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*Note: The image contains a detailed list of contents, poetry, fiction, nonfiction, and photography sections along with contributors. The text is organized into sections with page numbers and authors' names.*
I’m told tonight there’s a harvest moon, though the clouds deny it. Instead a harvest-drowning rain rides hard the southeast wind, scouring the scent of too much science from the air. This is a night when omen spins like a child’s pinwheel on a forgotten swing. This is a night when elements could easily exist to pry the lightning from a dead god’s hand. I’m told all that’s a fever dream, but the rising waters disagree.

All sound is wind, except the tiny hammers of the rain, and darkness is all the light. Yet the carriage that approaches is blacker than the night and the horses’ hooves spark on the surface of the flood.
POEM AFTER CAMPBELL MCGRATH'S \"NIGHT TRAVELERS\"
Jeremy Michael Reed

Each evening, my car up the state highway’s hill reminds me of a carriage, a line of carriages, in exactly, yes, this place, central Missouri, splitting from each other like a line of ants in the pink glow of late-day sun as stars awake. In this dusk, I remember how these carriages, the old and the new, scour paths in the hillsides, scars along the earth’s waistline. I’m reminded of wheat fields, combines, quonsets, and kin while I’m reminded of Ash borer. I’m reminded how crops grow in abundance here, waving from the buffeting air I send and how these are not the plants who call this region home, how a colony’s abundance also brings ends, brings shadows, brings more and more, and how the light hits the worn barn’s side, the wooden fence, how abundance is not health, how number is not increase in every way you might measure it, how wind can create landscape but can also make ill, can buffet time like a pinwheel’s paper spin, twist each turn of paper away, against, against, nearly leaving each hand it’s in by force, each hand held out the car window feeling air over, over, under. How do we hold each other without killing each other, not because there are no other ways to learn a place but because there are, and others have tried to teach me, and I’m still trying to learn how to listen. I’m still trying to learn. I’m still trying. And yet each evening up the state highway’s hill I wonder what kind of a future am I making. What kind of a future am I making?
FUSCA RED
Guilherme Bergamini
AVA and Quinn walked in through the gate together with their mom jeans pulled up high over their belly buttons, both feeling a wild sense of freedom on that Friday in November. They walked toward the white-topped tents of the fairgrounds, where bright neon lights flickered in contrast to the black tarp of the night sky, coloring the faces of visitors in various tones. Finally, they felt like something was going to happen.

They were always bored, because besides busying themselves with AP schoolwork and keeping up with their social media accounts, there was nothing to do. As soon as Ava turned sixteen she got her driver’s license, and then the two were always escaping together. They would ride around town restlessly, loud music assaulting their tender ears, searching for activities to entertain themselves. The county fair was an acceptable option.

They stood together by the ticket booth near the entrance, oblivious to the other patrons attempting to enter the line behind them. Ava pulled her phone from her back pocket and without speaking a word to one another, they posed for a photo at her front-facing camera. They tilted their heads together and stuck out their lips. Quinn could smell strawberry shampoo on Ava’s hair as it unfurled in the breeze, tangling with hers.

“What should I caption this?” Ava asked, flipping through filters on the picture, her face illuminated by the blue light of the phone screen.

“At the fair with Q?” Quinn offered, watching her languidly scroll back and forth as she considered Perpetua, Valencia, and Slumber.

Garlands of feather boas hung on the sides of a tent, blowing up and down in the breeze, dangling like tendrils from the plants hanging in their mothers’ houses, as if they were arms reaching toward the girls. The shiny metallic tops of multi-colored pinwheels spun in hypnotic circles while Quinn silently searched for the first ride she wanted to try, inhaling the scents of fried pickles and sugary dough from the food stands surrounding them. She flicked her long blonde hair off her shoulders, feeling slightly impatient and uncomfortable, while she waited for Ava to finish her post.

Ava’s hair was also long and honey-blonde. She swung it around, smiling with her white teeth exposed, and gloated: “I met a guy.”

“What?! Where?!” Quinn gasped.

“Snap,” she said. “Don’t worry, he’s real. I won’t get catfished.”

Ava slid her phone into the back pocket of her jeans and started walking toward her favorite ride: the Yo-Yo. Quinn, in disbelief
that she could be so unaware of the secret Ava had been hiding, struggled to keep up as Ava strode toward the electric swings ahead of her. Ava ripped two red paper tickets and handed them to a pot-bellied man with a mustache and a MAGA hat. She looked back at Quinn and rolled her eyes at the red hat. Quinn flashed her a conspiratorial smile.

“You sure you’re tall enough?” the man smirked at Quinn, spitting brown juice out of one side of his mouth.

She smiled briefly at the man, exposing a mouth full of metal and pink-rubber bands, and handed him her two tickets.

Quinn had never experienced her first relationship. At fifteen and five-ten, people were always making jokes about her height, her awkward lanky body, her metal braces, her plain face. She was too tall. Her long nose was too freckled. In contrast to Quinn, Ava was impetuous and supercilious. She complained to other girls at school that she’d had two boyfriends, but “they weren’t, like, really real relationships.” She’d texted Quinn about kissing Jamie Andrews during freshman year when she still wore her braces, and she’d sent her every screenshot from Drake Rogers on Snapchat last summer, when he wrote her \textit{BAE <3}. This included his last several snaps, the ones when he said he was \textit{horny}, before he got impatient and dumped her and started dating Maddie Brown.

Quinn was becoming more curious about a few older boys, but most of them who were her age still repelled her, and she definitely didn’t want to kiss them. She imagined their breath smelled like Doritos and Mountain Dew.

Quinn followed Ava along for almost anything, just for the sake of having something to do with someone her own age, even when she didn’t always agree with Ava’s impulsive actions. She often approached the thought that they were making stupid decisions, and felt close to saying as much out loud, but never did. She was afraid that her own ideas or suggestions would be boring or stupid, and so she was careful never to let Ava see her that way. She had never clicked with another girl until Ava came into her life. Ava looked at her like an equal—like a sister—so she always let Ava lead the way, even when it meant going down a dangerous path, like skipping class or talking to older boys. Sometimes she felt as if she were following behind her, living vicariously through her, like her brain was the voice of reason but always lagging behind her body—a child carrying a balloon, constantly checking behind to make sure it didn’t get stuck in a tree or float away.

“He’s coming tonight,” Ava said, while they waited for the man to come check their seatbelts.

“Oh my god,” Quinn said.

The motor of the electric ride began to rumble and the girls felt themselves lift up into the cool night air, their smiles widening in time with the circumference of the swings the faster and wider they swung. From high up in the air, Quinn looked down and saw the bright colored lights of the food stands and rides blur out of focus, like water droplets distorting traffic lights on the windshield. She felt a rush of adrenaline through her arms and up her forehead as the girls lifted up higher into the air. She looked over at Ava smiling, and for a moment she felt like she had never been so happy or free.

When they got off the ride, Quinn took out her phone and the girls posed together in front of the Yo-Yo sign for another pic. Ava
stuck out her tongue. Quinn made a peace sign.

“Let’s get some food. I want a giant pretzel,” Ava said.

Quinn followed behind checking her phone. She read a text from her mom that said: *Hope you’re having fun. Please text when you’re on your way home.* She ignored the notification, and instead posted the picture of her and Ava in front of the Yo-Yo sign to her Instagram account.

They sat at a picnic table with their assortment of lemonades, elephant ears, and pretzels. Quinn swiped her fingers, sticky with powdered sugar, across her phone and stared at the photos they had taken that night. She held her phone up to show Ava one she knew they would both approve of and smiled.

“Send that one to me,” Ava said, licking mustard off her pretzel and looking back down at her phone. “I want to send it to Todd.”

From the photos Ava showed her, Quinn was provided a thorough biography of Todd. She learned that Todd was a drummer. He was twenty-one, had his own car, his own apartment, a roommate named Derek, who was also in the band, maybe Quinn would like him?

Quinn was about to ask Ava if her parents knew about Todd when Ava squealed, “Omg, he just texted me that he’s here!”

Todd was tall, taller than Quinn, with piercing blue eyes and black hair that had sparse streaks of white. He was wearing a blue jean jacket with white wool around the collar, black jeans, and black sneakers. He had on a worn-in white concert tee underneath the denim jacket, but Quinn didn’t recognize the band. When Todd walked toward the girls, something sank in the bottom of Quinn’s stomach, like she’d swallowed an anchor. It was probably the fair food, but before she could say anything to Ava about it, Ava and Todd had rushed away together through the jagged rows of rides. Quinn followed behind them, slowing her pace more to see if they would stop to check for her or include her in their conversation, but they walked faster and farther away. The cacophonous sounds of screaming people traveled through the air and rushed into her ears.

Todd pointed to a sign that said *Haunted Carriage Rides* and said to Ava: “Wanna do it?”

“Omg, what?” Ava said loudly, smirking, turning around for the first time, realizing that Quinn wasn’t there.

“Go for a ride?” Todd raised his left eyebrow inquisitively, looking a little impatient.

They glided through a dark tunnel running on some sort of track system, where plastic skeletons and ghosts popped out too slowly to surprise anyone, and a poor audio recording warned them to *BEWARE*. Todd put his arm around her, and Ava couldn’t help but think that it felt heavier than any of the boys she had kissed before. The weight felt nice, though, and made her feel older. She nestled closer to him on the carriage seat.

“I think this ride is for little kids,” she said.

She wondered if she looked any older, as she stuck out her chest slightly, sitting up straighter.

“We can go for a better ride in my van, if you want. I have some weed,” he said.

“Ok,” she said.

They walked out the fair entrance gate and across the muddy grass to the parking lot where the baby blue van was parked at
the far end. Todd slid the side door open and lifted her up into the back. Inside it smelled like old leather and tobacco. Fast food wrappers were crumpled into small balls littered across the floor. Despite the mess, Ava’s heart quickened with the thrill of being alone with him.

Todd lit up a joint and handed it to Ava. Bands of friendship bracelets and metal bangles slid down her thin wrist as she held the joint up to her mouth and took a drag.

“Are we going for a ride or what?” she asked, looking around at the cluttered interior, her green eyes beginning to slant.

Todd inched closer to Ava and placed a lock of her honey hair behind her ear. He whispered, “I want you.”

“Ok,” she giggled, turning her soft cheek to him. He pulled her onto his lap and started to kiss her on the mouth. When he kissed her, he stuck his thick tongue in through her lips, where it touched her teeth. Her breathing was fast and shallow, and her heart throbbed in her ears.

He rubbed his rough hand across her jeans, and when she didn’t stop him, he reached his hand inside. While he touched her, she looked out of the foggy van windows at the bright colored Ferris wheel spinning in the dark sky across the muddy parking lot.

Quinn scoured the fairgrounds searching for Ava, every other girl appearing like a clone before her, wearing the same skinny jeans, oversized sweatshirts, and Vans. The neon lights blurred out of focus behind the unfamiliar shape of every stranger she passed. She was lightheaded and dizzy, and her stomach swelled with queasiness, like she had just stepped off the Gravitron. She wondered if Ava felt sick, too.

Quinn wanted to cry. She felt used, like a third wheel, as if Ava had only invited her so that she wouldn’t be alone when she met Todd, in case he wasn’t really who he said he was, or worse, so she could show him off to make Quinn jealous. She felt like she was sitting alone on a seat of the wobbly Ferris wheel, watching as Todd and Ava sat together in front of her, intimately, whispering into each other’s ears. She would never catch up. She was alone now, and the only ride she wanted was a ride home, but she dreaded the thought of her mom nagging her about responsibility or rules. She didn’t know who to text, so she opted instead to post a selfie to her Snapchat friends instead, adding emojis of a circus tent and a clown to the black ribbon across the screen.

I’m the clown, she thought, as her face grew hot. She started walking toward the wooden fence at the edge of the fair, looking for Ava’s car.

Ava opened the van door and descended the three metal steps onto the wet grass. Todd didn’t follow behind, but instead slid the door shut. She saw the light of his phone shine through the fogged windows. She wondered if he was checking her social. Posing in front of the baby blue van, her cheeks blushed and rosy, she produced her phone and, pursing her swollen lips, she snapped a pic of herself, a virtual trophy. She chose a photo filter that made a halo of cartoon hearts crown her head and saved it to private. Todd’s engine started abruptly, startling her from her reverie. She quickened her pace as she snuck away from the van and back toward the fair, her Vans crunching in the gravel.
She’d heard she would look different, she remembered, pulling out her car keys with the pink fuzzy puff ball keychain. She felt different and wondered if anyone else could see that she was different now. She felt like she had just won a race, like she had beat other girls her age to a finish line of some sort, some milestone they would whisper about at school or screen shot over Snapchat, but wouldn’t tell their mothers about. She took out her phone and shared the private heart photo.

Quinn stood at the edge of the fence surrounding the fairgrounds, waiting. She saw Ava walking toward her car, then stopping to do something on her phone, swiping her fingers rapidly across the screen. She held her breath as she stood there watching her, wondering where it was that she was walking back from, and what she was doing on her phone. Ava’s face appeared smaller than usual, flushed, her cheeks scarlet. She had a proud look that Quinn had seen before. Quinn felt her own face grow hotter, her hands shaking as she stood there, waiting to confront her.

Ava put her phone away and headed toward the fair entrance. As she got closer, she saw Quinn waiting for her there. The yellow lights from the fair behind her back lit up the shape of her tall, awkward body. Ava saw that her hands were sitting on her hips, elbows pointing sharply to the sides like arrows. Her height gave her no real authority, yet there was something different in the tone of her voice when she crossed her arms stiffly across her chest and said:

“Where have you been?”
The brutal winters buried him. He’d dig out to the truck, coax it to start, barrel through rising snow so he could get to the factory where they made shoeboxes and he kept the machines running, work through break, through lunch, until he came home, the smell of oil and cardboard thick in his hair, and found me sitting in front of the woodstove nursing our baby. I didn’t think he’d raise the money to buy the bike and sidecar, but he did, so I packed what I could in that tight space, left behind the carriage, most of the toys, the antique Jenny Lind bed that I loved so much, and snuggled in with the babe.

on my lap, the growl of the engine by my side, scouring my mind of any thoughts I might have had.

We camped all the way down, bathed in lukewarm showers in campgrounds where the nights grew tender with a thousand insects and my skin hurt from the way the roads pinwheeled beneath me. I kept waiting for the warmth, for days that would blister me sweet, when the air would smell of waves and wracked seaweed. But we never neared the shore and in our tent we huddled beneath our blankets, the little one cupped between us.

Our cash was almost gone in that last campground. I don’t know how he thought we could hew a life out of this sandy wasteland covered in snakes and palmetto. But he took me to a tree rising fine and clean in a patch of grass near the entrance to the park and plucked a tangerine growing there, like an apple back home, but it seemed so magical, flesh like honey, like paradise sneaking into my mouth.
THE SCOURER
Lisa Alexandra
We were fighting—it must have been a cold silence, or a bitter one, a pinwheel of anger hanging in dense air like mercury beading, poisonous and shiny. I had given her an ultimatum or maybe I’d scoured her phone. She had called me a name that pinched my L4 or she’d said adoption was a big mistake—fake mother, fake child. Still, the car slid, graceful as a carriage, through traffic all the way to school. And because I was distracted, concentrating to pull to a smooth stop, to pronounce evenly,
“Have a good day,”
while, wordless, my daughter
got out and walked away,
I almost didn’t notice
how my foot moved
to the accelerator,
gave it a sudden punch,
the car growling
and charging at her,
how, the second I jammed
the brake, she turned
and, for the first time in months,
looked me in the eye.

Theresa Senato Edwards

Each day I chose sunrise because I wanted to remember orange as wonderful. But there’s red
in orange, the red in a teen son’s 29-year-old girlfriend’s convertible she bought to carry his
metal smile away. Then he was someone else’s son at 17. I hardly remember my surrender
to motherhood, nothing but the long scour of green in a dying garden I tore apart desperate
for lavender walls. I baked homemade breads for a while in the flatness of an angry face. Orange
flowers circled. Pupils stretched, a pumpkin that’s neither clock nor carriage, but there’s an eye
in the middle. A pinwheel about to fall backwards still lands like time, even though a flower
may open then close and open and close.
A FIGURE LIKE YOUR FATHER
Rick Joines

1.

WE are in his new house, taking a break from unpacking boxes, moving furniture, and hanging golf art, and my father is telling a story. He holds his arm up, gesturing with his hand to illustrate something the dogs did on their morning walk. My eyes follow his watch as it falls down his wrist, almost to his elbow. He is wearing a “Mean Green” short-sleeved T-shirt, one of the many he’s bought at the thrift store since moving to town. His insulated stainless steel tumbler sits beside him. It’s the only thing not sweating on this hot August day, the last before another semester begins and I have to get back to work.

I hadn’t noticed how loose his watch was until then. Or if I had, it was with a sort of maintenance glance one gives family. His skin is thin as crepe paper. Wrinkles fold into amorphous brown-black bruises, the kind the elderly get as blood thinner flows through
their veins. *My old man’s arm,* I think.

My parents moved from Tennessee to Texas in the middle of summer. “To be near my only son,” my dad repeated to anyone who asked. There had to be at least one good reason to exchange the beauty of seasons, green trees, and rolling hills for flat, brown, oven-blasted scrub. Decades of belongings, padded or packed into boxes, stacked into moving pods. His Brentwood house was sold before I heard the story of how he yelled at the cute blonde pharmacist.

2.

“You picked up that prescription a couple of days ago, Mr. Joines.”

My father has routines. They do not vary. She had to be wrong. He had a little crush on this Walmart pharmacist. Even so, he yelled at her.

He told me this story during a Sunday phone call, and I tried to remember if he’d ever yelled at me when I was a kid. I’d done plenty to deserve it. Instead I’d get a talking-to, or sometimes a spanking, a symbolic swat, ceremonial, to mark the occasion.

After telling her off, he drove home. He opened the boot box where he keeps his rows of prescriptions and supplements. It was as she said. He had filled it. He counted the remaining pills. She was correct, again. Two days ago.

I could feel his shock as if it were my own: his surprise at finding the full white-capped amber bottle lined up among the troops. His dread during the short drive back to wait in line, make eye contact, and speak the necessary words. His confusion spun in me like a pinwheel, a glittery blur at the will of the wind.

Was it more difficult to admit he was wrong or to try to apologize? I knew before he told me how he tried to make his mistake sound reasonable: “You know, I pick up so many scripts for my wife . . . those must have gotten mixed up in the shuffle.”

Before I could register any significance to this story, he was on to the next one.

“And then on another day, I was about to put my groceries in the Jeep, and I wondered, *Why didn’t they bag any of this?* So I wheeled the carriage around to go back in and pay.”

I was starting to realize these were not his usual stories about errands to Walmart, but as soon as the second story ended, he’d started a third.

“I was sitting at the kitchen island, paying bills,” he said in a strange tone. “I was about to sign a check, and I forgot how to write my name.” He paused for a beat. “I walked around the house for a little bit, then I remembered.”

I’d grown accustomed to not paying much attention during these weekly calls. After this, I hardly knew what to ask. “Wait,” I said. “What are you talking about?”

3.

I have talked on the phone with my father every Sunday afternoon for the last thirty-five years. I started calling when I left for college in Kentucky. I called him during my exchange year in Japan. We talked on the phone when I went to grad school in
Kansas and Florida, and when I started teaching in Alabama. The calls followed a pattern. I called. He answered. Put my mom on for a minute. Then he began the what-we-did-this-week stories. I grunted to show I was listening. Or I made vague replies to what sounded like vague questions about what was going on with me. Basic information got exchanged. But this was turning out to be a different kind of conversation.

“My doctor told me I had to tell someone, and I haven’t told your mother.”

“Tell someone what?”

“I think I have dementia.”

“What do you mean, think?”

“I took the test online,” he says, “on the Alzheimer’s website.”

This is the first mention of that word. I’m not sure if dementia and Alzheimer’s are the same, but he doesn’t slow down to let me ask.

“It asks you questions and shows you pictures and sequences of things. You’re supposed to be able to remember them later. I didn’t do very well.”

“You can’t rely on that,” I say. “You’re in the middle of moving. Moving is one of the most stressful things a person can do. Every time we’ve moved I got exhausted and felt like I was losing it.”

“And my doctor gave me a test.”

“Which doctor?”

“My internist.”

“What does an internist know about it?”

“She says I have moderate signs of dementia.”

None of these incidents had occurred that week between Sunday phone calls. They’d happened before my scheduled trips back to Nashville to pack the house into moving pods. Before the emergency flight home for his hernia surgery. I’m still not sure of the exact dates or their sequence. Or when this medical interpretation began to suggest itself to him. I was hearing this all at once, but he’d been living with it, and worrying about it, for a while. Wondering if he ought to mention it, or how.

“She says I have to tell someone.”

I am, as it turns out, to my father, “someone.”

4.

“And that’s the real reason I decided we should move sooner rather than later.”

Back when he was telling everyone the “to be with my only son” story, he justified the accelerated pace with me. He ran the numbers over and over, like an actuary. He calculated what remained of the mortgage. Listed the bills to heat, cool, and keep up a large house. The HOA fees. He accounted for their monthly Social Security checks. The amount he needed to withdraw from retirement to keep living in Nashville. How soon that would get depleted. He estimated the years a white male with congestive heart failure, a pacemaker, arthritis, and cirrhosis of the liver might have left. It made sense to sell the house earlier than planned and downsize in Denton. He could make it, financially, another 25 years there, easy, he said. But none of that, as it turns out, was the “real reason.”

“And I’m afraid that someday soon I might not be able to take care of your mother.”
And I’m afraid. The words echo in me, soak me in their color, his dolor.

Did he, during that call, mention how he was forgetting other things? That someday he might need to have his car keys taken from him? That he was growing increasingly angry? Or was that later? He was afraid of forgetting who he was. I wondered if I’d ever known, or ever would.

5.

“I knew who you were as soon as I saw you walking this way,” my dad’s friend Michael said when I ran into him in at the Holiday Inn Conference Center in Little Rock, Arkansas. My dad trained him for his job as a traveling sales engineer over twenty years ago. Standing in front of their company’s booth amid all the other displays for road testing equipment, he said, “You look just like your dad.”

When did I recognize I was his double and that I didn’t resemble my mother, as I’d always thought, but him? Was it when I went ummph dropping into the seat of my compact car and heard the sound of his discomfort, or when I looked down to find his hands at the ends of my arms, holding what I was holding? When did my mirror become a portrait of his face, the sag under the chin, black bags under blue eyes? Like his shadow unmoored, step for step, everywhere I went, he was already there.

When I was a kid, I was sometimes a little ashamed of my dad. He was not athletic. Not a jock. He had big sideburns, brown polyester suits, and wide, striped ties. Bad shoes. Freckled and sunburned, he worked outside from the time he was a scrawny teenager, dynamiting the mountainsides of Tennessee to clear paths for I-24 and I-40. Later, he drove those highways, making sales calls all over the South, teaching people how to use his equipment to build better roads. But during baseball season, he made time to work outside with me on batting and pitching (“Keep your eye on the ball”). During football season, on down-and-outs (“Plant your foot, then turn quick”). During basketball season, on free throws and jump shots (“Tuck in your elbow, boy”). But he was never a “tough” guy like my coaches. It was their admiration I sought while my dad stood on the sidelines, clipboard in hand, keeping the stats. Every tackle, run, hit, strikeout, and score of every kid I’d ever played with was carefully noted and tabulated.

As we were tossing out junk from boxes that had made the move to Texas, there were reams of his handwritten stat sheets from all those boys’ games.

“You want these?”
“Yeah. I’ll take them.”

Someday I will dump all this in recycling. Until then, if I need to know how many tackles Tater Brown made against Una in 1976, or how many points David Hood or Billy C scored in the Jr. Pro city basketball championship game in 1979, or what my ERA was as a relief pitcher in Dixie Youth baseball in 1977, I don’t have to remember. I can look it up.

In the new house, he can’t find the tools he just set down or notes he wrote for the repair men. He isn’t sure where he hid the extra keys or in which cabinet he put the cookie sheets. Yet he can remember every Saturday afternoon we spent on The Strip
in Knoxville over 40 years ago. He can detail how the two of us, dressed in orange, made our way up Cumberland toward Neyland Stadium. He recounts where we got hamburgers, bought foam fingers, and shared a hot chocolate. He remembers how cold it was for that one Vanderbilt game. How he wrapped my feet in plastic newspaper bags and put extra socks over my shoes. He can describe the big plays, recall star players’ names, and report final scores. He loves to talk about the time we took my cousin to his first UT game. “I’ve never seen a kid get so excited,” he says when he retells that part of the story. He remembers all kinds of things like that, things I don’t recall, things I would never think to remember.

Sitting together in the air conditioning at the end of August, taking a rest from the heat and heavy lifting, he pulls his watch back down to his wrist, notes the time. He sees how I notice his sagging arm more than I’m paying attention to his story about the dogs. This exchange of glances embarrasses us, though we’d never be able to say why, so we make the usual noises about how we’d better get back at it.

There is still a lot of stuff in boxes to sort through. Standing on the concrete floor of the open garage, the Texas sun beating down on us, we triage the trash and the donations, and decide what to keep. There is no way we will finish arranging things inside the house before school starts. No way to straighten out the garage, either, but we cleared a path to park the Jeep. “That’s my number one priority, boy,” he’s told me many times.

“When do you think you’ll be able to come back over?”

“I was thinking Wednesdays. In the afternoon. After my meetings.”

“Wednesdays,” he says. “You teach Tuesday and Thursday?”

“Yes, and I have to prep classes and grade.” We’ve seen each other in the summers, at Christmas breaks. He doesn’t understand my schedule.

“Oh, yeah. I wasn’t thinking about that.”

“And Sundays, for dinner. We can do a few things then, too.”

“We’ll get it done eventually,” he says.

“Yeah. We’ll get it done.”

We leave the boxes of trophies taped up and set them against the wall. Old jerseys and warm-up jackets I wore when I was twelve. My deflated basketball he wants to keep. Evidence of our lives together. What other proof of our relationship will we find before we finish? We look around like two detectives arrived at the scene of a cold case. Unsure of what happened, we scour the scene for clues.
It starts so small, as all things do that come from somewhere, in this case, the rabbitbush with its bouquets of dry stars pinwheeling in the winds, which arrive off the hillsides like carriages used to, like the Butterfield Overland Mail from Yuma to Los Angeles, where the desert turns greener under the spokes of rapidly advancing news written now by the Santa Anas, their hot bite chewing up the brown fuels, the tiny habitats of fern and eye, until the winds find some handiwork, not unlike a lace collar but also like a violence, an outrage of flint and finger, an orange spark that flaps open to wings beating the space black, scouring earth so that the only way out
is under, although it is never clear what happens down there in the dark, whether the ground unfurls like a cover, or whether it disappears instead down a burrow, filling, filling, with the last gasp of small lungs.
PORTAMENTO RHAPSODY #1
Vicki Miko
Work on carriage. It matters, how you carry yourself through the corridors of power. The unspoken. Like floor motion, carried, or not, a signal. Charged. Deportment, old-fashioned indeed. Related words like career, cargo, concur, recourse—an origin story—say it’s all about how you run—your coach and four.

You told me when we started about your father’s hobby mending clocks—the striking train called a pinwheel—how you imagined tiny pinwheel fireworks spinning around, making it all go. Keep telling that one. The spark inside. “Pin,” at root means fly, rush along, plume, feather pinnae, a wing, poised to soar.

As for our hopes—theatrical scrim of abilities: accountability, credibility, responsibility—scour the horizon for the first tinge of ochre at dawn, translate the cricket chorus into dew on morning webs. You know we might do our best and still it will be winter—wooly bear with fat black bands, head and foot.
IT took three long leaps for Jenny to go from the moldering baby carriage at the corner of the field to the toaster oven with its twisted coils and cracked face glaring at the sky. From there, six hops and two twirls got her to the center of the dusty grass, to the rust-mottled dryer with its ripped-off dials and yellowing paint. She climbed atop, folded her legs beneath her like a bow, and took tiny bites of the peanut butter and jam sandwich she packed. The field belonged to everyone and no one, but Jenny pretended it was hers alone.

At dusk, when an orchestra of crickets played for the deer stepping softly through the trees ringing the field, and the fireflies pulsed like yellow hearts in the purpling dark, she danced like Cinderella at the ball, the whole world aglow beneath a marble moon.

Maggie watched her daughter sleeping and wished she could simply be grateful for the constant rise and fall of her chest. A feeble, well-worn wish. The doll Maggie had slept with when she was Jenny’s age sat in its usual place on a chair in the corner of the room. Tucked into Jenny’s side was a jar of stones, collected from the field out back. On her nightstand, a rumpled copy of The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe, Jenny’s all-time favorite—even now that she was eleven, Maggie thought.

Maggie stepped across the hall thick with televised laughter and closed the door to write. Curled up in bed with the notebook she’d purchased at her pastor’s insistence, she wondered if Paul had fallen asleep on the couch again.

Yesterday I took Jenny to the science museum to see the Pieces of the Sky exhibit because she begged and because Pastor Gray suggested I be more involved in her life. We looked at knobby shards of petrified lightning and gleaming gray rocks from outer space, everything boxed and untouchable.

Standing in front of a meteorite, Jenny suggested we make a wish. Though I pointed out we hadn’t actually seen it fall, she said, Close your eyes. You can ask for anything. When I looked a moment later, her lips were mouthing silent words, her forehead wrinkled with the gravity of her want. You can’t wish for that, Jenny, I said, even though I’d surely wished the same thing. When she looked at me then, I didn’t see her, but the sister she should have had.

I keep reminding myself, “Weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning.” I wish it were morning.

Paul stared at the screen and watched the characters walking
around, laughing, smiling, making conversation. They were paper dolls and ghosts, shadows dancing across a stage.

He knew his wife missed him and he disturbed his daughter with his sitting so still. He used to twirl her around the living room and make her laugh with his dramatic dice maneuvers when they played board games. Now he was a statue of his former self. In front of the TV, he could forget where he was, who he was. Unless a storyline reminded him. Then the past year flickered forward, a real-life rerun he couldn’t switch off.

“I’m so sorry,” the doctor said, his voice suddenly at full volume in Paul’s head, Maggie’s hand palpable in his. “An abdominal pregnancy is rare, and rarer still is your condition, in which the mother’s body, to prevent infection, calcifies the deceased fetus, creating a lithopedion. We’ll need to schedule a laparoscopy to remove it.”

“Stone baby,” Paul whispered, the term he’d found on the Internet. He stared at the television but did not see it. In these moments of remembering, there was no story as real, outrageous, or tragic as the one he was living.

In Science, Jenny learned about erosion, how the wind whips the earth across itself, sand and branches sliding over boulders like giant toothbrushes scouring plaque; how water flowing endlessly in streams and rivers causes rock to smooth in place.

She watched, mesmerized, as her teacher took a handful of pebbles and a bit of grit and dropped them into a tumbler the size of a softball, adding water to the barrel before flicking the switch. The cylinder slowly rotated. “It’ll take time,” he said, over the muffled clamor of stones churning, “but soon enough the rocks will lose their rough texture and become the smoothest of stones.”

Jenny wondered, if the doctor had put her sister in a tumbler, would she have emerged soft and shining, a satin gem almost too pretty to touch?

Went to the museum again today and was caught off guard by the Human Development exhibit, a series of glass boxes, each containing an embryo or fetus. I assumed they were models until I saw a sign explaining they were donated, the results of miscarriages and other misfortunes. I didn’t try to pull Jenny away. Maybe I should have.

We moved from box to box, from zygote to embryo to fetus, from day to day, week to week, month to month. The world had expected them—yet here they were, curled up like fallen leaves, their backs pinned to the centers of boxes filled with alcohol as clear as their souls, the fine porcelain of their bones wrapped in rice paper skin, ears carved into tiny loops, fingers and toes carefully splayed beneath a veil of fishing-line veins. A sculptor could spend his whole life trying and still fail to shape the delicate buds.

The boxes grew until we stood before a baby with eyelashes and hair, body curving in an open gray womb, mother dead and buried or cremated, or not dead in flesh but in spirit, half of her left where living children pulse against the glass.

On the drive home, Jenny didn’t say anything. We inched through traffic, quiet, everyone tucked into their own boxes, not knowing their incredible luck.
Sometimes, after Maggie and Jenny went to bed, he took the box from the mantle and snuggled it into his arms. He didn’t know why. It certainly didn’t make the memories stop. Even now, as his hand rested atop the rosewood lid, the aftermath of the initial doctor’s visit played through his mind.

In the weeks before the surgery, Paul could hardly look at Jenny, who was such a good, sweet child, who deserved a sister but would have only ashes and the thought of a baby born of stone and curled up tight as a winter rose. He knew there was nothing to be done, but Maggie spent hours praying, begging God to undo it, to make the baby soft. Of course, the baby remained intractable, lungs permanently fixed, heart unblinking.

“Sela,” Maggie had whispered into the darkness of their bedroom the night before the surgery, a full sentence, a name to fill a box on a birth certificate, on a death certificate.

Later, as he sat beside her hospital bed, painkillers running through her veins, he told her he thought it was a beautiful name. “It’s Hebrew,” she said, her voice faint through chapped lips, and then—he couldn’t be sure if she said this part or he dreamed it—“for boulder and cliff, for gravity and goodbye and love and falling forever.” He’d kissed her cheek and stroked her hair, and after she’d fallen asleep, whispered their dead baby’s name over and over, as he did now in the shifting light of the TV, carefully balancing each sound, not wanting to lose any of it.

After seeing boxes of babies never born, Jenny didn’t ask to go to the museum for a long time. Her visits to the field increased, even as it grew colder and the last of the leaves fell. She brought her backpack full of books and did her math homework atop the dryer, reducing fractions to their simplest forms until it wasn’t just the numbers that felt small. She saw how the trees, trembling in the autumn wind, shrank to skeletons of their former selves, how a mouse scurrying through the wispy grass must look to a hawk circling above.

At home, her parents continued not talking at the table. They spoke in the language of swallows and silverware scraping plates. After dinner, her mother went to her bedroom to write in her journal or cry and pray. Her father watched television late into the night. Sometimes Jenny sat with him, and he’d look at her for a moment and say, “Hello, peanut,” and his eyes would mist before returning to the screen.

She suspected the TV was, for her father, what the field was for her and what her mother’s head bowed over her clasped hands was for her—remainders in the wake of division. Since her mother’s surgery, she had asked everything she could think to ask about her sister, and her parents had told her more than they’d wanted to. She could tell by the size of her mother’s sigh when Jenny wondered aloud if witches were real, if Sela had been hexed into stone, and her father’s surprised look at her use of the word “stone,” his tired voice when he said she would understand better in a few years. She knew she was getting too old for fairy tales, but that didn’t stop her from wishing she knew how to make her family whole.

“Do you blame me?” Maggie sat beside Paul, her hand draped over his, eyes on the screen, watching the characters play out
problems that seemed laughably easy to resolve.

“Maggie Elizabeth,” he said, his voice unexpectedly warm and even like the maple syrup they’d poured over pancakes the morning they discovered she was pregnant, spreading through her until the characters blurred into impressions of themselves. She felt his palm slide over the top of her hand.

“It was my idea not to go to the doctor,” she said in a rush. “I thought,” she stumbled, took a deep, ragged breath, “if I asked God to deliver us a healthy baby—”

He lifted her hand, and the soft petals of his lips brushed against the thin skin of her wrist before their hands returned to the couch and she felt him pull back inside himself, like a snail that’s brushed something it can’t immediately identify. His hand relaxed, the fingers pulling up into tents, leaving a space between them.

Stifling a sigh, she retreated to the bedroom to get ready.

Paul and I are going out tonight for our 12-year anniversary, but I can’t stop thinking about Sela. She would have been born this month.

Should I wear the dress I wore the day we found out I was pregnant—red for remembrance? Or white, for the scar where they lifted her out?

I pray every night, harder than I prayed when Paul was deployed and I was home alone with Jenny, and still, there’s this ache. But I find solace in Job who, after losing his farm and his children, was assured by God his misfortune was a result of spiritual warfare, not a senseless punishment or holy mandate.

The guys in his unit said he’d be lucky to have a boy, but Paul wanted a little girl he could lift onto his shoulders, who would pick him wildflowers and curl into his lap during thunderstorms. Then he’d disappeared half a year at a time, the first seven years of his daughter’s life. The first few times he returned, Jenny ran to Maggie, her blue eyes wavering and wet as the ocean that had carried him home. She didn’t know who he was.

And then, miraculously, they were expecting again. He vowed it would be different. His baby would never run from him.

“What’s rigor mortis?” Jenny asked when the commercials came on. She wanted to know if it meant what she thought it meant: stiffness of the body, like arthritis but for dead things. She’d watched the show’s coroner lift a corpse’s arm at the wrist, had noticed how the elbow didn’t give and the arm had to be pried up against the frozen shoulder’s will, the limb as rigid as a mannequin’s.

He was already dressed to go out, a dark red tie looped around his neck and running down his middle like an incision, pressed black pants and jacket, patent leather shoes. He smelled like fresh licorice, mint mouthwash, and shaving cream, but he slouched and his forehead furrowed and shimmered with reflections from the screen. She wondered, if her dad were to die right now, would his face forever record the ripples of this moment with her? She wanted to press her fingers into the pleats and pull the ridges flat.

“Rigor mortis is the opposite of rigor less-tis,” he said, winking at her.

“Dad!” She laughed. She couldn’t remember the last time he had joked with her.
“Rigor mortis is what happens after you die,” he said, his half-smile already fading. “The body goes stiff, like a clock with jammed gears. Tendons pull tight around joints, locking them in place. Muscles calcify. The skin cools and hardens…” He didn’t look at her when he said it, but he didn’t seem to be watching the commercials either.

“Did you see it in the war?” she asked, knowing she shouldn’t. He never brought up his time in the service, and her mother didn’t either, but Jenny had a vague memory of her father dressed in black, recently home from overseas, a quiet conversation between him and her mother in the kitchen while she watched cartoons in the living room. He blinked, swallowed. The button on his throat rose and fell. “Does it last forever?” she quickly added, hoping to keep the conversation going.

“Nothing lasts forever, peanut,” he said, suddenly turning towards her. “Why don’t you go see if your mother is ready?”

“Mom,” Jenny asked, standing beside her at the bathroom counter, “how do oysters make pearls?” and Maggie, fastening the clasp of her necklace, imagined sand swirling through the hard lip of an oyster’s shell, though she knew that’s not how pearls are made. If it were, they would not be so rare.

“I don’t know,” she sighed.

“I think Pearl would have been a good middle name for Sela,” Jenny said, picking up a tube of lipstick and twisting the red tip up and down.

Maggie pushed a brush through her hair, kept her eyes on the mirror, on the deep blue of her dress, blue as the Earth from the heavens, and said, “I think so, too.”

Paul tilted his wine glass to his lips and gazed at Maggie’s necklace, a gift he’d given her for their first anniversary. Almost without thinking, he set his fingers on the pearl, startling her. She blushed, and he forced himself to hold her gaze. Her eyes were steady and almost unfamiliar, it had been so long since he’d really looked. He saw she was, and was not, the woman he’d married. She smiled an unexpected smile and quickly looked down at her pasta. He wanted to tell her he missed her, he was sorry.

“I wasn’t there, Maggie,” he managed.

“Oh, Paul,” she said hastily, as if she’d known what he was going to say, as if she’d been waiting a long time, her words closing mercifully around him, a safety net.

“I wasn’t there for you,” he said. “Or Jenny.”

“Paul,” she said, setting her fork down and threading her fingers between his. “We’re still here.”

And he saw then in his wife’s eyes his daughter’s eyes and his born-dead baby’s eyes, and over the thud of wine bottles landing on tabletops and the chime of a couple’s shared laughter and the flickering sputter of candlelight, he heard waves washing over a distant shore.

Over the field, the late afternoon sky churned, gray clouds pluming like ash poured from a wooden urn into a freshly emptied mason jar. The rain, beginning to ice, shushed against the dry grass and pinged across the glass and metal-strewn earth. Jenny’s lips were going numb, the air white with her breath. She wondered if
she would freeze without her jacket, if her thoughts would petrify before her cells, if the piercing ache in her bones was what her sister felt before her heart stopped.

She remembered once accidentally locking herself in a dryer playing hide-and-seek at a friend’s house. When she’d leaned against the door, pounding on it after many long, dark minutes, nothing happened. She’d screamed her head off when she realized she was trapped, until her throat was raw and her friend’s mom appeared with a loud pop in a shaft of fluorescent light.

Jenny hoped she’d fit the way she had then. She gripped the cold lip, stuck her head and torso inside and twisted the rest of the way in, her sneakers leaving the clotted earth, her body shivering against the drum’s fins. She pulled the door in fast, retrieving her fingers at the last second so it shut firmly in place, curved her back into a spoon and tucked her knees into her chest, curling around the ashes of her never-born sister. For a long time, she listened to the clattering overhead.

“We’re home!” Maggie shouted, flicking on the kitchen light. “Finally!” The roads had turned to ice during dinner, and their drive back through the slick darkness had been an agonizing crawl.

“Maybe she’s in the shower,” Paul suggested when no response came.

“She hasn’t eaten.” Maggie pointed to the untouched stew and buttered toast she’d set out just before they left. “Jenny?” Maggie hit the switch in Jenny’s room. Bed made. Backpack resting against the chair with the doll in it. No Jenny. Just a knot forming in her gut.

“Maggie!” Paul shouted from the living room. She found him holding their daughter’s urn, the box now brimming with a clutch of smooth, gray stones.

“She’s not here,” Paul said, casting the flashlight over the debris scattered around the field.

“Keep looking,” Maggie urged, stepping over a busted toaster oven in her heels.

It had stopped sleeting, but the frozen water crunched under his oxfords and threatened to displace him as he wove through the woods bordering the field. Though it seemed unlikely Jenny would be in the trees, he shined the light across the branches, in case she was the kind of girl who liked to climb. He couldn’t remember what she was wearing, and he kept catching himself imagining her the way she was the first time he came home and she didn’t run away, her head bumping his thigh as she wrapped herself around his leg.

Paul was about to call out to Maggie when he spotted her on her knees, hands knit at her forehead, the hem of her blue satin dress hovering inches above the faint white world.

It was beginning to snow when they finally found her, fuzzy flakes pinwheeling through the air like down loosed from a pillow. “Thank God,” Maggie breathed, kneeling beside the open dryer, rubbing Jenny’s arms and touching her face and hair, her body shuddering like an engine starting, or failing. Maggie pulled the jar of ashes from their daughter’s lap and set it in the ice-slicked grass.

“I’ll carry her,” Paul said, carefully lifting Jenny into his arms,
where she settled against his chest the way she did when she was brand new, and for a moment they stood together in the feathered darkness before going on.
THERE WERE HORSES
Shelby Handler

Long before us,
there were horses
in our backyard.
Muttering, muscled beasts
hauling buggies out
of the carriage house
they slept inside. Delivering
milk, bricks, ropes, meats
to a town that would become
a city and a home
to little girlchildren who suck
down gooseberries, stick out
their aching bellies while prying
pill bugs from the edges

of the lawn. The lawn that velvety
horses once shit upon
long before the girls arrived
with their poppy pollened fingers,
pupils pinwheeling from running
against the wind. We were
those girlchildren. We got caught
in thunderstorms,
we hoarded pine needles
and cracked cottonwood
twigs at their elbows
to reveal the soft, black stars
inside. Once, we fought over
a wishbone but finally
one of us won. Snapped it. The wish
spiraled out
in urgent, invisible smoke
and perhaps that’s one way
to say how fast we grew. How our
ankles sprouted out
the gate and flung our bodies
against our future

selves. We scribbled the day’s date
at the top of our diary pages

and didn’t think about our mother
dying or our father losing hair,
teeth, speech, song, maybe even
in that order. We didn’t imagine

a future stranger scouring
our cursive for the year

it was written, imagining who
we were, how we looked

while writing it, when it was
the present. It doesn’t

matter. It is good we did not
inspect the peeling paint

of the carriage house too closely.
We never thumbed the ridges

where the cart entrances had been
filled in with bricks.

We barely noticed how the opening’s
outline still remained. This would

have proved there were
horses here, once. Hungry,

snorting, galloping horses. The last
colt to leave the threshold

before it became a wall
never knew

it was the last one.
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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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