

Aji

m a g a z i n e

issue 8. spring 2018.

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FEATURED ARTIST
Bette Ridgeway

EMERGING ARTIST
James Carrillo

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The Spaniard

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Norma Alonzo, *Below and Above*

Artists & Authors

in this issue

Norma Alonzo

Norma Alonzo has always taken her painting life seriously, albeit privately. An extraordinarily accomplished artist, she has been painting for over 25 years. Beginning as a landscape painter, she quickly transitioned to an immersion in all genres to experiment and learn. Initially, Alonzo was torn between professions - the arts or a career in architecture. She chose the arts, graduating from San Jose State University in San Jose, California with a degree in Interior Design. After working in this field and ultimately heading her own design firm, her focus turned to the creation of fine art. Under the mentorship of Richard Lees (artist and art historian of Pasadena, California), Alonzo was encouraged toward honesty in her painting without judgment, without expectation, and without the confines of outside demanding interests. Through her paintings, Alonzo examines our place, metaphysically and functionally, in the midst of today's fast-paced world.



Dennis Bartel

Dennis Bartel has published work in *Harper's*, *Hustler*, *Mississippi Valley Review*, and scores of other journals, magazines and newspapers. In addition, he has worked for Time-Life and ABC News (commentator at Princess Di's funeral). He has taught writing for a decade at Johns Hopkins University and the University of Pittsburgh. His collection of stories, *Voyeurs*, won an award in Los Angeles for best of 2007. His novel, *High'd Up*, was published in the summer of 2015.



Ellen Wade Beals

Trained as a journalist, Ellen Wade Beals writes poetry and prose. Her work has appeared in literary magazines, in anthologies and on the web. In 1999, her short story "Picking" was awarded the Willow Springs fiction prize. Her poem "Between the Sheets" appears in the textbook *Everything's a Text* (Pearson 2010). She is editor and publisher of *Solace in So Many Words* (Weighed Words LLC). Her website is: www.solaceinabook.com.



Danisa Bell

Danisa Bell attended the Columbia College Fiction Writing Workshop in the fall of 2001 and the Tom Bird Writing Workshop in the fall of 2003. Most recently, she received her Creative Writing Certificate from Emory University. Her essay "But I Remember" has been accepted in *The Diverse Arts Project*, and *The Penmen Review*. Her short story "Princess" has been accepted in *Colere*. Her short story "Son of Royal" has been accepted in *STORGY*. Additionally, she received an Honorable Mention in the *Writer's Digest* Annual Writing Competition of 2007.



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Jenn Blair

Jenn Blair has published work in the *Berkley Poetry Review*, *Rattle*, *Superstition Review*, *New South*, *South Carolina Review*, *Adirondack Review*, and *Chattahoochee Review* among others. Her poetry book *Malcontent* is out from Press Americana (2017). She teaches at the University of Georgia.



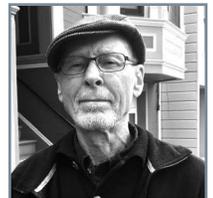
Michael Brosnan

Michael Brosnan's poetry has appeared in numerous literary journals. His first collection, *The Sovereignty of the Accidental*, was published in November 2017 by Harbor Mountain Press. He is also the author of *Against the Current*, a book on inner-city education, and serves as senior editor for *Teaching While White* (www.teachingwhilewhite.org).



Patrick Cahill

Patrick Cahill co-founded and edits *Ambush Review*. He received his Ph.D. in History of Consciousness at UCSC. His poetry twice received the Central Coast Writers Award. Recent work has appeared in *Otoliths*, *Forgotten*, *Volt*, *Aji*, *Into The Void*, *riverbabble*, *The Other Side of Violet*, *Permafrost Magazine*, and *Subprimal Poetry Art*.



James Carrillo

James Carrillo was born in Tularosa, New Mexico in 1983. He earned his Bachelor of Fine Arts in Photography from New Mexico State University and his Masters of Fine Arts from Cranbrook Academy of Art in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan. After graduating with his MFA, James began writing, not intentionally, more like he stumbled upon it. He began to write what meandered and also what rushed – more like sprinted – through his mind. James currently teaches Art and Photography at New Mexico State University – Alamogordo (NMSUA).



Martha Clarkson

Martha Clarkson manages corporate workplace design in Seattle. Her poetry, photography, and fiction can be found in *Monkeybicycle*, *Clackamas Literary Review*, *Seattle Review*, *Alimentum*, and *Hawaii Pacific Review*. She is a recipient of a Pushcart nomination, and is listed under Notable Stories, Best American Non-Required Reading for 2007 and 2009. Her short story "Her Voices, Her Room" won the *Anderbo Open City Magazine* prize for best short story in 2012. Learn more about her at www.marthaclarkson.com



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Gordon Ćosić

Born in 1956 in Čačak, Serbia, in 1975 Gordon Ćosić finished school for graphic design and since 1976 has lived and worked as a graphic designer. In 1985, he won the RK SSO “Daring Flower” award for creativity. In addition to graphic design, Ćosić is engaged in painting and photography. His works have been included in several group exhibitions, including an exhibition of miniatures at the City Gallery in Uziče.



William Crawford

William C. Crawford is a photographer based in Winston-Salem, NC. He invented Forensic Foraging, a modern technique for digital photography. For more information, see ForensicForaging.com.



Tatjana Debeljački

Tatjana Debeljački was born in 1967 in Užice, Serbia. She writes poetry, short stories, and haiku. She has been a member of the Association of Writers of Serbia -UKS since 2004 and is also a member of the Haiku Society of Serbia. Editor of the magazine *Poeta*, Debeljački has published four collections of poetry, including *A House Made of Glass* (published by ART – Užice in 1996), *Yours* (published by Narodna Knjiga--Belgrade in 2003), and *Volcano* (published by Lotos from Valjevo in 2004). A CD book of *A House Made of Glass* was published by ART in 2005. Her poetry and haiku have been translated into several languages. Find more about her here: <http://diogen.weebly.com/redakcijaeditorial-board.html>



Darren Demaree

Darren C. Demaree is the author of six poetry collections, most recently *Many Full Hands Applauding Inelegantly* (2016, 8th House Publishing). His seventh collection *Two Towns Over* was recently selected the winner of the Louise Bogan Award from Trio House Press, and is due out March 2018. He is the Managing Editor of the *Best of the Net Anthology* and *Ovenbird Poetry*. He is currently living in Columbus, Ohio with his wife and children.



William Doreski

William Doreski lives in Peterborough, New Hampshire. He has published three critical studies. His poetry has appeared in many journals. He has taught writing and literature at Emerson, Goddard, Boston University, and Keene State College. His new poetry collection is *A Black River, A Dark Fall* (Splash of Red, 2018).



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James Fowler

James Fowler teaches literature at the University of Central Arkansas. His literary essays have appeared in *ANQ*, *Children's Literature*, and *The Classical Outlook*; his personal essays in *Southern Cultures*, *Cadillac Cicatrix*, *Quirk*, and *Under the Sun*; his short stories in such journals as *The Labletter*, *Anterior Review*, *Little Patuxent Review*, *Best Indie Lit New England*, *Line Zero*, *The Chariton Review*, *The Southern Review*, *Riding Light Review*, and *Elder Mountain*; and his poems in such journals as *The Milo Review*, *Futures Trading*, *Aji Magazine*, *Cantos*, *Poetry Quarterly*, *Sheila-Na-Gig*, *The Bicycle Review*, and *Cave Region Review*. "The Voyage of St. Incertus" is loosely based on the medieval allegory *The Voyage of St. Brendan*.



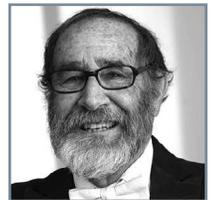
Cynthia Gallaher

Cynthia Gallaher, Chicago-based poet and playwright, is author of three poetry collections and two chapbooks. In 2017, she made a 10-city book tour with her nonfiction guide & memoir *Frugal Poets' Guide to Life*, which won a National Indie Excellence Award. The Chicago Public Library lists her among its "Top Ten Requested Chicago Poets."



Joel Glickman

Joel Glickman recently retired as Professor of Music at Northland College, where he taught from 1974 through May 2017. He maintains close ties with Northland, including studies with poet Cynthia Belmont. His poetry and songs frequently reflect his obsession with Wisconsin's lakes and rivers, with fishing and with waters everywhere.



Joyce Goldenstern

Joyce Goldenstern is the author of *The Story Ends—The Story Never Ends*, a collection of short stories (ELJ Editions 2015). Find her on the Web at jkayindexing.net.



James Grabill

James Grabill's recent work appears in *Caliban*, *Harvard Review*, *Terrain*, *Mobius*, *Shenandoah*, *Seattle Review*, *Stand*, and many others. His books include *Poem Rising Out of the Earth* (1994) and *An Indigo Scent after the Rain* (2003), Lynx House Press. His collections of environmental prose poems include *Sea-Level Nerve: Books One* (2014), *Two* (2015), Wordcraft of Oregon. For many years, he taught all kinds of writing as well as "systems thinking" and global issues relative to sustainability.



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Barbara Haas

Barbara Haas is a repeat contributor of fiction and nonfiction to *The Hudson Review*, *The North American Review* and *The Virginia Quarterly Review*. Her short story collection is *When California Was an Island*, and her MFA is from UC-Irvine. She is Director of Creative Writing in the MFA program at Iowa State University.



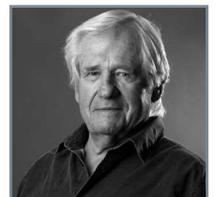
Nels Hanson

Nels Hanson's fiction received the San Francisco Foundation's James D. Phelan Award and Pushcart nominations in 2010, 2012, 2014 and 2016. His poems received a 2014 Pushcart nomination, Sharkpack Review's 2014 Prospero Prize, and 2015 and 2016 Best of the Net nominations.



Mark Yale Harris

Mark Yale Harris's artwork invokes an awakening of the sensual, stimulating a perceptual, internal, and intellectual response for the viewer: a visual that speaks to life's experiences. He works to create symbols of universal connection, underscoring the relationship that one has to another and to nature. His art conveys his nonverbal view of life and is an ongoing portrayal of himself, his behavior, adventure, exploration, risk taking, and non-acceptance of convention and the status quo. Constantly in search of the new and different, he is fascinated with the unconventional. Life has a hard, aggressive side, as does much of his work, represented by rigid, angular lines. However, the soft side is also apparent, visible as curves and soft forms. He has created an evolving body of work in alabaster, marble, limestone, and bronze. Combining different elements, he brings forth a duality in the sculptures that he creates.



Erin Hovey

Erin Hovey is native to the vibrant city of Springfield Illinois; this poet/ professor/ bartender writes on romantic female archetypes both professionally and creatively. She also loves dogs.



Michael Keshigian

Michael Keshigian, from New Hampshire, released his twelfth poetry collection, *Into The Light*, in April 2017 by Flutter Press. He has been published in numerous national and international journals including *Oyez Review*, *Red River Review*, *Sierra Nevada College Review*, *Oklahoma Review*, and *Chiron Review* and has appeared as feature writer in over twenty publications with 6 Pushcart Prize and 2 Best Of The Net nominations. Learn more at www.michaelkeshigian.com.



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Tricia Knoll

Tricia Knoll is an Oregon poet who worked for many years as the Public Information Officer for Portland's water utility. She writes about water wherever she goes. Her work appears widely in journals and anthologies and in three collections. More information can be found on her website at triciaknoll.com.



Nathalie Kuroiwa-Lewis

Nathalie Kuroiwa-Lewis is an Associate Professor of English and Writing Minor Director and Writing Center Director at Saint Martin's University, a private, Benedictine liberal arts university located in the Pacific Northwest. She is also a board member of the Olympia Poetry Network. She has published poetry in *OccuPoetry*, *Social Policy*, *Penny Ante Feud*, *THAT Literary Review*, *Dark Matter* and *In Layman's Terms*. She is currently working on a monograph of poetry to be published into a chapbook or book of poetry. In addition, she is taking guitar lessons in order to learn to compose songs for the classical guitar. Nathalie lives in Olympia, Washington and in her free time enjoys taking long walks, riding her bike, and travelling with her family.



Jonathan Litten

Jonathan was born in Atlanta, Georgia and received his B.S. in English Education from Kennesaw State University. His work has appeared in *The Aurorean*, *The Artifact Magazine*, *Foliage Oak Literary Magazine*, *North Wind: A Journal of George MacDonald Studies*, *Door is Ajar*, *LLC*, *Thrice*, *Gravel Magazine*, *One Person's Trash*, *Edify Fiction*, and *GFT Press*.



Lily MacKenzie

A Canadian by birth, a high school dropout, and a mother at 17, in her early years, Lily Iona MacKenzie supported herself as a stock girl in the Hudson's Bay Company as a long distance operator for the former Alberta Government Telephones and as a secretary (Bechtel Corp sponsored her into the States). She also was a cocktail waitress at the Fairmont Hotel in San Francisco, briefly broke into the male-dominated world of the docks as a longshoreman (she was the first woman to work on the SF docks and almost got her legs broken), founded and managed a homeless shelter in Marin County, co-created *The Story Shoppe*, a weekly radio program for children that aired on KTIM in Marin, and eventually earned two master's degrees. She has published reviews, interviews, short fiction, poetry, travel pieces, essays, and memoir in over 150 American and Canadian venues. Visit her blog at <http://lilyionamackenzie.wordpress.com>.



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Mike McNamara

Mike McNamara's collection of poetry *Overhearing The Incoherent* was published by Grevatt and Grevatt in 1997. His poetry has been published in *Envoi*, *Orbis*, *Tears in the Fence*, *New Welsh Review*, *The Dawntreader*, and in other places. Mike had a selection of poems published in *The Pterodactyl's Wing* (Parthian, 2003).



Stephen Mead

A resident of New York, Stephen Mead is a published outsider artist, writer, maker of short-collage films and sound-collage downloads. If you are at all interested please place his name in any search engine in conjunction with any of the above-mentioned genres for links to his multimedia work and merchandise.



Toti O'Brien

Toti O'Brien is the Italian accordionist with the Irish last name. She was born in Rome, then moved to Los Angeles, where she makes a living as a self-employed artist, performing musician, and professional dancer. Her work has most recently appeared in *Apt*, *Aji Magazine*, *The Spectacle*, and *The Goldman Review*.



Mary K O'Melveny

Mary K O'Melveny is a recently retired labor rights attorney. She lives in Washington, D.C. and in Woodstock, New York. Her poetry has appeared in journals such as *Allegro Poetry Magazine*, *GFT Press*, *The Flagler Review*, *The Write Place At The Write Time*, *The Offbeat* and *Into the Void*.



Toby Oggenfuss

Tobias Oggenfuss is an artist in movement metaphorically as well as physically as he explores the kinetics of the world around himself. In effect, Tobias is an integral part of the overall perpetual motion of atoms and electrons, the not so linear photons that reveal our world and universe. His images seemingly capture Earth's rotation and that of the cosmos in a surrealist fashion, the deconstruction of our perceived environment and the challenging of our visual perception. His work challenges the banal, thrusts the viewer into a warped reality that actually exists within our experiential comprehension and experiences; he questions and exposes our limitations: he reveals the known. But with the added questioning of the existing kinetics of known and non-charged particles, Tobias simply creates reality-based representations of the ever-present surrealism that escapes us due to cultural experiences and precepts.



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Bette Ridgeway

For over four decades, Bette Ridgeway has exhibited globally with over 80 prestigious venues, including the Palais Royale in Paris and the Embassy of Madagascar. Awards include Top 60 Contemporary Masters and the Leonardo da Vinci Prize. The Mayo Clinic and the Federal Reserve Bank top Ridgeway's permanent collections. Her books include *International Contemporary Masters* and *100 Famous Contemporary Artists*.



Margarita Serafimova

Margarita Serafimova was shortlisted for the Montreal International Poetry Prize 2017. Her work appears in *London Grip New Poetry*, *The Journal*, *A-Minor*, *Waxwing*, *StepAway*, *Ink*, *Sweat and Tears*, *Minor Literatures*, *Writing Disorder*, *The Birds We Piled Loosely*, *Noble/ Gas*, and many other places. More of her work can be accessed here: https://www.facebook.com/MargaritaSerafimova/?ref=aymt_homepage_panel.



David Anthony Sam

David Anthony Sam lives in Virginia with his wife and life partner, Linda. Sam has four collections and his poetry has appeared in over 70 journals and publications. His chapbook, *Finite to Fail: Poems after Dickinson*, was the 2016 Grand Prize winner of GFT Press Chapbook Contest. In 2017, Sam began serving as Poetry Editor for GFT Press.



Domenic Scopa

Domenic Scopa is a four-time Pushcart Prize nominee and the 2014 recipient of the Robert K. Johnson Poetry Prize and Garvin Tate Merit Scholarship. He holds an MFA from Vermont College of Fine Arts. His poetry and translations have been featured in *The Adirondack Review*, *Reed Magazine*, *Borderlands: Texas Poetry Review*, *Reunion: The Dallas Review*, *Belleville Park Pages*, and in many other publications. He is currently a Lecturer at Plymouth State University and a Writing Center Specialist at New Hampshire Technical Institute. His first book, *The Apathy of Clouds* (FutureCycle Press), is forthcoming in 2018. He currently reads manuscripts for *Hunger Mountain* and is an Associate Editor at *Ink Brush Publications*.



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Radhika Singh

Radhika Singh is a fiction writer, day dreamer, and weaver of words. Silicon Valley is the warp and Asian Indian immigrant experience is the weft of the weaving. Her work has received an honorable mention in the Fictuary short story contest and has been published in *Across the Margin*, *The Milo Review*, *The Bacon Review*, and *Literary Mama*.



Aaron Styza

Aaron J Styza received his BA in creative writing from Eckerd College. He is currently an MFA candidate in UCI's poetry program. His work has appeared in *Heron Tree*, *Sediments Literary-Arts Journal*, and *Two Cities Review*.



Sarah Summerson

Sarah Summerson is a poet from small-town Pennsylvania. Through her poems, she attempts to capture the essence of a moment through the suggestions and nuances of language. Her work has been featured in a variety of literary magazines including **82 Review* and *The Good Men Project*, as well as the upcoming anthology of Southwest poems from Dos Gatos Press.



Helen Tzagoloff

Helen Tzagoloff was born in the former Soviet Union, coming to the United States at the age of eight. She has been published in *Barrow Street*, *Poetry East*, *The Evansville Review*, *Slant Poetry Journal*, *Poet Lore*, *Interpoezia: A Stranger at Home* anthology and other journals. She has been nominated for the Pushcart prize and was the winner of the Icarus Literary Contest. A book of poems, *Listening to the Thunder*, has been published by Oliver Arts & Open Press.



Editor's Welcome

“Hic sunt dracones”—here be dragons—words of caution marking the 1510 Hunt-Lenox Globe¹--good thing we don't have to worry about those anymore. Right?

Yet we contemporary readers, writers, and artists still enjoy our mental journeys into territories of the unknown, uncharted oceans, rivers, and streams, archetypal forays into the subconscious where our humble outriggers drop anchor and we dream, rest, reflect, escape.

No, there are no dragons here, not exactly. . . .but within these pages you will encounter fantastic images, yarns and tales. You may be seduced by sirens, sylphs, wracked by hurricanes, or enchanted to the point of uproarious, irreverent laughter. You may, as did St. Brendan, observe “mountains in the sea spouting fires” as you drift from island to island, or somehow find yourself wandering through haunted Venetian streets, or experience a bit of vertigo looking down from the sixth floor of the Hotel St. Petersburg, still chortling irreverently at the thought of Shakespeare's most famous lines awash in irony and unbridled cynicism.

This issue comes with a warning: reader, beware. Within these pages, you might lose your otherwise sensible self in charm and reverie. Like Ishmael, Gulliver, and other sojourners on the high seas, you might be overcome with the obsession to explore territories of the unknown, or be lulled into daydream so appealing, you may hesitate to return to the literal world of work and unbending fact. You may lament, as did Tennyson's lotus eaters, “Ah, why/Should life all labour be? Let us alone. . . .”

As one admittedly drowning in stormy waves of responsibility, let me instigate unapologetic wandering. While eventually you will have to find your individual ways back to the shores of the actual worlds you inhabit, why shouldn't you linger here as long as you like, celebrating the unique and diverse creations of this issue's contributors?

Sincere thanks to all who submitted work for this issue, and to our reviewers, our graphic designer and web developer--without all of you, *Aji* would not be possible.


Erin O'Neill Armendarez, Editor in Chief



¹Gray, Andrew. (2013, Dec. 12). No old maps actually say “Here be dragons.” *The Atlantic*. The Atlantic Monthly Group. <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2013/12/no-old-maps-actually-say-here-be-dragons/282267/>



Mark Yale Harris
Princess and the Fish

LAYERING LIGHT



An Interview with Santa Fe Artist

Bette Ridgeway

Katie Redfield: *Where are you originally from and where are you working now?*

Bette Ridgeway: I was born in the Adirondack mountains of northern New York State, just a few miles from Canada. Surrounded by the pristine beauty of this region, I began painting little watercolor landscapes at 4 years of age. Since then I have traveled the globe studying, teaching, exhibiting and absorbing the colors and customs of diverse cultures. In 1996, I came to Santa Fe to pursue my practice as an artist full time.

KR: *When and how did you get started in the visual arts?*

BR: There was no question from early childhood that I was a painter. Although I raised a family and held many jobs as a single mom, I was creating art and having small shows. After my children had all graduated from college, I began to focus on my career. I made the leap in 1996, moving from the Washington DC area to Santa Fe, where the arts are central to the community and to the economy.

“I like to immerse myself in the flows of the paint – feeling the joy and exhilaration that comes from so many variations of pure, sensuous color.”

-Bette Ridgeway

KR: Who was your role model and mentor?

BR: My primary role model was Paul Jenkins, whose work is in every major museum in the world. He saw my watercolors in 1979 and encouraged me to eliminate the subject matter, work larger and focus on color. After nine years of exploring this, Jenkins saw my work and said, “You are ready to show.” That was really the beginning. I had a solo show at FOTA gallery in Alexandria, Virginia, and my career took off!

KR: Can you describe your current style or technique?

BR: The technique I developed was totally self-taught. I took many art classes, but none of them gave me more than the understanding of color and composition. My personal style took 20 years to develop – where I pour many layers of thin acrylic on canvas.

KR: Have you worked in other styles?

BR: I have experimented with acrylic on metal, wood and cell-cast acrylic. They were interesting and fun, but the final coats of resin are toxic, and made me sick. Now I stick to acrylics on canvas. My outdoor sculpture on metal has many layers of acrylic, but the final finish is an automotive clear coat (three layers), to protect the sculpture from the elements.

KR: How have you settled on this aesthetic?

BR: Since 1999, I have focused almost entirely on the pouring technique, which I call “Layering Light,” and my video of that title is available for instant download at <https://ridgewaystudio.intelivideo.com/>. Students are loving this kind of instruction online!

KR: What cultural influences have impacted your art?

BR: My travels have taken me to Africa, Australia, Europe, Asia, Mexico and South America. I had lengthy stays in Madagascar, Australia and Chile, where I studied and taught painting. The colors and customs of these diverse cultures have informed all of my work since the early ‘70s. I feel very fortunate to have been able to study in such a variety of places.

KR: What feelings do you hope your viewers experience?

BR: I am always fascinated by the ways in which my viewers experience my work. Everyone has a different “take.” The work is totally non-objective, yet some see people and places. I consider that the viewer really completes the work, by bringing their own experience to the piece. For myself, I like to immerse myself in the flows of the paint – feeling the joy and exhilaration that comes from so many variations of pure, sensuous color.



KR: Can you describe your process?

BR: First, I get an idea of the size and the color scheme I want to work with. I attach a large canvas to a series of supports, then plan the colors. I generally mix 3-4 colors to start, then begin pouring thin layers onto the canvas that has been shaped. I control the flow of the paint. Sometimes I allow each color to dry and sometimes there are many colors flowed on together. It is a very active process – very physical. It may take up to a week or more to complete the piece. Sometimes the unfinished paintings are rolled up and put away for a time. Then at the perfect moment, I will have an idea on how to finish them – and voila. Done!



KR: How do you know when the piece is finished?

BR: The painting tells me!





KR: How do you share your work?

BR: I don't share a piece until it is completely finished, unless it is a commission. Then I share progress photos as agreed upon.

KR: Do you work alone?

BR: Yes, I often work alone. Now, because there is so much going on, I have an assistant three days a week. This really helps me to focus on the creative process.

KR: What tools do you use to develop and grow?

BR: I work with carefully selected students who come and work with me in my studio. I often learn more from them than vice versa. I keep up with the art world. I look at other work in galleries and museums. I have learned that there are only two things going on with me, input and output, meaning that if I am working on a series of paintings, I cannot look at other work. It confuses me. I also recommend to students that they focus for a period on their own work, then venture out and see a lot of other work. This keeps us informed and generates new ideas.

KR: How do you want your work to contribute to the world/ your community?

BR: I just want to make beauty. My dream is to have people be transformed by the experience of looking at my work, to see the beauty and to get lost in the experience. That's all....pretty simple. No political statement, no social statement.....just the joy of color and beauty.

**KR: Do you think all art has inherent value?
How do you define “art” vs. “craft”?**

BR: I believe that the simple process of MAKING art has great value. Time is the best judge about the long-term value of art. For example, I saw an installation of a pile of chains on the floor in a gallery. Over time, I do not believe that this kind of statement will hold up. That doesn't mean that it is not valid. All art is valid. The marketplace also has a lot to say about the validity and value of art. As for art vs. craft, I leave that to the experts to debate!

KR: What goals do you have for the future?

BR: I am beginning a new project – a public art project for a new space in Northern Virginia. This will take the better part of 10 months to complete. My focus is on that, and who knows what will be next? I do plan to continue my studio work so that I may supply art to my many galleries. I'm looking for some young artists to help me part time. Interested parties should send me a note through my website guest book!

KR: What other artists do you recommend we should check out?

BR: There are so many: Monika Kaden, Santa Fe ceramic and bronze artist – her stunning work can be viewed at Monikakaden.com, Ben Wright – a Native American artist – whose work I admire greatly (find his work on Benwrightstudio.com), and Braldt Bralds, a Santa Fe artist, who does Dutch Master style painting with detail that boggles the mind (view his work at Braldtbraldsstudio.com).

KR: What advice do you have for aspiring artists?

BR: I love that question. First, make your work distinctive. Yes, I know, everything has been done. So, do it on a new support. Try working with new materials. Find your style and stick with it. Develop it beyond your wildest dreams. Treat your art as your business. Take it very seriously. Invest in a stunning website – this is your global portfolio, and invest in good materials, good photography, etc. The best investment in the world is YOU. You control your career, you make art that is interesting to the viewer and you get it in front of the right people.

KR: Where can we follow your work?

BR: My website, for starters. I do post some things on Facebook and Instagram, less often on Twitter and Pinterest. Here's another little piece of advice for aspiring artists: limit your time on computers; it takes time away from your creative process. Set a particular time working on your things....a sacred time when nobody disturbs you, and you turn your devices OFF. I know, there are kids, etc, but give it a try.....you will like it! Thanks so much for giving me this opportunity. I loved your questions! Bravo to you for your wonderful magazine.

*Works featured in this issue,
courtesy of Bette Ridgeway:*

Aquarius, page 19

Deep Summer, page 21

Along the Reef, page 22

Mountains and Sea, page 22

California Dream, page 23

EMERGING
ARTIST

*James
Carrillo*



To You from Me

I wrote a poem for you.

You?
Who?

Let's call you me--
Me, you, him, they,
I want to say

James--
I wrote a poem for James.

I've seen you seethe in anger, cry, outrage,
I've seen you cry in different ways
Waking with pillows soaked with guilt, heartache, embarrassment and longing.

I've heard your laughter so deep and real that it echoes on the lips of others – hearty,
I've seen you laugh as a torment disapproval, disgust, dismissal--

You've hurt and hurt others with intent and by accident.

Your tongue is sharp -- double edged:
Remember this, One day your ass is going to be kicked because of your mouth!

How old were you the first time that was said to you through gritted teeth?
Eight? Nine? Eleven? Twelve? – early—

What is this dissociative mess?
Is this an apology or a thank you note?

I'm sorry you're a dick, because you hurt people's feelings,
I'm sorry you're a bastard,
A bastard from a legitimate couple, but abandoned by a father who walked in the same house, slept in a room near you who gave up on you at thirteen.
A bastard because of your fucking mouth--

I'm a bastard because I stood up for my mother rather than allowing a closed mouth and silent tongue as my sisters bullied their mother. My mother -- a mother I miss.

Thank you for the truth--
You try your most to speak the truth.
Yes, you may flourish, elaborate, embellish, or Mad Libs it when a memory becomes vague or faint.

Thank you for being kind.
Yes, it's true. You can be.

James, why did I write this note?

Because sometimes we forget

I Know You

I know you
I remember you
I know you twenty years from now
Selling meth
in a single wide trailer
In a small trailer park

You think you're some celebrity
Your infamy only exists
Turning tricks
In back alleys
In back seats
Backrooms

Always in the back

She Mourns

There in the street...
Do you know what that is?
That glitter?

Those are
Tears,
Broken dreams,
Broken lives,
Tears,
Tears--

Tears made of bottles once filled with spirits.

Spirits to hide and mask the truly broken spirit.

Tears a byproduct from lives lived in
Dreams,
Fantasies,
Potential,
And memories not made.

Do you see the beauty?

Look at them glisten:
They shine in the fading day.

Once full,
Emptied with haste,
Smashed,
Broken,
Destroyed.

In a dry lot or atop the blacktop where they are momentarily stars.

They shine.

The street mourns for her children--



Measured

“tempest in a tea cup”
sometimes the tea cup is much larger than it seems
sometimes the tempest spills over
some drink from mugs
 glasses
 iced or hot
 tall/small
 grande/medium
 venti/large
the tea I pour and the vessel I am are not quantifiable
not in
 spoons
 pints
 quarts
 cups (again)
finding ways to measure as you loom over
casting shade

Smile

She smiled like crooked pictures
Flemish vanitas off level
Precious
Detailed dense with affection
We like a smile
Evanescent



*“Photography is
subtractive and
by its reductive
nature, it is a lie
by omission.”*

-James Carrillo

AN INTERVIEW WITH EMERGING ARTIST

James Carrillo

Aji Magazine: Can you tell us a little bit about your background as a visual artist?

James Carrillo: I have an BFA (Bachelor of Fine Arts) with emphasis on photography from New Mexico State University in Las Cruces, New Mexico. I also have an MFA (Master of Fine Arts) from Cranbrook Academy of Art in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan.

AM: What is your interest in photography?

JC: Truth in photos, as evidence as document as portrait In fact, I love photography because of its lies. A photographic image is deception. The photographer gives the viewer only what portion of the world s/he wishes to curate into the frame. Photography is subtractive and by its reductive nature it is a lie by omission. To think of photography in that manner leaves a creative doorway open to deceive the viewer.

AM: Can you describe your process for creating your scenes and still life photos?

JC: Some of the images are portraits of a dear friend of mine. All the items are her, her life reordered and organized in monochromatic color schemes. When making a “portrait” without the figure I think of Marsden Hartley’s (b.1877 - d. 1943) “Portrait of a German Officer” (1914), a painting reminiscent of a paper collage; the objects were arranged to represent a German Officer Hartley

had fallen in love with during World War I. The image is a memorial and a delicate representation of a lost love. The idea of creating an image with someone’s objects to tell a story of his or her life may seem a vapid or superficial concept. But the images are more akin to an archeological dig. The viewer is culling information about the person with clues presented to them in a vanitas or a still life – a life still.

AM: If you could sum up your artistic vision in one sentence, what would it be?

JC: This is a difficult question, to quantify my “creative vision” in one sentence. In an attempt to create one sentence, I compact my personality, my personae, my feelings – me – boxed up in a single sentence. Well, here is my attempt: My creativity is me.

AM: What do you hope your art conveys to an audience?

JC: What do I hope to convey in my art? Well, that is a difficult question. I am not sure I have really mulled over this idea. Like my writing, I wrote to appease something in myself. The same applies for my photographs. When a work is put out to be viewed, it is no longer in my hands to say what is what, but to be translated by the viewer. I hope that the viewer sees some semblance of my vision and can relate to what is presented.

AM: What can you tell us about the inspiration for your poetry?

JC: Words and images get caught in my mind in a loop; for the most part, I do not consider it writing. Rather, I am taking dictation or translating these loops. Personal situations, observations, and people inspire my writings.

AM: Give us the back story on your training/experiences as a writer.

JC: I did not feel I learned to write till I was in my college career. I learned writing through art history. I was guided with the aid of a great professor of art history, Dr. Elizabeth Zarur. I still feel that writing is not something that I fully understand with great confidence. I have an understanding of words, but not necessarily the mechanics.

Creative writing was born after I became disenfranchised by my graduate school experience. I lost a love of making photographs. It took me nearly three years post-grad school to enjoy visual art again and to be able say, “I like that.” To have the freedom to enjoy art without having to deconstruct the image to the point where a work lost its beauty because of dogma, to escape that feeling of disenfranchisement I had during those years, I began to write down the images that flashed through my mind. I used writing as a catharsis to express my creativity when I stopped using the visual form.

AM: Who are your influences in poetry and visual art?

JC: Painting is my biggest influence in my visual art as well as in my writings. I am trained as a visual artist. The visual arts are a lexicon of symbols, icons, metaphors, histories and with these tools in their various combinations artists create visual statements that speak without the need for words. Paintings can be lyrical, sartorial, comical, political just as any writing.

Writers I take inspiration from are Jean Genet, Gabriel Garcia-Marquez, Pablo Neruda (amongst others). The mentioned writers seem to write to a feeling, an emotion and to make these scenes tactile without being overly explicative. I feel it is more transportive for the reader, to create a scene with emotion. I believe the reader is compelled to position his or her personal experiences into the story or poem.

AM: What do you hope readers will take away from your poetry?

JC: I am not sure. I want to say “I write in the dark,” meaning I write for me. I know this is a self-indulgent answer. The letters that have formed words have been piled upon one another to make stanzas and are then put into the “light.” My writings are being read by someone other than myself. I hope that a reader relates to my writing. Some of my writings are coming from a place inside me – where I sometimes feel alone. I hope that others do not feel alone.

AM: What future goals do you have for yourself as a writer?

JC: Simply, that I continue.

AM: What advice do you have for other artists trying to reconcile or explore impulses in different creative media?

JC: Do it! Why not pursue other fine arts genres? One fine art field informs the other and widens the gamut of creative practice. By attempting another field, it not only informs you as a person, but you as an ARTIST.

*Photography featured in this issue,
courtesy of James Carrillo
After Hopper, page 25
Memento Mori White, page 28
Memento Mori Green, page 29
Memento Mori Red, page 32*



The Note

The note read: In case I don't see you...good morning...good afternoon...good evening...and...good night... I read the note multiple times hoping it would divulge more information. Thus far, and long into the good night, it had failed to provide anything more than a vague sense of familiarity.

I had found the note lying on the kitchen counter in the morning. When I read my wife's cursive writing on the sheet of white printer paper, I felt a dread fall over me and almost in reflex, as if to quell it, I stretched my hand out and opened the refrigerator. Imagine my surprise then to see only three items inside: peeled garlic, a jar of chili lime pickle, and a six-pack of Stella Artois. My mouth formed a soundless O and I stood there gaping at the bare shelves, which till yesterday had been stocked to plenty.

Nothing else seemed to be amiss in the one-bedroom apartment. Bed, couch, bookcase, TV, and coffee table were all in their Ikea-modeled places. I opened the refrigerator again. Its starkness demanded an explanation. I called Amruta on her cell phone.

"Did you know there's no food in the fridge?" I asked.

"I do," she said.

"What do you mean you do? Did you take it?"

"I did."

"There was a new pack of Chobani yogurt in there! Did you take it for the developers in your team?"

"Of course not. You're the only person I know who likes mix flavored yogurt."

"Raspberry and lemon!"

"Take it as an inciting incident. You needed one and I've provided it."

"You're not making any sense."

"Says the guy who sits in his boxers reading Greek mythology all day."

"I showered today. I'm wearing khakis and a polo shirt. And you wanted me to read them!"

"I did. But you're not helping. Anyway, this is something to start you off on the hero's journey – whatever, it doesn't need to be heroic, it's your journey."

"You want me to go do groceries now?" I asked.

"I have to go," she said and hung up on me.

I was so perplexed that for a moment I forgot all about the note. I wanted to call her back and ask what she meant by taking the food out of the refrigerator like this but then I figured I must have caught her at a bad time. She had left for work as usual before I got up in the morning.

I confronted the bare shelves in the refrigerator again then grabbed the six-pack of Stella Artois and set it on the kitchen counter. I chugged down a beer for breakfast and then clicked the Pandora app on my laptop. The *Forever Jazz Hits* station routed through the Bose speakers of the stereo system in the living room, and the gravelly voice of Louis Armstrong singing “*What a Wonderful World*,” filled the silence of the apartment. I picked up a second beer and went to sit on the couch. From the sliding glass patio doors, I had an unobstructed view of the cookie-cutter apartments rising twenty yards away, no doubt in preparation for the influx of tech workers. Except, where were the tech jobs and why were they not keeping pace with this frenzy of building? By the time I finished pondering that question and got up from the couch, it had become mid-afternoon.

I thought about what else to do. I had a paper on Greek mythology to write for a continuing studies course I was taking at the local community college that I had been postponing for weeks so I thought I might as well try to finish that. Then, I thought I'd better also ask Amruta about dinner plans in case I needed to step out for groceries but her phone went to voicemail again. Was she in a meeting with other developers during this crunch time at work? I texted her instead.

“Shall I order takeout for dinner? Hong Fu?”

After I sent the text, I felt my unvoiced questions form a tight ball in my stomach and I had two more beers to help wash it down. By evening, there was no return phone call or text and I finished the remaining two beers puzzling over both the note and the lack of food. The thing is, I wasn't hungry. I could have gone without food, or beer, all day. There was no food, so I didn't have it. There was beer, so I had it. In the evening, I found three more stowed away in the fruit section of the refrigerator and downed them for dinner. The buzz masked my unease as I sat on the barstool at the kitchen counter peering into my laptop screen under the harsh glare of the kitchen's recessed lighting. The now creased paper on which the note was written lay to my side on the black granite countertop, visible from the corner of my eye.

To divert my mind, I decided to finish my paper on Greek mythology, on the legend of Orpheus and Eurydice. By 11 p.m. my eyes glazed over the soft curves of the Times Roman font, the 12 pt. letters forming words my brain refused to parse. No matter. Nobody was terribly interested in my opinion on why Orpheus had crossed into the underworld to retrieve his beloved Eurydice anyway and I, myself, was also not sure whether I had anything original to say about the quest that had ended in such spectacular failure. However, I needed to deliver four double-spaced pages and my mind wandered as I thought of the things I could write.

I could start with the synopsis. Orpheus, the musically gifted boy falls in love with the beautiful wood sprite Eurydice. They get married but don't get to live happily ever after of course, because a story this short and sweet would wither on the vine of mythology. No, tragedy has to bring life to this story and it strikes on the night of their wedding when Eurydice gets bitten by a venomous snake and passes into the kingdom of the underworld. Orpheus grieves till he gets a bright idea. He decides to follow Eurydice into the underworld and ask the king of the underworld, Hades, for permission to bring his wife back. He succeeds in crossing the dangerous river Styx that serves as a border between the two worlds and enters the underworld as a mortal. A lot of stuff happens to get him through, but the main point is that Hades is impressed with his tenacity. He agrees to Orpheus's strange demand but he has a condition. Orpheus must not look back to see if Eurydice is following him on his return trip back from the land of the dead. If he looks back, he will

lose her. Suffice to say Orpheus screws up. He turns to look back only to witness the ghostly silver figure of his beloved wife fade away like a wisp of smoke and he has to relive this second tragedy of having it all and throwing it away.

What could I contribute to this myth except to state that Orpheus was a mortal and mortal men make mistakes? Lame or not, I stuck this in. Also, I could say that I had grown up in India imbibing tales of Hindu mythology. In my mind's eye I could see Professor H, raising her thin eyebrows at this bit about my background. She was the kind of teacher who stressed on personal meaning so perhaps I could extend this idea by adding that the Greek myths I read in America, while new, were familiar to me. Unpacking a myth was like opening a Russian doll. The more deeply I dug, the more little stories and interpretations appeared. It made me wonder if myth recounting wasn't yet another exercise for unpacking all the baggage we carried within ourselves. I ended with this punch line: Exploring these stories gives me something to do in this impossible year when I am laid off. I thought it was a terrible way to end an academic paper but I wrote it in anyway. This half-hearted attempt at mediocrity was nothing compared to the dissolution of my career.

The trumpet's crescendo crept back into my awareness, and I was struck with so many sudden revelations that I had to stack rank them in increasing order of importance:

I had a pounding headache

I'd been listening to Jazz all day

The only food I'd had was beer and

Amruta had still not called.

Then, Louis Armstrong started singing "*A Kiss to Build a Dream On*" in his deep voice, smoothing the jagged edges of pain that churned up into desire and I wanted to kiss Amruta and press my lips to hers and feel her softness again.

I recalled how during the endless months of my unemployment, Amruta had sought out things to keep me centered. One morning, I woke early so I could see her before she left for the day. Even though her commute was short, 20 minutes if the lights fell right through El Camino Real in Mountain View's peak traffic, she still left the apartment by 5:45 a.m. to reach her office early. Funny, how I saw less of her now that I stayed at home full-time.

"Prithvi Bhatt! You get yourself a nice little break now. Seize the day dear boy!" she had said, shaking my shoulders. She always called me by my full name when she was in a playful mood while mimicking my mother's forbidding demeanor. It was a joke between us. Amruta never got along with my parents, which is why we had to run away to get married after being in an Indian engineering college together. Our castes and communities were so fundamentally separate that a union could only be formed by eloping. I thought how oddly matched we still were. I was tall and sinewy, always spoiling for a fight. She was petite and curvy, always sure of herself.

"I don't know what to seize it for," I had replied in a sullen voice feeling as if I had run up against a wall.

“What about those Greek books you keep reading? Why don’t you take a fun class in Greek mythology? I saw a course offered in that brochure for the community college summer catalog. You can take it in the time between jobs. At least it’ll stop you from moping around the apartment all day,” she had said, running her hands through her wet, shoulder length black hair, too distracted to comb it before rushing out of the apartment. She had a strong, oblong face and her tangy fragrance lingered long after she spirited herself away.

“I do not mope around the apartment all day,” I shouted, following her departing figure on the stairwell.

“Look at that course!” she had yelled back, disappearing from my sight.



I now realized how much I missed Amruta. In a heartsick sort of way, I missed the virtual time we spent together, chatting on IM, and texting on the phone throughout the day. I thought about how my jobless months spent in futile self-enrichment had derailed us away from the fast track of a down payment on a condo and discussions on children to something slower and unrecognizable.

I changed the station on Pandora radio. The clock on the laptop read 11:58 p.m. when I clicked the *Classical Contemporary Instrumentals* station. By the time the Dallas String Quartet had finished the string performance of “*Sweet Child O’Mine*,” the clock on the laptop had changed to 12:01 a.m. and as the new day dawned, the unsettling feeling I had held at bay all day washed over me with certainty: Amruta was not coming back.

The realization wormed its way deep into me and dislodged the tight knot in the center of my stomach and I felt a strange lightness, a sort of coming to terms with all those questions from the morning. I couldn’t shake the feeling that Amruta had gone to a place that I was meant to follow.

I typed the entire sentence from Amruta’s note in the Google search box and got my answer. Funny, how I had not thought to search before. It was as if my mind was trying to work out the familiarity of the sentence I’d heard somewhere even as the memory of where eluded me.

It was Jim Carry’s line from the movie *The Truman Show* spoken before his character exits the screen and after he realizes that his entire life has been a carefully constructed set for a television show. Amruta had added the extra “good morning” to the sentence, which had made it sound odd but familiar when I read the note aloud.

I remembered watching this movie with Amruta. I had forgotten the plot so I read the plot summary on a movie review website. Afterwards, I knew I had to find the sort of place that Truman Burbank finds in the movie, a place where the frontier of one world ends and another world begins. The kind of frontier that Orpheus must have had to cross, I thought, as I smoothed the creases of the note with my hand.

I changed from my khakis into running shorts and t-shirt, tied my running shoes, grabbed my keys, and ran out the door. I used to be a one-marathon-a-year runner but I hadn’t run all year. As I ran now, the easy looping trot I used to start my long runs with came back to me. The cool air cleared my head and I didn’t feel unsteady as I ran through the streets of Mountain View, all the way to Shoreline Park, encountering

little traffic on Shoreline Boulevard. The road was dark in the sections where street lighting was blocked by trees.

In the park was a cool quiet and I slowed to a walk. A plush darkness had settled in the empty parking lot. In the moonless sky were stars and ahead the solid rectangular shape of the Aquatic Center loomed like a dark shadow and I skirted its side to walk at the shore of Shoreline Lake. I thought about how this man-made body of water was originally planned as a landfill for San Francisco's garbage, but is now a beautiful shimmering jewel set in the midst of Mountain View's urban sprawl. The reflection of lights from the stars above and from the office parks and condominiums far away to one side reflected like shimmering gold threads compressed into the water. A gentle breeze brushed my cheeks and I caught a whiff of something tangy and fruity, something that reminded me of...Chobani yogurt!

I walked to the unlocked shelter where the kayaks were stacked in upright rows. I picked one up and was surprised at its lightness. The paddles were set aside in a group. I picked up a paddle and dragged the kayak over crunching gravel to the edge of the shore. There was nobody to notice as I slipped in and thrust the paddle into the inky water. Amruta and I had taken tandem rides before but it always took me a while to rein in the rocking motion. I remembered to make the paddle thrusts closer to stop spinning in circles and finding my balance, I set off feeling like Truman Burbank sailing away toward his freedom on a distant shore.

As I paddled, I thought about how Orpheus's journey had been about his yearning for the one thing that was denied to him. He yearned not for Eurydice but for death. In this lay his contradiction. He wanted to fight death as an adversary so he could realize his true self and find out who he really was, but instead he had to placate death through his weapons of music and charm. In my mind's eye, I could see Professor H raise her eyebrows and show her beady-eyed disapproval for coming up with such an inconsistent interpretation of a classical myth but I really do think that Eurydice was a means to reaching a goal. When Eurydice faded away Orpheus was filled with despair. This was like winning against a formidable adversary when the adversary didn't enter the battle at all. It felt like cheating.

I felt a bit cheated too when the kayak bumped up against the darkened earth rising above the water line on the opposite shore. It had taken less than ten minutes to get here. I thought about my own self and wondered if I had to unpack my own myth to find out who I really was. Once upon a time, I was someone who relished winning management battles and the ceiling was easily within reach. Instead, I found myself in this impossible year where every job prospect had withered up and the ceiling had dissolved into nothingness.

I gazed upward. An ever-widening sky pressed downward like flattened poster paper, close enough it seemed, to touch. I sat in the kayak for a bit hearing the soft lap of the lake against the shore and then a laugh bubbled within me and I laughed aloud. Once I started laughing, I couldn't stop. The laughs came from within, strange bellows like sounds that shook my rib cage and threatened to topple me over. I wedged the paddle into the bank to prevent falling and a spray of cold salty water droplets showered over my face and these felt refreshing like morning dew. I had a sudden urge to eat burgers, French fries, fresh baked bread, and sausages. I had never known a gnawing hunger like this. I also wanted at this very moment to stand at the edge of the water line and reach my hand out to touch the skin of the sky painted in shades of indigo. I wanted to thrust through it and rip it apart and see the lighted world beyond.

I hoisted myself onto dry ground. I could see the faint glow of lights from the other world shimmering far away behind the trees on the opposite shore. In that moment, I yearned to follow Amruta into a new myth of our creation. And if I could find her, I'd remake our life together, and bask again in the comforting benedictions of our 235 Facebook friends. I felt in that moment reborn. As if I was not Prithvi Bhatt but an Orpheus who knew enough to not make mistakes. I'd follow Amruta from the end of this world to the beginning of another. I flung the paddle aside and took a bow. "Good morning!" I shouted to the lake..." Good morning, good afternoon, good evening, and good night!" I yelled, and ran on across the rolling expanse of land, tracing my way back through the parking lot, and then toward the road till I broke through to the lights of an awakening city.



Gordon Ćosić

Time

Trolldbane: a Tale of Water and Reappearance

after “The Danish Kings,” a folktale

A fish can make it happen. Your mother is old and barren. Your old father catches an old fish on the holy day of Whitsun. Taken aback by its whiskers and ugly countenance, he returns it to the sea. But it bites again and again, persistent as a recurring dream. “Cut me wide open,” the fish says, which seems strange and self-defeating. “Save all the scales. Throw my entrails on the manure heap. Do this. Do that. Bury this. Boil that. Feed my shoulder to your wife. My thigh to your mare. My tail to your yellow bitch. My eyes to a hawk flying overhead. In nine months’ time the twins will come with a rush of life-water from their mother’s womb. Follow my directions exactly. After fifteen years buried in the earth, my jaw bones will calcify into two swords. My ear bones will sharpen into two knives. All of my scales will shine golden coins.”

Your mother eats the boiled shoulder of the ugly fish. Nature takes its course. Birth is always a mystery. You could have been born another person, but you end up being born the person you are. You could have been your brother, for example, born second. But you end up you, born first. Who am I? you ask. Who is my brother? You and your brother are as alike as two drops of water. Never a cross word. Always together. When you both turn seven, the mare bears two colts; the bitch bears two pups; the hawk bears two chicks. Fortunately, two of each: one for you; one for Brother.

When you turn fifteen, Father gives you each a sword, each a knife, some golden coins for each of your pockets. You ride your twin horses, following the lead of the twin yellow dogs, the twin hawks perched one on your shoulder, one on the shoulder of your dear brother. You ride together, two waves of golden hair trailing in the wind, until suddenly the path splits. You, the eldest, must veer to the right. He, the youngest, to the left. But before you part, you each stick a knife into a lime tree. “We’ll check back in a year’s time,” you promise each other. Here is where your journey begins. Soon you get a name for yourself. It is Trolldbane, killer of a merman. You slew one with a sword. It’s a long story about a princess, a false knight, and a merman with nine heads. Suffice it to say, you were and are brave. You win the love of the princess. You wrap the nine tongues of the merman in her silk handkerchief. You shine your sword. But before you can marry, a year is up. You must race away, back to the crossroads, to the lime tree. The knives shine brightly there, signaling the good fortune of your brother. So you return to your true love, only to find that Ridder Rod, the false groom, stands at the altar, all set to take your place. With the tongues and the handkerchief and your swift sword and your anger, you prove your case. Knight Ridder Rod hangs from a dead tree on a forlorn beach, food for the birds. But even false grooms have mothers who weep. Your story twists and turns.

You marry your bride, but after the ceremony, a cock crows. You think, “A misfortune has befallen my brother.” A hag leads the way. The sea parts. You wander with your hawk and dog and horse, following the old hag, who misleads you, she being, in fact, the bereaved mother of Ridder Rod, ready to exact revenge. In her home a fire roars, a fire to roast the meat of men. You realize the fire’s *raison d’être* too late. She casts a spell on your animal trio and clobbers your head with her cane and throws you in the cellar, fire fodder waiting to be burned. She spends her days gathering the bones of her son, scattered along the sea shore by vultures. If she finds them all, she’ll restore him to life with life-water and water from her urine and her tears. Even villains have mothers who care.

Meanwhile, another year passes. Your twin brother returns to the lime tree where a rusty knife tells him your woe. This time he follows the path on the right. He meets your princess. Ignorant, she welcomes her husband home. Your brother sleeps in her bed, but, to her dismay, with a sword down the middle. Soon a cock crows. Soon a hag beckons and leads the same journey to the fire roaring in the hearth. But your brother, sensing treachery, beheads the old hag, finds the life-water and pours it over you. Suddenly you reappear. The lump on your head hurts, but you figure in the story again. Before long you are telling your life's adventures to Brother: the merman, the false groom, the princess.

He starts to tell you his story. But when he gets to the part about mis-identity, your wife and the bed, a sea roars and rages in your ears and you cannot hear him out. Instead you rehear the nine tongues of the merman. You rehear the false tongue of the knight. You hear "wife." You hear "bed." With one impulsive strike Brother is dead and you have killed him.



The sad princess yearns for her wedding night, but you cannot bring yourself to look her in the face, let alone sleep with her. Perhaps one day, you will catch a lucky fish. Perhaps one day, your hawk or the twin hawk of your twin brother will fly by, sprinkling life-water: a dream of reappearance, a vision of reunion. You have lived and learned that swift acts can alter destiny. No one is alive who looks like you. A peaceful kingdom ruled by twin kings? An absence, a hole in the heart, a tale untold.

The Workshop

Today I'm a little late after my dentist appointment, so class already started. Of course when I walk in, I hear Bill monopolizing the workshop with a really convoluted question with no discernable answer, giving him, yet again, the pleasure of hearing himself talk, and giving the rest of us, yet again, the terrible misfortune of hearing him talk.

"The short answer," the professor replies, "we don't know. We don't *really* know, do we?" he adds, giving the "really" a special, dramatic emphasis, which has even more special emphasis when said with a British lilt.

Bill smiles with the satisfaction of asking an unanswerable question, a feat that isn't that impressive because with Shakespeare, almost all questions are unanswerable.

Class continues from yesterday with an exercise of choosing a monologue from one of the Shakespeare plays we are reading and comparing the modern edition to the First Folio. Then Charles, the professor who has recently indulged Bill's meaningless inquiry and who happens to be a devout First Folio fanatic, races around the conference room with a heavy facsimile of the Folio clutched awkwardly in his arms to show us where the modern editors don't "know their asses from their elbows," which sounds silly in English but very sophisticated and insulting in English English.

"Well, they've gone and changed all the colons to periods. They've tried to regularize him, haven't they? But Shakespeare wasn't a regular writer, was he?"

Charles has the strange habit of ending almost everything he says in a sort of self-satisfied question, doesn't he? It's quite good fun, isn't it? Yes, yes darling.

I slip into my seat while Charles darts around the room comparing the texts the students have chosen for monologues: Portia, Brutus, Antony, and more than a few Rosalinds. The women in the class are very fond of Rosalind, so grateful to find a female character they can really admire.

But she doesn't *really* get her voice until she dresses as a man, does she?

In the opposite corner, a clear-eyed kid is sitting with three different versions of the Folio in his lap, scouring for passages as students call them out. Charles has introduced the boy as his former student.

The boy's red converse shoes dangle down from his crossed legs. He's wearing a sleeveless red flannel shirt, which looks like thick, winter wool, no doubt unbearably uncomfortable in the over 90 degree desert climate, but perhaps not, because it is, after all, sleeveless. His skinny, farmer's tanned arms protrude from the sleeves and into his lap where he's clutching different editions of the Folios--one with the modern spelling and one with the old Elizabethan spelling where all the s's are f's. He smiles and watches Charles rush back and forth from student to student, discovering all of the inconsistencies between the Folio and the modern editions.

The boy, who still has some youthful red in his cheeks, is easily the best looking person in the room. He brushes his blondish hair out of his eyes with the strange self-consciousness of someone who is so aware of how good looking he is that he almost feels bad for the less good looking people around him. Really, his

accomplishment of being the best looking person in the room isn't too difficult in a group of middle-aged, overweight English teachers who are even more haggard than normal middle-aged people because of years of trying to teach the mostly illiterate youth of America Shakespeare.

Today, Charles looks as if he has an extra pep in his step, doesn't he? A little more buoyant than most days, energized by the Folio, is it? Feeling extra vital in the presence of his young apprentice, is he?

After the Folio lesson ends, at lunch, most of the teachers form little groups. The atrium outside the conference room has turned into a time-warped cafeteria, conjuring all the miserable insecurity of the first day of high school and not knowing where to sit. Actually, we're all secretly agonizing over the sonnets that we were supposed to memorize for class. Bill isn't even eating, he's just strolling around the atrium whispering his sonnet to himself with this huge smile which constantly draws his face upwards:

What potions have I drunk of Siren tears,

Distilled from limbecks foul as hell within,

Two loves I have of comfort and despair, I think to myself. The lines coming now involuntarily throughout the day. I picked my sonnet based on the duality of the first line without realizing that the true duality in the poem isn't psychological but sexual. His better angel. A man right fair.

I picked my sonnet not knowing we were going to have to answer for our choice. Yesterday, a woman who recited really slowly and on the verge of tears, confessed that her sonnet made her think of her dead mother and time. All the sonnets are about Time and Death. Once she started to cry, her friend in the group started crying too because of how beautiful it was. "Why are you crying?" The sonnet professor asked the friend who joined in the crying.

"I don't know. I guess I started to think about my daughters," the friend said. It was one of those too intensely personal moments with strangers that make me want to laugh, but I didn't.

As I watch Bill pacing around the atrium, I begin to wonder what potions he drank of siren tears. With how he is grinning and reciting, I suspect his "potions" may have been alcoholic, but they aren't. Bill is simply drunk on Shakespeare. Drunk on the words.

Sonnet therapy. Even for a cynic, I had to admit, the bard had some strange power.

After lunch we start our voice and movement class. The voice coach, a half yogi, half voice/breath guru, makes us recite strange tongue twisting poems with increasing rapidity until they start to sink so far down that they feel like they were coming up on their own:

Do you remember an inn, Miranda?

Do you remember an inn?

And the cheers and the jeers of the young muleteers

And the whole room swirls with this bizarre incantation: do you remember an inn, Miranda? Do you remember an inn? And as the frantic energy of the repetition sweeps over me, I wonder, why would Miranda

remember an inn? What happened there? What the hell is a young muleteer? Now, the teacher is clapping and Miranda rockets around the room like some hypnotic ritual.

And the ting tang tong, of the guitar

Do you remember an inn, Miranda?

Do you remember an inn?

Once we finish the Miranda ordeal, we divide into two groups with half of the class watching while the other half moves around the room to various genres of music: upbeat tribal, creepy orchestral death march, freewheeling pop, waltz. With each change in music, we change our movement, finding a physicality to match the sound, and with the new movement we recite our sonnet.

“What potions have I drunk of siren tears,” I hear Bill whispering as he lunges from foot to foot in his waltzing, his voice deeper and more officious. Then the music switches to some dreadful Star Wars doom, like the Death Star is lurking through space and all of the teachers stiffen into stilted marching. I’m searching awkwardly in myself for a way to align my two loves of comfort and despair with the kind of SS lockstep that’s stiffened me into a wooden soldier. Eventually, I match the words to my march, *left right, two loves, left right, I have, left right, of comfort, left right, and despair* and the despair slithers out like an evil serpent.

The theatre teacher who is performing *My Mistress’s Eyes*, and who has an almost perpetual head-titled, creepy, porcelain-doll glaze on her face, has her head, wrenched even more sideways than normal with her arms awkwardly at her waist as she moves towards me: “If snow be white,” she snarls as the Death Star music heightens to an evil pitch, “why then her breasts...” and as she says *breasts* she reaches up, head tilted, eyes staring at me and through me, and grabs her breasts, then dramatically drops her hands back to her side, “why then her *breasts* be dun,” and the be dun of her sonnet synchronizes into a done at the very moment the song stops.

I shuffle in horror behind one of the other teachers, trying to purge the creepy-doll, breast-grabbing image from my mind, but it’s so strongly connected to the lines of the sonnet, so embedded into my brain with iambic rhythm, that I know I’ll never forget.

We take a break after the voice class and get ready to come back and work on our monologues. I still haven’t done my Jaques, but luckily the over-eager theatre teachers volunteer and spare me one more hour. Before the text-coach even asks, I can see David sort of slumping in his chair, sneering, with one shoulder hunched up towards his ear. By god, the bastard is already in character.

He raises his non-crippled hand to volunteer; then, in-character, he drags his hunched back and a limp leg into the middle of the circle. “Now” he begins, drawing the now sound as wide as he can, “is the winter of our discontent/made glorious summer” and as he pronounces *glorious* his voice whistles with the same regal majesty as Ian McKellen’s. His right shoulder is pushed up to his ear, with his withered arm hanging at his side, while the other arm, the good arm, sweeps open with royal address. He hits every damn line of the whole monologue and when he finishes, the room erupts in applause.

Even Charles and his apprentice who have been sipping tea in the corner of the room, lost in a whispered flirtation, stop to applaud. The over-achieving Richard straightens all of his crookedness as if magically healed and takes his bow.

Before the end of the day, I give my Jacques, which Charles smiles about and calls charming. Even though I can tell it's his way of trying to find something positive to say about my rather odd interpretation, I still relish the compliment. Bill gives his Siren's Tears sonnet. The head-titled theatre lady talks about her moment of sexual liberation she discovered during the marching sonnet activity--how the sonnet helped her re-connect to her womanhood. I shudder at the thought. At least three other people cry. One lady who tries hope against hope to talk her way out of performing her monologue and wrestling Shakespeare back under the microscope of criticism disappears sometime during the afternoon and never comes back. Some PhD doing research at the library gives a lecture about *Othello* and cartography and used the word "otherness" a lot and talks about "concentric circles" of something or other and a guy in the front row falls asleep which is hilarious.

At the reception show and tell for the donors at the library who helped finance the workshop, the Richard III does a Henry IV St Crispin's Day where he leaps between two old women drinking wine and eating cheese cubes, who look both dazzled and horrified, which seems like an appropriate way for the workshop to end, so it does. I say quick goodbyes to the few people in my immediate line of sight and sneak away because goodbyes are really awkward and the workshop and the sonnets have given the group a weird sense of human connectedness, so saying goodbye feels uncomfortable and kind of sad like the last day of rehab.

Now, with summer ending, we're supposed to take our new Shakespeare experience back to our classrooms to share with our students. I can't help but remember what Charles told us on the first day of the workshop: Shakespeare will always, always be dull and boring when you sit down and read him, but he will never ever be dull and boring when you stand up and Do him. And the little smile with the pun.

Then I think of my students. I think of their craned necks, hunched shoulders, their blank stares, their little screens reflected in their lifeless pupils. Shakespeare, I wonder. Maybe, just maybe.

The Voyage of Saint Incertus

1

Going down to the sea in a sturdy coracle, Saint Incertus committed himself to wind and wave. His wish was that he harm nobody on this journey. Hoisting a small sail, he chanted a verse on the goodness of oak galls and cardamom. The waters did not swing in rhythm to his praise.

2

On the third day he washed ashore on a fair island. The inhabitants, however, paid little heed to their surroundings. They focused instead on their Manuals for Righteous Living, which told them how to eat, dress, groom, pray, and conduct themselves in all walks of life. As it happened, though, there were competing manuals, which led to much conflict among rival groups. Incertus witnessed violent acts performed in a spirit of sanctimony. One poor soul accused of harboring small winged demons had a bundle of lit incense sticks jammed up his fundament. Smoke billowed from his nose and mouth. Dismayed, Incertus cried out upon the cruelty, only to be chased to the strand for his pains, whence he paddled away.

3

He could not land upon the next isle, as it was still in the process of being made. Lava crept down the sides of a volcano like red-hot serpents, hissing madly as they came in contact with the surrounding sea. Incertus marveled over the fearsome power that, once moderated, made new life possible for sundry plants and animals. Just so, he reasoned, humanity needed forging and tempering, with great care taken around its sharp edges.

4

Five days to the south lay a somewhat barren land that cultivation could only coax to produce starchy vegetables, and no great supply of them. The islanders did not seem to mind, though, as they spent most of their time chewing a local root that made their eyes glaze. The more they partook of this root, the less inclined they became to eat or engage in any other activity. The emaciated elders among them looked to be no more than thirty years of age. They were said to be most sage in their visions, able to see through blue sky to the astral reaches beyond. Young scribes hung over their lips to catch mystical mumbles before they slipped their mortal bonds. Incertus glanced at the collection of revelations but was too simple and earthbound to glean their dark wisdom. Offered a root to aid in interpretation, he graciously pocketed it, saying it was likely not prudent to consume just before launching into offshore currents.

5

The next day he found himself pursued by a creature from the deep, strange and awful to behold. Incertus still ate fish, though he was trying to wean himself off flesh, so despite his terror he discerned a kind of justice in his plight. Struggling to keep his wits about him, he recalled every last resource, and threw his newly acquired root into the monster's jaws. The beast gnashed its razor teeth, and a fresh look came into its cruel eyes as it floated past the helpless vessel. Incertus was thankful neither of them had to die that day. Sailing on, he weighed providence against coincidence in his mental scales.

6

Eventually Incertus approached another island with towering cliffs populated by what he first thought were nesting birds. At a nearer view, however, he saw men hanging by their fingers and toes from the sheer rock face. Then he was startled to see other men diving off the cliff top into the sea below, narrowly missing rocks in the boiling surf. Pale with alarm, he sailed to the island's far side, where the land sloped down to a shelf that allowed beaching.

Once ashore, he met the island's denizens, an animated, vigorous race. They explained what he had witnessed as part of their philosophy: this existence is the only realm of being, and those who front death most fearlessly manage to live most fully. In feeling his own heart pump harder just observing them, he as an outsider had gotten a small taste of their heightened condition.

Moving among them further, though, Incertus learned that there were a few dissenters. A few cliff men who virtually died practicing this philosophy testified upon reviving that they had glimpsed another land with cliffs that required different skills to scale. A handful of women and children were credulous enough to believe this hallucination, but they were largely laughed to scorn. In fact, more females were aspiring to challenge the men with their own acts of physical courage.

As in the isle of root eaters, Incertus noted the relative youth of this people.

7

The next island at which he arrived was shapely in its roundness, and laid out like a formal garden. Winding paths connected open spaces where the inhabitants displayed their various gifts. In one a woman trilled so sweetly, so piteously that Incertus just knew it had to be her swan song. With the last dying notes she sank gently to the ground, but her voice swept rapturously through the air like a pennon fluttering in a breeze. Incertus heaved a delicious sigh as he passed on. Next he saw two figures dipping pens in opened veins. One produced an exquisite drawing, the other a beautifully scripted poem. Incertus sensed that they would be finished when there was no more blood to draw. Turning a corner, he came upon a woman in colored veils moving with fluid grace. Her body grew ever less visible, until finally all Incertus could see was a panoply of shifting hues, like a heavenly sunset. It was only with effort that he could bring himself to move on from such an isle, a harbor of delight.

8

After rough sailing for several days, Incertus was tossed upon a rocky shore that damaged his vessel. Wandering inland, he saw fields bordered with solid stone walls, as well as cottages and halls likewise of sturdy build. Even the people here had something of a stony complexion. As he soon learned, they were in the habit of mixing powdered rock with their food and drink. Their very clothing was woven from the wool of sheep that grazed only on ironweed. They sought to transform themselves so as to challenge time itself. Their statuesque dead they stood up in public as examples of life's concrete pinnacle. When Incertus was ready to leave, local craftsmen repaired his coracle, deeming it fair of design but needing reinforcement.

9

His final landfall was on a crescent-shaped island with a westward-facing bay. The ingenuity of its dwellers struck him at once. They had managed to graft a tree that bore every fruit he had ever known, and others unknown. Salts fueled their lamps, and magnetic stones kept them in health. In time they expected to make seawater drinkable, and harness the tides. Incertus found their optimism contagious, figuring it a natural result of their always being oriented toward the morrow. He knew in his bones, however, that he must brave the main one last time.

10

After a week on the waves he felt his strength waning. He had drifted to a place where the water was so clear that he could see to the bottom. Though very deep, he felt as if he could have touched the sandy floor. Sharing his last crumbs with the sea birds and the curious fish that gathered round, he lay down and reflected on his adventures. He noticed that evening was falling as he roused from this reverie. The first stars glinted in a twilit dome that also seemed just within reach. As below, so above. With his final breath he murmured "Enough."

One with the Elements

As a child, on summer mornings, I packed cucumber, mayonnaise, and bologna sandwiches; poured milk into a Mason jar; borrowed a bike—either Uncle Jack's or my sister's boyfriends—and sped through Calgary's streets until I reached the outskirts of town. For the last few miles, I bumped along gravel roads, legs straining and heart thumping, eyes fixed on the ground, moving slowly up the last steep incline. Hearing the distant roar of water cascading over Glenmore Dam, my destination, gave me renewed strength and determination.

Once there, I found something to capture my overflowing pre-adolescent energy. The dam expressed raw power, whirlpools churning and foaming, water leaping into the air in graceful arcs. It felt like the heart of the world, pulsing and churning. You couldn't walk away from there the same person as when you arrived.

Serene pools within the dam's water treatment plant contrasted with the deafening, swirling, dynamism of the dam itself. Inside the pools—about six feet across and one hundred yards long—fish swam silently back and forth. Here the water was still except when fish broke the surface or gently stirred it up from beneath, a complete contrast to the tumultuousness of the dam.

Both areas interested me for different reasons. Inside the building, I could relax, let go of the terrible excitement the dam generated. I wandered among the pools, watching the fish slip through the clear green water, soothed and hypnotized by their rhythms, their endless motion, the svelte way they moved.

Outside on the spacious grounds, I followed well-traveled deer trails until I could go no further. Then I found a shady place where I could eat my lunch. I sprawled on the grass, dreaming and watching the clouds change into elephants and dragons, resting up for the long ride home, my own energy temporarily subdued in deference to what I had experienced in that place.

Before leaving, I had to return to the dam one more time, never out of ear shot—the thrashing waters more powerful than anything I knew. But even more amazing was the concrete wall erected to contain the water. It needed equal force to counteract the water's thrust. I was witnessing nature and civilization meeting: civilization put restraints on nature, determining where, when, and how the waters would flow. But the thrill was knowing the dam wasn't omnipotent; the constant pounding of the water could eventually erode and overpower the wall.

Drawn to where those opposing forces met—nature and civilization—I often walked on a narrow ledge (less than a foot wide) that extended out over the dam so I could stare down into the deafening roar. I was either too young or too foolish to feel frightened, to realize the danger. I simply acted on impulse, compelled to get close to this power.

Luckily, I never faltered and returned to safety each time. But while I was out there, balanced over the two opposing poles, I was freed somehow of ordinary life and felt at one with the elements. I simply was.

These moments were brief, and I never reflected upon them then. Later, I would climb on my bike, Mason jar empty but filled with the sweet, heated odor of milk, wrapped in the crumpled brown paper bag that held crusts from my sandwich, squashed in between a piece of waxed paper.

Tired and hot, I started the long, dusty ride home, face, arms and legs tingling from sunburn, calf muscles tight from all the pedaling. Though weary, I was alive in a new way. I noticed cloud cover rippling like waves on water, the vast prairie sky extending to infinity. Now there seemed no limit to where I might go. Emboldened by my trip to the dam, I had internalized its energies, and the world beyond the distant Rocky mountains appeared approachable.



Toby Oggenfuss, *Droppy Eyed Fish*

Sand Babies

Gather all the sand babies,
Let them hear the ocean tales,
Let them run with imagination,
Let them drift away on sails.

—Jacinda McKidd

My name is Hoyt, and I should've gone to jail for what I did when I was six. I know, it sounds ridiculous. I've heard it all before. I mean, it was 17 years ago, but for whatever reason, I just can't shake it. Sometimes, it seems like life is going good, and then, bam! Nightmares start up again. Someone points me out in the grocery store.

And Desiree. God. I can hardly stand the thought of that girl. She just goes around living life like she just won The Miss Universe title.

This therapist I've been seeing seems so sure I'll benefit from opening up and talking about it in a group setting like this. *Objective* people, he said. You won't feel *judged*, he said. I don't know. I hope he's right.



You see, Jacinda, my aunt by marriage, she came home with this beautiful new baby one afternoon. It was summer 1999. The baby, named Tabitha, was all anyone talked about. She had this light caramel-colored skin. You know, the color you see a lot on some kids that are mixed race. Not white like my skin, and not dark either like Jacinda's. When I tell you, this baby didn't even look real, I'm not kidding. She was half-Irish and half-Ethiopian. Her hair was this thick mess of satiny ringlet curls and the color of a bright angry fire. She had these giant blue eyes that right away made me think of those big dollar store marbles.

Me and Desiree, her big sister, were born a year apart. But even we got to sit on the couch and hold her a couple of times for about two or three seconds before Jacinda would snatch her up, saying we might drop her or let her neck roll backward and pop.



Man, we were filled with so many questions about that baby. Why was her hair so red and her eyes so big and blue? How did they get her out of Jacinda's belly after being in there for so long?

And my aunt, she was always ready for us with an answer to any question we could throw at her. And I mean anything. She wrote books for kids and had an imagination that could carry you from your warm bed at night clear to the moon. She was the author of this book series called *Sand Babies*. It was all about me and Desiree, if you can believe that, and the adventures of kids growing up on the beach.

Once, when I was four or five I guess, I asked Jacinda why her skin was so black. Skin so pretty and smooth like a melted Hershey bar. She came right out and told me that she was born precisely at the stroke of 12 a.m. and had been dipped in a tub of dark ink at birth so her skin would resemble the beautiful midnight sky!

“And,” she said when we asked her about Tabitha, “the baby’s hair is red because of all the wildfires that burned in the western mountains on the night of her birth!”

I could barely catch my breath at the thought of those mighty fires burning in the mountains. It’s like I was there. Right in the middle of those flames!

“And on that night, she cried out to the fire gods in her baby tongue and begged them to cease the destruction in the foothills.” We sat with our eyes wide as baby owls, our imaginations just dangling in the air, waiting for what she was gonna say next. “Her eyes are big and blue as topaz gemstones because she is her father’s child!”

“And where did she come from Mommy? Where?”

Jacinda smiled at us, her eyes wild, like they were dancing. “Why, she washed up under the pier, of course, in the still of night.”

“No way, Jacinda!” I said. “She was inside your stomach!”

“Aahhh, true, this is where she started!” She pointed to her belly. Her Ethiopian accent was raw, and with every word stronger, and faster. She lifted her finger to her lips like she always did to quiet us down, and then she whispered. “But then the gods came in the night as I slept and took her from my body. They bathed her clean in the salty ocean waters. And when they were done, they allowed her to float upon the giant sea until she reached the pier where she washed into the sand. Just like you, Dezzie! Just like you, Hoyt! And because of this, you are called Sand Babies!”

Desiree’s eyes had grown wide enough to explode! Having Tabitha around was almost as exciting as the summer carnival. I looked into her mouth when she yawned and squirmed in Jacinda’s arms. “Why doesn’t she have any teeth?”

“Her teeth will come soon,” she said, tapping my nose with the tip of her chocolate finger. “Strong like the grip of a tiger. Beautiful like an Ethiopian princess.”

“Strong like mine?” I asked, showing off my toothless grin.

“Yes, my nephew, strong like yours. Now off you go! I have chores to do.” She bent forward and kissed Desiree on the forehead, and then me, before we headed down to the shore where my dad was.



One Saturday when Tab was just a few days old, there was a baby shower. The women all took turns holding her. One lady, who was fatter than all the rest, said, “Such a tiny thing she is! How much did she weigh?” She snuggled her nose into the side of Tab’s neck, then kissed her on the cheek. “I could just eat her up right now!”

“Five pounds, nine ounces,” Jacinda said.

I held my breath and waited for that hungry lady to secretly twist off one of Tab’s arms like a rotisserie chicken wing and stuff it in her mouth, but instead she only kissed her again on the cheek and passed her on to my mother.

Truth be told, I didn't get it. I mean, sure, here's this cute little baby and all, but the way they were fawning all over her. Kissing her. Never putting her down. Did it really take all that? And then my own mother joined in when she held Tabitha. I heard her tell everyone she wanted a little baby girl too. She rocked her back and forth. "Oh! She's so precious, Jacinda. I wish Hoyt was a baby again."

"You should do it," said one of the baby snatchers. "You should have another one. Hoyt is what? Six now? He's not a baby anymore. You better do it now before he gets much older, then it won't be so much like starting over."



We couldn't sleep thinking about the Seaside Carnival. That Saturday was the last day, and Jacinda was going to take me and Desiree.

"My mom said I can wear my tutu tomorrow if I want. And my new sneakers with the pink glitter." Desiree already had her outfit for the carnival spread across the bottom of her bed. "And she's going to do my hair into long shiny braids like an Indian girl. What are you going to wear, Hoyt?"

"I don't know. Just regular stuff, I guess."

"That's stupid! I'm going to look better than you."

"So what if you do, Desiree. I'm going to eat funnel cake and corndogs, and ride on the Mind Twister."

"Let's go to sleep now so when we open our eyes, it will be Saturday! I hope we can stay until it's dark outside."



And then Saturday came. Desiree was up and dressed in her tutu and glittered sneakers before I even opened my eyes. But turned out, Tab got so sick that around lunchtime, Jacinda loaded the three of us up in the minivan and went straight to the emergency room. And even though we left the hospital in plenty of time to still make it, we rode right past the carnival, sparkling rides and all. Jacinda said we had to get Tab home to bed.

"But Mommy, there's the carnival!" shouted Desiree. "You promised!"

"I know, sweetie. But your little sister is not well. We must go home."

"Oh, but I have an idea. Can Daddy take us? What time is he coming home?"

"Not until well after dark. He will be so tired, Dezzie, after such a long flight."

"It's not fair! I hate Tabitha! She ruins everything!"

"Dezzie! I'll wash your tongue with soap, girl! Then rip it out and feed it to the lions!"

Desiree crossed her arms and kicked the back of Jacinda's seat with her glittered shoe.

We both looked at that tiny baby, asleep, stuffed deep down in her car seat. I remember, she had this big purple pacifier stuffed in her mouth, and it would bounce up and down every few seconds without warning. I thought about all the exciting stuff at the carnival that we wouldn't get to see again for a whole year. The Mind Twister, clowns walking in slow motion on those giant stilts, but especially the cotton candy, and Minnie's Salt Water Taffy. A year's a lifetime when you're six. And without Jacinda hearing me, I went right ahead and agreed with my cousin. "I hate her too."



"Hoyt, wake up!" Desiree whispered. "I have to take her back. Come on!"

"Take who back?"

"The baby. I have to take her back."

"Back where?"

"To the pier."

"Huh? The pier? Why?"

"I don't like her."

"Oh. I don't either."

"Everybody likes her better. It's not fair."

"But what about your mom and dad, Desiree? Won't they be sad?"

"They won't be sad. Mommy said she's only three weeks. I'm five." She held her hand up and spread apart all her fingers, showing all five of them. "I been here the longest."

"I want to go back to sleep." I pulled the blanket back over my head. I hoped Desiree would just climb her little self back into bed.

"Well, I'm telling then."

I threw back my blanket. She stood at the side of my bed, just like a little prison guard, glaring down at me with her arms crossed. "Telling what?"

"That you stole that Power Rangers watch from Mitchell. You're gonna get in so much trouble!"

Desiree turned and walked toward the door. She reached her hand in the direction of the knob and looked back at me like she was daring me to make a move. She was ready right then and there to go into Uncle Eric's and Jacinda's room and wake them up and tell them I was a thief. Man, I could only imagine the trouble I would be in. And once my police officer father found out, I might even go to jail.

I sat up in the bed. "Okaaay, then! Jeez, Desiree. Don't tell!"



To this day I wonder how Desiree could be so wicked. Still can't believe I went along with it. Damn.

We were going to take Tab back to the pier in a pillow case and a wagon by way of Fisherman's Pass, a little trail of sandy concrete that crawled just below the double-decker patios on all the houses. It was a smoother walk than drudging through the thick sand close to the water. There were eight houses between my aunt and uncle's house and the pier.

Desiree went across the hall to the baby's room and came back with Tab all wrapped up in a blanket. Standing there in the middle of the room it looked like she was holding her Missy Chrissy doll, about to toss it aside at any moment like she always did. We tiptoed down the back stairs and out the patio door.

I looked next door in the direction of my own house and could see the TV in my parent's bedroom flickering, lighting up the entire room with white flashes. I knew my mom was home from her nursing rounds at the hospital and sitting in bed doing crossword puzzles.

I thought it was a sign from God when that little bundle started to squirm and little baby sounds started making their way through the blanket. But then Desiree began to rock Tab like Jacinda had done so many times, and no sooner did the tiny squeals start, did they disappear into the night.

"We need a flashlight. Go get it from under the sink."

"I'm hungry. And still sleepy. Let's get some Pop Tarts and go back to bed."

"Hoyt, noooo! I'm in charge! Now go get my dad's flashlight!"

We headed down the two flights of stairs from the double decks that led down to the shore. The flashlight lit up the area at the bottom where most of our toys were. We had boogie boards, sand buckets, and shovels. Whatever you could imagine a five- and a six-year-old would have, we had it, including a new red wagon.

"Open the pillowcase and let's put her in," Desiree said. "And then you carry her, and I'll pull the wagon and shovels."

"Shovels? For what?"

"So we can dig a hole to put her in, stupid!"

I held the pillowcase open wide while she lowered the bundle to the bottom of it. "I don't know, Desiree."

"I heard your mom say she wished she had a baby girl just like Tabitha, instead of you!"

I didn't say a word.

"She said you were fat and you eat too much."

"You're a liar, Desiree! She said she loves me."

"Of course she loves you, Hoyt. She's your mom, dummy! But she likes Tabitha better. She said she was the most beautiful baby she ever saw."

I stood there holding Tab in the yellow pillowcase like a sack of potatoes dangling to the ground. I started thinking about what my mother said at the shower and a painful lump started to grow right in the center of my neck, like I was trying to swallow a jawbreaker or something and it just wouldn't go down. "I want a little baby girl too," she said. "Hoyt's not a little baby anymore." I could feel tears rushing in.

And out of nowhere, right there under the white of the flashlight, Desiree reached out and slapped me clean across my face! "You're just a big baby! Stop crying. We have to take her back."

Man, no matter what I did, I couldn't stop those tears. I didn't know at that point whether I was crying 'cause of what my mom had said or from the sting of Desiree's slap. It actually started making sense to me, though, that Tab should go back to where she came from. Maybe she could go to another family. Seemed like she was the cause of so many things going wrong. Suddenly, it made all the sense in the world.

We headed off in the direction of Johnson Pier, Desiree guiding our way with the light and the wagon, while I carried Tab over my shoulder in the pillowcase. By the time we reached the fifth house on the way to the pier, I had to put her down inside the wagon with the toy shovels because she just got too heavy. By the time we reached house number seven, she was screaming.

"What now?" I asked.

"Come on! We're almost there. See?"

We reached Johnson Pier and pulled the wagon underneath, right in the center. The tide was coming in.

Desiree peeled the pillowcase off Tab and tried to quiet her down by sticking her pacifier back in her mouth. She just wasn't having it. That baby lit up the entire shoreline with that screaming.

She put her back down in the wagon, and we grabbed our plastic shovels and got to work. We started digging like we were in some kind of race to get to the bottom of the ocean. Then, Tab was quiet and everything around us was peaceful again. I was so relieved.

A wave washed over the spot where we were standing, soaking the bottoms of our pajamas and smoothing out the sand inside our hole. We dug a little more. It wasn't deep, but it was enough to hold Tab in place so these so-called "ocean gods" could find her.

I picked her up from the wagon, and she started squirming again. Then I placed her in that shallow hole and grabbed up the flashlight, real quick. Me and Desiree ran and hid behind the nearest pier piling. We waited so we could watch the ocean gods take her away.

Another wave crashed hard on the shore and rolled across the hole where Tab was. "I think I see them! I think I see the ocean gods!"

"Me too. There's one right there!" Desiree pointed out to the ocean. "And another one! They're coming for her! They're coming for Tabitha!"

I was sure that when the wave finally receded she would be swept clean from the hole and taken away, but she was still there. Quiet. Motionless. My heart sank. The tide was coming in fast. I didn't understand. They didn't take her.

Then, voices. Out of nowhere. And small flickers of light off the sand not far from where we were.

“Desireeeeeee! Hoooooyt!” It was Jacinda! Her voice was like I’d never heard it before. Urgent, like when she would tell us stories, but worse. Like she was trapped in a burning house or something, screaming for someone to save her. And the sound of her voice that night, it still haunts me. Not only in my dreams, but when I’m awake too.

“Dezzie? Hoyt?” It was Uncle Eric.

Then from the other direction, car lights and another voice. “Hoyt? Hoyt?” It was my dad. I could see his patrol jeep bobbing towards us along the mounds of sand. He was calling for me through his loud speaker. The headlights from his truck lit up the entire area where we were, including the spot where Tab was laying, still not moving. Those *damn* ocean gods still hadn’t come for her. And I wondered, was it too early in the night for them? Too late? Something was wrong, that was for sure. I looked at Desiree. She’d started crying.

My dad stopped his jeep just short of the piling where we were hiding and turned on the blue flashing lights. He ran to us. “Hoyt! Desiree! For the love of God! What are you doing?”

Desiree took off in the direction of Jacinda, screaming. She jumped up into her mother’s arms. “Mommy! Daddy! It’s Hoyt’s fault! He made me give her back!”

Jacinda put her down and grabbed her by her tiny shoulders and started shaking her. “What are you talking about? Where’s the baby, Desiree? Where’s Tabitha?”

“She’s here!” My dad ran to the place where Tab was inside the hole. “The baby is over here.”

I just stood there. I watched my dad dig her out with his bare hands. And, truth be told, I couldn’t’ve move if I wanted to. My feet felt like two giant cinder blocks. The rest of me was numb.

Tab was limp as a wet rag, when only a few minutes before she was lighting up the entire beachfront with her screaming. Jacinda and Uncle Eric ran in our direction. The water was rolling in quicker now, covering our feet all the way up to our ankles with foamy waves before rushing back.

“Oh, God! They have killed my baby!”

I managed to walk over to where she was in the sand, on her knees and bent over, moaning like she had been shot in the stomach “No, Jacinda! She isn’t dead. She’s only sleeping. We’re waiting for the ocean gods.”

“What are you talking about, boy? Oh, God! What have they done to my baby? My sweet, sweet baby.” Uncle Eric knelt and placed his arms around her.

I stroked her hair. “The ocean gods. Remember? The ones that brought her here? The ones that bring all the sand babies, like me and Desiree. Right, Desiree? Tell her.”

Desiree stood off to the side with her little arms crossed, glaring at me like I had just shot her kitten, or something.

“Just like you said. Don’t cry, Jacinda. Please don’t cry.”

“What are you talking about, foolish boy!” She pushed me away from her and I fell back in the wet sand. “Foolish, foolish boy. There are no ocean gods, no sand babies! It was all just make believe.” She kept saying it, over and over again. “It was all just make believe.”

Stephen Mead,
Angel Wings



Run Up to October

In autumn, when tour boats scarcely skim across the Neva River anymore, and the color of its surface mirrors the lead of the sky, the underlying weight of water seems to exert a force now that the high season is over, dampening movement, disallowing activity, sluggishly forestalling transit. A heaviness makes the Neva appear solid and dense, not really liquid at all—and the smoothness resembles polished stone.

From my 6th floor perch in the Hotel Saint Petersburg I can track the river's natural tendency to trick the human eye. Only the presence of a tugboat convinces me that what I'm looking at is actually water. It zips about, carving in its wake a chop of froth. The welts linger several seconds, ephemeral inscriptions, before the river restores its blankness.

I lift my teacup, eyes on the Neva, and take a sip.

The sun squeezes through a cloudbank and concentrates its rays on a part of the river near Vasilevsky Island where a small armada of kayaks paddles along. On an afternoon like this the temperature can't be very inviting at river level, and yet here the paddlers come. They leave no wake as they traverse the channel, make no inscription. The water is in fact so still it looks as if an unseen hand has simply grouped a dozen kayaks or so together on a slate surface. That they appear to be moving is almost beside the point.

Russians once attacked Russians across this river, battling something solid and heavy that proved a barrier more insurmountable even than a moat-like width of water. On October 25, 1917 the battleship *Aurora* was moored on the English Embankment side of the Neva, and the Bolsheviks waited for its gunners to fire. The first shot would signal the start of the revolution.

Meanwhile, sailors from Kronstadt's Baltic Fleet helped Bolsheviks who had occupied the Peter and Paul Fortress to aim cannons across the Neva at the Winter Palace. The Tsar no longer lived in the mint, gold and ivory structure, having been displaced in a pre-revolution revolution the February before, so the target was largely ceremonial. The Winter Palace was the holiest symbol of the old regime, however, the enduring seat of the Romanov Dynasty. A dramatic and heroic conquest of it would be auspicious for the proletariat indeed.

"Only blood can change the color of history," Maxim Gorky said on the eve of the revolution. When Russians spilled Russian blood across this water they guaranteed that history would acquire a certain hue.

I'm standing here sipping tea 100 years after Red October, and the idyllic river below my hotel window has long erased any testimony of that turmoil, of course, abiding by its own tendency to smooth away the inscriptions it receives, no matter how breath-robbing or dire, planing them to flat nothingness with the smallest of ripples. Sunlight edges through the clouds and burnishes a part of the river near Vasilevsky Island, and my gaze tracks to that spot. The kayakers have pushed on, and the water has assumed a featureless solidity once more. The Neva is part of a hydrological chain that begins in the Arctic Ocean and braids its way down through landlocked Russia via the White Sea and Lake Ladoga using various channels and convoys, ultimately terminating here at Saint Petersburg where it flows into the Gulf of Finland.

Strategic as it is, factions could weaponize the Neva once more, could utilize it as a tactical feature of war, but what need is there? All of Russia is united in prepping for the feel-good task of hosting the World Cup in 2018, a major global event in sport. As one of the competition cities Saint Petersburg is astir with infrastructure amenities and shovel-ready projects like roadwork and bridge upgrades.

Its newest soccer stadium, designed for the Cup, sits on a spit of land right where the Neva meets the Gulf. From my window I can see the tops of four construction cranes jutting up out of the stadium as workers erect a bank of lights for night matches. In the many years I've ridden ferries from Saint Petersburg to down-coast Peterhof I have noted the progress the city has made on this opulent palace to sport, a gleaming testament to prosperity and functionality. Hosting the World Cup brings Russia front and center on an international stage of good will, patriotism and fierce competition. The event spawns a summer's worth of story lines and border-blurring soap operas, very distractible and passionate stuff: the star athletes and what they might post on their Twitter accounts, the coaches and their disastrous in-game decisions, the teams and their injuries, the red cards, the strategies, the infractions.

Hosting the World Cup normalizes Russia. The West punished it for repatriating Crimea in 2014 and has kept withering economic sanctions in place ever since. The Cup helps Russia change the narrative, mix things up a bit, rewrite the script—and for 2018, it is sparing no expense. Russia is counting on the Beautiful Game to underscore its normality.

Not that American athletes are going to be involved in whatever brand of normality Russia rolls out. The U.S. team did not qualify for the Cup, dropping in a deflating match to Trinidad and Tobago. On the American side of things, maybe it's for the better. The words "normality" and "Russia" do not often find their way into the same sentence. Our frenemy's monumental history of autocracy is too daunting, its lengthy totalitarianism too flummoxing for most people in the U.S. to square. Heap all the toxicity of the 2016 election atop that and there's little reason for Americans to wonder or care.

My friends and family question why I wonder, why I care, why I go out of my way to place myself there. Where words fail I bring back knickknacks and souvenirs, exotic brands of vodka, for instance, not sold in the States. My friends and family are eager for something to change my mind about Russia, but it's as if I'm an unofficial ambassador. I bring crab-flavored Lay's potato chips as gifts—Краб in Cyrillic—a variety no American stores sell.

For this trip I've stocked up on bonbons and truffles from Krupskaya, the legendary Saint Petersburg confectionery. Named for Lenin's widow—Nadezhda Krupskaya—this is one of the most venerated of Russian candy factories, and it has a storied history. Even during the 900-day Siege of Leningrad the workers continued to produce cocoa-dusted sweets, a feat which helped the factory achieve Hero Status after the defeat of the Nazis. The wrapper art on the candies is nicely nostalgic in a soft focus 1950's watercolor sort of way. The image on the praline nougat is of an adorable squirrel clasping a nut in its paws. The wrapper for the dark chocolate with sea salt displays a polar bear balanced on an ice floe. Every shop or store in Saint Petersburg sells Krupskaya candies in all their varieties: Golden Field, Summer Garden, Consonance. The brand is ubiquitous.

Drawn to the pretty wrappers, I scooped up handfuls of each type the other day, without regard for flavors, and when I examined my purchase later it was the mini-bar with the battleship Aurora that gave me pause. I unwrapped it, a cream fondant enrobed in white chocolate, and took a bite. Turning the wrapper, I studied the silhouette of the Aurora. The battleship was depicted in a crisp solid red color against a field of ivory. Draped around this silhouette was a ribbon in gold, blue, white and red, fashioned like the ribbons from which war medals hang, proof of its Hero Status.

As I stood there examining the silhouette of the Aurora, it struck me as strange that a symbol of the revolution like this would appear on a candy wrapper. The Aurora had fired the opening shot of the revolution. This was such a trivialization, an odd reduction—like if the Peeps company in the U.S., Just Born, were to fashion one of its sugary marshmallows into the shape of a Civil War-era cannon in order to symbolize that conflict. Studying the candy wrapper, I was struck with the Snickerization of Russian history. Polar Bear, Squirrel, Aurora. Saint Petersburg's iconic confectionary had banalized October.

“There is no common interpretation of the history of the revolution,” Vyacheslav Nikonov said as the centenary approached. He was the grandson of a major player in the formation of the U.S.S.R., Vyachesla Molotov. Molotov as in Molotov Cocktail. Molotov as in Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, which sought to divide Poland, Lithuania and Estonia between the Soviets and Germans.

So State Russia had opted not to commemorate the centennial of the Bolshevik Revolution in any official way. Even the approach of a big round anniversary number like 100 could not persuade it to deviate from the approved and sanctioned protocol. “There is no way you can celebrate the revolution so that the majority of the public would support it”—Molotov's grandson again (the apnews.com, Nov. 5, 2017.)

When the Soviet Union dissolved in 1991 Boris Yeltsin changed the name of the October holiday commemorating the revolution from the Day of the Great Socialist Revolution to Day of Accord and Reconciliation. He continued to keep the new post-Soviet holiday on the date of Red October, however, with the intent of recasting and reclaiming, a sleight of hand syncretism, not unlike the Catholic church's giving Afro-Cuban deities the names of Christian saints. In acknowledging the new political structure, the new political vibe, Yeltsin made only a minor incremental shift, but it was key.

By 2005 Vladimir Putin had changed both the date and the name of the holiday—three days earlier now. No more Accord, no more Reconciliation. It was Unity Day. A minor shift, too, and key. Putin's move made obvious that Russia was ready to leave the past divisions in the past and to unite full-bore now.

He declared this new holiday an official celebration of the event from the year 1612 when Dmitry Pozharsky and Kuzma Mnin expelled Polish invaders from Moscow. This ousting ended the Time of Troubles and cleared the path for the rise of the Romanovs. Because Russia possesses an epic and spectacular history, it has many legendary events to choose from, of course. If it's too complicated to honor the messiness of recent events, one can rummage about in Russia's deep archive and find something simpler, something tidier that will in fact unify and stir the populace.

A sculpture of Pozharsky and Mnin has stood on Red Square for nearly 400 years, and it is easily one of the most recognizable of monuments among Russians, very familiar. Krupskaya could certainly emblazon one of its candy wrappers with the silhouette of these two heroes. Perhaps it would be the Pozharsky and Minin Mint?

A leaden peacefulness smooths the quiet surface of the Neva. With no boats to prove otherwise it's as if the river has firmed up ever so gradually, hardened into place. From my place at the window of the Hotel Saint Petersburg, I find it easy to see in that unperturbed flow a solidity and density that belies the rip currents and undertow that must assuredly be there.

Bodies of water produce the grandest of illusions, whether absorbing the color of the sunset, reflecting tempestuous storm clouds above them or disappearing in a lens flare of light. It's part of why we're drawn to them, why we want to gaze into their mesmerizing depths, why we see things in their veils and crosshatches. A jet-ski cuts a figure-8 on the Neva, carving into the surface and churning up welts, and the water receives these marks like a blank document. Sometimes the document tells of hydrofoils grooving a channel back and forth on down-coast excursions to Peterhof and of tugboats scooting from dock to dock. Somewhere in its illusory depths the document tells also of global commerce and trade, ocean liners steaming through on their way to the Gulf of Finland and cargo ships, too.

It is an archive of water, which is to say unreadable, hard to interpret, yielding up nothing one can stand on, no matter how monolithic it seems. It is quick, too, with its ripples to restore the surface blankness, to erase marks and inscriptions, canceling them out—not in judgment, however, or as an act of editorial criticism, just in the natural flow.

There's nothing alarming in the predictability of a river's hydrological course, nothing breath-robbing, nothing dire, nothing to bring one to eyes-peeled alertness. But in those moments when the Neva appears dense enough to bear weight, a truth seems flashed across the surface of ordinary reality, something hard to name, impossible to hold, something startlingly monumental.



*6th floor view from the Hotel St. Petersburg,
photo courtesy Barbara Haas*



*Candies and other Russian goods,
photo courtesy Barbara Haas*

On Drinking

I am teaching myself to drink. This is strictly Emersonian self-reliance. I don't want any help. I seek no truck with toffy-nosed connoisseurs who instruct on which liquors taste best and which are best suited. This is my Dummy's Taste Test, where taste matters only a little. For this dummy, it's the high that counts.

Kind reader, you may ask, why at my late age, now that the illusions of my thirties have faded like steam on a bathroom mirror, am I teaching myself to drink? For that matter, why forchrist's sake haven't I been drinking all along? Perhaps we'll find answers along the way.

For now, the event of the moment. Here follow my initial findings of:

The Bartel Dummy's Taste Test of Distilled Beverages. (TBDTTDB)

I have restricted my research to the whiskey shelves, amber mashes only. That's a real man's drink. Thus, the kissy, foul-mouthed barflies who nightly sit beneath the TV so they can be alternative entertainment, sharing martinis and suckface, will find no help here. Like they need any help from me. I have also avoided sweet liquors – Frangelico, Drambuie, Sambuca – and all lip-smacking exotics. These are for party drinkers, not everyday ponders such as my sneering, lynx-eyed friend Sean who slams shoulders at my favorite hammered-tin bar.

Moreover, wine, being its own sub-culture, is omitted from TBDTTDB, as is beer, with its soda pop buzz. A true drinker like Sean, the kind to which I submissively aspire, can put down five ambers, neat, in an hour and give nary a thought to pissing. Try doing that with five draft pulls of Sam Adams, which brings us to our first rule of the manly art of drinking: *Never leave the bar for the bathroom.*

Jameson (Irish Whiskey) The cream of mash. Jameson passes my lips like a whispered confession, at once acrid and delicious. But more than taste, Jameson delivers me to a high of creamy nostalgia. I view the past through a sepia tint. Late one night last winter, as rain chanted its gray litany out on the sidewalk, I sat drinking Jameson alongside Sean. The wings of his nose were touched with pink. At some point deep in our conversation, the good toad said to me, "Sadness – it's the sane reaction to this life?" I identified the quality of this observation as substantially informed by both Larkin and Jameson, for the creamy mash likewise offers me its cradling arm and helps me down the crooked road to the past. Jameson enfolds sadness in a blanket of barley. It buffets. There's a reason the Irish are weepy-hearted ole sods. 'Tis the drink, laddy.

Tullamore Dew (Irish Whiskey) To my buds, T-Dew brings more of an urban bite to the first kisses off the lip, spiked with anxiety and fear. But that's just my *objective opinion*. Subjectively, Tullamore brings back to me bedside lamp-lit images of my tawny haired Irish lass, now long beyond my grasp, Anne Elizabeth. A.E. rarely spoke above a whisper. Dogs were instinctively drawn to her. She used to call me after hours from work to complain about her chump-husband, and during our long phone talks she curled up on the floor in the well of her desk, or so she told me and I believed everything Anne Elizabeth told me, as the counselor believes the counseled. A.E. and I did not drink together, though when together we were intoxicated. When A.E. and I got together it wasn't for drinking, so this is not a case of simple association: the flavor of T-Dew and the taste of A.E.'s unadorned lips. Rather, Tullamore's complex mash delivers a hushed, exquisite high which somehow summons her Irish ivory skin, and her mouth in a small astonished oval.

Seagram's 7 (Whiskey) Calls itself “a blend of distinctive character.” Part of the blend of this dark amber American mash (which comes in an even darker amber bottle as if hiding something) must be metal shavings. Has this stuff been aged in Haitian oil drums? Is that what's distinctive? Seven Crown rattles off my palate. The aftertaste is like sucking a rusty bedspring. Likewise, its high is blunt and slams my eyes with a stunned look. At least it's cheap. Recommended for head bangers and hockey fans. My cousin Vickie used to drink 7. She is a big bad strong woman. Her first husband was a skinny guy, and inside two years Vickie threw him through the front door screen out onto their porch and out of her life.

Jack Daniel's (Kentucky Sour Mash Whiskey) Corn-fed goodness. I was introduced to Old No.7 by Joe (his real name) the bartender at my favorite nicked-wooden bar. Joe has a salt and pepper beard that tapers to his navel, like a Sikh's. (I know such beards. During my twenties I lived among turbaned Sikhs, who did not cut their hair or drink whiskey.) Joe wears no turban. He's bald, soft-spoken, politic, gentlemanly. Rides a monster bike, a cell phone in his shirt pocket. One late night after hours, I sit at the bar drinking JD's sour mash with Joe's wife, TJ, who owns the joint. She tells me, incredulously, that Joe answers his cell phone even when on the Interstate. “He'll shout, ‘I can't talk now, sweetie, I have my helmet on.’” Joe looks over at us from down the bar and gives a grinning thumbs up. Sour mash is matured in oak casks with charred insides, but Jack's “sour” designation is deceptive. The more I drink, the sweeter it kisses the tongue. It invites more. The high is kick ass, daring, which for mild old me means shouting at the NFL as it plays out its dramas on TV. Joe, who has no personal history with sports outside ponies, sips a diluted Jack behind the bar and works up the occasional lather for the home team, if he can determine who that is, as a courtesy to his (his wife's) customers. It's sweet of him.



“What's the difference between Scotch and whiskey?” asks my friend and former student Paula one night at my favorite carved-wood java bar. Well, I say, the answer is an interesting compound of things, and the moment between us is not right for a discourse on malt and Scotch grain whiskeys, and the mash of pre-cooked maize. She has stolen this time to see me; no time to speak of what happens when malted barley gets blended with unmalted cereals.

“I bet a lot of cereals wanted to blend with barley's malt,” says Paula, who typically speaks with similar crackling intelligence & wordplay.

Then there are single malt whiskeys, translucently represented by **The Glenlivet**. I suggest this was the likely drink of the simplifying Ralph Waldo, or, if not Emerson, then his drinking buddy Henry David.

There's also rye and corn Canadian whiskey, such as **Windsor Canadian**, which is distilled under strict supervision of the Canadian Government to produce a lewd, leering high.

“You've been on one of those the last half-hour,” says Paula, wife and comely mother of three.

I could go on, but no, instead I remember the second rule of the manly art of drinking: *All things come to he who listens, not to he who pontificates.* (That goes for free drinks, too.) With Zen-like sparseness, I say to Paula, “Scotch is a blend. Whiskey is straight.” Paula gives me a look as if she has something important to figure out, and takes a sip of the Dewar's I bought her, squinting hard.

Dewar's (Scotch) It's true, Scotch snaps the tongue more acutely than whiskey. But after a few sips of this pale amber, Dewar's flows like a Robert Burns lyric. *The landlady and Tam grew gracious/Wi' favors secret, sweet and precious.* Dewar's delivers me to an alert, pensive high. It offers interesting ambiguity. A pleasing blend of action and inaction. The past is far; I am more in the here and now. On this night, sitting at the carved-wood bar of this java joint, Paula brazenly rests her hand high on my thigh and kisses me below the ear. I look ahead to the makeshift stage, where a husband-wife duo with guitars plays tunes by The Byrds. Paula takes my earlobe between her lips, yet I display the manner of a manly drinker, stoic, not indifferent, but not responsive, revealing nothing to people up and down the bar who perhaps do not have someone of their own to suckle their earlobe. That's where Dewar's comes in. It increases your empathy even as it emboldens your self-will. I may be sitting on the bar stool with my spine straight as a USMC pfc's, but I am also alive to her precious touch. Smiling Paula, graced with a fine Dewar's high, knows this and kisses me again. She cares not who sees.

Johnnie Walker, Black Label (Scotch) Coats my teeth like extra virgin olive oil. Black's illicit aftertaste expands in the nasal cavities. Think of Sade's hips. No extra virgin drinks Johnnie Walker, neither Black nor younger brother Red. The high is empowering. One spring night at home, at my computer after a single John Dub-ya, I e-mailed my cyber lover, who may or may not be a young woman of Wyoming: "As Richard Burton said on his death bed, 'I regret nothing.' So it is with me."

Johnnie Walker Black is the drink of my attorney friend Joyce. As she sits at my favorite chrome, swank and bluish-light bar, wearing a silk shantung suit, a glass of gold-patina rocks at her ready, Joyce projects *The Total Package: I manage an in-house staff of over fifty. I can handle myself on a sailboat, and I have good taste. Who are you?* As we sip Black together, Joyce tells me she has a list of twenty-five things she wants to do in life. "I keep checking them off as I do them. I checked off hiking the Northville-Placid Trail last year. Self-sufficient for two weeks in the Adirondacks." Joyce has no alcohol with meals. A pre-meal JW Black satisfies all her drinking needs.

J&B (Scotch) Enjoying this ultra-pale amber is a hard won reward. The taste at first does not invite, may even repel. It slowly sidles up to the tongue. Before long it can become "the only drink." The high? Remember Ricki Lee Jones with beret and brown cig? *Now it's J&B and me/That sounds close, but it ain't the same./But that's okay/Hot City don't hurt that much.*

Being a mash scientist, I recognize in those lyrics J&B's unique gut-check high. As it happens, TBDDTDB began with several bottles of J&B, drunk with my former wife J, as we sat across our floral table clothed kitchen table, during the grim final stages of our long, childless marriage. J&B seemed to be the only thing that would get her to talk about her slow withdrawal from me, and J&B may have been the only thing that helped me swallow it, until the day she left. I haven't so much as sipped it since.

Jim Beam (Bourbon) Often confused for the above, Jim Beam is a darker amber, a more honeyed mash, and delivers a friendlier (some say less clear-eyed) high. I have chosen to introduce this sweet Southern bourbon to my new honeyed friend Erin, at my favorite hammered-tin bar. Erin may be young but she is no novice imbiber. She both works the bar and patronizes the bar. Yet, whiskey of any kind has not been her drink. Jell-O shots and beer are more like it.

When reaching over the bar to serve drinks (I bow in reverence as I say it) the adorable young woman possess God's own most astonishing artistic achievement, or, if you are a non-believer, the most perfect and magnificent ass in my paltry life. Greater than Mozart. Better than Bauhaus perfection. More awesome than the Grand Canyon. That's not just the Jim Beam talking. I would give up drinking for one fistful of that booty.

But everyone, man and woman alike, admires Erin's curvaceous slopes behind the bar. I also watch Erin alight about the bar as a paying customer in slimming summer dresses, in search of animated conversation. Over weeks, we have a few mouth-to-ear exchanges in the noisy joint, but mostly pink-eyed Sean is hitting on Erin and monopolizing her crawl about the bar. Finally, though it was a hard blow to his ever waxing & waning ego, he realizes he's just too damn old (52 to her 25) and now assumes the role of mentor. He tries to warn her about me. But it's too late. Erin and I have formed a *manage-a-trois* here in the bar. She and me and Jim Beam.

Erin drapes her slender arm over my shoulder as I sit at the bar and tells me close, "I want to be someone who knows." Her Beam-breath is heavy near my ear. "You know. I want to know what you know."

"Very well, daughter, I will tell you the words of the Old Sage, as they were told to me. Ready your pretty shoulders 'cause here it comes. The Old Sage says, 'Life goes on.'"

She lets this sink in like the barroom profundity it is, and then with a naughty turn of her head says, "You want to know what I know?"

"Yes. It is why I came here."

And so Erin walks me up the street to my townhouse and teaches me.

I now think I should instead caution Erin on the vile truth about drinking Jim Beam, or any of the other ambers I've delivered into my system these many months, in the manner in which I have drunk them. For you see, in search of the high, over the taste, I've been compelled to keep drinking each liquor until I reach its high. I am proud to say, fellow seekers, that I obtained those peaks many times, and when on high I recorded what I found, mapped it out, distinguishing one high from the next. Alas, it is also true that my scientific efforts were slowed as each amber landed me on the couch the next afternoon for two hours of hateful drowsing before the big screen TV (the last present I gave J).

Which is why I am sore afraid to administer my TBDTTDB to **Wild Turkey (Bourbon)** 101 proof. By comparison, its potent country cousin Jack Daniel is 86. The Gobbler perches on the highest, far back shelf of every one of my favorite bars, shunted out of the way for disuse, yet ironically assuming a place of honor, on high. A drinker must make a long climb to reach the Turkey.

My genius poet alcoholic friend Mark (now dead for years) made the legendary climb. In the short years at the end of his life, when he was sober, at the mention of Wild Turkey Mark smacked his lips. "Smooooth, the finest," he remembered. Thanks to Mark, Wild Turkey and Shakespeare are inseparable for me. Every chance he got, or created, Mark quoted the Bard at will, not as an actor, but as one saturated with the Moor's rage, stoked with King Henry's testosterone, haunted by the same shadows as the Danish prince. "No more," went Mark's Hamlet, "and by a sleep to say we end the heartache and the thousand natural shocks

that flesh is heir to.” Mark’s utter Bardness was one of the phenomenological wonders of my empirical existence. I remember the days and nights when Mark most brimmed with Elizabethan theatre. It was when he consumed 101 in wondrous quantities. I swear upon Shakespeare’s Collected Works that I, as a young man who did not drink, once sat across a fold-up metal table in Mark’s stink kitchen and watched him break open and consume a fifth of Turkey in one hour, and then was astonished to hear he could still speaketh the English tongue, articulating tropes of Mercutio. “True, I talk of dreams, which are the children of an idle brain, begot of nothing but vain fantasy.”

That, Mr. & Ms., is a drinker. To him, I bend the knee, and perhaps a test on the Gobbler may be in order after all, soon, for the sake of research.

And for research’s sake, here follow, in brief, additional TBDTTDB findings.

Crown Royal (Canadian Whiskey) The Yukon’s idea of *Fine De Luxe*. Gaudy, broad-shouldered bottle, husky taste. An honest, expansive high.

Maker’s Mark (Bourbon) A slow-sippin’ Kentucky mash, excellent with mint. The high focuses my meticulous concentration. I marked up many a *Racing Form* with Maker’s as my betting buddy. About broke even.

Southern Comfort (Is it Scotch? Bourbon? Syrup? What?) Defies boundaries. Sweetened with molasses and Mississippi mud. An erratic high all its own. Sometimes you know what you got ‘cause it makes you feel good, other times it’s a ball & chain. Ain’t that right, Janis?

Disclaimer: All of the above research compiled by TBDTTDB is subject to individual life circumstances.

So, you want to hear the circumstances that led me to teach myself to drink in the first place? Nah, you don’t want to hear about that, do you? Besides, I think I heard Last Call, so let us forget all that and put our lips to a glass of **Old Grand Dad (Bourbon)**, on the rocks. A gum-singeing medicinal first taste, which grows whisker-soft but never quite cozies the tongue. The high pulls me inward. I can sit at any of my favorite bars the thirty minutes required to put away two Old Grand Dads and no one will speak to me, thank you please. My world is reduced to the pool of yellow-amber before my nose.

Which brings us to the third rule of the manly art of drinking: *Here is your watering place. Drink and be whole again beyond confusion.* Hey, kind reader, tell me, I forget, was it Frost or Old Grand Dad told us that?

At the Beach

Because Mother doesn't take breaks and the town is hot, I am sent to the beach with relatives I have never met. Wealthy people, they live up North, but for once they have rented a summerhouse in our area. I am four. Besides home, I have only been at my grandparents' so far. This is a displacement of frightening proportions, a plunge into the unknown.

I have no memory of how I arrived to the place. I don't remember goodbyes. I am here already, and time is absolutely still. Usually, things familiar—rooms, routes, routines—help me structure it. Clocks and calendar don't do much for me yet, but I know 'when' this is, 'how long' this will last, 'how soon' that will occur, because of where I am and what I am doing. Here a kind of linear flatness smooths it all.

Oh, the bungalow, how different from the turn-of-the-century building where our town apartment is perched—with its gigantic entrance, janitor's niche, elevators and staircases, balcony and terraces. Even counting steps while climbing to the fifth floor, landing after landing, gets me organized. But this bungalow, stretched in length, rooms like cells, all equivalent, barely furnished... The giant table—where they reunite in the evening for endless, luscious meals imbibed with alcohol—is also plain, non-descript. No twisted legs or complicated underside, no long cloth transforming it into a tent, where I could make my abode and nicely entertain myself. They use rubber place mats, way more practical.

Oh, the bungalow, how different from Grandpa and Grandma's country house—full of corridors, corners, pantries, dusty closets, wicker furniture sweetly crumbling away. No way to get bored while meandering through the incongruous maze, rummaging among myriads of useless residues.

Here, I said, all is linear—the bungalow, the thin stretch of sand separating it from the ocean, the expanse of pale water, the horizon. These surroundings are the spatial equivalence of eternity, a concept I am not yet fit to grasp, but it gets hold of me nevertheless.



I haven't been to the sea before. I don't know how to swim. As I thrust myself into the water, doing what others do, I swallow salted water by the gallon. I sputter and spatter. I choke. No one pays close attention. Some laugh. After a week or two, an uncle visits. He brings Mama's greetings, and a giant rubber swan I should ride across the waves, like a wild horse. The swan helps a bit, but is kind of slippery. I'm unsteady on my saddle, fall right and left, grab the long neck that sags under frantic fingertips. I keep drinking up.

I feel more at ease collecting shells in a bucket. This is a leitmotif of my stay. Afterwards, it will be all that I remember. Gathering loads, then looking at each single sample. Counting, categorizing, then disposing my booty in various patterns—a calligraphy of sorts. In the backyard, close to the kitchen door. Am I mapping the void? Tracing tenuous paths. Carving marks on the sides of the wall-less prison I am in.

Now and then, the cook speaks to me through the screen door (she's the only one who tries... the one I recall). She asks me if I am homesick. What does it mean? Nostalgic, she clarifies. I am still in the dark. She needs to get on my wavelength. She comes out, bends down, looks into my eyes. "Did you notice a knot in your throat?" That is what I feel all the time.

One night, during dinner, the grown-ups look happy. Maybe it is a celebration. I see that they are funnier than usual, more relaxed. They declare that we can eat chicken with our hands. I guess I am included. Permissiveness is in the air.

As I grab greasy morsels and zestfully devour them, my reserve and shyness suddenly melt. For the first time I dare addressing these strangers... I request they play a song on the gramophone, one I overheard as I was outside, tiding shells, and it caught my attention. It is called: "A shoe on your nose". Could you please put it on... the turntable, I meant. But a cousin takes off his sandal and touches his nostrils. They all laugh. I do too. They will not play the record. It is boring, after all.

And the radio is blasting the hit of the summer already. The cook always sings along with it, thus I have learned it by heart without even noticing. "Here's the rain and here's the thunder," she croons, "some feel good, some feel miserable".

"And some feel as they wish," I mindlessly chirp—on my four in the sand, eyes down, lining up conk shells like small, brave tin soldiers.

Crawl

When my grandpa died I grieved him painfully. Not only had he been a positive father figure, crucial to my development. We had recently established a more mature relationship, based on trust and respect—to me a portal into adulthood, a genuine initiation. I missed it. Growing up without it felt most uninviting. I was tempted to stop. Maybe retrace my steps? I had lost my zest for life. I felt hopeless.

In the summer I spent the day sitting on an armchair and embroidering, like a little old lady. I made pillows decorated with rusty autumn leaves. One of them, the one I preferred, was for Uncle Noah, my godfather.

Noah had asked me to be his girl's godmother as well, thus reinforcing the link between us—a connection of souls rather than blood. Being a godparent or godchild, in our southern tradition, was a term of election, a matter of affinity unrelated to religion, though the title was given during the christening rite. Noah took his role seriously. He remembered to have an eye on me, send a note or a small present whenever he could.

He must have realized how much I was suffering after Grandpa passed. Maybe not right away, but at some point he did something intended to shake me up. He purchased a series of swimming lessons for me.

That was definitely a first. My grandparents, with whom I had spent most of my childhood, lived right by the ocean but never went to the beach. And my parents didn't contemplate the seashore for vacations. Therefore I barely knew the water, and I couldn't swim.

I'm surprised that my dad, adamantly opposed to all physical activities, which he deemed strictly useless and dangerously futile, conceded his permission. More surprised, because I'd go to the pool—early on Saturday mornings—with three men. Adult and respectable, still three men and I was a teenager. An acerb, skinny one. Still, Dad came from a culture of frantic sexuophobia, casting shadows over the most innocent things.

Truly, I don't recall the slightest itch on my side. The occasion could have been propitious to a bit of excitement, at least curiosity. I attended a girl school. I had scant occasions to see a mixed crowd, especially a bunch of guys in their swim trunks. But that summer I was so submerged by mourning, I was anesthetized. I had lost lots of weight. I was thin, inconsistent, a ghost.

In fact, training at the pool cost me effort. I had to summon all of my strength, just focus on breathing, painstakingly counting immersions, strokes, laps. I was blinded by the turquoise surrounding me, flooded by the smell of chlorine. There was room for nothing else, but my strain of achieving what the instructor asked. First, overcome the fear of putting my head underwater. Then, build up tonus and endurance in my upper body. Uncle left his friends once in a while, and he came by to see how I was doing. He encouraged me. When the cycle of lessons expired, I swam elegantly.

Swimming was the one skill I learned with orderly steps and expert instruction. I didn't have much use for it, afterwards. My life never allowed such things as vacations, and I mostly lived in mountainous areas. But whenever the occasion arose—be it a lake, a river, a pool—I felt confident, thanks to Noah.

More importantly, those weeks lead me from the swamp where I was stuck to a slight elevation. Not that high—enough for me to turn back and see I had moved on. No doubt, the shift happened in the water,

thanks to my repetitive, obedient, neat motions. Literally, I swam myself out of the deadly grip of my pain. Had Noah planned on it? Not sure. He just wanted to do something for me. Maybe that's all it takes. Did his care and affection, did love extricate me? Not love alone. Love and water.

During my adult life, I have seen it happen in a movie or two—the protagonists elaborating their grief by relentless swimming. In a pool, as if the back and forth, as if the linearity helped, limiting distractions, channeling impulses, narrowing focus. I immediately recognized the feeling.

Maybe I know what the secret is. In the pool, I understood how you overcome a pain seemingly unbearable. Musing, pondering, brooding doesn't help. Thinking turns in circles. While you have to move away by a steady repetition of forward motions—one after the other, each bringing you a little farther. But you need to physically take those steps. No airplane, no transportation can remove you from loss. If you choose that kind of shortcut, your baggage comes along.

As I sat on a chair embroidering, confined to the small frame of the pillow, I circled around—while I had to proceed no matter where to. I could have walked or run, true. But water is such a facilitator. It supports the body, providing encouragement—solidarity—and it offers the kind of resistance prompting you to will the next motion, carve the next foot of freedom, dig it out, claim it for yourself.

When, a quarter of a century later, Noah died, I wished I had the means to go swim. I did not, and I missed him bitterly. I hang a picture of him sitting on a beach in my living room. With a smile on his face, the blue right behind him.

Venice

I was almost fifteen when I went to Venice with my family. Way too old for truly enjoying the excitement, my adolescence so ripe it was on the verge of rotting. I was reaching the time when I'd take the road, say goodbye to my parents. About nine months to go—I'd fly away in late summer, like the swallows. Now we were still in winter, past the Holiday season. Prices had melted already, tourists waned.

I was almost fifteen but my period hadn't happened yet, and I was in agony. I attributed to my missing menstruations my androgynous looks, to my androgynous looks the lack of sex and relationships, which were all that I cared about. In addition to my despair for not becoming a woman, I internalized Father's disappointment at my lateness.

My incapacity of sexually developing at the right time was shameful to his eyes. Alas, even if it wasn't printed on my forehead, all my relatives knew of my shortcoming (Mom kept aunts, uncles and cousins updated, as if my physiology were in the public domain). One of our relatives, a doctor, was regularly asked for advice. I disliked him, thus his being informed especially pissed me off. The poor guy was worried about me. He repeatedly said that I should see a specialist, as I must have a dysfunction of serious consequences. Mom thought his apprehension unreasonable.

He was right. I did have something. Maybe not of the kind he intended. I was ill-adapted, a bit twisted. I was twisting myself even more.



Venice in wintertime was a dream, but travelling with our folks wasn't fun for me and my siblings. We knew that there would be drama no matter what, scenes and fights for the most trivial reasons. Dad would pick ceaseless tantrums, essentially for our sake but eventually extended to a larger audience—hotel personnel and restaurant waiters, tourist guides and cab drivers.

He would regularly start off on his own, unwilling to wait for Mother and us to get ready. He'd decide where and when we should meet. Unfailingly, Mother would get lost and we would be late. As he waited, he would either grow furious or leave. We would ask for something futile (some non-cultural entertainment, some tasteless banality) and he would get mad. We'd behave improperly in public and he would punish us. Mother would be upset and whine. They would argue—guilt of their disharmony weighing down on our shoulders. An angry silence would follow.

In addition, we would visit monument after monument, and it would be all. No acquainting fellow travelers, no distractions, no fun. No bar sitting or window licking. Only culture, and religion of course. Churches would be on the menu, and we would attend Mass wherever we went.

Still, Venice in winter was beyond gorgeous, and I did what I used to do in such situations. I daydreamed. I took in the wonderful sights and the enchanting moments (tuning up to the smallest parcel of beauty, sipping every inch of landscape, shifting shade of water and sky, scent, murmur), then I shared them with a fictional mate, an invented lover. As I summoned him at my side, reveling in our amorous duet, my flesh-and-blooded company faded away.

Yes, the town was spectacular, veiled by the softest fog, full of palpitation. I could have savored the magic and been contented. Something, though, transformed the vision into a nightmare.

On the second night of our stay my young sister, nine years old, got her period. Way too early. Mom became extremely anxious, besides busy explaining, directing, helping the astonished girl. Mother was concerned because Sister was small, and as she began menstruating she might stop growing. Such prospective catastrophe made Mother panic, and she couldn't stop talking of it.

As we walked through serpentine alleys, crossed small bridges arched over silvery canals, squeezed among fabulous buildings—pastel colored, laced with exquisitely wrought marble friezes—Mother yapped incessantly about the same thing. Not with Sister, who for god's sake shouldn't share her worries. But with me, over and over.

I didn't reply, as a strange feeling gradually took hold of my senses. I was sliding down, deep and low. Backing up. Shrinking. Retrograding. Retracting. Not in infancy (I certainly wasn't a child any more) but in a sort of neutrality, a state of indifference. A limbo. Suddenly I had fallen off the expected trajectory leading me towards a defined feminine identity. Sister, six years younger, had surpassed me. Sis? I had just finished taking care of her, substituting Mom who was overloaded with work and responsibilities. I had been asked to take the new baby in charge, and I had responded with enthusiasm.

Now the little one I had fed, dressed up, helped to the bathroom, technically was in state of producing babies. She could become a mom, believe it or not, while I couldn't. Would I ever? The question hadn't yet formulated itself. Now it choked me. I remember a pang, a sharp cramp of pain. Alas, not in my uterus. A bit higher, in my heart—a less demonstrative organ. As we kept strolling, a cloud of despair submerged me.

Sure, I couldn't openly tell I was envious, not even to myself. I mortally was. I sure couldn't cry: 'What about me?' yet all of my cells were chanting those words. But uttering them out loud would have been childish, and I wasn't a child any more.



As evening neared, we took the last boat to the Island of the Dead, the actual cemetery, so frequently reproduced in paintings. How absolutely haunting, as it slid forward to meet us, quickly magnified, towering above us. As I said, the weather was perfect—gray, wet, mournful. Do I remember a tolling bell, out of nowhere?

I can't truly retrace what I thought when we set foot in the graveyard—if I wished to be left there, call it quits. I know I linked that site at once with my internal state of decomposition. The décor fit me perfectly.

Suddenly, I had lost faith that things would straighten themselves. What I was waiting for, I realized, might never occur. How did I reach such a conclusion? Was it Sis beating me to the finish line? Was Mom pouring her concerns over me as if I...

As if I didn't exist. That small graveyard, lone like a jewel, ringed by lapping waves singing litanies, was peaceful. It felt heavenly, and my life looked like hell. I don't recall any combativeness, or the faintest hope. Maybe the sun would rise at some point, but now I couldn't think of it. Venice was just a bloody crepuscule.



Mark Yale Harris

Menage Au Truchas

What We Live For

When we climb into our new minivan,
purchased at the all-inventory-must-go, blow-out sale,
you ask, What would Thoreau think?

Your index finger deftly shuts your window.
I crank the AC, adjust the lumbar support.
Our first stop: Walden. The Pond.

In the back, you slip into a two-piece,
a Rite-Aid superhero towel draped over your head.
I lock the cellphones in the glove box.

We walk the path to the water's edge in flip-flops,
trying hard not to say anything at all.
After all... after all these years, the pond is still clear.

Maybe not as clear as the day he first stripped to the skin
and slipped ecstatically in. But clear enough.
And that's something.

Two herring gulls float overhead.
A loon patrols the cove. There's something beautiful
in the way the wind whispers with the oaks.

He'd pick flowers along this trail, but we don't.
They won't let us. In the intervening years:
Too many of us with competing wishes.

We haven't exactly tossed nature aside.
But we're more attuned to the ribbons of highway —
the strangest of streams. Here,

you step in, wade out — ankles, knees, waist —
breaststoke toward the distant shore.
I follow, thinking: I can't un-complicate any of this.



Martha Clarkson, *Up*

The Ones Who Did Not Sail

I usually came across
them flipping pages
in my Uncle's study.
Corpulences flourishing
unto death. Distraught
tresses. Penitents pinned
to rock outcroppings
fast disappearing
as they raised pitiful,
soggy hands
to a far off boat
sealed tight with
holiness and resin.

Sorry for their fate,
I pored over
the un-repetitious
repetition of bare
breast and buttock—
curious: what exactly
had they been up to?
before the sky turned
solemn and the first
raindrop fell.

The Whaler Returns

Afterwards
they all whispered,
moving out of my way
as I progressed down the street
and though the preacher
spouted God's forgiveness
I always felt an uneasiness,
slight tremor in the next hand
I passed the cup, my wine-
daubed lips stirring up
outrage which had, hitherto,
lay sealed, comfortably
slumbering in hundreds of
years of Jerusalem amber.
This is my body. This is
my blood. My folly draping
soft, rotting flesh back
on pleasing bare bone.
Truth be told, I often envied
Calvary its spectacle, utterly
bitter but ultimately, swift,
not stifled out over an endless
procession of long sweaty
nights and vacant dull days.
Chary such thoughts
amounted to blasphemy,
I praised God even more
loudly and lost my mind
slowly and politely,
begging my wife sew a
hunk of bread in the seam
of my coat, to pat for
comfort as I walked
alone beside the waters,
and how many times have
I blessed that unseen lump
for keeping me from panic,
pressing the fabric til the
form collapsed into crumbs
I pray I may never have to
undo the stitches to get at,
though I do sometimes
dream of holding those
yeasty motes right next
to my breast for what for
who else have I truly loved.

Tidings

One night winds bluster through window cracks,
distort to voices; first a caterwaul,
then a baby's wail, haunting as the Furies'
incessant chatter. And what a pitch.

Seems to be, next morning, there's a message
in the sand, indecipherable runes.
Sea grass and tidewrack, sargassum and fingered kelp
spell out the salt-sprayed letters in code.

The prints of gulls and pipers cross-hatch
blurred words at surf's edge where each wave
pulls like a thought that does not catch,
flighty as the glint of sunlight on water.

Why think the sea is telling you something?
Foolish to look to changing tides for revelation.
Stare long enough at anything and patterns emerge.
There and then not there.

It's merely beach bits and ark shells
strung in pretty pictures, feathered with seaweed,
pooled in the dip and weave of the shore,
the drift of your own private reckoning.

Drip Drip Drip

This morning the plumbing sighs
that impatient sigh that suggests
how the world's water supply
has tired of servicing humans.
The hot water faucet dripping
in the bathtub angers you
with a waste of the resources
on which our retirement relies.

I'm too gnarled to turn a wrench
the way a wrench wants to turn.
Too rusty to handle small parts
like plastic washers and O-rings.
Too intemperate to sweat-solder
the copper piping we reclaimed
from the landfill. Blue jays creak
in the yard. Their harsh noises
sound far more fatal than plumbing,
but they aren't serious enough
to follow up on their threats.

You're tired of smutting curses
over every naked surface
and taking the shine off objects
that were new in our lifetimes.
You dislike the washer, dryer,
refrigerator, toaster, and range
but have tired of saying so.
Only the microwave oven
escapes your sultry expression.

But you hone your most poignant
silence to scrape the plumbing clean
of the foulest words. Maybe thus
unburdened, the faucet will heal
and we'll save the plumber's fee.
Then the water of the world,
pumped from our modest well,
will restrain itself from unholy
baptisms of the psychic void.

Splashing in the Bath

The song of you splashing in the bath explains why *Moby-Dick* is your favorite book. I'm more like Jonah, afraid of water and its contents. When snowmelt weeps into the basement I shudder with dread of something dank and wheezy floundering in the slop. Being a good citizen I trudge downstairs and with a wet-dry vacuum remove the offensive little flood. Again and again I suck up the skim and dump it into pails to refill your bath with ice water and shrivel you to something palm-sized, the way right-wing ideologues want to shrink the Federal government. I like my government writ large, although my anarchist shadow trails me everywhere, spreading doubt. Your splashing formulates a dialect of its own. A mixture of French, Spanish, Italian—your favorite romance languages muddled in a stew of tepid water. Just let me add the snowmelt. There, doesn't that thrill you to the bone? You're angry now, but later you'll thank me. You'll thank me for shrinking you to fit in my pocket where you'll be warm forever and ever, like one of those wheat seeds from ancient Egypt that sprouts three thousand years too late.

If Cotton Mather Were Here

Wading in the shallow bay
we crumple into each other
and kiss with timid overtones.
If Cotton Mather were here
he'd bless and curse us at once—

the water and sky horizon
fuzzy with incoming fog.
If Cotton Mather were here
he'd insist we marry before
putting on our socks and shoes,

insist we purify the moment.
Even in August the water's cold
enough to temper normal lust.
The smell of rotting seaweed
masks our pheromones to snuff

the temptation to wade a step
or two more deeply, risking
our street clothes and our dignity.
Cotton Mather would regard us
and our little sin with pleasure.

He'd feel another book growing
in the slop and slog of intellect
where completing worlds clashed
and clattered. Remember the day
we leaned on the Mather tomb

in the Old North Burial Ground
and soaked up the autumn sun?
The weathered sandstone surface
barely retained its inscription,
but we felt him thinking through

odd little fragments of bone.
Some say the past never passes,
but the weed-stink of this beach
and the vague pastels of our kiss
already belong to the era

of witchcraft and three-hour sermons.
That's when people shyer than us
smelted down inside their skins
to secretly reveal their nuggets
of purest alchemist's gold.

Mount Hope Bay

A nineteenth-century painting of Mount Hope Bay, Rhode Island.
Tiny schooners tack across the picture plane. Denuded hills

loll in muscular repose. I inhabit this scene. Walking
to the shore, my tote bag swinging, I'm simplified by perspective.

The day unfolds as the water slaps a beach littered with rockweed.
I've brought a little stool, the kind painters use. Perched on it,

I try to become a still-life. But staring out over the bay,
I realize this isn't a painting but only a moment of excess,

an overflow. The Mount Hope Bridge, a twentieth-century marvel,
sprawls from Tiverton to Bristol with traffic hissing along

and road rage secretly lurking. Houses crowd the shoreline
with expensive motorboats clinging to piers and moorings. The painting

hangs in the museum, too small to accommodate my aging bulk.
I don't know why I'm sitting on a folding canvas camp-stool

on a gravel beach staring out into more space than anyone
can fully occupy. Notebook in hand, I scrawl a few words:

water, bridge, weed, dimension. The air tastes of last year's fish
mingled with diesel exhaust. If I had nerve enough I'd wade

naked into the bay and kneel and let the slow tide absolve me
of whatever needs absolving. Then, dried off and fully dressed,

dusk falling, the bridge shimmering with headlights, I'd head for home
with a bag full of clamshells to clatter all night in a dream.

Loving a Man from Kalymnos

Neither the Great Glare,
nor Dark Dawn
could turn me away.

Untitled I

Beautiful are riders.
Straight backs, preeminence.
Time's tail is flowing beneath them, indomitable hooves.

Untitled II

I knew that the stars were engilding
your hair.
Here I was, looking at them.



Gordon Ćosić, *Ona*

The Shell

You cannot live in your head,
Unless you are a mollusk,

Which can imagine its home,
And from its body, pull it right out,

And curl inside the lips of that thought
With only a foot quivering in the world.

But you and I are not mollusks.
We, instead, have language:

Boundaries we cannot
Cross or hope beyond,

So when I spot one along the sand,
And tilt its spiral, just so, in the light—

How clean and polished it seems
Now that there is no tenant.

The Laughing Caffeine Poem

move me skirt swollen
heel wavering
broken on the
shimmering in the
shadow of a song
when my body takes up
space, I know it.
I cast off the
pink petticoat and go
ricocheting mad and
wild western woman,
legs open red
socks screaming

Abortion Clinic

Looking into the irises of the doctor,
you think of salmon leaping from a stream

in all their breathless inquiry,
certain in uncertainty,

their scales sheening like oil spills
left in a parking spot,

which is what you think of when you look
into the watercolor eyes of Christ—

It's like avoiding your father.
You are hiding, and he looks for you

behind each locked door,
coming nearer and nearer...

What else can you do but ignore him?
Either way, you're riding home alone in the taxi—

But how can you even care about that?—
What's important is to avoid looking too closely

into the irises of your father, those two stars,
deceptive with their dying light.

Fable: “El Puente Es Tuyo”¹

This is the way you enter the place

why

because the footbridge is yours

why

because it calls you here to feel its sway

why

because you were found among the stars

why

because the stars became a storm became a snow a scrim a screen of water a sheet of air

why

because an alligator waits for you beneath the bridge

why

because beneath his memory lurks a winter gaze

and

he has a voice a second voice for you

go on

as light falls across the reeds and warms his blood

isn't there another way

no

will it console him

what

my second voice

you will never know

or bring me to his jaws

till you cross the bridge the swaying bridge you will never know

¹*Inscription above a footbridge in Mexico*

Fable: The Sea¹

Talk to me, the whale said, under the bridge. Would you bring me a cappuccino and something sweet, an almond or chocolate biscotti, and we will sing a whale's song to bagpipes and flute, and praise the wonder of jicama with just a pinch of spice.

As the water rises I will swim out to sea, the bridge on my back, and you if you dare. The bridge in time will break apart and wash ashore and scatter its remnants across the beach. And we will dive beneath the waves and dance our dance in the depths of the sea.

¹*Images of whale and bridge, though not the narrative, from the Hispanic story "El caballito de siete colores."*

Wishing Well

What what Do do You you Want
want in my childhood a clear well
of silent river stones asked before

my offering splashed sinking, sunlit
penny to make a wish, somersaulting
copper sharply winking three times

for a charm then spun darkly telling
a story deeper than emerald moss or
eyes of frantic tadpoles still legless

fish, a gold doubloon in a drowning
pirate's last dream, until the ghostly
unspent coin slept forever at world's

end and a green voice without a body
spoke as I said *Nothing nothing* in
echoing surprise and heard instantly

the dark's answer, *Granted granted*
Your your Request request, receiving
all I'd asked for, all water could give.

Sailing

From early morn till death of sun
in a watery grave, we pierced
waves with pointed bow,
the hostile undulation lurched
relentlessly in our path,
punishing us with overspray.
There was no comfort this day,
riding the salty froth,
its anger tested our skill
in concert with wind and water,
it logged our skin like sodden earth.
The merciless oscillation foamed
a curdled white atop a green tint
that mixed with the sediment below,
bucking beneath the boat
like a stallion, deep and dense,
and we were frightened,
afraid to loft as a momentary sail
then dive headlong through the wind
into to percolating cauldron
full of seaweed and shells,
sinking like stones
through translucent layers,
till we rested upon a reef.
But luck this day rested
beneath our brackish shoes
when the deck steadied
as the slickened skipper
brought the rig about
to deflate the shredded wings
that flapped erratically upon broken masts
in the errant wind and suddenly
the sea surrendered,
the toppling ton of waves
ceased their urgent assault,
the wind lost its breath.
We floated dazed till darkness,
mute, white, upon the cusp of lethargy
till shoreline lights blinked welcome
and we flirted with the notion of sanctuary.

Seawater on the Rocks

It's a good bet parts of the world naturally pop open
like pea pods, but more slowly
than the West Coast sea stars
walking on tube feet through littoral slogs
that happen to a person who, tapped
on the shoulder, swings around
to look, and maybe an hour's passed.

Where did the oceanic hour go, and why didn't it leave
a message? Wasn't there something urgent
on its mind? Do sea stars require room and board?
What do they think this is, an archaic inn, or a warehouse
holding a rave? Are they pointing to exits
of the sacked age of colonization?

Has a small rock splashed out of a mirror, then sledged
through a wall of the house,
or are we just happy to be here?
It wouldn't be a good bet to believe everything's feeling
that revolves around identity.
Certainly there's no money in being part of the ocean
that never stops cinematically
hammering into every grain
of sand standing in its way.



The Rest of My Life Will Be Water

First my blue teapot. Pour in heat, steep
brew. More mint and blueberry leaves.
Stir with the cherry-wood spoon
you cousin carved decades ago.
Smell the steam. Imagine blue
laced with cloud.

Outline with my fingertip
the sage's ink carnations
on a scroll of faded rice paper.

Water arugula with leftover tea.

In the riparian zone
an alder sways in a south wind,
seedlings thrust up between long-time cedars.
Resilient, this turn-over tree
next to the flash creek where I fish
children's trucks from the current.
Swift water rubs off the boulder's edges,
comes down to me from neighbors
whose names I have forgotten.
Goes on to natter those downstream.
I embrace that creek. It runs as true
as rivers ever run.

My open mouth
a snowflake's last kite flight.

Rain

In the arid lands
where copper valley touches sun

I watch the mermaids
discern the stratus clouds
and squeeze drops
from the cactus
one by one.

I see them lay
arms outstretched on the high rock
calling names of sailors
whose ship strayed
colliding in waves of dust.

I see them weep for the ancient times
and beg Poseidon
to plant his trident in the ground.

I hear them sing of fossilized rock
and watch them wrestle with the concho of Venus and Mars
as the pieces of the ship's helm
break into their hands.

Ireland 2016

Rebut, chime, tapa, brave...
your hotel wifi code for today.
Glendalough's clootie tree marks St. Kevin's wishing pool.
Two coins for my children; the twin baby girls in the graveyard.

Avoca wool mills. (Our day of silence). Coffee ginger cake.
Incense and the blood of Christ's dark antithesis is
the smell of stale cigar smoke and blood
on the toilet seat at the Catholic Church.

Tir na nog playing in Carlow.
(I'm a serial killer of time).
Creedence playing Have You Ever Seen The Rain
as we buy an umbrella in Dublin.
Soup and soda bread in Sheehan's on Chatham Street
and there's a Caravaggio on display,
somewhere beyond the Easter Rising memorabilia.

(We are clever people
handicapped by stupidity).
Tripping on the tourist train,
Castle Express, Kilkenny.
'It's A Long Long Way From Clare To Here.'
(Are you my kryptonite?)
Pudding Lane and Butter Slip.

A watchtower. A boy selling lemonade on the side of the road.
Enniscorthy, Arklow. Behind the Wicklow mountains.
A Taste Of Heaven?
We must attempt to bypass this impasse;
Go back to where you came from,
Come back to where you came from.

The Queen of Cups

Drink, sweet impetus.
Drink, like skin, like desire,
like heart-broke bitches.

Between the lips. Drink.
Between the sighs. Drink. Between
the things you shouldn't have said.

Fill the clarity and cup with color, bubbles,
sweet and bitter, to keep this tongue
asleep and silent. Drink. Slut. Drink.

The pop, the crack, the crash of empty
fragile things carelessly tossed away. Wasted.
"Another drink!" shouts the slamming bar door.

Throw it back, like whiskey shots,
Like a too-small fish, dying at the end of a line.
Drink like little, unhooked fishes.

Drink the bartender's soft kisses
Those ones that taste like pity as he pockets
Your money and calls you a cab.

Drink, baby, sweetie, honey, dear. Drink,
like you remember how to be thirsty.
Drink like you did when it was fun.

Drink until you dream of drowning,
your lips and beer-breath bubbling
goodbyes above black water.

Drink until dreams are lifeless and you're
knee deep in the dead and void of forever. Open up
your Majesty, and drink this crowning resolution.

Black Eyes

Snaking above lashes with
point and black,
I rim my delicate, breathing
eye with coal and grease,
so that the dark of my
reproach bleeds into
definitive boundaries
that you can catch
with your own colors and hold.

When I wear blue, or red,
or brown, or gray on my body
and in my voice, my eyes
are still black. Like tunnels
or burns, or ink.
Like all those words
that slap the sockets
of a pocked heart,
which becomes shadowy
around the corners.

A pool of pupil
within the purple of bleeding
cannot let you forget
that it was once white,
and that you were once
the same. And, that I
may have once seen you
without the blackness or the lines.

A drip of deviation
in the heat of ferocity,
and now I cannot forget that you
control the depth and
I control the lines.
And, that my black eyes
are holding us together
like darkness does.

Helen Tzagoloff

Day-Old Baguette

Do you know what happens to the day-old baguette?
It's fed to the ducks in the pond at Gif-Sur-Yvette.
Men with Le Monde under the arm, men on the way
to play boule, women heading to market, all stop by
the pond to dispose of their dried-out baguettes.
Mothers hand chunks to toddlers in strollers,
grandmothers in flowery dresses watch grand-
daughters in bonnets throw high, close to the shore.
Old men patiently stand for an hour tearing up
their and their neighbors' unwanted baguettes.

The accepted etiquette of one person throwing
at a time forestalls a free market economy
for the Mallard ducks: mama with brood lined up,
a few scattered single adults. Satiated, swollen,
they waddle out, oil their feathers, nap, a few go
back into the water, the greenish pond water.

Toy-sized island, connected by decaying bridge,
is home to a statue, a nude young woman,
her triangle neatly shaded in black, so neatly,
I think by decree (the park is near the *Mairie*).
She gracefully extends an arm, an apple in her hand --
if only she could give it to the ducks for a change
from the hard, stale baguette!



William Crawford

*Red Hot Sax Player, Central
Park South*

Hurricane Gardening

I.

After Hurricane Irene, fish floated
right out of the creek. Swam across the woods.
They landed among hot pink and fuchsia dahlias.
Even after piercing winds died down
and soaking wetness began seeping back
into watery memory, the fish were luminous there.

They were dead by then, of course.
My watery flowers, bent over in dirt and leaves,
were too limp to bear their weight. By morning,
the fish were gone. An easy meal for raccoons
and hawks, once they shook off sodden fur and feathers.
Final demise quicker than their windy travels.

Yellow petals from the climbing rose, separated
from their simple pine trellis, lay scattered
impetuously like glowing wedding confetti.
Zebra grasses twisted backwards
as if trying to shake off dank and muddy coats.
Only milkweeds stood tall, awaiting other metamorphoses.

The little greyed wood bench tipped over,
new cracks peering out like age lines.
Respite there was still possible
if the moment were delicate and the need brief.
An unbroken crystal glazing globe came to rest
in the butterfly bush. A small deluge miracle.

II.

This garden was once just a jumble of weeds
before we took it on, our fingers mingling in dirt.
We pulled rock after rock after rock. Our nails broke,
thorns tore at our arms. We filled it with seedlings,
decorated the earth with our own designs.
Basked in the lure of creation.

There was a hunger there.
We were seduced by the lust of it:
pulling and pushing, giving in,
carving up, bursting forth, tending
and thriving. The siren song of new life
caressed us and we were starved for the thrill of it.

Now we evaluate an inverse weeding.
Water still runs freely here,
new planting spaces emerge
like loamy sculptures, a soggy Stonehenge.
A shattered wind chime lies in a far corner.
Perhaps its last bright sounds softened rainy blows.

The force of spitting winds
did not dislodge the rocks that fought
our every sweep of hoe and shovel.
They dot the wreckage like ordnance.
One imagines moles or chipmunks crouched
below, freed briefly from airborne predators.

III.

I always wonder where the birds go.
Some secret place where they can look out
into the eye of the storm, searching for signs
of earthworms being sucked up to the surface
from earthen tunnels. Maybe they huddle up
close, clinging together to sturdy branches.

Then, when the winds soften,
a tentative touch -- feather to air --
measures their chances of staying aloft.
Soon, we begin to hear their dainty sounds
rise up, slip back like a muted Morse code
calling out news of the *all clear*.

As I begin to gather tangled branches,
sodden weeds, odd bits of trash
that swam up with the fish,
I find a sturdy patch still fresh with lavender.
Looking further, buds of yellow yarrow
emerge from the sodden ground.

Suddenly, even in this sopping wreckage,
I feel that craving starting up again.
My appetites are untethered, renewed.
As I calmly survey the stormy damage,
Irene's wildness surges within,
spinning passions raging.

Anchises

I heaved my father's corpse
into the singing stream
that flows into the cave
which opens its mouth
just once in every year.
His corpse was weighted with
my needs and fears, my childhood
wants of the tall man
who had made me.
His corpse was weighted with
stones of adolescent anger and
with the bulky satchels
of an adult disappointed
in the terrible heaviness
of a too mortal man discovered
by his too mortal son.

Every year thereafter, I came
to stand beside the shining stream
to look again at the closed cave.
And every year thereafter, I counted
the days of his life that had overlapped
the days of my own.
And every year thereafter, I dwelt
in the heaviness of his
leaving me until
steadily the darkness of the tall father
shadowed smaller and smaller
like the time I realized I had grown
taller than he—or
that he had shrunk before me.
And every year thereafter, I felt the bittersweet
of love unweighing itself of
the anger of mortality.

But on the tenth anniversary of his leaving,
when the cavern opened its annual mouth,
my father's corpse
danced lightly from the water,
gilded from mists of spirit,
golden with levity as he
sublimated like the ice of winter
directly sunned into the vapors of spring.

Farewell to Fishing Once Again

Farewell to fishing once again.
I've said this last goodbye before,
but I'll be standing on the bank,
a live bait dangling in the creek,
line not quite taut, just slightly bowed
tomorrow or perhaps next week,
depending on the salmon run,
likewise the steelhead and the browns.
But sorrow goes out with me now
and walks me up and down the streams.
I used to dream of mythic brooks,
and each one ran right by my house,
and I would fish those too, all through
the watershed of years when I
could sleep. Now I can't bear to keep
my catch. I know life feeds on life,
and after seven decades plus,
you'd think I wouldn't fret so much
about how beautiful they are,
but here I am now, yet again,
with number six hooks and split-shot,
still hoping dinner can be caught
while also praying it cannot.
 I'll fish again no more.

A Genesis for Small Fish

And Jesus went into the temple of God, and cast out all them that sold and bought in the temple, and overthrew the tables of the moneychangers, and the seats of them that sold doves.

-King James Bible, Matthew 21:12

And I know nothing of what happened to the doves, whether they languished there or Jesus let them go but I know that all the coins from off the tables rolled down into the sea but did not sink, instead becoming all the smaller fishes, not the whales or any of the deep leviathans, but just the ones I've chased through life across the outback of a late and strange and Christian Era dream time. No longer busts of Titus and such tyrants stamped upon the ancient dinars and the drachmas, they are yellow perch and bream and red eared sunfish and green sunfish and little rusty pumpkinseeds.

I know who you are, each one, and you know me, Cro-Magnon, Neanderthal, aborigine, throwbacks all, gone on walkabout with hook and line, the old man near us on the train from Chicago going down to Mississippi for the bluegills, our grown child and his young child in Minnesota on a river ripe with summer catching crappies while I am near home in a small boat and I hear above the waves lapping on the hull and above the creaking of the oars the song that comes singing out of the water from the mouths suspended there giving themselves unwitting to the bait and pan. And their sweetness on my tongue is like religion and I hear cooing as Jesus feeds his pigeons.

Young Girls Run All Night Long

Young girls run all night long through old men's dreams
like rivers running down through weed and bramble.
Buckthorn and stinging nettles crowd the banks
on both sides, always bending to the water.

Crouched down along the edges they recall
the Dolly Varden and the cutthroat trout
cooked on a fire hard by the timber line
on clear and chilly evenings in the fall.

The thicket gazes blindly at the stream
and sees, somehow, each flashing fingerling
and hears the Lorelei begin to sing
a sudden song, begun without preamble.

Believers stake their children in the canyons
and drown there along with them in the gamble.
Young girls still flow all night through old men's dreams,
and swiftly by the banks all choked with bramble.

Poem for Katie, Queen of Ohio #10

I'm not going to choose
the love that moves you

towards the eight eyes
of appreciation

& I'm not going to choose
which crime, which painful

stream you get caught in.
I will save you enough times

to earn the right
to not be saved by you

if your mother dies before I do.
Katie, don't ask that of me.

Poem for Katie, Queen of Ohio #11

The tongue is a cliff,
sure, Ohio is all cliff, sure,

before you were born
we spent most of our time

talking about the cliff as if
it were the monster.

Ohio is the monster.
There is a real opportunity

here for a girl raised
on stories about Ohio

to drown an old giant
in the Olentangy River.

After Thomas Cole's "Distant View of Niagara Falls" 1830

if it weren't for the familiar roar,
wild curtain of flash, the seething, insistent mist
worked into horseshoes,
we would not recognize the nearby bluffs.

the painting points first to what's absent,
then what's not,
like the falls,
ever waiting to fall, yet ever falling.

no hotels here, casinos, light shows at dusk,
other than afternoon sunset,
no bridge, passports or borders,
other than this swift liquid below.

the Seneca stands with rifle slung
on the Iroquois side,
a white settler with the same on the far bank.
it's too far to shoot and they both know it.

if one did, the falls are too loud,
this painting too silent to hear.
we look, know the fate of the water up river,
of what is yet to come,

and there is no stopping it.

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