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CONTENTS

Poems

| | |
|--|----|
| Horn OK Please <i>Jessica Mehta</i> | 9 |
| Left in the City of Muted Colors <i>Lena Breda</i> | 10 |
| A Remembrance of Evergreens <i>Michael Harmon</i> | 12 |
| Roadside Stand Past <i>Connie Schultz</i> | 13 |
| Summer After Seventh Grade <i>Claudia Schatz</i> | 14 |
| Two Pairs of Black Lips <i>Denzel Scott</i> | 15 |
| Moja Mama <i>Elma Dedic</i> | 16 |
| Shine <i>Jason Boling</i> | 17 |
| Seeking the Subconscious <i>Lisa Meckel</i> | 18 |
| Soot. <i>Tom Pescatore</i> | 20 |
| Sleeping in the Town of My Birth <i>Justin Hamm</i> | 21 |
| Aliens <i>Matthew J. Spireng</i> | 23 |
| Sill Life with Dead Jackdaw <i>J.C. Scharl</i> | 24 |
| Non-Conformist Northern Flicker <i>V.C. McCabe</i> | 25 |
| On Aging <i>Maxima Kahn</i> | 26 |

Prose

| | |
|--|----|
| Room 607 | 29 |
| <i>Joel Burcat</i> | |
| The Memory of the Ocean | 35 |
| <i>Cécile Barlier</i> | |
| True | 44 |
| <i>J.P. Swartelé-Wood</i> | |
| This Video Kid, Too, Will Die | 51 |
| <i>Ephraim Scott Sommers</i> | |
| Alabama Drama in Red, White, and Black | 56 |
| <i>James Ryan</i> | |

Addenda

| | |
|-----------------------|----|
| Contributors | 66 |
| Submission Guidelines | 69 |

POEMS

POETRY EDITOR'S LETTER

Dear Reader,

Thank you for picking up the Winter 2019 Issue of *Euphony*. These past few weeks, Chicago has seen several ice storms, a polar vortex, and the odd morning snowfall, so I hope this issue is perfect for curling up and reading in between those busy and cold moments.

Given the poems that were chosen for this issue, it was perhaps too easy to organize them according to the life cycle: birth and infancy, childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and old age, but more specifically, according to the sorts of traits and markers typically experienced at each stage.

We start with “Horn OK Please” and “Left in the City of Muted Colors,” two poems that write of learning language and how to perceive the world, much like what infants experience. Then, “A Remembrance of Evergreens” and “roadside stand past” invoke those childhood moments, free of responsibility and full of carefree play. We move to the next stage, perhaps the hardest: adolescence. The next four poems bring out the quintessential ideas of those young adult years, like understanding your identity and your sexuality in face of the obstacles around you as you start to find your place in the world.

Then, the poems from “Seeking the Subconscious” to “Sleeping in the Town of My Birth” show what I viewed as the characteristics of adulthood: maturity, the deep reflection that forms as a result of time, and the realization of how memories of the past never leave us. The final few poems speak to the years of old age and of adapting to the changing technological world around us. Rounding out the section is “On Aging,” a beautiful ode to the passing of time.

I have ordered the poems as such based on how I view the markers of growth, but also to ask of you, reader, what you see as the characteristics of these stages as people grow and age. With that, a big thank you to our dedicated *Euphony* staff and to our submitters for making this issue possible. Happy reading!

Warmly,
Mahathi

Horn OK Please

Jessica Mehta

I began to learn the language
of Indian horns. The wail of a rickshaw,
the trumpeting of cargo trucks. Buses, they pulse
like whales navigating overpopulated pods.
We don't talk like that here—

we're all anger, rapid-fire blastings ,
fingers saluting the air like bloodied
full-mast flags. Remember: we understand
before we speak. Our parents urge us,
Say mama. Say papa. I love you. Open
your mouth, purge mistakes. We spend
our whole lives afraid of stumbling
while the lot of the world is desperate
to wire our jaws shut tight lest
truth and hard things tumble out.

Left in the City of Muted Colors

Lena Breda

I.
I am lost.

II.
Chinese men and women surround me.
Streets unfold like accordion-straw wrappers creased
in languages I do not understand.
They are me, but different.
Foreign, but different.
I could compare an ant and God with mores and lesses.

III.
I order a coffee
I know those words,

But I forgot the word for *cinnamon* and
bitter and
I am alone in this town of windows
and I am wearing the wrong shoes.
So when he holds up my drink and
a bottle of powder,
I take the cup
and drink it though it burns my throat.

IV.
I sat in a chapel today
A son smiled at me.
A man I cannot remember gave me a jacket so I could bow
beneath ivory pillars.
As I sat in the pew,
spice and sweat nuzzled into my neck like a curled dog.
A man I will not remember sat beside me and told me a
history I will not remember. I think it was of love and mold.

But this is not important.

V.

What is important is taking off my shoes at night,
the blisters puckering up at me like pursed, chapped lips,
and plunging them
into cool water.

A Remembrance of Evergreens

Michael Harmon

Later that morning the gray rain ceased
and sunlight burst across
the glistening two-lane blacktop
as my father drove us farther
into the countryside of Maine.

On the right, was a quiet, bright and level field,
some farmer's fallow acres.

But on the other side, dark,
fathomless, vast, and filled
with a deeper quiet as we passed,
were pine woods.

Only my father knew a cabin stood
somewhere in there,
half held up by wooden stilts
on a steep slope,
leading down to the cove of a lake.

How he knew what turn to take
where no sign was, to find the winding
bumpy dirt road in, we didn't know.

His guess, though, where it was, was right,
and as we turned off the road
and entered that mysterious domain
the sun-streaked shadows
from all those tall and long-abiding sentinels
descended,
their green and pungent spell fell over us, as well,
and I wondered then
if anyone else had thought they heard them say:
*Be safe with us in here,
this is a place for kindness and for play.*

roadside stand past

Connie Schultz

& the sliver moon
glass circles

lit from behind
cut sharp long shadows

& taffy clouds
cross the parking lot

spiral out

spread by currents
of real oriental red rugs

& dreams

with teeth
dance in the rain

dreams with apples
on low trees

unpredictable

trees to climb
don't look

& bing cherries burst
in Idaho hot summer

Summer After Seventh Grade

Claudia Schatz

We made a leggy, jaywalking parade
to corner stores with jostled bells on doors
in humming summer, lolling in the shade
as Sugar Daddies stained our tongues. The bore,
the chore of pulling open dresser drawers,
untangling straps and clasps with dangled sighs,
a postured trying on for size before
we feinted choice. With sweating quarters prized
inside each fist, we might pretend the eyes
of boys outside the store would trace our steps:
all angle knees, chlorine, and razor thighs,
the screech of styrofoam on teeth, split ends
that splintered from our braids in feathered glints.
The heat, the hoping, bodies dropping hints.

Two Pairs of Black Lips

Denzel Scott

Into a bowl of water,
into a bowl of salt,
I birthed a secret

consecrated by blood
of my mouth
that required
a miniature sea to cleanse
and make whole again.

I kissed a boy who
responded with his
tongue for a moment
and then his fist for
a long time.

My blood was
so rich with iron
that I thought I
must be a
statue underneath.

I had to be something else
than simply this
brown-eyed,
mahogany-skinned imp
who stole a kiss from
another black boy,
and never once
said sorry, but
begged God even
as he punched my skull
with his brick knuckles,
please let me have one kiss more.

Moja Mama

Elma Dedic

In my closet, I pray.
The wood beneath my feet,
splinters and sprouts through my toes,
it holds them.
Whispers of praying bounce off the walls and walk on my skin,
a stream of Allah in my veins; I am at peace.

My mother comes into my closet.
Her voice slogs into my ears, a screeching sound,
my nails engrave themselves into my palm, taking back skin;
a heavy gut sits with me.
Our love moves like a rising chest, up and down—
for once I wanted it just to stop.

She spits in my face
bombarded by her saliva, every inch claws my cheeks, my chin
I did not love her anymore.
She stands too tall for a five four woman,
indignant of the way she was raised, I need to learn like she did.

My mother,
the harmony corrupts between us and dust sits on my tongue,
and praises me that I kept my mouth shut.
For I have learned
my closet, I lost faith.

Shine

Jason Boling

I've only seen one play
went with my girl
we were pretty serious
a friend of mine was in a cheap production
"Waiting for Godot"
he was alright I guess but
I don't understand theater
I'm always acting
to keep from other things
like murder
and I never take a bow

we dressed nice
sat and watched him play
she smiled like a rosy baby the whole time

after
he had a shine when he talked
he had performed for us
and came near the spirits

the play was mediocre but he was radiant
kept talking about that scene where he fell badly
hurt his knee
he needed more attention

but that shine—
it was like the first sunrise to ever touch your skin

soon after
my girl stopped being my girl
ended up marrying him
and it kills me to this day

that shine he had
not her.

Seeking the Subconscious

Lisa Meckel

It's about this class I'm taking—
"A Self-Designed Experience in Personal Creative Revelation."
They gave me this text to read,
You're Nearest Your Subconscious When in Bed.
Oh dear, I thought,
that means a problem for one's lover, doesn't it?

In the interest of self-enlightenment,
I sent him away.
On my bedside table I opened my diary to a blank page,
placed my new pen beside it, and fell asleep.

Just as the book said, I woke
with words on my lips,
as it were, wrote them down,
slipped into deep sleep
dreaming of the lover who wasn't there.

In the morning
upon opening my eyes
I saw on the no-longer-blank page
two words waiting for me—
"Harry Hemphill," I read
"Harry Hemphill," I mused
"Harry Hemphill?" I questioned.

All day I pondered this name—
vibrant images of hemp-twine,
extra-hairy brand, came to mind
or high hill, the color of twine
or hill, name of Hemp.

I went to the web.
In one place I'd lived,
there were no Hemphills;

in another there were five:

George, Anne, Hillary, Gary
and someone...I can't remember.
So, no Harry.

Now I ask,
virtuously cry out to the universe,
"Who in the hell is Harry Hemphill?"

Soot.

Tom Pescatore

Soot.

sky was so gray
upon waking
that a heavy pink
underlined the clouds

you said, 'in Taiwan that means it will rain,'

but here
I waited all day
and it did not

I missed the rain

I waited for it

sky lost
its harbinger pink
by noon
it was flat
lifeless gray

you said, 'in Taiwan that means it will rain,'

but in America
on its eastern shore
the color on the clouds
meant nothing

Sleeping in the Town of My Birth

Justin Hamm

is not particularly a comfort
nor an anxiety
most of the time.

Surrounded by the usual joys,
my daughters and wife
snoring beside me,
a third child about the size
of a blueberry in the belly,

the usual worries nonetheless
flash like slasher movies
against my closed eyelids.
Rare cancers, car crashes,
humiliating professional rejections.

And stranger things, too.
Old blues riffs ringing like
invisible church bells.
Something Jim once said
to Huck in the Good Book.

The only real difference here
is the nagging knowledge
that somewhere among
the giant warped Victorians
a man sleeps better than I—
a man who sold my mother
the Fentanyl patches
she tore open with her teeth
and animal-lapped with her tongue
until her damaged heart went still
one bone-numb winter night
as my father dreamed
his last hopeful dreams
of ever growing happy
beside her.

I am a gentle person, ask around.

I strum a ukulele, read
to kindergarteners professionally.
But I confess, when not at my best,
I've imagined entering
his bedroom, silent as he snores.
Of covering his eyes, plugging
his nose with thumb and finger,
and pouring her ashes thick
into his gaping mouth-hole,
so he too can know firsthand
the pain of waking at three AM
choking on her memory.

Aliens

Matthew J. Spireng

Black cartridge is close to life, it's said on my printer for days, and I've been waiting to see what it will do, life sprung from black plastic. I keep hoping it will prove friendly, though I've a terrible sense of dread because of

the persistent warning. Will it kick open the door behind which it's been incubating for weeks and weeks since I got the new printer and go for my throat? And why didn't they warn me when I bought it that this

might happen? Now there's a new message: *Yellow cartridge is close to life*. A chill runs up my spine. I'm about to be overrun by aliens, and the more pleas for help I print and mail, the worse it gets.

Still Life with Dead Jackdaw

J.C. Scharl

A grub-chewed ornamental eggplant bush
sprawls, discarded, in the alley, rootless
as Yggdrasil at the end of days—
the worm poison got it as surely
as the worms would have.
Yellow eggplants languish in the dust
like little worlds; they don't realize yet
that their universe is overthrown.
Ripening purple floods
down longitudinal lines from the north pole
of the largest to its swelling equator,
which has been pecked open—split
as if there's a rip in the ocean.
Seeds flood out, and inside it is full of ants.
I don't see the jackdaw, caught
in the rigor mortis of the stems
until I pick up the bush by its base
and the glossy little corpse hops
to the ground by my foot. He bounces
after me over broken glass and bits
of shredded insulation, as if
he is only playing at being dead,
and really he intends to live forever
just like this, head cocked and merry black eyes fixed
on his trove of poisoned treasure.

Non-Conformist Northern Flicker

V.C. McCabe

While his kin live and work
in their natural habitat,
he refuses to conform.

I watch him defy instinct
to do as he pleases, this
solitary, obstinate bird—

a woodpecker by nature—
chiseling a stone wall
with his tiny, defiant beak.

On Aging

Maxima Kahn

We build dams against
the tides of time, watch our faces
wrinkle in the mirror, shore up
against loneliness.

Inside, the music turns warmer, deeper—
an old cello in an attic
among dusty books.

Wasps drink from the birdbath.
I am learning to love my life
in slow mouthfuls.

PROSE

PROSE EDITORS' LETTER

Dear readers:

Welcome to the Prose section of Winter 2019 edition of *Euphony Journal*. This has been an issue long cared-for and much considered, as returning Prose Editor Ben Schafer has been joined by new Editors Miles White and Orli Morag. Together we three strove to curate a coherent body of works, and at last we have the fruit of that labor. As we re-view these selections one last time, we find a common current: memory.

And why not? There is, after all, some kinship between story and memory: the way they shape us, the way they linger with us, the way the one feeds the other. Our lives are the stories of our memories, and our recollections shape the ways we view those lives. Nostalgia? Regret? Whether we try to forget or fail to remember, we cannot escape our pasts. Their contradictions are their own truth. It is fitting, then, that this issue we find five such spectres.

Our three fiction pieces are all explorations of trauma, recalling things lost and left behind. The characters of “Room 607,” “True,” and “The Memory of the Ocean” are caught in tragedy, their own and that of others. They relive and rethink, always trying to cope with their own crises.

We also present two non-fiction pieces. “This Video Kid, Too, Will Die” is a pointed miniature—the author wrestles with a single formative moment and the strange shadow it left over his life. Following this is the expansive “Alabama Drama in Red, White, and Black,” which performs the reverse. It juxtaposes the author’s experiences against the collective memory of America: its racial heritage and the color it cast on his own youth.

When we read these pieces, we reach the same place as the authors: we look back, as if through a window, on something we can never truly reach.

We hope that you enjoy your time with *Euphony Journal*. We hope, at least, that you find it memorable.

Happy reading,
Ben, Miles, and Orli

Room 607

Joel Burcat

The bellman struggled for a moment with the knob, then put his shoulder into the door and popped it open. Emily felt foolish as she allowed him to take her luggage to the room—she only had a single rolling bag and an oversized purse/briefcase—but hotel rooms crept her out and she felt safer having someone else enter it first. As she removed her wet raincoat, he rolled the suitcase into the room, shoved a wooden block under the door jamb, and flipped on lights. The lights flooded out the red and blue police lights that reflected on the dark walls from the street below. The room had an odd smell, chemical, maybe new carpet smell.

“Sorry about the sticky door. I’ll have the engineer come up here in the morning to fix it. Here’s the coffeemaker, here’s the closet, it has a safe, the bathroom is here.”

Something about it was different since the last time Emily had been there.

“King-sized bed...”

Rug, drapes, everything.

“Sofa, large-screen TV...”

The walls had been a pleasant shade of yellow, now they were greyish brown with a discomfiting swirling pattern.

“It’s different,” Emily said. “I’ve stayed in this very room, maybe five times, and something’s changed. It used to be more elegant. Now it looks a little Spartan.”

The kindly bellman, hair slicked back from the rain, smiled. “New owners. They decided they wanted to appeal to Millennials. The way it was before was too old-fashioned. They’ve been remodeling one floor at a time. They’re all going to look exactly like this.”

Emily made a face.

The bellman laughed. “Me too. It has one of those beds with the number. Here’s the control, you just dial the number you want, harder or softer.”

“I’ve slept on those in another hotel. Aren’t they really just air mattresses that you can deflate or pump up?”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“The connecting door is the one thing I remember,” she said. “I didn’t like it before and I still don’t care for it.”

“Nothing to worry about.” He unlatched the connecting door and

pulled it open. On the other side was another door—closed—with “607” stenciled on it and a metal plate where the door knob ordinarily would go. “You can only open this from one side. Someone inside each room would have to open their door to get into your room.” He pushed the door to room 607, but it was firmly closed. “Plus it latches on the inside.”

The bellman closed and latched the door. “If there’s anything else at all call and ask for Charlie Smith.”

“Wait a sec.” Emily reached into her pocket and pulled out the twenty-dollar bill she had stowed there for this. Too much, she knew, but she hoped that it might guarantee faster service if she needed it later.

The bellman palmed it and lightly touched his hand to his forehead in a half-salute. His shoes, still wet, squished musically as he retreated down the hall.

Emily immediately double-locked her door, then went to the adjoining door and opened hers. She pushed on the door to the next room and confirmed that it was locked. She closed her door and threw the latch. Then she pulled on it again to make sure it was locked.

Exhausted, Emily grabbed a nightgown, made sure the curtains were pulled tight, quickly stripped off her clothes, and took a long shower. The towels, which once were large and soft, now were narrow and coarse. She tried to see herself in the mirror, but it was too foggy.

Emily laid under the covers and surveyed the room in the dim light. At 37, she was a seasoned business traveler and always asked for the same room number at whatever hotel she was in. If she could, she always stayed in room 605. That was the time she got up in the morning and it was easier to remember. Her husband, Jim, a small-town lawyer, almost always came with her when she had business in New York. They married late and their love was so strong that they decided on no kids—they only needed each other. Emily thought about her times in this room with him and struggled not to cry. She tried not to think about the accident, but before too long, the pillow was wet with her tears.

Emily sat up and blew her nose. She forced herself to take deep breaths, and found herself looking at the new curtains in the dark. She recalled the multiple layers of drapery fabric, valance, and lacy under-curtain like at her grandmother’s house. It had been replaced by a single khaki-colored curtain made of burlap. The pretty pictures were gone and next to the window was a weird wall-hanging made of chrome and glass. The old furniture had been traditional, wooden, American. Now, the sofa was grey-brown with institutional fabric and a too-deep seat—she hated that. The lights were an assortment of modern shapes. She felt like an idiot as she tried to figure out where the switch was on each lamp when she’d turned out the lights. She knew it was ironic that she was an expert in marketing to Millennials. *Damn Millennials*

with their hemp dresses and pretentious beards, drinking over-priced micro-brews out of mason jars. She laughed out loud. At 37 she missed the cut, and hated that hers no longer was the target demographic.

A few moments later, a man and woman shouted at each other in the room next to hers—Room 607. She couldn't hear any words, just the sound of their voices. Then she heard the adjoining door open behind her pass-through door.

Emily immediately grabbed the phone. A muffled man's voice said, "The handle's broken. I can't open it." Light shined under her door. Someone pushed on her door, tried to get into her room. "Try harder," a woman said loudly. Then, someone pounded the door. She started dialing the front desk when the outer door closed and the latch was thrown. She held onto the phone for many minutes, then finally relaxed and turned over in bed. Later, she heard some talking and loud moaning from the next room, first a woman, then a man. Unmistakable noises. From the other room she heard the man exclaim, "Jennifer, oh God!"

Crap, please be quick. Emily covered her head with the pillow and thought about Jim. The first time they stayed in this room. Other first times. Tears freely escaped her eyes. The drops turned into rivers and she wept quietly under the pillow. She hugged the pillow and felt his arms around her. He whispered his eternal love in her ear. She took deep breaths, and finally fell asleep.

Emily returned from her meeting. It had gone late and then she had dinner with three executives from her client company, all men. One—married, of course—tried to invite himself back to her hotel "for a nightcap," but she gently laughed him off and claimed exhaustion and an early flight the next morning. She hoped she'd never see him again. The room had been made up and looked fresh. She froze. The door between the rooms was slightly ajar.

"Hello?" she said as she approached the door. "Hello?"

Both doors were open. Afraid to enter the adjoining room, she pushed at the door to Room 607. "Hello? Hey neighbor, your door is open."

Her heart pounded. She glanced into the darkened room. The only light in the room seeped through the rain-slicked window. The couple who had spent the night was gone. She was surprised to see that the room was the old style. Fancy old curtains, nice furniture, regular bed, yellow walls.

"Huh," she said.

A cold breeze, like the air conditioning turned too high, blew onto her from the room. The hair on her arms stood at attention. Her guts told her not to enter. She quickly returned to her room and dialed on the phone. After many rings, Charlie answered.

“Could you come up here please? The doors between my room and the next are open and it’s freaking me out.”

She waited for an interminable time and thought about the twenty she had slipped the man. Annoyed that it took him so long, she heard him and tugged on the front door. Charlie stood in the hallway, uniform and hair still dripping from the endless rain, a look of concern on his face.

“Why did you take so long?” she asked shrilly.

“Nothing to worry about, Ma’am. Sometimes the maids use the adjoining doors when they’re cleaning. Every now and then they forget to close them. It happens.”

“Well, last night the couple in there opened their door after I was in bed, that really scared me.”

“Funny, no one was supposed to be in that room last night. You should’ve called me.”

The bellman crossed into the adjoining room. “Looks fine to me, I’ll just close and lock the door.”

Before he closed the door, Emily glanced inside. It now was decorated the same as hers—identical Millennial furnishings. Then the bellman closed himself into the room and locked the door. A moment later, there was a tap at her front door.

“You need anything, just call me,” Charlie said.

“Just one thing. Was that room decorated in the old style, you know fancy curtains, furniture?”

“No, just the new style. Everything on this floor was updated a few months ago.”

He touched his forefinger to his forehead and pulled her door shut.

Emily was glad she’d be checking out in a few hours. She set her alarm on her iPhone extra early as she didn’t want to miss her 7 am flight. All she wanted to do was get back to her little house in Tulsa. Since Jim died all she wanted was to be back home. She was so alone.

She arranged her nightgown on her bed. It was only 9 pm but she felt overwhelmingly exhausted. She quickly shoved her dress and underwear into her suitcase, then spent a long time in the shower, as hot as she could stand it. As the hot water cascaded around her she thought about the last vacation she took with Jim, to this very hotel, and started to weep.

Emily stood in the steamy bathroom and toweled off. Suddenly, she heard a crash in her room. She pulled the skimpy towel tightly around her body and searched for her nightgown, recalling that she’d left it on her bed.

“Damn it,” she whispered.

She looked for the bathroom phone. It was gone. *Fucking Millennials and their smart phones.*

She cracked the door. "Hello? Is someone there?"

A cold, wet wind slammed into her and mountain ranges of goose-bumps raced up and down her damp, naked body.

"Hello?"

The towel didn't cover her butt. *I'll grab my nightgown and get the hell out of here.*

She shivered violently as she slowly ventured into her room. The window was smashed and the curtains gusted horizontally. Two bright lights behind them nearly blinded her. The floor was littered with shards of glass. Rain and broken glass blew into the room and cut into her legs. She immediately felt the pain of the dozens of cuts she received up and down her legs. The wind blew violently in her room. Her nightgown and suitcase were gone.

Then the hair on her neck stood on end—the door to Room 607 was wide open.

The hell with this! Emily grabbed the front door knob and pulled. It was stuck.

Desperate, she scanned her room, looking for her iPhone. It was gone. She ran to the room's phone. The broken glass cut into her feet and sent shock waves through her body. She grabbed the phone and heard a voice—Charlie—"Hold on, help is on the way."

The curtains billowed. Something was coming through the window. She had no idea what it was. She panted hard. Covered her face with the towel. Backed up to the open pass-through door.

Suddenly, a pair of hands stretched out for her and grabbed her roughly by the arms. She screamed as she was pulled into the adjoining room. In one motion she was hurled to the floor and someone jumped on top of her. Protectively. It was—

"Charlie?" she yelled.

"Hold on! Hold on!"

The noise in the room was deafening. An endless crashing. Blaring. Coming on loud and hard. The man held her in his strong arms. Something about his smell was familiar. She looked at him in the twisted light but couldn't see him. She felt his firm grip as he protected her body with his. His breathing was hard and his arms were tight around her. She held him as firmly as she could, not caring about the towel, the blood, or the glass. She was comforted even as the noise enveloped them.

"I've got you. You're safe, you're safe. I love..." His voice trailed off.

"Jim!"

"The handle's broken. I can't open it." Sargent Charlie Smith screamed over the driving rain.

"Try harder," his partner, Officer Jennifer Wilder shouted.

Charlie gave it his all, but the door wouldn't open. The officers were

breathing hard now from the exertion.

Charlie played his flashlight onto the front seat.

“Jennifer, oh God. There’s a man in there and a woman too. Blood.”

He cupped his hands to the window, “Hold on. Help is on the way!”

Using a tire iron, the two police officers pried at the door until they wrenched it open.

Charlie put his hands on the man. “He’s gone. I think his neck is broken.”

“What about the woman?”

Gently, Charlie pulled the man’s lifeless body off her.

He carefully felt her neck for a pulse. “No,” he croaked. “Her face was caved in by the semi.” He looked away.

They stood together in the rain, bathed in the flashing red and blue lights from their cruiser. The small BMW wasn’t just smashed, it was obliterated. In the rain, the semi had skidded into it head on; a chrome headlight glared obscenely over the car. The pavement was slick from the rain and fluids from the car. Broken glass covered everything.

A few seconds later, the EMTs ran up. Charlie knew they’d have little to do. He put his arm around his partner’s shoulder and held her close for a moment. He heard one of the EMTs say to the other, “Time of death, 6:07.” As the EMTs pushed the woman’s lifeless body past Charlie, he touched his finger to his forehead.

The Memory of the Ocean

Cécile Barlier

Jose Luis and Amparo had to catch the first bus to El Cajete from the central terminal. There they waited for Emilio's pickup, where they sat in the open cargo area and journeyed on the bouncy dirt road through the safety checkpoints where the guards didn't let the pickup slow down before they waved and hand-lifted the gate arm. They had left the apartment at five in the morning. Because of the waiting times and the slow pace at which the pickup rode the dirt, it took them until ten in the morning to travel the seventy and something miles to get to the beach where the body parts had first been spotted.

It was one rare day off since they had taken a job at the gas station in a new neighborhood. Amparo worked the cash register, which the owner had set up like a prison parlor with a bullet-resistant window and a metal tray for passing cash and keys. Clients were truckers on their way up the Baja Peninsula. Jose Luis filled tanks and checked levels and tire pressure. He seldom faced complicated tasks, though he once repaired and fitted a transmission shaft on an old Dodge.

The owner of the gas station didn't let on if he knew what had happened. There had been a tidbit in the *Informante*, with a small square picture of the three of them—one that Emilio had taken at Teresa's quinceañera—Jose Luis stood upright, a bit rigid, with his right hand on Teresa's shoulder, and Amparo stood on the other side of Teresa holding one elbow; Teresa wore her braids around her head and smiled into the camera with both arms crossed in front of her. Jose Luis and Amparo looked down at their shoes. Emilio had not warned them as he pushed the camera button, and the light from the flash had surprised them.

For the past year, Jose Luis had let his hair grow and tucked it in the hole behind his black cap, Amparo no longer used barrettes and let her hair loose on either side of her, and they both had lost a lot of weight.

This was the second time they were taking the trip with Emilio. The first time, they had not found the location.

On the bus, Jose Luis looked mostly calm, looking through the glass speckled with dried remnants of summer rains. Amparo wasn't looking out; her eyes were fixed on something invisible inside the bus because the outside was too bright. Here along the coast, the light made even the cochal seemed white, the kind of chalky white that splashed there by chance.

In the back of the pickup, the bumps prevented Jose Luis from

changing position much. He had to hold onto the edges. It was cold, and Amparo squeezed her legs together while trying to absorb the rising sun's warmth. Sometimes the pickup would stop on the side incline to let a vehicle pass in the other direction. Sometimes an animal would cross: a stray dog or a flock of quails. Each stop made Jose Luis glance ahead through the window at Emilio's broad shoulders and strong torso, his neck disappearing into the collar of his light pink shirt, the flat square of his head covered in slicked-back hair.

In the last stretch along the cliff, they both sat cross-legged facing outward on the same side of the truck, where the horizon stretched out very far. Now, the vision ahead was blue, brown and blue with the island of Espiritu Santo lying on its flank in the middle, and one white pelican in a slow flight. They kept silent. Jose Luis had put his hand on top of Amparo's and pressed on and off as he opened and closed his eyes.

Father Jorge, whom they saw after mass on Sunday afternoons, said it was normal to get mad at God, to curse him. He said that anger was what comes from the edge of the abyss where they stood—a place where time had stopped. But he went on to say that time hadn't stopped and that in fact they needed it, that it would take a vast amount of it to regain strength.

"I know those words ring empty," he said. "But they're still true."

His lower lip shook a bit as he said that—and he kept his eyes on the floor as if he was talking to himself.

Jose Luis was the one who did most of the telling. He spoke rapid-fire fast with clear enunciation and in plain language. His voice bounced against the walls of the church.

When Jose Luis and Amparo were both fifteen—that was sixteen years ago—they'd go every week to the next village to sell small articles. He was making animals with copper wire and plastic pearls; she was making heads and small statues with clay. They had in common that they made imaginary things with their hands.

He kissed her one day as they were walking back to their village. After the kiss, they moved apart to look at each other, and she held his face between her forefingers and her thumbs.

By his next birthday, they were on the road heading south of the peninsula. They arrived in La Paz before they got married. She got pregnant behind a bush outside of San Ignacio. Their exodus was their prolonged honeymoon, and most of the way, they went at night on buses and on trucks and on foot. The moon was there always, even when it wasn't. The moon was silent and shone white or orange from another's light. They set up in La Paz because of the name and because by then she was too big to go any further. Also, they recognized a hill that they

had never seen before for which they credited the Virgen. They rented a room with a chassis repair shop underneath, and the owner had Jose Luis work as a twenty-four/seven assistant in exchange for shelter. Jose Luis learned on the job. Amparo made a painting on a small tin plate that he rescued from the shop. The preparation of the piece took as long as painting it. It was rusted and wavy before it was clean and flat with only a few spots of rust. She knew about votive painting, just as she did about making a room yellow, fixing snacks with *nopales* and corn, and cutting wet hair.

Teresa was born.

The first time they went to meet Father Jorge, a small choirboy told them to wait.

While sitting on the bench, clutching to Jose Luis's hands, Amparo started to shake. The choirboy retrieved a glass jar candle from a stand and gave it to Amparo as he left.

While Father Jorge and Jose Luis talked, Amparo held onto the candle, her fingers clamped on the glass until her phalanges became white. There had been the smell of myrrh in the church, a smell that Amparo didn't know, a smell that transpired in the moment.

When Teresa was six, they moved to an actual apartment and met a couple who had a girl of five.

Amparo took them to the park together. The girls looked like a pair of miniature adults; they were quiet and patient when in line in front of the ice cream truck.

Amparo got used to the girl. It looked like Teresa had found herself a sister, something that she wasn't able to deliver. Strangers complimented Amparo on her well-behaved girls, and she didn't bother to correct them.

Soon Amparo left the girls alone for short whiles in the bedroom and then in the kitchen. And one day, Amparo heard Teresa's howling from the kitchen. Teresa's index finger was gushing blood from a cut. The girl sat on the floor with an open can of diced tomatoes in hand.

Amparo didn't tell Jose Luis how this happened. Jose Luis just noticed the bandage and kissed Teresa's finger. Soon it was forgotten. But whenever Teresa bruised herself while playing, whenever she had a cold, or was scared of a stranger on the street, or hid her face in the kitchen curtains at the pop of the *cohetes* on the Day of the Dead, Amparo would hold her daughter's face in her hands and feel her daughter's features with her fingers the way a blind person would.

Father Jorge paused often between sentences and questions. He was not like the other priests. He was not in his fifties, not brown-

skinned, with no thick eyebrows, no oval gold-rimmed glasses either. He was about Jose Luis's age, though his cassock made him look more mature. His light-colored hair was held back close to his skull, making a bird shape opening above his large forehead. He had thin ears and generous lobes. He wore the cassock like a soccer player's jersey. Even if the cassock was black, heavy, and long, it did not make him look constrained or stiff—it was as if it was much lighter than it seemed. His large and slightly drooping frame drained all formality, all convention, all fear, out of the robe.

“The first time, we couldn't find the location,” Amparo said.

“But this time you found it?”

“Yes, first we found the landing strip. Then we found the church and the hill behind it.”

“Are you certain this is where they found them?”

“Yes.” Amparo forced her eyes shut, like a bird that just hit a window, her chin dropping a little. The landing strip had been short, half a mile maybe, yet so straight and unyielding. She had never seen a landing strip before; nor had she ever seen an airport, just a few airplanes that would draw a white wooly stripe across a perfectly blue sky. The landing strip was all dirt—a red dirt from the local stones crushed to powder. It shot toward the belly of the hills like an arrow.

“The church had no window,” Jose Luis added. “The wind blew right through it.”

Jose Luis spent a while in the church; he stood in the central aisle, heard something like a buzz, looked for where it might be coming from. He found a wasp nest and stuck a finger in it. There were no wasps in the nest. Amparo called him from outside.

“Come. We need to find the beach.”

He followed her out.

They did not hold hands, although they walked very close to each other, the skin on their arms and shoulders brushing at times. The path on the hill was narrow and uneven.

“She got sick,” Jose Luis said and looked to Amparo to check whether it was okay for him to say this.

Father Jorge lifted a fist before his mouth as if to contain a cough. He waited.

Amparo vomited onto a strawberry cactus in bloom. Jose Luis held her hair back until she was done, wiped her face with his sleeves, and then wiped his sleeves onto his pants. He had thrown dirt onto the strawberry cactus, knocking the ground with the toe cap of his sneakers. Amparo looked shiny with dampness. She also looked smaller than usual. She looked like standing required superhuman strength.

Jose Luis did not go into these details with Father Jorge.

When Teresa was eight, Jose Luis listened to her sing. He was not a musician himself—music had been absent from their childhood village—but Teresa had a special voice, and when he heard her croon some of the tunes from the radio, he wanted the sound of Teresa to grow. “I think that she has a gift,” he said to Amparo.

It turned out that there was a neighborhood music school not too far from the garage where Jose Luis worked, and singing lessons could be taken after school and on weekends. Teresa practically taught herself how to read a score. In the evenings, she practiced in the bathroom, which was the only room with an actual door.

Most days Jose Luis finished work at around the same time as the music lessons ended, and he and Teresa would ride back to the apartment together on the municipal blue bus. The bus had tinted windows and white side mirrors that hung from the top like bull horns. It was the only La Paz line with AC, which made the ride pleasant and fresh at the end of their day. The routine was that Jose Luis hopped on first and waited for his daughter to get in at the next station. He always sat in the front by the window on the side where he could see her waiting at the bus stop. He and Teresa talked about what they had done during the day, whom they had met, what they would eat for dinner. They forgot that there were other commuters on the bus, and once or twice a grumpy passenger would grumble about the disruption from their lively conversations.

Father Jorge said that they didn’t have to tell him everything. It may be too hard to say certain things. It was up to them. “Does it make you feel good to talk? Or bad?”

“I don’t know,” Amparo said before Jose Luis could answer.

She looked absent as she talked. Bits of her hair were adhering to her neck from perspiration. She looked like a prematurely old child; her dark hair woven with a couple of random wiry whites.

Jose Luis’s eyes had rolled sideways before they settled on Amparo; the breadth of his shoulders caved in; his frame had shrunk.

During Teresa’s first year in high school, breakfast was predawn because the school was far. Amparo would cross the kitchen in her nightgown and sit on the worn yellow sofa before the day started and after she’d fix *molletes*. Teresa would come out with her hair still dripping from the ends. She set the table for the three of them; the tinkling of the knives and forks on the plates mingled with her low hum. Amparo would watch her daughter from the sofa. She’d watch her eat the *molletes*, while Jose Luis still showered. There was no talk. There was the smell of *molletes* and of the pineapple soap that Teresa always used. There was no light coming through the kitchen window.

One morning, Teresa was taller than Amparo.

There came the day when Teresa wasn't waiting at the bus stop, and Jose Luis had to finish the ride alone. When he arrived at the apartment, Amparo asked him where she was.

"Look, I waited and she wasn't there," he said. "I'll wait for her at the terminal."

Amparo stopped kneading the corn paste on the wooden tray turned dusty white from the flour. "I'm staying here in case she shows up," she said.

The last four buses arrived at the terminal, and Teresa never climbed down the steps as the doors opened. By the time she showed up in front of the apartment building at the back of a scooter driven by another girl, the tortillas were long dried up and Amparo had a stiff neck from looking down the kitchen window.

Amparo turned around from the sink when her daughter walked through the door. She had her hands wet from soapy water.

"I'm sorry, Mama," Teresa said, and before she could respond, Amparo's chest got caught in the vise of her daughter's arms.

"Teresa" was all Amparo could say. "Teresa," she kept repeating. When Jose Luis came home from the terminal, Teresa was busy braiding Amparo's hair on the sofa, only interrupted upon receiving the monumental slap in the face that he gave her.

The days expanded as summer approached and with them the heat that made everything slower and quieter. From her kitchen window, Amparo watched the neighborhood getting empty between eleven and four. She noticed how the street cats were skinnier and dustier than before and how the buzzards were pecking at the dead ones. She let the window open in half, and the land winds flew in, drying up the laundry and making her thirsty. She unhooked the hand-painted clock above the entry door "because of the noise," and Jose Luis came home later as he found small tasks at the end of the day that he needed to get done before the next. The girl on the scooter was a student activist, and the father-daughter bus rides became increasingly rare.

Amparo knew about the marches and protests, but she never mentioned them to Jose Luis. There was no TV in the apartment, but there was one at the laundry down the block. Out of courtesy for the customers, the sound was turned low, and to follow the news, Amparo had to read from the captions at the bottom of the screen. It was too fast for her to read, and she could only pick up words here or there if they stayed a little longer on the screen. Some of them stuck with her as visual shapes more than words: assassins, repression. She had a hard time with: truth, freedom, dialogue, gunshots. She had a quicker grasp of the ones that

ended with the same letters: justice, ignorance, police.

She got in the habit of watching while she waited for the wash cycles to complete. Her face was quiet and untroubled; her hands were resting on her lap.

It was one week after the day of the Grito when Amparo spotted Teresa's face in the crowd on the TV screen. The reporter's camera was moving in all directions, because of the commotion as the students rushed to the ferryboat and because the reporter was being hit with batons along with the students. Teresa's bloody face appeared in one corner, grew to occupy a good portion of the screen, and then it was gone. All of the sequence took no longer than five seconds. Heavy drops of sweat sprouted on Amparo's skin around her forearms, and she wiped herself with the cloth used to carry her laundry. She came near the screen, stood on her toes, touched it with one hand, and swayed under the shock of the static electricity discharge. A shampoo ad was now playing.

By the time she made it back to the apartment, Jose Luis was already there.

"I came back early," he shouted from the bedroom.

Without closing the front door behind her, she stood there holding the bundle of laundry across her chest.

"I brought you something," he added, still in the bedroom. "Look on the sofa."

There was a small cardboard box tied with kitchen string.

"Open it!"

Inside the box—three fishes made of copper wire decorated with pearls on their tails.

He was behind her now, holding her in a bear hug, telling her that he didn't need any special occasions for gifts, that he was just happy to have her and Teresa.

Fifty days elapsed between the students' disappearance on the ferry and the rumors of the plastic bags with body parts washed ashore across from Espiritu Santo.

On the evening when Teresa didn't show up, Jose Luis and Amparo had walked back the seven miles to the music school, to the scooter girl's apartment whose address they had found in one of Teresa's notebooks, to the empty docks where the Baja ferries left for Mazatlán. All that walking had occupied the night, which was immense and quiet, apart from one cyclist who rushed past them on their way to the docks. The streets were so clean it looked like they had just been swept and scrubbed in preparation of a holiday procession. When they reached the fence that closed the entrance to the docks, where the heavy smell of gasoline puddles would not go, Amparo had fallen on her knees,

slipped out of Jose Luis's arms like a heavy sack. She had made a faint but continuous sound that resembled the howling of the Coromuel wind. From there they went to the police station.

For some time, Jose Luis kept going back to the police station with Teresa's picture. He was received by a different officer every time, who would look at the picture and either click his tongue or pat his shoulder, and made him wait for hours until they came back with a heavy file and a sorry smile. But then Emilio told him about the stories of disappeared students who had been kidnapped with the help of the police, and he stopped going.

They did not have the money to take Amparo to a doctor, but Emilio's mother gave them a concoction to quiet her down, and a few days into taking it, she looked very quiet. Days Jose Luis would find her asleep on the worn yellow sofa, her legs bent at the knees and bent again at the feet, her hair splayed behind her like the wheeled feathers of a human-bird. Amparo's face was peaceful and smooth, her breathing barely noticeable. It was Emilio's mother who told them about Father Jorge, and though they had rarely set foot in a church, Jose Luis decided that they would go.

"You asked us whether it made us feel good or bad to talk? Last time you asked us?" Amparo said.

"Yes, I did," Father Jorge said.

"We had to think about it."

"Yes."

"We decided it made us feel bad. So we won't come again."

There was always a time delay with Father Jorge's reactions, as if the news traveled to him at a slower pace, as if some atmospheric layer around his body slowed the propagation of emotions. Still the small nod he gave seemed to indicate resignation or acceptance.

The beach wasn't big: about one hundred meters long. The sun was at its highest now, and their shadows were getting lost under them. Only if Amparo took a big step forward would the dark outline of her leg briefly get drawn in the sand. Jose Luis looked down at the portion of the ground where he would step next, cautious not to trip on the pebbles, some of them angular and sharp. She was wearing the light-colored braided sandals that she wore when it wasn't a workday; he was wearing his usual sneakers. He did not look toward the sea. She did not look toward the hills, where the elephant cacti shot up like fingers pointed toward the sky. They were both looking at the ground for plastic bags with body parts on a beach that was obstinately clean.

The fifth time they crossed, Amparo stooped and picked up a

handful of sand. Jose Luis, who was walking behind her, stopped. They both stood there a while.

“What are we gonna do?” Jose Luis asked.

“We keep looking.”

Hours later, they were sitting by the edge with their feet in the cold water. The wind had picked up, and their hair was flying around their shoulders. Amparo had her arms around her knees. Jose Luis held his chin in one hand.

“Do you think she’s in here?” Amparo asked, pointing her chin toward the sea.

“That’s what everyone says,” Jose Luis said. “That all the disappeared are here: just across from Espiritu Santo, they found some already.”

“But you? You think she’s there?”

“No,” he said. “I think the sea took them somewhere else. I think it’s been too long and the currents have taken them by now.”

“Where?”

“God only knows.”

They heard a heavy splash as something jumped and landed on the surface of the water. At first it was too fast for them to understand what was happening. Then another splash, and then more. Maybe thirty of them. A black crowd slapped the water unabated—all too quick to fully grasp the diamond shape of the manta rays.

True

J.P. Swartelé-Wood

The kitchen door opens.

“Hey, Linda.”

My brother’s voice startles me. The cup I drop hits the kitchen sink but doesn’t break. I should be used to Lloyd’s visits: Since December he’s my Saturday regular. He’s keeping an eye on me.

I know that look on his face—the frown of concern. I figure he’s caught me slumped over the sink, looking worn down. I straighten my shoulders and try to make my voice chirpy. “Come on in, Lloyd. You’re letting in the cold.”

He closes the storm door with care, wipes his feet, shuts the kitchen door, and drapes his huge gray anorak over the back of the chair, taking his time. He clears his throat and says, “How you doing?”

“Fine.” A lie. The truth isn’t always what people want to hear. And right now, with Lloyd, I’m not up to it myself. I re-rinse my coffee cup and bend down to the floor to sponge up crumbs that aren’t there. Better to look busy. “Coffee?”

“Sure.” Lloyd scoots his chair up to my kitchen table, leans forward, accepts his coffee, stirs in sugar, folds his hands. “Crummy timing.”

What is he talking about?

At my blank look his frown deepens. “Your timing. Sad, is all.”

“Lloyd, I’ve got no idea what—”

“Linda. What’s today?”

“Saturday.”

He’s shaking his head. “The date.”

“The date...” I step toward the sink, where my wall calendar still shows January. I flick to the next page. “The date is Februar—”

“Fourteenth.” His voice is almost a sigh. “Valentine’s Day.”

I understand. Hearts and cupids and everlasting love. Three days ago, Scott, my fiancé, was sitting here at my kitchen table. (Last Thanksgiving I had said yes. We made a plan: We’d save for a house and in a year or two would marry.) Scott reached for my left hand and began to finger the ring he had given me—five small stones, sapphires and diamonds, set in white gold.

“So, Honey, you want to be a June bride? He turned the ring round and round.

I felt something twitch in me and pull away.

“Or how about we jump the gun?” He laughed.

I couldn't speak.

"How about next week, you and me? Elope. Vegas!"

I felt his hands, so familiar, playing with the ring, turning it on my finger, and I knew that something like blood—necessary, flowing unnoticed until now—had drained away. Was gone. Some words came to me, something like, "not June, no, not Vegas, no." And finally I heard myself saying—in exactly these words—"The truth is...I can't."

But Scott isn't the person troubling me. If I tell Lloyd what's really on my mind, it'll be more truth he doesn't want to hear. He'll shake his head again and say, "Linda, you gotta snap out of it." (My ex-fiancé has called me "oversensitive"; my brother prefers "morbid.")

Like most of my family, Lloyd has not budged from the opinion that I should forget about "all that." Those two words mean what happened last December ninth, mid-afternoon, on the sidewalk outside Brownie's Café, when "that woman"—a stranger—was shot and lay in my arms, her eyes darting, then clouding pale like frost on glass. She was twenty-six, a year older than I'll be on my next birthday. She had brown eyes and reddish hair, curly. Rita. That's not her real name, I know that. It's Evelyn. But I still think of her as Rita.

At my corner table just behind Brownie's plate glass, I was stirring creamer into my coffee and daydreaming about Scott and me, his excitement over a new catalogue of dream-home blueprints, how perfect our life was becoming. I looked up and saw.

Outside, Rita and the man were arguing. She held her fists tight at her sides. Twice he put his arms around her and their faces came close, but she twisted away. Passers-by frowned and skirted past. He tried again. He pressed his forehead against her temple; his hands opened and closed through her hair, over the shoulders and down the sleeves of her long, green woolen coat.

I turned away. What was going on? So personal—I couldn't watch this. I tried to think of Scott with the blueprints and sipped my coffee till I'd had enough and wanted to leave. I pulled on my car coat but the waitress ignored me when I tried to catch her eye.

Finally I looked out again. I watched. Alone on the sidewalk Rita and the man were all arms and fists jabbing the air and twisted bodies and mouths wide open in pinched-up faces, shouts coming muffled through the plate glass, and all at once his arm in its dark sleeve poked straight out. Snaked toward her. I didn't see the gun but I knew. More shouts, louder. A flash of light and a snap. Like bone cracking.

His head swiveled "no" right and left, all jittery, and his feet did little forward-and-backward steps, like a nervous minuet. He bent over, backing away. Then he was gone.

I ran outside. Her blood pooled from under the green coat and was seeping along the outline of ice-patches, cutting rosy fingers

into the snow.

Can't be, I thought. *Not real, not true, oh God*. I grabbed her and wrapped my arms around her like she was my doll. Even when I felt my knees on the grit and ice of the sidewalk and when I saw more and more legs of people arriving and when I felt my hands wet and then sticky and I smelled blood, I thought: *Not real, not true*.

These past two months I've been keeping busy, the way people tell you will help. My boss at Webster Office Supplies likes me more now that I stay after-hours. At Adult Education I've signed up for Basic Sewing and Quicken for Beginners.

I'm careful not to mention Rita anymore to my friends. I never mention her now to Lloyd and that side of the family. (His wife, Patty, accused me of spoiling Christmas: By being witness to a killing, I'd reminded the family of all the evil in the world.)

The police let me talk to their psychologist in Victims' Services even though I wasn't part of Rita's family. Dr. Bentham said that he would help me understand. He urged me to talk. He would listen. Every time we met he said, "These things take time." I wanted to ask him which things and how much time. He talked and I tried to listen. He made suggestions: to do deep breathing, to see myself happy on a tropical beach. But I kept hearing Rita's jagged breathing and seeing Rita sprawled on the bloody ice, her fists clenched. I kept wondering how much time it takes for love to come undone.

When I need to talk about Rita, I go to strangers. "How terrible, how sad," they say and almost always let me be the first to leave the park bench or take the next free seat on the bus.

For a while I could talk to Georgia, who works behind the counter at Brownie's, because she saw it all and understands. Georgia kept saying, "She was so young," and "You never know." But now Georgia's ex-husband is trying to patch things up with her, and I can see she doesn't want to think about Rita.

I try not to think about Rita, too, but today I can't help myself. This morning I was gathering up clothes to take to the cleaners—the black dress pants my mom gave me for Christmas and the beaded purple jacket I wore New Year's Eve. And my red car coat that I hadn't been able to touch since that day with Rita. Her blood was just dark stains, mostly near the hem.

A discount coupon from Blockbuster Video came out of my pants pocket. I reached for the car coat by its lining. In the right pocket I found the striped gloves I'd been missing, a twenty-cent coupon for toothpaste, a really old gum wrapper from a kind I don't chew anymore. In the left pocket a lot of that stringy lint you get when a loose Kleenex starts to fray. And something sticky. I pulled out the pocket lining. Rita's mint. Wrapped in cellophane, smeared, torn. Hard candy. Peppermint.

A white wheel with flared red spokes, like an open umbrella.

I'd forgotten about Rita's mint.

After the gunshot, when I reached her on the sidewalk, I thought I could stop her dying. I dropped to my knees. She didn't see me, her eyes so frantic and wild. "Hold on now, it's gonna be all right." She trembled; her clenched hands shuddered on the filthy ice. I scooped her onto my lap. "Help's coming, 911's coming." I hugged her close and rocked. All through me I could hear the way she breathed. Almost like I was inside her: Rocking her in my arms was pumping the air in and out again. "Hold on, they're coming." But then her breathing changed. Liquid. When that watery breath started, those fists of hers jerked up to her throat and clenched more, so fierce, like she could keep her heart going just by holding tight. That's when I saw the rings. On her left hand was a gold wedding band and, on the index finger, a silver ring. I touched it and felt her hand soften. Cut in the silver were four letters, spaced wide apart: R-I-T-A.

Her name. "Rita, Rita," I said. (I'd heard how people in a coma will wake up if you just keep calling their name, reminding them of things they care about, touching them.) Hearing her name might be enough. "I've never met a Rita before. Such a pretty name. You hold on now, Rita, 911's on its way. They'll take care of you. All you need, Rita, is just hold on, hold on."

She stiffened. "Rita, when you get well I'm gonna tell everybody the crazy way I met this woman Rita and how we're friends. They won't believe a story like that, they'll say I'm pulling their leg, it's not true about this Rita-person.

"That is a pretty name, Rita—I bet your folks liked those old Rita Hayworth movies, 1940s you know, the old black-and-white ones. Rita. Pretty.

"I'm Linda. Hey, you know, my name *means* pretty. Really. In Spanish. It does. Linda is *pretty*."

Something was slipping inside her.

"Come on, Rita. You gotta hold on."

Her eyes changed.

I shook her. "They're coming. Hold on, Rita." Part of me could hear the voices around us shouting and the feet crunching on snow and ice and the siren getting louder and part of me could hear that water sound of Rita trying to stay alive and the sound of my own words getting louder, "RITA, RITA!"

A man's voice came through: "You're wasting your time, lady."

I looked up, thinking I'd find the man with the voice and tell him he was wrong. But seven or eight men and lots of women stood packed tight around Rita and me, like walls of a room that had no roof. I couldn't tell which man was the one.

When I turned back to Rita, her fists were gone, like her hands had come unstrung. I kept saying *Rita, Rita*, but I knew I wasn't making any sound. Her right fist had let go of something and I reached for it—a mint in cellophane.

“Make room, folks. Give us some room.”

I could feel hands reaching down, lifting me away from her. My hands, in front of me, were red and wet. I reached for the medic's sleeve. “Her name's Rita.”

The EMS crew closed round her, dropped their gear, knelt and worked, traded positions, swore. One man stood up and said, “That's it.”

I opened my hand to look at Rita's mint. The two twists of cellophane had gone flat in her tight grip but the wrapper was not torn. It was only wet and sticky, dark red. Inside, the red and white spokes had softened and smeared from the heat of her hand. An ooze had crept between my fingers. Rita's blood lay sticky on my skin. I centered the mint on my left palm and closed my fist.

Someone's hand drew me aside. “You're family, miss?”

Under the sheet Rita looked smaller than before, too small for the long, green woolen coat that let her blood leak through onto the snow and ice.

“Miss, are you related to this woman?”

I closed my eyes and said, “Her name's Rita. Her name's on her ring: R-I-T-A.”

One of the medics knelt down and grabbed Rita's hand. He gripped the ring and her other fingers dangled free. I saw the dark cut of the letters of her name.

“Oh.” My voice. I'd been wrong. There were more letters on the silver, more than the four of her name.

“V-E-R-I-T-A-S,” he read. “*Veritas*.”

“Very-*what*?” the second medic asked.

“Veri-TAS”.

“What kinda name is — ?”

“It's not a name. It's Latin.”

“Oh, yeah? How do you know Latin?”

“St. Joe's High. Three years of Sister Mary Ignatius.” He bent down again to turn the silver ring. “*Veritas*. Means truth.”

“No kidding.”

“Truth.”

Outside Brownie's I waited for the police to ask their questions, my hands clenched against the cold. I held on to Rita's mint.

It went from her fist to mine, so I know that the oil from her hand and from my hand are there together. I know that the microscopic cells from Rita's skin and from my skin are mixed in the folds of cellophane, and it would take careful testing to draw the line between

hers and mine.

For two months Rita's mint was in my coat pocket. This morning I laid it in an egg cup in my kitchen drawer. I don't know why.

Two months is a long time, I guess, to spend thinking about a stranger. The psychologist from Victims' Services opened his office door to me and said, "Come in." He answered my questions about Rita. He told me that Evelyn Martinson was married to the man who'd killed her, and this man in his confession stated that they had been in love, that he would love her forever. Dr. Bentham leaned forward in his chair: "Do you have any other questions?" I didn't answer. He folded his hands and said, "These things take time."

"These things take time," Lloyd says. "I'm real sorry about you and Scott. A breakup is tough." He swallows the last of his coffee and tilts the mug to spoon out the sweet-sugar dregs. He gives my hand a squeeze. "Let me know if I can help."

"Thanks. I'll be okay."

"You bet. Cheer up, right?" Lloyd shifts his chair back from the kitchen table and hooks his hand on the chain loop of his anorak. "Life's too short to be moping around."

"That's the truth." I feel his warm breath graze my face and the slick nylon of his anorak. His hug, rarely given, is really two hugs—one casual and the second much tighter.

At the door, Lloyd pats his anorak pocket to locate his car keys. "Yee-gods, I almost forgot!" He turns around and sets on the kitchen table a small bundle of Valentine candies wrapped in red cellophane, tied with a pink ribbon and a knot of red-and-white paper hearts. "From the kids. They'd kill me if I forgot their present to Aunt Linda." Lloyd's grin always brightens when he mentions his kids. "Happy Valentine's."

I stand at the back door and wave my brother good-bye. At the table I untie the ribbon and fan my fingers through the candies—a mix of pastel hearts, chocolate kisses, and red-hots. Pink lettering on some hearts is smudged but the words on most are clear: *Hey Babe, All Mine, Dream Girl, Hot Stuff...* I flatten the red cellophane and push the red-hots and kisses aside. I turn over some of the hearts so their words are right-side up.

Sweetheart, Say Yes, Forever, Be True, Love.

Cool, Wild, All Mine, U R A 10, Lover Boy.

Crazy.

I run my fingers through the lines of hearts stamped with words that speak of love. For Always. Rita and the man who killed her had been married. Were sweethearts. In love. Scott loves me, he says. I have been in love. *Crazy.*

A pink heart says *Love Me.*

A green heart says *Forever.*

Behind the spoons in my kitchen drawer I rummage past old keys and coupons for the egg cup that holds Rita's mint. Its colors have run more; the brownish-blooded cellophane is brittle and torn. I lay her mint among the hearts, sprinkle on the red-hots, the chocolate kisses, and scoop them all together onto the red Valentine cellophane.

I twist the neck and reach for the pink ribbon. My hand slips and a lavender heart falls out: *Kiss Me Quick*. I put it back and choose a yellow heart for myself. And two red-hots. And a kiss. I tighten the pink ribbon.

Rita's mint lies among the bundled hearts. I drop the candies in the drawer. Tucked away like that they'll keep.

I put the yellow heart in my mouth and am about to bite down but I stop: I haven't read the message. I give the heart a lick and see its blank side. Turned over, it reads *Be True*. Back in my mouth it stays a long time on my tongue. I want to make it last.

This Video Kid, Too, Will Die

Ephraim Scott Sommers

Outside, slow October corrodes the sassafras leaves to rust. Rock Hill, South Carolina. 2018. Saturday morning. From under a blanket on the couch, I thumb the cold day away on my cell phone.

Online, my Aunt in Montana has posted an old home video from what must be the late eighties, and I watch, with some sense of estrangement, the kid in the video, some prior version of me, who must be on the shy side of eight, as he dances a cardboard glider across his grandmother's back lawn in California, how with every one of his tiny limbs, he swims through the sunshine.

Reader, can you see how unaware this video kid is on this the day of his death?

"Ephraim," his sister, Sarah, calls from behind the VHS camera. "What are you thankful for?"

The film begins its slow widening, its panning backwards as the video kid (can it really be me?) with the fake plane throttles up to the lens, three teeth missing from the front of his mouth.

"What?" He asks, crossing his right leg over his left and leaning forward.

"What are you thankful for?" She repeats.

"Ummm," his eyes rise to the left as if to find an answer by reading the shingles on his grandmother's roof. "The Lord." He says.

"The Lord?"

"Uh huh," he says, a hole in his smile. "Can I go fly more?"

"Sure," she says.

The camera tries to keep up with the boy looping big wide circles into the dirt before losing him in a cloud of apple trees. Sarah, an amateur video journalist, bumbles off, then, to pepper other young cousins with a question, but the audience doesn't get to follow. The tiny window on my phone goes dark. The clip online cuts out, starts over, runs through the whole scene again.

What are you most thankful for?

Under the blanket, in my pajamas, I watch this video kid on my cellphone while I wait for my wife to get home from work, and maybe when she does I'll finally be ready to talk about the past.

Again and again, I watch the video, so you, too, Reader, can watch it, can watch me watching it because I know that on this day in the late

eighties it must be Thanksgiving, and I know, on this day, this video kid will die, and the person left in his place will never be able to sort out what happened to him, and this is where you come in.

I know in a little over an hour the video kid will be in his grandmother's haybarn, and then the memory will begin to unreel out before me like fishing line, and I'll lose the ability to keep it tight.

In the film of the past, in my head, in the barn, the video kid and his younger cousin, Ben, at the direction of their older cousin, Nicole, are made to play a game she calls "Buying Slaves." The two boys, shirtless at her request, recognize the smell, both familiar and intimately earthy, of aged hay as they wait for her, as they watch the dust falling upwards in the afternoon light, as the donkeys go on beeping and honking somewhere beneath the fruit trees outside.

Nicole struts in, on this the day of the feast, in an oversized ladies race track hat (her grandmother's). Across the planked floor, she drags a yard of metal chain behind her. There is no other sound like it, heavy, rusted, metal on bruised wood. It sounds like an entire generation of bloody labor.

The video kid and his cousin, Ben, each lean back against a wooden pillar, their bodies being inspected by the prospective buyer, Nicole, who is maybe a young teenager herself by this time, Nicole, in that floral-print dress four sizes too big, Nicole, who stares so long and leering and deep at the first full half-naked body before her, studies it, pinches a bit of skin on the shoulder, her hands like microscopes.

What are you thankful for?

Who does the body belong to?

A kind of something like shame or gratitude balloons inside the video kid, the one who had been flying in his sister Sarah's film, the one being touched. It is like he has swallowed the top of a lollipop, and it zooms around and around on the inside of his stomach, uncertain of where it might finish, as if something fuzzy rubs and rubs against the backside of his belly button.

No one, who hasn't been his mother, has ever looked at his armpits so intently, her gaze like a quilt that covers everything, as if he's been stuffed between her iris and her eyelid that is right now closing to darken the sun.

Then, it's over.

Nicole slides sideways, then, and examines Ben, the chain aching out a moan at the movement.

Then, she retreats, and after she backs away from both of them, some silence swallows the room. The video kid shifts his weight to his other foot and uncrosses his arms and legs, the skin on his belly fully exposed.

Nicole points.

“I’ll take this one,” she says, meaning the kid from the video.

She speaks to the empty room behind her as if to some slave auctioneer who she, for some reason, believes is altogether fat and rich and lazy and terrible at his job.

“Well how much, you twit?” She scolds the man again, but there is no man standing there, just a square-head shovel hanging on the wall, just three kids playing a game of “Buying Slaves” in a hay barn. “This is the one I want,” she orders. “Prepare him.”

And that’s when she cups the video kid’s chin in her right hand, tucks his cheeks together forcibly, and kisses him, slowly peaking her tongue inside his mouth, exploring the space where his three teeth once were, where his saliva still is. It is balmy, sweet like pink lemonade Jolly Ranchers or darkness, and she lingers...and lingers. I can’t tell you for how long...and longer.

A thousand gypsy moths give themselves to the air inside the boy’s rib cage, or a four-wheeler accelerates too quickly over the top of a dirt hill.

She pulls away.

She opens her eyes.

She smiles. She laughs.

Is it terrifying yet and for whom? Is it illegal?

She wanders out of the open barn door, then, and into the rectangle of blue outside, the chain slithering along behind her like a pet anaconda or dragon or unicorn.

“Come,” is all she says and disappears into the background.

But the video kid doesn’t follow, the video kid who has been chosen, who has been kissed. Instead, he stands there, tranquilized, a long time, somewhere in between how to feel, one foot in a hot bath and the other in a frozen stream.

What are you thankful for?

Right or wrong?

I’ve never wanted to be either one, but here I am again in the part of the film where that has to happen.

Can you help me, Reader?

What else do you need?

I think the video kid was drunk on some new sense awakened in his body. It grew inside him as a thing not named, a thing amorphous, and that feeling without definition seemed more delicious than any of the words he’d learned practicing for the San Luis Obispo County spelling bee that year. O the allure of a floating inside us without a way to describe it!

Then, the weather changed. A cloud must’ve stopped in front of the sun, or death walked into the building. It got dim. Someone, some other younger cousin who must’ve been spying on the three of them, some

other cousin that wasn't Ben, because he was standing right there, and some other cousin besides Nicole, because she had been the agent of the great interior plate tectonic change, someone must've told the older sister, Sarah, because Sarah scorched in like a lightning storm without her camera and interrogated the video kid who stood there, half-naked and dizzy, with a kind of blimp bumping around inside of him.

"What's wrong?" Sarah said, her mouth like a news camera.

She didn't ask him what he was thankful for. She didn't ask him about God.

"I don't know," the kid from the video responded. If he didn't speak it into existence, I imagine him thinking, it could still have been some kind of everlasting dream he could live inside, forever testing the boundaries of the impossible body.

But Sarah shook his shoulders so hard that, "Nicole put her tongue in my mouth," pushed its way past the half-inch gap in his teeth. His sister's face in its grimace, then, turned what had been uncertain, so rapidly, into the direction of sour and spoiled milk on his tongue.

"That's wrong," she said and thundered off after Nicole.

Did the video kid feel guilty for the feeling in his belly?

Had the video kid already expected the world to call him wrong before that moment, when, right there on that dirty barn floor, he died?

Some will say the video kid hadn't say no.

Some will say the video kid hadn't wanted his cousin to be his first kiss, and then it was.

And would the boy who was born in the video kid's place understand anything of what came before?

Right or wrong?

I haven't seen Nicole in decades. I couldn't tell you how old she was. Our families never were close either emotionally or geographically. I couldn't tell you her mother's name. I'm not sure knowing would help.

Or I just don't want to know.

What are you thankful for?

I've never asked my sister, Sarah, about that day either and never will. We, too, for years like me and the video kid have been estranged and maybe always will be.

I know I was eight, that day, which means Nicole had to be maybe three to six years older than me.

And this is why I need you, Reader, whoever you are.

The video kid is dead, and right and wrong, it seems, so often, are not separated by a line, but by a lens, and this is mine.

A lens, a vast one, dirty, obscured by memory, and sometimes as wide as a lifetime, but still mine.

So how should I feel because this is what happened after the scene ended: my sister thundered out after Nicole. Ben wandered off a few

minutes later in no hurry at all, pawing at a mosquito-eater or a lady-bug. I can't be sure.

And after the video kid died, the boy I was came to life in his place and rubbed his palms all over his body, then, in order to make absolutely sure it really did belong to him. He stretched his long-sleeve shirt back over his shoulders and squatted down on a bale of hay, hoping to discover the angle to best sharpen the scene of his birth back into focus. I imagine him praying.

He was no longer the gap-toothed kid in the Thanksgiving video, and maybe he realized it then, that all of us, including me, that everyone he'd ever tell would have to decide for themselves whether he would be a victim or just a boy in a hay barn, playing a child's game.

How will you wrap a frame around him? Reader, I thumb the day away on my couch in South Carolina, awaiting your answer because in less than an hour, I'm going to tell my wife this story for the first time.

So please be clear.

You must be certain.

Tell me, Reader, through which lens, now, should my next life begin?

Alabama Drama in Red, White, and Black

James Ryan

*We lived our little drama
We kissed in a field of white
And stars fell on Alabama last night*

As sung by Billie Holiday

Long ago in the Bronx, on a walk to get the morning newspapers at Jack Krasnoff's candy store at Oneida Avenue and 233rd Street, just across from Woodlawn Cemetery, my grandfather told seven-year-old me a riddle.

"Tell me, Jimmy," he said, "what's black and white and red all over?"

I thought. I looked around. I shrugged.

He said the answer.

"But a newspaper isn't red," I argued.

"Sure it is," he said. "That's what you do with it. And that's why spelling is important."

I laughed at his joke.

If he asked me now, I would have answered differently.

I would have said, "Alabama."

RED

We Whites had even plundered their names! Alabama is one of twenty-six states named after disinherited, vastly dissipated Native American tribes. The *Alibamu* were members of the Muscogee (Creek) Nation displaced west of the Mississippi River to Oklahoma, death-marching along its "Trail of Tears."

An example of this birthright uprooting lives is the Vietnam War-era Merle Haggard song, "Okie from Muskogee." It extols the down-home patriotic, small-town American life, free from marijuana and other complexities, while remaining ignorant of the genocidal horror of its stolen birthright. "Muskogee" should not be a city in Oklahoma. The ravaged Muscogee (Creek) Nation should not have been forcibly extirpated from its *Alibamu* homeland to Oklahoma. Incidentally, "Oklahoma" is a Choctaw word meaning Red (*okla*) People (*houma*). The stench of racial extermination pervades.

The Creek Nation, known for its comity toward the invading White race, was dubbed one of the five “civilized” Southeastern Indian nations. That would not save any of them. Credit this genocidal malfeasance to The Indian Removal Act of 1830. From then until the beginning of the Civil War, the number of Southern slaves doubled while cotton production rose five hundred percent. The architect of this inhumane efficiency? The notorious Indian hater, Andrew Jackson, then president of the United States.

Cotton trumped all. And clear-cutting forests would unearth the wondrous fertility of Black Belt soil. Since the free labor of ignominious slavery was key to economic progress, the tribes and their forest homelands were doomed. Goodbye, trees! Hello, black earth upheaval! The lands stolen from the Creeks were congruent with the areas of densest, darkest slave concentrations in Alabama. One crime begets another.

The Black Belt produced two stark crops—white cotton and Black slaves. Wilcox County, Alabama was an exemplar of the plantation system. Blessed with fertile soil and the Alabama River’s vast network of tributaries, high-cotton time had hundreds of riverboat landings to service the endless paddlewheel traffic downriver to Mobile. There, they offloaded to seagoing vessels heading overseas to Liverpool. Plantation owners flourished. By 1860, Alabama and Louisiana held first place among slave states—forty-five percent of their population was slaves.

Cotton was king. Call it economic harmony. Call it Southern comfort. Call it Dixie Land. With tribal homelands usurped, their birthrights stolen, all five “civilized” nations were banished west to *terra incognita*. And today, Andrew Jackson’s portrait hangs in the Oval Office of the president of the United States.

Bad angels, not stars, had fallen on Alabama.

Forty-five million years ago, give or take a few, a warm, shallow sea covered half of what would later be called Alabama. The enormous prehistoric ancestors of whales had succumbed to age and a cooling planet. These creatures, sixty feet long, named *Basilosaurus cetoides* or *Zeuglodon*, lay in quiet extinction covered by the fertile sea-bottom muck. This “muck” would become the Black Belt.

Now fast forward millions of years to 1842, where Judge John G. Creagh’s slaves were clearing fields on his huge plantation near a town called Catherine. A few feet down, their shovels rang out against some odd-looking rocks. Herman Melville described their discovery in *Moby-Dick*:

But by far the most wonderful of all cetacean relics was the almost complete vast skeleton of an extinct monster, found in the year 1842, on the plantation of Judge Creagh,

*in Alabama. The awe-stricken credulous slaves in the vicinity took it for the bones of one of the fallen angels.*¹

One lost paradise interred in what would soon become another.

Unearthed fossils were so common on the Creagh plantation that it was dubbed “The Rocks.” Slaves plowing new land stacked them to mark field divisions as New England farmers stacked upheaved boulders to make fences. Fossils seemed everywhere. Some Alabama houses even used whalebones to secure their foundations. Vertebrae served as andirons for fireplaces. Alabama declared the *Basilosaurus cetoides* as its official state fossil in 1984. A replica hangs from the ceiling in the Grand Gallery of the Alabama Museum of Natural History in the city of Tuscaloosa, the name of a Muscogee chieftain.

Karl Marx famously noted that history repeats, first as tragedy, then as farce. Note this deadly, tragic farce.² Note the place: Fort Rucker, Alabama, home of Army aviation, both fixed-wing and helicopters. It was another Southern army base named for a Confederate Civil War general, this one, Edmund Rucker. In 1960, the base was the home of the Iroquois. Later would come the Apache, the Kiowa, the Chinook, the Lakota, the Huron, the Cayuse, the Chickasaw, the Cheyenne, and the Black Hawk. No, they were not the wandering, lost tribes of homeless Indian nations. They were helicopters. All helicopters, and all about war and destruction. All rising in Alabama. While military hospital ships are named *Comfort*, *Hope*, and *Mercy*, U.S. Army attack helicopters celebrate the victims of genocide in the so-called “Indian Wars.”

After annihilation comes macabre remembrance, like arsonists returning to view their blazing crime scenes. This Native American fixation was furthered in Vietnam, when the land beyond government control became known as “Indian country.” And the revolutionary enemy became “gooks” and “termites.”

As Melville’s whaling ship, *The Pequod*, was “a cannibal of a craft, tricking herself forth in the chased bones of her enemies,” so does the United States military trick itself forth in the cannibalizing aircraft with the murdered names of its slaughtered enemies.³ As noted linguist and political activist Noam Chomsky put it: “We might react differently if the Luftwaffe were to call its fighter planes ‘Jew’ and ‘Gypsy.’”

¹ Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick or The Whale* (San Diego: Canterbury Classics, 2016), 445.

² Karl Marx, “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte,” in *The Portable Karl Marx* (New York: Penguin Books, 1983), 287.

³ Melville, 68.

Today, the Creagh plantation has gone the way of slavery and the aboriginal Native Americans. Twenty-two members of the Creagh family remain interred in a moldering private cemetery in a town called Catherine. According to the 2010 census, there were also twenty-two living residents—none named Creagh—in Catherine, the least populated census-designated place in Alabama. *Sic transit gloria mundi*.

Melville described the uniqueness of the white whale, commenting that “blackness is the rule among almost all whales.”⁴ Blackness, the harsh rule of slavery, the soil they slaved upon, the mark upon the soul left by that great American double obscenity—the genocide of the Red race, the enslavement of the Black.

As for Percy Bysshe Shelley’s “Ozymandias,” so for the plantation owners and their black leviathan called slavery:

*My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings;
Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away.*⁵

Nothing beside the Creagh-Glover Cemetery remains except the much-diminished town called Catherine. Gone the plantations. Gone the slaves. Gone the primordial Red race. Yet...

BLACK

“My soul has grown deep like the rivers,” wrote Langston Hughes, the great poetic voice of the Harlem Renaissance, adding, “I’ve known rivers: ancient, dusky rivers.”⁶ It’s a universal voyage, a timeless poetic monologue for Hughes in his “The Negro Speaks of Rivers.” As Melville ceded universal ownership of the seas to the Nantucket Indians, metaphorically all Indians, Hughes bestowed his Black race the great rivers. Bathing in the Euphrates at the beginning of time, listening to the singing Mississippi slaves with Abraham Lincoln, Hughes held ancient dreams for modern times. And why not? The touch of the poet prevails.

Mark these touches of Alabama Black-times...

⁴ Melville, 136.

⁵ Percy Bysshe Shelley, “Ozymandias,” in *The Complete Poetical Works of Shelley* (Boston; Houghton Mifflin Company, 1901), 356.

⁶ Langston Hughes, *Selected Poetry of Langston Hughes* (New York: Vintage Classics, 1990), 4.

On March 2, 1955, nine months before Rosa Parks would refuse to give up her seat on a Birmingham bus, a fifteen-year-old high school student, Claudette Colvin, had already done the rebellious deed. Arrested for her principles, four months later, Colvin joined four other arrested Black women as plaintiffs in the federal civil action lawsuit *Browder v. Gayle*. On November 13, 1956, the United States Supreme Court upheld the civil action and ordered the desegregation of all Alabama buses. Today, March 2 is known as “Claudette Colvin Day” in Birmingham, Alabama.

A year later, on February 3, 1956, Fred Shuttlesworth, pastor of Bethel Baptist Church in Birmingham, accompanied Autherine Lucy as she registered to enter a graduate program in library science at the University of Alabama. Violent riots erupted. First, the university suspended Lucy for her own safety. Later, she was expelled. Reinstated after thirty years, she re-entered the program and earned a master’s degree in 1992. At her graduation, the university endowed a fellowship in her name.

Christmas Eve, December 24, 1956, Fred Shuttlesworth is asleep upstairs in his parsonage next to the church. The Ku Klux Klan gifted him with sixteen sticks of dynamite in a white bucket. It blasted the parsonage into collapse. But Shuttlesworth emerged from the basement unhurt. Years later, he would describe the event as him being “blown into history.”⁷

Christmas Day dawned and Shuttlesworth, unperturbed, would lead one hundred demonstrators to the Birmingham Bus Terminal to test the rigor of the enforcement of the *Browder v. Gayle* desegregation ruling. There, they fully occupied the White sections of buses. Twenty-two arrests ensued, including his.

And time wore violently on for Reverend Shuttlesworth. Multiple arrests, multiple beatings, multiple billy clubs, baseball bats, bicycle chains, firehoses, snarling dogs, tear gas at the Pettus Bridge at Selma, his eulogy at the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church for the “four little girls.” Martin Luther King called him “the most courageous civil rights fighter in the South.”⁸

The future held worse. The “heat of the night” violence that erupted in 1961, beginning with the torching of the Freedom Rider’s bus in Anniston, Alabama. The welcoming mobs in Birmingham, the bus station beatings in Montgomery, the iron pipes. Alabama was boiling. Sit-ins and bus burnings all over the state. Bull Connor and his snarling

⁷ Diane McWhorter, “Marching in King’s Shadow,” *The New York Times*, October 6, 2011.

⁸ Matt Schudel, “Fred L. Shuttlesworth, courageous civil rights fighter, dies at 89,” *The Washington Post*, October 5, 2011.

dogs in Birmingham. Beatings. Killings. Violence. Hatred. The Mother's Day bus firebombed in Anniston. Black tears and White fears and the Alabama streets ran crimson. And church burnings, four more little girls will die in the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, George Wallace "stands in the schoolhouse door," and more bombing in Birmingham. "Bloody Tuesday" in Tuscaloosa. "Bloody Sunday" in Selma. Martin Luther King jailed. Martin Luther King awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. Martin Luther King murdered.

Fred Shuttlesworth died in Birmingham at eighty-nine. Unfailing courage defined him.

BLACK AND WHITE

As West Point cadets, *The New York Times* and *The New York Herald Tribune* came to our rooms every morning. They didn't help us learn much about Alabama. Neither did study of the American Civil War, nor "Stonewall" Jackson's bold campaign in the Shenandoah Valley, nor Grant's campaign at Vicksburg on July 4, 1862 that finished the Confederate Army on the Mississippi River. Nor would deconstructing line-by-line Stephen Vincent Benét's poem "John Brown's Body."

We did know that public transportation, particularly buses and trains, more specifically seats thereon, were sensitive items down South. As were drinking fountains, restrooms, and waiting areas. I had discovered that in a bus station in Fort Bragg, North Carolina. The evening bus to Rocky Mount was ready to go. And so was I, urgently. I remember the expression on the Black man's face next to me as I urgently used the urinal in the colored-only men's room.

Now consider another Fred from Alabama, my West Point classmate. He was born in Anniston, about two hundred miles north of Fort Rucker. Fred left Alabama as a child and grew up in Battle Creek, Michigan.

Fred and I were similar. Like me, Fred was tall and slim. We were in the same cadet company. We were in the same gym class section that was organized by weight. To further assure fairness for boxing and wrestling class, we were further ranked by height. So there we stood, always beside each other, evenly matched. Such similarity granted us the equal right to pound each other with left hooks and right crosses. Freed us to grab and pull, push and grope each other, our sweaty faces contorted and often wedged in unseemly places. This was called wrestling. These programs of learning the manly arts lasted one year. They were all about making contact.

In the end, we came out where we started. Even. A fair match, both of us limited only by our innate deficiencies. Similar in physical ways,

except one—I was not Black. My classmate, distinguished by nature and ever distinguishable, was the only Afro-American in the entire class of over six hundred cadets. Only one young Black man! An infinitely small, sad representation, 0.16% of our class of 610. The institution seemed mindless of the infinitude of the insult. That too was the kind of America we would all soon swear to serve.

And mark this too—the Jim Crow Ordinance 798-F then prevailing in Birmingham, Alabama entitled “Negroes and White Persons Not To Play Together.”

It deemed unlawful for a “Negro” and a White person to engage in cards, dice, dominoes, checkers, baseball, basketball, or any similar games in any public space or house or tavern or restaurant or ball field or stadium. Blacks and Whites must be “distinctly separated by well-defined physical barriers.” If my boyhood hero from Fairfield, Alabama—Willie Howard Mays, now starting for the San Francisco Giants—came to Birmingham, he could not play with or against a team that included me. Nor could I play checkers with Mr. Mays in the dugout or anywhere else in Birmingham. Nor could I play with my classmate Fred in a public library.

This was the America that we as new officers would soon swear to support and defend.

Our West Point class was on a summer orientation trip visiting military bases in the South. It was dripping-humid-hot that June evening at Fort Rucker, Alabama in 1960. We were dressed in starched dress whites for the occasion, a welcoming dinner-dance. Each cadet would be randomly assigned a dinner date from a pool of over six hundred young White ladies, except, of course, for Fred. A social dragnet must have swept southern Alabama. Local towns like Ozark, Enterprise, Dothan, and Daleville were scoured for candidates. In the best tradition of *Gone With The Wind* and Southern hospitality, we cadets would dine and dance with Southern Belles. I imagined that notices like this might have been posted on lampposts:

WANTED

Attention, Southern Belles!
Meet, Dine, and Dance with a West Point Cadet.
Fort Rucker Officers Club. Dress Nice.
Get information at the nearest post office.

And so it came to pass that over six hundred begowned young ladies descended on the Fort Rucker officers club that steamy June evening. Each received a card, a table number, and a cadet’s name. To avoid

chaos, cadets stood at their assigned tables, nametags affixed, awaiting their moments of truth. Six of us, including Fred, had been assigned to the same table, but Fred was not there.

Perfume and fancy frocks filled the air. Our dates had arrived. The girls seemed okay—quiet, a bit confused, wary, shy. The chitchat flowed at a languid pace. There was an edgy eating of dinner rolls. My date was blond, attractive, and friendly. She said she aspired to become a nurse. My treacherous nose quivered. It was the perfume, hers. In an instant, I knew our relationship was doomed. My penchant for al...al...allergies... I sneezed boldly into a round of God's blessings. Still no Fred. I groped inside my tunic for a handkerchief. My nose, like a West Point cadet, never lies. No scented Southern Belles for me. We sat talking about where we were from, the heat, and who would sit in the two empty seats.

The dance floor was a flood of swelling pastels in a field of military whites. Soon we must wade in. Suddenly, like Moses parting the Red Sea, Fred and his date parted the white. We rose in greeting. Our dates remained seated, fidgeting and mumbling. Ladies don't stand, but there was something else happening. They had noticed what we five cadets had never considered. And as we started introducing Fred and his date, our Southern Belles levitated in one wordless, ignorant whoosh. And off they flounced in a racist huff, and not to the powder room either. They fled the premises, trailing their perfumed biases behind. Something stunning had happened. We didn't know what to do, in shock that such willful ignorance could be so publicly displayed. Well, goodbye, Scarlett O'Hara! And goodbye, Jim Crow too! Some other evening, they might learn about the inevitability of the multicolored world.

We sat transfixed, six cadets, one young Black woman, and five empty chairs. She was the daughter of a sergeant stationed at Fort Rucker. Call her Louise. Imagine being one of the two Black faces in a crowd of twelve hundred. Imagine her. Imagine Fred. Imagine America.

We examined our fingernails. We shook our heads. We fumbled with silverware. We devoured more rolls. Five empty seats. Five empty plates. A long evening loomed. Fred had Louise. We had chairs.

Then someone had an idea. He rose. "Louise," he said, "may I have this dance?"

Louise smiled brilliantly. "Why, I'd be delighted," she said. "Simply delighted."

I like to think that I am remembering correctly. I like to think that we five dateless White cadets dressed in spotless white tunics sat around the table and alternately danced with the sergeant's Black daughter. I like to think that we cracked jokes with our splendid Black classmate. I like to think that we talked about the weather then prevailing in the Dothan area. I like to think that we sought out the Officer in Charge and

rendered an outraged complaint about a civil rights violation and about a hate crime committed on US government property. I like to think that we acted as we were trained to do, to behave as honorable gentlemen, to defend the abused, to protect the endangered. I like to think all that. What happened at Fort Rucker was happening all over the country. And it would worsen.

As James Baldwin had written in 1955: “This world is white no longer, and it will never be white again.” This was the great truth for the coming ages.

And so it was for us, or perhaps something like this, on a long-ago, black-and-white evening in Alabama. An evening that we all might have danced with a Black woman, perhaps named Louise.

THE END

NOTES

1. Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick or The Whale* (San Diego: Canterbury Classics, 2016), 445.
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3. Melville, 68.
4. Melville, 136.
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7. Diane McWhorter, "Marching in King's Shadow," *The New York Times*, October 6, 2011.
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