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Board of Editors

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Poetry

Sitting in the Rothko Chapel on a Summer Afternoon

PAUL ALEXANDER

For years, he worked on the fourteen canvases
until, sick and depressed, he hired two assistants
to apply the paint at his direction, one deliberate
brushstroke after another, until they achieved
the dark hues he dreamed of. He did not live to see
the canvases mounted on the walls of the chapel.
Death was simple for him—an overdose

of antidepressants, then a razor blade to both arms.
The artist of his own death, he was found
lying on his kitchen floor, blood spilled on
the white tiles like paint splattered on a canvas.
Today, I sit on a bench in his chapel. On the walls,
the dark canvases surround me, drawing me
into a place where, once again, I can hold

my mother's hand in mine, just as I did weeks ago
in the austere white of a hospital room filled
with the cacophonous beeps of machines
tracking her vital signs, numbers documenting
what the doctors needed to know to keep her alive.
What they did not understand—what she *did*—
was that she was ready to die. As I stood beside her,

she bolted up in bed and, like a sparrow flying
off into the night, life left her body. In the silence
of the chapel on this summer afternoon, I can hear
her voice calling out from one world to the other
telling me she is not yet ready for me to join her.
Nor am I, but that will change in time,
on another summer afternoon, soon enough.

Trees Gathering Themselves into Ceremony

PAUL ALEXANDER

Perhaps it is the silence
that draws me to the grove at the end of the road
curving down
from the house, vacant now.

All I know is
I am walking toward the grove as the sky
leans down, a September sky
so striking I am taken

by its absence when I step
among the first trees. Heading for the heart
of the grove, I stoop
and collect a handful of leaves—

mostly oak but birch too,
even apple—and cup the leaves in my hands
as if I were holding rain.
Their veins, intricate

like the veins of a heart,
flow in a pattern I do not understand.
When I crush the leaves,
the pieces, sharp and brittle,

cut into my palms,
and I think of why I am drawn to this place.
My grandmother
would sit out here on a summer afternoon,

the trees blocking the sun.
Lost in time, she could not even imagine the day
she would feel the small
explosion in her chest. Finally, as I walk deeper

into the forest I know she's here—

sitting in the chair she left permanently
for such an occasion,
among the shadows of birch and oak.

The truth how God spoke

AIDA BODE

When I was little
God always stayed in the dark.
I never understood why
he liked it so much.

He didn't talk
and I wondered if
he had ever whispered a word.

One night, I said to him
"Let there be light"
but he put his head down,
opened his mouth
and I saw his
tongue was cut off,
his ears, his hands,
his feet, too.

He hadn't walked in a long time,
but had learnt how to count
and cried
five hundred years of tears;
all pouring from the East
over the ruins of churches—
failing to reach the Vatican.

I took one of my dolls,
removed its limbs
and put them on God.
Then I carried him
in my bed
and promised him
the light would shine
again.

Burning Down the Carousel

GRANT CLAUSER

was not my idea, but watching paint peel back
from the white horse's strained face was as shocking
as opening the shower door to my mother's
naked body when I was eleven

and even then I knew enough about the world
to understand those wooden horses had lives beyond
their worn down saddles, their chipped glass eyes
that lasted longest in the carousel's losing fight

with flames, the calliope hitting its brass death notes
as it collapsed to the floor, smoke stinging our own eyes
where we hid behind the Fun House, its clown face
long fallen or dragged away by vandals

like most everything else at this abandoned park.
The gas and lighter Dod stole from his dad after
he was too drunk to notice, and then we
circled the park for hours, hopping fences

breaking into the Haunted House where every skeleton
lay smashed already, spray painted names marked
where older boys lashed out at their youth
or carved their history into fake coffins and ticket booths,

until finally we came to the carousel, leaning hard
on wheels burst from dry rot and years of cotton candy
stuffed riders, the ghosts of children hanging tight, trying
to catch the brass ring, a quick wave and hand clap

from mothers beyond the rail. I swear Dod was crying
when he drenched the white stallion with gas, lit the bear
and tiger, then tossed the can into the creek—
the first flames crawling over a silver mane

like a praying mantis looking for the softest tissue

between head and body, where in the last act of love
it plants its mouth, cutting off the head, devouring
the flesh, leaving behind a shell it will soon forget.

Butterfly Effect

GRANT CLAUSER

The whole field saw it
coming the moment
we heard the crack
of the bat and then

the softer thud when
the ball hit Jay square
in the temple, a sound
like the shortstop hitting

his glove with his fist.
And Jay became the center
axis the world spun on
as he crumpled till even

the monarch butterflies
drinking milkweed near
the dugout could no longer
change the weather in Africa

with the beat of their wings.
By the time Jay's dad
reached him the world restarted,
all of us caught in the wake.

Winter Nap

CARLOS A. DEJUANA

I awoke smelling magnolias,
the sweet sticky smell
hanging thick between
the ferns and humid air.
Or was it the sharp odor
of onions in the fields
across the tracks that
no longer exist,
its scent carried by a warm breeze
in the moonlight,
as I walked barefoot,
naked but for my shorts,
across the driveway
to put a hurried and
forgotten letter
in the mail?

The Ambulance

ED DOERR

I swear the driver
called himself Charon
as he loaded me
onto his rig,
city lights clouding
the windows
like night's last breath.

He tells me
to stop squirming
as he tightens straps
across my chest,
but their Velcro bite
just makes it worse.

How to explain that,
more than anything,
I just need to make sure
I have change
for a dollar?

Sautéing Spinach with My Aunt

ED DOERR

Flesh collapses inward
at the faintest tickle
of heat, as if preparing,
from the start, to wilt,
as if that first stab of pain,
like that which would soon
attend the blinding
rupture behind her eyes,
simply soothes the stress
of waiting. After twenty years,
I can see those leaves,
charred and bled,
still shrinking.

Loyalty

KELLY DOLEJSI

At 16, she devoted herself to time and place
and physics, which loomed in the form
of a Himalayan peak in the dark and asked
with each step whether she was more conscious
than the avalanche, while just above, stars
stuck in the sky like countless stilled ice picks
on an empty ridge, daring her to trust
her crampons and mittens as again
she struck the axe, felling cubes of ice
tidily down to Dad's whiskey, Mom's
manhattan while they stood at the bottom,
a little cold, warning her about the gaunt air
that clattered like a skeleton inside her lungs,
till she rested a moment to please them.

Beulah

GEORGE DREW

Anima mea turbata est.

She wrote the American Novel three times
then had the nerve to give it up,
but by god she's a writer discovered
by herself, then by the *New York Times.*

There's even two photographs—in one,
knees showing; in the other big blue eyes,
attractive nose, strong jaw, thin lips,
hair white as a poinsettia by O'Keefe.

She's 94, has cataracts in both eyes
and hasn't slept with anyone in years,
but to quote her neighbor, Mr. Vandenburg,*
"a chilly landscape tightens the mind."

She'd rather quote the *Times.* She's a genius,
so she wears a red beret, crosses on green,
and keeps a Christmas tree in her flat
year around, taking one minute at a time.

Let others look for meaning in strict rhyme,
scream at God to give them what they want.
God isn't listening. He's between deadlines,
weathering nicely under the Southern Cross.

*Actually, Weldon Kees

Aaron

CHRIS ELLERY

The wood we gathered
in the afternoon
tells its story
as it burns: change
from seedling to sapling,
from branch to fuel.
Its theme is falling.
Somehow it becomes
the flames, and the flames
point the way.
I too first came
to this place as a boy.
Same abandoned
look-out tower.
Same patch
of berries, once
again in bloom.
From where I sit
I see
two decades' growth
has changed the view,
though not so much
you'd notice it
unless you wanted to.
To my son
it is all very new,
this night out
in the wilderness,
this mountain reverence.
I want to look
until he sees
me sitting where he sits
vested
in the same fiery light.

Nowhere-Man

DOMINIC FONCE

It's not located in the eyes, or the spine,
or the heart, but in the two hands—nails hacked, torn,
stress-bitten—and the draining brain.

It's clear. I'm jealous. A poet discusses her father's phone calls—
such inspiration—while unreliable flickers of Dad tease
my distant lobes. She says, "There's a poem everywhere."
I say, "There's also a poem nowhere."

It's true. I'm jealous. You're right; I'm left
alone, puzzled, puzzling
these razed patches of a man.
A mustache goes here. A bald spot goes there.

I carry a tin hand in mine; I start there—building, sculpting
a nowhere-man from a garbage heap. In there, only a single
Truth, from a pile of perfect ideas, can be assembled.

Bandera Family Practice

D.G. GEIS

In the waiting room
life decays:

a walker parked in the corner
against two wheelchairs,
four issues of *Field and Stream,*
one oxygen bottle (unattended),
the wheezing old gent
transplanted to a Danish chair,
carpet pickled green,
an oh so subtle hint of upchuck,
upchuck freighted with blackberries
finishing nicely with a lush flowering of isopropyl
and subtle undertones of pus,
The Watchtower,
another religious tract entitled: "Hell is No Joke!",
an equally monitory treatise titled: "Diabetes: the Facts,"
Highlights for Children, "Hospice Care: What You Need to Know"
(these two are separate items),
A fortyish grandmother with run-flat tits and a two-ish grandson
(no tits, no teeth, no problem),
People (the magazine),
more people (the waiting room),
Texas Highways,
my copy of the Penguin *Selected Essays of Montaigne*
page 25, Book 1, Chapter 9
"Of Liars."

"Our soul happy in the present, Cares not what lies beyond."
I love it when Montaigne quotes Horace;
almost as much as when he quotes himself:
"He who fears he shall suffer,
already suffers what he fears."

I have a 10:30 appointment
with Dr. Khalafy.

I have no idea where he is from
or even where he went to school.

I like him because he is sympathetic
and brown.

I like him because he never frowns
and respects the rights of malingerers.

I like him because he knows my despair of diapers
and that I occasionally leak urine.

I like him because he washes his hands
before he ever touches me.

I like him because when he says "Open Wide"
what he really means is "Allah be merciful!"

I like him because when the time comes
he will gently take my hand

and tell me
god-willing

that everything will be all right.

The Parable of the Wheat and the Tares

RICHARD JONES

bread unleavened by love
becomes a stone

Unable to sleep, the man opened a book
and nibbled the last of the day's baguette.
The first page he read used the phrase
"the tares of domesticity." He remembered

the parable. The tares would be burned,
but the man wasn't exactly sure what a tare was.
The man knew the tare was Satan's weed—
the dictionary called it a "vetch"—

and his quick research revealed the grain
toxic to humans. And yet, during famine,
medieval monks shared a bread of vetch meal,
praising and giving thanks for its bitterness.

How to reconcile such humility with the bitterness
of this life? Then the man considered the end
of the stale baguette, hard as stone in his hand,
though early that morning at the fragrant bakery,

his wife had purchased the baguette fresh,
still soft and moist in its warm paper.

Blue Heron

ROBERT LEE KENDRICK

Two rivers within easy flight,
still he hunts this slit drainage

creek. Monk-hunched, wings
spread like a cloak, he studies

blank scrolls of water.
No silver darter, no dappled sculpin,

but he will stand for an hour,
more. Return the next dawn,

continue attending to nothing,
as now—intent on the least

shifting ripple, all his strength
charged for one lunge to silt bottom.

Mountain Elder

ROBERT LEE KENDRICK

Blunt almond hoof prints, pine bark
rubbed smooth to bleed sap on bristle,
scat clusters glistening in shade

like raw onyx, fresh hog gut luster
of protease, mucosa and villi,
heat glow left from acorn, wild

yam, chickweed, blackberry root
fermented for sugar to stoke
horned snout. Not native. Feral.

Scent-wise to men's hands on traps,
dog musk wound between trees,
razor hide-helmeted brain mapping

hollow and ridge line acre by acre.
Five hundred years since ancestors
escaped DeSoto, armor-skinned,

taking their refuge in bottomland,
thicket, Blue Ridge hollow and cave.
No sounder here. No piglet or sow

nest—just one aged male, obeying
commandments from belly and mouth,
scouring his Sinai or Israel.

Mid-August

RACHEL ESSAFF MAHER

The kids have finally lost their minds.
Less than a month left to go
until school starts back up
and they've finally lost their minds.
Isaac keeps bursting
into fits of senseless giggling.
Ryan, banned from video games this week
due to bad behavior, has taken
to walking around
with the Super Mario Bros
game held tightly to his chest,
humming the theme song.
Andy, meanwhile, has begun
describing life in Lego terms
and spends hours talking
to himself
while building vast Lego structures.
I take them outside for some fresh air
and they become fish
in the swimming pool, turning pruney
and looking like Swamp Things
in goggles that leave red circles
around their eyes and noses
long after they've been removed.
They lay in the sun
like strips of bacon
sizzling while I read. Out there,
Ryan says he's working on his tan, asks
me to paint him a Mario moustache
with eyeliner
while his upper lip beads with sweat.
Andy tries to teach himself to breathe
under water, tells me
he has Kryptonite in his hand.
I don't understand
the connection. Isaac collects stones

in a yellow metal truck, tells me
they're potatoes
and I had better eat them all
because it's nearly dinner time.
Squinting, I look up at the sun
and know he's lying.
The sun smiles and says
it's not even lunch time yet.

Sticky Stung Wandawoowoo

KENNETH POBO

I drop Concord grapes
in my pail. Hornets hang
between leaves—
getting sweetness is risky.

A sting: lightning slicing
into my arm. Friends say
be careful. From a distance.
They miss
the juiciest ones
that squirt down my shirt,
make me a mess, the best

that this world can give
coloring my skin, stickying
my lips.

Monarch in the Urn

MARILEE RICHARDS

Tadpoles bellied-up as she drifted downstream,
a fragment catching on some wayward twigs.

My sister, still a child beneath the gray,
handed out clumsily crayoned Easter cards
to the few attendees—

all of us planted like vertical fossils
in the red Utah sand, ear pairs attentive

to a friend's slender-without-being-vacuous eulogy
which deserved a solid B, B+ maybe, considering

the inevitable paranoias which remained
obedient spaniels at our feet. Everyone spoke.

Someone from the half who loved Jesus
offered a prayer—

Heavenly Father something or other…
No one brought food.

Deer

TRAVIS TRUAX

Quiet whitetails
never breaking a branch,
they blazed the trails
behind our house,
split the thick brush
around the pond.

We saw them
in the mornings,
with dew-damp legs,
moving through the fog.
Sometimes at dusk
they'd walk across
our drive, my mother
pointing to the fawn.

Their stories must have
all been simple,
their bones light as air,
brought to life in a forest hum,
returning to earth:
someday a hip bone
or leg brushed beneath
the leaves.

Achilles

LOREN WALKER

He was the source of all my scars:
forehead, knee, anklebone.
Three years ahead in the game,
our world was slaps and fists,
knuckles driven into thighs,
wrists seared by Indian burns.
I'd seen his car crashes,
taken panicked calls in the dawn.
But he was always fine in the end.
Mother said coolant gnawed away his skin,
ran into his boot when the air bubble blew
in the car factory, pooled and chewed.
Third-degree right down to the bone,
and a trail of speckle-scars,
burns arcing across his back.
I imagined the heel as scooped out:
a ball of flesh, neatly rounded, removed
and pulsing, a hollow, bloodless cavity.
But I couldn't; I wouldn't creep down
the basement stairs
to see those plastic sheets,
his body turned by nurses.
I got drunk on disinfectant;
studied bandages brought to the kitchen,
oily and orange; eavesdropped
when he shifted his weight
on the pull-out couch,
watching cartoons alone.

Border Town

LOREN WALKER

"Watch out for the Americans," we were told early on:
the wild-eyed nineteen-year-olds that make their way
from Detroit to Windsor, to Bentley's over the border
who grope, grind, and follow us girls,
then steal back over the Ambassador Bridge
in the morning, snorting, giddy with getting away
from this second-rate automotive capital,
from the hard lemonade that legally stings the tongue,
from our sweet mouths, our girlish arms empty, yet open.
But no worries, girls: I can speak their language;
my father is the alien from Chicago and Salt Lake
who brought me over state lines for the summers.
I have it covered. And we Canadians aren't as nice
as they say. We're glaring, audio-abrasive on this side
of the border; we give a flick of a finger when they stare,
when they grab, when they corner, pull and run,
when we fight through a radius of fingers, mascara smudging
in the heat, our goose bumps writing a story.
On Thursday nights we take our revenge; in this Windsor bar,
here goes our best imitation of Cape Breton soul:
we scream in unison, raise bottles, go hoarse,
hook arms and lock the Americans out.
They look on in bewilderment, waiting to pollinate.
But they don't know these words, this country's bar anthem.
They can only swing their shoulders without knowledge
through tobacco, slosh through clouds of smoke,
clutch the beers they can only order here,
staring at the backs of our jeans as we dance.

Short Fiction

Covering the Bull

JAY LEE ELLIS

They were in the back of some bull fighter's pickup doing donuts in the Lancaster town square when Luther daylighted into the street in front of a sheriff's car and busted his ankle. Eric'd hauled the little bull rider back up over the tailgate but then Eric jumped out on a turn before they could get to the freeway. He landed running low and got up a fence and flipped over it the way you have to when you draw a mean one wanting to kill you. Good practice for tomorrow, the sheriff's car went on after the truck. Back at the party house Eric heard the chase ended over the Dallas line and instead of the boy's cousin locking him up safe in Lancaster, little Luther went straight to Sterrett.

Some bottles and hours later on Eric woke up in some buckle bunny's bedroom with the phone ringing and he picked it up. Luther's cousin down at the Lancaster station, a friend at Sterrett had just called him. They wanted somebody to come pick up the little rider, because every guy in holding was starting fights with him but the bull rider was finishing them. They collected the bail from what was left of the party and drew lots for who had to pick him up, and Eric lost. Still drunk, he only half remembered where to turn to get to the jail.

"I'm sorry as shit," was all the little rider could say.

Eric imagined the ankle ballooning but no way was that boot coming off before the rodeo. The hospital just put a cast on Luther's free hand and let him sign a waiver for the right to ruin his own leg. At the party house all beds had been taken and the carpet was so wet they decided to sleep in the bed of the truck, what little of the night was left to them.

Luther drew Red Rocker the next day and covered him with the ankle banging on the jumps and his free hand in a cast. That was the first time Eric broke the bad leg, the last time he'd ride in Mesquite.

The Necklace

MIKAEL KELLY

One day a young hunter walked through the gates of the town, a bow slung over his shoulder. For some time the townspeople had speculated after about the thin chimney of smoke from the mountain, and here was the keeper of that fire. In the tavern the hunter drank and told of his travels. He had traversed a desert on a camel, crossed a sea in a creaking ship, and in a city that stretched to the horizon he had walked through a library with marble halls and balustrades and plants hanging from inner balconies. On the shelves were all the books of the world. As he told his stories, the patrons of the tavern hushed and gathered.

As the evening neared, the hunter prepared to return to his camp. No, the townspeople said, you should stay. It's cold at night and there are wolves. I'm not afraid of wolves, he said. I've shot lions, bears, bandits. Even so, they insisted, one of us will put you up and we will feed you. The townspeople whispered amongst themselves, arguing who would take the hunter in. You can stay with me, a farmer offered. He was a man of some influence and did not want to be outshone by his fellows.

The hunter rode back with the farmer and met the farmer's wife, his son, and his daughter. They lived in a sturdy wood house. At dinner the hunter ate and drank a great deal and continued to tell his stories, repeating some of the tales the farmer had already heard at the tavern, albeit occasionally altering characters and events and descriptions. I've found the people of the world to be different but unified in their kindness, the hunter said. Every time I have needed they have provided. As he said this his eyes met the daughter's eyes and each smiled. The daughter's name was Lotte.

The next day the hunter ate a large breakfast and seemed to not make any movement towards leaving. The farmer was already tired of being hospitable and hated the hunter's starry-eyed boasting, but his wife had been taken with the man. It's good for our children to know a citizen of the world, she argued. If he stays longer, we'll be the better for it. He's a vagabond and nothing more, the farmer said. After tonight he'll leave and for good.

In the day the hunter set out for the town, telling the farmer that he wished to meet more of the townspeople. He met Lotte in the piney woods instead, their rendezvous arranged through passing notes the previous night. They walked amongst the trees and Lotte spoke of the many books she had read, and some of their worlds were not unlike those of the hunter's stories. When they came upon a waterfall they

held hands. The hunter said the valley was wondrous but there were other places even more so. He was happy there with her, holding her hand, but he would be even happier if she left with him the next morning. Together they would see the world. I should love to go, Lotte said. I should love to see the sea and the great library. She walked back through the forest to her home, watching birds flit between the branches.

The hunter went on to his camp. As he gathered his blankets and a few trinkets the farmer appeared from the between the trees and cut the hunter's throat. He buried the body and took the hunter's things to a forge and burned them to dust. The night fell and the rest of the family fretted about the hunter. That's what happens with those types, the farmer said. They come and go as they please. In the morning Lotte walked to the waterfall where she had stood with the hunter and watched the silvered water and wept.

The farmer proved too consumed by jealousy to approve any suitors for Lotte. When he died suddenly from a tumor, Lotte was not old but far from young. She was courted by a wealthy farmer, a widower and the second son of an old rival of her father. One of his first gifts to her was a necklace made from gold and pieces of blown blue-green glass. For your love of the sea, he said, for she was drawn to sea-themed poetry and had recited some to this elderly suitor. It was a heavy, grand piece, warm to the touch. Lotte wore it everywhere. Her marriage was comfortable and placid. As newlyweds the couple traveled to the coast and picked their way along a beach. She thought it surprisingly foul smelling and unpleasant. Faraway she could see little lumps of land. She wished she wanted to explore those islands but she did not. She just wanted to go home. In the years to follow, Lotte busied herself with helping to raise her daughter Inge with the help of two servants. She continued to read.

One spring it was Inge's first dance. Lotte helped her daughter dress and primp. When the girl was ready to leave for town, Lotte gave her the necklace. Her forehead knotted as her fingers fumbled with the clasp. She took her daughter's hands. I wish you the best, she said. I wish you love. I wish you the world. The loose skin under her chin trembled and she could say no more. The girl looked at her doubtfully. She was often rather stern with Inge. Lotte stood in the road watching Inge and the servants disappear into the trees. The place on her neck where the necklace had rested was bare and cold. She pictured Inge at the dance, regarding it all: the music troupe, gaily playing, the children in their finery, standing shyly but also excited, her friends, whispering, eyes darting, the boys, daring each other to cross the empty floor as the music swelled, her life before her like the plane of some unknown land.

Tommy the Motorman

TRAVIS LOGAN

On a beat-up old drilling rig in an overnight storm, a crew of rained-on roughnecks clang and thump in a panic. They're just boys, mostly, faces smeared with tar under hardhats splattered with dripping oilbase and rain, and they're slopping around with iron pry bars and chain tongs, whimpering curses at a cross-threaded valve head stuck in the drill pipe that burbles black mud fizzy as champagne.

In the doghouse, the driller's eyes widen. He's about to lose control of the well.

Muttering, big ol' Tommy comes out of the toolshed. He crosses the rumbling rig floor through a haze of gas and seizes the tong handle from a slimy floorhand. He whips the chain around the valve, latches it, and leans into it. His neck swells, his face reddens; a boot starts to slide. His usual nonsense jabber builds itself into such an ugly moan that the fat old company man eyes the silent driller, whose bearded jaw hangs half-open; the kids on the floor step back. Groaning, Tommy takes an impossible step forward, and sparkling black oil rises as suddenly as blood from the thread-jam. A young roughneck in a rush to secure the loose valve head hits Tommy like a doorframe, and splashes on the diamond-plate steel floor. Tommy glares at another, who stays still, gas and mud spewing out of the open drill pipe between them. The baffled company man pushes out onto the rig floor from the driller's cabin. But Tommy can smell it; the gas is too thin for fire. He drops the bent chain tong to the deck and steps back as the young roughnecks come to their senses, hastily spinning and torquing the backup valve head down, the frantic driller back to barking orders into the radio.

In the change house in the morning, the driller tells the relief crew how Tommy saved the rig.

Thank ol' Tommy for yer jobs, boys, cuz I almost burned 'er down last night. Damn dumbass kids I got workin' floors torqued a cross-threaded TIW valve when the well started flowin'. Tommy put out s'damn hard he damn near broke a damn chain tong in half.

Tommy's a strong sumbitch, says one of them. *Need 'im on the board racking back pipe.*

Shit, I'm thinkin' they need to up the day rate on these sumbitches, we got two iron roughnecks on this motherfucker, the driller laughs.

The whole roomful of stinking men laughs.

Where's ol Tommy at? somebody asks. *I ain't seen 'im.*

Halfway back to Oklahoma by now, I reckon, says the driller. *He don't hang around when it's time fer days off.*

Fuckin' Yankee.

He ain't no fuckin' Yankee, the driller says, thinking of all the times he's dragged piss-soaked Tommy out of bed for work, all the times he's seen him blabbering to himself behind the roaring generators. *He's just misunderstood's all.*

On the highway, stinking and still covered in grease and splattered oil, Tommy's blabber lapses into near lucidity. What few cars pass him see a raving driver-side silhouette gesturing with a plastic bottle of sloshing whiskey, drifting thoughtlessly between lanes.

Lone, alone, blown—once lamblike once hamlike, he half-sings,

Lone-larking lamblike lilies, leg-deep

Hills, lots of them lilting

O, Lord.

Ha!

He gulps, glugging whiskey that runs down his chin.

O, Lord.

O, lily-like lilies, lamblike lilies like ladies I've known

In my lamb-knifing life,

I'm sorry I knife—Ha!—I'm sorry I knife!

I'm sorry to've leapt like lizards from leaves,

forever lost to your fluttering, lambish lashes.

A speeding idiot leans on the horn as he passes, and then pulls in front of Tommy, brake lights flaring.

I was a stem-bender, stem and storm bent myself, in love, I'm sorry, he says, wiping his glistening jaw.

But as any low lizard, what bent me like a lily

was wildfire, and I drifted to it like a leaf to listen

to the hissings, he rams the left side of the idiot's bumper at 80 miles an hour,

of the drippings, the idiot careens wildly and flips off an embankment,

of my butchering hands.

Two hours later, a liter of whiskey drunk, still channeling nonsense, he pulls into a roadhouse parking lot lined with motorcycles, and stumbles in sideways. He slumps into a booth, smearing grease over everything he touches, drawing eyes like a drawn gun. The blonde waitress gives an impatient look to an overweight man behind the bar who defiantly doesn't react. She rolls her eyes and, passing him, hisses, *He probably stinks to high heaven, Bill.*

On her way with a lunch menu, she begins to hear Tommy and slows. Guttural wheezing, drool.

He looks at her, still jabbering half words and cusses.

Excuse me?

He elbows the condiment caddy off the table, eyes wandering beyond the her as the shattering glass and tinkling metal rings out between them.

When they do make eye contact, she sees the widening shadow of a meteor.

He lunges at who knows what, but the waitress screams and two looming bikers grab him by the neck. They scuffle until Tommy's hit in the head with a chair and collapses onto two men as he's put to sleep.

. . .

Back on the road, bleeding and with ears ringing from the fight that ended with him dragged unconscious through the kitchen and left face down on the concrete next to a Dumpster, Tommy slurps and slobbers at the plastic whiskey bottle.

Arriving home in the evening, his thudding, scraping footsteps end abruptly in a loud tumble down the basement stairs, where he inches lamely to the center of the room and reaches shakily into the heart of the hallucinogenic darkness. With the flick

of the lighter to a candlewick, the walls and ceiling bloom into carnival twinkling, a mosaic of polished scrap iron and steel tiles that whirls in a lazy eddy of dancing candlelight.

He rolls onto his back, and drifts peacefully into a dream on the floor of the shining room.

Snakes and Ladders

MOHINI MALHOTRA

Grandma stood in the doorway, brandishing a rolling pin in her raised right arm. Her grey hair, normally trapped in a bun, hung raggedly over her shoulders. She wore, as always, a loosely draped white cotton sari, only this time it was disheveled, pleats and folds unraveled, and it seemed to be fluttering and billowing around her as though a gust of wind had swept in beneath it. She could have been floating, except that her brown shriveled feet were planted firmly on the stone floor.

My sister and I were lying on the floor, heads hunched over our board game. We were in our bedroom, with walls the color of sunshine. Our beds were pushed against the walls to leave space in the middle for us to read and play on the blood maroon Tibetan rug. In the middle of the wall to the right was a door connecting to grandmother's room. It was always locked.

I can't describe her room so well, since we rarely entered it. I remember that the curtains were always drawn, and that it smelt of wrinkles and memories. She had a big silver metal chest next to her bed, from which, on Easter and Christmas, she pulled out little treasures for us, hair clips, rings, glass bangles. On these two days, out of the 365 days in the year she was just like other people's grandmothers, she held us on her lap, hugged and smiled, and told us stories while she brushed our long dark hair.

It was dusk. A storm had been teasing to cut the heat all day. It was dinner-time, but our little brother was burning with fever and our parents took him to the doctor. Before leaving, they checked that the door from our bedroom to Grandmother's room was locked, even though no one ever opened it. "Make sure you lock the door to the hallway behind us," they said. They never said why, that would have felt disloyal, but we understood. "We will, we will" we reassured. We were so immersed in our game of *Snakes and Ladders*, we forgot.

Just as they pulled the door shut behind them, the storm let loose. We could hear the wind bleating against the walls, and the rain hammering on the window pleading to be let in. Grandmother started to bang on the connecting door. As she often did. But this time the banging seemed different, it was louder and more insistent. "Open the door. Open the door!"

We stared at each other. She continued to bang on the door and shout. "Open the door. Let me in." Her shouting turned angry. "You defy me. You ignore me. You

laugh at me. I'll get you, you'll see. You think I'm crazy. You wish me dead I know you do."

How did she know? I did wish her dead. Every day I wished her dead. I never told anyone since we don't talk about death, doing so invites it in, they say. But I did wish it. So she wouldn't bang, so we didn't have to lock doors, so we didn't have to be afraid of not knowing what she might do to us, and if she would really act out her threats, given a chance.

I'll get you, you'll see, you just wait…" she mumbled.

We held hands. We felt safe in our little sunshine room behind locked doors. Safe that soon our family would be home, that our father would calm her, and that she would stop. We resumed our game to wait her out.

Only our father could calm her. His presence was like a cool hand on a hot forehead. I could see her muscles stop twitching and her clenched fingers soften when he was around her. The few times we had been in her room, it was with him. He explained that it was because he was her first-born, but really because she was grateful that he remembered her as she was before. He recalled it happened after her second son died of polio. She didn't speak for two years, and never recovered from her grief. Her seven children born subsequently never knew her otherwise.

It was my turn to roll the dice. The hallway door pushed open and I looked up thinking it was the wind. My sister had her back to the door, but she knew immediately from the look on my face that Grandma stood in the doorway. Her white sari billowed around her, she looked twice her size.

Then my sister, all of 12, stood up and turned to face her. She pushed me behind her and said, "Grandma, please don't hurt her. She's only eight. Hit me if you have to." I swear she soared to become one hundred feet tall in that moment. Her voice was calm and steady and came from somewhere deep inside her. It sounded like our father's voice when he spoke to his mother.

I scrunched my eyes to prepare for the wrath of the rolling pin, or for whatever was to come. I clung to my sister from behind, my head buried in her back.

Nothing happened. We waited. Nothing happened. I slowly looked up. I saw an expression of tenderness on Grandma's face that I had never seen her wear before. Her raised hand slowly fell to her side. The rolling pin fell to the floor, it looked like a toy. Her sari stopped billowing. She shrunk back to her size with her arms limp and

drooped. She stepped back and still watching us, pulled the door closed and shuffled to her room.

Years later, in my memory I hear crying from behind the locked door that I don't remember hearing then. Maybe she had simply been afraid of the storm, and had wanted to be in the sunshine room with her two granddaughters, gift them a small treasure from her silver trunk, hold them on her lap, and brush their long dark hair.

Rule Number One Is That You Never Turn Your Back On the Ocean

ANNE PANNING

said the waitress at the Old Bath House restaurant after it happened, after my new bride and I had both ordered the Turkey Avocado Panini with salad, not fries because we were in California, after all, not Lubbock, and we'd noticed things were lighter, healthier here, and the waitress, an older lady, told the press all of this afterwards: "I could tell they were on their honeymoon because they both kept looking at their rings and holding hands. We get a lot of that here," which was, as far as I can remember, probably ten, fifteen minutes before it happened; we were so young then—Samantha just twenty-three and ready to start med school, and me, twenty-six, still painting houses but going for my realtor's license, *soon,* we kept saying, but Sam had us busy every minute with the wedding—and I remember after lunch we walked to the edge of the cliff, Lover's Point, and stood arm in arm looking at the churning, gray water, and since it was the last day of the honeymoon, I said, "Sam, stand over there—let me take your picture," and she was so pretty with her dark blonde hair curling from the sea salt and her little orange North Face jacket she'd bought just for the trip and her brown lace-up boots and to be funny she fanned her left hand over her chest to show off the wedding ring and I lifted my phone to take the shot and right then a giant wave rose from behind and swallowed her, sucked her down the twenty-foot cliff, and the next thing I knew I'd jumped in the roiling water, calling, "Sam! Sam! Over here!" which was apparently when the waitress at The Old Bath House saw us struggling in the cold water and called 911, but when I finally got to Sam and grabbed her hand, she slipped away and I shouted, "Hang on! Just hang on!" but the currents pulled her away, and I fought the water myself, gagging and thrashing, which was when, the waitress reported later, "a huge set a waves came up, one after the other, and then I saw her floating," and when 911 finally came, they picked me up first and went farther to find Sam: her eyes were open but dark; they told me she had a chance, but I knew by the furious way they pounded on her chest, she was gone;

sometimes, still, when I order eggs and toast at Magnolia Café before work, I think about that waitress, wonder if she ever thinks of us, wonder what my wife Jen would do if she found out my secret, which is stuffed hard in my heart, bears too many strings for her and the kids to untangle, though I do worry they might someday Google and find the clips, "Couples' Honeymoon Tragedy in Huge Tempest-Tossed Seas," but they'd have to search hard to find the one remaining wedding photo of Sam and me buried in *The Lubbock Journal*—Sam with her yellow roses, lacy veil and curled bangs, me with my dark goatee, crooked bow tie and shy smile.

Essays

Reading

ELIZABETH BERTSCH

When my daughter was a young reader, she had designs on reading books way above her Lexile level. It was hard for her to walk through the young adult section of the bookstore knowing that these books were out of her reach—she wanted to hold all those big thick books with fancy and provocative covers in her hands and read them on her own. She took her time becoming a full-fledged independent reader, and until she did, she relied on the context of a sentence and story to assist her in reading the words that eluded her. Rather than break words into discrete sounds to sound them out, she often inserted words that made sense but lacked phonemic connection to the words on the page. Pedagogists of reading know that a child's ability to approximate meaningfully is part and parcel of learning how to read well, and we believed that she was developing the foundational skills and concepts of a good reader. We were hesitant to view her reading process as a problem—she had enough problems with a severely scoliotic spine that required yearly spinal surgeries beginning at three years old.

Bridie needed daily reminders to remain patient, that her reading will progress, and that all those vampire novels will be there when it does. And then one day she returned home from school with a book about fairies that she purchased at a school book sale. After showing us its shiny silver cover featuring a delicate winter fairy, she sat down on the sofa, kicked off her boots, ignoring the sand spilling onto the floor. She no longer needed us to sit next to her—she was off on her own. It was hard to ignore the grin on her face—some children experience this kind of thrill when they learn to ride a two-wheeler but my Bridie, who had her heart set on reading big thick books from the time she was five, had finally arrived. She will never fully master the two-wheeler because of the severity of her scoliosis, but her books will take her places a bicycle cannot.

As Bridie became a more accomplished reader, she read books that brought her to the place she loved most—inside the social worlds of young women. In the book world, Bridie's favorite genre is sometimes called "chick lit" meaning books for girls, and she's fine with calling her beloved books by that genre. She's an emerging feminist who understands that books about boys are called fantasy, mystery, and every other genre under the sun and that the stories about young women are often marginalized. Bridie knows only too well what it means to inhabit a place in the world outside the mainstream as she has spent a good deal of her childhood inside of hospitals and

doctor's waiting rooms where she has encountered children like herself, whose life stories are mostly absent from the children's literature that they are expected to read.

On our way to an appointment to see an oncologist for a second opinion about whether Bridie was to receive chemotherapy for her recently discovered optic tumors, my husband and I were nervous about how what to expect in the waiting room. We had no idea what a room of children receiving chemotherapy looked like—a room in which our daughter might very soon spend much of her time. When we arrived, we found children tucked in all corners of the room, building with blocks, doing puzzles; drawing, laughing, and things took off when the candy cart arrived. The children all seemed to know the procedure for selecting candy and what could have amounted to a chaotic experience, was orderly and fun. Seeing a room of relatively happy children put us all at ease.

While Bridie ate her chocolate, and read a book with my husband, I scanned the room and noticed a young woman sitting in her wheelchair reading. Her mother was sitting next to her, looking at her phone, occasionally looking over at her daughter. I recognized the young woman's book; it was a "chick lit" book whose protagonist was about the same age as the young woman. She was about thirteen, with bright blue eyes, and light blonde hair that dipped just below the hat she wore to hide the effects of chemotherapy. Amidst all the energy and chatter of young children, she remained absorbed by the story of a thirteen-year-old girl. I know the book, and I know it is full of juicy problems about best friends, boyfriends, and there's some kissing.

My first childhood encounter with "chick lit" was Judy Blume's *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret* in fifth grade. Inside of Margaret's first person account of her search for God and experiences of becoming a young woman, I discovered that reading could be intensely personal. Although I loved *Stuart Little* and other books written expressly for kids, for the first time, I consciously connected with a character—Blume's Margaret who was smart, confused, and at times, alone in her pursuit of what it means to be a girl. Margaret's direct and honest conversations with God about her changing body and frustration over religion enveloped me. While my classmates played games during choice time, I read on until the story reached its conclusion in Margaret getting her first period, and in her decision to leave religion, not God, to the world of adults. I was thoroughly absorbed and satisfied by my first experience with a book relegated to the genre of young women's fiction or "chick lit," and so when my daughter began reading almost exclusively within the genre, I understood wholeheartedly.

When Bridie's name was announced in the waiting room, we followed the receptionist into a small examination room and were met by the doctor. He joked with Bridie for a couple of minutes, read her medical file and began his examination. We watched them—Bridie and the doctor, and smiled to communicate our approval of this man who is telling her to follow his fingers with her eyes. In minutes, he turned towards us to let us know that he felt chemotherapy was not warranted at present, and that although he couldn't prove it, he believed that the tumors were near the end of their growth period. Bridie was to have regular MRI's and eye exams, and we were to monitor them. He talked about his three young kids, and after exchanging parenting stories, he made sure to let us know how happy he was that could give us he had good news, and we let him know how happy we were to receive it.

On our way out of the office, we passed through the waiting area, now quiet and tidy because the kids who had occupied the room were receiving treatment inside the many small exam rooms. My husband and I made eye contact, and the worry that we lived with for weeks, flew from our faces. Inside my jumble of thoughts about our good news, I thought about all the children, especially the brown haired five-year-old boy whose mouth was full of tootsie rolls while talking to his brother, and the young woman with a book in the palms of her slender hands. I wonder about her experience of adolescence when chemotherapy and cancer are added to the already complex equation of becoming a woman. I hoped that the right books find their way into the hands of both the mother and daughter and reading offer them respite, hope, and the rare privilege of stumbling upon a character who will leap from the page into their minds and hearts.

In the span of weeks, we learned that as our daughter developed from a toddler to a young girl, tiny tumors emerged in her brain and wrapped themselves around both her optic nerves and our narrative of concern and worry would include her vision, always. There would be more spinal surgeries, more MRI's to track these tumors, and despite this new chapter in our daughter's medical history, we were just given good news, and we needed to enjoy the moment. All three of us are learning to carry the subtext of dissonance that characterizes living a happy life alongside regular medical procedures, trauma, and chronic worry. As we got in the car, our conversation shifted from chemotherapy to dinner, and we decided to go with Bridie's suggestion of Italian food. We'll enjoy our bowls of pasta, perhaps even have a couple of sodas to celebrate the good news, and our memory of this day will occupy a space somewhere inside of all of us. Mine will sit right next to the Margaret that I knew so well when I was eleven years old. "I know you're there, God. I know you wouldn't have missed this for anything. Thank you, God. Thanks an awful lot."

Boots

TOMMY VOLLMAN

A few months prior to what should have been the end of my final year of undergrad, my then-girlfriend told me she was going to study abroad in London.

It was the middle of the spring semester, but any identifiable aspects of real spring had yet to hatch. The air was a rusty knife—unwieldy and dangerous—and the whole city tossed and turned under a thick, grey duvet of clouds. My then-girlfriend was set to graduate, but I wasn't; I needed 12 credits and fourteen thousand dollars. The 12 credits didn't include foreign language, and the 14 grand was for unpaid tuition and fees, which triggered a hold on any future registration. Despite all of that (or maybe in spite of it), I planned to go to London, too. My hold, though, prevented me enrolling via the regular study abroad channels.

Going to London was important. It was as if something fragile had to be held in place and my going to London would hold that fragile something exactly where it needed to be. I guess I sort of figured I'd be able to sort everything out once I arrived. Of course, I thought everything could be sorted out when the time came. Everything.

The first two weeks I was in London, I bounced between a half-dozen hostels. I had nowhere to live since housing arrangements ran through one's sponsoring school. Because of my hold, I had no sponsoring school, so I had no housing arrangements. The other American students—the ones officially enrolled in the study abroad—gave me a nickname: *homeless*. It was a joke between the dozen or so of us—my homelessness—and I suppose that since I was 23 years-old I should have known better, but I didn't.

Near the end of my first month in London, I finally got a room in a flat up in Northolt. The sub-letter was a woman, a blackjack dealer at some casino out along one of the autoroutes. She worked almost every night of the week, so she and I were on nearly polar-opposite schedules. When we did cross paths—no matter what time it happened to be—she always seemed to have on some sort of satin robe or gauzy coverlet, which was usually untied so that I'd catch momentary glimpses of her negligee or bra (always lacy and fire-engine red) or (on at least three occasions) naked breast. I moved out of her place in the middle of the night after only about a week-and-a-half because she 1) sneaked up behind me in the kitchen one morning, pressed me against the counter, tongued my ear, and whispered *You know you want to fuck me* (which I most definitely didn't) and 2) barged into my what-I-thought-was-locked-

and-probably-was room late one night to see if I wanted to shag her from behind while some other guy watched (which I likewise wasn't at all interested in doing).

When I told my friends about her and her come-ons, they agreed that it seemed I'd been better off homeless.

And now, almost two decades later, that same word, *homeless*, is clattering around inside my brain, and the only thing I'm thinking is, *How many students are even at this school?*, which is pretty fucked up given what I've just been told.

A voice suddenly stabs forth from the center of our little group. It's the President.

"A hundred and two?" she asks.

I think she hopes, like me, that she's misheard the figure. Sadly, she hasn't.

"Yes," the counselor repeats, "a hundred and two."

The counselor's name is D'Marne, and she looks quite young and has on these shiny, patent-leather heels with long, narrow points at the toes. Her blazer is cinched tight by a single, diamond-shaped button that wrenches her torso just above her waist. She seems uncomfortably off-balance and disproportionate to both herself and the space around her.

Her lips twist awkwardly around the words she speaks, but I don't want to notice this twisting since it seems so awfully inappropriate given the implications of what's being said.

"The latest data," she continues, "and we're swimming in data, indicates that we have one hundred two homeless students."

As she speaks, my chest collapses. Of course, it doesn't really collapse because nothing that trite happens outside of movies or short stories, but I am given time in the slow, beating movements of blood and breath to think about what, exactly, D'Marne's statement implies. I'm uncomfortable with this, uncomfortable considering the explicit awfulness a reality where one hundred two students at a single Milwaukee public high school are homeless.

I'm standing in the massive, open-concept, glass entryway that anchors the north and south wings of Leslie Tech, part of a little huddle of administrators from the handful of four- and two-year colleges that dot the map in and around the city of Milwaukee. I see students in classrooms crammed with a complicated array of

technology. The students—at least a majority of them—seem distracted. It's as if they've been teleported here from bedrooms or isolation booths or places where this type of stimulation is foreign and rare and so overwhelming that it almost posits a complete shutdown of all cognitive processes.

And now D'Marne is talking about something else, but I can't pay attention; I can't shake the thought of one hundred two homeless high school students. This thought bothers me because I don't know what to do with it. Holding it feels so heavy that I'm afraid I might slip and tumble right off the edge of the Earth. Not holding it, though, seems reckless. Not holding it seems irresponsible and convenient. I shift and squirm and stand and look at them—girls, boys, men, women. How many of them, I wonder, are homeless? How many of them have nowhere to go when the bell rings at 2:45? How many of them are included in that number: *one hundred two*?

I wonder how the one hundred two survive. I wonder how they even show up, day-in, day-out, and do whatever it is they're doing. I wonder how me or anyone else can expect them to do anything different than whatever it is they're currently doing. I mean, just by being here, they've accomplished a hell of a lot more than I ever would or could if I was in their position.

It's a raw deal they've been dealt. It's unfair, untenable, indigestible, and like a single spark that grows and multiplies and lights the darkest depths, I want to do something about it.

I need to do something about it.

But what?

Conversations erupt all around me—educrat talk about co-requisite acceleration and retention, about support and testing.

But fuck all of that.

I want to say something—anything—to get us all back to the point that matters, the one we're all working so hard to ignore. But I can't. All I can think about is the number *one hundred two* and the way D'Marne's voice shuttered like a slightly torn sail as she spoke it only moments ago.

I'm restless and furious; I'm scared I might explode. But I can't—I won't—explode.

What, then, can I do?

What can any of us do?

There are so many peaks and canyons tucked into these insurmountable mountains. I hate myself for not being brave, for not having answers that don't exist. The only response me and my privilege can muster is to tuck both of my hands into my pockets and stare anxiously down at my boots. I got them in Los Angeles from a store on the corner of Lincoln and Venice Boulevards. I didn't pay for them, but I know they retail for $559. *Five hundred fifty-nine* is a big number. It's far, far bigger than *one hundred two*. And even though these two numbers (559 and 102) are seemingly unrelated, it's their current, conjoined context that seems to inspire everything. I wonder as I stand here and stare at my boots, how I can be so concerned with *one hundred two* when I care so little for *five hundred fifty-nine*?

There's weight behind *five hundred fifty-nine*, but it's different than the weight attached to *one hundred two*.

I live in Wisconsin where minimum wage is $7.25 per hour. A Wisconsin resident who works 40 hours-a-week at minimum wage earns a gross, weekly paycheck of about $310. Taxes and pay-ins take a little less than 20%, which essentially means that a minimum-wage Wisconsin worker pulls home roughly $268 each week.

Sources that seem mostly credible report that the average American spends about half of their weekly income on housing. Most of these same sources state that between one-third and one-half of the remaining amount is spent on food. That means that after housing and food, a minimum wage Wisconsin worker has about $89.33 left in their pocket for other things, both essential and non-essential. It's pretty clear what category my boots fall under, but let's just—for the sake of argument—pretend they fall into that other category. If a minimum-wage Wisconsin worker wanted to purchase my boots at the price they retail for, they'd have to work for 6.26 weeks and purchase/pay for nothing but food and housing. 6.26 weeks of work equates to 250.4 hours or 15,024 minutes or 901,440 seconds, which is a fucking eternity, especially when you're thinking about how one hundred two students at a single Milwaukee high school are homeless. It's even longer, I suppose, when you're the one who's actually homeless. The truth is I have no idea how long anything is when you're homeless since I've never been anywhere close to homeless except in the tentacles of my most furious and terrible nightmares. There, of course, and at the butts of bad, tasteless jokes short on consequence, but long on insensitivity.

I wonder how many seconds I could last if I were actually homeless.

It sure as fuck wouldn't be anywhere close to 901,440.

And even with all this, I still can't manage anything but silence in the face of one hundred two homeless 14 to 18 year-olds.

I have so many words for so many other things. I throw words away, toss them around like disposable capital, and yet I can't make a single, goddamned sound for any one of those one hundred two.

So, as I stand here in this massive entryway, the number *one hundred two* careening through my skull, I think about the cost of my silence.

But it's hard to talk about cost.

From a manufacturing standpoint, my silence has no cost since nothing is expended in its production. By all intents and purposes, my silence is the very absence of production.

From an economic standpoint, the cost of my silence is nearly impossible to determine since it's unclear what's lost as a result of it. Also, what's the perceived, apparent, or relative value of my silence? That, too, is nearly impossible to determine. I can't, after all, retail my silence. It doesn't actually exist in a physical, quantifiable sense. The argument, of course, can be made that it exists in a quantum sense—that it has weight and utility and the ability to occupy space—but that discussion is theoretical. This discussion, on the other hand, is real.

The truth is that I don't say anything because I don't have to. I can afford to remain silent. I want to say something, but I don't know what to say or how to say it and because I don't actually have to say anything, I remain silent.

These students—the ones in front of me, all around me—they can scarcely afford my silence, especially those one hundred two.

But none of them know what to say, either.

Their voices don't work; they can't and won't form words because what are those words, anyway? I mean, how can anybody—especially them—possibly begin express the awfulness of homelessness at 17. Or 16. Or 15. Or 14.

Fourteen.

Fucking fourteen.

So they embrace their only seeming alternative, they manifest their voices through their actions, their demeanors. I stay quiet, they rage silently, and we all burn like some junkyard tire fire. How can sentences be strung together, sentences that would become paragraphs and whole essays on injustice and privilege and opportunity (or the dire lack thereof) when words aren't available?

And whose fault is it? Theirs? Mine? Is it the fault of the schools? The administration? The parents? Who's to blame, after all? The system?

It has to be something, doesn't it?

Something has to be to blame for this; something must be at fault.

The awful truth is that it's not the fault of any of those aforementioned things. It would be nice (or at least convenient) if it was. I mean, then we could point to one or two things (maybe even three or four) and assign blame. That would give us all something quantifiable to work with, something physical and manifest. Then we could all dive in, right up to our necks if we wanted to, and fix matters. We could solve the problem and insist that all it took was a fresh perspective, a willingness to get one's hands dirty with organized effort. We could talk about how it really wasn't that difficult, after all. Then, if our solutions proved faulty, we could look for other, less apparent elements—ones that hadn't before emerged—and we could reassign blame to them. Or, we could blame some aspect of the process. We could analyze the process, gather more data, and see where things went wrong. Eventually, we'd really know what or who or how to blame. And that, we'd agree, would make all the difference.

But we can't do any of that.

I mean, we can (and we do) do all of that (and more), but we really shouldn't. We shouldn't do any of it since none of those things—those convenient, quantifiable things—are actually to blame.

It's the silence, really. The silence is the problem. The silence is to blame.

The silence is guilty—mine, yours, theirs, everybody's. Our collective silence is fucking criminal.

And my boots with their $559 price tag?

Well, they're innocent.

After all, they're the only ones talking, the only ones making noise.

I hear their sound every time I take a step.

And it's so fucking loud against the backdrop of my silence—against the backdrop of everyone's sickeningly ridiculous silence—that I can hardly stand it.

I hear my boots all the time, echoing louder and louder with every single step: *Privilege*. *Privilege*. *Privileged*.

Author Profiles

Paul Alexander is the editor of the essay collection *Ariel Ascending: Writings About Sylvia Plath* and the author of seven books, including *Rough Magic*, a biography of Plath, and *Salinger*, a biography of J.D. Salinger that was the basis of Shane Salerno's documentary *Salinger*, which appeared on American Masters on PBS. He has published nonfiction in *The New York Times*, *The New York Times Magazine*, *The Nation*, *The Los Angeles Times Book Review*, *The Village Voice*, *The Boston Globe*, and *The New York Review of Books*, among many others. His poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in *Poetry* (Chicago), *The Sewanee Review*, *Southern Poetry Review*, *POEM*, *Poetry Now*, *Mississippi Review*, *The Louisville Review*, *The Vanderbilt Poetry Review*, *Tar River Poetry*, *The Spoon River Quarterly*, *The Black Warrior Review*, *The Hiram Poetry Review*, *The American Journal of Poetry*, *Connecticut River Review*, *Deep South*, *Cold Creek Review*, and *The Gay and Lesbian Review*. He is the author of *Edge*, a one-woman play about Sylvia Plath. A graduate of The Iowa Writers' Workshop, he teaches at the Eugene Lang College at The New School in New York City.

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Aida Bode is a poet and writer from Korca, Albana, whose works have been published in a variety of online and print magazines including *Prelude*, *Allegro*, *Dr. Hurley's Snake Oil Cure*, *Vayavya*, *Prolific Press*, *Boston Poetry Magazine*, *The Yellow Chair Review*, and more. She's also the author of the well-received novel *David and Bathsheba*, based on the biblical story of King David and Bathsheba. Her writing style is characterized by a poetic sense with a deep philosophical outlook on events. Aida holds an M.A. in English and Creative writing from Southern New Hampshire University. More information about Aida and her writing can be found at www.aidabode.com.

Roger Camp is the author of three photography books including the award-winning *Butterflies in Flight*, *Thames & Hudson*, 2002 and *Heat, Charta, Milano*, 2008. His work has appeared in over 100 magazines including *The New York Quarterly*, *New England Review* and *Witness*.

Grant Clauser lives in Hatfield Pennsylvania. He has two books: *Necessary Myths* (winner of the 2013 Dogfish Head Poetry Prize) and *The Trouble with Rivers* (Foothills Publishing). His poems have appeared in *The American Poetry Review*, *Cheat River Review*, *Tar River Poetry*, *Southern Poetry Review*, and others. He also writes about electronics, teaches poetry at random places and chases trout with a stick. Read his blog at www.uniambic.com.

Carlos A. DeJuana is a native Texan but has lived in Washington, DC, the past 12 years. His poetry has appeared in *Live Nude Poems*, *Synethesia*, and *riversEdge* (published by UT-Pan American). A former journalist, he now works for the federal government. When he's not taking care of my wife and two kids or scribbling down poems, he tries to find time to take a nap.

Ed Doerr's work appeared most recently in *One Teen Story*, *Water/Stone Review*, *The Tishman Review*, *Firewords Quarterly*, and the *New York Times* bestselling collection *It All Changed In An Instant*, among others. When he's not writing, he teaches middle school English in New Jersey, where he lives with his wife and has recently completed a masters degree in Creative Writing from Fairleigh Dickinson University.

Kelly Dolejsi is a graduate of the MFA program at Emerson College and a YMCA climbing instructor. Her work has been published most recently in *Fifth Wednesday*, *Denver Quarterly*, *Vine Leaves Literary Review*, *Up the Staircase Quarterly*, and *1001*. She also has poems forthcoming in *North American Review*, *Allegro*, and *Timberline Review*.

George Drew was born in Mississippi and raised there and in New York State, where he currently lives. He is the author of seven collections, most recently *Pastoral Habits: New & Selected Poems* (2016), *Down & Dirty* (2015) and *The View from Jackass Hill* (2011, winner of the 2010 X.J. Kennedy Poetry Prize), all published by Texas Review Press. His eighth collection, *Fancy's Orphan*, will be published in 2017 by Tiger Bark Press. His work also has been anthologized, most recently in *The Southern Poetry Anthology, II: Mississippi* (Texas Review Press, 2010), *Down to the Dark River: An Anthology of Poems About the Mississippi River* (Louisiana Literature Press, 2015) and *The Great American Wise Ass Anthology* (Lamar University Literary Press, 2016). George has won several awards, most recently the 2016 Knightville Poetry Contest (The New Guard) and the 2014 *St. Petersburg Review* poetry contest; he is First Runner Up for the 2017 Editor's Choice Award, *Chautauqua Literary Journal*, and his poem will appear in the fall. In 2010 his collection, *American Cool*, won that year's Adirondack Literary Award for best poetry book of 2009. *Pastoral Habits*, his New and Selected, was nominated by Texas Review Press for the 2016 Kingsley Tufts Award, the National Book Critics Circle Award and the Paterson Poetry Prize, as well as several others. George was a recipient of the Bucks County Muse Award in 2016 for contributions to the Bucks County literary community.

Chris Ellery is the author of four collections of poetry, most recently *Elder Tree* (Lamar University Literary Press, 2016), and co-translator (with Asmahan Sallah) of *Whatever Happened to Antara* (University of Texas Press, 2004), a collection of short stories by the award-winning Syrian author Walid Ikhlassi. He has received the X.J. Kennedy Award for Creative Nonfiction, the Alexander and Dora Raynes Poetry Prize, and the Betsy Colquitt Award. Ellery was a Fulbright professor in American literature at the University of Aleppo, Syria, 1999-2000. He is a member of the Texas Association of Creative Writing Teachers and the Texas Institute of Letters.

Jay Lee Ellis grew up between Dallas and East Texas, performing professionally on drums from age eleven. He later attending Berklee College of Music and has graduate degrees in writing and literature from UT Dallas and NYU. His nonfiction includes *No Place for Home* (Routledge) on Cormac McCarthy's novels, and his creative work has most recently appeared in *Flash Fiction Magazine*. Still playing jazz, he has performed at New York's Knitting Factory, and at Red Rocks Amphitheatre—not far from Boulder, where he teaches writing at the University of Colorado.

Dominic Fonce is an undergrad English major at Youngstown State University. He's been published in fiction, poetry, comics, and journalism. Some of his work can be found at *Calliope* of the University of Mount Union, *Penguin Review*, *The Jambar*, and the forthcoming summer 2017 issue of *3Elements Review*.

D.G. Geis lives divides his time between Houston and Galveston, Texas. His first full length book, *Fire Sale* was published by Tupelo Press (Leapfolio) in February 2017. His chapbook *Mockumentary* will be published in May of 2017 by Main Street Rag. Most recently, his poetry has appeared (or is forthcoming) in *Fjords*, *Skylight 47* (Ireland), *A New Ulster Review* (Ireland), *Crannog Magazine* (Ireland), *The Moth*, (Ireland), *Into the Void* (Ireland), *The Naugatuck River Review*, *The Tishman Review*, *Zoomorphic* (U.K.), *The Kentucky Review*, *The Fish Anthology* (Ireland), *Blue Bonnet Review*, *Drylandlit*, *Permafrost*, *Ink and Letters*, *The Journal of Creative Geography*, *Solstice*, *The Worcester Review*, *Broad River Review*, *Riddled With Arrows*, *Cloudbank*, and *Under the Radar* (Nine Arches Press UK). He is editor-at-large of *Tamsen* and a finalist for The New Alchemy (University of Alaska) and Fish Prizes (Ireland). He was also a finalist for the 2016 Main Street Rag Chapbook Competition, The Edna St. Vincent Millay Prize, The 2016 Louis Award, The 2016 Rash Award, and was shortlisted for both the 2017 Percy French Prize (Strokestown International Poetry Prize Ireland) and the 2017 Ballymaloe International Poetry Prize (Ireland). He has an undergraduate degree in English Literature from the University of Houston and a graduate degree in philosophy from California State University. He was formerly a rancher in the Hill Country of Central Texas.

Sandra Hosking is a professional editor, writer and playwright based in Spokane, WA, USA. Publishing credits include *The Spokesman-Review*, *Journal of Business*, *Glass International*, *Inland NW Homes & Lifestyles*, *Down to Earth Northwest*, *Insight for Playwrights*, *Literary Salt*, *Redactions* and *The Midwest Book Review*. Photography recently appeared in *3 Elements Review* and *Joey*. Hosking holds an M.F.A. in theatre/playwriting from the University of Idaho and an M.F.A. in creative writing from Eastern Washington University.

Michael Hower is a photographer from Central Pennsylvania and has been working in the digital medium for the past four years. Over that time, he has amassed a resume of more than sixty juried, group and solo exhibitions. In the past year he has had solo shows in Wilmington, Delaware and Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. He was also part of a three-person show entitled "Legend" at the Fitton Center for Creative Arts in Hamilton, Ohio last winter.

Richard Jones received an MA from the University of Virginia and an MFA from Vermont College. Jones's first collection of poetry, *Country of Air* (1986), won the Posner Award from the Council for Wisconsin Writers. He has since published several additional collections, including *The Correct Spelling & Exact Meaning* (2009), *Apropos of Nothing* (2006), and *The Blessing: New and Selected Poems* (2000), which won the Midland Authors Award. Jones has received the Coordinating Council of Literary Magazines' Editors Award for his work editing the literary journal *Poetry East*. He has also edited the anthologies *Poetry and Politics* (1985) and *Of Solitude and Silence: Writings on Robert Bly* (1981), which he co-edited with Kate Daniels. His

own poetry appears in the anthologies *Poetry 180* (2003, ed. Billy Collins) and *Good Poems* (2003, ed. Garrison Keillor). Jones has also produced a CD on the art of poetry, entitled *Body and Soul*. His website is www.RichardJonesPoetry.com.

Mikael Kelly grew up in Oakland, CA. He lived in New York and Argentina, and now lives in his home city again with his lovely girlfriend. He has new fiction forthcoming in *Whiskey Island* and is working on a novel.

Robert Lee Kendrick lives in Clemson, SC. He has previously published, or has work forthcoming, in *Tar River Poetry*, *Xavier Review*, *Louisiana Literature*, *South Carolina Review*, *The Cape Rock*, and elsewhere. His chapbook, *Winter Skin*, was released in 2016 by Main Street Rag Publishing. He can be found online at robertleekendrick.net.

Elizabeth Lemon recently graduated from The University of Texas at San Antonio with an M.A. She has been living in San Antonio for the past two years, and has lived in Austin and Wichita Falls as well. She now works as a public school English teacher in downtown San Antonio.

Travis Logan has had a story in *Bull: Men's Fiction*, one forthcoming in *As You Were: The Military Review*, and another in a compilation by the Veteran's for Peace Spokane called *Vet Lit II: ...So It Goes*. He's also had some headlines published in *The Onion*.

Rachel Essaff Maher lives in Southern Vermont and writes poetry, fiction, and nonfiction. Her work has previously appeared in *The Pitkin Review*, *Spires*, *Hersam Acorn Seasonal Guides*, and *The Vermont Money Saver*.

Mohini Malhotra is from Kathmandu, Nepal and lives in Washington, D.C. She is a development economist, founder of a social enterprise (www.artbywomen.gallery), and a writer. She loves language and her fiction has appeared in *Blink-Ink*, *Flash Frontier*, *82 Star Review*, a *Quiet Courage*, and *The Writers' Center*, among other journals.

Anne Panning's novel, *Butter*, was published in 2012 by Switchgrass Books. She has published two short story collections: *The Price of Eggs* and *Super America*, which won The Flannery O'Connor Award for Short Fiction and was selected as a *New York Times* Editor's Choice. She has also published short fiction and nonfiction in places such as *Beloit Fiction Journal*, *Bellingham Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Fourth Genre*, *New Letters*, *The Florida Review*, *Passages North*, *Black Warrior Review*, *The Greensboro Review*, *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *Kalliope*, *Quarterly West*, *The Kenyon Review*, *Newsweek International*, *The Laurel Review*, *Five Points*, *River Teeth*, *The Hawaii Review*, *Cimarron Review*, *West Branch*, *Phoebe*, *Clockhouse Review*, *Thin Air Review*, *River Styx* and *Brevity* (4x). Four of her essays have received notable citations in *The Best American Essays* series. She has also published poetry in *32 Poems*, *Hotel Amerika*, *Fugue*, and *Room Magazine*. Her forthcoming memoir, *Dragonfly Notes*, will be published in 2018 by Stillhouse Press. Her next book project is a novel, *All-You-Can-Eat*, about a competitive food eater. She lives in upstate New York with her

husband, Mark, and two children, Hudson and Lily, and teaches creative writing at SUNY-Brockport.

Kenneth Pobo has a new book forthcoming from Circling Rivers called *Loplop in a Red City*. In addition to *West Texas Literary Review*, his work has appeared in *Two Thirds North*, *Nimrod*, *Mudfish*, *Indiana Review*, and elsewhere.

Marilee Richards is the 2016 winner of the Asheville Poetry Review William Matthews Poetry Prize.

Travis Truax earned his bachelor's degree in English from Southeastern Oklahoma State University in 2010. After college, he spent several years working in various national parks out West. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Flyover Country*, *Quarterly West*, *Pinyon Review*, *The Flagler Review*, and *The Eastern Iowa Review*. Currently, he is in Bozeman, Montana.

Tommy Vollman is a writer, musician, and painter. He has written a number of things, published a bit, recorded a few records, and toured a lot. Tommy was nominated for a Pushcart Prize for his 2016 short story, "Jimmy." Recently, he's had stories appear in *Two Cities Review*, *Palaver*, *Pithead Chapel*, *Gris-Gris*, and *Per Contra*. He was selected as an Honorable Mention for *Glimmer Train*'s "Family Matters" and was a finalist for *Glimmer Train*'s "Short-Story Award for New Writers". He has some black-ink tattoos on both of his arms. Tommy really likes Kurt Vonnegut, Two Cow Garage, Tillie Olsen, Greg Dulli, Tom Colicchio, Willy Vlautin, and Albert Camus. He's working on a novel entitled *Tyne Darling*. Tommy released a new record, These Ghosts, in November of 2016. He currently teaches English at Milwaukee Area Technical College and prefers to write with pens poached from hotel room cleaning carts. He can be found online at www.thomasjamesvollman.com.

Loren Walker was born in Ontario, Canada, and now lives and works in Rhode Island. She holds a Master of Arts in writing and poetry, and published her first novel *EKO* in 2016. Her website is www.lorenwalker.net.