

**Light streams in again**

by

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## ABSTRACT

Through poems and lyrics essays, *Light Streams in Again* tells a narrative of family, art, mental illness and memory, set primarily in southeastern Virginia, where the author—and collection's narrator—was raised. Woven into vignettes of memory are meditations on natural cycles: primarily using the lenses of biology and physics. In particular, the collection is interested in the ways natural cycles interact, run parallel, or collide with interpersonal relationships and individual lives. The narrator tells his own story through the confluences and patterns formed in the tangling of personal and impersonal cycles, particularly patterns of decay, loss and maturation. Simultaneously, the collection meditates on, and blurs, the lines between his narrative, the narratives of family members, and broader ecologies.

# Particles

## twisting the ropes

one hundred rings spread lopsided  
 from the loblolly's stump. i trace  
 the outer years for ripples, its memory  
 of my weight and the swing dad strung  
 with a fishing pole. as a boy, i'd twist  
 the ropes tight to the high limb, jump  
 to the board, and spin a dream of flight  
 with the dangling of my legs, head thrown  
 back to salt marsh    magnolia    house  
 blurred and inverted in my open shutter.  
 rings don't show this, but a dendrologist  
 might find the first bad flood: strong wind,  
 storm surge and cancerous loss of needles;  
 a week in august without ac, sleepless  
 in heat and sound of foxes fighting or mating,  
 my brother punching a hole after he'd wailed  
 enough on me. but if i laughed when i spun  
 on the swing, it was quiet, knowing  
 from the baritones' jeers in choir, how  
 my voice sounded, until i simply stopped  
 singing. the trunk i sit on is still resinous,  
 but only deep in lignin not yet dried by light,  
 or pocked by cicadas, whose desperate sizzle  
 painted that week before seventh grade.  
 i was as tall as my brother, though my voice  
 had not cracked, he must have known  
 that his years of easy victories were over.  
 we were firing paintballs at the pine. i wanted  
 to cross the yard, to set up a target and he promised  
 not to shoot, but fired as i walked back  
 and hit me shirtless, then kept firing, painting  
 my body. it wasn't from the pain that i cried,  
 but from thinking he would stop, so i stood there,  
 welts and red vegetable oil until my crying quieted:  
 i quieted, stopped fighting back, especially  
 if he wanted me to.

1 69 \_ACON  
EGG AND  
CHEESE

the winter aunt sara had an asthma attack  
mom asked me to help with her paper route.  
i didn't complain, not that i had anything better to do,  
a plaid-clad scarecrow with dreams of getting my braces off  
to one day smile from the front page with my strat in hand:  
headline—*the next jimi*. maybe, when she was young,  
sara wanted this too, her and her piano: *rachmaninoff's heir*.  
long before she moved into her van, leaving a house  
reeking of cat piss and yellowed newspapers,

everything torn out to look for cameras,  
before foil covered windows and baths in the ocean.  
i didn't have much to say that morning,  
but sara talked about how you could tell madonna was a clone.  
she insisted on the importance of wearing ear protection  
while playing music, talking urgently, and gasping for air  
at the end of each sentence. when we had to stop for a restroom,  
she insisted on hardee's—*a last bastion of democracy*.

ten years and i've never eaten at hardee's without feeling  
that morning. i've also just never eaten at hardee's  
but i've bought the food for men who say they're hungry,  
as though this will right things. i brought a man there last week  
before the blizzard. he asked for bologna, then for the closest thing to it,  
and i waited for him to pour his mr. pibb.  
we walked and i listened until we got to the library  
leaving him to find books on how to write gritty poems

about compassion. i left him like i left sara ten years ago,  
hobbling back to her van in the parking lot where we met.  
you have to or there'll be no end to it, and anyways  
she was excited to finish composing an opera  
with her cracked clarinet. at hardee's that morning,  
we ate bacon, egg, and cheeses, and in that warmth  
with sun just showing through the smudged window, she paused  
and took off her sunglasses. she said blankly *i only ever  
wanted one thing, but i couldn't do it. i couldn't do it.*

## Silver Salt

When I was twelve, dad took me to the darkroom to help him develop film. He wanted to show me the enlarger, the dangerous developer liquid, and why red light won't react with silver salt. I could bring my GI Joes. Actually, not GI Joes, a brand called The Ultimate Soldier, and I loved them because the magazines came out of their guns, but especially because you could see bullets on the tops of the magazines. We made silhouettes of the soldiers by laying them onto photo paper and shining direct light to capture their shadows, but I didn't think it was as cool as he wanted me to. Then we developed a roll he botched by letting light get to part of it, just enough to cut swaths of white into the positive images—half our dog's face an ethereal burst, her tongue fading into being at the bottom of the image and tail hovering above white void, penumbra of gray grass around the explosion.

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*... That's why, when you blow-out the ISO and overexpose film, you introduce grain to the photo, dad said between bites of his meatball sub, dollop of marinara falling to wax paper. I looked out the smeared window of the Subway to industrial Richmond, where we'd gone to take senior photos and explore VCU's campus. Grain is good, he continued, beautiful, even. It gives a photo warmth. Noise, on the other hand, which is the digital equivalent of grain,*



*isn't desirable. Take a look...* He wiped his hands and mouth on a napkin and spun the camera around to show me its screen. *I overexposed this one.* He'd zoomed in on the gray and black shirt I'd worn that day, the one that said WISH YOU/PINK FLOYD/WERE HERE—song title split by the band name. He was right, there was a metallic pixilation, something grating and almost spectral, but hard to pick out without knowing what to look for. *Wish You... Pink Floyd... Were here,* I said in a low mumble. *Huh?* He said. *Nothing.*

Before the stroke flashed through his Alzheimer's nerves, grandpa read my shirt like that, as it was written, over and over, bothered by the syntax in a way he couldn't figure. *Oh yeah, that shirt always confused him, didn't it?* said my dad, lifting the sub back to his mouth, but I was elsewhere, thinking about MRI photos I'd seen of a brain in different stages of Alzheimer's. As the photos progressed, shadows in the brain's ridges crept deeper into positive matter, with small pockets of void growing in the central regions. *The beauty of silver salt,* he said after the long pause, *is that each grain has an infinite gradient in its exposure.* He crumpled the wax paper. *A digital camera, no matter how sophisticated or how many millions of pixels it can pack into an image, will always be limited in the gradience of its pixels.* He paused again, before a smile came over his face—his teacherly lightbulb “dinging”. *So here's a way to think about it... Digital noise is a ghost, a gambling ghost, who rolls the dice when a pixel is between one value and another, and the machine “thinks” itself to one side or the other of a hue. When this happens, you get what's called*

*“aliasing.” Sometimes the computer chooses the wrong color or wrong shade. “The ghost in the machine,” as they say, “chooses” a zero or a one—black or white, light blue or dark blue—rather than the infinite grays and in-between colors that molecules of silver salt give you. It’s the jaggedness of chance.*

$$|N| \sim |V| \simeq |N|$$

Think back to trigonometry class, x and y axes and graph paper, failed attempts to draw a smooth sine wave. This is sacrament, the fluorescent lights, borrowed pencil and gum under the desk, but mostly the asymmetrical wave with debris of pink eraser—first communion. A little heavy-handed, but if there were a religion made from physical rules, its god would be the wave. And if there’s anything close to a religion in modern physics, it’s string theory—a framework that could theoretically solve every paradox of physicality. String theorists envision a world where the fabric of all matter and space itself is a symphony or interwoven one-dimensional “strings,” the frequencies of which distinguish the various natures of matter. It’s as beautiful and mathematically sound as it is unverifiable.

The first thing to understand about waves is they don’t exist, or at least, they are no thing, no *they*. A wave is simply the pattern of movement real things take—the motion of energy through a medium, like a plucked string. We say *the string is vibrating*, not *the vibration is stringing*, although the latter suit the string theorists’ universe better. But if the particular characteristics

(frequency, timbre, amplitude) of waves are captured in a medium over time, the shadow gains a body—grooves in a vinyl record or the arrangements of magnetic particles “written” onto magnetic tape.

And the first thing to understand about digital and analog technologies is that each mode makes a certain type of infinity possible: in analog media, the infinite *gradiance* of an analog wave—a note’s “quality”; in digital computation, the theoretically infinite “quantity” of *information* that can be packed into a file.

If you were to cross-section a vinyl record and look at the groove with a microscope, you’d see the recorded waveform is pure, with a perfectly smooth gradient, and the only limitations on the record’s fidelity are the molecular characteristics of vinyl itself. Yet these “limitations” are the exact qualities that audiophiles desire: the inherent “warmth” that vinyl imparts.

|N| ~ |V—z\|

I considered myself a photographer briefly in college, went out early one black Friday to photograph all the shoppers outside stores before they opened. Facebook has these photos exactly as they were when I took them a decade ago, though I’d long forgotten about them. They are typical of a novice photographer who attempts to make fresh compositions but lacks the skills to do so. There are a few good shots, but mostly they are too concerned with odd angles to pay any attention to the subject. That same

November I went shooting with dad at a local park. He gave me a camera and looked at what I'd captured later that evening. These shots are a little better—aided by crisp November sun—but still obsessed with their own obscurity. There are multiple pictures of my dad taken through a tangle of limbs, focusing on the tangle rather than him.

Dad encouraged me in his distinct way—*I'm sorry to say it, son, but you have an eye*—cheekily acknowledging the artist's burden. But he didn't just praise; he called out my “breakthrough” compositions for what they were (pretentious), and instead complimented me on the shots I considered the most dull. I remember thinking that my dad—a professional photographer and art teacher for thirty years—was missing something. At twenty-one, the single selfie in the bunch shows my facial structure as it is now, save for the sparse stubble and traces of acne. One of the good shots of dad—fifty-five then—shows him leaning against the rail of a dock looking onto the water. He's a little thinner, hat cocked forward, reposed in blue shadow like a man in an Edward Hopper waiting for a bus. He was at an age when I knew I should accept every invitation he gave to kayak, take photos, or get a beer, but didn't because of some latent embarrassment to show him affection.

$\mathbb{N} \sim \mathbb{V} \simeq \mathbb{N}$

To say that a computer is digital is to say that it only “understands” data in manageable pieces (1s and 0s). When a wave is recorded digitally, it is chopped to “bits,” like snapshots. These snapshots are pieced back together by the

ear, which, like the eye, can only perceive discontinuity of separate events below a certain threshold of frames or samples per second. The resulting wave, as recorded by the computer, is a staired series of points that air smooths out after it has interpreted the code.

Language is no different: words cutting the round waves of thought into shards, then music again in the air, and finally hitting the listener as semantic bits that round back into thought. But *that* thought isn't what the speaker intended—aliasing occurs, noise—yet the *thought* is still living—*incarnate* in both. Even the speaker will hardly recognize their own voice upon hearing it later, or at least embarrassed by their lack of eloquence: *Oh Jesus, is that what I said?* And furthermore, they have already changed their mind, the *thought* aged imperceptibly.

~^|\\|||\\| — ~~~~ — ^|\\ ^| \\ / ~

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...*

~^|\\|||\\| — ~~~~ — ^|\\ ^| \\ / ~

Hanging to the right of my desk and matted on styrofoam is an image of my grandfather not long before his stroke. Dad's photo, shot from above as grandpa napped in his recliner, is stark and painterly—its colors washed-out and its edges smeared. Even the print has a coarse look from the watercolor paper it was printed on, its roughness juxtaposed with the pristine detail of my grandfather's

head—wisps of white hair in focus, while the surrounding world is a greyish blur. You can still make out his hands, folded at his chest as though in prayer—the way he always held them while napping—but they too are blurred. Individual hairs fray from focus into ether. It's breathtaking—crystalline, icy. And it's digital. This is readily apparent, not because of noise in the image, but because it's clearer than life.

Like music, there are analog purists in photography who believe film produces the clearest image. It doesn't. And like vinyl records or tape, analog film is ultimately limited by the physicality of silver salt: there are only so many molecules that can fit onto a strip of film, while the number of pixels in a digital image is theoretically limitless.

But this is all beside the point: people love records not because they sound exactly like real life, but because they sound “better” than real life, warmer; because the act of playing a record is physical; and because the very act of listening to a record shortens its lifespan—records age with us. This last point is what transfixes me—to the point that it's the sound of disintegration that I find most beautiful.

But the devil's advocate will point out that digital technology can mimic these imperfections to the point that not even the beloved failures of analog media can pass a test to distinguish them. This poses questions: is it the warm sound of the record I love, or the *idea* of warmth; the warped record with dips in pitch, or the idea of *age*; the tangibility of memory, or the *idea* of tangibility?

I admit, it's the idea... I grew up with Mp3s, and don't even own a record player. It's the idea of tangibility, the frailty of meaning that can be lost or skewed if you stack it the wrong way or leave it in a hot car, something true about it, something human: *the Word made flesh*.

^v^v^v|||~010010111010101100101~/\||~/

Before I moved to Germany at twenty-five, I had never lived outside my hometown. I skyped my parents nightly for months, and they'd always just tell me I was doing the right thing. At the end of the calls, during the goodbye, the screen would freeze my parents' last expression, always something unflattering and comical, but I felt an unplaceable dread and pang reminding of my parents' mortality—smirks smeared across the screen like a sand painting in digital wind. I felt our brittleness: bonds electron-thin and triangulated from the vacuum of space. Maybe, these expressions exist forever in some server, but they are metallic, cold.

## Particles

Full moon floods the valley with silver, and the alps looming on every side are lit from within. In the oceanic light, one mountain is clearer than during the day, so clear that I want to un-see it, as though it were a leviathan lying dormant in the cold depths.

Earlier, mom told me through blue light across the Atlantic the dog is dying of cancer. *He can't hear or see, and he snaps at me when I carry him up the stairs. I think he's forgetting us.*

*Can I see him?* He's grown closer to the floor, rug-like, hair covering his eyes, and raises his head out of pity for my mom. Before old age, when we would come home, he greeted us with an offering in his mouth, usually a sock or a leaf to show his productivity while we were away.

I talked to him when I needed someone who didn't care about words, only the low vibration, a cloth of sound slipping from above, as his senses muffled and the world became the dark boundlessness of scent-memory.

Even if he could see, he wouldn't look at my face on the screen, moving past to the hand holding the phone, the scented world, and the only world that matters in a house of large windows where bodies leave, but one scent stay in dust.

---

In the valley, snow is sparse like the cotton fields I awoke to when I was twelve, camping with my father and other fathers with their sons from our rural church. It was always just cold enough to hear a .22 open the crisp blue like the rapture of a righteous insect.

Camping to tell ghost stories and fire guns, many for the first time, boys on the cusp of puberty—old enough to not want to sleep in a tent with their fathers, but not old enough to say so, fathers on the cusp of sleep apnea, and the resentment forming in sons when their dads fell asleep first.

Emerging from our tents, eyes hot with tiredness, we found pale eggs and burnt bacon growing cold, while our fathers chatted around the smoldering fire, ashier



than the night before, their second cup of coffee in hand, planning for when the morning shit hits.

I realize that I loved guns until that day when I held one at the end of my thin arm like a diamond and felt its recoil unhinge gravity, singularity of sulfur and steel, my ideal collapsed.

At the same age, my father walked down a train track converging into the same sky, a .22 in his hands and a science experiment in his head. He'd read somewhere that a bullet deforms in flight, and he wants to see it, the unseeable, like an angel or age itself, outside of time. Two trials, and he has found his setup. He is going to shoot a block of wood pinned to the track with his foot. But when the bullet hits the track, shrapnel pierces his boot, ideal liquefied into molten metal.

---

The night cuts through my wool socks and faint wind sends a few flakes out of the ether. How does memory move through us like dark energy?

In the stratosphere above Antarctica, physicists float weather balloons to detect neutrinos flying from the sun at the speed of light. They are massless, invisible, and pass through the earth without interaction.

I'd like to think that memory and the soul are similar, that we have something to do with neutrinos, souls moving through each other, blinded by our own lightness and speed. But I don't think that's true.

Neither, however, are we like my father, the track, and his bullet.

Something in between.

My grandfather lived with us during his last year with Alzheimer's. When he knew our names, it was brief as a sunshower, and his lucidity turned to anger when he drifted back into amnesia. He would fight his way out of the house to catch a train, until we convinced him it would be back.

After the final stroke, my dog laid by him in bed, silently vigilant. My grandfather had lost speech and rarely opened his eyes, but occasionally felt his way across the covers to find the dog next to him, patting the dog's head in a momentary

greeting before laying his hand back down. When he died, my dog continued to lay in his absence, not leaving for a few days, staying with the dust.

Snow fills the air, and infinity becomes visible. The world and its materials—its copper pennies on steel rails, light switches; all children holding hands at bus stops, and water lapped from bowls by dogs with filthy muzzles; every magnifying glass and sizzling ant, and the strong nuclear force holding each thing together and separate—rushes into itself as individual particles become uniform.

Snowless patches fill and the valley is stitched into a cloth.

## The Valley

Mom asks if I remember my fever dreams.  
I do, but every memory is an old pot of lentils

thawed and refrozen. Mostly, I sit and scratch  
scalp onto this paper—psoriasis being auto-immune—  
new cells created, abandoned and created again.

In Germany, I cleaned hotel rooms, guests  
arriving to small soaps placed just so, beds tucked,

no trace of the guests who just departed.  
I crossed the Loisach every day on the way to work,  
its glacial blue fed from the Alps' runoff.

Most of the housekeepers had just finished college  
and were in Germany to drink. Slow days, some

would enter a checkout, lock the door, and sleep  
off their hangover, then remake the bed.  
After our fifteen month contracts, we left

without a trace. Enrique, who'd cleaned rooms  
for twenty years, taught himself German and Greek

from the texts lining his cabin where he traded  
his bed for a mat and ate lentils with brown rice,  
pooled in the olive oil he couldn't afford in Puerto Rico.

Toothless and near 60, Enrique believed  
he could be immortal by eating enough spirulina,  
and did still run marathons, although his knees

were starting to give. He invited me for dinner  
one night before I returned home, light rain pitting

the snow and tapping his roof as we played chess. I asked about loneliness or romances he'd had, to which he laughed and changed the subject to Aristotle.

I felt guilty when I saw the move that turned the game against him, guiltier when he complimented my victory as I left.

**Mark**

Physics tells us that time curves space  
 and the universe, outside of time,  
 looks more like a spiral than a sphere  
 as it pulls into its past  
 thinning this April day  
 into a streak of hot pollen,  
 a chorus of waving, black ties.

The yellow waterslide  
 Mark climbed into four months ago  
 and filled with the fire of his synapses  
 is now surrounded by police tape  
 but everything else, the winter rain,  
 his freezing hands and glassy eyes,  
 is spiraling to the interior of the universe  
 leaving bones, clothes,  
 and an empty pill bottle,  
 its label decayed.

How did he end up back here?  
 Our rural church,  
 escaping rehab to ride the greyhound  
 seven states and leave his wallet  
 on the church step,  
 walk across the field where we played  
*red rover, red rover,*  
*send Mark over,*  
 and choose a neighborhood pool  
 abandoned by winter  
 to burn like a flaming leaf  
 down through snow.

~

At the memorial, a church elder  
 compares Mark to Icarus.  
 From the back of the room

I stare at heads above chairs  
 with grey hair hanging like vines  
 from oaks in a foggy orchard.  
 Golden saplings punctuate the oaks  
 with tan skin and pubescent shoulders  
 and in the fog the oaks heave and creak  
 while the saplings bend silently,  
 and they are all wet and lonely  
 but joined at the root,  
 all with the same desire  
 for Mark to emerge from behind  
 one of the great trees  
 dazed in cut off jeans  
 and oblivious to the occasion  
 just a glimpse.

~

A memory comes back—four of us lying  
 on a leaf covered trampoline, early autumn,  
 cold sweat chilling after the jump,  
 young joints so loose as to be invincible.  
 Mark talks about infinity,  
 Its spiraling beauty.  
 He pulls a Sharpie from his pocket,  
 sits up, and draws the horizontal 8 on both hands.  
 A girl laughs and names this  
*the marker mark of Mark*  
 and he traces the symbol  
 on all of us, before we fall back again,  
 into the deepening blue  
 suburban stars fading into being  
 just the brightest few.

## Lost in Berlin

1. The underground is a womb.

on the metro a boy sleeps with  
 his head on his mother's lap,  
 small body rocked by hydraulic  
 sway: the city, a ship in his dreams,  
 solidifies as he finds words,  
 the thin anchor of his mother's hands  
 tethering him to the surface.

Berliners enter the train  
 laugh loud in ironic leather  
 asymmetrical haircuts  
 drunk already and embracing,  
 until the metro accelerates  
 and they fall silent in the blue  
 light of smartphones. Waves  
 of hipsters cycle through  
 each stop, knowledge of dusk  
 reaching the underground  
 through their voices. the boy  
 and his mother ride the line  
 to its terminus, then change  
 to the next train.

2. Through the Holocaust Memorial,

children chase each other  
 their laughter collides with the concrete  
 monoliths, a maze that rises and falls  
 as the grade descends  
 toward the middle of the grounds.

I walk the austere calculus,  
 multiplication of peoples, trains  
 going one direction, millions.  
 But this number is a balloon,  
 in the maze of facts that children

learn during the day filled large  
enough to float into the haze  
of forgetfulness the same one  
they run through in the orange  
evening, fire coating the tops  
of the columns, fading to blue  
shadow, crepuscular city waking,  
reborn every night like a tree fed  
by the ash of its own burning.



# Waves

**lost in budapest**

our hair  
 anointed by dandelion seeds  
 was unwashed  
 its oils enmeshed the spores  
 that scattered  
 like flecks torn from my letter  
 about the freezing river  
 in a town where i had no language  
 how its trickle narrowed  
 and stilled eddies leavened  
 into silver dendrites  
 like my neurons  
 as i learned a language that i feared  
 and could barely say more than  
*i would like salad with trout, please*

that was winter  
 but in spring the seeds  
 billowing above budapest  
 rest on everything  
 apples in fruit stands  
 look moldy under a fine fur  
 and at night  
 newspapers covering men  
 flap under each gust  
 dusting their surfaces  
 in a drift of thoughts  
 wishing their way to soil

who did we become in that space  
 id-less  
 chasing a street car  
 past streets whose names  
 rearranged themselves  
 and nothing  
 to keep ours straight?  
 in front of the hungarian parliament

you asked me to slow dance  
to roy orbison  
played from your iphone  
gusts off the danube  
choreographing our steps  
that window we opened  
without knowing why or caring  
only wondering  
what the other thought of it  
even as the dates  
on our plane tickets neared  
i rested my head  
in the crook of your shoulder  
where you let it stay for a moment  
before correcting my posture

**oak leaves in november**

mold already pulls  
 their dried ends together,  
 the early ones, now the late ones  
 have fallen too, and october  
 has spaces missing between its veins.  
 last month you sat across from me,  
 combed your hand through dark water  
 and pulled green tendrils out  
 to watch them drip sunlit  
 into the bottom of the canoe.  
 you stopped paddling to face me  
 but didn't look up.  
 i felt strong and good pulling us  
 through the water, pulling  
 myself toward you  
 receding at the same speed.  
 locked like this. there was a cypress  
 with spanish moss backlit  
 i rowed to the shadow  
 showed you its glowing effigy  
 but the sun was blinding  
 in your spot, so i paddled us back  
 til the shadow slipped  
 off me, fell on you.

white and red oaks are distinguishable  
 by their leaves, red oaks' pointed,  
 whites' rounded—consonants and vowels.  
 they gather their thoughts through the year  
 feed each syllable the same,  
 all known and shown through:  
 my god, to be sunlit sound  
 without thought, then  
 all spent in a strong gust,  
 settling in winter and becoming  
 unintended and brittle.

were the words on the tree  
 audible in the first red  
 tinged leaves unfurling  
 or in the later green  
 no, imperceptible,  
 like the look before the look  
 in the eyes on the darkened bridge  
 where we let our legs dangle  
 high above the janes.  
 they were visible, then words were said  
 and they circled between us for a while,  
 leaves caught in an updraft  
 or in eddies below. you pointed  
 to a spot on the water  
 where quivering light reflected  
 a train trellis and called it lacy.  
 then you turned my hand over  
 ran your finger up  
 my arm, tracing rivers  
 where veins once were.

if the white oak is a rounded mouth,  
     it will say the same vowel  
 over and over, its shape set—lovestruck fool.  
     what choice do we have,  
 sharing most of our genes with trees?  
 i don't know, just like i didn't know  
     what to say the last time i saw you,  
     sitting in the same wal-mart lot  
         we first met in  
         that awful symmetry.  
 but i follow the leaves' venation  
 with a finger: see the curves of each  
     reaching for the same thing  
     but all twisted different—  
 words new each time they're spoken.

we stayed too long in the canoe that day  
 and had to drag it to the ramp.

i didn't mind because my boots  
were old—holes in the bottom of one—  
i asked if your feet would get wet.  
but you said the soles were good  
as my boot filled.

**I-95**

red heaven, highway fog flooded  
by *storage* sign light, or red  
somewhere: i ask you to keep me  
awake as sleep darkens my  
bathysphere: far from you now,  
eyes like windshield wipers on  
high, dreaming and waking,  
dreaming and touching your thigh  
with the hand not on the wheel, and  
you dragging your fingernails  
across me. you ask if i'd *rather  
slide down a blade into alcohol or  
get boiled in a deep fryer*, and i  
think *what the fuck? is she asleep  
too?* and this thought wakes me  
slightly more than the fear we have  
already crashed and are together in  
a dream where a girl i just met asks  
about sliding across knives and the  
boy she just met misses the exit in  
petersberg, drives straight through  
emporia and we sleep next to each  
other in lowered seats at the truck  
stop. we drool on the headrests, and  
i dream about nothing, wake to  
orange fog, her breathing, and  
remember that same night—bridge  
above the james. She put her lips to

the bottom rail, said it was cold,  
told me to try it, and I did: like a  
pica, some mineral missing from  
her. her dad's dying, and we're  
driving again, derelict filling  
stations outside franklin, and she  
talks about his fishing trophies and  
the taxidermied bass on her wall  
from when he was state champion.  
her daddy who played with her hair  
the last time she visited him at the  
memory center and hasn't known  
her name in a year, while i've just  
learned it, already praising it, as if I  
know anything about her, as if I can  
help her, praise it like an arrowhead  
found in the field by a wal-mart lot,  
which is where we finally separate,  
street lights still lit, as sun pinkens  
the sky's eyelid.



### Fisheye

When it got dark, Billy brought the stack of his dad's magazines to the trampoline. The boys at the birthday party who knew what to do with them took turns to sneak one to the bathroom—hands still covered in pizza grease, sweat from the humidity.

I didn't know what to do with them, so when I was given the flashlight to look, still on the trampoline, something else but the urge to vomit turned in me as I flipped, and I focused less on the pictures than the yellow reflection collecting in the magazines' creased pages.

Bodies flattened like finger-smudged plexiglass outside the abandoned movie theater by the mall. It didn't survive the analog-to-digital transition, or rather, the owner locked up and left everything where it was until nostalgia created a market for the defunct equipment. But there's one projector room where a manager threw parties the summer the building closed, inviting all the employees who could keep a secret. They cleaned up after each party but the last, which the projector room's trash records—beer cans, wrappers filled with roach droppings and one, mummified. The projector is still uncovered, and the film needs to be dusted, or—for the conceptual and lazy—watched as is, but the film on the label, one of the endless string of Marvel flicks, will be obscured by the narrative of dust flickering along the reel and the long hair draped over the front of the projector. It will sway in the electric hum—its tendrilled shadow floating on the screen.

The next morning, Aaron punched me awake, said *smile*, and took my picture with the fisheye lens dad let him borrow. He didn't have much of an eye, but took to the mechanical nature of the camera and anything he could disassemble, whether or not he could put the pieces back.

We both liked the photos—how the periphery narrowed at its edges and warped around the exaggerated center. Though six years older, he was a child as much as I was. Sometimes, he'd bring the green-plastic-alien-lamp we called Junior to supermarkets and photograph it standing between aisles and atop goods.

Along with the older boys from church, Aaron once made a homemade VHS called *The Ninja Can Run*, which they filmed at various drive-throughs. They ordered whatever wasn't on the menus and explained to the intercom they were *ninjas from Borneo* and unfamiliar with our cuisine. In the titular scene, one of the *ninjas* wearing only a speedo and sunglasses runs across a field between the movie theater and the mall, which would also soon be derelict. The scene is shot from a car driving slowly alongside and is cut to without explanation in the middle of the movie. The original tape was lost, but copies were made and then copies of copies, until the audio of the only version one of them can locate is primarily hiss and pops. The video warps and striates into jittering color bands.

Sometimes, the older boys canoed to islands in the middle of a reservoir to camp, sometimes bringing a tent, but more often prioritized axes, bows, arrows and gasoline. I'd never been invited until that morning, still reeling from the new anatomies etched into my mind's eye.

At Andrew Mulford's, the boy whose mom was dying of cancer, we loaded the canoes as the sun began to set, early summer, and little need for sleeping bags. In the canoes, there were, in fact, no sleeping bags, though there was a tent, three gallons of water and one of gas.

As the kid brother, I knelt in the middle of one of the canoes, which raced and wove in and out of each other's wake. Sun glistened off their 18-year-old shoulders and the water, while a faint breeze atomizing the sun's reflection into a swarm of flickers.

I smiled and braced my hands on either side of the boat, trying to forget what I'd seen, but as the sun fell, I unraveled from the moment and the moment from itself like the positive of a polaroid peeled from its negative. The voices and splashing paddles pulled away like the twin eddies spinning opposite from each stroke of their paddles, light glinting in the edges of each spiral.

---

When it first happened—the “unraveling”? Remember the vinyl seat on the bus isn't cold through your khakis, your backpack of dogeared papers crisp. And the sunlit seat isn't slack or fragrant with heat, but pleasantly warm, so it must be late spring or early fall.

It's a short bus, the kind friends may have made fun of years later, and maybe you laughed, forgetting how you couldn't write between lines or read without your eyes circling back to loop each phrase endlessly.

You couldn't tie your shoes until third grade, and your handwriting exercises—spirals on the chalkboard from a central point and infinity signs—were meant to draw the lines with equal distance or repeat a patterns on top of themselves.

Some days you tried to find this rhythm, but just as often enjoyed the lines' natural drift, like a string slightly detuned—its note beating against the others. Mrs. Kellogg was kind either way, and either way you couldn't focus when she enunciated slowly, wondering instead about the tooth-shaped indentations on the side of her tongue as if she'd been biting her tongue gently her whole life.

It was all time, the clocks with hands that glide rather than tick. One time, the school psychologist asked the number of hours in a day, and you paused, remembering it was almost 24, but not quite.

Then one o'clock, time to go back to the playground which was still wooden before enough parents complained about splinters. There was still the web of rubber-covered chains between

platforms where you played spiders and flies with the other students, and the mulch was still made from shredded tires, which grew hot enough in summer to burn bare skin.

You were excited that morning for the solar eclipse, and Mrs. Mulder cut holes in note cards to watch as the crescent shadow grew.

But that afternoon, the bus driver dropped off the middle schoolers and returned to the special ed building. I always sat in the back of the bus. She locked the bus on her way out and I continued to sit there.

It took maybe a half hour to realize I'd been forgotten, and the sun was already half-eclipsed. The shadows of leaves thinned and became willowy. I grew paralyzed—too afraid to open a window, embarrassed, as much for the driver as for myself. I remember this, being embarrassed in a general sense, for the mistake the driver made and wishing it wasn't due to me.

The shadows projected against the wall of the bus became scattered slits. They were raindrops pitting into sand. I could see that the world was revolving, and it wasn't that I felt small, but transparent, not invisible, but vaporous, narrowed.

---

I told all of this to my ex on the phone soon after we met, along with other minor tragedies in my life. I don't know why. She called every night while I was visiting home last summer, always after I'd gone to bed, an hour ahead of her, and I talked where I laid in the dark.

We described the types of trees we climbed as kids. White pines were her go-to, always to the top, where she could feel its sway. She loved the way her hands smelled when she got down and went as long as she could without washing them, until her mom made her because all the door knobs were sticky. I climbed magnolias, sometimes to the top, but just as often settled somewhere in the middle, hidden in the glossy-leafed fort.

Her dad had been a pastor in an Iowa town of 700. They rented a house, always ready for God's call to pull elsewhere, and she could never have pets, which made me feel bad for her. Somehow these are the things that make you want to hold someone, the minor tragedies that are more like happenstance, and like happenstance, they are the characteristics that stick with you when they're no longer around—fragments of a melody that would be easier to forget if you could remember the whole thing.

Before she opened her own business tailoring clothes, she cleaned student apartments, where stoves would sometimes have a centimeter of coagulated, quesadilla grease.

She threw tantrums as a little girl, and when she wanted to travel alone across southeast Asia at 18-year, her mom simply said *make it happen* and she did.

She lived in a basement where, once, while throwing a party, a geyser of raw sewage shot up from her kitchen drain and sprayed her guests.

I explained how my siblings all had more visible issues than I did, so I always slipped through the cracks. I wasn't and probably never would be "the squeaky wheel". *So... your siblings had shit geysers*, she said. I waited a beat, *Yea, my siblings had shit geysers and I had GI Joes*. I didn't know how this was funny, but I could tell she held the phone away from her face for the better part of a minute, and I pretended to laugh with her.

---

She picked me up from the Minneapolis airport when I got back from Guatemala. I wasn't sure whether I was excited or not until I saw her by the baggage terminal where we hugged and she said I was shaking. At her car, I gave the plastic bag full of Guatemalan textiles I'd bought for her. She had cookies and strawberries, and we drove to a park along the Mississippi, which was unbearably green. She led the way down a path to the river where we took our shoes off and set them on a black willow before wading into the water.

Always rivers, always the silt around toes and abandoned beach chairs, rusting against the tree. We didn't wade long and found a spot on the willow to sit. I wasn't ready to talk about Guatemala yet, and transparent as I was from travel and speaking a different language poorly, was nervous about little else but the fact that it felt so natural to sit beside her, who I didn't know at all. So I talked about the willow, how aspirin first came from willow bark.

*You love trees, she said. I do. Why? I guess I like to think about how they experience the world... and they're pretty. I like these willow branches,* I said, snapping one off and handing it to her. *They're thread-like, I'm sure people used to weave goods out of them, baskets, whatnot.*

*What made you love sewing?*

---

Our flaming branches threw embers that spiraled and hissed into the water between the two islands, each with a bonfire by the water where we grabbed the sticks. Three of the boys were on the other island, while my brother and cousin agreed to have me on their team. Every shred of clothing but boxer shorts had been tossed to the black willows, whose tethered branches hung to the water, rippling in the wake of the flaming missiles.

When we blinked, the embers' orange trails inverted to green calligraphy in our quick shutters.

---

After school, I'd walk to Jesse Dunlap's house, one shoe's laces—the one tied by the teacher who double-knotted them (bless her)—holding fast while the other's dragged in my wake. Jesse was my best friend. His dad had guns in his office and a radio with a huge antenna on the roof that picked-up signals from anywhere in the world.

The signals held words and sound in the same type of waves that rippled from charred twigs I flung into the moonlight six years later, the same as visible light. Same in every way. Only the mediums differ.

The glass-faced gun cabinet at Jesse's house was a storefront for us to ogle and dream at without knowing the guns' weight. So we hollowed a foxhole between the roots of a willow behind his house and fashioned switch-tethered twigs into the guns his dad helped us name, their letters and numbers bright in our mind as jolly ranchers. Mr. Dunlap had been drafted to Vietnam when he was 18, while my dad's number never got picked.

We crouched in the roots and looked out over the salt marsh as the tide came in, imagining firefights among the tendrilled shadows of willow branches that lengthened as the sun fell, learning war until the areas between the cratered mud filled. Or until the willow shadows no longer danced in our foxhole and the sun grew low enough to scatter into mirror shards on the wet mud.

---

My dad never took me fishing when I was younger, but Mr. Dunlap brought me along once when they set out from their small dock. We caught more croaker than he could haul back in the cooler, and they mumbled in the cooler all the way back to their dock.

In a picture from that day the sky is overcast—clouds layered like scales—and Jesse holds the largest croaker with his fingers in its gills. Hi smile is squeamish and he raises his arm with the heavy fish away from him. I remember he didn't want to put his fingers in its spasming gills, how he began to cry, but Mr. Dunlap wouldn't let him go into the house until he took the photo.

---

*Sewing is primal, and, honestly, it's just something I started doing. I don't know why, but, in some ways, that's the point. If you keep doing it long enough, a pattern will emerge, even if you*

*don't know what you're sewing when you begin. I'm a practical person. I was raised that way—to mend things.*

---

When I was younger it always seemed enough to witness the world's patterns, just to witness them. I'm afraid, sometimes, I still feel this way. There's an ant colony on the sidewalk outside my apartment, and when I look at it, sometimes I think *Hey, that's me! a river of ants*—how light is both a particle and a wave—a flurry of dumb urges, but also, maybe, a melody too slow to perceive when you're in the middle of it.

This is how I make God and how I kill God, needing to always see the back of the tapestry, how the images are stitched.

---

While away from my garden for two weeks, morning glory entwined with my squash so entirely, the mesh of competing plants depended on each other, even as they tried to fight each other out of the space. Two poor tomatoes, grown without structures were caught in the fray and gourd tendrils wrapped around their leaves and branches, pulling the plants to the ground.

I severed the tendrils and unraveled them from tomato leaves, uncoiling sunlight from itself. This hour of sunlight solidified as morning glory, this as squash, tomato. But, of course, nothing is like that: nothing divided into hours like that. Example—a body, in a little apartment, sometimes forgets and sometimes remembers the touch of the person who used their bathroom with the door open, as they read poetry on the couch or watched hail fall sunlit outside the window. You can see their tangles in the corners, swept where the dust pan can never get to.

The morning glory recovers after a few days and finds its way back up the tomato cage. When I pulled the individual thoughts, nothing changed about the roots beneath. How to fall back asleep after waking in the night with them already pushing their green spear through the surface?



Does the vine touch structure and *know* how to bind itself? How does it know? A bright epiphany like scent memory, then instinct, a pull to see if the structure is worth wrapping, then the body's green movement. Or is there no epiphany, just the blind engine of sunlight knocking electrons inside the chlorophyll, enough in its tissue to push, pull, and repeat, always the push towards something new, always the pull to see what holds.

**pine needles in February**

roots knot the path around the lake  
 and stephen watches his right leg  
 to make sure it can clear them,  
 helps lift with a hand  
 in the space behind his knee.  
 tumors had knit a shawl  
 around his spine in yarn  
 i imagine violet against bone,  
 and from outside our lives, maybe  
 his sarcoma would look exotic, ink  
 in water, orchid of ice  
 graying a pond.

*pine needles stay  
 on limbs and flip  
 the narrative  
 that when leaves mold,  
 they mold their carbon back  
 into the loam  
 under their own trunks.  
 needles also rot into a wet bed  
 but more acidic,  
 and the tree appears the same,  
 no cycle, no remission.*

chemo was killing him faster  
 than the new universe of his cells,  
 so he stopped and his hair  
 grew back, thin, but soft  
 as his chinchilla when we were young.  
 always some rare animal in a cage  
 or aquarium. at the end, when he curled  
 like an eyeless pup on the hospice bed,  
 he'd sigh a word, and his cockatiel  
 would squawk. i reached  
 a finger into its cage to stop it,  
 and it puffed itself up, snapped at the air.

i hadn't seen him in years,  
 but his expressions were the same:  
 embarrassed smirk when he  
 enjoyed something, quick laughs  
 when finally comfortable, if ever.  
 nervous high schoolers—lucky weekends  
 were when we could score a dime-bag  
 off someone who didn't scare us,  
 smoke it on a sheet of computer paper,  
 and cough more from the paper  
 than the weed, small freedom  
 under the pines of a backroad,  
 canopy blurred into whisper.

*loblollies are like bunnies,  
 each tree identical  
 as far as you could tell  
 quick-growing, expendable.  
 they're shaved into telephone poles—  
 it's what they're good for,  
 and they stand with electric wind  
 in their tops—morphine  
 rain dripping from their*

wires: clouds moving  
 faster, north, south, or wherever  
 would correlate to the top of stephen's body,  
 and he holds his head in his hands, *wow*,  
*that's new*. *wow*, and the pain  
 shines yellow through  
 fentanyl haze. two nurses enter,  
 one demonstrating how to change the syringe  
 that sends clouds through metal  
 into blood and sticks the metal in him  
 like a boat in a bottle,  
 and the other stands  
 with hands clasped,  
 asks questions sometimes.

*indian summer the week  
you went, one day i sat  
by your bed, told you  
about the school bus outside  
your window and the pines'  
warm hush, sunlit tips of needles  
like golden threads frayed  
from sky, unravelling*

**Nest**

A sparrow sits on the gutter  
a single pine needle in her beak—  
one glowing strand pulled from  
the bundle. In Iowa, spring is slow  
to reach the toes of trees, fingers  
and foliar buds hard like hands  
that remember nothing but pockets,  
and in numbness think the thumb  
belongs to someone else. But hope  
is in the sap, like the shy brother  
at a wedding who loosens the tie  
of his sobriety just as the dancing  
ends—the short sister watching  
the bouquet fly toward her. Again  
and again, the sparrow swerves  
her head toward the source—  
devotion—remembering from  
having forgotten so many times.

Weave

### Thread

I keep old birthday cards. Their wholesomeness breaks my heart, though I'll never read them again or even look at them. At the cafe last Saturday, my ex gave back two books and the purple t-shirt she wore home one night a month ago. She washed it to rid herself of my smell, but filled it with hers. I don't want to smell it but don't want to wash it either. I keep the letters from her, along with letters from other exes, stashed away in a drawer, like my purple shirt will soon be.

I've never been a "things" person. I don't often work with my hands and the pictures I took in Guatemala this summer remain compressed on the camera's SD card. I let the world I touch and the few things I own pile up on themselves out of a mixture of laziness and reverence, a house of sheddings.

This is why I write poetry: why I write songs and why I rarely finish either of them. I like the thread ends to show. In some way, I think it's why Janae broke up with me. I always do with exes, like they've found my lack of... I don't know... some fundamental stickiness. I begin to smell like dust.

Mom met my ex before I did. My parents had driven from Virginia to visit me in the small Iowa city where I'm studying how to increase my output of unfinished poems, and we were walking through the farmer's market. After talking to the couple selling Emmentaler, my mom had to ask about the butterfly sculptures made from metal rods. Lynne Frailing is ebullient: a gardener, botanical illustrator and lover of people. I'm the type of person who, when I can't nod politely to the goat cheese guy anymore, will simply walk away from the conversation. Mom caught up with me in the middle of the road and looked upset. "We're only here four days. We came to see *you*."

“Mom, I don’t mean to be inhospitable or rude, but I can’t talk to every street vendor.” She nodded and we moved to the sidewalk, walked on. And when mom saw Janae sitting with a typewriter on a folding table and a small sign saying “Janae’s Pocket Poems: Pick a Topic and I’ll Write You a Poem,” she said, “Oh that is too cool. We need to get a poem.” I saw her too, and the fact that she was beautiful made me want to talk to her even less. At first.

I walked on for a minute, then retraced my steps to where mom and Janae were already friends and the topic of lilies had been decided on. Janae is a tailor and was sitting in front of her shop. Mom complimented Janae’s coral dress and introduced me as I walked up, “My son studies poetry here. We’re actually visiting him from Virginia.”

We looked at each other in the May shade by her storefront window, behind which an eyeless mannequin stared at us. Janae was surprised when she looked at me, and I was surprised that she was surprised. I was wearing the purple shirt that day, which isn’t itself a great coincidence because I only own 4 shirts, and there was a hole in my pants that is still un-mended. Months later, she offered to stitch it up, but I like my clothes to show their age.

I write about this like it happened in another town than the one I’m in or at least another part of town. But my house is three blocks equidistant from her shop going one way down Burnett and her house going the opposite.

While the purple shirt wasn’t a great coincidence, the gold coins I found that day are. I had bought a heavier-than-shit, antique sewing table from Goodwill when I first moved in, but immediately hated it and stashed it in my closet. Before dad helped me bring it to the street, we went through the drawers and found three coins dating to the beginning of the century.



If they'd been mint, their value would have been in the thousands, but they were well worn. The feathers on the Indian-heads had been smoothed over by thumbs and handkerchiefs, perhaps in an effort to preserve the minute detail.

But they were still gold, and easily worth close to a thousand dollars, a fact missed by the family members who must have brought the table to the Goodwill after clearing out the house of a deceased relative. Many assumptions, I know, but the little signs of life in the sewing table were untouched and showed gentle happenstance. The gold coins were scattered among West German pfennig, Czechoslovak koruna, and other defunct currencies—all curiosities, all worthless. Spools of thread, scissors.

I'm not as unique as I think I am. Maybe, more so than the smell of dust and staleness that I fear, it's the fear itself that kills my relationships. Janae is four years younger than me but has more gray hair. She cherishes these hairs and mourns a little at the loss of each. I loved this about her, and I loved her love of typewriters, loved that this love had less to do with metaphor and more to do with production, but that's assumption too. In any case, she's better at finishing the poems she wrote on the sidewalk, cutting the threads where it makes sense. I can't look away from the world, can't stop taking it in through an open shutter while each new experience blurs into the spider web of tangled light.

Or maybe the reason we broke up has little to do with me, little to do with this pretension. In truth, I've already washed the purple shirt and have simply exaggerated myself for effect. It just didn't work. We didn't work, and all the poetry couldn't blur our edges completely.

But artifacts exist. My shorts she made from the fabric I bought for her in Guatemala, a trip I left for just two weeks after we met. And the rest of the intricate fabric, which she may never use, stored somewhere in her shop: if she sold the fabric, I would understand, even if I never could. I'd hoped she could make a dress out of it, but I know nothing about fabric, nothing about thread, except as a metaphor.

And other artifacts: typewriters, photos from our trips on the same card as my photos from Guatemala, also unsorted. I don't know what to do with these, except to let them sit exactly where they are. There's something honest in their placement and in their blunt reminder.

But the body moves on. I separated my shoulder three weeks before she separated from me. The thread between my clavicle and scapula partially tore, and aside from the occasional pop and twinge, it will heal itself almost without recollection, scar tissue over stitches and a pinkish hue. The body kindly lies until it doesn't.

Still there's a time when flowers don't know they are planning for the future; seed heads can be preserved and lit golden by a window in winter. I have some next to me now—from the time we walked through the prairie at the beginning of fall—in an old juice bottle with the label torn off. In the pictures, she's always laughing.

**string theory**

i.

the corroded guitar strings  
know nothing  
but they'll open your skin  
if you stop asking.

i played today after months,  
bled, and remembered  
when we broke into my window  
with a pair of pliers.

i was locked out and we didn't  
know each other well,  
and we pulled the screen apart  
from its glued seal.

ii.

i still find her hair sometimes  
longer strands tuned to a note  
faded into linoleum and  
coffee stains. i found one today,  
half cleaning, half counting  
my own to see whose genes i have—  
both grandfathers giving this jagged  
widow's peak like a stalactite. one  
lost his hair, but died with food  
and sports rich in his veins.  
the other kept his, but outlived  
his wife, and became translucent  
as an icicle.

iii.

god is personal the same way  
a chord is a house: the major third  
and fifth open the windows.  
the seventh opens the roof.  
where ceiling had been,  
a minor second—dissonant  
because the tones are so near—  
paints a cloud you could run  
your hand through if it didn't  
pull away. you want to sit  
in the space between the notes,  
like a new color,  
but when you do—silence.

## Weave

Back at the hostel in Antigua, the couple on commission from Penguin to write travel vignettes were brainstorming how to convey the acid trip they had while trespassing through the ruins at Tikal. The Parisian boy, designer shirt unbuttoned, thought they should write everything as it happened, gonzo.

He penned a few dreamy lines about the moss-covered steps at the main temple and thought *pas mal*: not-bad enough, in fact, for a cigarette.

The girl from Oxford was worried that an acid-infused travelogue might be out of style. Still, she felt something in those ruins, toucans trailing colors across the constellations and squawking in resonance with something older than conquest, some vestige of Anglicanism she never renounced.

How could she isolate transcendence from the potentially problematic nature of trespassing through millennia-old Mayan ruins to spice up a vignette for *The Great Gatsby* insert Penguin had commissioned first? Maybe she couldn't. Or maybe their visionquest wasn't the right fit for the book, especially since the woman from Penguin said it would be going at the end.

---

Since my ex stopped talking to me, I've become maniacal about reaching my students. It gives me stability. In the letter she wrote explaining her conflicted feelings, she mentioned all the things she liked about me—all the pros, I suppose.

She mentioned a time before we were dating when I commented on the birdsong in her garden, how much I loved their non-repeating motifs, no predictive equation to sequence which chirp or would follow the last trill. She wrote that I helped her *tune into the divine in the ordinary*.

To escape from the day I surround myself with pretty noises from the old tube amp in the corner of my living room, not that everyone thinks they're pretty (neighboring tenants), not that I care today.

My guitar signal runs through a series of metal boxes with circuits that mangle and distort the signal into walls of gurgling and fluctuating sound. To my credit, it's not exactly noise; there are definite harmonies, subtle melodies, and some sense of composition—the least amount possible to meld intent with contingency—to not interfere with my primary goal—to purge myself of words.

---

Just write whether you know where you're going or not, I tell my students, let yourself sink into the image, until it matters only to you. Until you're flying and can't remember why you're writing. The context will come—you have to earn your morals.

But when I look for the ways the context *emerged* in my journals piece by piece, I find only grease pooling at the foot of a hearth. The image's power had seemed self-evident at the time, but I was also very hungry.

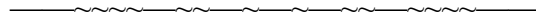
The paper looks yellow under the plastic roof of the restaurant in Antigua, where birds picked chicken bones left on plates and pulled sugar from droplets hanging from the rims of empty cokes.

They might have been wrens, and if i say they were wrens, and that I sat at the table closest to the brick hearth, where a man my age stood in the heat

turning chickens, their grease won't puddle onto the floor any faster or slower, but it will drip, and dry in the night

after the floors have been swept and the man's shirt is stiff with salt. And though he is supposed to wipe down the hearth, he lets the grease to turn to a wax, which the wrens peck into miniature topographies,

a different contour every morning he returns—his t-shirt clean and hair combed, ready for another day to drink and sweat his weight in water.



Often, my artistic pursuits—poetry, guitar, photography—seem to boil down to little more than this: a man with a fond appreciation for non-repeating birdsong. My ex-girlfriend is a classically trained pianist, while I stumbled on jazz chords by tuning my guitar strings to random notes, thinking I'd created a new type of harmony. I didn't furiously write poems as a child like poets are supposed to have done. I mostly just wanted to be a pirate.

For my ex-girlfriend, these patterns were sure proof of a creative and complex God rather than evidence against order. I couldn't agree or disagree with her at the time.

Once, she told about a time when she prayed and God answered. She'd been hiking with a group of friends in Wisconsin when everyone's phone got an alarm that a tornado was in the area. When the rain came, there hadn't been time to set their tents up but one of them had a tarp they slung over a low limb and they sheltered inside, each holding a corner tight as the wind almost took the tarp out of their hands.

She quieted herself and said a prayer for safety. The rain kept up, but the wind did subside. Later, she heard about how close the tornado had come but veered off unexpectedly. When she told me this, I agreed that it was a beautiful story and how encouraging her faith was. But internally I was

nagged with the thought that praying a tornado won't hit you is praying that the tornado will hit where someone else might be.

---

One night at the shore of Lake Atitlan, where I'd been studying the previous week, I'd had a beer with two other students—a girl from Colorado and another from Australia. We talked about our life plans, our callings while dangling our legs from the dock.

On the beach below, at a smaller dock, a group of kids jumped in and out of the water, their clothes clinging to skin and their skin reflecting the lake's blue haze, which deepened and grew dense as the sun fell behind the lake's volcanoes. Their straight, black hair matted into cowlicked helmets.

A rowboat entered their fray, paddled by a bigger brother or cousin, and splashed them with an oar, which made them scream and giggle louder. The fisherman's hood still covered his head after a entire day in the sun, waiting for fish and waiting for the next day when, over the same deep wells in the lake, he'd wait again, without a watch, as the equatorial days neither lengthened nor shortened, knowing time purely by the look and feel of the light.

A boy grabbed onto the side of the boat, and the fisherman hauled him up. The boy shivered and stood to stamp his feet, jostling the boat, and his brother/cousin berated him mildly before nudging the boy back into the water with his oar.

Across the lake, the lights of other towns began to flicker and jitter, and the public *lanchas* ferrying shoeless, yoga acolytes and tired families with crates of chickens and crab pots continued to hum into the evening. Trash collected at the shore, ebbing in the *lanchas'* wake. The kids brushed aside the trash each time they emerged from the lake to jump back in.



---

When trying to teach my students to write their first drafts without questioning themselves, I asked them to think about where they could find flow in their lives, whether it be sports, music, or video games.

Because few of them were artistic, I described when I used to be on a swim team, how one night before a meet, I swam in the pool until it closed. I told the students about the rhythm of swimming—living in that rhythm and knowing nothing else in that space, ratio of breaths to strokes as one fluid, thoughtless motion.

The pool was cold, and the next day I swam without thought like I'd done the night before, the only time I won every race I competed in. I explained the benefits of entering states of intense inspiration or flow, that these states are intrinsically valuable in themselves without tangible product.

The artist throws the ball of iron pigment above him and it splashes into the stream where he stands, pants rolled up, to watch his last four hours of grinding red rocks and dripping water onto powder from cupped hands explode into a fluid cloud and fall back into silt.

In the freshman English class where I projected this scene, boys wore Nike sandals with white cotton socks, backward hats. Three girls in the back wore identical Reebok sneakers, but the pictures on their socks were unique to each: bees, colored dots, one with cartoons of littler socks. When they couldn't understand why Andy Goldsworthy would make art to disintegrate, I showed them clip after clip of ecstatic music performances, trying to prove my point.

A Japanese drummer sets one poorly tuned snare on a table and convulses his body around it while doing fast but random drum roles, falling over the table but never letting the drum fly from the center of his controlled chaos.

---

Like Goldsworthy's ephemeral art, my guitar soundscapes intentionally disintegrate. Unlike Goldsworthy, no one will witness them, no one but a handful of supportive Instagram followers and unsupportive neighbors. The majority of the pedals are analog and the ones that are digital are "voiced" to sound analog.

For example, I have a digital delay, which is meant to mimic the warmth and imperfections of magnetic cassette tape, an effect present on recordings from The Beatles to modern indie-darlings who have the money to buy and fix the increasingly rare and finicky devices.

One of the functions of the pedal—which can be had for a tenth of the cost of the real (reel) thing—is to create a virtual tape loop which degrades over time. The snippet of repeated music is played continuously and can be added to for as long the pedal remains plugged in, but as new layers are added, old layers fade into an amorphous haze. With each repetition, less of the original sample remains true.

---

At a certain point, I stop playing and simply listen to the ways each motif crackles and blurs into others—new melodies of beating distortion emerge and frame the fading ones in new light. I turn the volume on the amplifier from three to four and get down from my chair, sit directly in front of it and let the pressure waves break against me

The guitar pedals are spiritual mediums—like radio telescopes filtering the room's radiation to tease out the texture behind things, truths hidden in the troughs of sine waves. The neighbor above me stomps across her apartment.

There's a romance to this—wantonly letting earnest artwork wash away like a sand painting, but you're full of shit if this is why you tear up your ideas, for the romance of it;

you're full of shit if decoherence is so beautiful you want to live in it. In this way, I am full of shit, or simply scared shitless of failure.

---

By the time we arrived at the outcrop at the edge of the abandoned quarry, we'd just missed the last sliver of sun behind the far hills but decided to stay for a while anyways. White plumes rose above the cold city from smokestacks and a gold lining coated the far ridge when the din of chirping in the quarry was engulfed in a waterfall of wings.

The starling murmuration wasn't as large as ones I'd seen on the internet, but the biggest I'd seen in person. We stood unmoving as the cloud swerved, darkening when the starlings' bodies flew perpendicularly to us, and translucent as the bodies flew toward or away, like a set of blinds opening and closing in the sky.

When she sat at the edge of the quarry, I watched her awkwardly and then looked back at the starlings, feeling the urge to sit next to her pass before deciding to sit on the ledge below hers. We watched in silence for a minute before she said *It's strange to think they can't see themselves, see how beautiful they are.*

## Signal/Noise

**body=sound**

fever dream  
 pink dusk turned  
     in the apple  
     of my lung  
     capillaries whistling  
 like organ reeds  
 all this i saw  
     childhood asthma  
     and bone pain  
     knees shins  
     everywhere tendons  
 rubbed cells  
     divided  
 my temperature rose  
     and the squeezed note  
     with it fell and  
 the worn hurdy gurdy  
     of me covered  
     in cold sweat  
 called *mom*

~

before i thought puberty was the name  
 of my brother's middle school principle—*mr.*  
*puberty*—before I smelled the word on aaron  
 like phosphorus from a snuffed match, i saw  
 evening peel reeds from their shadows, watched  
     fireflies trace yearning, cupped one  
     in my hands and wondered about its burn  
 unseen on the sweaty pews of my palms, but

rather than the lines of my hands aglow, it was soft,  
 clay musk, fused with the sharpness of rye  
     that lingered. clay malleable then  
     dried into fabric of the family station wagon  
     its rear-facing seats. in the *way back* i waved  
 and giggled at the cars following, drivers like  
 my own parents, going *somewhere* offscreen  
     from a movie whose tunnel lights and road  
     rewound, pulled forward by some decision  
     made behind my small head. i held my breath  
 through the tunnel, half-dreaming the ship props  
 churn above—mechanical suns and the gyres  
     upturned murk, low murmur luring metal  
     tendrils at the bottom of the river. then

light, and mom cracked the windows to early  
 spring, crepe-myrtles' pink petals spilling  
 in our wake, rushing to school early and in time for  
     zero bell—smell of clay and turpentine,  
     students rubbed sleep into charcoal drawings,  
     desire blurring the edges of disproportioned  
 pears, an easy a and room to daydream  
 before morning prayer on the intercom  
     buttoned the collars of their blue and red.  
 i drew too, before my own school day began,  
 religiously with the older students and always  
 the same blue whale, its profile from memory—  
 the w encyclopedia's spine split and pages glazed

in a patina of finger-oil. on the way home  
 from the beach—station wagon spilling sand—  
 we'd play 20 questions, though it only ever took  
 one for the bigger bodies to guess mine: *blue whale?*  
*yes*—always, unphased, before rattling off numbers  
 about size or tons of krill eaten per day, how fast

and deep it could glide, but at seven, everything  
was in flight, everything suspended in the medium

and tetherless. jonah, i was sure, had lived in a stomach,  
although not in a whale like the model we'd stood below  
at the smithsonian, which was too small. in feverdreams  
i'd seen the real ones, from the inside, like i saw my own pink  
larynx stretching and deepening like a pipe organ. i couldn't stop it,  
nor a feeling of flight in my gut, pulled from one end of the tunnel  
to the other, as if riding a pendulum whose arc grew with time.

on the swing in the backyard, sometimes i'd sit and hit  
a rope to watch its quick ripple telegraph to the limb  
and back, twice perfectly before diffusing into a wash.  
i observed that more weight made a tighter rope, faster ripple,  
higher note and thought about how bigger bodies and deeper  
voices would pull a higher tone, how even the most  
stoic men in my family couldn't not giggle, gravity's slow pull  
loosed from their old sinew. grandpa whose ears  
had grown to great conches and nose to a polished  
gourd from staying awake to the unseen, whose own  
name had flaked off the dry-rotted sail of his mind like  
a catkin stripped of pollen, chuckled—there is no other  
word for the sound—at the sudden rise in his gut.

~

the world is a whale  
singing so far under  
water and so high in  
pitch the closest we  
come to hearing it  
is flotsam in the wake  
of those that leave

**grandfather clock**

pecan shells sharp against your hand  
fishing through your jeans pocket

for screws he entrusted to you  
jeans you hated and only wore

because mom said *work pants richard*  
and dropped you off at grandma and grandpas

to rake leaves shell pecans and help grandpa  
in his woodshop which meant standing

tired in cold sunbeams  
wood dust

he rounds a flourish at the top  
of the clock and you'd rather be

at the table with grandma  
listen to her talk about crabapple

pie fresh from the backyard and why  
they were too tart when you ate them off the tree

*which is what you deserve*  
*because i told you i was makin pie*

but she gives you a slice anyways  
winks and yells out the window

*randolph munden cut that racket*  
and he doesn't say a word but cuts

it out do you remember  
a single word he said before



he lost his memory  
 you could count the words on your hand

after an entire day helping in the shop  
 or splitting pecans with a mallet

wrapped in cloth to keep the pieces together  
 maybe something like *you can chuck*

*the hollow ones right in the trash*  
*ain't no good* but did he say ain't

am i even southern  
 or is that easy caricature

his violin has the same strings  
 as when he showed me how to hold it

between my slight chin and shoulder  
 not long before letters to claim sweepstakes

piled on his rolltop and replaced  
 quick scribbles of what he hoped not to forget

you could trace time's darkening in his words' tremor  
 wind behind letters like a tangle of snags

anecdotes of things he'd seen  
 the lightness of a teapot he brought to his wife from japan

he wished he'd gotten her more nice things like that  
 then about the bones of a cardinal he found once *standing straight up in its nest*

*maybe died singing*  
 he even tried drawing them in blue ink on the cheap yellow paper then scratched it out

half-remembered lines from that one kipling poem about being a man  
 then the notes simplified

who his wife was  
 who his children were

then one story looped  
word for word

though his t's grew uncrossed  
i's undotted

who his father had been  
he wrote this story back to every sweepstake company

*Randolph Munden. My father, Eugene  
died in a ship accident. Boiler explosion with three others.*

*All scalded. Mother, Rosa Capps, saw him briefly before he passed. I couldn't.  
She said they wrapped him in white cloth.*

*Skin could heal, but not his lungs.  
She said he could whisper a little.*

*Then, unwrapped, they put him on our dining room table  
before the ground.*

the same each time until words disappeared  
companies that only asked he respond with his signature

like this was his signature  
what he could almost hear hissed in the clang of the radiator

pulling covers tight around himself as a boy  
then a boy again

### Signal/Noise

Aunt Sara doesn't name the cats who know the sound of her van when she brings food behind Walmart. She doesn't like to assume anything that they don't tell her, and they never say each other's names when she's around. She realized it's how they let her know they can be trusted, that they won't pry into who *she* is.

When she first realized that they understood her quite well, she was stooping to fill their bowls and gasped aloud, thinking these exact words *Y'all understand me quite well*. She straightened up, took a swig of malt liquor and grinned at the cats vying soundlessly for a spot at the bowls. Then she flipped the shades from her glasses so they could see her eyes, which are so blue that they sometimes frighten people when she's without sunglasses. Even in the orange light of the streetlamp, a cat looked sideways and stopped when he saw her turquoise eyes. He thought something and when she heard it, she couldn't contain her laughter. She laughed until she started wheezing and had to stop herself and said in English "Well I'll be *damned* if y'all aren't cleverer than most the assholes out there on *two* legs."

But she did name one of the streetlights behind the Walmart, after her mother. She saw it move one night when she was watching it with her binoculars, and something about where it was—giving light to the creatures most like children to her, so they could hunt birds from the plastic-wrap nests woven into kudzu—and how it was a little brighter than the other lamps—she felt something of her mother in the lamp. The way grandma made eggs and pie crusts with Crisco: this was part of it too, when she found the cats lapping from a ruptured can of it that had fallen from the dumpster.

But the complete logic isn't something she could explain, even to herself—why, exactly, a streetlamp that illuminated cats lapping Crisco held some essential part of her dead mother. It was partially the flavor and the smell, when

she dipped a finger into what the cats couldn't get to and tasted it. She saw her mother lick her fingers after putting pecan pies in the oven, then yell something at her husband.

There are two people in the world she might try to explain it to: her old boyfriend Pete and my mother. But Pete's liver gave out when he didn't take her advice to switch to beer. He died a few months after the death of grandma and a few months before grandpa. My mom, in her imagination and love for her older sister, would feel exactly what Sarah was saying until it became too strange and she would break down.

After Sarah saw and understood the streetlamp behind Walmart, she saw two more that she knew. Her father, the taciturn carpenter, was out in the middle of a peanut field. Just him, shining on two cottonwoods. And mom was the lamp at the end of a pier by the oceanfront, shining on a bench where Sara went to hear waves against pylons. Sometimes she'd be out there with her fishing tackle having full conversations. She knew no one was there, but she felt a presence that beer amplified. She'd drink almost until she couldn't walk, but always quit before the fishermen came to check their nets, hobbling back to her van to sleep.

One night, when her check from the government hadn't come and she didn't have enough money to get drunk, let alone eat, she played her cracked clarinet for the cats behind Walmart. The music was her own opera, written and practiced in the back of her van, and she knew it well enough that she could weave through the lines of its rich instrumentation, as if she had originally composed it for a soloist.

She was wheezing badly by the end of her performance. All the cats had finished eating and most had returned to the trees. A few remained nearby, licking their paws. She barely managed to make a quip that they were a better audience than those she used to play for, but she has trouble getting her breath afterwards. Her asthma was the worst it had ever been that winter, and she got back into her van and drove to the park where she slept. The next night, when she couldn't get through her paper route, she finally called my mom for help.

---

I share asthma with aunt Sarah. I remember the Waffle House where dad brought me the morning after a night we spent in the hospital opening my airways: the waffles were made with Crisco. The only other customers were drunks, truck drivers, and drunk, truck drivers.

Dad had to work in the morning and, at that point, realized there wasn't enough time to sleep, wake up and drive back through the tunnel and into the city to teach. I still tasted the medicinal vapor from the machine they hooked me up to, loosening capillaries to get rid of the wheeze, which, if I had perfect pitch, I would have heard to be an A-flat.

While I laid in the hospital bed, dad sat in a green, plastic chair. There was a point when both of us were sleeping, my airways full of sweet smoke and my father snoring with his head back and his legs stretched.

And a nurse coming in to check on us saw us sleeping and stood in the doorway briefly before flicking the light off. She remembered something in that moment, how her father took her to the hospital one Christmas day when an ornament shattered into her hand when she was playing with it. He hummed "Jingle Bell Rock" as she got stitches, hummed himself to sleep. It was a Wednesday and he only got one day off for Christmas from the shipyard, where he piloted freighters into the harbor. As a girl, when he brought to work one day, he hoisted her to look over the captain's wheel. The ship was a heavy dream drifting toward the dock, and her dad talked about how much force it took to slow its momentum and how precise it actually was to steer through something as fluid as water, how graceful the ship was for something so enormous. *Steering*

*a ship is like steering a life. Gotta plan well in advance, so  
keep doing your homework.*

And her dream slipped out of her just as quickly as it came and slipped into us, and then we were driving home through the tunnel. Above the tunnel ceiling, freighters drifted into the dock, their propellers humming low through the metal walls and I wondered if there were whales. I watched the tunnel lights like I always did. If I focused on something else while I watched, they would blur into one rippling line that waved, like a sung note. Dad thought about work and decided he didn't have time to sleep—might as well get some coffee, get both of us something to eat. I kept watching the lights of the tunnel, which seemed in that moment like a throat, and I drifted in and out of sleep, feeling my airways clear. The radio dad left on absently while going through the tunnel shifted to static as we descended into the water. Then, as we ascended, the static became the voices of talk radio again—whatever local show was on at that hour.

Sarah did have perfect pitch and, in her wheeze the night when she played for her cats, she heard a B on her inhale and F# on the exhale. This meant something to her, the perfect fifth between the notes of air passing through her—body like a pipe organ. It made her feel beautiful, but she didn't mention it to my mom when she called for help.

At the time, I had only met Sarah once at a family reunion, years before. What I knew about her was that she had been a concert pianist, she was mom's older sister, she lived in her van and bathed in the ocean.

That week I got up at 2:30 to meet her at Walmart, and I spent the mornings sitting on a milk crate where a passenger seat had been, tossing papers out the window as she drove. The last day of the week, we finished when it was still dark so she drove us to the oceanfront to hunt UFOs.

We parked at the end of a road near the beach and walked to where we could see the lights of the boardwalk in a straight line. "They like to hide among the streetlamps" she said. "See, they're engines are very advanced, and they can

hover for a long time, so they align their lights with the lamps, the lights they can't make invisible, that is. (The rest of the ship is cloaked, of course). Then they sit there and watch us. Just sit there, they don't want to hurt anyone, they sit and collect their data... just like me. I like to think we have a mutual understanding between us... an *if you don't tell, we won't tell* pact, so to speak" and she winked at me, hung a huge pair of binoculars around her neck and cracked open the *Steel Reserve* she'd stashed in her binocular bag.

"This'll be a real treat for you, shorty. It's a perfect night for hunting, cold because of the wind, but that's why it's perfect." She took a long swig of malt liquor before continuing forcefully between wheezes. "Don't look at me, look down the line. You're lookin' to see if any of those lights shudder in the wind, and I can assure you that they will. And when they do, you let me know, so I can take a *closer* look", and she held up the telescopic set, grinning widely.

We didn't see any lights shudder in the wind, and after a while she told me to watch the sand dunes instead. To look for patches where the sand wasn't as stirred as much as the rest of beach. I did as I was told without a response: already shy, and all the more resigned after a night of delivering papers and UFO hunting. I watched the dune until she said I could stop, and put the empty can back into her binocular pouch, silent for the first time that whole week. "You're good, a little like my dad... your grandpa", she said. "You can gather information without saying anything and still be pleasant. I've been a lot of things through the years, but pleasant was never one of them." She paused again, looked out at the dunes, "They're just like ocean waves. Did you know that? Same physics formulas as the ones that describe water or sound, just moving over a longer period of time..."

I don't know how much your mom's told you, but when I was a pianist, I loved Rachmaninov best. His pieces came the closest to matching the sound inside of me, but I could never work with conductors. No matter how hard they were or how they tried to control me, I was always louder. The sound in me was louder than the orchestras. The noise."

## Lost in Prague

Evening drew my shadow away from me and swept it  
down cobblestones to the gothic arches of Charles Bridge

into tidal crowds bending around a man playing digeridoo,  
his notes collapsing into the troughs of their own sine waves like dunes.

Pigeons boiled around a puddle of gelato dropped by a girl  
with sugared fingers pointing at the prism of dust

lifting gulls above the Vistula to unfurl after their meal  
of cherry blossoms and pink cheeseburger wrappers

the petals resembled. At one end of the bridge  
a teenage girl in tattered jeans dipped twine-lashed wands

into an oil pan of soap water. The bubbles she made  
holding the wands to wind had traces of motor oil

that fell to the bottom of the bubble and pulled the reflected colors  
down, thinning the soap to 80 nm, just thin enough

for interfering waves shining on both sides of the bubble  
to slosh and combine into magenta, and the girl transfixed on the gulls

now sees a bubble float toward her. I can't see what she saw, but the evening  
lowering and time darkening was the moment before a bubble explodes

by a portrait artist painting a woman whose jealous boyfriend watched the artist's  
strokes for tenderness and his girlfriend's eyes for brief, unintended desire.

But the woman was watching the boy watching the bubble—the glint  
off the boy's hair striating light like sinuous green at the edges of grass.

Sunlit hair flashed a shard of memory before words, something about the way  
tree bark felt just like *bark* when it first became *bark*—the day the word cut



uncalloused skin on the woman's hand when she was still a girl  
and tried to hang from a branch. Her botanist mother had been teaching the words

for leaves by touching one to the girl's palm and tracing each lobe while saying a letter.  
And when she taught her *branch*, her mother lifted her to hang on a birch sapling,

catching her when her grip slipped and a knot cut skin easily, but the girl  
didn't cry when she felt the sting, not even when her mother saw blood

on the branch and looked at the girl's hand. Her mother ran her finger  
around the wound and said *bloooooD* in a low tone, then blew

on the girl's hand, paused, and whispered *breathhh* and the *thhh*  
tingled on her skin, a river under each phoneme.

For the afternoon, the space between new words and what they signified  
was light trapped within the width of a soap film. The woman being painted

took off her sandals and felt the dust and grit between her toes,  
almost remembering how bark became what it was and could never change from it—

how it was the moment her father scolded her mother that the pain changed—  
when the woman sees out of the corner of her eye the girl reaching to the bubble

but blinks as it ruptures on the girl's finger, not seeing the exact moment  
before the rupture when the sticky finger of a girl pushed the film too thin

and for an instant, the soap catches every color, and the photons  
turn completely black. The girl sees it, though.

Sees it and has no words to describe it. And the teenager making bubbles  
stops to take a joint out of her purse.

### finding aunt sara the day after christmas

it's loud inside the piano,  
but it's a cloister, her symphonies  
recorded in smudges and breath

on windows. the matte-black van jostles  
when I call *aunt sara* and step back  
a few paces, bearing a bag of cold fries.

delusions take energy. at 70,  
sara's no longer "undercover"  
not that she was ever hard to spot.

she emerges from the back, surprised,  
*i heard a man's voice and thought*  
*'those men won't leave me alone',*

smiles briefly and fits a few curses  
between gasps, shoving fishing tackle  
to exit. it takes energy, but less than

absence of delusion, impossible to face  
years that estranged family didn't search.  
*wasn't expecting you, but how are ya, honey?*

*your mom send you here?* i tell her  
i wanted to walk on the beach, and mom  
said i might see her by the park's office.

she refuses the fries and tells about  
the starbucks woman who brought  
food to her van one night. *i thought*

*"am i gonna have to take this bitch out",*  
*i'm trying to lose 80 pounds.* i laugh  
at the levity mom can't enjoy without

offering money, reality or anything  
that would invite sara  
into this world and keep her here.

by appearance, she hasn't aged  
since mom told her she wasn't welcome  
to park in our driveway anymore,

but awareness has grown,  
and for 15 minutes, we might look  
like the kin we are, a planned reunion

at the ocean, the two musicians  
in the family. but i was never brilliant  
like she was, never pushed, perhaps

because of her, but also, never felt  
this part of me affirmed, maybe  
because of her absence. so

we share this moment before gravity  
returns, discuss her latest theories  
about nazis cloned into republicans,

her "work" the cia has yet to pay her for.  
leaving, i pass the gnarled beach pines  
that cling to shifting sand, seeds that fell

here and not a mile inland, and sara  
sinks behind her blue submersible window  
with a view of the sea and internet access.

**Light streams in again**

after another day left like a car  
on the roadside, rag in its window,  
avoiding poetry, not wanting to know  
how far my heart was from the mark.  
But lying in bed this morning  
as the blinds began their glow—  
images from yesterday, driving  
through fields of wind turbines,  
their blades motionless in the gusts—  
I realize I only saw them turn  
as night fell, only by faint light  
cast from blinking red, leviathanic  
lightning bugs, mammoth blades  
churning like dreams. But during  
the day, even in a squall, they stand  
still, life's excruciating now  
passing from us in the night.  
We wake to the veins in our arms  
lengthened, alluvial lines spreading  
from flooded rivers, which themselves  
have deepened, dammed by thought.  
Change. We wake, faces glistening  
with the snowmelt's fresh silt. You  
who hide flowers within flowers,  
Rembrandts for ants eyes, and deeper,  
a symphony playing of/for itself,  
the eyeless electrons, the swarm,  
You, who hide beauty inside arteries  
and every unseen thing, do it again

## Large Windows

*In every case in which heat exchange does not occur, or when the heat exchange is negligible, we see that the future behaves exactly like the past... The fundamental phenomenon that distinguishes the future from the past is the fact that heat passes from things that are hotter to things that are colder.*

—Carlo Rovelli, *Seven Brief Lessons on Physics*

### Randolph Munden wakes

not to heaven but light shining through a glass door onto the bedside table where bifocals refract two more doors. Not heaven, but not entirely different, if heaven is a persistent “now”.

Some mornings are more like heaven than others. Some mornings he knows the glasses on the table are his while others he’s closer to his wife Sarah who died last month. But the closer he is to his wife, the less he remembers about her, and paradoxically, the mornings when he has more of an idea about where he is—daughter’s house, Lynne, drives a Buick; *she liked painting as a little girl*—the stronger those facts are contrasted with the ones missing.

Most mornings are somewhere between. He is where he should be, the world that has always been, but some explanations are missing while others, which he’d been looking for the previous night, are now taken for granted. This too has become something to make peace with or not, like the consistent rush of water while living by a stream, the muffled sounds of a life lived more frequently submerged—and the transition of lungs to gills is long enough that dreams of work in the shipyard become dreams of recognizing the woman across from you, connecting the smell of burnt fat to the bacon on his plate.

He’s hungry. The word *jelly* occurs to him, something known before the watery surface of bright curtains appeared—significant somehow, but unmoored from meaning. *Jelly*: an expensive tool bought for a rare screwhead which was lost before it was used, and the problem could be fixed by a simpler wrench. Years after the problem was fixed and forgotten, the tool shows up again.

When mom needs help with grandpa, I find him shuffling for problems to solve—many ways to use a pair of slippers—and he's neither surprised nor expecting me. To convince him he needs the bathroom and that he needs my help, I talk about the *problem*—wet diaper—as if it has nothing to do with his body—a filter replace, earth too damp for tillage.

*I think they have new ones in the bathroom out here*—speaking as a young clerk directing him to sprockets: ideas, spoken as suggestions, and, usually, he trusts them, repeats *oh yea... new one*.

Upstairs, the clock he built ticks with a regular beat. It wasn't tuned when grandma was dying, but when he moved in, mom wanted it to function well, not as a metaphor for his health, nor for the person he'd been. But because she wanted him to see it tuned, whether or not he remembers he built it.

In doctor's offices museums, grocery stores, his attention was on the ceiling, the joists, how the ducting had been arranged and the logic behind it. It was his way of being interested rather than disinterested in the people buildings held.

Now, dad tunes it with the few rules of thumb he gleaned from grandpa: namely, push the pendulum when it stops and level the floor where the clock stands. An uneven floor elongates one end of the pendulum's swing, and skews the tick's relation to tock.

That the floor is bowed and ceiling cracked isn't lost on. Its varnished wood and glass covered assembly reflect the nine large windows at the front of the living room. Is it beautiful there, maybe, but is it sound? If dad hadn't adjusted the clock's four corners well, Randy would catch it, but in the absence of words, he'd simply lift his hand slowly and point, halting conversation to intone *it's wrong*.

And if, among the clock's planks, some came from a pine that leaned out from oak-shadow, and it reached—truly reached

one limb into the torrent of light, each day  
 ticking from the night's dark tock—  
 and even the days dilate  
 across the year's wider swing—  
 some of the boards' grain would record  
 the tree's change  
 in a calligraphy of lignin—  
 its strokes showing how the limb stretched  
 and each year's curved growth  
 echoed the previous—

he may have thrown those beautiful, but warped, boards into his wood stove. They sat in the stove seconds before carbon recognized oxygen and pulled air into itself, beginning the chain reaction where the fire that split air and grew the limb perpendicular to the trunk warms Randy's hands. He may have thought about this, surveying the other lumber for grain with stories too dramatic to be sturdy. And maybe he wondered if life is more like a tree growing from its fingers

or from the crook of its limb.

If fingers, then God heard him cry  
 as a boy when his father died—the tree  
 not just growing the way water drips  
 dumbly from icicles, but leaning  
 from shadow into light  
 by quiet knowing.

If from the crook,  
 then it doesn't matter  
 whether God heard him or not:



the world is an accidental anthill assembled  
 grain by grain across generations,  
 in a frenzy of genitals and instinct.  
 And if I am as like him as I sometimes feel,  
 he might have thought this,  
 but only briefly before drawing  
 his measurements to cut.

*Sealed & lacquered, the clock holds sun indefinitely  
 or... a long time : depends on how far the seasons  
 swing < boards — summer-loosed — shift :  
 winter — shifts stiffen >*

*^strength/^flexibility^*

*^but something teeters /*

*and rubs heat ~ time : the pendulum + air = heat:  
 gears behind the clock's face ~ heat: sweet, clicking  
 hands arrive nearly on time , but life jostles, gains,  
 and loses, and needs another push: cells in the hand  
 fueled and disassembled by...*

*Well, what is work then, but softening the  
 transfer of forces—slowing a baby on a swing?*

1. *The kids need hats.*
2. *Eat peanuts rich in fat (which is heat).*
3. *Toss the shells where they don't mess.*
4. *Glue the wood tight, but allow some  
 give.*
5. *Insulate the house and level a spot.*

*It will outlive you five-fold.*

**Mom buries roots**

until daylilies  
 enclose their anthers  
 and evening splits tomorrow's  
 sealed intentions before thoughts come to light—digs  
 until she doesn't think about her home's cracked slab or what my brother said  
 about the large trees she removed—that she'd become *trigger happy*: sometimes

in the tidal flicker of pines, she feels her mother's presence,

the way needle-shadows shift  
 in massless-ripples,  
 a pond inside June's air,  
 and a gust opens the canopy,  
 nudging a gyre of shadows in the wake—  
 someone shaking a blanket  
 of bright pollen and  
 helicopter seeds:

the way heaven might be approximated  
 by a child with infinite time and tissue paper  
 to choreograph true gradience, each leaf  
 with its own orbit of interference—*they always return*—  
 she tells herself when the camelia's resin-pocked skin  
 remind of her own thirst, her love of honey in green tea, and she leaves  
 the tools where they are.

There is some poetry she read this morning and wants to tell her poet son—  
 the one who seems to write one good line per month—if she can remember it.

It has something to do with the way squash sometimes

trails exactly where you want and sometimes it doesn't,  
 biding its time with ragged, yellow-green leaves and battling  
 morning glory like a teenage rival—so much potential—until one day  
 it explodes and goes where it pleases.

But specific syntax doesn't matter now: the moment singular,  
 and she thinks how Buddhists probably know something she doesn't,  
 but that curiosity too, she knows, has past,

only enough life to be confused by one religion, and complain about one preacher  
 then concede he does pretty good job.

She just wishes he'd stop yelling at the church ceiling  
 as if addressing God directly. *Yeah, God's up there, but we're down here.*

If her mother, is in the shadows on the ground,

the strobing undersides of oak leaves and the frayed flicker of  
 pine needles contain a joke she can almost remember her mom telling  
 about their catholic neighbors and their 12 children,

and somewhere in the upturned earth,

not the ground itself, but the *upturning's* Ecclesiastical toil,  
 her father hums and thinks about squash.

She can't hear both, in fact, if she tries to hear either,  
 she starts to think about the day again:  
 the cracked slab and the old trees she had to remove—*trigger happy*—  
 that my brother said she just wanted more room for more *old woman plants*,  
 but the 150-year-old pine lost a limb which was itself big as a tree.

It gouged a trench in the hill, and the trunk, which took three men to encircle, seemed to lean more than before. She thought she had to remove it, but regretted upon seeing the trunk's core strong with no rot.

Then the southern magnolia did begin to rot. It had been one of the first reasons she wanted the house: one of two dense trees by the driveway which made the house feel like it was in a forest. Years before, her husband had cut the lower limbs he could reach, not knowing what he was doing, but she doesn't blame him anymore. The house she raised her children in—its large windows she loves but never kept the heat in or out and its yard she's afraid she can no longer tame—is autumnal.

**Hermit crabs materialized**

inexplicably in the rooms downstairs when I was a child. Flick on a light and one would be waiting with its oversized claw held like a shield, skittering a war dance around the toilet.

Before I returned home this Christmas mom said she felt the house was betraying them. She didn't like having to replace the walk and driveway, but its cracks brought more water to settle in the basement. The house's impractical design—a rare “split-foyer” from the 70s—smote my art-teacher parents when they were at an age to deal with the romantic error of having a basement near the coast.

More sky every time I return. Mom's paintings of flowers grow more perfect and Baroque, each part revealed by a light that doesn't exist in this world—light without directionality. The Magnolias are so good you could hang them where the tree had been with an information plaque and speaker describing its aroma.

I return grizzled from Iowa and shave my beard with the dead dog's razor plugged-in by spackled holes I punched a decade before. The holes my brother punched have been painted enough times that their outline is almost invisible. He taught me how to punch by punching me, but that's been painted too.

Though right-handed, I always punched better with my left, always swam with my left hand pulling strongest—parents say I was a beautiful in the water, whether I won or not. On land, I was all knees and elbows, bones growing too fast for the rest to fill in. Before meets, I shivered on the bench in speedo with the other children

I could never dive well, and whether I won or not was always dependent on whether I could catch up with the swimmers who reacted faster. All I cared about was being in the water—to hear the world as amniotic clicks: it didn't matter how I got there. The other swimmers didn't matter, and I would know if I'd won by the way I felt my body felt, whether my joints had come together.

Now I'm trimming my beard with the dead dog's razor and thinking about how mom used to wrestle with the terrier to cut his hair. He hated the clippers and snapped every chance he got. I knew when this was happening because I could hear my mom arguing with him outside the bathroom.

He made no noise: he'd been here before, and knew the sooner it was over, the longer he'd have until the next shave—his snaps were principled, a Sisyphian middle-finger a la Camus, and like Camus, he was a loveable rascal. Unlike Camus, he was neutered.

Sometimes, she would shave a patch clean to pink belly—his yelp the only indication of another agent in the bathroom her. She'd feel sorry, give him a bath and release him to a world of couches to dry himself, rugs to flop on like a fish—an ecstasy truer than any I've known since my own naked flight from bath time—baby of the family—siblings cheering like the end of a marathon.

His haircuts varied in style, depending on where she began, nicked and stopped: one paw with nails long like a flamenco guitarist, two paws socked in fur, sometimes all four so his dash across hardwood slid him into doors and we cheered him on, until he'd pant, stare and rage with one last surge of post-bath euphoria, his ecstasy desiccating.

### Dad scatters fish food

lifting his robe above his knees to step into the water, where he likes to be with his fish. Second day of Indian summer—high close to eighty. The fish are confused by the sprinkled food and hairy feet shuffling on the bottom of the pond—confused out of torpor for the second day.

I watch him stumble and almost fall, dropping part of his bathrobe in the fishpond. He has numbness in his feet, but this morning he feels the cold from his knees to his toes and is ready for more coffee. Fish nip his shins. He turns around, and I step behind the side of the house, wait for him to hoist himself out of the water with hands braced on one knee.

I turn the corner and he's urinating on the azaleas, so I wait again. To help while visiting, today I will use a chainsaw and sledgehammer to destroy the remaining foundation of the shed by the saltmarsh. It slowly rotted from floodwaters which rose higher and became more frequent every year every year. As a boy, I visited dad when he painted in his shed to tell him dinner was ready.

Or when I was really young, to sit with him and watch as he daubed brushes in turpentine, opening and closing the jar quickly—fumes mixing with the more-pleasantly caustic kerosene. There was a rug, saturated with dust and fumes, but the particle-board floor was still solid.

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What does the door of the shed sound like? There is a chain hanging from the spring near the top hinge that swings and taps when it opens and closes. What does the window facing the house show when you round the azaleas and start down the hill? Dad shuffles between work tables, looking for the right gray to mute phthalo-heavy snow on the roof of a boat, grounded. He's responding to Turner's painting "Steam Boat Off A Harbor's Mouth" with something showing

the same majesty of its pre-impressionistic maelstrom but with a boat at rest. The storm is in the boat.

Twice he rode his bicycle from his hometown of Manitowoc, Wisconsin to the cliffs of Oregon. The second time, he had dropped out of college—also for the second time—and when he finally called his parents, it was Father’s Day, and he was in North Dakota. He and his friends had a certain number of dollars in their pockets and each day he rode as he’d done the day before. When they had no more dollars in their pockets, they found some way to make more. The second trip was as easy as the first, its consequences equally light, until they got to the storms of Montana. When the first came, the group was still far from the Rockies and they saw the solid mass of clouds creep up from the horizon until they saw the solid curtain of rain. None of them said anything to each other, but shot glances as if playing chicken. Their glances said “Yeah I see it. You need to stop? Because we can stop if you need to stop. No, I’m fine. Are you fine? *You* need to stop. Only if you do, pal”, until none of them needed to say anything, all knowing how long they needed to get the tents up, and they only had that much time. They worked as a team before each collapsed inside their own tent and could hardly hear each other laughing and yelling above the rain pelting against nylon, wind bending the poles.

The next day, they started out after checking that nothing had been carried away—the morning humid but not yet hot. Then, not even halfway into the day’s ride, another wall of clouds. They passed through a small town when Claude, the strongest of the group—who could throw a frisbee so hard it whistled, and who later lost his mind and then his leg when he tried to “beat the train” as he had so many track competitors—said he felt sick and needed to stop. Claude ate like the rest of them—the key to each meal being the highest calory-to-cost ratio possible—whether that be chocolate bars, cheese curds, sticks of butter. But, unlike my dad and the other two, Claude didn’t have a nice Italian road bike for the trip or paniers to carry his gear. He prided himself on his heavy old Schwinn and wore a steel-frame backpack with his gear each 100-mile day.



They stopped at a gas station to stock up on processed sugars and animal fat, to ask about the rain and whether there was some shelter they could camp under. The young attendant rang them up clumsily, wondering how to make small talk with three long-hairs pouring snickers bars and beef jerky to the counter, a fourth bent double outside the store looking as though he was about to vomit or already had. From a distance, they may have looked rough, before smelling them and seeing their gauntness and that they rode bicycles rather than motorcycles. The attendant knew about an abandoned caboose outside of town where they could stay if they laid low.

They found the caboose with makeshift cots and scattered wrappers which they cleared and replaced with their own. The rain continued off and on for close to a week. They played cards. Their weed didn't last long. Eventually, there was nothing to do other than what they were specifically trying not to do—contemplate their futures. One found an old tab of acid in his pack and took it without telling the others. He wandered all day in the rain,

came back shivering to contemplate  
 rusted wheels of the train,  
 hearing their metallic shriek,  
 feeling rhizomes of railway in his gut.

When he confessed, crying with guilt, the others laughed and forgave him, happy they weren't tripping in a moldy train car somewhere in eastern Montana.

One evening, their rations running low and barely 10 bucks between them, dad walked out during a lull in the rain. Sunlight shined sideways into the windows of the caboose and he grabbed the drawing pad he'd been carrying across the country but hadn't cracked, except to keep score for card games. His dull pencil didn't allow much precision when he drew the caboose and the sharp relief of its shadows, and he stopped once or twice to despair about the unintentionally impressionistic doodle. He saw he didn't have much light left and grabbed a piece of charcoal from an abandoned fire that looked mostly dry, said *fuck it* and let the looseness of the smeared gestures guide him. By flashlight, while the others played cards and the rain fell steadily, he wrote his parents a

letter on the back of the drawing, explaining where he was, that Claude was sick but getting better and that he'd call when he got to Oregon. He didn't write that he missed home or was sorry. He didn't have to.

He returned to school, studied art education, married, had two daughters and moved to Maine. Then, his first wife left them while he was in the hospital. The snow on the boat he's painting is the snow of Maine, which melts and refreezes every day at the end of winter—every evening of which he melts and refreezes hamburger chowder to feed his daughters—when any reasonable part of the country would be thawed. When he couldn't do another winter in Maine, he remarried another art teacher after moving to Virginia to be closer to his siblings. He adopted his wife's son who had trouble in school helped make another son who is almost completely silent. The gray isn't right. He's an art teacher and spends his time teaching students how to hold their pallets or tell them not to turn the light on in the darkroom. Occasionally a few with real talent and he does everything he can to send them to the top art schools. The gray isn't right and he wants to swear and smear a glob of it across the entire boat, but he hears a light knock at the door of the shed.

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In winter, when it's dark by dinner, you know the path by feel. Shades of violet close to black outline the path around the fishpond. Everything is larger now than it will be when you write this. The path is longer. You kick what you hope is an oak gall, not dog shit.

By the azaleas, there is a spot where neither house nor shed lights reach you. Usually, you walk fast, but sometimes, you stay in the dark while magnetism rises in your gut: like lowering your hand into the quivering heat above a candle until it singes hair and rubs the skin of your wrist, and you run down the path, steadying your steps before the door.

Heat pours from the door that barely shuts. You smell kerosene, hear dad listen to The Talking Heads—the song David Byrne sings to a lamp when they

played it live, swinging the pendulum of it and his elastic body in time with the synth that bends down a half-step and back up. *I can't tell one from another. Did I find you or you find me? There was a time before we were born. If someone asks, this is where I'll be. Where I'll...*

I start the chainsaw and rev it, hold it in one hand to make an Instagram video with the other, eager for any opportunity to appear burly if my ex wants to know what I'm up to. I make quick work with the saw and decide to test my shoulder with the sledgehammer. The particleboard is so rotted, it's hard not to make a mess.

Each year, the storm surge crept higher. Nights before hurricanes, we kept watch on the backyard with flashlights as the black water crept up the hill. The dark, reflective surface negated land. In front of the beams of our flashlights, rain reflected light back at us, not slow enough to be perceived as discreet drops, not fast enough to blur into streaks of light. *Something in between.*

## **We transport camelias**

where they'll have more room to flourish.

We dig close to where the elm had been, but its roots still weave densely beneath the surface; the birch is there too, and a tree I can't remember. The tangled network fades and leaves tunnels for new trees to spread into, but sometimes an old tree will survive for years just in its roots, like soldiers who never hear the war has ended and are found living in their bunker years later.

Grandpa slowly folds to grab magnolia pods and throw them into a pile. The way he throws, with quick underhand flicks is a vestige of efficiency, the way one throws scraps at a worksite with a stoic swagger—afternoon lengthening, the hard work won. The first time mom saw him she said gently *Thanks dad, but you don't have to worry about that, why don't you sit? I made you some tea.* The glass sits forgotten in a ring of condensation, its ice cubes the size of rice, briefly... now gone. He agrees, but soon after she turns around, he's back at it.

This repeats a couple times before she says *That old goat*, then to him *Dad if you keep bending over like that, you're gonna fall and hit your noggin*, to which he laughs and begins kicking the pods. Though his muscles have slackened, he is still strong, the same 6'1", 165 he was throughout his life and straight as a popsicle stick. The pods bother him, and that's all there is to it, so mom grabs a bucket for him to use.

As fixated as I am on decay, I want mom to paint a watercolor that doesn't show the plant at its peak: a deconstruction, with some parts young, some old, and some in pieces, or a painting she simply abandons halfway, with areas of one leaf or petal colored and others a scaffold of veins and fiber.

Mom has to leave to show a house and asks if I can finish, then get grandpa inside. I widen the edges of the last hole enough for the root-ball, and when I look up grandpa has wandered off. Because this has happened many times, I'm less afraid he'll get far than I am of the confrontation to bring him back, sadder about the fact I can't let him wander. When I catch up to him on the street a few houses down, I tell him we need to go back. *No*, he says without looking at me or breaking his stride. A switch in him has turned. I step in front of his path and ask *Where do you want to go, grandpa?* He stops and points to the bend in the street with a strained look *There's a train out there, and I have to get to it. Find it. I have to find it. They're leaving.* As if in this moment, certain memories connect, he remembers how this has happened before, the same tall teenager asking questions, the street, a train he can all but hear, stuck, and there's anger in his voice.

I walk beside him and talk about the train. I say I know about it and know when it will return. *We won't make this one, grandpa, but the next one will be here soon.* He stops again and faces me. *Ahhh... it's not... it's... shit. I gotta catch this one.* It's not usually this hard. I tell him if we drive, we might catch it, which softens his resolve. On the way back, I make conversation about the cars we pass on the street, hoping he'll forget. We pass my old Volvo and I mention it as if it were someone else's, and when we get to the driveway, and both my parents' cars—the cars he recognizes best—are missing, he pauses. I know he remembers, so I say *I think my mom, Lynne, is at work, but when she gets back, she can drive you. Let's wait inside.*

**At twenty-one, mom envisioned a shack**

to live with her art supplies on the Currituck sound: only the Outer Banks of North Carolina separating her from the Atlantic and hurricanes. She was moving to North Carolina to teach printmaking at a rural high school—her first job out of college. She knew nothing about printmaking, but after the one-eyed principal talked at her for two hours about everything in the world but printmaking, so she felt relieved and simply said *I'll take the job.*

She packed clothes, art supplies and an emaciated cat named Casper into a junked '61 Biscayne her dad revived. There had been and would be an endless string of these beaters fixed by Randy and run back into the ground by her and her siblings. All the windows that roll down are rolled-down.

*Drive like you're visiting Douglas' farm,* her father explained to her, tracing a map with his finger into the dust on his workbench, *take that road farther than I've ever taken you kids, then keep taking it.* He winked, and she hugged him tightly, to which he patted her twice on the back with the hand not steadied on the workbench. *I'll call as soon as I get to the house.* He put his large hand on her shoulder before she exited the woodshop. *Ok, Lynne.*

As the shipyards of Norfolk transitioned to cypress swamps and peanut fields, she liked the thought of her car whittling an intaglio on the map inside her, that life is an engraving, something which needs to be scratched and carved into a medium. If she stayed in Norfolk, the image her path would show when its lines were filled with ink and pressed onto paper would be one of a termite or ant's gnawing on a few square inches. She drove and felt like she was dancing, drawing a broad, bright stroke across the canvas of her life.

She passed the turn for uncle Douglas' farm. As a girl, her dad brought them to visit the old Munden farm. The best times were in summer when they'd each be given a basket and shown a strawberry of market size by their uncle: *pick*

*any strawberries smaller than this, as many as you can... you're doing me a favor.* The three of them would wander out into the field while her dad stayed with Douglas at the edge of the patch, talking in a drawl she imagined worms might hear better than human children.

The home mom rented in Currituck wasn't on the water as she'd envisioned, but it was, at least, a shack—owned by a fisherwoman who brought back stories from the Sound and sometimes bass. The woman was kind and charged almost nothing for rent, herself living in a marginally nicer shack near the road. Likely, she wouldn't have cared if mom didn't pay at all, and she let a few down-and-out fishermen live for free in a trailer that had been left on the lot before she owned it.

The men never bothered mom, who was beautiful and alone, nor interacted with her at all. But at night, she smelled the cloying perfume of malt-liquor coming from their trailer and heard them mumble to each other between spits of chew that slapped the bare dirt around their trailer. Mostly, she wasn't afraid of the men, who the fisherwoman vouched for, but none of the doors of her shack locked. She slept fitfully until the exhaustion of teaching caught up with her and, to be safe, she loosened the door hinges so their rattle would wake her if someone intruded.

It was a sufficiently bohemian life for a while. Art classes in high schools, particularly poor schools, are typically regarded as some combination of recess, detention and therapy, so mom's lack of printmaking skills went unnoticed. In the first few weeks, she arrived early each day with a lesson plan that involved staying one step ahead of the students. And during this time, she learned a great deal about the medium. Some days, during morning announcements, the one-eyed principle sang Elvis over the intercom, and she soon lapsed in her self-training.

A couple things happened for mom to realize there was no reason to halt her southern exploration in Currituck. She was once called to the office where a group of FBI asked if she was Lynne Rose Munden and then proceeded to read my black haired mother in her ink-stained apron the Miranda Rights. In a creative leap, mom had devised a way to get her students interested in printmaking by

printing money. She figured it would be harmless if she printed bills in black and white and only on one side. As it happened, gas stations throughout Currituck and neighboring counties were inundated with the counterfeits, which were good enough for a new set of pumps that accepted cash. That the FBI asked her name was strictly pageantry, as she'd given the one final creative touch by replacing Lincoln's face with her own. She cried and tried to explain, but the FBI already understood mom wasn't leading a coup in rural North Carolina. So they asked her to please never counterfeit again and filled out the paperwork.

One night not soon after, a strong thunderstorm blew through the area. It was late in the school year and mom was uncertain whether she should convince the school to forget the counterfeiting incident and have her for the next year. She sat on the porch and listened as the thunder grew more distinct. The humid air cooled and made the fishermen's mumblings clearer. They spat their chew and cussed and it seemed like when they spat, the air responded in kind, blowing a gust of heavy drops that slapped the ground which was exceptionally dry for May.

There was a large pecan, which shaded her house and gusts blew its still-maturing nuts against the wood siding. She missed her parents and the way they came together to enjoy each other's company—a rarity—when it was fall and pecans littered the ground and her father opened them easily with his hands. Her mother would bake pies. On the warm days of fall she ran barefoot through the yard and sometimes a jagged shell dug into the soft skin of her foot. It stung but never cut, unlike the broken bottle she did once step on playing in the ditch by their house.

A small hurricane brushed the coast, bringing flooding but little wind and she splashed with her siblings in the storm water, pretending the wake of passing cars were beach-waves. All her life she felt that in her father's silence and lack of reactivity, his core was somehow closer to the surface than her mother's, who was always reacting and could befriend a cashier in the time it took them to ring up a few items. Grandpa took her to the hospital to get stitches and kept his hand on her knee as she cried. When they got to the doctor, he turned to her and said calmly *it'll get better before you get married.*



She'd had boyfriends visit her in Currituck, but none ever felt like sticking around. The crackling dimensions of thunder grew distinct and she shuttered the windows and doors. Though exhausted, she tightened the hinges of the front door and slept so deeply that she heard none of the hail, thunder, or clattering of pecans. When she woke with no traces of dreams, life felt utterly possible, here or wherever. Then she heard a mumble she recognized, closer than she'd heard before. She laid still in soft morning light. Then a throat scoured its phlegm, and clearer:

*Mizz Munden, you alright in there?* She threw on her robe and went to the living room where every window and door was wide open, the rug near the front door in a puddle. She walked over the wet rug to the door and saw one of the fishermen standing outside scratching his scalp with the brim of his cap. When he saw her, he cleared his mouth of the slurry that had collected while waiting and mumbled again *you alright in there? Saw your windows and front door wide open. Figured I come see you made out ok. Some damn storm.*

*Yea, I... I guess I slept through all of it. I didn't hear,* she raised her hands to gesture to the open windows and the yard littered with sticks. *I didn't hear any of this. Y'all okay, and the trailer?*

He spit again and kicked wet dirt over the embarrassing glob. He put his hat back on, squinted across the field and shrugged. *Yea, doin' fine.* Then he pointed above to the pecan tree. *Gonna have to do something about that pretty damn soon. Doesn't look like it's holdin' by more than a pinky.* She tiptoed into the yard where she could see a major limb, thick as the trunk of a younger tree dangling directly over her bedroom, held by a joint maybe an inch thick. Its swaying sounded like a meow.

One loud HA leapt out of her, then a pause, before she started laughing. Then she couldn't control her laughter and had to brace with her hands on her knees. She put her hands over her mouth and when the man asked *what's that danglin over, your bedroom?* she could only nod her head.

*Well shit,* the man said and began to laugh with her.

She packed her things almost immediately, and as soon as the school year ended, she drove to the outer banks, where she lived in another shack near the beach and waited tables at a seafood restaurant. She made sculptures from beach-debris, and swam in the ocean. Backstroke on the way out, so he didn't know how far she'd gone until she rolled-over.



There was some rift between them my mother alludes to, but has never explained, and they slept in separates beds for as long as I knew them.

Somewhere—*she* (a swarm

of embers:

the fire

off-screen

as a dream

seen in periphery—

look to see who's speaking

but something like magnetism

halts your gaze from where you try,

like magnetism, to look—but not like a scratched cd

or faulty code) *is here somewhere*, although the water between him and her—*who never took anesthetic for root canals and refused the clouds of methadone until she could barely speak—sitting in her chair with an eyepatch and wincing only when no one looked but still joking with the hospice nurse about that Bush clown*—is too turbulent to see through. Not a faulty piece of code, which corrupts an image entirely. She is beneath the murk, but her voice—*heard through the wall in the cold bathroom outside his workshop that had no bulb*—spins and quivers like ash above a fire he can't see but can feel warmth from.

He gets out of his wife's chair, searching for the source of what feels like heat... or cold, he's never sure these days. *Coming or going?* If he is warm, some part of the house must be cold. It's physics. He opens the door of the room, hot as an oven or a hive to the colder hallway, looking for some window to be shut, some draft to be stuffed with a rag. *Is she warm or cold?*

Upstairs, the clock he built is almost level, but anything less than perfect and the swing is lopsided. And even if it were perfectly level, heat will be lost through the gears. Heat and time.