Crosscurrents Volume 54, Issue II
Associated Students of the University of Puget Sound
HTTP://CROSSTHECURRENT.TUMBLR.COM
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Crosscurrents would like to thank Lisa Olstein, the professors who donated their time to review our Select Works, the English Department, the Art Department, the Humanities Program, Collins Memorial Library and the Office of Admissions for making this issue possible, and Photo Services for helping out with our Art Photoshoot.

Printed and bound in Kent, Washington at Digital Print Services on FSC Certified 100% post-consumer recycled paper.

Set in Adobe Garamond Pro.
Crosscurrents
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Throughout the school year, whether student, parent, alum, faculty, or staff, we’ve been asked “What does 125 mean to you?” with regard to the celebration of Puget Sound’s 125th anniversary. Pondering this question myself at various times in the year has, unsurprisingly, resulted in varied responses. Reading through, laying-out, and editing this semester’s Crosscurrents submissions brought me to yet another answer:

One of the myriad things “125” means to me is Crosscurrents itself. Puget Sound offers us a vibrant and ever-growing community of musicians, writers, actors, visual artists, and others with which we may surround ourselves to support one another, learn, and grow. Crosscurrents endeavors to represent Puget Sound’s creative community with each issue we produce. While pages, budgets, and the very medium of magazine limit the possibility of ever truly accomplishing our goal, it is my hope that this semester’s issue offers our readers the opportunity to appreciate some of the best artists and writers Puget Sound has to offer and the promise to continue to strive towards our goal in the years to come.

Emma Wilson, Editor-in-Chief
Lisa Olstein is the author of Radio Crackling, Radio Gone, winner of the Hayden Carruth Award, and Lost Alphabet, named one of the nine best poetry books of 2009 by Library Journal. Her third collection, Little Stranger, is just out from the Port Townsend-based Copper Canyon Press. She is the recipient of a Pushcart Prize and fellowships from the Sustainable Arts Foundation, Massachusetts Cultural Council and Centrum. Her poems have appeared in many literary journals including The Nation, The Iowa Review, American Letters & Commentary, Denver Quarterly, Fairy Tale Review, Indiana Review, notnostrums, and Glitterpony. She is a contributing editor of jubilat. She cofounded and for ten years codirected the Juniper Initiative for Literary Arts & Action at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. This fall, she will join the faculty of the New Writers Project, the MFA program at the University of Texas at Austin.

Bio courtesy of: lisaolstein.com/bio_contact

Books tell us how to pierce the neck, how to open the airway of a fellow passenger with a hollow pen, how to wrestle an alligator, but not how to out-swim a bear.

There’s no out-swimming a bear. Books tell us about men on mountaintops who freeze without ever putting on the extra sweaters in their packs, who starve with food in their pockets, poor bastards, they tell us how not to be like them. We bring ourselves to very cold places so we may feel warmer when we huddle inside.

We admire the raptors that live in our city, a city we’d thought unfit for the wild, the way they soar above traffic and make nests of pylons and still manage to find trees.

We admire the way they wait for mates no one believes will ever come and the way they mate and the way they wait for a new mate when the old one suddenly is gone.
cold satellite

In the second chamber
of my fourth heart
down to the left of the third valve
is the room I keep for you
for me to think of you.
It’s where I find you drowsy,
half-asleep, half-clothed,
with your eyes half-closed.
Lace the curtains with holes
you say let me out.
This is no room at all
why don’t you mix me a fucking drink
you say or draw me a map
but all I hear is beating.
A satellite passes every three hours
and thirty-three minutes
through our night blackened sky.
It sees the world in a ribbon’s width
blindly with steel eyes
and waves that read the air
that write the air we can’t read.

the brain is an operations center

The raccoon in the good-enough woods
knows when to expect you.
The geese don’t look down
from diagramming the sky.
Suddenly the boy is scared of coyotes,
worried for his cartoon animal friends.
Your body is wired through the air to his body.
Like a sharpshooter knows to pull the trigger
between heartbeats, you can test-run
the system in your mind. There is
a blankness shame will fill, but for now
there is only one way to feel: afraid.
elegy

We see how the children cluster around the afflicted girl.

We're familiar with the way cruelty accrues cruelty.

If we kept them, all our secret diaries would read the same:

her blouse was high
and would be fun to unbutton,
	ruffle listing to the left,
to the right.

All riders dismount.
All wrecks are transformed.

Which is the first fish
to inhabit the sunken cockpit?

How long before the fuselage is
a safe haven for anemones?

To render from memory
in memory the sail of a cheek

known first as electricity
in the brain then translated

into the fine movements of fingers
is an act of love

but in this crowded portrait room
let's forbid all graven images

let's respect in this way what we love and cannot touch.
I love my teeth and worry about them lasting but in my coffin they’ll be what rise up towards you in the dark. I’ve been working out. I’m turning my natural weaknesses into my most distinctive traits.

It pleases me to give you the answer you hope to hear. I blame this on my brain, its wired systems of reward and release. All I want is a voice to talk me through the night from time to time when I wake and can’t remember the room. Shine a lantern on your troubles, the saying goes. But sometimes everywhere it is light out. Or lights out. Sometimes everywhere it is raining.

Everyone moves through it like hero-victims in a horror flick. I can’t see you, there you are.

What led you to choose Copper Canyon Press as your publisher?

I had a first manuscript, and I was trying to acquaint myself with the wide and ever-changing world of publishing opportunities for first books. I submitted it Copper Canyon’s Hayden Carruth Award, which was a little out of the norm for where I was sending, since it was a contest for first, second or third books. But, you know, I figured, “Why not try?” I was really fortunate to have my manuscript selected, and my first book came out with them in 2006. I have been counting my blessings ever since.

You have a new collection coming out, Little Stranger. If you had to choose a prominent theme or “thread” that connects the poems together, what would it be?

There’s a strong preoccupation with the meeting point within an individual of the intentions of the internal world that are pressing out from the inside and the tensions from the external world that are pressing in, that line between those two that we’re constantly navigating in our thinking, in our emotions, and in our relationships — certainly our relationships to one another, but also in our relationship to our self and our own experience and definitely in our relationship to the world around us.

I’m thinking here about what it’s like to live an emotional life in a this time and place as relates to technology, when, for instance, on one screen you can watch a “bear cam” where you get this insanely intimate look into this one random black bear’s den...
after she’s had cubs, on another screen you can be watching a robot performing surgery, and on another screen you can be watching real-time protests in which people are being killed. So, the poems are looking around at the world, but really they’re trying to navigate that experience of consciousness and the various tensions and pressures and transmutations of consciousness and thought and feeling that are very rich and very difficult at this particular time and place.

Tell us about your process.

I keep a physical notebook that I try to never be without. If I happen to be without it, then I’m scrawling on the backs of gas station receipts or whatever happens to be in my wallet. In the notebook, I write notes in long hand with pen, but pretty quickly I transfer those notes into a computer document. Usually a first draft of a new poem gets written in that document, and once it’s beginning to take shape, I’ll give it its own. It may still go through many more drafts, but it all starts in the “Notes” document. I think I do that to take a little pressure off. It feels like a way of navigating the “blank page” syndrome. Some of the notes never make it off of that document and ten years later, they’re still hanging out at the bottom.

Otherwise, it’s really varied for me. Sometimes I’m lucky and a poem gets written top-to-bottom all in one sitting with very few changes later, and other poems I slog away on for months or work on and put away and come back to a year later. That part really varies, but more and more I feel like the poems that are successful are written a little more quickly than they used to be.

Why do you think having a formal education in writing/creating is important?

I think there are a lot of different paths up the mountain. I don’t think that every “real” poet definitely goes to an MFA program or that every “real” poet definitely can only be self-taught. I think that, for me, community can matter a lot — having other people to have these conversations with — to find out what they’re reading, how they’re reading it, what they’re writing, why they’re writing — and I think that the differences that you find amongst the people in your community are as important to your development as the similarities. It’s really wonderful when you find someone like-minded or they’re a really natural reader for your work, but I know I’ve benefitted at least as much, and maybe even more, from having to be in close proximity to people who have a different opinion, or whose work I don’t automatically gravitate towards, but over time I come to understand and it broadens my sense of what’s possible and what I want to do.

Do you have any advice for aspiring writers and artists?

It’s a balancing act. Most important is really listening to your own idiosyncratic inner voice that guides you to the things that make you want to write, that speaks to the reasons you write — privilege those things above all else: things that get your poetic imagination going, things that get your sensitivity to language heightened. Whatever those things are, you need to honor them and to explore them and to feed them. And, then, at the same time, you need to remember to step outside of yourself and recognize that you’re stepping into a tradition that is really big and really long and really vibrant and diverse. You want to pick your head up and look around and see what all those different voices have to teach you.
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Bit by bit, rain, eyes
glass and glow, to decipher
one’s own secrets, how

Rolling colors, eyes,
slow, June blueberries, ripe,
under tongue and tooth

Earthen wells, sap and
warmth, fluidly absorb,
irises up spring
sundays
ava williams

My sad is ripe on Sundays.

In daylight
such nostalgia, sepia sweet,
drips from the sun
to the cars
to the street.
It is such a full day.

Later though,
it hangs heavy with despair,
cool and beseeching like
Sunday night air.
It hangs on by a thread.
I don’t sleep till I’m pitted.
My sad is ripe on Sundays.
I’ve always been terrified of spoiled milk. It’s the smell that gets me. Not that I’ve ever smelled any, but I just know it would be awful and I make it a point to spare myself any sort of discomfort. Sometimes I think the aforementioned milk issue is why I can’t live alone for any extended period of time. I need someone there to smell the milk. I did it myself once. I stood there holding it open near my face for a full fifteen minutes before I could lift it to my nose. And the whole time I could feel the cat judging me, each flick of his tail counting off the seconds of my prolonged inhibition. It smelled white. It prickled my nose; I thought I could feel it in my tongue. I tossed it anyway, just to be safe. Now, I don’t buy milk when I live alone.

Yesterday, I poured the last of the milk over my cornflakes. All that was left were the bubbles that gurgle inexplicably from the bottle’s mouth when you upend it. So, now I’m standing in the refrigerated section of the gas station down the street from my apartment. The hum of the fluorescent lights distracts me from my bi-weekly milk buying routine and I have to start again. I walk to the end of where they keep the milk and one by one I check the expiration date on each carton. I can barely feel my fingers. Next time I’ll bring gloves.

Lately, we’ve averaged about a carton every ten days. I select one
with an expiration date two weeks in the future. I think we should be safe.

I pass through the aisle with the cookies and the cleaning supplies. Two girls in big coats are stuffing Twinkies into a backpack. They can't be too much younger than me and they look clean. Maybe they do it for the rush.

When I get to the register, George is ready for me. After three years he knows my routine.

“That’ll be $1.95,” he says. “Pick a good one Mandy?” He smiles at me. There’s a bit of bread stuck in his teeth, I want to offer him some floss but I think that might seem rude.

“Yeah, I think so. You had a better selection than usual.”

George rests his hands on his belly as I pull change from my wallet. His nails are dirty and there’s a small ketchup stain on his graying t-shirt at the top of his belly. I can see the fibers pulling. Maybe next time I’ll suggest he switch to light beer.

“I’ll see you next week,” he says, tilting his head to the side a bit. He deposits the last of my nickels into the old register. “Say hi to Reggie for me.”

“Thanks.”

The bell above the door chimes as I leave. Quickly, I look up trying to gauge my height on the yellow yardstick decal next to the door.

Outside, the air is dense. The clouds are like giant bruises in the sky and I think they look heavy. The weight might soon become too much and the sky will break, sending them crashing to earth. I look for Reggie and the air clings to my skin. It’s hot and wet. Reggie isn’t anywhere I can see, but there are five Marlboro filters littered among the weeds where I left him sitting. It didn’t feel like I was inside long, but I suppose it is darker than when I went in. I figured it was just the storm.
I set the bag down and pile my hair on top of my head. My wrist tickles where the split ends brush it. A few rogue strands escape, plastered to my neck with sweat and humidity. The clouds are pressing in, and I feel claustrophobic under the open sky. I pick up the milk and hurry toward the safety of walls and a roof.

The clouds are rolling quickly now and I walk faster. A gust of chilly air blows through the trees. The leaves swoosh against the air and creak. The Mason kids are chasing each other in front of their yellow house. Evidently the boy has taken something from the girl that she wants back. The wind whips her hair and skirt around. I want to escort them inside, so they’ll be safe. But then, I don’t really know them, not even their first names so I guess that’d be inappropriate. Their mother calls them inside. I’m glad.

I am regretting my gray cutoffs and tank top. I should have anticipated this, ever running from discomfort. Somewhere in the back of my brain I know I’m being irrational, but I wish Reggie had waited out the milk expedition. He always wears a hoodie, even on hundred degree days like today used to be. I know he would have given it to me, after I asked a few times. I wonder where he is. And why he didn’t wait. And why it’s so hot and so cold. And whether the milk has already spoiled with the heat. And if I’ll beat the rain. The thoughts rattle and bump together like loose change.

Oscar is waiting for me on the front stoop. His orange tail flicks back and forth, no doubt collecting as much dirt as possible before I let him in.

“Hi bud,” I croon. He weaves his massive body around my legs while I fumble with my key in the old lock. I twist and jiggle the door attempting to find the perfect position. I should call the landlord again, add the door to my list of unacknowledged complaints. Oscar’s heavy purrs vibrate against my calves and with a final lift and push the door bangs open. The antique glass rattles as it hits the wall.

The pipes groan and clang. Reggie must be doing the dishes. He’ll know I’m coming; the bang of the door and the violent creaking of the stairs will have alerted him. There’s very little privacy here. Never seen, always heard.

Robin’s egg paint and plaster fall into my hair as I slam the door to the apartment. I release it from its sticky bun and shake the plaster out. I straighten my back and Reggie is leaning against the fridge. He’s staring at me.

“Hi,” I say. I lock and unlock the deadbolt several times. I want to be sure it’s really locked.

“So, that took a while,” says Reggie. In a single stride he reaches the table and sits carefully in one of the chairs. We try not to worsen the cracks.

“I guess,” I say. “But I think it was worth it.” I walk to the brownish fridge. I think it must’ve been white once upon a time. I’ve spent hours trying to scrub it clean over the last three years, but the dirt seems to have sunk in, clinging to the plastic at an atomic level.

“Listen Mandy,” says Reggie. “I’ve got to go.”

“Okay, I’ll see you later.” I pull the fridge open against protests from the hinges and set the milk in its usual door spot.

The chair creaks as Reggie shifts his weight. He clears his throat. I look at him and his eyes flick downward avoiding mine. He has that look. I’ve seen it before, on all the others.

“Actually, no you won’t,” he says. “I think I’m, uh, kind of done with this.” He waves his hand back and forth between us.

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“Actually, no you won’t,” he says. “I think I’m, uh, kind of done with this.” He waves his hand back and forth between us.

“Really.” I turn away from him and begin placing the now clean ceramic coffee mugs back in their correct places, marked by puckered rings in the yellow shelf paper. It was nice of him to wash the dishes before he left.
“I mean it was cool while it lasted, but all your, um, stuff stopped being cute a while ago.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I say. Raindrops pound against the windowpane. I hope it doesn’t break. I should tell the landlord about the flimsy glass.

“Sure you don’t,” Reggie says. He stands and grabs his suitcase from the corner. Its huge and red and I wonder how I missed it.

“Look, I’m not trying to be harsh. It just seems like you have some stuff to deal with.”

I stare at him for a moment. I’ll probably miss things about him, though now I can’t think of what. Maybe the sweatshirts. They were perfectly too big.

“Fine,” I say. His eyebrows pull up in surprise. I think he expected me to cry, or to ask him not to leave. But the truth is he isn’t the first and he won’t be the last. Everyone leaves me. The blow of their leaving doesn’t really land anymore. I guess he lasted longer than most, nearly six months, but still, I only feel a vague disappointment.

I walk to the bedroom and shut the door. I leave him in stunned silence. He’s so taken aback by my reaction that I sit on my bed for a full ten minutes before the door slams and his footsteps thunder away down the stairs.

Oscar is scratching at my door, his claws gliding through their pre-established pattern worn into the wood of the door. I sigh and stand. He probably wants more food. I feed him more than I should. His belly is beginning to touch the ground when he walks. He meows loudly. I’m not moving fast enough for him. I move faster, I must not disappoint my morbidly obese companion.

He attacks the food greedily. I adjust the pink tulip refrigerator magnets so they line up. The paint is chipping on some revealing the clear plastic beneath. Reggie is waiting downstairs; his red
sweatshirt is now a dark maroon. I wonder if he called a cab. He
hunches his shoulders against the rain. I should ask him to come
back inside, I think that’s what he wants because he turns and looks
up at the window. He probably thinks I still care, that I’m being
brave. But I’m not brave, I never have been. I think I must already
be over him.

I clean the whole apartment. The smell of Lysol has always been
soothing. Sharp and chemical, it engulfs me. This is my routine,
whenever someone leaves. I try to make it sparkle, but there’s a
certain dingy‑ness that never seems to go away no matter how hard
I scrub.

I wonder who I’ll cohabitate with next. It seems too cold and
quiet with just Oscar and me. I’m not sure why, but somehow the
presence of another 98.6 degrees seems to fill the cold.

Tomorrow I’ll look for someone new. It’s never too hard. There’s
a certain desperation in their eyes, a loneliness, the desire to be
needed. And I need them. Or their transient presence in my life,
if not their specific person. I’m not sure how I do it, but I’ve never
been alone for more than a month, and usually less. I’m good at
hiding my cracks until I become comfortable, and then one by
one they begin to show. Then the façade crumbles and they run
screaming. All alone I rebuild.

When I check the window, Reggie is gone. Maybe his cab
arrived or he decided to walk as soon as it became evident that he’d
never get the satisfaction of watching me beg. The rain is subsiding
and silvery droplets cling to the windowsill, illuminated by the
moonlight peeking through the dissipating clouds.

I walk to the refrigerator and remove the milk. I remove the
cap, momentarily tempted to smell the bottle’s contents. Oscar digs
his claw into my ankle. The skin tears and tears spring to my eyes. I
brush them away and tip the milk into the sink.
He’s got the car so
She does the walking
And she’s got the jitters so
She gets to talking
And he’s raising eyebrows
Just playful mocking
She tries to bite back but
You know how it goes.

So he’s got her skirt off
And next are the stockings
She’d stammer on but
His watch is tick-tocking
She tries to stop thinking
And bodies start rocking
He bites at her neck and
She curls up her toes.

It’s so nice like this
With limbs interlocking
Could almost be real
Just feeling, not talking
Then he shudders and stops
Reality’s knocking
She says “drive me home”
And he says “get to walking.”
A pit of molten lava
flows and pulses
beneath my feet.
I can’t let my
Pocahontas sandals
touch the ground
or I’ll burn to death.

Spaceship doors open on
a land of rusted soil.
I secure my helmet and
make sure my
Rugrats sneakers are
tied extra tight
before I step beyond,
the first human to
grace this new world.

I watch from a distance as
Cheerio winds his way
through sagebrush,
leaps effortlessly
over the wooden fence,
then squats,
emptying his bowels
into the neighborhood litter box.
Lentils cooked on butane stove and summer sausage, fistfuls of granola, bruised fruit and water that tastes like rusty spigot. I never felt so greedy for a meal before, nor such joy at my greed. We crouched outside the tent, we ate like dogs, licking sauce and salt from our fingers, scooping third helpings. I nursed the hunger that kneaded my tongue since we crossed pine country.

This appetite is the product of something more than exertion. Paw prints in the dirt and pausing in the cold shadows of boulders. Shrieking cicadas that we somehow slept through. I don't know why the stomach comes alive out here, but, like that burned out church we passed in Wharton with knee-high wildflowers growing between the pews and cats on the altar, those must be hints.

I wouldn't say I'm unhappy in the backseat, riding home with your head on my shoulder with our flat-tired bikes racked to the roof. In fact I said the opposite. And meant it. But don't you ever wonder where our bellies have gone when we're home, dining with our favorite people?
Selected for their strength as works of art, both in worksmanship and insight, the following pieces are explored by Puget Sound faculty to exhibit their depth and recognize their achievement.

Selected for their strength as works of art, both in worksmanship and insight, the following pieces are explored by Puget Sound faculty to exhibit their depth and recognize their achievement.

I am walking along a path that dissolves into igneous rock formations. Water pulses through the cracks, and rolls over edges into darkened pools, the bottoms of which are hidden by the opacity of sediment stirred up from yesterday’s rain.

Simbe comes here every day. His brother owns the hotel by the town’s main intersection. He says he knows the falls, and has visited them faithfully since he was a child. He is always smoking at the base where the river loses strength and becomes an estuary, eventually emptying into the sea.

He is like a water spirit. I would believe it if other people told me that I was the only one who could see him. He wears a tattered t-shirt from a thrift store that sells American clothes by the pound.

When I first met him, I coaxed the cigarette from between his fingers while he was talking and took a drag. I took without asking. I suppose this is a kind of assumed intimacy.

I had quit smoking for years, but the cigarette reawakened something in me. The pleasure was at once subtle and strong. The instant hum of nicotine loosened my frame and I felt myself open like a hibiscus toward the intense Central American sun.
The next day when I see him, I take his cigarette and finish it. He does not stop me. Instead, he casually lights another, and we sit smoking side by side. The white noise of the river causes a loud silence, scribbling over the lines. It dominates.

Smoking soon becomes a ritual for me as it settles into my routine. The cognitive dissonance the act causes offers me a welcome respite from my hypochondria; denial of my own mortality is freeing.

Smoking is sensual; in the afternoons I lay alone against mounds of coarse sand in tidepools that fill with foam and starfish. Splashes ignited by the reflection of the setting sun rise up around my legs.

Breathe in; light headed swirls tickle then release upward and outward as I exhale as slowly as possible. The smoke exits in unfurling licks the shape of flames. This feeling evaporates quickly. Soon, only the first cigarette of the day is sensual; the rest bring me up to ordinary.

The next day, Simbe tells me about a secret cove in the falls that none of the tourists know about. Past the lower falls rife with rope swings and zip lines are the upper falls. They are smaller, wilder, and less accessible. We had to sidle across ledges and hold onto roots that writhed through the dark cinnamon soil to approach them. A group of Norwegian backpackers sunning themselves on the rocks below watch as we disappear beyond the reach of the footpath.

The cove was only big enough for two people, the entrance sealed off by a thick wall of water. I turned around and Simbe was naked. The loud television-static noise of the cascade beating the rocks swallowed my words. My voice is robbed as it evaporates from my throat, replaced by the river’s own roar.

He couldn’t hear me. No one could.

That was yesterday. Today when he sees me at the estuary, he takes off his knapsack, flicks his cigarette and disappears into what looks like a shallow puddle but must be one of the many secret sinkhole pools only he knows about. He did it for the effect, a glib magic trick.

I unzip the side pocket of his knapsack and find his cigarettes; a full pack. I take them and disappear into the foliage before he resurfaces.

When I think of Simbe, I turn cold. When I talk about Simbe, it is with words that feel numb on my lips.

My face is pressed against the window of the airplane, and I watch Costa Rica and myself vanish beneath the cloud cover below. I am lost; I am an imposter. Others feel this too. I am not allowed to return to the falls ever again, they tell me.

The truth is that I never left.

A year later, I am aboard a research vessel in the Atlantic.
One of the first tasks I am given is to filet a large tuna. A long-time vegan, this is an especially violent act for me. I have to hoist her, club her, hold her expressionless face firmly in my hand as I snap the spinal cord through the gill with my knife.

I tickle her spine with the blade as I remove her flesh; nerves that are still attached dispatch volts that cause her to twitch. I throw the cleaned filets in a Tupperware container then hose the deck, throwing the spine, guts and head back into the waves as chum for the sharks.

“You should have kept the ovaries,” said the captain. “In my country, they’re a delicacy.”

She couldn’t speak. Not words.

I whispered ‘thank you’ to her dismembered remnants before throwing them overboard; this was a ritual taught to me by the captain. Is that really enough? Is it a worthy exchange?

If she tried to speak, I couldn’t hear it. No one could.

... 

I dream of the falls every night. Compassion resides in a heart that has room for pain, not one thoroughly soaked in it.

... 

Emotional fallout is worse than the offending act itself. It is a long, slow bleed with a half-life. The original explosion destroys and cauterizes, and you walk away numb. But your soul has been amputated, and no one can recognize you anymore. It feels like they all abandon you, but the truth is you are hollow.

Forgive them.
Forgive yourself.

Empty rhetoric.

... 

This is what it looks like:

I eat the same meal every day. Soup and pudding. I think about pirates and how they would get scurvy after long voyages subsisting on nothing but rotten potatoes. I wonder if I need vitamin C. I wonder if I should eat at least something that is not brown. I wonder, and I do nothing. Grocery shopping is an insurmountable task, unscalable. I lay in bed and watch the patterns of the sun move across the ceiling, from one end to the other. I phase in and out of sleep, haunting the falls in my dreams, drinking the southern sun, breathing the electric air with my whole being. Returning constantly to what I lost.

... 

I know the punchline of this joke, and it’s cancer. It is on the edge of my cervix, threatening to creep through viney capillaries upward into the uterus, where it would then be what the doctors call “invasive.” They want to cut it away. A mutiny of cells aboard one’s body is the culmination of one’s toxic debts. They have been settling over time in layers, forming first a veiny mosaic, then a lesion, then a tumor. Sedimentary layers of tumor are a time-vault of cellular states; biopsy a piece and you see soup and pudding. Cut a little deeper and you see Marlboro Reds. Deeper yet and you see the cove. Underneath all of that is me.

Excise me. Cut me free.

...
They tell me that cervical cancer is a multifoliate problem with a variety of known causes that tend to act in tandem. Known factors that increase risk are cigarette smoking, poor nutrition, and the virus HPV, which is transmitted sexually. Depression is known to weaken the immune system, allowing an HPV infection to take hold. The cancer was a seed, nourished by toxicity, growing until it can spread seeds of its own to other organs through the currents of the lymphatic system.

My own cancer is a sprout, freshly germinated, not yet a seedling. Its twin leaves are in prayer position, angling upward.

Cancer is nature. Cancer is unblinking, unassuming, and indifferent. It is a name we give cells that eschew death; immortal growth.

My body, a soft animal, speaks in the language of cells, and cancer is its voice. The layers of cancerous tissue that have accumulated need to be answered with layers of love. Layers of self-care. Layers and layers of listening, of fine-tuning and context and offerings. The cells must be reclaimed, not cut away. To unearth this seedling is to miss the message.

Cancer demands silence.
I have chosen to remain still.
I have chosen to listen.

There is something I didn't tell you.
In my dreams I see Simbe's brother typing at his desk. Maybe typing to me. Maybe telling me that I am excommunicated from his family and his home. He clicks “send,” such a strong poison from such a subtle sting.

Behind him is a floor-to-ceiling window, and through that I can see the estuary, nestled among tangles of mangroves.

Behind that, between the upper and lower falls is a little tributary that breaks away from the river; it makes its way across the footpath, and there are three stones that function as a sort of bridge.

I never regarded the tributary as more than an inconvenience to be crossed.

In this new dream, I divert from the path, and follow the tributary. It twists and teases through fallen logs and miniature canyons. I have to leave my sandals so that I can feel my footing, gliding over pebbles, sands, and slippery beds of moss. River spiders the size of my hand watch silently, flattened against stones, blending in like secrets.

The conclusion is her face: a bright cascade, cradled by sloped granite, softened by centuries of flowing relentlessness. Cool mountain water spreads over her in a smooth glossy sheet, and I know at once that this is a place that Simbe has never seen.

I lay back against her and listen to the water’s quiet roar as if it were air passing through a throat, boulders and lush mosses shaping her thick voice like a larynx.

To hear the way I needed to be heard; I give her that.
In her groundbreaking study *The Body in Pain*, cultural critic Elaine Scarry explores the trouble, if not impossibility of articulating pain and loss. For Scarry, these experiences are beyond the realm of language. Renee Meschi’s story “Perdida” grapples honestly and thoughtfully with just this question of loss and its partner silence. Moving through memories that jostle the reader from concrete details to the more abstract thoughts that those details inspire and back again, the story taps into the powerful ways in which loss of voice, memory, and health plays on language and communication.

The story’s opening, “I am walking along a path that dissolves into igneous rock formations,” prepares the reader for the slippages between objects, metaphors, thoughts, and memories that characterize the narration that ensues. Indeed, Meschi moves her readers slowly and methodically through a series of memories and images that depend upon concrete detail, but are shaded always by the metaphorical and mystical. This sort of hybrid narration of psychological and magical realisms is difficult to achieve, but Meschi finds a good balance. In one section, the narrator articulates the gutting and filleting of a fish while on board a research vessel in the Atlantic. The details are visceral and hard: “I tickle her spine with the blade as I remove her flesh; nerves that are still attached dispatch volts that cause her to twitch.” And yet the narrator’s impossible but persistent desire to communicate with the living, then dying, then dead fish shakes the certainty that such violent and concrete details imply: “If she tried to speak, I couldn’t hear it. No one could.”

This silencing – this desire to have voice or be heard – is one that surfaces at various points in the story and is what effectively binds together the otherwise fragmentary pieces that make up the narration. Halfway through the story, we learn that the narrator has been diagnosed with cervical cancer; the silencing that resounds in the preceding vignettes suddenly take on new meaning. Too, the shifting recollections now embody a more clear longing to hold onto what is slipping away – memory, experience, and what seemed at some point to stand for life. The movements between past and present, most explicitly rendered through shifts in verb tense, echo the narrator’s lost state of mind.

There is something poetic about “Perdida,” with its morphing images and the clipped but poignant sentences that punctuate the more dreamy and cascading ones. Meschi’s onslaught of images sometimes jar against each other – but such dissonance reminds us of the silencing and de-centering of the narrator and her attempts to hold onto what she is losing. In the end, silenced but faced with a series of cascading dream images that crystallize all that preceded, the narrator chooses to listen. So should we.
the angel of america celebrates your coming out
hayley hilmes

Lumen
Age of enlightenment: 19
Heralds arrive with blonde highlights asking
for an answer over the late night white noise
in a loud crowded room – and the breeze of Yes
carries, ruffling the bright feathers of Her Steely Wings.

Phosphor
Heralds arrive in darkness draped
in Glowsticks. They say dim years are yielding to the mirror
bright halls of heaven. They are messengers come
to strew rose petals and after cracking, crown you
with their temporary chemiluminescence.
“Revelator. Exterior. A Great Honor for the friends, family.”
“I’m afraid.”
“You should be.”

Fluor
She descends
in the Pristine
white of shoelaces
under black light.

Candle
Our holiness in Motion: Dancing flame
electric feet. Wildfire fanned by the great
Beat Beat of steel bright wings then:
She-She-She crashes through your ribs and skin.

Greetings Babe.
Que la fête commence.
Hilmes's poem confidently narrates the adrenaline, excitement, and fear that so many experience when coming out. The title itself reminds us of that other rite of passage in which a teenager crosses the threshold into young adulthood – the “coming out” ceremony that Americans borrowed from the British as a way of marking a young woman’s marital (and sexual) availability. Hilmes, however, astutely identifies a new era of coming out, noting the way in which the debutante ball has faded into the distance to be replaced by a modern, edgy coming out celebration that resembles a rave, with its glowsticks, blacklights, and the background “Beat Beat” that is both the “bright wings” of the Angel and the dance music unmentioned but not unheard. Gone are the romanticized swirling ball gowns, elaborate wigs, and sparkling tiaras of the serious, yet saccharine, debutante balls – those hallmarks of tradition that pushed women into a particular brand of heteronormative femininity. Instead, we have the “Pristine white” shoelaces, “blonde highlights,” and “crowns” of “chemiluminescence” from the glowsticks that illuminate both the heralds and the space of the poem itself. This is coming out, updated for the twenty-first century.

Hilmes deftly weaves together the simultaneous strains of excitement and anxiety that emerge at any such type of ceremony, where personal doubt and indecision must resolve into a public declaration – a mere “breeze” of a “Yes” that nonetheless has the force to carry over the “late night white noise / in a loud crowded room.” The speaker’s “Yes,” however, is accompanied by a second public declaration, this time of trepidation – an acknowledgment of the fear and anxiety amidst this revelation of desire and identity. Tony Kushner’s Angel, who has shown up to attend this coronation ceremony, may honor the celebration with her attendance, but her presence is not wholly reassuring; in response to the speaker’s claim of “I’m afraid,” the Angel bluntly replies with “You should be.” Such fear, however, becomes sublimated into the adrenaline of the moment, and the poem abandons the individualized “I” and “she,” becoming instead a pluralized “our” as the Angel and the speaker join together in an ecstatic, if painful, unity. Indeed, let the party begin.
Yuri Kahan’s sculpture requires the viewer to ask, “what am I seeing, what should I see and what do I need to see?” What I see is a piece that is dealing with structural elements based not on beauty and life, but on destruction and decay. Upon closer examination of the surface unanswered questions are conjured up. I want to know what happened here and what events transpired to result in this corroded infrastructure. A feeling of loss and abandonment are evoked. With that said, an understanding of a work of art is a purely personal experience. Everyone brings his or her own worldview and sometimes the search to understand does not occur with the first exposure to artworks. The more you look, the more you read and the more you study art, the better able you are to interpret what an artist is trying to convey in his or her work of art. What could be off-putting at one point in your life, may be welcoming at a later point. I can imagine the consternation many people felt when abstract expressionism became in vogue. Yuri’s piece will require, for some, a deeper investigation into one’s own understanding of what is and isn’t art.

After over 35 years of teaching at the University of Puget Sound, Professor of Art John McCuistion is retiring at the end of this semester. An accomplished ceramic artist in his own right, McCuistion has impacted the lives of numerous art students at Puget Sound, and we thank him for his contributions and wish him the best of luck in his retirement.
Every day my house plant
tries a bit harder
to crawl out the window.

It bends
its swollen leaves –
ghostly green
and lavender –
towards the East

It yearns
for the empty
and the dry.

Meanwhile, I check the clock
and braid my hair.
I pull on my socks,
and I forget to grab laundry
quarters for the fifth time,
and I think to myself,

I wish I had a reason
to visit New Mexico.
Adrian was fourteen when he fell in love with the stars. “Look up at the sky,” Stella had said one afternoon. They were sitting in the field between their houses, idly picking wildflowers. Adrian had gathered a pile of plucked daisy petals. He asked each petal a silent question before letting it drift down by his bare feet. Six daisies later he had an even count: three she-likes-me, three she-likes-me-not, and a whole field to weigh in on the debate. Stella, meanwhile, was busy with a burgeoning collection of buttercups. She held them in a tiny bouquet and watched the sunlight bounce off their shiny petals. Her eyes reflected yellow until she turned them to the sky. “Look up,” she repeated, pointing. Adrian followed her gaze. “I don’t see anything,” he said. It wasn’t entirely true. He saw the sky, scattered with clouds; he saw the end-of-summer sun, shimmering in the heat; and he saw the moon, faint as a wink. But there wasn’t anything unusual, and Stella was always discovering the unusual. She would point things out to Adrian as they walked to school: crows squabbling over abandoned sandwiches, multicolored cars, curious people at the bus station wearing elaborate hairstyles or carrying oddly-shaped packages. Once they saw a pheasant chase a smoke-colored cat up a tree. He treasured the sights they saw, not for their novelty, but because they were Stella’s and Adrian’s alone. He remembered everything she’d shown him, and he was always turning at her call to behold another wonder. If Stella said “Look in this pond,” Adrian might find a colony of tadpoles or a two-headed fish; if she said “Look up at the sky,” he expected green clouds or an alien spacecraft or a giant dandelion in place of the sun.

But not this time. “It looks normal to me,” Adrian said, after looking as hard as he could. “It’s just the sky.” “Exactly!” Stella turned to him, her face glowing bright from the handful of buttercups she held beneath her chin. “Isn’t the sky just the most amazing thing?” “Why?” “Because it’s not real!” Adrian looked askance at her. “What are you talking about?” Stella sighed happily and flopped back onto the grass, staring up beyond the thumbnail moon. “You know how the sky isn’t really blue, and we’re just seeing a reflection of light or something, and meanwhile there’s a whole infinite universe behind it? That’s what I’m talking about. During the day all we see is just this big blue flat thing, but it’s like – it’s a mask. It’s a blanket over the planet, turning it opaque and hiding all the stars and planets out there. We can’t see them, but they’re still there, like they’re watching over us.” She fell silent and chewed thoughtfully on her bottom lip. “We can see the moon, though,” Adrian said. He brushed the daisy petals off his legs – five she-likes-me, four she-likes-me-not – and lay back with his arms behind his head. “That one’s always there. How does that fit in your metaphor?” Stella was a budding poet, and absorbed words as if through her skin. Her favorite writer was different every time Adrian asked; this week it was Frost. “The moon has its own metaphors, don’t worry. The moon is – let me think. Oh, I know: the moon is the circle of life! Especially death.” Adrian groaned playfully. “Not the circle of life again.”
“No, hear me out! It’s a valid metaphor, trust me. It’s – okay, think of it like this.” Stella wiggled her shoulders, getting comfortable in the grass, and raised her hands to gesture as she spoke. “The moon is always hanging overhead, just like how death is that possibility that’s always waiting at the end of the road. It works in cycles, where it gets bigger and fuller until it reaches its peak. Then it slowly dies out and then it’s not even there at all, just for a night. It’s pale, and cold, and it sucks all the life out of colors. You know how when you’re near death it’s called ‘the winter of your life’? The moon is the winter of the sky. It’s a symbol of ending and renewal – but the ending always has to happen for the renewal to happen too.”

Adrian sat up and swirled his fingers through the pile of petals in the grass. “You said the same kind of thing about flowers last week,” he said. A trend had begun to emerge in Stella’s speech lately: the more poetry she read, the more grandiose her ideas became, as if the ghost of every poet she read had taken roost inside of her. Adrian could almost see them, crouching in her skull and rattling the bars of her ribcage, and he was enthralled with the way she harvested their expressions. He endlessly challenged her to make up metaphors for everyday things, then sat back and listened as she picked a sprawling bouquet of words. They were far from perfect, but for him, it was enough just to hear her, and be near her. She was a planet and he was her moon, drifting on her fringes but never straying far, always coming back for another glimpse of her soft hazel eyes.

“Flowers? I did?”

“Yeah. You found a bunch of dead flowers and held them out to me, and you said, ‘Look at these flowers, Adrian. These flowers are dead, but they won’t be for long.’ So I asked what you meant, and you said, ‘Every flower has a seed, and every seed becomes a flower. It’s a perfect cycle, and the dead flowers that sink into the ground in winter rise again in the spring.’ It was a nice image, I thought,” Adrian said, trailing off awkwardly.

Stella sat up slowly, tilting her head to try and make eye contact with Adrian. He ducked away to hide the incriminating flush in his cheeks. “You have a good memory,” Stella said lightly, teasing him. “Too bad I can’t keep you around when I take math tests so you could tell me all the stuff I studied.”

Shaking his head, Adrian stumbled over his words as he rushed to hide the truth. “No, it’s not like I – I didn’t memorize what you said, not really, I just – it was a beautiful image. Even if it’s not totally right.”

“It’s not? How so?” Stella, ever curious, was quick to question. More than once she had jumped into a debate and become the most exuberant participant before realizing what the argument was about in the first place.

Adrian paused to collect himself, reflecting on Stella’s recent poetry and trying to match some of her insight. Slowly, he said, “You said they come back themselves, but that’s the part you got kind of wrong, because what grows after they’re dead isn’t them anymore. It’s a different thing entirely than what they were before, and it’s new and alive and beautiful.” He paused, then added quietly, “The thing is, I wish people could do that.”

“What?” she countered.

“You know, bring something back from the dead like that. Or – I guess it’s more like allowing something else to live. What’s so perfect about plants, I think, is that they pave the way for other things to grow. But a person dies, and they’re just gone. There’s nothing else there, and they don’t grow anything new, and they don’t bring something back. They just leave a hole. Like – I don’t know. Like a puzzle that’s just missing one piece.”
Stella smiled then, and to Adrian it was warmer and more welcome than the hot sunlight draped over his shoulders. “Adrian, you’re becoming quite the poet!” she proclaimed.

“I’ve been learning from a pretty good one,” he replied, his smile matching hers.

Stella waved a hand dismissively at him, affecting modesty. “Oh, go on,” she said, but Adrian could tell by the gleam in her eyes that she enjoyed the compliment. She lay back again, spreading her arms and legs out like a snow angel two seasons too early. “You’ve got a point, though. Everything is about cycles – just different kinds. The moon and flowers and stars and everything are connected. It’s all one big life-and-death metaphor, and it’s what every poet I’ve read is trying to answer.”

“Have you answered it yet?”

“Nope. But you’ll know when I do.”

Adrian wanted to reflect Stella’s light back so she could see how beautiful she was to him, but her gaze refracted in his. He wanted to help her find the answer to her metaphor, but he didn’t have the right words. His heart crouched on the tip of his tongue like the poets in Stella’s skull, and he wanted to let it speak. So he decided to give her something more concrete; Stella, he knew, could create words for it. He decided to give her a star.

That night, he waited for the sky to strip away its blue mask and expose the darkness beyond, then slipped out of the house. He left his parents asleep in their beds and wandered out into the field, where the earth and sky opened up to each other. Adrian stood on his tiptoes in the yawning gap between worlds, reached out into the night sky, and plucked a tiny blossom from its abundant garden. He held the blooming star close as it unfurled petal-soft rays, sparkling with life. The absent star ripped a tiny hole in the mosaic of constellations, leaving the sky a puzzle of interlocking shadows missing a single piece. Adrian ignored the hole, though it watched him like a blank eye. He left the star on Stella’s doorstep, wrapped in golden paper and tied with a wide red ribbon. *You have shown me light*, the attached note read, *so I’m returning the favor.*

She showed up at his door the next day, the radiant star in her cupped hands outshone by her smile. Adrian’s heart clamored in his chest: a hopeful confusion, a daisy-petal chorus of she-loves-me, she-loves-me-not, she-loves-me. Stella held the star up, and its light reflected off her chin like buttercups.

Matter-of-factly, Stella said, “This is the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen.”

“So are you!”

The words tumbled out before Adrian could catch them. He clapped a hand over his mouth, but it was too late: she had heard.

Stella, still holding the star, leaned up on her tiptoes and planted a kiss on Adrian’s cheek. His skin warmed under her touch, and his smile swelled until he thought it would burst. She wrapped her arms around him, and he imagined his heart going supernova, catching fire and exploding into a jubilant glow; it seeped into his bones, where it pooled like spotlights on a stage.

“That was a cheesy line,” Stella whispered into his collar, “but it’ll do. I’ll make you a poet yet.”

“Sow me as a poet,” Adrian whispered back. “Bury me in lines of verse.”

“Still cheesy, but better.” She laughed and hugged him tighter until their hearts tolled in rhythm, and the chorus became a single refrain over and over and over again: she-loves-me, she-loves-me, she-loves-me.

They went walking, hand-in-hand, and in her other hand
Stella kept the star. Its warmth dispersed into the air like dandelion seeds on the wind. By nightfall they found themselves out in the field again. It had always been their favorite place, but now it was their place, and the simple familiarity of its grassy furrows and wildflowers spoke to Adrian more clearly than the most eloquent verses. He and Stella lay on their backs and looked up at the sky, and for once let the vast image before them do all the talking.

It became an unspoken tradition: every night, just after dinner, Adrian would knock on Stella’s door, or she would show up at his. They would take hands and walk in a ring around the neighborhood. In the end they always gravitated back to the field, where they would lie down and talk about nothing, or everything. Stella eventually stopped bringing the star along, and instead kept it in a jar by her bed – but its light was always visible, echoing up through her eyes. The night became their favorite time, and their hearts rose with the moon, though Stella still glowed far brighter to Adrian. He decided, over time, that he preferred the night exactly because she shone so bright in the darkness: he could see her more clearly than in day, free from the heavy veil of sunlight. The sky, dotted with constellations like the freckles splashed across her nose, beckoned to him. It shivered with the light of tiny distant blossoms. He fixed the axis of his gaze beyond the Earth, and only drifted back with the guidance of Stella, his pole star. They kissed beneath the moon, its gaze washing them pale and clean.

They grew like bean sprouts: closer by the day, and far too quickly.

They bought a small house and a black cat and opened their windows to the sky. The stars sprouted and withered in cycles, a slow pulse that linked night to night, year to year, decade to decade. Time faded into chaff. Adrian’s shoulders grew hunched, and he had to stretch a little farther every night to reach the stars. Eventually, he couldn’t reach them at all; but he had Stella, and she had him, and they had no need to expand beyond their slowly binding roots. His hair wilted, leaving his head bald as untilled earth. Stella’s golden curls opalesced into a moonlit shroud. Her freckles tucked themselves into folding wrinkles and peeked out from between laughter lines. Their nightly walks became weekly, then monthly, then stopped. The stars glittered just out of reach. The moon hung heavy and ripe above their house, spilling seeds of silver across the worn floorboards.

Adrian came home late the night the stars returned. The light in the kitchen was still on; the single bulb over the table shone through the front window, its light stark in a sea of shadow. He paused on the sidewalk in front of the house, hands shoved deep into his pockets. Fear coiled slowly around the base of his spine. “Stella?” The word escaped unbidden from his lips and coalesced into tiny crystals of steam. The only response was silence. He burst in through the front door – rounded the corner to the kitchen – skidded on the smooth hardwood flooring – and froze. Stella lay sprawled on the floor, her head towards the sink. Her long skirt was twisted around her legs in a motionless cyclone of fabric. A shattered glass vase, flowers spilling out of its broken neck, lay just out of reach of her soft, wrinkled hands – hands he’d kissed only that morning. A thousand frightened images flashed through his head: Stella, still and gray; a grave, swampy and overgrown; himself, alone in the frozen expanse of their empty bed. Adrian’s joints creaked as he knelt beside his wife and gently picked up her hand. He planted a soft kiss on it, then curled his fingers around her wrist, looking for a sign of life – of hope. He brushed her tousled hair off her forehead, feeling the faint warmth of her skin against his.
“Stella?”

She stirred gently. “Adrian?” she mumbled. Her fingers twitched as she tried to reach for him; he closed the distance and wrapped his cold fingers around hers. “I fell,” she said simply, for once unable to find adequate words. Her lips trembled with the ghosts of unspoken phrases. “My heart – I can’t – ”

Adrian cupped her cheek in his hand and murmured, “Don’t worry, my dear. Hold on. Keep those words close, and keep breathing. Stay with me.” He rose slowly, painfully, to get the phone, his knees straining to lift his bulk. His heart alone weighed fifty pounds.

The phone lay on the counter on a throne of books. Adrian’s fingers shook as he dialed emergency, but he couldn’t tell where the arthritis ended and the shivers of fear began. He glanced back at Stella, lying perfectly still, and his throat tightened.

“Nine‑one‑one, what’s your emergency?” The voice on the line was young and bright.

“My wife has had a heart attack,” Adrian said. His voice quivered, but he spoke distinctly, giving the operator his address with painstaking patience. He turned back to Stella as soon as he hung up. With each fading moment, he more closely resembled a grotesquely‑posed statue. He whispered her name once, too quietly for the sound to breach the barrier of his lips. He whispered it again and the word floated softly to the ground, where it spread itself out in the shape of a star, the shape of his heart, the shape of an old woman whose frailty was only now peeking through the cracks.

Holding back visions of emptiness and dark, cold rooms, Adrian knelt once more by Stella’s side. He tucked a loose lock of silver hair behind her ear and felt how much warmth had already faded from her skin.

“Stella,” he said again, finally making a sound.

She mumbled something inaudible and her eyelids fluttered, but none of their light shone through. Adrian dropped his head onto her shoulder. Memories of their best days trickled through his mind. He remembered with sudden clarity a day so many – too many – years ago, when Stella had recognized the end she knew would come. Then she had just begun to bud; now she was wilting, and her time had come to step out and make way for new life. She could at last fulfill the metaphor she believed in so strongly. He realized, too, that he had been wrong: when someone died, they didn’t just disappear. Stella would leave a hole in him, only to fill another. She could complete again the puzzle of stars he had broken. The last thing Adrian wanted to do was let Stella go, but he finally understood what all of her poets had been searching for; and he couldn’t deny Stella her part in the universe she dearly loved.

Adrian kissed Stella’s cooling cheek and stepped onto the silver path laid out for him across the floor. The moon was full, its belly a soft iridescent curve in the darkness. There was no warmth in the moon’s light, but peace. Adrian reached out, feeling the too‑far stretch in every muscle as he strained for a prize he had little chance – but just enough hope – of attaining. He plucked the moon out of the night and held it close as it opened itself to him. The light flooded over the small kitchen and stripped everything down to the bones of its colors. Every surface blurred, every shadow sharpened, and Stella opened her eyes. Their brightness was petal‑soft and pale. Adrian crouched beside her, ignoring the pain in his joints, and held the moon up to her.

“It’s the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen,” Stella murmured.

With all of his old inelegance, Adrian replied, “So are you.”

Stella bestowed upon him a final, glowing smile; then she dimmed to gray. The moonlight faded politely, as if sensing it had overstepped a boundary. Color bled back into the room cloaked
in late-night hues. Adrian shivered in the sudden emptiness. Then, carefully, he pared the moon’s light from its form in paper-thin layers. He wrapped Stella in diaphanous shades of silver and tied a red shawl around her shoulders, sealed with a farewell kiss on her forehead. The constellations of her freckles had winked out, leaving a blank and wrinkled slate; even so, shrouded in moonlight, she was more beautiful than anything he could have imagined. Through the open window, the stars stretched their light into the kitchen, reaching out to Stella as she had done so many times to them. It was time for her to return to the hole she had left in the universe.

The stars quivered under her weight and Adrian crouched to lift her up to them. Their light embraced her, moonlit wrappings and all, and their warmth thawed the chill forming in Adrian’s heart. He had taken a piece of the stars; now they took a piece of him.

He walked outside to see the sky more clearly, and Stella winked down at him: a new seed in a garden of stars.
Where are all the maniacs?
Where are all the comets?
The false prophets
Who stand upon soapboxes of boxed wine
And orate with burnt out cigarettes

Where are those that favor serpents?
Where are those that favor fire?
And where are the winters?
Seems this world has forgotten hate
And with it went desire
While I was overseas, combating the North Vietnamese in the jungles of the far Orient, my aged pater familias passed away quietly, in his office chair, with a pipe still smoking in his hands, listening to the distant sounds of the riotous revelry of a generation he never understood. With his only progeny tramping the rotting jungle, his funeral was quick as it was conventionally Christian. He was buried in the cemetery on my family estate, the last of my lineage to rest in the restless American soil.

In my youth, my father and I had never overburdened ourselves with an excess of familial sympathy or closeness – my mother’s death in my early youth from a polluting infection of the heart followed by the wasting of her physical and mental faculties was sufficient to cast a stifling air of unstated expectations and affections, as if the only way we could communicate was by performing our duties with a deliberate eye to satisfying the others’ unspoken desires. We continued in this manner for most of my life, passing whole days swallowed in silence, attempting to fulfill each other’s wishes from afar and producing, when we failed, emotional outbursts whose intensity exceeded rationality.

I received a letter notifying me of the proceedings and read it in the languorous afternoon heat on the bank of the Perfume River. Rather than the drifting flower blossoms from which the river took its name, different debris wallowed listlessly in the green water, polluting the Perfume with charnel, and I read in a haze of smoke,
half narcotic and half the acrid smoke of gunpowder and napalm. Some parts of Huê were still burning, and the sky was painted in ugly black smears. I understood my loss only in terms of abstraction – an absence so vast in its implications that it seemed that I and everything else was about to be consumed in its lacking.

Later, the Oriental sun burning out in the West, we came upon the VC burial grounds – shallow graves for hundreds: foreigners, republicans, intellectuals – executed at the altar of Oriental communism and buried hurriedly during the communist retreat and the firebombing of once majestic Huê. Corpses never look so macabre as when viewed half-high in the bloody light of an Oriental evening. Shortly following this lurid discovery, still in the grips of a fierce emptiness, I was reassigned to Charlie Company of 1st Batallion, to combat the particularly fearsome 48th NLF Battalion, whose ranks seemed to consist of vicious demons and avenging specters. They fought tenaciously, so tenaciously it seemed that the jungle itself was their ally. Sometimes, when one of our platoon would fall into a cunningly constructed rope trap and spring ankle-first into the air, men would succumb to their panic and begin shouting wildly and discharging their firearms into the trunks of trees.

In mid-March, the heat seemed to boil the water in the air, and our minds were volatile. We rose one morning before light, and prepared to assault some minor villages where the VC Battalion we had been hunting was said to have gone to ground. We took our positions in the jungle, on the periphery of the small clearings swallowed by forest and waited for the artillery bombardment to end. When it ceased its pounding, we rushed into the shocked silence. I cannot, with any certainty, repeat the actions I took that day.

I can only remember seeing first an old Oriental, head snapping
around in surprise, face twisted in rage and fear, a look hanging about his eyes that mirrored exactly the emptiness that swept over me at the Perfume River, and an insanity such as alcohol or cannabis could never have produced filled me.

As another bloody sun set in the West over the impassive trees – uncaring in their malevolence – I was again in a narcotic haze, this time hard by an irrigation ditch. I approached the lip of the ditch, the stained bayonet on my rifle raising as if possessed, terror threatening to overwhelm – I peered over – horror, unknowing malevolence – there was an infernal movement.

... 

“I open the door, and it’s out in public, fighting panic,” I told him. I told him, with appeal in my eyes, that the heavy creak of my front door opening is the roar of a tiger, and I am still over there, on Orient’s shore, looking West to the fecund impenetrability of the teeming jungle – the only difference being this, the awful premonition like a fever in my breast. His response was quiet, as he passed the illicit bag across the table – “Just try to stay relaxed. The jungle is not a safe place, but it’s over there, man.” I pretended satisfaction with his response, but peace was beyond me, for I knew rationally it was not the jungle that was to be feared, but the malevolent vision it contained.

My family home was far too large for a veteran’s comfort. It had been built using money a distant ancestor had made in some gold venture, though I had been raised to be indifferent to the story, so I had never learned anything about the ancestor, or his claim. The drive swept up a bare coastal cliff into a courtyard formed by the two large wings of the house. Through the generations, the house had been renovated so many times that only the frame remained unchanged. The family’s fortunes having turned after the Second World War, my father had not bothered to update the façade, and it glared forth, limestone wrought in Art Deco filigree, which, though being quite new by architectural standards, still managed through its rushed construction to molder and give the appearance of decay.

The door to the home in which I passed the heady days of my childhood had swollen over the years – it closed with a heavy effort and loud protest, but when it was shut, it took a heavy force to expose the cavernous foyer to the light of the setting sun. Returning from the house of disrepute at which I had made my illicit purchase, I pushed mightily at the door with my shoulder, which would not budge. For a breath it felt as if the door had shut forever, that I should never enter, and I had almost resolved to break a window or burn the door down to obtain entry – but then, all of a sudden, it sprang open with a roar to admit me. I placed my VA check next to the letter of honorable discharge and a desiccated casket spray. The foyer that constituted the main entrance to my home was a large room, normally lit by a great fireplace at night and windows facing the East in the daylight. Both sources of light had been shrouded in heavy black for my father’s funeral, and, despite the ominous effect of the drapes, I refused to move them for the duration of my stay, finding the somber quality soothing to my excited nerves.

The phenomenon, which drives the events I am about to narrate, despite its incredible nature, despite its very impossibility, is entirely true. The main foyer in my home has a second floor landing running perpendicular from the door, over whose railing I was wont to look as a child with a terrified vertigo. One evening, as I prowled the shrouded halls of the manor, brain lit by the fiendish devices of alcohol and cannabis, I heard a rustle reminiscent of the humid breezes that stirred the jungle’s leaves. At first I dismissed it as a product of my stupor, but its persistence galled me, and I began to pursue it through the house. As I approached the foyer from
the East wing, it increased in sonorousness, until it seemed as if a
monsoon gale were assaulting the house. I opened the landing door
and was battered with the same stench of charnel and moisture that
had permeated the air around the Perfume River.

I approached the railing, a familiar emptiness beginning to
yawn in the back of my mind, and with each step, the heavy cloth
of the black drapes seemed more and more to undulate. I reached
the railing. Peering over, blackness throbbing in my head, I saw, in
all its grotesque grandeur – the same infernal movement – bloodied
hand stretching from a morbid pile of gore, and a voice, my father’s
crying sonorously “Do your job!”

I ran from the back door and down the drive, not stopping but
to write this epistle, and after it is deposited, I will turn and board a
plane west, across the Pacific, and find again the malevolent vision
of the far Orient!
I think about what you’re doing
Maybe sleeping—blankets, instead of my arms
Helping someone order coffee, practicing the strange gruff sounds
Walking on dusty streets, feet dirty at the end of the day
Taking pictures—of unknown women, hair wrapped with plain scarves
Of whitewashed buildings, bars on the windows, where I’ll never be.
Or eating foods foreign to me, with unpronounceable names

You’re near the mountains with the white hats—I saw the pictures.
A whole night’s sleep ahead of me
Too far for trains or cars—the sea keeping us apart
Morocco is damn lucky to have you.
I’m jealous of an entire country of people
Who get to talk to you, in your new tongue
Acrid words that I’ve never heard, or will ever understand

Maybe you’re thinking about what I’m doing
As I look up and see the bright buttons holding up the sky
In between
Her front door
And the kitchen
Stood a clock,
Towering over my five years

My grandmother clock
I called it
Passed down
From a grandfather
Who
To me
Had always been long gone

A pendulum that swung
With the enthusiasm
Of a playground play date
And a chime that was never quite in tune

With every ninety degree shift of its hands
My Mama would step outside
Press her long white cigarette against
Bright red lips
Lips that left a mark
On everything they touched

Movers came
Some years later
Carted off her clock
To storage
Or estate sales
In Pennsylvania
No one was left
To turn its key
sonnet 13 – pigment
ation
jordan cox

In the recesses of our aged love you
Create doubt – Does my devotion remain?
Often uttering that I should bid adieu
For your darkness, but let me explain.
I am partial to the incarnations of green
Mixing, as artists do, my fervor for blue
And acidic yellow, poison to my scene
Palatable for me, if you only knew
I blend and meld; a fragile alchemy
Until I can paint a complete picture
The whole of you; wonder and agony
Displayed on a canvas as my treasure.
It hurts that you doubt my sincerity
These shades of love are such a rarity.
Morning does not exist here.

We wake in dark rooms, thirsty and tangled, sand rough in the sheets, and listen to chickens scratch and the dog chewing at his fleas in the yard.

We order tall beers, fried fish and fruit for breakfast. Eating the papaya with a steak knife and chewing shrimp shells in our teeth, we play cards and smoke until the shop mama makes eyes and we know to go.
This is where people walk slow.

Whole families fit on a single bicycle, the gypsies sell weird hash and jewelry made from forks and the ex pat and his lover are honeymooning again.

Old men sit on shady stoops in dirty cotton shorts, whistling at girls and scratching their balls.

The night comes slow pushing wet bodies out of the sea and into white linen, which flashes in the dusky streets.

Cumbia plays on thick, salty air, pouring from iron gated store fronts flickering neon.

And above us thousands of pigeons sleep on telephone wires their ashy bodies looking sacred in the streetlamp light.

Meanwhile, the tide is a thief. Carrying things away so slowly no one notices they’re gone.
To: ksmith@coughtastic.com
From: jslattery@coughtastic.com
RE: Mr. Parkinson brought his tarantula collection into work.

Dear Ms. Kirkevold-Smith,

I am writing to file a complaint against Mr. Parkinson in marketing. Yesterday, when I was making a presentation to a client, I heard a faint screech coming from down the hall. At first it didn’t seem very important. I thought human resources should be able to deal with it, so I kept presenting. However, the screeches continued, causing considerable distress to the client. I myself was slightly irritated. After the interview the client failed to purchase any Coughtastic cough syrup for his pharmacy.

Mr. Parkinson is directly responsible for the loss of this sale because he brought his tarantula collection into work. His terrarium overturned, setting the tarantulas loose around the office. My coworker, Ms. Lynn, is agoraphobic. The sudden influx of tarantulas caused her to screech in a manner quite similar to that of a cat whose tail has just been stepped on. When I inquired of Mr. Parkinson why he felt it necessary to bring this collection into the workplace, he said that he was worried they recently been suffering from separation anxiety. The tarantulas have been discovered in all manner of inconvenient places i.e. the Chief Marketing Executive’s coffee pot. Boiled tarantula guts do not make for a refreshing morning beverage. In addition, Mr. Parkinson assaulted the Chief Marketing Executive with a piece of the Xerox machine. Mr. Parkinson claimed that the Xerox machine didn’t work anyway. While this is correct, it is still destruction of company property.

As justification for his actions Mr. Parkinson said that he was “avenging Biffy’s death.”

Also, these tarantulas may cause a slew of office pranks. I distinctly overheard multiple employees say that they were collecting them for use at the quarterly budget meeting. I only hope that these employees will be discreet, and any misdemeanors they commit will not reflect badly on our department – they are in no way representative of our departmental values. Please impose appropriate sanctions on Mr. Parkinson; these antics do not make for a positive working environment.

Sincerely,
Jeanne Slattery – Assistant Director of Marketing

~ lorna mcginnis