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My Mother Was a Bottle Blonde 1 & 2

Annelise Duque

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Inscape is the inward quality of objects and events as they are perceived by the joined observation and introspection of a poet, who in turn embodies them in unique poetic forms.

—Gerard Manley Hopkins
FALL 2017

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Editor’s Note

“The greatest thing a human soul ever does in this world is to see something, and tell what it saw in a plain way...To see clearly is poetry, prophecy, and religion,—all in one.”
—John Ruskin

Here we have the taste of the moon; a chickadee with a bullet in its wing laid to rest on flowers, flowers that will try to breathe the wild world into your lungs; here we have thirst like a freshly burnt home; corn dogs warm from the deep fat fryer; an image of your father that you’ve never seen before; here we have Jesus and leopards lying in parks; a dead woman’s braid before her burial, her bobby pins that you will weave onto your daughter’s glowing head; here we have a garnished zither; a knife that you’ll grip tight, tighter; here is a canyon, your lover is on the other side, look down, look up, look down again; here is a cave’s mouth; here is a brown hand that you slip dollars into; a bandaid to patch up the earth.

Here are pearls from the bottom, to make the world a little more bearable, a little more delicious, a little more aurora borealis.

January 2018
Meg McManama
THE GARNISHED ZITHER
by Michael Turner
translated from Li Shangyin (c. 813–858)

The garnished zither unending,
   its fifty strings.
One string for one peg:
   I think of handsome years.

The scholar Chuang lucidly dreamt
   of mystified butterflyhood.
The prestigious lord took his spring heart
   to form a cuckoo.

The deep sea, the moon luminous:
   a pearl with tears.
The indigo field, sun inviting:
   the jade uncurling smoke.

This bliss could wait
   for full recollect.
Still, this while
   has been burned forgotten.
John James Audubon woke to the sound of a mountain chickadee singing her distinctive song somewhere nearby. He blinked cold dew from his eyelashes. He did not quite speak the language of the mountain chickadee, but its dialect was similar enough to that of the black-capped chickadee for him to understand the essence of the conversation: she was telling a friend about her plans to renovate her nest.

Audubon extricated himself from his makeshift bed on the ground, straightened his coonskin cap, and tucked his gun under one arm.

“Good morning,” he whistled. The chickadee language always sounded so melancholy to him; even a simple greeting took on a kind of sadness.

“Hello!” replied the chickadee. “Join us. We’re just south of the clearing, in an elm tree.”

Audubon flattened a path of asters in his stride. The rising sun cast a peachy glow over the scene, reflecting off of the barrel of his gun. He adjusted the weapon before walking into the woods, his anticipation growing with each step, fully alert, not even noticing the numbness in his toes. A gentle breeze from the northwest played in his hair. He had yet to paint the mountain chickadee.
The birds froze as he approached. “It’s all right, friend,” he sang. “It’s me.”

Upon catching sight of Audubon, one of the pair flew away (so easy, so graceful), but the other bird, the singer, relaxed. She was a lovely thing, with a soft, oat-colored underbelly, striking blue-gray tail feathers, and a large, intelligent, black and white head.

“Your chickadee is wonderful,” she said. She looked at him curiously. “Are you—would you happen to be John James Audubon?”

Audubon smiled, flattered to be recognized so far away from home. He felt it was as it should be. “Yes,” he whistled. Identifying himself may have been a slight risk, but he had to find out how the little bird had heard of him, what she knew of his illustrious adventures.

“I have a message from your son,” sang the chickadee. “He said to look for a Frenchman pretending to be Daniel Boone who could sing chickadee.”

Her mocking tone annoyed Audubon. “Well, what’s the message?” he asked.

“He just wants you to come home,” the little songbird replied. “He says that you have ignored his last thirty-two letters, so he had to find another way to get the message to you. He says his mother misses you and needs you to come back home now to support the family.”

Audubon laughed with sincere puzzlement. “But it’s November! If I came home now I would miss all the winter birds,” he said, as if explaining something very obvious to someone very obtuse.

Before the chickadee could reply, she was lying on the forest floor with a bullet hole in her left wing.

Audubon gathered her up in his hands with tender care. She looked at him with silent reproach as he stabbed her through her
heart with his pocket knife. He could do it without spilling much blood on her breast. His shoulder smarted slightly from the kick of his gun. Working quickly, he glued strewn feathers back into place, strung fine wires through her wings, and posed her still-warm body in her never-to-be-renovated nest before rigor mortis set in. She really was a gorgeous little thing.

He whistled a chickadee song as he rendered the finest taxonomic details of her plumage in watercolors, taking pains to capture the inquisitiveness of her face. She looked almost alive.
MEXICAN MOTHERS OF AMERICA
by Mallory Dickson

Let your kids belong!
Get them out of their casas and cuartos

and into a friend’s beat-up Chevy lleno de
music, not bachata but country

guitarras swaying to blonde hombres and chicas.
And when you cook chicken, rice, and beans

and cook them you must, give it to the abuelos.
Slip dollars into brown hands

venturing through the electric arches
of fast food and fake Hispanic buffets.

Let them play football, the American
kind, and leave their soccer balls olvidadas.

Fifteen is no longer the fiesta, Hola is no
longer a serious greeting.

Forget your abrazos and warm latino
soul. Shake hands instead, when
absolutely necessary.
They’ll thank you for the neutral colors,
the white hips and flat r’s.
Soon they will forget the meaning of their names.

-After Frank O’Hara
Where do houses go when they die?
—Loone, “Offering”

On August 17, 1959, the Montana sky likely shone bright. The moon was full and large over the rugged landscape; the moonbeams brilliant, unmarred and unhindered by light pollution or smog. The campsites inside Yellowstone National Park, as well as those that surround the park, were packed.

The season was past its peak, but reports from that day describe the campgrounds and cabin-filled neighborhoods of the Madison River Canyon as full of life, full of families, full of slumbering people from across the country who had come to brave the August cold and see the great landscapes of the West.

Just like the annual snowmelt causes Hebgen Lake to swell and expand, the summer months cause hordes of visitors to pool into every valley and riverbed in the Madison River area. Like every other year, 1959 was packed with tourists. But August 17 couldn’t have been expected; it was a snap-shot of the true character of southwest Montana, a reminder of the raging behemoth just a few miles under the soil, a
supervolcano as temperamental and dangerous as humanity’s most destructive forces: love and lust and greed and every other human avarice. But these pressures are easy to forget when they lurk so many miles beneath the soil. The visitors must have forgotten them, or perhaps the swelling heat beneath the Earth’s crust was unknown to them, a surprise as sudden as the twinkling in a woman’s eye and just as debilitating.

But this night served as a reminder.

Mountains fell and rocks roared as they rolled into campgrounds. The earth shook as landslides pushed the once-languid canyon air at speeds of one hundred miles per hour. In this tight space, the air whipped hard, hard enough to rip tent spikes out of the ground and throw some of the poor campers off their feet. The noise of the gusts and the crumbling earth was deafening.

Fault lines collided and scraped, one against the other in the most ancient form of dance. One side of the Hebgen lake-bed, which had sat calmly for years on the Madison River valley, dropped, causing the water to slosh in torrents across the artificial dam. The water tore pieces of cement off the structure as it roared over and into the valley below. Cabins, too, were pulled up and away from their foundations by the waves. But the flood’s destroying angel passed over some edifices and left them for a later destruction, a fate of erosion as the water wore them down grain by grain; some cabins were left behind, some tents submerged, and some roads never driven on again.

The mountains imploded a few miles down the valley from Hebgen dam, re-plugging the waters that had jumped up and over that original barrier with rock, dirt, and debris. This landslide may have saved the communities below, but it trapped those Madison
homes and it trapped twenty-eight people’s weary bones. The new nature-made dam birthed a new lake that swallowed those relics of life and leisure whole.

It took days for the rescue workers to count the casualties; it took days for the report on the severity of the earthquake to come in: a 7.5 on the Richter scale, earth-shattering. Still, it would be another couple of months before the Forest Service could track the scarp lines and understand how drastically this moment changed the environment, creating small hillocks and little ravines, ripping the roots of trees from their mother earth. In all the years since, after all the miles walked to measure the fault lines and the progress of new vegetation growth, we still might not understand those effects. Our human proclivities cannot, in the course of a few years, measure each shoot of new vegetation growing and cementing the soil back together, nor can the faunal shift at new waterholes be completely tracked. The ecology is bigger than us; it’s bigger than our science and our measurements.

Maybe it was our determination to understand the damages and their cause that led to a visitor’s center being built on the edge of this newly created Quake Lake. But more likely, it was our morbid fascination with watching things fall apart. Maybe we want to stand on the edge of destruction. That explanation comes a lot closer to explaining why people who are driving through the area will often stop to view the skeletons of old cabins buried in the clear waters of the lake, to see the dreams that the flood couldn’t quite sweep away.

***
Everyone I've ever loved is full of ghosts. Every time they leave they make another one.

—Loone, “Offering”

Nearly fifty-seven years after the devastation, she and I stood on the shores of Quake Lake. The overcast of the day produced colder, darker water, too dark to see the old structures left behind, but not dark enough to hide the memory of those twenty-eight souls drowned beneath the waves. We rehearsed the stories and tried to spook each other with the violence that lay just beyond the shore. But we didn’t sleep in that valley; we had learned from the mistakes of those who came before. Instead, we drove back to Utah, back home. We drove back to safety—or the closest thing to it.

Our two warm bodies weren’t huddled under thick blankets next to wood fires in a cold Montana cabin; instead, we curled up like the Pompeii lovers across a couch in a house on the edge of a cul-de-sac on the outskirts of Salt Lake City. The cold mountain wind didn’t whip over our thick fabric tent; instead, we swam in cool basement air. We didn’t face the elements, but lazily indulged in each other’s laughs and promises.

It would be our last night alone with each other for over a year. We pressed our bodies tight, too tight, like tectonic plates building pressure as denim and skin rubbed together. Friction. Heat. Thoughts and hopes and fears about our future building and becoming the pressure that shook deep within us both.

Until the tension broke. The words that would change the landscape between us came pouring out.

Rolling over, onto me, and straddling my abdomen, she said,
“Maybe we should get married the winter after I get back.” My body trembled beneath hers. She leaned down and kissed me on the lips.

“Do you promise?” I asked, my side of the fault line pushing back. She did with her smile. I just laughed.

It took rescue workers a few days to count casualties in Montana; it took us roughly the same amount of time. After three days, she boarded a plane and moved to Portugal for longer than I knew how to calculate; at least we could measure the distance. 5,113 miles put a number on the damages—it became the length of the scarp lines between us, splitting our communication over time zones and continents. Still, a few months passed before we really knew what to make of our landscape. Months of talking long-distance, months of letters helped us to survey the new territory that was searing with uncertainty, hidden miles beneath a crusted-over promise—uncertainty that came boiling up at night, my stomach aching beneath the sheets, my brain waiting for sleep to come, replaying our fading memories.

The Yellowstone fault lines still sit atop magma chambers that allow the earth to rise and fall, breathe in and out, offering hope that the tears might realign. But our faults seem crystallized, cooled by time and tied in place by the growing root systems of new lives, new priorities. Short, terse replies, like fault scarps between us, hardened into long stretches of silence: December never came. It’s hard to keep a promise across continental lines. But on occasion, I still find my mind retracing the crevice that divides us, as if this will offer me some kind of peace.
ODE TO THE SHOEHORN
by David Garner

Hesitant attendee;
sinner’s ferry;
usher who escorts others to their seats
but is never seated for the show;
Olympic diver; claw
which descends in an arcade crane game
and emerges empty eternally;
doorman forced into early retirement;
lapdog; dutiful confessor;
Jacob called-Israel;
you who at the cave’s mouth,
before the eyes of the trail-master,
rappel into the unknown,
and return as a mute,
you who began life as an elephant’s tusk,
you who broke off from the antler of a battling stag;
you who were replaced by plastic or rebuked by impatience,
servant who is unseen except as summoned;
un-breaking barrier—we write you here.
Edward VanHeiden weeps into his hands.

I hear his rough body scrape against his side of the confession box as he speaks, lips thick with spit, his plethora of sins. They are the same as last week.

I am doing my best, I promise! I don’t want to look at Fräulein Stella, but she is temptation itself! And this morning she did it again! When we hopped off the cart at the field—and I was thinking pure thoughts, I swear—and her skirt caught the edge of the cart. She got so tangled in it, laughing and hooting and making a fuss for everyone to see. And then she looked right at me, and I smiled! I didn’t want to smile, but it happened so fast, like sneezing. I know my wife knows, and I promise I try! But we are always put in the same row to hoe, and I can’t stop. It’s only looking.

I recite without passion. The Lord has taught that betraying your wife in your mind is just as wicked as using your body. You have sinned. You have done wrong, my son.

I call him my son although he is several years older than myself.

—And then she ties her skirt around her waist, and I see her thighs. They are so smooth and tight, young—
I rap my fingers against my leg and roll my eyes.
God is with you, my son, I repeat. Just endure and persevere.
I let my thoughts wander to the body of Della Müllner. It lies on the washing table behind the altar and behind the curtain, the corpse fractured and purple. The odor of her death seems to sully the entire chapel. The stench is either her or Edward, huddled on the other side of the confessional, refusing to mask his naked shame. He comes daily, shirking the last two hours of work to cry. His clothes are still stiff with sweat from the fields.
As he continues to describe Fräulein Stella in detail, I look through the square window of my side of the confession box. The orange sun peeks its face in the top of the stained glass window, saturating the sunken stones in blues and scarlets. The day is leaving me. I withhold a sigh.
You are forgiven. Go and sin no more.
The words sit dry on my sandpaper tongue. I pause for a breath, and Edward takes the opportunity to describe—again—Stella’s fair hair. I raise my eyebrows at no one. If I were assigned a church in Frankfurt, I wouldn’t have to deal with this.
Eventually I hear him stop to breathe, and I rush out a promise of forgiveness. This time, he hears me. He stutters and blubbers as I continue. Upon taking my last breath, he steps out from his side of the box. I plaster on a smile and emerge as well. His calloused fingers swallow mine in a handshake.
Bless you, Pfarrer, he says.
His palms are rough and unpleasant. I nod demurely, once. I watch as he glides past the pews, his limbs so weak and soft that it seems he will catch the air and drift away. But his large body
stays on the ground. Edward smiles towards heaven as he wafts out the door.

He will be back tomorrow.

My back aches. I swallow once, twice, then rub my hands together. Cleaning a body is a chore. So I first sweep the pew seats, then wipe down the altar, then say the Lord’s Prayer. When I finish, I break form, blessing the village and the people and their sins and the crops and the houses and the foundations of the houses, and I pray we shall avoid another bout of the Black Death. Finally, when the sun is low in the sky and I can no longer justify a delay, I rise from my knees and reach for my basin of clouded Holy Water.

I hear a knock on the chapel doors. I blow air out my cheek.

Come in.

The heavy door opens before I finish speaking. A little girl grunts as she shoves with all her might. When she manufactures a crack big enough, she slips inside the chapel.

My heart drops to my feet. I swallow. The child is young, and—compared to other children—quite beautiful, with bronze curls and raspberry cheeks. I turn away from her.

Pfarrer Weber in Berlin warned me to avoid being alone with beautiful children. He told me there was a plague of lies, stories of old priests committing wicked acts. Naturally, none of these are true, he said. Such things do not happen, but prying eyes can spin stories of deceit, and we must be wary. Pfarrer Weber held my hands, his palms smooth from turning pages of the Holy Word, as he made me promise I would avoid the appearance of all evil—or even insinuated temptation. We are above such things, he said.
The child is staring. I scratch my forehead and look at the floor before her feet.

Hello, dear one. I cannot remember her name. Erica? Agatha? She is one of the Josts’ daughters. Families in the congregation produce children by following the same tried-and-true method as that of planting a good harvest of corn: sow as many seeds as possible, and expect only a few to survive until ripening.

Welcome to the Lord’s house.

Hi, Pfarrer. This one is still young enough that her sudden death would not be a shock or a tragedy. We buried a child around her age last week, and I briefly wonder how many wore this girl’s dress before she ended up with it. Her bare feet slap the floor as she walks down the aisle. Bathed in stained light, she looks my way. Pressing her hands together, bouncing them against her belly, she says, How’re you?

As well as I can ever be in the service of our Lord. Where are your parents?

Still in the fields. Mama likes to finish her rows before she makes supper.

I stand there, holding the bowl of Holy Water.

I see. How may the Lord serve you today?

Her inherited dress still reaches her feet. With time—and luck—she will live long enough to grow into it. The sounds of the fabric scraping against her thin body echoes through the chamber.

Is it true Oma Müller died today?

Indeed, I say. She has been freed from this mortal coil and has been returned to God.

Oh. Her gaze trails the empty pews. Can I see her?

I blink. What?
She stops and fingers a chipped armrest.

Oma Müller used to live in the house two away from my house. We’d run races in front of her door all the time. She was really mean. Awful Abigail, she’d call me.

Abigail.

Death is a part of the plan, Abigail. She is at peace with God.

Oh.

I sway, waiting for her to leave. Her clear eyes meet mine.

So can I see her or not?

I look out the window. There is no one nearby. The villagers won’t return from the fields for an hour or so. I shrug, intrigued.

I suppose for a few minutes. Then you’d best be on your way before anyone comes.

She grins and frolics forward. I pull up the curtain to the backroom, brow furrowed. I check the window again, seeing no one. She enters. I follow.

The room is cluttered with used robes and dirty rags. The washing table lies in the middle, well worn and oft used. I am grateful that I wiped the table for the most obvious blood puddles before Abigail came in. Now Della Müller’s broken body is only glazed in an orange film, dried and splitting. Her neck is twisted to one side, jaw unhinged. One leg is backwards.

Abigail stares, mouth wide.

Hi Oma Müller.

I hide a smile. I give the appearance of ignoring her as I snatch up a bronze-stained rag and wet it. I wash the face.

How come you’re cleaning her?

The water trails down Oma Müller’s cheekbones and pools in
her ears and open mouth.

I clean her to honor the creation of her body, I explain with care. According to the Bible, God made it. Now it is empty, and we reverence Him by cleaning His creations.

Oh. Well why are her eyes still open?

My tongue presses against my teeth.

Because she is empty. It doesn’t matter if her eyes are open because she’s not here. This is just her body.

Will she ever come back?

I wipe along the eyebrows.

She shall return to her body at the Resurrection. But the body is not her—only her soul is who she is. Her body was a shackle, an evil prison. And now she is free from the sin of it.

Oh. She doesn’t blink while she watches. I am awakened to my movements. I take extra time rubbing Della Müller’s hairy chin, striving to appear engaged in my work.

If she’s gonna get resurrected, maybe we should close her eyes then. She won’t want to wake up with her eyes open.

I say I’m not going to close the eyes.

Okay, I guess.

Abigail rocks on her toes, hands behind her back. She tilts her head. How’d she die?

I wipe around the nose and mouth, caked with years of sweat and dirt. Sunspots and worry lines underneath manifest themselves.

She fell out of a tree.

Huh. Abigail takes two steps forward. Her lips pull together like a period. Why was she in a tree?

My shoulders tighten. I don’t want to say that Della Müller came
in a few days prior asking about the consequences of taking one’s life out of God’s hands and into their own. She asked how badly hellfire hurts and postulated whether—like a scorch mark from a match—someone could adapt to its perpetual throb. I informed Della Müller that we are expected to rise above our bodies and their base, violent impulses, regardless of our temporary circumstance. Della Müller didn’t shake my hand when she stepped out of the confession box, neglected making the sign of the cross, and went crying into the night.

I tell Abigail none of this. Instead I say, I don’t know. Sometimes adults do funny things.

But they don’t go in trees. They know they’re high.

I don’t respond. She watches my hands move up and down the body’s voiceless leather neck. Cold water drips off my fingers as I squeeze out my rag and start on the left arm.

Can I help?

I am not sure if you want to. This is harder than it looks.

It looks easy, though.

I raise an eyebrow and continue working. Abigail skips to a cluttered table and rifles through a sack of rags. She pulls out the grayest one she can find. Holding the rag by two corners, she inspects it on both sides in the dim light before returning. She drops it in the basin of water, letting it float atop for a minute. Then she presses in the center and drowns it. With a little hum, she wrings it once and hurries over to the end of the table.

Can I help do the feet?

I say nothing. She is grinning wide, loose hair bouncing as she lifts onto her toes. She starts rubbing the soft underbelly of the feet.
Then she says, Her feet are wrinkly. Like brown apples, only more wrinkly.

Shouldn’t you be going home?

Abigail wraps her rag around an ankle. She twists it. They don’t mind I’m here. Mama doesn’t look for us anymore, except if we get in trouble. If I was in a tree like Oma Müller, I’d be in huge trouble. Maybe if Oma Müller had a mama like mine, she’d know not to be in the tree. Or if Opa Müller was still alive, he would’ve told her to get down.

I finish the arms. It feels improper, somehow, to undress the body in front of the girl. So I lift the neck of Della Müller’s dress and reach blindly, tapping the woman’s belly and breasts. I feel her ribs shift as I press down. Abigail watches, holding her rag with both hands. I redden in shame. I have never been embarrassed touching a body before.

Does she hurt?

No.

I look at the floor and study the knots nestled in the floorboards—how they weave and move at my feet.

Abigail soaks her rag again. The water now drips a dirty brown.

I give up on Della Müller’s covered parts. I will finish when Abigail leaves. I pull out my rag and wash it. I start in on the upper legs. We continue in silence, both rubbing the filth from her body, a steady rhythm in each of our movements. The sounds of us brushing her flesh echo like calling birds.

My baby sister died last month.

I know, I say. I remember.

It’s because she was so little. She couldn’t run fast enough, but
I'm big enough so that if death came for me, I'd run away.

Is that so? I smirk.

She nods, her blue eyes gleaming. With the corner of the rag, she pushes carefully between the toes, a little smile on her face. She hums a little tune. I mirror her, wiping in between Della Müller’s fingers. The webbing between whines red, as if they protest my harsh touch. As if it still feels.

Do you fear death, Abigail?

I watch her expression move up and down.
Mmmm . . . not really. I’m too fast. Death can’t catch me.

That doesn’t make sense.

It does if you pray about it.

Now it’s my turn to purse my lips.

That’s not how prayer works.

Oh. Sorry.

She wipes the curves of the ball of Della Müller’s foot, a sudden frown on her face. I correct myself.

I suppose prayer can work that way sometimes, in a spiritual sense. After all, when we pray our bodies are strengthened by the Lord. So spiritually we can outrun the Father of All Lies with enough determination and righteousness in pursuing the Pfarrer of Truth. Spiritually, we will all live, even if the bodies we inhabit fall.

My words reverberate in the chamber. I like the sound and taste of them. They savor like an oft-quoted hymn or a beloved idiom.

Okay.

She isn’t listening anymore. She is fingering the rough patch of Old Lady Müller’s backwards foot. Dirt is engraved in her rock-hard heel.

You don’t have to get all the black bits.
But I can, she insisted.
She scrubs hard.

Sorry, Oma Müller, Abigail says as she digs in.
Sorry, she says. Sorry.

I am done, but Abigail is not. So I wipe down Della Müller’s mouth again, trying to force the jaw closed. I listen to the steady rhythm of Abigail’s apologies.


When Della Müller’s feet are buffed pink and soft, Abigail declares herself finished. Folding the rag on the table, she reaches for the twisted foot with both hands. Grunting and groaning, she struggles to flip the leg upright. After a minute, she drops her arms with a loud sigh. Then, wiping her brow, she carries her wet rag back to the basin. Placing it beside the dirty water, she nods once. I reach for a white shroud off the tall pile. It billows as I begin to drape it over her body.

Abigail screams. I jump back.

What?
You can’t be done!
I’m not. I freeze, scared. Of course I’m not.

I watch her moon-wide eyes burn with tears. She edges around the table, her bare feet hitting the floor. She points, accusatory.
You haven’t brushed her hair. You can’t bury her like that!

I keep my arms hanging in the air, the shroud halfway on the corpse. Abigail glares back, defiant. I sigh and let the sheet collapse on Della Müller’s legs. I wipe my hands.

Fine. You can brush out her hair if you want.
Abigail smiles and starts in on it. I have no hairbrush, so she does
it with her fingertips, scraping out tufts of curls from under Della Müller’s ears. Gritting my teeth, I step close and lift the head. Abigail pulls the rest of the hair out from behind the neck and continues.

The woman’s neck pulls and twists as the girl’s hands get lost in the tangles. She sings stories, silly stories, about frogs playing with Jesus and her pfarrer and brother down by the biggest stream by the village, and they play tag and catch frogs. She’s at it for so long that I feel that itching discomfort again of being alone with her. It must be dark now, and anyone could walk in on me watching her work.

So I say, I am going burn a candle for Oma Müller’s soul.

Uh-huh, she says, not looking up.

I peel back the curtain and move into the chapel. As predicted, the sun has fallen below the horizon and the room is cast in purple shadows. I light two candles on the altar, then reach below for a small, white one. I ordered a surplus of votive candles last year after the outbreak. I finger a match and strike it against my leg. It bursts into activity, sizzling to life. I carry its enthusiasm to the dull wick. It catches easily, erupting into an orange animal swaying above dead wax.

The flame on the matchstick burns fast. My fingers grow hot, and I wince at the impact. I flick it out. The ghost of it trails high and fills my mouth and nose. It smells of autumn and the fading of days. I breathe it in. I can taste its spirit on my tongue.

Placing the white candle in the center of the altar, I do not pray for Della Müller. Instead, I watch the second flame, the child of the match, move and dance on its pinnacle. At first, I think it is shackled to the black wick, the prisoner of its anchor. But, with time, I see the flame overcome the string, holding it like a child holding the hand of a parent. Part of me burns to touch it, to scorch myself and feel its
sting for days, but I do not move. I only watch. The wick head glows a soft peach, and it raises its three-pronged arms towards heaven, speaking an elusive song of rapture.

I’m done now.

Abigail pulls the heavy curtain away and comes to join me at the altar. She is unimpressed with the flame.

I’m not really good at braids, but I did my best. I did two braids cause she used to feed those two rats on her porch. I know she did it, but she didn’t tell anybody because rats are gross. But I was sneaky.

Well, Abigail. I turn to her and smile. I still worry about us being caught through the window. Thank you for serving in the church today. The Lord will remember this sacrifice on Judgement Day.

Uh-huh. She bounces on her heels. Well I’m going home now. She starts her way down the dark pews, bending left and right. Something catches in my throat, watching her dance and twirl in her homemade dress that is too big for her. She reaches the door.

Abigail?

She stops and faces me, chin jutted out. I stutter, searching for the appropriate words.

Why did you bother braiding Oma Müller’s hair?

Abigail tilts her head. Her hand rests on the knob. She then grins. ‘Cause her face is so fat. Fatty fat, like some rabbit or something, and she doesn’t look like a person unless she’s got her braids, don’t you agree?

I repeat that it doesn’t matter.

Abigail shrugs. She turns and yanks on the door handle. It doesn’t budge. She says something about hell, a parroted curse from some
loose-lipped farmer in town. I step forward and open it for her. The night outside is bitter. She smiles at me.

Thanks. Goodnight. Bye, Oma Müller!

The door closes. The sound of it rings throughout the chapel like a chant, doubling over itself in vain repetition. It fills the empty space, invigorating the nothingness.

I sway on my feet. My thin body moves on its own as I turn around. I face the golden cross behind and above the altar. The entire day I had forgotten its existence, as it hangs so high.

There is a marble corpse stuck to the cross, hanging low and broken. He is a horrid sight, drenched in black blood. A mournful expression creases His indented eyes. I meet His gaze as the three flames burn at His feet. His mouth gapes, as if He will either speak or groan. I open my mouth as well, and breathe in the quiet echoes of the last chant of the closing door. The sound enters me, whispering in an arrhythmic pulse. I suddenly feel naked.

Looking back to the floor, I shake off the feeling and retreat into the washing room. She still lies there, half covered. I don’t feel comfortable washing under the dress anymore, so I move to the front and grab the edges of the cloth. Then I see the braids.

They are horrendous, haphazard and crude, limply bloated and swinging off the table. I drop the cloth at her waist and, with unsure fingers, I unthread them. My hands tremble as I do so, and I redden as Della Müller’s face bounces when I pull. My hair is short, and hers is long. I haven’t experienced someone’s hair in a long time, and it is smoother than I remembered, like the silk of a bishop’s robe. A few stray strands catch the air like smoke.

After the braids are out, I pull my fingers through her hair again,
Inscape

from root to tip. Just once, for the feeling. Her hairs slip through like a river and flutter down. Before I know it, my fingers stand empty in the air.

I throw the sheet over the purple body and turn away. I shuffle the rags together and furrow my brow at no one. I feel like I have done something unpardonable in this back room; as if I've taken a knife to Della Müller's body and carved her open, and now she won't heal. I cannot rub the grease of her off my fingertips.

Pfarrer!

Edward is back, calling for me. He hasn't endured two hours without sinning.

I move past the table in a rush and heave the dirty rags to the floor. I apologize to Della Müller—apologize in the same blind way I speak to misplaced table corners and strangers on city streets. Jesus looks down at me as I emerge, and I am scared to look up at His face. I know His face. Instead I focus on Edward.

The farmer doesn't even look at me as he slips into the booth. I enter the other side and sit, rubbing the corners of my eyes.

Bless me, Pfarrer, for I have sinned.

Edward begins his rote complaints. They muffle and catch in the thick curtain between us. He continues along in his same, tired way. All about Stella and the sin of her. We cannot see each other, so Edward VanHeiden does not notice a few minutes in when I bend in at the shoulder blades, hunch into my arms, cover my flushed ears, and bite back a sob. I endeavour to do so without betraying myself, but the sound still rises like a smoking tendril, hot between my lips, an animal breaking free.

He stops suddenly and says, Pfarrer?
I am listening. I return to my erect position and wipe my face with full palms. The heat of my shame whines in my innards. I am still here, Brother VanHeiden. Please continue your confession.
In the quiet of a street shaded by an invasive species, beautiful except for its slow strangle of trees you once believed was an embrace, on a day well over 100 degrees, a slow, belly scorch, just outside of the house you were sure had been abandoned, reclaimed by nature many years ago except for the guttural sounds you occasionally heard coming from that direction if you stood at the very edge of the woods in the far end of your yard, the flash of yellow T-shirt you sometimes saw and ignored in favor of abandonedness, the house your parents complained had never been painted correctly, one side left a peely beige—but it didn’t matter because the dingy, not-quite blue was unsightly anyways—the house the school bus stopped at sometimes (you noticed when your parents drove you in the mornings)—it was outside of that house and on that day that your dad pulled over suddenly, asking you what was that, but you couldn’t see anything over the plastic window brim, so you got out, he encouraged you, and there it was; stomach muscles rippling along the pavement through heat haze, the five foot boa constrictor, head confused but scales reflecting the light as they should, a distinct caramel pattern—Sometimes,
even now you still see that ghost boa, your head turned over your shoulder as you’re pulled back into the car, pushing itself over the scorched curb eventually disappearing into wild overgrowth as your eyes are once again eclipsed by the brim of the window.
Knots in stone, steps hacked into a cliff face. Persevera, exquisite mephit. So many ways to climb. Fire, instinct, is a kind of ladder. When like a God
You instinctively throw a grappling hook and climb into a nest of arrows? When like the Anakim
to pull up the ladder after?
DEATHDAY

by Drew Rupard

today I think I will leave
my unfinished seltzer water on the nightstand
shoes kicked under the sofa
leftovers in the fridge
a clutch of cellar spiders by the radiator

otherwise a clean house
making me look good
making it easy on my family and friends

—I know it will be hard for them, days from now
when they read my journals and count my bobby pins
in the bobby pin dish, holding them to their lips
with the faint hope that these once lay in her brown hair,
pretending to smell Pantene, holding the pin close to the eye,
inspecting for places where the gold paint has nicked

then, not knowing what else to do with them,
putting my old pins to use
on their own glowing heads—
they are so easy to lose
after all
The waiter sets the glistening steak in front of me: a gorgeous piece of meat that shines as though covered in a layer of plastic.

Fake steak for fake people with fake names and fake faces.

Even as I stare ahead, I can feel the blood-filled juices—the last warm remnants of an unnamed animal—seeping out onto the pristine whiteness of the plate. I gaze unblinkingly into the face of the man across from me, a man I do not know and do not wish to know. Yet he is there, talking and talking and talking about his villa in the south of France, the faultiness of the American educational system, and the uselessness of history. I cut the meat into tiny pieces to avoid looking at his suede suit jacket and thin lips. My focus is on the pointed blade of my knife. Thin. Delicate. Deadly. It reflects the light like the scales of a butterfly wing.

I feel the overpowering urge to plunge the knife into the man’s vulnerable chest, to end this ceaseless egotism and empty-headed heartlessness for the benefit of mankind, which has enough on its plate as it is. “The Dinner Party Hero,” they would surely call me. “Well, I do what I can,” I would coquettishly reply.
But I sit with my ankles crossed, and I smile and nod and smile and nod with an unnatural frequency, hoping my fraudulency is detectable. I see my lipstick smeared like a bloodstain on the rim of my glass. I think about the poor dead cow, the realest being at this table. I grip the knife tighter.
READING THE HEADLINES
by Anne Thomas

I thank you, Lord,
   for the clear, cool curve of the invisible sky
Dissolved in the implausible rust that throbs on the mountainside.

For eyes pooling light, for light glazing grass
   that quivers under fly leg and wind-lick.
I thank you for bones plumb between muscles
   and veins branching unbroken from finger to lung.
For nerves drinking air and air dusting to night,
for a face open to the moon.

Though the next night be seared and shattered,
   this one breathes, pond-dark with stars.
ON SELLING OUT
by
Kessia Robinson

Meg and I flipped out the legs of the fold-up table and heaved it upright. It skewed slightly on the gray brick flagstones of Brigham Square, but held. So we proceeded to deck the tabletop in print copies of *Inscape*, to litter it with flyers, and—of course—to sprinkle candy over every possible surface. Then, with a flourish, we taped signs to the front edge of the table and to the easels around it: “Poet for Hire.” We were set.

The Poet for Hire booth was a way to promote *Inscape*, BYU’s literary magazine, which meant that we had a mission. So—with the zeal of a good cause—we accosted students on their way to and from BYU’s student center, flagging them down with dramatic feather pens, luring them in with chocolate.

“Get a poem portrait,” I cried. “For your spare change, get an original poem written for you by one of our poets right now. On the spot!”

It was a good day for poetry. It was the last week of September 2017; the trees around the square still waved green leaves; pink petunias waterfalled over the edges of enormous cylindrical planters; the sun’s warmth was pleasant, the air crisp.
Soon, all of our poets were busy scribbling away, writing poetical caricatures for people and collecting pennies and quarters as payment in our little lantern tip jar. I myself wrote several poems for passersby. Then, toward the end of my shift at the booth, one particular student halted before me at the table, his eyes scanning the journals and the candy. “What’s this?”

I explained the Poet for Hire concept. “You want a poem written about you?”

He shrugged. “Yeah, but I don’t have any change.”

“That’s okay,” I said. The booth was more about promoting Inscape than turning a profit. “This one can be for free.”

I interviewed the young man briefly, sifting through his life for poetical details. I found out his name was Mark, that his major was computer science, and that he adored his girlfriend. Nodding, I sat at a chair by the table and started to scratch out a poem on a notepad.

Multiple times, Mark said, “I just feel so bad that I don’t have any change.”

I assured him this was fine and continued writing. Then, when I was almost done, Mark blurted, “Oh! I know what I can give you!”

I glanced up to see him fishing through a leather wallet. Then I focused back on the paper. I was on the last two lines when something plopped onto the table in front of me.

My eyes flickered over to see what Mark had given me—and I froze. Because it was a condom.

Unmistakably. Square, orange wrapper. Trojan logo. There it was. I gawked down at it.

And then an uncomfortable, bizarre thought squirmed through my mind: How are you paying me, exactly, sir? What do you have in mind?
Slowly, I raised my head to peer at Mark—and he mirrored me, so that we lifted our gazes from the condom in sync until our eyes met.

Then Mark looked away, a flush creeping up his neck.

“That wasn’t what I was going to give you!” he said, snatching the condom off the table and burying it back in his wallet.

He pulled out a fast-food coupon instead and placed it in the tip jar.

I hurriedly finished the poem, ripped the page out of the notebook, and handed it to Mark. He took it and raced away, humiliated—poor thing—and I sat back in my chair, alternating between laughing and furrowing my brow.

Thoughts flitted through my mind quick and liquid as a flock of starlings. But Mark didn’t need to worry. I didn’t spend a second puzzling over Mark and his girlfriend, over the BYU Honor Code (which calls for complete abstinence), or over Mark’s embarrassment.

Nope.

I was too busy wondering, with a bemused sort of grin, whether the universe was trying to tell me something. Was selling my artwork for a profit like this a form of prostitution? Suddenly, the phrase “Poet for Hire” seemed disturbing.

Even now, weeks after the Poet for Hire booth, I’m still considering the implications of Mark’s accidental offering—because the fact is that “selling out” is a true concern for artists. It’s an old paradoxical conflict, because most writers do sell their work. They participate in a market for novels, for poetry, for essays, trading their precious artwork for pennies and quarters and royalties.

Yet, for many writers, publication isn’t about the money. Rather, it’s about gaining a readership; it’s about the joy of witnessing your art reach another person, affect them, change them. It’s a deep,
vulnerable form of communication, my soul to yours, and as such feels a universe away from profit margins, from haggling, from the vulgar daily battles waged over nickels and dimes.

For those more economically minded, this is perhaps difficult to understand. For instance, writing this now, I can’t help but think back to an argument I had a few weeks ago with my roommate, Ann, over the purpose of writing creatively in the first place. She said, staunchly, “As an author, your job is to write things your readers want to hear. Your book is like any other product produced in the marketplace. It’s all supply and demand. You need to create a product that people actually want. That’s the whole point, isn’t it?”

I stiffened, a little offended. Still, I stayed calm, attempting to talk to Ann about the nature of art as personal expression, but she obstinately kept coming back to the marketplace, comparing writers to manufacturers of dollar-store soap and combs.

I found myself getting angrier and clamped my mouth shut in an attempt to remain civil. Because what I wanted to do was stand up, clench my fists, and scream, “What would you know? You’re not an artist! And you’ll never be an artist, because your soul is all abacus and humbug, and I hate you!”

Luckily, I managed to keep my tantrum to myself.

Now, writing this essay, I can calmly admit that, of course, Ann has a point. As writers, we definitely need to consider our audience and compose with their needs in mind. However, what Ann doesn’t understand is that there’s an expectation of integrity among artists—of creating works that are true to some elemental part of who we are as individuals. There’s this uncommunicated understanding between us, a belief that art is connected to identity,
that the value of art is about the personal fingerprint of the artist—and so if we alter our work too much in order to placate an audience, if we destroy the personal touch of the self in order to gain a profit, then we have betrayed ourselves, and our art, and our fellow artists to boot. This is the essence of what it means to “sell out.” This is why the title “starving artist” is a point of pride, a badge of honor among writers everywhere. Because an impoverished artist is probably a true one.

At the Poet for Hire booth, I began to wonder if I’d sold out somehow. The booth itself didn’t worry me. I felt no shame about creating cute, poetical caricatures of passersby in order to promote literature. But I did take the condom incident as a comical and slightly absurd warning and an opportunity for reflection on a larger scale. I wondered: Was I in danger of prostituting my art in some other way?

In terms of literal prostitution—no chance. If there is some weird market out there where writers trade sonnets for sexual favors, that market can count me out.

As for selling out for cash, that’s simply not possible for me. It’s true that I’ve made a little money off of my writing—but not much. And likely, I’ll never make enough of a profit to even have the option of selling out. This is just not a sin I’m capable of committing.

But here’s the thing: there are plenty of other ways to sell out. We can alter or cheapen our art for any number of goods, nebulous or concrete. We can sacrifice our writing even for things as elemental and abstract as love.

Or happiness.
Years before the Poet for Hire booth, my father and I strolled down the sidewalk on University Parkway near BYU campus. It was November, and the trees around us had grown stringy and ragged, just a few brown leaves sagging from their bare branches. As my father and I walked side by side, I kept my hands deep in the pockets of my peacoat to keep them warm, and told my father about the creative writing class I was taking.

My father paused, then said, “Yeah, but you’re too happy to write poetry now. Right?”

I halted mid step, my foot pausing in the air just long enough for me to lose my balance and stumble.

What? I thought.

“Careful,” my father said as I regained my footing.

We continued walking, and the conversation moved on, but my mind didn’t. My thoughts whirred, stuck on that one fascinating statement: You’re too happy to write poetry now.

Where had that sentence come from? And what did it mean?

Apparently, my father believed that happiness undermines one’s ability to write poetry, that poetry and happiness are not conducive, that they are antitheses. And not only did he believe this, but he also saw it as common knowledge, a fact so universal that he didn’t need to introduce the idea or clarify it afterwards.

And then there’s the last word of that statement: now. You’re too happy to write poetry now.

So what was I before?

A miserable writer? A disturbing Poe-esque poet? The cliché tortured artist? At what stage of my life had my father seen me this
way? His statement was like a funhouse mirror; in his words, I saw myself distorted and monstrous—and grotesquely fascinating.

Now, thinking back on this experience, I can’t help but wonder if there’s something to his statement, some kernel of truth in his morose perception of poets—or even writers in general. Is there a blood price necessary in order to don the wings of the artist? Must I pay for each word I compose with a tear?

My father is not the only person to believe that true art requires deep suffering. In fact, this belief seems to be a pretty general assumption. For instance, once, in a creative writing workshop class at BYU, a classmate declared: “My parents gave me a happy childhood—and I will never forgive them for that!”

According to this misery theory, the path to great artistry is as follows: You must have a terrible childhood—you must be able to swap abuse or neglect stories with Jeanette Walls or Dave Pelzer. Or, as an alternative, you could develop a debilitating mental illness, like Sylvia Plath, or Virginia Woolf, or even Leo Tolstoy. Regardless, your unique brand of human agony must compel you to do bedlam-esque things, like put your head in an oven or walk into a river with pockets filled with stones or—at the very least—cut off your own ear.

I may be a bit melodramatic here, and I’m sure there are and have been happy writers, like perhaps Ray Bradbury or Ursula K. Le Guin, or maybe Madeleine L’Engle. Still, counting the number of agonized writers is easier than trying to dredge up some smiling ones, to the point that there’s a common theory that the recipe for high-quality writing includes misery. And I can’t help but wonder as a would-be artist myself how true this

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theory is, and how much I’m willing to endure.

Is this where I’m selling out? Am I really too happy to write poetry?

***

I’ve spent many hours puzzling over my father’s statement. Part of the strangeness of his words lies in the nature of our relationship: we’re not particularly close. Certainly, we care about each other, and whatever interactions we have are generally warm. However, such interactions are intermittent at best. My father lives in Southern California, and I live in Utah, and we almost never talk on the phone. We don’t email. We’re not even friends on Facebook. So our little stroll down University Parkway was not a regular occurrence; it was an oddity.

And, during the entire walk—like most of our relationship—we talked only of surface-level things, safe topics with no room for conflict. We skirted around taboo subjects, subjects that are endless and impossible to quantify but that include the following: my mother and father’s relationship; my mother’s jealousy that my father and I were spending time alone together without her; everything we’d have to do after the brief walk to appease her because of this; any discontentment on his part or mine with family, school, work, or life; any past conflict between us or between either of us and my mother; anything that could remind either of us of said conflict; my social life; finances; food; existential dilemmas; spirituality; personal goals; etc. We eschew these topics and many others and ask no clarifying questions. This is the main rule for keeping the peace.

This means that I have little to no understanding of how my
father sees me as a person. That’s not a safe subject. So his words that day—You’re too happy to write poetry now—gave me a peek into his concept of me, and a weird one at that.

Of course, he was right, in a way. Not about the fact that I’d stopped writing poetry—because I hadn’t. But it’s true that I’m much happier now than I was growing up. I was a thoroughly depressed teenager (isn’t that part of being a teenager?) in a home filled with parental fighting and conflict, and I produced hundreds of agonized poems on the subjects of death and grief and pointlessness.

But here’s the tricky part: my father never read any of those poems. In fact, my parents never read anything I wrote. They didn’t show interest in the nine novels, hundreds of poems, and dozens of short stories and plays I completed before graduating high school. They bragged to people at church about the fact that I was a writer—but that was the extent of their interest. So how did my father know about my emo poetry streak?

Then, several months after our walk together, I remembered. Once, during high school, I was recognized as a finalist in a national poetry competition. As such, I received a congratulatory letter and a free softbound copy of the poems of the winners and finalists. My poem was included in the collection.

That day, my parents expressed excitement about the award—but still, I never imagined that they would actually read my winning poem. They hadn’t read any of my other poetry after all. And after that day, we never discussed the award again.

It would only be years later that my mother would say to me during a casual conversation, “Oh yeah. I remember that poem. It terrified your father.”
Have I sold out in the name of happiness? This might seem like an odd question, but the truth is that I have never been as productive a writer as I was during those years of high school and family conflict—when I was abjectly miserable. If I peer back through the years, it’s easy for me to note that the times that I’ve produced the most work—and the deepest work—have always been my times of greatest distress.

Part of me longs for that—for the suffering that yields poetry, for the pain that spurs me to write. In some ways, I reflect fondly on dark moments that led to artistic triumphs. But would I want to go back to home-life-level misery now? Just the thought makes me shudder. Just the thought makes me feel as resistant as a cat being forced into a bucket of water.

And so I wonder: If it came down to a choice, what would it be? Happiness or poetry? Would I sell out to escape from suffering? Would I surrender my pen if doing so could guarantee me a life infused with joy?

Burdened with such a question, I feel like Christine from Phantom of the Opera—like I must choose between the disturbed masked muse with his mesmerizing music of the night and the happy-ending prince with his sunshine and fine horses.

Of course, for the most part, this is a false dilemma. Fantastic writing doesn’t always stem from broken childhoods or shattered minds. And even if it did, even if art depended solely and completely upon suffering, our portion of pain is not always something that we can choose. Staying true to one’s writing does not guarantee someone a greater portion of life’s hardships and therefore a deeper well of inspiration.
But even so, I don’t think that this dilemma—happiness versus poetry—can be dismissed easily. There’s something that rings true in my father’s words: You’re too happy to write poetry now.

Can it truly be a coincidence that so many of our most renowned writers were depressed? Were recluses? Were disturbed? I think of Fyodor Dostoyevsky. Emily Dickinson. Mary Shelley. Emily Brontë. Edgar Allen Poe. Surely, without their woes, we could have no Grand Inquisitors, no funerals in the brain, no melancholy monsters, no Mr. Rochesters, and no pessimistic ravens.

There must be something, then, in suffering—some path to artistry, some door into the inner chambers of poetry itself. Perhaps it is not the only door, the only path, but it is there. I sense it in these books I read, in these authors and the suffering that lives and breathes just beneath the letters on the page. I sense it in myself, too. For me, at least, suffering—and the confrontation of suffering—is at the center of conflict, of plot, of essay, of poem.

And while perhaps it is true that we cannot always choose the amount we suffer, we can choose how much we are willing to face our hardships, to what degree we are willing to descend into them, and find hidden paths that lead to places we’ve never been.

The reality of this is demonstrated by writers like Lauren Slater, who in her autobiographical work Prozac Diary outlined her fear that if she treated her depression, she would no longer be motivated to write. In a way, this proved true. After she started taking Prozac, she didn’t write much at all for months, years. She no longer felt driven to write in the same way.

Of course, I’m not saying she shouldn’t have taken her medication—just that there does seem to be an inverse relationship between
happiness and poetry, and that there also seems to be at least some element of choice in the matter. That choice may not be as simple as choosing between a pill and a pen, of course. Nor do I think that medication is the solution for any and all misery. But there’s something in this idea—something real, if nebulous, about the choice between happiness and poetry.

So which do I choose?

Perhaps the decision seems simple, the answer obvious. Happiness, you might think. Raoul and true love and fine horses. What else is life for?

But here’s the crux: there’s a reason that this decision is difficult. The very fact that art is comparable to happiness in this way, that the two exist on the same plane, that the two are similarly valuable, is telling. There is a satisfaction that we gain from poetry, a transcendence, a moment of triumph, of overcoming. There is a way in which art alters our view on reality, our view on ourselves, on our own lives. There is a bliss in creation, a catharsis in expression, a godly power in the binding strength of the word. If this is not quite happiness, then it is equally potent.

And perhaps that’s why, in our suffering, we naturally turn toward art—because if we cannot quite reach joy, then we can still reach this. We can commune with the muse and pluck up our troubles like flowers and arrange them on the page in a way that is heartbreaking in its beauty, in its complexity, in its truth.
In all honesty, I don’t believe that my winning poem was especially dark. However, when I think of it through my father’s perspective, I suppose I can catch a glimpse of his terror.

My father was a man who made boasting about his children a sport, who told anyone who would stand still long enough that his daughter played basketball and volleyball and ran track; that she had a 4.4 GPA; that she did mathletes and academic decathlon; that she wrote novels in her spare time. He painted an image of our family through surface-level details like this—an image of flourishing and happiness.

I used to hate it. It felt hypocritical to me. It felt like a lie, especially when, in private, our home was filled with slamming doors, shattered dishes, and shouting.

But here’s the thing: I think my father believed his lie was true, at least about me. Since the surface-level details were all that we talked about, how could he know any different? How could he understand that all of my supposed accomplishments were simply distractions that concealed who I really was? That they were the two-way mirror I set between myself and the world, which reflected back to people only what they wanted to see? How could he know that, behind that mirror, I sat making faces at him, at everyone, hating them, hating myself?

My winning poem was short. It went like this:

Light eradicates darkness,
Eradicates darkness,
Darkness.
This I tell myself.
Moan myself.
Inscap e

Scream to myself
As I rock
In the bile-colored lightning.
Dark
Light
Dark,
Thunder and dark.
A howl from heaven;
Just a smile from hell.
It was called “Too Late for Grace,” and after my father read it, I don’t think he ever saw me the same way again.

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Now, thinking about the Poet for Hire booth—about being offered a condom for my poetry—I once and for all consider whether or not I’ve sold out. Have I traded my poetic nature for a little happiness? Given up a universe of thought for a smile? Have I prostituted my writing for a measure of contentment?

I hope not. It’s true that I’m happier now than in my tortured high school days. But I remain willing to confront my suffering—to explore it, to transmute it into artwork. I’m not afraid to use tears as ink, or to laugh in the face of anguish, to mock it on the page even as I revere it. So I guess if there’s a choice between happiness and poetry, I choose poetry.

Once, after that strange conversation with my father on University Parkway, I tried to explain to him what being a poet meant. This time, my father and I weren’t walking. We were in the car, he with
his hands tight on the steering wheel and me in the backseat, peering out the window. I told him then that I didn’t fear hardship—that I’d learned to enjoy it, in a way, through writing about it.

He paused for a long time. “Do you consider yourself an optimist, then?” he asked.

In some ways, this was still a surface-level question—but it was a deeper one than he normally posed. And I felt strange echoes between the words, as though this inquiry was his way of asking all the questions we had no skills to discuss: Are you happy? Do you know what happiness is? Is it truly too late for you? Too late for grace to touch you? Too late for you to know joy?

All the questions of a concerned father seemed wrapped up in that one: “Do you consider yourself an optimist?”

I thought for a long moment—about happiness versus poetry, about the meaning and satisfaction poets wrest out of darkness, about how my pen equips me to handle every experience, to relish what most people fear.

Do I consider myself an optimist?

“Yes, Dad,” I told him. “I do.”
THE CAPTAINS OF CHAMPAIGN

by Carl Boon

After Kennedy fell, football continued, and we got wasted Thursday nights

at Clark Bar, scarlet-faced and scanning the blondes who came and went.

Blatz was a quarter a pint, and Marty, blonde as corn in June, motioned

with a stitched-up finger to Janey who sat with a vodka tonic, wishing

it would rain. But always the storm clouds, which peaked near Decatur,

resisted us and fell away, leaving September’s heat and the dying fields.

So we went home, looking east and west, stopping at the juke box for the song

that mattered, that would take us breathing and whole toward whatever
paradise meant back then. A girl, a boy, Bobby Darin oohing and aahing and so

unlike us it didn’t matter. We were scraps of Fords in Aurora, screams

in Bourbonnais, the obstacles of mothers in Peoria. We danced a bit and, weary

of it all, went for enlightenment instead. When it didn’t come, Jesus

did, then children and grandchildren and obscene thoughts about the past.

Janey tonight—so far into the future of her—sews a granddaughter’s blouse.

Marty moves his hips across a foyer, staring past Georgia, so wide and forgiving.
BUYING FLOWERS FOR MY WIFE AFTER A DISAGREEMENT

by Kyle Singleton

When I walked into the flower shop on the corner I thought of what my mother once said to me about gifted flowers: “Always trust flowers given on anniversaries. Never trust flowers sent from an unknown admirer. Trust flowers given after the birth of a child, but don’t trust flowers that say, I remember you. You can trust flowers that say, you’re beautiful, and flowers that smell edible, but not flowers that say, I’m sorry.” Then, I wondered what my flowers would say and if they could be trusted, but I looked around the shop anyway. I saw the lilies that stand in elegy, the frangipanis that toast freshly made vows, and the pink peonies that remind graduating daughters they are still young. In the back stood the orchids waiting to pray over the altars of hospital beds, and the carnations that will ask anyone to sleep with them. And right before I left I found a flower that, when you stare into its nectar, breathes a wild world into your lungs. I forgot to buy something on the way out.
Eighteen years ago, Frank traded in his corner office as a bank manager for the greasy kitchen of a food truck fry cook. He never looked back. Frank liked the seat in his cramped cab better than the seat in his cramped cubicle. Frank had no mortgage, no car payment, no pension. All Frank needed was enough money to pay for a tank full of unleaded gasoline, a fryer full of restaurant-quality peanut oil, and a freezer full of the best darned homemade corn dogs and thick-cut french fries.

Frank sat behind the wheel and inhaled the smell, meaty and golden brown, that permeated the vehicle, permanently lodged in the food truck’s sun visors and streaming from the air vents. He turned on the defroster to fight against the chill November air. Frank was on his way to Cincinnati. It was about 1:30 in the afternoon, and Frank had been driving for almost six hours when he saw the sign for Meyers. The town lay thirty-two miles off the highway. He rubbed the knot out of his neck and flicked on his right blinker.

Frank guessed that Meyers had a population of about two hundred as he pulled into the parking lot of the only church in town. The church was small—just one room, Frank suspected—but easy to
spot. Its white walls and steeple blazed against the sky, higher than any other building around. Perhaps Frank should have felt guilty doing his money-changing at the Lord’s house, but he didn’t. He always said, “The best place to be is a spitting distance from the local chapel. Come hell or high water, the Lord will protect the walls of His edifice—and perhaps its parking lot as well.” Besides, it was a Tuesday; Frank knew it didn’t matter if these people were Catholic, Protestant, Baptist, or Seventh-day Adventist—nobody holds mass on a Tuesday.

Sure enough, before Frank even had the awning up, a man with a wide, balding forehead and a pair of bootcut jeans was already approaching the truck. The man asked if Frank was lost as his wide eyes looked up and down the tower of a truck coated in brightly colored paint. But Frank responded that he wasn’t lost as long as he was somewhere where folks enjoyed delicious deep-fried food. The buttery scent of the food truck wafted to the man’s nose. He smiled, shook Frank’s hand, and ran door-to-door telling his neighbors to grab their wallets and purses.

And they did. By dinnertime, half the town had gathered with chairs and tables collected from people’s homes and from the storage closet inside the little church. Children played while the adults drank beer and pop. The men told stories that were partly true, and the women told tales that were mostly lies. The oldest man in town, who everyone called Old Man Walters, had never had a corn dog before. After he took his first bite, a smile spread across his wrinkled face, and his cheeks turned a rosy red. Frank made plenty of money, and when Bobby, the young son of the balding man Frank had first spoken to, asked to see the inside of the truck, Frank showed him the
bubbling oil in the deep fryer and let him stick his head in the big freezer and showed him the pull-out cot. Bobby grinned widely and was impressed. He told Frank that he wanted to grow up to be a fry cook too. Frank laughed hard and heavy and did not miss forcing a smile and pretending that a man in a suit with a six-figure income was being reasonable.

When the town had had their fill of homemade corn dogs and thick-cut french fries, they put the chairs and tables away, gathered their children, and returned to their homes. The stragglers stayed and shook Frank’s hand, thanking him for coming and for frying the best corn dog to ever come to Ohio. Frank thanked them back, found the pastor among them, and asked if he could leave the truck overnight in the parking lot. The pastor told him that he could but that they were expecting some bad weather. Certainly he could find someone in town to put Frank up for the night. Frank told the priest that he was grateful for the offer but that he’d cast off the shackles of mammon and that a man’s dwelling ought to be his temple and that he slept better in his own cot anyhow. The pastor said that he understood, and Frank tucked in for the night.

When Frank woke up, the snow was halfway up the wheel of the truck and still falling. But Frank wasn’t in any hurry. He smiled and turned on the deep fryers. He’d be on his way once they had the roads clear; now it was time to feed some fine people.

At lunchtime, a few townsfolk came by to get a quick bite. But by dinnertime, most of the town had gathered around the truck in their puffy coats and their fluffy mittens. When Frank passed the corn dogs out the window, they steamed in the frigid air. The townspeople ate happily and were not so worried. They congregated
in the parking lot as they waited and filled the pews, laughing and talking together as they sat eating and shielding themselves from the cold. Every time someone opened the church doors, a gust of frigid wind rushed through the chapel. But nobody complained; they simply held their coats a little tighter and took another bite of piping hot corn dog and savored the breaded meat warming their throats and stomachs as it slid downward.

Bobby came to the window and asked for two corn dogs, and when Frank told him he couldn’t eat that much, Bobby replied that one of them was for his dad. But Frank knew that Bobby’s father had already ordered—he had been one of the first and had eaten his fill. Frank just chuckled to himself and handed Bobby the corn dogs, one in each hand. The boy ran off, his feet moving in quick, small steps so that he could push through the layers of fallen snow.

As the people of Meyers ate their dinner, a pine tree—many miles away, straining under heavy snow and leaning from the driving wind—wrested free from the frozen ground and fell onto a power line. The lights of Meyers went out. And Frank’s food truck glowed as if it were a single candle in an empty room. And the people of Meyers slowly began to huddle in closer to the food truck and closer to one another. And for a moment all were afraid of the sudden darkness. And for a moment all were in awe of the beaming lights. And it was like watching a death. And it was like watching a birth. And the remaining townsfolk shuffled from their darkened homes and joined the rest. And then, under the glow of the solitary lights of the food truck, the people of Meyers commenced eating.

The snow continued for days. Eventually, it got so cold that the people’s trucks and cars would not start, whether because of frozen
gasoline or frozen pistons or frozen starters they could not be sure. They tried and tried to get the vehicles to run, but eventually the mechanics and the handymen had to give up and leave the useless husks to be buried beneath the cascade of white. The men would shovel and plow all day, only to awake and find the snow piled just as high. After a couple of days, they had men working through the night, taking shifts, and still they could not keep up with it. When the first group of men working the night shift came back in from the cold, they realized that Old Man Walters was not with them. He had been working some distance from the rest of his group, and when the slowly drifting flakes had suddenly become a swirling surge of snow, they had lost sight of him and had not seen him since. The men had intended to go out searching for Old Man Walters with flashlights and hunting dogs. But the flashlights could not pierce the whirling white, and the dogs pulled against their leashes, dug their heels in by the door, snapped their jaws at their masters, and would not go into that storm. So the men said a prayer for Old Man Walters, asking that God watch over him while they could not.

The town’s small grocer, who had been awaiting a new grocery shipment on the day the snow had begun falling, was quickly running out of food and wasn’t sure how long his stock would last. The roast chickens and canned chili went first, then the bread and sliced deli meat, until the little grocer had little left besides raw vegetables and cottage cheese.

But Frank’s supply was holding, his freezer packed with delicious dogs waiting to be dunked in bubbling oil. That is, until the air vent on Frank’s freezer froze over and Frank was forced to move the corn dogs to the snow pile outside his door. Thankfully, Frank’s generator
Inscape

seemed immune to whatever ailment had afflicted the cars and trucks. Though they could not understand it, the lights stayed lit and the oil kept bubbling. The people kept coming too, in greater numbers now that the food supply had dwindled. The people came to the window, paid, and said, “God bless you!” and “What would we do without you!” But Frank brushed these away and silently thanked God that he was not denying another home loan.

It seemed natural to address God near the food truck or outside the church, for the two had become as one in the minds of the townspeople. The bright colors of the truck had long since been encased in snow, and it looked to be the very same shade of white as the painted walls of the church. When they prayed in the church, the smell of beef and cornbread—manna from heaven—filled their nostrils, and they imagined that heaven must smell just so. When they took their corn dogs from the window, they held them between their mittens and bowed their heads to eat.

It was on Tuesday when the corn dogs ran out. For a moment Frank was concerned. But the people of Meyers were not. Some of them had raised livestock: fed, watered, and bred animals for just such a moment. They would not go hungry. Their supply was not limitless—this was not a ranching town—but they could last a few days. The men slaughtered the animals and Frank cut the meat into strips, breaded it, and deep-fried it. Bobby stood nearby and shouted encouragement, excited to see them at work. They could feed the entire town a meal from a single cow. And when they had no more cows, they ate the pigs; and when they had no more pigs, they ate the chickens; and when they had no more chickens, they ate the horses. Some of them could not bear to give their cats or their dogs
to the men with the butcher’s knives. But some of them could, and the people of Meyers ate another meal. And with each new menu item, the people of Meyers exclaimed that it was better than the last and that they hoped he’d never leave. The snow that had built up on the sides of the food truck had turned to ice. At night the lights beamed white and brilliant through the glacial crystal.

It was Sunday when the animals ran out. Frank had just finished frying the last morsels of Mrs. Johnson’s cat, Snowball, when he turned to the meat pile to discover only a bloody patch of snow. Frank walked back behind the window and raised his voice to shakily announce to the town that there was no more meat. For a moment the people of Meyers were filled with dread. And Frank was as well. Some cried. Some shouted. But many just sat in the fallen snow and stared at the little wooden sticks still in their hands.

But then Bobby’s father walked up holding three dead rats by the tails. He had found them in his basement and figured they were hiding out from the cold. He was certain there were more in the church because of the gnaw marks on the corners of the hymnals. If they could catch enough, they could last another day or two. Certainly help would arrive.

Frank looked at the rats and knew that the townsfolk of Meyers would do better than survive. They would eat well. He skinned the rats, cut the meat into strips, sprinkled some of his signature seasoning on each strip, skewered each on a wooden stick, slathered them in batter, and deep-fried them on low so that the stringy meat would get soft and tender. Then he handed the first one to little Bobby, who said that it tasted just as good as any corn dog he had ever had. The townsfolk sent up a cheer and set about pulling up the floorboards
of the church, hunting for future fair food. Frank beamed with pride upon his people. For a moment he considered selling deep-fried rat on the streets of Cincinnati but suspected that city types would never accept a food so exotic from a source so familiar.

Somehow the snow was still falling the next morning when they found Old Man Walters leaned against a tree, affixed there by the ice. They brought him to the church and said they would bury him as soon as they could get through the frozen ground. Frank could not bear to look at the body, for he knew that it would not take long for Meyers to run out of rats. And when the rats ran out, it would not take long for Meyers to get hungry.

The next day, Frank handed out the last deep-fried rat for lunch. For a while, some of the men continued to prowl through the exposed crawlspace hunting the rodents. Every time one of them came to a heap of torn-up floorboards or a removed pew that had been piled at the side of the church, he would shine his flashlight between the slats, hoping that one of the thinner rats had wedged itself within. But eventually, the hunters realized that there were no more rats to be found. And they would haul themselves out of the muddy excavation and curse under their breath and not bother to wipe their feet as the men had done when they first began to foray beneath the church. Back then, the church had always been well cleaned, but now the air was filled with dust and the lingering smell of dead rats, killed on holy ground. The grime stuck to the walls and the single stained glass window seemed to let in less light than it had before. The cross at the front of the church leaned at an angle from when Bobby had bumped it while chasing after a plump-rumped but quick-footed little meal. No one had bothered
to right it—if, indeed, anyone had noticed, for it seemed to fit there, hanging askew.

When at last all had given up on finding any more rodent morsels, the people of Meyers sat upon the ground or upon the pews that remained upright or in the mud of the crawlspace and did not say much to one another. The men sat and shivered, and the women sat and wept, and the children sat in silence. All listened to the sounds of their bellies rumbling and felt the cold creep through their bodies. It began in the head for some and the feet for others, but for most, a chill began in their stomachs and crept outward until their entire persons felt empty and immovable. For the first time in a long time, Frank wished he was sitting behind his desk, organizing his pencils, and waiting for someone to put money in or take money out. And the people of Meyers went to bed hungry and woke often to the rumblings of their own stomachs.

And Old Man Walters sat frozen so very near the spot where the corn dogs and the rats had once waited to be fried.

No one could remember who had first suggested eating Old Man Walters. Perhaps every one of them believed it might have been himself or herself who had first said it aloud. Eventually they would all accept that Old Man Walters’s spirit, before passing to the afterlife, had spoken to the heart of every man, woman, and child individually. They would all accept that it was all right and that the person, whoever it was, that had suggested it first, was only acting as a mouthpiece from the beyond. But someone proposed that if Frank could make rat taste good—and that since Old Man Walters was making no use of the flesh on his bones—well, it only seemed reasonable. And all agreed.
Frank suspected it would come to this. He had planned to refuse, to scream in horror, to pound his fist on the counter and damn them all to hell. But when he looked into their pleading eyes, he could not seem to summon the righteous anger. His eyes found little Bobby, who looked longingly at the fry cook as he licked snow off his icy mittens. Frank allowed his eyes to fall upon the frozen Old Man Walters, and, with a burdened soul, he answered the people of Meyers.

So Frank did with Old Man Walters just as he'd done with the rats, only he added an extra shake of his special seasoning because it seemed right somehow. And he asked God to make it not taste however he imagined it might taste otherwise, and then he dropped the first battered piece of Old Man Walters on a stick in the oil. And the smell of meat and cornbread filled the church once again. And the townsfolk ate solemnly until Bobby shouted that this tasted better than the rat! The people of Meyers couldn't help but laugh, and they nodded their heads in agreement.

And the people of Meyers gathered around Frank's glistening white food truck as the darkened church loomed beside it, only visible by the light of the truck. And the people of Meyers put their arms around each other to keep warm and waited their turn to receive a deep-fried piece of Old Man Walters with both hands. Bobby smiled a toothy smile, and Frank was glad to be a fry cook.

And the roof of the church strained under the heavy load as the snow kept falling.
Sleep slips from these soap-waxed hands as I sweat into the dawn of my last living summer: we sour on smoking patios, pining for fatter days, drawing breath with tar-thick lungs in the volcanic spill of cement. Skin assumes the dust, and in the sun turns gold, rots purple in drooping mood, returning earthward. And everybody’s lonely, everybody’s horny. The mercy of a lover’s shadow is somewhere on the frost-dewed shelf of memory, too high for arthritic reach. Here, on summer eves, when hot and humid indulge their rampant affair, disciples of season resume worship on motorized chairs, studying more sultry gospels in paperback: dog-eared saints with prayers for every shade of solitude. A Chinese man in silk shorts tells me he is addicted to the chocolate pudding. No, I say, no appetite of mine will survive this heat—geriatric footwear marks the end of itching passion. O, sleep! You were once in the gardens, the givenness of the harvest. In the tomatoes, in the thousand-veined tomatoes, the throbbing expanse of the watermelon, the paltry stench of the tomatoes, dying. I call it suburban luck: the twisted comedy that brings you to a place like this, where folks are killed by learning to ask less of life.
PEACE
by Andrew Tate

Peace is reading Njal’s saga in the rain
and watching a zoomorphic interlace rend
the complex sky

and hearing halberds splitting shields
on the overhang

and watching the soil drink water
like a freshly burnt home.
AFTER THE ACCIDENT

by

Leah Fretwell

Jane was lying on her back, her legs and one of her hands severed from her body, her head crooked on an open neck. There were voices hovering above her and sirens rushing towards her, and a boy with a black-and-white-striped t-shirt crying for his mother somewhere beyond her left ear. The sky flickered in and out of focus. There were no stars; she wished there were stars. One of her eyes must have melted out of its socket; the other must have been blinded by the sudden light. Everything glowed. For a moment she thought, Finally, heaven, but she knew she was not dead yet, because she could still feel blood moving from her body and flooding the pavement. It was staining the white dress she’d purchased earlier that day. All day she’d regretted spending so much money on it, but she did not regret it now. She was annoyed with herself for ruining it so quickly, that was all.

*I am in shock, she thought. I must be. The last time she’d been injured at all was years ago when she was ten (eleven? She couldn’t quite remember), and her mother still made her wear white tights to church and would not let her shave her legs. Thick black hair poked through the fabric. Even the priest stared, distracted from
the psalms, and the girls in Sunday school were unforgiving. Still, her mother wouldn’t budge. “You’re a child,” she insisted, “not a cheap whore.” But her mother spent her days smoking menthols and making bets on boxing matches and never noticed what Jane was doing. One day, bored and tired of being laughed at, Jane locked herself in the bathroom and took her grandfather’s straight razor, a long blade tucked between his shaving cream and a bar of unused soap. She worked at her legs slowly, one foot planted in the tub, one foot resting on the bath mat. On the left leg she accidentally nicked herself, a short red mark on her skin, and then she could not stop herself from extending the line, blood blooming across the white tile floor. She wrapped her leg in a towel and limped out of the bathroom to show her mother. Her mother screamed, red-faced, the cigarette between her fingers dropping to the floor, and she cursed her womb for bearing such a child and told Jane she was going to hell.

Was she going to hell? She didn’t know. She cut people off in traffic. She cheated at Yahtzee. Sometimes she stole Post-It notes from work. She’d borrowed Sex and the City season five from a friend and never returned it. Once she’d left a stick of gum as a tip. She didn’t think she’d really mind going to hell. Besides the heat and the company, how bad could it be, really? She hadn’t prayed since she was fifteen. She wondered briefly if she should pray now but decided against it. If God hadn’t minded her ignoring him all these years, he wouldn’t mind now. If he had, one prayer wouldn’t change his mind. After all, she’d done some shitty things. Lied to her parents. Showed up drunk to her sister’s bridal shower. Laughed at her grandmother’s open casket. Her aunties had decided to dress the body in a yellow muumuu with pink bows at the sleeves. Who does
that? And—Jane's forehead creased—who would dress her for her funeral? She decided to shoot off a short prayer, despite her earlier resolve. Please God, she prayed, Please God let it not be my mother.

Lights were flashing, a disorienting blue and red blur in her dimming right eye. Men and women in dark blue and yellow crowded the pavement and made loud, angry noises. She could not feel her body anymore, she did not know if she still had a body, and she did not mind the sensation. Someone covered her with a blanket and everything was dark. The paramedic working over her saw her chest push the blanket in and away, in and away. A small circle of spit stained the fabric around her mouth, fresh and wet. He pulled the sheet off of her face and tried to get her to speak.

Jane looked up.

It was a young guy, or at least she thought it was. He was a stroke of gold and blue and gray. He was solicitous in a way that irritated her, patting her shoulder lightly, asking if she was in pain. He touched her remaining hand.

"Ma'am," he said, "Ma'am, everything will be alright. I'm right here with you."

He was earnest and concerned. He brushed her hair from her forehead. "Can you speak to me? What's your name?"

Jane opened her mouth and breathed out her last word.

"Bullshit."

The man paused, his hand still on her shoulder. "W—what?"

Jane rolled her good eye and let go.
Sometimes I heard voices in the trees and in the light.

My sisters and I sat obedient on the roof of our car while Father informed us of his plan: “I am sorry children. I have to kill your mother.”

Staring at the sun, or at Father’s black gun, I envied eternity.

In groves of aspen I heard voices in the clattering leaves, like light.

Birds broke their necks flying into our windows, they would seize until still.

I couldn’t believe the minutia of their suffering, the blow and rupture of organs or splintering of flight’s hollow bones.

A baby bat on the path once trembled in morning sun.

Cottonwoods rushed like river water in evening light.

To stave off rot, Father would immediately chill slaughtered meat.

Music and muslin triggered memories that might be delusion or dreams.

I dreamed of my mother drowned in a pool.
Creek water wrinkled shadow and radiance—blending locust leaves with liquid light.

If naughty at school, I found a willow switch to carry home for Father to whip me. My mother rarely lifted her eyes those contracted afternoons. I kept my own eyes open wide.

Through the window, summer nights, I heard poplars gorge on moonlight.

From the hood of our car, between my two older sisters, I stared at Father’s black gun— we never saw our mother again. She drove north to Oregon that day. Still, I remember voices in the trees, in the light. Sometimes I heard voices in the trees and in the light.
When I was in high school, an eighteen-month-old girl wandered away from home and drowned in the river. The tragedy became a defining moment in my hometown, Horseshoe Bend. Everyone in the community felt it; many kids skipped school because of grief, and teachers were told to excuse children who requested a visit with the counselor. We were asked not to spread rumors about the death. There was a well-attended funeral in the community center. Afterwards, they released a cloud of balloons. Finally, they erected a big white cross on a hill near town in memoriam.

I, of course, was an ignorant, selfish teenager. Every time I saw that cross, I thought to myself how melodramatic it was. It was the only monument in town, erected in memory of a baby. I remember commenting to my mom that I didn’t know why everybody was making such a big deal out of it. “She’s a baby,” I said. “Of course it’s sad when babies die, but when somebody’s that young, you don’t even really have a relationship with them yet. It’s not like losing an old friend.”

My mother didn’t attempt to make me understand. She simply said, “You’ve obviously never had children.” I was offended by my
mother’s comment. Like many teenagers, I was arrogant and felt like adults took me for granted because of my age. I’d been around plenty of babies and was sure I was right. But I wasn’t right. I wasn’t right about how serious the tragedy was, I wasn’t right about a parent’s bond with an infant, and—though I didn’t know it at the time—I still had a lot to learn about love.

My daughter, Ruby RaeAnn Flake, was born ten days early on February 27th, just over a year after I married my wife, Emily. Ruby was the thirty-fourth grandchild born into my family and only the second born into Emily’s family. She got the best of both of us: Emily’s almond-shaped eyes and dimples, my complexion and cleft chin. Her size definitely came from Emily’s side; Ruby was five pounds at birth but still deemed a healthy child. We were proud of our newborn.

I had always been under the impression that babies were homogenous—all of them were pretty much the same. Personality was something that didn’t develop until someone was four or five. And true, Ruby did spend the bulk of her time as a newborn sleeping and eating, but her individuality became apparent almost immediately. She preferred sucking her fingers to taking a pacifier; she preferred being outside to inside (even when it was cold); and, once she graduated from an all-dairy diet, she preferred condiments to any other food we offered her. It had never occurred to me that someone so small could have opinions.

That wasn’t the end of it. Though our daughter wasn’t a fast grower (even now, at a year-and-a-half old, she still fits into clothes meant for six-month-olds), she was a fast learner. Half a year past her first birthday, she could walk, talk, dance, throw, climb,
high five, give kisses, and take her dirty diapers to the garbage. Sometimes I’d find her in her room, flipping through a book, reading to herself in gibberish. I was shocked by how complex she was—not to say that Ruby is some sort of prodigy, but I’d taken for granted that babies developed on schedule with some sort of unwritten curriculum programmed by God. I thought their interests were 100 percent dictated by what their parents conditioned them to like.

This was not the case. Even when we were trying to teach Ruby her first words, she still blazed her own trail. In the months we spent endeavoring to coerce a “Mama” or “Dada” out of her, Ruby started saying, “duck,” “poop,” and “Jesus,” often interchangeably. Sometimes she would even use words that we were sure we’d never said to her, like “temple” or “platypus.” She made it clear that she had no interest in television unless we were watching it together; she thought it rude of us to eat anything we weren’t willing to share; and she begged me not to play my mandolin unless she was asleep or at the park.

Ruby invented many of the words we use and many of the games we play. She loves to fake us out by tempting us to come get kisses and then telling us to go take a nap right before we get any. She refers to all of her peers as either “friend” or “Sally” and believes the two most meaningful ways to interact with them are to give them hugs or follow them around. And all this from a girl who’s barely over eighteen months.

Ruby is the same age that the baby from Horseshoe Bend was when she drowned. Was that child inventing words and games, discovering the world, forming opinions? Was she learning to
speak, laugh, and love? How could I have known how wrong I was? Ruby isn’t just my daughter—she’s one of my very best friends. Because of Emily’s demanding nursing job, Ruby and I spend a lot of time together. We have expectations of one another, we have inside jokes, we miss each other when we’re apart, and we have a lot of memories together. If I ever lost my daughter, there is nothing that could ever replace her. Would I put up a cross for her? Maybe.

And so now, as I reflect, I express the remorse I should have felt for that poor family that lost their child. It doesn’t take a lifetime to truly love someone—it doesn’t even take eighteen months.
THEY HAD FORGOTTEN THE TASTE OF THE MOON

by Rachel Bundy

They had forgotten the taste of the moon.
That man on the corner with the midnight bowler hat,
and the lady in cut-off jeans and a faded-blue baseball cap,
and even that hobo that lives under the rotting stairs on Rua Moises.

Of course it’s not like La Tur cheese.
Nor is it a crumbling cloudy scone.
Or honeydew melon
slavering saccharine sap all over the terracotta tiling
for Dali’s erotic ants to eat.

The Chinese were the ones who brought the oranges
across a sea of biscuit crumbs.
What a novelty they were!

Europeans missed the mark
Saying,

“Nadie come naranjas bajo la luna llena.”

But what lover has not
felt the searing flavor of oranges
on their tongue at night,
the kind that perfumes fingertips
and leaves its cologne after the pith is gone.
Maybe then, the Chinese were the first to understand the night and the bittersweet, musky odor of the moon.
INTERVIEW WITH LIA PURPURA

Lia Purpura is a celebrated poet and essayist. Her writing frequently focuses on things that either seem mundane or that generally instill disgust, exalting them with her vivid language into the realm of the beautiful. Her published works include, among others, *It Shouldn’t Have Been Beautiful* and *Rough Likeness*. She is currently the Writer in Residence at the University of Maryland.

INSCAPE: How do you feel your upbringing in Long Island has affected you as a writer? What landscapes have influenced you?

LIA PURPURA: The landscape that any writer grows up in will absolutely affect her work in one way or another, whether they’re resisting that landscape, or embracing it, or developing a complex relationship with it. The landscape of Long Island was a real mixed bag for me, and I think that mixed bag is represented all over my work. The natural parts of Long Island, meaning for me primarily the ocean and the beach, were like companions. I felt really comfortable there, and I wanted to be out at the beach walking the dunes as much as humanly possible. The other built-up, suburban parts of Long Island were completely deadening for me and really awful. I felt like my soul was cauterized by that landscape. I lived in a really nice neighborhood, and by nice I mean it was full of older immigrants.
and people who had settled down in that area. It wasn’t in any way a wealthy area, and there was a little scrap of woods that I spent a whole lot of time in. I spent a lot of time trying to stay away from the brightly lit, overly-built suburban ugliness since it was really kind of soul killing. But, then there were the soul sustaining parts. So I mostly just wanted to get out—I wanted out of there. We were close to NYC, which was about a forty-minute train ride away, and I did spend a lot of time in NYC because I had really good friends there, and it was incredibly exciting. We did a lot of great stuff. We went to museums and concerts. At that time you could go to the opera if you were a student for five dollars and stand way up in the nosebleed section, and that was really rich and exciting.

INSCAPE: In your essay, “There are Things Awry Here,” you write about the body in relation to its environment: “I can’t figure out how to get my body to land in a land where the present’s not speaking. Where stories won’t take, and walking is sliding.” How do you find inspiration in places that seem monotonous and mundane?

LP: That essay, “There are Things Awry Here” takes place in Tuscaloosa. The parking lot, the giant, endless parking lot of whatever hotel I was staying at, was surrounded by these awful big-box stores. I’m a walker: I have to walk at least three, four, sometimes five times a day with my dog. It doesn’t really feel like it, but a lot of work goes on while I’m walking. I was trying to find a place to walk in Tuscaloosa, and that was the only place I could get to. As I walked this parking lot, which was a kind of crazy thing to do, I kept thinking, “There are stories here, and I can’t hear those stories. I don’t know what they
are; they’re not able to speak. They’ve been asphalted and capped, and there’s no way I can even feel my way into this land.” I went to the special collections and asked to read the history of what went on in that area and they came back with really great literature about the history of that area. So I was able to write into that and think about being there and think more deeply now that I had the history. I thought about what had been there, what was missing, and the gap between the two. In that sense, going into that environment with a sense of hunger was what kickstarted that essay. I couldn’t find anything; I couldn’t hear anything—and I very much needed to.

INSCAPE: In the collection One Word, in which you appear, you discuss the significance of the verb. How is the verb, or action, an integral part of your writing? How does this coincide with the physicality, or “musculature,” of writing?

LP: Verbs are so important and interesting, and when they’re flat, they just drag a sentence down. But when they’re surprising, they lift the whole image; they lift the concept and motion of that moment right out of the mundane and into the stratospheric. A surprising verb almost works like a little window into the life of whatever character, dog, cloud, human is under surveillance by the writer. Almost better than any sort of image, the verb shows the musculature. It often shows a really surprising aspect of this creature’s relationship to the world. Active verbs for any student are so important.

INSCAPE: In your childhood, you say you kept a “book of quotes” where you collected poems, song lyrics, and words that you liked. Do
you have a similar book now? What is your journaling process like?

LP: I absolutely collect words. Every region has a set of words, so I'm always listening for those words. Already, I can tell you the words "mission" and "sister," used to describe a companion, are unique to this area, and this was just in the car ride over here. Those are completely different from my points of reference. They are not Baltimore regional words—you'll never hear that. You'll hear "sista" but it’s more like, "hey sista, hands off!" The regionality of words is completely thrilling to me. We have a friend who's a contractor, and he's an older guy who uses language so brilliantly. He used the word "muster," like to muster your energy. He's from the Eastern shore of Maryland where people still use the word muster, a very old word. I do keep lists of words. I have pages and pages of words. Sometimes they're drawn from my readings, sometimes they're overheard, whatever's interesting. These words often suggest scenes, they suggest ideas—just the words alone. It’s kind of a different concept than writing something and trying to find a word. It’s almost like starting with a word and seeing what the word exfoliates, what it blossoms forth for you. They’re very alive like that for me.

INSCAPE: I love the honesty and beauty in “On Coming Back as a Buzzard.” What drew you to writing about the buzzard? What’s the story behind the essay? What is the value of writing about typically-overlooked or neglected and complicated subjects?

LP: The buzzard's work, in my mind, is a kind of holy work—undersung, full of care, part of a working system, and necessary. I've
thought about that for a long while. Without that work, demeaned as it is, or scoffed at as it is, we would be living in a very messy place, and I believe so deeply in using up our leftovers and not wasting things. It’s a spiritual endeavor to not waste and to use something fully and wholly, completely. The bird and its habits mean something to me, ecologically and spiritually. In that one creature, all of this came together.

INSCAPE: How does your spirituality play into your alignment with anything outside of yourself?

LP: The act of creating metaphors is a spiritual act: it is an act of empathy and insight and surprise and curiosity. It allows us to step into another’s body and feel from within, and it makes connections that are unseen until they are made. There are so many silent, invisible tethers between people, between people and objects, between objects and ideas, and metaphors uncover all the invisible ways we are connected and all the invisible ways that surprise us. They force you to see things in others or in “the other” that you had not seen. That act of rebirth is exactly what metaphors are working on, constant rebirth of attention, of recognition, constant rebirth of your capacity for aligning yourself with another creature, another person.

INSCAPE: Do you feel like you go through an aligning process continually, or is it separate moments of alignment?

LP: I think it’s a way of walking through the world that makes a person porous and attentive to the body. Driving in here and seeing
the mountains was a physical experience. Coming from Baltimore, it’s a physical experience. It’s dry and they’re imposing and they’re gentle and they fold, and they exert. To be open to the sensations of a mountain is at first a really wordless feeling. That’s why I want to write. I want to find how language approaches that feeling. It’s a way of living. This isn’t an act of sitting down to the paper or the computer; it’s a way of living.

INSCAPE: What is the appeal of maintaining the mystery of the lyric essay and why is it necessary for this genre?

LP: If I were to assert that I wanted to maintain the mystery of the lyric essay, it would probably be because I don’t really see a need to pin down the attributes of a subgenre. I call what I do the essay. I don’t subgenre my essay; it has been subgenred. There’s a difference between what I do and what an essayist who works in journalism does. For the purposes of study and discussion, we can make these nuanced divisions. I prefer to call it the essay. I started my writing life as a poet, and it’s clear that poetry influences my prose. When I’m reading the essays, they normally sound like long poems to me. The lyric essay is a prose branch of poetry.

INSCAPE: Are poetry and prose more related and integrated genres than they’re often made out to be?

LP: I think the best prose is completely attentive to all sorts of poetic elements, like sound, rhythm, and breath, and inflection. Poems shape themselves very differently: they use space and lines. Sometimes prose
uses space and sometimes lines. In that sense, there are some very serious and identifiable crossovers. Some poems are highly narrative and read like stories, and some prose reads like a long poem. Great prose writers have an ear that's poetic.

INSCAPE: You began your career as a poet but, after your pregnancy, began writing prose. How did becoming a mother evolve your writing and writing process?

LP: It's hard to make that call, to see how being a mother in some way informed my life as a writer. In certain essays, [my son] makes little cameos. I don't have long essays dedicated to him. Sometimes we've had conversations that fit into some idea I'm writing about, or I need to refer to his friends for some reason. Those are the most practical ways he fits in. I'm sure it's made me see the world in a different way, but I'm not sure what claims I can make about that. I don't think it's an event or a way of being that's made me more alert or compassionate or ferocious. Probably something on the ferocious scale. I've had to figure out how to stay on a schedule, how to write and have a family. I was always interruptible and my son never interrupted me much, so we had a good vibe going. I've had my eye on certain subjects in certain essays, as a mother, that I wouldn't have had access to before. There are definitely essays in which I've called myself out as a mother, and that's been very clear.

INSCAPE: Several of your poems, such as “Design” and “First Leaf,” have to do with fall. What about this season is so evocative and inspirational for you?
LP: That’s so true! I’m not a person who has favorites, just, in life. Whenever adults ask kids, “What’s your favorite season?” I think that’s the most boring question. You’re asking them to rank things, and evaluate. But I’m going to go against all of that and say that fall is pretty much my favorite season. Everything being on that cusp of decay, there’s something so poignant and ferocious about the season— and bold. I realized when I put this last collection of poems together, It Shouldn’t Have Been Beautiful, how many poems took place in fall, and I had to take a few out because it was so unbalanced. That book was originally arranged by season, and there was a huge fall section. But I do feel quickened in fall—very alert, very alive. The colors are brighter because they’re about to crash. My dog is happier.
INTERVIEW WITH ROSELLEN BROWN AND MARV HOFFMAN

Rosellen Brown is a celebrated poet, fiction writer, and essayist. Her strict attention to rhythm, syntax, and word choice not only demonstrates her love of language, but also gives all her work a poetic vibrancy which entrances her readers. She's published ten books, including Some Deaths in the Delta and Civil Wars. She currently lives in Illinois with her husband Marv Hoffman, and teaches at the Art Institute of Chicago.

INSCAPE: As I think about you and your husband, I also think about the writing students here at BYU who are trying to balance their lives. They have to synthesize school and writing, as well as their careers and lives as parents.

ROSELLEN BROWN: It’s never easy. There were times when I had to go away to readings and things like that, and I did that a lot. Fortunately, at that point Marv was teaching kids and had a slightly more flexible schedule than a lot of people, so sometimes if I had to go off and go do a gig like this, he could cover for me when my kids weren’t in school.

MARV HOFFMAN: Just an interesting parallel: I once did a series of interviews with scientists about how they do their work. Several of them started their careers in Germany and Hungary and were fleeing
from the Nazis, and they all said to me that they did some of their most significant work during those years. There’s something useful about that kind of pressure.

RB: It’s imposing the discipline on yourself to do it when you can do it. I never used to work when my kids were home. I would work when they were in school. And one day my oldest daughter came home from school while I was finishing working on the typewriter, and I said, “Honey I’m sorry, I’ll be with you in a second.” And I go on, and she’s standing there. And I say, “Honey look, there’s milk and cookies in the kitchen, you know, please, I’m sorry.” I was very apologetic. And she said, “But I want to see what it looks like when you’re working.” When she was home, I was trying to pay attention to her and not to my work. She is a writer now, though she doesn’t have children. I’m much less disciplined now than I was then, because now I have all the time in the world—in theory.

INSCAPE: It strikes me that people think writing books when you’re married is a challenging process, but there are some partnerships—literary partnerships—like Virginia and Leonard Woolf, George Eliot and George Lewes. Creating a space for your work without sacrificing the needs of the children had to be a partnership deal.

RB: Absolutely. I was very young when I started writing, and I knew that I wanted to write. I have a number of friends who discovered way later, when there was something they were dying to say, that they wanted to become writers. I remember one friend who’s a writer who
started late, Hilma Wolitzer, mother of the currently popular Meg Wolitzer, saying, “We had to renegotiate the marriage contract.” My husband had to discover that maybe dinner wasn’t going to be on the table exactly when he wanted it, or whatever. I was not there to serve him, and of course every relationship should be that way, but an artist certainly needs it.

MH: And there are some men who say at that point, “This is not what I signed on for.” But you already had an identity when we married.

RB: I had an identity as a writer in graduate school, and I started publishing very early. I think that was one of the things that attracted Marv to me, and of course he didn’t know what he was getting himself into, but he did know that I had an identity and that my identity was not going to be pushed to the side, and I think that was very important. I have seen people whose marriages have crashed when the husband discovered that his wife was not at his service in the way that he might have expected her to be. So with Marv and me, some of it was the wisdom of knowing what we wanted and maybe needed or didn’t need, but most of what happened after that, I think has a lot to do with luck.

INSCAPE: You’re a very good husband, Marv.

RB: Fifty-four years and counting.

MH: I got a lot in return.
INSCAPE: What do you think about the relationship between character—not character as in a novel, but personal, individual character—and the simulation of voice and authenticity? Is there something in the rigors of style and the capacity to think that apply also to the rigors of character and the capacity to act?

RB: I’d like to think it, but of course the horrible reality is that a lot of writers are terrible people! (Laughs). It’s one of those things you discover when you read the biographies of great writers. Dickens two-timed his wife, which, of course, is hardly unique, and had many other shortfalls of moral character. So it’s hard to say, “Well, if you can do a complex sentence, you have a complex character.” I’m not sure that they really translate. I have a distinct memory: I had an instructor in college with whom I, like so many other young women in black who thought of themselves as budding artists, fell in love. It’s almost a given that that will happen—but then I discovered that he was not the person whose wisdom showed up on the page. He was a wonderful poet, but his moral character was another thing altogether! It was a very sad awakening.

INSCAPE: Do you think there’s a responsibility and opportunity as writers, or as teachers of writers, to help people to learn to think, and to introduce new thoughts, and create—

RB: Aspirational! (Laughs). I wish! I don’t know. I’d like to think that’s the case, but we can’t claim too much power as writers; let’s face it. When I think about some of the wonderful writers who are horrible people and who abuse their families or other people, clearly all that
reading has not made them into better people. So it’s an aspiration, but I don’t know that you necessarily improve people. Wouldn’t it be nice if it worked that way!

**INSCAPE:** So I was also thinking about how many of your novels deal with domestic tragedy. It sounds like you have such a wonderful family and marriage, but you also deal with these difficult problems in your books. Where does that come from?

**RB:** I think it comes from the idea that if I do it on paper none of it will happen to me in real life (laughs).

**INSCAPE:** That is a great idea!

**RB:** Well, I’ll tell you in part where it comes from, and this is probably going to surprise you: I’m not a good storyteller. I have to kick start my so-called “plot” with something big happening. I’m really not the sort of person who thinks of one thing happening after the other, and my books for the most part are strung together episodes. There’s only one book that actually has what I think of as a plot, something where if you took one thing away the whole thing would fall apart because you wouldn’t know what comes next. The rest of them deal with complications and aftermaths of the tragedy. And I’m not very interested in actually describing the tragedy itself. What I’m interested in are the ramifications of the thing: how people respond to it, the psychological complexity of it. I’m just not good at telling really interesting stories. So in some ways the tragic events in my stories are a result of a weakness. The impetus for most of my novels
is something I've heard or read, situations that seem to promise complex responses, no easy solutions. I have to re-frame them totally but the initial questions are still there.

INSCAPE: But you've made it a strength! You're really good at delving into the psychology of your books’ family members.

RB: Well, that's what I'm interested in. Marv was trained as a psychologist, though he's ended up teaching, but it's of real significance to me.

INSCAPE: Did you pull from that in your research? I've noticed that, in a lot of your novels, you really delve into a lot of legal ramifications.

RB: Well, I've had to get help with that. When I wrote my book “Tender Mercies,” I had to learn about being a quadriplegic. For Before and After, I needed advice about some things that would happen in court, so I found a lawyer and said, “Well, I'm sorry, but I'd love to take a little of your time if you wouldn't mind,” and she said, “I'm so interested in meeting you because I've read your stories and they've informed my family court practice.” She let me come to her courtroom, and she gave me terrific advice. I thank her in the beginning of the book. So, yeah, you have to hope that the research doesn’t overwhelm what you’re doing, but you need to learn some stuff.

INSCAPE: That's amazing. So I was wondering; you have two novels, Civil Wars and Half a Heart, that deal with the civil rights movement. What do you think about our current political climate?
RB: You really want to hear? I’m not allowed to curse here, as far as I’ve been told. (Laughs).

INSCAPE: Well, if we shut the door. (Laughs).

RB: Well, without being specific, I can’t imagine a more appalling state of the country than the one we’re in right now. I don’t think anybody can listen to each other or be honest about their experiences. I just think we are in a very terrible period.

MH: There’s a wonderful African-American writer, Julius Lester, who said that when people interview political candidates they often ask the question, “What books are you reading?” Well, you can’t even ask that of Trump because you know that he’s not reading anything, but in the past people would talk about various biographies or *Six Crises* by Richard Nixon, or you know, *The Winds Of War*, and Lester said that’s the wrong question. You have to ask, “What novels have you read?” Because if someone reads novels, they have the capacity to empathize with characters. When Rosellen met Barack Obama, long before he was famous, he told her that he had read *Civil Wars*.

RB: Immediately I said, “Whatever he stands for, I’m going to vote for him!” (Laughs).

MH: My point is that you can see in his autobiography that this is a man who knows how to empathize.

RB: And how to write, as a matter of fact. Talk about what’s happened
to the English language with our current legislators! I mean, we’re very much the worse for it.

INSCAPE: Things I thought we were past, like intense racial tension, we’re not actually past.

RB: Well, when we went to Mississippi—we moved there in ‘65 and lived there for three years—like most Americans, we thought that the horrible racism was endemic to the South. We went there from Boston, which, as it happens, is an incredibly racially divided city. Racism is not just in the South, and in many ways it’s more frightening farther north.

MH: We were back in Mississippi a few months ago, and I think the disheartening thing about being there was that we initially felt we were part of something that was fundamentally changing the country, but we were confronted with the fact that that’s not the case. There are a lot of superficial things that have changed, which shouldn’t be discounted. The fear that people lived under was really intense, and that’s gone, but underneath the same structural inequities exist.

RB: Frankly, I’m pretty discouraged in a lot of ways, because the country is going backwards now, I believe, when it comes to equality. So much is now permissible now to say that could not have been said earlier. But that was just sort of slightly hypocritical self-control that people were exercising. Now, unfortunately, our president has led the way in giving people the right to say anything they want to. It’s very sad. So, like everything else, it’s complex. What you do when
you write is you try to destabilize people’s sense of what is absolutely set and perfect, because life’s not like that very often. We need to listen. We need to talk. We need to figure out ways to move forward.

**INSCAPE:** We do have a problem in our culture of not listening to each other. You’ve said before that, essentially, the beginning of style is listening to others. How does one make that part of the culture of a classroom?

**RB:** It’s very difficult. At the School of the Art Institute in Chicago, I teach what we call Generative Seminars, in which people write afresh every week and then read it to each other. We have copies, of course, that people pass around so you have it in front of you, but people really have to listen very carefully, and it’s hard. It’s especially difficult with poetry to be able to critique on the spot, but it does sort of enhance the necessity of listening. But in general, what you’re talking about is a moral problem. It goes way beyond the realm of writing that we don’t listen to each other, that we speak over each other, that we tend to exclude ideas that other people have. So I think it’s something that goes way, way deeper. But just to listen to the words—I think that’s a conscious practice, actually.

**INSCAPE:** When you teach kids, you accept the fact that, beyond 10 minutes, they don’t listen. I’m pretty sure that something similar happens with adults. But you have to build your teaching around the recognition that listening is an intense activity, and you can’t expect it to go on for very long. So people need to move into some more active kind of posture, which is sharing their ideas with each
other, doing their own writing, whatever the activity is. But it’s true that listening is a challenge. I think that may not have been true in other cultures at other times when the whole mode of education was sitting quietly and listening.

RB: I think that’s true.

INSCAPE: A storyteller mentioned how critical it is to know your audience and speak to that audience. Among other things, that’s how history was passed down from generation to generation.

RB: I think that’s true! Maria Edgeworth, Dryden, and people like that wrote long, complicated paragraphs that are difficult for us to penetrate! The audience was used to that and that was the prevailing style at the time; the long, classical sentence structure was what people did and knew. And Shakespeare! Even those of us who have read a lot of Shakespeare and are pretty adept struggle. The first few minutes of a play, I have to adjust to the sound of that syntax because it is complicated. It is not a twenty-first century syntax, and it takes a while before you begin to think that it’s natural. The Globe Theatre, where Shakespeare’s plays were originally produced, was a pit of people—smelly people who could not take showers, untrained, uneducated people—who came to listen to those plays, and yet they, without educations, were able to follow what some of our students find almost impossible. Marv had a student who said, when he was doing Shakespeare with them, “This stuff is pretty good. I’d really like it if it was in English!” (Laughs). Because it isn’t automatic! But we’re sort of coddled by the terseness of television scripts and
newscasts that are coming at us in short bursts all the time—now we’re down to, what, 140 characters? Now there are novels and poetry being written on phones. There was a film a few years ago that was called Tangerine that was made entirely on an iPhone 5. I mean we’re in a very, very different culture.

INSCAPE: You said something earlier that I think is interesting about the sound bite. And people have talked about that before in terms of the “tweet,” but there are some things you just can’t do in 140 characters.

RB: If you think you can reduce things to 140 characters you are not getting the whole picture.

MH: When our kids were little, when they watched television—and this will tell you how ancient we are—-Sesame Street started. They had been watching this show called Mr. Roger’s Neighborhood, which was beautiful and quiet, calm and peaceful. And when Sesame Street came on, it felt like the beginning of the end. It was incredibly rapid fire. I don’t know what’s chicken and what’s egg in this situation, but it reinforced a certain kind of short attention span.

INSCAPE: Is there something we can do to counteract this as writers?

RB: Read Moby Dick. (Laughs).

INSCAPE: Write 440 page novels. (Laughs).
RB: I don’t know if anyone has the patience for that ... you hope that your students can somehow enjoy enough of what you assign to them so that they’ll go on doing it themselves. There’s not a policeman out there saying, “You must read continuous prose!”

INSCAPE: Harry Potter changed things, in terms of publishers accepting longer works.

MH: One of the fascinating things about Harry Potter was to watch the kind of attention the kids were able to invest in those books. I mean, there were kids who sat down and read those books in one take.

RB: A lot of Marv’s teaching is in inner city Chicago, and you have kids who are so far from the Harry Potter experience, and they would sit down and gobble this stuff up.

MH: Those Harry Potter books are usually way, way beyond the reading level of the kids who were fascinated by them, but it didn’t stop them at all. So that’s an interesting example. There’s still a kernel of possibility for paying attention.

RB: Apparently there is.

INSCAPE: Obviously you’ve been a very successful writer. You’ve had numerous books published, both in poetry and prose, and you’ve done all of the genres you could do.

RB: Except children’s literature.
INSCAPE: There’s still time! But I wondered if there was a moment in your career when you felt like you’d really “made it,” or felt like you’d reached some sort of literary success?

RB: I’ll tell you a small thing. I was one of Ms. Magazine’s “12 Women of the Year” in 1985, which was probably before your parents were even born. There were people in there you’ve probably never heard of, and we all had little things written about us. And a writer named Judith Thurman wrote an essay about me that in a million years I could not have dreamed of. I simply could not have imagined anyone saying these things about my writing, not about me personally, but about my writing. That is a moment that I hold incredibly dear. Last year there was a celebration for a so-called “lifetime achievement” for me, and a lot of it was about writing, teaching, and mentoring. My old students were there, and other writers, and they talked about me with big parts of my writing up on the wall, projections of prose and poetry. It was a great moment, but long before that this one essay by this one person that I respected that took the writing seriously was probably more significant to me than the fact that one of my books was made into a movie. It was a terrible movie, but I did get to meet Meryl Streep and get a hug from Liam Neeson. That was good. But seeing somebody who was the ideal reader, who got what I was doing and who could tie it all together, was much more important to me than any of the rest.

MH: This is more Rosellen’s style: She put up on her office door at the University of Houston a royalty check which she got for—
RB: For a story that was anthologized.

MH: Well, the royalty check was for twenty-four cents.

RB: I wanted my students to be forewarned about what they were getting themselves into! (Laughs). Not to mention running up debt paying for school.

INSCAPE: You mentioned that those late seventies were years when there was intense pressure on you as a writer. What have you noticed in terms of being relaxed or confident under pressure?

RB: Some people need less time than others. I have a friend who’s quite a prolific writer, and we went to a Cubs game with her, and between innings she would pull a manuscript out of her bag and revise it while we were sitting in the stands. I can’t do that. I’ve always needed a lot of time. Maybe not down time, but drifting and dreaming time, in order to write.

MH: And there are issues like when to take care of little things that have to be done around the house.

RB: Well, I’m always giving the advice, and still to some extent do this: When I’ve been asked all those questions about how to be a mother and a writer and all that, I say the first thing you learn is that you do not do your housework first. I make the bed, but basically no one cares about what your house looks like during the day. At the end
of the day you can fix it up, but you don't have to do it during your prime possible work time.

MH: The new novel that's coming out next year is happening a long, long time since the last novel. So this is another aspect of dealing with a career, because she's been out of the spotlight for a long time. There are implications for your self-image, your identity, the feeling that you're sort of off people's radar.

RB: Yeah, I used to do gigs like this all the time, but I don't do them much anymore because this generation doesn't know my work. And my new book is a chancy book for me. I think a lot of people won't like it. It's a book different than what I've done before, and people don't like that. They're not ready to cut you the slack that you need, like, "Well, she thought this was going to be interesting to do as a different kind of book, and maybe it works and maybe it doesn't work." But it should be part of a career.

INSCAPE: What's your new book called?


So you'd like a piece of advice. Hmm...I think I've pretty much said it implicitly: take yourself seriously. Dare to consider that what you're doing matters. That doesn't mean that you mustn't take into consideration the lives of the people around you, who often have to support and protect you and your time and concentration. But if you want to — need to — write, then don't give that up because it's difficult
or opens you to rejection or because you’re deferring to others’ career needs. Be your own champion and find a few people who believe in you to help you on your way. Then pray for luck because a lot of what will happen to you is out of your hands!
Contributors

Nick Bontorno is from upstate NY which has influenced the way he approaches art greatly. He received an MFA from BYU in 2012, where he focused on portraits of people in rural settings. Now he is starving to death. Please send money.

Rachael Bundy was born in Austin, Texas but spent the larger part of her childhood in Illinois. She is the oldest of five children. As a child, she was an avid reader of books. Now, she regularly writes poetry and short stories. Rachael is currently a Spanish undergraduate student at BYU who is also minoring in Portuguese and TESOL. She hopes that as she continues her career she will be able to produce literature not only in English, but also in Portuguese and Spanish.

Carl Boon lives in Izmir, Turkey, where he teaches American culture and literature at 9 Eylül University. His poems appear in dozens of magazines, most recently Lime Hawk and The Lullwater Review. Forthcoming work is scheduled to appear in The Maine Review and The Hawaii Review. He was also a 2016 Pushcart Prize nominee.

Mallory Dickson: From a young age Mallory Dickson has been fascinated with books and writing, pulling her parent’s library collection off the shelves and flipping through each book one by one as a child. She has worked on a fantasy trilogy for over seven years, dabbles in poetry, and writes creative essays. She is a senior at Brigham Young University, studying English with an editing minor.
Annelise Duque is an interdisciplinary artist who explores themes of identity and displacement through her photographs and videos. Her work reflects the complexity of belonging and fitting in as a direct response to her own heritage and to what it’s like feeling torn between two cultures. She uses art to make sense of the world in which she lives through meditative repetition and disruption. Annelise is currently working on a BFA at Brigham Young University.

Lisa Favicchia is a recent graduate of the MFA program at Bowling Green State University. She is the Managing Editor of The Coil by Alternating Current Press and the former Managing Editor of Mid-American Review. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in Midwestern Gothic, Rubbertop Review, Adelaide Literary Magazine, The Airgonaut, and Vine Leaves Literary Journal.

Julien Fish is from an avocado town in southern California. He lives in Idaho with his wife.

Dillon Flake is a senior graduating in landscape management. Dillon loved growing up in the small Idaho town that frequently appears in his writing, including his recently-published novel, Rumor of the Year. Dillon lives in Provo with his wife, Emily, and daughter, Ruby.

Leah Fretwell is an MFA candidate in creative writing.

D.R. Garner: A Masters of Accounting student at BYU, D.R. Garner writes to escape from the business world and embrace his inner adventurer. He was
born and raised in Mesa, Arizona, and served an LDS mission in Milan, Italy, where journal writing and weekly emails home sparked in him a love for writing. When he isn’t writing or studying, D.R. can be found watching baseball, singing in his car, or playing games of all sorts with his family and friends.

Ellie Goldrup: Though currently pursuing her undergraduate BFA degree at Brigham Young University, Ellie has lived and worked around the world. The daughter of a diplomat, Ellie grew up drawing inspiration from her surrounding cultures. She has lived in Jordan, China, South Africa, India, and London, England. She has completed numerous curatorial, design-oriented and political internship experiences, and believes that all of these provide fodder for creating a more cohesive narrative within her work. She thirsts for knowledge in all settings and has learned to thrive in cultural ambiguity.

Bette Hopkin is a studio arts major from Cincinnati, Ohio.

Natalie Kinkade was born and raised in Oregon. She now writes and sleeps in Utah, where she is a senior in art history at BYU. Natalie originally wrote this story for Dr. Joey Franklin’s class and thanks him for his advice.

Alison Kolander is a native of Sacramento, California and she is majoring in math education here at BYU, with a minor in creative writing. She loves to take photographs when good opportunities present themselves, so she had a lot of fun on the British Literature and Landscape study abroad capturing moments of individuals doing ordinary things in their everyday life.
Jacqui Larsen is a painter and mixed-media artist who has exhibited her work widely. Jacqui has taught at Northwest College in Houston, Houston Community College and at Brigham Young University, where she co-directed a study abroad program to Spain. She has also served on the Board of Directors for Art Access Utah. Her work has appeared in many literary journals, including Gettysburg Review, Rattle, Tampa Review, Ellipses, and Folio as well as on the covers of three University of Tampa poetry collections.

Maren Loveland was born and raised in Atlanta, Georgia. She is a junior studying American Studies at BYU, with a particular emphasis in American literature. Her career goals include inspiring and teaching others, ardently defending the humanities, and creating beautiful things.

Garrett May is a junior at BYU who plans on graduating in 2019 with a Bachelor of Arts in Interdisciplinary Humanities and a minor in linguistics. A former graphic design student, Garrett enjoys working in hard mediums like ink and graphite, as well as experimenting with digital content through Illustrator and Premiere, and is passionate about using the arts to study people, culture, and morality. After completing his undergraduate studies, Garrett plans on attending law school to receive a J.D. and begin a career in the fields of immigration, international diplomacy, and embassy work. He lives in Cedar Hills with his wife Jocelynn Clegg May, where they both try to look after their grandparent roommates and enjoy serving in their local church ward as missionaries and nursery assistants.

Mari Molen: Currently a senior in the English program at BYU, Mari Molen originally hails from Fountain Valley, California. She enjoys working in
the library archives as a research assistant. In her freetime, Mari likes reading, cooking Japanese food, making dragon noises, psychoanalyzing strangers online, and speaking in the third person. Mari is not an android giraffe from Brooklyn, and asks politely for the parties involved in circulating those rumors to stop.

John Timothy Robinson is a traditional citizen and graduate of the Marshall University Creative Writing program in Huntington, West Virginia with a Regents degree. He minored in studio art: printmaking. John is also a thirteen-year educator for Mason County Schools in Mason County, WV. He is a published poet with work appearing in thirty-eight literary journals and websites since August 2016. In printmaking, his primary medium is monotype and monoprint process with interest in collagraph, lithography, etching and nature prints. “A Grotesque” appears in Diagram, Issue 16.6 2016. “Red Triumph with Daffodils” will be published in The Tishman Review 2017.

Kessia Robinson is an MFA candidate in fiction at BYU. She enjoys writing novels and creative nonfiction. She’s often happiest when frolicking through the woods with a book in her hand and wildflowers in her hair.

Drew Rupard is an MFA candidate in poetry at BYU. Her interests include America, heaven, and mythmaking. She is especially partial to green paintings.

Madeline Rupard grew up in suburban DC and has spent her recent years in western America and eastern Europe. Influenced by both fiction and memory, her paintings are preoccupied with character and setting and attempt to extract the emotional content of a narrative without
explicitly defining what that narrative is. She received her BFA in 2016 from BYU and is currently an MFA candidate at Pratt Institute.

**Colby A. Sanford** grew up in a humble and unconventional home. He was encouraged to paint on the walls of his room, taught how to fix vintage cars, and didn’t have a bedtime. Colby recently spent four years in Far East Asia, and now his most precious moments are spent at home (cooking, woodworking, sewing, adventure planning, orange juice tasting) with his wife and little babe.

**Dominic Shaw** is an undergraduate, studying English at Brigham Young University. He will graduate in April of 2018. This is his second essay to be featured in *Inscape*. The use of place and nature in his essay relates closely to his career interests; he will begin a J.D. program with an emphasis in environmental law in fall 2018.

**Kyle Singleton** is a senior at BYU studying English and creative writing. He is originally from Florida.

**Jacob Stebbing** is a junior studying Russian and international business. Though he hasn’t been there in a while, he will always call Texas home. In what free time he manages to squeeze into his schedule he enjoys reading, writing, running, and taking pictures.

**Andrew Tate:** A busy computer scientist with the heart of a humanities major, Andrew Tate nurtures his lifelong love affair with poetry as best he can. He grew up laughing hard as his mom read him Shel Silverstein’s poems.
Later, the British Romantics caught his wistful attention and he counts his visits to the Lake District among his most hallowed experiences. Poetry is the breath of his soul and—finding himself at the end of an twenty-one year long inhalation—he is just beginning to breath normally, trying his hand at writing as well as enjoying, breathing out as well as in.

**Anne Thomas** is currently applying for graduate school in ecology but sometimes she writes poems.

**Tamara Pace Thomson** is an MFA candidate in fiction.

**M. Alexander Turner** is a linguistics student at BYU. He likes writing poetry, translating Tang Dynasty verse, and practicing calligraphy.

**Tanner K Williams** is a young and fresh interdisciplinary artist working in whatever media each new project demands. Williams is very interested in using the ugly, the repulsive, the kitschy, the cheap, the neon, the metallic and the incandescent to illuminate current social issues and emotional struggles.

**Kevin Zalewski** is a senior studying linguistics at BYU. He was drawn to creative writing because he found it the best way to stroke his ego and feel noble about it.
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