



3ELEMENTS

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Stowaway

Microphone
Wonderland

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THE BOY WITH A DREAM

Knute Walker

THE truck lurched violently from side to side, its arthritic shocks screeching in pain. The boy was jolted awake. He sat with his back against an old mattress strapped in place by a bungee cord. A pencil line of daylight under the rear roll-up door was all the light he had—barely enough to help him dodge the bombardment by unsecured furniture and boxes: a loose lampshade bounced into his lap, a child's rocking horse kicked him in the leg, and an old upright Hoover sped towards him on its punching-bag sack. The boy knew that the rough ride meant that the truck had left the highway and was now on one of the long and rough dirt roads stretching north. He was getting closer. He smiled remembering how Abuelita had told him the story of Jonah and the Whale. The square belly of the truck box was his whale, he thought, and he would be delivered just like Jonah.

“Ten paciencia, have patience,” his abuela always said. He just had to wait.

He clung tightly to the small plastic shopping bag that carried everything he could manage for the trip: a bottle of water; a torn, but clean, washcloth; his favorite Nirvana tee shirt, and two packs of peanut butter and cheese sandwich crackers. He carried his toothbrush and a small plastic comb in his shirt pocket and his pocket knife in his jeans. His brother, Inocente, had made him a wallet out of cardboard and duct tape. It held a small Polaroid of him smiling between his brother and Abuelita. He padded the wallet out with torn newspaper strips. He wanted to give it heft, to make it feel real.

The boy had always been a confident and competent child. When his father left for his final trip to the border, he readily assumed the role of provider for his brother and grandmother. Innocente was older, but he was more of a whittler than a worker. The boy felt guilty leaving Abuelita in his care, but it was she who pushed him to leave.

“What is here for you, mi nietito?” she’d nag him. “Your brother will always eat, and I will soon die.” She would take him by his chin and bend so that her wrinkled smile would be level with his eyes. She’d pull him tightly to her bosom. “God always sees the righteous, mi cielo, always.”

The boy had no way of reckoning time, so he lost himself in daydreams. In one, he found his parents alive and awaiting him;

in another, he played guitar in a rock band; or he was an international soccer star. But, as always with his dreams, the anger crept in, anger at his father for never once reaching back for them after he left. Anger at his mother for dying of COVID. Anger at himself for abandoning his brother and grandmother.

Occasionally the boy's thoughts were punctuated by the driver's muffled voice singing tunelessly to the radio. He thought he could hear him talking and joking with someone. Perhaps there was a passenger? He wondered what kind of man the driver was. He knew it would be safest if he could slip out of the truck unseen, but he had no plan.

The heat inside the truck had become unbearable. He unbuttoned his shirt and mopped his forehead with his washcloth. The peanut butter and cheese crackers made him thirsty and he drank all of his water far too soon. He needed air. He needed out. The truck's door was locked from the outside and he realized that as long as it was moving, no amount of pounding or screaming would help. "Ten paciencia," he told himself and stifled his tears. Wait. What would happen, would happen.

Soon after, the truck lurched to a stop, but the engine was left idling. He heard the cab door open and the driver raise his voice in a command, "Out! Come on, let's go! Out, boy!"

At first the boy thought the driver was calling to him, but that was impossible.

He heard the man urinate on the ground. Then the man made

a high-pitched whistle, followed by another command. "Roadie, Come! C'mon pal!...Good boy!"

But almost immediately the boy heard the driver sigh and call again, "Hey! Hey! Roadie, where you goin'? Get back here! Roadie boy! Come back!"

But the dog had fixed itself by the truck's rear door and began to bark insistently. The boy stood up in the darkness, his legs wobbly. He opened his pocket knife. When the rear door rolled up, the boy was struck blind by the sun. He shielded his eyes and stumbled forward, toward the edge of the truck, nearly toppling over.

"What the fuck! Jesus Christ! Shit!" cursed the driver. "How long you been back there?"

The boy tried to speak but his throat was parched and he had no words anyway. "It don't matter," the driver answered himself. "Goddamn!"

The man shook his head. The dog stood at alert by his side. When the driver noticed the boy's raised pocketknife, he gave a snort of dismissal. "Put that fuckin' thing away."

The boy was frozen. The driver gestured impatiently, extending his arm and opening and closing his fingers.

"Just give it here," he blurted angrily. The boy's eyes could focus now. The man was tall, solid, serious. "Come on, give it!" The boy gave the man the knife and each of them took the other in. "What else you got back there?" The boy handed over his

plastic bag. The empty water bottle fell to the truck bed with a hollow bounce. “Pockets, kid—empty your pockets! Come on, your ‘bolsillas’ or whatever...” The man threw the comb and toothbrush into the plastic bag. He told the boy to turn around and grabbed his wallet, giving the boy a shove back away from the edge of the truck. He opened the wallet. He looked at the photo and ran his fingers through the torn newspaper. He tossed the wallet in the bag.

The man grabbed the pull rope on the rear door. “Stay here!” he warned. The boy once again stood in darkness. The driver called to the dog.

The boy hated himself. He should have fought, stabbed the man in the eye when he had the chance. But in an instant the door rolled open again. The driver threw in a water bottle—full and cold—then quickly pulled the door down and locked it.

The boy drank. He soon felt the rough road turn steady. They were back on a highway. He could hear the occasional rumble of other trucks. “Ten pacencia,” he calmed himself. The only thing he could do was to breathe, to sleep—and to dream...

The truck was still. Silent. The boy heard a hum of nearby voices and vehicles. The strip of light under the door flashed red then blue. He heard the driver talking with another man, laughing.

It felt like hours, as if he were in a fog. When the driver

opened the rear door, the boy could see that it was evening. They were parked in a paved area full of cars and trucks and men in uniform. There was a huge white tent a hundred yards away. A fence. There were people standing in long lines. His people. The driver pulled him down and grabbed him by the collar. He handed the boy his plastic bag and his wallet, then prodded him towards a large man in a uniform and a big hat.

He saw many men like that, some with guns and rifles. The big man had a bull horn with a handheld microphone. He addressed one of the lines of people. "Welcome to the Estados Unidos," he said. "Well, almost!" He chuckled with a thick accent of cruelty. "No ticket to Wonderland for you all, amigos! Now, you just do what we tell you to do and there won't be no problemas here. Got it? Comprende?"

The boy saw the driver step back into the truck's cab. He started the engine but didn't shut the door. The driver watched intently as the big man with the bull horn motioned to the boy. "Hey, you! Over here!"

The boy walked to the man. He could feel the driver's eyes on him. "We don't take stowaways in this country, kid," said the big man. "That's not the way it works. But, you're in luck. That driver over there, he says you got papers." The boy had no idea what the man could possibly mean. The man grabbed the boy's plastic bag and rummaged through the contents. When he finished he tossed it on the ground near a pile of backpacks and clothing.

“This all you got? No wallet?” The boy gave up his wallet. The man examined the Polaroid and crumbled it in his hand. “You won’t need this anymore.” He thumbed through the strips of newspaper carefully and came to a one-hundred-dollar bill. He did not look surprised. “Well there now, these papers look in order.” He folded the bill and put it in his pocket. “Get back to your uncle there. Quick, boy.”

The boy ran back to the truck. “Get in!” the driver said, and reached across him to pull the heavy door closed.

The two were silent until the truck pulled back out onto the highway and built up speed. The dog, Roadie, made room for the boy and rested his head on his lap. The driver turned to the boy. “What’s your name, son?”

DISCOVER
Cecelia



Y ISLAND

. Rogers

THE WHITE WALLS OF CHENGHUANG TEMPLE

Minghan Zou

ChengHuang Temple's white walls
weren't here last year. Supermarket
eggshells, they encase the difference
between apricot roofs upturned
to the sky and chrome lattices of
Bund nightlife.

The State called it
renewal: the walls' bleaching,
the disappearance of vendors,
the muffling of temple-goers
with red-white microphones.

Can we
call them walls? These thin, rippling
screens of pellicle, unabashedly
white—masks.

Grabbing onto
YeYe's hands, I was six when
I ate a *ChengHuang* sugar dragon,
its flying whiskers *TangHuLu*
sweet.

Yellow parchment *KongMing*
 lanterns snuck through cracks
 in the plaster, paper-thick skin
 glowing a New Year's red.

On the
 temple steps, a girl twirling in
 wavy *CheongSam*, smile blooming
 in the sun.

Then the stalls, each its own
 wonderland of garlic and scallion,
 sizzle and pop of *TsiFanTuan* and
ShengJian, seared in crackling oil.

Here I am, marveling—
 stowaway in a cacophonous
 grove of *CheongSam*
 & *TsiFanTuan*, lantern
 & sugar dragon, garlic
 & *YeYe*'s hand-in-mine.

Here I am, marveling
 at frozen drips of white paint.
 Their reflective shimmer.
 Whispering—
 wet with tenacious life.

HO

Nawmi M



ME
Manaaam



IT'S ALL WRONG, IT'S ALRIGHT

Jonathan Daniel Gardner

I was already late when I remembered the whiskey.

Remembered like a malfunctioning siren. Like something physical suddenly attached itself to my ribs and started pulling.

Phone out. Calendar open. Too many notifications. One of them blinking.

Birthday thing.

Bushwick.

Tonight.

I checked the time. I checked it again.

Midtown.

The whiskey was in Midtown.

I ordered it weeks ago in a moment of false adulthood. A special bottle. Old. Serious. The kind of gift that says, *I know you, I plan, and I'm capable of follow-through.*

I didn't plan. I deferred. I forgave myself repeatedly.

Now I was in my apartment wearing yesterday's shirt, my thoughts arriving faster than my limbs.

Counter. Little mirror. Morale adjustment. Immediate confidence. My gut objected.

Keys. Left shoe. Wrong shoe. Back off. Right shoe.

I checked my pockets for a better version of me.

Out. Right key. Door locked.

The hallway smelled like other people's food and future regret. I took the stairs three at a time and stopped after three.

Outside, Cobble Hill was in a good mood. Couples strolled. Dogs had jobs. Babies slept like it was planned. A man carried a baguette without irony. I was in breach of something unspoken.

I ran down Warren St. because I had obligations. I stopped behind a tree to boost morale with a pen cap.

Subway. Underground. Everyone looked straight ahead. I tried to look straight ahead.

Body wouldn't listen. Tried to play a tremor off like I was born to dance. No one bought it.

The F train arrived like a thousand rusty chains thrown down metal stairs.

I sat down and immediately stood up again. Got self-conscious and pretended to check my back pocket. I looked at the pickup email again even though it hadn't changed. I checked the time again. I checked my reflection in the window and tried

to wink but gave up halfway and started blinking aggressively to hide it.

Midtown arrived like a verdict.

Above ground, the air smelled like money with somewhere to be. People moved fast without panic, which felt unfair. I half-ran, half-apologized my way down the block, clutching nothing, already exhausted.

The shop was dim and expensive and calm. Bottles everywhere. Glass. Labels.

The guy behind the counter looked at me like I might start confessing.

“Pickup,” I said, too quickly.

“Name?”

I told him.

He typed slowly, deliberately, like he had a fifty on me failing.

He came back with a bag and set it on the counter.

“That one’s special,” he said.

“Is it,” I said. “I ordered it during a window of responsibility.”

He smiled professionally. “Gift?”

“Yes,” I said. “For someone who hates birthdays.”

He nodded immediately, which worried me.

“Wrap it?”

I looked at the bag. Wrapping felt optimistic.

“No,” I said. “I want it to look like I acquired it under duress.”

He did not laugh, but I felt we were now aligned.

Outside again. Time check. Bad. Still salvageable.

Subway again. Whiskey bag on my lap like a sleeping animal, a stowaway I checked constantly so it wouldn't escape.

I did another morale adjustment on the platform, telling myself it was to focus. My nose burned with ambition.

Bushwick. Darker. Quieter. Brick and graffiti and bars that looked like they saw everything and refused to be a witness.

The address. Stairs. Music leaking under the door, muffled like it had been told to behave.

Inside: coats everywhere. People holding drinks like they were hostages.

Someone hugged me. Someone else handed me a beer.

The birthday guy was in the kitchen, calm, already tired of it. He looked at me like I was going to knock something over by standing still.

I held up the bag.

"We're not doing gifts," he said.

"Right," I said. "This isn't a gift. This is a historical object."

He sighed and pointed to a chair near the fridge.

On it was a pile. Not gifts. Objects. Bags. Bottles. A plant. A framed photo that looked confrontational.

I added my whiskey to the pile like I was returning something to the ocean.

No one acknowledged it. No one thanked me. No one stopped me from standing there too long.

I drifted, it felt safer than staying still.

Someone told me about their job. Someone else asked if I was okay. I said yes too fast. I was talking too much and also not enough. My hands were doing things.

A man near the window said something about astrology. I nodded and tried to remember if astronomy or astrology was the good one.

The man said something about my sign and I laughed out loud, alone. Someone looked at me. I nodded like it was on purpose.

I took another drink. I took a small trip to the bathroom, to get morale up. I told myself I needed to level out. I did not level out.

I talked to everyone. I talked too much. I talked to a coatrack. I told a woman I admired her boots and then apologized to the boots for objectifying them.

I laughed at things before they were jokes.

I kept checking the whiskey pile like it might redeem me.

Time stretched. People arrived who knew how to arrive. Music got louder. I felt myself slowly becoming unnecessary.

The birthday guy opened the fridge and asked if I was doing okay.

“Yes,” I said.

It was a perfect lie. Clean. Uncomplicated.

I stayed another twenty minutes to prove something to no

one.

Then I left.

The train arrived already tired of me. I got on anyway. The car smelled like citrus cleaner and old heat. I sat, stood, sat again. My legs were vibrating independently of my plans.

Across from me, a woman mouthed the words to a song, like she was testing a microphone.

When we hit Bergen, I stood too fast and apologized to a pole.

Up the stairs, my legs started negotiating. Halfway up I stopped and leaned against the wall, forehead cool on tile, pretending to read a poster about service changes that did not apply to me. Someone passed me and didn't ask if I was okay. I was grateful. I wasn't in the market for witnesses.

Outside, the street tried to catch me. It said, *Walk*. Cobble Hill had gone quiet, a closed down Wonderland after hours.

I walked past my own block, realized it, turned around, pretended it was a choice.

Door. Key. Dropped. Picked up. Missed lock. Laugh once. Missed again. No laugh.

The apartment smelled stale and familiar.

I washed my hands, too thoroughly, like I could scrub off the night. The mirror caught me mid-process. My eyes looked too bright. My face was gaunt and accurate.

I lay on the floor because I didn't deserve the bed. The radiator clanged once. My phone buzzed. I stared at the ceiling. I

tried to remember something. Anything.

Eventually, my body stopped vibrating. My thoughts didn't. I stayed there.

Tomorrow would arrive whether I participated or not.

I closed my eyes anyway, not to sleep, just to reduce the number of things asking me to exist.

THE GODS OF NATURE

Sebastian Fernandez



MELANCHOLIA AT CHRISTMAS

Argentum August

Every year, the Christmas tree grows
a little more beaten up and beautifully
wilted and brings a little more
pain. Dear,
you aren't imagining it,
every inch penciled in carefully on the wall in fading Sharpie
brings you a fraction farther into that wonderland called oblivion.

Every year, you hide in your room
while the snow falls and take the pills
everyone told you would take away your
pain. Dear,
you aren't imagining it,
every wide-ruled notebook turned stack of looseleaf turned Google spreadsheet,
all the lists of shit you wished as a kid,
couldn't pull you from your ratty gray blanket.
And then you break one day

and it's six hours in the car when you realize
 December's gone and passed you by
 and you don't have a card, not one surprise, and everyone is
 singing about *fucking*
reindeer.

And it's Christmas Eve and you can't breathe or sleep
 and winter's no wonderland no more.

Fleece pajamas in the basement and tangled-sweaty-self-hatred,
 it's no wonder you think you'd like to not exist for Christmas.
 Careful carols crooned into microphones
 and all you can do is dread going home for Christmas.

A bed away, a baby brother—you still aren't allowed your privacy.
 When you're ill, your parents are always suspecting something.
 The hymns of kindness don't match how you're burning up,
 each song flooding itchiness all through your eyes
 and you have to turn it off because *big kids don't cry*.

You think there must be a stowaway in your brain.
 Internalized transphobia. White wintry curtains of shame.
 Healthy people don't think, *Pills or rope?*
 They snickerdoodle their oven and tinsel their tree and cope with
 help from their family,
 and when you're collapsed and covered in gray-mud-silt-snow,

and friends tell you, *Happy Christmas!* and they just don't know,
and you're getting your humanity flat-out wrong,
perhaps you were only a stowaway all along.

I can't run my frostbitten mind under warm water;
the best I've got is hot chocolate and tears for catharsis.
I can't be alone. The night is ripe for melancholia at Christmas.

ESCAPE
Asma Ejaz

THE DANCE

Dory Rousos Moore

I move the microphone closer to my lips, feel the buzz of alcohol and adrenaline, and let myself sing Whitney Houston's "I Wanna Dance with Somebody." I'm at a local fundraiser with my friend Heather, singing karaoke between trips to the open bar, pretending that I'm in my early twenties instead of my early forties. I close my eyes as I belt the chorus. I do want to dance with somebody. Not some body, your body. You.

As I sing in the strobe lights, memories spin into the front of my mind, stowaways from another time—back to when I was sixteen, when I sang another Whitney song, a drive-thru rendition of "I Will Always Love You" as I leaned over the middle console in my friend's car at the Taco Bell window at 2am, proclaiming my love for chalupas for everyone in line to hear.

"I will never fall in love with anybody. I'll stay single forever,"

I said as I sipped my large raspberry iced tea and took another bite, nacho cheese dripping onto the plastic wrapper. Ever since my mom had been diagnosed with cancer, I hadn't been able to think of love without thinking of what could be lost.

We started to talk on the phone because our friends hooked us up to go to prom together. I sat close to you as we flirted at a party a few weeks later, glitter pressed to my eyelids, the sleeves of my sweatshirt so long that I could bunch them in my hands like two bouquets of flowers. As my friends and I were getting ready to leave, you leaned into the back seat of Heather's car, and we kissed. I screamed out the open window the whole way home, while my friends laughed, telling me to shut up.

At prom, there were metallic cardboard stars with each couple's names written in Sharpie that were hung in rows. They stretched across a black backdrop like a meteor shower. I kept ours for years—packing it when I moved to college, taping it to one dorm room wall and then another. My dress was iridescent yellow-green. I was a mermaid dancing, dizzy from being on land, a wildflower blooming in wonderland. The last song of the night was “The Dance.” As Garth Brooks sang, it seemed like a bad omen: *“I could have missed the pain, but I’d’ve had to miss the dance.”* Or maybe the lyrics were telling me it was OK to risk getting hurt, that it would be worth it even if I did. I was floating away. The disco ball was a spinning planet, the fog machine created clouds at the edge of the galaxy, my corsage was a cluster of star petals on my wrist.

A couple of months later, I wrote you a long letter explaining the only kind of relationship I wanted—the kind my parents had. I described how my dad carried my mom up and down the stairs when she grew too weak from chemo, how he ran her bathwater, washed her frail body, and cleaned the port in her chest with orange antiseptic afterward, how he rocked her in his arms in her hospital bed that was set up in the dining room on the first floor of the house at night. I was worried my intensity might make you step back, but you wrapped your arms around me, as steadfast and solid as the concrete ground beneath us.

We danced in your parents' driveway a few years later when I was home one weekend from college, singing Tim McGraw and Faith Hill's "It's Your Love," my lips glazed with Washington apples, some extra shots of Crown tossed in, pressed against your neck, the scent of Bud Light and bonfire on your skin, a cigarette passed between each chorus. I believed we would be young forever, that all we needed was the next night out, the next day together, a car with a full tank of gas and the windows rolled down, gas station French vanilla cappuccinos in both cup holders, holding hands across the middle console, and a road that stretched like a high note at perfect pitch, so dazzling and clear that it seemed to go on forever.

Nine years after prom, we walked onto another dance floor holding hands. I spun under your arm as Brad Paisley sang, "*I thought I loved you then.*" The diamonds on my ring and the

rhinestones in the white satin flower by my ear both reflected the spotlight, so in photos it looks like I had stars alight on my left hand and tucked into my dark hair.

My mind comes back to the present moment as the overhead lights click on at the end of the fundraiser. As Heather and I walk to the parking lot, we reminisce about how long we've been friends, my ears ringing from being so close to the speakers. When I get home, everyone is already asleep. I drift into a dream where I'm dancing with you under the stars, under a disco ball, under a constellation of reception lights. I dream I am seventeen, twenty-one, twenty-six.

The next morning, I walk down the stairs as sunlight spills through the front window. The kids are still sleeping, and the house is still. All the highways, backroads, and detours have led to here, to home.

You are in the kitchen, and my slippers are quiet on the tiles as I lean into your open arms and lay my head on your shoulder. We've gotten older, and the landscape has changed over the past twenty-three years as our love has grown. You hum the chorus of "Stone in Love" by Journey as we sway back and forth while our dog sashays between our feet. The running dishwasher becomes the swooshing echo of piano chords, my boiling teapot bursts into a one-note guitar solo, and the ESPN announcers' voices from the living room TV are soft, muffled background vocals as I dance with you.

MUSTA BEEN A LONG RIDE

Michael Montlack



BEACHED

Philip Byrne

Something's amiss unraveling toward me. It'd be easy to float here, buoyed in the swell, to hide from the unadulterated, mundane quotidian, drifting. The tide comes in, washes away my castle.

Increments of day stack up, jam me, the pressure is hydraulic, accretes. I try to find space between my ribs. There's a price to be paid, but pure joy is ungraspable. We name things 'vast'—the sea, sky, grains golden to the horizon that belly dance in the silky wind. Hosts of people wobble and rave in a muddy field in Lisdoonvarna as the singer pogo jumps around on stage and the microphone screeches, but there's sunshine, and your sweet honey kisses and months of Sundays blur, decades go ring-around-the-rosie and you fall down. I lost your scent before you were gone.

The house is full of sweet wreaths, their bouquet. I don't want to empty you out of it. I'm wrecked, in the doldrums. Tears flow. How easy it is to be a stowaway in limbo. A shroud is slid overboard, sinks fathoms deep, a bitter pill to swallow. I wish it was my body that had betrayed me.

I need a room to hide in but there's no room to retreat to. I curl up in a ball under the eiderdown. I could bawl. The way you still tumble me. The pillow won't fit down my throat. It'd be easy to melt between the sheets, atrophy. Tree ribs are a shadowy diorama on the wall. Outside, the neighborhood is amped up, animated in white and black. There's snow. Anamneses shake and fall as in a snow globe.

I go to bed early to get to the next day. The room's a shadow of divisions, geometric shapes and figures, abstractly voluptuous. I loved you naked. Desire infiltrates dreams. Is it a dream; the house is silent, holds its tongue? I need the analgesic sun to come out. Come out. Give me a day to groove-and-tongue daily rituals, chores, and run some errands. I have to get out of bed, see if the fish still swim in the aquarium. Shake the globe.

Odd, the sea; though look, out to where horizon and sky meet yet divide, unfathomable. The rise and fall of waves are compulsive, recursive loops, resoundingly blotting the sandy shore. Their symphony in this wonderland is divine, without airs or epiphany. Soothing is the sea that unravels toward me.

BY THE LIGHT OF APOLLO

Najib Joe Hakim

ECHO CHAMBER

Judith Seaman

ONE day my father was home working, his desk filled with books and piles of paper, jars of pencils and mugs with coffee stains. The next day he was gone. He'd had a heart attack. I was thinking about this when I felt the hearse move. I had just sat through my father's funeral service, and now here I was lying hidden like a stowaway, next to his coffin in the moving hearse.

My father was only forty-seven so that he died came as a shock although he was a smoker and could consume a whole block of cheddar in a week. His lunches were baked potatoes with melted cheese or a tuna melt. Breakfasts, cheese omelets. Dinners, steak or lamb chops. Monday nights, when my mother volunteered at the Temple until five, my father would start with cheese and crackers and then wait for her to return home with pastrami on rye. He drank scotch every night, always on the

rocks. He was the consummate writer of the fifties, and he never went to a doctor. I don't even think he had a doctor. His idols were Edward R. Murrow and Jimmy Breslin, two experts on words and drink, as my father would say.

He didn't do much socializing, my father, but he did enjoy the music and reading nights he and my mother hosted. On Saturday nights, my mother's friends, all musicians like her, would come and play. There was Frank S., the jazz piano player, Ava, the Czechoslovakian opera singer, and my mother, the classical pianist.

Reading nights were on Thursdays. My father's writer friends would gather in living rooms and talk about their work and sometimes read a passage or two from a piece they were working on. When those reading nights were at our house, my mother would serve cheeseballs, drinks, and chips. Then she would retire to her room and listen to WQXR on the radio. I planted my dressing table stool by the hallway door and listened intently to the readings. The best part was later in the night once the scotch bottle had been emptied and the room was filled with cigarette smoke. All my father's friends drank and smoked and swore up and down that they were true blue to their wives but after a while some cracks in those stories appeared. What I learned from those nights was the importance of investigation, of first-hand knowledge.

My father's writer friends came to pay their respects at the

funeral. They reeked of smoke. A couple of them used All Spice aftershave. Only my father used Lime Cologne which I love to this day. There was no hint of lime amongst them. They were dressed in dull brown jackets and wool ties. For men of words, they said very little when they came up to my mother and me. They may have been stunned, I don't know. I watched them turn around awkwardly and sit in the pews closest to the back.

We waited for the rabbi to speak. All I could think of were the words 'echo chamber.' I formed a million sentences with the words echo chamber. Dad is in an echo chamber. Dad is in his private echo chamber. Dad is reading a book in his echo chamber. Dad's voice is echoing as he reads aloud, without a microphone, just the voice I loved, the voice I longed for. I could hear it in my head. I wondered if he could hear us.

I wanted to time the rabbi, as he was known for his verbosity, but my watch was on my left wrist, and my mother had a tight grip on my hand and I couldn't move. To make matters worse, I was wearing the ring with my birthstone that my father got for me, and every time my mother let out a soft cry, she squeezed my hand, and the ring would pinch my fingers. I tried to get up and move to her left side, but that only made her squeeze harder.

When the service was over, my mother remained in her seat, sitting perfectly still. I didn't dare budge. Finally, though, she turned around and saw that everyone was gone. The funeral director and his assistant told my mother before the service that

the coffin would be wheeled down the aisle before everyone left but she insisted that they keep it in the chapel. She wanted to have a few minutes alone with her husband, she said.

“Should I wait in the car?” I asked after everyone had cleared out.

“What car?” my mother said. Neither of my parents had ever driven a car.

“A car that will take us to the cemetery.”

“We’re not going to the cemetery.”

“But Dad will be all alone.”

My mother didn’t answer but just looked at me as if I were from outer space. I walked down the aisle to exit the chapel. The funeral parlor was old, and the wood floors were creaky. I left the door a little open and watched my mother go over to the casket. One thing I was sure of: I couldn’t let my father be buried without any of his family present. I had to do something. I noticed a small closet and crouched inside next to some cleaning supplies. My head rested on a mop. I quietly shut the door then wondered if I would be locked inside. I heard my mother as she walked toward the back, calling my name, then the sound of her heels clicking against the marble floor as she went to the funeral director’s office where there was quiet talking. After a few minutes, I heard the two of them walking up and down the hall calling for me. We didn’t live far from the funeral parlor, and I heard my mother say that I must have gone home by myself, and she left.

It was quiet for a while. I bravely cracked the door open a bit and saw the funeral director and his assistant propping open the doors to the chapel and then rolling the coffin out to the parking lot. I followed them, hunched over like that old detective in the TV show, the one with a bum back, and when they went back into the building, I climbed into the hearse and lay down next to my father in his plain pine casket. Ashes to ashes happens quicker without varnish and metal locks.

Lying there in the hearse I was sure that my father could hear my thoughts and that I could hear his. But what could I think that would have weight, that would make a lasting impression on my father? I had to come up with something good, a question, an insight, that he, as both my father and a writer, would take pride in.

The hearse driver started up the engine. We bumped along on the city streets and then onto bridges and highways. We were city people, New York born and raised. This was not new territory, yet it seemed different, odd, as if turned inside out or upside down. Like Wonderland, nothing seemed as it once was. Nothing was as it once seemed.

I told my father that he wasn't alone. But I knew he hated clichés, so I got quiet and thought for a long while for better, more profound thoughts. It was just me and my dad, both lying perfectly still, searching for what to say.

I remembered what my father taught me about structuring an

article. First you give the five W's, he would say. Then you choose the most important issue and delve into it. Okay, I thought. The five W's of this excursion are the day of your funeral, and you and me in a hearse traveling from Manhattan to a cemetery in Queens. But I got stuck at the last 'w,' the 'why.'

'Life is strange, pumpkin,' my dad would say when I wanted to know why that kid teased me or why the teacher didn't love my essay. But the 'why' in this story was a mystery.

My dad had a calendar on his desk with quotes from famous writers. Sometimes we'd flip through them together and choose a favorite. His favorite was something Henry Wadsworth Longfellow said: "For after all, the best thing one can do when it is raining, is to let it rain."

The hearse was slowing down. I heard the driver open his window and say something to someone, probably a guard at the cemetery. That's when I started worrying about my punishment because, oh yes, I was going to get punished all right. So, I thought that I'd better start considering what I was going to tell my mother, what I learned and what on earth I'd hoped for.

It was hard to think. What did I learn? I asked myself as I heard the funeral guys approaching. I learned that you could keep a person alive in your mind if you keep talking to them, and so I promised my dad I would keep talking.

I'll never forget the look on their faces when they opened the door to take the casket out.

They kept calling me ‘kid’ and ‘little girl’ and telling me that what I did was wrong, very wrong. But I hardly paid attention because from the first to the last shovel of dirt I threw onto the casket, I talked to my dad and when it was all over, the hearse driver put me in the front seat and took me home.

My mother stood under the building’s awning, her arms locked, her face tight and red. At first, I froze and couldn’t think of what to say. But then I remembered what I heard my father say in the hearse. ‘Give her time. Both of you lost me.’ So, I hugged her and we went inside to our apartment where life, somehow, would begin again.

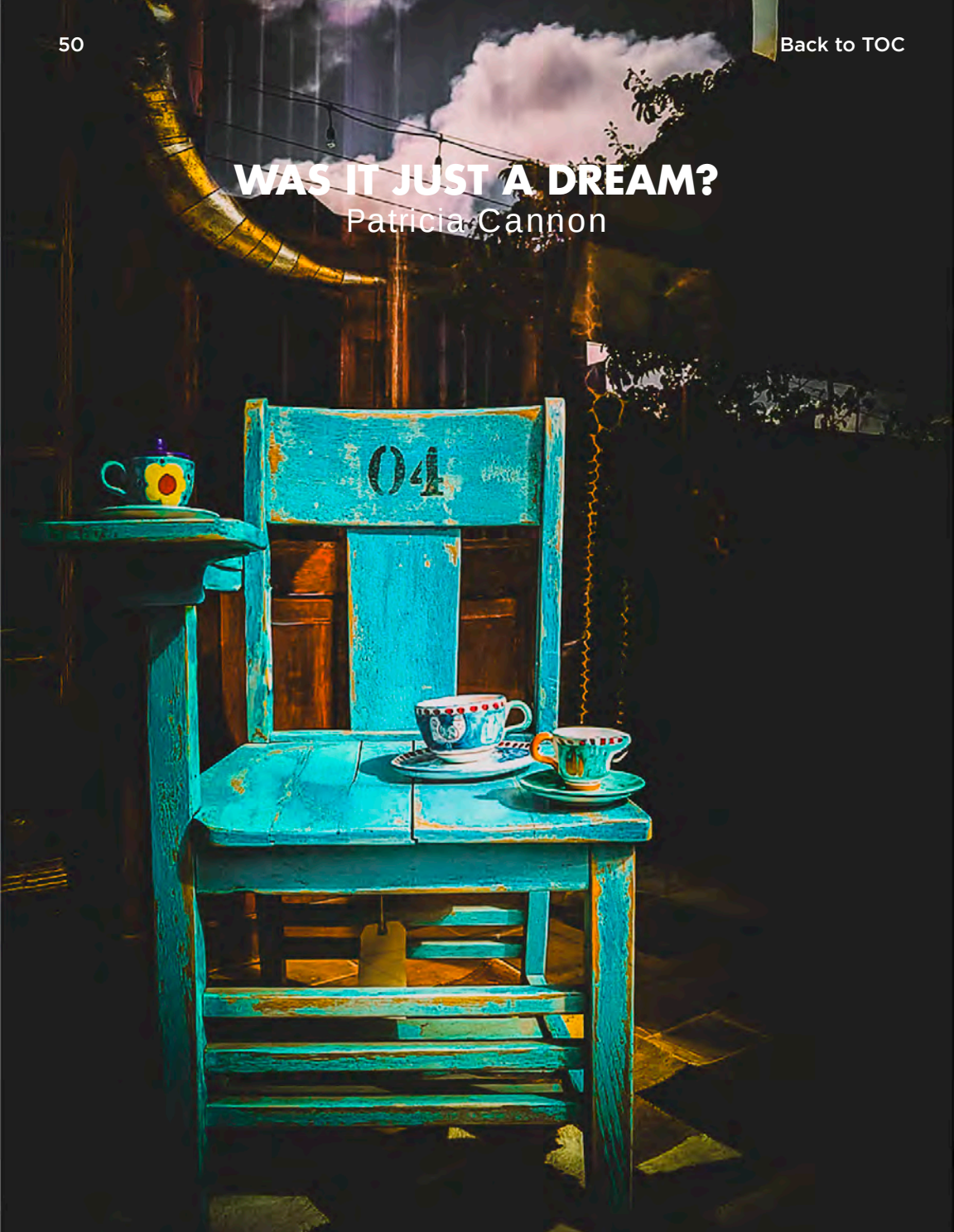
THE SURPRISE

Cecil Morris

I had no idea that parenthood would mean
becoming stowaway on my children's joy,
that I'd shrink myself into their roving eyes
or fold myself to favored animal shapes,
learn to growl and squawk and snuffle in their necks,
not man but origami interloper
for pocket or backpack, for tabletop games
of football or hockey. How could I have known,
a young man without the gift of foresight,
that parenthood would transform me, turn my ears
antennae or microphones to catch their glee,
to hear even the whispered needs of their hearts?
I had no idea the wonderland I'd find
when I hitched myself to children, wild and mine,
those flighty, feathered spirits, little magpies,
little hawks, from nest to wing to gone.

WAS IT JUST A DREAM?

Patricia Cannon



THE SWIFT

Sarah Burton

IN the event that you find a lizard on your living room floor in the middle of winter—having removed itself from your open suitcase to explore the jumble of clothes and Costa Rican souvenirs and seek heat—locate the nearest expendable Tupperware, poke holes in the lid, and capture the tiny reptile for closer examination.

Do not trust Google's diagnostic capabilities, this is no Western Fence Lizard, unless it was foolish enough to climb into a suitcase in California, disembark in Chicago, and re-plane for South Bend in the middle of an ice storm. Still, if you make the mistake of believing what AI tells you and drop money on a terrarium it will soon outgrow and set it up for a desert-dweller rather than the rainforest creature that it is, do not worry. You will come to your senses while combing through pictures from your trip. As it happens, *you* are smarter than Google.

It is an Emerald Swift, a female. And once the terrarium is transformed into a humid, bark-carpeted wonderland, the lizard will begin to turn a tell-tale greenish-blue and be visibly happier about the change in her surroundings.

You should be warned about the feeding. Stay away from the large crickets—they will chase her unmercifully. But the small crickets will bring out a mighty ferociousness in your stowaway that does you proud.

The flightless fruit flies are also appreciated and easily kept. They spontaneously generate in a plastic container filled with a fruity brown sponge of unknown constitution. No matter how many flies you feed the lizard, if there are one or two left in the container there will be thirty the next day. And despite the label, they appear to grow wings.

The crickets may or may not on occasion get loose in your home. And as these are the high-jumping, non-chirping kind rather than the friendly and musical kind, it would be to your advantage to take great care in removing the soon-to-be-food from their enclosure.

This lizard will become a source of comfort to you in the days ahead. This resilient little stowaway, an accidental immigrant, will remind you that even small beauty is a powerful antidote to big ugliness.

Watch how she basks under the light, long toes splayed on the faux wood, eyes closed in meditative pleasure. Trace the zig-zag

pattern of slate, black, brown, and white on her back. Observe the greenish tint of her tiny scales. Look her in the eyes that round and slit and close and tell her that her small magnificence is enough. Use your thumb as a microphone and tell her that she is welcome, that you are glad she traveled safely, that she has come to this country and is now a part of your family. Speak words of comfort over her losses and the farewells she could not give her friends and neighbors. Pledge yourself to caring for her and keeping her safe.

And when the country is cold with ice and white with snow and human beings are being shoved into cages with less care than you would treat an animal, and you despair in your heart that there is no warmth or beauty or kindness left in this world, take your bowl of cereal and eat in front of the terrarium. The lizard will turn her reptile eyes to you and they will be fearsome enough to give you courage.

BEFORE TIME

Alexey Adonin



BREAD & BUTTER

Stefanie Lee

You are the yellow fat of the morning, the grain of the afternoon & the serrated silver teeth that divorce one from the other. You have been scraped so thin across the calendar that the light passes through your ribcage without casting a shadow. They tell you: *Stop looking. Love is a stray dog that finds you once you stop calling.* This is the kind of gospel spoken by people who have never had to suck the marrow out of their own luck just to feel a fullness in the belly. So, you stop. You wait with your mouth shut like a coin purse. To lunge for the microphone is to risk the feedback screech of your own pulse. But there is a stowaway in the pantry of your heart's ventricles & she is done with silence. Done waiting to carve a buttered-up wonderland out of salt & hope—so you reach back into the dark for that steel edge to cut a fresh slice out of life, thick & unapologetic.

03-02-2026

Laya Sivakumar

A puppy sleeps on a chest. This is fact. The weight is warm and the breathing is small and steady. The temperament will not be chosen; it will only exist.

The ribs expand and contract. Someone is holding something precious and volatile. Someone is being held. The question dissolves in the dark.

Wonderland was supposed to be the place where things stayed soft and possible. Where wanting a different world was just imagination, just play. But even in sleep the puppy growls sometimes, small sounds in its throat like distant thunder.

It grows. Slowly, then not slowly. The weight becomes different. Still warm. Still breathing. Still impossible to predict.

In the lonely apartment, a chest rises and falls with the weight of defiance pressed against it. *Stowaway*—smuggled into

the cargo hold of inheritance, past the customs of reasonable expectation. The puppy is there, making its presence known through warmth, through the small motor of its heartbeat. A hand presses against it. This was chosen. This yes.

But also: terror. What if it wakes and runs into traffic? What if it bites the wrong hand? What if the world, which is not kind, breaks its small bones?

The puppy shifts. Dreams, perhaps.

At three a.m., a different chest. Or the same chest, or all chests where this puppy has learned to sleep. The phone hasn't rung and this might be good news or no news. Somewhere there is a microphone, or a crowd, or a geography that cannot be followed because the map of conviction is drawn in a language not everyone learns.

The puppy—which was always going to grow despite everything, despite careful tending—sleeps warm and solid. It was there at fifteen, small and fierce. Visible in eyes that looked at the world and saw blueprints instead of fixed structures.

A hand on the sternum now, feeling an echo. The puppy breathes and somewhere else, in some other room or street or moment, the same defiance breathes too. The boundaries blur.

Wonderland was supposed to mean staying. The childhood where revolutions were only in textbooks, where changing the world meant rearranging furniture. But something walked

through the glass. Something that cannot be called back.

Stowaway: refusing to disembark where they told you to. Hiding in your own life with contraband convictions pressed against your heart. Slipping past the checkpoint of reasonable adulthood with something unauthorized that breathes.

The puppy is heavier now. Time moves strangely here—months or years or no time at all—but the weight has changed. What fit in two hands now spills over. What could be controlled can now only be influenced. What slept soundly now stirs, restless.

A voice speaks into a microphone somewhere. The sound travels through air, through walls, through skin. Another voice, maybe the same voice, covers its own mouth: *shh, shh, not yet, not like this, you'll get hurt*. These are sometimes the same hands doing both gestures.

On the floor after long lectures about theoretical frameworks that were supposed to liberate but mostly just rename the cage, a chest holds the weight and asks: *will you let me grow?* And simultaneously, across time or space or just across the same body, hands reach out to touch that sleeping thing, to check if it's still breathing, to pray it stays small even as it grows.

The chest bears both questions.

You cannot train a dog not to be a dog. You can teach sit, stay,

come. You cannot teach it not to want what it wants—the street, the noise, the fight, the world outside where things might change. Where wonderland is not an escape but a blueprint. Where speaking is not reckless but necessary.

The dog has its own personality. Only its existence was chosen. The rest unfolds according to laws no one controls.

In the back of the car, the puppy sleeps. In the kitchen waiting for the sound of keys in the door, the puppy sleeps. Same puppy. Same breathing. Different chests or the same chest remembering different versions of itself.

Fear moves through one set of ribs: this will cost everything. Hope moves through another: this will change everything. The puppy, unconcerned with these distinctions, simply is. Simply breathes its warm breath against whoever holds it.

Someone is carrying something. The weight of conviction or the weight of worry or both weights at once, indistinguishable in the dark. The world has teeth. The world must change. Both true. The puppy knows none of this, knows only the warmth of the body beneath it, the rise and fall, the steady rhythm.

At night, in the dreamlike space between waking and sleep, one chest becomes another. The defiance carries the fear like a second heartbeat. The care carries the hope like contraband. The puppy sleeps regardless, growing according to its own internal logic.

The microphone is passed hand to hand. Someone is always speaking. Someone is always listening with a hand pressed to their chest, feeling the phantom weight of a conviction that might not even be theirs but exists in them anyway. The sound travels. The borders between bodies thin.

Wonderland was supposed to be clean. Justice arriving like weather, inevitable and without cost. The puppy staying puppy-sized and playful, defiance theoretical and beautiful and safe. But here: the actual weight. The actual breathing. The actual risk of what it means to keep something alive that insists on being itself.

Tomorrow the puppy will be bigger. Tomorrow it might wake and strain or bark or run toward something no one can see yet but it can smell coming. Tomorrow there will be more fear or more certainty or both at once, layered like sediment.

The chest—which chest, whose heart beneath it—cannot always be distinguished. In one moment, lying on a floor somewhere, feeling conviction curl like a question, like a fetus in a womb. Both rudimentary: the beginning of inquiry and the beginning of life. Both curled into themselves, knees to chest, question mark and embryo at once. Inception. The moment before becoming. The curiosity that breathes before it knows what it's asking. In another moment, sitting upright in the dark, feeling the same shape move through worry, that same curled thing now grown heavier, insistent. Same warmth. Same

impossible tenderness.

Stowaway, everyone involved. Smuggled into each other's bodies, each other's fears, each other's hopes. The defiance is *always* inherited and the care is *always* learned and they tangle together until the threads cannot be separated.

But now: this moment. The weight that is warm and alive. The breathing that is small and steady even though the body doing the breathing is growing too large to hold easily. The chest rises and falls. In the pause between actions. In the wait between phone calls. In the dreamlike float where linear time suspends itself.

All anyone can do is this: keep a hand there. Feel the proof. The small engine humming. Tomorrow it will be wild or contained or something in between. Tomorrow the world will demand answers no one has.

But now the puppy sleeps. And the chest beneath it—rebel, tender, both, neither, just a human chest with human ribs and a human heart—holds it. Or is held hostage to the breathing, to the impossible tenderness, to the shared weight of caring for something that insists on being alive despite everything.

The puppy dreams. What does defiance dream of? Of microphones that work. Of wonderlands with no admission fee. Of a world with room for barking, for questions, for the radical act of still feeling when feeling has been optimized out of the

equation.

Dreams come too, when they can. Different dreams. When the weight allows. When the breathing on the chest reminds that something is still alive here, still possible, still stubbornly refusing to accept that this is all there is.

The puppy wakes. Another day of keeping it safe, of keeping it fed, of keeping it alive in a world that has no use for unsanctioned defiance but cannot quite extinguish it either.

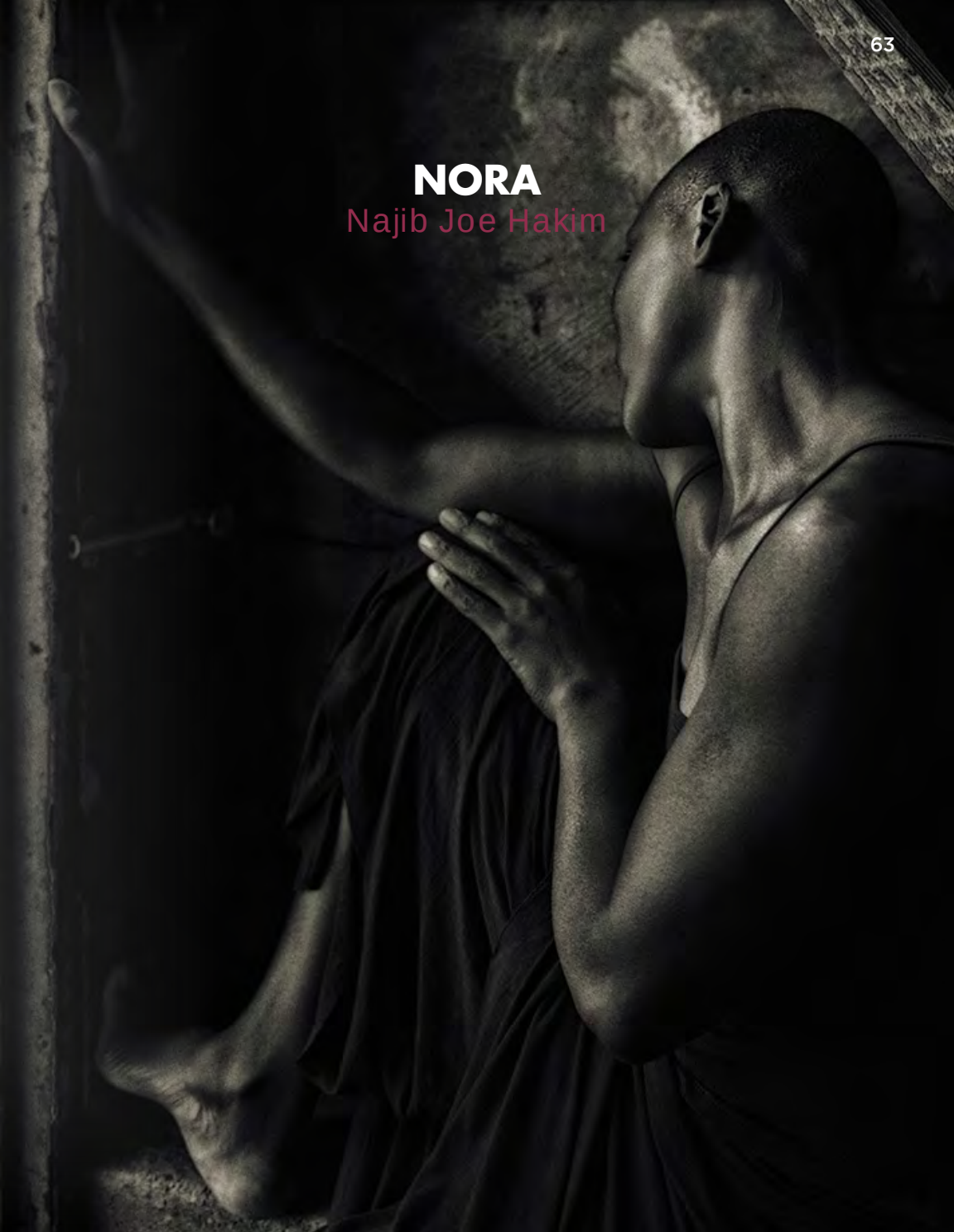
Another day of conditional tenderness. Another day of impossible care. Another day of the warm weight on the chest, breathing, dreaming, trusting in the keeping of promises never made but kept anyway.

The defiance is tender because it breathes. The care is defiant because it refuses to let go.

The chest rises. Falls. Continues.

NORA

Najib Joe Hakim



later when a foot
and its shoe were
discovered.

One guide with a
microphone says
catastrophe comes
as a slow flow of
lava, not all at once.
I understood
later that being
here was as close as
we could have been to
witnessing your
death.

We learn the geyser's size and try to think what it means to become
stowaways of
the earth. remember jumping off swings at dangerous heights, and
You are singing about birdmen, up in
the air.
There are many ways
to die here, like
jumping into a
spring to rescue
a dog, emerging skinless
and blinded. Or
wandering through the
rings of blue, green,
purple, and orange.
Bacterial communities,
Dad says, thriving
in death's dominion.

Irises of
the earth, I think, to
remind us of
all the ways to
see.

We joke about the eyesores of fallen trees and fight nausea
from looking at hillsides hung with evergreens and all the life made
possible by wildfires. The unoriginality of it all.

On our final night
we drive to a
clearing to watch falling stars
and my sister
asks if it's true that
all the stars we
see are already
dead.

This is the second
closest I've been
to god. The first was
you singing Amazing Grace at a
funeral you
couldn't remember
was your son's.
Aren't we all
extremophiles.

We tilt our heads back as if we could inhale the beautiful

fleeting impression
left behind.



DIRT ROAD

Reda Raji

MY son was sixteen when he went through the bathroom window.

People say runaway. People say a lot of things. Running away is slamming a door, sleeping a night under a bridge, coming back in the morning with dirt under your fingernails and a fresh lie. Tyler didn't come back. He climbed over the sill and that was it. No sound. No word. Just the scrape of a body against aluminum, then nothing.

On the other side there were people with no address. Not in the mail sense. In the severed sense. People who had cut the thread themselves and who carried names you don't put on a school form, don't say at the dinner table, don't shout down a hospital corridor.

He's eighteen now.

Or he would be eighteen. I don't know which tense to use anymore. I've become the kind of mother who conjugates her child in the conditional. Years have dates. Bodies have proof. Tyler has a maybe. That's all he has.

This morning the police sent me an email.

Five attachments. Five audio files. Captured from his phone's microphone.

Subject: Case 2024-GR-4471 / Audio Evidence.

The detective wrote that the exploitation of Tyler's WhatsApp account had only recovered five voice messages. The rest was corrupted.

Corrupted.

She had written it the way you write defective or out of service. A report word. I read it differently. I thought of my son's phone. Of what was inside it that had rotted. Something damaged beyond the point of reading. The word was right. Too right. It lodged in a place inside me I didn't know existed.

In the audios, Tyler was talking to a girl.

Chloé. Seventeen. Chloé Music on social media. A handle like a shop sign. Police report filed January 12, 2024.

My son was following her.

He would sit behind her at yoga. Tuesday evenings, six-thirty, back row. He'd wait for her outside afterward. One night at a concert he'd grabbed her arm for a selfie. She hadn't asked. I'd seen the photo on Instagram. Blurry image, framing too tight.

She was smiling. The kind of smile a girl makes when she can't leave. Tyler's hand was on her forearm. She didn't look like she'd been invited there.

When the detective told me, I didn't cry.

I wanted it to be false. For her to be exaggerating. For the girl to be the type who exaggerates. For it to be a misunderstanding. I heard my own voice building a defense file inside my head and I let it.

Me. Dana. Mother of the year. The one who thinks she's perceptive. Who thinks she listens. Who buys parenting books and sets them on the nightstand as if that were enough. I had thought: my son has a girlfriend.

I had clung to that. I hadn't looked. I had done better than not looking.

One evening I'd asked him, hands in the sink, without looking at him:

— Who's this girl?

He'd answered too fast:

— A friend.

I'd answered too fast as well:

— Good.

Good. One word and we move on.

The detective called me after the email. Low voice, tired. She said ma'am too often. At one point she said Dana, just like that, as if we knew each other. I felt something catch in my throat.

She had forgotten to mention a detail.

On the files, he wasn't saying Tyler. My son was calling himself Dirt Road.

She said it slowly. With a kind of caution.

The kid whose mouth I wiped when he spat out his purée. The one whose diapers I washed. The one who pressed himself against me at three in the morning because he was afraid of the dark. His name was now Dirt Road.

The cult was called the Children of Adam.

The leader called himself the Father of Adam. His real name was Jean-Marc Servier. Fifty-seven years old. Jean-Marc. A name you forget as you read it. And behind that name there were warrants, complaints, words I couldn't fit into the same sentence as my son. The detective mentioned a flight somewhere in West Africa. She named one country, then another, then corrected herself. We don't want to confirm. Two international warrants. Extortion. Rape. Fraud. She lined the words up like someone filing cases. I could hear in her voice someone who had learned not to fall.

I was falling.

Then she gave me another name. Mathias Berger. Twenty-four years old. He was the one who had driven Tyler to the compound. The ranch, she said.

Mathias had come back. No one knows when. No one knows how. Nobody ever knows anything in these stories. Not because

information is missing. Because nobody has the guts to say what happened. Everybody saw. Everybody heard. Nobody wants to open their mouth. He had never reported to the police. Never answered the summons. The questions. Nothing.

He had hanged himself in a studio apartment in Voiron. A Monday in March.

I didn't ask which one. I didn't ask the time. My body registered the sentence and filed it with the others. Hanged. Police report. Corrupted. Words that stay.

I said yes. Okay. I understand.

I hung up.

I stood in the kitchen. And my body did what it does before the mind catches up. I vomited in the sink. Then I turned on the water and watched it run.

I sat down.

The laptop was open on the table. The screen lit my hands blue. Five gray rectangles. Numbers next to each one. Twelve minutes and fourteen seconds. My son fit inside that. The cursor moved on the screen because my hand was moving on the table. I laid it flat. I waited for it to stop. I put on the headphones. I pressed play.

audio_001.m4a Sent: 04/02/2024 — 22:47:13 UTC+1 Duration: 12 min 14 s Recipient status: undelivered (number blocked since 12/01/2024)

Chloé,

You're gonna think this is stupid but the first thing I thought stepping off the bus was that you would've loved the smell. Not the kind they sell as little trees for rearview mirrors. The real smell. The one that stings and slows you down. You would've closed your eyes. You would've said something like that's crazy though. And I would've said nothing because I would've been watching you and that would've been enough.

But you're not here.

It's fine.

I'd planned for it. Mathias told me it was possible. He said: she'll come next cycle. And I'm not worried. It's just that the bag felt heavier between the parking lot and the building. And I kept my earbuds in with no music so I'd have something to do with my hands. And when the bus engine cut out the silence made me hear my own breathing like it was someone else doing it.

But I'm not disappointed.

The compound is three wooden buildings above the village. No address. Mathias had sent me a GPS pin and I had to zoom in six times to understand that the path between the trees was the road. The buildings have names. The Clear House. The Low Garden. No numbers. I like that. It's a place you don't end up by accident.

You would've liked that. You who said at yoga that cities are

stacked noise.

I stood there in the hall. I wasn't putting my bag down. Putting the bag down meant accepting you weren't going to walk through the door behind me. So I just stood there with the sweat drying on my back.

I thought: it's beautiful here. I felt strange. Out of place and finally in place at the same time. Like Alice in Wonderland.

And then someone touched my hair.

I hadn't heard footsteps. A finger slid the strand behind my ear. A voice said: welcome.

On the bed there was a note. Folded in half. Blue ink on brown paper. We were waiting for you.

Nobody had ever waited for me.

At home we talk in passing or we don't talk. Doors slam or they close. That's it.

Mathias came after. He's always there at the right moment. Leaning against the doorframe. He watched me read the note and he smiled. He said: glad you're here. He looked like he meant it.

He said you'd come next cycle. He said it like stating a fact. He says cycle, space, alignment. Here nobody talks like they do at school. Nobody says bro or dude. They have other words.

Listen. I need to tell you.

The yurt. It's round. It smells like incense. Mathias took me by the elbow and led me to my spot. Nobody explains anything. You watch. You do.

Everyone closed their eyes. I closed my eyes.

After an hour I was losing focus. So I did the thing. You know? The chant. The mantra we do after the sun salutation. I opened my mouth and the sound came out.

For a second I didn't recognize my own voice.

I kept going.

I opened my eyes.

They were all turned toward me. Eyes open. Nobody moved. Nobody coughed. Nobody smiled.

My heart was pounding in my throat.

At the center of the circle there was a man. I hadn't seen him before. Or I'd seen him the way you see a post by the side of the road, without looking at it. He was sitting and he was staring at me. He was smiling at me. Slowly.

Afterward, outside, people came. A guy touched my arm. A woman told me my aura was very strong. That it had moved everyone.

Here they call her Celestial Breath. That's original for a woman. Another one squeezed my shoulder.

I felt light. I couldn't explain it to you.

I don't know how to tell you this without it sounding ridiculous.

audio_002.m4a Sent: 07/02/2024 — 01:03:41 UTC+1 Duration: 0 min 22 s Recipient status: undelivered

Chloé,

Mathias told me you were coming to the ranch in February. He told me that in the parking lot after the Tuesday class. You'd already left. I said yes. I didn't even know what the ranch was. I said yes anyway.

I really hope I see you again Chloé. You're everything to me.

audio_003.m4a Sent: 19/03/2024 — 23:58:02 UTC+I Duration: 08 min 47 s Recipient status: undelivered

Chloé, I ran away.

There. I don't know why I'm telling you this. You're the only one I can talk to without it going sideways. I love the people at the ranch. But if I told them this, I'd look stupid. Anyway, you don't even listen to my messages.

My mother asked me to piss in a cup.

A Tuesday evening. She was waiting for me in the hallway. The cup in one hand, the test kit in the other. She said: Tyler, I want you to do this now. Not tomorrow. Not after dinner. Now. Because she'd found a bit of joint in my jacket. A bit of nothing. Not even finished. And she made it into what she makes of everything.

I said yes, Mom. I took the cup. I walked into the bathroom. I locked the door. And I looked at the window.

That's it.

The rest is gravity. You piss in the cup or you open the window. I didn't think. I jumped. I ran.

I landed here.

The only place where I feel at peace is a place my mother doesn't even know about. Don't you think that's insane.

I'm not allowed to smoke at the ranch. But Mathias is cool. We smoke together when everyone's asleep. Like a stowaway and his lookout.

Mathias says mothers are the burden of the species. He says that at night when we smoke outside behind the back building. Everyone's asleep and we're sitting on the concrete steps and the joint makes an orange dot in the dark. There are spiderwebs. He says you can't be born without a mother but that the real birth is when you surpass her. That you have to kill her. Kill the father, too. Everyone who thinks for you. He says that blowing smoke toward the sky and his voice has that calm people have when they stopped doubting a long time ago.

Last night we watched the stars. The mountain cut the sky in two, the black part and the part with the stars. I thought of you. I'm sure we're not even on a map. No sign. No number.

Nothing but a dirt road between the trees. Maybe that's what peace is.

The cup must still be on the sink. My mother must still be waiting for me.

audio_004.m4a Sent: 28/11/2024 — 04:12:09 UTC+1 Duration: 10 min 03 s Recipient status: undelivered

Chloé,

Mathias isn't doing well. He's lost weight. Not lost weight like someone who eats less. Lost weight like a sweater washed too hot that hangs off the hanger. His voice has changed. Before he'd talk and people would turn. Now when he talks it sounds like he has something stuck in his throat, sand or gravel, and you have to lean in to hear. The other day at dinner I sat next to him. He didn't lift his head. He was looking at his soup. The spoon resting on the rim of the bowl, his hand flat on the table. He was looking at the soup the way you look at a hole.

I said you okay?

He said yeah. Yeah.

People who say yeah twice mean they're not okay. That I've known for a long time.

Maybe he's sick. There are ticks here. There are things in the grass. Or maybe it's one of those cycles they talk about. He's going through a difficult cycle. Here they say some cycles are descents. That descents are necessary.

He's my only link to the outside. He's the reason I found this place.

I still have the phone. Everyone put theirs in the wooden

box. I took mine back when no one was looking. I slid it into a sock under the mattress with my weed. It's not glorious. But my photos are in there. Our messages. And the photo from the TOOL concert, the one where you turn your head and your hair moves and the stage light is red behind you. That's my wallpaper.

The Father of Adam says phones are false idols. That you think you're talking to people but you're feeding machines. He's probably right.

I only turn it on at night. I go to a spot on the ranch where there's signal, behind the back building, where the ground slopes toward the trees. I put my earbuds in. I listen to TOOL. I smoke. And I send you voice messages you don't listen to. Or maybe you do. Maybe you see my name pop up and think he's alive. Or maybe you turned off notifications and my voice falls into a place where nobody goes looking for it.

It's fine. If I stop talking, what's left?

audio_005.m4a Sent: 10/03/2025 — 01:10:30 UTC+1 Duration: 29 min 12 s Recipient status: undelivered

Mathias has left us. He was too sick. He couldn't attend the ceremony.

The Father of Adam gave me the cassock. Linen. Not the terrycloth from hotels, real linen, thick, slightly rough against the skin. He weaves them himself. In the morning, I see him outside

with the thread between his fingers, sitting on the bench in front of the Clear House, and his hands move without him looking at them. He knew my size without asking. He laid the cassock across my arms and said nothing at all.

I was naked underneath. Naked.

We went down into a cellar. The trapdoor is in the barn, under a rug that smells like burnt hay. You pull the rug, lift the plank, and underneath it's black. The walls were sweating. The ceiling was low enough that you could feel the weight of the earth above. It smelled like smoke and wet stone like underneath a bridge after rain. The lighting was fire. Flames in the center. No bulb. No switch. Nothing.

We filed down in a line. You could hear people breathing in the dark before you saw their faces.

I told myself this is a movie.

And at the same time, it wasn't a movie. Because I had goosebumps on my arms. The floor stuck under my bare feet and each step made a mouth sound. Someone coughed and the sound bounced off the walls and it was enormous.

Everyone took off the robe.

I'm not going to lie to you Chloé. I saw bodies. Real ones. In the firelight the skin shifted between orange and black. The shadows of ribs. Shoulders. Bellies. Breasts. And me in the middle with my sixteen years and my arms along my sides and I didn't know where to put my eyes. I looked at my feet. They were gray

with dust.

Then I breathed. And it passed. Because nobody was looking at me. Nobody was looking at anyone. We were the same thing. Bodies and fire and air.

Celestial Breath started to sing. Her voice rose toward the vault and came back down like water running over stone.

The breathing began.

Everyone inhales. Everyone exhales. Slowly. Then it speeds up. Little by little.

My fingers tingled. My hands went numb. My jaw clenched on its own, teeth against teeth, and I had to force it open. My heart was beating high in my chest. It was hot. Too hot. Thirty naked bodies in a closed space with fire in the middle. Sweat running between the shoulder blades. The chanting. The breathing. The air was thick as water.

I was afraid.

One second. Like when you step on a plank and it bends and you don't know if it's going to break.

And the plank didn't break. The fear left. All that was left was the breathing. Theirs and mine mixed together. Waves but coming from inside people. And I thought I will never be this alive again. Not at school. Not in my bedroom. Not on Tuesdays at yoga. Right then I was there. For the first time in my life I was in the exact place where I stood.

The Father of Adam walked among the bodies. Naked too.

Everyone was panting and he was walking. Slowly. Like someone passing between rows of wheat and looking at what's ripe. He would stop. He would look at a face. He would choose.

He stopped in front of a woman. He took her face between his hands. She looked him in the eyes. You always have to look him in the eyes. Lowering your eyes isn't something you do here.

He kissed her on the forehead.

She fell.

He moved to the next.

Forehead. Kiss. Fall.

Forehead. Kiss. Fall.

The bodies fell on the packed-earth floor and made a dull sound.

I waited.

Chloé. I wanted it to be my turn. I wanted his hands on my face. I wanted the kiss on my forehead. I wanted to fall. Falling meant being chosen. Falling meant someone saying yes, it's you.

He came to me.

He took my face. Palms on my cheeks. Thumbs on my cheekbones. His hands were dry. Warm. Bigger than my mother's. Bigger than anyone's.

The Father of Adam said look at me.

I looked at him. His eyes were black in the firelight. Still.

He kissed me on the forehead.

And the ground rose toward me.

I woke up outside.

Dawn. The sky was pink and dirty. The air was wet. I had dirt under my fingernails. Grass stuck to my knees. My cassock was back on but I didn't remember putting it on. I didn't know how I'd gotten there. Someone had carried me. Or I had walked without remembering.

I had marks on my arms. Finger traces. Red on white skin, four parallel bars.

I didn't ask questions.

The Father of Adam was standing at the edge of a stream. The water was black and slow. Steam rose from the surface and tore apart in the low branches. It looked like the earth was smoking.

Everyone was crying. Standing in a line in the wet grass. Cassocks soaked at the hems. Faces swollen.

I was crying too. Not from sadness. From something I don't have a word for.

He baptized us. One by one. His hand on the top of the skull. The black cold water on the head. It ran down the back of my neck and along my spine and I felt each vertebra.

A new name.

My new name is Dirt Road.

The audio stopped. A second of white. A computer sound. Then nothing.

I was looking at the screen. The gray rectangle. The duration.

The cursor no longer moving.

I closed the laptop. I opened it. Closed it. Opened it.

I walked to the bathroom.

The window was there. The same frame. The same height.

The same yellowed seal. The same handle.

I looked at it for a long time.

I thought about the cup. About me in the hallway. The test in my hand. Convinced I was protecting something.

That's where he left. No suitcase. No word. No sound of a door.

He left me five pieces of voice on a screen.

And a name I didn't choose.

Dirt Road.

The kitchen faucet dripped into the sink, one drop every three or four seconds, and I could hear it from the hallway. The house made all the sounds it makes when there's no one inside it.

YOU KNOW THOSE VOICES YOU WERE HEARING. WELL, WE HAVE AN ANSWER

K.G. Ricci





TO SING IN BANNED FREQUENCIES

Eileen Porzuczek

they stowed me where no microphone could find
the signal that i'm broadcasting from below.
my wonderland exists in frequencies they've banned.

i learned to tune myself beyond their range, aligned
with wavelengths only other stowaways will know—
they stowed me where no microphone could find.

but suppression is a frequency designed
to drown us out. i've learned to let mine grow:
my wonderland exists in frequencies they've banned.

each night i'm amplifying the unsigned,
the voices trapped in static, undertow—
they stowed me where no microphone could find.

i'm building stations for the unrefined,
the cargo hold collective, the overflow.
my wonderland exists in frequencies they've banned.

so let them think their silence has defined
what's possible. i've found the frequency of no—
they stowed me where no microphone could find.
my wonderland exists in frequencies they've banned.

FOAMY BEDS

Sultana Raza



LIFE PRESERVERS

William Hawkins

I think it's bad luck, to celebrate a wedding on water. You disagree.

"It's their story," you say.

Jay and Stella met on the New York Ferry. Jay and Stella got married. Jay and Stella chartered a boat for their wedding reception. Now we're getting drunk on the East River. Which is fine. It's no problem, getting drunk on water.

"A relationship should be built on solid ground," I say.

If you're amused, you hide it. Either way, I'm in trouble. I've been in trouble for the past six months. I'm getting used to it. Or maybe it's the liquor. I throw the plastic cup into a reflection of Manhattan. It's a dare. I dare you to be angry at me. Go on. Do it. Say what the trouble is.

The DJ has his lips on the microphone. His breaths are hard sounds between his words. "Making their appearance for the

first time, Mr. and Mrs. Jay Thrush!” There is applause. We’re outside on the—I don’t know ship words. Maybe it’s called an observation deck? It’s the open platform at the back of the ship, presumably over the engines. Through a large, open door is the stateroom where all the action is. There aren’t many people out. A few lonelies, smoking cigarettes or scrolling their phones, learning things they don’t really need to know. A few couples, having quiet discussions. Like us.

Their song is “Your Body Is a Wonderland.”

You laugh at the first notes. It’s a pleasant-sounding sarcasm. Good thing we’re not with the crowd inside.

Then you start sobbing. They escape your throat like rats, those infamous stowaways, fleeing a sinking ship. I hold you. You slap my hand. We have attracted attention, but it is the kind people pretend they’re not giving. We’re being watched from the corner of a lot of eyes. A few heads even twist in our direction, before twisting back. You recover your face quickly. In the water, the Upper East Side shines.

“Would you jump after me?”

I grab your shoulder. A few heads again twist in our direction. They don’t twist back. I let go of your shoulder. I even back away. I am giving you your space. No. I’m making sure I’m seen giving you your space. You watch me. A few tears dry on your cheeks. The light reflects their shape.

You look so good it hurts sometimes.

Who chooses “Your Body Is a Wonderland” for their first wedding song? Why not dance to “Let’s Get It On” and be done with it?

You step toward the railing.

I wouldn’t, is my answer.

Later, we return to the stateroom. The dance floor is crowded. We eat our slices of wedding cake and watch the drunk dance on water.



WEST OF
Willy C

A photograph of the Oracle Conley building, featuring several large, white, geodesic domes with diamond-shaped windows. The building is set against a backdrop of mountains and a clear sky. In the foreground, there are green trees and dry, yellowish grass. The text "ORACLE" is overlaid in large white letters, and "Conley" is overlaid in smaller white letters below it.

ORACLE
Conley

NOTHING IS RANDOM (II)

Anthony Calzia

Nothing's random, the urge to sing
in the shower, hot water pressure
pleasuring the skin, a meant event. Head
of the shower held in our own hands,
a cleansing microphone, a home studio.
The world is a train that won't stop
We are all stowaways sometimes. Hidden
children, watching, as the world's
wonderland passes by—in slow motion.
Who'd want to be a wave? The world is
an ocean! Crested walls tipped white
rise and fall, crashing in restless ripples
across the shoreline. The world is a smile,
joy presses hard, unveiling miles of dimples.

THE WON

Jennifer



DERLAND

Schelter



CONTRIBUTORS

Alexey Adonin is a Jerusalem-based painter working in abstract and surrealist modes. His practice explores perception, memory, and inner landscapes through layered brushwork, organic forms, and atmospheric color. His work has been exhibited internationally in galleries, museums, and publications, and often suggests quiet psychological or dreamlike spaces that exist between the visible and the imagined.

Argentum August is a neurodivergent poet from Massachusetts whose work explores themes of cycles and rebirth, mental illness and healing, and finding the gray area between binary opposites. Ari can be found teaching kids fun facts about non-Newtonian fluids and/or wandering the stacks of the nearest library.

Philip Byrne is a retired teacher living in Westchester, New York. He was a poetry editor for *Inkwell Magazine* during the aughts. When he's not writing, he bikes the county trails, identifies birdsong on the Merlin app, creates his own yoga poses, and watches too much soccer for his own good. Recent poems are in *The Soliloquist*, *The Westchester Review*, *Passionfruit Review*, and *Beach Chair Press*. Forthcoming ones will be in *Pure Slush Great Cities Anthology: London*, and *The Hungur Chronicles*.

Sarah Gane Burton is a freelance writer living in Michigan with her husband, two children, a dog, and an Emerald Swift named "Stow". Her poetry and fiction pieces have been published or are forthcoming in *Still Point Arts Quarterly*, *South Carolina Review*, *Flash Fiction Online*, *365tomorrows*, and *Skipjack Review*. She enjoys botanical gardens, thrift stores, and looking at other people's bookshelves.

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Patricia Cannon was a Registered Nurse at UCSF for over two decades. She worked in various fields of critical care, including cardiac critical care and neuro-intensive care, heme-oncology, and research. Patricia finds solace in her faith and creative expression in photography and poetry. Her book, *Wild Heart*, has been published by The Poetry Box and is available on major online platforms and local bookstores. <https://thepoetrybox.com/bookstore/wild-heart>

Enid Cokinos's plays have been performed and placed in contests across the United States, the UK, and Toronto. Most recently, her full-length play *Framed* was named Best Stage Play in the 2025 Purple Sky International Film Festival (Hamburg,

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Willy Conley, born profoundly deaf, is an award-winning writer and photographer whose nine books include *Photographic Memories*, *Plays of Our Own*, *Listening Through the Bone*, and *The Deaf Heart*. Early in his career he worked as a medical photographer at leading hospitals in the US before earning certification as a Registered Biological Photographer. He is professor emeritus of Theatre and Dance at Gallaudet University, the world's only liberal arts university for deaf and hard-of-hearing students, in Washington, D.C. For more info about his work, please visit www.willyconley.com.

Asma Ejaz is a photographer by hobby whose work explores themes of curated environments and striking contrast, often highlighting a juxtaposition of elements. She discovered her skill and passion for the art through mere coincidence, assisted with the keen eye of fellow colleagues. Though an amateur in the field, her work was one of the driving forces in garnering an online audience for the launch of HiDubai.

Sebastian Fernandez is a medium format film photographer crafting cinematic, otherworldly imagery that celebrates transformation, texture, and color. Their work combines theatrical set design and expressive portraiture to build emotionally resonant, dreamlike scenes.

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Najib Joe Hakim is a working documentary photographer, artist, and photography instructor. Hakim also serves as the President of the Board for the Network of Photographers for Palestine and is a founding member of Class Conscious Photographers. He is the recipient of the Rebuilding Alliance Storytellers Award for a trilogy of projects on Palestine, a Political Art Fellow at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, and a past nominee for the US Artist Fellowship. You find him at <https://www.jaffaorangephoto.com/> and his books at <https://bit.ly/MagCloudBookCollection>.

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Stefanie Lee is an ambitious young writer from Montréal, Canada. Living with a rare physical disability called Nemaline Myopathy, she is a motivated software engineering student. When she is not writing or studying, she can be found editing her photography or solving crossword puzzles. Her poetry has been featured in more than a dozen literary magazines, including *PRISM International* and *Eunoia Review*, and is forthcoming elsewhere. Read more of her published work at <https://writingbystefanielee.ca>.

Nawmi Manaam is a self-taught artist from Bangladesh. Noticing the little shadows, highlights, and trying to recreate it sparks joy in her mundane life. Her artwork has previously been published in *New York Times*' "Growing Up With AI" contest.

Michael Montlack's photographs have been featured on the covers of *Tampa Review*, *Pedestal*, *New York Quarterly*, and *Gertrude*. His photos have appeared in *Salt Hill*, *Ocean State Review*, *phoebe*, *Northwest Review*, and *SoFloPoJo*. This summer he was the Featured Artist in Allium. In October 2024, he had his first show at Nails Gallery in Brooklyn.

Cecil Morris is a retired high school English teacher. His first collection of poems, *At Work in the Garden of Possibilities*, came out from Main Street Rag in 2025. He has poems in *The 2River View*, *Common Ground Review*, *Rust + Moth*, *The Sugar House Review*, and elsewhere.

Eileen Porzuczek is a creative writer and artist. She is the author of *Memento Mori: A Poetic Memoir in Three Parts* (Finishing Line Press, 2025). Her writing appears in numerous anthologies and can also be found in literary magazines such as *Creation Magazine*, *So It Goes*, *Tulsa Review*, *Sheepshead Review*, and others.

Reda Raji is a Franco-Moroccan writer and former clinical psychologist specializing in psychotrauma. His fiction draws on the intersection of violence, obsession, and institutional failure. His work has appeared on Reedsy, where he writes under the name The Necromancer1987. He lives in Casablanca.

Sultana Raza, an awarded artist, has received Category Awards and Honorable Mentions in numerous contests: Julia Cameron Awards, Pollux Awards, Intl. Photo Awards, etc. She's exhibited in New York, Europe, and South Korea. Cover art on: *3Elements Review*, *Focus* (BSFA), *Alchemy Spoon*, and inside numerous journals, along with poems, fiction, and creative nonfiction.

K.G. Ricci is a self-taught NYC artist who has been creating collages for the past seven years. In that time his work has evolved from the larger 24x48 panels to 7x10 books and most recently to a series of 11x14 collages on cardboard titled *Incongruities*. His work has been in gallery exhibitions throughout the country, and he has appeared in numerous online exhibitions. Many of Ken's most recent "visual stories" have been featured in literary magazines.

Cecelia Rogers is a young photographer who loves to photograph anything nature related. She's also known for her work in the writing industry. She published her art twice. On her days when she's not photographing nature she is either enjoying theater or classical literature. She dreams of moving to London one day and can't wait to become better acquainted with the photography world.

Dory Rousos Moore lives in Ohio with her husband, three rambunctious sons, and opinionated rescue dog. Her work appears in *The Good Life Review* and *Modern Haiku*. A dedicated daydreamer, she loves reading for hours and letting her optimism lead the way. You can find her at dorywrites.bsky.social.

Jennifer Schelter is a writer, photographer, and teacher whose work explores the beauty of daily life, impermanence, and the quiet wonder of the natural world. She has published micro-memoir, exhibited watercolors, and has written one-woman shows produced nationally. She teaches memoir writing, meditation, and creative practice at universities, arts institutions, and retreat centers, including the University of Pennsylvania, Wharton Executive Education, and Maine Media Workshops & College. She is the founder and host of the Radiant Retreat, an annual writing and contemplative retreat in Mexico. Her visual and written work is rooted in meditation, paying attention to the present moment, and a devotion to natural beauty.

Judith Seaman graduated with a BFA from New York University where she majored in film production. She has studied fiction writing at The Writers Studio in New York City, the Hudson Valley Writers Center, Grub St. Center for Creative Writing, Gotham Writers Workshop, and the Martha's Vineyard Writing Retreat. She spent many years as a film and video editor at NYC television news stations. Seaman also creates video memoirs, offering people an opportunity to tell their own important stories.

Laya Sivakumar is twenty-one and studying literature. She was born in Coimbatore, where she is rooted, and now studies in Chennai, constantly growing. She is learning the names for things already felt, learning which feelings have footnotes and which must be smuggled in as stowaways while figuring out ways to make her passions (hopefully) pay the rent.

Knute Walker is a retired television producer and documentarian. He spent his entire professional life telling stories, but never (knowingly) worked in fiction until recently. He has studied at Gotham Writers Workshop and participated in a fiction workshop at New York's 92nd Street Y.

Brie Winnega Reamer is a writer and researcher whose day job is to help nonprofits. She is Founder and CEO of New Leaf Collective, a consultancy committed to supporting mission-driven organizations. She holds a PhD and MA in English from the University of Texas at Austin and BA in English from University of Michigan. She is an avid reader, amateur woodworker, and lives in Austin with her spouse and two dogs.

Minghan Zou (he/him/his) is a junior at Phillips Exeter Academy. Originally from Shanghai, his writing explores themes of isolation, identity, natural wonder, and culture. He is affiliated with the WORD! Poetry club, and his work appeared in the *Kenyon Review Young Writers Anthology*, the *Exeter Asian Magazine*,

Beyond Words, *Eunoia Review*, and *Tap Into Poetry*. His work is also forthcoming in *Temple Lit Mag* and *The Academy of the Heart and Mind*. Outside of poetry, he hosts two radio shows and enjoys reading history books, as well as listening to music.

NEXT UP

Issue No. 51
Summer 2026

3ELEMENTS:

Hatch, Standoff, Step-Ball-Change

DUE MAY 31, 2026

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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STAFF - 3ELEMENTS

Mikaela Shea received her MFA in Fiction Writing from Columbia College Chicago. She was a writer-in-residence at Ragdale Foundation and has published stories in *Midwestern Gothic*, *Copperfield Review*, *Hypertext Magazine*, and others. Mikaela won the Editor's Choice Award for Fiction at *Waypoints Magazine* and *Superstition Review's* First Page Contest. Mikaela is currently looking for a home for her novel. She lives in Iowa with her husband and three kids, @mikaelashea.

Megan Collins is the author of the novels *Cross My Heart*, *Thicker Than Water*, the Barnes & Noble Monthly Mystery/Thriller pick *The Family Plot*, *Behind the Red Door*, and *The Winter Sister*, which was a Book of the Month Club pick. She holds an MFA from Boston University and teaches creative writing. A Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net nominee, her poetry has appeared in many journals, including *Off the Coast*, *Spillway*, and *Tinderbox Poetry Journal*. (megancollins.com)

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Ashley Kirkland is a poet from Ohio where she lives with her husband and sons. She holds a B.A. in English and Creative Writing from The Ohio State University, a M.Ed. in Curriculum and Instruction from the University of Cincinnati, and is a former high school English educator. Her work can be found in *HAD*, *Major7thMagazine*, *The Citron Review*, *English Journal*, *Cordella Press*, among others. Her chapbook, *Bruised Mother*, is available through Boats Against the Current.

Charlie M. Case is a fiction writer from Southern California, currently based in New England. Case has had fiction and poetry published in *The Masters Review*, *Long River Review*, *Major 7th Magazine*, and *Apricity Press*, among others, and loves a strong narrative more than anything. More of Case's work can be found at cmcase.org.

END

