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Autumn, Upstate
Molly Labell

Glimpses
Katrina Hegeman

Trap Your Memory in a Jacket
Johanna Rois Beck

I am learning to put my faith in man
Alex Bandazian

At Sunset
Braden King
Post Road  
Molly Labell

I was never more awake than
I was that summer in that house
just off Post Road, baking bread and
braiding hair and rolling cigarettes until dawn.
I was sixteen and sometimes I’d forget to go
home for days but it was no trouble,
there was always extra berries and iced coffee
to go around and they needed me to
stay to meet their quota of bare feet
and remind them all to bathe once in a while.
In the evenings we’d drink white wine
out of jam jars and I’d jump
handsprings in the front yard with the Israelis
and ride my unicycle around the block
until I was winded. I wasn’t shy in the summer’s
twilight—how could I have been, with my friends and
lawn chairs and the ever patient humidity as my
only audience?
At night I’d dream of tomorrow.
Aubade
Gabrielle Kappes

“before their feeling died out completely, before Time altered / them”
-“Before Time Altered Them,” Constantine P. Cavafy

I
I unearth Ty,
diving for
anemones.
Our bronze bodies
spring from the
eastern lemon sea.

Sailing
rings round
volcanoes,
I feed him figs,
his hands
scan my
apricot
skin, he sighs
Aurora,
kissing my
coral lips.

I dream
he is immortal:
an underwear model
galloping on a
stallion
at sunrise.

II
But awake
beside him,
bound in a
linen cocoon,
dawn’s peach lashes
brush his hair white, and
sketch
topographic maps
on his brows.

We watch
sun’s spears
spew from
Palaio Frourio’s
twin peaks,
minutes shaft
into years, into
photographs
framed.

III
Each morning,
I devour
pomegranates
until I’m seventeen,
and through pink haze
hear
chirps
drifting from
our bedroom
door.

At night
his bony
carapace
scratches
the sheets.
It was grey the day the Pardoner came; rain fell on the canopy of leaves and pattered loudly on the forest floor. The town was dismal, and the sun was masked with blear and gloom. Clouds the colour of sodden ash rolled overhead and hurled down rain with bitter ferocity. In the town, though, every fire was roaring. Trails of smoke from the chimneys plucked at the storm-clouds with pale fingers, and, though the rain smote the straw roofs and old thatch of the town, it was warm and dry inside. Frigid water trickled from the watchtower’s parapets so that the gargoyles on its sides seemed to weep. The bells failed to toll at the Third Hour office, for the brothers were bent in prayer.

The Pardoner hobbled along old paths to Grenewych, and a pale horse clopped along morosely behind him. Upon its back were wrapped bundles and cunningly tied packages containing secrets and trappings untold. The old man walked with a staff of twisted ebony from the forest, stripped of its twigs and slick with the stain of long travel. Like him, it was withered and dried as with a long season’s cruelty. He was clad in all black up to his old cloak, which was so soiled that its original colour was indistinguishable. Indeed, he resembled a huge raven, and the rasp of his voice did little to dispel the image. A large cross with cracked gilt hung around his neck, and his pale hands toyed with it constantly.

As he passed under the shadow of the town gates, the Pardoner tossed the stick away, and the winds snatched it up and gleefully and tossed it to and fro until the forest received it again. He passed the lych-yard, and a murder of crows perched on the gate like a mass of dead flowers screamed and flew off into the storm.

Watchmen came down from the little tower, but the old Pardoner merely nodded to them silently and unblinkingly, and walked on. His horse slogged through the mud at the centre of town, and the Pardoner tied it himself under the Hostler’s roof, for the wretched prentice was shivering in the straw and did not hear the pale horse approach.

When this was done, the Pardoner walked to the grandest house in Grenewych, and, without knocking, entered. Not even the servants could say what words he spoke to the Lord Mayor. Whatever they were, the Herald was soon dispatched to every house, inn, and home, telling all to heed the Mayor’s summons.

The townspeople—wet cloaks, sopping breeches, chilled feet, and all—gathered in the Lord Mayor’s atrium. There were seats, and the people sat, or squatted, or stood with arms crossed and eyes wide. Water dripped from cloaks, a
steady pit-pat-pit-pat, and none spoke. A few children—the brave ones—kneeled close to the old man, curiosity overmastering their fear. They soon withdrew, for he smelled of dead leaves and damp, and his drooping white hands, curled like birds’ claws, made them uneasy.

When they had arrived and the doors and windows had been shut, the Pardoner reached up, and with his wrinkled hands took down his hood. He was pox-pale and bloodless as a corpse. His eyes were quick and cunning, dangerous as those of hunting-fowl, and held the same hue and sharpness as a new-forged blade. With the menacing cleverness of a magpie, his gaze roved the crowd before him, judging, gauging, and perceiving all. A certain air of chill authority was in his features, and he would not seem out of place neither at court in Londinium, nor in the dim wilds where only the old powers dwelled in chaotic reign. All who met his gaze felt a sting of dark surprise—as though his pious eyes saw to the depths of their soul, flensing away flesh and guile and cutting into their very consciousness. The Hostler, a large burly man, met the Pardoner’s eyes once and looked away; the same for the Squire and the Knight and the Venator, for guilt was in all their hearts.

The Pardoner raised a hand, and with a single long finger, slowly pointed to each and every person in the Lord Mayor’s atrium. An icy light smote all of the townspeople from this strange old man’s eyes. He lingered on some more than others, but slowly and cannily saw them all. The silence in the hall was eerie, and the townspeople feared to break it.

At long last he spoke. His voice was old and scratchy, the sound of coffinwood splitting. An icy cold came with his words, as serious as the grave and twice as forbidding. The people were cautious, since they knew the tales of the Wan Piper and the roaming Wild Hunt and even of the Prince of Night himself, who donned human skin and tricked men into following his paths to damnation. But they knew, too, that the word of God was delivered in unexpected ways, and that its messenger may not appear in a pleasing form. Pardoners had come before: some fair, and some foul, and so their worries and hearth-tale apprehensions were doused, and they listened with pious raptness to the Pardoner’s words.

He told them of his sleepless journeys through stagnant marsh and mildewed mead, slogging through England’s long pastures in the name of God. He awakened in them old fears and deep-embedded doubts, and disquiet grew on their brows and in their hearts. Dull fear of a cold grave and the burning horror of the nine hells or golden cities of masks and mercurial riddles and throttling nightmares loomed in their thoughts. The Pardoner’s speech encircled and wrapped the folk in their embrace, swelling and crashing like the furious sea when a tempest scowls above. The words were no longer important; they faded
away into the greater pull of the speech, with parables of such exquisite beauty
and tales of such awful veracity that one could not help but listen in quivering
trepidation.

So they listened to the Pardoner like a half-drowned sailor clings to
the mast when the storm is nigh. The old man pulled life up by its ugly root for
the townspeople to examine, and they saw something there that was bleak and
ill-favoured. They scrutinised their foolish hour upon life’s stage, recalling each
ripple and wrong. The people sat and thought, and were as still and silent as
elms in a winterbound garth. The dusty lamplit hall grew colder as the fire died,
and no effort was made to rekindle it.

The Pardoner’s hard voice went on, and the people heard how the
world was set adrift like a rudderless skiff and left to mire in sin and iniquity. His
voice was like grinding ice, and it reached every corner and sat upon every ear.
Farthest from the hearth, the holy brothers and the Prior mumbled fervent mea
culpa’s and nodded their tonsured heads over rosaries. The Solicitor and the
Constable fingered their fine robes and stared at the straw-strewn floor, and a
drasty Poet chewed the end of his quill, eyes bent on eternity.

Somewhere away in the darkened city, the Merchant heard rumour of
the Pardoner’s words and left off his coin-counting. The Friar stopped a bawdy
jest in mid-sentence, and a song died on the Minstrel’s lips. Some inexplicable
and inexorable yearning came over those who had not heeded the Herald’s
summons, and they came as well to hear and see this holy Pardoner.

The lamps popped and hissed in the Mayor’s hall. Dying embers
cracked, and a dog howled somewhere near the cowsheds. The Pardoner,
moving on silent feet without slowing his speech, went to a window and looked
out. The howl died. Shadows bred and danced about the room, and the Par-
doner’s eyes were like holes in an oak-tree.

With doom and damnation hot on their minds, the townspeople
watched with burgeoning curiosity as the Pardoner walked over to something
covered by a filthy cloth. The tattered rag was spotted with mildew, and several
objects protruded from beneath its stained covering. With his forefinger and
thumb, the Pardoner reached down and withdrew the cloth from that which it
hid.

The Miller and his daughter standing near the hearth shifted to see,
and the Reeve’s wife crouched in a corner craned her long neck. Two Clerks
from Oxenford, young and nervous, crossed their arms and pretended to look
uninterested.

There were four articles beneath the cloth. The largest was a shoulder-
bone, long since separated from its owner and grey with age. Next to it, a
desiccated tongue lay on a scrap of velvet. The third, a small bit of moulder-  
ging rope, was coiled near the last article, a glass sphere filled with water that  
contained a chip of tooth or bone. Red light glinted on them dully from the  
embers in the hearth.

The Pardoner told of the relics and their renowned origins: the shoul-  
der-bone of Saint Christopher, the Christ-bearer; the tongue of Saint Francis  
that spoke to the animals; the rope that bound the hands of Christ on the way to  
the Cross, and a chip of Constantine’s finger-bone.

These relics have vast power, the Pardoner said; power to help and to  
heal. This shoulder-bone, planted in the field, will make rich crops sprout up  
at once for the best of wine or the finest of grain. The tongue, placed over the  
threshold of the barn, will make even the wildest mount within ride well and  
swiftly, and indeed grant mastery over all animals. The orb with the finger-bone,  
given to the proper builder, will raise cities that the world will remember. The  
water that the rope hauls up from the well will be clean and pure, and those that  
drink it will live a long and proper life.

A mutter grew in the Mayor’s hall. The Pardoner hobbled over to a window and,  
with sudden strength, threw it open, and the townspeople of Grenewych beheld  
that the storm outside raged no longer; bright golden shafts of sunlight pierced  
the circling clouds and pooled merrily on the wet ground. But then he snapped  
the window shut, and the gladsome light from outdoors vanished.

Behold, he said to the gathered people, the power that lies in my hand.  
Though I give these relics to you freely, they are not gifts. They will work only for  
those pure of heart and clean of soul, who have freely and unrestrainedly told  
their sins to all gathered here. If the last sin or guilt is not revealed, you will hold  
only bones, glass, and cloth. Their virtues emerge only under this condition.

The Reeve, whose eye had been on the finger-bone ever since the  
Pardoner mentioned it, stood first and told of things he had done in the past—  
showed wrath to his wife and a dearth of hospitality to guests. His face was grey  
with shame when he finished. The Friar, still wet from the storm outside, told  
of the women he had swived and how he had taken more than his coffers could  
hold in food, gold, and gifts. Some in the room turned their faces away, and  
the men’s mouths were set in grim lines. The Solicitor told the people how he  
accepted gold to alter his decisions in the law-court. The Merchant, from whom  
he had taken many court-fines and taxes, grew wrathful, and glared across the  
atrium.

More folk stood and told of their sins—some nuns, the lusty Squire, a  
wife from Bath, and a strapping Venator. Only a single Monk remained silent.
When all was said that was to be said, the Pardoner, who had been listening intently, distributed the relics with a caution. If even the smallest sin is untold, he reminded them. none of the relics will work. But they ran off, heedless.

The Hostler took the tongue. In the stable, a wild-eyed mare kicked him in the jaw, and would not be mounted for her life; the cows in looked at him with gloomy passive eyes, but did nothing more. Atop his sawdust-laden workshop, the Reeve’s nails would not bite, though he had taken the finger-bone. The rainstorm returned with full fury, and the wood was slick. The wind blew hard, and he fell from a scaffold and broke his leg. The Vintner planted the shoulder-bone, but no grapes burst forth from the ground. In anger, he set fire to his vines, and they burned even as the rain fell. The Prior drank water from a well raised with the rope, but it was foul. He fell sick, and died hours later.

The people returned at once to the Mayor’s hall, where the Pardoner waited with a knowing smile. There is something that one of you has not confessed, he said, and a single sin untold will render these relics mere trash and rubble. Speak freely, he said, and his voice was as smooth as slow-moving tar.

Speak freely, for we are all friends of God here. But no one spoke, and night fell. It was a chill, clammy, unwholesome kind of darkness that stifled the breath, dampened nightly noises, and made the horses in the stable whicker uneasily.

The rain fell down and down, and the streets grew thick with ice and water. All windows were dark, houses abandoned, save for the Lord Mayor’s, where a grim inquest of the people raged throughout the night.

A pale dawn groped its way over the land, but still the problem had not been resolved. The relics had changed hands a dozen times, but still no miracle came. From a small window overhead, bruised wintry light made its way down until it brushed the floor of the Lord Mayor’s house. What it revealed was an ugly scene. The townsfolk had set upon themselves. They cried out horrible accusations, made false confessions, and, when nothing else worked, exhorted confessions from those that had admitted too little. The barrel-chested Hostler had beaten four men bloody, and the Constable, all authority gone, nursed a broken nose. Wives and women, having confessed to crimes they did not commit, stood shaking in the corner. The Mayor himself was chained somewhere in his own root cellar.

Still the relics did nothing. The shoulder-bone lay idly, and the bony finger in its glass merely gave the illusion of movement in the flickering lamp-light. The dusty tongue sat over the stable threshold, and yet still the stallions thrashed in their holding.

The people kept their cheerless vigil. Accusations were hurled, and the town tore itself apart. The Solicitor thumped his staff for order, but order and
reason had long ago departed. The men swore and pointed and broke furniture. The women shrieked and protested, and some of them even joined in the fray. Almost no one noticed the Pardoner slowly pack his relics under their tattered shroud and take his lean horse from the inn. Clamour rose from inside the Mayor’s atrium, but the Pardoner walked on until he passed the unattended tower of the town. Night had fallen again after a day of weak sunlight, and the rain fell in a gloomy deluge once more.

With a sly smile cracking his shrewd old features, the Pardoner looked to the skies. A dry chuckle left his lips, a lingering sound like the grating of bones in a charnel-house, and he walked on, over wet paths in the wildwood where only hunters and hermits dwelled. None but the meek eye of the moon, appearing now and again through the heavy clouds, saw whither he went as he left Grenewych behind. A cutting wind blew, and the tattered hood fell back like an opening jaw; drops of rain hit the Pardoner’s face with a hiss before turning to steam. When a swathe of cloud passed over the moon, its soft silver light faded, and he was gone. All that remained was a whiff of sulphur borne on the air.
Heart Strings
Hannah Allen

My fingers, dark from webs that spiral, spun
With charcoal smeared ’til gray from black on white,
Felt clean and soft beneath your circling thumb.
Your heart’s rendition of the beating night
Matched music in between its twisted sheets
Where we lay too, too restless in the notes
And strokes of Ringo’s garden under fleets
Of sailors traveling far from home in boats.
But then you ripped your calloused hand from mine
And played your folk for other folks, and her,
And left me mangled in the ocean’s brine
Eyes tangled up in blue, a salty blur.
      Not even gods could light our fading song:
Artificial Eyes
Karen Grieb

“If you were here...”
Words blow to wires
traveling traveling
under over so many feet
bounced to space and back again
finally vibrating past his front door
and into his bedroom
to be released
in .8 seconds
from their birth.

A bitter-sweet smile
crosses his face.
She returns it.

What days
  what days
  what days
  these are.

3,000 miles
yet only prison glass between,
taking the form of a mic and computer screen.

Map it—
It says: ‘reach Atlantic ocean; swim.’

What days
  what days
  what days
  these are.

Where wires lift our souls from our bodies,
and silence drips in two rooms
instead of one.
And for the first time he kissed me here and there, behind my ear and in my belly button. I squirmed and sighed. 

“I’m going to plant a kiss tree.” He explained, smiling and showing his one dimple. I had one dimple too, but on the opposite side. I liked to press our dimples together and feel the little negative space between our cheeks.

We had just waded out of the pond and even though he was soaking wet, his hair dripping and making puddles on my skin, his lips were dry and nervous. The kisses tickled and I got up and dashed off to the bushes where we had laid out our clothes. He got up and followed me, pressing his toes into the outline of my shadow.

He grabbed my waist and pulled me close. I pushed him away gently and ran home, my skin buzzing where he had kissed me. I touched my fingers to my ear, my belly button. They didn’t feel any different. But they were. I floated in to the kitchen.

My mother was there cooking dinner. I kissed her on the cheek and grabbed an apple. “I’m on a diet,” I explained. She must have rolled her eyes but I was already upstairs.

Hazy, humid air came in from my open window and soaked into everything in my room. I lay on the bed and tried not to move. I could smell the pond water on my skin and the freshly mowed grass from the front yard.

I slowly ate the apple and smiled as my lips stung with the sour juices that dribbled down my chin. I thought about him. His smile, the freckle he had on the back of his left knee in the shape of a comma, the way his fingers were crooked.

I fell asleep with him under my eyelids. I dreamed about him, about that moment at the pond, kisses, kisses over and over. Every part of me that he touched came to life while I slept.

The next morning I itched. Behind my ear, my belly button, all the fingertips on my left hand. I lifted my hand and there was a small green bud on each finger. I reached behind my ear and another was growing. I lifted my shirt and saw another growing out of my belly button.

I flicked the one on my belly button and it tickled. I tugged gently but it was firmly planted in my stomach. The buds on my fingertips were more brittle, I didn’t push them too far because I was afraid they would snap.

I was worried they would grow and at the same time, I felt hungry for sunlight. I went out to the backyard. I could feel all my buds reach their little
heads up to the sun. It felt warm and refreshing. I walked across the street to his house.

He opened the door and I smiled. He smiled back; he had a gap between his two front teeth. I raised my left hand. “Look what you did.”

“I told you I was going to plant a kiss tree.”

He held me and brushed his lips against my fingertip buds. He took my hand and led me out to his backyard. We lay on deck chairs. I could feel myself soaking up the sun like never before.

“Will you still let me kiss you?” he asked after a little while.

I looked down at my belly button. The light green stalk was growing, buds for leaves and flowers were forming. I smiled. “Of course.”

He kissed my lips this time, over and over.

But the next morning my mouth was covered with more green stalks. They were thick and ran into each other in a tangle. It was hard to open my mouth, harder still to stretch it into a smile. I took a shower and the flower behind my ear bloomed: a dandelion. As I lay out in the sun again, my fingertips grew longer and began to bloom too: daisies.

My belly button didn’t bloom, it just grew. A long springy umbilical cord connecting me to his kisses. After two days it was three feet long. At first it just dangled down around my ankles, but after two more days it was strong enough to stick straight out and a little bit up towards the sun. The green was being covered with thin bark.

All I could do was shower and sit in the sun. The rest of my skin was bright red from sunburn, peeling and re-burning underneath. He still came over every day. He would rub his lips over my forget-me-not lips. He was afraid to kiss me again. He closed his eyes whenever he touched me.

It got harder and harder to move with the kiss tree in my belly button. My center of gravity shifted and I stumbled forward. It was bigger all the time and one day it began to sprout leaves. He brought over a tree identification guide and determined that it was an oak.

“Rip them out please,” I begged. He wouldn’t kiss me, wouldn’t touch me, I could barely move. His kisses had paralyzed me.

He was afraid to touch me. The final straw in my book. That night I braced my left hand with my knee and yanked the daisies out. They came out, roots and all, but left behind bloody holes. I couldn’t move the tips of my fingers, and when I looked closely I saw that I had ripped out bone.

I swallowed hard, trying to keep down my dinner. I reached behind my ear to the dandelion. It was now a puff ball. When I was young I would sit in the yard and blow dandelion away, creating a cloud of fuzz. It stuck
to my hair and clothes. I spent all summer as a white haired little girl. With a strong yank it came out. My ear was pounding and filling with blood. I thought it was going to pop, the skin unable to handle that much pressure underneath.

Next came the lips, which formed scabs quickly. All around my lap were flowers with bloodied roots. I looked at my belly button oak. I would never be able to rip it out. Carefully, I made my way to the basement, leaning back as I walked to offset the oak. I found my father’s saw in his toolbox, and as carefully as possible, I sawed off the tree close to my stomach. I counted the rings, fourteen, one for every day since he kissed me.

I felt lighter than ever before. I stretched and danced, cringing as my burned skin stretched and rubbed against itself. I ran upstairs and across the street to his house. He opened the door and looked at me.

My lips were scabbed, my hair was caked with dried blood, my fingers were a bloody mess. I grabbed him and kissed him.
Art Table at the Museum
Caitlin McDonnell

A little more planning, a little less doing
she said, as if we got to Everest or equality
through clean paperwork.

If no one did, than dreams would sweep
themselves into bins designated “foolish.”

You need to think, you need a plan
she ordered, because she despised the freedom
and frivolity to mismatch. And her daughter

was mismatching blue and green ribbons on faded
red envelopes, glue pustules abound.

Her daughter understood, at three years old
that foolishness and practicality are both inevitable
but glue will always stick.
You Can’t Own a Dinosaur
Seth Cosimini

-after Barbara Ras

but you can buy the plastic ones
for kids and say “ROAR!”
as you stuff Hot Wheels
in their mouths.

You can watch Jurassic Park
and be scared at the images
of dinosaurs,
which you can turn off from the couch.

You can go to the Bad Lands
and dig up their bones,
put these bones in museums,
catalogue species, give them names,
wire the bones
into different positions,
be scared,
take pictures,
and wait for the bones
to turn to dust.

The moon used to be attached to the Earth,
a meteorite hit it
and took the moon away.
We put a flag on the moon;
We have claimed it.

But it is much harder
to take back.
The Mommy Shower (excerpt)
Katrina Hegeman

CHARACTERS:

THE MOMMY-TO-BE, baby registry diva
THE LOVING SISTER, the shower thrower
AUNT (pronounced “ant”) RANT, the almost uninvited
THE MOMMIES (at least 4), hyper-motherhood neurotics
THE BABIES, bundles of incognizance
THE SALESMAN, a bonus gift
AUNT LYNN, the latecomer

TIME: The immediate present.

PLACE: A function hall decorated lavishly for a baby shower. It bursts with balloons, banners, streamers, party favors, bows, presents, and countless baby-related paraphernalia.

At rise: THE MOMMIES and THE BABIES gather at tables around THE MOMMY-TO-BE, who sits in an elevated throne surrounded by heaps of presents. THE LOVING SISTER stands next to the throne. AUNT RANT sits by herself in a chair in the corner, visibly discontented and smoking a cigarette.

THE LOVING SISTER: (speaking through a megaphone) Hello, everyone! Yes, hellooo…Hello, and welcome. If I could have your attention for just one minute, please…
(AUNT RANT coughs repeatedly and stamps out her cigarette. THE LOVING SISTER, irritated, waits for the room to become completely silent.)

Very good. Thank you all for coming today to this wonderful baby shower for my wonderful baby sister. (smiling up at THE MOMMY-TO-BE) Well, I guess she’s not a baby anymore.

(THE MOMMIES laugh.)

But really, my sister and I are so glad that you—our selfless friends and relatives—have come together to share in this momentous occasion.
AUNT RANT: (digging in her purse, loudly) The invitation said “catered.” I’ve got it right here. (raising the invitation) It does not say “homemade macaroni salad and cheapo deli tray.”

(No one seems to hear her, as they are all smiling wildly at one another.)

THE LOVING SISTER: As stipulated in your Shower Itinerary Packets, I will begin today’s shower by reading a poem I wrote for the occasion. I wanted to give my sister something special, something from the heart.

(THE LOVING SISTER clears her throat.)

(lyrically)
Babies are born just once, it’s true,
Popped out of the wombs of me and you.
I’m so glad my sister has tied the knot
And finally proven her oven is hot.

(sniffing and tearing up)
My sister, with child, is swollen and round.
(pointing at THE MOMMY-TO-BE’s belly)
We’ve determined its sex via ul-ter-uh sound:
It’s a girl!
It’s a girl!
It’s a girl!

(THE MOMMIES “aww,” and THE MOMMY-TO-BE hugs and kisses THE LOVING SISTER.)

AUNT RANT: (disgusted) Pile of Hallmark puke.

(THE LOVING SISTER gestures toward THE MOMMY-TO-BE’s belly.)

THE LOVING SISTER: (to THE MOMMIES) Won’t you all help me in welcoming this baby into the world? (She puts her megaphone down and, leaning over the throne, kisses THE MOMMY-TO-BE’s belly.)

(to the bulging belly)
Welcome to the world, Pittsburgh!
THE MOMMIES form a line and do the same. THE MOMMY-TO-BE sits regally, beaming.

THE MOMMY-TO-BE: (speaking over THE MOMMIES and patting her belly) It was the city of her conception.

THE LOVING SISTER: Romantic and trendy!

(As THE MOMMIES continue their welcoming, AUNT RANT gets up and loiters in the background, picking up the presents and shaking them. She finds an envelop she likes, opens it, and pockets the cash. MOMMY 2, catches her doing it and steps in.)

MOMMY 2: (overtly motherly) Don’t think I didn’t see that, missy.

AUNT RANT: See what?

MOMMY 2: (extending her hand) Give that back.

AUNT RANT: I don’t know what you’re talking about.

MOMMY 2: (wagging her finger furiously) Oh, I think you do. Don’t try to play games with me. I’m a mother: I know exactly what you’re up to.

(AUNT RANT sits back in her chair and takes out a pile of lottery tickets from her purse. She goes to town scratching them.)

MOMMY 2: Just wait until I tell everyone about this, you bad, bad girl. When they find out, you’ll be—

AUNT RANT: (looking up, menacingly) Put a lid on it, stretch-marks, or I will.

(Pause)

MOMMY 2 bursts into exaggerated bawling and returns to THE MOMMIES, who comfort her.

THE MOMMY-TO-BE: (rising from her throne) Is someone crying?

(AUNT RANT scoffs.)
THE MOMMY-TO-BE: (harshly) Who’s crying? (Crying MOMMY 2 quiets and the room falls silent.)

(Pause)

I know it’s an emotional day for all of us, but please refrain from that infant-like mewing. I’ll be hearing plenty of that, soon enough.

(THE MOMMY-TO-BE sits back in her throne.)

Proceed.

(THE MOMMIES return to their seats, chattering and checking on THE BABIES. They enter a frenzy of diapering, powdering, hand sanitizing, and formula mixing.)

THE LOVING SISTER: (walking over to AUNT RANT, who is still absorbed with her lottery tickets) Excuse me. Aunt Rant?

AUNT RANT: (looking up) Is it time to go already? Drats. (starting to get up)

THE LOVING SISTER: (pushing AUNT RANT forcefully back down into the chair) Oh no, silly. We’re just getting started.

AUNT RANT: Well, what do you want?

THE LOVING SISTER: I just wanted to discourage you from…um…well… I’m sure you noticed that there’s a bar in the restaurant downstairs, and, well… (beat) You’re a sloppy drunk. (beat) Let’s just put it that way. Remember the bridal shower?

(AUNT RANT rolls her eyes.)

The…um…incident with the garter and the face paint?

(AUNT RANT goes back to her lottery tickets. THE LOVING SISTER lifts up AUNT RANT’s chin so that she is forced to make eye contact.)

(threateningly)
Just don’t ruin this day for my sister—for everyone.
We’re all here to celebrate birth, the birthing of our beautiful children.

(AUNT RANT slaps her hand away and goes back to her lottery tickets. THE LOVING SISTER stares coldly and walks back to THE MOMMIES, who are still in their frenzy. She bustles among them for a few moments, cooing the babies. THE MOMMY-TO-BE—watching all of them with fascination—takes notes as the women share their mothering tips.)

MOMMY 4: Keep a small bottle of hand sanitizer in your purse in case someone asks to hold your baby!

MOMMY 1: Come on, Arlene. That’s an old one!

(THE MOMMIES agree.)

MOMMY 2: How about this: To lighten baby’s hair for that summertime glow, just use a little lemon juice! It’s all natural and costs less than hair dye!

(THE MOMMIES like that idea.)

MOMMY 3: Wait, wait, I’ve got another one! After cutting out all of your diaper and formula coupons, staple them onto a fashionable beret. (taking out her coupon beret and putting it on) When you wear your coupons on your head, you always know where they are!

(THE MOMMIES cheer, and MOMMY 3 tosses her beret, catches it, and puts it back on again.)

MOMMY 1: Here’s something new—I read about it in Crafty Mom: Recycle your old car air fresheners into a festive holiday mobile!

(THE MOMMY-TO-BE, THE LOVING SISTER, and THE MOMMIES clap and cheer; squirting powder into the air. THE MOMMIES continue cheering and begin running around, acting out childrearing acts with one another—i.e. cradling, feeding, playing, scolding. During the commotion, AUNT RANT gets up.)

AUNT RANT: (walking to the door) Jesus! What I wouldn’t give for a Bloody Mary! (trying to open the door but finding it locked) What the hell? (banging on the door) Hey! Let me out!
THE LOVING SISTER: There, there, let’s save some of our energy for later.

(AUNT RANT sits, bewildered. She takes out some cough medicine from her purse and gulps it down. THE LOVING SISTER climbs up onto a rather large present.)

(shouting)
Listen up, mommies!

(THE MOMMIES start settling down.)

(fiercely)
I said shut up!

(Instant silence.)

(sweetly)
Thank you, mommies…

THE MOMMIES: (whispering in unison) Mommies! Mommies! Mommies!

THE LOVING SISTER: It’s that time. Time to get down to business—hey motherhood is work, right?

(THE MOMMIES laugh and nod.)

(suddenly serious)
As you can all see, there are Baby Bingo cards on every table.

THE MOMMIES: (together) BABY BINGO!

THE MOMMY-TO-BE: (rapidly, in a high-pitched voice) Baby Bingo! Baby Bingo! Baby Bingo!

THE LOVING SISTER: Yes, yes, I know we’ve all been looking forward to playing Baby Bingo. It’s a baby shower favorite!

AUNT RANT: Why are you doing this to us? Is this what motherhood is about?
I am not doing this! I’m not! I’m not!

**THE LOVING SISTER:** *(cheerfully)* Everyone is going to have fun, and everyone is going to play! *(staring at AUNT RANT)* And we’re all going to *play nice.*
You and I both were searching for home.
We had been displaced by
the Hurricane of the Century
and were racing down shredded alleys,
the city to our backs.
The sleeve of my velvet overcoat
brushed yours with each brisk step we took.
The world was vacant to us, except for the
sobs and squeaks of rats
scurrying about on the littered ground below.
There were warehouses
looming on either side of us—
their windows were blotched out,
walls drenched in foreign graffiti and swastikas.
Up ahead, through the
narrow alcoves, shone a dim bulb;
a dim bulb whose light dulled our path.
Pushing pins into her portrait, Pangea marks the aliases and places she has been.

Meghan Smith

Last autumn,
as North America, I preferred pine perfume, spring water,
hungered after shiny things. Drove my own car, ordered breezes to go
cruising into winter. When I masqueraded

as Europe for six months
in muffled leather boots, my grey woolen coat slithered through alleyways.
A pack of cigarettes. Left pocket. Lapel singed with soap and spearmint.
I bought a ticket from Moscow to Beijing,

became Asia that spring,
held a weekly radio show in
cognito. My fingernails were like petals swirling around switchboard dials. Riding
the waves down to Buenos Aires,

I assumed
South America, danced for three days and nights without stopping I watched sweat pool in my footprints, the moon rippling in my skirt, and tilted my head back until I thought I could hear the other side of my feet,

the other side of the world. Sitting at the dinner table,
I melted into Africa, pressed my ear to my sister, whispered: Do you remember hurricanes at midnight? How we ran to each other, toggled flashlights, drew paths on the quilt? We could skim messages over oceans. We could be pen pals.

Raking leaves in the dusty yard, I unearthed
my Antarctica and Australia diaries from high school. Antarctica always locked in a blue hardwood room playing Rachmaninoff, warming fingers by bleeding
on catgut. Propped on bar stools, picking off adventurers, ordering whiskey on the rocks.

As Australia, I carved distances into divided faces,
raised clay creatures and architecture that glowed terra cotta and sang in drum beats.
I wiped my brow, looked up to admire shadows cast across the garden patch.
I repeat myself:

_Thumback riddle_

every map. I have been
many places without
anyone noticing.
I walk through customs
and they always say
welcome home.
Pangaea in the library
Meghan Smith

I complete research
in a room that smells like burnt leaves
and oil slicks, quiet
as the precipice before a sneeze.
Circumnavigating,
I learn how I was conceived:

Collisions. When present-day-this
clutched what-is-now-known-as-that
until, cleft and clave, I suckled seas.

Combing microfilms and card catalogues,
I uncover yellow clippings, evidence:

Candids of my awkward Atlantic
growth spurt, gap-toothed Tethyan Trench,
high-speed Cenezoic dramas.

Fossils of terrestrial creatures,
foraging connoisseurs
of Brazilian and Ghanaian soil.
South America and Africa, complementary
coasts like a halved conch. Sonogram.
Fetal-curved, I slept in my amniotic Panthalassa sea.

My new portrait begun by Ptolemy.
Posed north-end up, I reclined,
neatly quartered.
Filed out of order
is a stowed away

McArthur’s universal corrective map.
Me hanging upside-down, knees over monkey bars,
arms stretched wide, mouth open—

my throat still burns
with that volcanic laugh.
Apartments
Gabrielle Kappes

Apartment 12
“Those who speak do not know; those who know are silent.”
—“Reading Laozi” Bai Juyi

Mrs. Chan silently watches at the window—
they enter but they never see her.
Broadway flows, a gray river rumbles near
the courtyard her universe; the impatiens her peonies;
red heads bobbing in her mother’s garden before
invasions and executions, when Nanking
mountain’s shadow descends and
fishing lanterns glisten like dragon’s scales.

Autumn nights in Apartment 12, she cooks
jasmine rice and breathes the silky steam.
Shantung shawl ripples red—
falling falling falling.

Apartment 54
The sun hides its fire in the co-op king’s face—
a flaming mask. Carmina Burana shakes his
dull brain, smothering each shareholder’s grumblings.
Goneril and Regan, his Rottweilers, snarl strange
screams at courtyard whines and the thud of shutting doors.

King Foible eyeballs his hoard of indoor parking
spaces, storage lots, and garden plots of swollen
plum tomatoes. But pit-bull urges gnaw at his
spongy soul and battered bones until all that’s left:
a raw heart seared and branded by greed’s hot iron.

A tattered blue bathrobe as his shrunken mantle
he roams the laundry room, howling at coin slots
and lint bins. The cycle continues: dryer’s glass
eye mirrors his round face, regal wreaths of socks and shirts
crown his head—clanking prophecies, spinning visions.
I dream of the desert often. I have never been to a desert before. The one in my dream is flat and purely tan. There is nothing else there other than the color tan – no bushes and no trees. There are never any animals in my dream of the desert, and there are never any people. It is just me, and I stand in the pulsing heat with an uninterrupted view of nothing. The sun is bright, but in my dream I do not have to squint my eyes. It lies heavy on my skin, turning the consistency of my sweat to milk. I pulse with the heat of the sun, my heartbeat radiating throughout my body. It is exciting. I can turn in all directions and I see everywhere.

Life in prison is a melding of binaries: comrades with enemies, the individual with authority, sterile cleanliness housing the convicts of a nation. Memories with the now.

The first backyard that I remember was small and dusty, surrounded by a chain-link fence. There wasn’t much in it – mostly dirt and a couple of straggling patches of grass. A plastic Fisher Price slide, barely taller than my head, resided in one corner and a dingy kiddie pool in the other. Algae grew thick in the bottom of pool, and we used it to play Pictionary, scratching out stick figures in the slime with our fingers. On one side of the yard was the back wall of our trailer; the other three sides butted up to the yards of our three neighbors. My earliest memories are of that square of backyard, looking into those of my neighbors. Depending on how you focused your eyes, you could almost see through the diamond pattern in the fence and pretend it wasn’t there. Two dogs lived in the yard to the right, a Doberman and Dachshund, and of the two, the Dachshund was the more intimidating. I think it was because he was so small in comparison to his yard-mate, because he was the kind of creature that owners dress in plaid sweaters and matching hats, because he was the kind of pet that I wanted myself. He had to prove himself to me that first day I stuck my fingers through the fence to rub his damp little nose. He snapped, biting down on my fingers till they bled, and there is still a scar there on my pointer finger. It is ragged and turns ruddy pink when my hands are cold. From then on I knew that I probably shouldn’t trust in appearances, and I knew that I definitely shouldn’t trust in the things that I wanted the most. They end up being the worst for you, as it turns out.

I woke up at seven today. The first thing I did was two hundred crunches; most of the guys here do. That’s usually the sound you wake up to, the huffs and grunts of the guys in the hall doing there morning routines, pumping
like steam machines. The first half of my crunches was bicycles and the second I did hanging off the edge of my bunk so that I would be at an incline. It is important to do the harder part of any work at the end and not at the beginning because that makes you a stronger person. You shouldn’t be afraid of hard work, even when you are tired and your muscles tremble and your mind whispers, “You don’t need to do this.” If you listen to it, you give up and then you’ve only done the easy half. And where does that leave you?

I loved a girl once. She was prettier than any of the lady officers here; her hair was long, brown, and shiny. She lived on the opposite side of town from me, and sometimes we used to meet in the field behind our middle-school to do cartwheels in the grass. I remember one day the whole field was awash in white and yellow daisies. It was early in summer and she smiled and rolled into a clump of them and then lay down. She said that she was studying flowers in her biology class and plucked one of them.

“Bellis perennis,” she said, pronouncing the words carefully and plopping down next to me, offering the daisy. She pointed to the petals, and the yellow nodules in the center of the head. “These are its florets.”

“Both of them? The white and the yellow part?”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

It was a perfect day. The grass smelled as grass should; bitter and green. The air was quiet, but not silent. Dragonflies hummed by and the air was so dry it crackled. I was happy and my chest felt too full, like it was going to burst and my organs would fly away, finally free.

“Did you know that they are considered weeds to nearly every house around here? They try to cut them down and they spray them and they dig them up out of their lawns. They prefer just plain green grass, with no flowers.” She looked sort of sad when she said this.

“Well, at least they have grass. My yard is mostly dirt,” I replied, and she laughed.

“Well keep this one and maybe if you leave it outside, the seeds will bury in the dirt and then one day you’ll wake up with a backyard full of daisies.”

We picked handfuls of flowers for me to take home, and I left them to dry out and die in the backyard for over a week. No flowers ever bloomed. I think I should have kissed her that day, and told her that I liked her, but I didn’t.

I live at the end of a hall next to a man named King Vernal, and he says that I can either call him the King or Your Majesty. I have lived next to the King for three months now. My last neighbor was a man named Rick, who got transferred to a different prison, up north to New Hampshire. I don’t mind the King. He is built like a freight train, and he has round cheeks that puff up almost
to eyes when he grins or when he holds his breath. He’s a lifer, nine years in out of who knows how many. Until he dies, I guess.

My cell is exactly like the King’s, which is exactly like everyone else’s in our hall. It is six feet wide by nine feet long by nine-and-a-half feet tall. The walls are cement, and are painted off-white on the top half and are painted a soft sea-foam green on the half closest to the floor. You can see where the paint didn’t adhere to the cement as well as it could have; there are tiny porous holes in some parts, and others have bulbs where the paint dripped, then gathered and dried. My bed is for one person and it is metal and bolted to the floor. It is covered with a grey mattress pad that is pilling badly. My pillow and blanket are thin and rough to the touch, but they keep me warm when it is cool. There is a metal sink, a metal toilet, a metal shelf, and a metal towel rack. These things are bolted to the wall and even though the metal is dull and scratched, the stainless steel has a clean feel.

I had to stay overnight in a hospital only once in my life. They said I could have probably gone home, but they wanted to make sure that my brain didn’t swell up inside of my skull. I was twelve and in the sixth grade. We took a field trip to the beach and our teacher had us count the number of living things we each saw and try to figure out what exactly they were. I had the most fun at the wading pools in the rolling mounds of rocks exposed by the low tide. The water in those pools was warmer than in the ocean, heated by the May sun. I could count the rings of slick algae and the knobby layers of barnacles depending on how often the rocks were covered by water: only a little where I stood at the top and growing steadily more abundant toward where the water was pooled. The water was clear; it smelled brackish. When I put my fingers in, they were diffracted by the light, and it looked like the tips of my fingers were fleeing, shedding the rest of my hand like an exoskeleton. I trailed my hand through the strands of seaweed reaching up from the bottom of the pool, floating hairs attached a granite scalp. The swirled shells of tiny ocean snails clung to the sides of the pool, at least twenty blending into the inky wetness of the rocks. To be that small, I thought, would make even these shallow pools seem like an entire world. One little puddle reached on forever to them. A crab the size of my palm, horny and purple orange, scuttled just out of reach, and when I twisted my wrist to create a mini-whirlpool in the water, he bounced and drifted across the bottom. I let the salt water dry on my hand and my fingers felt grainy and sterilized.

I slipped on a dark clump of algae on my way off the rocks back down to the shore. My head hit the barnacle-encrusted bank and when my forehead wouldn’t stop bleeding, my teacher wrung her hands and called an ambulance.
They said I hit my head pretty hard; the teacher heard it crack.

The hospital felt sterile too, but in a fake way, like bleach was covering a
darker dirtier truth. I preferred the salty freshness of the ocean. As I lay penned
between the rails of the hospital bed under the fluorescent lighting, my head
wrapped four times around in gauze, I sucked the taste of the afternoon off my
fingers.

I go outside every day, during the hour I get outside of my cell. The rec
yard is good for that. Even though the walls are built high and solid through
and you can’t see anything outside the rectangle field of the yard, there is
nothing blocking the view of the sky. If you go to the very center of the yard and
lie on your back and look straight up, the top corners of the walls are outside of
your peripheral vision and all you can see is the gray-blue sky above you. If you
don’t turn your head at all, it feels like it is all around you. You could be
anywhere, for all you know.

Lifers are the ones that are here for the long haul. I know a few of them
other than the King. They are the ones that aren’t going to ever know anything
else. They have their memories and they have what is happening to them in an
instant. The King says that he doesn’t make memories any more. He says that he
doesn’t need them because memories are to save for later. He says, “If the only
later that you have is dying, then what is the point?”

A daisy bloomed in the exercise yard once. It was the beginning of
summer and one day a flower started to bloom the middle of the patch of grass
that the guys sometimes used as the outfield for baseball games. No one
noticed it at first because before the flower appears, it is just green leaves like any
weed. But then, within a couple of days, a stalk shot up a few inches and a bud
sprouted open and there in a dusty patch of rutted grass a shock of white blazed
forth, brilliant and pure. It took all of us by surprise, I think; we crowded around
and just looked at it. The leaves were dark green with a waxy sheen, like the skin
on a sick person’s face. The slender stem of the flower shot straight up from the
center, straight and true for almost five inches until it bowed over a little bit at
the top where the flower weighed it down. The flower was white and yellow like
a daisy should be. There were forty-seven petals. Jimmy said that that meant the
flower was probably his because he was forty-seven years old as well. Deshawn
said it was actually probably his flower because he was the one who saw it first
and told everybody about it. Nobody else said anything.

I went out to see the flower every time that I was out in the yard; I think
most of us did. Just to look at it. See if it was still there. One day it wasn’t.

I heard later that someone stepped on it; whether it was on accident or
purpose was unclear. Later on he got attacked by a couple of guys in the dining
hall. They fucked him up pretty bad, enough so that he couldn’t see out of one of his eyes and he had to stay in the hospital ward for a few days and nights. I don’t know if it was because of the daisy, but I wouldn’t be surprised if it was.

Dinner last night was good. Spaghetti and meatballs, with brownies for dessert. Milk or water. If a prisoner uses his utensils in a malicious way they get confiscated. He must eat in a separate place, with others that have the same problem, and they don’t get anything to eat with anything other than their hands. They eat finger food, usually the Loaf, which can be cut off in slices. It has everything that you need in it: vegetables, beans, bread, cheese, raisins. It is terrible, it is a punishment, and I make sure to eat the good food that I am given carefully and properly.

My mother used to read to me on weekends during the summer outside on a blanket. We would bring lunch in a basket, usually tuna or chicken salad, and she would lay my head in her lap and read to me the favorite parts of the books she was reading. She had an affinity for French writers and biblical advice. “Le bonheur ne vient jamais comme on l’a imaginé,” she would chant from above me. “At the moment of temptation, sin and righteousness are both very near.” They became our mantra, and we would say them over and over to each other. We were lying there once, listening to the lilting timbre of our own voices when a raven flew over us. I saw his shadow pass on my mother’s forehead and the brief darkness made her look older than she was. He was a silhouette in the sky, backlit by sun until he was nothing but a blotch of ink on a blue and white paper sky. He did eerie figure eights among the clouds and then stopped, hanging in the sky, motionless, not even flapping his wings. He should have fallen out of the sky then, I thought, but he didn’t, wavering up above us as if our words had cast a spell and frozen him where he was. When I stopped speaking, he flew away and I felt like I was God.

Head count is everyday at 8:40 a.m. We leave breakfast and head back to our cells and stand in them next to the barred door. A guard walks by and checks us off on a list. The hall is between thirty-two and fifty-four stride lengths, depending on which officer is walking it. Each footstep echoes and they run around inside of your head for a while even after the officer is gone. No one speaks until it is over.

I ask the King about his life before he got in here. “I was the security guard at a stadium,” he says. “Did you like it?” “Not really.” “You didn’t?” “No.”
“But why not?”
“No one really listened to me.”

I wonder, sometimes, what the King did to get in here. He is the biggest
mystery in this hall; everybody else always announces the depths of their crime
as soon as they arrive. But not the King, and when I ask he just stares at me for
a few seconds and then starts to hold his breath until his skin tone deepens as the
blood rises to the surface. When he lets it all out, it’s in a low whistle like a loon,
and he never replies. “All my life is in this moment,” is all he ever says. “There is
nothing outside of it.”

Panopticon. Someone always watching. If a mole sees a hawk flying
across the sky, he will not try to run back to his burrow, he will not try to fight.
He will stand frozen, paralyzed by his knowledge and his fear of what his actions
may lead to. But what happens if the mole can never see the sky? He will never
know when the hawk is there—if it is ever there at all. So what does he do?
He can take his chances, or he can stay paralyzed forever.

The eyes of the law are always watching, they tell us. We know this well;
we are in prison, aren’t we? We took our chances.

I am up for parole in a little over a year.

“Every man, every woman, carries in heart and mind the image of the ideal
place, the right place, the one true home, known or unknown, actual or
visionary,” someone once said. I think I know mine. I dream of it often, so much
so that it worries me. My mother once said to me, “Be careful what you wish for,
because it might just come true!” If I find this desert, what am I supposed to do
when I get there?

I want it so bad that I might ruin it.

I had the dream again last night, only this time there was a tree there in
amidst all the tan. I don’t know what that means. I like it when everything is flat,
when everywhere you turn it goes on forever, slipping around the curve of the
globe like a fitted sheet. The tree confuses me. I have never been in the middle
of a forest before, and I don’t think I’d like to. They would be threatening, I
imagine, ready to press into you and suffocate.

I asked the King what he thought about it, but he just grunted and
shrugged.
Sonnet XI

Stay away: the son never comes, even though the father’s been gone for years. A slow bruise, an old pain, still. Everywhere, here, there are barriers to entry: the Navy cap, the one bedroom, the slotted spoons lined up at attention, even the path that crumbles underfoot outside. Born blue—he never recovered, faltered with T and L, 52, 23, emotional cognizance. Down the hill, his aunt’s taken him in, invites him to Christmas. But this place, still, is a clapboard fortress: the father’s ashes, blown into the wind, form a thick cloud around the coast, a net to trap the unwanted. And his wife? She mostly stays away, as well: wintering in Florida, venturing North only when the stars, or ferries, or plane paths, align. Two daughters. The light smells like sea. It bakes the ground. If anything, this is a place for women. She comes alone, if at all.

Sonnet XII

This is a place for women. You came alone, three children, husband at home. Your children bring you now: the neatness of your life has eroded, like black and white crossword squares set adrift and floating, gently, to the torn edges of Sunday’s paper like neurons gone rogue, like the way I imagine you fell out of bed last night, gliding to the floor, your hip splitting precisely in two. This, for once, is understandable. Optical grays everywhere, now. We think things will never change, and then they do. They turn, they open, they close, like the perfect green tomatoes I found under the seaweed and leaves raking the corner garden last fall. Mornings, she asks questions without knowing the answer: who are they, and why shoes? Her children ask her to tie her shoes, she might need her feet someday. Looking down, she discovers the island the way our ancestors did: coastline.
Sundays and Tuesdays Higgins would convince me to spend the night and he’d make love to me in the morning. No matter how fast he’d finish, I was always late for dance and while I’d press against the barre and pose in arabesque, I was loose limbed and sweaty and I’d imagine he was too, slowly coaxing himself out of bed in the late morning’s light.

We were different then, love: you had a beard and I had nothing. It was Ithaca, the whole town was damp with spite. We’re different now: you’re quieter and my eyes have worsened, but still when I plié in first and turn pirouettes, I remember your agony. The floorboards moan underneath me as you once did.
Sober Habits

Twenty-seven chairs, none of them matching. No bookcase, no nightstand, no bed. Twenty-seven places to sit—burgundy settee, bittersweet Bentwood, highchair (wicker), office chair (metal)—but no place to sleep. Yard sales—trinkets, price-tags, attic-found treasures—can be deadly, for someone with a loose change purse, like me.

I welcome winter, with its sober habits.

Summer

Past the front porch calico children run barefoot, cupping wild blackberries in their hands, relishing summer’s sweet, staining, purplish juice. Rocking chair spinsters, fussy from leisure, chase the children, with their voices. “Aren’t you going to wash those?” No head turns; no stride breaks. Rush, hunger, laughter. The hay-haired, suntanned children disappear behind the house.

When His Window Became an Ocean

Thomas sunk into himself, went underwater, so to speak. Sure, he nodded hello, farewell. But his eyes were washed over, window-watching trees sway. *Like sea grass, silent motion,* he said, rising on reed-like legs. Unlatching the window, lifting, reaching out. His silver hair glimmered, fish scales in the sun. *All those diamond-crest waves.* He dove.
I bought a brainwork jacket and my father cried over it at breakfast. His tears formed small, negative spaces in the sea beneath him. It was a bowl of pickled herring, fish and cream, another reminder of his childhood. The first had been the jacket, which had a faux fur collar that rested atop the thick weave of the jacket itself, the kind with raised veins running all over it, like a flexed, thirsty forearm, or a surgical scar, looking like coral and smelling like the Salvation Army. “It reminds me of brain,” he said, all glassy-eyed.

It had been just a few months since his parents died. Fairly expectedly. They had moved from Florida back to New York just prior to that, as it was obvious enough to everyone involved that their time was soon to come. “I miss the weather,” my grandfather had said, and we remembered that he had never gone outside. The movers had picked up their house in Florida and tipped it over, spilling the contents into a two-bedroom apartment in Roslyn to create a more condensed replica of their former home. When we visited them, we sat on familiar chairs and ate off familiar plates. We had the same conversations, basically. The candies in the brown enamel box on the coffee table was the same. You might call them old-fashioned but they were more likely just old. Jellied candies. They left your bite memorialized in teeth marks after the first, and only, taste.

Sometimes, the stories my grandparents had to tell were so fantastic, I couldn’t believe them. I couldn’t picture them being any more alive than they looked before my eyes. My own father didn’t make them seem any more credible; he was wholly unenthusiastic about his childhood and life in general with them. It seemed clear to me from early on that his own life mirrored in excitement what theirs was in boredom. He grew a great beard when he went to college. He lived in a dark, wooden house and belonged to an eating club. He told jokes to men who became famous and re-used them in their movies. He was friends with the now-renowned homeopathic doctor (who also had a great beard) and described how he (read: they, together) took drugs in the park. He married a millionaire and travelled the world at her expense until she got too crazy to call a wife. He then married my mother, who befriended the other woman, because that’s what hippies did. And then he had me, which was great for him, I know, and I feel sorry that he wasn’t the same way for his parents.

Though my father practically invented a country. It’s too much to explain in one, small, space, so read it as a metaphor if you like. He invented a country and his parents never went to it. I knew they were well-travelled; there
were albums upon albums of photographs to show it. My grandmother describes to me, when she wants me to see that she has, in fact lived a life, the story of a restaurant in France where they let their cats roam free. On the chairs! The tables! The mantelpiece! Onto the very Maitre’D! They couldn’t stay. My grandmother doesn’t like cats.

She was a very beautiful woman, which I also knew from pictures, and had a brainwork jacket, too. She wore it to my father’s bar-mitzvah, which we had been talking about one day at the apartment in Roslyn. Rather, my father had been talking about it, and I had been listening. My grandmother had been staring nervously at the concert ink all over my hands, and my grandfather had been looking at the television. “Isn’t that just the clearest picture you’ve ever seen?” And it was. The bar-mitzvah memory grew smaller, the jacket grew bigger, and my father stopped growing all together.
I am learning to put my faith in man
Alex Bandazian

Sharing memories over burning branches and butterbur tea,
I apologize to myself,
and ask forgiveness for the crooked god complex that I have accrued.

There’s economy in the background—
sunrise and sunset—
selling lower highs and higher loneliness
in pursuit of new perspectives on unknown outcomes.
Back in the city
I rev up my T.V. and soak
revolutions per minute
broadcasting from first-world food courts,
mumbling.

And somewhere a farmer at the end of his days,
picks up a pitchfork in steadfast mockery
of traditional non-conformist, non-violent protest.
And behind him a thousand others prickle
against the darkening clouds.

A benevolent god, trying to keep you smiling in these heart-long days.
I haven’t had the time even to shave.

And somewhere a man on a railroad platform checks his watch.
And, noting that He is late for the first time, leans out over the tracks
and looks off beyond the vanishing point
for the train that will soon arrive.
At sunset
Braden King

Since the shortest day
the light is growing longer;
a waking cat, stretching
its paws and back, grasping
a moment of air, yawning
to swallow the world.

It’s so cold at night
It sets, I know
and I can’t stay.
every day, moving
slowly across the horizon.

Your child
still unborn and no less
beautiful,
will crawl and walk,
discuss the moon and
politics.
And she will be you

saving the softest note
of wool, hand open
for the dawn.
A rushlight, flickering and small,
is better than no light at all.