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** Indicates a branch piece. Branch pieces respond to, comment on, or are inspired by a weekly “Trunk” piece. Both trunk and branch are included in the Chapbook.*

EDITORS' NOTE

"The Universe being intrinsically a Perhaps, being too probably an 'infinite Humbug,' why should any minor Humbug astonish us? It is all according to the order of Nature; and Phantasms riding with huge clatter along the streets, from end to end of our existence, astonish nobody." (Carlyle, Past and Present)

This is the season of feverish quiet, of almost-revelation. It reeks with the watery smell of snow and gasoline. This is the season of constant, unrealized potentiality. The season where things are brewing, where pressure builds but never leads to release. But Humbug allows for interruption. We remind each other that creation can emerge from stagnancy.

We still meet in the poetry room of Sanborn. It still has strange shadows and slightly uncomfortable furniture, and private conversations are still impossible—the ceiling bounces whispers all over the room. We still bring poems, prose, a podcast and we still choose to believe in someone else's work for an hour each week and it is still wonderful.

This is the season we learn how to leave. The editorial board will be transitioning after this chapbook, giving the seniors the chance to play violins and go for runs and write a thesis or two. We'll keep workshopping, of course.

So here's what Humbug has been thinking about recently, a collection of pieces that have few common themes and no common direction—just like us. But we're here, and we're writing, and that is somehow enough.

Much Love,

Lacey Jones

Hum bug: noun

- | | |
|-------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p>'həm,bəg/'</p> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Deceptive or false behavior 2. A coastal mountain in Oregon 3. An exclamatory challenge to a statement or idea |
|-------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

Note About Art

The art in this issue was created by Rebecca Rowland '16, Julia Huang '16, and Tiantian Zhang '16, to whom we are (still) eternally indebted.

Molly Ryan

A Group of Americans Walk Through the Bush

**"There are rules for walking in the bush.
Stay alert.
Watch where you step,
keep your eyes open."**

Twisting dance around
bushes and thorns,
bodies of ducked heads and curled
shoulders.
Grabbing snagged hats
from snatching branches.

**"Keep your ears ready;
Sometimes the animals are hard to see,
but you can hear them."**

Huffing wildebeast,
cackling hyena,
keening alarm of the zebra,
all drowned by heavy falls from boot-feet,
each step an intrusion,
a cacophonous symphony.

**"Be quiet.
Do not talk or make noise
(only Black Africans do that,
even in cities,
to scare the animals away)."**

Narrowing eyes,
wrinkling brows,
cocking heads, they do not speak.
But even silent, the white Americans
(gossip, grins, guitar)
are the loudest animals in the savanna.

**"If you see an animal,
do not run. Stay together.
Move to keep the gun
between you and the animal.
If it charges, I will shoot."**

Stepping blindly,
single file line following
whitemanwithrifle.
The tracker
(Black South African)
has his eyes on the ground,
searching for sign, avoiding glances.
He will stand apart at the campfire that
night.

"Trust your guide 100 percent."

Visiting Africa, the tourists
trust their gear,
their stomachs,
their money to these men.
In the bush, they question
(in silence)
the guides' guidance, and rules.
They question their senses,
themselves.

Logan Collins

The Tall Folk

**This piece was presented as a branch to “A Group of Americans Walk Through the Bush”*

The raindrops have each entrapped little pieces of the savannah. Zoom in. A simmering oily perfusion churns incessantly within the little sphere of fluid. It changes restlessly; first appearing to contain an iridescent cluster of mating beetles, then a flock of glistening gossamer storks, then a tangle of shiny snakes. We know who started this storm. It was the Tall-Folk who left the rest of us humans behind over two decades ago.

The Tall-Folk started off just like you and I, gangly and fleshy and clothed in various vestiges. Soon before they left Earth, they were sighted during tornado chasers. They stood unmoving in the midst of the ripping wind: thirty meters high, entirely hairless, and with skin of silvery grey hue. The Tall-Folk, by virtue of their physical stature, earned their appellation. Some mistook them for real-life examples of oft imagined alien caricatures, but most of us realized who they really were. Now that they no longer walk the grounds of this planet, they seem to be set upon launching these vicious tempests upon the land of Africa.

No one dares venture to certain regions of the continent anymore, though there have been reports of unsettling events observed from a distance. The skies consistently flicker with eerie luminescence during the nighttime. Someone thought that she saw a herd of elephants dissolve in the rain, only to be reformed about five hundred meters east of their original location. Another person swore that a lion had levitated in the night and performed a weird aerial dance. Several small cities were discovered to have simply vanished.

Observatory telescopes have illustrated other curiosities. Nightmarish shapes steadily hover in geostationary orbit above the African continent. Some of them resemble distended swimming hyenas while others are clearly representative of the Tall-Folk themselves, though it is impossible to say whether those forms are actually their physical bodies.

Now, in yet another instance of unnerving bizarreness, the raindrops are alive and full of miniature animals (though it is unclear as to whether those animals are actually a part of the physical, or are merely ghostly data packets). We don’t know what will happen next, but nobody tromps through the African brush anymore.



Chrissy Long

God

Hanging out with God is exhausting

And God is like any one of them, with a name and a voice that all amounted to something no more, and no less, than any of the others were. Yet his is an endlessly burning energy that lives on a sliding scale of impressive to obnoxious.

“You heard about God’s new thing yet?” “Hmm? No I don’t think so.” “Yeah well, I dunno it’s not a lot. It’s a new war, right now, I think. But he’s really excited about this Churchill character.” “Hmm. Yeah. Yeah he said something.”

And the conversation peteres out, dissipating like fog under the hot rising sun. Not that there is much in the likes of fog, or sun, or spatial existence between the two of them. They resume being, quietly. Because quiet being is the nicest thing to do.

God has heard the conversation, of course, but he doesn’t much mind it. He doesn’t much mind anything that prefers to be, and not do. And he does. And he does lots. And he gets himself giddy at the stubbly chin hairs he threads through his newest creation. This would be a mover, a shaker, one of those plot-stirrers who out-strives and out-does and out-achieves most of his other few billion creations. God has a fondness for those above all others. And he makes this one a Buddhist for the Hell of it.

“The next one...I’m going to give the next one about 40 years,” God speaks to the Be-ers. They grunt out a lazy noise of acknowledgement. “He’s going to grow up always just a little hungry and dream about large buildings until he realizes how cold they feel and instead live in a small hut with a wife who makes two sons for him while he writes a book about the merits of simple living that he mostly believes and dies in his sleep from a stroke at 40.”

“Yeah,” one of the Be-ers says.

“Make some too,” God says.

“Nah,” the same, or maybe the other Be-er says. It flops its consciousness in a high-frequency ting, adjusting.

“I’m going to make some characters that are like you guys,” says God.

“Yeah, okay.”

“Do you want to hear about them? They’re in this next part. This next part of the story has nuclear energy. I’ve been thinking about this for a long time now. I’m gonna introduce nuclear energy as a plot point.”

“Tell us more about Mussolini.” A third Be-er has wandered in, a touch more empathetic toward God than the first two.

God's face sours. "No. I'm tired of him. He's on his way out."

"Okay. Churchill seems good."

God nods, pleased, and content again. "He's a good character. Sometimes as a writer, you just need to throw in some real wit to keep a piece moving. That's always what I'm concerned about. If the piece is exciting enough. I feel like the humans were stagnating. Did you feel like the humans were stagnating?"

"No," the empathetic Be-er answers, who hasn't paid much of any mind to God's stories since he put those favorited apes of his up on two legs.

"Okay good. That makes me feel better. I was worried about that, you know? But I also didn't want to make too much happen. It wouldn't feel natural. I'm getting rid of Mussolini, you know? Spoilers. But yeah. It was a bad move I think. I'm trying out this new plotline where the potency of humans is explored more subtly. Not everywhere. But some places. Want to hear about this new character?"

"No thank you."

"She's like you."

"No thank you."

"You can name her."

"Will she die?"

"Yes."

"Then why am I naming her?"

"It's more potent this way!" God insists with an exasperated flick of his energy. "There's so many of them I have to cycle through, but they all connect. It's about the potency of the human condition."

"Uh huh."

"They're about to have nuclear energy."

The third Be-er has joined the first two, awash. It flickers to relax. Stretches its tendrils and indulges in the softness of being. God grunts. He doesn't hate the Be-ers—he is one after all—he just finds them dull.

The Be-ers all fall to the same frequency of flicker. One of them thinks about Churchill and loses its synchronization. It fixes that quickly. And no, it doesn't hate God—it is one, after all—it just finds God exhausting.



Laura Sim

The Beautiful Country

It's 1992, and Silence of the Lambs becomes the first horror movie to win Best Picture, Boris Yeltsin announces that Russia will stop targeting American cities with nuclear weapons, the Washington Redskins defeat the Buffalo Bills 37-24 at the Super Bowl, and Microsoft releases Windows 3.1, signaling the dawn of the golden age for Windows. It's 1992, and somewhere in a harshly-lit swap meet in Compton, California, an elderly Korean couple has no knowledge of the Academy Awards, Boris Yeltsin, the Superbowl, or Microsoft 3.1.

Ji-eun's grandparents Don and Hwa-ja do know, however, exactly how many pieces of jewelry they sold in the past week at their corner kiosk, and exactly how many more they would need to restock their inventory for the following week. They know the price of gold at any given. And they are most certainly aware that the next major holiday is Father's Day on June 21st, for which they have already prepared an extra stock of men's watches and silver cufflinks.

Immigrants own the majority of the kiosks at the Compton Swap Meet. You can smell it in their packed lunches, which they warm up with cheap microwaves hidden under their cash registers. The pungent smell of kimchi from the Korean shopkeepers complements the Vietnamese shopkeepers' *nước chấm*, while the sharp notes of minced Chinese pork travel through the air. Many of the vendors have old transistor radios playing the music of their motherlands, oblivious that the stench of their food and the voices of their cultures may turn customers away. You can see that the vendors have taped photos of loved ones on the inside walls of their kiosks, as ever-present reminders of those they are working so tirelessly for.

When you enter the swap meet, the first things you see are the maze-like aisles of VHS tapes. Randomly arranged and only some of them pirated, the VHS tapes stand stacked next to the cassettes, most of which are locally produced mixtapes that the nearby Tower Records refused to stock. Nearby, you can hear the blaring sounds from the kiosk selling car stereo parts, blasting the latest Top 40 tracks. Compton Swap Meet features dozens of clothing vendors as well, with names such as Fashion 4 U and Lucky 21. They sell discount clubwear like sequined, flouncy skirts and neon-colored halter tops, hardly distinguishable from the clothes sold at surrounding vendors. Years later, one of these same kiosks would become the retail giant Forever 21, climbing up out of the swap meets of immigrant America to the shiny streets of Fifth Avenue.

But for now, Ji-eun's grandparents can only fantasize about the American dream and pass their days catering to customers who rarely purchase the jewelry they try on. Most of their customers are the local black citizens of Compton and Gardena, and they range from young, troublemaking wanderers to tired, new mothers bringing in their young girls to get their ears pierced by Hwa-ja. Occasionally, rowdy teenagers arrive with boomboxes blaring on their shoulders, and with their limited English, Don and Hwa-ja can only look at each other helplessly, not knowing how to ask them to turn the volume down. "You always have to keep an eye on these kids," Don always says. "You think these kids are really coming in to buy some gold?" Other times, when their granddaughter is there to help manage the store, she can translate, but speaking the language of currency does not always translate to easy sales. But despite the difficult customers and slow business, they always show their kindness. Unlike the other neighborhood cashiers, her

grandmother always places change directly in her customers' palms, rather than setting it on the counter. Her grandfather, on the other hand, always replaces watch batteries for free for his returning customers.

One summer afternoon, Ji-eun returned to her grandparents' store following a day spent in the city. It was the summer before her freshman year at Berkeley, and Ji-eun had enrolled in a class on identity and social justice issues at the community college. She considered the opportunity after having been called a chink in her senior year history class, and the ugly word had never left her mind. So for five hours a week, she attended classes downtown, and though her family rarely understood what was

discussed in these meetings, she tried to share with them anyway.

"Our son-nyo is back!" Her grandfather shouted, pleased to see his granddaughter, as if she had been away for three years, not three hours.

"Hi, hal-abeoji!" Ji-eun said, returning his hug. "Business going alright today?"

Outside, the three heard the deafening alarms of firetrucks and police cars.

"Tsk, there's always so much crime in this part of town," her grandmother said with a sigh. "Business went alright, but that's not for you to worry about. Just focus on your studies, hm?"

They enjoyed Ji-eun's company at the store. Her welcome visits punctuated otherwise uneventful days, and her grandmother reveled in stuffing Ji-eun's stomach with spicy rice cake and porridge, while her grandfather asked her to translate whatever letters had arrived in the mail.

"Hush, turn that radio down, Don," her grandmother said. "Or put on something that Ji-eun will like."

"Grandma, don't trouble him," Ji-eun said, but her grandfather would turn on KCRW. "It's fine, really -"

Just then, a voice filled the dead air. "It's Seth Midan on the air with a breaking report. Four LAPD officers were acquitted of assault today in the videotaped beating of Rodney King, and riots are already breaking out in the city and surrounding areas. Affected areas include East LA, Central LA, Gardena -"

"Did you hear that, hal-meoni, hal-abeoji?" Ji-eun cried. "Remember how that taxi driver almost got killed by those four cops a couple weeks ago? They're being cleared, oh my god, I can't believe it."

Though Don and Hwa-ja did not know who Rodney King was or that there was a beating at all, they did sense the fear in their granddaughters' voice.

"They're saying that riots are breaking out," Ji-eun continued. "I'm calling Mom and Dad and telling them they should close up the dry cleaners. And we need to leave now. We need to tell everyone else here to leave now, too," she said, frantically looking around at the neighboring kiosks.

Ji-eun could see the resistance in her grandparents' eyes. She could see her grandmother thinking about all the expectant customers who would be arriving later that day to pick up their repaired jewelry, and how confused they would be to find the shop closed. But that day, for some uncertain reason, Don and Hwa-ja did not resist their granddaughters' pleading. Perhaps it was the fear in her eyes, or the raw urgency in her voice.

And so Ji-eun and her grandparents rolled down the steel doors that housed their shop every night, unsure of the events that would unfold. As swiftly as the fires that were spreading over the city, the three hopped into their car. Over the sounds of their car's ignition, they could hear the continued shrieks of alarms. It was unclear whether the sounds were coming from police cars, firetrucks, or ambulances. This time, Ji-eun turned on the radio. But she did not have to hear Seth Midan's voice to see the terror that was reigning over the city. Seth Midan could not tell Ji-eun or her grandparents what it was like to see their favorite neighborhood liquor store being burned to the ground, the one that Ji-eun had visited as a child with two dollars in her hand to buy her favorite candy. And Seth Midan could not describe the anger of the rioters marching down the open streets, reeling from the

news of the police verdict.

When Ji-eun and her grandparents finally arrived home, the three were met by the anxious embraces of Ji-eun's mother and father.

"We'll return to the dry cleaners and the jewelry store soon," her father said. "But not until we know it's safe, maybe sometime tomorrow."

Three days passed. Much of it was spent with eyes glued to the news, waiting for any sign of relief. But the news could not deliver the assurance Ji-eun's family needed. Visions of their once-favorite neighborhood haunts flashed on the screens. Mr. Park's grocery market had been looted to oblivion, while Mrs. Lee's beauty supply store had been reduced to a pile of ashes. Eventually, her stubborn grandparents had had enough, and fulfilling the American dream did not mean sitting around. They knew to expect the same destruction waiting for them, if only to receive an answer to their curious dread. And so, they decided it was finally time to return to the store and see if their store had met the same fate as Mr. Park's or Mrs. Lee's.

"Hal-meoni, hal-abeoiji, let me go with you," Ji-eun insisted. "Things are probably fine now, but I just want to be there with you in case."

"Always so caring, our granddaughter, so grown up," her grandfather said. "Are you sure you want to come?"

"Of course, it's not like I'm headed downtown anyway, with everything that's been going on."

When Ji-eun and her grandparents pulled into the parking lot, the three were relieved to find the swap meet just as they had left it. Unlike the terrorized markets and convenience stores, the swap meet did not show any indication of burnings or lootings from the parking lot. The peeling paint of the big-box store building remained, and the weeds in the cracks of cement were growing as wildly as ever. Then they opened the doors.

They first saw the overturned aisles of VHS tapes, with their remaining contents spilled everywhere, bleeding into the mess of cassettes littering the ground, many of which were cracked because the looters had trampled over them in their haste, and then Ji-eun and her grandparents saw the kiosk that sold the car stereo parts, with broken speakers flung onto the ground and the rest ripped right out of their displays. The looters did not forget about Fashion 4 U and Lucky 21, where the same colorful clothes had been flung in every direction, flouncy skirts, neon halter tops and all, and then their eyes finally met what remained of their own corner kiosk - her grandparents cried out as they saw the shattered display cases, housing nothing but broken glass. Their locked cabinets had been torn open, and the cash register and safes housing their inventory had been seized whole. Even her grandmother's microwave had been taken.

There was nothing to do but mourn that day - mourn the riots, mourn the small businesses, mourn lost profits, and mourn the state of the city.

On the following Monday, Ji-eun drove downtown. She hoped that returning to her course at the college would restore a sense of normalcy to her life, or at the very least, distract her from the events that had transpired over the past week.

Sarah, the course's professor, opened the workshop. "I know a lot has happened in the last week, and I think this is a good time to debrief." Some sighed, while others shifted uncomfortably in their seats. The reality of the riots stung like fresh wounds, and Ji-eun could feel her chest grow stiff.

After a moment of silence, Ji-eun said, "My grandparents' store was looted this past week, and everything was looted or destroyed. I'm angry, and it's hard for me to not think of them as these innocent victims. Because the police beat Rodney King, not my grandparents, or any of the other Korean business owners.

Another pause.

"I know it's easy to view your grandparents as the scapegoat, Ji-eun, but right now, we need to remind ourselves why the riots happened," Sarah said. "There has been growing tension with Koreans moving into black communities and taking their business. It's not your grandparents' fault, Ji-eun, but it all happened."

It was all difficult for her to hear – that it wasn’t about her, or about her grandparents. Always guilty of wearing her heart on her sleeve, Ji-eun could feel the stares of her classmates. Some threw pity her way, others hostility. A small part of her knew that her professor was right, but she stood up and bolted out of the room anyway.

In Korean, the word for America is “me-gook,” which literally translates to “The Beautiful Country.” So it is no wonder that young Korean couples swoop into immigrant hubs like Los Angeles, expecting every street to glisten with the fervor of Rodeo Drive, and every American walking down these streets to have wild, blonde curls bouncing along with them. They imagined American eyes to be endlessly blue, as if Americans owned their own skies inside of themselves, because in The Beautiful Country, everyone can enjoy the pleasures of ownership. These soon-to-be transplants dreamed of a blissfully quiet life in the suburbs, in modest, white-picket-fence houses they would purchase with their twelve-hour shifts, just like the ones they had seen in the movies.

But it was not this America of their visions that greeted them during the summer of 1992. In fact, this white-picket-fence syndrome would soon come to a screeching halt, when the America they came home to was a crashing sea of brown, black, and yellow, with no blonde or blue in sight. In the angry heat of East Los Angeles, fruit stands occupied by tired mothers and impatient children littered every street. “Fruta fresca! Fruta fresca!” they would yell, all morning and all night, until the mothers’ voices grew hoarse and the children grew cranky. The dirty, graffitied streets hinted at gang territory warfare, so that no one felt safe walking home after sunset. And once every so often, someone would find an empty syringe in an alleyway or a body, impossibly cold in the angry Los Angeles heat.

What became known as the LA Riots shed new light on the meaning of the American Dream. To Ji-eun’s family, the Dream looked like a quiet life living in the suburbs, making just enough money from a jewelry store and dry cleaning business to send their Ji-eun off to college. They hoped that their Ji-eun would live a life unburdened, and that her freedom could take her to every stretch of America’s promise. But three days of destruction had shaken thirty years of hope, and Don and Hwa-ja had nothing to show for their hard work other than a pile of shattered glass.

Sometime that next year, Don and Hwa-ja heard of an available storefront on Crenshaw Boulevard. The property was located in a bustling strip mall between a newly renovated 99 Cent store and a Payless, not far from Compton Swap Meet. Perhaps that could be their opportunity to start again, they thought, a fresh new start in a store all their own. But their insurance claims from last year’s

disaster had not been processed yet, and Don and Hwa-ja could not buy enough inventory to stock a whole new store. But more than the money, their spirits remained shaken, and nothing could erase the feeling of their hearts sinking when they first walked into that looted swap meet. But the American Dream does not wait for those who sit around, so the two decided to take out some loans. With their new store’s success, they could pay off the loans in ten years – maybe even five, if business really took off. With hesitant optimism, Don and Hwa-ja collected the few savings they

had left and opened a new store, one that stood proudly on its own. They restocked and rebuilt, and this time, they focused on repairing the relations that had been ignored in the past. They learned the names of their returning customers, and they spent slow business hours learning English. Even though it was difficult, Don and Hwa-ja continued to feel the sweeping motions of the American Dream, if only for the loved ones whose photos were taped on the wall. Because Father's Day was coming soon, they had already prepared an extra stock of men's watches and some silver cufflinks, too.



Grant Schutzman

Thumbs Do Not Have Magic Powers

Today, I noticed the crisscrossing lines where
the skin by your mouth meets your cheeks.
Your eyes bend downwards. I want to scrub those lines off
softly, with the tips of my thumbs.

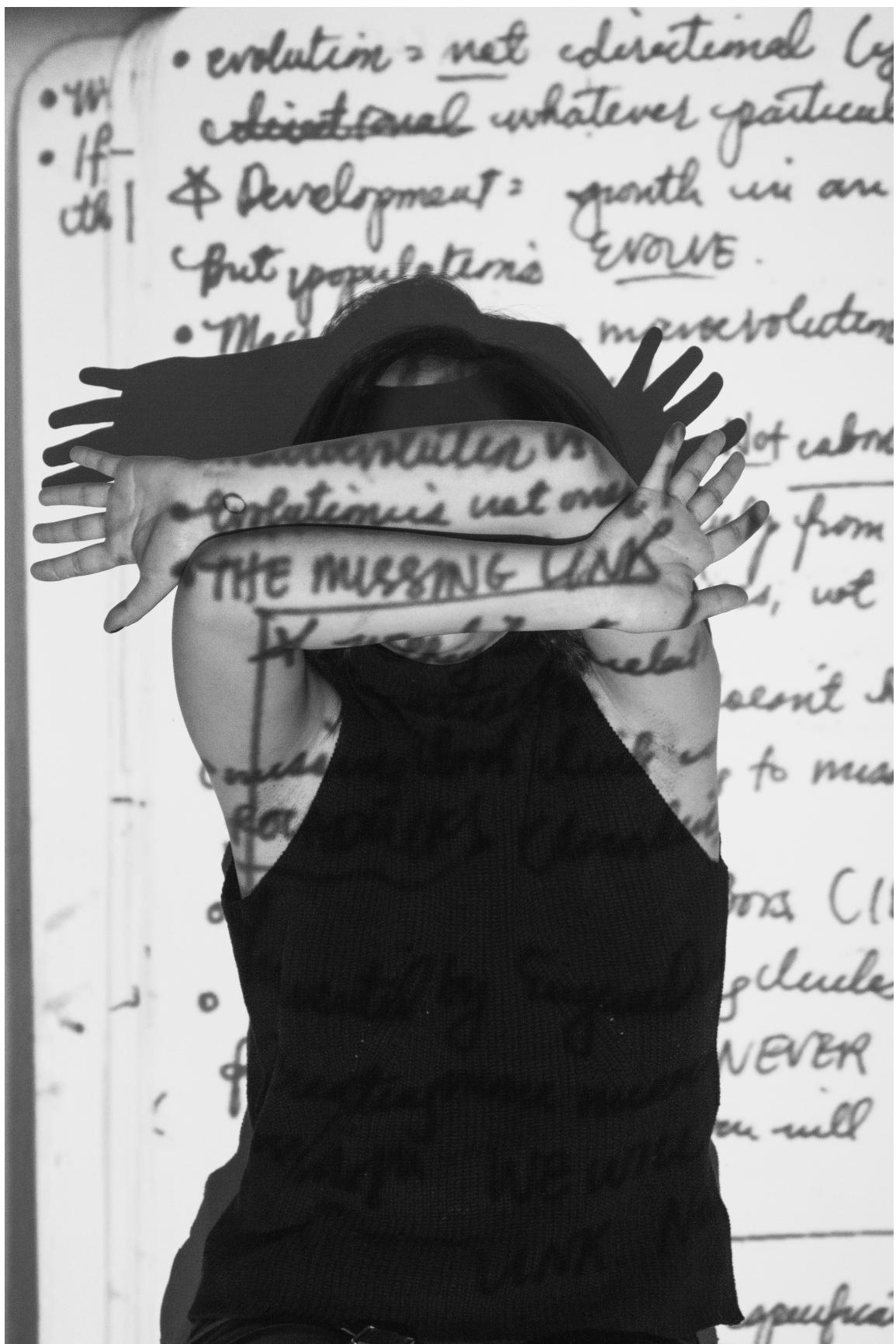
You dreamt bright, warm spaces for me,
so large that I squint when I look
from end to end. You dreamt me
into grand, empty landscapes
no man could fill.

You did not ask me to –

Just to expand in their space.
Just to stand in their light,
so, naked, I could feel the heat
from the sun you'd laid there.

Today, I remembered
that you will not live forever. That those lines
along the corners of your mouth cut
far deeper than they appear.
That they sever skin from bone
at the end of life, and the red light
from the fading sun carves them
even deeper.

I want to scrub them off softly,
with the tips of my thumbs.



Robbie Herbst

The Sunday Morning Club

The Sunday Morning Club is where men go to sip instant coffee. When you finish your instant coffee, you chew on cigarettes. When you finish your cigarettes, you stare at maps. If you finish staring at maps, then you leave the Sunday Morning Club, and you come back next Sunday. All the members of the Sunday Morning Club were there last week. They'll all be there next week too. The only rule of the Sunday Morning Club is that you don't say anything, but that isn't very difficult to follow.

To get to the Sunday Morning Club, you head east on West street, take the 3rd right onto 4th street, and count your steps to 100. You arrive when you see the storefront with the rusted skeleton of a bike outside and the blue sign above the door that says something like "Mike's Automotive" or maybe "Klaus' German Deli" or even "Church of Christian Scientists. You never notice what it says because you don't think about the walk here or where you are going or where you came from.

You show up and the men are named something like "Jeremy," or "Quentin," or "Felipe," but you address them in the second person and don't use names. If it's your first time at the Sunday Morning Club, you don't speak at all. You sit and stare at a particular map of South America and study the bulge of Brazil. If it's your first time and you are lucky enough to get any coffee, it will be decaf, and it will taste like shit. You have to bring your own cigarettes – the machine has been sold out for ten years.

I said before that the only rule of the Sunday Morning Club is that you don't say anything, which is true and shouldn't be questioned. But men still talk. Those who know how to speak without saying are beyond reproach. The ones who break the rule are the ones who sniffle or cry or let their voice crack. If you do that, it's your last time at the Sunday Morning Club. It happened to Levi last week.

This is what the Sunday Morning Club looks like: Camouflage, fluorescent, laminate. Crumbs, carpet stain, linoleum. Crown molding, aubergine. Popsicle sticks. This is what the Sunday Morning club doesn't look like: Teak, calligraphy. Swiffer wet wipes, radishes. Lofts, burgundy, French onion soup.

You don't really know what it looks like. It doesn't occur to you to look until after you've left, when it's Sunday night and you're back in bed and it's another week again. And you think, "why bother. I won't be back next week anyway." You don't actually think that, but you hope that one day you will. What you actually think is, "I'll get a good look next week. I'll remember next week." You won't.

The men who come for the first time are normally named something like "Aurelius" or "Stewart" or "Tyrell," but you never remember their names because they don't tell you because they are staring at South America. You think, "they are new. I'll ask next week."

If you don't drink coffee, drink orange juice. If you don't like cigarettes, chew cherry stems. If you are a Mormon and abide by neither caffeine nor nicotine, and you also need to be at church very soon, you can stand in the corner. Be warned that people will stare and think, "well, at least I'm not him."

The coffee here tastes like licorice. The cigarettes taste like black pudding. The maps are usually outdated, except the ones that show the highways and lowways of Arizona or the geologic features of the White Mountains.

The men who talk usually say things like "policy," or "fearsome," or "unequivocal." If you talk back, they'll say things like "neuter," or "Philippines," or "my second cousin Joanne." One man named John said the following:

Have you ever been to Costco? It's like one of those bulk food stores. Yeah, you've been to Costco, who hasn't nowadays? It's ridiculous the stuff you can get there. Toilet paper in packages so big you can't fit it in your cart. Big vats of ketchup you'll die before you can finish. All of it dirt cheap too. It's a steal! Especially if you're some minivan driving mother-of-ten who knows how to handle a shopping cart. Now have you ever noticed what happens when you leave the store? You've just spent thirty minutes checking out with the GDP of a small country, you've loaded up your bags and what do they do? There's a guy, the receipt guy, it's his only job. He goes through every item on your receipt and every item in your cart. If you have something that's not on the list, you're in trouble. If not, he wishes you a good day and you go load up the trunk of your Toyota Corolla and just like that you're on your way and have already forgotten about the inconvenience. But let's think about this for a second. Why does Costco - a store you need a membership to use anyway – need to have this extra security measure? Well you gotta figure, if they're doing it, it's for a monetary reason. A company that big doesn't do anything unless it's for money. That means that their shoplifting problem was so bad, such a disproportionate drain on their store, that they needed this guy doing a job you would normally seen done at stores with the poles on the shopping carts to make sure you don't walk out and steal the cart too. So these minivan-driving, Oprah-watching, 38-year-old white women are actually stealing big fuckin' mounds of toilet paper and dress shirts by the dozen and anything else you can think of to sell in bulk. They take those big fabric purses of theirs and just stuff them with bunker-bottles of mayonnaise. It's disgusting. This is the good part – you can look it up it's all true I swear – these women steal more than any other demographic in America. Doesn't matter where they go, they just steal and steal and steal. You only see the security at Costco because that's like, their watering hole. It's like, finally, we've rounded up middle age suburban moms, the real menace here, and we can police them like they need to be policed. I mean Christ, they are lawless. They call it kleptomania, see. That makes it ok. Shit everyone has kleptomania. You have kleptomania. Nobody's looking and you'll take the toilet paper too. He smiles and she smiles and they all fucking smile at each other like everything's ok. Yeah, bullshit. I'll tell you about Costco.

This is the sort of thing you hear at the Sunday Morning Club. John is here every week. John has never been to a Costco.

When I said earlier that the men don't say anything, I meant it 100% and that shouldn't be questioned. You must never know why the other men are at the Sunday Morning Club. If you speculate privately, it should be a stray thought, and you should squash it with great psychic

vehemence, for should you know why the others are there, the Sunday Morning Club will cease to exist. You'll get lost turning north on South Street, or counting to 202, or else you'll enter the church only to find a congregation, or a garage, or a corned beef sandwich. And then you're really screwed because every Sunday for the rest of your life you'll lie in bed wishing you were the kind of person who bought instant coffee or chewed cigarettes or knew how to read a map properly. And you'll be stuck with your own name, which is something like "Devin," or "Kevin," or "eleven," and even thinking about that isn't very much fun and no use besides. So that is why there is the rule about not saying anything and that's the end of that.

But men talk. You talk about Costco and European History and Proust and anything else that doesn't spin its wheels like a week does, anything you can fit into language and move and shape and control like a tongue. We sit at our folding tables, sipping instant coffee and chewing cigarettes, thinking on the violence of Saturday night, or the optimism of Wednesday morning, or the soul-crushing certainty of Friday afternoon. When you are done staring at maps you go home and you don't feel happy or satisfied, but maybe a little emptier and little cleaner. It's not that you need to feel emptier or cleaner, for the week will happen again, and whether or not you are ready you will be crushed by the spokes of Saturday. Then you'll be right back at the Sunday Morning Club, staring at Chile and biting your tongue.



Isabelle Blank

The Northern Mecca

Strewn across the kitchen linoleum around a half-packed dim plaid suitcase are half empty gum packets, dusty water bottles, scratched DVDs, an iPad, sharpie-smeared CDs, boxes of Tic-Tacs, sickly yellow McDonald's napkins, a SPAM can that does not contain an ounce of SPAM, and the Lexus user manual. I bend my head over and throw everything on the floor into the compartments of the suitcase on top of our clothes – a movable mess, though the suitcase won't zip.

An organized revolt of the inanimate.

I sit on the suitcase, compressing the contents of our life into the compact space, merging the useful with the superfluous. The teeth finally catch and, hopping off, I clap my hands together and move to the front window. Next to the car parked in the concrete driveway are three Costco 50 unit cases of Diet Doctor Pepper – my wife's morning, afternoon and evening pick-me-up. My daughter used to call it poison in a can. I glance back at the SPAM can.

Stella's blue compact hybrid pulls up into the driveway. She emerges from the car, her auburn hair coiffed into two perfect lumps at the top of her head, rolled into a tight bob that ends just under her chin. Her hair has remained the same throughout the thirty years I've known her. At university, the bob had more of a wave, but those lumps on either side of her part have remained the same. Back to just the two of us, living in only two rooms of our house, it was like we really *were* back at university.

Just over her head, a squirrel darts out from a tree branch and hops along the edge of the fence. It jumps back on the fence as a strong wind blows, losing its footing momentarily. I wonder what the other squirrels would do if it plummeted to its death in my driveway and its soul left its body so that all that was left of the squirrel was some fur and blood and guts and maybe an eyeball rolling out from its skull. I wonder if squirrels mourn.

My wife clicks the 'lock' button on her keys and looks back as her car blinks and honks before coming into the house. She rolls her eyes at me to convey *what a day* she'd had, and puts her hand on my shoulder as she passes me, stepping into the kitchen. I stay standing, staring at the fence where the squirrel has since disappeared.

"Long day?" She turns to look at me before gathering the debris on the floor into a black garbage bag. The SPAM can sits untouched on the floor.

"Unbelievable." She dumps the garbage bag near the sink, then walks back to the middle of the kitchen, picks up the can, and checks the makeshift seal.

"We almost ready to go?" Her voice is quiet.

"Yep, just gotta load the car." I heave the suitcase up from the floor and move it to the car, throwing it into the back before sliding into the driver's seat. Stella gives me a grey-eyed look before squatting down to load each case of canned poison into the back.

She slips into the front seat with the SPAM can while I'm changing the position of the vinyl-covered steering wheel and adjusting the mirrors. Stella glances at me and brings up a fist, counting with her fingers,

"DDP, snacks for the car, Claritin, ibuprofen, vitamin C, Colgate toothpaste, electric toothbrushes – you did bring the electric ones? Good. Mouthwash, credit cards, phone chargers, computers, triple A card. Ok." She slaps her hand on her thigh, pats the can that sits between us, and sighs.

My wife grew up in the north and moved down south with me when we married, to raise our daughter in humid summers and mild winters. She associates idealized American life with

the north: canoeing the summer away on Lake Placid, skiing in the mountains of New Hampshire, ballgames and hotdogs at Fenway Park, New Year's in company of the Chrysler building. It was for this reason that she chose the North as our daughter's final resting place. Why we had to scatter her ashes in the dirty waters of Pleasure Bay I did not know, but I was making this drive for my wife, not my daughter.

I pull out of our driveway and drive along the streets of our little neighborhood. I look over at my wife, who has an absent-minded smile plastered on her face, though her knuckles are white, her hands clenched in her lap. I drive through the expanses of summer-drained brown lawns sprinkled with sparse low shrubbery, and pass beige strip malls colored with the occasional red neon sign.

“The lawn guys still coming while we’re gone?”

“Should be – Ed’s got ‘em scheduled.” We say nothing else. Stella is now entirely focused on inspecting the brown grass in front of each house as we pass by.

The expressway on which I’m driving lies on the other side of Southview’s main boulevard before it veers off to merge with the highway. The strip of land between the two main drags is a commercial sweet spot. Whitewashed brick squat buildings huddle together along the strip between, boasting Chinese take-out, three-star hotels with brown roofs, and florescent nail salons.

“Merlin’s Cleaners.” I stiffen and look over at my wife, but she is looking down at the veins that bulge from the taut skin of her hands.

Turning towards the highway, I can feel the vibrations of cars on the bridge overhead as I pass underneath. The SPAM can knocks against the edges of the cup holder, and Stella rests a hand on the top to stop it from shaking. She takes it off once we’re travelling fast and smooth, and looks blankly out the window.

“Do you think she wanted this?”

I look at her now, and take my right hand off the steering wheel to pat down the hairs that are standing up at the back of her head from the static of the vinyl seats.

“I know she wouldn’t have wanted to lie in the ground.” I take my hand off her head. She continues to stare into the expanse of the highway. We don’t say anything about the road or my driving or the greige seats or the greige world or the SPAM can that sits between us, letting silence settle empty and barren in the car. Eventually, she reaches out for the radio knob.

“Tom Smith doesn’t care about minorities – don’t give your vote to Satan!”

“It just happened so quickly.”

“This ad is not affiliated with any candidate or party. All views expressed do not reflect on either candidate or party.”

I nod and grip the steering wheel, continuing on the long, straight expanse of highway until the noise on the radio becomes fuzzy and the red needle on the gas gauge is close to E. We pull into a gas station in a type of Southern no-man’s land between one-street towns that boast things like socks and billboards quoting the Bible.

When all of the cogs and wheels of the car roll to a stop, the electrical currents running through the car becoming negatively charged, Stella slips out and slides her credit card through reader at the pump, punches in our zip code, and sets the gas nozzle in the car. As the black numbers on the screen tick up, her chest expands and contracts to fill up with the smell of fresh gasoline. She loves it, which is why I always defer to her to fill up the gas tank.

“I forgot shampoo.” Stella looks up at me between breaths of the saccharine, toxic fumes.
“I’ll just be a sec.”

Across the street, a CVS rises up out of the cracked pavement in the gold afternoon light. The light inside CVS is sterile, and cleansing, like the infrared lights at the dentist and doctor's that rid surgical tools of teeming bacteria bred from the human body. I breathe in the smell of Clorox and Hershey bars, and walk further, squinting up at the aisle signs, searching for shampoo but thinking of SPAM. The tilted security mirror lining the back of the store seems to hover over the aisles. I stare at my reflection in the mirror. The figure above me is warped by the tilt, and grey while emitting a white light caused by the glare of the florescent lights interacting with the pallor of my skin. The image has a spiritual and sacred nature to it – my features in the security mirror are portrayed with an elevated clarity. My body in the mirror hangs above the people buying soda and laxatives, a purveyor of drugstore activity – a CVS deity.

I rub my eyes and walk down the middle isle to the shampoo. I randomly grab an aqua bottle and look down at the label. Sea Breeze Root Revitalizing Shampoo. A woman with olive-toned skin stretches across the wrapping, one leg outstretched across hazy hints of a beach scene.

I want the woman on the shampoo label. I want to look into her blue eyes, to tell her about my daughter, to tell her about the wire hanger and the blood, about the SPAM can. I cannot talk about these things with Stella, but this woman on the shampoo bottle is different: removed, exotic. She exudes sexuality, mystery, inner peace. I walk back up the aisle to the cashier, peace bottle in hand.

“Four seventy-six.”

Less than five dollars to purchase my shampoo bottle confidant. I am aware of the absence of my reflection in the atmosphere as I step out into the humid dimming evening light. Stella is waiting for us in the car, sipping on a can of Diet Dr. Pepper, glowing blue with the light from her cell-phone.

We drive on through the night. The green digitized numbers on the dashboard clock seem to accelerate, and the moisture in the heavy southern air falls away as we draw closer to our destination. Clouds gather in a ubiquitous mass overhead in the near-darkness – a purple-grey knotted mass that calls to mind the tales of Greek heroes lost at sea amidst a Zeus-driven storm. An orb of orange light hangs over the trees running alongside the highway. A streetlight on a street beside the highway? A wildfire? A UFO? A ghost? God’s presence itself? No, merely a flashing traffic sign directing traffic away from an accident. I look to the side of the road, rubbernecking they call it, but I see no wrecked cars, no bodies, no blood, not even skid marks. For some reason, that makes it worse.

I pass signs, which some time ago changed from the South’s green to the North’s blue. Gone are the billboards advertising cigars and preaching quotes from the Bible, replaced by lit wooden signs pointing towards scenic vistas and log cabins. It is as if the North has somehow replaced industry and faith with a commercialized outdoors – as if the entire region’s worth is based solely on how scenic the topography proves. It’s comfortable in the car, I am with Stella and in some strange way I think we both feel a little closer to our daughter – we too are in some strange limbo on an anonymous highway.

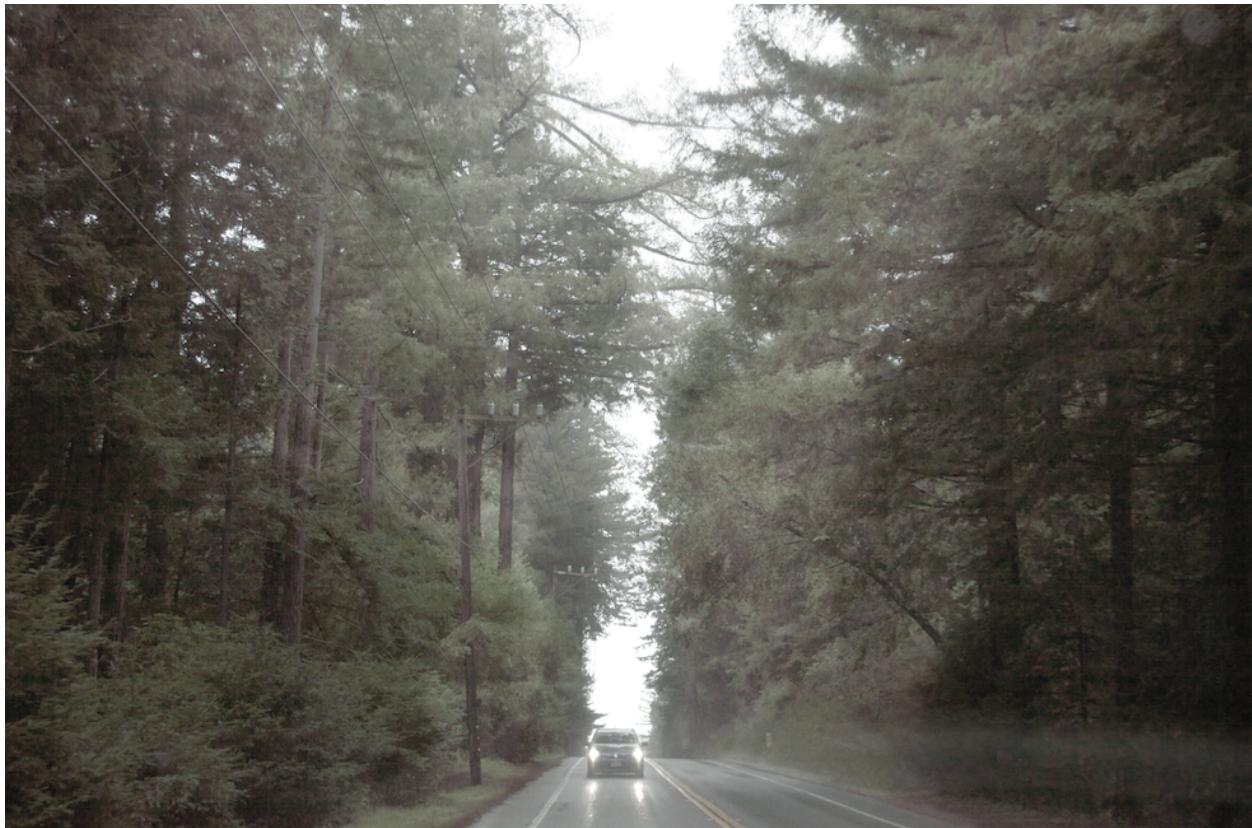
I put my hand on Stella’s thigh as we pass the blue highway sign: Massachusetts welcomes you. You, plural – we have finally arrived. The land looks no different past the sign than it looked 500 feet before it. As I get off at the beach exit, we’re revisited by strip malls, neon signs, and billboards of white beaches and colorful umbrellas, of robin’s egg blue skies and lighthouses quaintly perched on gray cliffs are illuminated by white lights in the yellow-black night. I pull into a shopping center, in view of a Rite-Aid. The hotel we rented for the weekend sits behind the shopping center overlooking the bay. I wonder why we even bothered to book a hotel. I want to get the deed done and leave, never to return to Pleasure Bay.

Once we're in the lot, I cut the ignition and sit in the seat for a minute, thinking of a story I had read about the healing waters of the Ganges, of the Statue of Liberty that stands in the dirty Long Island sound, of the Zamzam well and bird baths. Stella pats my hand, then slides out of the car with the SPAM can in hand. The trunk opens with a metallic thud. I place my forehead on the steering wheel and think of our daughter's southern baptism, then open my door and step out of the car and walk around to the back. Stella is squatting on the shopping center asphalt. She stares at a mass of dust that has fallen out of the overturned can, spreading in pathetic clouds across the parking lot. Dark matter. I do not say anything, but simply open the trunk. Stella does not move. I yank out our suitcase and, at the site of this unholy mecca, the zipper breaks. Dog eared tabloids, ripped binders, computer chargers, hair elastics, empty Styrofoam cups, vitamin d canisters, reading glasses, peanut butter packets, and nail clippers all fall out into the electric night – mixing with our daughter's ashes.

Stella looks up at me. The hem of her khakis is covered with the dust. Her eyes are dry.

"I wanted to scatter them to the wind – in the water," She motions to the ash that is still rising in little plumes among our possessions. "Not like this."

I nod my head. I think I understand. I brush a little ash from where it has settled in her hair and take her hand. We leave our car unlocked, our possessions strewn on the asphalt, and walk into the hotel. I watch her staring at the wire hangers hanging in the closet until the sun comes up over the brown, brackish water and I fall asleep. I dream of my daughter's peaceful eyes looking at me from a shampoo bottle.



On Cover Letters

I.

I was supposed to be working on my cover letter. This should have been an easy task for a narcissist, but I spent all of winter break in avoidance mode, binge-watching *Orange is the New Black* on Netflix. This method is great for discovering that your parents are highly uncomfortable with lesbian relationships, less so for making yourself employable. I returned to Dartmouth with a better understanding of prison cigarette fashioning and little else.

My application is due on March 15th. It will function as a futile attempt to acquire an editorial internship at a literary magazine. Or, more honestly, as a last ditch attempt to find something I love more than the soul-tiring, mid-life-crisis-inducing world of academia: last Monday, my English professor said that sometimes he feels more like a nineteenth century syphilitic on the verge of a breakdown than a twenty-first century academic.

II.

I am sitting under a staircase in Sanborn, staring at mustard-colored walls. The desk here is made of plywood, installed as an afterthought. A nail head pokes through the top layer of veneer. If I lean carefully to my left and slouch against the sideboard, stiff, achy heat from a radiator warms exactly half of my body. My right side is freezing.

The window here has bug corpses clinging to the dust in its curtains. Through it I can see a young professor, up for tenure review, carrying her laptop. It's eleven o'clock on Sunday morning, and the computer's screen is open. Perhaps she began working early this morning and barely had time for this trip to her office, perhaps she could not afford to stop reading on her way inside. Maybe there's solidarity here—students hunched over their own computer screens, trying to coax something eloquent out of minds filled with heart-breaking scenes from Netflix dramas.

Instead of my cover letter, I am writing this.

III.

On Saturday, I stopped by Barnes and Noble to journal before going to see *The Imitation Game*. A couple sat at the table across from me with a stack of books between them. He removed his coat. Blue vest, plaid shirt, worn-in jeans. She didn't take off anything. Her coat was blue. Purple. Indigo. A sort of in-between shade that looked synthetic. The bottom two books on the table were about prostate cancer. The one on top was by Mitch Albom: *The First Phone Call From Heaven*. The man picked up one of the books about prostates and showed it to his partner. When I glanced up again, she no longer sat at the table, was instead looking distractedly through a rack of greeting cards. She still had not taken off her coat.

I do not think my cover letter will convey the intimacy of watching strangers in bookstore cafes.

IV.

I am not good at timelines. I prioritize backwards, doing everything possible before I'm left only with whatever terrifies me. On Tuesday morning, I read an old senior thesis as preparation for my own, a project due over a year from now. My cover letter is due in less than one month.

I can think of several reasons for this procrastination, all of them good, none of them good enough. To give an empty version of myself to a stranger seems troublesome, to think that they might want the empty version of myself more troublesome still. And the physicality of the page! Horrible, unimaginative typeface, three block paragraphs, cheap printer paper. They're so presumptuous, laid

out for immediate reading, throwing themselves at their audience. Not like books, which allow for agency (one selects a text, chooses to open the cover) and are encapsulated, do not spill over.

V.

I am hungry but cannot bring myself to eat an apple in the silence of a library. I trudge upstairs to a bench on the top floor. A girl is lying there, olive green Canada Goose hood pulled over her head, lime green detailing on her Nike high tops. Maybe I'm disrupting necessary healing. I move back to the lobby and settle for crunching there, taking intermittent sips of a London Fog and muttering the text of Simmel's "The Metropolis and Mental Life" aloud. Turns out city-dwellers feel they must exaggerate their individuality in order to retain a unique identity. Not until cover letters did I recognize the value of this exaggeration. But I hate my overstated self.

VI.

I am walking past the Visual Arts Center, alone, at night, and it is snowing. I am thinking about the nuances of vocation, and then I am thinking about the moment I sat in the same Sanborn nook and worked on an old piece of fiction. I am thinking about the paper I wrote on alchemy in Donne last term, the one about performative martyrdom in *Dictee* from the summer, the half-finished villanelle waiting in my journal.

It is not academia I am trying to make myself stop loving.

VII.

Last year, I sat across from my religion professor in Lou's and told her that I planned on finding an isolated spot, living there during the spring, and writing. The idea has not occurred to me in four months.

VIII.

I will end up writing the letter.
I am not brave.



