

LOST & FOUND



COVER ART BY ANIL C. RAO
COLLECTED BY MADISEN D'ASCENZO & KELLY BROCIOS
CHOSEN BY COSMIC DAFFODIL JOURNAL MEMBERS
EBOOK DESIGN BY MADISEN D'ASCENZO
FORMATTED & EDITED BY MADISEN D'ASCENZO & KELLY BROCIOS

COSMIC DAFFODIL JOURNAL: LOST & FOUND

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“WE WILL BE LOST AND FOUND A THOUSAND TIMES ALONG THIS
COBBLED ROAD AHEAD OF US.”
ATTICUS

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Bella Chacha is a Nigerian writer whose stories explore identity, memory, and resistance. Her work has appeared on platforms like *Webnovel*, *Moboreader*, and social media. She began writing as a teenager and continues to tell stories rooted in her culture and imagination.

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Born in Korea and raised in East Africa, **Melanie Hyo-In Han** recently moved from the U.S. to the U.K. She is the author of *Abecedarian: Banff, Canada* (kith books), *My Dear Yeast* (Milk & Cake Press) and *Sandpaper Tongue*, *Parchment Lips* (Finishing Line Press). Learn more about her at melaniehan.com.

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Michael Samuel is a speculative fiction writer from Missouri.

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Robert A. Cozzi was educated at James Madison University. Robert has maintained a daily journal since he was in the ninth grade, where a favored teacher encouraged his writing. He regularly shares his unedited, handwritten journal entries with his readers online.

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Sam Aureli is a design and construction professional from Italy, living in Boston, MA. He turned to poetry later in his journey, seeking refuge from the chaos of daily life. His poems have appeared, or are forthcoming, in *Sontag Mag*, *Sidhe Press*, *Underscore Magazine*, *Prosetrics The Magazine*, among other literary journals.

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Anil C. Rao is a widely recognized artist who has been featured in several leading international and national media publications and magazines, including *The Times of India*, *The Gazette*, *Pune Mirror*, *The Hindu*, *Debonair Magazine*, and Telugu newspapers such as *Eenadu* and *Swaathi*.

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Gerry Sikazwe is a Zambian poet with titles 'Words That Matter' (2018), 'Take Me With You' (2020), and forthcoming 'Umutolilo Wa Nsele' (2026), an Ici-Bemba poetry collection to his name. He writes and curates poetry readings and spoken word events in Lusaka, Zambia's capital city.

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Rachel Turney is an educator and teacher trainer in Colorado. Her poems and prose are published in *The Font Journal*, *Nap Lit*, *Pulp*, *Ranger*, *Through Lines*, *Blink Ink*, *Bare Back*, *The Hooghly Review*, and *Teach Write Journal*. Her photography appears in *Writers Resist*, *The Salt*, *San Antonio Review*, *Umbrella Factory Magazine*, *Prosetrics*, *Vagabond City*, *Dipity*, and *Ink in Thirds Magazine*. Blog: turneytalks.wordpress.com Instagram: @turneytalks

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Eduardo Frajman grew up in San Jose, Costa Rica. He is a graduate of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem and holds a PhD in political philosophy from the University of Maryland. His work has appeared in *Electric Literature*, *the Point*, and many other publications.

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Dave Nash writes stories about masculinity's complexities. His work appears in places like *The South Florida Poetry Journal*, *Bulb Culture Collective*, and *The Hooghly Review*. You can learn more at <https://davenashwrites.substack.com>.

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Taylor Harrison is a writer and photographer of Mexican, Syrian and Polish descent. Her work has been featured or is forthcoming in *P.O. BOX OUTER SPACE*, *Cosmic Daffodil*, *Thought Catalog*, *The Shuffle*, literary journal *Women's Studies* and *ROAR Magazine*, and she holds a Master of Arts in English from Claremont Graduate University, where she specialized in modern American women's literature. You can learn more about Taylor by following her Instagram account, @tharrisonwriting.

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Gavin Kayner's plays, prose, and poetry have won numerous awards and appeared in a variety of publications.

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A Pushcart Prize Nominee, **Pamela Manché Pearce**, is the author of the chapbook, *Widowland* (Green Bottle Press, London) and is Poet-at-Large on the monthly radio show, Planet Poet-Words in Space, WIOX, Roxbury, NY. Her poems have been widely published and anthologized in the US and internationally. She lives in NYC.

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Shelbey Leco is a thirty year old native, New Orleanian visual artist. She was raised among a lineage of story tellers and tried to use her artwork as a tool in order to create stories.

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Stacey Lee Bartlett is a writer living in the beautiful mountains of Western North Carolina. Two of her novels are published with *Monarch Educational Services*. Her work appears in various literary journals, including her short story COUNT ON THE MOUNTAINS published in the spring 2024 issue of Reckon Review.

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Ilenia Vacca Todorova is a writer and sea lover with roots in Sardinia and living in Copenhagen. Often referred to as an ocean daughter, her work explores the intersections of ecology, memory, and displacement. Her stories drift between land and sea, shaped by a life lived close to the water.

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Patricia Pease has been published in *Hippocampus*, *Barren*, *BULL*, *Spillwords*, *Uppagus*, *Revolution John*, *The Rye Whiskey Review Magazine* and more. She has a BFA from UNC School of the Arts

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David Henson and his wife have lived in Brussels and Hong Kong and now reside in Illinois, USA. His work has been selected for Best Microfictions 2025 nominated for and has appeared in various journals including *Cosmic Daffodil*. His website is <http://writings217.wordpress.com>. His Twitter handle is @annalou8

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Sean Bw Parker MA is an artist, writer and musician. He has written or contributed to a number of books on culture, justice reform and poetry, had artwork shown at exhibitions, given talks at venues and festivals, and lives in Worthing, UK.

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J.I. Kleinberg lives in Bellingham, Washington, USA. Chapbooks of her visual poems, *How to pronounce the wind* (Paper View Books) and *Desire's Authority* (Ravenna Press Triple Series No. 23), were published in 2023; a full-length volume, *She needs the river* (Poem Atlas), was published in 2024.

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Brendan Grande lives in Paris, France, where he teaches English and writes on the side. He has a bachelor's degree in English Literature and Writing. He has lived in England, Italy, and the United States.

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Sahana Pathak is a 16 year old high school student whose love for reading and writing fuels everything she does. She founded *Bibliolo*, Ahmedabad's first online library for kids to share that passion with others and is a published writer, podcast host, and national level debater.

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Teresa Brady, B.A., M.B.A., J.D., Honorary Doctor of Letters, is an attorney, former professor and business school dean. She is the author of, *Ignite Your Psychic Intuition*, and has written dozens of journal pieces. Teresa is the co-leader of the Writers' Group of the NYC Harvard Club.

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Danielle Salerno is a poet living in Southwest Florida. Her work is featured in *The Tongue is Sharp: An Anthology of Feminine Rage* and *Scenes of a Better World Zine* and is forthcoming in the inaugural issue of *Prudence Dispatch* and the *2025 Poetry Anthology* by Arcana Poetry Press.

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Scott C. Holstad has authored 60+ books & has appeared in the *Minnesota Review*, *Exquisite Corpse*, *Pacific Review*, *Santa Clara Review*, *Chiron Review*, *Southern Review*, *Poetry Ireland Review*, *Libre*, *Ink Sweat & Tears*, *miniMAG*, *Horror Sleaze Trash*, *Bristol Noir & Blood+Honey*. He's moved 35+ times & lives near Gettysburg PA.

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Joanne Maybury has lived in Uganda and Sudan, and journeyed with the chronically and terminally ill. She now lives in the borderlands of Scotland where she is learning to be a hopeful gardener. Her poems have appeared in *Poetry Breakfast*, *Poetry Scotland*, *Snakeskin Poetry* and *Theology (SPCK)*.

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Chris Robertson is an emerging writer and recent graduate from Florida State University.

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Noah Soltau teaches about art, literature, and society to the mostly willing. He is managing editor of *The Red Branch Review*. His debut collection of poetry, *Titanfall*, is forthcoming from *Madville Publishing*, and his most recent work appears in *Harbor Review*, *storySouth*, *Susurrus*, and elsewhere. He lives and works in East Tennessee.

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Tory V. Pearman resides in Cincinnati, OH, where she teaches literature and writing. Her poetry has appeared in journals like *Moss Puppy*, *Pine Mountain Sand & Gravel*, *Salamander*, *Atticus Review*, and *San Pedro River Review*. Her work has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net.

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Lucia Owen, a long-retired high school English teacher, lives in Western Maine and doesn't want to live anywhere else. Until his recent death she was the caregiver of her husband of almost 48 years. In her eighth decade she finds poetry helps her keep on keeping on.

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Karen McCarthy has lived all her life within 3 miles of I-75. Philosophy-trained and librarian by profession, when not living the life of the mind she can be found enjoying her cats and her wife. Her first publication is with *Waffle Fried*.

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Cori Matusow is a New York-based writer and photographer. Cori has recently been published in under the gum tree, *The Quarter(ly)*, the *New Croton Review*, and *Superpresent*. She has forthcoming publications of her essay "Shattered" in *Stone Canoe* and photos in *Blood and Bourbon* and *Sunlight Press*.

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Jacqueline Goyette is a writer from Indianapolis, Indiana. Her work can be found in print and online journals, including *JMWW*, *trampset*, *Stanchion*, and *The Forge Literary Magazine*. Her work was selected for Best Small Fictions 2025. She now lives with her husband Antonello and her cat Cardamom in Macerata, Italy.

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Mikki Aronoff lives in New Mexico, where she writes tiny stories and advocates for animals. She has stories in *Best Microfiction 2024/2025* and *Best Small Fictions 2024* and upcoming in *Best Small Fictions 2025*. More at <https://www.facebook.com/mikki.aronoff/>.

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Sofia Bagdade is a writer based in New York City. Her writing appears in *Bright Flash Literary Review*, among other publications. More of her work can be found at sofiabagdade.weebly.com. She finds joy in smooth ink, orange light, and French Bulldogs.

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The God Who Applied for Asylum

The dust of Lagos clung to her like a forgotten blessing. Not the fine, red dust of her riverbank, rich with the promise of life, but a grey, gritty film that tasted of exhaust fumes and broken dreams. Once, the water of Ọmambala flowed through her, a liquid song of power, and her name, was whispered with reverence. Now, the river choked on plastic, and her name was just another sound swallowed by the city's relentless roar. They no longer remember her or her full name. Now, she is only Mbala—the river's breath, the forgotten mother of flood and fire.

She clutched the worn edges of her wrapper, the cheap fabric a poor disguise for the shimmering scales that once graced her skin. Here, in this land of towering concrete and blaring horns, no one would recognize a river goddess in a faded secondhand dress. They bowed to booming voices amplified through speakers, not the gentle murmur of flowing water.

Hope, fragile as a butterfly's wing, had led her to this place: The Redeemed Tabernacle of the Holy Elect. Its neon cross pulsed like a frantic heartbeat against the night sky. Maybe, just maybe, these new gods had room for an old one, a displaced deity seeking spiritual asylum.

The security guard, a young man with eyes glued to his phone, barely glanced at her. "Mama, you need something?"

The God Who Applied for Asylum

"I... I wish to speak with the Pastor," Mbala said, her voice raspy from disuse. The language of supplication felt foreign on her tongue.

Eventually, she found herself in a plush office, facing Pastor Josiah. His smile was wide and polished, reflecting the expensive gold cross on his chest. "Welcome, sister! What brings you to the Lord's house?"

Mbala swallowed her pride. "I am... a spirit. A power... from the old ways. My place... it is dying. I seek... refuge."

Pastor Josiah's smile faltered, a flicker of something unreadable in his eyes. "Old ways? You mean... idols? We cast out such darkness here."

"No! I brought life! My waters nourished the land, my currents brought blessings, Women came to me to pray for children." Mbala pleaded. "But the people... they have forgotten. My river... it sickens."

He steepled his fingers. "Interesting. You say you have... power?"

"I did. I can still... perhaps..." Desperation clawed at her. "My stream. The last part of it flows behind the industrial zone. They plan to fill it in next month."

Pastor Josiah leaned forward, his gaze sharp. "Prove it. Show me this 'power.' If your... abilities are truly of God, then perform a miracle.

The God Who Applied for Asylum

Save your stream. Show this city your relevance, and perhaps... perhaps we can find a place for you in our congregation.”

The challenge hung in the air, heavy as the Lagos humidity. A miracle. Her power was weak, tethered to a dying river, fueled by forgotten prayers. But the thought of her last vestige being erased spurred a flicker of her old strength.

The next day, Mbala stood on the banks of the polluted stream. It was a pathetic trickle, choked with refuse, a far cry from the vibrant waterway of her memory. A bulldozer loomed nearby, its metal teeth glinting menacingly.

Closing her eyes, Mbala reached deep within. She remembered the feel of cool water rushing over her skin, the whispers of the wind through the reeds, the songs of the river birds. She focused on the small, resilient life that still clung to the edges of the stream – the stubborn green shoots, the darting silverfish.

She began to hum, a low, resonant sound that seemed to vibrate through the very earth. It wasn't a booming prayer, but a soft, insistent call. The air around the stream shimmered. The polluted water began to... shift. Not dramatically, but subtly. The plastic debris swirled and gathered at the edges. A small patch of the water cleared, revealing the muddy bottom.

The God Who Applied for Asylum

The workers paused, watching with bewildered expressions. Pastor Josiah stood behind them, his initial skepticism slowly giving way to a calculating gleam.

Mbala felt her strength ebbing. This small act had taken almost everything. But the stream... it was still there.

Pastor Josiah approached her, his smile back, but different now – predatory. “Impressive. Truly... a unique power. But raw. Untamed. We can help you channel this, sister. Imagine the offerings, the tithes, if we could harness this... this ‘river’ energy.”

His words chilled Mbala more than the polluted water ever could. He didn’t see a goddess in need; he saw a resource to be exploited.

“Harness?” She whispered, understanding dawning. The real monster wasn’t a forgotten deity; it was the insatiable greed that sought to consume even the remnants of the sacred.

She looked at her dying stream, then at the towering city, a monument to progress and forgetfulness. Her fight wasn’t for asylum in a new pantheon. It was for the memory of the old ways, for the whisper of the water, for the right to simply be.

With a newfound resolve, weak but unwavering, Mbala turned away

The God Who Applied for Asylum

from the pastor and faced the bulldozer. The battle for her last drop of divinity had just begun.

Point

사실대로 말하자면

나는 어릴 때

한국어를 꽤나

잘 했다.

하지만 내가

On the other hand, as I got older, my English became better because I used it more often than Korean.

더 많이

쓸수록

한국어가

조금씩

아니, 많이

서툴어졌다.

The Word for “Pocket” is “주머니”

My French-Canadian partner and I lived in Korea last year. The reason? He wanted to learn Korean. So we packed up our lives in Boston and we moved. In Seoul, he attended a Korean language class at a university. He studied Korean for 4 hours a day, 5 times a week, for 9 months.

Every evening, he'd come home and practice his Korean.

가 나 다 라 마 바 사 아 자 차 카 타 파 하

He'd watch K-dramas.

오징어 게임 갯마을 차차차 도깨비 슬기로운 의사생활

He'd memorize vocab.

아기 아이 병원 사람 나무 토끼 대학

He'd order for us at restaurants.

파전 하나, 김치 찌개 하나, 막걸리 한 병 주세요.

He'd chat with my grandparents.

오늘은 날씨가 좋아요. 건강하게 잘 지내세요.

We went shopping for clothes. I tried on a jacket, and the store clerk asked me if I liked it.

자켓은 마음에 드는데...

The Word for “Pocket” is “주머니”

I started explaining that I liked the overall style of it. But I wanted to let her know that I didn't like how it had so many pockets. And I suddenly couldn't remember the word for pockets.

I panicked. The clerk stared at me waiting for me to finish my thought. I looked at my partner.

“I can't think of the word for pockets,” I told him.

“It's 주머니,” he replied.

주머니가 너무 많아요.

I finished my train of thought. I handed the jacket back to the clerk. I couldn't bring myself to buy it, the jacket that would always remind me of my tongue's betrayal.

Searching for Home

Rufus padded his way through mud and mush, yellow-ish green grass stuck in his matted fur. His once golden-white fur had turned towards a darker and darker brown the longer he had been away, trudging through sticks and fallen trees too weak to stand upright against the storms and winds. Mud and dirt caked every inch of his body, growing leaner by the day as he fed off of scraps of trash or roadkill.

Yet despite all his misery, he looked forward towards one simple hope: the sight of that broken chain link fence surrounding his quaint little home, where his most beloved people in the whole wide world awaited his inevitable return.

Rufus marched forward, past the squirrels and broken birds nests, only taking a brief pause when he came across a creek to wash his wounds and free his fur of soil and sod. He lapped at the freshness of the flowing stream, letting his aching muscles relax as he quenched his thirst that had lasted for hours. He became so enraptured by the rhythmic sounds of the water and the cleanliness he suddenly found himself in, that he found himself drifting off to sleep.

Upon waking from his slumber, Rufus noticed how much darker it had become. The last of the sun's rays shone through the tree line, leaving Rufus shivering from a mixture of his dampened hairs and the setting sun. Shaking himself off, he set forth, even more anxious to make it home.

Searching for Home

His first sign of hope arrived when he glimpsed gray. A tornado had swept through the area a few years ago, knocking down some trees that had damaged their fence. Ever since then, it had sat haphazardly crumpled across the edge of the woods in their backyard. The gray of that broken fence sent joy throughout every muscle in Rufus' body, launching himself forward despite his pain, ignoring the flare of his aching body as he ran up the back porch, scratching at the screen door that led to what he called home. Met by an equally happy owner, his barks of excitement mixed with his best friend's excited laughter, filling the night air as they became reunited at last.

Scene from a Best-Friendship

Scene from a Best Friendship-1996

(Derek and Rob)

“So, Sire, how do you like living in New York?” Rob asks, seizing a handful of roasted peanuts from the brown bag Derek holds out.

“Oh! I love it. I’m kinda surprised to see graffiti covering everything, even the subway cars inside and out but it’s great. It’s art everywhere, no matter where you turn your head. And being surrounded by skyscrapers is well ... iconic! Derek adds, tilting his head up. “I just love having to look straight up to see the sky, Rob! “

“Yeah, I never thought about it that way before.” Rob says, lifting his own head up to face the sky.

“Oh! Plus, all the yellow cabs with their checkered stripes peeling down these streets look like bursts of sun! You already know about my love affair with the color gold!” Derek says, squinting his eyes to the street and then back to Rob.

“Yeah, the city has it all and it has one speed: FAST!” Rob exclaims.

“Yeah. You’ve got to keep up. I’m a ... uh ... I’m a different person here, Sire, because up until now I felt like my entire life was on mute, but

Scene from a Best-Friendship

not here, not now.” Derek remarks in a serious tone as he grabs a fistful of peanuts and shakes them rapidly in his right hand.

“Definitely not!” Rob agrees, reaching over to squeeze his best friend’s shoulder.

Then, like a true New Yorker, Derek throws back his head and pops all the peanuts into his mouth.

The Final Scene from a Best Friendship-1997

(Derek and Rob)

The hospital bed squeaks as Derek scoots himself closer to Rob.

“Do you have your Walkman in there?” Derek asks, motioning to Rob’s knapsack on the chair.

“Uh, yeah I do,” Rob replies reaching in and pulling it out.

Rob inches closer to Derek - close enough for them to share the headphones.

“Rhiannon?” Rob asks.

Scene from a Best-Friendship

Derek nods and closes his eyes.

Rob hits play.

Derek taps his thumb against Rob's keeping beat to the song.

As soon as it finishes, they remove the headphones.

"I ... "Derek cuts himself off abruptly. His eyes flicker with surprise as if caught in the middle of something he didn't mean to say. He rubs the expression away and shoots Rob a forlorn look.

Rob puts his left hand to Derek's right, and they lace their fingers together.

"It's going to be okay, Sire. YOU'RE going to be okay." Rob says with as much reassurance as he can muster.

"I ...I'm scared," Derek manages.

Rob puts his arm around Derek which prompts him to rest his head under Rob's chin.

They stay like this - with Rob gently brushing Derek's hair from his forehead - until the orderly arrives to take Derek for the CT scan.

Scene from a Best-Friendship

Rob kisses Derek on the top of the head and whispers, "See you before you look for me," as they gradually separate their hands until only their pinkies stay intertwined for a second.

A lifetime passes as Rob paces and waits.

Then the door swings open and a doctor enters the room.

Rob reads the downcast face before the doctor says, "I'm sorry. He's gone."

Rob's body reacts first. His skin is hot and cold all over and his eyes swim with tears that shed quickly.

His throat tightens as shock explodes like a package bomb in his brain.

The doctor says something about fetching the social worker.

The door shuts and Mordred's sword plunges down - straight through Rob's heart.

Vanishing

I feel them slipping away—
fragments of memory loosening, drifting
like dandelion pappi, tiny parachutes
tossed into the wind.

I reach, desperate,
but my fists flail uselessly—
a futile attempt to reclaim
what's already been lost.

I don't want to forget.
Each lost moment, like a grain of sand,
carries with it the weight of time,
heavy, invisible.

So I turn to small rituals:
crosswords in the morning light,
numbers lining up in quiet order,
a gentle fight against the tide.

As my hand grazes the tall grasses,
yesterday loosens its grip.
My father's voice drifts,
not lost, only changing—
like mist lifting off the river.

Vanishing

I open my lungs
to the golden air,
to sunlit fields,
to the steadfast pulse of this world.

Stairway to Temple



An Inquiry Into Loss

From dust to dust. From clay to clay. From mother's cry to mother's cry. Back to the beginning, 23 years later. The road turning into the farm. Seems shorter, as if my memory added some kilometers with each passing year: some trees are still the way they were, fat and green, while others have been cut and kept intact entries in life's gallery of beauty and decay. They lie down like lowly obeisant doormen welcoming feet long departed, prodigal returns. In this morning, before the sun shone, Luwisha left us. Her body couldn't fight the pull anymore. In the morning, she broke into the lights of the sky! From dust to dust. From clay to clay. From mother's cry to mother's cry there she has returned as dust, tears, forgiveness, acceptance, joy, light.

CTA Lost and Found

i left an envelope filled with
one-dollar bills on the blue line train
it wasn't the first thing I have
lost on the cta

two years ago i dropped my
chanel lipstick and it rolled
down the aisle
i asked passengers to move
in search of the white tube
but never found it again

i left my copy of
zorro by isabel allende
on a red line to chinatown
on a warm summer day
i was drinking milk tea and waiting
for a friend when i discovered
it was missing

a walgreens bag with two small jars
of nivea lotion i left on the yellow line
they were supposed to be gifts for my sisters

one small half eaten tub of
magnolia bakery banana pudding
i left behind on the
brown line
i was beyond sad when i realized it was
missing later that night

CTA Lost and Found

i left a notebook with sketches and poems
on a late-night blue line when i exited at
the belmont stop
this time i called cta the next day
a small black notebook
the first three pages sketches of arms
the rest mostly poems
yes they had my item

i collected the notebook from the
rail terminal
someone had written
on an empty page
i liked your poems and your drawings

i hope this finds you again
claire has signed her name
and presumably turned my
notebook in at the o'hare stop

i traced the words that claire
had written to me with my finger
and thought of this mystery person
who helped me
find my poems again

Clockwork Love

A knock at the door and there was Vitrevsky, covered in dust, back home at last. "Something's wrong," said Vitrevsky.

The words were intelligible yet distorted by low scraping rasps emanating from deep inside. I tightened my ears to hear all the better.

"It hurts," said Vitrevsky. "I need help."

"You left," I said.

"I had to."

"You didn't. You wanted to."

"I'm sorry you're angry."

"I'm sorry you're hurting."

We cried against each other.

"Will you please help me?"

I didn't want to. I had to. Is having to simply the most perfect kind of wanting to, much like a well-functioning movement is the most perfect kind of heart?

"No one's more thorough than me," I said.

"No one I know," said Vitrevsky.

Carefully, yes, lovingly, I removed Vitrevsky's head. I undid the bolts holding it to the neck and, my hands on Vitrevsky's jaw, pulled it out of its hole. I placed it, eyes closed, lips parted and trusting, on a piece of clean soft felt I had arranged on the shelf.

I undid the latch and opened the front of Vitrevsky's torso. I took my time to examine the movement inside. One should be utmostly familiar with a living mechanism before touching it, let alone taking it

Clockwork Love

apart. Even if movements are similar in their structure and functioning, no two are ever identical, each possessing its own unique qualities, its own oddities and idiosyncrasies, either inherent in its make or acquired over the course of living in and around matter and motion. I took note of how the wheels were positioned in relation to each other, the angles of the pallets, the tightness of the cocks, the width of the barrel, the length and thickness, from what I could observe, of the mainspring.

Sure enough, Vitrevsky's movement had changed since the last time I'd seen it, changed in subtle ways, in the way the teeth of the center wheel pulled too heavily on the intermediates, in the way a pinion was scratching at the insides of the lateral ratchet, in the way the mainspring struggled to uncoil. Ah, the spring, where the rasps were coming from, dirty and showing subtle signs of rust, and bent too, just a fraction, no one but me would've known. What were you doing, Vitrevsky, for your mainspring to get twisted so?

I closed up the chest. I removed Vitrevsky's arms and placed them on the shelf. I walked the rest of the body to my workbench (a headless body will still know to put one foot in front of the other so long as they're connected via the movement to the mainspring). When it was lying prostrate on the bench I unscrewed the legs.

I removed the lugs that secured the movement to the inside of the torso. I pulled the movement out through the back door and placed Vitrevsky's empty shell on the floor, out of the way. I removed the

Clockwork Love

large components and then disassembled each with my screwdriver and flat-nose pliers. I take pride in my deftness and skill, but most of all in the care that I put to my work, in never damaging any piece that I touch.

Hardest of all was to let down the mainspring. I placed the barrel down on the table, turned the winding button counterclockwise, then lifted it away from the ratchet wheel until it clicked, as it should, indicating that it was ready to be fully rotated. I did this slowly, making sure the mainspring didn't suddenly unwind, which was liable to scratch my hand or even my eye, or, worse still, damage the barrel wheel. The spring refused to come out, deformed as it was, so I applied a little cleaning oil and pulled, carefully, firmly, until it gave. I let it unspool. I saw the notch, the twist, the damage. What did you do, Vitrevsky? It would have to be replaced.

The strength of a mainspring is inversely proportional to its length, meaning that a spring twice as long will deliver half the energy, but proportional to the cube of its thickness, so that a spring twice as thick will exert eight times the force. I was careful, then, to select a new spring as close in thickness to the damaged one, even if it was a bit longer, which would matter almost none. I placed the new spring at the proper angle, hooked it onto the barrel wheel, and tightened it with the key, making sure that, fully coiled, it occupied a third of the area inside the barrel.

That done I cleaned the rest of the parts of the movement. I

Clockwork Love

dipped them in oil and let them rest, then wiped them pristine with the grease brush, then polished them with the soft-bristle brush. When every component was done, when every piece reflected my face like a mountain lake, I reassembled the movement, hooking every piece in its place, tightening the bolts and the pinions, assuring the whole could contain itself.

I wound the key and set it in motion.

It wasn't the same as before Vitrevsky left. It could never be. But it was repaired, and cleaned, and working fine. Finer, perhaps, than before.

I retrieved Vitrevsky's torso and reattached the movement. I lifted the body onto its legs, reinserted the arms, and, lastly, the head. I left the front door open for Vitrevsky to check with probing fingers for tightness and fit. When he signaled satisfaction I closed it and fastened the latch.

"Thank you," said Vitrevsky. "I feel like new."

That made me glad.

"Will you leave again?"

Vitrevsky's eyes were bright with regret.

"I think I'll stay here," the words came out pristine and undistorted.

"Will you stay with me?"

"Perhaps," I replied, "after I've gone on my own for a while."

We smiled against each other.

"No one loved you more than me," I said as I went away.

"No one I know," said Vitrevsky.

After the Burial

I listen to Tracy Chapman.

She whispers about revolution and re-evaluate my consumption.

Between the train station and work, her voice pushes me out of the ordinary. There's something refreshing about her — a spiritual voice over an acoustic guitar hinting at roots, coffee houses filled with an old soul sound that echoes past closing time. I leave the train into a grand white concourse—a sea of bundled figures in black winter coats, bracing against the cold, gray day.

Tracy sings a timeless theme — change, she repeats “run, run, run.”

Contrasts lie in our periphery, all around us, swimmers caught in a riptide. Escalators carry us out onto the cold concrete sidewalks beneath the cityscape's encased office spaces that divide labor, capital, and us.

Tracy sings of a Fast Car.

It resonates between my ears — my old man, problem, bottle, too young to be that old, care. Outside, a gust of icy air lashes my eyes. Though it's mid-April, winter's last gasp still bites. A single tear wells up—blame it on the wind, I tell myself, as I step from claustrophobic crowds into this open plaza.

She sings about quitting school to look after her old man.

He should have had another ten, fifteen years. But the bottle— or maybe something deeper—cut his time short. More of my tears seep

After the Burial

out in the plaza that's lined with bare trees and surrounded by carts selling instant coffee and stale donuts. I admit it. I've pushed these tears down for too long. When's the revolution going to start, if not now?

I started listening to Tracy again because my old man died. I returned home. I spent time in all the places of my childhood. Drive past the landmarks of my former world. Shake hands and accept condolences from people I thought I'd never see again.

The week prior to his funeral saw anger and past grudges dry out like tears on my cheek. I let my sister give my old man's eulogy. I passionately wanted to do it when I drove up to meet her. But in the instant we came together, I realized my error. She needed it to grieve. We come to agreements like that.

I sit on a plaza bench. People stream by — heads down, hands in pockets, stride with purpose — past brown branches, gray squirrels, and filthy concrete. Faces in the crowd that have left their humanity at home, or at least at the station. Tracy rises above the hum.

Wakes. Funerals. Burials—I don't cry. Tracy Chapman songs—I weep. Is it her meaning, or my own guard falling? Why have I steeled myself so long, only to break here on a stone bench?

I don't want to lose these tears. They wipe away attachments, resentments, fears. Keep going, I tell them. They tell me – run, drive, call — the revolution is within.

After the Burial

This April, Tracy reissued her debut album, remastered on vinyl, thirty-seven years after the original. On the cover she stares out, as young as ever. Maybe that's the revolution—the timeless voice reminding us we're alive, against the slow dying of everything.

Everyone's death reminds me that I have my own coming; it's I who is dying. I feel years, periods, phases, eras, lost for good. All the innocence and the phoniness. That person I was then. It's a part of me that I mourn for.

Hallelujah, Tracy sings, the bucket is kicked, the body is gone, stand up, put on a smile.

And I go to work

Blank Lenses

As the flames consumed the hillside, I sat in wait, armed with my prized possessions: a crescent-shaped box filled with my grandparents' jewelry, a torn mailing envelope full of my mother's photos, and my father's eyeglasses. A rucksack holding enough clothes to last for a week was placed neatly near the front door, and the other mementos were stuffed in a *New Yorker* tote bag. I paced back and forth, peering into the tote and shuffling the items around to ensure I hadn't forgotten anything that was irreplaceable. I glanced toward the wall, noticing the dozens of framed prints that I would not be able to take with me. I sighed, my heart racing as I absentmindedly picked at a newly formed blemish. I remembered the exposure and response prevention exercises that were supposed to put an end to my obsessive-compulsive disorder, but the familiar suspicion that something was not quite right niggled at the back of my mind. I crouched down in my entryway and put my hands in the tote bag once more.

I grasped the warped obsidian frames, running my fingertips along the scratches that had been etched into the plastic decades ago. I reminisced about when my father had worn them, like when he picked me up from elementary school after I had to be sent home for feigning illness or during the weekends when I would accompany him on errands, when he still referred to me as his "little buddy." They

Blank Lenses

were all I had left of him, or at least the man I once knew, and I had secretly wept when he gave them to me one afternoon when I was visiting him after he had divorced my mother.

My father and I have had a challenging relationship for as long as I can remember, often complicated by his extramarital affairs and callousness. He was raised by Mexican immigrants who claimed they were French, the first and only of their children to be born in America. My paternal grandparents came from a mysterious background, with my grandfather weaving tales of serving in World War II, becoming a pilot, and then a police officer. To this day, the only verifiable fact about him is that he volunteered at his local library as a retiree, but other than that, nothing is certain. While most of his claims have been proven impossible due to his immigration timeline, my grandfather sought to differentiate himself from others—and to achieve this, reality had to be malleable, and the truth, optional. My father was yet another generation of this mindset, living proof that the apple never falls far enough away from the tree.

Although my father was alive, I remained in perpetual mourning for the relationship that never was and the man I never truly knew, and perhaps even the man who did not know himself. I clutched the glasses close to me, closer than I had ever been to my dad, counting the times we had hugged on one hand.

Blank Lenses

The TV blared from the other room, and the newscaster indicated that residents in my area were safe for the time being. The air was thick with soot. I stood helplessly as the landmarks I loved burned to the ground, again peering down at the glasses. I searched and searched for my father in the reflection of each lens, seeing the slim silhouette but never the fully fleshed out man, instead finding the mirror image of the parent I had been to myself. There I was, the eyes, the nose, the mouth. I never left.

Birth Mother

On Mother's Day
She surely dreams of you
And waking
Calls your given name

Perhaps you hear her voice
A bright shimmering of bells
And go quiet
Just briefly
To wonder what it is
That quickly melancholy
Like lightning Knifing through you
Then gone and nameless

On Mother's Day
She must sit by a window
Plotting your life
While you play quietly
In a world she aches to know

Perhaps you feel the sweet
Touch of her hand and look up
At the curtain being
Swept out across the room
You smile and reach for it
Playfully
Laughter bubbling from you

Birth Mother

And later
On Mother's Day
In the cusp of evening
Perhaps the kiss of rain
On your face
Takes you beyond memory
To a place bittersweet and
Resonate with yearning
Leaving you adrift
And momentarily lost

While she weeps and traces the line that has
Unraveled between mother and child
Seeking assurance
Forgiveness

A way back.

Beloved,

there is no word to describe
how it feels to hear you say my name
just as there is no word for the moment the stars
come out or when they disappear.
My beloved's voice is like moonlight
reflected in a polished silver bowl
placed on the windowsill
after I've pulled back the curtain
to make space for it.
Only you can dress me
in a wedding gown of fire one day,
make me feel that I teeter at the edge
of the 61st floor on another,
and then say words that shock me awake;
Look, beloved, I have found the last iris
of the season, blooming in a bed
of dry leaves in November.
You are a shredder, and you are lightning,
and you are a passport to countries and continents
and planets, named and yet to be named.
Beloved, I have put away winter,
and I have found the lost necklace.
I wait and wait, a crow waiting for a frozen field
to turn gold with sunflowers.

Which Version Do You Want?



The Search

She searched for herself along the sunny shore. Small hands lifted seashells and seaweed as she looked underneath, always sensing someone waiting for her there in the shifting sand. Her mother's voice called her away, back to splash in the ocean with the other screaming children or to sit on the faded quilt and eat icy, sweet watermelon while the seagulls soared overhead waiting for their share. What had she been looking for? The ocean whispered to her in froth and foam and she almost remembered, but it was time to go home where the smell of beer and the sound of fury would scare her fledgling self away.

She ceased searching for herself when she found her first love. The white rocking chair kept a steady rhythm on the farmhouse front porch until his old pickup truck rattled down the gravel drive, and he was her life. Motherhood later filled her with joy and purpose, but she forgot who she had been looking for. She sensed herself in brief, enchanting moments, peeking out from between the lines of a beloved novel or soaring overhead with a red-tailed hawk in an endless sky.

She was startled by middle age. It snuck up on her, silent in the deepening darkness. She sensed the shortness of her remaining time

The Search

on a spinning planet and searched in earnest for her elusive self. There she was in a sunbeam on a shiny floor, in a favorite line of poetry, in the sight of misty mountains in the morning, and in the first golden leaf of fall. She reached for herself, walking ever closer, fingertips touching. The struggle to survive stalked her and pulled her away from her writing and herself, but she was always there, her soul strengthening even as her body weakened.

She knows the show must go on, and it is almost time for her third act. The stage is being set, memories as backdrops, dreams as script, hope as overture. She waits in the wings, smiling at herself illuminated in the spotlight, arms outstretched. The search over, she will join herself for the final curtain call, hands clasped, whole, inseparable, a grin and a last bow before she says goodbye.

When the Mantas Return

No 'blue bottles' of petrol have reached the island since March. My Scoopy sleeps beneath the mango tree, now overtaken by vines and spiders, an insect hotel of sorts. With no speedboats, no tourists, no ATM money or imported food, the island has returned to a slower rhythm. The monkeys have reclaimed the village, vegetation swallows buildings whole, and the markets open only every two weeks. Sea turtles glide again into Toya Pakeh Harbour. But not the mantas. Not yet.

They were the reason I came here. Seeing them has become a distant, almost impossible dream. Still, signs of life persist. The road to Gamat Bay ends abruptly, giving way to jungle or to the shanty homes of those who've stayed. Their shelters, made of palm and plastic, barely move with the wind. I see them gather sprouted coconuts, half for them, half for their chickens. Men haul them across the island on their shoulders, trading for goat's milk to feed their babies. Their lives, our lives, have all changed too quickly.

A ripple of laughter breaks the quiet. Children are gathered on the exposed reef, shouting and skipping between coral heads revealed by

When the Mantas Return

the low tide. For a moment, I think they're playing with hermit crabs, like I used to with my brothers on the other side of the world. There's something universally soft about children's games. I walk toward them, trying not to startle.

"What are you up to?" I ask. "Is it a game?"

They hesitate, then:

"Kami sedang menangkap kerang untuk dimakan."

"Makan?" I repeat, recognising one of the few words I know.

"Makan-makan!" they cry, proudly showing their plastic bag of clams.

Their joy has urgency, not play. A rusty knife appears, a clam sliced open, offered to me. Their eyes sparkle with the same mix of kindness and need. I shake my head.

"Tidak, terima kasih," I say.

Their voices fade as three adults shout from the shore. The children scatter, expressions shifting from excitement to alarm. I don't know if they're afraid of me, or something else entirely. I'm a bule, a foreigner. I like to think I belong here, but I know I don't. I came to help, to heal

When the Mantas Return

the coral. But that doesn't mean I was invited.

The others I arrived with have long since gone. Only John, our project founder, and Putri, his partner and the soul of our work, remain. We came to restore the reefs, study El Niño's lasting scars, build coral nurseries, and document the bleaching. The reefs were already ghost-white when we got here. Still, we worked. We tied living fragments to welded structures, powered them with old solar panels, watched tiny signs of growth appear. It was slow, quiet work. Hopeful.

The locals called us *tukang kebun karang* - the coral gardeners.

Some days, John and Putri didn't show up. With the tourists gone, their diving shop stood still. No income, no future plans. I left mangoes on their doorstep in silence, until eventually, they let me sit in their garden. We shared a few sunsets.

"I remember when I was the only *bule* on this island," John laughed once, though his eyes were tired. "Now there are two of us to blame."

When the Mantas Return

Putri's silence lingered. She poured coffee ground from her neighbour's trees, a rare treat. I sipped it slowly.

"Locals think we brought the virus," John continued. "And the bleaching. White skin, white coral. Putri's mum, may she rest, said our marriage killed her sister."

Guilt settled into me like a fog. I came with good intentions, but maybe that was never enough. Just because I'm from an island doesn't mean I understand this one. Still, I stayed. I had no one to go back to.

Most days, I walked to the diving shop, suited up, and descended to the coral garden. I logged each visit carefully. Planted. Fixed damage. Watched. Without tourists, the sea began to repopulate. Small fish first. Then stars, crabs. Groupers claimed new dens. Turtles returned, resting atop the acroporas like sleeping on stone beds. But still no mantas.

After John's words, I avoided the bay when I saw others down there. I didn't want them to see me and think: *curse*. The island's isolation

When the Mantas Return

became my own. I disappeared into the coral.

Until that January morning. The current was strong, the sea thick with krill and jellyfish. I went in anyway. My suit, my fins, my logbook in hand. Focused on the deeper garden, I barely noticed anything around me until I felt the water shift. I looked up.

A manta.

Wide, shimmering, dancing just beyond reach. Then another, curious and fearless, glided directly toward me, mouth open, turning just inches before my mask. A third one brushed my arm with silk-soft wings. They circled me like an old friend's embrace.

Time stopped.

For a moment, I forgot everything else. The reef, the garden, the virus, the distance. It was just them, and me, and movement. I stayed until my tank ran dry, then reluctantly surfaced.

When the Mantas Return

On the shore, people were waiting.

The children. Their mothers. They had seen the dance. They were clapping, laughing, shouting “bule!” But this time, it was different. They were smiling.

They hugged me.

The mantas had returned.

The Abduction of Sunshine

I disappear real good in this park crowd... a shadow with dirt brown hair and cloudy gray eyes, just another mother watching her kid go down the slide. In fact, my kid *is* goin' down the slide. Only, she don't know I'm her mother.

Five long years I've been lookin' for my girl. Some negative bozos in the clink kept sayin' 'forget it, she's gone'. I could've punched them in their ugly faces—I could never “forget it” and thank God I didn't because my hard work paid off—I found her, dammit!

Anderson Correctional Facility houses some wicked good computer geniuses. Very talented inmates that can find out anything online. What I had to do to get that information...you don't even wanna go there.

What got me sent away wasn't entirely my fault. I was just a kid when I had her. Wish my lovin' her had been enough to get me clean.

When she was three months old, I scored an eight-ball and passed out with a lit cigarette while she slept in a desk drawer. My stupid pillow caught fire and the smoke inhalation nearly killed her. So they got me for possession and child endangerment. I punched a cop when they took her away.

The Abduction of Sunshine

But I've been clean for over five long years, paid my dues and all. Overpaid if you ask me...they tried to break me for one little screw up, made me feel like garbage. Well, that little girl I made didn't come from garbage! And I'm gonna prove it. I'm just as good as any of these holier-than-thou mommy piss ants.

She's my girl and I deserve another shot at this mothering deal. I hope I don't spook her by showing up out-of-the-blue like this. Will she know me? She has to, right? I can't keep still, crossing and uncrossing my legs, my foot pumpin' up and down like a piston. There's gotta be something inside her, like a mommy switch, that will turn on when she sees me. That's what I'm counting on.

Her hair is so glossy it looks like a crown of sunshine. I wanna bury my face in it. We'll brush each other's hair, and she'll look up at me, touch my face with them chubby baby hands. I'll plant angel kisses all over her cheeks and give her what nobody else can...a *rea/* mother.

Her hair brain nanny is on the phone-oblivious-rummaging through her purse. That nitwit ain't even watching her slide down on her cute belly. I'm doing my kid a solid, taking her away from this space cadet. My daughter is running in back of the slide, waiting in line to climb up to the top again. This is my opportunity.

The Abduction of Sunshine

Once I get her in the car, we'll head west. It'll be an adjustment, but she's young-she'll adapt. I even brought a dog along to keep her busy. Kids are suckers for dogs. We're gonna have so much fun. She's going to love me-I'm countin' on it.

Parts of It

I hadn't thought about Gerry Rydlasky for years. Decades even. As happens at my age, I found his obituary when I looked him up online.

I knew Gerry for only a couple of months during a college summer session. He was a few doors down in the dorm. He had a Lego Stonehenge on his desk, wrote letters to historical figures, as well as their imagined replies, and slept in his clothes so he could set his alarm later. He told some joke about the difference between Planck and plankton; I didn't get it.

I hung out with him not because he made a semi-nerd like me seem cool, but because he was likable and interesting. He knew a bit about everything. He could teach you how to swear in three languages and seemed particularly fond of *stronzo* and *merde*. Curious about the Thermidorians? The Big Bang? Gerry knew.

Turned out he was an avid reader — but only parts of books. *How do you know about the climate in Nepal, Gerry? I read a book about it. You read a book about Nepal? Parts of it.*

Parts of It

We saw the movie Chinatown together. I shrugged it off as just a detective story; Gerry thought it was deeper, and convinced me over deep-dish pizza.

Over the course of our friendship, Gerry told me a bit about himself. His father had dropped dead in his early 50s from a heart attack. Gerry blamed his mother's nagging. Gerry had been a sixth grade teacher, but lasted only one year. The students made so much fun of him, he was let go. He said he sobbed for days.

Gerry lived with his mother and planned to return there after the summer session. I harped at him to get his own place. One day, toward the end of the term, he surprised me and said — I remember his exact words — *By God, I'm going to do it.*

The next day, Gerry said a counselor told him not to do anything rash. Gerry thought that was good advice. About a week later, the summer session ended, and we lost touch.

Parts of It

Gerry's obituary said in part that he *worked briefly as a teacher following college but then devoted most of his time to caring for his mother...*

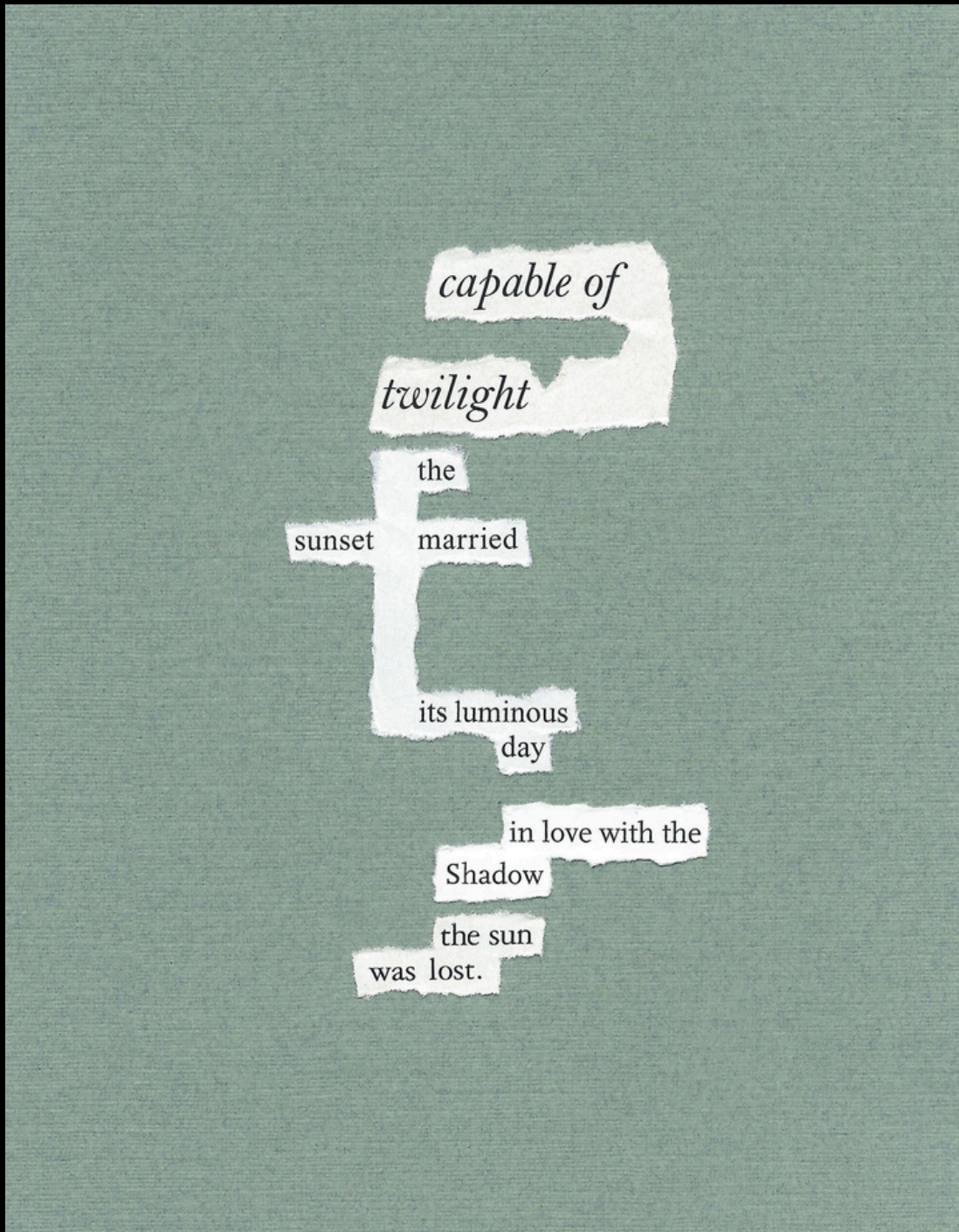
I checked out the handful of postings on the "memory tree." One was from Gerry's best friend in grade school. The two boys were trying to become Eagle Scouts, but Gerry's friend was about to give up because he believed he couldn't do the required three pull-ups. *Gerry cajoled and encouraged me, the post said, until I went for it. I succeeded and was awarded the rank of Eagle Scout. I learned to never count myself out of something that I really fear. To this day, if someone asks me about things that I have accomplished in my life, I mention that I am an Eagle Scout. Because of Gerry Rydlasky.*

Sometimes I imagine asking Gerry if he was happy with his life. He says *parts of it*. I say *Same here*, realizing that in losing touch with him, I'd somehow found something about the choices we make and don't make. Then we talk about Stonehenge.

Blue Army Elvis



capable of twilight



Odette

While my sister opened presents
I pulled ribbons until they unraveled.

This one had wings that lit up, sparkles of periwinkle blue, and a crown like a swan,
her pointed feet tied neatly to pink shoes so that she might dance under twinkling lights.

Be a good brother, give it back to your sister!

But she was my friend and understood me the most
for I too came from a box.

The humans that made me wanted things rigid and straight
like signs on a bathroom door
silent while I twirled and whispered *save me* into that blonde Barbie's hair.
And take me far far away.

I dug my nails deep in my flesh
not gentle, but you are what you know.
Haunted by the day he took me out of my box,
a bitter flavor injected in me.

Maybe little boys should be abused,
at least then they'd be strong enough to
face the monsters under their beds.

"Once boys turn seven, they no longer play with dolls."
As wooden soldiers, we march along.
Sharp bones down my back where they cut off my wings
made me into a wind-up toy.
Pull the string and I'll tell you, *blue eyed boys don't cry*; it's not what we're made for.

Odette

Just last year, I saw her again. Behind the counter of a vintage toy store. New in the box.
Hello, old friend. My Swan Lake Barbie, just as I remembered, smiling at me,
melting my cold,

cold heart.

Eyes pleaded, as if she needed me too.

I couldn't risk someone taking her from me again.

So I vowed to keep her safe

preserved in that box.

Where nobody can hurt us.

Driftwood

The sand crunched between my toes, as I ambled after him to find some 'drifwoo'. His accent had been difficult to understand ever since I had arrived, but he seemed so excited about this, I didn't have the heart to ask him what he was saying a third time. At the age of 7, I had heard no accents or dialects except the lilting tones of the Indian accent, and back at school, I was considered quite the scholar in my English class. This was why it irked me so greatly when I failed to understand what people here, in the United States, were saying to me. He who currently had my tiny, cold hand grasped in his large, warm one, was my great uncle, and spoke no language but English. While we had many misunderstandings, this was never a defining barrier, because our enthusiasm to spend time with each other would always overcome it.

This particular morning, he had woken me up slightly earlier to take me to the beach to find some driftwood. At this age, I had no clue what the word meant, and especially not in his harsh New York accent. I only had to sit on a large rock for a few minutes, tired from our expedition, for him to surface the first piece of driftwood I would

Driftwood

ever see. It was shaped like a thick, three-dimensional Y which had been bent in half at a random point. My vivacious imagination had already started running overtime to figure out what the source of this object could be. Perhaps it was from the mast of a pirate ship, or perhaps it was a fairy's broken and mutilated wand. However, when he motioned to me to start walking back to the house with the driftwood in hand, I tugged his hand back.

"That doesn't belong to us! Someone's lost it!"

"Exactly, someone lost it, and we found it."

With only that sentence as an explanation for his actions, he started walking back with a faint smile on his lips. My moral systems were not strong enough to risk remaining all alone on that rock, so I quickly jumped up and ran after him. My chastising continued until he turned around and said:

"If you lost that favorite white teddy bear of yours, the one you sleep with every night, would you rather it remain lost forever, or someone else give her a good home?"

Scrunching my nose, I mumbled "The good home thing you said, I

Driftwood

suppose.”

He grinned, his point proven, and said: “Let’s go into my studio. Today I’m going to show you how we can give this wood a new purpose.”

I later found out that he was a sculpture artist, and this was his livelihood, but for those 2 hours we spent in that studio, it was as if he was determined to make this wood brand new just for me.

I helped him paint it the perfect shade of pink, the same shade as my walls back home, and put swirls of gold into it, hoping that it would diffuse some magical qualities into the wood. A few days later, I left his house with the ‘sculpture’ securely placed in my suitcase. Upon reaching home, I placed it on the table right next to the front door, the most prominent place of display my brain could conjure. For 3 months, I would give it a little pat every time I left the house and passed by it. The 6 months after that, I would pat it whenever my glance fell upon it, maybe once in 2 weeks. The year after that, this habit slowly faded, and so did the memory. The memory grew holes in it, while the sculpture collected dust. 2 years later, my mother had a big event to host, and placed the sculpture in a drawer for the night.

Driftwood

After that night, the sculpture remained there for another night. And another. And another.

Perhaps the sculpture had already been ‘lost’ from my mind for a while, but it also became physically lost in the past few years as no one in the family could recall where it was placed, or even having seen it in the past half decade. Maybe it was always in the driftwood’s fate to be lost and found by different people throughout its lifetime, or perhaps I was the only owner silly enough to have lost something so special, something so greatly imbued with memories. My great uncle would ask about it every time we visited, even as his memory deteriorated with Alzheimers, and I would lie through a forced smile, until he passed away from a respiratory disease last year. I have no idea how many times that driftwood was lost and found, and no idea whether every occurrence was as painfully bittersweet as mine, but I have always hoped that it was *found* again.

WHERE'S LITTLE JOEY?

I remember the first time I met my cousin, Joey, at the hospital nursery. I was seven years old, and he was the cutest baby I'd ever seen, with his little body and disproportionately large feet. When I peered into his bassinet, I tugged at my mother's skirt, "Mom, look, he opened his eyes and wiggled his finger at me." We had an immediate connection.

As he became a toddler, I was his babysitter and playmate. On Sundays, my family visited his parents and grandparents. Joey and I were inseparable playing games, making up songs and taking walks outside. We'd always sit next to each other at the dining room table giggling and eating all the ice cream and cake we could swallow. I understood his baby talk and was often called on by his parents to act like a United Nations interpreter to translate his sounds and grunts.

Then he was gone.

I was ten years old the last time I saw my three-year-old cousin, Joey. It was as if he disappeared into thin air. One week everything was normal, the next, no more Joey and no more telephone calls from his mom. Whenever his dad visited us, his eyes were red and swollen. I asked my mother where Joey was. She shook her head and said, "They took him away."

WHERE'S LITTLE JOEY?

I got a sick gut feeling; My mind raced. I didn't know about power.

I asked, "Was he kidnapped? Did someone hurt him? Will they feed him?" I demanded to know, "Who? Where? We must get him back. We must fight for him. Should we call the police?"

Mom said nothing, holding back tears. I sat on the kitchen floor and sobbed until I fell asleep.

This was my first taste of raw powerlessness and the moment the sweetness of child innocence became a burden and a hindrance. I had no information, no know-how, no money, no life experience. I was an anchor, a negative to myself and to little Joey.

I was too young to know there were two different families in a family, the dad's and the mom's. I thought family was family. To me, Uncle Joe was my uncle and Aunt Helen was my aunt. I was too young to know about family politics, wars brewing, and the necessity of treading lightly to avoid outbursts.

I was too young to know there was such a thing as divorce because in my head, moms and dads are always happy and they always love their kids. I didn't know a little boy could be used as a pawn by the people who should care about him the most. I was a grief-stricken child, powerless to bring back little Joey.

WHERE'S LITTLE JOEY?

Little Joey's big presence in my life became an empty void. I'd often think, where is he? What does he look like now? How is he doing? Is he happy? Why would his mom just take him away from us, from me? Did I do something wrong?

Time moved on. My tears dried and holidays and birthdays came and went. I grew up and became an attorney, but my cousin was never far from my thoughts. Whenever I did legal searches, I'd search for little Joey. His name and date of birth were seared in my memory. But no luck. I was always disappointed. Maybe he really did disappear. Maybe I'm not supposed to find him. Maybe it's best if I just leave him alone.

Sometimes life has a way of unraveling life's knots. Decades later, our uncle Gaetano, died without leaving a will. My mother was the last living member of her siblings, so she was the court-appointed administrator of the estate. The court instructed her to hire a search firm to find Joey because he was an heir. He was found in Colorado. Armed with his contact information, I now had the power I didn't have as a child. I dialed the telephone number.

My heart was pounding, waiting for him to answer the phone. When he did, I heard in my head what sounded like the suction of a vacuum and what felt like a jolt, an esoteric drawing back of little Joey's

WHERE'S LITTLE JOEY?

energy into the fold.

Little Joey is now Joe, a widower, former eye doctor and business owner. We talk on the telephone almost every day and visit often. Although Joe remembered no one from his dad's family, he was happy to hear that there was once a little girl who remembered everything about him from the color of his eyes to his favorite toy.

Vahevala

What does it mean to be “lost in song”? I think many of us, myself included, have lost ourselves to the act of singing or dancing, in an ecstatic or meditative way, but I am talking about getting lost inside of a song itself. When we “enter” a song, where is it that we go?

There are as many answers to this question as there are destinations within an inner landscape. Sometimes a song is a tether to the past; a doorway into memory where past and present lose their demarcations and become a maelstrom of sound and color. Paul McCartney has called music “the soundtrack of our lives”. There are just some songs that keep us company as we move through life.

Sometimes a song is the personification of a ghost; it conjures a lost love or a cherished relation. I’ve created entire playlists of spectres, a musical graveyard I visit over and over again from my car or my desk, leaving daisies at the feet of familiar harmonies.

There is such a song, for me, that embodies both of these musical landscapes. As I sing along to the lyrics, I’m transported to a hot car on a summer morning in a dusty parking lot of my childhood. The humid air is stifling, the solution just steps away - a township lake, water reflecting in the pools of her eyes and beckoning us both to come seek relief. But we can’t get out until the song’s over. She’s taught me the importance of ritual, and this one is no exception.

Vahevala

I watch her head bop in time as she plays the drums against the steering wheel, and I shred my air guitar in the passenger seat. We belt out the closing notes together, adding jazz hands for style points. Passing families turn to stare at our bombastic interruption of their quiet morning, and we laugh as she reaches to turn the volume up.

The chorus whips me from the lake to a different car on any number of different summer mornings. We ride lower to the ground, the trunk laden with bags and suitcases. The windows are rolled down so we can smell the warm salty breeze through the marshes on either side of us. We've just turned off the highway. It's time.

We cue up the cassette tape, or maybe a CD. Perhaps we plug the iPod into the Aux port. She bops and drums, I shred. We both shriek along in tune. Cruising the side streets on our way to the same shoreside motel, we attract looks and laughter as we make our way. We laugh and dance in our seats as she reaches to turn the volume up.

The drum solo rips me from the car to the antiseptic smell of iodine and the steady beep of the monitoring equipment. I'm in a dimly lighted hospital room. She is too silent; a machine breathes for her. This is a journey I cannot make with her. I hate that she has to travel it alone. I hate that there is no music.

Vahevala

So, I start to sing. Quietly, at first, but that was never our style. I have nothing to drum along to, so I caress her cheek and sing in her ear. I don't know if she can hear me wherever she is, so I sing louder. My singing attracts looks and stares from nurses and patients passing by in the corridors. So, I laugh, and turn the volume up.

The song: Vahevala, Loggins & Messina, 1972

[https://open.spotify.com/track/6FjrWD7UNxu9iexxmAytwj?
si=b493f83a601f4211](https://open.spotify.com/track/6FjrWD7UNxu9iexxmAytwj?si=b493f83a601f4211)

We Would Have Found Robert Bond Again

We would have found Robert Bond in Rome if we had made it there on time, or perhaps Madrid. Never the Vatican but maybe Pamplona instead. Earlier, perhaps Kenya, or later Delhi. You'd have been in a hot little dive with excellent food and sweating drinks, listening to music and engaging in talk, like back in Tangiers. You'd speak of poetry, musicians and the saxophone, listen to pounding drums - while in the background, a wistful violin played for its near-dead audience.

We would have found Robert Bond in New York City if we'd flown there, you claiming work toward an MBA at Columbia of all things, as though that last degree gotten in Rome didn't count outside Europe, and sweating out those American summers which after all really don't compare to the heat in Kenya or Egypt. Man, you do get around, my friend. At least since getting kidnapped in Mogadishu, you learned better travel strategies and can still hear the throbbing and rumbling of the music. Lucky, that?

We Would Have Found Robert Bond Again

We took a red eye to Cozumel, having heard you
were there snorkeling yet naturally missed you
by a single day. But jetting off to see the Nile
on your own? You put Hemingway to shame!

Last month I sent you a message announcing
the publication of one of my new poetry books
only to have it returned to me, “address unknown,”
unable to forward. I thought that said so much
really, you wraith, you ghost. We’ll likely never
catch up to you, but if little else, do those piano
bars wicked justice for old times’ sake, don’t
forget to keep trying to resurrect Esquivel,
and we’ll be forever gloriously eternal.

Some things change and others never do

Waiting

Twenty-eight years ago we lay together,
still bloodied from the struggle.
You no longer swam with the waves of my heartbeat.
With the shell of your ear against my chest,
you listened for echoes from a distant world.
You nuzzled my breast, searched for my nipple.
How did you know?

And now we wait.
Cross off the days on our kitchen calendars.
You, welcoming the knife
that will make you who you want to be.
Me, remembering the softness of your skin,
the lightness of your bones,
your eagerness for life.

*

Some things change and others never do

Preparations

You are four hundred miles away
and smiling on my computer screen.
You tell me you have stocked the cupboard,
frozen meals. You had thought
you would convalesce alone
while friends drop by.

My heart begins to bleed.
I think you are strong to plan that way,
and stubborn too.
I think that you don't know I cannot be
four hundred miles away
when you are wounded, in pain.
Twenty eight years ago they cut the cord,
but you do not know it was not just pulsing flesh.
You do not feel the tug that worries me
to your door, that pulls me toward you
whichever way I think I need to go.

Some things change and others never do

Ask me your questions, you say.
But the questions bleed into one another.
Questions I don't want the answer to
about what they will do to you.
Questions about what help you'll need.
Questions about how we got here.
How did you know?

*

Surgery day

I have read what they are doing to you.
English words, precise Latin terms.
I like the distance the Latin gives;
it stays in my head, not tearing my heart.
So much. I think of you today.
Ready, poised, vulnerable, certain.
My prayers are wordless.
God must read the language of my heart.
I hold you, bleeding, wrapped in my love.
You have always been precious to me.
You still are.

Traveler

I land on a planet that's barren and pinkish. There's nothing but silence. It's perfect. I set up camp and drift into entrancing sleep. That night I dream of a bull introducing me to his family in a house made of mazes. At the dinner table his mother asks where my horns are. I begin to cry. I wake up and leave the wretched place.

I land on a planet coated in brutal psychic storms. As I exit my ship I can feel the layers of my brain peeling away, it feels kind of good. I decide to decline my death and re-enter my ship. I come back out just to get another taste, it's too much so I go back to the cockpit. I can't help myself. It goes on like this for some time.

I land on a planet that's immediately desolate. I depart my ship and observe something in the distance. It's a flower planted singularly into the arid soil. It starts whispering my future to me. It's full of light and sound. As I get close enough to touch it—my memory goes blank. I've become much younger, and I'm forced to live a very long life in this place until I remember how to drive my starship. Until my spacesuit fits perfectly again.

I land on a planet made entirely of glass. I fashion a mirror and

Traveler

observe my reflection for the very first time. Afterwards I drive my heel into the ground and everything starts to shatter. Before it's too late I climb inside my starship and take off. I leave myself behind.

I land on a planet with yellow rings. They arch overhead and crash like rainbows into the distant horizon. I look up and wonder what it takes to become them. I find a stone pylon with my name on it. I remind myself that I am happy. I remind myself that I am guilty of being away from home for too long. I remind myself that it doesn't matter. I remind myself that I don't really know where home is anyway.

Rock Creek, 6:45 a.m.

I found her cold body next to a metal bowl
full of antifreeze

Jolly Rancher green
small paws folded over in the gravel
soft coffee arch of fur deflated in
the frosty morning air
the neighbor's dark trailer
quiet like a grave
old pickup up on blocks
too far away to be an accident

When she didn't come home last night
I went out with headlamp and flashlight
Miles and hours later

no sign
A little bit of joy dies in the woods
next to the single wide
next to the grave yard
with the noose
tattered Confederate flag
flapping over four generations
of illegible
moss covered
forgotten
corpses

Poem for a Beach Made of Stars

In my dream a poem greeted me. It seemed genuinely happy to see me and smiled wide. It asked me directions to the beach where the grains of sand are shaped like stars. *But, I don't know what that is,* I said, looking upward. The sky was still dark, and a few stars winked at us. *Is that the star-sand beach?* I asked, pointing up. The poem gravely shook its head, said, *Not yet,* and explained that sand-stars are exoskeletons, the many chambered shells of protozoa dragged up from their seabed and washed ashore. *You see, the poem said, they are the calcium carbonate children of the North Star and the Southern Cross. A great sea snake rose on the day of their birth and struck them, pulling them into the ocean depths.* I pictured the snake gulping the stars as they fell to the ocean floor. I don't know why, but I had tears in my eyes. Perhaps they were shaped like stars; perhaps they were just drops of saline on my cheek. *I don't know where to find them,* I managed, *and, besides, aren't they all already dead?* I was really weeping now, spilling tears over the poem as I imaged walking over and crushing those tiny star-bodies. The poem took my hand as I cried. *Yes, these stars are corpses,* the poem explained patiently and even lovingly, *but they are also made from the corpses of stars.* This seemed like something only a poem could know, so I nodded along, then rested my head against the poem, reasoning that later on we could look for that beach together. I sighed and closed my eyes, briefly seeing a flash of stars. When I opened them again, the poem was gone.

Leaving Rehab

*My wife gets me out of here
every day, away from nightmares.
I twist awake, sweat and sleep
again, afraid I will not wake.*

After weeks, he's allowed –
I help him, with others helping,
into the car. *Just Drive*, he always says.
Back roads. Anywhere.

That day I missed a turn – road
dirt to tar to dirt again – *we came
to where it made no sense.*
No turning back until we came out

there – top of the hill, Mechanic Falls –
just turned around from where we thought we were.

*Finally they let her bring me home,
half-healed – how do I
get out of bed, get dressed,
eat breakfast,*

He asks for what he cannot get
himself as if he can. I reach for him.

Leaving Rehab

*live, learn to walk again
in this house we built?*

I feel him dream and wrestle
in his sleep with pain
and what isn't there -
a road that goes somewhere I know.

We find each other, hold each other.
It makes no sense, so turned around
from who we used to be.

November 30, 1990

November 30, 1990, or maybe January
he prints it out carefully
(my father and his gadgets)
in a font specially selected

a love letter to my mother
that I will find 21 years later

In a dresser drawer
I already know will be the hardest

with the black shawl she wore
with her red dress and red nails
(the only time I can remember them painted)
and two thin gold watches

he did that for a while,
print out notes
or write a few words
in that engineer's hand
hide them or mail them

that was how he loved
in paper and ink
tucked away in strange places
sent out only to come back

November 30, 1990

I find myself with my mother's hands
her voice at times
but I am my father's daughter

in paper and ink
tucked away in strange places

One Man's Junk



Beautiful Downtown Beanblossom

I found the navy blue *Beautiful Downtown Beanblossom* t-shirt at the general store in Beanblossom, Indiana for who can remember how much. There were other colors too. Browns and reds and that pink that looked like you had washed the shirt in the wrong load of laundry. They were on a rack next to the watermelons and the crates of peaches, in front of the pickle shelf. I picked one up along with a bag of barbecue potato chips and a roll of Sweet Tarts, right before we headed back to camp, down the hill, following the long stretch of gravel roads.

There was something about those summers. The eighteen year old versions of us, the long limbs, the short shorts, the hacky-sacks and the way we learned to make sheet pans of grilled cheese sandwiches, set tables for campers, fill plastic pitchers with bright red fruit punch that left permanent grins on our upper lips. From the end of high school to the first summers after college I packed up all my things, stuffed extra underwear into a backpack and slung it across my shoulders. Dreamt of independence for a full three months. Who was I to deny the call of the wild? My brother had done the same before me

Beautiful Downtown Beanblossom

-- the summer camp counselor. A rare breed. I had spent my childhood as a camper and those magical firefly nights, the way dusk brings out the best of us in capture the flag, the music and the words we sang all week long -- they stay year after year, leftover melodies that we could take with us, even after our parents picked us up, drove us up the dusty roads toward home.

Maybe that was what the t-shirt became. A souvenir of a time in my life. I wore it then on in the strangest of moments. To afternoon lessons in East College Hall. To meetings and concerts and my first new city out of college, fresh faced and the drive to Washington D.C., singing along to Billy Joel and Uptown Girl all the way through West Virginia. But nothing is forever. The fabric thinned out. The letters lost their luster. And one day it was no more -- I don't even know where I lost it. Where we put the things we once loved, however much we loved them, and then one day we wake to find them missing. Hiding under the dresser drawer. Stuck behind the laundry basket. And I was lost too, that version of me -- that girl and her long waves of hair: 1998 and still falling in love with camp songs, with the smell of sunscreen,

Beautiful Downtown Beanblossom

with the slip of her feet on the floor of the swimming pool like a photograph. The daylight fading. The summer on its knees. And there it was no longer -- gone in some crumpled up t-shirt, missing with the rest of those trinkets of girlhood – forever and ever, like a whispered hallelujah.

Karen, Clinging

Russell, thank goodness you've come!

Sorry for always calling you "Tater" back then. We were both such stupid kids. I couldn't help it, "Russell" teetering on "russet" like some nervous child wobbling on a rickety seesaw. You, always so jumpy and toothy-smiling like some kid auditioning for lead but sent home on the first round. I could never erase the image of the pudge of you struggling to wedge yourself between me and that bully straddling me on the ground as he fake-marimba'd my new braces with sticks, you too slow and roly-poly to dislodge him. On the one hand, what were you thinking? On the other, nice try. You were the only one who did. Sorry for not thanking you then. I'm sorry, too, that you died. So, tell me, Tater, is it like they say? And maybe hover back a few feet?

Nurse told me I should've exercised, taken my meds, stopped smoking or drinking, can't remember which, said I was damn old enough to know better. A little late, don't you think? Now she tells me I'm not long for this world, as if she could cobble another together for me. Tell me, Tater, did you feel like you were riding on some slow tide at the end? Did you get a place with a view? *Make plans*, that nurse said, *so your loved ones don't have to. So they can grieve*. Did she see that on a funeral home billboard? Has she assessed the vigor of my

Karen, Clinging

mind? Tallied the visitors to my room? Let me tell you, Tater: Zero. Not sure if you'd count. But say, since you're here, I was hoping you could tell me what's coming down the pike?

No, Russell! Wait—I need you! I'm so cold. Should I bring a sweater?

Lady Luck

All that remains of the pier are swollen stumps by the shore. She watches his figure outlined in dark blue, his sneakers wet with foam. She stands there and lets the waves arrive. In the dark, she can almost see the casino that once stood on stilts, suspended here on the invisible pier. The soaked slot machines and coins come in heaps, glistening under dark seaweed. He turns, and she thinks he smiles, the night muddling tenderness.

The hem of her jeans catches on a piece of pockmarked driftwood. She thinks of the women in hoop skirts swishing down the boardwalk, the stolen ivory canes tap dancing in step. The only restaurant in town with white tablecloths hung a picture of the pier above an old grand piano. Sometimes she slips through the glossed French doors just to get a glimpse of the scene, pretending grandeur in the sea of lobster bisque on silver trays and stiff chef's coats.

Her mind latches to the pockets full of promise, emptied to billiards and blackjack tables. The flicker of doubt, casting its blue shadow across players' fingertips as they pressed cues and cards to green felt. How was it any different than postmarking a letter in the mail or holding his face in her hands—the blind faith in forces that might interrupt the serendipity of reception.

The tides carried her thoughts to his wet laces. They both stood at the sharp breaks in the waves, their minds in distant rooms. His on the damp sheets and cracked open window, the view of that broken fountain across the street that gurgled with force every so often. Her

Lady Luck

bare arm outstretched on his chest, the spray of freckles and sun-bleached wisps of hair. The pang of yearning he got, bare and disarmed, her asleep in the tallgrass in a sunhat or painting her toes yellow on the rim of the bathtub. He felt her standing behind him now, wanted to duck through the crawlspace that was her brain, wear opera glasses to spy ideas idling through.

She imagines him in a three-piece suit and top hat, hair just gelled and cheeks stiff with after-shave. Sauntering through the linoleum halls, heels clicking, wads of limp cash and so silent save the whir of the roulette wheel and hushed sideline advice.

“Where are you right now?” he asks her, finger gesturing at his temple.

She says something, the waves break. She tries to speak again as the froth recedes so far back into the night, bubbles dance off the soaked sand. He waits. She says, “With you.”

He smiles now, she can see clearly, no shadows warping distance. Her eye moves to the pier stump green with algae and time. Soon they both stare. His lighter flicks, the seconds grow slow, languorous.

“The pier’s still here, in a way. Just submerged and in pieces now—like these pilings, they extend farther out than we can see. Still here though,” he responds after a while.

Lady Luck

“And that casino?” she turns her gaze on him.

“Yeah, yeah I think so. A shame that fire came, brought that whole place right down to the ocean.”

She nods, holds her hands out to him, palms tucked inside the sleeves of her sweater. He drops his cigarette to the ground, grinds his heel to the sand, takes her hands. The red sparks meet the sea foam, suffer then blend with the bright spume. He watches the darkened alchemy. She wonders why we swallow what sustains us.

Special Thanks

TO EVERYONE WHO BELIEVES IN
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WE'RE SO EXCITED TO SHARE THESE
STORIES WITH YOU. HERE'S TO
WANDERING AND FINDING, TOGETHER.

WITH LOVE,
MADISEN D'ASCENZO
EDITOR IN CHIEF
KELLY BROCIOS
MANAGING EDITOR