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Look ‘em

A.M. Hayden

Today you are a secret keeper
because you don’t eat pork
so, you pretend to not hear
how she conjured these dripping
silk collards, greased them
with fatback slabs, soaked them
in hog jowl, after she first doused
the leaves in cool sink water to look ‘em
for bugs, worms, and other garden critters
and so, you tune out all that jowl and slab
take spoonfuls of sliding butterbeans,
penny-sized black-eyed peas, and sop it up
with a buttery yellow biscuit
because she put her foot in this food
and anyone who doubts a southern
woman needs only watch her raw cut
the green leaves, squeezed tight in one fist,
with the serrated knife in the other
suspended straight in the air
striking like a copperhead
without hesitation

Stogies

Terry Savoie

1. Milwaukee, 1958

My old man's cigars reeked to high heaven
no matter which way the wind blew, but
that was back in the 50's when a working
stiff was still fool enough to imagine he was
a king in his own private, little kingdom,
exactly what my old man believed to be
a fact until he found himself squatting
on the back stoop when his cheap cigar raised such
a god-forsaken stench that Ma swore such would never again
have any place anywhere inside *her* house.
After that, my old man was pushed further
to sit on a fruit crate behind the garage, and the furthest
away possible. There he'd squat whenever he got a yearning
to light up without her lighting into him and puff
away in bliss and total abandonment on one
of his five cent "factory" cigars, one he pulled from a box
that, once empty, he'd set aside for her, a place to squirrel
away her buttons and pins and whatnots, the one
reason she'd give consent for that devil's habit
he'd never relinquish, his best excuse to wiggle out
from under Ma's thumb. Yes, my old man understood
his stogies weren't expensive Cubans nor did
they have any of that sweet blend or high-
falutin' foreign tobacco to seduce his olfactory senses.
He just understood his world for what it was forever destined to be.
He had no regrets, none. He'd sit out there, lean
back against the garage & smoke to his heart's
content, his head forever inside one last heavenly cloud
of god-awful stench.

2. Iowa City, 2014

Late this morning, I passed an old-world gentleman walking along Market Street & smoking up a storm, puffing on the short butt-end of his well-chewed stogie, clamping down on it the same way my old man did back behind the family garage when I was a kid. I caught the odor, & it was all I could do not to imagine my old man passing by. I wanted so much to reach out & hail him with a hearty, *Hey! How's it going these days?* but I caught myself up short. That codger wasn't more than a few years older than I am right now and that's not what I really needed to say to one who's a total stranger. Moreover, one whose head is wrapped up in a cloud of cigar smoke with its odor like a wet mongrel on a tight leash trailing reluctantly behind. There ought to be something a bit more ingratiating to say for such a momentous moment as the chance encounter of a onetime prodigal son with his long-deceased father who suddenly comes out of the blue walking along Market Street, but as old & slow-witted as I've become, the two of us were separated a full block before I could even think exactly what it was I should've said. Now I realize that between sons & fathers there are things that should never be addressed since, I regret, the time has been long swallowed up into eternity for any regrets.

Hind Quarters

Hiram Larew

Joy is much more than wide open arms
or big bursts
It's kind of like night lights.

In fact joy's smoothness is more
like ball bearings
or cracks in old pots
than it is confetti.

And it's surely more like first names than last
or like those muttering dreams
that no one hears.

Yes, it's these weeds right here
coming up through
the gravel.

Joy is exactly what afar is about
or hind quarters
Isn't it?

So won't you join me in
this big whisper --
of how joy is a jelly
and how it also comes to us with
each or every leaf that bugs chew.

The Roommates

G.C. Collins

The landlord said as long as I didn't burn down the fourth-floor walk-up, I could do whatever, which meant subletting the other, much smaller, bedroom. Mine came furnished with a lofted bed, a desk and a chair. All of it looked like it had been there since the building was built for student housing decades ago. I set down my bag and immediately unpacked my water colors, pencils, brushes, palettes, and the tabletop easel. I stared out of the small window above the desk where the opaque glass monolith of an office building opposite reflected the apartment's crumbling facade back as through a blackened puddle. Hardly a view. The only bathroom in the place was small, and the pipes sputtered murky water when I twisted the half-rusted knobs. It took a while for anything to come out somewhat clean and somewhat cold. I filled up extra cups of water as a precaution. I made a note to call the landlord first thing.

My footsteps rang sharply on the grimy tile of the kitchen and bathroom and echoed on the old hardwood everywhere else. It was lonely for the first few weeks. Sometimes, I heard laughter from the other bedroom – seething with jealousy, I immediately walked over to open it. It was locked. I jiggled the handle and even knocked but it was suddenly quiet in the apartment again.

The pipes clattered and clanged when I ran the water to brush my teeth or wash my hands. That didn't bother me as much as when I had to fill up my water bottles and watercolor cups. Opening up both knobs, the pressure was so intense yet the water, for the first few minutes at least, was always brown and smelled of rot. I realized then why the rent was so cheap – the landlord was not easy to get a hold of.

I covered the bit of wall next to my window with the few finished pieces I liked: a tiny island of rock sticking out of the water like one of the humps of a Chinese dragon; a self portrait made of circles through a light fog of smudged charcoal; a landscape of harvested vineyards, like rows of bramble, harsh against the pure orange and yellow and red of the dying sun.

One day I was mid-bite into a piece of toast when I noticed the other bedroom door was ajar and someone was humming. "Hello?" I called out.

The door swung open. Rachel stood there decked out in athleisure. “Sorry,” she said. “I just started making myself at home.”

I wasn’t expecting her to be the first to move in. “No, you’re good, you’re…” My voice sounded weird after not talking for weeks. I went over to her, unsure of how to act, when she hugged me with a tenderness that I did not expect. It felt good to be held. Tears pooled in my eyes. I had a vision of us sitting in my room – she would write and I would paint in a warm and communal silence.

She pulled back and said, "It's good to see you, Inna."

I buried my head in the crook of her neck. "This is going to be weird to say out loud, but I'm sorry for not being your friend in high school. I was such a bitch to you and everyone else."

“It’s okay,” she said.

“Can we be friends this time?”

She smoothed my hair. "Yes, I'd like that."

I loved having her around. When she read drafts of her poems out loud, I sat back on her bed (procrastinating my own work), closed my eyes, and let her words pop like bubbles in my mind’s eye. Her poems were thorny, thick and knotted. She broke off-beat, and raised and lowered her voice in strange, lilting rhythms. Sometimes it was just a few lines and other times she would continue on for so long I would drift away. When things weren’t good, her poems became haunted, burrowing deep inside me long after I left her room. Then, when she tired of that, they became lighter yet opaque, like bursting with shafts of moonlight. When she had a really good day, she wrote something that was arcing with electricity. I paced around the room with her and when she finished triumphantly, we fell onto the bed together, giggling with excitement. I didn’t even realize until later that there were no water issues when she was living with me.

One day, she burst into my bedroom, asking to put on a reading in her room that weekend.

“Of course,” I said, relieved to be distracted. “I can help you host and get drinks and stuff.”

“That would be great.” Her eyes glittered as she smiled.

All of the friends, acquaintances she ever had, anyone who gave a single shit about her – they were invited and they all came. I gave up asking

people to take off their shoes as the apartment needed a deep clean anyway. She began with a few shorter pieces, each planting stakes deeper and deeper in us. I was already on the verge of tears and looked around. They felt it too. Solemn but not pretentious. She wasn't changing the world, but God, she sounded good. Controlled. She started a longer piece, one that I had only heard snatches of but didn't get the privilege of hearing the whole thing. Halfway through, I understood why. There was a third rail running through it, an exposed nerve that she invited us to touch. Gently. When we closed our eyes and met her halfway, she was there with us, comforting us, soothing our disgusting, filthy souls and quieting our most destructive thoughts. Her voice became my own, and for a moment I panicked, realizing that I wasn't the center of the world, I wasn't just me, I was her, she was me, I was everyone in the room, and so was she.

I opened my eyes and she had disappeared. The audience got up quietly, whispering reverently, and left the room. I blinked, rubbed my eyes, and blinked again. She was gone. No – I heard her voice deep within me. That's where she went. I felt a good cry coming on and shepherded everyone out of the apartment. In the bathroom, I twisted and twisted, nearly unscrewing both knobs but no water came out. I made a note to call the landlord again and figure out this mess. I ended up drinking leftover beer for hydration and woke up the next day with the worst hangover. The other bedroom was locked again and I tried to get some work done but I couldn't bring myself to use the awful water.

Adi moved in soon. He was an intense guy, even back when I knew him from the first neighborhood I lived in. He took the rules of any games we played seriously, and tried to keep everyone else on the same page as him. He was already in the kitchen one morning, cooking oats on the stove top. I almost didn't recognize him. He'd lost a lot of weight and gotten muscular since last I saw him. We caught up quickly. I didn't tell him about the water issues but everything was working perfectly.

His door was almost always propped open with the pull up bar. He could easily do twenty in a row and started working on his one-arm pull ups. On his "rest" days, as I came to understand, he would stretch and meditate. I know he wasn't showing off, but I felt pathetic and weak in comparison, thinking about how winded I got just walking up the stairs.

"How do you do that meditation stuff?" I asked him over dinner. It was his turn to cook and I was surprised by how good a simple meal of stewed lentils and rice could taste.

"I breathe rhythmically, slowly, and when the chattering starts up again, and it always does, I return to the breath," he said through a mouthful of rice.

"That easy, huh?"

"Not easy, but this doesn't get simpler."

"You're like a warrior monk. Honestly, it suits you."

"Hopefully just a monk." He looked sad and didn't look me in the eyes for the rest of the meal.

Adi was training for a free-standing handstand push up. I watched from the kitchen as he contorted himself off of an L-sit, spreading his legs wide, his muscles rippling from his neck up through his back. Stabilized, he pointed his feet at the ceiling, and then walked with his hands across the length of his room. On the other side, he locked in his balance and controlled the release of his body down, engaging his anterior and posterior chains equivalently so that no muscle was left unburdened. I was so impressed that I tried to do push ups for the first time since gym class. He smiled, wiping off his sweat, and came over to give me pointers.

“What do you do now?” I asked him once.

He said, “I used to be a consultant. Sixty hour work weeks, constant travel, constant drinking. My coworkers and I expensed everything, including the cocaine. Then, one day, I was in Honduras, meeting with a pharma company that was trying to open up there, part of an outsourcing thing. He stretched out his hand, tall, handsome guy with a suit, and I couldn't do it. My hand just wouldn’t reach his. I screamed at myself to do it, just shake his fucking hand, yet it stayed by my side and my colleague had to apologize for me and we nearly lost the contract.”

He stopped talking. We ate in silence but I knew that wasn’t the end. I cleared my plate and asked, “What did you do after that?”

“I went back to my hotel, finishing the day early for the first time in years since I started at the company, and just sat on the bed. It was like someone else had been talking for me, shaking other peoples’ hands, doing the excel sheets, presenting, eating, drinking, partying – not me. I was furious at myself. I had somehow locked myself away and thrown out the key. I saw myself,

starved in my own mind, realizing that it was both me and not me, a mirage yet a necessary illusion. I took a flight home the next morning and quit that same day."

"Wow," I said. "That must have been scary, to change things so drastically overnight."

"No," he said. "It was the easiest thing I've had to do so far."

He soon took a voice of silence. At first I was mildly annoyed that I had lost a conversation partner but he listened patiently when I needed to hear my voice again, nodding along or shaking his head when appropriate. Over the next few weeks, he became blurry and translucent around the edges. I could see through his hands. Only the outline of his fingers and his palm lines were visible, like thin, dark strokes of calligraphy pen. It was strange to see him hold utensils when he ate outside of his room, which became rarer and rarer.

"What does it feel like?" I asked him once.

He closed his eyes, put his see-through hands together, and pressed his thumbs on his forehead, his lips, and his heart in that order. Every day he faded away more. It was less lonely than I thought it was going to be. Even when I stopped hearing him, and the few belongings in his room slowly faded away, I felt a comforting presence in the apartment. I was inspired to cook a dinner of stewed lentils and rice, half expecting him to show up. When he finally disappeared, dust accumulated on the floor of the other room. I closed it and heard the lock slide into place.

I had no water for a week. I called the landlord again and she called the super but he couldn't figure out what was wrong with the plumbing. He didn't ask about my paintings and when he left, I felt emptier than ever. The bodega guys knew me by name and teased me when I bought gallons of water daily on my dwindling debit card. The bottles always seemed to have less and less water when I glanced up at them while working. I kept the caps tightly closed on them – where did it all go?

Jordan was the last one to move in. She kept her door closed, so it took most of the day to even realize someone was in there. I knew she had a thing for me in college but it was awkward and she was already so painfully shy. I wish I had let her down so we could have kept being friends, but she never told me anything and avoided me after I found out. She was one of the few serious artists that I liked hanging out with, so it stung. I took a deep breath

and knocked on her door after dinner. She opened it a few inches and didn't look me in the eyes.

"How are you, Jo? You doing okay? I haven't spoken to you in ages," I said as gently as possible.

"Hi, Inna. Sorry things have been… complicated. I had some stuff I needed to figure out. I figured this would be a good place for that." She smiled but still couldn't look me in the eyes. I couldn't help but crane my head over hers to see what she had brought. She graciously opened the door and I saw an enormous keyboard against the wall, opposite the door.

"I'm glad to see you, really," I said. "I always loved your playing at school."

"Thanks." She glanced up finally. "Is it… Is it okay if I finish unpacking?"

"Of course. Settle in." I wanted to give her a hug but her body language was confusing. I reached out and touched her elbow. She didn't pull away.

I took advantage of the working pipes and drew myself a bath for the first time in years. Through the walls, her piano sounded beautiful and achingly slow, each note drawn out like a final breath. But when I would stop by, or even walk by her room, the music suddenly stopped. She would open the door a crack, say sorry for playing so loudly, and then went back in and didn't play again. I said it was okay, play louder but she didn't take me seriously. She would put on headphones but even then I could hear the whisper of the keys being pressed and her controlled breaths. I wanted to talk and distract her and myself, but she stayed in her room and played. It reminded me of the work waiting for me back in my room and I was disgusted with my stupid, lazy self.

One day, I felt like being an asshole and waited outside her door all day but she never opened the door and didn't play anything until I finally got bored and went to my room.

I finally caught her in the kitchen, sneaking prepackaged Whole Foods meals. "Jordan, please, don't shut me out, okay? We're all working through stuff, but I would love to just hear you play once, if that's okay."

She looked like she was going to cry. I wanted to let her go but I was determined – even if she yelled at me to leave her alone, or lied and said sure, anything was better than another sad smile and her door closing on me.

Finally, she said, "You're right. I want to play for you too. But I just can't do it yet, is that okay? It's not... quite there."

"Of course," I said, surprised. "Whatever you're doing, it sounds incredible out here. Even just one song, or even if you're practicing—"

"No." She was stern now. She looked directly at me. "I promise I'll do it, but on my own terms."

A few days later, Jordan knocked on my door to tell me she was putting on a show at midnight that night. I felt nervous. Frustrated. I was being left behind. My wall barely had anything new on it. Nothing felt good enough. The easel with my latest stood there, dumb and mute. This new concept was strong, I was excited. But the execution lacked. I had started it over now ten times, each time with more and more conviction. Yet I couldn't get past the drafting stage, and the intricate landscape faded away. All that was left was a slightly dirty piece of paper with deep, weathered creases across it. I saw the morning light play on those depressions. How subtle the depth – too bad Rauschenberg already did this seventy years ago.

Then, as soon as it came, the thought flitted away and I was unimpressed. I drew the dead tree outside of my window for a quick morning exercise and left my room for breakfast. Jordan's door was closed and I couldn't even hear her moving around. I had promised her that I would be patient.

A handful of people came later that night. Her friends, some who I recognized from college, were nice – they brought drinks and beers so that I didn't have to do a single thing. When midnight rolled around, Jordan shyly led us into her room and we sat down on the floor. I felt like a schoolchild.

She started to play. Her chords built on top of each other like a pyramid, endless stacks already waiting at the top of the barely breathing cadence. On top of that, she layered her melodies like frozen bits of web, delicate and chaotic and purely organic in their construction. Her notes wobbled dangerously, in and out of dissonance like a nostalgic dream verging on a looping nightmare. I saw her sneaking glances at me while the volume of the tiny amp in the corner of the room increased until each bass note pressed on us like a sustained CPR compression. The wall of sound enveloped us. I couldn't keep my eyes open. It felt sacrilegious to mix any sight with this overwhelming sound. My body was carried into a mausoleum made out of ice

and the door shut behind. The earth shook underneath us. A crack opened up to the center of the world, and then – relief, silence flooding in into the vacuum left behind by her releasing the sustain pedal. The last two notes, a descending melody – "Ee-na" – dissipating into thin air.

My eyes shot open. A chill ran over me as I stared at the corner of the room where Jordan sat, just seconds ago. Tears stung at my eyes. I should have talked to her more. I should have reached out to her when she felt most alone. The tinnitus hidden in the overwhelming silence after the performance was louder than the performance itself. No one dared say anything to break it. We shuffled out of her room in a daze. I dropped the "good host" act and immediately shut myself in my room. I was missing her already. The ringing in my ears was a clue though. Jordan was telling me, Inna, finish something, anything.

After the guests drank the rest of the beer and left the apartment, I felt a thirst so strong it was like my throat was about to crack into pieces with my next barren swallow. I turned on my desk lamp and realized I had no water left. I wasn't going to make it down the stairs to the bodega. Cursing, I tried the bathroom sink, knowing it was futile. The kitchen sink too. I stared at the toilet, horrified by my willingness to even consider such a thing, but when I opened the bowl and the tank they were bone dry.

Back in my room, under my bed, I found one cup with a bit of water left. Just enough for a painting or one more useless sip. I dragged my tongue on my cracked lips and closed my eyes. This was it. I needed to finish something, anything. I got my palette and rummaged through my paints. I took out the aquamarine and cobalt blues, as well some sap green, and squirted some out on my palette. I had to work fast. With the tiniest amount of umber, I mixed the blues together and carefully poured some water to thin it out. Then, I took my largest brush and soaked it. My hand shook. I had an intrusive thought to dip the brush into my mouth and suck the water from it. Instead, I willed myself to wet the paper a bit with trembling fingers and put down my first layer of paint.

The fibers carried the pigment urgently across the wetted paper. For the first time in my life, I felt able to work with chaos inherent in the water layer. It dried quickly. I added some green to some water and added a thin layer of

that. Hunched over the painting, I added more layers and dry brushed details, desperately searching for something, I did not know what.

It came quicker than I had anticipated. I felt a coolness waft from the paper, like the softest of ocean breezes caressing my face. I put my brush down. Everything around me was desiccating. Bits of raw paint on the palette were already dust and any water left evaporated as soon as I stopped looking. Yet the painting flowed, drying slowly, with a cool wind coming off of it. I squeezed my eyes shut and plunged my face into it.

Ohh. It was so nice on the other side. They would have loved it.

another cicadagirl poem

amanda trout

slip-shed my skin like the best of my brethren
i can camouflage music with wing-flick, sound

slip into silence when the morning comes.
see the way i fake competence in love

slip sultry words into every speech. see
the way I slip into cicada poetry

slip in all the not-so-accidental metaphors
and know I mean every single one.

Back to the drawing board

Cristiano Cardone

I can't do anything but watch my daughter struggle in that bed, rotting in the sadness of her curled-up legs in the corner of the world she's created for herself. She actively shields herself from the darkness around her—spotted stains of Twitter ink that push her to produce.

Maybe she inherited this heaviness from me, that poor girl. No, not pity—all I feel is regret, because I'm the one who should have left her with enough strength. I, with my emasculated persona, my absolute thoughts stripped away; my violence packaged into LinkedIn photos with colleagues and business dinners; a clean vocabulary, and a tie.

The open door lights up her back, which now has the shape of a woman's. That's all I can see of her through the cone of light from the window under which she lies—on that bed—against the farmhouse beams. This was supposed to be our vacation, but she couldn't stop drawing. This was supposed to be a week of rest, and yet I keep writing, reworking manuscripts lost in years of illogical thoughts. I probably should have gotten checked out years ago when the interest in my mental health still led me down paths I thought were bright. The paths to success are always destructive; I aimed to find my space and shine, as my father would have wanted. Explode like a firework to show I was a good boy, how skillful I was at reaching that position, that artistic, personal goal; a good and diligent boy, finally worthy of being remembered before a certain death.

«Dinner's almost ready.»

«I'll be right there, Dad.»

I stared at her again while the morning rain's dampness was utterly divorced from the return of the night's humidity. I'd bring her dinner up there, the creaking wood beneath me, her back would be straight again at her desk to

draw a commission—an original character or something. She would have kept drawing, me writing.

I went downstairs, my heart grateful for my wife's presence at the stove. I wouldn't have mentally been able to get up from the couch without her there, standing, breaking the mantra of my troubled thoughts with her simple daily routine. We'd always been united through betrayals and falls; now we were just together. I placed a hand on her waist, near the back that had produced the back that would one day leave me. The roughness of my beard was so deeply rooted that it resonated in my vocal cords.

«She's still drawing.»

«She always draws sad or erotic things.»

How could she draw anything else? I couldn't say that to her; a simple grunt of approval completed the strained conversation. What time was it? 7:42 PM. If I sat in our room, on the edge of the bed, I'd still have 33 minutes before 8:15 when dinner would be served. I was strong… I had been. Something divine or ancestral had always communicated to me that I, precisely who I am, would be able to achieve all the goals I desired and be good, productive, intelligent, and devout. What a feverish press parental influence is, instilling such inconceivable notions and unreachable goals. Anxiety – I couldn't waste time—hand to the books. My determination led me to bed. My eyes skimmed the words, fiction—switch books—philosophical concepts, then literary criticism. How much was I absorbing? In the eternal return to specific paragraphs, emotional exhaustion, and tears lingered on meaningful words, sometimes entire passages. One last spasm of dread made me question how productive I was in my free time, those tiny moments I had.

The mistake was sitting on the bed to try to focus in solitude as my gaze drifted beyond the lines, through the words, into the world of dreams.

I realized I had fallen asleep when a blinding beam of light—a harsh summer radiance—reawakened my existential anxiety. It was hot; I felt it on my

forehead and the few hairs I had as beads of sweat began to form. I couldn't figure out where that glare was coming from. I tried to direct my eyes toward the window, but that blinding white continued with the same intensity. My pupils were dry. Only after a few seconds did my retinas adjust to the panic, allowing me to distinguish the source of the light: a figure at the doorway. I had to look up; the sphere of light seemed to come from above the figure. It was a girl with a vestal cloth around her hips, covering her groin and cascading softly to the parquet in a marble-colored wave. I could see better now, but that didn't help my understanding. The figure took a few steps toward me, and the heat intensified. I was now drenched in sweat, but I could see the torso; there it was! No! What dismay, it wasn't a torso—it was a back! Where there should have been a chest, there were only shoulder blades, where there should have been a navel, only a line in the thin trajectory of the spine. That torso moved awkwardly, advancing with slow, deliberate strides until it reached the edge of the bed. Just inches from me, I saw that the woman's arms were absent, with only two stumps serving as a warning of the horrors, the experiences lived by that fearsome presence. A horrifying Venus de Milo!

I was suffering; I felt my skin burning from the intensity of the sun, the first layer of epidermis being scraped away by the relentless rays. With precision and violence, an even greater brightness greeted me when the figure leaned over me, inquisitive. It was my daughter! The face was my daughter's! Above her head, the power of the sun god burned and tormented my skin. Yet not even that blood offering, not even the most divine light, could calm my daughter's yellow eyes, shrouded in vile shadow and ferocity.

> «Why didn't you explain to me what femininity is?!»

My skin was boiling; I couldn't tell if I had really heard that question.

> «What does it mean to be feminine, Dad? Do you know? It bothers me that you didn't teach me. How was I supposed to grasp it from Mom's few social hints?»

I couldn't have answered even if I wanted to—my lips were fused. But soon, more questions followed.

> «Why, despite all my years of studying, can't I find a job in my field? I worked so hard and got the highest grades, but it was all for nothing. Will I never be independent and have the joy of living doing something I love? You know I'll never have a pension, never retire? Will I have to work my entire life without ever getting even a fraction of the social benefits paid for by years of taxes in a lousy job? Why did you leave me in a world that's dying, Dad? Many animals from the books when I was little don't exist anymore. Soon, there won't be any forests or lakes or the peace we loved. Why?»

The more her head bent over me, the more the pressure of that heat pushed me into the bed, melting my existence. The room was intact; only I was burning.

> «WHY does discrimination exist? What is it? It's talked about so much, but I don't understand. WHY does integration exist? What is it? It's talked about so much, but I don't understand. WHY do I want to hate and kill men? They disgust me so much, but I don't understand. WHY are other girls stupid? They disgust me so much, but I don't understand. Which gender should I choose, Dad? Do you want to tell me, can you help me? Do you even know what I'm talking about? Do you know what my gender is? Give me a hand, tell me who I CAN be, who I SHOULD be? DAD!!!»

By then, all that was left of me was a carcass stripped by the unmatched power of the pure, true sun. The weight of her questions buried me in the abyss of blankets. I couldn't do anything anymore; I just wanted to disappear and turn to ash in the scorched earth. I didn't know how to answer those questions—they weren't questions I had ever actively asked myself. They weren't questions that had touched my life, perhaps grazed my generation, but avoided me. Yet this didn't grant me innocence. I, the father, was responsible and complicit in my daughter's pain, in the world I was leaving

her, in the bitter inability to confront questions I had never asked myself. My knowledge was limited by an information stream so detached from the daily life of that girl that any answer I could have conceived would have been wrong. I knew the time would come when she would hate me, I knew she would leave me, and that back would move away, but I didn't think I would feel such emptiness inside. Sinking into the black of the bed, the earth enveloped me in its waves, and as I descended, the bedspread became my shroud. The back and the sun receded.

The hours she spent curled up in her room, her back barely visible—it suddenly all made sense. She bore the weight of the sun on her head while I lay sheltered in my cave.

«What the fuck is a woman?!»

I woke up sweaty and shaken—a message on my phone and my wife at the doorway.

«Are you okay? Come on, dinner's ready.»

I nodded and read the message on my phone. It was from my daughter.

"I love you, Dad."

Circumnavigation

Eli Daniel Ehrenpreis

They merge with a symphony of tymbals.
attacking the specialized senses in my ears.
I am an eccentric, you think, on our walk, hopscotching not to crush the living creatures.

This cacophonous oscillation, throbbing and waving, pleasant and troublesome.
The intake is good. The onboarding and experience are problematic.
Wavering just as I do, these sounds of wings.

Fresh Starts on Earth

Allan Lake

Fresher air, fresh start after
things go the way of things,
due to laws that must be
obeyed or else. A place
become placid, not for first
or second time, just again.
Happy accident for a few.
Something that is
may learn or relearn to fly
because energy is lust to be
while non-being gets lost
on the rutted ancient road
to absolutely nowhere over
any rainbow. Expect soothing
silence for awhile but
some things will muster means
because assertive Nature is
the meaning maker and may
be amenable, yet again.
Nature never needed any of us
to reveal creation's formula.
All is science experimentation,
monkeying around, the mechanics
of trial and error. A wee oddity
works for millenia; goes in a blink.
Wollemi pines witnessed a blaze
of latter day dynamism that felt
elated but never got the plot.

Fresh or even fried old bread
is not simple as it looks,
likely won't be baked again

once all the clever bakers are.
But patient earth and truthful
trees will still act as recording
angels. Leaves of grass emerge
from graves. Moon will mirror
sun's excess, seas see moods
of clouds and impartial Nature
will have choked all the false
gods to death. So be it.

Functionally Extinct

Regina Beach

My British husband drove me six miles over the Welsh hills to the clinic in the middle of the work day. I was scheduled to get a replacement IUD—which the Brits call a "coil." I said I'd take the bus, but he insisted. I have my U.K. driver's license but for the past few months my feet have been too numb to feel the pedals and I don't feel safe behind the wheel.

We turned on the radio as the news was reporting that the last of the pink Irrawaddy River dolphins had died. The species is now officially extinct. The last remaining pod lived between Laos and Cambodia in the waters around Si Phan Don—4,000 Islands, in quieter parts of the raging Mekong River. The locals reported that the last dolphin had been sick for a month. They didn't have the technology nor the veterinarians to offer him any help when he got tangled in a fishing net. He didn't have any family to mourn his death as dolphins are wont to do. It must have been a lonely twilight with no one to talk to and no one to be comforted by when death knocks.

We pull over when the GPS announces "you have arrived," and I get out. I'm not entirely sure where I'm heading. The clinic is on the first floor—that's the second floor for my fellow Americans—of a nondescript building tucked down a narrow drive between the police station and the courthouse. I use my two hiking poles for support as I make my way up the uneven concrete steps with no rail, past the station and then up a ramp to more steps. I wait for a man to come down so I can go up at my own slow pace only to discover the steps lead into the courthouse and not the clinic. I head back down the stairs, down the ramp, down the drive to a different nondescript building.

Inside the front door is a reception window and a list of the healthcare providers in the building. I press the intercom button as instructed, give my name, and am asked if I know where to go. I don't. The woman on the intercom tells me to go through the door, up the lift or stairs and turn right.

A previous version of myself would have bounded up the stairs. This version opts for the lift and finds the dingy quarters of the GUM clinic (that's Genitourinary medicine for all things "down there"). The receptionist is in a dark room with dark green carpet and an open metal filing cabinet full of IUDs stacked in their boxes. She has me sit in a chair while a nurse takes my blood pressure; it's normal. The sleeve is tight and painful on my right arm. I don't weigh enough these days, barely hovering at 100 pounds. My muscles are wasting away from disuse. The nurse gives me a slip of paper with some numbers scrawled on it and tells me to wait in the waiting room for my appointment.

I told my husband that my 3:15 p.m. appointment was at 3 p.m. so we would be on time. Even with my slow walking and not knowing where I was going, I am early and they are running late. The waiting room is filled with stacks of plastic chairs and a few upholstered seats with light green vinyl cushions. I pick the green one closest to the door. The receptionist and the blood pressure nurse asked if I needed help—I said I didn't. But their concern is obvious. I look disabled. I *am* disabled. Now I know that people think I look like someone who needs help walking across a hall and into a waiting room. I don't. At least not usually. But the perception I have of myself as a strong, independent woman is clearly at odds with my current reality.

The Irrawaddy dolphins were already functionally extinct when I saw them in 2018. There weren't enough breeding pairs to continue the species. I saw them just a few weeks after my husband and I met for the first time. For me, teaching in Laos was a respite from the burn out I'd experienced after nearly a decade working in Chicago Public Schools. He was on a soul-searching motorbike trip. His visa was running out and he had to make haste for the Vietnamese border, but he said he'd come back to visit. I didn't believe him, but he was a man of his word. He headed east and I went south to see the dolphins and meet a friend from Chicago who flew over to visit. We took a tuk-tuk down a dusty, bumpy road to a beach with a lone snack shack and half a dozen barefoot Lao men waiting to take tourists out on the river to look for the elusive, freshwater dolphins.

A wave of paranoia brings me back to the present moment, the waiting room, the trekking poles, the nurse and the receptionist. I think of what must be going on in their minds, *She needs a new coil? Who is she having sex with? Her poor husband having to take care of his disabled wife.* I stop myself. They might not be thinking any of those things. It's not my business what they think anyway.

There's a little stereo belting out pop music from a side table in the waiting room, some of which I recognise and some of which I don't. I don't particularly like any of it. I would rather sit in silence in preparation for what's sure to be a painful experience, but I'm a rule follower and even though I'm the only one waiting, I don't know if I'm allowed to turn it off. I play on my phone for a bit but I only have 30% battery and I need to be able to call my husband when I'm done, so I put it in my pocket and read the posters on the wall. Like all leaflets in this country they're written in both Welsh and English. One is about a survey to help determine future services. One is about childcare. Another woman comes in and chooses the green vinyl chair across for me. We don't make eye contact.

When I close my eyes I don't imagine myself as disabled, but the reality is I've just received my Blue Badge for disabled parking from the city council. My neurologist has rated me as a 6.5 out of 10 on the expanded disability scale. Zero is able bodied and 10 is dead. Before my appointment, I used the accessible toilet at the end of the hall. The two girls that were standing outside offered to open the door for me. I declined. But now I know I'm the type of person who looks like she can't open doors on her own.

The blood pressure nurse comes back in with a clipboard. The other woman is called first. A second nurse comes to get me followed by the midwife who introduces herself as a "coil fitter" as if she's part of some workers' union of coil laborers. Her name is Lynn. She asks me if I'm alright or need help. I get the sense that she doesn't usually greet her patients out here. I address the elephant in the room and tell Lynn the coil fitter and the nurse that I have MS and that's why I can't walk well. It's still painful to say out loud. The three of us

walk in silence past the receptionist's room, through wooden double doors and into an exam room on the right.

Lynn appears to be in her 50s, maybe 60s. She has white hair streaked with purple. She brings a chair over from the other side of the room, presumably to spare me 10 steps. I sit, leaning my sticks against the wall. She asks me all the usual questions about my height and weight, what medication I'm on. I try to remember their names, but the new one gets stuck in my mouth and I tell her it's So… Solina… something. I could look it up, but my phone's on airplane mode and I don't really think it's relevant, anyway. She asked what it's for and I tell her bladder spasticity. MS robs you of dignity; it has robbed me of mine. No 35-year-old woman should fear peeing her pants. Lynn asks when I was diagnosed and she seems surprised when I say April. As if she was expecting longer. As if she didn't think so much disability could come on in such a short amount of time. Maybe I'm reading into things.

In Laos there are only two possible responses to the question, "do you have children?" One is "yes" and the other is "not yet." When I got my stray cat fixed my Lao friends were confused. I said I didn't want him to continue the cycle of sick, mangy kittens barely living and often dying in the streets. They were appalled, not by the number of stray animals living off garbage and fighting late into the sweltering nights, but by my brazenness in taking away a being's most basic right and privilege to procreate.

Since my friend and I went with a barefoot man from the beach, our dolphin viewing vessel was simple, not much more than a wooden canoe fitted with an outboard motor. If we had booked ahead with a company that boasted English speaking guides and maintained a website, we may have been regaled with tales of the Mekong while sipping fizzy drinks from the comfort of a shaded bench covered in cushions. Our captain did not speak English and didn't tell us anything about the dolphins or their habitat. We exchanged pleasantries in my broken Lao, but once he turned on the motor it was too loud to keep up conversation.

Maybe it was me who didn't think so much disability could come on so quickly. Up until a few years ago I was averaging 5 miles of walking or running a day. When my now-husband and I parted ways for the first time, I cycled, on a bicycle, from where I lived in Savannakhet 370km to the southern border where Laos meets Cambodia to see these dolphins. They were beautiful and I loved every blisteringly hot second of it. They breached first here, then over there. Leaping out of the cool water into the searing sun, bodies glistening, bulbous nose first. Their body shape is, *was,* more akin to a beluga whale than Flipper. The boats trailed behind the pod, circling them so the rich foreign tourists could get snapshots, gawk, point and shout, "over there, did you see that?"

Lynn reads me all of the possible side effects and complications like the device perforating my uterus and needing to be surgically removed. I sign the waiver hoping that I'm not the unlucky 1 in 1,000. For a second I wonder why I'm even doing this. My husband and I don't have sex very often at the moment. We've only been married a few years. I thought the spark would stay a little longer, but a year ago I was numb up to my bra line. I stopped being interested in sex. I was having a hard time reaching climax. I am still less sensitive than I used to be. Lynn asked me if I've ever terminated a pregnancy. I say no and think of the girls in my homeroom in Chicago.

We weren't allowed to teach sex education in the West Side high school where I worked. Every once in a while one of the 20-some girls I was responsible for would confide in me that they were itchy or late. I would Google the walking directions to the Planned Parenthood a mile from school and say nothing. I'd hand them a Post-it and a pen. We'd exchange a glance and they'd copy the map and we'd never bring it up again.

Once a girl in my homeroom hid her pregnancy for 8 months under baggy sweatshirts until her mom called to tell me the news. After the baby came I tutored her at her too-small house that she and her new baby shared with her mom, grandma and little brother. That was at a time in my life when I felt vivacious and unstoppable. Between work, socializing and planning my next adventure, I was always on the go. I've always been honest about not wanting

children. My students knew this and wherever it came up would defend me saying, “Ms. Beach doesn't need kids, she has all of us.”
The nurse comes back in and I get on the table and undress from the waist down. I try to be discreet but I know that Lynn knows I’m wearing an adult diaper. See seems unfazed and asks me to slide down the table. More. A little more. My knees won’t cooperate in the stirrups, they keep falling to the side. I try to straighten them, but my muscles are reluctant to do what my brain tells them. My nerves don’t fire right and the message doesn’t reach my legs. Lynn examines me with her index and middle fingers. Then she slips off her gloves and opens me up with the speculum. The nurse holds my hand and distracts me with questions about how I met my husband. I tell her about our third date riding motorcycles in Vietnam. I tell her about our fourth date cycling across Italy to Split, Croatia on the trip where we promised to figure out how to live in the same country, a promise that brought me to Wales.

I got my first IUD on my 30th birthday, eight days before Obama passed the torch to his successor. Obama had been *my* president, winning the first presidential election I’d ever voted in and governing throughout my 20s. As the 44th presidency came to an end, I became afraid. As a woman in America, I feared my rights were endangered. I couldn’t imagine what my country would look like with such a volatile personality at the helm.

I commemorated Trump’s election to the presidency in two ways. I applied for a Fulbright fellowship to teach English in Laos. I felt incapable of continuing my teaching career in Chicago under his administration. I also decided to swap birth control pills for an intrauterine device, my logic being hormonal IUDs prevent pregnancy for five years, when we’d hopefully have a new president who would repair whatever damage to women’s health and access to contraception 45 was sure to cause.

Seven months after Trump took office, I was on a flight to Vientiane, the Lao capital. Laos is one of the least developed countries in the world. Communist and landlocked, it’s still covered in leftover bombs American pilots dropped during the Vietnam War.

I taught at a teachers' training college in the south of the country and met my now-husband when he rode his motorcycle through town on a tour of Southeast Asia. He didn't want kids either and told me we'd make a great married couple after knowing me only a few days. Four years later we've lived through an international move, a global pandemic, and purchasing a house together. Now we're navigating a tough diagnosis that's rocked me to my core.

I'm wistful for the not-so-distant past, and even more so as Lynn takes my old device out. It's painful; I'm cramping and I hate it. But at least it's proof that those nerves aren't dead, so I try to be grateful for the pain. The nurse lets me squeeze her hand hard as she tells me about her daughter who lives in New Zealand. I tell her about my three siblings while Lynn sprays my cervix with numbing spray. I don't believe it works, because the next part is horrendous. I squeeze the nurse's hand again. I tell her it's going to be worth it. I'll suffer through five years of period pain all at once and then won't have to deal with it again until I'm 40.

And then what? It feels like a long time from now but I'm not sure what I'll do. Will I still be fertile at 40? A quick search reveals that after 40 pregnancy chances are less than 5% per cycle. After 45 it's 3% to 4%. And low as that is, it's not 0%. So will I just keep replacing this foreign object in my womb until I'm 50? I have set in motion a plan to make my genes functionally extinct. It's still a minority position, to remain childless. Even if I wasn't sick, I still wouldn't want to be a mother. I feel guilty admitting that.

I recently saw on social media that one of my former students was expecting a baby. "Oh no," is always my first reaction. In my mind she's still 15 years old, wide eyed and too young to really know herself, let alone navigate the floodwaters of motherhood. Then I stopped myself. This young woman is now 24. She's finished her education. She's posting family pictures of her with her swollen belly and her partner. They look happy. They *want* this baby. They may have *tried* for this baby and 24 is a perfectly reasonable age to start a family. Am I a spinster for thinking that motherhood is always an unplanned burden?

Lynn pushes the new IUD in and my left ovary feels like it's going to explode. I presume this pain is mild compared to childbirth. I don't know if Lynn has children or not but she and the nurse both agree that labor is much worse. I lay on the table for a while, breathing. They ask if I was already wearing a pad. They already know the answer, but we all pretend for dignity's sake that they don't.

If I outlive my siblings, I won't have any blood relatives to mourn my death. They are childfree, too, for now, at least. Will I have a lonely twilight with no one to talk to, no one to be comforted by when death knocks? That fear doesn't seem like a good enough reason to procreate.

The nurse helps me get dressed. It is both so caring and so humiliating. Lynn gives me a bag of information leaflets and condoms to use until the coil takes full effect. She asks if my husband is coming to get me. I call him and try to explain where I am, not at the courthouse, but the building behind it.

I'm cramping and faint but I know if I wait for him to try to find me upstairs I'll be waiting a very long time. After five minutes in the waiting room I head to the lift. I am so grateful I don't have to take the bus home. My husband finds me in the parking lot and we walk hand in hand back to the car.

It was the humans with their hydroelectric dams, unsustainable fishing practices and pollution that led to the Irrawaddy dolphin's demise. Scientists estimate that up to 150 species go extinct each day, but I guess only the cute ones make the news. I don't know if I'll ever have the chance to go back to Laos. For me the Mekong will always have pink dolphins swimming between its banks.

I don't know if I'll ever walk normally again, either, but I know in my bones that I won't have biological children. With this decision have I made myself, and my family line critically endangered? Is there something fundamentally wrong with me that I don't have the urge to be a mother? My gene pool is rife with the recipe for autoimmunity. I don't think the world will lose something

valuable if it dies out. And so in five years, I'll replace my coil again. I'll ensure my genes are functionally extinct.

Documentarian

Megan Cartwright

An Attenborough special,
executed in my living room.
Vision: drawn claws,
a monochrome bloom.

Guttural utterance
and feline energy.
You snapped the mouse's neck
(I pretended not to see).

Glass-eyed, play dead –
learn to hone instinct.
It works much better if
they think you cannot think.

Death: No Surprise

Norah

click picture to go to soundcloud

Writing Memoir

Helen Patrice

I am the remember-digger,
crunching through the tough protect-crust
of icy past.
Sometimes I reach grow-soil,
sometimes bone.
Sometimes a bog where a body is buried.
I must reach for slow-time,
for the back-looking-glass,
and see my own reflection.
Who was that new girl,
and can I forgive her for not knowing
what she needed to know?

The Home

Richard Garcia

Back in the old days people really died when they died, not like now. It was a big deal, suffering. The high, four-poster bed you were born in was the bed you died in. All the relatives gathered around to hear your last words. Here at The Home you get sick and you stay in your small apartment. A nurse drops by and leaves. Your friends and floor mates drop by and then they don't. It can get busy here so the workers start to empty your apartment of furniture and other objects, getting it ready for the next occupant while you lie in bed, floating away on a raft made of your empty medication bottles. Or you might see your lover, from years ago, dancing across the floor of your apartment while you tap out an Arabic beat on your Djembe. Or you might sit with her eating take-out on a hillside waiting for the full moon to make its appearance. You are giving the moon and the first stars scores as if the two of you were a panel of judges. In the morning your friends and floor mates will sit in the sun at the entrance to The Home as they do each day. They will barely raise their heads when the coroner's wagon comes. Someone remembers something funny you said, and they smile. Later, some of your belongings appear in the common room on the rack for free stuff.

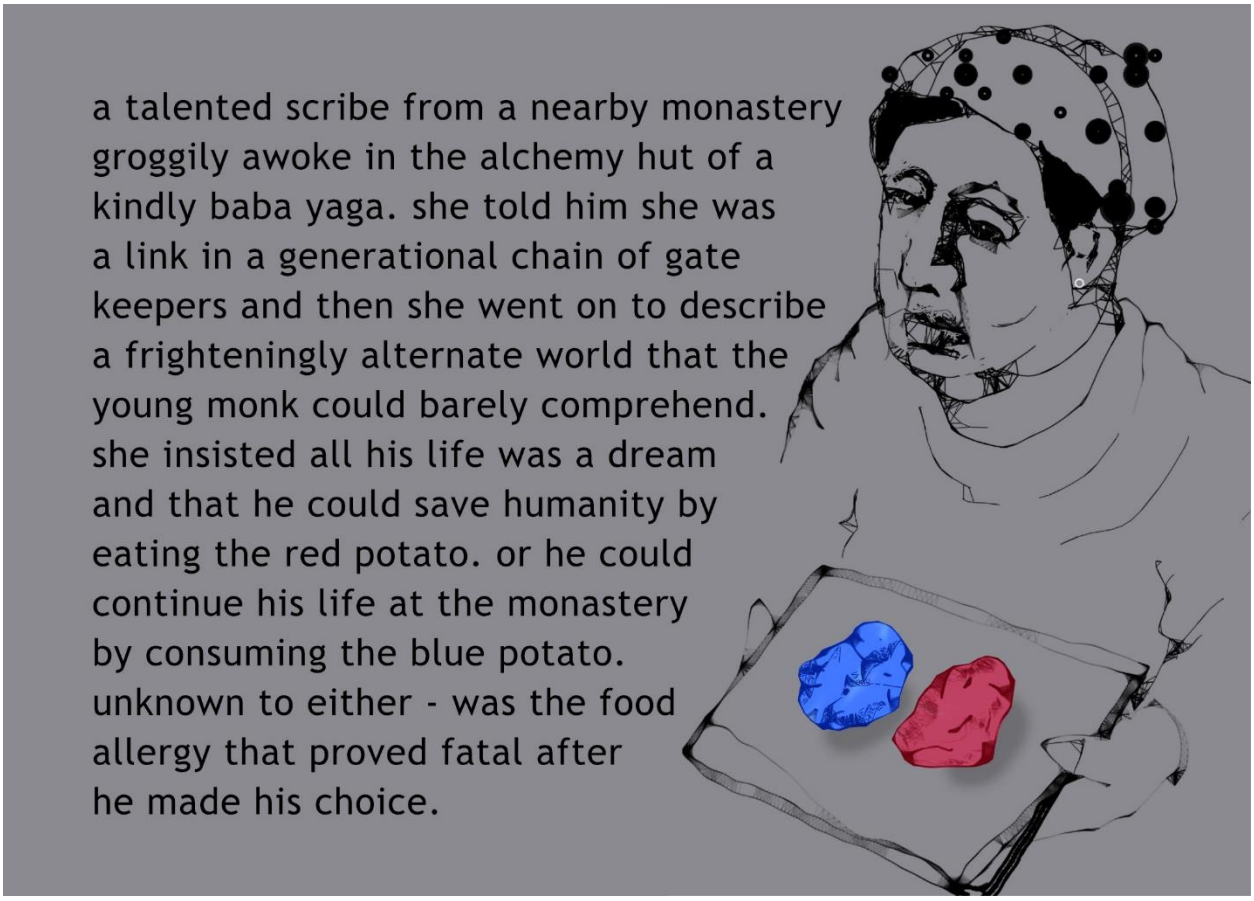
To the Granddaughter I Never Had

Gail Dawson

There she is at Lake Marion across from our family's lake house, my 4-year-old granddaughter, giggling and screaming in feigned distress. She is in the swampy area in front of the lake covered halfway with swamp sand and mud. Her head and hands sticking out of the soil, her torso buried and her legs sticking out the back looking like the magician's lady cut in half. *Darling, did your cousins do this to you? Call for them and ask them to dig you out of your weedy tomb so you can run and play together. A day in the marsh is worth a hundred days in the classroom. There is so much to discover here, frogs, may flies, gar fish, and more. You can go fishing. Learn how to put the worms on the hooks yourself. Be watchful for the snakes and alligators. Stay with your older cousins. Squish the mud through your toes. Nothing exists outside of this place. Pay attention to everything around you, the trees, the sky, the plants, and animals, and pay attention to your very own self. Time doesn't exist. Be wild. You exist here. You exist now.*

~

c_zientek


a talented scribe from a nearby monastery
groggily awoke in the alchemy hut of a
kindly baba yaga. she told him she was
a link in a generational chain of gate
keepers and then she went on to describe
a frighteningly alternate world that the
young monk could barely comprehend.
she insisted all his life was a dream
and that he could save humanity by
eating the red potato. or he could
continue his life at the monastery
by consuming the blue potato.
unknown to either - was the food
allergy that proved fatal after
he made his choice.

hill house, not sane

Lyman Gamberton

if the body is a house
it can be haunted just the same
as bricks and mortar can

ancestral predilections -
tumours underneath the floorboards,
addiction undermining the foundations -
the fact of your tongue, shed

with seven years' regeneration
of every cell that made me then.
nothing of what you were

is in what I am. but the neurons
still rattle the bars, their moaning

hopeful, even now.

Still Life with White Plates

Jennifer Eagle

I will wear my white dinner plates like Victorian collars
cut my tongue out, serve it on a bed of red
blood, crisp white plate
those who have told me I talk too much
can let my voice round out in white silence
I will offer myself beheaded
white plattered
like some unsainted John the Baptist
without the treacherous dance of Salome
but with all her treachery
I will get out of bed
smash plates at the wall
ignore the mess
of glistening porcelain
lie down and feel what is now unfelt
perfect sheets of angry white shards
scratching my hot cheek
to dream of
tossing endless white

to boomerang at incomparable enemies

Little White Perch

William Arnold

On the other side of the dock, the boy watched as his uncle's fishing line tensed with the weight of a small fish. The man yanked his rod just a touch to set the hook and then began reeling it in.

The fish was small—no bigger than the boy's hand—but it fought with the ferocity attributable to a much larger creature. The fish kicked and splashed with all its might, bumping against the dock in an effort to escape, but the man won him over without much tribulation at all.

"That ain't no catfish," the boy said. "He's too little."

"Nope. That's a white perch," Uncle said, grabbing the fish as it swung on the end of his line. The scales caught a twinkle of sunlight.

"We're*...keeping him?"* the boy asked, crunching his eyebrows.

"Oh, sure."

"We can't eat him, though, can we, Uncle? He's too little."

"No. But som'n else will." The man set the rod down and then brought the fish closer to the boy. "When you're gettin the hook out these littler fish, you're gon wanna pinch the gills here, see?"

"Yeah, so they can't breathe?"

"And cause it makes it easier to get the hook out. But you're gon wanna pinch hard, though, cause they slippery, these fishes. This one here's easy, though, he's got the hook caught just in his lip. You can just pull it right out. No workin it around much." But the boy just watched. Uncertain of the swinging fish hanging off his uncle's line.

"Don't you wanna do it, boy?" his uncle asked.

"No, not if I don't have to."

"What?"

"I don't wanna,"

"Why not?"

"Cause he's so little. I feel like I'm 'onna hurt em."

“You ain’t gonna hurt nobody.” Uncle said. “Here, c’mum. Get it. C’mum.” The boy stayed looking at his uncle, then turned his eyes to the horizon, where the sunset loomed over the bay, a flaming ball of golden-orange shimmering across the calm water of the Chesapeake Bay. The scene vividly reminded the boy of a painting his mother kept in their living room right above the couch.

“You sure it don’t hurt ‘im?” the boy asked, blinking in the sun.

“I’m sure,” he said. The mouth and gills of the little perch pumped futilely for air. Its glossy yellow eyeball stared up at the sky with indifference.

The boy reached over and began to work his fingers around the hook, but the fish immediately thrashed and slipped out of the man’s grip. It landed hard on the dock, and flipped and kicked trying to make its way back to the water, but the man snatched it up in an instant.

“Whoa there, buster,” he chuckled, working his burly fingers back around the breast of the fish, pinching the gills. “You’re gonna wanna push it in and get the barb out first.” The boy sat criss-crossed. Unmoving.

“C’mon kid. Unhook ‘im or he’s gonna start chokin on the air. And that’ll really hurt him.”

“It already did hurt him. He just tried to get away.”

“No, you only scared him is all. C’mon. Unhook him, boy. Ain’t your daddy teach you anythang?”

“No. Not about fishin. Pa ain’t never much liked to go fishin.”

“Well your momma does, and she wanted me to take you out and teach ya, so go on and lemme teach ya somethin. You don’t wanna disappoint your mama, do you, boy?”

He reached over and grabbed the fish from Uncle, pinching the gills as he was told. The little white perch felt cold and slimy, the scales coarse one way and smooth down the other. It was a strange feeling, touching a fish. Very strange.

The little perch was completely still now. It had given up. The only movement was the mouth and gills pumping for air. The boy pinched the hook and in one swift push and pull, it came right out.

“Atta boy,” the man clapped his nephew on the back. “Told ya it was gon be easy.” He took the perch from the boy and pinned it down into the planks of the dock with his thumb. The boy wiped the slimy hand on his cargo shorts as Uncle reached down to his belt loop and retrieved his pocket knife.

“You’re killin him?”

“Yeaup.” Uncle flicked the blade out and placed it right behind the yellow eye of the fish and smacked the butt of the knife with the heel of his other hand. It was an anticlimactic death. The boy expected to see more for some reason, but the blade sank only an inch and the fish flexed and jittered and then went limp and died. He also thought the bulging yellow eye might have closed after it was killed, but it did not.

“How come we’re killing him?” the boy asked. Uncle was already cutting it up into pieces, starting with the head.

“Well, he took our bait didn’t he? Now this som’ bitch gon make up for it and catch us a nice rockfish,” the man smiled his rotten, tobacco stained teeth.

“Well, it looked like it hurt him. Whenever you just stabbed him.”

“Naw. Fish don’t feel pain,” the man baited his hook with the fish head and stood up to cast the line out, which went out in one strong, relaxed motion. He reeled the slack out and squared his worn Orioles baseball cap before sitting down to dangle his feet in the water. The boy mimicked his uncle and sat and dangled his feet off the dock, but his feet didn’t quite reach the water.

The man lit a cigarette, smacked a mosquito off his neck, then smoked and watched his line for a few minutes. While watching the line, the man noticed a heron fly down and land on an adjacent shoreline. It settled right on the edge of a forest of green cordgrass, turned its head toward the sunset and sat there watching it. Just as the man and boy on the dock.

“Don’t they feel…*anything*?” the boy asked, breaking the silence. “The fish?”

“I don’t know. Prob’lly not.” The man said, turning his attention back to the line.

“Well, they feel if the waters hot or cold, right? Else they freeze to death.”

“Yeah, I guess that’s right.”

“So how come they can feel the water but not the knife?” the boy asked.

The man paused and removed the cigarette from his mouth. “How old are you, kid?”

“Nine and a half.”

“Nine years old?” he snorted. “God*damn*, kid. Your momma was right, you are somethin.”

The boy looked down at his feet dangling barely above the water line. He wished he was just a few inches taller—a few years older—so then maybe his feet would reach the water like his uncle’s.

“I don’t know how they can’t feel the knife.”

“They don’t feel the knife. Awright? Jesus, quit worryin so bad. Plus it duddn’t matter if they did. We’d still be fishin if it hurt em. It don’t make no difference.”

“He doesn’t feel it cause he’s already dead?”

“Yeah. Exactly. It's dead ‘fore it can feel it. It’s…*aah* what’s the word?”

“Instant?”

“Yeah. Instant,” he said, snapping his fingers.

“So did my daddy feel anything?” the boy asked. “Mama called that instant, too.”

Uncle's eyes rounded and deepened. “Oh—oh, kid I’m sorry I…*Damn* kid, I’m sorry, I ain’t mean to—”

“Did he?”

“No, son. No. Your daddy ain’t feel a thing. He went straight to heaven. Didn’t feel a thing.”

“And heavens where you go when you die?”

“Heavens where *good* people go when they die and your pa was a fine, *fine* man. I got no doubts he’s up there in heaven watchin us fish right now.”

The boy looked up to the empty blue sky, and the look on his face nearly made the man shed a tear. “One time—now this was way back when, whenever your Ma and your Pa were teenagers—I was gettin roughed up bad by Lonnie Griffen and his brothers out back behind your grandmuh’s stable—now, this was before your uncle was big and strong like he is now, mind you—but your Pa, he ran up on them boys and just started whoopin on him. Skinny as he was, he just started *whoopin* on em. That ain’t last long, though, cause we was about the same size back then—which wuddn’t much better than a couple a’ twigs, so we both went and ended up gettin whoopins. But dammit boy, gettin whooped up by yourself is ten times worse. I never forgot that and that was twenty some years ago. You don’t ever start gettin no doubts about the Lord’s treatment of that man, ya hear me boy?”

The boy nodded and smiled sadly. It was hard to think about his father. He could talk about him and think about him but he was nothing more than gone. Just gone. And there wasn’t anything anybody could do for him. The boy had begun to forget how his father stunk coming home at six o’clock from the oyster cannery up in Crumpton or how spiky his cheeks felt without a shave or how he could flip a log in the fire pit without burning his hands or how he could make Mama laugh like nothing else in the world. But that was all gone now. All well and gone.

Uncle reached over and ruffled the boy’s hair and tried his best to smile. He wanted to say something to the boy, something clever. Something that would take that look off of his face—but there was nothing. He couldn’t think of anything.

“Someone at school told me my daddy wuddn’t gonna go to heaven,” the boy said, eyes staring blankly at his feet. “Because he kilt himself and killin yourself is a sin and that the Lord don’t take no sinners.”

“Kid,” the man began softly. “Look at me. Look at me. Your Pa ain’t gone to hell. I promise you that. Your pa was a *good* man, ya hear? Best I ever known. You think I woulda let a less of a man marry my sister? I wouldn’t have let a less of a man *near* her. You best believe that. And them kids shouldn’t

have been sayin nothin like that to you, that wuddn't right at all. The Lord oughta have a talk with *them*."

"I'll go to heaven. Won't I, Uncle?" the boy asked.

"Yes," he nodded. "Less you do somethin really bad."

"Does everything go to heaven?"

"Yes, mostly."

"Even the fish?"

"Even the fish." the man said.

The boy slouched his shoulders and watched the water just below his feet. A little bubble floated to the surface and made a small ripple. A cicada buzzed in the woods. A breath of warm evening wind whispered through the forest behind them, a bullfrog croaked in the cattails, and far out on the shimmering water, a male mallard dove underwater and came up with a fish clamped in his yellow beak.

The boy looked down at the little white perch beside him. Butchered into bait. It didn't even look like a fish anymore, just two blocks of flesh and a little splat of blood and scales, the head hanging on a hook somewhere in the water.

"Momma says you don't believe in God." the boy said.

The man shook his head and said, "No, but you ought to."

"Why?"

"Cause your Ma and your Pa believe. And I hear it's just good to believe,"

"But you don't."

"No. No I do not," his uncle said.

"I heard Momma tellin Mrs. Mabel that you quit believin ever since you went to Europe."

Uncle sighed, slowly reeled in the line and then set the rod down beside him. He gazed off to the setting sun watching over the vast miles of the Chesapeake Bay, casting its warmth as far as the eye could see.

The man shuffled in the breast pocket of his blue chambray shirt for his matches. "Well," he said, flicking a match and lighting another smoke.

The boy watched the man's eyes go to the horizon again and not return. He waited for Uncle to speak again, but he stayed just smoking his cigarette and staring off.

"What's in Europe that made you quit believin?" the boy asked. The man scratched the stubble on his chin.

"I guess I..." he cleared his throat. "I guess I saw what a man could do to another man." The cherry of his cigarette crackled as he took a long drawl and slowly exhaled. "Since then I ain't believed in much of anythang at all,"

For a while after that the two just sat beside each other on the dock, not saying anything at all, bathing in the warmth of the evening sun. Both of them were content with not fishing, now. He knew the boy hadn't liked it and thinking of Europe had exhausted his own desire completely.

The boy zoned out on the perch's head hanging on the hook. Its big yellow eye pointed up at the sky, no longer looking, no longer seeing.

"He went to heaven?" the boy said, "The perch."

"Yeah," the man said, "Yeah, the perch went to heaven, too."

"He went to heaven just then? Whenever you kilt him."

"Yup. He went just now."

"So how come he's still here on the dock?" the boy asked. "How come he ain't in heaven?"

After thinking for a little the man said, "Cause it's his soul that goes." The boy blinked at his uncle who still wouldn't look at him, who still stared far off in the distance with eyes as dead and listless as the ones on the fish.

"He's just dead, ain't he?" the boy asked.

The man didn't say anything.

"I don't think he never went to nowhere. I think he's just dead, ain't he? Just dead?"

Contributor Bios

in order of appearance

Cynthia Yatchman is a Seattle based artist and art instructor. A former ceramicist, she received her B.F.A. in painting (UW). She switched from 3D to 2D and has remained there ever since. She works primarily on paintings, prints and collages. Her art is housed in numerous public and private collections. She has exhibited on both coasts, extensively in the Northwest, including shows at Seattle University, SPU, Shoreline Community College, the Tacoma and Seattle Convention Centers and the Paci:ic Science Center. She is, a member of the Seattle Print Art Association Artist Trust and COCA (Center of Contemporary Art)
Facebook cynthia.yatchman
Instagram @cynthiayatchmanart

A.M. Hayden is the current Poet Laureate and award-winning Humanities Professor for Sinclair College. Her debut collection, *American Saunter*, is forthcoming by FlowerSong Press in Fall, 2024. Her first chapbook, *How to Tie Tobacco,* and second full-length collection*, Old World Wings*, will be released by Wild Ink Publishing in 2025. She recently won the 2023 River Heron Editor's Choice Poetry Prize for her poem, "The Faery Bridges" and is a Pushcart Nominated Poet for her piece, "Watching Ukraine." She lives with her family and many furry rescue babies, including their very special blind, three-legged pup named Vinny Valentine.
Website https://windychickenpoet.com
Facebook WindyChickenPoet
Instagram @windychickenpoet

Terry Savoie's poems have appeared in excess of 400 literary journals, anthologies, and small press publications over the past four decades. These include *APR*, *Ploughshares*, *Poetry* (Chicago), *Prairie Schooner*, *The Sonora Review*, *North American Review*, *Commonweal*, *American Journal of Poetry* and *The Iowa Review* as well as recent numbers of *Chiron Review*, *Tar River Poetry*, *North Dakota Quarterly* and *Cumberland River Review* among many others.

Hiram Larew's most recent collection, Patchy Ways, was published by CyberWit Press in 2023. As founder of Poetry X Hunger, he is bringing a world of poets to the anti-hunger cause. http://www.HiramLarewPoetry.com and www.PoetryXHunger.com
X @HiramGLarew
Facebook Hiram Larew
Instagram @HGLarew

G.C. Collins is a writer living high in the mountains of the US. One day they will finally come down, move to the coast, and fulfill their destiny as a senior surfer/writer.

Amanda Trout is a Midwestern-based writer with a passion for sound, form, cicadas, and all things strange and unusual. Her work has been featured or is forthcoming by Yavanika Press, *Raw Earth Ink*, The Common Language Project, and other publications. She teaches composition at the University of Missouri-Kansas City. Find Amanda on Instagram @atrout2972

Cristiano Cardone, born in Naples in 1997, has published two novels (*Fecola di Neve* and *Etimasia*) and continued working independently to develop and sharpen his work. In 2019, he decided to attempt communicating through another medium, starting with the adaptation of his recent novel, *CFBT*. This is the first installment in a trilogy of comics/webcomics. *CFBT* was independently printed in January 2024 and debuted at the Oslo Comic Expo festival in June 2024. He is now working on short stories and another novel is to be expected within summer 2025. Cardone completed his BS in literature in 2019. He moved to Norway, where obtained his MS Ibsen's studies in 2021; he is now completing his second master's degree in Library and Information Sciences at OsloMet.

Instagram @crycaelumcardone
X/Twitter @CryCaelum
Facebook cristiano.cardone

Eli Daniel Ehrenpreis started life as a musician and became a physician, educator, and inventor. He stopped seeing patients after a major surgery. He has published many scientific papers and six books on medical topics. His poetry and short stories are published in *Reapparition*, *Pharos, Medicine and Meaning Journal*, *Hektoen International*, 101 Words, and *Star 82 Review*. He lives with his wife Ana and a little dog named Fili in Skokie, Illinois.

Allan Lake, originally from Saskatoon, Canada, has lived in Vancouver, Cape Breton, Ibiza, Tasmania, Western Australia and Melbourne. His latest chapbook of poems, "My Photos of Sicily", was published by Ginninderra Press. Such journals as *The Hong Kong Review*, *Quadrant Mag*, *The American Writers Review*, *Tokyo Poetry Journal*, *The Antigonish Re*v, *New Philosopher* and *The Fabians Review* have published his poems.

Regina G. Beach is a disabled poet and essayist. Originally from the American midwest, she now calls the Welsh Valleys home. She is the inaugural poet in residence at the Risca Industrial History Museum for 2024. Themes in her work include the arts, culture, travel, wellness and the unique people and places in those spheres. Her writing has appeared in *Global Poemic*, *Boldly Mental*, *The Rail*, *Haiku by You*, *Five Minutes*, *Visual Verse*, *The Horror Tree*, and *Disoriented* among others. She is the founder of the literary magazine *Lesions | Art + Words*, which features the work of people living with chronic health conditions. Regina hosts Writers' Hour and a monthly virtual open mic for the London Writers' Salon and is the editor of the Salon's Writing in Community anthology. She facilitates monthly writing workshops for the MS-UK charity and is the producer of the Living Well with MS podcast. Regina has written about living with disability for Overcoming MS, the MS Society, MS-UK, the Unwritten and

Wales Online. Read more of Regina's writing at reginagbeach.com or subscribe to her newsletter at reginagbeach.substack.com.
IG @nourish_by_regina
Twitter/X @reginagbeah

Megan Cartwright is a poet based in Canberra, Australia. Her work has featured online and in print in journals and magazines including *Barrelhouse*, Contemporary Verse 2, *Cordite Poetry Review* and *October Hill Magazine*. Instagram: @screechavitch

Helen Patrice is an Australian writer living on unceded Wurundjeri country in Naarm(Melbourne). Helen writes both literary and speculative poetry, short speculative fiction, creative non fiction, and memoir. She blogs occasionally on WordPress and is spending a year reading some of her poetry out on TikTok(helenreadsherpoems). Helen is working on new chapbooks of poetry and has just re-published two older ones.

Richard Garcia's poetry books include *The Other Odyssey* (Dream Horse Press, 2014), *The Chair* (BOA 2015), and *Porridge, Press 53* (2016). He has received a Pushcart Prize, and has been in Best American Poetry.

Gail Dawson has been writing poetry and children's stories for most of her adult life as a hobby. She didn't get serious about writing poetry until she retired from being a public school Resource teacher. About 2 years ago she met a professional poet who invited her to become a member of his poetry writing group. A collaborative poem written with her teacher was published in the Spring, 2024 edition of *Rattle Magazine* as her first piece of poetry published.

c_zientek is a transplanted creative - from the garden state to the great lakes state. He has served many masters, drawing, photography, graphic

design and writing. Retired from promoting late stage capitalism and commercial consumerism, he is continuing to explore drawing and the plasticity of language. Sifting through and sorting the serendipitous confluence that occurs assembling his thoughts from his septuagenarian babbling.
Instagram @czientek_51c

Lyman Gamberton is a queer diasporist writer from the British Isles. His work draws on folk horror, Jewish mythology, and stories from the (ritual) fringes, often finding itself in the space right in between the sacred and the profane where you can get them to kiss on the mouth. He wishes there was a really solid rhyme for "pomegranate". He would like to pay his respects to Shirley Jackson for the title of this poem.

Jennifer Eagle is from Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. She became fascinated with poetry at the age of fourteen when a book of e.e. cummings' fell off a library shelf. Her poetry has appeared in *Secrets from the Orange Couch*, *The Rat Creek Press*, *Words for Wellness Contest*, and most recently in *Gyroscope Review*. Jennifer was accepted into Sage Hill, a notable writing retreat in Saskatchewan, in 2018, where she won a Robert Kroetsch bursary for her poetry. She's currently completed one manuscript of poetry and is writing a second.

William Arnold is a senior in high school and a lifelong resident of the Eastern Shore of Maryland and the Chesapeake Bay. He has had a passion for writing short stories for around nine years, and is largely inspired by the works of Ernest Hemingway and John Steinbeck.
Instagram @williamwyattarnold