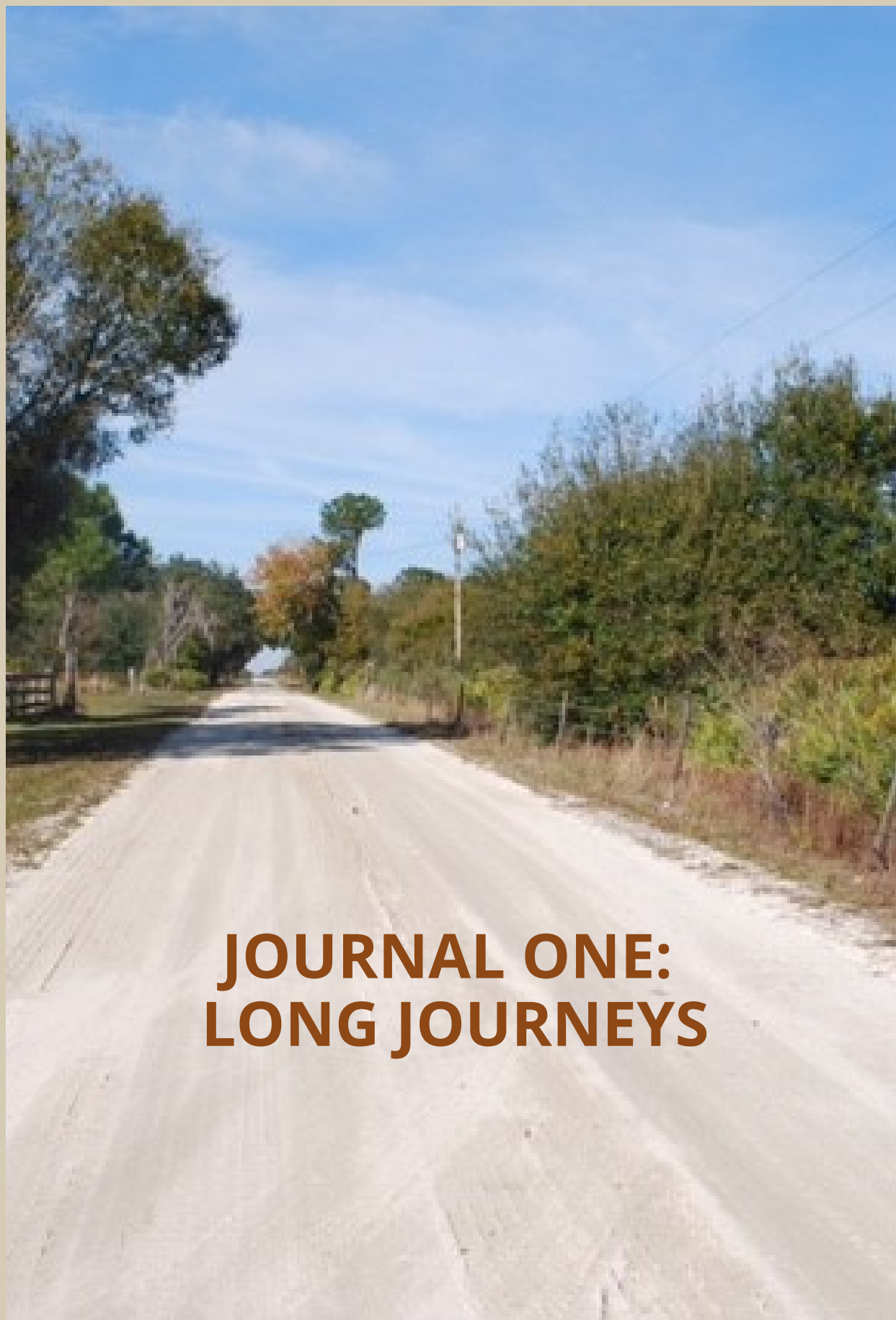


MULESKINNER JOURNAL

Long Journeys



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

- 01 SM STUBBS, SOMETHING LIKE A LOVE POEM
- 02 ANDRE F. PELTIER, WYATT EARP IN OUTER SPACE
- 03 BOB KING, EVERYTHING WE'VE TAKEN THE RTIME TO LEARN
- 04 CHRISTINA HOLBROOK, THE SHOWER ROOM
- 05 ROCHELLE NEWMAN-CARRASCO, THE PRICE OF AIR
- 06 MICHAEL LODERSTEDT, CALLING MY STEPMOTHER
- 07 IAN DEMSKY, THE GOOD KNIFE
- 08 MELISSA GREENWOOD, A LASTING LOVE
- 09 GARY CAMPANELLA, EDGEWATER
- 10 GARY CAMPANELLA, LQA CHARM
- 11 JOHN ROMAGNA, HUMANS SHOULD FLY
- 12 JOHN ROMAGNA, NOT LIKE A BEETHOVEN SYMPHONY
- 13 PETER ANDREWS, FUSED QUARTZ
- 14 TOM PHALEN, IN THE BEGINNING WAS THE WORD
- 15 JEREMY PROEHL, FROST SMOKE





SM STUBBS

SOMETHING LIKE A LOVE POEM

In the balcony at Housing Works Bookstore
a woman wearing a Harley jacket helps
a photographer fill out papers for a grant.
His English isn't great so she's explaining each
line on the forms. She says to him,
"When describing your work remember:
this isn't just a photo of a road—," then car horns
on Crosby drown out what else it is. She grazes
his forearm, touches her hair, flirting.

Years ago, I too sat here hoping to fall in love.
I'd sip lattes while my heart cast spells
on the beautiful people browsing the shelves.
I tried pretending to need a book near their seat
then waited for sparks to arc between us.
I found tomes on witchcraft, wondered
if they could help. At some point
doesn't everyone consider magic to solve
the problem of romance? Potions, prayers or hex
bags,
whatever fills the lonely hollow beside you.

Something always goes wrong though, that's what
books teach us, that we can never use magic
to conjure a love that's true because love
is its own mercy. When our time comes,
it conjures us, pairs us off ache to ache,
echo to echo until we recognize ourselves in it.

The Harley woman says to the man, "Your work
must seduce the heart as much as the eye. Try
to think of photographs as portals to places
the viewer hasn't been, places where
the most extraordinary things happen." They laugh.
He nods, holds a hand over his mouth, blushes.



ANDRE F. PELTIER

WYATT EARP IN OUTER SPACE

Cracking skulls
in Dodge City, in Wichita,
on the great buffalo hunts,
Wyatt Earp had a dream.
While dealing cards
and pimping whores
in those back-water cow-towns,
Wyatt Earp had a dream.
He would lie in the tall grass
under the stars
of the Great Plains and wonder.
"How does one
make his fortune?" he asked.
"How can we strike gold
and make it count?"
He loved his brothers,
his family, his dentist,
but more so he loved his
money.
"Maybe we should mosey south;
we could book passage
and land in the land
of silver and the holy saguaro."
Wyatt Earp stared at those stars
and considered the moon.
The last great frontier.
"The moon could use a Marshall,"
he thought.
"The moon could use some
law and order."
Only getting there was the problem.

Virg had been a lawman
in California,
and he fought in the War
Between the States.
Virg had an idea.
Wyatt knew adventure
was out there,
even for a poor pimp with
bad teeth.

"Get some rope," said Virg.
And so Wyatt roped the moon.
He climbed and climbed
and climbed.
There are no saguaro
in the Sea of Tranquility.
There's no silver
in Montes Agricola.
But Wyatt found riches
of the mind.
He slept in the shadows of
Mons Esam,
a dreamless sleep:
contented,
at peace.



BOB KING

EVERYTHING WE'VE TAKEN THE TIME TO LEARN, WE EVENTUALLY FORGET

The scientific theories, universal equations,
recipes, driving directions, sports statistics,
and I've never been good with names anyway.
The brand of chocolate you prefer, the exact
amount of feathery pressure you enjoy from
my body part to your body part. Or foreign
vocabulary hastily scribbled on now-well-worn
index cards, and dead white dudes who wrote
XYZ and in which order; geologic time stamps,
thousands of song lyrics and opening piano notes,
gods and generals and criminals and heroes,
as if any of us can be one-word defined. And
what're the names of that new young couple
who bought the Smith's house down the block?
The neighborhood's really turning over. And
"i" before "e" except after "c," birthdays
and anniversaries, and what you came into this
room in the first place for because your glasses
are atop your head and you're holding your
phone; no, I haven't seen your keys, but breathe,
and did you unplug the iron before you left?
Did you lock the back door? Why did you start
with him in the first place? Why you left.
Why you forgave. What you chose not to.
That the plot is one-part events, two-parts
the why they happened. Cynicism and
sarcasm and inside jokes and superstitions
and little stitions and Jeopardy categories
of all your so-called expert areas. All gone.
Gonzo. Sayonara. How to login, remember,
think, walk, act, lie, dream, distill water,
start a fire, fight germs, hide, hunt, eat, breathe.
Poof, like slowly, sweetly sifted powdered
sugar atop Grandma's Famous French Toast.
In neat little dust piles congealed in butter pools.
As if dry yet misty fallen constellations. Star
charts of everything you once knew that no
member of any genus or species will ever

remember exactly as you did. If you're lucky, those preserved ashy clumps will remain on the floor of the satin-lined box in the dirt near the crabapple with the pair of Northern Cardinals over on the back hill of the cemetery boundary, and after your last grandkid kicks, no one will ever visit again, grave marker or not. Yes, in less than 26,000 days—25,000, 24,000, 23,000, 22, 21, 20, 19—tick tick tick—you'll have no more days. And likely 75 years after that, no one will remember your days or name or the small philosophical wars your privilege allows you to wage, like your irritation at your species' inability to park neatly between the lines in the grocery store lot. But this doesn't mean you don't allow yourself to wonder. To wonder and to soak up wonder, those little moments that leave your jaw hanging slack like some dumb ape because suddenly you almost can't stand the beauty from thank-god-another sunrise. This is going to be a good day. You'll make present tense present. You'll slow down. For now, you'll slow down and stay right here because the meaning is inside the process. It always has been.



CHRISTINA HOLBROOK

THE SHOWER ROOM

The thick, spongy loaner bathing suit. It felt like it had been worn by at least a hundred women before her. And today, showing up for class in this lumpy relic had filled Marie with anxiety that she somehow stuck out as hopelessly dorky and pathetic. She couldn't wait to take a shower and get her clothes on again. Who in the world would arrive to a swim class without her own bathing suit? What had she been thinking?

When Marie had stumbled out of her freshman dorm room at the college, half asleep at 7:45 a.m., heading to Beginning French, she'd actually not been thinking about swim class at all.

Earlier that morning, the sound of groaning had awakened her as she lay in the dark, in the tiny unfamiliar room. She'd tried to orient herself to the tight space jammed with two beds, dressers, desks, and bookshelves. In the opposite bed, a mound of covers had heaved as somewhere beneath it a creature—her roommate, Fiona—tossed and turned.

Perilously close to sliding into the pit of homesickness, Marie had thrown off her quilt, pulled on sweat pants and a t-shirt, and gone down to breakfast. She'd secretly feared whatever unhappiness Fiona's mournful sighs expressed might suck her in, too. When she'd gone back up to get ready for class, both the lump in the opposite bed, and her roommate, were gone.

All morning Marie had been thinking about taking a nap. She'd forgotten about Introductory Lap Swim, so she had ended up being unprepared and looking foolish. Now, class over, she heaved herself up out of the frigid water and onto the pool edge, her baggy, one-piece suit catching and pulling against the concrete. The suit had been borrowed at the gym check-in. She needed a bathing suit of her own! But that would require walking into town to buy one.

She shuffled across the pool area towards the lockers, a thin white towel partially hiding the ill-fitting garment. Her eyes were stinging from the chlorine and her mass of dark, curly hair felt as stiff as hay. She really needed that shower.

A steamy warmth enveloped her in the shower room, a space that was pleasingly simple and unadorned. This was a women's college, so there was only one shower room—for women. Marie's shoulders relaxed after being hunched up around her neck. She and the eight other students had just spent the past hour swimming laps and then standing around in the freezing-cold pool, listening to their instructor.

The stalls near the shower room entrance were missing shower curtains. Marie scanned the entire room for a stall she could use and realized that no curtains hung in front of any of the stalls. How had she not noticed this on her way to the pool at the beginning of class?

Another girl, a freshman like her but wearing her own sleek, black bathing suit, followed her in.

Marie recognized the girl—Cecilia—from her dorm. Then three more girls joined them. They all looked at the open stalls and then at one another.

Cecilia muttered out loud what they all were asking themselves: “How do they think we’re supposed to take showers?”

Uncertain—and therefore annoyed—the girls filed through to the dressing room and the individual lockers where each had stored her clothes. No one showered. Each girl found a corner of the dressing room and turned her back to the others.

Marie peeled off the bathing suit, her body hunched, then shoved her legs and arms into her baggy green army pants, sweatshirt, jean jacket. She buckled on her flat-heeled ankle boots.

Intentionally, if somewhat self-consciously, she had started dressing to show the world who she wanted to be: An artist. Or at least, some kind of rebellious person who rejected tight-fitting clothes women were supposed to wear specifically to appeal to men. But with her dark hair wild and straw-like, she was pretty sure she looked more like a witch.

Alone, she returned her wet suit and exited the gym.

Three days later, Marie was back at the pool and mentally prepared this time for the dowdy loaner bathing suit. Classes, homework, freshman meetings, and getting lost while following the meandering campus pathways had left her no extra time to purchase a suit of her own. On top of all those excuses, the prospect of viewing her reflection in a dressing-room mirror—pale flesh jammed into a thin, revealing nylon swimsuit—had not exactly put her in the mood to shop.

It had never occurred to her to pack a suit in her college trunk. But then, during the week of orientation before classes began, she’d scanned the options for mandatory freshman Phys-Ed. Introductory Lap Swim seemed the only choice that didn’t involve hitting things or smashing into anyone. Team sports were out. Marie’s high school exposure to the win-or-lose ferocity of contact sports had convinced her for all time that she was not a team player.

She could, on the other hand, imagine herself swimming, face down in the long blue lap lane, in water as cold and quiet as outer space. Weightlessly cutting through the liquid silence, she could mull over her own thoughts, uninterrupted by someone in cleats trying to run her down and kill her with a field hockey stick or knock her over the head with a volleyball.

Now as she walked through the shower room towards the pool, she averted her gaze from the girl who stood in one of the curtainless stalls, naked under a hot shower. The girl was just standing there, showering. Completely exposed! Though she’d barely glanced at her, Marie was almost certain the girl was Cecilia.

Tall, and with the erect posture of a dancer, or a police sergeant, Cecilia came across as very sure

of herself. With envy, Marie had observed her dashing off assignments during lunch for the Philosophy course they shared—literally a minute before class. The professor had returned Cecilia’s first assignment with a big A+ scrawled across the top in red, while Marie, who had labored over hers, had earned only a B. Cecilia also had her own car, a sign to Marie of her greater, adult-like independence.

And now, Cecilia nonchalantly showered with no curtain around her for privacy.

Marie walked out to the pool, sat down on the edge, and tested the cold water with her feet. The instructor had outlined her expectations during their first class as she’d strode around the pool with long, tanned legs that suggested days filled with nothing but swimming laps, in an outdoor pool, say, in sunny Florida. Not one inside a chilly gym in Massachusetts. Seventy-two laps—more than a mile!—three times a week, she’d announced, with a goal of completing the laps in under forty-five minutes.

Marie had scowled and her teeth had chattered. She had to be kidding, right?

Weekly laps could be accomplished under the “Honor Code,” the instructor had continued, meaning that students could swim on their own, any time during the week, and keep track of their own results. But she did not, apparently, trust her students’ “honor” entirely: They would have to clock in and out at the front desk of the gym, and the instructor would be checking the timesheets.

The instructor had not been kidding.

How was she going to do this?

Today, Marie had to admit she liked it here, in the big, open, blue-gray-white space. The enormity of it, the absence of people talking, the feeling that she could think her own thoughts without interruption. It reminded her of a museum or a church—which was weird because the pool was obviously not at all like the Catholic church her family attended.

Even the smell of chlorine in the warm, humid air soothed her. Strange. The view of trees outside caught her eye, too. Fall leaves changing to gold and scarlet fluttered outside the bank of picture-windows set high above the churning blue water, and they drifted in the air carried by a breeze. It was so ... unhurried. Gentle. She eased off the rough ledge and began swimming, back and forth, across the twenty-five meter pool.

One, two. Three, four.

How was it, Marie brooded, that this other girl—Cecilia—could just stand there, stark naked, in the open shower room? She felt defensive and critical—it was not something she would ever do. From her brief, embarrassed glance, she had observed that Cecilia was neither thin nor fat. It wasn’t like she had some amazing body to show off, like she was a model or anything. She was just...herself. Naked. Taking a shower.

The word DANGER in big neon-red capital letters lit up inside Marie's brain. Didn't Cecilia feel awfully... vulnerable?

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Marie was too fat. "Thunder Thighs," a group of unkind girls in high school had nicknamed her. No way had their family doctor been right when he'd informed Marie that, to the contrary, her weight fell in the "average" range for her age and height. Despite her haphazard attempts to get into a routine of sit-ups, her belly felt soft. She hated how embarrassing her nipples looked to her—too big. And her breasts didn't stand up the way she assumed they were supposed to, but hung softly on her chest. Her body looked and felt all wrong.

Lap thirteen, fourteen.

She would never even consider saying out loud that she didn't like her body. That would sound prudish and anti-feminist. But now, in the safe embrace of the pool, swimming back and forth, something inside Marie relaxed. She breathed deeply, evenly, one stroke after the next stroke after the next. It felt okay to admit to herself that her body made her uncertain. Scared. Sometimes her own body seemed like a thing apart, a thing she had a hard time owning. Her eyes stung with underwater tears. If she were honest, sometimes her body felt like an alien being she was at war with.

Twenty-five, twenty-six.

She kicked off from the pool's edge, and propelled herself into her next lap with an unexpected surge of anger. Too many other people seemed to think they had some claim to her body!

Her mother had regularly worked herself into near hysterics ever since Marie had gotten her first period, at twelve. Before that, Marie had moved about her child's world freely, like a wild animal. Girls and boys had all run around together playing in the neighborhood. Then suddenly, Marie's body had turned into a ticking time bomb! Those same boys, or so her mother insisted, "just wanted one thing." They were intent on detonating her like an explosive!

Marie had resented that she had to be on guard, now, in a way her brothers did not. By ten o'clock at night her parents expected her to be home, while her brothers had no curfew. The boys lived as they always had, while she had become a prisoner-of-war under her parents' constant surveillance, threatened with getting thrown out of the house should she allow her body to misbehave in some reckless and careless way.

Marie gasped for breath. Why couldn't her parents see that their fear and lack of trust in her had just made her angry and confused—and uncertain if she could trust herself?

Forty-seven, forty-eight.

That was it. Forty-eight laps were all Marie could swim today.

She grasped the side of the pool, puffing, trying to catch her breath. Her instructor with the long, Florida legs strolled into the pool area and straight over to Marie. She leaned down to talk.

"It's Marie, right? You've got a good, strong kick, Marie!"

Marie had not expected the praise. She smiled like a goofy little kid.

"When you take a stroke, try not to lift your head up out of the water. Think about making a rotating motion with your chest, from left to right, and just allow your head to turn naturally for a breath with each stroke. And don't forget: Raise each arm up from the elbow."

Marie nearly swaggered into the shower room. She stood up taller. She hadn't thought that anything about the way she lumbered through the water was right, but her instructor's comment that she had "a good, strong kick" had given her a burst of self-confidence. Her thighs weren't "big" or "fat"; they were strong.

She stood for a moment enjoying the thick steam cocooning her. She ran her fingers up one of the smooth, light-brown tiled walls. She pressed her feet down and spread her toes against the warm tile floor. The warmth felt like acceptance. Should she take a shower?

But ... like hypervigilant parents, her feet began moving her past the showers to the secluded safety of the furthest corner of the locker room.

Friday afternoon, she set off from the campus and walked into town. In a sporting goods store, a Speedo suit with a purple tie-dye design fit perfectly. On Saturday, clutching her new suit, swim cap, and goggles—and with the instructor's suggestions in mind—she returned to the pool.

She'd approach the class like a real swimmer. She dove in.

Lap one, two.

Churning through the vast, silent blue of the pool, her mind slipped back to her junior year in high school. Her boyfriend, Jordan, then a senior, had been obsessed with having sex. He'd badgered her endlessly with "When are we going to do it?" and they'd spent hours making out in his car. Jordan would try to get his hands between her legs, while Marie, aroused and horny,

the crotch of her jeans wet, would burn with frustration at her body's unruly desires—and at her boyfriend for pushing and trying to direct everything. He never gave her a chance to figure out what she wanted.

They'd end up exhausted, disappointed, and angry at each other. She'd be relieved to get away from him and back to the safety of her house. Why was it that her body, too, seemed to have its own agenda, and was at war with her mind?

Nineteen, twenty.

Marie realized she felt more at ease in the water now, like she had a right to be here, swimming. Rolling from side to side, turning her head from right to left, lifting from the elbows as her instructor had suggested worked! With her improved form Marie's speed increased, her strokes pulling her through the water as fast as the girl in the adjacent lane. Faster, even.

Thirty-three, thirty-four.

It pissed her off that she was supposed to listen to, and take into account, everyone else's opinions about how her body looked, and what she should and shouldn't do with it. In the end, the only strategy Marie had been able to come up with to fend off her parents' oppressive fear and control—as well as the unfair and untrue accusation by Jordan that she was a “cock tease”—had been to separate herself from the object of everyone's relentless fixation. To make an enemy of her own body.

Fifty-five, fifty-six.

She wished she wasn't divided into so many pieces. There was her brain that seemed to be on constant high alert, especially in this new place. And then there was her unpredictable body, driven by its own impulses.

Sixty-seven, sixty-eight.

Who was she, and who did she want to become? These questions came from her heart. The most hidden and unknown of all the pieces. She didn't want to be broken like this, cutting herself on her own sharp edges. She wanted to be one smooth, whole person.

Seventy-one ... Seventy-two!

Marie stood at the shallow end of the pool, breathless, smiling. She'd done it! Seventy-two laps! Over a mile! Okay, she'd been swimming for more than an hour, but so what? She'd done it.

In the shower room, Marie saw two girls, each in her own curtainless stall, standing naked under the hot water. Soaping up, washing her hair. Marie paused and stood still in the warm safety of the tiled space, trying not to look at them. Trying to name the feelings that rose up

inside, choking her. Ultimately, she landed on: ashamed and afraid. How did those girls feel comfortable enough to expose themselves like that?

Were they that different from her?

Earlier that day, on her way across campus, Marie had heard an unbelievably awful noise that turned out to be her roommate Fiona playing bagpipes on the Green. Fiona had turned bright red when Marie walked up to her. "It's pretty loud, right?" she'd admitted, abashed and apologetic.

"No! I mean, well yes, it's pretty loud," Marie had said, "but ... it's so different, too. I think it's cool that you play bagpipes."

Later, in the cafeteria, she'd found herself at the same lunch table as Cecilia. As they'd talked, she learned how hard Cecilia worked to live up to the expectations of her famous parents, both actors on TV. "You're so confident, Marie," Cecilia had sighed. "Like, how you dress—just the way you please. You never act as if you're trying to impress anyone."

Marie had not considered that her baggy wardrobe—partly a statement, but also, she had to admit, partly a disguise—might come across to anyone as a sign of self-confidence. To say the least.

Maybe they all felt nervous and insecure, each in her own way.

Now in the shower room, despite the triumph of her seventy-two laps, she hesitated. Then, she walked with determination into a curtainless stall. Still wearing her bathing suit, she turned on the hot water and felt the muscles of her body relax under the pounding heat. But this was stupid, showering with clothes on. Was anyone really looking at her? Passing judgment on her? And if they were, did it matter to her now, the way it might have when Marie was younger and surrounded by the cliques and popularity contests of high school?

Last spring, right before the end of high school, that younger version of Marie told her parents she was staying with a girlfriend but instead took a bus to visit Jordan for a long weekend at his college.

A smiling young woman named Debbie popped into the common room Jordan shared with his two college roommates, offering a plate of freshly baked chocolate-chip cookies. As she assessed Debbie's tight t-shirt and short shorts, Marie tried to hide her jealousy and instantaneous dislike. Debbie even asked if the young men had any laundry they wanted to add to the load she was just about to do!

Debbie was so pretty, and yet Marie could see her straining for their approval. Did trying to win guys' affection, she wondered, automatically make girls feel like they had to act like their mothers—or their maids?

That weekend, however, Marie had more important things on her mind than Debbie and her cookies: Whether or not she and Jordan were finally going to have sex. Nearing graduation, Marie was determined to lose her virginity. A Catholic school virgin! What a childish cliché.

There was no way she was arriving at college without having had sex at least once.

Saturday night, she and Jordan found themselves alone in the dorm suite while his roommates were out partying.

“Do you have condoms? Because I snuck a few, from my brother. In case.” In her nervousness, Marie tried to sound assertive. Prepared.

“I know what I’m doing, Marie,” he rebuffed her. He pulled a foil square from his wallet, then fumbled with the slippery, rubber tubing. He climbed on top of her and then ... she gasped from the sharp jab. A few struggling thrusts later, it was all over. Was that it? Was that what all the threats and arguments and drama had been about?

“For future reference? Being so pushy... it’s kind of a turn-off,” Jordan grumbled before turning his back on her. “I don’t care what all the ‘feminists’ say.” He fell asleep, leaving Marie to feel irredeemably unattractive—and sad. So, this is what it was like, then, between grown-up women and men.

Sunday morning, she overheard Jordan laughing with other guys in the common room: “Oh Jesus! That’s so sick!” one of them snorted. Something about their tone—like the high-pitched, squeamish laughter of little boys torturing some small animal—summoned a sense of dread inside Marie.

When Jordan returned to the bedroom where she was getting dressed, Marie asked, “What? What were you all laughing about out there?”

Jordan looked embarrassed. Like he didn’t want to say.

“WHAT?”

“About Debbie, if it’s so important for you to know. There was a party at Sigma Chi. People are saying she drank too much, got wasted ...” Jordan turned all serious and distant. “Then ... I guess she disappeared into one of the frat bedrooms. Let a bunch of guys have sex with her.”

“Disappeared into a bedroom? Let a bunch of guys have sex with her?” That sounds like rape, Jordan. Like your friends raped the cookie girl, who does your laundry for you!” Stiff with shock, Marie sat down on the rumpled quilt, on the verge of being sick.

She couldn’t help imagining pretty Debbie’s injured, used body. A body that was, after all, like hers. Maybe Debbie had believed she and the guys at the party were all buddies. But in the

end, she'd been nothing more to them than that empty plate of cookies: 'Here,' they might have just said. 'You can take this now. We're finished.'

"Where's Debbie now?" Marie asked. "Did anyone check to see if she's okay?"

"How should I know? I doubt she'll ever want to show her face in class again, after this."

"Are you serious, Jordan? It's your friends who should be ashamed. They should be kicked out of school! She should report those guys to the campus police."

"Keep it down, okay, Marie? Jesus Christ ... it was a party."

As she began to throw things into her suitcase her ears were ringing. She wanted to block Jordan out, as he made more excuses for his friends' behavior. On what planet was it okay for Jordan to pretend it was perfectly normal for multiple guys to have sex with one drunk girl because it was a party?

Jordan rolled his eyes, and spoke to her with his new, worldly college voice. The voice that came from a person she no longer knew. "Don't be so naive, Marie."

She stared at him, until he looked down at his feet.

"Should I walk you to the bus stop?" he asked, like he already knew the answer.

"Don't bother."

Lugging her suitcase, Marie marched past his surprised roommates and out the door as messy tears streamed down her face.

In the shower room, Marie peeled off her bathing suit and hung it over the tile dividing wall. The sense of vulnerability she felt was excruciating, her embarrassment dreadful.

DANGER!

She glanced across the room. One of the girls had gone and the other one was paying no attention to her. She took a deep breath, felt the warm water pounding on her, thrumming all over her body and calming her down. Smoothing her sharp edges.

In her real life, the one that started now, she could wash her parents' fears and demands and the immature pettiness of high school, right off of herself, watch all of it slip through her fingers, swirl between her toes, disappear down the drain.

In her new, real life, she would not allow her ex-boyfriend Jordan's callous view of the world to stifle or intimidate her. Down the drain with that, too! Let him try to feel better about himself by

calling her naïve. That just made him a coward.

The truth was, she'd decided to expect something more—something better—between herself and men, even if she couldn't yet imagine what that might be.

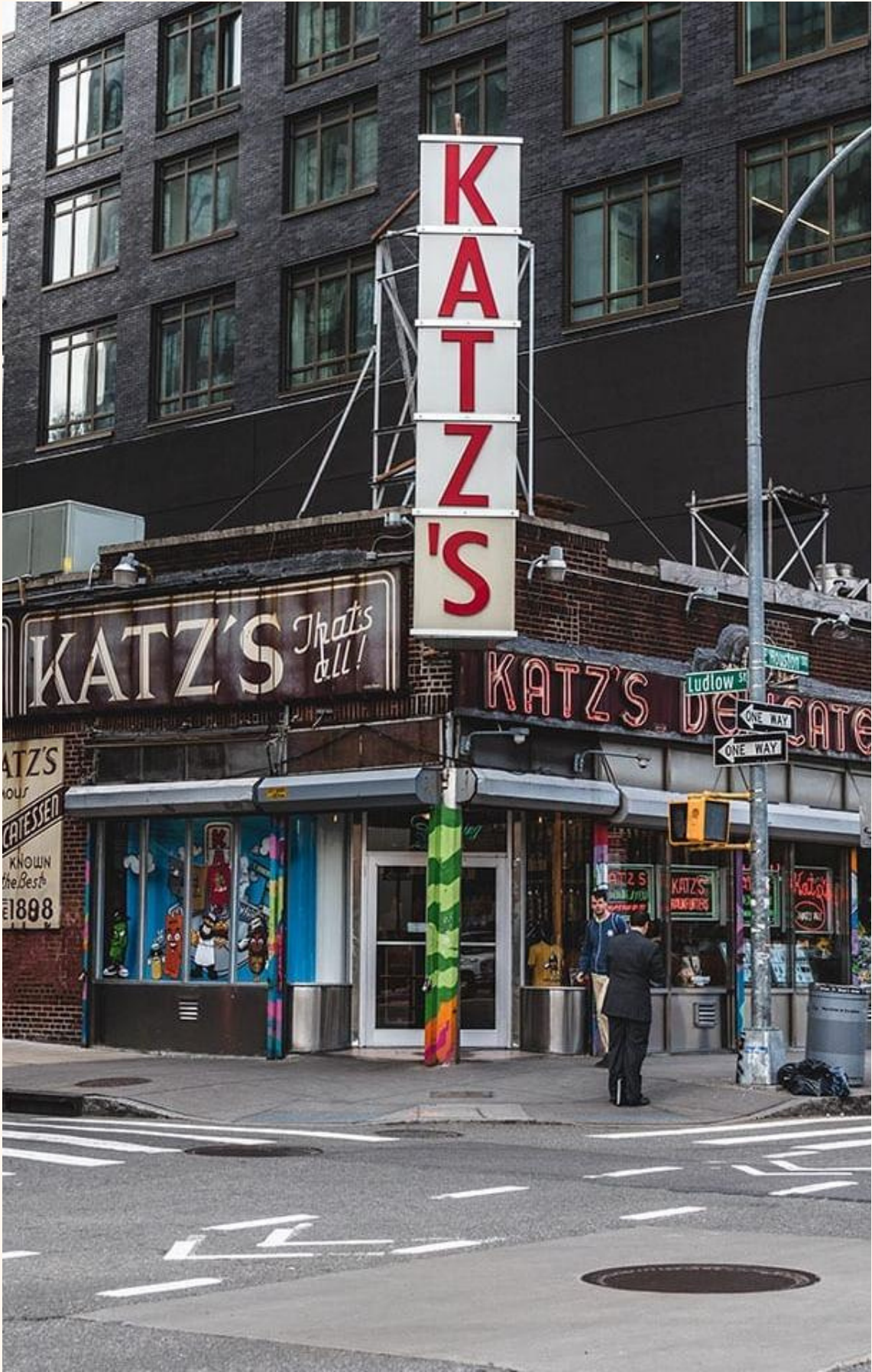
She lifted her hair and let the water rinse through it. She ran her hands down her body and felt a sense of tenderness for her soft breasts, her strong thighs. Silently, she apologized to her body for considering it too fat, or somehow wrong. Or dangerous or untrustworthy. Her body was her ally, not her enemy.

Marie was strong, after all. She had a body that could swim seventy-two laps! A body that held her heart and mind and belonged to her.

More girls came in. More taps turned on. Steam billowed all around them. Then one by one, the young women finished washing up, swiveled their taps to "off," wrapped their hair in towels. They walked around the shower room as if they were strolling across campus, at once unguarded and unassailable.

In this place—here, now—no one was obsessed with nakedness or frightened by their own vulnerability. Standing among the other women as she toweled her body dry, Marie understood that they were all the masters of their own legs and arms, faces, hands, and feet.

As if here, in the shower room, they'd found the way home to their bodies and to themselves.



ROCHELLE NEWMAN-CARRASCO

THE PRICE OF AIR

I was flying red-eye from Los Angeles to New York for business. Red-eye flights never bothered me and an early morning arrival would put me in New York on Labor Day. With no meetings until Tuesday, I would have a whole day to myself. I was born and raised on New York's Lower East Side. Although my family moved to Los Angeles when I was fourteen, the Lower East Side remained my answer to the question "where are you from?" This wasn't my first trip back to New York. I had been flying in and out of New York for several years, but my business trips were too short and too stressful to allow for any detours or sightseeing. Over time, the Lower East Side had become a remote corner of the city where I knew no one. Everyone I once knew had either moved or died. This would be my first trip back as a tourist.

With several hours left in the air, I started scanning my laptop to see if there was anything special going on downtown. I came upon a site called LowDown: News From the Lower East Side. A headline grabbed my attention. Breaking: Katz's Deli Sells Its Air Rights But It's Not Going Anywhere. There was also a picture of Katz's deli, a one-story building on the southeast corner of Houston and Ludlow where they have been serving pastrami for the past one hundred and twenty-six years.

The article said Katz's was staying put, but the idea of selling air rights made me claustrophobic. Could people really buy and sell air? For the rest of the flight, googling Air Rights became an obsession. I tried to find out as much about them as I could. Air Rights, it seemed, were a principal of property law, the gist of which was summed up in the Latin phrase *Cuius est solum, eius est usque ad coelum et ad inferos* --"whoever's is the soil, it is theirs all the way to Heaven and all the way to Hell."

From my aisle seat on the plane, I could only see a piece of the sky, but I was no stranger to the surreal scenery one sees looking down from thirty thousand feet; the cotton clouds, the sci-fi rock formations, and the patchwork earth quilt broken up by lines, circles and an occasional baseball diamond or swimming pool. I discovered that it was the invention of flight that first called the definition of Air Rights into question. After all, if planes were to fly overhead, how could mere mortals own air up to the heavens?

Air Rights. I searched again.

Formally, Transferable Development Rights, or TDRs - originated with the 1961 revamping of the city's zoning laws. In essence, if a building adjacent to a construction site is lower than neighborhood zoning laws allow, the developer can acquire the building's unused air space, add it to his or her project, and erect a taller building.

The more I learned, the more I wanted to know. My sleepless fingers typed search words on the laptop keyboard. I clicked on countless links. I had flown all night but I wasn't tired. I just wanted to get into the city and make my way down to the Lower East Side before it was

swallowed up. I imagined the neighborhood I grew up in shrinking. Vanishing vertically. Skyscrapers rising, looming over six-story tenements, blocking light and blocking air. An Etch-o-sketch skyline gone in a shake.

I want to exit the subway station on East Broadway, but I'm feeling the effects of sleep deprivation and the signs aren't clear. As I make my way to the top of the steps, I realize that my choice of exits is wrong. I should be seeing the park. There should be nothing blocking my view of the street. Instead, I see a wall covered in bright paint, not quite graffiti, more of a mural. I want to stop but I keep moving. It's a subway stairwell, I remind myself. I reach the street, the corner of Madison and Rutgers, which I don't know as well as East Broadway. Madison and Rutgers are closer to the water and closer to the projects, lower-income housing, so growing up we knew not to go there. I don't remember how we knew but like many rules of city survival, we just did. In the distance I see water and the girders of a bridge—the Manhattan Bridge, I guess. Between the water and the trees, the corner where I'm standing seems safe enough, almost serene. It's quiet, but not creepy quiet. People are out but there are no signs of troublemaking teenagers or knife-wielding thugs. It begs to be explored. But childhood street smarts kick in and I head toward more familiar territory, East Broadway, Essex Streets, the streets that framed my world and kept me safe. Everything is changing so fast. It's not just that Chinatown has moved further east. Everything is cleaner, which should be a good thing but it feels too new, generic, like it could be anywhere. I stand on the corner of Rutgers and Canal. I take it all in, the new, the old, the air. Lower East Side air. Growing up here air. I imagine it still carries molecular particles from the white gusts of winter breath that I once exhaled, that everyone I knew exhaled.

As I often do in the city, I look up. The tops of New York City buildings always have stories to tell. Historic dates, names and other architectural finds make looking up worth the occasional misstep. Tripping off a curb. Crashing into an oncoming passer-by while you're busy making eye contact with a gargoyle. With air rights on sale, what will become of the gargoyles? The building across the street gets my attention. I'm looking at it from the side but it still stands out. Not a tenement, taller, perhaps ten stories tall but it seems like a giant on a block of dwarfs. It's not new. It's part of the neighborhood, part of its history. The word Forward is etched into or is it painted onto the red and cream-colored wall of the building? The side wall facing West. I cross the street and stop at the front door, peering in through glass panels. The doors are locked and the lobby is dark so it's hard to see. This was once The Forward building of Yiddish newspaper fame. Now it's an upscale condominium. So much for the paper's socialist past. Although it retains its name, I imagine that the new tenants only ever pronounce it Forward. I hope someone teaches them to say Forverts every now and again in honor of the Yiddish immigrants and socialist spirits that might still roam the halls.

Next door to the Forward building is Wing Shoon Seafood Restaurant, another reminder of how much the neighborhood has changed. Chinese restaurants belong in Chinatown, at least that's

how it was. A for rent sign is slapped on the building. Metal gates rolled down over every door and window are a canvas for graffiti artists. Wing Shoon sits vacant on a corner that remains vibrant. This is the spot where the Garden Cafeteria once served strictly dairy meals to the likes of Elie Weisel and Isaac Bashevis Singer. I know the Garden's history but I look it up on my cell phone anyway. Perhaps things feel more real that way. Or perhaps I just need to know that someone has written all of this down. My grandparents liked The Garden and I liked eating there with them. I would watch Pop Meyer and Nana Jenny turn borscht pink with a dollop of sour cream and drink steaming tea from a glass with a sugar cube in their teeth. The Garden Cafeteria was a dairy restaurant like Ratner's on Delancey, but not as fancy. You entered the self-serve cafeteria through a turnstile. But first you took the ticket with two rows of numbers—dollars and cents. The clatter of thick white dishes was constant as you made your way along the rail, studying the stations of food, tray in hand. If you got a vegetable plate, for example, your ticket got punched with every different vegetable you chose. After the dessert station, you reached the cashier. He added up all your punched prices and that's what you paid. Then you looked for a table, tray in hand, often finding people who really weren't eating, people who just wanted to sit there and read. That wasn't encouraged, so depending upon how busy it was, you could either turn the other way or get them to leave.

If self-service wasn't your thing there were other dairy restaurants, but none more popular than Ratner's. Ratner's reigned over Delancey Street. It was not far from Katz's, just up the street but a world apart. Ratner's was dairy and kosher. Katz's was meat and kosher-style, meaning you wouldn't find pork or seafood, but you might mix meat with milk. As different as they were, Katz's and Ratner's did share one thing in common. Rude waiters. And that was part of their charm.

I recite the names of Lower East Side restaurants as if I'm reading names of the deceased. The Garden is gone. Ratner's is gone. Shmulka Bernstein's—the Kosher-Chinese restaurant with waiters who wore red and gold fez caps with tassels—gone. I whisper their names like a rabbi does in a synagogue when words like Kaddish and Yahrzeit form on the congregation's lips. I don't really know the rituals, but I remember the sounds.

Standing on this corner, I am at a crossroads. A straight walk down East Broadway will bring me to Grand Street and put me closer to the corner I grew up on, where Grand ends and the Drive begins. I can pass the Educational of Alliance, which we called "the Edgies." I once studied Hebrew there but didn't stick with it long enough for the language to sink in. Just long enough to satisfy my father. I can pass the corner of East Broadway and Clinton and find out if the corner bodega is still there with its bins of penny candy outside. To this day, I feel a twinge of guilt about having shoplifted penny candy from them on my way to and from Junior High School 56 only a few blocks away—off I went with pockets full of Bit O' Honey's, Bazooka gum and Tootsie Rolls. Of course, the candy was nothing compared to the Nancy Drew books I took from the drug store on Grand and Clinton. If I keep walking straight, I will pass the Seward Park Library where, growing up, I read so many books in the children's section they had no choice but to give me an adult library card before I hit adult-section age. I remember how

steep the steps to the slim three-story grey and pink building seemed and how heavy the arched iron door was as I left with as many books as I was allowed to take. Or as I came back with the books I had to return, some overdue. In the winter, I knew my towering stack of books was not supposed to wind up in the snow, but it was hard to hold on to them when I was all suited up like a puffy snowman, my mittened fingers barely bendable. I would do my best balancing act as I walked from East Broadway to Grand Street, my eyes tearing up and my scarf slipping just enough to expose my skin to the burning, biting chill of the East River winds. I look toward the Seward Park Library and then up toward Essex Street. I see taxis. Not just one or two, but a row of gleaming yellow taxis parked right outside of the F train stop; taxis lined up and facing the subway steps that exit onto East Broadway. A sign of change. When I lived here a taxi was impossible to find. Drivers avoided the neighborhood, telling you their shift was over when they learned where you were headed. Or saying things like "Sorry lady. My life isn't worth the fare," before driving off. It wasn't the safest neighborhood but it wasn't that scary either. At least to those of us that lived there.

Rather than walk down East Broadway toward the river, I decide to wander up Essex Street toward Grand instead. I pass a stretch of tenements sitting side by side by side. Zigzag fire escapes hover above the street side retailers and basement stores below. I had read that Gus and his pickle men had left Essex Street to set up shop near the Tenement Museum on Orchard Street where they could double as an exhibit. It seems strange to walk down Essex Street without stopping to look into an open pickle barrel. The acidic smell of sauerkraut lingers in my mind, but on Essex Street it is gone. A few storefronts down from where the pickle barrels used to be is G&S Sporting Goods. Their windows were always filled with boxing gloves, trophies, team shirts and bats. No more. I can tell from across the street that G&S is closed. If anything remains in their display windows it's out of sight, hidden behind a solid metal shutter. We all bought our autograph books here, little zippered and locked books with pastel pages that our teachers, friends and family would sign. Not only did G&S sell the books, but you could ask the store clerks to make the first pages special, drawing hearts in Elmer's glue, sprinkling sparkly glitter on top and keeping our books safe until the glue dried. The G&S sign is still there. I wonder when their sixty-seven year run came to an end. And why.

Seward Park High School is on the next corner, less than a block away. Seward had been my father's alma mater and my mother's as well; only she didn't talk about it half as much. She wasn't one for school but my father was. He kept all of his yearbooks and was especially proud of the ones that featured essays and poems by the actor Walter Matthau, spelled Matthow at the time. The high school was behind scaffolding when I last walked down these streets. Since then the building has been renovated and split up into several smaller schools. Looking up Grand Street toward the East River only a few tenements remain but they still line every street headed west toward Chinatown. Were my father alive he'd tell me about the tenements he grew up in, about his father the cheese man and the men who delivered ice. There were stories about sleeping on fire escapes knowing that one wrong turn could mean falling to your death. I should have listened more. Now there are things I want to know and Google is the best I can do. There is a Tenement Museum and walking tours but I know I can't be trusted to just listen and observe. I imagine I would interrupt any guide with a script, insert

myself into their narrative and announce to the real tourists that they had a genuine third generation Lower Eastsider in their midst.

From the corner of Essex and Grand, the Essex Street market isn't quite in view. The buildings that house the market have been in a state of disrepair for years although some tenants remain. A brighter, cleaner Lower East Side—that's what Fiorello LaGuardia envisioned when he pulled pushcarts off the streets and put them under a roof. If he couldn't erase the Lower East Side's sordid immigrant past, he could at least hide it. My mother shopped at the Essex Street market in the sixties, when I was little, but I can't remember why. The Co-op supermarket was closer and it had everything. There was a kosher butcher and a bakery on Grand Street as well. Over time, we would go to the Essex Street Market less and less. Perhaps that's why so much space, four city blocks, was allowed to wither and waste away. I remember walking from one side of the Market to the other, passing stall after stall. There were bins piled high with fruits, vegetables, fresh fish, meats, and bric a brac, like candles and buttons and things called notions. It smelled a little stale, but it was perfume compared to the putrid smells of fish and fruits sitting outdoors and rotting in the sun. The Essex Street market stalls were fun to weave in and out of, scouting for unrecognizable items, something exotic, which often meant Puerto Rican. It was all indoors and there was even an entrance just steps from the Delancey Street subway stop making it easy to get out of the cold.

As I work my way down Essex Street toward Delancey, I know not to expect much. The market is either completely shut down or close to it. I had read that a major project called The Essex Street Crossing will soon be underway. A brighter, cleaner Lower East Side is in the works once again. Sophisticated but sanitized. I think about Times Square, where my hotel is, where a pedestrian mall entertains tourists on the same scandalous ground that was once walked by prostitutes and is synonymous with porn. Now Times Square has gone Disney. Is that what's in store for the Lower East Side?

No sooner does my mind wander into the future than a blue glass monster of a building appears, jutting out of nowhere. It looks like an uninvited experiment, a crash landing of alien proportions, a futuristic architectural exercise gone wrong. Yet there it stands. Somewhere near Houston or Delancey. From where I am on Essex, I can't see its base; I can't tell where it begins. All I can see is its looming high-rise body, cutting into the sky, oddly arched and angled, covered in reflective blue glass triangles. Out of place. I want to scream, this does not belong here. I want to throw a tantrum like a child does when they are drawing a picture and you pick up a crayon and add your touch. That does not go there. Now you ruined it. But the yelling stays in my head. There is no one to talk to.

People walk by. They seem oblivious to the monstrous modern blue glass building. I find it hard to turn away. I wonder about the next intrusion. I think about the disrupted lives. Rising buildings and obstructed views are bound to mean rising rents and shifting values. Does a neighborhood's character count for anything? Does holding on to its history make sense? Or is that what museums are for? Open a gift shop. Hold an exhibit. Conduct a tour.

I turn around and make my way back to Essex and Grand Street where the changes are many

I turn around and make my way back to Essex and Grand Street where the changes are many but seem manageable in comparison. On Grand, there is still a long low-rise line up of stores—the drugstore, the toy store and the liquor store. There’s a clinic where the Essex Street Theater once was. The Essex Theater had gotten old and dirty and was closed decades ago, so no surprises there. Kossars Bialys is still in tact and on this stretch of Grand Street Kossars is really what matters. Through their big front windows, I would watch bialys being made by hand. Lumps of dough, sitting on flat wooden planks that looked like oversized spatulas, slid into cavernous ovens covered in powdery dust; the smell of roasting onion and garlic was everywhere. The same planks were used to pull the bialys out. Baked, crisp and ready to eat or to hold onto for the warmth. The window and the warmth are still there. A donut shop has moved in right next door, which doesn’t seem necessary but still makes sense. There is even a kosher deli on Grand Street, but that’s all it is. Just some deli. Would it be anything more in time? Not to me.

As I head east on Grand Street, the old Catholic church comes into view. It has always been there. Saint Anne’s? Saint Mary’s? I can never remember this church’s name. Growing up Jewish made churches something to consider from a distance. Although as an adult I have joined my husband at many a midnight mass. Just not on the Lower East Side. That feels wrong. I keep walking up Grand, pausing at the triangle-shaped sliver of a park where my grandparents sat when they weren’t sitting on foldout chairs in front of their apartment building. No one sits in front of those buildings anymore. Tenants with too much money and too little humanity complained. It appears those tenants don’t like the aged and they like aging even less. The park benches sit empty, but I can still hear the sandpaper sounds of Yiddish, full of throat clearing and phlegm. The language of dirty jokes, gossip and sorrow. Adults spoke Yiddish when they didn’t want “de kinder” to understand. It was a secret language then. It’s a dying language now. I can still hear Puerto Ricans shouting in Spanish out of windows. It’s the language we learned in school. Yiddish faded away, its static sound becoming background noise. Spanish sang out of radios. Spanish and English slang blended into a musical stew. Round women wheeled shopping carts while rolling their r’s, purring like stray cats, ready to pounce and scratch your eyes out. Or just rub up against your leg.

As I sit in the triangle park, I get hungry. Willett Street could take me to Houston Street and then I wouldn’t be far from Katz’s. That route means walking past my grandmother’s apartment in the Hillman Buildings, which is only a block away. It also means passing the Bialystoker Synagogue and I have mixed feelings about that. When I was little, younger than six I think, I would go to shul with my father. I was allowed to cling to his side, wrapping myself in his prayer shawl and playing with the fringes of his tallis. I pretended to understand the sounds and the songs and the ceremony that unfolded on the main floor where the men sat or stood davening—rocking back and forth with an occasional bend of the knee. Never a kneel. Jews don’t kneel. Up in the balcony, it was all women. One day that’s where they sent me. There was no air up there. In the summer it was sweltering and women would faint from the heat. Smelling salts appeared and, once waved under noses, closed eyes fluttered open and women were brought back from the dead. Between the fainting women, and my mother’s tendency to belittle my father’s religious beliefs, spirituality became stressful.

I recently read that the Bialystoker was a stop on the Underground Railroad but I find that hard to believe. Wouldn't I have learned that as a child? I want to believe it but it feels like part of a new mythology that Lower East Side landmarks are creating to attract attention. Reinvention is good for real estate prices.

The triangle park puts me right across the street from my grandmother's apartment, from the shul, and from the Henry Street Settlement, with its hundred-plus years of history and a roster of notables who either taught or performed there before they were anybody. Orson Wells, Eartha Kitt, Aaron Copeland, Martha Graham. Around the corner from my grandmother and down the street from the Old Amalgamated Courtyard, filled with fountains and flowers, is my elementary school, PS 110. These few blocks deserve a longer visit but for some reason they seem permanent, untouchable. I let them be, promising to come back.

Before going to Katz's I decide to walk all the way down to the East River Drive. I need the air. No one can take away my East River air. I grew up looking out on a river view, twenty stories high, and now on very little sleep I'm determined to make it all the way back there again. As far East as one can go before you hit the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Drive. The FDR. East and lower. Green spaces. Parks with slides, seesaws, and swings. The closer to the water the colder, but other than winter the river is always a special treat. East River seagulls. Tugboats. A distant glimpse of an oxidized Lady Liberty. The Manhattan and Brooklyn Bridges competing for attention in the foreground. It's quiet. In spite of the neighborhood's dark side, it's almost quaint. I think of it as a hamlet, without really knowing what a hamlet is. East River, Brooklyn, the Williamsburg Bridge. This was once my looking-out-my-living-room-window world. Swirling script letters that read Domino Sugar hanging on a building that tried to hang on to its sweet cubist past. Until the condos moved in. I read that the sign is now locked up somewhere; that they haven't thrown it out.

As I work my way from the East River Drive to Houston Street to Katz's, the Williamsburg Bridge stretches out before me. It once connected Brooklyn and Lower East Side Jews but it doesn't play that role anymore. Williamsburg is more hipster than Chasidic. The Lower East Side more affluent than immigrant. There is less Lower East Side every day.

My mother used to take me to Katz's deli just so she could point at her favorite sign behind the counter. "Send A Salami to your Boy in the Army." I can still hear her reading those words out loud. When she accentuated the rhyming words, she was playful but uneasy. Her laugh would shift from childlike joy to an uncomfortable self-consciousness. Like the laugh of someone being tickled a little too long. Something embarrassed her. I never knew exactly what. We didn't eat at Katz's very often because it was only kosher-style, which means it wasn't really kosher. My mother didn't care, but my father did and Katz's was too close to where we lived for my mother to get away with cheating. For that, she preferred Chinatown.

I see the building, the red and white Katz's Deli sign. Nothing and everything has changed. The big white knobs on the Etch-o-Sketch will soon be twisting, walls will be going up and shadows will be cast. Dim memories will grow dimmer but there will always be a reason to walk these streets. Breathe the air. No matter who the air belongs to the memories belong to me.



MICHAEL LODERSTEDT

CALLING MY STEPFATHER, ONE YEAR AFTER MOM DIED

I remember that hot, late-August afternoon
the thick air unmoving as the box slid
from the hearse, then dipped
precariously toward earth.
Is anyone lifting this thing?
I squinted at the men beside
and across who once knew her.
If this casket hit the ground
it would be on me. Ma
would be on me.

I remember that mockingbird's
crazy song, perched at the end row
of uniform white crosses
near the island road.
Going on and on and on
like some skipping needle
on a record player.

When my stepfather answered
I said, It's Michael.
Michael who?
Judy's oldest son. I just wanted
to ask how you're doing?
Judy's dead.
I know Lester. I was at the funeral,
do you remember?

I thought about the last time
he called, saying, You've got
to come quick. A year ago,
a year ago barreling six hundred
miles to St. Helena without
stopping to eat, only to piss.
Arriving just hours after
she'd passed. Her body
gone, Lester bellowing
in the corner room
like an old horse.
At the funeral home

CONTINUED...

I kissed her cold forehead
slipped my middle-school
picture under her pillow. How
now to go on in this world?
Who will make the spaghetti sauce?
Will I remember the laurel bay leaf,
add the day-old coffee?
What measure will it take?



IAN DEMSKY

THE GOOD KNIFE

These radishes recall those radishes.
Crisp, white-tipped torpedoes halved and piled
on a black plate, an anthill of salt.
And I remember trying and trying to make
just one good photograph
of the way the light was lispings into that tidy cave à manger
through the big glass doors on the Rue de Paradis.
You were so patient with me.

The specimens in this local bunch are nearly spherical,
and, instead of dusty pink, the kind of steadfast red
only Marina Abramović could wear. This will be my first time
eating them roasted. And I watch as with the good knife
you pare off the tops, knowing that in the oven they will wilt
to a mere suggestion of themselves.

Soon you shift the skillet, our long-seasoned
wedding gift, up to the stovetop, folding in butter to brown,
chile flake, coarse black pepper, honey, vinegar.
And that impregnable red gets me thinking, leap-wise,
about that early piece of hers — Abramović — set in an airport.
The announcements are on a loop.
The plane is always leaving, immediately,
from a gate impossibly far.



MELISSA GREENWOOD

A LASTING LOVE

Chris and I connected on Match.com in January of 2011, four months after my last boyfriend, Daniel, left me. Daniel was only supposed to be gone for ten days on his annual Labor Day trip to the Black Rock Desert—but when he came back to LA from Burning Man, he had a new girlfriend in tow who quickly became his fiancée, then wife, then baby mama.

I was in no state to be meeting anyone at the time but craved a distraction—anything to keep me from picturing Daniel and Zoe’s limbs tangled up. Yet, when I walked into that hipster North Hollywood bar, and our eyes met—my big blue to Chris’s kindly, soft brown—I smiled a little too enthusiastically and mentally mapped out our future. Hey, neighbor, I said as I took a seat next to him on the red velvet couch.

Two months in, and Chris was my boyfriend. Nearly twelve years my senior, he was my plus-one to my twenty-seventh birthday, just as Daniel—who also had over a decade on me—had been to my twenty-sixth. Geminis of similar ages, Chris and Daniel also both stood at about 6’2, had wavy brown hair, and wore oversized spectacles. The resemblance (and my type) was unmistakable, although Chris’s hair was darker and his build thinner. But the similarities stopped there: whereas Daniel—the guy who, unbeknownst to me, already had a girlfriend when I met him; wouldn’t be my friend on Facebook; didn’t invite me to his own birthday party; and regularly went out with a female doctor friend until the wee hours of the night, dancing and tripping out on Ecstasy—had devastated me, Chris would never disappoint.

That night, Daniel called to wish me a happy twenty-seventh. Giddy at the sight of his missed call, I sneaked into the bathroom to listen to his message: “I think about you often, and I hope you’re having a fabulous, fabulous time—because you are...fabulous.” I couldn’t focus on the party or my new boyfriend. All I could think about was the fact that my ex, who said I was “fabulous” didn’t think I was fabulous enough, good enough, anything enough to still be his. I went back to my party, trying to replicate my pre-bathroom face—the face of a girl who was enough—enough for her friends and her current boyfriend, who really was fabulous. I threw back a few glasses of champagne like it was New Year’s on a year when I wasn’t taking a sleeping pill and going to bed at nine. I talked too fast. I forced my cheeks and mouth to form a smile—all evidence that I was the happy birthday girl. But my eyes were already glassy. A few false lashes had broken free of the adhesive that was keeping them stuck (like me, I later reminisced).

Luckily, the crowd was thinning. My gracious new boyfriend settled the bill, then helped me to navigate my way to the car on my wobbly heels with my wobbly post-bubbly balance. He drove me home. Unzipped my dress. Assisted me out of my too-tall pumps. Pulled the covers back. Lay me down. Did his best to strip away the sick feeling, the emptiness, the abandonment that he had no part in creating. He did so much, and I simply fell apart, glue bits and eyelashes stuck to my face—long curls of black against my too-pale skin. I couldn’t bear it, this man I didn’t deserve, treating me with such care. Handling me like the fragile thing I was when a ghost haunted me still.

Chris didn't run or leave me to cry alone in my bed. He didn't tell me to "f*ck off" either, as he rightly could have. He curled up next to me and held me tight, even though he had to be at work early the next morning. At the time, he was a Product Manager at Disney Interactive. (I couldn't tell you what that means, except that he's the Chandler Bing of his inner circle.) His coworkers had once voted him Best Personality, and now I knew why.

"It's okay, everything is going to be okay," he said to me as I sobbed. He stroked my newly-shorn hair (I had "cut off the assh*le," post-Daniel) and collected fallen falsies from my so-wet pillow.

Why didn't he go when he saw I was yearning for, hurting because of, someone else? Why didn't he drop me at the door and never look back? "It was hope," he later confided. "Hope in you. Hope in us. As naïve as it sounds, it was hope that made me stay."

Chris continued to stay. We were a couple for three years and eventually lived together, too. The kindness he had shown me on my birthday was the kindness he showed me every day: making dinners for me, making room for all of my things when I moved in with him (he let himself be booted out of his own closet), and even making room for Daniel's ghost. That fractured relationship continued to weigh on me and my self-worth. Even as months turned into years, the perceived loss pressed heavily on my chest, sometimes constricting my air.

Daniel's ghost notwithstanding, things between Chris and me were serious: I met his family back east, we sent out a joint holiday card, and I even bought a cream-colored dress I thought I might wear to our future-wedding. I was always planning ahead. But whereas Daniel and I had been all about the sizzle—it's the only thing we had—Chris and I, romantically, were more like a fizzle. We had to acknowledge the painful truth that we were better off as the best of friends who, nevertheless, needed to part ways.

My dad Norman was more upset about the breakup than I was. He and Chris had developed a special bond over the years; in fact, Chris was instrumental in bringing my father and me together. Pre-Chris, Dad and I had a strained relationship. He'd been an emotionally-absent father, but as I entered adulthood, he wanted to make amends. Chris and my dad understood each other. They are both soft-spoken and enjoy chatting about a good TV series or movie. (Chris was a film major.) An electric car geek, my dad even helped Chris to broker his own EV-deal, staying at the Nissan dealership with my then-boyfriend past midnight until the numbers were exactly where he wanted them—down to the penny.

When it came to my dad, Chris was happy to do the work I was resistant to doing. He accompanied me to dinners and made reconnecting with a formerly-estranged parent feel more relaxed and less awkward. To this day, Chris will visit my dad at his photo shop, which Dad has conveniently outfitted with a car charger. Then, they might catch up over burgers and a craft beer, or three in my Dad's case. I'm grateful they keep in touch. Grateful that Chris was there to act as a go-between at a time when I wasn't ready to go it alone.

Chris and "Norm"—as Chris calls him—remain close, and Chris and I remain close as well. More

than a decade after we met and eight years after we broke things off, he's still my go-to guy. After my wedding (I bought a new dress—this time once I was actually engaged), it was Chris who drove my husband and me back to our hotel. The three of us have a WhatsApp group chat that I named "The Boyzzzzz." We are constantly checking in—sending one another funny messages or pictures or filling each other in on stories about our days or the latest low-emissions news (we're all Team Electric). It warms my heart that my husband has welcomed Chris into the fold—into our joint-lives. Chris, my husband, and I—along with my dad and his longtime-girlfriend, also an EV-driver—even celebrate special occasions together. We refer to ourselves as "The Gang" whenever we sign our names at the bottom of a birthday card.

I have tried and failed to remain in contact with other exes in the past. Perhaps it was easier for them to make a clean break, but after things were over, they never seemed to want anything to do with me. Chris is the exception. Hope made him stay on my twenty-seventh birthday, and nearly eleven years later, he's still here: one of my boyzzzzz; part of my gang. While he no longer has to scoop up my body, errant lashes, or splintered emotions, he's always just a phone call—or text message—away, available to make an airport run or pick up groceries, dry cleaning, or the pieces, wherever they should fall. He still has the Best Personality, and he definitely also wins the award for Best Ex.



GARY CAMPANELLA

EDGEWATER

One dusty afternoon, burnt from walking, I came to a sandy road with a worn out wooden sign that read Edgewater Inn. Other than the aqueduct I was walking along, there was no water in sight, no water in the air, no water anywhere. It was the Mojave Desert in July.

I followed the road for a mile and came to a two-story farmhouse, desert shabby, with a front porch and a few outbuildings. The inn was open and run by a couple named Randy and Betty. Randy was a retired air traffic controller. He wore jeans, cowboy boots and a threadbare flannel shirt, the uniform of the desert rat. Betty looked like a grandmother who loved making apple pie, but with hard lines on her face and a harder stare at the horizon. There were no sounds at the inn but the persistent, blast furnace wind. The desert is like that.

Randy and Betty ran a makeshift restaurant in the big front room, and they served me a dinner of homemade burgers for a few dollars. I couldn't afford to pay for lodging, but they let me camp in their yard, behind the house.

I camped without a tent, under stars and the wind blowing over. My desert solitaire was shattered late when Randy and Betty started fighting. Betty screeched and called Randy a fucking loser. Randy screamed that Betty was a fucking maniac. I heard stuff being thrown around, and glass breaking. The fight subsided after a while, and I began to relax, but then it started again. Death threats hurled out the windows. There were more things being thrown. It went like that for hours. I stayed alert until dawn, waiting for a gunshot or a backyard spillover, or any event that would spring me into some kind of action.

In the morning a rooster crowed near me, and I woke up in the sun. I tiptoed into the inn for a bathroom and found a smiling Betty preparing breakfast. She was the Betty of yesterday, like nothing had happened. I studied her face for a clue, like bruises, or tiredness in her eyes, but her voice crackled only warmth and concern for my sleep. She served the meal free of charge. Randy was not around. Truckers arrived, regulars, and Betty introduced me as a wandering traveler on a great adventure, like she discovered me.

After the truckers rumbled off and the silence of the desert afternoon remained, I got ready to leave. I went back to the kitchen to thank Randy and Betty, but found Betty alone, crying. She told me that her sister had died the night before. I gave her the best words of comfort I had, knowing they were of little use. Betty returned to cooking, soldiering on. I stayed put.

Betty worked all morning and through the lunch "rush" of about a half dozen regulars. Randy had still not appeared. The regulars lingered, drinking soda pop and telling jokes. Later Betty took me for a ride through the desert, showing me narrow box canyons and fields of California poppies.

Back by mid-afternoon, I had plenty of time to get back on the trail, but lingered again. I was tired. Randy came back from wherever, parking his truck by the front door, facing out. I reached into the bottom of my pack, produced a ten-dollar bill, and gave it to him for another night of

food and beer. We drank together on folding patio chairs he set up in front of the Inn, while Betty cooked, and the sun set. He told me yesterday was his birthday.

Near dark, the unmistakable silhouette of a long-distance backpacker appeared on the horizon to the south. His name was Pete Fountain. He was a kid like me, trying to backpack the length of California. Like me, he got bogged down by late spring snow in the southern mountains, and was troubled by the Sierra ahead. We decided to hike together, did for a while.

That evening we toasted our new partnership with more of Betty's burgers. We drank beer and played pool with Randy, who told us stories about airline near misses. Betty also drank beer, and with no TV or radio, we partied like nothing existed beyond the darkness outside the walls of the Edgewater Inn.

We had the kind of evening that wandering travelers have been having forever. We were strangers transformed by happenstance, seizing the odd opportunity. There was an uncomfortable moment when I thought Randy was trying to find out how much money I carried. I deflected the inquiry, but Pete did not, and he carried substantially more than me. I caught a quick glance between Betty and Randy during the exchange. I couldn't interpret it, and it made me uneasy, but nothing else happened or changed. They did not mention Betty's sister or Randy's birthday, but we talked of everything else. The overnight in the backyard, Pete a few feet away, stayed starry and silent.

Pete and I got up at dawn. Randy was nowhere around, but we said goodbye to Betty. She wished us well but seemed distant. After a few minutes of walking away, I turned around for a last look at the Edgewater, but we must have turned a corner or crossed over a small bluff, for when I spun around, it wasn't there anymore. I stopped Pete. We both stood for several minutes, scratching our heads, wondering where it went. Time and distance are deceiving in the desert. It's all the open space. Something that looks a mile away can be ten. Somehow, in a few minutes, or in a few more minutes than we thought, the desert had swallowed the Edgewater Inn.

A long time later, still wondering what did or didn't happen, I returned to the Mojave and tried to retrace my steps. I drove miles of road looking for the Inn. I never found it.



GARY CAMPANELLA

LA CHARM

A hummingbird hovers at the high branches of a live oak, while I wait for morning fog to clear, lean to the window, pick at my problems, and watch the tiny emerald-necked thing take off, alight, take off, and I wonder if its wings get tired.

The branchlets sway in a breeze that slips through my window, smelling of flowers, coarse from the ocean, wistful for stealing across the grime and sadness of America's sprawling city of slumbering angels and personal demons.

The hummingbird moves away, haltingly off toward other trees or flowers or the other side of this tree, and I also turn away, step away from the window and the oak and my downtown view.

My house is rooted here like the tree, but I am unsteady when standing still, more at ease with the wind across this city, drafting up the hill where I sleep, to the patch of grass I defend from neighbor dogs, to the migration in my oak tree, to the glitter charmed with sandy grit across high desert ghost towns.

The oak tree makes its own dust, as do I, as do hummingbirds, and the breeze carries these away with the rest of it.



JOHN ROMAGNA

HUMANS SHOULD FLY

They start early, following my flight path
As I circle and dive
And lift myself again,
Like a singer
Warming up,

Not enough to scare the fish,
Though one sticks the butt-ends of
Four fishing poles
In the sand,

Tight lines slanting to the waves,
And waits.

Low tide must look like a pause
In the earth, waves turning the pages
Of a long book, jetties standing out
Like solid citizens, beaches smooth
From last night's tide,

From where they are, can they see
An ocean's strength in numbers? Waves
Heading this way one after the other,
Having the weight and power
To finish things.

Shit! This afternoon, they'll be hard to ignore,
Bringing umbrellas, books, setting up chairs,
One guy has a tent as big as an airplane wing,

Spraying their bodies to look like rain
On car windshields, taking selfies,
Checking coolers,
Reading,

Kids throwing frisbees,
Who can't judge the wind and
Don't care,

CONTINUED...

Swimmers going out too far,
Lifeguards whistling them back. Ok,
So they swim. When will they fly?
On their own, I mean.

I'll stay up here, gliding in a figure-eight,
Holding my wings wide as though
This is easy, which it is,
Hearing their music,
No one, I hope,
Impersonating Elvis.



JOHN ROMAGNA

NOT LIKE A BEETHOVEN SYMPHONY

(For Tim Romagna: 1990 – 2012)

Being with Tim was not like listening to a Beethoven Symphony, every note, every phrase exactly where it should be, following the one before it and leading to the next. It was more like a piece by Stravinsky, notes like meteors burning up before you can tell anyone where to look, you wondering how he got such ideas, where the music will go and how it will end.

By the time he was in high school, Tim had learned to keep things to himself, as though he was the only safe place. Yes, there were moments, the time he ran out of his room wanting us to look at a video he found on YouTube, birds pooping on Captain Hook's head, Peter Pan laughing so hard he collides with a tree trunk.

He had his room, his guitar, notebooks, art work, his art consisting of drawings, some geometric, some realistic, and watercolors. There were school books, though I wondered how much attention he paid to them.

After he died, I read his journals...Tim speaking to himself, and the rest of us, without speaking directly to any one of us, about the New Year's Eve we took him to London, about other places he would go, about a high school classmate who had become pregnant, about what happens every time a good man dies, convincing me he could have been a writer, he said he wanted to be one, if he had been willing to keep at it, if he could be patient, if he learned to believe in what he found within himself, making that interesting and valuable for others.

At Tim's memorial service, his friend Derek told a story: He and Tim walked to Derek's house one afternoon, taking a dirt pathway beside the school baseball field, Tim kicking stones off the pathway, not in anger, just because he could. He said to Derek, "...when you want to talk to something, talk to a rock. It won't talk back."

After he finished 9th grade, I found a school I thought he would like. More than that, where I thought he would thrive. A school in northern New Hampshire, about a seven-hour drive from home, with small classes, academics combined with mountain climbing, canoeing, winter hiking and camping, learning survival skills. He applied, maybe wanting to please me, maybe he secretly agreed with me.

The drive to the school gave me an experience that might have been the best three days with my son. For the first two or three hours, we sat in silence, each looking at the road, or he was looking ahead without seeing much, in the passenger seat wearing a headset. I listened to my Beethoven CDs. I have all nine symphonies, and after two, I'm guessing I played the Beatles, and maybe Tim got tired of my music, or tired of not talking, or maybe I needed to be with him in silence for several hours just to pay my dues. He removed his headset and asked, "Dad, have you heard the Ramones?"

"No."

He took a CD out of his case, ejected the one I was playing, and for the next few hours, we listened. I liked their songs. He could give me the story behind a few of them, and the musicians, pulled one CD out and put in another, telling me, "You have to hear to this one!" At lunch time, we found a shopping center with a WalMart, bought two more CDs, another by the Ramones, one by Green Day. Driving, listening, talking more, never allowing conversation to overcome the music, it was as though for him to be a willing part of my world, I had to show I could be part of his.

Tim was admitted, but we didn't send him to that school, finding one closer to home. That might have been a mistake. The trip was not, I learned to trust him more, to believe in him more. Tim didn't have long enough to let us know who he was. I'm sure he's not the only young man one could say that about.

Saying so doesn't give me much consolation. Not like remembering the truthfulness, the easy togetherness of those three days driving to New Hampshire and back. For me, they are like grave goods that had been lying not far beneath the earth, and I'm the archaeologist who remembers brushing the dirt aside, holding up a sword, a coin or a ring, and it gets me closer to what I'm looking for.



PETER ANDREWS

FUSED QUARTZ

Snapping a few pictures of a sealed tool shed disturbs the dead... and the peace of the person who got paid to let someone in.

I pulled the plastic off the windows. With Jimmy's help, I yanked the tarp clear of the roof. "Cut the chain."

Jimmy took aim with the bolt cutters.

"Hold it," I said. I held out my palm.

He shifted his weight to balance the cutters, reached into his back pocket, tossed me his wallet. "Take seven."

"Eight," I said. I'd pissed away my inheritance. If I had to violate my dad's wishes, it was going to pay.

He hesitated. We stood sweating in August's heat and humidity.

"Come on. Let's go," I said.

"It's like entering a tomb. Think we'll find a mummy?"

"Let's hope we don't find a daddy."

Jimmy groaned.

The cutters took one bite, and I was entering my dad's studio for the first time in twenty-five years.

Studio? Actually a tool shed, about the size of an efficiency apartment. Sure enough, there were antique mallets, saws, rakes, and hoes pinned to the walls. But the center of the room was dominated by two cabinets of drawers, each inset with zinc sinks.

Jimmy snapped some pictures. "This is old stuff. Original?"

I laughed. "You mean like it's all been sitting here since the eighteen eighties?"

"At least. Why is that funny?"

"My dad stick-built this place in 1991."

That was the year Dad turned fifty. The same age when my grandfather had succumbed to a ravenous form of dementia. I saw it all. Pop-Pop writhed, cursed, and melted away in less than a year.

Pop-Pop's death haunted Dad. His own fiftieth birthday party was a wake. He couldn't abide music from that day. Sunshine brutalized him. Hugs were forbidden. It was as if all his senses had been red-lined. I found a shotgun later, but he never used it.

He died quietly, sitting on the ground, nearby, as if he'd simply fallen asleep. I glanced outside through the doorway. The stump I'd found him leaning against was still there.

"Stick-built?" Jimmy asked. He combed through the place. It was a real New England salt box, with layers of thick white paint over the irregular boards and dark green trim that showed brushstrokes. He tapped a window. The glass was wavy and bubbled.

"This, at least, might be nineteenth century. I can't tell the difference between scavenged glass and what Andre makes. Both are pricey, but a hit TV series pays."

"Particle Man."

Particle Man was an engineered ghost my father created for the bespoke comic book. A genius, who'd been poisoned, had transferred his mind into his experimental project, animating self-assembling nanoparticles. Each week, he sought revenge. Kids liked him because he could turn himself into a mist, fit through tight spaces like pipes, and reassemble himself at the other end.

Jimmy started humming the theme song, a real earworm. I'd be stuck with it all day.

Jimmy unloaded a crystal ball from a velvet bag for his signature picture. Placed the sphere on one of the cabinets. Lined up the shot, featuring three of the old tools in the circle, captured in the square frame of the rest of the room.

Click.

"Um."

Jimmy frowned. My arm was in his photograph.

I edged toward a window on the far side of the room.

Click.

One pane of glass had a sticker on it. The Grateful Dead logo. I stooped down for a closer look. I touched it.

Click.

"Did you just take my picture?" I asked.

"Sure. Who knew Billy Bronson was a Dead Head?"

"He wasn't. His jam was jazz. Don't print that photo." Had some asshole fan gotten in?

He aimed a C-note at me. I snagged it. "Fine."

The room shuddered, and both of us had to scramble to stay upright.

"Earthquake?" Jimmy asked.

In the Catskills? "This mountain hasn't moved in a million years. Maybe someone's blasting."

The crystal ball rolled off the cabinet and shattered on the floor. The shards were milky white. I picked up a piece. "Fused quartz?"

Jimmy nodded. "Yeah. And expensive. I'm suing whoever's blasting."

I noticed his gear bag was half off the cabinet. "Another shake, and you'll lose that."

Instead of putting his stuff on the floor, he put it into one of the sinks.

I went back to the sticker. It didn't belong in here. The glass I held had a sharp edge. I scratched at the sticker with the shard, barely getting a few flakes off. I braced against the window frame with my other hand and pushed harder. The shard slipped and cut the hand I used to steady myself. When a drop of my blood hit the floor, the temperature plunged, like stepping into a morgue's cooler.

Trauma? The wound wasn't big, but the chill worried me. Afraid I'd lose consciousness, I squatted down and put my head between my knees. My breath misted when I exhaled.

Click.

Water started filling a sink. The one with the bag.

"Crap!" Jimmy fished the bag out, sloshing water on his expensive camera. He did an agitated jig.

A laugh came, but it caught in my throat. A whirlpool rose from the sink full of water and congealed into a shape. Damned if it didn't look like Particle Man. Or Dad.

The image was gone in a moment. I don't think Jimmy saw it.

He was staring out the window. Snow was falling on a summer day. "Check under that sticker," he said.

I took the shard, my blood still on it, and went back to work. This time, the sticker peeled right off, in one piece.

I expected to find something underneath. Nothing. I crouched down for a closer view. My breath fogged the window, showing a message that had been scratched in.

"Everything feels too much. Leave me in peace."

I wiped the moisture off the window before Jimmy could snap a picture.

I hope my father found serenity. I haven't. Next year, I turn fifty.



THOMAS PHALEN

IN THE BEGINNING WAS THE WORD

IN PRINCIPIO ERAT VERBUM, ET VERBUM ERAT APUD DEUM, ET DEUS ERAT VERBUM. GOSPEL OF JOHN

I heard the howl, when it stabbed the sky,
Unleash its spell, as it slashed the wind,
A troubled cry I could not ignore, surely.
Its wordless sorrow remade the night
Its lament ran feral, careened back,
It touched me and enchanted me so purely:
Ululo.

I heard its primal conjuration
Just like one time that wizard spoke
When water was to wine remade, so truly.
Echo's resound from the mountain's throat,
By sorcery's cunning song beguiled,
Remade those rocks, remade me too, profoundly:
Hallelujah.

I heard judge pass his sentence bewigged
Grave upon matters of life and death
Not knowing why but that he must, the jurist.
For who the fool just once to forget
That all our lives we wander lost?
Full tilt from justice to the arms of mercy:
Condemno.

I heard priest cant, his divine invoke,
'Gainst what him now and ever besets
Bedeviled by fear and madness, so clueless.
Unmade by beauty and by life's pain
Mad to stanch what's beyond his scant wit
His prattle in me never did find purchase:
Damno.

I heard my voice cry in the night
When none were near, so no one heard
My chant, my spell, my secret woe, so poorly.
Invoking stone and writhen tree
Pale light ashimmer on moonlit sea
My lone uncanny sound it pierced right through me:
Clamo.

CONTINUED...

I heard Mother chant her cradlesong,
Her child, sad bawling to the walls,
On which the storm's teeth outside gnashed so cruelly.
The love song cast its resistless spell
Quelled weathers inside and out the night
Drear grief composed again in me so sweetly:
Lullaby.

I heard the Mage, her magik chant
Her timeless spells of love and loss;
Wisdom and riddling mystery, alluring.
And where'er is heard the naked howl,
Its song, the oldest prayer of all,
Lives love's lament; its sacred wail enduring:
Ululo.



JEREMY PROEHL

FROST SMOKE

deer step through frost smoke
forage, taut skin over ribs

satellites spawn in orbital streams
miles above my reading chair

a raccoon kit huddled next to its dead mother
the rescue charged to put it down

my father once cried over a lost coupon
while standing at the register

I never offered my father the value of a coupon
although I had the change in my pocket

I shaved my father one night
the next day I flipped a coin, coffin or urn

In July the lavender blooms, and
my neighbor takes his trees to the axe

deer step through frost smoke
ice falling splashes



AUTHOR BIOS

SM Stubbs co-owned a bar in Brooklyn until recently. Recipient of a scholarship to Bread Loaf, nominated for the Pushcart and Best New Poets. Winner of the 2019 Rose Warner Poetry Prize from The Freshwater Review. His work has appeared in numerous magazines, including Poetry Northwest, Puerto del Sol, Carolina Quarterly, New Ohio Review, Iron Horse Literary Review, Crab Creek Review, December, and The Rumpus.

Andre F. Peltier (he/him) is a Lecturer III at Eastern Michigan University where he teaches literature and writing. He lives in Ypsilanti, MI, with his wife and children. His poetry has recently appeared in various publications like CP Quarterly, Lothlorien Poetry Journal, Provenance Journal, About Place, Novus Review, Wingless Dreamer, and Fahmidan Journal, and most recently in Lavender and Lime Literary. In his free time, he obsesses over soccer and comic books. Twitter: @aandrefpeltier. Website: www.andrefpeltier.com

Bob King is an Associate Professor of English at Kent State University at Stark. He holds degrees from Loyola University Chicago (BA, English, 1995) and Indiana University (MFA, Poetry, 1998). His poetry has appeared in American Poetry Review, Allium: A Journal of Poetry and Prose, Narrative Magazine, The Cleveland Review, Cooweescoowee, The Spoon River Poetry Review, Sycamore Review, Sonora Review, Northwest Review, Hawai'i Review, Quarter After Eight, and Green Mountains Review, among other magazines. He lives on the outskirts of Cleveland with his wife and daughters.

Originally from New York City, **Christina Holbrook** now lives in the Rocky Mountains of Colorado. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in Blue Lake Review, Bright Flash Literary Review, City.River.Tree, Bombfire, and others. When not writing, she is probably out hiking with her dog Luke and trying to avoid surprise moose encounters. She has just completed her debut novel. *Note: The dowdy loaner bathing suits from Christina's freshman year at Wellesley College have long since gone out of circulation, much to students' relief.*

Rochelle Newman-Carrasco credits her NYC Lower East Side roots with her love of culture, humor and language. She holds a BFA in Theater from UC Irvine and an MFA from Antioch, Los Angeles with an emphasis in CNF and Literary Translation. Her bilingual children's book, Zig-Zag, co-authored with Alonso Nuñez, was published by CIDCLI of Mexico City. For over three decades, she has specialized in US Latinx marketing, writing for Ad Age, MediaPost and other industry publications. Her essays have been published in such literary journals as Lilit, Off Assignment, Lunch Ticket, Role Reboot, NAILED, and others. She has also done travel writing, stand-up and an 80-minute one woman show which has inspired her memoir-in-progress.

Michael Loderstedt was recently published in the NC Literary Review. He has also had poems published in a recent anthology entitled Neighborhood Voices (Literary Cleveland/Cleveland Public Library) and received an Ohio Arts Council Fellowship in Literature in 2020.

Ian Demsky spent a decade as a newspaper reporter in Nashville, Tenn., Portland, Ore., and Tacoma, Wash., before launching a second career as a science writer for the University of Michigan. His poems have previously appeared in publications including Sulfur and Chelsea, and in the anthology Resist Much, Obey Little: Inaugural Poems to the Resistance. He lives in Ann Arbor, Mich. with his wife, Kelly.

Melissa Greenwood, who writes both CNF and poetry, has an MFA in creative nonfiction writing from Antioch University Los Angeles. She has been published—both under her real and pen name—in Brevity; Lunch Ticket; Annotation Nation; The Los Angeles Review; the Los Angeles Review of Books; Meow Meow Pow Pow, where her flash piece was nominated for a best small fiction award; the Pup Pup Blog; The Manifest-Station; Poke; Neuro Logical; The Erozone; Moment Mag; Sledgehammer Lit; Screenshot Lit; Pink Plastic House; Impostor; Jewish Literary Journal; Potato Soup Journal; and forthcoming in Rejection Letters, Drizzle Review, and HOOT's Cookbook Anthology. Melissa lives in LA with her Canadian husband (an elementary school teacher), and—when she's not reading, writing, or singing—teaches and practices Pilates.

photography by Gary Campanella







THE MULESKINNER JOURNAL

LONG JOURNEYS. HARD ROADS. GOOD TIMES.