

Red Savina Review *Spring 2016*



Red Savina Review

The Online Literary Magazine in the Southwest

Vol 4 Issue 1

Spring 2016

ISSN 2169-3161

EDITOR in CHIEF	John M. Gist
MANAGING EDITOR	Wendy Gist
POETRY EDITOR	Wendy Gist
ASSISTANT EDITOR	Matt Staley
REVIEWS EDITOR	Royce Grubic
BASQUE LANGUAGE EDITOR	Nere Lete

Red Savina Review (RSR) is an independent, bi-annual e-zine publishing short films, creative nonfiction, fiction and poetry in March and September. RSR is a nonprofit literary review headquartered in southwestern New Mexico. For submission guidelines visit our website redsavinareview.org/submit-2/.

Copyright © 2016. Red Savina Review contains copyrighted materials, including but not limited to photographs, text and graphics. You may not use, publish, copy, download, upload, post to a bulletin board or otherwise transmit, distribute, or modify any contents in any way. You may download one copy of such contents on any single computer for your own personal, noncommercial use, provided you do not alter or remove any copyright, author attribution, or other notices.

Contents
Creative Nonfiction

<i>Robert Vivian</i>	<i>Essay As the World's Worst Jeweler</i>
----------------------	---

Poetry

<i>Roy Bentley</i>	<i>Taos, Lightning</i>
<i>Mary Cresswell</i>	<i>Time Capsule, Testing Ground High Desert</i>
<i>Theresa Hamman</i>	<i>Without</i>
<i>Eleanor Lerman</i>	<i>Observe the Age of Comings and Goings, To Live in this World Requires</i>
<i>Jennifer MacBain-Stephens</i>	<i>What to the What</i>

<i>Joshua Medsker</i>	<i>be:</i>
<i>Daniel Moore</i>	<i>A History of Weather Conditions</i>
<i>Rich Murphy</i>	<i>Conspiracy Theory, Prologue to the Impossible</i>
<i>Caleb Nelson</i>	<i>Kingdom of Crumpets and Narcissism, Flashlight</i>
<i>Lois Roma-Deeley</i>	<i>Praise Song for She Who Would Clean the World; Among the Red Rocks of Sedona, a Soldier's Wife Leaves No Stone Unturned</i>
<i>Stan Sanvel Rubin</i>	<i>Let the Services Begin, The House of Answers, Overcoat, Troy, Curse & Forgive</i>

<i>David Anthony Sam</i>	<i>Stone Birds</i>
<i>Elizabeth Savage</i>	<i>Pacific, Remaining Within, Musicality</i>
<i>D.N. Simmers</i>	<i>Shoulder Against Harsh Wind</i>
<i>Matt Tordoff</i>	<i>Polder</i>

Fiction

<i>Alex Haber</i>	<i>Under the Pier</i>
<i>James Hanna</i>	<i>The Body in the Bay</i>
<i>Al Kratz</i>	<i>Happiness is a Warm Gun</i>
<i>Katixa Agirre Miguez</i>	<i>Pajama Party</i>
<i>Steve Mitchell</i>	<i>Currency</i>
<i>Michelle McMillan-Holifield</i>	<i>Choreography</i>

<i>Patty Somlo</i>	<i>Before Everything Changed</i>
<i>Jim Weitz</i>	<i>Kitchen Midden</i>

Robert Vivian

ESSAY AS THE WORLD'S WORST JEWELER

For he has been balled up and thrown away 10,000 times into the valley of the skull and scrap heaps only to pogo like a severed leafy head down the cobblestones of nil and so he loves and cherishes all flaws as he is profound flaw himself in his effort to be and to say and has been retrieved and flattened like a crinkled map whose coordinates point to pure wandering, no destination or x marking the spot but walking flaneur meditation on a button or a doorknob or one day last summer when essay fell asleep in a meadow and little birds entered his mouth one by one and essay is wary and even afraid of any perceived perfection or striving after thereto, essay digressing constantly and asking questions for which there are no answers—will you marry me, the bark of a cherry wood tree—and will you seek to enter the temple of a fish by way of artificial fly, outlandish streamer, the nymph named after a prince with the feathers of a peacock, and essay doesn't even believe in the value of pearls or gems but adores the least humble pebble and stone at the bottom of a river where he often wanders and wades like a gobsmacked fool, essay on an errand of ecstasy and union with a floating leaf, a bald eagle feather or any precious and windblown thing that was once a part of flight for essay dreams of flying and hopes his one page self will be turned into a paper airplane by a child's loving hands with the aerodynamics of an arrow so that he may soar and coast as long as a breeze will take him, essay on the loose, essay gone wild, essay so briefly above the earth he can see and breathe almost all of it before he crashes into the ground or a hillside or even the haunches of a deer sipping from a stream at midnight below a harvest moon for essay wishes to catalyze her startled leap in a graceful arc and parabola without equal in the annals of bound before Quick, look, there she goes and now she is gone dearer than any hush or murmur, heartbreaking ballet of vaulted alarm.

Roy Bentley

Taos, Lightning

That afternoon we moved through Taos Pueblo, the oldest continuously inhabited human dwelling in North America, learning what it is to live together, a good thing to try and make sense of on a honeymoon. We crossed light-burnished Red Willow Creek. Skies had blackened to the south in the direction of Santa Fe. We ventured into dim shops to handle silver artifacts, eat frybread, and came out to the first huge droplets

of a thunderstorm. Arrows of lightning rained down from the clouds above arroyos, star-bright branchings of no discernible intelligent design loosed and blazing and vanished in an instant. The strikes were in the hills above the Taos street where Kit Carson had lived once. We ducked for cover inside a rental car. You shivered as I started the engine and rolled down a window. Lit a cigar I'd bought in Santa Fe, the leaf-scent a thing

a passing Tiwa man said was pleasant and welcome. All this was years ago, and my memory plays tricks. Maybe the Tiwa man said nothing but only looked in our direction—these beings who move as one—and I learned what humans have always known or might learn on any given afternoon in New Mexico: that we are all just trying to come in out of the rain, visiting for such a brief time under the turning sky.

Mary Cresswell

TIME CAPSULE

The photos you took that evening
went yellow or red, depending.

The voice we must use is uncertain.
Perhaps we should scatter dead leaves.

Let's leave our bones as a signal,
trust the map, and ignore the clouds.

Some places moon paths don't matter
and trees can keep needles forever.

From inside the tree roots, our fingers
reach for the ghosts of the children.

TESTING GROUND, HIGH DESERT

High on the rim sunlight is starting
hassling morning chivvying day

Around us the land is stretched like a hand
trying to grasp what's happening next

Remnants of birdsong clog up the frequencies
bats always know when sound is unsound

Whispers of water flickers of thought
trickle down deeper the harder we look

Tricks of perspective play through the canyon
daylight won't show us what's starting to grow

Theresa Hamman

Without

Remembered happiness is agony;
So is remember agony.
-Donald Hall, "Midwinter Letter"

Tell me again
how grief waters
the iris of an eye
bound to forget you.

Remind me
to walk this shore without
your hand
or your warm skin
beneath your coat.

I no longer hear you
whisper prayers

or sing ice
over this sea.

Show me again the way
your hair fell white
covering your eyes.

My callings
go unanswered

and the sunset
has lost your name.

Eleanor Lerman

Observe the Age of Comings and Goings

Where are you traveling? Supposedly, wherever
your ticket says, though all you can remember
of your movements in years gone by is that
there was some vague appointment to be kept
in a distant city. Perhaps, if it was a sunny day,
there was a place where you would have stopped
to eat lunch

But where are you going now? There was a plan,
once, to seek out Ilion—do you remember?
To ingest whatever was being sold in the markets
and slap the faces of those flat-faced, marble beauties,
the ancients who would not answer us. Who conceived
their revenge in the shape of beasts and whirlpools
Who pretended that they knew things that we
did not

So why are you packing? Who told you
that you have to go? Instead, you should ask
who enslaved you, who tied you to the years
and broke them like rocks into hours and
days and abandoned them on your doorstep
Who made these rules? Who threw stars at you
but lied about their power to beat inside you
like a heart?

Remember the promise of resistance
Remember that for every train that leaves
the station, the power of the observer diminishes
as he or she (your choice) watches it depart
Besides, he or she will soon forget you,

just in time to ply their trade with others who
are more—well, let's say, desirable. Expect that:
your only job now is to loosen your grip on the
observer. Observe: the age of comings and goings
is almost past

All that is left is to fight your way into the
great hall of invisible forces and tear up
the timetables. Time tables. Then the marble hands
will pretend to applaud you and all the seasons
will send you messages from the future,
which you are entitled to read where and when
you want to. If you want to. If you haven't already
acquired a war dog and a generation of allies
whose ruthless dreams are finally scheduled
to come true

To Live in This World Requires

To live in this world requires
that you leave your house every morning
and step into the wind
Every morning: with all your memories
on file and the future pinned to some wall
you will have to build and tear down and
build again. If you get there. If. If.

Into the wind: first you walk the dog whose
blessed face belies the beast it is built upon
Millennia behind you, that beast enters a cave
and decides whether or not to kill a child sleeping
by a fire. It does not kill the child
because its heart has been surprised by love
Both softened and sharpened by it, inexplicably
Inexplicably, to this day

And on this day, the wind relents
The morning star lifts itself into a changeable sky
and you, carrying extra weight, wearing
last year's clothes, start walking towards the train
Seeds that grew from ancient science digest in your stomach;
your bones begin to separate because science did not plan
this length of life; your heart slows down and you feel
the pressure of dragging a million, billion years
behind you. A million, billion lie ahead that you
will know nothing about

Thus, harnessed to time, facing the inevitable,
constructed by science and fed on inexplicable events
taking place somewhere in the middle of history,
your day goes by. Miles away, the ocean
murmurs to its own beloved creatures, a mountain
applies pressure to the weaving of a golden seam
And in your house, the dog wonders
if you will make it home again. And each day,
despite or because the performance of this feat
is both a mystery and a triumph, somehow
you will. You do

Jennifer MacBain-Stephens

What to the What

Dedicated to Phife Dawg (1970-2016.)

After A Tribe Called Quest's song, "What" from A Low End Theory Album. (1991)

What was in the crock pot someone bought for someone's wedding?
What does it matter if crock is close to crack?
What kind of friend or frenemy buys a crock pot?
What does it matter if suburbanites see crack as a prop, as a powder,
in a spoon near Wallace's mouth on The Wire?

What is it about that I am intimidated by crockery—
especially crockery that sits still for so long?
What is crockery?
Is it close to tomfoolery?
What is an extinct word or a word that doesn't work

any longer in the context of speaking or writing or
texting but it works in a poem?
What kind of poem uses a word like that?
What is it called again?
What it is called when I write Zeitgeist?

What does it mean that I couldn't describe this time we live in?
What does it mean that living is tied closely with daily work?
What does it mean that I haven't begun work yet?
What does it mean when we think of work we think of hats?
What is a yellow construction hat on top of a skyscraper

high high outside in the city but what if I wear the hat inside?
What is the big yellow hat for in Curious George?
What interest is there in monkeys?

What are monkeys who smoke, monkeys who fax in an office environment, monkeys who rove, what about those who don't touch monkeys?

What do all of the signs in Africa say if No touch Monkey?

What if I attribute that phrase to Ayun Halliday?

What is the distance between two writers?

What is the distance between two thoughts?

What is the distance between two continents?

What plane should you fly to get to the next continent?

What if time flies?

What if time is wasted?

What is a tombstone worth to you?

What if I meant not the pizza but the stone?

What is wasting ten minutes trying to accomplish an errand, one morning, and it is a major fail?

What is it worth if it takes thirty minutes to get it right?

Was it the right errand to do then?

What does it mean to not work out,

to just sit there and objectify everyone?

What if everyone around you is an object that stays at, that stays at, that stays at, rest?

What if it's also me, who is an object, and not you?

What if I objectify myself in a timely manner?

What if the timing is wrong?

What is bad timing vs. good timing?

What is it worth to remember someone's favorite color?

Is it red because I always bought him red shoes or is it red because he chose red for himself?

What is cataloging differences vs. card cataloging, which is going extinct, and all cards move into a period of stasis?

All white cards and green cards and tarot cards and cue cards and flash cards that just hold their place for a brief instant?

What moves from state to state?

What is a good joke?

What calls an old friend back to you and you like her a lot and then the friendship drifts off by way of not seeing her face to face?

What inside me misses her and I want to call her

and I don't know why I don't and I cannot use "what"
in a sentence properly anyway and
what remembers that I, that I, that I
remember that I wanted to do something important today?

What if I don't do anything important today?
What day always goes by faster than any other day?
What year was the best year?
What best years are in front of me?
What remembers that voices are different?

What is in us to keep using our voice?
What occurred in the last 3 minutes since I last tried?

Joshua Medsker

be:

where you're going,
why you're going,
what is there—
be what's not

be: everywhen you've been
be: why you come back

Daniel Moore

A History of Weather Conditions

Oh wicked weather, Oh teacher of extremes,
we your students of white leather lightning
snapping the ass of a Midwest town,
graded on how our heart survives
being rolled up and twisted in aluminum clouds,
like Sunday school art in a dark church basement
where the fearful gather to practice their faith
in a god who unplugs vacuums in the sky
before the world is made clean.

Oh criminal clouds, Oh professor of fury,
show me, your dropout, in the halls of impermanence,
why I live on an island by the sea, in a farmhouse
between prairies where goodness and graves
have for centuries recorded the history of rain,
a confederate gray, hysterical weeping,
sometimes drizzle, sometimes monsoon,
depending on the mood of this northwest god
and how many sinners in the Sodom of Seattle
got A's on their final exam.

Rich Murphy

Conspiracy Theory

Syphoning willed-ignorance
and tweaking cellphone apps
manufacturers generate for the undead.
Lacking poetry, the production lines
spit from straight-faced university facades,
and middleclass shadows emerge with “yes”
on tongue tips and with dashes for legs.

Infiltrators laid in wait in banks
and at corporate headquarters
while insurgents poisoned
with pens 40 years ago,
experimented with group-think.
Sleeper cells embedded in Congress
to become lobbyists when called on:
Slow-motion jujitsu moves . . .
The welfare state rattled, riddled and rifled.
Elite brick and mortar forces
downsized into gas over cities, overseas,
to where the poor plunge.

Stunned and stunted by the crashes
on 9/11 and 2008, the audience welcomed
into homes and on streets reality television.
And then the coup began
by co-opting fear and anger,
and spoon-feeding
to saturate keyboards, images, and ears.

Cliché and platitude propagated,
had long been for illiteracy coming to terms.
Shiny swinging objects and beds tether,
or armored cars mow – domestic violence.

The plot came to roil after debt enslaved.
The Corporate Media Awards Ceremony
rhyme at the Grand Ballroom
at The Caesar Palace in Never Mind, USA.

Prologue to the Impossible

In the suspect society,
democracy implodes,
and, to create a black hole
for morals, willed ignorance
denies the violence.
Short term interest
for short term gain
erases memory, history,
and solves problems
using prison, better yet guns.
“Against the wall and spread ‘em.”

Corporate thinking manages:
Public issues efficacize
into private suffering.
The cheerful robots
who studied, practiced,
and blame themselves
own foreclosed hopes
and death urges.

Broad social justice movement
breaks into departments:
environment, race,
immigration, war, taxes, etc.
The boutique activism
provides overtime
opportunity for cops,
one weekend a month,
sometimes two and little else
where trembling shrinks men.

The impossible remains
on the storage shelf
in the basement, down
around the belly,
the only option
and nothing to lose
but fear.

Caleb Nelson

Kingdom of Crumpets and Narcissism

At last, the honey in your head
is boiling and your murky heart

shoots fire petals into the ashtray.
They don't tell you this in school:

you can find someone to tell you
anything you want, purple clouds

of acid will storm over the lake,
cautious flecks of jelly will invade

my barren pantry, white tigers
will parade in my shower

and tell me to fuck off. I've
been thinking about naming

our dog narcolepsy. I've been
thinking of filming a documentary

concerning the tiny pianist
living inside my ribcage,

that kingdom of crumpets
and lemon bars and narcissism.

Flashlight

What we have left without our secrets
bits of sweet venom, blackberry and bread.

When I ride my bike for punishment, you
do not even watch me go. The smell of bleach,

Perugia, pomegranates, none of these things
are capable of neglect, but I'm going

to be honest, my tongue is stupid. My heart
isn't. I know the beginning of mercy is trauma.

Lois Roma-Deeley

Praise Song for She Who Would Clean the World

Late night, I hide,
broom in hand, inside the shadows
of a house seven doors down.
I make myself thin
as I pull myself
behind brittle bush and Saguaros.

In another time, I might have been
a goddess
sent to blind mortals
with thunderbolt teeth and diamond eyes.
But now, I cower in the moonlight.

I'm often afraid
passing cars and early risers will catch me
brushing my way down the street.
I fear my neighbors will see only
a woman and broom sweeping over suburban sidewalks
through the desert park, past Grayhawk elementary,
then up again toward Phantom Lane
and they won't understand the necessity to forgive

errant strips of stray candy wrapper, newspapers browned
by the sun and wrinkled by automatic sprinklers,
to purge the Palo Verde trees. I fear
they do not comprehend that purifying the mouths

of storm gutters, absolving every garbage bin
by restoring them into one perfect, shining row
will release us from a future
where no one is safe and nothing is whole.

Among the Red Rocks of Sedona, a Soldier's Wife Leaves No Stone Unturned

As we hike the short, steep climb into the saddle points
of red rock country, I am uneasy. Since you came home
I search for the magic words

which will open your heart, make you whole.
You won't speak much. You don't sleep
in our bed. You wander for hours. I don't know where you go.

Now the sky above us is a relentless blue.
I lean, hard, between two walking sticks, hunched over
like some bewitched character in a fairy tale—

a servant girl? a beggar? Cursed
by a sorcerer who's always jealous and never tires
of turning handsome men into trees

and all the beautiful women into doves.
Iraq is a long, long way from here.
But, across the wash, near the granite cairns,

there's a low growl rising from the bottom of your throat,
escaping between your teeth, and
now it's me who's terrified. But the sound

of the wind in Pinyon Pine and Juniper leaves
fairy dust sprinkled in your hair. From the lips
of penstemon and wild lilies still in bloom,

an incantation is sung just for you, my love—
and I ask its mighty power
to grant us the one wish I have left.

Stan Sanvel Rubin

LET THE SERVICES BEGIN

A moth
caught in a window
against all the colors.

This rain of faith,
you can't hold it.
Remember what it was.

Afterwards, candles
of sky point to the place.
This is not a funeral.

THE HOUSE OF ANSWERS

After love was over, I thought of reasons.
Reasons multiplied in my sleep like mice.
The answer to everything just below the floor
of the house I was in, asleep, dreaming
of a different room in a different house
where there are other sleepers
and other reasons for this dream.

OVERCOAT

It's another wintery Saturday.
Wind off the strait.
Leaves fly like birds.

What makes me remember
your shadow in the doorway
shaking snow from a dark blue coat?

There's a hard look to that sky.
In another few minutes,
this silence will end.

TROY

The evanescence of being
is brought home
by the toaster's pop.

Burnt toast carries
the smoke of ruin
before tongue catches its sting.

In a kitchen as empty as this
you get the sense
of everything burning.

CURSE & FORGIVE

When they took the sky away, I woke to darkness
where thoughts replicated like shadows on a wall.

The walls were words you can't put into a sentence.
Through the narrow slits I heard birds fly

into a distance I thought I could imagine
but as they flew farther, they vanished.

Bitterness fills the mouth intense as fear,
offering its poison like sustenance.

I was hungry for more. Night surrounded me
the way day surrounds you when your sun is weeping

honey through the clouds. When I looked out
to see the world without its furnace, I saw myself.

So many things the heart doesn't tell the eye.
I discovered what makes light, its source.

Please forgive me, I whispered.
To the walls. To the birds.

David Anthony Sam

Stone Birds

(After a poem by Ali el-Sari)

In this garden, stone birds
speak while I am muted—
words mist from the inert
to voice silence in morning.

I asked for refuge
in this unmeant world
and found myself in an alley
ending in blindness.

Echoes sing my steps
better than any voice when
language breakers rejoice
in campaigns of slogans.

My double tongue splits
in fractures of marble
that I try to resculpt from
the daily wreckage of newsprint.

This is why I stay silenced.
This is how I abide in
the silence of terrible result
as rain spatters me with truth.

Elizabeth Savage

Pacific

Night begins chopping apart the next day, under
dressed, the will pressed, the end

of the line. Salt moves mountains, then
splits waves godless as the green. All

intention is arranged by the effort. The oysters
taste of it, seasoned with hesitation

an ocean of refusal is what stood you
here. Cut by wind

reduced to reversals of light. Without
a compass, no other place

is in reach. Nowhere else is near
but the wind, crowded with reflection

The glinting beach empties of struggle. Once
the fight readied your skin

Remaining Within

This could become a story of cars, tears
against windshields wiping

away a history, invoking one's love
of fate. Let's make it

about distance or the occasional over-
consciousness of breathing. If there is

an order for oppression, the downsizing
counters with new liberty. Do without

silence for one day, one hour and see those
fluctuations of weathered trees

deliver a noise beyond our energies. If
late, sunset adjusts to its time zone

but the real story is one you'll never notice, holding
your breath, following the dark around

Musicality

All by ear in the soft, soft bed weighted with
restlessness. At last the back surrenders its

planed passivity. At last the feet turn ambivalent
parting into grey feathered jokes

about flight. Inverted conversions of the unmoored
no, the mind won't quiet by air but

repairs to its buried dark, a condensation
of pressure and motion. Forget the disarrangements

of the body. Bold outlines a hull the night at last
pours through.

D.N. Simmers

Shoulder Against Harsh Wind

*“ When friends lie down shoulder
to shoulder against the harsh wind.”
-Heinz Piontak*

The night is full of rain and the news

of more tornadoes.
In Kansas and the wizard of Oz
comes back with the storms
cellars.

Places to hide or a twister will take all away.

Not to some magic kingdom
but the blast of the
grim reaper and the black dogs.

These killers this year

does not help the ones who have died
in the gauntlet of wind.

Spinning barrels of instant dead.

While the world spins faster, the winds
decide to touch down here , there, but
not everywhere?

And streets are flattened, lives are taken.

The young and old grabbed like
they are just marbles, to be played with,

like a second hand clock of the dying.

Matt Tordoff

Polder

When the dykes
pinned backed the waters,
creating new lands
on the Zuiderzee,
the old men started out,
in wonder first, then idle
back and forth, wringing
their wrists, grinding
their teeth, slipping
insane, unable to accept
the new flatness of the land.

In younger days their toes
touched the sea. It engaged
them in quiet counsel, speaking
though neaps and risings,
a dialogue now broken
with windmills and with walls.

Their sons would farm
these new fields,
growing soups and stews
of carrot and turnip, tulips
for their lovers;
but that promise brought
no solace for the old men,
the memory of their past
romances purloined by
the removal of the tides.

Now, I hear their echoes
in a little café
along the Zilverparkkade
where diners clatter, shift
knives and shakers, plot
to rearrange their landscapes.

I see them in the waiter's face
as he delivers bitterballen
and an Amstel to my table.
He asks if I am ok,
if anything is missing.
I grab a half- empty bottle,
place it to his ear, ask him
to listen to the roar.

Alex Haber

UNDER THE PIER

We left school early to go down to the pier.

It was there the fishmongers parked their boats late at night and unloaded. Mark said it smelled like sex, but in the afternoon, the docks were dry and specked with fishermen, the wafting flags of fishing lines stuck to wooden posts.

“What do you want to go there for?”

Maria said, “I have to show you something. You trust me, right?”

I thought of Mark. My friend was no expert on most subjects, but at the time he'd been dating Peggy Lawson, and you couldn't call bullshit, after all, on things you knew nothing about.

And so I went. For part of it she even held my hand.

Once there, she took me under, to a dark place where the tide was mostly foam. She didn't take her shoes off or let me either, so we sloshed through the current with heavy footsteps. She kissed me when we got in deep, on my cheek, and I burnt right up.

“Thanks for coming,” she said. “You won't be sorry.”

The docks creaked above us, among the songs of the fishermen and wind. The smell was rotten. Almost no light reached us there, but one line drew a path from Maria's temple to her lips. I saw it clear. “Most people are too chicken,” she said. “Are you ready?”

Tracing from point A to B, I almost didn't hear her.

“Chicken?” I said.

Maria laughed and squeezed my hand. I wanted to kiss her back.

Then at once she was screaming. I crouched and covered my ears.

“What’s wrong?” I shouted. But Maria didn’t stop. The sound was shrill and it seemed to shake everything. I imagined the old men above us, as stricken as I was, jumping and peeking through the slats.

“Maria?” I shouted. She looked to be smiling.

Soon another screeching took over, a voice as high as Maria’s – they sounded in conversation. Maria stopped at once and ducked and pulled me with her. By accident, I touched her left breast. I only felt hard cotton.

“What’s happening?” I asked her. Just then a missile shot over me. Soon another and another. I held Maria tightly, and over the screeching I could hear her constant laugh.

The bats were shooting in single blasts, and then all at once, in a great, black cloud. They burst out from the bottom of the pier and flew toward the ocean, hitting the sunlight and then curving in a premeditated direction back around.

The whole time Maria was cheering. We held each other close. In the commotion, I pretended to stumble a little, and again I grazed the padding of her chest. Maria was so overwhelmed by the phenomenon that she ignored me completely.

When the last bat disappeared, Maria stood upright, still shaking.

“Have you ever seen anything like it?” she laughed.

I shook my head.

“Look!” she shouted, lifting my arm to eye-level. “You have goosebumps!”

“I do?” I said.

“I knew you’d love it! I could just tell.”

When I leaned in to kiss her, finally, for real, she let me – if only for a moment. Her lips were moist and heavy and sweet. Then it was over. She turned and ran through the water, away from me, splashing as she went, toward the beach. I watched her go, unmoving. She was laughing. The air was sick with smell.

JAMES HANNA

THE BODY IN THE BAY

Nietzsche's cutting quote, "If you gaze into the abyss, the abyss will gaze into you," is by now a redundancy. And so, when I became a San Francisco probation officer, I prepared myself to keep company with the abyss. But I had not quite realized how extensive the abyss was. I saw it in the eyes of the senior probation officers, so exhausted by massive caseloads that they were counting the months to retirement. I saw it in the faces of deputy jailors, disaffected shift workers who were all but deaf to the human clamor of the cell ranges. And, of course, I saw it in my clientele: hollow-cheeked crack heads, asocial gang bangers, vagrants with thousand mile stares. But at least the abyss could be mellow where probationers were concerned. It was mellow in the case of Joseph Shepherd, a middle-age drug peddler on probation for chocking his girlfriend. Entering my office for his intake interview, he glanced at the tower of case files on my desk and chuckled. "I know you have it rough," he remarked in a voice that could be poured over waffles. "So I plan to make it easy on you, sir." He smiled with the insular charm of a sociopath then shook my hand with a python grip. He seemed to be a man of elemental strength—a brawn with a life of its own—yet his broad open face and puppy dog eyes set me completely at ease.

For a year, he was a model probationer. He was always on time for our weekly meetings, attended his batterer's program regularly, and he so liked to talk about books that I rarely hurried our meetings. After a year, his girlfriend phoned me to say he had choked her again. I quickly called his cell phone and invited him to my office. "You know what I have to do," I confessed. "You must do your job, my friend," he said, and he showed up at my office within the hour. He stood still as a statue as I cuffed him up and he asked me how my day was. He had honed that code of etiquette typical to old style criminals, the kind the gang members called *original gangsters*. And, of course, his girlfriend would probably recant—domestic violence victims usually did. When she appeared in the courtroom the following morning, a small dried-up woman with haunted eyes, she held out her hands like a beggar. "I lied, your honor," she wept to the judge. "Please jail me instead cuz I lied." Sitting at the defense table, Joseph looked at me as the judge threw out the charge. *I apologize*, his gaze seemed to say. *Didn't mean to cause you any inconvenience*.

An hour later, after getting out of jail, he dropped by my office unannounced. He sat for

awhile in silence, but clearly he wanted to talk. Eventually, he rested his chin on his thumbs. “She won’t cut me loose,” he murmured. “I have given her every good reason to leave me. She just won’t cut me loose.” He shook his head theatrically and smiled his glacial smile. “Why won’t she cut me loose?” he said. He spoke as though reciting a mantra—he did not seem to want an answer. “Are you flattered?” I asked him. “You seem flattered.” He groaned and showed me a bruise on his arm. “She hits me all the time,” he said. “She gets off on the make-up sex.” It was classic male-pattern thinking, the type his program was supposed to challenge. Yet his program reports cited progress: he never missed a meeting, he excelled at group role play, and he had become a class leader. He chuckled profoundly, rose to his feet, and pumped my hand before leaving. “I believe I have taken enough of your time. Do give my regards to your wife.”

The next morning, when I bought the *San Francisco Chronicle*, I read about the body in the bay. It was the body of a woman, crammed into a suitcase that had floated to shore near North Beach. Her state of decomposition confirmed she had only been dead a few hours. I recognized her name—it was Joseph Shepherd’s girlfriend—and I felt a chilling relief. I could not be blamed for letting this happen—my paper trail was in place. I had hooked him up only two days ago; I had walked him down to the jail; and the woman had stupidly sealed her own fate when she came to court and recanted. I felt no empathy for her—only self-righteous contempt. The abyss, its numbing darkness, had settled within my soul.

Had he meant to kill her?—probably not. Probably, he had been choking her for the hundredth time during one of their arguments. But this time his hands had lingered too long; this time he squeezed with a bit too much pressure. And this time she didn’t recover when he relaxed his grip on her neck. No, he had not intended to kill her—he had panicked a little too much. According to the homicide report, which I acquired later that day, he had dragged a suitcase through the lobby of his hotel in full view of the security cameras.

I drove to the hotel with a SWAT team, but of course he was not there. So I went to court, picked up a warrant, then faxed his mugshot to several local precincts. Hopefully, a police patrol would nab him and save me the strain of busting him. And when the story about the body made the evening news, I turned the television off. I had no good reason to dwell on the matter—not until our dragnet picked him up.

A week later, I was in our conference room attending some mandatory training. The course was Interpersonal Skills, which struck me as rather untimely. Joseph Shepherd, after all, was a master of interpersonal skills. And so I was already distracted when a front desk clerk burst into the conference room. “He’s here!” she whispered into my ear. “Mister Shepherd is here! He is waiting for you in the reception room!”

Had he come to turn himself in? Or had he come to cover his tracks? Since the media had made no mention of him, he may not have known he was in trouble. So I felt I was being uncivil when I asked another officer to help me with the bust. But the officer, Jerry Ferrari, was eager enough for the task. “Right behind ya, Jim,” he chirped, and I told him to wait in my office. I reminded him to go fetch his handcuffs, which took him nearly five minutes.

I forgave my hands for shaking as I walked to the reception room. I was about to arrest a murderer, after all. But he was sitting quietly in one of the chairs, much like a commuter at a train station.

He seemed relieved to see me. “Good morning,” he said, rising from the chair. “I think we are due for some rain.” Did he feel the tremor in my palm as he warmly shook my hand? If so, he was too polite to mention it. Obediently, as though keeping in step, he accompanied me to my office.

Closing the door behind us, I nodded to Jerry Ferrari. He was adjusting the settings on his handcuffs, clicking the bars into place. But he was having trouble aligning the teeth and the bars kept swinging free.

Putting his hands behind his back, Joseph rolled his eyes. “Do you really need backup to bust me?” he goaded. “I thought we were beyond that, sir?” I felt like an ingrate as we double cuffed him then set the safety locks.

“Relax,” he said as he sat on a chair. “My friend, whenever you want me in jail you just have to call and tell me.”

“So why did you come?” I asked.

He shrugged. “Don’t I see you every week?”

He looked at me with welcoming eyes—eyes that carried no blame. But I did not want his friendship so much as I wanted him in jail. So the reticence was mine—not his. Somewhere, in the vast aridity of his soul, something green was growing.

As I waited for the detectives to fetch him, I mentioned his girlfriend’s body. I did not read him his rights though he might have been close to confessing. A spontaneous admission, after all, could be legally included in my arrest report. But he quickly clammed up as a pair of detectives burst into the office. One of them was waiving his badge like amulet. “Homicide,” he barked. “We got *questions*.” The detectives flung him through the door as though he were a sack of laundry.

As the detectives marched him away, Jerry Ferrari looked at me proudly. He was an athletic kid with a collegiate aura—the untempered zeal of a fraternity rush chairman. “Jim,” he said to me after awhile. “That was one fine bust.”

*

The following morning, another article appeared in *The San Francisco Chronicle*. The article was about Jerry Ferrari; he was taking credit for the arrest. *Probation Officer Nabs Murder Suspect* the headline boldly declared. The photo featured Jerry Ferrari with a Glock holstered at his hip. He looked like a marshal in a spaghetti western. “I’m like a bloodhound,” the quotation read. “When I’m on the scent, I don’t quit.”

That afternoon, I interviewed Joseph to finish my arrest report. The interview took place in the Glamor Slammer, a state-of-the art jail on Seventh Street where we met in one of the attorney rooms. He had heard about the article in *The Chronicle* and he seemed to be rather amused. “You should have cuffed me up by yourself,” he teased. “Have I ever let you down?”

“I had nothing to do with that bullshit,” I said.

He laughed. “Let the kid have his fun, my friend. It must be a slow news day.” On advice of his public defender, he did not want to talk about his case. But we chatted for several more minutes before I left his cell pod. “She was a crack head, a thief, and a hooker,” he sighed, his voice as heavy as lead. “Even so, I did not do her justice.” “None of us did,” I said as I slowly shook his hand.

I started scanning *The Chronicle* daily, hoping for more information. A quote from her mother, perhaps, or maybe her personal history. But no more stories appeared about the body in the bay.

AI KRATZ

HAPPINESS IS A WARM GUN

My girlfriend, Allison, and I have been scoring drugs and crashing in rich California homes while the owners are out of the country on vacation or business. Not too long ago, we resolved to quit this life before we turn thirty which means I have less than a year to go, but for tonight, we're in the nicest place we've ever been.

She dances around the house, gathering spoons, lighters, candles, and guns from drawers or closets, tossing pillows and blankets into the air like it's clown-sized confetti, gaining unstoppable momentum until the force of her whirlwind brings everything together on the floor of the main living room with three stucco walls, a twenty foot ceiling, and an entirely glass fourth wall with a You Got To Be Kidding Me view of the Santa Monica Mountains.

Propped on a pile of pillows, she slightly leans toward me, her forever uncombed hair revealing just a bit of her vampire-pale face. Her painted black eyes grab hold of me as she says let's fix. Can we do that now, please, honey?

We can.

We aren't running away—we're in search of feeling. This morning, I saw her skin starting to rot, but I didn't say a thing. We want to be children again. We want time to reverse. We try our veins. She wants to be six or seven again. I want to get fetal. My back curves hard against the floor, but I can't feel it. Until I'm numb, I can't feel a thing.

And there we go. Now we're in business. Now we're on vacation. I see her hands grow smaller. She is young again. I want to squeeze her little-kid-face, but I can't reach her. She's leaving me behind.

Hey, you look like my little sister used to, I say.

She starts to cry and I can't tell if she thinks I'm lying or is she crying because she knows I'm telling the truth.

You were such a cute little kid, I say. I pull my knees to my chest, but something's wrong with me. I don't want forgiveness—I want to be innocent. I want to pull comfort from my knees, but my legs are too long, my gut is too weak, and I unwrap.

Allie isn't running away. Behind her long black hair, I see innocence. Someone should take a picture. I want her to be remembered this way forever.

I wish she'd stop looking at me, but her eyes won't let me go. I'd tell her a bedtime story, but I can't remember any, and I'm getting cold. I want to cut off my knees. I want to fit under cover. I want to be small like her.

Allie watches me struggle. From under the blanket, she retrieves a shotgun and stands it upright with her tiny-kid fingers. She and the gun are too serious. She stares at me like the gun has either asked a question or it has answered one, and she doesn't care which it is. Ambivalence makes the picture more honest.

You can do it, I say, you can do anything you set your mind to, and in my mind, the gun is already aimed at me.

I know, she says, unafraid. I'll do it when the time is right.

Katixa Agirre Miguelez

PAJAMA PARTY

(English Version)

Go ahead and throw them away. There's nothing else you can do. Before throwing them away, you could make a little ball with them, if you wanted to, and then, do throw them away: far away, without hesitation. There is no room for hopeful statistics, any kind of optimistic statement, philosophical and/or transcendental reflection, poetic essay, medical or scientific evidence heard or read who knows where, any of those inspiring and comforting stories of a friend of a friend that are based on true events. That is how it goes, bear with it. No room for them, now. They are useless. Useless now, useless always, actually.

When your best friend calls and delivers the words "mom" and "metastasis" through the phone line in the same sentence, you can consider yourself fucked. That's how it is. Forget everything before that. Don't even try. Unless you want to make a fool of yourself. Find yourself speechless? Want to say something but you can't? That is how it usually goes, yep. You are not the first one nor the last one.

Then, what? Then, nothing. You only have one option. The fake way out. The door of deception. The feeble attempt to protect yourself behind three simple words. Three words blurted out in the most cowardly voice possible. These words:

"I'm truly sorry."

And then, if the stench of silence spreads at the other end of the line, if, at your end of the line, you start to feel short of breath, because you are the worst friend in the world, it is also legitimate to add -always aware of the fact that you are making an excess:

“If you need anything...

Words can't protect us for very long. We will use other excuses, then, like distance. Distance, why not: the gap between two points in space; the time-space gap between two things.

The space gap that separated Nora and Amaia was of barely sixty-three kilometers. That excuse could work for a week, at best. Come the weekend, and that would be it. Because, during the weekends, it's easy to hit the freeway for sixty-three kilometers. Turnpike: 4.25 euros (and rising).

A large family. Now, that is another interesting excuse. Large family: according to current regulations, a family with three or more children. Nora had two sisters and a brother. Four children, total. They would handle it better together. Cheering each other up. Cooperation, protection and strong support within the family circle.

The father, that smiling and vigorous father. The older brother, he recently came out victorious from a similar experience with his wife. A solid team, tribe, clan. Amaia didn't have anything to do in there. She didn't want to have anything to do and, besides, who asked her to be part of it?

Another week went by.

Nora wouldn't call with improvements or setbacks. Maybe she would have to call her? Was that what friends did? There had been a surgery. She knew that from the first call. A removal. A problem removed at the root. That was a good sign: a sign that something could be done. Was that really true? No questions allowed, though. (Why not? Where did she read that?) She could only wait.

Really? Was that all there was? And why not stop time until things cleared up?

Amaia didn't call the day of the surgery, but she was brave enough to call two days later. How did everything go, how did everything go. It didn't seem too hard. It would be a short conversation. Informative and cordial. She would feel better afterwards.

She dialed. She held her breath. (How did everything go, how did...) No answer. She tried again fifteen minutes later. Still no answer. Confirmed: She could only wait.

And yet.

A countdown in Amaia's head, tick-tock, once again, the feeling of being the worst friend in the world. If not the worst, almost the worst. Tick, tock. Although, if science can't, what can one do? And yet, those words. I'm truly sorry, if you need anything, I'm truly sorry, if you need anything...

Finally, an urgent, desperate solution, an act of vanity, almost. An e-mail from work, a

quick, last minute e-mail, written by four shaking fingers:

Come to my house for the weekend. No excuses.

Click, sent.

Later, she regretted mentioning the excuse thing, she would easily take excuses such as radiotherapy. How wouldn't she take radiotherapy-colored excuses.

But there was none of that. No excuses, at all. Shockingly, Nora said yes, through an e-mail, as well. She would go, of course. What a great idea that was. It would do her good to get away for a weekend. Mom was at home, after the surgery, with Dad, waiting to start chemotherapy. The youngest sister, the one living in Wales, was at home, too, on a special leave from work. And the brother, the brother was also by Mom's side. Everything tied, then. She was free that weekend. We will spend it together. It will be good for me. And, yes, yes, she was sorry, she saw her two missed calls, but she couldn't answer at that moment and then she forgot to call back, oh well. But they would talk that weekend. At ease.

Perfect! answered Amaia, in her last one-word e-mail.

Perfect? she wondered, immediately.

Nora arrived on a Friday night. Amaia had some Mexican food ready, two bottles of wine and a bottle of rum, just in case. Nora came in the house flushed and covered in sweat, cursing the traffic, the traffic officers and every taxi driver in the world. She couldn't find a parking spot and had to park in a parking garage. It was not fair. It was a plain joke. The prices! For two square meters flanked by two white lines!

What did she expect, really? A weaker, frailer Nora? A Nora three times smaller in size? A friend lower in decibels? The shadow of someone who is running out of batteries?

She took her coat off and stared at the wall, as if looking for a hook on which to hang it. Next, looked at Amaia, and then, began talking staring back at the wall, still holding her coat in her hand:

"I don't want to talk about it, at all, ok? There is nothing special to talk about, anyways. They don't tell us much, everything is a mystery, darkness. For now, they have cut her whole breast off. And now, treatment. Fluorouracil, doxorubicin, cyclophosphamide: there, our new gods, our sacred chemical religion. That is where our hope dwells, apparently. Because if it was for all those white coated monks... Medical tests night and day, driving the whole family crazy, my mom is tired, my dad is tired; and, in the end, not one of those fucking doctors can tell us if she'll make it or not. And we are not asking much, I don't think. We just want to know. A percentage, at the very least. Margins of error and all. But they can't say anything. It's too early, allegedly. Early. They want to be sure, in others words: they don't want to risk it. So, let's not talk about it, at least today, ok? And Josu, is

he home?”

“He’s out for the weekend, visiting his parents. Here, I’ll take your coat to the bedroom” said Amaia, finally reacting.

“All the better. And don’t take it wrong. Josu is nice. Quiet, true. He works too much, doesn’t he? That’s what it seems, anyways. But he is nice. What I meant by that is that we are better off by ourselves, I don’t feel like being around too many people. -Nora talks a little louder while Amaia goes in the bedroom.”

“I get it, I think we’ll be better off by ourselves, too. So, are you hungry, hon?” she said, in a motherly voice.

“How wouldn’t I be hungry? Didn’t I say I’ve been battling this nasty city’s traffic for two hours? By the way, it’s time you told me why you live in this city. I seriously don’t get it.” Nora always had an excellent appetite. By the look of things, it hasn’t gone anywhere, either. She would eat and eat and never be satisfied. That’s how Amaia remembers her at the campus cafeteria. Eating as fast as she could and then asking everyone for their dessert. Are you gonna eat that? Amaia would always give it to her, specially the ice creams and custards; she was following a very strict diet, at the time (her entire college years). Well, she tried. Really hard, indeed.

“One more tortilla, Nora?”

“Of course.”

“More wine?”

“You don’t even have to ask.”

“It’s delicious, isn’t it?”

“Wonderful. And the salsa? Did you make it?”

“Yes. Well, kind of. I took it out of the glass container and put it on the plate.”

“Well, congratulations, your transference performance was excellent.”

“Thank you, my cooking skills are improving as the years go by.”

“I knew it. That’s why I accepted your invitation, why else?”

Because the conversation was limited to the details of the nutrition process, Amaia began looking at the situation with greater relief (wine might have been partly responsible, too) and she thought that, maybe, Nora’s warning was real, that she didn’t have any intention to talk about it, and that they would hang out, there, eating and drinking, putting their irony

to use, trashing every unfortunate acquaintance at hand. Just like the good times. Like a pajama party. Why not, it wasn't that far fetched.

"You guys have a nice house. And big, pretty big for what you see these days. Every time I visit it looks bigger. And my little hole, smaller and smaller."

"And it's cheap rent, too."

"Yeah, keep on making me jealous."

"Our lease will be up soon, though. And now, the landlord wants to split the apartment in two, separate it, as they call it, and double the profit. We should start looking for another place as soon as possible."

"And you won't buy? One a federal employee and the other one of those guys who travels business class. You wouldn't have any problem getting a mortgage."

"Not for the time being. We are thinking about it. And he might be traveling business class, but every time he takes more paperclips than the allowed amount he gets in trouble at the office."

"It's easier to start an adventure like this as a couple, though."

"Yes, that is what it seems like."

"Since I haven't tried it... living together, I mean."

"Lucky you!"

"That's exactly what I think, too, although Mom thinks otherwise."

"With that Markos of yours, it will happen any day..."

"Markos? It's been ages since I saw him, hon. Didn't I tell you?"

"What are you saying?"

"Exactly that, that we're not seeing each other anymore. That we agreed that our relationship was over. That's how you say it, right? We both decided it, it was a mutual break-up. But, well, that's not true, I told him to go fly a kite. I couldn't take it anymore."

"Geez, hon, you looked happy together. Say the time when we had dinner together, for example, that was two or three months ago, no longer. And then, out of the blue... what happened?"

"What happened? It's easy to explain: he was impotent."

“And is that a problem in the ages of the blue pill?”

“You’re right. He wasn’t impotent, I lied. He was just the opposite: he didn’t know how to be with me, out of bed. He wanted me to be there, twenty-four hours a day, non stop.”

“I don’t see any problem there.”

“You’d think that. In the beginning, it’s fun, then, after a while, you realize how many good things you are missing in life. I don’t know: hiking, reading a book, sleeping...”

“You’ve never set foot on a mountain.”

“That’s why, because I never had the chance, maybe I will get the hang of that, too. How about you guys, do you go hiking?”

“Not at all, it doesn’t even cross my mind...”

“What about sex? Is Josu just as serious when it comes to that? Is he one of those who gets a wrinkled forehead and a concentration face?”

“Seriousness in sex is a virtue that I appreciate more and more.”

“Yeah, I know guys like Josu. He is one of those that keeps all his imagination for the bed, isn’t that right?”

“Hey! We are done with our first bottle of wine! How did that happen?”

Food, drink, irony, gossip and (she almost forgot!) sex, of course. But, always with a distant, indifferent voice, just like Nora liked it. She never wanted to get too close, in fear of getting burned. She would never open even the smallest of the windows to her personal life. Amaia knew how to be in control of the conversation. She knew how to reply to her digs, just as fast and just as witty. She had had some practice at that job. After the second bottle of wine, it would be easier to get the giggles, easier to find an eccentric answer to any comment. It would be easier to spend the night like that. They would be the same old Nora and Amaia. Shameless, inappropriate, a bit cynical, brave. Still clear from the tragedies of life.

Everything would go fine. To even think that she had felt nervous and restless that afternoon! She worries too much, and for what?

But the worm. The worm was there. The worm of conscience. The one that kept telling her it was her responsibility. That she was the one that should help Nora get it out of her system. She could see it clearer than ever. To whom was she going to talk about her mom, if not to her? Not to her family: everyone would be trying to be strong for each other, no one would want to shed a tear of weakness in front of the others. To colleagues? Apparently, she didn’t have great friends at that catholic school, especially since they caught her smoking in the bathroom with some senior students. That Markos was, allegedly, a thing of the past, for

reasons not known, too. So then, what? Without a doubt, all arrows pointed at Amaia. It was her duty, she could feel its weight on her shoulders. It was real and unavoidable. The tragic fate of the superhero.

How would she do it, though? How to put cancer on the table? By the guacamole? Between the first and second bottle of wine?

Amaia pulled with all her strength until the cork popped.

“I don’t think I should keep drinking, with that damn Tranxilium...”

“What?”

“Well, I guess you are right, one more glass won’t kill me.”

“What did you say?”

“Nothing, that I’m taking Tranxilium.”

“Come again?”

“Tranxilium, an anxiolytic.”

Amaia leaves the bottle, uncorked, without filling the glasses. An anxiolytic, she said, lightly. Now she sure can tell that it’s a fake cheerfulness, by the slight shake of her lips. Nora takes the bottle herself and fills both glasses up, under Amaia’s stare. Struggling, she manages to say:

“An anxiolytic...how come?”

“Well, the other day, I was in front of my computer, completely bored, to tell you the truth, and I got one of those funny messages, with lots of colors and bright promises, and I said to myself, why not, I’ll order a box, and see if they make me as happy as they say. And, boom! Twenty-four hours later, I got a box with five hundred tablets in it. A miracle!”

“What are you talking about, Nora?”

She said in an ugly voice, half scared half authoritative. The kind of voice she’d use with a rebel teenager in trouble. That cranky tone she only rarely uses with her students.

“Relax, hon. I got the prescription from a doctor. Tranxilium 5, quite mild, it won’t turn me into a zombie, if that’s what you are thinking. I’ve been having anxiety issues lately, to be completely honest, I don’t sleep well and, sometimes, I have trouble breathing, too... It’s nothing, nothing serious, I mean. I’ll get over it; thanks to chemistry, of course.”

“Are you on a leave, then?”

“No, it’s not necessary. I took a couple of days off, when Mom had surgery. But I went

back. I feel good at work. I keep the crowd under control. The trouble comes at night. When I'm alone. Nobody knows; at home, I mean. But it's nothing. I don't want to come to my family with silly things, we have enough already."

"I'm truly sorry."

Again, she fell for that stupid phrase, again! Sorry, sorry, so what? What is it, in the end, that she is sorry for? The need for chemicals? How she imagines her in bed, alone, crying, short of breath? Or is it the fake strength of Nora's for which she is sorry, the deterioration of a foam-core wall? Or is it the fact that she didn't try her best to help her friend in need that bothers her most? Why didn't she do anything until now? Why did she wait sitting comfortably until all the alarms went off? But, now that she is in front of all those alarms, why is she not able to do anything?

"And are they doing you any good?"

"Yes, a bunch. Music takes over my body and I spend the whole night dancing. It's wonderful, you should try it."

"I'm serious."

"Well, yes, I sleep better."

"And does it have any side effects? They say that sometimes..."

"Shit, I shouldn't have told you anything. Now, you're going to think that I'm a junkie without a prescription teetering from pharmacy to pharmacy, trying my luck."

"Why do you say that? I didn't think any of that, not even close. Lots of people take pills these days, you don't have to feel embarrassed..."

"...yes, yes, anxiolytics don't make me a bad person, and one of your friend's friends took them during a rough time, and this and that. I'm familiar with all that trash. Keep it to yourself, please."

Amaia was speechless. It's not Nora's style to act this hurtful and bitter. They shouldn't hurt her, considering the situation, but those words hurt her. Nora was not fair, she overreacted, but Amaia wasn't at her finest when she squeaked that "what are you talking about, Nora?" How to turn this ugly situation around?

"Excuse, me" said Nora, just in time, "I'm going to the bathroom."

"Down the hall, to the right."

"Yes, I remember."

In the meantime, Amaia starts cleaning up. It's time for dessert, but she doesn't feel like taking the ice cream out. She is standing in front of the freezer with the door open. The cold air feels good; she drank the most of the two of them and her face is probably red hot. She can feel her ears burning. She finally takes the ice cream out and serves the chocolate miracle into two bowls. She serves Nora an extra scoop, but, then, she decides she will need a higher dose, as well. That is her favorite drug, the marvelous sweet that will stand by her side at her lowest moments with no side effects -if not for the fat layer around the hips. But her low moments are a joke, the silly misfortunes of a teenager who knows nothing about life. She should remind herself about that more often.

She is about to be thirty and she only has been to one funeral: an old uncle of her mother's whom she barely knew. Apart from that, mom and dad are alive, and what's more amazing, both grandmas, too (the granddads died when she was very young and she doesn't remember them). The most serious condition among her family members is pneumonia, and even that, quite mild. No serious accidents. Many relatives are past the age of 90. They have excellent genetics. Nature is on their side. Everything is life and abundance. How could she compare her recent ups and downs to the ordeal Nora was going through?

To say ordeal would be excessive. If she blurted that out at Nora, this is what she would reply: "An ordeal! This is not the afternoon soap opera, sweetie. It's fucked up, let's call things by their real name, fucked up, true, but, in the end, the kind of fucked up we should all expect. It is just natural to outlive our parents. It would be much worse if it was the other way around, don't you think?" But, of course, Amaia won't use ordeal (or any of its synonyms) in front of Nora. No: she'll watch her words. She will have to.

She hears the water running, the bathroom door opening, then Nora's light footsteps across the hallway. Amaia is waiting, ready, sitting at the table and holding a spoon. "Chocolate ice cream! What a great friend you are!"

They go back to eating, again. Chocolate and a bit of wine, here and there. Amaia needs chocolate more than ever. But nothing has vanished. The metastasis, the Tranxiliums and all the unpronounced words are still there. Even the inappropriate ones.

"The other day, the same day Mom had surgery, I saw Goio. Do you remember Goio?"

"Your college boyfriend, the Art student..."

"The very same one."

"The one that later hooked up with your cousin's friend, Garazi."

"That's him, yep. You remember him better than I do, girl. But that happened after I left him, ok? I want to make that clear. Well... I ran into him in the elevator. We were both going down to the cafeteria. I tried to ignore him but there are not many places to hide in an elevator. He ended up seeing me. And then, hi, how are you doing, long time no see, and all that. But that didn't seem to be enough for him, and he added, as happy as can be:

“We had a baby boy today, Garazi and I”. I was floored, tongue-tied, trying to remember who that Garazi was. And with no time to react, he asks: “So, what are you doing here?”

And I say: “It’s Amaia... Do you remember Amaia? She had a baby, too, and I brought her some flowers”. And he persisted: “Really? What a coincidence! But when did she have it? I didn’t see her on our floor... they told us that the only baby born in the last twenty-four hours was a Chinese baby”. “No, no, it was the day before yesterday, or the day before that, oh well, I have to go now”. I didn’t get to the cafeteria, I got off on the second floor when someone was trying to get on. On the second floor. Cardiology.”

“So, what did I have, a boy or a girl?”

“It’s not clear yet, you can choose for yourself. It’s the bright side of a pretend labor.”

An awkward silence: no one says a thing, and because they are done with their ice creams, the spoons got quiet, too. More ice cream, maybe? Is that option even worth it?

“It’s ok, Nora, I get it” yeah, try empathy now, as if it is not too late, because it is too late “you don’t have to go telling your whole life to the first stranger you run into.”

“I did it for him, mainly. Why ruin his day? Why make him say an I’m-truly-sorry-I-hope-everything-turns-out-fine the very same day his baby is born...”

“Yes, you’re right.” And yet, she can’t stop thinking that she, also, is forced to say the I’m-truly-sorrys.

“And speaking of which... when are you having kids? The real ones. You said you wanted to have them before your thirties, and look at us now...”

“Looking at the way things are now, I’d be grateful if I had them before I’m forty.”

“You are easy to please.”

“I may be.”

“Amaia...”

“What?”

“Nothing. Hey, are we going out or are we spending the whole night in front of the TV, like a couple of old ladies?”

Who would want to go out, get wet and cold, go to smoky bars, put up with hammered teenagers, dodge rivers of pee while you walk, pay prohibitive prices for toxic beverages, be unable to hear anything over the music. They are much better sitting on this couch. No TV, certainly. Finishing up the ice cream. (Why didn’t she buy more? A container won’t

be enough!) No rum (Amaia hasn't mentioned a word about the bottle she keeps in the refrigerator to Nora, she hasn't forgotten about the anxiolytics). There is an album playing on the CD player: Katia Guerreiro, the fado singer. A souvenir from the last trip with Josu. Sintra-Lisbon-Porto. A five day tour. (She will tell herself that she chose that album randomly, of course).

"Sad music and no alcohol. So happy that I came, really. You really know how to take care of friends."

"Hey! You were the one who wanted to stay in. We could have gone out. It's still possible to find a low-key place on Fridays. And we did have alcohol: do I have to remind you of the two bottles that we just drank? And you said you were tired, too."

"Yes, you're right, but I remember that the last time I was here there was upbeat music and beer. I don't know, I expected something else. What happened?"

"Things change."

"Tempus fugit, right?"

"Yes, ubi sunt those happier times?"

"Carpe diem, hon."

"Memento mori!"

"Four years of Language Studies for this."

(Four years for Amaia. Nora took it easier and spent five years in college).

"It could be worse."

"Hey, this is nonsense. What are we doing babbling Latin and listening to Katia... how was it? Listening to Katia Guerreiro?"

"I was about to tell you that I was going to put my pajamas on, just to be comfier."

"Pajamas! This is the wildest party! No, I won't let you put your pajamas on, seriously. We'll stay here, nicely dressed, like good girls. I'm here to have fun, right?"

"Alright, no pajamas. We, also, can change the music, if you want to."

"No, it's all good. I'm guessing you brought it back from your trip to Portugal. Muito bonito Portugal, right? You never told me much about that trip"

"Yes, I did. I showed you the pictures!"

“That’s right, I remember Josu’s face, completely sunburned. When was it? Around July? Oh my, it’s been only five months and it seems like ages. Look around now. Five degrees Celsius and pouring rain all through the night. It’s hard to believe. The Holidays will be here soon, again. Do you guys have any trips planned for Christmas?”

“I don’t think so. How about you?”

“Right now, I don’t make any long-term plans. Chemotherapy sets the due dates and the breaks.”

“Certainly, yes, I’m sorry. Hopefully, things will get better with the new year.”

E então fiquei, parada à esquina do tempo, e não voltaste, e então esperei, sentada à esquina da vida, e não chegaste. That is the way the album ends. In a dull way. In the same way Amaia’s living room fills with silence right after those barely understandable but utterly touching words. The CD player hints at the nature of the circumstances with a blue light and a single word: END. A whole week’s worth of exhaustion (and bitterness) falls onto Amaia’s shoulders. Perhaps, a month’s worth. She would love to go to bed right at that moment, forget about basic good manners, even, about the guest herself, and close her eyes. See you tomorrow, boa noite, bye. They made the best out of the evening. There was no use in trying harder. Things hadn’t worked out? It could have been worse. Let’s not hope for miracles.

But tomorrow. Tomorrow can be different. Let’s keep up the hope. If it stops raining they could drive to the coast on a trip. They could have lunch in any of those charming old seaports. A little more wine, maybe...

She can only think of eating and drinking. It seems like they are her only alternatives. Not only for Nora, but for herself, too. They are weak alternatives, out of place. They should cut the drinking down, they drank enough today, they will probably have a dry mouth and a headache tomorrow; and the eating is not good for her. She ate more than enough today. It will be celery and apples, tomorrow. After years of experience, it is the menu that works best for her. After feasts, celery and apples. If Josu were home, she would tell him: “Tomorrow, remind me that it’s only celery and apples, ok?” But Josu is not there and she doesn’t want to bore Nora with the same old story. And it was truly an old story. She had forgotten about her eating habits. She thought they were a thing of the teenage years. But, these past weeks, she has been binge eating, again, and guilt-fasting.

No, it’s not that bad. The scale is only reprimanding her for a kilo and a half. That’s not much. It’s something manageable. She will get over it. She will calm down.

But now she wants to go to bed. She is staring off into space, and Nora is probably doing the same thing. Goio and, who was it? Garazi? had a baby. Unbelievable. Was it a girl or a boy? Still silence. The blue END had faded off, gradually. There is an array of noises coming from the street: singing, yelling, dogs, night buses, arguments between drunks and

street vendors. Nora's eyes are closed. And she is snoring in the slightest way, hugging a silk pillow. How long ago did she fall asleep? She stares at her friend, with impunity.

"Nora, Nora... pssst, let's go to bed."

She opens her eyes and lets go of the pillow. Then, she wipes her lips with her sleeve, as if trying to remember where she is. She let herself down by falling asleep. It would appear that she felt ashamed. She is not one of those people who dozes off in every corner, no. And she didn't come here to do that. Even when Amaia helps her get up, she can see her begging gaze: "No, let's not go to bed yet, I came here to have fun, ten more minutes, please".

"You can sleep in our bed, Nora, it's big. We don't need to open up the sofa-bed."

Finally, Amaia puts her pajamas on: it is like a liberating experience. She'd like to hug herself and feel the soothing touch of the satin. It seems that with her pajamas on nothing can go wrong. These pajamas are the secret cape of the super hero, they protect her from all the dangers in the world.

Nora is in the bathroom. For the second time since she got there. This time, she will notice, clear all doubts. She may be half-asleep but she is not stupid. And she always has paid attention to details. You can even tell Josu's absence in the living room: his books are not there, and the small flower vases that Amaia put out make the empty space seem bigger. None of his photos are there. Trips and birthdays. The five birthdays they spent together, the many trips. She threw all of them away and replaced them with family pictures. Mom, dad, the two grandmas. But, because the difference between women and men is greatest in the bathroom, it is in the bathroom that Josu's absence is most obvious. Tampons 1-Aftershave 0.

Will Nora look through the small cabinets behind the mirror, to confirm her suspicions? Will she ask her anything before going to bed? Or will she wait until Amaia is asleep to check the bedroom closet, just like she did with the mirror cabinets? Hey, where are the suits, the ties, the underwear? Amaia, Amaia did you have something to tell me and waited until now?

And what if she asks her? Is she ready to tell her the story? Is she ready to explain a betrayal she can't yet understand? Ready to be the target of compassion herself? She wouldn't stand it. It is one thing to fail at every attempt at consolation, to give alcohol to someone on anxiolytics, to play tearjerker music, to be unable to find the right words. But it's another thing to turn things around completely and end up being the recipient of such compassion. No, she won't do it. She won't allow herself to do such despicable thing. This is her last chance (don't forget tomorrow might stop raining) to act like the good friend, there's still hope. That is if Nora lets her. And Nora will keep her act together, too. She will help her act like the good friend. She will play the game.

Because, if she says something, what will it be? Can anything be added to the emptiness

of this house? That she feels sorry? I'm truly sorry, if you need anything, I'm truly sorry, if you need anything. Or she may use a different strategy: that that's not a problem, that she got rid of that disgusting guy just in time; let him go after every skirt in the office, until his penis falls off. And what else do you say in this kind of situation? That you deserve better, of course. That it will eventually happen, when she least expects it. And what else? Oh, yes, the final stab: that she is the one with a problem, the problem that's spreading throughout her mom's bones. That that's a tragedy and not the other thing. That she is lacking perspective. That she'd better open her eyes and start enjoying life. That as long as we are healthy, we are lucky.

And now, if given the chance, she wouldn't know which to choose. Compassion or disdain? Tempting, but she can't just keep one.

But Nora will say nothing. She hopes so. No, she doesn't hope so: she knows. Her friend is back from the bathroom, in her pajamas, as well. They are very much like children's pajamas, with red dots and a red bow on the pocket. Her eyes are wider now. She also looks sadder. Her gaze finds the closet. X-rays in her eyes. No underwear, holy shit! Then, she looks at Amaia. Although, the X-rays can't go through. She gets in bed. She takes her watch off.

She doesn't say anything. No good night, no we had a good time, right? They are sharing the bed, but they are not touching each other.

"Ready?"

"Yes."

Amaia turns off the lights. They don't move. They don't turn around to find the right position, to get used to the nest. But they both feel safer in the dark.

"I'm scared," one of them wanted to say.

"Me too," the other would have said.

PAJAMA PARTY

(Basque Version)

by Katixa Agirre Translated by Oihana Andion

*Hartu eta bota. Ez dago besterik. Bota baino lehen,
nahiko bazenu, pilotatxo bat ere egin zenezake, eta orduan
bai, bota itzazu: urrun, inongo kontenplaziorik gabe.
Soberan daude orain estatistika itxaropentsuak, baikortasun
adierazpen oro, hausnarketa filosofiko edo/eta
transzendentalak, saiakera poetikoak, ez dakit non irakurri
edo entzundako ebidentzia mediko eta zientifikoak,
gertaera errealetan oinarritutako urkoaren istoriotxo aberasgarri
eta suspergarri horiek guztiak. Hala da, onar ezazu.*

*Orain, ez. Ez dute ezertarako balio. Ez orain, ez
inoiz, egia esanda.*

*Zure lagun minak hots egin eta “ama” eta “metastasi”
hitzak telefono linean barrena bidaltzen dizkizunean,
esaldi bakar baten barruan bidali ere, izorratutzat eman
dezakezu zeure burua. Hala da. Ahatz ezazu aurreko guztia.*

*Ez ezazu ezta saiatu ere egin. Zeure burua barregarri
ikus nahi ez baduzu behintzat.*

*Hitzik gabe zaudela? Nahi eta ezinean? Horrela izan
ohi da, bai. Ez zara ez lehena ezta azkena ere izango.*

Orduan zer. Orduan ezer ez. Aukera bakarra duzu.

*Irtenbide faltsua. Iruzurteko atea. Hiru hitz xaloen atzean
babesteko saio makala. Ahalik eta ahots koldarrenarekin
bota beharreko hiru hitz. Hauexek:*

Asko sentitzen dut.

*Eta gero, linearen bestaldean isiltasun-kerua hedatu
bada, linearen alde honetan munduko lagunik txarrena
izanagatik airea faltan botatzen hasi bazara, gehiegikeriaz
ari zaren sentsazioaz beti ere, hurrengo ere zilegi da:*

Ezer behar bazenu...

*Ezin dugu hitzen atzean luzaro babestu. Bestelako aitzakiak
baliatuko ditugu orduan: distantzia. Distantzia,
zergatik ez: espazioko bi punturen arteko tartea; bi gauzaren
arteko alde fisiko zein denborazkoa.*

Nora eta Amaia banatzen zituen alde fisikoa hirurogeita hiru kilometro eskasekoa zen. Astebete iraun zezakeen aitzakia horrek, asko jota. Asteburua ailegatuta, akabo. Asteburuetan erraza delako autopista hartzea eta hirurogeita hiru kilometro gidatzea. Ordainsaria: 4, 25 euro (eta igotzen).

Familia numerosoa, horra hor beste aitzakia interesagarri bat. Familia numerosoa: aplikagarrian den araudiaren arabera, hiru seme-alaba edo gehiago duen familia.

Norak bi ahizpa eta neba bat zuen. Lau seme-alaba, guztira.

Guztien artean hobe eramango zuten dena. Elkarri adorea emanez. Sostengua, babesa, euskarri irmoa familia-gunean.

Aita, aita kementsu eta irribarretsu hori. Neba zaharra, emaztearekin antzeko esperientzia batetik onik igaroa orain dela ez asko. Multzo trinkoa, tribua, klana. Amaiak ez zuen ezer pintatzen horren barruan. Ez zuen ezer pintatu nahi eta gainera, nork eskatzen zion ezer pintatzeko?

Beste aste bat pasa zen.

Norak ez zuen deitzen, aurrerapen edo atzerapenen berri emateko. Berak deitu beharko zion, akaso? Hori al zen lagunek egiten zutena? Ebakuntza bat zegoen tartean.

Hori bazekin lehenengo deiagatik. Mozketa bat.

Errotik ezabatzen den arazo bat. Seinale ona zen hori: zerbait egin zitekeen seinale. Hala izango ote zen? Ez zegoen horren inguruan galdetzerik ordea. (Zergatik ez?

Non irakurrita zuen holakorik?) Itxoitea baino ez zegoen.

Benetan? Hori al zen dena? Eta zergatik ez denbora gelditu, hau guztia argitu arte?

Ebakuntzaren egunean ez, baina handik pare bat egunetara, deitzera ausartu zen Amaia. Zer moduz joan da

dena, zer moduz joan da dena. Ez zirudien oso zaila.

Hizketaldi motza izango zen. Informatiboa eta adeitsua.

Eta lasaiago geldituko zen.

Markatu zuen. Arnasari eutsi. (Zer moduz joan da dena, zer moduz...) Ez zion inork hartu. Handik hamabost minututara berriro saiatu zen. Eta inongo erantzunik ez, ostera. Konfirmatuta: itxoitea baino ez zegoen.

Eta hala ere.

Atzerako kontaketa Amaiaren buruan, tik-tak, berriro ere munduko lagunik okerrena zen sentsazioa. Okerrena ezean, ia okerrena. Tik, tak. Zientziak ezin badu, zer egin dezake batek, baina? Eta hala ere, hitz horiek.

Askok sentitzen dut, ezer behar bazenu, askok sentitzen dut, ezer behar bazenu...

Azkenean, irtenbide larria, urgentea eta hantustea, ahoberokeria bat, ia. E-mail bat, lanetik, azken orduan

eta azkar idatzia, lau atzamar dardartiz:

Etor zaitetz asteburu pasa etxera. Aitzakiarik ez.

Klik, bidalita.

Aitzakiarena aipatu izana damutu zitzaion gero, erradioterapia edo antzeko aitzakiarik erraz onartuko lukeelako. Nola ez onartu erradioterapiaren koloreko aitzakiarik.

Baina ez zen horrelakorik egon. Aitzakiarik bat ere ez. Ustekabean, Norak baiezkua eman zion, e-mailez berak ere. Joango zen, noski. Ideia ona, bai horixe. Ondo letorkioke asteburu batez deskonektatzea. Ama etxean zen, operazioa eta gero, aitarekin, kimioterapia noiz hasiko zain. Ahizpa gazteena, Galesen bizi zena, baimen berezi batekin ere etxean zen. Eta neba, neba ere ondoan zuen amak. Dena lotuta, hortaz. Libre zen asteburu horretan. Batera pasako dugu. Ondo etorriko zait. Eta bai, bai, sentitzen zuen lehenago ikusi zituen bere bi dei galduak, baina momentu horretan ezin zuen hartu, eta gero bueltan deitzea ahaztu eta tira. Baina asteburu horretan hitz egingo zuten. Patxadaz.

Primeran!, erantzun zion Amaiak, hitz bakar batez osatutako azken e-mailean.

Primeran?, galdetu zion bere buruari segituan.

Ostiral gauetz ailegatu zen Nora. Amaiak prest zuen janari mexikarra, bi ardo botila eta ron botila bat, zer gerta ere. Aurpegia gorri, izerditan blai sartu zen etxean Nora, biraoka, trafikoa, udaltzainak eta munduko taxilari guztien kariaz. Aparkalekurik ezin topatu eta lur azpiko parking batean utzi behar izan zuela autoa. Ez zegoela eskubiderik. Adar-jotze hutsa zela. Prezio hori! Marra txuri batez inguratutako bi metro koadroengatik!

Eta zer espero zuen, ba? Nora txikituago, xahutuago bat? Hiru taila gutxiagoko Nora? Ahots meheago batekin, dezibelio murriztuekin? Umetxo bat kontsolamendu bila?

Berokia kendu eta paretari begira geratu zen, berokia zintzilikatzeko iltze baten bila balego moduan. Gero Amaiari begiratu zion eta azkenik, berriro paretari begira mintzatu, berokia oraindik eskuan:

Ez dut horretaz hitz egiteko inongo gogorik, ados? Ez dago ezer bereizirik esateko, gainera. Ez digute gauza handirik esaten, dena da misterioa, iluntasuna. Momentuz bularrekua errotik moztu diote. Eta orain tratamendua.

Fluorourazilo, doxorribizina, ziklofosfamida: hara hor gure hiru jainko berriak, gure erlijio kimiko kuttuna.

Hor omen dago gure esperantza guztia. Zeren eta

*mantal-zuridun abade horiengatik guztiengatik balitz ...
Frogak gora eta behera, familia osoa mareatu, ama nekatu,
aita nekatu, eta azkenean, ospitale horretako mediku
puta batek ere ez digu esango ama biziko den ala ez. Eta
ez da asko eskatzea, nik uste. Jakin nahi dugu. Portzentaje
bat, besterik ezean. Bere hutsune-marjinekin eta guzti.
Baina ezin dute ezer esan. Goiz omen da horretarako.
Goiz. Ziur egon nahi dute, hau da: ez dute busti nahi.
Beraz, hobe gaia uzten badugu, gaurkoz behintzat, bai?
Eta Josu, ez dago etxean?
Asteburu honetan kanpoan da, gurasoak bisitatzen.
Berokia logelan utziko dut, emaidazu –Amaiak, erreakzionatuz,
azkenean ere.
Askoz hobeto. Ez, ez gaizki hartu. Jatorra da Josu. Serioa,
bai. Lan gehiegi egiten du, ezta? Hori ematen du,
behintzat. Baina atsegina da. Esan nahi nuena da hobe
gaudela zu eta biok bakarrik, ez dut jende askorekin egoteko
gogorik. –Norak ahotsa altxatu du, Amaia logelan
barna galdu baita.
Ulertzen dut, nik ere uste dut hobe gaudela bakarrik.
Ea, neska, gose zara? – etxeoandre maternalaren tonuaz.
Nola ez naiz gose izango? Ez dizut ba esan bi ordu
daramatzadala hiri nazkagarri honetako trafikoarekin batailatzen?
Bide batez, ea azaltzen didazun behingoz zergatik
bizi zaren hiri honetan. Nik ez dut ulertzen, zinez.
Beti izan zen Nora sake ederrekoa. Hori ere bere horretan
mantentzen dela dirudi. Jan eta jan egiten zuen
eta inoiz ez ase geratu. Unibertsitateko jantokian horrela
gogoratzen zuen Amaiak. Agudo baino agudoago janez
eta gero mundu guztiari bere postrea eskatuz. Jan behar
al duzu hau? Amaiak beti ematen zion bere postrea, batez
ere izozkiak eta natillak, garai horretan (unibertsitateko
urte guztietan) dieta zorrotza jarraitzen baitzuen. Tira,
saiatzen zen. Gogoz saiatu ere.
Beste tortilla bat, Nora?
Bai horixe.
Eta ardo gehiago?
Ez dago galdetu beharrik ere.
Ederra dago, ezta?
Zoragarria. Eta saltsa hau? Zuk egin da?
Bai. Tira, ez guztiz. Nik pasa dut kristalezko potetik
platerera.
Ba zorionak, ederki burutu duzu ontzi aldaketa.
Eskerrik asko, urteek aurrera egin ahala geroz eta trebeagoa
naiz sukaldean.
Banekien, horregatik onartu dut zure gonbidapena,*

zer uste zenuen?

Elkarrizketa elikadura prozesuari buruzko detaile horietara mugatzen zenez, Amaia lasaitasun handiagoz ikusten hasi zen egoera (ardoak ere bere ardura parte izango zuen) eta pentsatu zuen agian egia zela Noraren gaztigua, alegia, ez zuela horretaz hitz egiteko inongo asmorik, eta han ibiliko zirela, jan eta edan, ironia praktikatzeko, eskura jartzen zitzairen edozein errukigabe egurtzen. Garai onetan bezalaxe. Pijama festa batean baleude. Zergatik ez, posible zen.

Polita daukazue etxea. Eta handia da, nahiko handia gaur egun ikusten denarekin konparatuta. Etortzen naizen bakoitzean handiagoa iruditzen zait. Eta nire zuloa, geroz eta txikiagoa.

Alokairu merkea dugu, gainera.

Segi, segi inbidia ematen.

Laster bukatzen zaigu kontratua, dena den. Eta orain, jabeak pisua bitan banatu nahi du, segregatu, esaten dutenez, eta etekin bikoitza atera. Beste leku baten bila hasi beharko genuke al bait azkarren.

Eta erosteko asmorik ez? Bata funtzionarioa, eta bestea business classean bidaiatzen duten morrosko horietako bat. Ez zenuen ba arazo handirik izango hipoteka bat lortzeko.

Momentuz ez, pentsatzen ari gara. Eta business classean bidaiatuko du Josuk baina gero klip gehiegi eskatzen baditu arazoak ditu bulegoan.

Bikotean errazago da, noski, horrelako abentura batean sartzea.

Bai, hala dirudi.

Nik, nola ez dudan probatu... Bikotean bizitzearena esan nahi dut.

Zorionekoa zu!

Hori bera pentsatzen dut nik ere, ama ez dator nirekin bat ordea.

Dena den, zure Markos horrekin, egun hauetako batean...

Markos? Aspaldi ez dudala ikusten, neska. Ez nizun esan ala?

Zer diozu baina?

Horixe, ez dudala dagoeneko ikusten. Gure harremana bukatutzat eman genuela. Horrela esaten da, ezta?

Bion gauza izan zela, biok adostutako haustura. Baina, tira, ez da egia, nik bidali nuen antzarrak ferratzera. Ezin nuen gehiago agoantatu.

Jexux, neska, pozik ematen zenuen batera. Afaltzen egon ginen egun horretan, adibidez, bi edo hiru hilabete

baino ez dira izango horretaz. Eta bat-batean... zer gertatu da ba?

Zer gertatu den? Erraza da azaltzen, begira: inpotentea zen.

Eta hori arazoa al da pilula urdinen aroan?

Arrazoia duzu. Ez zen inpotentea, gezurra esan dizut.

Justu kontrakoa: ohean baino ez zekien nirekin egoten.

Hogeita lau orduz nahi ninduen hor, jo eta su.

Horretan bai ez dudala arazo aztarnarik ikusten.

Ez pentsa, hasieran ondo dago, baina luzaroan konturatzen

zara bizitzaren beste alderdi eder asko galtzen ari

zarela. Ez dakit ba: mendira joatea, liburu bat irakurtzea,

lo egitea...

Zu ez zara sekula mendira joan.

Horregatik, ez dudalako aukerarik izan, agian orain

trebatuko naiz horretan ere. Eta zuek, mendira zoazte?

Gu ez, ez zait burutik ere pasatzen...

Eta larrutan? Beste gauzetan bezain serio da gure Josu

maitea? Bekokia zimurtu eta kontzentrazio aurpegia jartzen

duten horietakoak?

Seriotasuna larru kontuetan geroz eta gehiago preziatzen

dudan bertutea da, ez pentsa.

Bai, ezagutzen ditut Josu bezalakoak. Beren imajinario

guztia oherako erresebatzen duten horietakoa

da, ezta?

Aizu! Bukatu dugula lehenengo ardo botila! Zer da

hau?

Jana, edana, ironia, egurra eta (ia ahaztuta zuen!) sexuaz

jardutea, noski. Baina beti ere Norak nahiago zuen

tonu urrun eta indiferente horrekin. Inoiz ez gehiegi hurbilduz,

erretzeko beldurra tarteko. Inoiz ez bere intimitatearen

leihotxorik txikiena ere irekiz. Amaiak bazekin elkarrizketa

kontrolatzen. Bazekien Noraren enbidoak

erantzuten, berak bezain azkar, berak bezain zorrotz.

Praktika bazuen lan horietan. Bigarren botilak behera

egin ahala, errazago izango zen barre tontoari ekitea,

edozein komentariori itzuli xelebrea bilatzea. Erraza izango

zen horrela gaua eramatea. Betiko Nora eta Amaia

izango ziren. Lotsagabeak, ozarrak, apurtxo bat ziniko-

ak, ausartak. Bizitzaren tragedia ezinbestekoekin oraindik

topatu gabeak. Dena ondo joango zen. Arratsaldea

urduri eta deseroso pasa zuela gogoratzea ere! Gehiegi estutzen

da Amaia, eta zertarako?

Baina harra. Hor zegoen harra. Kontzientziarena.

Esaten ziona berarena zela ardura. Berak lagundu behar

ziola Norari barrua husten. Inoiz baino argiago ikusten

zuen. Norekin hitz egin behar zuen amaren egoeraz, bestela?
Familiarekin ez: guztiek indartsuen itxura egin nahiko
zutelako, inork ez zuelako nahiko besteen aurrean
ahultasun malko bat ere agertu. Lankideekin? Mojen
ikastetxe horretan ez omen zuen lagun handirik, azken
urteko ikasle batzuekin komunean erretzen harrapatu zutenetik
batez ere. Markos hura ere, ahaztuta eta lurperatuta
omen zegoen, arrazoi ezezagunak zirela medio. Orduan
zer? Gezi guztiak Amaiarengan zuzentzen ziren, dudarik
gabe. Bere ardura zen eta sorbalden gainean sentitzen
zuen. Zehatza zen, atzeraezina. Super-heroiaren patu
tragikoa.

Nola egin, ordea? Nola minbizia mahai-gaineratu,
guakamole saltsaren alboan, lehenengo eta bigarren ardo
botilaren artean?

Amaiak tira egin zuen, indar biziz, kortxoak plop
egin zuen arte.

Ez dakit gehiago edatea komeni zaidan, ditxosozko
tranxilium horrekin...

Zer?

Tira, arrazoa duzu, beste kopa batek ez dit kalterik
egingo.

Zer esan duzu?

Ezer ez, tranxilium ari naizela hartzen.

Nola?

Tranxilium, ansiolitiko bat.

Amaiak botila utzi du, irekita, kopak bete gabe.

Ansiolitiko bat, esan du, arintasunez. Baina arintasun
faltsua da, orain bai antzeman du, bere ezpainen dar-
-dar minimoan. Norak berak hartu du botila, eta bi
kopak bete ditu, Amaiaaren begiradapean. Honek, nekez
esan du:

Ansiolitiko bat..., nondik nora?

Ba aurrekoan ordenagailu aurrean nengoen, asper-asper
eginda, egia esanda, eta mezu elektroniko sinpatiko
horietako bat ailegatu zitzaidan, kolore askorekin, promesa
biziekin, eta esan nuen, zergatik ez, kutxa bat enkargatuko
dut, ea esaten duten bezain alai jartzen nauen.

Eta, zapla!, hogeita lau orduren bueltan etxean nuen kutxatxo
eta bostehun pastillatxoak. Miraria!

Zertaz ari zara, Nora?

Ahotsa itsusi atera zaio, erdi-beldurtuta, erdi-autoritario.

Bihurrikerietan dabilen nerabe kontrolaezin bati
jarriko liokeena. Bere ikasleekin oso gutxitan bakarrik
erabiltzen duen tonu zatar hori.

Trankil, neska. Mediku batek errezetatu dit. Tranxilium

5, bigun samarra, ez zuk buruan duzun zonbi utz nazakeen pilularik. Antsietate arazoak ditut azken bolada honetan, dena kontatu behar badut, gaizki egiten dut lo, eta, tira, arnas egiteko arazoak ere baditut batzuetan... Ez da ezer, ezer grabea, esan nahi dut. Pasatuko zait; kimika lagun, noski.

Bajan zaude, orduan?

Ez, ez da beharrezkoa. Pare bat egun hartu nituen, ebakuntza egin ziotenean amari. Baina itzuli egin naiz. Lanean ondo nago. Kontrolatuta daukat koadrila. Gauzez dator komeria. Bakarrik nagoenean. Ez daki inork; etxekoek, esan nahi dut. Baina ez da ezer. Ez dut nire umekeriekin agertu nahi familiaren aurrean, nahikoa dugu gurearekin. Asko sentitzen dut.

Berriro, berriro erori da esaldi malapartatuan! Sentitu, sentitu, eta zer? Eta zer da, finean, sentitzen duena? Kimikaren behar hori? Nora bere ohean imajinatzea, bakarrik, negarrez, arnasestuka? Edo Noraren indar faltsua da gehien sentitzen duena, harri-kartoizkoa zen segurtasunaren hondamendia? Edota lagun behartsuaren aurrean behar bezala jokatu ez izana da agian gehien aztoratzen duena? Zergatik ez du ezer egin orain arte? Zergatik eseri da, bertan goxo, alarma guztiak piztu diren arte? Baina orain, alarmak piztuta begi aurrean izanda ere, zergatik ezin du ezer egin?

Eta on egiten dizute?

Bai, portzierto. Musika nire gorputzaz jabetzen da eta gau osoa dantzan pasatzen dut. Zoragarria da, probatu beharko zenuke.

Benetan galdetzen dizut.

Tira, bai, hobeto egiten dut lo orain.

Eta albo-ondoriorik izan al duzu? Esaten dute, batzuetan...

Joder, ez nizun ezer kontatu behar, orain ziur jonki bat naizela pentsatuko duzula, errezetarik gabe zabu-zabuka farmaziaz farmazia zortea probatzen duen horietakoa. Zergatik diozu hori? Ez dut hori pentsatu, inola ere ez. Jende askok hartzen ditu pastillak gaur egun, ez duzu zertan lotsatu beharrik...

...bai, bai, ansilotikoak hartzeak ez nau pertsona okerrago bihurtzen, eta zure lagun baten lagunak ere hartzen zuen bolada txar batean eta abar. Ezagutzen dut zabor hori guztia. Gorde ezazu zuretzako, arren.

Amaia hitzik gabe geratu da. Garraztasun mingarri hori ez da Noraren estilokoa. Ez lukete mindu behar, dagoen egoeran egonda, baina hitzok mindu dute. Injustua izan da Nora, gehiegikeriaz erantzun du, baina Amaia ere

ez da oso fin aritu “zertaz ari zara, Nora?” karrankari hori bota dionean. Nola eman buelta egoera itsusi honi?

Barkatu –esan du Norak, momentu justuan–, komunera noa.

Pasilloan behera, eta gero eskuinera.

Bai, gogoratzen dut.

Amaiak platerak jasotzeko aprobetxatu du. Postre garaia da, baina ez du izozkia ateratzeko gogorik. Izozkailuaren aurrean geratu da, atea irekita. Hotzak on egiten dio: berak edan du gehien bietatik, eta aurpegia gorri-gorri izango du ziurrenik. Belarriak, behintzat, berobero sentitzen ditu. Azkenean, izozkia atera eta bi ontzitan banatzen du txokolatezko miraria. Norarenean bola extra bat jarri du, baina gero berak ere dosi gehigarria behar duela erabaki du. Hori da bere drogarik kutunena, bere momentu baxuenetan ere albo-efekturik gabe (ez bada gantz geruza aldaka inguruan) lagundu dion goxoki maitagarria. Baina bere momentu baxuak bromazkoak dira, bizitzaz ezer gutxi dakien heldugabearen buruhauste tentelak. Gehiagotan gogorarazi beharko lioke hori bere buruari.

Hogeita hamar urte betetzear dago eta hileta bakarrean egon da bere bizitza osoan: apenas ezagutzen zuen amaren osaba zahar bat. Osterantzean, bizirik ditu aita eta ama, eta, harrigarriagoa dena, amona biak ere (aitonak bera oso txikia zenean hil ziren, ez ditu gogoratzen).

Pneumonia da bere senitartekoek pairatutako gaixotasunik larriena, eta hau ere, aski arina. Istripu larririk ez bere inguruan. 90ko muga igaro duten senide ugari. Aurredisposizio genetiko bikaina. Natura beren alde. Dena bizitza eta oparotasuna. Nola konparatu dezake bere azken boladako gazi-gozaok Nora bizitzen ari den oinazearekin?

Oinazea, hitz esajeratua. Noraren aurrean botako balu, besteak erantzungo lioke: “Oinazea! Hau ez da bazkalosteko telefilm bat, maitea. Putada bat da, esan ditzagun gauzak argi, putada bat, bai, baina azken finean, denok espero behar dugun putada. Gure gurasoak lurperatu beharra naturala da. Askoz okerragoa da kontrako formula, ezta?”. Baina, noski, Amaiak ez du oinaze hitza (ezta bere sinonimoetako bat ere) erabiliko Noraren aurrean.

Ez: hemendik aurrera tentuz neurtuko ditu bere hitzak. Beharko.

Ur-txorrotada entzun, komuneko atea ireki eta Noraren pausutxuek pasilloa bete dute. Amaia zain dago, prest, koilara eskuan, mahaian eserita.

Txokolate izozkia! Zu bai lagun ona!

*Jateari ekiten diote berriro. Txokolatea ardo pittin
batekin tartekatuz. Inoiz baino gehiago behar du Amaiak
txokolatea. Baina ezer ez dago ahaztuta. Hor jarraitzen
du metastasiak, Tranxilium-ak eta bere garaian bota ez
diren hitz guztiek. Baita garaiz kanpo botatakoek ere.
Aurrekoan, ospitalean, ama operatu zuten egunean
bertan, Goio ikusi nuen. Gogoan duzu Goio?
Unibertsitateko zure mutil hura, arte ederrak ikasten
zituena...*

Hori bera.

*Gero Garazi zure lehengusuaren lagunarekin liatu zena.
Horixe, bai, nik baino hobeto gogoratzen duzu, neska.
Baina nik utzi ostean izan zen hori, e, argi gera dadila.
Zera, ba... igogailuan topatu nuen. Biok jaisten, kafetegira.
Ez ikusiarena egin nuen hasieran, baina igogailu
batean, ezkutatzeko aukera gutxi. Total, ikusi egin ninduela.
Eta aupá, zelan, aspaldiko, hori guztia. Baina horrekin
konformatu ez, nonbait, eta tipoak botatzen dit,
ezin zoriontsuago: “semetxo bat izan dugu gaur, Garazik
eta biok”. Eta ni, harri eta zur, zer esan jakin gabe, Garazi
hori nor ote zen gogoratu nahian. Erreakzionatzeko denborarik
eman gabe, berak galdetzen dit, “eta zu zer zabilta
hemen?” Eta nik: “ba Amaia..., gogoratzen duzu
Amaia? Berak ere ume bat izan du eta lore-sorta bat ekartzera
etorri naiz.” Eta berak, etsi gabe: “A, bai? Hau kasualitatea!
Baina noiz izan da? Ez dut solairuan ikusi...,
azken hogeita lau ordutan txinatar umetxo bat baino ez
dela jaio esan digute, gainera”. “Ez, ez, herenegun izan
zen, edo aurrekoan, tira, banoa”. Ez nintzen kafetegiraino
jaitsi, bigarren solairuan norbait sartzen zela aprobe-
txatuta bertan gelditu nintzen. Bigarren solairuan, kardiologian.
Eta zer izan nuen, mutikoa ala neska?
Oraindik ez dago zehaztuta, zuk zeuk aukera dezakezu.
Hori da alegiazko erditzeen abantaila.
Isilune arraro bat: inork ez du ezer esaten eta izozkia
bukatu dutenez koilarak ere isildu dira. Izozki gehiago,
akaso? Bide horretatik jarraitzeak merezi du?
Lasai, Nora, ulertzen zaitut –bai, orain ulerkorrena
egin nahi du, beranduegi ez delakoan, baina beranduegi
da–, ez diozu zertan lehenengo ezagunari zure bizitza
osoa kontatu beharko.
Beragatik egin nuen, gehien bat. Zertarako zapuztu
bere eguna? Zertarako behartu “asko-sentitzen-dut-dena-
-ondo-atera-dadila” bat botatzera, noiz eta ume bat jaio
zaion egunean...
Bai, arrazoia duzu.– Ezin ahaztu, ordea, bera ere “asko-sentitzen-dut”*

hori botatzera behartuta izan zela.

*Eta orain gaian sartuta gaudela... noizko umeak,
baina benetakoak? Hogeita hamarrak baino lehen izan
nahi zenituela esaten zenuen garai batean, eta begira
nola gauden...*

*Gauzak nola dauden ikusita, berrogeiak jo baino lehen
izatearekin, konformatuko nintzateke.*

Gutxirekin konformatzen zara zu.

Hala izango da.

Amaia...

Zer?

*Ezer ez. Aizu, irtengo gara ala hemen gelditu gau
osoa, telebista aurrean, atsoen modura?*

*Zeinek nahiko luke kalera irten, hoztu, busti, kez
beteriko tabernetan sartu, nerabe hordituak agoantatu,
pixa-errekak saihestuz ibili, edabe toxikoengatik prezio
ezinezkoak ordaindu, musikaren gainetik ezin hitzik
ulertu. Askoz hobeto daude sofa honetan. Telebista piztu*

*gabe, hori bai, behintzat. Izoziaren azken arrastoekin.
(Zergatik ez du gehiago erosi? Kaxa bat ez da nahikoa
izango!) Ronik gabe (Amaiak ez dio Norari hozkailuan
gordetzen duen botilaz fitsik ere esan, ansiolitikoak
oraindik buruan). Disko bat musika-aparailuan:
Katia Guerreiro fado abeslaria. Josurekin egindako azken
bidaiaren oroigarri. Sintra-Lisboa-Oporto. Bost
egunetako tourra. (Disko hori kasualitatez aukeratu
duela esango dio bere buruari, noski).*

*Musika deprimigarria eta alkoholik ez. Pozten naiz
etorri izanaz, benetan. Zuk badakizula nola zaindu lagunak.
Aizu! Zu izan zarela hemen gelditzea erabaki duena.
Ateratzea bagenuen. Ostiraletan oraindik posible da leku
lasairen bat topatzea. Eta alkohola bagenuen: edan ditugun
bi botila horiek gogorarazi behar al dizkizut? Gainera
nekatuta zaudela esan duzu.*

*Bai, arrazoia duzu, baina hona etorri nintzen azken
aldian musika alaiago eta garagardoa bazegoela gogoratzen
dut. Ez dakit, beste ideia bat nuen. Zer gertatu da
hemen?*

Gauzak aldatuz doaz.

Tempus fugit, ezta?

Bai, ubi sunt garai alaiago horiek?

Carpe diem, neska.

Memento mori!

Lau urtez filologia ikasten honetarako.

*(Lau urte Amaia-arentzat. Norak lasaiago hartu eta
bost urte eman zituen fakultatean).*

Okerrago izan zitekeen.

Aizu, hau ez da plana. Zer egiten dugu hemen latina lardaskatuz eta Katia... nola zen? Katia Guerreiro hau entzunez?

Ba oraintxe esan behar nizun pijama janztera nindoala, erosoago egoteko.

Pijama! Falta zitzaiguna bakanala osoa izan zedin! Ez, pijama janzteka debekatu egiten dizut, benetan ari naiz. Hemen jarraituko dugu, bakoitza bere arrokekin, txintxo. Dibertitzera etorri naiz, ezta?

Ondo da, pijamarik ez, eta musika aldatu dezakegu, nahi baduzu.

Ez, berdin da. Suposatzen dut Portugalera egindako bidaia horretatik ekarriko zenuela. Muito bonito Portugal, ezta? Ez zenidan gauza handirik kontatu bidaia horretaz. Nola ezetz? Argazkiak erakutsi nizkizun!

A, bai, Josu aurpegi guztiz errearekin, gogoratzen dut. Noiz izan zen, uztailean edo? Ene, bost hilabete baino ez dira eta mendeak igaro direla dirudi. Begira nola gauden orain. Bost gradu inguru eta euria gau osoan, atertu gabe. Gezurra dirudi. Dena den, laster izango ditugu oporrak berriro. Gabonetan bidaiaren bat egiteko asmoa duzue?

Ez dut uste. Zuk?

Nik, gaur egun, ez dut epe-luzerako planik egiten. Kimioterapiak ezartzen ditu orain epeak eta tarteak. Noski, bai, barkatu. Ea urte berrirako gauzak hobeto dauden.

E então fiquei, parada à esquina do tempo, e não voltaste, e então esperei, sentada à esquina da vida, e não chegaste. Horrela bukatzen da diskoa. Horrela, hain kaskarki. Horrela, erdizka baino ulertzen ez diren baina erabat bustitzen duten hitz horien ostean, egiten da isiltasuna Amairen egongelan barrena. Musika aparatuak argi urdinez eta hitz bakar batez adierazten du egoeraren nondik norakoa: END. Aste osoko nekadura (eta mingostasuna) jausi zaio Amaiari sorbalda gainera. Agian hilabete osokoa ere. Ohera joan nahiko luke oraintxe bertan, abegi onaren oinarritzko arauak ahaztuz, gonbidatu bera ere ahaztuz, begiak itxiz. Bihar arte, boa noite, agur. Gauak ez du gehiagorako ematen. Ez luke gehiagorako eman beharko. Gaizki atera dira gauzak? Okerrago ere izan liteke. Miraririk ezin espero.

Baina bihar. Bihar desberdina izan daiteke. Esperantza hori ez dago galtzerik. Euria egiteari uzten badio, itsasoraino egin dezakete txangoa. Kostaldeko edozein portu

zahar xarmangarrian bazkaldu. Ardo pixka bat gehiago edan, akaso...

Jana eta edana, hori besterik ez zaio bururatzen. Bere baliabide bakarra dirudi. Norarentzat, baina baita bere buruarentzat ere. Baliabide kaskarrak dira, desegokiak. Edana murriztu beharra dago, nahiko edan dute gaur, seguru bihar aho lodia eta buruko mina izango dutela; eta jana, berari ere ez zaio komeni. Nahikoa eta gehiegi jan du gaur. Bihar apioa eta sagarra. Urteetako esperientziaren ostea eraginkorren suertatzen zaion menua. Betekaden ostean, apioa eta sagarra. Josu etxean balitz, berari esango lioke: “bihar, gogorarazi iezadazu, apioa eta sagarra besterik ez, ados?”. Baina Josu ez dago eta Norari ez dio hain aspaldikoa dirudien kalamatrika hura sartu nahi. Eta aspaldikoa zen, bai. Ahaztuta zituen bere jate kuitak. Nerabezaroko kontutzat zituen. Baina azken aste hauetan, berriro ekin dio bere jate konpulsiboari, bere abstentzio tarte errudunei.

Ez, ez da hainbesterako. Baskulak kilo bat eta zazpiehun gramo berri aurpegiratzen dizkio. Ez da asko.

Gorabehera kontrolagarria. Pasako zaio. Lasaituko da. Baina orain, ohera joan nahi du. Ezerezera begira dago, eta Nora ere horrela egongo da, seguru asko. Goiok eta , nola zen? Garazik?, ume bat izan dute. Sinestezina. Neska ala mutila ote zen? Isiltasunak jarraitzen du. END urdina itzaliz joan da. Kaletik denetariko hotsak ailegatzeko dira: kantak, garrasiak, txakurrak, gaueko autobusak, hordituen eta arabiarren ika-mikak. Norak begiak itxita ditu. Eta zurrunga ari da, bai, oso arinki, setazko kuxin bati besarkatuta. Noiztik dago lotan? Lagunari begira gelditu da, inpunitatez.

Nora, Nora...psss, goazen ohera.

Begiak zabaldu ditu, eta kuxina askatu. Aho ingurua maukaz garbitu du gero, non dagoen gogoratu nahian edo. Bere buruari huts egin dio, lokartuz. Lotsatuta sentitzen dela dirudi. Ez da izkina guztietan lo-kaikuka ibiltzen den horietakoa, ez. Eta ez da hona horretarako etorri. Amaiak altxatzen laguntzen dionean ere, bere begietan erregua ikus dezake: “ez, oraindik ohera ez, dibertitzera etorri naiz, hamar minutu gehiago, mesedez”.

Gure ohera etor zaitezke, Nora, handia da, ez dago zertan sofa-ohea ireki beharrik.

Azkenean Amaiak pijama jantzi du: liberazio baten modukoa izan da. Bere burua besarkatu nahiko luke, satin ehunaren taktu lasaigarria sentitzeko. Pijama jantzita ezin dela ezer txarrik gertatu dirudi. Super-heroiarenekin kapa

*sekretua da pijama hau, munduko arrisku guztietatik
babesteko balio diona*

Nora komunean dago. Ailegatu denetik bigarrenez.

*Oraingoan ohartuko zen, zalantza guztiak argitu. Erdi-lo
egongo da baina ez da tontoa. Eta beti izan da detaileei
arreta jartzen dion horietakoa. Egongelan ere aski agerikoa
da Josuren ausentzia: ez daude bere liburuak eta
Amaiak jarri dituen lorontzi txikiek hutsunea zabalago
egitea baino ez dute lortzen. Ez daude bere argazkiak. Bidaiak
eta urtebetetzeak. Batera pasatako bost urtebetetzeak,
hamaika bidaiak. Dena utikan bidali du eta familiaren
fotoak jarri ditu horren orde. Ama, aita, bi amonak.*

*Baina, bainugeletan ikusten baitira argien gizon eta emakumeen
arteko diferentziak, bainugelan da agerikoen Josuren
desagerpena. Tanpoiak 1-After Shave 0.*

*Begiratuko du Norak ispiluen atzeko armairutxoetan,
bere susmoak konfirmatzeko? Lo aurretik zer edo zer galdetuko
dio? Edota Amaia lokartu arte itxarongo du, bainu-gelako
armairutxoetan ez ezik logelako armairuan ere
muturra sartzeko? Aizu, non daude trajeak, gorbatak,
galtzontziloak? Amaia, Amaia, zerbait kontatu behar al
didazu eta orain arte itxaron?*

Eta galdetzen badio zer? Prest dago istorioa kontatzeko?

Prest dago ezin ulertu dezakeen traizio hura azaltzeko?

Prest, bera izateko orain errukiaren jomuga?

*Ezingo luke jasan. Gauza bat da kontsolamendu ariketa
guztietan porrot egitea, alkohola ematea ansiolitikoak
hartzen ari den bati, negar egiteko moduko musika jartzea,
hitz egokiak ezin topatzea. Baina beste gauza bat da
egoerari erabateko itzulia ematea eta bera agertzea errukigarriarena
egiten. Ez, ez du egingo. Ezin dio bere buruari
horrelako zatarkeriarik baimendu. Azken aukera
du (ezin ahaztu bihar euria egiteari utz diezaiokeela), lagun
onaren plantak egiteko, oraindik esperantza badago.
Norak uzten badio, behintzat. Eta Norak ere eutsiko
dio. Lagun onaren plantak egiten lagunduko dio. Sartuko
da jokoan.*

*Zeren eta zerbait esaten badio, zer izango da? Zerbait
erants daiteke etxe honetako hutsuneari? Asko sentitzen
duela? Asko sentitzen dut, ezer behar bazenu, asko sentitzen
dut, ezer behar bazenu. Edota bestelako izango da
bere estrategia: hori ez dela arazo bat, garaiz libratu dela
nazkagarri horretaz, joan dadila bere bulegoko kuleru
guztien atzetik, zakila usteltzen zaion arte. Eta nola esaten
da kasu hauetan? Berak beste gauza bat merezi duela,
bai, horixe. Eta ailegatuko dela merezi duen hori. Egun*

hauetako batean, gutxien espero duzuenean? Eta zer gehiago? Bai, hori, azken sastada: arazoa berak duela, bere amak hezurretan barrena zabaldua duen gaitz horretan. Hori dela desgrazia, ez bestea. Perspektiba falta zaio-la. Begiak zabaltzea hobe duela, bizitzaz disfrutatzen hastea. Osasuna dagoen bitartean, zorionekoak garela. Eta orain, aukeratzeko eskatuko baliote, ezingo luke batekin edo bestearekin gelditu. Errukia ala mespretxua? Tentagarria, baina ezin bat aukeratu. Baina Norak ez dio ezer esango. Hala espero du. Ez, ez du espero: badaki. Komuniketiz izuli da adiskidea, bera ere pijama jantzita. Pijama infantil samarra da, puntu gorrikoa, lakiotxo gorri bat bularraldeko poltsikoan. Begiak zabalduago ditu orain. Tristeago ere badirudi. Armairura zuzentzen du begirada. X izpiak bere begietan. Galtzontzilorik ez, arranopola! Gero Amaiari dedikatu dio begirada bat. X izpiek huts egiten dioten orduan. Sartu da ohean. Kendu du erlojua, eskumuturretik. Ez dio ezer esan. Ez gabon, ez ondo pasa dugu, ezta? Batera daude ohean, baina ez dute elkar ukitzen. Prest? Bai. Argiak itzali ditu Amaiak. Ez dira mugitu. Ez dute bueltarik eman, postura topatzeko, habiari egokitzeko. Baina iluntasunean, babestuago sentitzen dira biak. Beldur naiz –esango luke bata. Baita ni ere –esango luke besteak.

Steve Mitchell

CURRENCY

I'd said the wrong thing, then Lynn said the wrong thing, and before we knew it flame was curling from the pan on the stove, smoke clinging to the air. She leapt for the lid to smother the fire, turning back to me but I had no words left. I couldn't really remember what the argument was about, I only knew the grip of rage at my throat. I walked away. She called my name as I moved toward the door but didn't follow.

Beads of rain rattled from the frame when I slammed the door, peppering my shoulders, cold on my face. The night was slick and oily, the rain indecisive. The glow from the streetlight had tangled itself in the trees. I stood on the porch, searching my lawn for something familiar.

It felt good to settle into the car and pull the door closed, its distinct click carving out a certain silence in the unnerving rhythm of the night. I didn't put the key in the ignition just yet, wanting to avoid its incessant chime. I folded the keys onto the passenger seat, covering them with my hand.

The bitterness scorched through me. Not her bitterness, or ours; something older, scrubbed and claw-like, twisting down my arms and into my fingers, bringing its own responses from the shadows of a past I could no longer decipher. I pounded the heel of my hand at the steering wheel, once, twice, three times, until the sting became an ache rising into my arm.

I was hollowing to a singular note of emptiness, the plummet after rage and blame as adrenalin pulls away, leaving bruised flesh and raw bone. In the absence of rage there was nothing; nothing but the night around me, the night outside the car, beating its constant pulse. I rubbed my hand absently, the pain somehow soothing.

I didn't want to see the house or the light in its windows, the slant of the sidewalk or the shrubs we'd planted in spring to frame it. My eyes lost focus in a kind of willful night blindness. I didn't want to see the lawn unfolding to the road or her car silent next to mine

or the large, plain pumpkin resting by the front door. I wanted to be free of the past, the clutch of it, and its blind recurrence. I didn't want to feel the same feelings, think the same thoughts, contend with the cold darkness which always fell after our arguments.

Lynn's perfume lingered in the car like a rootless memory, and it wasn't simply the perfume itself, but its scent once it had become a part of her, after an hour or so on her skin. There was a slight spice, a certain citrus, and the smell of her hair when she was asleep at two in the morning. Recognizing this didn't make me angry at her ghostly presence. It was more a sadness, an unarticulated loss, and the vague exhaustion one might feel at the thought of having to repeat a long journey.

I heard myself sigh. The sound bored me, the tone and the drama of the exhalation, and every faltering pressure framing it. My hands came to rest on top of the steering wheel, my fingers weighted, then curling slightly.

When they touched the underside something sparked, the tips completing a lost circuit, phantom voltage traveling the length of my spine to release a tiny synaptic warmth. Memory tumbled on sensation, side to side and back, never in a straight line, like a child randomly leaping one stone to another. I sank into it, the muscles of my back releasing into the seat, my heavy body receding, falling away, replaced by something smaller, more contained and ecstatic.

I'm bouncing at the knees, clutching the wheel, raising myself up then letting myself drop. I fall back and lurch forward, anchored by the steering column. I can't be more than five, standing on my uncle's legs before the wheel. His voice is close at my ear. Itchy excitement jangles my arms and legs as I struggle to listen, knowing it's important.

"I'll let you drive, but you gotta pay attention."

I bounce on his thighs, bumping my head gently on the roof of the car, enjoying the muffled sound it makes, the tingle along my skull. He chuckles, releasing the handbrake. My hands lock at the top of the wheel while his hover near my waist, thumb and forefinger notched at the bottom, casually suggesting the direction of the car.

I remember the weight of the machine around me. The way the world opened to our motion, changing shape as we passed. The sunlight flickering along the windshield, the canopy of trees gliding by in reflection: green and yellow, blue, then green again. The sense of momentum, of flying, with my Uncle's hands applying just enough pressure that everything felt dangerous, but not too dangerous.

Later that day, or the next day, or another year, I'm in the kitchen with Grammy Jane. She's made a grilled cheese sandwich for me and I'm sitting at her sturdy oak table, straightening the sandwich on the plate after every bite, the buttery crumbs sticking to my fingers and my glass of milk when I replace it by the plate. She's as sturdy as a post, planted at the kitchen sink, peering into the backyard, washing a spatula. It's spring, I think, because it seems warm and the windows are cast in green. The light is high; sweeping past Grammy

Jane from the back yard, filling the room around us.

She turns to me as if I've called her name. Her light blue eyes are deep-set and clear and she's wiping her hands on her apron. My legs are dangling over the edge of the chair above the floor. I pick up my sandwich for another bite and she says, "You are my darling boy."

Her glow passes through me. I remember kicking my legs out in the chair, rocking back and forth, looking toward her and taking another bite. I come into my body, filling it to bursting, something inside growing large to push against the very boundaries of skin. I kick my legs out, bouncing, and the chair rocks leg to leg on the linoleum floor. I chew my sandwich.

And, one night, not so very long ago: it's two in the morning and Lynn thinks I'm asleep. She turns her body toward me in the bed. I can make out the glow of the clock over her shoulder, the numbers blue white and persistent, and the nest of her hair tousled by sleep. She rests on one arm, her loose hand pausing at the smoothed sheet an inch from my chest before touching me cautiously. She says, "I love you, Sam Lightner. You are the person I love in this world." Her sleep-stained breath glances my forehead, her warmth soaking me beneath the shell of the blanket. She stares at me for perhaps five minutes, and I don't dare move, then she kisses me lightly on the forehead so as not to wake me and turns away, sinking into sleep.

Grammy Jane tucks me into the spare bed at her house. I stayed for weeks that summer because they said mother was sick and needed quiet, and dad was away. Grammy Jane sits on the side of the bed. The room is dark but the door is open and the hall light is on, so a wedge of light spills by the bedposts, draping her lap. She's told me a story of her childhood, of looking for a missing calf with her father, of holding his hand as they made their way down to the creek and feeling his pulse quicken along her fingertips when they heard the first plaintive bellow of the animal, of the way he tossed the calf around his neck, pinning its legs to both sides of his chest. They walked home like that, she bumping close beside him, he with the calf on his shoulders; the animal quiet now, found. She'd been proud of him, proud of his strength, his intelligence and compassion, and the pride came through in her story about a man I never knew.

After the story she sits silently for a time, remembering him perhaps, holding his presence vital within her. She turns toward me. My eyelids are heavy, my limbs melting into the clothesline smell of her sheets. I'm squirming in the bed, too exhausted to be sleepy, too stubborn to be quiet. Grammy Jane starts to talk again, only it doesn't seem she's talking to me, but to herself, or another figure in the room just beyond my vision. Her voice is low, more of a hum or a song. She talks about things I don't understand, but it doesn't matter; it's the slow intimacy of the moment that settles over me. Her fingers sweep the hair from my eyes and stroke my forehead; her fingers large and rough with work, smelling of flour and lemon and starch. I curl my body around hers on the bed, nestling into her back, and drift into the seat, behind the wheel, allowing something precious to fade and peering after it into a darkness.

All the time feeling I'm constantly looking in the wrong direction; as if I have a story I'll never understand, apocryphal memories which refuse to cohere into narrative. They chart the features of another kind of history unfolding in the shadows, glimpsed but never clear. And what I remember is what I remember, whether it happened or not.

I turn the key and the headlights click off, leaving me with only the night. I pull them from the ignition and place them on the passenger seat, tenting my hand above them. The car settles itself to rest around me.

Lynn would be standing in the kitchen now, making a cup of tea, and the cat would be curling around her leg as he always did when she came to rest by the stove. She'd be staring off to the left, not quite toward the window. She'd pull the teapot from the flame just before it began to whistle, twining her fingers around the cup as soon as she deposited the teabag. She'd spiral into the armchair around her cup and the cat would settle into her lap.

Or, she might be coiled and seething, waiting for the sound of the turning lock to pounce with a harbored rage.

Or, she'd be propped in bed on four pillows, the comforter at her waist, book resting on her knees. Her cup would steam on the bedside table. Her glasses would be partway down her nose, her hair pulled back with a clip, two buttons of her pajama shirt unbuttoned, revealing just enough skin that I might stop when I enter the room and she might peer over the top of her glasses in my direction, the slightest smile curling at her lip.

I pull up the pictures as if they are snapshots in an album, or scenes where I linger just above the room. They're dream images in which I watch myself. I pull them up. I let them go.

She died before I could get there. She'd managed to reach the phone, managed to call 911 and me, at home in my pajamas in front of the TV while her car lay crumpled and upside down in a shallow ravine. She'd managed to stay alive until the EMT's arrived. But, she died waiting for them to cut the metal skin of the car away from her.

I stand in the wet, black grass, my slippers soaked, my raincoat whipping around my pajama pants. The night shudders pulses of blue and red, strobing the branches in the trees, the landscape unsure of its shape. The gash in the bank, the gnarled car. Voices run past in both directions, shouting, dragging themselves up and down the hill.

I drop to sit in the grass, eyes sliding over the blurred picture, returning to the car door and her limp hand then sliding away to the blinking trees and back to the car door, the EMT leaning in through the shattered windshield, pushing at the door inside with all his might, and I only know I'm alive by the weight of my body on the grass, the pulsing grind of the night around me, the hand of gravity forcing me farther downward, hard and unrelenting.

I have not moved her book from the bedside table. I keep her clothes, folded in the drawers. And now and then, in the morning at breakfast or late at night, I turn the phone in my hand

for a moment or two before playing one of the last messages she left me. It's unremarkable. It's the one where she says: "I'll be home in an hour or so. I'll stop and pick up a few things for dinner." It's the one where she adds the casual "love you" in that tone we use when we feel something is commonplace and accepted.

I sit in the car, hands resting at the top of the wheel. I don't want to see the light in the curtained windows, the shrubs along the walk rustling in the breeze. I don't want to look. But I do. I stare through the fogging windshield toward the amber glow hanging in the living room drapes and the porch light Lynn had switched on eight months ago when I stormed from the house. I haven't turned it off.

Now and then, when I climb into the car in the morning, I catch the scent of her, present for only an instant. Then, it's lost.

But it's enough. Enough to winnow some tiny pocket within me which allows breath. Enough to remember the laugh she saved for me, the silken lull just below her armpit, her hand finding mine across a table. Enough to remember the nights I fell asleep wrapped in the language of her body.

I've been driving for hours, going nowhere, passing the same familiar stops and landmarks of our history. The car warm now, comforting now, within the sea of night. I'd like to fold into the seat and sleep.

I close my eyes and Grammy Jane sits in the near dark at the head of my bed, stroking my hair in silence. The weeks at home before, the shouts and broken dishes, slide away. Her silence is a comfort. It contains.

I'd asked about Grandpa, what had happened to Grandpa. Curled within the cocoon of the sheets, it's hard for me to distinguish the music of her silence from her voice. Suddenly she's purring near me, her words low and calm as honey. She's whispering, as if I might remember some phrase or another thirty two years later. There's music in her voice and it seems I don't hear words at all but a kind of slow and even exhalation. She'd been talking about Grandpa and now she was talking about something else. She tells me, "Praying is a way of knowing something, I guess. A way of saying something." Her hand, wide and warm, rests on my shoulder, as other hands would. "It's a way of being, when there ain't nothin else."

I get out of the car, closing the door softly behind me as if afraid of awakening someone. It's two in the morning and the neighborhood is still, the houses lined blankly on both sides. The road is black and empty. I take two steps from the car and find it's as far as I can go.

I'm looking up, directly into the giant pool of the sky. It's dark and cold, the kind of cold which slips its own crystal tone into the air. The stars are rippling their pasts in my direction, and somewhere there, far into the darkness above me and nearly unnoticeable, there's a sudden note of stillness. It's a stillness which allows the planet to stop.

Lynn's presence pours into me in a jolt with the chaos of weather. It's a great roar, fully present at once, a thing my body can't contain. She turns to me from the edge of the water, our eyes catch and she smiles. A hint of a smile, a ghost of a smile. Lynn says something to me. It doesn't matter what. I take the form her voice allows.

Michelle McMillan-Holifield

CHOREOGRAPHY

“You have to love dancing to stick to it. It gives you nothing back . . . It is not for unsteady souls.”
Merce Cunningham, Dancer and Choreographer

Let go of the routine. When you follow the same steps for thirty years, your feet and hands dance before you're even out of bed. Your body bemoans. Your mind has already made it down the street, around the corner. You bend, lift, swing to the melodious sputter of song. Low chamber-rolls like drums: rumble, tumble, idle.

Think of the occasional wave. Your arm lifting in response. You continue to wave until the stranger is obscured by the spill (so fresh, unexpected) of tears darkening your shoes. So deeply will you miss those small gestures that you might even love that stranger without restraint.

If someone asks what you enjoyed most, swagger, come to rest on your strong leg, tell them this: the plosive joggle of the garbage truck, the cadence of the engine, its muddle-noise. The bobble route, the nomadic shimmy of bend, pick up, release. The daybreak, the dusk, and all the mix in between.

Patty Somlo

BEFORE EVERYTHING CHANGED

The tide went out along the Longport Peninsula six short minutes after seven a.m. If anyone had been on the beach, they would have noticed a faint mauve glow in the shape of a curled ribbon, weaving across the retreating water. Damp shallow puddles darkened the sand. According to the tables, with their vertical columns of numbers and times, so small even young people needed magnifying glasses to read them, the tide was expected to return that afternoon at four o'clock.

The afternoon turned out glorious, with hours of sunshine and barely any wind. Normally, that finger of land on the southern edge of Washington State was a soggy place. It had separated from the mainland thousands or even millions of years ago, leaving a bay to bubble past, lapping against its former shore. The highest point, a third of the way down, where acres of Douglas fir and Sitka Spruce formed a constantly dripping canopy, received an annual soaking of nearly one hundred inches of rain. On the occasional days when the sun peeked out, locals said it was a gift from God.

A few minutes after four o'clock, Katie Larson decided to take advantage of the weather, knowing it would be dark by six or thereabouts. An artist, Katie photographed the ocean, mountains, lakes and rivers, and fields of wildflowers, then covered painted canvases, using the prints for reference. She liked to venture out moments before sunrise or close to dusk. Even though she had painted scores of canvases, trying to capture the light as it first fell or was fading, Katie still felt she hadn't managed to capture the beauty that she saw. After taking photos today, she would try again.

She had lived in the pale blue, batten and board-sided cottage going on seven years. When asked what had brought her to live on the Longport Peninsula, where Sand Street dead-ended feet from a path through the dunes, Katie said the city had gotten too crowded, noisy and expensive. Like many of the people who made their permanent homes there, Katie loved the area's quiet wildness. Because of the weather and the distance from major cities, the Longport Peninsula was one of the least populated areas on the West Coast. The population was an odd mix, of longtime locals who fished for salmon and crabbed or ran small businesses; fugitives from the law, squatting in moss-covered trailers at the peninsula's windswept end; and artists.

Even in the rain, Katie took her beach walks. The only time weather kept her inside was during the fiercest winter storms, when wind gusts reached seventy to eighty miles an hour. On those days, she got the pellet stove going and made sure flashlights and candles were arranged atop the coffee table, for when the power went out.

She didn't pay attention to tide tables. So on this day, as on every other, she wasn't aware that the tide should have rolled back in by four. As soon as she left the pathway framed by the grass-covered dunes and the beach and water came into view, Katie sensed that something was wrong. She stood for a moment at the base of the dunes, looking around. Her first instinct was to check the sky, assuming clouds had rolled in, as they often did on a clear day up that point. But the sky remained cloudless.

Shaking her head, Katie walked toward the water. The going was slow, the sand deep, loose and dry. She silently scolded herself. There is nothing wrong, she whispered. But something looked different; she couldn't figure out what. The beach was wide but today seemed even wider.

The tide must be out, she thought, and that made Katie smile. She loved when the waves retreated, leaving fat wet puddles that caught the light and reflected clouds back to the sky. Also, this brought the sandpipers out, pecking madly at the sand, then scurrying away when the waves washed back.

Katie walked closer to where the dry sand turned damp. Yes, she could see the tide was out. But had she ever noticed it out this far? Damp sand stretched from the beach a good ten or fifteen yards. If she dared, Katie could walk a long way and still not wet the hem of her pants.

Tsunami, Katie thought, and hurried backwards, her eyes focused on the water. This is what happens before the water comes roaring in, drowning everything for miles. She turned and ran toward the path. The sand was deep and soft. As hard as she pumped her legs and arms, she felt stuck, as if she weren't getting anywhere.

A tsunami would swamp her small, one-story home. It would flood the entire road, all the way to the two-lane highway.

Her mind started darting in several directions at once. What should she take, who could she call, which way ought she to drive? Questions crashed into one another without a response. The beach was one of the longest anywhere. The wave would devour the entire peninsula. She needed to drive to the park, the only place high enough to survive.

Even as Katie hurried through the cottage, grabbing insurance policies and filling a nylon duffle bag with clothes, she listened for what she assumed would be a terrifying roar, when the fantastic wave came barreling onto the coast. All she heard, though, was the familiar faint whoosh the waves normally made, a neighbor's barking dog, and a few birds calling. It took less than ten minutes to pack the car. As soon as she hit the main road, Katie dialed 911.

The dispatcher repeated back what she thought Katie had said.

“The tide is out too far. You think we might be about to get a tsunami.”

Neither Katie nor the dispatcher mentioned anything about an earthquake, the phenomenon that usually preceded a devastating tsunami. She listened for the sound of sirens, signaling that the tsunami warning system installed ten years before had been activated. But no such sounds entered the car, even though Katie had opened the driver’s side window.

Entering the main town of Longport fifteen minutes after leaving the cottage, she anxiously looked around. It appeared like any other late afternoon, mid-week in the offseason. A few cars were parked on both sides of the road. One couple strolled down the west sidewalk, eating ice cream from large tan cones, stopping to look in the window of a shop with colorful kites hanging overhead.

Katie pulled into the parking lot of the small police station. She race-walked to the front door and yanked it open. Her throat dry, when she tried to speak, nothing came out. The second time, she got three words out.

“I just called,” she croaked.

“Yes,” the woman at the reception desk responded, urging her to go on.

“About the tide.”

The earthquake monitoring system hadn’t picked up even a whisper of seismic activity off the coast, Jim Kirkpatrick, who ran the peninsula’s five-officer police force, informed Katie.

“Someone should at least have a look,” Katie said, as she realized the police chief thought she was crazy or making the entire thing up.

“I’m taking a ride,” Chief Kirkpatrick informed the receptionist, before following Katie outside.

“You can show me what you saw,” he said to Katie.

In the offseason, it was legal to drive on the beach. Deep furrows in the sand, starting a few feet beyond the white wooden sign in the shape of a half-moon that announced WELCOME TO LONGPORT in large red letters, indicated that numerous drivers had preceded Katie and the chief there. Just as by the cottage, the beach was wide. The chief kept the police car in the furrows, so as not to get stuck in the sand.

Katie held her breath, as the car edged closer to the water. After driving west, straight toward the ocean, the chief turned left, following the furrows south. He drove several feet and looked out toward the horizon. The water seemed awfully far away, he thought.

He stopped the car, turned to his passenger and said, “Why don’t we get out and take a look?”

Kirkpatrick opened the driver’s side door, stepped from the car, and walked past the hood, his elbows crooked, hands poised above and to the right and left of his belt. At first, he thought the problem was the lateness of the day. The sun had set moments before. In places, the water was still shaded mauve, but dark in others. He had to admit, though, the start of the ocean was very far away.

He didn’t want to say this out loud, though, at least not until he’d had a chance to study and ponder the situation a bit longer.

“Oh, my God,” Katie said.

“What?” the chief asked.

“The tide’s even farther out than before.”

Not only in Longport, but across the United States, in Europe, on the African continent, and in Asia, people had known for a while that something was wrong, at least when it came to the weather. What had once been considered normal could no longer be expected. The surprising part was that the shift seemed to have occurred almost overnight.

Once people on the Longport Peninsula noticed that each day the tide retreated farther out to sea and returned a little less close to the beach, their thoughts quickly shifted from shock and surprise to acceptance. A small number of residents assumed, though nothing had been proven yet, that the disappearing tide was another manifestation of the environmental destruction humankind had been causing for generations. The majority of residents, though, viewed the change more fatalistically. People, they argued, had nothing to do with this. It was God’s will, some said, a punishment for sinning. One group believed it signaled that the end times were near.

Scientists from the University of Washington drove down to try and determine the cause and the effect it might have on everything, from fish and shellfish to shorebirds and marine mammals, and to the weather. The tidal alterations were puzzling for several reasons. First, while scientists had accurately predicted certain changes in the weather and effects on animals resulting from a warming planet, they hadn’t imagined anything happening to the tides. Even more puzzling was the fact that the rest of the West Coast had not been affected. Other sections of the Washington Coast were fine. Only the tides that moved back and forth along the Longport Peninsula had changed.

Katie felt too afraid to take her almost daily beach walks. She was plagued with insomnia, as she worried that at some point the tide would come rushing back in, a wave of such force, speed and magnitude, it would swamp the cottage, her tiny dead-end street, and even the main route to town.

Those first frightening days and weeks soon stretched into months. Nothing changed. The abnormal became commonplace. Tide tables were reprinted, until oceanographers realized that the tide was receding a bit more every week. They decided to simply post the new times daily on the Internet.

Six weeks after Katie first noticed the altered tide, she overcame her fear and headed to the beach. The sun hovered low on the horizon. The tide had retreated so far, she could barely see where the water started.

It was beautiful, of course, the damp sand saturated dark pink, as far as Katie could see. Reflections of clouds and even bits of blue sky were caught on the surface. An entirely new landscape had emerged, one that Katie hadn't ever painted. Wondrous, really, even though she felt a gaping empty sorrow in the pit of her stomach, at what had been lost, maybe forever.

Rumors of frightening occurrences began flying around the peninsula, from the Beach Market in Salmon City to Hal's Tavern in the heart of Longport, to Ocean Elementary, a mile north of the boat harbor. The small black bears that lived in the pine forests had started roaming the beach, it was whispered, packs of them, even in the middle of the day. Thousands of crabs were coming ashore and dying, abandoned by the retreating waves.

Up and down that narrow spit of land, people began complaining of frequent and sometimes excruciating headaches, stomach pains, and occasional vomiting. Women experienced overwhelming bouts of sadness, bursting into tears at the slightest provocation. For the first time in the seven years Katie had lived on the peninsula, she started to be plagued by a haunting, stifling loneliness. Having treasured her time alone – the solitary walks, painting, reading, working in the garden, or sitting in front of the pellet stove – Katie now faced a daily dark, yawning emptiness every morning she needed to escape. She wasn't aware that other people on the peninsula were experiencing the same feeling. Not sure what to do, Katie gravitated toward town, to any place she might encounter someone with whom she could just talk.

Instead of eating breakfast alone in her tiny kitchen — a bowl of cold cereal, banana, a cup of dark French Roast coffee and a novel propped up against the carton of one percent milk — Katie drove into Longport. She grabbed a vacant stool at the counter in the Coast Bakery and ordered a currant scone and coffee.

No matter who joined Katie on the neighboring stools, the topic of conversation hardly varied. All anyone could talk about was the tide.

Soon, however, another subject came up. The more Katie went out, to the bookstore, the pub, the tavern, or the market, this became what everyone wanted to discuss. They yearned to reminisce about the way life on the peninsula used to be, in the years before everything changed.

The old timers grew the most nostalgic. The salmon, they would say, gazing off into the distance and sighing.

Katie listened to the women who had worked in the canneries.

“It was such hard work,” a woman named Lois said one stormy morning. “We stood in a foot of water all day.”

But she went on to tell Katie how the women all became friends, that they celebrated each other’s birthdays, and decorated the cannery for Christmas, Easter and Thanksgiving. Katie heard about the days when salmon was plentiful, and a man could make a good living from fishing, enough to support a large family. She was told about the cannery workers’ union, the strikes that were won, about good wages and benefits. She learned how friendly people were back then, that if someone had a problem, all the neighbors pitched in to help. There was talk of the weather. How it rained much more then, and the summers weren’t as hot. Then, people moved on to what everything cost.

“Not like now,” a crusty old fisherman named Harold said to Katie one night, as they perched on tall stools at Hal’s Tavern. “In them days, we was free. ‘Cause nothin’ cost so much.”

He told her about times he and his family and their friends camped out at the tip of the peninsula. They’d fish during the day and sit around a big campfire at night. Tell stories, eat the grilled fish they had caught, sing sea shanties.

“Life was simple,” he explained. “We didn’t need so much stuff.”

It was as if the tide, in retreating farther and farther out and refusing to come back in, as close as it had been before, reminded people of everything they had lost. If asked, the older men and women, and even some of the younger people, might have said that they knew their world had shifted before this seismic event. But for some reason they couldn’t explain, what had happened with the tide gave them permission to speak about the pain and disappointment they’d mostly been keeping to themselves.

Six months and one week after Katie first alerted the police department to the strange and far too distant tide, one scientist’s measurement gauge showed that the tide had begun to inch closer to shore. The morning had dawned cloudy, with a bruised charcoal sky hovering low.

As the tide crept toward shore, it picked up sand and small shells, turning the water the color of mud. Each time the waves rose and fell, the salt-filled, sandy water let out a long, low sigh.

What began slowly picked up speed as the morning went on. By noon, the tide had surged, rushing up the beach to the narrow path, leading through the dunes to Katie’s dead-end road.

Katie headed to the garage after lunch, where she started a new painting. She prepared the blank raw canvas by brushing white paint across with a wide, black-bristled brush. Around three o'clock, she thought she heard a gurgling sound, on the other side of the garage door. Dark clouds had been threatening a storm all morning. She assumed rain had begun to fall, and didn't bother to look outside.

About a half-hour later, she decided to return to the house. When she stepped out the side door of the garage, water that had accumulated on the driveway licked her ankles.

At first, she thought rain had caused the street to flood. But wading across the driveway, she witnessed what she'd feared. Water was pouring onto the street from the path to the beach.

This time, Katie didn't need to pack the car. She had kept her important papers and several changes of clothes locked in the trunk. All she retrieved from the house was her purse and two bananas.

When she reached the main road, she saw a line of cars, stretching as far as she could see toward Longport. As she got closer to town, she began to spot tan military Humvees heading in the opposite direction.

Not knowing where she ought to go, Katie followed the traffic as it inched toward Longport and then through town, where the water had risen to the level of the sidewalks. She drove past the hospital and the high school and beyond the boat harbor, to where the ocean terminated at the river. Here, at least, the road wasn't under water. She kept following the other drivers as they headed for the bridge.

When she reached the Oregon side of the river, she saw that the traffic was being diverted from the main street by two police officers. She kept following the other cars, not having any idea where she was headed. In her entire life up to this point, Katie had never been a victim of anything. She had seen them on TV, men and women in tears who'd just lost their homes and everything they'd owned, in a tornado, hurricane or fire. She couldn't imagine how that might feel but was just now beginning to find out. Numb, she would have said, if anyone asked. I feel numb.

Sometime during the night, while Katie lay awake on a cot, in the shelter set up by the Red Cross, the little blue batten-and-board cottage was lifted up. Helicopters hovered overhead, the thup-thup of the blades the only sound for miles. The cottage came easily off its foundation and then began to float.

Waves surged, with water gushing farther and farther inland, then sucking out. With each outward thrust, the cottage and pine trees, boards from fences, televisions, washing machines, dressers, and kitchen chairs sailed toward the horizon.

A blanket of fog draped low over the water as the day emerged. The governor appeared on

the morning news, along with aerial shots of the devastation. The news anchors on different stations read the same copy that claimed this was a once-in-a-lifetime event. Katie and the other refugees at the shelter knew they would see floods like this again.

Three months later, on a remote Pacific Island, a small blue cottage washed up on the beach. An old man hurried across the sand to find his four grandsons.

The boys carried the surprisingly intact structure to the two-acre plot the old man had lived on since his birth. He moved his favorite rocking chair inside and set it in front of the large living room window. That evening, he could be found rocking and smiling, as he watched the sun set over the water from the comfort of his new home.

Jim Weitz

KITCHEN MIDDEN

THE bag that hung on the wall contained the old man's leftover thoughts. They were mostly questions. From time to time, the bag spoke in very faint whispers. But long ago, the old man had decided not to listen.

When it first began, the whispers seemed to come from nowhere. The old man would pace his room for their source, stopping to press his ear to the wall, to look under pillows and chairs and behind pictures. The murmurs faded into and out of existence like the buzz of attacking mosquitos that vanish into the air. Then one day, he noticed the bag. His frail arms lifted it off its hook and brought it slowly to his ear. After a moment, he jolted back, sat down and stared a long while. When he was young, he had dutifully ignored his wild thoughts. But in the back of his mind, curiosity and love still stalked him like willful misbehaving children—laughing from behind closed doors, peering at him through windows and from the rotting rafters of his home. The bag had asked: Where is your family? Do feelings die if we can't share our thoughts?

Now the old man, whose name was Li Desheng, had a visitor, a stranger actually. The two had run into each other that afternoon at the annual week-long market for traditional Chinese medicine, art and wares which drew tens of thousands of people from hundreds of miles around. So many vendors came each spring that after the snows melted into streams, 200 meters of trails needed to be widened up the shallow mountain slopes to make room for their stalls. The vendors were blasting their pitches into tired old faces and spellbound youthful eyes when Desheng felt someone tugging on his sleeve. He turned to see an elderly man looking at him sullenly. Desheng recalled from previous years a couple brief encounters in which the same man had lacked a certain generosity of spirit, as when he saw him ignore a crying child who had become separated from her parents. This time, without even saying 'hello', the stranger began sounding off about the high prices of the medicinal mixes, wondering how they had risen year after year to the point where they were now mostly out of his price range. The bear bile, the five alcohol poison (snake, scorpion, spider, frog and plants), and the ling zhi mushroom were all up at least 50 percent. Desheng suggested he could find many of these things for free in the mountains. But the stranger dismissed the idea. Foraging in the wild was not civilized.

Desheng observed that the wood sculptures were not of the same quality as in years past.

The stranger shrugged. Though Desheng wasn't sure about the depth of the man's knowledge of all things Chinese, he had at least found someone to talk with. It was in fact so unusual for someone to have a conversation with him that he extended an invitation to the man to come to his home to drink some sun-dried brown-leaf pu'er tea. The two of them went to Desheng's house, and in the large main room that made up both the kitchen and dining room, Desheng and the stranger talked for a long time. But the stranger was longwinded, Desheng grew tired of his voice, and indeed, not being accustomed to visitors in the first place, completely forgot he had one and fell asleep.

When he woke, the sun had set and twilight filled the room. With his poor eyesight, he could only just make out the hand-painted blue and white porcelain vase on the table that had belonged to his wife, or the pictures on the wall of his mother, grandparents, brothers, and children. Even his collection of poetry books and some pieces of furniture were barely there. Only in his mind's eye could he clearly see the room: spacious, but cluttered with antiques his wife had collected while she was alive, relics from his own life, and a few heirlooms from his ancestors.

He heard breathing. The form of a man was outlined against the opposite wall. He recalled the afternoon in the market and realized that the stranger had not left. When Desheng began to speak, his voice left his mouth sweet and slow, like sap from an old huà tree.

"I am old and doze easily," he said, politely making an excuse for his guest.

"Really?" replied the stranger. "But I think you're my age. When I first saw you in the market, I said, 'there he is, a man exactly my own age. We could be twins! I must talk to him!' No, you are just a little tired my old friend."

Desheng grimaced. "I am as old as the wind that howls at the cellar doors, but that must find someplace else to howl, because a lonely old hound that nobody wants, and that is not allowed out because it farts too much, thinks it has found a friend in me and starts to howl back."

The stranger scratched his beard pensively. After a moment, he leaned forward and spoke again: "You are like a beautiful ancient lake on a sunny day, full of colorful fish and laughing children, with chirping birds on the branches of the willows along its banks..."

"How delightful," said Desheng, beginning to smile.

"...under which a sinkhole opens," continued the stranger, "leaving an empty crater with a government official waiting at the bottom to sing karaoke with you all night." The stranger grinned.

"He might make better company." Desheng frowned again.

There was a whisper too soft to hear.

“What was that?” asked the stranger, sitting up straight.

“I didn’t hear anything,” Desheng lied.

“I’m sure I heard something. Is there anyone else here?”

“No.”

The two men sat among the odds and ends that cluttered the room: pots and pans, chopsticks, sifters, tea, tea whisks, small bottles of home remedies and medicinal powders. The last light of day drifted into the room.

Desheng heard another whisper, then jumped up from his chair.

“What are you doing?” asked the stranger.

“I have to pack,” said Desheng. “I must see someone.”

“You are going to see someone? When was the last time someone saw you?”

“What a question!” said Desheng. “People do sometimes pay me some attention.”

“But you’re almost a non-entity.”

Desheng opened the closet door and took out an old Mao Zedong suit that had been popular in his day. He shook out some wrinkles and quickly slipped it on. Then he picked up a match.

“Now what are you doing?” asked the stranger.

“I was going to make some light.”

“But I can see fine! And don’t try to change the subject. Where could you possibly have to go?”

“To visit my daughter. I haven’t seen her in a long time.”

“Where is she?”

“In the United States, studying.”

“What is she studying?”

“My daughter is studying Chinese Painting and Art History,” Desheng said proudly.

“Why is she studying Chinese Art History in the United States?”

“She says she can paint her feelings more expressively there,” Desheng shrugged.

The stranger scoffed. “Any accepted thought can be freely expressed in China! At any rate, does she really need you? And the time and cost of such a journey—”

“I’ll stowaway on a ship,” said Desheng. “I already have the visa and dollars and her address. She lives in a place called ‘Kansas’.”

“Many young Chinese get Ph.D’s in the United States in a sensible field. Finance and Economics, for example. A strange girl your daughter.” The stranger shook his head.

“Anyway, if you leave, you might not come back. Why not just stay in China?”

Desheng waved away the idea with his hand. “She’ll graduate soon. And I should attend the ceremony.” Desheng paused. “Besides, maybe I’d like get to know her better.”

“Ah, yes, of course.” The stranger scratched himself and appeared lost in thought for a moment. “As a famously pompous American immigrant, who like you, prioritized career over family all his life, once said, ‘The great thing about family life is that it introduces you to people you’d never otherwise meet.’”

Desheng struck the match and in a sudden harrumph the stranger disappeared; the lingering light of day fell to the floor and shattered into 82 jade shards that emitted a very slight glow. Desheng stood still and squinted at the floor for a long while after the match had burned out. He picked up a broom and swept the shards into the center of his kitchen. Then he took the bag off the wall and guided the jade inside it. In the darkness, like a blind man who confidently knows every cranny of his own cluttered home, he made his way to the door and left to begin the long trip East.

Desheng took his seat on the night bus. Nobody seemed to notice. On the way he slept, occasionally waking as the bus picked up and dropped off travelers who lived far from any official stop. He sometimes tried to peer out the window, but in the darkness he could not see the farms and small towns passing by.

It took 10 hours to arrive at the coastal city. Desheng got off the bus in the center and started making his way to the port. As he passed a large university, some students were inviting tourists to come visit their art studios and perhaps buy a painting. Others were asking tourists if they would like to chat over a cup of tea. The pictures were manufactured, and the tea prices artificially high, but the students were learning to make money. They appeared not to notice the tired old man carrying his heavy bag as he passed.

After a couple hours, Desheng found the port. It covered a huge area with dozens of ships of all sizes docked for loading and unloading. The old man asked around to find out which

boat was leaving for America, but everyone was very busy and kept at their work without responding. He walked back and forth along the loading dock until he overheard two men saying that one ship was ready to depart for California. Desheng walked unobtrusively up the long gangway and set down his bag on the deck as he looked around for a place to rest. A Chinese customs official turned around and, ignoring Desheng, picked up the bag and opened it. It began murmuring. His eyes widened. He shouted to another official who rushed over to listen. The two fell into an intense discussion about whether the thoughts were legal for export. Their strident conversation attracted the attention of some PSB officers on the dock below who began arguing with the customs officials about who had jurisdiction over thoughts, generally. The officials, distracted as they were by their own mooting, did not notice as some nearby dockworkers silently shuffled away, or as Desheng picked up his bag and left to find some restful quiet.

Suspended about 10 meters above the ship's deck, Desheng saw a small orange boat with a ladder leading to it. It looked like it could hold about 30 men. Desheng climbed inside and found lots of bottled water, some strange kinds of dried food, and a few cushions – almost everything he would need. He lay down on one of the benches and fell into a deep sleep.

The trip took 10 or 12 days. Only once, on the first day, did a crewman come in, and only for a minute to quickly inspect the provisions. He was apparently too busy with his work to notice the old man. In the evenings, Desheng stared out the window. The beautiful sunsets over the western horizon made him think of home.

When the ship docked at port in California, Li climbed down the ladder to the deck, then slipped passed the sailors and down the gangway unnoticed. He entered a building and found two lines of people with two large signs hanging at the head of each one. One of them looked like this: "FOREIGNERS" and the other like this: "U.S. CITIZENS AND PERMANENT RESIDENTS". Desheng got into one of the lines and scuffed along until he arrived at a window with an immigration officer behind it. The officer looked at Desheng for a moment and said "Passport." Desheng did not respond, so the officer repeated the demand in Chinese. Desheng took out his passport and handed it over. The officer leafed through the pages for a minute and then yelled something at someone standing nearby.

Desheng turned to see another customs official only a few feet away. He motioned to Desheng to follow and led him to a windowless room with only one white table and a few green plastic chairs. He took a seat and motioned for Desheng to sit down across from him. Then he leveled his gaze on the old man.

"We're trained to recognize all types," he said brusquely in Chinese.

"What do you mean?" asked Desheng.

The officer ignored the question and began his interrogation.

"What do you do in China?"

“I’m retired.”

“What did you do before?”

“I haven’t thought about that for a long time.”

The officer narrowed his eyes. “Well, you might want to start now.”

“I think it was agriculture,” Desheng said staring back.

“You think?” The official leaned forward. His questions came rapidly while Desheng answered slowly.

“Yes. I’m quite sure it was agriculture.”

“Any international trade?”

“Oh no, not like that. My family were farmers ... yes.”

“Why did you decide to come to the United States?”

“It’s only because of my daughter. I’m going to see her graduate.” Desheng smiled pleasantly, but the cascade of questions continued.

“What is she studying?”

“Chinese Painting and Art History.”

“Where?”

“The University of Kansas.”

“Are you a member of the Chinese Communist Party?”

“My membership expired.”

“Why are you traveling so lightly for such a long trip?” The official nodded towards Desheng’s bag.

“I don’t need much.”

“What’s inside your bag?”

“Nothing really.”

“Would you open it for me, sir.”

The old man hesitated for a moment, then lifted the bag off his shoulder and onto the table. He loosened the tie, letting it fall open in the direction of the officer. The officer leaned forward for ten or fifteen seconds with his ear to the opening, then he sat up and looked at Desheng.

“Where did these come from?” he asked.

“From my home.”

“All of them?”

“Yes, are they a problem?”

The officer paused for a moment. “They’re not a problem in this country, sir. You can close it.” He pushed the bag back toward Desheng. “A lot of people wander through here lost in some way,” he said.

Desheng bowed his head, then slowly leaned forward and raised it back up: “Sometimes a silenced thought can turn into a feeling that does not remember where it came from.” The officer stamped Desheng’s passport. “Welcome to the United States, sir.”

The old man exited customs and found his way to a bus station selling tickets to all parts of the U.S. He caught a bus going eastward to Phoenix before continuing on to the heartland. The two-day trip passed quickly and before he knew it he was in Lawrence, Kansas.

It was 6 a.m. and still dark out when he arrived at the old red brick building where his daughter lived on the top floor. Desheng was unsure whether to knock. Perhaps it was too early, would he wake up the whole house? As he was considering this, he heard a voice call his name from behind. He turned around to look, but there was only darkness.

“Don’t go in, Desheng. There’s nothing for you there.” Desheng recognized the voice as that of the stranger from the market.

“You failed to dissuade me before!” Desheng shot back to the air. “What makes you think you can succeed now?”

“I only want what’s best for you and your daughter. It’s as impractical to express your ideas now as the day you first thought them. They will only leave your daughter confused. And then imagine your disappointment.”

Desheng turned around and rapped lightly on the door... It slowly creaked open. He called out, got no reply, then quietly went in and started walking up the uneven wooden stairs.

With each step the bag felt heavier and the stairs moaned as if in protest. At the fourth floor landing he came to Na's door, which was slightly ajar. He leaned forward and peered inside.

Facing away from Desheng on the far side of the room was his daughter. Her uncombed long black hair splayed chaotically across the back of her white blouse. On the right side of a very large canvas that stood on an easel in front of her, she was painting a tree with dozens of limbs branching off at different angles. The black hair against the white blouse merged with the dark limbs on the white canvas in such a way that Desheng had difficulty distinguishing the border where his daughter left off and the painting began. The tree was gigantic, but with much open space around it. She dabbed on some paint, then held the brush hesitantly before attempting another in a series of small details. Desheng drew in his breath.

"Na!" he called out. But Na was focused on her painting and gave no indication that she had heard him. From behind him came the stranger's voice again: "You see, she does not even hear you say her name. How will she hear your thoughts?" Desheng turned around again, but still saw no one.

He pushed open the door hesitantly and walked slowly across the room. As he neared his daughter, he began to make out the scene. Where the tree ended, she was painting a beautiful background of sky, mountains, and streams. He sat down on a stool a few feet behind her and watched silently for several minutes. The stranger's voice chattered on, but Desheng no longer heard. He lifted his bag off his shoulder and set it on a table next to him. It fell open and the jade spilled out throwing a strong Chinese light onto the canvas, as if the sun were already rising.

His daughter continued painting, a little faster now and with less hesitation. She finished the natural scenery, then began with scenes of buildings and people. Below the limbs of the tree she began painting a house that looked like Desheng's.

Then the bag began to whisper a rush of thoughts that had been waiting a lifetime. But the whispers were more distinct than usual. And it was not only Desheng's voice, but the voices of many others speaking along with him.

Do silenced thoughts warp our feelings? What is the self without sentiment? Are children our greatest investment in society?

As the bag spoke, Na began painting richly expressive images. Inside the bedroom of Desheng's home she painted her mother in childbirth. There was a scene of a young couple in love. Across the street from her childhood home in China was a school where some children were studying and others were playing.

If all truths are connected, does dishonesty obscure reality? If we cease to strive to understand, will we know without understanding?

The jade glowed brighter. Na painted faster and with such spirit. Outside, groups of people were in the street demonstrating, some discussing whether to hold a vote to oust corrupt officials. Still others were discussing a just punishment. Elsewhere, a speaker was giving sincere and useful advice to graduating students.

How are living and being alive different?

His daughter painted scenes with such speed now and without missing a detail. There were lots of people from his town – sometimes the same people at different points in their lives. Desheng recognized many whom he had not seen in generations. The colors came alive as the images began moving on the canvas. Emotions washed over him that he had not felt since he was young. While he watched, he thought Na had painted herself too, as a little girl back in China, in the kitchen helping her mother prepare a large dinner – a feast for all the guests in his house. She walked to the dining room and started to arrange plates and glasses on the table with great care, as if it were a very special occasion. She had on a yellow sundress he remembered she often wore when she was a girl.

Na had one last detail to add. The little girl in the sundress looked up at her father, the paint in her big black eyes stared back at him.

“Aren’t you coming to dinner daddy?” she asked.

Desheng’s chest tightened and air would not pass into his lungs. Na cocked her head and continued looking at him from the painting, as if waiting for an answer.

Desheng heard the voices of his neighbors and family. He began to relax as the familiar smells of his mother’s cooking wafted under his nose: steamed fish in chili sauce, mala chicken, tofu, pig tendons, lotus root stuffed with sticky rice, fried peanuts, sour cabbage with hot peppers, fried green beans, chicken broth soup, pumpkin bread, and his favorite dish of red braised pork.

“Sit down here, daddy. Everybody’s coming.” Na motioned for him to take a seat at the head of the table and skipped back to the kitchen to help her mother.

Desheng sat down. The table was very long, running so far that it was impossible to see to the other end. “Hello!” “Long time no see!” “Have you eaten?” “No? Then time to eat!” Another daughter came up and put her arm on his shoulder. One of his sons poured him a glass of baijiu.

People were taking their seats. His daughter had painted well. The love from his family felt like a big blue sky over a wide-open field of wild flowers.

Na ran back in excitedly. “Taste the soup!” she said.

Desheng took a taste.

“It’s delicious! You and your mother are wonderful cooks.”

Na smiled proudly. “Will you stay long this time daddy?”
The question seemed to have such a simple answer.

“Yes, Na. I think I will. I missed you.”

“We missed you too daddy.”