

LEAVINGS



Spring 2022 | Issue 3.0

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I see reflections of insanity
in window-glass: yard shadows coalesce: dis-
tended fruit depends from every tree: out of emptiness
I conjure cardiac anomalies—

tortured branches twist: my wrist-
pulse is percussive (blood and gristle in a fight
for width): gate bang's a whip-smart gust
of yesterday's excessive trust in wit—

I pace, believing in infinities
of cherry trees: their wounds ooze sap—a soft-
barked army, waiting
for the ax—but underground, their roots commune

my solitary cell contracts: window bars resemble
railroad track—

in a locked room, my head rests
against dead wood: I will, when orchard noises
cease, send to the city for seed.

The one thing you will miss when you are dead
is the music of Pat Metheny. That you will never get to listen to

“San Lorenzo” on your bed, balling your face off
like when your lover leaves you

for another lover and you swear to God believe
there will never be any more love to have
between yourself and another lover

down the river

whose name might be Barb.
Sometimes you get fired from a job
that you’ve worked at for 24 years

but when you go home you can still put on *Travels* and get the fuck
out of Dodge
in your mind

like that time you went to Cleveland and the snow was very dirty.

When you are dead Pat Metheny’s “As Falls Wichita Falls” will still
be played
somewhere in Detroit or Los Angeles

by a 20-year-old who has just discovered her heart
is a snow globe

dropped onto Ventura Blvd before rush hour.
It won't have anything to do with you.

You will be dead

and Lyle Mays' piano will drift in and out of the parked cars
for anyone who ever knew how to get undressed under the Mis-
souri Sky
at midnight

before the locust showed up.

PORKBELLIES AND THE MARKET ECONOMY

There's this woman I know--or knew.
We went to grad school together and she liked some of the women
I liked

and I liked some of the women she liked,
and we probably had some asshole competitive thing going on.

She had a name that she changed because of her mother or some
dinosaur in her dreams
that haunted her when she was a kid.

That, *Hey motherfucker, this is America and I can be whomever I want*
thing.
I don't remember her original name and now, sometimes, I look
her up on YouTube.

There are videos of her talking about The Replacements and the
2008 economic crash
and nihilism and capitalism and the Black Panthers or maybe I am
making this up

because the only reason I look her up is because we used to like
the same women
but that's not really true either.

I admire her. How smart she is. I listen to her words

and they are perfect, like Beethoven, how an *existential* follows a
palindrome, perfect.

Oh, there is some digressive shit happening, too, maybe like Mozart,
or even The Beatles,
but it all sounds fluid. Don't get me wrong,

I don't understand one thing she's talking about it's just the words
coming out of her face and her face isn't even that glowing.

Once, though, we danced together in grad school at some grad
school event,
to Prince's "I Could Never Take The Place of Your Man."

That's when I was having a thing with one of those women whom
we both liked
and I only bring this up, these women, because my mother is dying
and so

is the economic underbelly of the U.S. of A.
and it makes me feel more gorgeous, which is stupid

and sometimes I listen to her videos to figure out
when the next economic crash is going to take place, so I know
what to do with my money.

Did I mention she's a poet and that's why we were at grad school
together?
And once, she was in my apartment, and read one of my poems and
totally liked it

and I got the feeling, kinda, that she kinda wished she'd written it
which made me feel good,

which makes me feel good, now, because I will never be as smart
as her
or know as much about Jonathan Richman and Blondie

and how they represent the positive and negative space of a
capitalist economy
driven by pork bellies and underwritings and futures.

We had futures back in grad school
and everything was beautiful even though everyone was drunk

and I always wondered if she listened to Pat Metheny's album
Travels
because it is super soft

and I wanted her to be super soft
the way, sometimes you can tell things about people,

that life was hard for them when they were kids
and so they needed to change their names because their parents
did a number on them.

And sometimes I think she's so smart and accomplished
because in the deep gut of her liver it was all about fuck you mother/
father

I did this whole thing without you. I get that, I do,
and today I read something by her and it was like watching her
YouTube videos.

Her voice was so beautiful even though I couldn't understand $\frac{3}{4}$
of what she was saying
and what I'm saying is we need more people like her in the world

who can make tones and moods with their words, alone,
even though we don't know what they are talking about

but at least we are held tightly warm
in our stupidity

because we all need to be held more
especially when the God Almighty Dollar

is blinding us like one of those yellow neon signs flashing in the
rain on the highway:

Bridge collapse:

Caution Caution Caution.

We long for what
we had not

A serene progression of thoughts
Intimacy with streams and clouds
At home inside a cloak of wool

Once we did not graze on each other
Spiritually against everything

Time was something you were born with, or not

In the middle of flowering, we found a deep freeze
Our staff was like the old hands of corn
And we moved inside a system that suffered but never died

The undeniable reality of land
Makes me chew through life

Living makes me spit it out

PASTORAL II

It was a spare existence
And I long for it still

Less means less
This thin subsistence I understand

Someday child of pumpjacks
I sat atop an oil well counting my wins
Like cotton bulbs baled, they were just enough

A fake preacher told me I was sad
Even at the bottom there's room to turn a profit

I was too pliant to want more

Until out of the limestone grew
A mound of fluorescent lantana

And an appetite was born

PASTORAL III

Someday child likes to sleep
On the job I lie down in green pastures

There are acres on which to become
Precious, kept, and lovely

I was given a rod so fine
So full of wrath a lamb so plump
With a lion's share

Wolves carried my message on their fangs
To cities where gates jingle and
All slaughterhouses overflow

Money, I learned, is uninhabitable

What has my baby done to deserve peace?
My sheep will guard you as I have guarded them

And in this way, you'll never owe

“Dear Matt Hart, O you have
the most beautiful scream of
all. Dear Matt Hart, from where
do our screams come from?”

—Jay Ponteri

Inside the dwarf star
I am sitting
At my kitchen table nodding
To the music
Coming out of the lo-fi
And knowing my own voice
So dirtbag
With azaleas, geraniums,
Unicorns, Uraniums
 (“What are Uraniums?”
See the Seven Dwarves
See the night sky...)
But my voice
Is laying or lying
In wait of the next time
My eyes begin to roll
With what’s inside
My heart tearing up
(or tearing up)
And whirling down
A mountain of milk
And honey roasted pumpkin seeds
And feeling suddenly
The pang of memory
My parents in their youth
Going wild about money

The gods eating each other
To maintain their power
Over fire over water
Over everything
That moves
Or stops in its tracks
In the unfathomable distortion
The roaring correspondence
The call and response
The rush
Crescendo-ing and descrescendo-ing
O trickstery owls
O cataclysmic wolves
It's not as bad as it sounds
It's better or it's worse
Digging deep to find you
Digging deep into the earth
But only finding someone's old tooth
A busted PA speaker
The imminent crush
Tomorrow I'm a lamb
Or a horsehair brush
But today the rain
Pours out of my mouth
I am a fountain
Of ridiculous sparks
Open your light, dear friends,
To my arms

WHORES

is the name of a band
in case you're wondering
why that's the title of this poem
I've been watching
their guitar player this morning
go through all his gear
for Premier Guitar's Rig Rundown series
I've never heard the band,
but the guitar player seems nice
and I'm pretty run down,
though not in series
or parallel either
and if you get that reference,
or, better yet, know the difference
you're already way ahead of me
My allergies are a mess
from all the Juniper trees
and I still can't figure out
why anybody likes Germanium
transistors more than Silicon,
or why anyone would
at this late date
still be snobby
about the superiority of tube amps,
when the tech has come such a long way
in the solid state arena

For one great example
of a solid state amp that sounds as good
as any tube amp I've ever played
(which is many by the way)
see the ZT Custom Shop Lee Ranaldo Club
But this isn't only an advertisement
for ZT Amplification, "the smallest little loud amps
in the world," it's also another call for a response
I mean, does anyone reading this,
or hearing me read it,
know what the fuck I'm talking about
Nerdsville is me
Geekdom is the way
I'm just biding my time
before a colonoscopy today,
which dates me I know
like a weird jug of milk
a little bit expired, but only slightly sour
Blinky is what they used to call that
Blear in the milk in the whites of your eyes
which makes me think of wide white skies
or somebody high in the stars' slurry light
Anyway, I just checked out Whores' music
cause I was stuck after that last line
and I have to say they sound pretty crushing
by which I do not mean attractive in a delicate way
that causes brief but intense infatuation
I mean it in the other three hundred ways
that "pretty crushing" can be meant
That's what poetry is
at its best, and music
at its best
is poetry

BUILDING YOUR DEFENSE

Here's what you'll need:
forests for trees and
mountains for dirt and
mountains for rocks and
mountains for goats,
since goats are the best
defense against the offense
of wild weeds and overgrown grass
Maybe you already have all of this
If you do, great, but I know for a fact
that you don't And also,
you don't have a lawnmower You had one
but now you don't and why you don't
is too boring to get into, but
that's why you need the goats
You also need big round gaseous spheres
of bright green money floating in the sky
That way whenever you need to pay
for any of the expenses associated
with building your defense,
you will have the cash on hand
and won't need to put it
on a credit card Credit cards
are evil They make you lazy
and defenseless They make you think,
"Why do all this work grabbing

at the money planets in the sky
when I can just buy everything on credit
at a low introductory rate and worry about it
later” Thus, credit cards make you weak
and eventually they make you weep
Believe it Also, for your defense
you will need a Deathstar like the one
Luke Skywalker so recklessly destroyed
in *Star Wars* The force was with him,
but also he got really lucky A lot
of the other X-wing fighter pilots were not
so lucky Lucky for you, however,
there are no more X-wing fighter pilots
and no more Jedis, so your Deathstar
will keep you safe and warm
and walled off from pretty much everybody
And yeah, a Deathstar is a lot of fire power for one person
But thanks to the 2nd Amendment
you have the right to build a Deathstar
and to use it, if you must, to stand your ground
against whatever you’re afraid of,
which, let’s face it, is pretty much everything
It’s amazing you’re still with us
given the myriad threats you face
on a daily basis For example,
when you’re out with friends at Hooters
eating jalapeno poppers—or even herding
your goats beneath your glowing clouds of money—
you can pretty much expect you’ll be attacked
or possessed or overshadowed
by somebody But once you have a Deathstar
you’ll never need to worry Bad guys
are deterred by Deathstars
and also other visible and invisible threats
to their coherence With your defense
up and running, they’ll stick to their guns—
and leave you to your Wonder-
white truck nuts in peace So get to work now

defending your freedom You'll need the forests
and the goats, etc But you'll really need that Deathstar
Like magic, your fair share can be the whole pie
Your conspiracy theories depend on it

DEAR READER

“Into the nothingness of scorn and noise”

—John Clare

To be clear
I'm not saving anyone today
because to be a savior
I'd need an orange
life preserver, and I don't
have an orange
life preserver or an orange
from Florida or a lovely
fruit of light I don't
even have any light
because—no real window
in this basement—it's glass block—
but more importantly it's 4:45 am
so still dark, and I've been awake
since 2:45 thinking about what to say
and what not to to my classes
to my friends to my daughter, my wife—
and not because I have anything
special to say or something to confess
but because sometimes I like to be
part of the larger community
of grasshoppers spitting
their brown chew juice and blurring
their black indecipherable wings At least
I think they have wings
or maybe just legs

like the bottom part
of a mannequin
with a couple beers
sweating on it, like it's a table
for two, but the people
left in a hurry having better things to do
than being part of this poem
I get it I'm always writing poems
and sometimes people—
and by people I mean you—
just don't have time
to be in them Anyway,
that's why you're not in this one,
except you are, except
you aren't But
whatever you're doing instead
I hope you'll keep me in mind
I'm worried that my worriedness
is cause for alarm
A colorful insect just bit me
on the arm There's no fucking way
I'm going down with this ship
I might need some help
boring out my boring heart



Meredith Rivers is panty-less under her paper gown and her butt is stuck to that crinkly paper they pull across the examination table when the doctor—not her usual OBGYN, a new one, a much younger one—enters the room wearing a face mask, face shield, latex gloves, and a plastic surgery gown over her scrubs. This is just the protocol now, Meredith tells herself, but everyone in the office is all but wearing a hazmat suit, and it makes her feel both contaminated and defensive. “But I’ve done everything right,” she wants to whine, “I’ve followed all the rules.” Masks, hand sanitizer, gloves, bleach, and Jen is the only person she’s touched in almost four months. She hasn’t even been to the grocery store. God, how she would love to pick out her own apples. The ones Jen brings home are either stones or have the consistency of oatmeal.

The doctor sits on a rolling stool and propels herself not toward Meredith but away from her as she starts to talk. Between the layers of protective equipment and nearly ten feet of space she’s put between herself and her patient, she has to speak quite loudly, making everything she says sound like an attack to Meredith. Preeclampsia is the only word that’s registering; “possible” doesn’t even make a dent. Meredith doesn’t remember exactly what it is—she’s been trying to stay away from the “Complications” chapter of *What to Expect When You’re Expecting*—but her face grows hot, tears well up, and her mind just stops.

The doctor slows her speech. “There’s no protein in the urine, so this might be something we can manage with blood pressure medication. We’re going to give you a prescription and run more tests. It’s not time to panic, just time to pay attention.” Meredith can tell that she’s trying to be reassuring, but she’s so far away and so young. She wishes she was being told this information by Dr. Ross, who’s forty-five years of experience have left her with both an air of authority and a comforting, grandmother-like vibe. “I’ve seen it all,” Dr. Ross used to assure Meredith when she began listing off her pregnancy-related anxieties,

“and you’re fine.” She could perform a complete pelvic exam in under a minute.

Dr. Rita Vaswani doesn’t know what to do with her own patients these days, let alone those of Dr. Ross, who she feels don’t trust her, though she’s not sure if it’s her age, her skin color, or just the fact that she’s not “their” doctor that’s the problem. Belinda, she corrects herself, she wants you to call her Belinda. Given her age, it only makes sense that Dr. Ross, *Belinda*, has taken a leave of absence, but even though the clinic has only been seeing the high-risk pregnancies with any regularity and has stopped taking new patients, Dr. Vaswani’s swamped.

Emotions always run high at the IVF clinic, all these women—almost uniformly white—desperately grasping at the life they’ve always imagined for themselves, the infertile ones devastated by their body’s betrayal, as though bodies weren’t designed to betray us, but the ambient stress of the pandemic has taken things to the next level. This is the seventh pregnant woman she’s watched cry today and it’s barely ten a.m. It’s not that she doesn’t feel for the woman clutching her hospital gown on the examination table—even from across the room she can see the jittery rise and fall of Meredith’s chest that indicates ragged breath, panic—but Dr. Vaswani is exhausted on several levels and can’t summon the energy to play therapist the way the patient wants, needs. “Do you have any questions?” she asks.

Meredith shakes her head, though she’s swirling with them, and wishes Jen were with her. Struggling back into her maternity clothes after the doctor leaves, she feels both weepy and stunned. She thinks of how many times she’s wished she wasn’t pregnant, of how many times she’s questioned this decision, and feels so shakily guilty that she can barely tie her shoes. Crocs would’ve made more sense, but wearing them outside the house feels like giving up. When she exits the room, she finds a nurse, also swathed in protective gear, standing by, holding an armful of cleaning supplies.

As Meredith plops down in her car, she catches a glimpse of herself in the rearview mirror, of her red-rimmed eyes over her face mask. The patterned fabric—smiling woodland creatures and pine trees at jaunty angles—that was so cute and hipster

when she made it seems ridiculously childish. She rips the mask off and Googles “preeclampsia” on her phone. Wikipedia isn’t exactly a great source of information, Meredith knows that she should go to the Mayo Clinic’s website, something with *any* credibility really, but she clicks nonetheless, and her eyes snag on the sentence about death rates. Blinking back tears, she scrolls down to “Causes and Prevention.” She knows she forgets to take her prenatal vitamins sometimes, and what do they mean there’s “insufficient evidence” that excessive exercise is a cause? Jen was right, she should’ve quit Pilates sooner. And what had she been thinking with all that prenatal yoga on Zoom? Meredith is sure that this is her fault.

Jen says very little when Meredith calls her and Meredith is sure she’s angry, that she also knows that Meredith is responsible.

“Should we cancel the shower?” Jen asks.

“How can we? It starts in less than eight hours.”

“It’s our shower, we can do what we want.”

They both know this isn’t true. Even though it’s their baby, even though Meredith’s the one wearing elastic-waist pants, they have little say on this aspect of the pregnancy; Meredith’s cousin Pauline has completely taken over. Claire, one of Meredith’s oldest friends, agreed to co-host in an attempt to rein her in but has reported only limited success.

Though the phone call ends with Jen assuring Meredith that she loves her and that everything will be all right, Meredith starts crying as soon as she hangs up the phone. She leans her forehead on the steering wheel. Do not, she tells herself, do not have a meltdown in this parking garage. But it’s June 2020 and Houston’s numbers are spiking and half the country is in the streets and she might have preeclampsia, so how is she supposed to not have a meltdown in this parking garage?

She’s about to give up the fight when she hears the echo of footsteps coming her way. It’s another pregnant woman. Her posture is slumped, and she’s walking with a heavy slowness, but the first thing Meredith notices is her black, pointy-toed pumps. How is she wearing *heels*? She looks to be further along than Meredith, and Meredith’s down to Crocs and sneakers.

A man exits the green jeep a couple of spaces away; though the parking lot is almost empty, everyone has parked in the northeast corner. It's because of the elevator, but it looks like the cars are huddled together for protection. He goes to the woman, arms outstretched, and pulls her to his chest. They begin to sway gently, as though they're rocking each other to sleep. Meredith watches, feels guilty about watching, and pulls out of the parking space. As she leaves the garage, she sees that both the man and the woman are streaming tears into their masks, and she sure that something has gone terribly wrong.

Meredith hasn't been able to handle Houston's highways in years—the speed, the aggression, the abrupt jumps from lane to lane and *no one* uses a blinker—so the long drive home is even longer than it should be. She makes it only a third of the way when, turning from Piney Point onto Westheimer, leaking tears and thinking about the couple in the parking garage and trying not to think about how this pregnancy is going to fail, how it's going to end in nothing but physical and emotional pain, how will it rip her marriage apart, she hits a curb and hears the sharp pop of a punctured tire. A rapid hiss follows and the car begins canting to the left. Shit. Meredith spies what looks like a mechanic's a couple of blocks away and slowly thumps her way toward it.

Though she knows it's absurd, as she pulls into the parking lot of Christian Brothers' Automotive, she imagines black-robed monks peering at engines, changing tires, sliding out from underneath cars on those wheeled wooden thingys. It's probably just a name, she tells herself. Probably they aren't brothers. Probably they're not even Christian.

She pulls her mask over her ears, wipes her eyes, and hoists herself out from behind the steering wheel. Not quite seven months pregnant and already every movement involves hoisting, heaving, hauling. As Meredith walks toward the building, she feels the mechanics watching her. Or thinks she does; she doesn't actually know as she keeps her puffy eyes on the tips of her tennis shoes, only lifting them to survey the bumper stickers on the cars parked outside the office. "Trump 2020" on an overlarge black truck. But there's a Sierra Club sticker on the one next to it . . . maybe the place is okay?

Meredith finds that someone has painted a cross, one with lots of rays, on the glass door to the office, and the angel-bell hanging from the handle jingles as she enters. The ten-by-ten-foot room is baby blue and none of the four men inside are wearing masks. Well, she supposes that one of them technically has one on his face, but it's pulled down under his chin so he can eat a sandwich. She has an immediate self-conscious impulse to remove hers, to fit in, but she can hear Jen's voice in her head: You're going to risk your life, our *baby's* life, because you're a pleaser?

A small man stands up from behind the desk, introduces himself as Jerry, and follows her outside to take a look at the tire, which has deflated so much that the hubcap is touching the asphalt. "How'd that happen?" he asks.

How'd it happen? She wants to say it happened because her blood pressure is through the roof and the doctor—not even *her* doctor—had started throwing out words like "preeclampsia" and "bedrest" and "induced labor" and because Jen hadn't been there because she wasn't *allowed* to be there and that, if she follows the loose chain of causality she's been constructing in her head, somehow Trump, the coronavirus, police violence, and yard signs are responsible as well. "Curb," she says.

"We'll take a look and see if we can patch it. If not, I think we have something that will fit." He circles the car. He can tell that the tires are shot, but he knows her type. Convinced that tires last forever, that standard automotive maintenance—oil changes, tire rotation, replacing the radiator fluid—are scams cooked up by money-hungry mechanics. Convinced that things will always run smoothly, that cars never need to be repaired. She's probably bent the rim driving on that flat. "You might think about replacing all these," he says, with little hope that she'll listen. He's exasperated by the amount of space the woman is keeping between them, and by the mask. There've been rumors that Texas—Texas—is about to require them and he's been debating how much of a fuss to kick up. There are his beliefs, but then there's his business. He smiles too broadly at her and wonders if, underneath the mask—are those squirrels?—she's smiling back.

Meredith takes the chair that seems farthest away from

the other customers and texts Jen. *Blown tire, can you believe it?* She checks her email, even though she checked it before leaving the doctor's office thirty minutes ago, likes a few Instagram posts, does *not* Google preeclampsia again, and begins playing Regency Love, which she's been doing to stay off Facebook. Loosely based on the novels of Jane Austen, the goal of the game is to marry off her character, Constance, to one of the five eligible, but seriously flawed, bachelors in the fictional town of Darlington. She's currently debating between Mr. Ashcroft, who is rich, kind, and unbearably controlling, and Mr. Curtis, a well-read feminist who is also kind of a dick. A sixth eligible bachelor is available for \$1.99, and Meredith wonders if he's of a better quality. She also has to pee.

The ringing of the angel-bell signals Jerry's reentrance. "Ms. Rivers?" He leads her out to the garage—the smell of motor oil is overpowering—and this time she's sure the eyes of the jump-suited men linger on her. Is it because she's wearing a mask, because she's pregnant, or just because she's a woman?

Hector Ramirez is the only mechanic paying her any mind. He's looking at her belly and thinking of his wife, who wants another kid. He's not sure what to make of it all, the pandemic, his boss insists the whole thing is overblown, the protests, his boss has a number of thoughts on them as well; really his boss has a lot to say on pretty much any topic and feels more than free to expound despite receiving no encouragement from anyone in the shop. But is this the time to bring a new life into the world? Besides, they already have five, and aside from the expense and the constant demands on his attention—he doesn't think he's been alone for longer than three minutes in years—there are the looks people give them. But he loves his wife and she loves being pregnant, which makes the other women in his family suspicious. *Who likes being pregnant?*

He thinks of bathing his youngest in the kitchen sink, rubbing one of those soft cloths with the ducks on it over his sparse hair, one hand on his son's forehead to keep the faintly rose-scented suds out of his eyes. Julian's become too big for all that, which makes him suddenly sad. He could do one more. He would like one more. But right *now*?

Jerry shows Meredith the punctured tire and says something about tubes and hammering the rim back into shape. “The bad news is that we can’t patch it. The good news is that the Firestone tires for a car this size are on sale. Now they’re still a little more than the Kumho, but they come with a one-year warranty and believe me, they’re worth it.”

Meredith squints at him. Would a religious mechanic be more or less likely to cheat her? She wishes Jen were with her. Jen would make him go through all the options, she’d comparison shop on her phone, she’d call his bluff if he was bluffing and get a fair price if he wasn’t. “Okay.”

“Do you want to go ahead and do the whole set?”

“Just the one.”

Jerry glances at her left hand. “Maybe you want to call your husband? Let him decide?” She’s pregnant, she’s obviously been crying, looks like she might start up again actually, and he’s glad she has somebody to take care of her. He also wants her, her mask, her suspiciousness, and her ridiculously large handbag out of his shop.

“I’ll do that. But just the one for now.” This isn’t a thing she does—pretend to be straight—but she’s alone and the mechanic’s shop is called Christian Brothers’ and she just doesn’t have it in her to deal with any homophobic crap from a small man named Jerry.

Jerry nods.

She returns to the office, pulls out her phone, and reopens Regency Love. Mr. Ashcroft is upset because she apparently snubbed his sister, Prudence, at a dress shop, which she has no memory of doing. Would leveling up in needlework mollify him? Or maybe if she increases her amiability score she can soften some of Mr. Curtis’s sharp edges.

Meredith’s gathering points by answering questions about propriety in the eighteenth century—there is always a right way and wrong way to behave—when Jen calls.

“Are you okay?”

“I’m okay.”

“Are you? You don’t sound good.”

“I’m wearing a mask, I’m just muffled.”

“Where are you?”

“I’m at,” Meredith swallows a slightly hysterical laugh, “Christian Brothers’ Automotive.”

“Do you want me to come get you?”

Meredith peers through the window over Jerry’s desk into the garage. “They’re probably almost done.”

“Are you sure?”

Her eyes well up and her bladder constricts. This is what it’s like to be pregnant: a constant need to pee and cry. “No.”

“I’ll be there in ten minutes.”

Meredith and Jen have a few pregnancy stories they like to tell: the symbol on the at-home pregnancy test that didn’t match anything on the box, the potential sperm donor that turned out to be their friend Claire’s ex-boyfriend Teddy. But the favorite, the crowd-pleaser, is the one about the tarot reading they received at the local farmer’s market. Meredith does a killer impression of the reader’s husky, contrived whisper, and Jen mimics the flair with which she’d flipped over the final card superbly.

It had been late January, Meredith and Jen had been trying to get pregnant for three months, and Meredith’s period was a week late. Jen was overjoyed. Meredith was suddenly unsure if it was the right time, or even the right move altogether.

The woman on the last card was wearing a nightdress that reminded Meredith of her grandmother: high-necked, long-sleeved, floor-length, folds upon folds of floral. It was probably supposed to be a gown, but except for the crown, she looked more like she was going to bed than to a ball. The yellow circle of the scepter she held was echoed in the symbol for female floating above a field of green-gold wheat.

“The Empress,” the tarot reader said, leaning over the card table she’d set up in the center of the tent, “symbolizes the maternal. It means,” the woman waved her fingers over the card, “creation, new life. Not necessarily a physical pregnancy; it could be a spiritual pregnancy, a new business, a new,” she hesitated and looked at Jen, clearly trying to ascertain the nature of their relationship, “love.” Jen likes to dramatize this searching gaze when they tell the story.

As they reentered the shuffling crowd of the farmer's market, Jen tapped the back of her wife's hand. "I told you."

Meredith looked back at the tent, which wasn't a Gypsy tent but the kind you'd buy at REI. "Gypsy" isn't the right word, she knows, but nobody gets it when she says "Romani tent," so she puts "Gypsy" in air quotes when she tells the story and hopes her audience understands that she doesn't mean anything by it.

"Have you noticed," Meredith asked as they passed the vegan baker, the kombucha booth, the wild-haired man tout-ing CBD as a cure for everything from anxiety to fibromyalgia to cancer, "how few actual farm products there are here? Was it always like this?"

"I think we should keep the gender a secret."

"We don't even know if I'm pregnant."

"You said your breasts were sore."

Meredith glanced around them, embarrassed to be discussing her body in public. "That could mean anything. I might just be spiritually pregnant." They stopped at the fermented foods table.

"Try this sauerkraut. It's got curry in it." Jen lifted the spoon to Meredith's face, cupping her left hand underneath to catch any spillage. The smell hit Meredith like a fist. She normally liked sauerkraut, its sour tang, but this smelled overpoweringly like decay, and bile immediately rose in her throat. She gagged, slapped the spoon from Jen's hand, and just barely made it to the trash can.

Meredith knows it's a great story: weird, funny, vaguely mystical. People love it. But when she thinks of that day, it's not the reading or the sauerkraut she remembers most viscerally, it's trembling over a trash can surrounded by strangers, sure that she's made a mistake and knowing that she'll never be allowed to say so.

How like her, she thinks, reopening Regency Love, to work toward something for years, to fantasize about it obsessively, to save up the money to inject her stomach with hormones that make her feel crazy, to abstain from drinking for what feels like an eternity, to give up control of her body, first to

doctors and then to this person growing inside her, and then be unsure if she wants it. And how like her, now that she thinks she might lose it, to desperately need it again.

Meredith still has to pee and is eyeing the filthy bathroom—what happened to cleanliness is next to godliness?—when she sees Jen walk into the *garage*. Not into the office, but into the garage, her ponytail bobbing out of her ballcap. Despite the fact that she’s striding into their territory like she owns it, or maybe because of it, none of the mechanics does more than glance at her. Meredith cranes her neck, trying to see what’s going on through the window above Jerry’s desk, but all she can make out are Jen’s tanned shoulders and Jerry’s head nodding in profile. She’s afraid that Jen is going to make a scene, about the masks or Jerry’s presumed homophobia or the mechanics staring at Meredith even though, she realizes, Jen doesn’t know about that and it might not actually be happening. There’s some gesturing that means nothing to her—it doesn’t *look* angry—some pointing at the car, and Jen heads for the office.

“Hey, hon,” Jen says, sitting next to her. “We’re going to need all new tires, so it’s going to be a minute. Weren’t you going to take care of that a few months ago?”

Meredith guiltily remembers making and then cancelling an appointment at Discount Tire Company back in early March, when the idea of a global pandemic still seemed wildly unlikely, thinking she’d just do it later. She shrugs.

“Why don’t you take my car and go home?”

“You sure?”

“You don’t need to be here, especially not with,” Jen flicks her eyes at Meredith’s stomach. “Listen,” she continues, lowering her voice, though not as much as Meredith wants her to, and leaning on the armrest of her chair, “about what the doctor said—”

Meredith shakes her head vehemently. She doesn’t want the fight that’s coming, the one about how she hasn’t been eating right or has been exercising too much or has been too stressed out—how is she supposed to not be stressed out?—and she certainly doesn’t want it in front of an audience. “Not here.”

Jen withdraws her arms and withdraws into herself. This

is so like Meredith, to just *refuse* to talk about something. No, instead she'll obsess, get herself all wrapped around the axle, and then by the time she *will* talk, she'll be all but incoherent. But what's Jen going to do, pick a fight with her teary, pregnant wife in the middle of this cross-filled garage? She walks Meredith to the Corolla and waits as she lowers herself inside.

As Meredith moves to shut the door, Jen grabs it and leans in. "Hey," she asks, "Did you tell Jerry you had a husband?"

Meredith feels a deep, fast shame followed by an urge to lie and is just starting to stammer out the word "no," when Jen reaches into the car, snaps the elastic of Meredith's face mask lightly, and laughs. She shuts the car door and waves before walking back toward Christian Brothers'.

Meredith wants to get away from this place, from the world, really, to curl up in a nest of blankets like a fox, but she can't peel out of the parking lot the way she wants to—if it's even possible to peel out in a Corolla—because Jen's shorter than she is, and not pregnant, so she has to adjust the seat back, the distance from the steering wheel, the mirrors, and everything is controlled by buttons that she *cannot* seem to locate. It takes forever and she's sure Jen is watching her, wondering what she's doing. She finally gets everything in order except for the rear-view mirror, which she decides to adjust manually despite its resistance. It breaks halfway off. Meredith sighs, looks at the mechanic's office, jams the mirror back in place as best she can, and pulls onto Westheimer.

Without Regency Love to distract her from her possible preeclampsia and need to pee, they're harder to deal with. She turns on NPR. This morning two boys were shot in Seattle. Last night one was shot in Louisville. There are rumors that the military will be deployed and the president has tweeted then deleted a video of a man in a golf cart yelling "White Power" at Black Lives Matter protestors. Meredith turns the radio off and feels guilty about turning it off. She hasn't logged-on to Facebook in a week and a half and has been limiting her news consumption to *The New York Times's* morning and evening updates. "Just take a break," Jen had told her. "The world will still be horrible in a couple of weeks." But why should she be allowed to take a break?

She thinks about the videos. She reads about them but has never watched one. Not the one of Eric Garner telling the officer who has him in a chokehold that he can't breathe over and over and over again, not the one of a man in uniform leaning on George Floyd's neck for almost ten minutes. He couldn't breathe either. Not the one of Walter Scott being shot five times in the back, not the one of Tamir Rice—only *twelve*—shot in a park, not the one of Ahmaud Arbery, also shot, not the ones of Alton Sterling or Rayshard Brooks or Stephon Clark or James Boyd, also shot and also shot and also shot and also shot.

Meredith tells herself it's out of respect for the victims, their families, but really it's just that she can't bear it. But why should she be allowed not to bear it? Other people have to watch it. Other people have to live it. You're a hypocrite and a coward, she tells herself.

She feels even worse as she finds her self-recrimination overpowered by her need to pee. Should she stop someplace? The bathrooms at the Starbucks on Shepherd are usually clean and they require masks. But her friend Claire had told her about an incident that ended with an anti-mask customer hurling a cup of coffee—lukewarm, thankfully—in a barista's face. Not at *this* Starbucks, but still. And even if nothing dramatic happened, stopping would involve hand sanitizing, and wondering if people are standing too close to her, and forgetting what she's touched, and hand sanitizing again, and constantly wondering if she is doing the right thing, just always wondering if she is doing the right thing, and she'd have to buy something, so fuck it, she can hold it.

Meredith loves their apartment. It's got tons of light, beautiful hardwood floors, retro tiling in the kitchen and bathroom, and a great location. The only problem is parking. They have to park on the street and it's a nightmare. A recent influx of townhomes has eliminated half the curb-space and on bad days it can take ten minutes of circling the neighborhood to get a spot. Meredith thinks the apartment is worth it, except for right now, when she has to pee and everyone and their mother is at home so there is no parking, just none.

Except, yes!, someone is leaving the vet's office on the corner. Meredith is terrible at parallel parking and tries to avoid it, especially in front of people, and while it's not *crowded*, there's a steady stream of neighbors trying to stave off the stay-at-home madness by walking their dogs, their kids, themselves. Jen, who has run every morning for the last decade, has been greatly irritated by the influx of new-found outdoor fitness enthusiasts. "It's like playing frogger out there."

But Meredith really has to pee. She pulls up next to a large, blue SUV, aligns her back wheels with the bumper, turns the steering wheel to the right, and begins to back in. It's a tight fit and it's hard with the SUV being so big, but she manages to get into the space without *too* much back and forth and feels a rush of pride and a desire to show off to Jen, who has been known to reenact Meredith's parking fails at dinner parties. Except one of the cars might leave before Jen gets home so . . . picture? She's thinking of this as she straightens the car a little, moving slightly closer to the curb—if she's going to document her parking job, she wants it to be perfect—and doesn't see the woman get into the Prius behind her, doesn't notice the car pulling forward just as she's reversing.

The impact is minimal, both cars are going less than five miles per hour, but Meredith hurtles forward a couple of inches before the seatbelt catches her across the chest and the abdomen and slams her back. She feels a warm wetness spread under her, and the first thing she feels is jelly-legged relief. The war is over, who cares if she lost. The next is panic as she sees the woman get out of her car and walk toward the Corolla. She frantically looks around for something to cover herself with, a towel or a picnic blanket or—why is Jen's car always so *clean*? There's not even a stray cup in the cupholder or piece of mail on the floor. Meredith grabs her purse and sets it on her lap. It's a large bag, a hobo bag, they call it, which is probably not okay, but it's at least somewhat effective at covering up the dark spot across her lap. It's the best she can do. Looking in the now-dangling-again rear-view mirror, she finds that the woman has slowed her approach to inspect the bumpers. She roots around in the bag for the aromatherapy spray Jen's sister sent her, locates the bottle, and

sprays wildly. It does nothing to cover up the sour odor; now the car just smells like pee *and* lavender.

The woman knocks on the window with one knuckle, and now that she's up close, Meredith can see that she's really more of a girl, twenty tops and maybe still in high school. It's hard to tell with the mask. She starts to roll down the window but then thinks that if the girl is wearing a mask then she should wear a mask, and she fumbles the woodland creatures onto her face before opening the window, only an inch so that maybe the smell won't get out.

"Are you all right?" the girl asks.

"I'm fine," Meredith says in a tone that she immediately knows sounds far too chipper. She hunches over the bag. "You?"

The girl nods and scratches at her ear. Her mask, Meredith realizes, is decorated with tiny penises, and the shock she experiences makes her feel prudish and old.

"The cars seem fine and I'm not even really sure whose fault it was so—"

Meredith, who has been nervously running her fingers along the armrest, accidentally hits the window button, and cuts the girl off with a pane of glass.

"Sorry!" she rolls the window back down—too far, pee smell—then up again so that it's open just a crack. "What were you saying?"

"Just that I don't think we need to get the police or the insurance companies involved."

She probably means "we don't need to tell my parents," Meredith thinks.

The girl seems to be waiting for something. "Don't you want to look at the car?" she finally asks.

Meredith waves her hand. "I trust you."

The girl, Evelina, examines the woman and tries to figure out what her deal is, wonders if this is some sort of trap or scam. She's pregnant and close to her mom's age, looks a little like one of her mom's friends, actually, which make Evelina want to both trust and resent her. She studies the little of the woman's face she can see between the sunglasses and the mask—isn't she a little old for those frolicking woodland creatures? She's prob-

ably just like her mother, who she just spent a frustrating half-hour debating politics with, evincing all these liberal beliefs but won't protest, won't cut ties with her racist brother Phil, thinks defunding the police is "a little extreme." She probably voted for Elizabeth Warren in the primaries. "Why would you?" Evelina asks. "Trust me, I mean."

The woman shrugs and rolls up the window, which she has only cracked an inch, as though she's afraid of her. After a moment, Evelina walks back to her boyfriend's Prius, pausing to look at the bumper of the car. Warren.

Meredith pulls out her phone and pretends to be busy while she tries to figure out what to do. Their complex is only half a block away, but there are a number of people out and about. Maybe I can wait until it dries, she thinks. But it's a *lot* of pee and, while Meredith is not an expert on the evaporation rate of urine, she thinks she could be talking quite some time. She really doesn't want to, but she opens the messenger app and texts Jen.

When you get home, could you bring me a skirt? I'm outside the vet's.

Jen calls her immediately. "Why do I need to bring you a skirt? Are you okay?"

"Everything's fine, but there was an accident—"

"An accident?"

Meredith can hear panic infusing Jen's voice and she tried to channel her prenatal yoga teacher. "I'm fine," she says in a slow, soothing monotone, "I just need you to bring me a skirt."

"But *why*?" Now Jen sounds both scared and exasperated.

"It's embarrassing."

"We're having a child together."

Meredith reluctantly relates what happened. "Please don't laugh."

"I wasn't going to *laugh*, that's horrible. Are you sure you're okay?"

Meredith sighs. Of course she's not okay. Nothing about this day, this year, has been okay.

"It looks like they're bringing out the car now," Jen says.

"I'll be there in less than twenty minutes."

Meredith opens Regency Love. It's been a long time since

she's dated—she and Jen have been together for six years and married for two—but she finds herself falling into old patterns. She's stringing along two suitors, neither of whom she particularly cares for, because she doesn't want to hurt their feelings by rejecting them, and she's perpetually trapped in conversation with the interminably boring Mr. Dibley for the same reason.

The eligible bachelors have three facial expressions: mildly pleased, displeased, and neutral, and she find herself chasing after those faint smiles like a sad puppy, changing the answers she selects from the drop-down menus, adjusting her skill sets. Then she fills with rage at “having” to manage their moods—her therapist would have something to say about this—and comes as close to telling them off as the game will allow. Which is saying “Good day, Sir,” and walking away abruptly. Then she feels guilty and goes panting after their approval again. Thank God she's not single.

Jen arrives sooner than Meredith expects—she must've found a good parking spot—carrying a plastic bag. Meredith rolls the window down but Jen walks over to the passenger's side door and holds the handle until she clicks it open.

“Here's what I was thinking,” Jen says as she pulls a lump of fabric out of the bag, “I brought that wrap skirt so you can just put it on over everything and then shimmy out of those pants. I also brought a towel.” She looks at the soaked seat, the fluid on the floor. “I maybe should've brought more than one.”

Meredith clammers into the backseat awkwardly and Jen hands her the skirt.

“Aren't you glad I got the tinted windows?”

“I can't believe this is happening.”

“It'll make a great story.”

“We are *never* telling anyone about this.” Crouching on her knees, Meredith wraps the skirt around her waist. It's not a maternity skirt and it barely fits. She tries to figure out the least revealing method of removing her soaked pants and underwear and ends up wetly wriggling out of them with her butt pressed against the back of Jen's seat. “I'm sorry about the car,” she says.

“I needed to get it cleaned anyway.” The car is immaculate.

After wadding her clothes into the plastic bag, Meredith reaches for the towel. She shoves it up the skirt and ineffectually dabs at her skin.

“Shit,” Jen says, tapping the rearview mirror, assuming it’s the result of the fender bender. Meredith knows she should correct her, ‘fess up, but doesn’t.

“Everything looks okay on the outside though, right?” she asks instead.

“I didn’t stop to check the car.”

She does, however, do a walkaround once Meredith is standing on the sidewalk, holding the skirt closed with her fist and barefoot because she can’t bear to put her soggy tennis shoes back on. “Seems fine. Weird about the mirror.” Jen turns to her. “Are you sure you don’t want me to get you some shoes?”

Meredith shakes her head.

“Why are you scrunching up your skirt like that?”

Meredith lets go and the fabric falls open in a thigh-high slit. Jen gives her a cat-call whistle.

“I’m covered in piss.”

The concrete is prickly, and Meredith walks slowly, carefully. Outside their courtyard she stops to brush debris off her feet. “I feel like everyone is staring at me.”

“No one’s staring at us,” Jen says, though the next moment Ralph, who lives in the bungalow next door, is walking toward them.

“How *are* you?” He starts at the prescribed six feet away, but he’s a close-talker at heart and keeps inching forward. Meredith and Jen shuffle backwards. He inches forward again.

“We’re hanging in there,” Jen says. She doesn’t follow up with a reciprocal “how are you?” so Meredith does.

“For the first few weeks it’s wasn’t too bad, but now I don’t know . . . Did you hear what the lieutenant governor just did?”

Ralph can tell he’s talking too much, talking their ears off. He barely knows them—can’t even remember Meredith’s wife’s name—but he can’t help it. He just wants to converse with someone other than Petey, their miniature schnauzer. His miniature schnauzer now, he supposes, since David moved out three

weeks ago. They'd been having problems for a while, and Ralph had considered ending things in February, before everything started, had told his friend Lisa that he'd fallen out of love, but still, in the end, Ralph had begged him not to go, gestured around the room but meaning the world and asked David how he could possibly leave him now, in the middle of all this.

"How can I stay with someone who doesn't love me," David had said, also gesturing to everything and nothing, "in the middle of all this?"

Ralph rambles on about Texas's lieutenant governor, who he despises, and about the state attorney general, who he despises even more, about the rumors of a mask mandate. He can see the women gradually backing away, but he can't help himself, he keeps moving closer, keeps talking.

"I'm sorry, Ralph," the one who isn't Meredith says. "We're late for something."

Ralph shuts himself up and smiles apologetically under his mask. He thinks Meredith is doing the same under hers.

Jen's phone rings as they enter the apartment, and she picks it up and throws her keys into the basket on the end table. She *always* answers the phone, which is great when Meredith is the one calling and irritating every other time. It sounds like a work call so Meredith waves to get Jen's attention and points down the hall. "Shower," she mouths, and Jen nods.

Clean and wrapped in towels—one over her body and one twisted around her hair—Meredith sinks onto their bed. Their cat, Chairman Meow, joins her. A few months ago, a woman on the light-rail, overhearing Jen and Meredith bicker about who would take him to the vet, had advised them to get rid of the cat before the baby came. "They smell the milk," she said, "and they attack."

Meredith knows it's ridiculous, that cats and women have coexisted for centuries, but she can't get the image out of her head and she crosses her arms protectively over her breasts as the Chairman kneads her stomach. Which is extra stupid because it's not like there's milk in there yet. Maybe never will be.

Jen leans in the doorway, silhouetted by the light from the hall.

“Why are you lying like a corpse?”

On her back, in the dark, her arms in an x over her chest, Meredith realizes she looks like she’s preparing for burial. She also suddenly understands that the woman on the bus wasn’t warning Meredith about the cat attacking her breasts; she was warning about him attacking the *baby*. She uncrosses her arms.

“You want some lunch?”

Meredith shakes her head.

“You should probably eat anyway,” Jen says, but she moves toward the bed not the kitchen. She lies on her side next to Meredith. “Can we talk about it now?”

“Okay.” Meredith clasps her hands over her stomach, martyr-like, and waits for the recriminations.

“I don’t think we should freak out. I called my cousin Kelly, you know, the nurse, and she says that a lot of times this is no big deal, that sometimes the next reading is totally normal. And even if it *is* preeclampsia, it’s not like we’re on the prairie, babies survive this all the time. And yes, weeks of bedrest would suck, but we’d get through it.” She’s speaking uncharacteristically quickly but without the fury Meredith expected.

“You’re not mad?”

For the first couple of years of their relationship, Jen thought this *thing* Meredith does, always assuming the worst of people, always assuming the worst of her, the incapacity to trust that she’ll react reasonably, was due to some as-yet-undisclosed trauma or betrayal. Toxic relationship? Childhood abuse? Sexual assault? Jen had prepared herself to be sympathetic, understanding, and waited. And waited.

She spent the next two years fighting off a constant low-key irritation, with Meredith for *being* this way for no good reason and with herself for spending so much time worrying about the painful secret that had turned out not to exist, and trying to argue Meredith into a more reasonable worldview.

And now? Now she’s used to it. She barely even reacts anymore. It’s amazing, Jen thinks, what you’ll accept when you love someone.

Jen raises up onto an elbow. “Why would I be *mad*?”

“I kept doing Pilates when you told me it was a bad idea.

And all that prenatal yoga.”

“High blood pressure isn’t caused by *Pilates*.” Jen rolls away from Meredith and off the bed. “I’m going to make you a sandwich.” Amazing what you’ll accept when you love someone. Amazing and also terrible.

When Jen pokes her head into the bedroom to tell Meredith that lunch is ready, she finds her wife curled on her side, fast asleep. Her glasses are still on, and Jen sighs. She’s already broken two pairs rolling over on them. Part of her thinks she should leave them where they are, that maybe busting a third would convince Meredith to be more careful, but she removes the frames from her wife’s face and places them on the nightstand before sitting down at the kitchen table.

There’s nothing wrong with the food—the avocados are ripe, the brie creamy, the bread lightly toasted—but everything tastes like sawdust and Jen can barely get the first bite down. She feels agitated and lonely and she does not want to sit with her thoughts, so she calls Dee.

“How possible is this possible preeclampsia of Meredith’s?” Dee asks.

Jen glares at her sandwich. Though Dee has assured her that she doesn’t dislike Meredith, it’s always been obvious to Jen how little patience she has with what she calls, usually with a circular wave of the hand, “Meredith’s shit.” Maybe Dee hadn’t been the right person to call.

“Don’t you think all her problems are in her head?” she had asked Jen over a bowl of queso just before the pandemic.

“Obviously they’re in her head,” Jen told her. “That doesn’t mean they’re not real.”

“I guess,” Dee said, folding her arms and leaning back in her seat. “But I grew up fat, Black, and butch in rural Alabama, so you’ll have to forgive me if I’m not moved by champagne problems.”

And really, Jen can’t fault her for her attitude. But it’s *Meredith*.

“Look, I’m just saying, it’s *Meredith*. She’s a little . . .” Dee pauses and sighs into the phone, clearly trying to think of the

least offensive way to say what she wants to say, “prone to catastrophizing. You know you’ve always had a thing for neurotic women.”

“I don’t have a *thing* for neurotic women,” Jen says, knowing perfectly well that she has always had a thing for neurotic women. She can’t help it if all the ones she finds interesting come with a basketful of anxieties and the high-strung nature of a whippet. And, yes, Dee’s right, Meredith makes a mountain of every molehill, but this isn’t that. She wishes it were. “This is real,” she says, and for the first time she lets herself feel what it will be like if something happens, if Meredith loses the baby, if she loses Meredith.

“If it’s real, you know I’m there for it,” Dee says.
“Anything you need.”

And she suddenly knows why she called Dee, of all people: while Meredith’s the one she’s in love with, Dee’s the one she can rely on. She’s the one that took Jen out and got her drunk when her mother told her not to call again; she’s the one Jen’s spent every holiday with for the last fifteen years, the two of them plus a rotating cast of friends and girlfriends; she’s the one that’s family. Jen’s eyes grow hot and she wants to express some of this to her friend, but that’s not the way they talk to each other so she just says thank you, and they stay on the phone talking about nothing until Jen’s phone beeps to let her know she has another call.

“I have to go. It’s Bryce,” Jen says, and she braces herself to deal with the cocky but inept good-old-boy who calls himself her supervisor.

Of *course* there would be a hiccup today, and of course Bryce would demand that it be fixed immediately despite the fact that the problem is limited to an obscure corner of the network that hardly anyone uses. And of course he would insist that Jen be the one to do it even though, given that the fix requires the technical expertise of hitting the reset button on a router, she could easily walk any fool, even Bryce, through the process over the phone. But at least this will give her something to do besides think. Jen leaves a note for Meredith and heads out the door.

The sound of her cellphone chirping wakes Meredith from a dream in which she's in the middle of a crowded Target without a mask, one of her new cadre of coronavirus-related nightmares. Opening her eyes, she finds the world all fuzzy swaths of muted color. Jen must've taken off her glasses while she was asleep. She squints at the screen of the phone: her mother. Her mother who wants a grandchild more than anything. Almost every week an Amazon box shows up on their doorstep with a Baby Einstein DVD, or a toy that's supposed to increase hand-eye coordination, or a onesie decorated with puffins accompanied by a note saying *Just a little something for you and the baby*. No, Meredith thinks, she can't tell her, not yet.

She fumbles on the nightstand for her glasses, finds a Post-It note stuck to one of the lenses, rips it off, and jams the tortoiseshell frames onto her face. Once the letters are in focus, she reads in her wife's neat handwriting *Went to the office to deal with stupid shit and to pick up your RX. Home by five. Meredith glances at the clock: 3:18. She slept for more than two hours? Call if you need anything. Everything will be fine. p.s. Your partner is physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually attracted to you.*

When they'd first started dating, Meredith's one-bedroom had been littered with positive affirmations she'd written on pink Post-It notes she stole from work, part of an effort to transform herself into someone less like herself. *I radiate love and others reflect love back to me. The shape of my body is beautiful and appealing. I know, accept, and am true to myself.* She'd done a sweep before Jen came over for the first time, hiding the slips of paper in the junk drawer with the pens, batteries, and old keys that she was afraid to throw out in case she remembered what they unlocked. Somehow she managed to miss the one on the bathroom mirror, the most visible one, the most embarrassing one, the one her therapist called the *crème de la crème* of affirmations: *I am enough.*

Meredith was stretched across the bed basking in the afterglow of good sex with a new person when she heard the sounds of laughter.

"What is this?" Jen asked as she returned to bed holding the Post-It.

“Nothing.”

“Does ‘nothing’ work?”

“Not yet.” It made Meredith feel terribly vulnerable, this discovery, those words, much more so than their lovemaking, and she turned onto her side and clutched a pillow to her stomach as Jen got back into bed.

“You are enough,” Jen whispered in her ear.

Meredith stopped with the affirmations after that—not, she told herself, because she was ashamed, an emotion her therapist termed “worthless”—but because she didn’t need them. Anyway, Jen took up the mantle. *You make decisions easily. Your ability to conquer your challenges is limitless. Your potential to succeed is infinite. You are enough.* Meredith finds the notes on the fridge, in her purse, on the screen of her laptop. They’ve become less frequent over the years, but the discovery of one still brings a blush that’s half-pleased, half-annoyed to her face. She’s never figured out to what degree Jen’s making fun of her and to what degree she’s genuinely trying to bolster her self-esteem.

Meredith groans and pushes herself out of bed. She hates baby showers. She doesn’t want to have one and she especially doesn’t want to have one on Zoom. And she even more especially doesn’t want to have one now, when she’s not sure what’s going on with her body, with her baby.

Her cousin Pauline had tried to put a positive spin on the digital format when it became clear that the pandemic wouldn’t be over anytime soon. “Now we can all be together, friends and family.”

As though Meredith hasn’t spent her entire life trying to keep them apart. She wants an impermeable border between the two, a militarized zone, one with barbed wire and German Shepherds. If she has to have a baby shower, which she apparently does, she wants two separate ones, the way they’d originally planned.

She walks to the kitchen for the *half-cup* of coffee she’s allowed each day and finds that Jen has left her a toasted brie-and-avocado sandwich, her favorite, saran-wrapped on the counter. Though the doctor told her she didn’t need to change her diet, Meredith forgoes the sandwich and eats a packet of

unflavored instant oatmeal, feeling sorry for herself.

Still left with hours before the shower, she tries on all of her maternity clothes and worries. They're mostly hand-me-downs from Pauline and all of the dressy ones have frilly collars that make Meredith feel like a missionary's wife. After carefully curling her hair and then uncurling it, striving for a wind-tousled effect but ending up looking like an unkempt poodle, and applying and reapplying her makeup, she goes through all the clothes again and changes into a more flattering but too-casual ensemble. She wraps a light scarf threaded through with glitter around her neck. Better?

Then she wonders why, given everything, it matters what she looks like.

She plops down on the loveseat, in the midst of the Zoom background she and Jen set up the night before. Green letters saying "welcome baby" hang above her and she's surrounded by artfully arranged gifts and stacks of decorated bibs and onesies. Pauline and Claire are running everything; all Meredith has to do is show up. She sees *What to Expect When You're Expecting* underneath the coffee table and feels a self-destructive urge to peruse the "Complications" chapter. Instead she opens Regency Love and pisses off Mr. Curtis by being polite to a new character, Harmony Whitmore, who is apparently his ex-fiancée. How was she supposed to know? She tries to charm her way back into his good graces but only earns the Unapologetic Flirt badge for her trouble and wonders why, given all the options in this dream world, this mockery of eighteenth-century England, she's chosen to be herself.

Headway has been made with Mr. Curtis when she gets a text from Claire: *Living in historic times turns out to suck, but look at this video of red pandas playing with a pumpkin.* Meredith follows the link to YouTube, and it's goddamn adorable, the fuzzy red pandas tumbling over each other, their stomachs as round as the pumpkin. She calls Claire and tells her everything. "Have you talked to you mom?"

"How can I?" Meredith asks, thinking of all the misshapen little hats her mother—generally more prone to pick up a book and a glass of wine than a pair of knitting needles—has made for

the baby.

“Let’s walk about it,” Claire says. “I’ll be outside in five.”

They’ve been walking together—if you can call walking on opposite sides of the street with their phones pressed against their face masks “together”—almost every day lately, and Claire’s already waiting with her phone out when Meredith leaves the air conditioning and steps into the sun. A graphic designer and general misanthrope, Claire has been working from home for years, and Meredith had thought she’d be fairly well prepared for the new reality. But she seems to be slowly losing her shit.

“It turns out,” Claire had told Meredith during week five of the stay-at-home order, “that there’s a big difference between minimal social interaction and no social interaction.”

“Tell me how you’re feeling,” Claire says once Meredith picks up the phone and starts walking.

But Meredith finds that she doesn’t want to talk about how she’s feeling, about how everything inside of her is on the verge of collapse, how the walls and ceiling are about to come down in chunks, so she brings up the neighborhood association’s new yard signs, which she wants a second opinion on. They’re red, white, and blue with the words “A good neighborhood is not an accident” in italic faux-cursive. “Isn’t there a bit of a ‘stay-out’ vibe about them?” she asks. The neighborhood is mostly white.

“I’m not sure, but I can tell you that font is a mistake.”

“Look,” Meredith says as they walk, examining their neighbors’ houses for clues as to their political affiliation, “none of the yards with Black Lives Matter signs have them. Or the ones that start ‘In this house.’”

“I hate those,” Claire says.

Meredith has always disliked them herself, though she can’t say why. She agrees with the sentiments—she believes love is love, she cares about women’s rights, she thinks science is real—but there’s something about them. “Why?”

“Smarmy. But also those raggedy-ass margins.”

They walk in silence for a few minutes, listening to each other breathe through their phones. Claire wishes that Meredith would walk on the same side of the street as her; she thinks

that with the masks and them being outside and all it would be fine. But she has a heart condition—minor, though the smoking doesn't help—and Meredith has added Claire's increased risk should she contract the coronavirus to her carousel of worries.

Claire racks her brain trying to think of something funny, something to cheer Meredith up. Reassuring would be more appropriate, but Claire's better at funny. Jeremy recently told her a pretty good story about a customer at the art supply store where he's in charge of the pens, but she's not supposed to be seeing Jeremy. She's not supposed to be seeing anyone. No, she's supposed to stay at home, alone, getting drunk and getting old and talking to people on Facetime and watching videos of red pandas in an attempt not to shoot herself for however long this pandemic lasts. Jeremy thinks that things will "for sure" be back to normal by the end of the year, but Claire looks at the data, looks at history, adds six months because she's a pessimist, and comes up with two years. Minimum.

She knows that her off-again, on-again . . . not boyfriend, never boyfriend, but her off-again, on-again *something*, is a poor choice for a quarantine fuck-buddy, that if she has to have one, she should pick someone as isolated as she is. Though Jeremy says he's distancing, that he's following the rules—and he probably genuinely believes he is, the idiot—she's seen his version of careful. She's seen the threadbare, coffee-stained bandana he uses for a mask day after day, seen the quick dips under the faucet he calls washing his hands. And while, sure, he has to go to work, does he really have to go to band practice?

"Have you talked to Jeremy?" Meredith asks.

"Of course not."

"I always thought you'd end up with him." She sounds disappointed.

"Why?"

"You keep getting back together—"

"We've never been together," Claire says, turning to face Meredith and holding her cell between her chin and her shoulder so she can make air quotes around "together."

"But you love him."

Claire snorts. "Not in a serious way, more the way you'd

love a puppy. A puppy who gives really good head.” She pictures it, Jeremy’s face on a puppy’s body, lapping away, and shudders.

“Can you tell me about the shower?”

“You’re lucky it’s not in person,” Claire says, relieved at the change of subject. “You won’t believe the games Pauline would’ve had you playing.”

“I’m afraid to ask.”

“So there’s one called ‘Tinkle in the Pot’ where you, like, waddle around with quarters between your knees and drop them into buckets.”

“You’re kidding.”

“And in this other one you melt different chocolate bars and put them into diapers . . .”

Meredith and Jen log in to Zoom fifteen minutes early, as instructed by Pauline.

“Should we be beautiful but blurry or be ourselves?” Jen asks, hovering the mouse over the “touch up my appearance” button.

“Why would anyone want to be themselves?”

Their faces take on a ghostly but attractive haloed appearance as Jen clicks on the filter.

“Add me as co-host,” Pauline demands as soon as she joins them. Meredith fumbles with the settings ineffectually until Jen takes over. “I can’t wait for y’all to see the activities we came up with,” she continues as Claire joins them, and Meredith feels like crawling under the couch and dying.

The other guests—twenty in all—trickle into the “room” and awkwardly say hello. Meredith’s grandmother can’t figure out how to turn her camera on, and her aunt’s screen name is set to “Connie Lingus,” no doubt a result of sharing a computer with her seventeen-year-old son. Jen’s family is represented only by her sister and her cousin Kelly, and she can’t help but feel a stab of pain at her mother’s absence. But Dee’s there.

Pauline calls the shower to order by muting everyone, cutting off Meredith’s aunt—“I can’t imagine why he’d be calling himself ‘Connie.’” Apparently as co-host she has that power. She unfolds a piece of paper, no, multiple pieces of paper, and begins

to speak. Forcing an expression of goodwill onto her face, Meredith prepares not to listen.

Her cousin frames the shower as “celebration of love in these difficult times” and calls the baby a blessing from God. A message from Claire pops up on the screen. *More like a blessing from science and donor r528. Add me as co-host too, just in case.*

“Everyone uncross your legs,” Pauline says, and there’s some shuffling on the screen, though almost nobody’s legs are visible. “Our first game lasts the entire shower.” She explains that “in honor of” the mother-to-be’s doubtlessly constant need to pee, they’ll be holding a contest: who can go the longest without crossing their legs. The winner gets a ten-dollar iTunes gift certificate as well as the glory.

Jen looks at Meredith pleadingly, clearly desperate to tell the story.

“I mean the pun alone,” she’d said as they’d rearranged the presents for the fourth time before logging on.

“Pun?”

“Accident and *accident*.”

“Oh my god.”

“At least let me tell Dee.”

“No.”

Meredith sees Claire lean forward and a moment later the words *I’m sorry!* appear in the chat box. *I tried, I swear I did.*

“Stand up, Meredith,” Pauline says.

Meredith stands.

“Come closer.”

She moves forward.

“Closer.”

She takes another step.

“Now lift your shirt up and show us that baby bump! We’re taking bets on how big it is.”

This is exactly the thing Meredith hates about being pregnant, the constant attention paid to her body, the assumption that it’s public property. The same woman who warned Meredith about cats had reached across the aisle of the light-rail and lain her hand on top of Meredith’s stomach so nonchalantly that it made her wonder if she was crazy for being uncomfortable.

But was there any other situation in which her cousin would be demanding that she show a large group of women—she barely even *knows* Jen’s sister—her stomach?

Meredith’s mother stares at her through the screen, not at her stomach but at her face. She’s always been able to tell when her daughter’s upset, the tightness around the nose and lips, the way she can’t sustain eye contact, are dead giveaways. What she cannot tell, what she has *never* been able to tell with Meredith, is why or what to do about it. There’s something about her that’s always been just out of reach; they have a good relationship, they *do*, but still it breaks her heart. It was the same with Meredith’s father. She pours more wine, and thinks about all the hundreds of hours she’s spent failing to understand the people she loves.

Meredith suffers Jen to wrap a tape measure across her belly. Eighteen-and-a-half inches. Their friend Shauna wins, which figures; she’s an engineer. And the games go on.

Jen is surprisingly great at matching the guests to their baby pictures and Meredith finds that she is able to complete more nursery rhymes than she expected. Photos of her at various ages are displayed. They tell the tarot card story after someone asks when they found out they were pregnant and, as always, it’s a hit. The whole thing is like being in hell.

Even on Zoom, Claire can see how exhausted Meredith is, how on edge, so she rushes everyone to the gift-opening portion of the evening. Pauline sends her a text “reminding” her that they skipped Baby Charades, which she ignores. What is wrong with that woman? She turns off her camera, opens the window, and lights up a cigarette. At least with the shower being on Zoom she can smoke.

Every onesie, every copy of *Pat the Bunny* or *Goodnight Moon* or *Corduroy* has to be held up and exclaimed over. Jen and Meredith take turns. Jen rips everything open with speed and ferocity, leaving curls of ribbon and crumpled wrapping paper festooned with bears or baby bottles in a pile at her feet. Meredith’s equally eager to get things over with, but her fingers are clumsy and for some reason she feels the need to take the tissue paper out of every gift bag and refold it for later use.

A message from her mother pops up on the screen. *Are you okay?*

Dee's gift, the one she'd dropped off just an hour before the shower, comes about halfway through the stack. Jen quickly unties the glitter-trimmed ribbon and tears through what seems to be Christmas wrapping paper—so Dee—to a box depicting a toaster oven.

"It's not a toaster oven," Dee's newish girlfriend, Gillian, calls out from over Dee's shoulder. "Keep going."

Jen fetches a kitchen knife, cuts through the brown packaging tape, and pulls a stuffed elephant out of the box. She pauses before she hands it to Meredith. It's not just any stuffed elephant: it's a Fluffywuffy.

The internet has unanimously declared Fluffywuffy the best stuffed animals in the history of time. Non-toxic, made from ethically sourced cotton, and "soft as clouds," or so says the tagline, they cost at least \$60 at Pottery Barn. The gift is adorable and frivolous and exactly the kind of thing Meredith loves but feels too guilty to purchase. It's perfect and it must've just killed Dee, who is both exceedingly practical and somewhat cheap, to buy it. Jen mouths a thank you at her friend through the screen and hopes she can tell just how grateful, how touched, she is. And perhaps she can, because Dee smiles sheepishly and shrugs.

Meredith looks at the unnaturally blue elephant, the gentle waves of his plush. Though his eyes are just thread and are set back deep in its fluffy head, they seem expectant, as if he's waiting for her to say something profound, to explain something he desperately needs to know. He doesn't stand like a regular elephant but sits with his hind legs outstretched and his front feet placed playfully between them. Meredith brings one of his large, floppy ears to her face. It's ridiculously soft, like clouds, just the way they say, and she knows it's stupid, so so stupid that this, *this* stuffed toy is the thing that's going to break her, but she's imagining coming home from the hospital, childless and trailing a silent Jen, to find this cashmere-creamy elephant looking at her from an empty crib with his question-eyes, and she doesn't see how she can live with it and her stomach begins

to convulse with the sobs that she's been holding back since the parking garage.

Claire snaps into action instantly, turning on her camera and taking over without even removing the cigarette from her mouth. She mutes Meredith, fairly shouts that Aunt Peggy has won the "don't cross your legs" game—the woman actually looks quite pleased about this and raises her glass as though she's about to toast her victory—claps her hands, and clicks "End Meeting for All" just as Pauline opens her mouth. She spills ash all over the keyboard.

In another city, hundreds of miles away, Meredith's mother reaches reflexively toward the computer screen, wanting to put her hand through the glass and wires and chips, through whatever it would take to reach her daughter. And, of course, she can't. Again.

Much closer, Dee closes her laptop, sighs, and turns to Gillian, who she's starting to think might be the one even though she doesn't believe in *the one*. "I really thought she'd like it."

Gillian sits on Dee's lap and kisses her. "I'm sure she loves it. And if she doesn't, she can return it and get sixty-five dollars. And who doesn't love sixty-five dollars?"

Only a few blocks away, Claire picks up her phone but remembers that Meredith has Jen, that she doesn't need her right now, that to call would, in fact, be intrusive. She lights another cigarette and texts Jeremy, knowing that it's a stupid move, knowing that he'll probably overstay his welcome, that he'll probably make her listen to whatever his new favorite band is for *hours* and wander around her apartment in tighty-whities and a sweater or some equally dumb outfit until two p.m. the next day and eat all her Triscuits. But it seems better than nothing, better than being alone.

Things turn out okay and not okay. The blood pressure medication works and Meredith never develops preeclampsia. She not only carries the baby to term, but a week past her due date, barely avoids being induced. Meredith assures Dee, repeatedly, far past Dee's patience, that she loves the Fluffy-wuffy, which she does. As Constance, she marries Mr. Ashcroft

in Regency Love and, according to the text that scrolls across the screen over a picture of the two of them looking out over a mountain vista, they live a happy though childless life together and she becomes best friends with his sister.

Meredith and Jen tell parts of the story but never the whole thing. Meredith describes the scene at the mechanic's in great detail, tripling the number of crosses in the office and emphasizing Jerry's short stature until she decides that's cruel, and in subsequent tellings he's six-foot-two. Jen eventually persuades Meredith to let her tell Dee about the accident/accident, but no one else. They occasionally recount a version of the baby shower, a comedic romp about hormones—aren't they crazy?—but only Dee and Claire ever know about the possible preeclampsia.

Three days after the Fluffywuffy, who they call Barry, takes up residence in Jen and Meredith's bedroom, Texas passes the rumored mask ordinance, which makes Meredith feel hopeful for a couple of days, but nationwide the coronavirus numbers go up and up and up, FBI agents are sent to Portland and Seattle, and half the country erupts in flames. A grand jury in Kentucky declines to bring charges against the officers who shot Breonna Taylor in her home two hours before Dr. Vaswani—who Meredith has come to quite like—crouches between her legs as she gives birth to a baby girl while worrying that Trump will refuse to leave office if Biden is elected and that she's going to test positive for Covid-19 and be separated from her newborn the way she saw on the news. Inspired by the aspirational names of eighteenth century—or more accurately of Regency Love—after a great deal of bickering and compromise, Meredith and Jen call their daughter, this life they decided to create, this person that they hopefully, foolishly, decided to bring into the world despite everything they know about it, despite everything, Mercy.



I want to write you something like the bend
of light in our room in the morning, the smell

of your clothes after work, your rough clean hands.
Like the sun fracturing so red through your car's

back window driving home from the beach, winding
Florida highway over low water like a road in a dream
and you, drenched in golden hour, shoulder blade

freckles like starmatter, your accidental muscles
dappling and your dark green voice
saying how you love the ocean

but not like our room and home meaning to arrive
at each other's bodies and finally lay down,
hair harsh with salt, the unmade sheets

like a foam-roiled wave receding
silver-thin from the shore, and all of this blinding me.
But I'll probably only begin to know

how to write about you when we're already over.
We have each left so many selves behind to get here.
I'm not foolish enough anymore to think this shedding

ever stops. It is easier for me to bring us to the dmt
smoked on a fire escape in pouring thunder when I was 19

and the rainbow sandstorm of musical symmetry
that followed, than to explain you looking at me
from the doorway of the kitchen. Easier to show

the spiderweb bedecked in suburban rain those summers
of my hounding neurosis, my mother called the cops
on me every night, than to write anything like a vow

or your name. Instead, let me show the northern lights:
how you lay on your back over a frozen lake in Alaska

before we ever met, you said it looked
like the silhouettes of huge strangers

passing before a gossamer neon curtain.
My tongue stupidly believes the roof of your mouth
is larger than that sky. But maybe the body of my now

and the body of your now, when we have flown them
and they fall away behind us like husks, will hitch together

the way the cicada shells we saw clung to the trees,
those small ornately-decorated emptinesses. And maybe

the memory of that day on the beach, how the two
of them walked far away from everyone, the wind

so loud in their ears, how she stood with her arms crossed
in a hoodie and just bottoms and he cracked the beers with his keys.
Maybe it will all remain in the consciousness of the dirt.

The way you cannot feel the planet turn or tilt but suddenly a day
or month is over—I lay watching you in the morning

as we change imperceptibly

out of ourselves. My father
once told me love is a mountain

some part of you climbs and never descends.
Did he mean that you're less after? Or by being divided

much more? God is merciless
in her dispensing of beauty but somehow, we endure.

**YOU SAY I LOOK HAPPY IN A PHOTOGRAPH FROM
WHEN WE WERE APART
AND I THINK**

of the royal blue lagoon of my bed.
Wide ashen meadows of Friday nights I
somehow crossed
bare feet stripped raw on that heather. Dawn was the tug of
stitches in my mute flesh. I was
a badland—heart like that predictable singular cow skull,
dry wind whistling
through the eye-holes and jagged snout.

To no avail I implored anything but the kitchen knife
to gleam. Each lace panty was a coffin
I threw in the sea.
How the lavender pale
eyeshadow and blood-colored blush dusted away
among imploded letters of half truths
and truce.
See, I caught your love like
a ricochet bullet
just when I thought I was safe, pouting violently like the bad
boyfriends in movies,
regretful and spoiled. But without even ambition enough
to show up
to your new valentine's house all leather jacket and switchblade,
without the energy to punch holes
through drywall.

My red lipstick stood on the bureau uncapped that year
a zoo animal chewing its cud, a small giant
tiger left in its cage at the end of the world.

While we were apart, in the
shower it was acceptable
to say your name into the clatter. To hide my face
as the train car
barreled out of underground darkness and became a capsule
of light.

For my mouth to fill with venom
if anyone bothered kissing me.

And when
my niece and I walked through the
park, early June
swinging our clasped hands, she hummed that
certain childhood ballad
which coasts into dreaming: *If I.. know you . . . I know . . .
what you'll do . . .* she stopped suddenly
and asked where you were. I looked around—each
insect lit gold
by the falling sun was a word I used to hold inside me.

LOVE LETTER TO MYSELF AT SIXTEEN

How beautiful you look mid-fall
driving out to the radio tower hills
with someone you hardly know
and parking up. The distant night city

a studded black leather jacket.
You, in a headdress of lit cigarettes.
Your rage, a flammable ocean.
How can I console you?

Your menarche was a maroon convertible
that plowed through the living room wall.
Your menarche, a red kite ripped away.
Categorically late like your mother's,

staining your hands like a crime,
your menarche was a note inked
on silk, crumpled half-written.
Year like a wedding gown

doused in kerosene, your virginity
in an unmarked grave. You cut class.
And yourself. And the headlights
and drive, music turned up

like a chemical bath. Your father's
death makes each cigarette

like kissing, deliciously, his killer.
The girls at school are a hoard

of cannibal monarchs, & you, blue
morpho whore, getting the spins
in the mirror, dysmorphic & lost,
that straightjacket cocoon.

How many lovely birds can you
wound with the thrown stone
of your body? In the backseat slithering
out of a fake snakeskin skirt,

watching the boys skate
on the edge of the emptied pool.
Sated, on the verge of starving
for anyone's desire. Your bedroom

at the end of a long tunnel,
the ketamine made your own name
sound strange, benzos made your body
bearable. Not even I can reach you.

Catatonic in your favorite shoplifted
highlighter-orange nail polish
and those bamboo hoops
the gold rubbed off of.

I still root for you, still worry
at your chances. How each night
in the woods of your soul
a gang of hounds hunts a deer.
She escapes them

mostly, nimble & practiced.
But then some nights
falls among them
like drowning in hunger.

NIGHTBLOOM

Why tell someone the nightmares where they harmed you?
Blonde eyelash, morning dark with rain, every moment of lostness
was the finding. On the living room couch, fingers locked
inside my body, you asked *Did you miss this?* Blue pyromania
of your stare carving a shrine in me by kaleidoscope.
How whales feel weightless all their lives, I watched
from the bedroom your slim silhouette in the shower
like someone struggling through snow. My ass cheek craved
its bitemark. In my old bedroom, buoyant third floor
gloom, your mouth like hot wax sealing an envelope
of secret royal matter. You like to lean back and observe
my heathen glossolalia, scratching and pulling your hair
like I need something from you. I need something from you.
You know I missed this, and long before I saw its outline
black against the guessing newborn sky.
I used to bike through the thrown knives of city lights
after work, drunk, nostrils gritty with stardust as every
possible death honked its horn, swerved around. Skullfucked
by the noise in my headphones, daring violence, glowing yellow
face of the bell tower clock was a nauseous second moon
its hands like scissors cutting expensive bolts of time
wrapped neatly, delivered to oblivion. I was numb not brave.
We were blind asteroids barreling toward each other
across the ghostly pink nebula of childhood
through the dark eons slept on the bathroom floor
my soul, unconscious and churning, expelled a prayer

that was more like a gasp, like a trapped animal
vocalizing loneliness, I had no word yet for this:
cove of your jaw, neck, collarbone, that sacred constellation.
May I mourn the present? I miss you even as I look at you,
as my hair swirls over your chest in the night like ivy
climbing a castle wall. Our favorite drinking game:
the ten of cups turned over. Stars firing, irises opening
chrysanthemum boy, what do I look like when I'm gone?

They say you can save
your own life with what you make.

They say this, Telemachus.

Each night
I take the loom apart
in darkness, but not
because I need him

in these gardens—only
because I know now
what the doomed know:
we are only as sacred as what unmakes us.

Say his name
when you go to bed, Telemachus.
Then leave me, let me

say this to your father:

Child—you are
a child, aren't you—
I walk now
by these dark and hardened waters

and I pity you
the last days of your voyage.

For surely
you have long ago discovered it,

long ago
though the wind lives
to afflict you, long ago

though the dark
is every harbor, long ago

though you've broken
far from home.

Listen. Listen. Listen:

there are the wild things
the sirens sing
to take us

and the burning things
the Circes dream
to keep us

and the little hymn
the living live
with the living

where to go to what you are is not to go.

LATE HYMN

Sooner or later you will have to do it.
Go in. Open
the heavy door of childhood

and listen
to the same wind in the linens; listen
as it brings you to the bed again,

as you lie down
in the ruins of the new moon,
the new moon

with its bitter taste
of ashes, the tattered moon
with its silks

that bid you stay.
This
is the same moon, the moon of youth,

like all the heavy halters of a breaker.
This is the place
where the fear came, where it broke your life

like common bread
in darkness,

where it opened you

to the new moon in its changes. This
is where you gave your life
away.

Listen. Be still
and listen. Unlasting, at last,
is what you have now—

—And when you lie down
in the ruins
of this new moon, when you rise up

and stand again
in tatters,
look back

at the old ghosts
in the coldness,
the darkened house

of shadows as you close it,
as you open
to the spring wind

in the grasses, the cold road
you will walk, now, to its ending—
through the new

moon, through its ruins, through its music,
and as far as its changes will take you
toward the great

and the changed place
of the saved ones
where to live this life and sing it are the same.

INVENTORY

This is what we have.
The hawk calling in the dark forest.
The hands of our lovers,
resting on our chests as we sleep.

And more.
The spring wind
waking us again
like all the bridles of childhood
dragged across our bodies,
still warm from the wild things that were broken in them.

The brokenness
is what we have.
That, too.

At the edge
of the road,
the doe curls in sawgrass
where the wreckage left her.

No one is alone on this wild earth.

Let sorrow come.
Let the rain fall

on the cold doe in the open

where she crumbles in the coming rush
of trouble.

Let the heart
do
what it must do, ruined

as the wintered lips of the broken
doe,

but opening,
sniffing the pistol.

After Hurricane Ida

We came to handle fallen trees,
their bark and branches howls now faint,

just having breathed their final swirl:
their knotty selves ready for us

or ready for a final shaking
of life from leaf to limb; it takes

a moment, just exhale the beauty
onslaught atop the roofs above.

We awe at broken walls and trunks,
lament the way we've come to hold

ourselves— like hardwood, holy and true.
In truth, they end up cracking first,

because of their inflexibility.
In truth, it's nothing to do with height

and everything to do with earth
but mostly groundwater, the braids

of rain to river beneath this haze.
The lovely couple whose house was cleared,

they offered electricity
and bottled water. This is why

we came: to wander floodwaters,
to find the living and the dead

among these tributaries
and taste the taste of purest storm.

NEAR FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT'S SPRING HOUSE

Tallahassee, FL

Every morning when I push aside
my bedroom curtain, I see green
bananas, their curved true stem weighs
down the tree's neck. It hangs lower

than the day before, male flowers
begin brushing the shrubbery beneath
in light wind— I wonder if my neighbor
Cooper even knows they're ripe now.

My other neighbor Chelle hacks down
her entire tree when harvesting bananas.
They only come in every few years, she says
while stroking the bark. They're sticky too.

There are things you learn as a home-
owner in Florida coming from the West
deserts. Lemon trees, for instance, come
like roses, heavy and thick with thorns.

My lemons are acting weird this year;
they're not falling like they should be,
even when I take it at the branches, though
they're full, plum-covered with dust—

A landscaper once said my lemon tree
was planted too close to my driveway.
*Why did they plant your figs so close to the house
anyway?* He went on and on about them.

Manny, who lives on the corner,
told me about the man who once owned
my house, how he shot & killed himself
in my front yard. After a quick inhale,

I said, *My house and property have been blessed.*
And thanked him for waiting at least a year
before telling me this. Maybe that's why
the guy before me planted an entire garden

in the front yard. *It looked funny,* Chelle said.
But it grew really well. He planted everything,
she said, tomatoes, raspberries, strawberries.
One year the guy planted a small cornfield

and Chelle thought she saw a crop circle.
Manny told me about the other corner
man who swore aliens took over the body
of his brother, shaking him violently

until the paramedics arrived. About how
the now overgrown molded blue house
once thrived as a makeshift café, where
fishermen would bring their fresh catches

from Lake Jackson, just at the road's end,
to be fried up. There'd be cars parked
all up and down Waterline; you couldn't
hardly get into your driveway. And Miss Rita,

boy, she was one heck of cook! She'd fry up
those fish & hushpuppies like it was nothing,
then boil up some grits & greens for your plate.

Course she had lots of practice being a carnie
for all those years, after her parents gave her up,
half of her siblings too! That was during
the Depression time. They could only afford
to feed 7 of the 14 of them. The rest, well—

maybe it's why she took in all those prostitutes,
didn't want no one feeling left out, the way
she was all those years ago. Yeah,
those were some tough years, Manny said

before going on about the peach orchard
that once thrived where Coop's house
now sits—

where Coop's banana tree overhangs
the fence into my yard, heavy with fruit.

school in an oversized cinderblock. O how I wanted
slingshots and moon pies, a house of cards
with fifteen triangular eyes. A stop-
motion fox who can dig his way
from thievery. All this as I grimace at the dab
of her cotton ball and pastels start to run.

CONTRIBUTORS

Tacey M. Atsitty, Diné (Navajo), is Tsénahabílnii (Sleep Rock People) and born for Ta'neeszahnii (Tangle People). She is a recipient of the Truman Capote Creative Writing Fellowship, the Corson-Browning Poetry Prize, Morning Star Creative Writing Award, and the Philip Freund Prize. She holds bachelor's degrees from Brigham Young University and the Institute of American Indian Arts, and an MFA in Creative Writing from Cornell University. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *POETRY*, *EPOCH*, *Kenyon Review Online*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Crazyhorse*, *New Poets of Native Nations*, and other publications. Her first book is *Rain Scald* (University of New Mexico Press, 2018). She is the director of the Navajo Film Festival, poetry judge for the Eggtooth Editions Chapbook Contest, a member of Advisory Council for BYU's Charles Redd Center for Western Studies, a member of the board for *Lightscatter Press* and founding member for the Intermountain All-Women Hoop Dance Competition at This is the Place Heritage Park. She is a PhD student at Florida State University and lives in Tallahassee with her husband.

Anthony Borruso is pursuing his Ph.D. in Creative Writing at Florida State University where he is a Poetry Editor for *Southeast Review*. He has been a Pushcart Prize nominee and was selected as a finalist for *Beloit Poetry Journal's* Adrienne Rich Award by Natasha Trethewey. His poems have been published or are forthcoming in *The American Journal of Poetry*, *Beloit Poetry Journal*, *Pleiades*, *Spillway*, *The Journal*, *THRUSH*, *Moon City Review*, *decomp*, *Frontier*, and elsewhere.

Joseph Fasano is a poet, novelist, and songwriter. His novels include *The Swallows of Lunetto* (forthcoming from Maudlin House, 2022) and *The Dark Heart of Every Wild Thing* (Platypus Press, 2020), which was named one of the “20 Best Small Press Books of 2020.” His books of poetry include *The Crossing* (2018), *Vincent* (2015), *Inheritance* (2014), and *Fugue for Other Hands* (2013). His honors include The Cider Press Review Book Award, the Rattle Poetry Prize, inclusion in the Forward Book of Poetry, and a nomination for the Poets’ Prize, “awarded annually for the best book of verse published by a living American poet two years prior to the award year.” His writing has been translated into Russian, Ukrainian, Lithuanian, Spanish, Chinese, Swedish, and other languages. He serves on the Editorial Board of Alice James Books and as the Founder and Curator of the Poem for You Series. He is currently writing a “living poem” for his son and posting it on Twitter at @stars_poem.

Matt Hart is the author of nine books of poems, including most recently *Everything Breaking/for Good* and *The Obliterations*. Additionally, his poems, reviews, and essays have appeared or are forthcoming in numerous print and online journals, including *Big Bell*, *Columbia Poetry Review*, *Harvard Review*, *jubilat*, *Lungfull*, *Mississippi Review*, *POETRY*, and *Waxwing*, among others. His awards include a Pushcart Prize, a grant from The Shifting Foundation, and fellowships from the Bread Loaf Writers’ Conference. He was a co-founder and the editor-in-chief of *Forklift, Ohio: A Journal of Poetry, Cooking & Light Industrial Safety* from 1993-2019. Currently, he lives in Cincinnati where he teaches at the Art Academy of Cincinnati and plays in the band NEVERNEW.

Jess Booth was born in Basking Ridge, New Jersey. They are currently studying at Maryland Institute College of Art and working towards a Bachelor’s of Fine Arts in painting. Jess works in oil on canvas, using small scale clay sculptures as reference for their paintings. Their work reflects an interest in interpersonal relationships and how people communicate through the sense of touch. They have been included in various exhibitions including *Combustion* in the Lazarus building at MICA and *Virtu-*

ally Beside You, a virtual exhibition. This year, Jess will be finishing thesis and graduating class of 2022. Jessica Booth currently lives and works in Baltimore.

Matthew Lippman's collection *Mesmerizingly Sadly Beautiful* (2020) is published by Four Way Books. It was the recipient of the 2018 Levis Prize. His next collection, *We Are Sleeping With Our Sneakers On*, will be published by Four Way Books in 2024.

Jude Marr is a Pushcart-nominated nonbinary poet who writes to survive. Jude's first full-length collection, *We Know Each Other By Our Wounds*, came out from Animal Heart Press in 2020 and they also have a chapbook, *Breakfast for the Birds*, from Finishing Line Press in 2017. Their work has appeared in many journals, including *Kissing Dynamite*, *Cherry Tree*, *Harbor Review* and *SWWIM*. Jude recently relocated back to the UK after 10 years of living, teaching, and learning in the US.

Monica McClure is the author of *Tender Data* (Birds, LLC, 2015), *Concomitance* (Counterpath Press, 2016), *Boss Parts 1& 2* (If A Leaf Falls Press, 2016), *Mala* (Poor Claudia, 2014), and *Mood Swing* (Snacks Press 2013).

Sarah E. Robinson is a fiction writer from New Mexico and Texas. She received her MFA from the University of Houston, where she served as fiction editor for *Gulf Coast*, and is currently pursuing her PhD at Florida State University. Her work is forthcoming in the *Cincinnati Review*.

Aimee Seu is the author of *Velvet Hounds*, winner of The Akron Poetry Prize. She graduated from the University of Virginia Creative Writing MFA Poetry Program in 2020 as a Poe/Faulkner Fellow where she was recipient of the 2019 Academy of American Poets Prize. Other awards she's received include the 2020 Los Angeles Review Poetry Award, the 2020 Henfield Prize for Fiction, the 2016 Academy of American Poets Prize at Temple University, the Temple University 2016 William Van Wert Award, and the Mills College Undergraduate Poetry Award. She was a semifinalist in

the 2019 New Guard Vol. IX Knightville Poetry Contest judged by Richard Blanco and a finalist for the 2020 Black Warrior Poetry Prize judged by Paul Tran. Her poetry, fiction and nonfiction have appeared or have forthcoming publications in Ninth Letter, Pleiades, Los Angeles Review, BOAAT, Redivider, Raleigh Review, Diode, Minnesota Review, Blacklist, Adroit, Harpur Palate, and Runestone Magazine. She is a Philadelphia native currently living in Tallahassee where she is a Poetry PhD student at Florida State University.



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