

Tin Lunchbox Review, Vol. 2 No. 1, 2017-2018

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# The Tin Lunchbox

Feed Your Brain

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## *A Few Days before the Apocalypse*

Vivian Wagner

No matter what, the dog needs walked.  
Towers might crumble, democracy fall,  
but the dog needs walked.  
The news might flash with fire,  
the National Guard might march the streets,  
opioids might creep into families,  
a father might shoot himself,  
electric bills might be unpaid,  
skin cancer cells might proliferate,  
stock markets might crash,  
students might lose their flash drives,  
once-imaginary walls might be built,  
and all the worst words might find voice.  
Still, though, the dog waits by the worn oak door,  
tail wagging, expecting this one good thing.

## ***None of Us Knows What Love Is***

C.L. Bledsoe

In the waiting room, there's a TV. Watching it is even sadder than reading the fashion magazines, the money magazines, the health magazines. The show that's on today is about rednecks who send in films of them and their friends maiming themselves and destroying property in the stupidest ways they can imagine. People who are famous for destroying their lives in similar ways dress up in costumes and sing songs about how stupid these people are. I wonder what it's like to laugh without being watched. When I'm done with my appointment, I go outside. A truck pulls up beside me with an American flag in the rear window. Everything the driver owns was made in another country, including the flag. The people who made them can't pay their rent either.

# *I Took Another MindRide Last Night*

P.W. Covington

Black room dark with mirrors where I stood  
With suddenly Asian features  
Younger, full cheeked and erstwhile  
I changed into a beautiful woman  
Then a grotesque one, then an aboriginal child  
Smiling

I saw myself from inside of the husk  
Worn by a dying Nordic beast  
Adrenal overload threw me to the ground  
And I crawled closer to the mirror  
Mirror with no edge or end  
Placed my eye directly on the glass  
I was seated on a bed in early winter

The full and solemn peace of high ordeal, satisfied  
Came to me  
The drug high of The Fear  
That raged before was gone  
I knew that somewhere near  
An erotic cabaret was playing  
I heard Ella Fitzgerald reading the poetry of Katie Hoerth  
Kittens, lapping milk, could be sensed  
Along with the barnyard calliope of commuter trains  
Shrimp were being served on the flight deck

Axial tilt realizations  
It was Girl Scout cookie season

“You don’t have to be here when you die”  
The voices told me in conspiracy  
“Some of us haven’t checked back in for years.”

## *Ode to Routine*

Eric Howard

Mr. Sand climbs the back stairs to his desk  
and wrinkles his face at the hourglass  
that mocks his deadlines in grainy burlesque  
of time that spins his pallets of laughing gas  
and oxygen away from the right docks.  
His frozen computer won't scrape  
the barnacles from clocks  
across the region. He cannot escape  
the Operations boss coming his way.  
Sweaty clouds besiege his balding castle  
but can't make boxes walk or dollars pray  
to stay where they are. He knew some hassle  
like this would come to blast his end-of-year.  
To sleep tonight, he'll need more pills and beer.

Dune Woman covers for someone sicker  
with more than a hundred orders to fill.  
Old fluorescent volts above her flicker  
as she pushes tons of paperwork uphill  
into the drawer where her head disappears.  
The folders of her devotion,  
a library of tears,  
will be recycled on March 31,  
soon after severance; all her invoices  
will feed the big shredder, and all those days  
spent making a dozen tiny choices  
will pass like decades of traffic in praise  
of Routine that drop-shipped her youth, the king  
of morning promises and their breaking.

Praise every employee of every week.  
The ghost we breathe, blood pressure, and heartbeat,  
you schedule the stars and hide where we seek  
fresh coffee and daydreams and find defeat.  
Hooray, *Dental Supplier News* Manager of the Month.  
Goodbye, *Dental Supplier News* Manager of the Month.



## *Cream of the Crop*

Sharon Goodier

The only time he ever rolled  
was out of a tavern  
ejected for raucous behaviour  
swearing or touching  
the waitress' pancake breast

He'd stumble home singing  
buddy songs, infantry ballads  
loneliness and the syllables  
colliding with memories  
illusion's feast

Home, he'd head for the toilet  
truth coming out both ends  
wipe, wash melt into the couch  
dream the wheat fields  
of his foreclosed farm  
snore, sputter, his motor  
flooded, drool seeking his chin

In the morning I'd find him there  
heavy head, holes in socks  
shirt stained yellow  
Halloween pumpkin grin  
no light inside

yelling for coffee  
lots of coffee  
like his life  
black, no sugar  
hold the cream

## ***Belated Elegy***

Howie Good

He must have really wanted to see Jesus. One bullet hit him in the chin. It knocked him sprawling on his back. I was surprised. I wondered how anyone could let that happen to himself. If it were now, you would have gone to the police, but there were no laws then. You pointed your camera without thinking about the act and effects of appropriation. We were ordered to leave. Oh well. Goodbye to the merry-go-world. Descendants of Marcel Duchamp sold snowballs on the street.

## *Comments Open*

Gary Glauber

You desire a new name  
for this reclaimed you,  
a fanfare of fresh introduction  
as slow fuse burns its  
metamorphic anticipation.  
Every day is a new year,  
a dawn of great expectation  
blossoming onto the nearest tree.  
This sculpted body, a project  
displayed digitally to all.  
The dance of success  
measured in individual hits -  
beats vs. heartbeats in syncopation,  
the closest we get to  
the thing once called love.  
Scroll down & unsubscribe  
from that green dress of springtime;  
trying hard to feel at ease,  
revealing the hidden message  
behind, beyond this sated state  
of tired transparency.

# *Memory*

Sharon Goodier

first casualty of stress

dog shedding hair

in summer heat

nerves          split ends

like too-teased hair

fractured sidewalk

info in cracks

we forget

the way ground

forgets grass

when snow falls

## *Sky Limit*

Kayla Dugan

Today I lifted  
above the sky.  
Tonight I may sink  
beneath the ground.  
I awake with hunger  
cravings coursing through  
my being.  
My skin can feel too  
tight.  
But it stretches over  
the day.  
It makes it hard to breathe  
when my skin is taunt.  
But when it is loose  
I slide right out of myself  
and what is left behind  
cannot always be found again.  
But it's not always worth finding.  
In some dreams I have  
taken over other bodies  
with powers undescribed  
in the morning I am back  
above the sky  
without my skin  
and it is tight when I go back in.  
And in my travels  
I have never known  
such a place  
like my own skin.  
For when I go  
I know I will  
be back again.  
Though I  
may not be the same  
as some can fly  
and some only run  
yet one thing  
we may compare  
and find we  
feel the same.  
It is that we question,  
Who am I?

## *Dancing in the Rain*

Frances Mihulec

Scent of petrichor  
Ignited by palms pressed and awkward  
Steps to a cacophony's beat  
Sloshing up water about our ankles  
While flashes blinded us  
And ancestors beat their dreams  
Seconds behind our rampaging hearts  
"1...2...3..." Boom, baby  
The flames in your eyes  
Suggested that your demons  
Recognized mine  
But we called it fireworks  
And sealed a contract  
With rain-soaked kisses  
From simmering coal lips

## *Jerusalem Café*

Tyler Robert Sheldon

After the road we throw in  
through dark cherry doors  
and oh  
it's the easiest thing in the world  
to skin dark olives with teeth  
or a drive with Friday KC traffic  
if you don't expect too much.

We draw out brush pens—  
rust, jet, midnight blue—  
to make a book. I start  
writing this poem.

Nothing here is for eyes alone.  
Pens change hands  
on the minute, and the waiter  
brings more bread, flat  
like welcoming hands.

We have here everything  
we need and we know it.  
We turn the pages, carry on.

## ***Northeast Well***

Anu Mahadev

in a placid enclave, dulcet whispers,  
a green patina of moss, lichen,  
chipped walls, a faux mask  
peels with bygone days. draped in fine  
lace cobwebs, occasionally targeted  
by a maverick coconut or papaya.  
a canopy of overhanging banana  
leaves and branches of drumstick  
trees cast their shadows on bushes  
of sugandhi, kanakambaram flowers.  
this ancient water cooler, a spot  
for the clink of copper pots, glass  
bangles and measured laughter,  
now - minerals float to the top  
of the inert surface. like my heart,  
once a fountainhead of unending  
water tables, now a caked veneer  
sits tranquil, oblivious to the hubbub  
surrounding its stone-lipped column.



# *Dystopia: The Musical*

Gary Glauber

In this heightened reality, minor chords  
convey present troubles, lyrical swells  
rise in measured dissonance, narrating  
historical chaos, where reality smothers dreams.

Romance helps stave off rife insanity,  
war's brutal dehumanizing ways & orders;  
brief meaningless pleasures blanket pain  
in illusory promises paid out in hours.

We watch as they are broken, incensed,  
world awash in tears. Still the search continues,  
a quick quandary where unthinkable things occur.  
No one expects a happy ending.

Lessons like lesions heal our wounded souls,  
expose our follies through showtunes meant  
to flourish in memory. We sing & dance as  
children's charms soften sharp edges.

Tonight's standing ovation comes  
from the protected safety of distance;  
such atrocities never touch their suburban haven.  
This bubble of false hope surrounds them,

yet terror is off-stage smirking,  
lurking in the wings.

## *Holding Dreams*

Kimberly DuBoise

I am holding my dreams close;  
I can see them shimmer in the light  
of my heart, its inner chamber  
warm with the golden glow of them.  
Every breath is an inhalation of hope,  
every exhalation a releasing of doubt.  
I must keep vigil on them-  
the dreams of my night-  
the hope of my day.  
To nurture them is my purpose,  
my joy and my peace.  
Watch me fly, watch me soar  
high as I hold onto my dreams.  
It shows I am awake.

## **No More Tears to Cry**

*from the Untitled photograph by Larry Fink, 1958*

Adrian Ernesto Cepeda

No words to confess  
as she slumped  
her face buried on my chest—  
a familiar place I loved feeling  
her breath but at that moment  
outside I felt nothing—no excuses  
left. She once saved accusations,  
setting off in my presence—  
waiting for her insinuation to cause  
implosions she loved untangling  
best. The only stars we saw in flights.  
There were no other faces, no friends,  
sans family we never strayed outside  
from under our covers until the blinds  
showed our shades, now we're standing  
in black and white. Sometimes I think  
she'll miss my lips. Our kisses always  
reached for colors that never could exist.  
In the morning, the front door was always  
open, the cold would chill and awaken us  
either she was leaving or I was looking  
for exits—despite each riff cranking  
our AM solos before the coffee simmered,  
all crème without her sugar; even our spooning  
that stirred us to rediscover this gift  
each night unwrapped we savored  
nakedly and sipped together, remains  
a consummation prize for this—  
our inconsolable rift.

## *In Translation*

P. W. Covington

She'd flick her ashes into  
A Dr. Pepper can  
Tell me she was  
The survivor of a suicide pact  
How she was raped, serving in the Navy  
Jumped ship in Spain  
And learned the language  
Traveled for decades without visas  
Fucking princes, painters, and heroin dealers

She took me to visit temples  
Abandoned  
Now that myth had overtaken religion  
Happy Donut shops  
Down the street from beat bookstores  
Introduced me to men that knew men  
That used to play piano in  
North Beach Bars

That airport bar in Dallas  
Outfield seats to see The Dead at Wrigley  
Day drinking martinis on Frenchman Street  
For lack of a better plan

Her poetry stands up to the turning of pages  
But she understood  
That she'd always be  
Most appreciated

In translation

## ***Arts and Métiers Metro***

Malik Crumpler

*Shit!* he says walking on  
a gold street with mansions.  
*This is no place for a poet.*

How can it be heaven without  
a hemlock blocking out the sun  
while blocking in perfect quiet?  
Li Bei says he died trying  
to embrace beauty. That should  
count for something in the afterlife,  
at least a drink.

Give him a river bank and fireflies.  
Surely that can be provided in a place  
that gets rave reviews

for bliss. Angel Gabriel  
says no one writes poems in Heaven.  
With all mysteries solved, there's no need.  
He's wrong. There's always need,  
great need, always.

## *Cowrie*

Anu Mahadev

beach shell, brittle  
caught in a tidal swell  
flung onto thorium-striated  
black sand, empty.

Arabian sea, conch-bearer

of mollusks -

what rises in your crest,

what sinks in your trough?

orange rose blush is this sunset,

a syrup of muscovado.

my family - four generations, the youngest

in the water's spritz, the oldest

far off on a concrete bench.

the rest scattered in the sand,

each one a step closer to the fizz

of sea salt, a step further from verity.

## ***Grasping Ahold of Her Distance***

*From Dialog, 1973 photograph by Rudolf\_Bonvie*  
Adrian Ernesto Cepeda

Waiting on mattress  
wide, vast spaces of  
thread counts for her  
to reach over, with fingers  
awakening a touch. Her  
hand on mine, no lips,  
no hips, nothing else  
tracing my skin. Just hints  
of electricity, spark within  
the grip of her clutching—  
so soft and yet slipping—  
try beseeching her by  
brushing heat my arms do  
reach, as she turns over, her  
as those same fingers  
reaching somewhere lower  
with eyelids she swims,  
pretending to sleep,  
she drips in concentration  
with her thoughts of him—  
I cannot compete; although  
we're naked, I'm the only  
one rippling ignited, feeling  
her drifting back, still  
blanketing a distance  
from the crease of our  
ruffled dialog— I hear  
the silence between us  
so much wider on her  
side of the sheets.

## ***Reality Bought and Sold***

Kayla Dugan

Step right up!  
Would you like to see  
A little thing called reality?  
it's rare to find  
and harder to know  
this idea called truth.  
take a pill  
and see splintered visions  
that dance and move.  
They might change colors  
out of the corner of your eye.  
Wiggle and whirl  
making you feel out of control.  
Pills are bitter  
they might show you  
how control is just an illusion  
swallow them with care.  
Maybe you might like  
to toss back a bottle  
or two with liquid heat  
that makes the world sway.  
Some think it makes problems go away  
but it may cause some to  
find themselves places they  
have never gone and a part of them  
comes to call home.  
Maybe smoke is the way  
you want to be light headed  
clear as day this inhalation  
shows deviation from the norm  
between dragons and balloons  
higher and higher  
climb through the sky.  
If you believe that I have lied  
no refunds for tickets bought.  
For we deal in reality  
and illegalities.  
Because every truth has a price  
if you are ready  
step right up and pay yours.



## *Nature and Resistance*

Sharon Goodier

November  
trees groan  
louder and louder  
Power saw wind rips off leaves, branches  
Everywhere the struggle to hold on  
    one more hour, day, week

I stomp the barren ground  
beneath my feet  
leave no boot print  
on the already frozen face of earth

Brazen wind  
freezes the homeless  
refugees in camps  
citizens who can't afford heat

Everywhere the struggle to hold on  
Beneath a dying oak  
three leaves of a shamrock  
conjure the luck of Irish survivors  
downtrodden for centuries

Can't freeze hope  
One more hour, day, week  
– all we need to stand up green  
resilient, unstoppable  
    every time we yell  
    into the gathering storm

Enough!

## OBE

Tyler Robert Sheldon

“...an unusual group of experiences occasionally reported by some people awakening after general anesthesia.”

–Australian anesthesiologist G.M. Woerlee

In the operating room where we learn  
about cold metal and the flavors of gas,  
a surgeon saves his first patient  
finally from some malady (we  
also learn the man’s family had  
prepared a tombstone) and collapses  
to the table like a lung. The patient  
will resurface soon. He knows  
exactly how the surgeon’s eyes  
flickered like lamps, full  
with half-lit fire. He breathes  
not a word to anyone, but floats  
above his doctor’s shoulder,  
last actor in a dark theater  
where the curtain holds itself up.

## *She Longed to be Turned into Exquisite Literature*

Adrian Ernesto Cepeda

You know the kind  
that drips off the page,  
scents rise from her  
skin lines reflecting  
volumes, intimacy  
of voices recalling  
you, the reader,  
there in the room  
with her, she wants you—  
needs you to watch  
how I relit our moment,  
the first night, after  
spilling wine on the carpet  
as the logs on the fire  
under the painting  
of two naked lovers  
stared at us. That's  
where we started,  
part of me is still  
there, where she left  
me. I remember walking  
upstairs with nothing  
but her lipstick stains,  
glowing against my skin,  
candles lit each love  
scar until I found  
her open on the bed,  
like a book ready  
to be devoured—  
bookmark me,  
she whispered,  
leave each sentence  
ear-bent, flashing  
exclamations nakedly  
like the cover starlet  
flashing short cuts to  
*Quiet Days in Clichy*;  
she longed to be  
immortalized  
in chapters climaxing  
between each volume  
some nights, if I reach

hardbound, from the bed—  
I find her open,  
still flexible spine;  
she remains—  
so well re-read.

# Consolation Prize

Malik Crumpler

It took eight years  
to build what is demolished  
with one Republican senator's signature  
everything, again as it always was  
that immature cloak of alternative  
cultural change hangs burning in effigy  
no more conservative apparitions  
Those haints are as real as the crowns bank  
no more polite criticisms or apologies  
Those haints twerk sadistically in legislation  
no more empathy for underprivileged targets  
Those haints vow to disembowel all *Others*  
no more irrational pleading to a deaf democracy  
that your life matters when legislatively  
you never have nor will you ever be  
more than 3/5 human and 2/5 public enemy  
hemorrhaging energy about your damaged identities  
as unfortunate survivors of an endless class war,  
wherein peace is illegal for you sloppy illegitimate  
children of ancient aristocracies whose kingdoms are sand  
you 21<sup>st</sup> century slaves of silicon plantations,  
overseen by machines everything swiped & scanned  
may your brain be washed cleaner than your empty hands  
may your soul be drowned in the black gold coursing  
beneath your forever lost lands  
while companies colonize countries  
so all remains as the colony commands  
meanwhile we retreat to virtual fantasies  
forever liking & sharing our favorite brands

## ***Exit Strategy***

Gary Glauber

From the edge we see  
the depths of the canyon.  
It is a long trek down,  
and already we're racing sunset.  
Better to depart back  
through forest trail,  
follow long shadows  
beneath evergreen canopy,  
searching for peace  
and a way to forget  
between the prowling  
of angry hawks.  
They fly toward oblivion,  
refusing to be tamed,  
true to feral instincts,  
while we meander,  
pondering a catalogue of sins  
destined to define us,  
irresponsible explorers  
in this lifetime of regret.

## ***Weather Photographer Visits Class***

*for Stephen Locke*

Tyler Robert Sheldon

and we all flash, released static,  
while he unpacks,  
sets his camera on the long table  
with its wide lens staring.

“Photographs are just piles  
of electric mush the shade  
of this carpet,” Stephen says, “until  
developed.” He brushes fingertips  
through beige, cocks a brow  
like he’s saying ya dig?  
Stephen rides this talk  
easy in the harness.  
He doesn’t mess around.

He shows still shots  
stitched into video vivid as rain.  
The biggest twisters  
have sidekick vortices  
which whip into that helix  
that shotgunned Dorothy to Oz.  
Stephen shows the cyclone  
he’s captured, a fish story  
on his screen.

We all breathe,  
glad to be anywhere  
but Kansas plains made dark  
with coming storms.

# *The Name You've Always Trusted*

Gary Glauber

There was history there,  
configured to please generations:  
no need changing formulae.

Yet she brought the mighty down,  
toppled palms & palaces  
with deftness deemed magical.

Her name was familiar to all,  
legends preceded her,  
tales of devastation & harm.

In the kitchen, she seemed charming,  
softness to the beauty surrounding her,  
laugh of genteel politesse.

For her, it had become rote,  
this agenda of pretend normality,  
the heart's response to notoriety.

While periphery charged with whispers  
abuzz with baseless innuendo,  
she acknowledged nothing.

Was it fear or respect  
that parted those in attendance  
as she passed like Moses in Red Sea?

No one dared ask her to dance  
so she stood in one corner,  
a diamond brilliance ignored.

It was a new world order,  
& she the journalistic catalyst,  
but it was a world that would not forget.



## ***With/Without Love***

Amitabh Vikram Dwivedi

Without love, life moves;  
Like a wheel,  
Freely-  
Without any obstruction-  
Continuous and constant,  
Like a wheel in a bicycle  
On stand.

Love needs a static nest.  
Life becomes  
Benevolent; and body expands  
Gives shelter to another life.  
Feelings travel without a visa into  
Foreign body; there is no discrimination.

But those who are not loving;  
Are they really living?  
As for living we require air,  
But for love we require heart.

## ***We Don't Need To #MAGA***

Vivian Wagner

The country's large, with its  
wheatfields and cliffs,  
its glaciers spilling through  
valleys into their own melt,  
its cities rising in steel and glass,  
its winding streams writing  
long sentences through oakwoods,  
its expansive sky, its tenement  
buildings and ranch houses and  
tents under bridges,  
its feral cats, growling, its  
villages huddled into themselves,  
its sunflowers and poppies and  
flaking paint, its public libraries,  
its babies in highchairs,  
its buttercreamed birthday cakes,  
its flicker of blue stoveflame,  
its chairs, rocking,  
its wisps of soft, gray hair  
pulled behind an ear  
listening to the bright  
mid-winter chirp of  
cardinals.

We Don't Need to #MAGA first appeared in *Grey Borders Magazine*

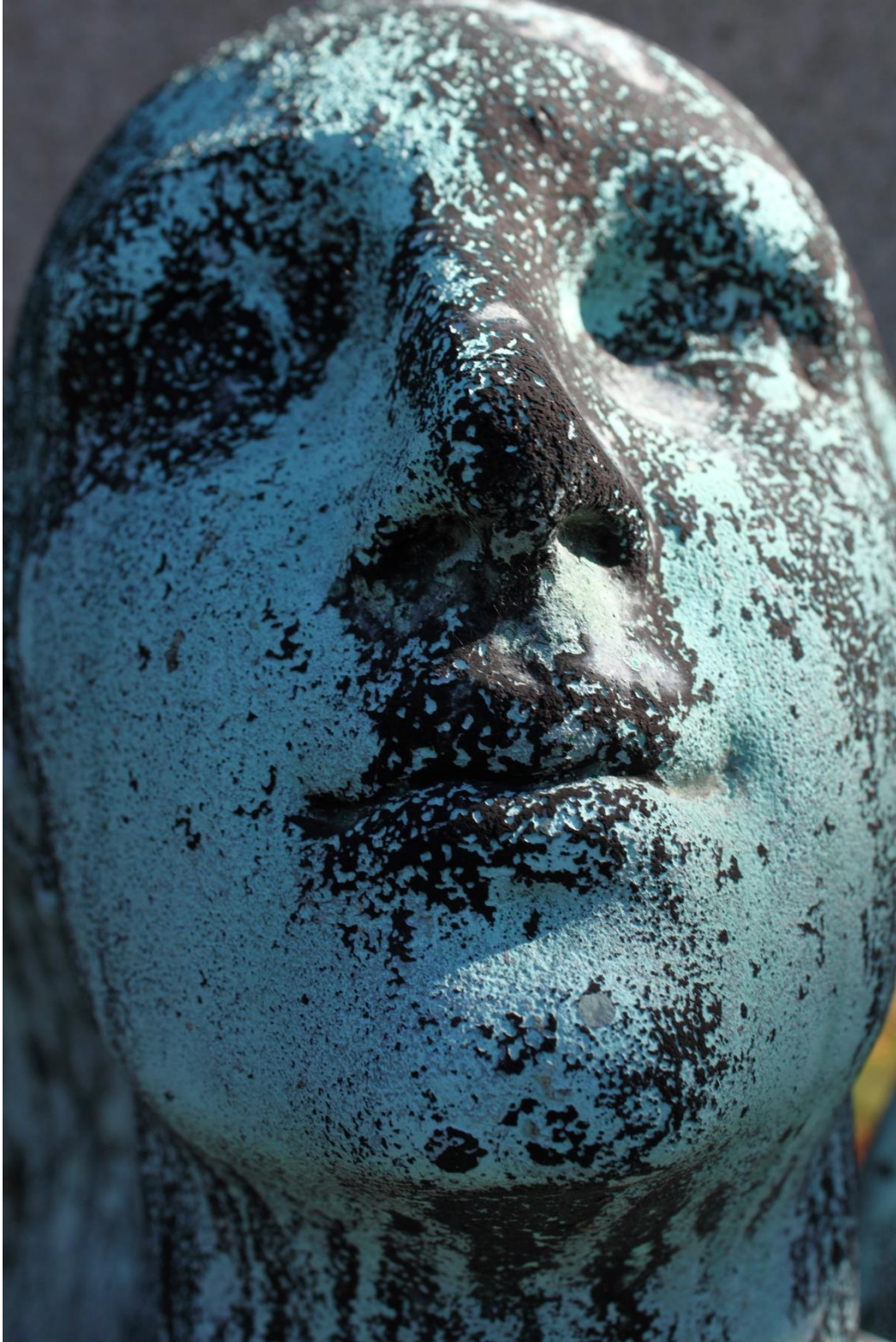
# Weathered Reports: Trump Surrogate Quotes from the Underground

Mark Blickley & Amy Bassin

The following five pieces are from the collaborative text-based art series created by Mark Blickley & Amy Bassin. Blickley matched quotes from history's most tyrannical men to Bassin's funereal sculptural portraits to produce Trump surrogates from Genghis Khan to Charles Manson. Each piece echoes a distinct Trumpian thought, issued forth from the weathered patinas of outdoor cemetery sculptures. We consider the Trump administration to be a graveyard.



**“Look down at me and you see a fool, look up at me and you see a god, look straight at me and you see yourself.”** Charles Manson



**“The more we do to you, the less you seem  
to believe we are doing it.”** Josef Mengele





**“I am the wrath of God. If you had not committed great sins,  
God would not have sent a punishment like me upon you.”** Genghis Khan



**“I tell you, freedom and human rights in America  
are doomed.”** Osama bin Laden



**“The country was formed for the white not the black man.”**

**John Wilkes Booth**

## *Heirloom*

TJ Doyle

Sizzling butter in the bottom of the pot mingles the pungent, savory garlic and the spice of fresh cracked black pepper. I add chunks of tomato, letting them sauté before adding the rest of the ingredients.

“You have to let the flavors in slowly.” It’s like my grandmother was speaking from over my shoulder, the same as she did when she first taught me how to make her tomato soup. That was the magic of her recipes: she still spoke, still lived through them. “It’s not what you put in the soup, hon’, it’s how you put it in the soup.” She always had a way of making cooking into subliminal life lessons. She taught me that if you get a little too spicy, adding just a touch of sweetness would balance you out. “Same works if you find yourself a little bitter.”

I immerse the pot’s contents in chicken broth and give it a good stir. The blop-blop of the bubbles rising through the soup becomes sharper as the mixture thickens. I give some sunflower seeds, basil leaves, and green onions a coarse chop while the potage cooks down. I sweep the seeds and basil from the cutting board into the soup. A light, woody scent now lingers in the background of the aroma dominated by the fruitiness of cooking tomatoes and piquancy of basil and garlic. I sprinkle green onion over the top just before taking the pot off of the stove.

“Mmm, that smells so good, Grampa!” Amy’s eyes, bright green and flecked with gold, shine from between her cherry-wood colored hair and arched cheekbones, all features she shares with my Grandmother, her great-great. “Can you show me how?”



## ***Beer Can***

Kayla Dugan

He stopped talking when the Bud Light bottle rolled out from underneath his seat. He gripped the bottle with tightened fingers and looked at her. She was driving, but she took a moment to look over at him and for a single moment their eyes met. She said nothing, and in that moment, there was nothing he wanted to say. Both knew that neither one of them drank Bud Light. The car ride continued in silence as he rolled down the window and tossed the empty bottle out onto the road. He did not care that he was littering. Because if he did not throw the bottle out the window he felt that some other sort of violence would overtake him. So, he tossed the bottle quickly, she watched it roll in her rear-view mirror.

She put her eyes on the road again. Lips pursed tightly, a stony expression on her face. Only the sound of the car filled the tense silence between them. Then she was pulling into her driveway and once the car was turned off both of them sat there. Knowing that speaking would somehow break the spell that was still holding them together.

Finally, he turned towards her, and in that moment, she felt as if some veil had been ripped away from her. She had been shielded before from his scrutiny and the harsh reality that was him. His anger pierced her and held her to her spot. Faster than she could react he reached out and grabbed her throat with one hand and forced her to meet his eyes. Eyes that were cold with anger. His violence let her find her voice.

“Don’t touch me.” She whispered hoarsely.

For a single heartbeat they both just sat there and then he ran his thumb over her cheek before abruptly letting her go. He got out of the car and walked to his own slamming doors as he went. Not looking at her house, or back at her.

She got out of her car watching him stride away. A tiny part of her wanted to call him back, tell him that Bud Light was terrible and that she never liked beer anyway, but that was only a very small part. The much larger part was bracing herself as her heart hammered away in her chest and she gripped her keys tightly in her fist as he drove away never sparing her a single look back.

After a moment of watching his car drive down the road she walked over to her recycling, lifted the lid and stared at all the Bud Light bottles that sat inside. She could still smell beer as she looked down at them, heard an echo of them clanking together. After only a minute more she let the lid slam and walked to her door, locking it behind her.

## *A Different Version*

by Joe Baumann

The multiverse theory, hypothesized by cosmologist Max Tegmark, argues that our universe isn't alone, claiming that many universes exist parallel to each other.

\*

Cameron and I sit under his new composite built before summer began punching days with steamy heat and the grass grew long and ticklish. His mother and father are entertaining a gaggle of obese aunts that have gathered to celebrate Cameron's graduation, and I pretend that they don't know we're hidden down here, but the gaps between the decking planks are wide enough that anyone up there would have to do nothing more than squint and lean over and they'd see us: sitting hunched on the moat of cement blocks holding back a small pond of white and beige rocks the size of quarters arranged beneath the steps leading into the yard, preventing the stones from spilling onto the unused concrete slab of a patio that is home to a rack of rotting fire wood.

What they wouldn't see, though, is that we're holding hands. Our bodies are close together, legs dangling over the cement blocks, and tucked between his left thigh and my right are our hands, knotted together. This, we both know, is dangerous: Cameron's family is deeply Catholic, and should his parents catch us they would kick me out and before I finished the walk home Cameron's mother would have already called mine, her rage at our affront to God the perfect opportunity to speak to my mother, with whom Cameron's mom is obsessed because my mother once had a successful country music career. The shine of her fame, despite the fact that it has faded to nothing but the final embers of a forgotten camp fire, is enough to attract Cameron's mother like a mosquito to an electric blue bug zapper.

\*

Tegmark's multiverse theory includes four levels of parallel universes. The first level revolves around probability: that outer space is so massive that somewhere out there, based on simple numbers, there must be planets exactly like earth. An infinite universe has infinite earths, virtually identical in shape and structure and population, so that somewhere in that endless black vacuum there are a mass of other earths with slivers of teensy difference where we might find reflections of ourselves.

\*

Cameron and I should be able to trudge up the stairs, hands still clasped, when his father, sauced on gin and tonics, calls down to us that the burnt steaks are ready. We should be able to swing our braided fingers while Cameron's aunts hem and haw over us, pecking our cheeks and fawning over young love. Our mothers should eat salads and plan our future together, becoming fast friends while they rack up reward points on their Macy's credit cards and talk about possibility and how hip they feel being parents to two men in love.

But instead we wait for his father's voice in terse, close silence. One of Cameron's bloated aunts is telling some nonsensical, impossible story that is making the entire cadre bray with laughter, their voices sloughed with beer and wine. Theoretically, our friend Jolly Farberger and some of Cameron's now-former teammates from varsity basketball will arrive in the coming hours, after the family has either departed or become so warmed on booze that they won't care if the teenagers raid the pebbled coolers filled with cheap beer or even steal pulls from Cameron's father's bottles of booze stored atop the dining room hutch. But Cameron asked me to come early, and we retreated to the space beneath the deck, hopping up onto the ridge, sitting close. I was the one to slip our hands together.

Instead of speaking, Cameron and I communicate through squeezes of our hands. These squeezes don't mean anything in particular; we don't use Morse code or some invented encryption system whose message is clear to us but incomprehensible to others. These are simple pulses, long and short, pressed into fingers and palms. We use them in both public and private, replacing our voices with silence and the smash of our hands against one another. Where others might feel the need to fill a noiseless void with small talk, Cameron and I simply sit, hands braided together, the flare of touch enough.

When his father yells down that our steaks are ready, Cameron gives my hand a single long squeeze, so hard and endless that I think my bones might crumble in his grip, the skin seeping into his so that a part of me will always be trapped there along his fingers, and every time he grabs a dumbbell, palms a basketball, caresses another person's cheek or thigh, I will feel it and know what he is feeling, experience every tremor of pleasure, fear, worry, surety, doubt. Whatever Cameron carries I will carry too, and I want to zipper myself up against him, sew our bodies together so he can never drag himself away from me.

Then he lets go of my hand, hops down, and turns to me.  
“We’d better go up,” he says, raking his hand through his hair and turning away.

\*

At the second level, Tegmark theorizes that because regions of space continually inflate, the space between universes grows, expanding exponentially. So while parallel worlds might exist, they are unreachable, the distance between them too infinite.

\*

In only a few weeks Cameron will fly to Miami, Florida, to join the Hurricanes’ basketball team as a back-up point guard. The news of his division one scholarship spread through our small private high school with a speed and efficiency only possible because it concerned someone as popular as Cameron Riggs, and that speed doubled when followed immediately by news that Jolly Farberger, our school’s star wide receiver, had received a similar offer from Michigan State and would become a true freshman Spartan in August. He, too, will jet off in no time, to East Lansing, to start summer two-a-days, while I languish for the rest of the summer before hauling my stuff into my parents’ car for a three-hour drive to the small liberal arts college where I’ll join the thirty percent of the student body that majors in English. When I made my decision, my mother tried to smile but told me I did not have to feel compelled to pick the school that gave me the better scholarship; money was no object, according to her (“Well,” she said, “it’s a small object, but like a speed bump rather than a concrete barrier”), insisting she just wanted me to be happy. She’d cupped her hands over mine, eyes shiny with tears. “That’s all that’s ever mattered to me.”

I’d almost told her about Cameron that day. We’d kept our relationship a secret for nearly two years, hidden from everyone except Jolly, who is always quick to point out to me that if it weren’t for him I would have spent the last half of high school depressed and alone, pining from afar for Cameron Riggs. I stared at my hands for so long that my mother squeezed her fingers on my shoulder and asked me what was wrong, and the words nearly slipped out. Senior Prom was three days away, and if I hadn’t promised absolute secrecy about our relationship to Cameron, I’d have spilled my guts, shouted out that all I really wanted was to dance with him instead of watching from across the room while he was inevitably crowned prom king (he had been) and looped his

hands around the model-tight waist of Cassidy MacLeod, the head cheerleader who was desperately in love with Cameron, rumored to have taken on-the-sly photographs of him after basketball practice once when he was wearing nothing but a pair of white compression shorts.

On the deck, Cameron's father is reciting the details of Cameron's scholarship package—a full ride, no tuition or room and board to speak of, prime housing in the dorm specifically for athletes, a clothing and food stipend—to the drunk aunts and Cameron's mother, who sit around a tempered glass table for six. When we approach, Cameron takes the lead and grabs a plate from a stack next to the gas grill. I follow. His dad slaps a huge ribeye steak, marbled and oozing fat and blood, onto each of our plates.

"Your mom's potatoes are on the table. Great combo, boys," he says, slapping his belly with his free hand while waving the greasy tongs like a conductor's baton. "Steak and potatoes. It does not get more American than that." He gives us a salute. Cameron nods and moves past him. I can smell the Tanqueray on him when I pass.

Cameron's mother is the only one of the women at the table who does not weigh at least two hundred pounds. Four fluted glasses sit on the tabletop, half-filled with wine the color of urine, and in the center is the wide serving dish heaped with similarly-colored potatoes, whipped and pigmented by the two sticks of butter Cameron's mother mixes into them; a moat of congealing yellow liquid surrounds the mound, which is dotted with flecks of paprika and cinnamon. The first time I ate the potatoes, a Friday night when Cameron's father was out of town on business (Jolly was convinced he was banging his secretary; Cameron responded by carving him a hard jab to the shoulder), Jolly and I scoffed at the combination of spices and lard, but under Cameron's mother's hopeful eye we each took a small helping and, after eating a few bites, were compelled to take more. Somehow the combination works, and, according to Cameron, the potatoes are the one thing she can cook without causing a food poisoning epidemic.

The chorus of aunts, like back-up singers to Cameron's mother, the slim, fit, idealized star of the show, turn and look at us, their chatter and chewing ceasing as we approach the table. I've already said hello once, been introduced when I arrived—one of the aunts blurting out her inquiries about whether I was leaving a lovely girlfriend behind when I zoomed off to college, my face blanching red at the question, which had caused a chorus of querulous laughter—followed by a round of wet, slobbering kisses on the cheek from the

cartoonish aunts while Cameron stood next to me, radiating embarrassment on my behalf. “Cameron’s best friend,” his mother had called me, forgetting, as usual, my first name.

Now she smiles and asks what we’ve been doing.

“Just chilling out beneath the porch. Avoiding the heat. It’s cooler down there,” Cameron says.

“Heat rises!” one of the aunts crows. The other two cackle and reach for their wine glasses, sloshing liquid on the table.

Cameron reaches past them for the serving spoon buried in the potatoes like a planted flagpole.

“We’re so proud of you, Cameron,” one of the aunts slurs when she sets down her wine. She’ll probably be in the too-drunk-too-leave, too-drunk-to-notice-eighteen-year-olds-drinking-next-to-her category by sundown. She sounds like she’s just heard about Cameron’s graduation today, his impending move to Florida news that she’s received for the first time.

Cameron nods while he spoons potatoes onto my plate and then goes back for more for himself. “Thanks.”

Another of the aunts follows suit, letting out a hacking cough after taking too-large a slug of wine. “And Cameron’s friend, what will you be doing next year?”

I explain my scholarship, my small school.

“So close to home!” Cameron’s mother says. “I’m sure your mom is so excited.” She then explains to the aunts who my mother is—of course she knows my mother’s name with no problem—and they begin to squeal with delight, their eyes wide at their sudden link to a minor former celebrity.

“She’s happy enough, I guess,” I say. “Carrying on a family tradition.”

Cameron’s mother and the aunts blink up at me, a mob of silenced birds.

“Marcie went there, too.”

More blinks.

“My older sister.”

“Ah,” Cameron’s mother says. “Good for you.”

“I think we’re going to eat inside,” Cameron says. “If that’s okay.”

His mother nods, and we escape into the quiet interior of the house, a wide central room with vaulted ceilings and overstuffed couches arranged around a television as big as a movie theater screen. The kitchen and dining room spill into the living room, the transition from hardwood and linoleum to carpet the only delineation between spaces.

Cameron sets his plate down on the low glass table in the living room before sinking into one of the sofas, the leather creaking beneath his weight. I sit across the table on the second couch, knowing that we cannot be close together; the blinds on the wide bay window looking onto the porch are open, and anyone who saw two eighteen-year-old boys clumped together on a single couch would know exactly what was going on.

“God,” Cameron says, rubbing his hands on his face. “It’s the party from hell. Really, only my parents could throw a graduation party with this level of shittiness.”

“My parents didn’t even throw me one,” I say. “My graduation present was a fifty-dollar gift card to Best Buy.”

Cameron says nothing, his head still cradled in his hands. I stare at him while I spoon potatoes from my plate, the buttery flavor and sweetness exploding in my mouth, tingling my tongue. I swallow and eat another heap. Cameron doesn’t move.

“Are you not going to eat?”

Then he lifts his head, and my stomach flops: Cameron’s eyes are wet with tears, his face puffy. He opens his mouth and closes it, repeats. He’s like a gasping fish, his sides shuddering. I feel a similar shudder and set down my fork.

“Cameron.”

“I’m sorry Allen,” he says.

\*

Tegmark’s third level of parallel universes is the one most sci-fi fans are familiar with: worlds that exist in the same space as one another, a thin, invisible membrane separating them. Every moment of your life, every decision you make, causes a split: your “now” self-shattered into an infinite number of future, separate selves, all of them unaware of one another. No matter how similar you are to these other selves, you have never, and will never, come into contact with them. You have no way to access them, no matter how close.

\*

Cameron refuses to say the words “break up,” as in “I’m breaking up with you.” He dances around them, replacing all of his physical prowess—low center of gravity, fast feet, hands that can move the ball between his legs and behind his back with the speed and grace of a ballerina or puppeteer—with words instead, leaping around linguistically despite the gloominess in his voice.

He's dragged me to his bedroom because he's crying so hard, and it's everything I can do not to cry too. He still worries about what his parents might see, and as he dithers about the difficulties of long distance and loneliness, I am tempted to haul myself down the hallway, throw open the back door, and scream to his family that their basketball star is breaking up with his boyfriend. When he reaches out for me—he is crumpled on his bed, I am sitting in his wheeled desk chair, knees brushing his comforter—I do not move to take his hand in mine. I'm not feeling sadness but rage, and this rage is not directed at Cameron. He is saying things that I have wondered and wrestled with in the dark of night for months, ever since he broke the news that he was going to Miami.

I never told him, but I also applied to Miami; the first acceptance letter I received came in a plain white envelope with the green and orange school emblem in the top left corner, and my mother squealed with delight when I showed it to her. I stood over her in the kitchen, tears forming in her eyes as she told me how proud she was of me (I wasn't sure why; I had always gotten great grades, and my elder sister Marcie had marched off to college three years prior with no problems of her own—I was not a first-gen student, nor did I think the bar of getting accepted into a public university in Florida was set particularly high). She noticed my lack of excitement and asked what was wrong. I shrugged, telling her I wasn't sure I wanted to be that far away. I did not tell her that I had applied as a delay, a way to avoid thinking about the fact that the world Cameron and I existed in was undergoing a reverse gestation, growing smaller and smaller, would soon divide into two tiny cells that grew independent of one another. We would not be high school sweethearts who managed the miles and time zones between them to find happiness and a perfect life together. Despite the dreams I may have clung to about Cameron and me and a future, I knew that they were just that: dreams, touchable only in sleep. The burble of the real world was different.

I am not angry at Cameron when I tell him I need to leave. I am still not angry at him when he looks up at me and, with a noisy, wordless plea reaches one of his calloused hands out for one last grip. I pause but do not take his hand. I stare at his fingers, longer and stronger than mine, the fingernails square and hard and clipped unevenly. My anger is not directed at him when I shake my head and tell him I am sorry, that I know he has only said what needed to be said.



I am angry at the world Cameron and I have lived in for nearly two years, a universe separated from the one I see on television and in the news. We are not like other young men who love one another and are able to share it, their smiling heads tilted together in photographs, arms around each other's shoulders. We exist in place that overlaps that world but is nonetheless incandescent under its own glaring, different sun.

Cameron's family is still drinking and laughing on the back deck, and I can see them through the window blinds. I pause at the front door, staring at them, knowing they do not see me standing in their foyer. Cameron's mother is laughing, her wide mouth open, horse-y teeth perfect and straight. His father works the grill, still, turning over hand-sized steaks for Cameron's friends, expected later. The picture is one of any family enjoying an early evening in summer; the sun, settling into a half-circle over the roofs of the houses past Cameron's, has bloodied the sky pinkish-yellow, its lazy last rays giving the scene a golden hue that amplifies the family's serenity. I can hear his father's guffawing laugh, his mother's high trill. An aunt claps her hand on the table.

I try to imagine Cameron in his room—despite the fact that I can hear his family, I cannot hear him—wiping away his tears, giving me enough time to escape before he gathers himself and returns to the party in his honor.

I step outside; the air is warm, but settled, the May heat dry and temperate.

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A level four parallel universe, according to Tegmark, is hardly parallel at all: a magical, weird place where the rules operate on a different axis. It would follow fundamentally different laws of nature than our universe, but this does not make its existence any less likely: any universe physicists can make sense of on paper would and should exist based on the mathematical democracy principle: any universe that is mathematically possible is just as likely to actually exist.

\*

On the way home, I cross paths with Jolly Farberger. Even though he owns a car, a clunker whose doors are all painted different colors, every surface covered in so much rust that every time the doors actually open Jolly gives a little yelp and makes the sign of the cross, he likes walking, he says, especially in the summertime; he works at an ice cream shop a mile from his house and has never driven there once when it wasn't raining.

“Allen,” he says, clapping a hand on my shoulder. “Where are you going?” Jolly’s grip is strong, his hands powerful from catching thousands of passes on the football field since he was in sixth grade.

“I’m going home, Jolly.”

“But why?”

With a sigh, I tell him that Cameron has broken up with me. I expect the wide grin that is permanently plastered to his face to dissipate but it only grows larger. “Why are you smiling?”

Jolly Farberger has been my best friend since we were six, and I have never seen him not smiling, even when he was repeatedly rejected by my older sister Marcie, whom he has been in love with since seventh grade. “I’m simply choosing to imagine all the possibilities.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Walk with me, Allen.”

“I’m going home, Jolly.”

“Okay. I’ll walk with you, then.”

The sun continues to set, and by the time we’ve crossed the two blocks between my neighborhood and Cameron’s legions of fireflies are blinking off and on in yards and the noisy thrum of cicadas fills the air with its grating, constant sound.

“See, Allen, your life is like one of those fireflies.”

“I’m a blinking fluorescent bug ass?”

“Well, that’s one wildly misunderstood interpretation.”

“So, what’s the real interpretation you’re going for here, Jolly?”

“Do you ever wonder where the fireflies go when it gets cold?”

“Not really.”

“Well they must go somewhere.”

“I’m guessing they die off.”

“But then where do they come from when it gets warm again? Some of them have to survive.”

“I’m having trouble understanding your point here, Jolly. Which you’d better get to quick because we’re almost at my house.”

“And I have a party to get to. I know.”

“So?”

“Well, their lives blink on and off, you know? Kind of like their little lights.”

“Are you mixing your metaphors now?”

Jolly sighs. “Trying to talk symbolically with English people is a pain in the ass, you know that, Allen?”

“I do, Jolly.”

“Okay, look. Forget the firefly metaphor. That didn’t work.” Jolly claps a hand over my shoulder, letting it rest there. “Life goes on, Allen.”

“We English people call that a cliché, Jolly.”

“Jesus Christ. Okay. It may be sucky that Cameron broke up with you like that, and yeah, I know you were deeply and massively in love with him—”

“Any chance we don’t already jump into past tense here, Jolly?”

“Right, right. My bad. Yeah, I can tell you’re about to cry, so I’ll let you go do that. But listen, Allen. Really, listen to me.”

I’d been looking away, everywhere except Jolly’s face. If we hadn’t been best friends for so many years I might find him attractive, but I know Jolly too well for that (he is also, as he has told me over and over, “one-hundred percent straight,” and insists on giving me the intimate details of every sexual encounter he has with any girl willing to see him naked). Over the last two years his body, which at sixteen already showed the groundwork and potential for the musculature and breadth necessary to become a wide receiver at a top-tier college football program, has blossomed into a towering mass of graceful moving parts, heavy with strength but minus the excess bulk of a linebacker. He is quick and broad, all veins and curving muscle. Before graduation, he ran three miles every morning—even doing so before his early football practices—mostly to offset his penchant for beer that developed when we were sophomores.

I look up at Jolly now, towering four inches above me. The distance seems massive. In the dimming light, his eyes are a light hazel, the color of bleached wheat, and his dark hair has already been tamed to a medium brown from his time in the sun.

“I know I’m a bit of a goof,” he says, “but I know that this isn’t it for you and Cameron.”

“That’s optimistic, Jolly.” We can both hear the quaver in my voice. His grip on my shoulder tightens, sieving into my skin.

“Really, Allen. Trust me. It’ll work out.”

“You can’t know that.”

He shrugs, lifting my shoulder with him as he raises his arm. “Don’t have to. Just gotta think it.”

“I think I’m going to go now, Jolly. Have fun at Cameron’s party.”

“I’ll tell him exactly what I’ve told you.”

“Okay, Jolly.”

“Bye, Allen.”

“Bye, Jolly.”

\*

When I was eight, my sister Marcie gave me a baggie of marbles for Christmas. The glassy globes pressed against the red mesh fabric that held them, and for a long time I simply rolled the bag in my hand; I loved the feeling of those cool, shimmering marbles lolling along my skin, the rough bag digging against my palms. When I did finally slice the bag open I spent hours sitting on my bedroom floor, a puddle of marbles before me, and I would flick the shooter toward the cluster and relish in the sound of the larger marble punching into those smaller, swirly ones. They were all tinted a light sky blue, the interiors swathed with strips of red and green and white that reminded me of my tri-colored toothpaste. They were like tiny worlds being shaken and rattled around, scattering about the universe of my carpet, and I would let them loll and rush as far as they could through the shaggy fabric before I finally gathered them together in a new messy pile, only to send them clattering apart again.

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The house is already dark, and the porch light doesn’t snap on when I step up to the front door, so I have to stab at the keyhole several times before I unlock the door and stumble inside. The smell of maple—my mother keeps air fresheners plugged into an outlet in every room—hits my nostrils, a syrupy, autumn smell that jars with the warm night air outside. Even though it is barely after eight o’clock, the house is silent, as if my parents are asleep. But I know they are not.

I step into the living room, where the only light comes from a table lamp shoved into the corner space where the arms of two couches meet. My mother is slumped on one of the couches, her legs tucked up beneath her. A pillow sits on her lap, and on the pillow lays my sister Emmeline. My mother is reading a book, which she props up in front of her face with one hand, elbow digging into the arm of the couch. She strokes my sleeping sister’s hair with the other.

My sister, now six years old, suffers from progeria, a genetic disorder that causes her to age quickly, a particular structural protein in her nerves involved in the shaping of cell nuclei going rogue and tricking her body into speeding up its own degeneration. She is unlikely to live more than seven more

years, probably suffering a heart attack or some other complication from atherosclerosis, like a stroke.

There is no cure. The only treatments are those that ease suffering from complications. She takes low-dose aspirin every day and eats a high-carb diet.

My mother lowers the book and smiles at me, the constant sadness in her face amplified by the trick of shadow and rheumy light from the table lamp. She is well past the point of needing to scold me into quiet when my sister is able to sleep as deeply as she does when she lays on the couch with my mother, the pulsing warmth of her center lulling Emmeline into a soothed comfort better than her bed, which is dressed with a specially-designed mattress whose price tag has not been justified due to its inability to provide my sister a healthy, restful night's sleep. Nor does my mother any longer cry over my sister's fate; she knows that a countdown is happening deep within her daughter's body, its cells careening at light speed toward combustion, an unstoppable, unslowable, irreversible process.

I say nothing, but I do nod at my mother, who waves at me as I cross the room and head for the stairs. I know that my father is probably tucked in the upstairs study, perusing a book on Roman history, or perhaps leafing through the first edition Bulfinch's *Mythology* I was able to find for him at a used bookstore before last Christmas. The pages were leafy, ancient, smelling as I imagined a campfire in the wilds of Athens might have. When he opened it—I warned him to be careful, the gift was fragile—his eyes filled with tears and he moaned a garbled bit of gratitude and held me close, his slackening body pooling against mine.

My parents do not talk about my sister any more. They do not fight about the fact that my father can barely be in the same room as Emmeline, his face and body contorting and twitching to hide his sorrow. My mother once told me that she doesn't hate him or blame him. Pain and sorrow, she said, come in all forms. She'd squeezed my arm and asked, in lieu of nothing, how I was feeling.

I climb to the second floor, leaving my mother behind in the lunar haze of her reading lamp. I pass the door to my father's office, where a strip of orange light brightens the lip of space between door and flooring. He coughs as I pass but doesn't call out when the floorboards beneath me squeal like chirping, dying mice. My bedroom is at the end of the hall and peers out over the garage and street. Rather than turning on the overhead light, I make my way to the window, tripping over the wheeled leg of my desk chair and

catching my foot on a pair of tousled athletic shorts before I can wrench up the Venetian blinds so that silver moonlight spills into the room, illuminating the cavern of bookshelves that line the walls, stuffed with the novels and short story collections I've gathered since I learned to read fifteen years ago; the Berenstain Bears share room with Goosebumps and Great Expectations alike. Once, my mother shook her head and lamented the chaos of my personal library, and I told her that I knew exactly where everything was.

She could test me, I told her, and she looked over the shelves, then stared at me and said, "Find Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy." Without scanning the shelves, I stood on my bed, turned, and plucked the book down without looking.

"It's only chaos," I said as I reshelfed it, "if you don't see the patterns."

Across the street, a silver sedan idles in our neighbor's driveway, and two heads bobble in the back seat, lips locked in tangly, spitty kisses: Dominik Neale and Cassidy MacLeod, who has finally gotten over her obsession with Cameron. I've watched them before, standing at his front door. Dominik is skinny and pimpled, a math nerd. Cassidy choosing him feels like something out of a world turned upside down. I stare up at the sky for a minute and then look back down: they are still there, caved against each other in the back seat. I wonder how long they will sit there, how much time they will be able to gather from one another, pulling the lines of their worlds together before cleaving apart, before one of them realizes the absurdity of the universe they are creating and they finally move off, anchors aweigh, drifting toward something shiny and new.

## *Home in a Bowl*

Adam Steffens

Potato soup is best on cold days in the fall or the winter. It puts a warmth in your belly so you can enjoy chilly days and cold nights, and really savor those great lungfuls of crisp, frosty air that you can only get when the leaves have fallen. It's cozy, and comforting. Warm, creamy, and smooth. You can't eat it every day—at least not if you lead a sedentary lifestyle—as rich as it is it'll make you fat, and soft. But that isn't to say that it's bad, or even bad for you. Really, it's no worse than being at home. Home is shelter and safety. It is solid, and unmoving. It is a place of security, full of warm blankets and smiling faces. But if you never leave, your life will suffer for it. You have to go outside sometime—even when it's cold—and live. But sometimes, you need to come home, relax, and warm up. This is when you kick off your shoes, hang up your coat and enjoy a hot bowl of potato soup

The first thing I do is sharpen my chef's knife. It's nothing fancy—a 10" Messermeister with a plastic handle—but it's professional and does its job with aplomb. I can see in the light, some shiny spots along its edge that belie dullness, likely from my children dumping it into the steel sink or stuffing it into a drawer packed with other kitchen tools. It is maddening. I use a pair of 1000 and 6000 grit Japanese water stones. The 1000 grit side first, then the 6000. The stones glisten with the absorbed water and feel cool and moist to the touch. I lay them on some paper towels near the edge of my sink, and gently glide the edge of my blade up one side and down the other. It is a methodical, rhythmic thing—an action I have performed thousands of times. The edge isn't too bad, so I only do this for about a minute. I wash the brown slurry off the blade, and inspect it in the bright, sterile kitchen light. Nothing—just a thin, black line. No light means a fine edge. I replace the stone with its even finer grit cousin. Whereas the first stone was a soft, cocoa color, and felt like a smooth stone, the 6000-grit stone was almost pink, and feels like polished glass. I repeat my previous actions on this stone, only now for maybe 30 seconds. I wash off the blade, dry it, and walk to where I have hung my strop. It is an old leather belt loaded with ultra-fine metal polish. A few licks, and I drag the blade over the edge of an old wooden chopping block—ever so softly—to remove any wire that may have still clung to the blade. It is sharp enough to shave my face—and that means it is ready.

In order to feed my family, I choose four good-sized russet potatoes. These I wash and bake—approximately two hours. I usually do this earlier in the afternoon to save time. I chop up two of them with the skins, and two I peel. The skins add a nice, earthy flavor to the dish, but in every bite, it becomes a distraction. A hint of the earth is fine—eating dirt is not. These, I set aside. I then chop up a couple onions

and two cloves of garlic. I never use more garlic than that for the amount I'm making. Potatoes have a soft, delicate flavor in contrast to their hard and sturdy appearance. Garlic can easily overpower it.

In a nonstick soup pot, I add equal parts olive oil and butter over low heat. The olive oil is a light, almost clear, extra virgin oil. This is for its lighter flavor. In contrast, the butter is thick and rich and bright yellow—full of fat and deliciousness. This is not an overpowering flavor, but a complementary one. With an inferior butter, the other flavors are like passengers lolling about the warped boards of some meager skiff, lazily drifting down a muddy river. With the right butter, however, they dance on the polished decks of a steamer tearing across the Atlantic. Oh yes—butter matters.

To this glorious medley of butter and oil, I add the chopped onion and minced garlic. The acidic juices of the vegetables mixing with the melted fats and oils makes one of the most heavenly aromas on earth. Butter and oil, onions and garlic—they are the sautéed base of so many grander culinary constructs. I love it. I am hard pressed to describe the aroma, but I do recollect that garlic was a healing commodity in bygone eras, with no small measure of magic power. It was said that it warded off disease and was like a plague to vampires. I'm not certain of the truth of those statements, but as I fill my nostrils with the glorious scent, all I can think of is that Dracula was a fool.

When the pale flesh of the onions and garlic has turned a translucent gold, I begin adding flour. Just a bit at a time, from my hand as though I were sowing seeds. I sow, then mix, then sow some more. I am making what is called a roux. Some roux is dark, others light—they each have their own flavor profile for different dishes. The roux I want is blonde, so it doesn't take very long for the flour mixture to cook into a perfect shade of tan. This is a critical task—too long, and the flavor will become too harsh; not long enough and the flavor won't have matured. When I am mixing roux, there is silence in the kitchen. I observe, and stir, and savor the smell. My eyes and my nose will tell me when it's just right.

When I am satisfied, I stir in four cans of evaporated milk. Evaporated milk is sort of like milk concentrate. A can of evaporated milk has had most of its water removed in a heat sterilization, canning process. This creates a thicker, richer flavor—but also makes it shelf stable for several years. It also doesn't scorch as easily and can do the job of milk without risk of burning. Condensed milk is similar but has added sugar (for anti-bacterial purposes) and is therefore sweeter. I don't want sweet—I want savor--so I punch open the cans and begin to pour. The first I just dump in, to get things going. I mix up the roux and scrape the pot until I'm certain it's all in suspension before adding the remaining cans. I love watching milk flow, like a glorious little cascade of creamy white. I can't call it a waterfall of course—that would imply thinness and lightness. This is heavier. It pours slower. It truly is like



molten color. To me, milk evokes thoughts of coolness, and freshness. It is flavorful and comforting.

The rest of the cans are added one by one, and I will whisk everything together to ensure that nothing is clumped up. The flavors must all combine. Two boxes of liquid vegetable stock are added. The temperature is raised to medium and I let it simmer for about twenty minutes. I then stir in the potatoes I had chopped earlier. Almost done. I put a lid on the pot, and let it come to just about boiling, then I turn the heat down to low and let it simmer. The potatoes are soaking up the soup, and the soup is soaking up the starch. This thickens the whole thing and can take anywhere from 45 minutes to an hour.

While the soup softly murmurs on the back of the stove, I fry a pound of thickly sliced, well-marbled bacon. Any kind will do, but I prefer to use a simple, hardwood-smoked variety. As mad as it may sound, the bacon is not the star of the show here, and more complex flavors may distract. I fry it crisp—crispier than normal--and stack it on my cutting board. I roughly chop the deliciously salty strips of meat and fat and smoke and add them to the pot when it is almost done. Ideally, I want some of that bacon flavor to meld with the soup, but not become overpowering, and not become soft either. Meat is a wonderful thing for a soup—it gives some “bite” to it, creates little pockets bursting with a flavor all its own. The last thing I add is some heavy cream. The evaporated milk doesn’t have near the flavor or richness as the cream, so it is an absolute necessity.

In a perfect world, I would serve the soup in large, crusty bread bowls—but that is a rare occurrence. Normal bowls will suffice. Multiple loaves of French bread are provided, as well as a dish of butter. Spoons are available, but the bread does the real work. It is plunged into the hot, creamy soup and allowed to absorb its liquid joy.

The first bite. Hot, but not painful. It is cream and butter and white and golden and...good. It’s just so good. The next bite is a scoop, and the intent now is to get some of those morsels of potato and bacon. This bite introduces the soft earthiness of the russets, and that salty crunch of bacon. More cream. More earth. More warmth. More home. There is silence at the table as these first few bites are taken. It is a sacrament—a time when the body and mind experience for the first time, the love that has crafted the meal. It is personal, and intimate, and sacred.

Eventually, spoons are picked up, and glasses are raised. Cool, clear water rinses hungry mouths, and cleanses palates for the next few bites. Loaves of bread disappear, and laughter and conversations begin, and end, and begin again. Anxiety and the weights of the outside world are as hard crusts of bread, dipped into the all-consuming power of hearth and home, softened and made edible by caring hands and a practiced touch. Outside, the wind is howling, the light has faded and the cold of winter sets its icy weight upon the earth. But here—have a bowl of potato soup, and let it warm *your* belly, and fill your heart with happiness, and peace, and home.

## *V is for Vindaloo*

Maggie Thistle

My Nani used to say that she could feel the presence of bad weather by a creeping in her bones, that it declared its arrival by scraping through her wrists and knees before the clouds even knew what was happening. Incoming rain felt like fire ants marching in line along her limbs. Approaching thunder storms felt like hypodermic needles poking aimlessly under her skin, tirelessly trying to draw from dusty veins. When she walked, she cracked like popping fire, her joints trying to loosen their coils but never being able to unfurl. Despite the engorged knots that riddled her small frame, though, I always pictured my Nani's body made up of hollow bird bones, light and airy as she fluttered in the kitchen devotedly tending to a simmering pot of her self-proclaimed "World Famous Vindaloo". She would flicker over the small silver dishes of spice or dice vegetables in quick slashes with sense of both fervor and accuracy, quickly swiping at sauces or tasting the steaming brews that bubbled and boiled, smacking her wet lips with approval or grabbing at different tins in her cupboard in search of just the right pinch of this or the perfect dab of that. I wondered how her bones would feel in the midst of this forecast. I'd bet that if her crippled body hadn't already forewarned her that this was the end, she would be wishing it was anyways just to relieve the pressure that pulsed through her sharp boney ankles and inert spine.

The party was my idea. It seemed a natural extension of the impending news - "The End of The World!" as was proclaimed over and over. What else could a bunch of university students possibly think to do at a time like this other than party? The location was obvious too. An entirely void but nearly completed addition to the University campus. It was a building so large and empty yet teeming with such a blind promise and hopeful future. At least the party would allow the building the dignity of going out having been used, if only once, to house something other than spitting construction workers and troves of yellow hard hats. Straddling a bare beam in the part of the building that still remained an unfinished chart of pillars and poles, I stared at the party below. Some of the students lay sprawled, moving in slow motion as if the world around them was thickening gelatin, their minds as lethargic as their limbs. They were what I imagined the beetles that ended up as magnets for sale in museum gift shops or crafted into pendants that hung low on women's necks looked like as the thick syrupy amber hardened around them. Too uncaring or unwilling to move as they became rocks of themselves, perfectly and perpetually crystallized into a single moment in time and idly letting the air around them harden because they couldn't think of anything else to do. Others huddled together, shoulders rising and falling in little sobs, hugging and clinging and gently patting the backs of others as if trying to wipe away

the thought of what was to come. Some partiers bounced against each other, grinding with a desperate ferocity. They were entangled in heaps, their bodies entwined so viciously they looked like cartoon fight rumbles of dust and dirt, arms and legs, yelps and moans. I honestly thought that's what I'd be doing. Covered in sticky flesh, absorbed by another body. Wildly feeling my around stomachs and legs and reaching for anything that oozed softness and squished between my fingers. After much dedicated thought, however, and considering the short amount of warning time we all received to plan for such an event, and then cautiously weighing it against the general magnitude of performance related pressures already linked to the overall success and enjoyment of group sex, I figured that maybe it wouldn't be the best way to spend my final minutes. It is one thing to have a bad experience to joke about later with friends at some dingy pub, but who wants to risk ending the world on a bad bang? I watched the fuzzing, sweating bodies heave below me like a hawk perched on a branch of a naked, metal tree. They all looked so small from up here - like little mice prey scuttling around - but I could feel their emanating bodies on my face as if it were jabs of direct sunlight reflecting off the polished steel sheets and shiny, skeleton pipes of the building.

Sitting so high above them I felt otherworldly, their puny bodies nothing compared to my breadth. I was a different species then them but, really, just the same. Alien-esque but so similar that I crept in among them unnoticed and could mostly pass without raising any eyebrows. But I could never have been in that dank heap among them without feeling absurd or at least unnecessary. It was actually kind of funny to think that I had once thought it would be a good idea and that I had convinced myself that it was where I belonged. I was struck again by the coldness of metal between my thighs and I twinged out of discomfort. There was a dampness in the air that made my cheeks clammy and moist, like leftovers packed away before having a chance to fully cool causing a steamy film to swirl around the lids of a plastic Tupperware containers. My face was dewy and damp almost prickly. I felt sick and my head began to swirl. A weight pressed on my chest and it felt like I had swallowed a mouthful of salt that was slowly trickling down my throat grain by grain. I began to breathe heavily in short tufts and felt as if my temples were slowly caving in on each other. I knew none of this was right.

Nani has been a cold grey stone coddled by starched white sheets and a bed on wheels since her stroke a few years ago. We moved her into a care facility right afterwards, my mother having no clue how to care for such a soft and needy shadow. Since then, our house has never been the same. The state of the kitchen made it noticeable how much she was missed. It was as if someone had removed a photograph from a wall where it had been hung, untouched, for decades. A perfectly square portion of floral wall paper revealed completely fresh and un-faded piece of time, one not yet

clouded by years of accumulating cigarette smoke, cooking fumes and passing breath. An untarnished cut-out of a time before. It both managed to cause nostalgic stirrings while also making it glaringly obvious how diluted and worn things had become. Her kitchen was a vacant lot now. Nani had taken all the simmering fragrances and clomping pots with her when her body became a stagnant husk of itself. My mom still cooked in there and still tried to follow the passed down secret family recipes and covert tips and tricks, but the kitchen was swept bare of any warmth, save for whatever sad heat fumed off the orange coils that seemed to have to work so hard to just to glow under the pans on the stove top. The kitchen was merely just another room in the house without Nani swishing through it and swelling into its creases.

I refocused my eyes and stared hard at the lines of the building frame. They were like a game board, crossing and hatching over another in calculated angles and intersections. The exactitude of the cut lines was a calming grid that caged around me. The foundation walls and ducts were shiny and cold but so clean and gleaming that I ached to smear it with my sweaty hands leaving smudges of my oily fingertips just to ruin. I pictured myself trying to reach out and touch the chrome surfaces and imagined sliding right off of it with one swooping strike, like the comedic gesture of an unsuspecting footstep onto an ill-placed discarded banana peel. Whomp. I let out a little laugh at the absurdity of dying from fall moments before the Big End without even moving my mouth or chest.

Small slats of sky could be seen between the frame lines in the roof and a sudden streak of brightness crossed from one edge of the square to the other. I began to see slices of sun cracking the clouds in the distance. Sharp bursts of light jabbed through the thick night in flashes of orange and pink. Its pulsating rhythm pulled me back into thoughts of Nani jittering around, feeding, feeding, feeding, and always getting people to eat. She never sat down or stopped until her stroke. I thought of her in her kitchen and pictured myself there. Hopping notes of cumin and turmeric surged the air around me, charging my head with tingles from their spice. The sun began to arise at a quickening speed, buzzing like Nani at her fastest, swirling the remnants of night away like every swipe of her spoon clinking against the side of a pot. I closed my eyes and felt the swarming warmth of the sun prick my skin and I tasted its howling heat like a heaping spoonful of sizzling Vindaloo.