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WHEN THE SUN DIES
Paul Dickerson

WHEN the sun dies I will be on the shore. My fraternal twin sister Leigh will be there too. Our footprints will fade like memories in the sand as we survey the coast for good seats for the world’s last sunset.

An assembly of floating heads freckle the beach as far as I can see. Some people have brought blankets and chairs, others have brought their trucks and cars and bikes. The ocean hums and coos as Leigh and I find an empty dune to watch the sun’s swan song.

It’s hard to know what will matter after the sun dies. Or what color the sky will sour when it mourns the loss of the sun’s light.

I think about the years Leigh and I have spent apart, separated by our respective abuse. The family veins that run through our bodies have blown and collapsed from my coffee-and-meth hunger strikes, and Leigh’s brickboned boyfriends who purpled her body in bruises when they didn’t get their way.

Clouds are forming sigils in the sky, paying tribute to their
favorite vanishing star. It’ll be strange rising to the sun’s ghost, a shadow, instead of the sun’s shine. No one knows how long we’ll survive. All of the politicians are quoting the reporters who are quoting the astronomers. Words travel like dominoes falling in reverse.

Some people seem happy to celebrate the sun’s funeral. Children are building mighty sandcastles while their parents share Coronas huddled under umbrellas. Leigh is burying her bare feet in the sand, a common beach practice in our family. Her arms are sunburnt, a last ditch effort to hold onto something before losing it forever.

“What do you think the sun will reincarnate into?” I ask her.

“A colony of bees,” she says with no hesitation.

Sometimes I wish I wasn’t the one who got the fear gene of the two of us. Being sober means being afraid all the time, instead of none of the time when I was on drugs. If I’d known in my drugbaby twenties that the sun would die by the time I turned thirty-five, I wouldn’t have gone through the trouble of getting clean.

Eight years, three months, and twelve days without pills, powders, and pot. If you drained all the fluid from my body and poured me through a strainer, you’d sift out mothballs of dried up crystals that have lived and died in my blood vessels since I took my last hit.

When the sun dies, everyone assumes the sky will turn black, maybe gray, or deep blue. The stars and moon are projected to glow yellow and white like a big-toothed smile in the sky.

Whirlwinds of seagulls caw above us. Stray pelicans as big as
planes intersect their noisier troposphere neighbors. The pelicans don’t speak. There won’t be enough lighthouses to lead all of these birds home.

The dumbwaiter in my chest lifts my heart to my throat. I want to scream, but I want somebody else to do it first.

My sister. I see the scar on her head from the time her college boyfriend threw her down the stairs during an argument outside a honeymoon motel room. I thought I’d be more sentimental right now. I’m forcing myself to think of the good times, the flashes of joy that people experience before they wilt away in the face of God. All the waves we surfed in high school on this very same beach. Circumnavigating waters of stingrays, jellyfish, and sand tigers. We’d end our nights drinking muddy beers on the shore and watching the dolphins raise their fins like sails above the rising tide.

Maybe the sun is a hole of light that can be filled.

Leigh and I have seen the end of the world already, and this is definitely not it.
SEAWEED
Susannah Jordan
The empty winter branches, austere like a monk,  
I stare and stare until I am looking at nothing:  
a place through which my soul can sieve,  
combed by the fine cold fingers of oak and ash.

Up there is the quiet of quiet,  
I empty my head on the shore of the forest,  
my heart a sigil.  
The birds gather,  
curious and hungry,  
they eye the wriggling shapes I string through the branches.

It’s a mess.  
It seemed so much easier in theory.  
I am tangled,  
I am stuck,  
the birds come closer,  
take a little here,  
a little there--  
a vicious meditation  
and me, the dumbwaiter.
Once in a twin bed, my mother died
and I walked down tar roads, belly pressed,
eyes devoured by what remained in the world.

I curled in the dumbwaiter of my father’s arms,
fell ill with loss, lived with the scent
of fish bones, the blue lake beside us.

After the funeral, I watched out the window
as we drove home and two boys
on horses rode by laughing. Their elbows
and knees cut angles of alarm in me.

Sunset held me in a hollow tube, caught
between arbitrary prayers and mean reality.

An aluminum door cut the air
between my father and me. He stowed
his pain behind tight lips. I carried mine
down to the shore, dumped it in the skiff,
untied the line and watched it drift away,
undefined in gray haze.
WHAT LIGHT MAY COME
Briana Gervat
smoke
throb
on the dunes
He crept
weaving
the water
from his body
SHE hadn’t seen land in two days. But at night, the low-lying, skinny clouds resembled mountain ranges. It was after midnight when her turn at watch began. She’d started out alert. Pure navigational thoughts prevailed—until all at once she was diving into the crisp, swift current of familiar reveries. [What are reveries? Do you mean like memories?] We were sailing next to the divine. God listened quietly because her thoughts sounded like prayers.

Chill air rising off the ocean penetrated her black fleece, especially around the pockets where the material had faded and pill ed from too many washes. The deep sea swallowed the sun-warmed water leftover from the day before. [I love this.]

When at last the glow of her water-resistant Casio indicated her vigil was nearly done, my mother pressed each palm against the other hand to stretch out her wrists. [At first, I saw “God” and then “her” and I thought, “Wow, my daughter really has changed.” But
It’s you. Oh? I see, yes, it’s your mother.

She stood firmly, solidly against the aspiring, rolling, bucking, plunging of the ship. [I’d change this to “small craft.” That’s my take. Or “small, sailing vessel.”] Bracing her legs, she lifted her chin to scan the horizon. Her glutes were stiff after so long parked on a thin, damp cushion. [I can’t picture your mother with glutes.]

Holding the rail on the teak staircase [I would call this a “companionway” because, I think, and I’m going to Google that, yep, a companionway is what the stairs are called on a boat. We called it that. I always tell the story of your mother going down first and it’s dark and she stepped on a fish. She thought it was a kitten! No, no, it was a fish, but it was still alive.], Mom turned on the red light and tiptoed in double-socked feet through the boat’s cabin. [You might want to say something here about the red light. It was for nighttime, so your eyes can adjust.]

Her children had learned to sleep deeply on these nights underway. The closed door to her daughter’s bunk creaked against its hinges as the boat surged steadily onward. The day before the day before this night had been this little girl’s birthday. Out in the cockpit, they had sung me a sped-up version of the song before the wind whipped out all six of my candles. Now a bellyful of box cake conjured up visions of burglars wearing balaclavas. I’d recently developed a preternatural fear of burglars. Beneath closed eyelids, the little girl watched the bad men creeping down the stairway, tiptoeing silently behind her mother. These nocturnal thieves were coming for my teddy bear.

Mom gently shook my father awake, but not tenderly. [It was not tender because she was saying, “You talked me into this!”]
He let out a breath—long, loud, and annoyed. Mom popped out a drawer to use as a step and then vaulted over him, efficiently flattening her body along the far side of the double bunk. She turned her back to him [I love this! Has your mother read this?], nestling against the wooden hull that carried engine vibrations throughout the boat. The small blessing of sharing watches with the person who shared your bed was that it stayed warm.

“Anything out there?” Dad pulled a long-sleeved running shirt over his head. My parents’ wardrobe consisted entirely of 1980s running t-shirts from Northern California fun runs. [It was the 1970s and 80s. And you might want to make us sound better and say they were marathons.] This is how they’d met. Sweaty endorphins inspiring feelings of romance. [Has your mom read this? I hope she laughs]. Love that had bloomed in the desert heat, now drowning in saltwater. [What desert? You mean the Valley?]

“Just water.” Mom’s voice was muffled by the pillow.

Dad tilted his walk to match the keeling of Abishag’s present course. [Keeling? Or heeling? I think that should be heeling.] He switched off the red bulb on the stairwell. He checked the horizon and the autopilot. No land, no lights, no problems. The engine throbbed steady and normal. For several minutes, he stood at the helm unnecessarily as the autopilot made its minute corrections.

The parent on watch could not read books even with the brightest moon. To be on watch was an exercise in near perfect boredom. [I honestly don’t think I was ever bored. I really don’t think so. I just liked it out there. Because I used to be on watch in the Navy, so I’ve always liked it. There was always something out there to see, even at night.] But after twenty minutes of standing
and shivering, thinking of how warm he had just been, Dad sat down and experimented with thinking about nothing from another angle. [I do that now!]

He stared into the starry sky. The stainless-steel cockpit railing felt cold against his neck. Clouds passed over the stars. He twisted to peer into the water flowing behind Abishag’s stern. Bubbles rippled, moonlight flickered off the foamy surf, fooling the eyes. Did a fish jump? He considered trolling a line, but if he caught something he’d have to fillet it right away. The icebox was already brimming with fish steaks. [Not to get too technical, but I think they were probably filets. Steaks are with the bone. Or the middle of the fish. Then the intestines and innards are taken out so they’re in a U-shape.]

Dad thought about marinades. Maybe he’d add more paprika to the next one. Less lemon pepper for the mahi-mahi. [I was debating about whether to say anything here. I’ll let you decide. The fish we caught were dorado. That’s what we called them. It’s the Spanish name. And they are also called dolphin fish, that’s what’s on the logo for the Submarine Service. But when they are served in a restaurant, they’re called mahi-mahi.]

The boat swayed counterintuitively. [I like that word. That would be a good Scrabble word.] A lurch. A stirring forward from the cockpit. As he stood up, Dad had to take four small steps backward to catch his balance. Though we’d been sailing for months by now, his once landlocked feet were still learning to dance to the rhythm of the sea. Dad sashayed forward on the port side of the deck. [I haven’t sashayed in years! I want to find out what the definition of sashay is... “Walk in an ostentatious yet
casual manner, typically with exaggerated movements of the hips and shoulders.” Yeah, that’s what I was doing, alright."

He held on to the lifeline with both hands. If he fell overboard, it would be a while before his wife woke for her next watch to notice him gone. A dark sea would make a lonely grave. [Only if I woke her! She would have kept sleeping.]

Huge pupils scanned the deck [Do I have huge pupils?] up and over the boom with the sail folded away for lack of wind and skill. His eyes followed the mast up fifty-two feet—but then paused. Two-thirds of the way to the top, perched on Abishag’s mast spreader, a visitor had landed.

Dad laughed out loud. Miles from shore, this tenacious, heavy-bodied avian had found a tree. A break in the clouds revealed the moon, helpfully exposing the feet of the intruder. Blue feet. Types of birds and fish were a regular conversation topic for my family. Dad didn’t need to flip through our dog-eared copy of Birds of North America to identify this species. There are a great deal of sea birds that call the Pacific coast of Central America home. Most of them are variations of gray, white, and black. Standard bird colors. But there is only one bird with the audacity to paint its feet blue—a sigil of impudence that characterizes the blue-footed booby.

A new cloud covered the moon, and he noticed the chill on deck after coming out from behind the cockpit awning that blocked the wind. My father’s amusement faded. There were things on the mast that were breakable and hard to replace. Sensitive instruments with delicate parts. The radar, the eyes and nose of the boat, was mounted high up on the mast. What if the bird damaged something
expensive? [I don’t know if that’s what I would think.]

“Shoo! Get off! Go away!”

[I don’t remember any of this.]

His daughter slept on, blissfully unaware of the drama above deck. This little girl had long since memorized how the ocean felt after dark; she’d joined her parents on enough watches during sleepless nights. It was one of a hundred nights we would spend traversing the seas. Even now it takes barely any effort to visualize the blackest line where the sky dives into the water, or to feel the spray of the ocean’s epidermis peeling away in the wind. The only unique thing about this night on this watch in this gulf was this bird.

Dad commanded the bird to leave. The booby tucked its beak under its wing, as if to more pointedly ignore my father’s hoarse intimidations. Dad wedged his left foot under a cleat and wrapped a loose line around his right wrist while he waved and windmilled his arms.

These bombastic gesticulations had no effect.

Back in the cockpit, he rummaged around under the sunshade—this catch-all plane piled with binoculars, plastic cups with ancient ice melt, a chart with three distinct coffee stains from three unique spills, a metal bowl with remnants of popcorn, and, wedged in the back corner, the flashlight. A heavy Maglite, the kind policemen carried. Hefty enough to knock a burglar out cold. Dad swung his torso around to the other side of the awning, aiming the flashlight at the booby. But the beam only made it halfway up the mast before night swallowed it.

Undaunted, my father opened the lockers under the cockpit
seats, scattering cushions into the wheel well. Here, ropes and bungees. In the next one, an empty jerry can, a fountain soda cup half filled with Micro Machines [Are these toys?], and a plastic cutting board, still stained with fish guts. Tools and toys and tins of food elbowed each other for space in the farthest starboard locker. Underneath a mess of damp life jackets, he discovered the industrial-sized floodlight.

Dad returned to his balancing spot forward of the cockpit. Stomping a level above his sleeping daughter’s bunk [This doesn’t quite make sense to me. No, okay, I got it. “A level above.” It’s the next floor up.], though I was cocooned by the engine’s hum, and pressed in on all sides by at least ten stuffed animals of varying belovedness. [Only ten?]

An increasingly rapid series of clicks revealed the bigger light’s dead batteries. Dad swore. [I don’t swear. (He laughs.) I’m such a garbage mouth.] He considered causing more cockpit chaos to find fresh batteries, even going down below and causing a mess there. But as much as he wanted to remove the offending visitor before it started shitting all over the sail cover, he wouldn’t abandon his post. Resigned, my father sat down on the last cushion still in its place and glared at the dark smudge of bird.

Anger bubbled up from deep inside; like a belch, it started somewhere low and sought passage upward. Dad could feel the small burp of rage traveling from his gut with the steady speed of a dumbwaiter. He was not used to being ignored. Though his family-crew rarely followed his orders with the speed or thoroughness he desired, his words usually inspired action. He spoke, and shit happened.
The booby shifted a tired head to its other wing. Dad glared up motionless until his neck started to ache.

The huge stick of the mast, pinning Abishag upright in the Gulf of Tehuantepec, strained to keep its posture tight on this bull ride. [Ain’t that the truth.] It waggled at the moon like a disapproving finger. [Oh, I know that finger! A little girl used to waggle her finger at me. Do you remember that?]

His arm snaked outward for the metal popcorn bowl. When the sun was high and sails were flying, he’d cooked popcorn on the small propane stove in the pot with the burned-out bottom. Abishag’s little propane stove worked fast and hot and burned half of what popped, while many of the kernels stayed small and hard. These “grannies” were often crunched in moments of absent-minded snacking. A dangerous dental game to play while living far from land. I liked to suck the oil and salt off the hard kernels and then spit them into the sea, or at my brother.

Thoughtfully scooping and releasing handfuls of the oily kernels, Dad wondered about their potential as projectiles. The bird perched at least forty feet up. He wiped a salty hand on his jeans. [Remind me in a minute, I am going to come back to this jeans part.] In the wheel well, by his feet, the convenience store cup with a plastic lid had a straw jutting out the top. The straw shrieked in dissent as he released it.

Dad stepped over the gunwale lip with the bowl under one arm. The straw hung out the side of his mouth like one of Cruella De Vil’s cigarettes. Bracing against the outside of the cockpit awning, he fitted a kernel into the straw end and blew hard. The first blow hurt his cheeks as the kernel stayed lodged, but the second puff
successfully launched a single granny.

It barely cleared the sunshade, but Dad believed he had come close.

He kept at it. One after another the unpopped kernels sailed in a high arc. [I don’t remember doing this.] None quite hit the target, but each seemed like it might. The tantalizing addiction of the near miss.

Abishag and her sleeping crew carried on. The autopilot made slight adjustments to keep her on course. The booby took a short nap.

As the wind picked up, even Dad had to concede the kernels were not persuading his feathered adversary. He flung the last five kernels all at once in a furious finish, wiping his hand on his shorts as a shift in the wind sent the grannies whistling back into his face. [So now I have on shorts? I’m a quick-change artist!]

Empty-handed and discouraged, Dad sulked. How might things have escalated? Would he have systematically launched larger and larger items until everything not bolted down was scattered all over the deck?

But in a moonlight epiphany, Dad recalled the mast had lights of its own. The red and green navigational lights were already on, but these may have drawn the bird initially to this Christmas tree at sea. The mast also came equipped with lights for distress. Strobe lights and fog lights and lights for communicating with other boats. Dad turned them all on. Click, click, click. Little metal toggles. Abishag’s mast lit up like the dawn. The booby bristled under the brightness of interrogation but held fast.

Then Dad turned off each light, methodically plunging the boat
into relative darkness.
   On again.
   Off and on. On and off.
   One last flood of light was more than the booby could tolerate.
No tree was worth this persecution.
As it flew away at last, those comically blue but dangerously sharp claws nabbed a small piece of Abishag’s wind indicator as a souvenir. [I don't think this is how the wind indicator broke.] A real burglar had come and gone, but I saw none of it. Somewhere on the ochre Isthmus of Tehuantepec, a nest had won a very expensive twig. [I remember it broke, but I don’t think this was how it happened.]
Dad let out a triumphant cry—aimed at the underside of those turquoise talons. He had bested his beast, and just in time for the end of his watch. My father shuffled downstairs in pursuit of feather-free dreams. If the bird came back now, it would be my mother’s problem.
In the morning, my brother and I puzzled over the tens of popcorn grannies scattered over the top deck. Dad directed us to seek out and collect every kernel. He didn’t want them to attract birds, he said.
We were excited to play a new game. I announced the discovery of each golden nugget trapped under a line or wedged behind a cleat. Echoes of this joyful hunt stayed with me for years. As I flung each foundling one by one into the choppy sea—often to see my lobs fall short by a foot—I collected its story. We found more loose kernels on deck over the next few days, some even weeks later.
[I don’t remember any of this.]
Don’t worry, Dad. I’ll remember this for you.
ORANGE YOU SHORE?
Renée Cohen
CLASH
Amanda Huang
Your tongue, all muscle, tries to sing, but slurs it: \textit{emphysema}: lungs a trashy heap of tissue, useless like the lung of birds. Along the shore, the gulls all wait, asleep, for tomorrow’s meal washed up in seafoam. You clear your throat and say the word again, unclear. You find a diction book at home, and underline it: \textit{emphysema}. When the sigil is complete, the word will wash away with sand into the gulf, the spell will heave your broken lungs like waves, the wash will feel so clean, and we’ll believe the spell as useless as a dumbwaiter. Up/down, you float on seafoam. We all watch you drown.
SHELTER FROM THE STORM
GJ Gillespie
BEACHED
Jennifer Weigel
SHORELINE
Leah Dockrill
We could drive down the same old path, take Summerlin to Gladiolus and head straight toward the briny air.

Over the drawbridge, everything will be the same: bikes rented by the hour and roads that wind into water.

We’ll park illegally behind cabbage palm, race down the boardwalk barefoot, not stop until we’re safe in sand.

Not even stop when we realize there’s no sand, just shells. Broken shells that people still can’t help but pick through—

we think of the lady from She Sells Seashells and feel a little bad for her. Everything feels like excess now, like the dumbwaiters at the Veranda, everyone’s favorite spot for prom and special occasions. With no spot to look out from, the deck is boarded from storms;

we try to laugh it off, but it hurts to be here. The shells are hard on our feet, make marks like sigils, and we will be branded forever.
We breathe sea stench all afternoon, watch worried tourists trapped in seaweed that forms webs around their feet.

We could drive to Mike’s, pick up a cone or something cold to drink, but now sick fish have started to wash up on shore.

A man passing by says, “It used to be so nice here.” I try to cheer him up by showing him the shell I’ve found, that I almost missed, so round and perfectly whole.
FRANK went off to college and I found myself with a bedroom to myself, and time. Mom was at work `till late; I drifted. And boats tend to drift to the shore. All the fatherless townies hung out there, skipping rocks and smashing discarded whiskey nips. We aggregated in the sand like flotsam, became buoyant and portentous. I was twelve years old.

The tourists had fled back to their city towers, leaving our gaudy resort town wide open. We jimmed open window latches and spent afternoons inside sprawling Victorians and weather-beaten saltboxes, eating and drinking the remains of summer and sending empty wine bottles up and down the creaking dumbwaiters until one or both smashed. We kept coins of mysterious provenance, pocket knives bearing the family sigil, and antique brass boat fittings that rich people had strewn about their abodes for nautical ambiance.

What we loved, though, were their roofs—to just lounge
there, lording and omniscient—and one in particular. Nestled in among twin groves, it wasn’t but a bungalow with a carport, and the slowest among us could scrabble up its trestle in half a minute. At our backs an unruly forest served as a barrier between our misdeeds and passing eyes. Before us: the brackish pond. Beyond that: the ocean. We’d just sit there. What did we see? Glassy riptides meeting swaths of glacial-gray seawater. Whitecaps carving parabolically around the jetties. A striped being picked apart by gulls and crabs. The island where they found that coyote carcass one time. The smaller island they used to bomb.

A few of us were up there in a haze one afternoon when a man emerged from the woods carrying on his shoulder a five-foot-long pipe scummed up with algae. Dressed in a blue long-sleeved work shirt tucked into denim pants, we thought he might be a barge runner or stevedore who’d lost his way during a piss break and would just carry on. He didn’t; he told us to scram, get off there, mind ourselves, etc. His face was tinged with a kind menace, and we fatherless, lionhearted children climbed down and followed in his wake, whispering and theorizing.

He looked back and laughed, then stopped a moment to light up a crooked cigarette, all the while the pipe balancing on his shoulder, pond water dripping from its ends. He gave off a throaty little laugh and said, “Fuckers.”

We kept stride with him a few more blocks, interrogating him as to his intentions with that pipe until it became clear that no answers would be forthcoming. We eventually broke away and he carried that pipe off to god-knows-where to do god-knows-what.

I, too, eventually broke away, no longer needing my
fellows. Over the winter I wandered alone, carrying out random neighborhood crimes with my BB gun. Every afternoon was a new future.

One day I was about to perforate a lovely driveway lamp when I noticed a key perched inside its little glass window. A quick investigation revealed that it unlocked the house’s garden-level door. I set my gun aside, let myself in, and climbed the spiral stairs to the main floor.

I toured the place; no big deal. The mantel was lined with quahog shells and a painting of blobby seagulls. The carpeting was green and worn from summer traffic. From the deck you could see the Sound undulating blue and eternal. And I thought, Why is the ocean here called the Sound? The sound of what—of photographs?

Before leaving I checked the bedroom. There a mattress leaned against the walls, the sheets only half clinging to it, and muddy prints covered the floor like someone had been dancing alone or with someone so small they never touched the ground—someone child-sized, me-sized. Every towel in the place lay in a heap in the corner, sodden. The air had a fungal overtone, plus petroleum and either kelp or dill, like a weird pizza. I fled down the stairs and grabbed my air rifle and put an end to that particular career track.

Seven years later the pipe-carrier was arrested for murder. He was living on one of the islands by then. The victim was a mute auto-mechanic. The nature of their dispute was never discovered, the pipe-carrier being a taciturn itinerant with a name no one knew how to spell: either Leslie Dillon Pedersen or Lesley Dylan Peterson or a combination thereof. The evidence against him was ample. I wondered, did the victim make a sound?
The local paper reported on it widely. I was by then a freshman in college and my mother mailed me clippings as the case unfolded. I didn’t tell her about the time he’d led us out of the woods with the scummy pipe balancing on his clavicle like a bad circus act or that he’d been crashing just a few houses away.

The kids that day—they were lowlifes, worse than fatherless. Some were dead by then. Some were on fishing boats, well out to sea. The ones I managed to track down had no recollection of such a man, such a pipe. As for the murder, they were disturbed but not astonished. Most had been privy to bloodshed in their own living rooms.

I recalled how years ago my uncle had said the pond was once home to an ice factory. Returning home for the holiday break, I donned some rubber boots and headed to the woods fronting the shore to retrace our decade-old steps. Perhaps other deaths lay among those coastal groves. I imagined skull fragments, a decaying dress, a gin bottle with a pool of saliva in its bottom.

A dinghy lay upside down nearby. I flipped it, climbed in, and shoved off, using a branch to pole my way along the rim. Bit by bit the guts of the factory appeared, some as preserved as the day they were forged and hammered: bogs, chutes, levers, pulleys, and of course pipes. I’d never seen so many pipes. I could practically hear them being extruded. I could hear the water rushing through them. They were calling out to be saved.
"LOOK AT ALL THE MONEY!"

Jill Dery

She’d say this, my mother,
when the waves
stretched themselves onto the
shore, leaving bubbled traces on
the sand and on our feet.

They’d crawl backward, then,
entrusting change—round coins
or sigils—though I didn’t
know that magic word,
sigil. Seagull. Seal.

Etching salt on sand
edited by dimpling
crabs—foam and crabs conspiring
to mint exotic symbols—
currency they deposited

with me, dumbwaiter, transporting
plunder over years—
sHELLS, sand dollars, abalone,
“pearls that were his eyes”—
undervaluing this treasure
that I carried, washed,
placed on undusted shelves,
treating them as counterfeits
’til now—years both fast and slow,
still undervalued (mother dead and gone)—

I walk upon this same
shore where tired waves transport
bottlecaps and plastic straws,
dying birds and dead whales.
Nothing more.
SIGIL SHORE
Janina Karpinska
Hauling our mechanical hearts
   our hopeful freight
      into another fickle season

Unknown hand at the controls
   this random rise and fall
      through wither and bloom

Once more
   the birds’ bitter
      chatter wakes us

Into their chorus
   a stolen spring
      weaves its story

No happy release
   for lingered notes
      tucked to breast

shored dreams
   of stirring worm
      and bathing puddle
promised warmth
snatched cruelly
back to zero

We watch blushing
trees caught with
their blossoms showing

Our breath
a tongueless sigil
blobbing windows

Reluctant daffodils
festoon themselves
in snowy bows

Even the dog’s
rimy muzzle
begs forgiveness

Chair-huddled
and grim-eyed
we chew hope

like day-old gum
flavor weary and ripe
for the bedpost
sit down. I’ve been sifting through your past lives. date nights, karaoke competitions, *Seinfeld* marathons. the mahogany rows turned to watch your white dress meet your tan suit. then the smell of dirt and Play-Doh. sand between our small toes. three collections of first steps, school days, and sex talks for fifteen naive years. I now see the signs, the sigils. the eyes, which once whispered pretty secrets, gone blank before the list of things you both dare not mention, until every room reeks with the tension of a house whose bones shake with your silence. the angst that kept me in bed for three days straight. I bear the weight of seeing things exactly as they are, like an awful haircut, a racist joke, or the lady who spit on us in the Ross parking lot when I was eleven—our contrasting colors not matching her vision of family. I hear the disguised insults shattering glass at our dinner table. the sobbing at 12 AM. the footsteps returning to your bedroom at sunrise when you think I’m asleep. I know how dark hands once gripped the steering wheel white. the red wine. the empty pill bottle. the piece of paper binding you to a house whose dumbwaiter never made it past the first floor. a house that forgot how much she loves you, the way he still looks at you.
maybe you’re both caught in the monotonous cycle of mid-life, one sock stuck sipping expensive bourbon with pretentious friends—without the woman you fought to swoon with two-buck chuck—, the other lost in the arms of a trainer who stretches your insecurity, making disgust a reflex for the man you promised the world. you never hold the door. you never share the umbrella. you never take her out, or ask how he is. you never touch anymore. you never notice. part of me still believes that sometimes people grow in opposite directions. sometimes the people who locked eyes across a snowy shoreline can occupy the empty house on the hill 20 years later. sometimes stolen glances become bloodshot. perhaps mahogany isn’t meant for everyone.
First, I wearied of certain words—
seminal, paradigm, wrought. Then the weather
grew cold and the West Union Cemetery trees,
suddenly black with rain,
stopped dancing. My girlfriend fell in love
with a man who wore knit ties and a sigil
on his lapel I mistook for a monogram.
They read Nietzsche together
Sunday afternoons on the shore
of the Hocking River and drank
martinis in the bars at night. With my cat
and the plays of Harold Pinter
I imagined her kissing his beard and choosing his clothes
for Monday, giddy, determined, and strange.
I took a C in Shakespeare, a B- in The Theory
of Theory, and—having been warned—
cracked my top-left incisor on a Mason jar
of grape juice the Tuesday before Christmas.
I paid in credit for the tooth, credit for the gas
that took me up I-77 through Guernsey County,
Holmes, and Stark, where a man in a Sunoco
south of Canton told me Nixon was going to bomb
Cambodia—thank God—and why wasn’t I there with the boys who loved America? Why wasn’t I there with those boys dying to make the world a safer place? Home for a week, I had to listen to my sister ask where Rebecca was, what happened, as the slush on the streets of Akron froze overnight, and my father say McGovern was a fraud to begin with, a hippie-lover who would’ve made things worse. I took no comfort from the whores on Kenmore Avenue and read *The Dumb Waiter* instead, lost in farce, a fragility only I could understand.
ALL IN LOVE
Narges Poursadeqi
WE—my father, my sister, her new husband, and me—choose a pew in the back. We want to pay our respects, but we know we’re unwelcome. I assume my mother is here so I sit between my father and my sister, head bowed as if to pray, the novena in my bones a plea for invisibility, a wish to be tolerated, a hope we’ll maintain our drawn lines, our cold war.

It’s my grandfather’s funeral. My mother’s father, the only grandfather I’ve known. I’m 30-something and he’s a stranger to me, this man in the casket. The grandpa I remember was a stogie-smoking, beer-swigging, silent man, a veteran, a Southwestern Bell employee. After Grandma died 20-some years ago, after their four children scattered, he started fresh: new wife, new family, new life. We’re here to pay respects, because it’s the right thing to do. I’m not here to mourn him. Can I mourn someone I no longer know?

I sift through definitions in my head: mourning, noun, the act of a person who mourns; sorrowing or lamentation. I wear no
armband, shed no tears; is sitting here enough, does it count as an act? I bear witness to a life once lived; it’s all I have to offer. Mourn, verb (used without object): to feel or express sorrow or grief; (used with object): to feel or express sorrow or grief over (misfortune, loss, or anything regretted); deplore. Or anything regretted. Deplore. I deplore her: truth. I regret this: truth. Can I measure mourning, I wonder? I look at the brick walls of the old church, full of scales: Agony in the Garden, Scourging at the Pillar, Crowning of Thorns, Carrying of the Cross, Crucifixion. Sorrowful Mysteries, one Our Father and ten Hail Marys between each, Glory Be to the Father, but the mother, my mother: no. No glory there.

I look for her—my mother—but see nothing except the backs of heads. I crane my neck, stare at the casket in the vestibule. I wonder why we’re in a church—the man I knew was not Catholic; he never stood ready to bow his head and say Amen after a priest ashed a sigil on his shiny forehead—and try to connect the dots of a life I don’t know. I barely see the four people standing with the casket: one man, three women. They look familiar, if I squint, like aunts I once knew. Diana, the oldest, my godmother, and Vicki, is that Vicki? She looks so old.

I turn back to face the front. My sister nudges me, says, “Did you see her?”

“Who?”

“Carla. Mom. You were looking right at her.”

It clicks: Diana and Vicki, Carla and Bill. Bill looks like Grandma Irene but with dishwater blonde, stringy hair. Vicki walks with a cane.
But Carla? The Carla I remember is perfect and petite. Blonde hair, shoulder length, perfectly waved. Thin. Clear skin and piercing, bright, deep blue eyes.

The Carla standing with Diana, Vicki, and Bill is heavy—so heavy she’s almost two of the Carla I remember. This Carla’s hair is thinning and cut short. This Carla looks drawn and dull. Old.

“No,” I whisper. “I didn’t see her at all.”

We stand and sit and sing and kneel. The routine of Mass is still rote, even though I’ve long stopped dipping my toes in this side of the holy water. A cradle Catholic, I’m unwelcome on the right side of the shore after my divorce—an adulteress by definition—so I do not take communion. Carla does. I watch her walk, head bowed, hands folded together, fingers in church position. Yes, that’s her—the profile is the same despite the extra weight. Yes, that’s her—the stolen glance, the blue eyes that stare right through.

Yes, that’s her, I think, my eyes locked on her gray, braided rattail as she pivots and kneels. I stare at the back of her head, try to remember the last time we spoke, but my brain is a hive gone mad, nothing but incessant buzz. I see it then, the movie reel of memories: trips to the library and stacks of books, her teaching me to keep score at Little League baseball games, a day at Worlds of Fun. Her standing in our shag-carpeted living room, laughing, as she held my sixth-grade diary up like a teacher during story time, reading aloud to her sisters, her voice pitched, her eyes aflutter:  
 Dear Diary, I got my period and I’m too embarrassed to tell mom. What should I do? How, once I hit high school, she stopped buying me Pepsi and instead stocked Diet in the fridge, next to her beloved Mountain Dew, telling me it was for my own good because my ass
was already too wide. How she taught me to hide pills in a spent cigarette pack, how to twist it so it looked like trash instead of a stash. Would there have been more memories, a better flashback reel, had she not gone to prison? I do the math, wonder about the ratio of good memories to bad, calculate positive interactions per year. Wonder: what does she know? Does she know it’s her voice I still hear? Does she know the soundtrack groove on which I’m stuck, in perpetuity, is hers: her voice, her words, forever etched there, so deep I can’t reach them to fill the gaps, spackle the holes? Does she mourn, too, or is the ache mine alone?

We rise at the priest’s prompt, stand together as a family to watch his last exit, the casket’s wood buffed to belie a lifetime of sin. Every gunshot at his gravesite plucks my body like a banjo string, each *amen* offers a new prayer: turn casket to dumbwaiter, Lord, like water to wine, and bury this ache with the dust of him.
LIFE IS SUPER
Paul Castro
CONTRIBUTORS

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NEXT UP
Issue No. 24
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3Elements:
Effigy, Sleepwalk, Wane

Due August 31, 2019

Submission due dates are November 30, February 28, May 31, and August 31, for issues forthcoming February 1, May 1, August 1, and November 1, respectively, unless otherwise noted on our website.

There is no minimum word count, but please keep your fiction and nonfiction submissions under 3,500 words. Poems must be under two typed pages.

It is equally important that all three elements given for the specific submission period be included within your story or poem. Artists and photographers are only required to represent one element.

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End