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“I don’t believe in accidents. There are only encounters in history. There are no accidents.”

— *Pablo Picasso*

STRANGE ENCOUNTERS: Fiction, Memoir and Poetry Anthology

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Contents

FICTION

<i>Teresa Giordano</i>	
Sock Puppet.	1
<i>Sheree Shatsky</i>	
By Proxy	12
<i>Nancy Méndez-Booth</i>	
Stations	18
<i>Robert Bradford</i>	
Tip of the Hook.	30

MEMOIR

<i>Erika D. Price</i>	
Ohio Portraits	34
<i>Barbara G. Hallowell</i>	
Bill.	37
<i>DeVonna R. Allison</i>	
The Encounter.	43
<i>Amelia Wright</i>	
24 Hours After a Tragedy.	44

POETRY

<i>G. Timothy Gordon</i>	
Blackbirds	49
<i>Meg Eden</i>	
Old Man	50
<i>Jamie Gage</i>	
Wake	51
<i>Katharyn Howd Machan</i>	
When She Went to Baba Yaga	52
<i>Müesser Yeniay</i>	
Cat.	53
About the Authors	54

Sock Puppet

Teresa Giordano

Who knows how long Eva stared at the primary colored object propped at the base of the trash can on 120th Street and Broadway before she finally bent for a closer look? Eva often lost track of time. She was walking from the subway to her apartment, her eyes cast down, when she spotted it and stopped. Perhaps it was the bright red of its armless, legless body, or its four uneven strands of yellow yarn hair. Maybe it was the missing button eye that gave it a vaguely rakish yet sinister look despite the goofy felt grin that stretched beneath it. It called to her. She picked up the sock puppet and put it into her canvas tote along with the manuscripts she carried home from work.

Twenty-five years is a long time to be invisible. But somehow Eva had managed it, dwarfed within the high walls of her cubicle at the center of a department full of ever younger copy editors for a large and often-merging publishing house. Day after day she hunched over her work, her ruined eyes owly behind thick transition lenses, her spine curved like an ill-placed question mark, her wrist stiff with carpal tunnel as she scribbled red “delete” marks that resembled bloody inverted nooses along the pages of authors who Eva considered (had always considered) young and gimmicky or old and hackneyed. Night after night she went home alone to her walk-up railroad flat on Manhattan Avenue. A hold-out tenement that, like Eva had become surrounded over the years by newer, shinier additions to the neighborhood.

It was a Friday in November, marked by drizzle, dreariness and Eva’s birthday. She would celebrate tonight with a split of French champagne and a Magnolia vanilla cupcake topped with a buttercream rose. Once home she placed the found object on a towel rack and took a long hot shower, letting the old sock steam clean

even as she dressed for her dinner of scrambled eggs and toast. Then she turned off the water and ate all the while feeling ... what? Restless. Eva felt restless.

After clearing the dishes, she went to check on the thing. It was dry and so she slipped her hand into it. A wave of electricity passed from the scratchy wool body up her arm and into her chest. Eva smiled. Did the puppet's grin grow just a fraction? Eva looked at it for a few moments, the puppet looked back. They turned to face the bathroom mirror, as if taking the measure of their match as a couple. They turned to face each other again. They let a few more seconds pass. Then, "hello Sock Puppet," Eva whispered. Sock Puppet took a moment to get his bearings, to find his voice. Then, "hello Eva," he cooed. "Happy birthday."

That night passed quickly. Eva popped her champagne and plated her cupcake while Sock Puppet, draped over the bakery box, watched her. It was he who insisted on a candle and on singing Happy Birthday. At bedtime she placed him on the dresser between her glasses and the birthday card her parents sent from their Disney Cruise: "Dear Eva, a famous celebrity says Happy Birthday!" An envelope tucked inside showed a picture of them grinning madly alongside a life-sized Pinocchio, *Dear Eve — the best is yet to come. And that's no lie!* scrawled along the bottom.

"Hey Eva who's your new friend?" Glen Condelli's Monday morning check in.

He was peering over the top of Eva's cubicle at Sock Puppet perched atop her computer screen. Eva looked up from her manuscript, a book by one of the publisher's hottest young authors that seemed to her to be written in some kind of code. On page after page the author had circled in red his narrator's mistakes or the mistakes of his characters; common punctuation marks stood in for silence or things unsaid; there were lines typeset on top of lines so that some pages appeared fully black. Blank pages, picture pages. A copy editors nightmare! She snapped out of her daze.

"Don't touch it!" she said.

Glen pulled back the hand he'd been reaching across her desk, as if Sock Puppet might bite. He had never before heard Eva raise her voice

Glen had copy-edited for almost as long as Eva. His longevity was attributable only to Eva's uncomplaining nature and meticulous work. Twenty years ago his soft eyes, narrow shoulders and adenoidal wheeze seemed boyish and bookishly charming to her. She was delighted to teach him, to demonstrate 'delete line space,' 'insert and close up,' in the margin of an author's text. She'd taken pains to explain faulty diction (DICT), comma splice (CS), dangling construction (Dgl). The two often sat like kindred souls, one red pencil between them; delete marks in those days the shapes of fluttering hearts. But Glen lacked stamina in all matters. His focus wavered. His ability to hunt down and make his mark alongside faulty abbreviations and problem pronouns faltered. His heart wavered too. Sitting shoulder to shoulder in Eva's cubicle, the red writing instrument between them was too much for him to bear. He began dropping manuscripts off at Eva's desk, asking her to "double check" them. She would discover that he had stopped his work three quarters of the way through, then halfway through, and soon it was up to Eva to make his marks for him.

Glen inhaled noisily. "Eva do you mind double checking these for me?" The question was barely out of his mouth before he dropped his manuscripts onto her desk and moved away. Eva took in a breath so deep her shoulders shook as if she might weep. Then she let out the long breath, lifted Glen's manuscripts, dropped them onto her to-do pile and continued her work.

"Awk," she heard whispered. "Frag!" Eva looked up at Sock Puppet and then back to her manuscript. True the novel's expression was unconventional but she could find nothing awkward about its wording or construction. Nor did she see any fragmented sentences unless done intentionally. She looked again at Sock Pup-

pet. He cocked his one eye toward the direction Glen had taken, his yellow hair swayed. “Awk,” he said again. “Frag.” “Delete!” Eva smiled. Quite a sophisticated sense of humor Sock Puppet had!

At ten to seven Eva made her last mark on Glen’s manuscript. She removed her glasses, rubbed her eyes and smiled at Sock Puppet.

Sock puppet sighed, a loud indignant breath. “Well finally!” he said.

For the past forty-five minutes he’d been restless and bored, trying to get Eva’s attention.

“Eeevaa. Eeevaa ... come on! We’re the only two left here! Let’s bounce!”

He wheedled, cajoled, and tried to bully her into leaving with him.

“Eva!” He used the tone that her mother used when Eva was little and dreamy, lost in a book or penning one of the stories she liked to make up. “Eva look at you! Pale as a ghost and twice as ghastly! Get your nose out of that book and get outside for some fresh air!”

But just as Eva had learned to retreat into her own world and ignore her mother’s bullying, so she was able to tune out Sock Puppet while she worked.

“Well finally!” Sock Puppet was suddenly all smiles. “We have a big day tomorrow Eva. Let’s get going. I want to make a stop before we get home.”

Eva frowned. The Copy Editing Department had cleared. Everyone gone early to prepare for tomorrow night’s event.

“The Celebrated Authors Dinner Eva!” Sock Puppet beamed. “Don’t you think it’s about time you get something new to wear?”

By the time they left the building, Sock Puppet had convinced Eva into taking the subway to Manhattan’s former meat packing district, now the center of New York City chic. They stood outside the neighborhood’s newest boutique, *Save the Cows*, Eva peering into the window at clothing that cost two weeks’ salary, Sock Puppet making muffled, histrionic sounds in her purse.

“EIII mmm seee! EIII mmm owww!” Let me see Eva, let me out!”

She positioned him so that his good eye peeked out from the top of her bag and together they walked into the store.

Who knows how long they stood rooted just inside the threshold watching long-legged women with hair blown straight and lush, posing in front of mirrors while equally long-limbed salesgirls in short black dresses brought them arm loads of clothing. Eva stood silent, ignored by the shop girls until Sock Puppet cleared his throat loudly.

“A-HEM!”

Did the entire shop fall silent for just a moment or was it Eva’s imagination?

“Can I help you?” A spidery blond leaned toward Eva, who was lost for words. Sock Puppet cleared his throat again. The sales girl looked startled.

“Do ... you ... need ... help?” she asked slowly, and rather scornfully, as if Eva might need to read her lips.

“Size ten,” Eva managed. “I’d like to see something in size ten.”

The sales girl scowled, pointed to a rack of clothing and disappeared.

“That bitch!”

“Stop it Sock Puppet” Eva said, “someone will hear you.”

“I don’t care!” Who does that anorectic shop girl bitch think ...”

Sock Puppet was not allowed back out of Eva’s purse until they were in the dressing room. She took nearly everything she could find in size ten. She tried on a black velvet dress with cap sleeves and a square neckline.

“Too conservative.” Sock Puppet advised.

A floor length sheath slightly fitted at the waist.

“It makes you look hippy.” Sock Puppet said without a hint of sensitivity.

A midnight blue long-sleeved, drop-waist dress was “too school girl.”

A black satin pant suit was “too Hillary Clinton.”

A red wool shift came close but then Sock Puppet thought it would be embarrassing if they were dressed similarly.

Eva was close to tears. She was hungry. She was sweating. Her glasses kept slipping down her nose and once or twice they actually slid onto the floor and she nearly stepped on them.

“Buck up Eva!” her shopping companion commanded. “There’s something in this pile of rags just for you!”

Finally she slipped into a pink A-line dress with a plunging neckline and straps covered in fabric roses. The skirt was layers of tulle embroidered with delicate roses and decorated with rhinestones.

“It’s like my birthday cupcake,” Eva said and wept just a little.

“You look like a princess baby!” shouted Sock Puppet.

Eva kissed Sock Puppet on top of his head and then told him something that she had hardly dared to say, even to herself

“You know Sock Puppet. Tomorrow’s dinner doesn’t celebrate only the Publisher’s most Celebrated Author. Each year the Company also names its most valuable Editor and ...” she hesitated ...”and Copy Editor”.

“And this year ...”

“Yes Eva? Yes?”

“This year ...”

“Go on Eva, say it.”

“This year,” she whispered into the place where Sock Puppet’s ear would be if he had them “I think ... I think it may be me.”

A full forty minutes before dinner was to begin Eva stood squinting into the ladies room mirror, the pink filmy layers of her dress creating a penumbra around her blurred reflection. Spread before her lay pots, tubes, and cases of colored creams and powders. She had, with some success, shadowed her eyelids, darkened her lashes, highlighted her cheekbones, and tinted her lips two shades darker than her dress. After last night’s shopping spree she went to her parent’s empty apartment and raided her mother’s closet taking a pair of glittery very high heels and a matching clutch bag. In it were her glasses, a comb, a delicate bill fold she’d also swiped

from her mother, and Sock Puppet folded over on himself. The two were not speaking. All through the night and into the early morning Sock puppet badgered Eva, insisting that he attend the dinner pinned beneath her plunging neckline.

“No Sock Puppet!” Eva put her foot down.

“Oh but Eva, what a pair we will make! Tracey and Hepburn! Fred and Ginger! Bert and Ernie!” You can’t have one without the other. “Sock Puppet and Eva!”

“S.P.” she tried to reason. How will it look if I walk into the Celebrated Authors Dinner with an old sock pinned to my dress?” She immediately regretted her choice of words.

“Old Sock! Old Sock! I happen to be a hundred percent cashmere. Except for the parts of me that are wool and felt. Also a hundred percent you can be sure. Furthermore, I could have lured anyone over to that trash can. I could have gone home to Park Avenue. Madison! I chose you Eva. I chose you!”

Eva felt a tingle. Was the hair on the back of her neck standing up? She let it pass.

“I’m sorry.” She said. “Of course you’re more than an old sock. But wearing you to the dinner is out of the question.”

“Why? Why, why, why, why, why?”

“You’ll clash with my dress!”

“Mix pink with red Eva, take a risk! Besides, when was the last time anyone noticed your breasts honey? Just think, with me nestled between them everyone will ...”

Finally Eva could take it no longer. She flung Sock Puppet into her wicker clothes hamper and covered her ears against what sounded like a string of shocking obscenities.

Still, she could not abandon him entirely and the next morning she retrieved him, folded him in half and tucked him in her evening bag, safe until the dinner.

“BFF’s?” Sock Puppet said rather sheepishly when she opened the bag to put away her cosmetics.

“Of course, Sock Puppet. Of course.”

Eva walked into the dining room, found her place card and joined her co-workers at table 17. The food was abundant and rich. Alcohol flowed. Eva rearranged the food on her plate while conversation floated by her. During desert, Lindsay, a young newcomer to the Copy Editing Department turned to her and said “You haven’t eaten a thing. Aren’t you hungry Eva? And by the way, you look really pretty tonight.” Lindsay leaned in closer, her blond hair swaying a little, her snug black dress rippling with the contours of her body “Glen can’t take his eyes off you” she giggled. “You two should really get together.”

“Glen is an A-hole” sock puppet grumbled from deep within Eva’s purse. Lindsay snapped back to an upright position.

Who knows how long Eva sat on the bench at the west end of Central Park near Columbus Circle, while New Yorkers strolled and taxis dropped tourists off at their hotels. If Sock Puppet spoke during that time, she didn’t notice. It wasn’t until she smoothed her skirt beneath her thighs and felt the two jagged tears that she remembered.

The author of the difficult manuscript she’d labored over, the publisher’s literary darling, was named “Most Celebrated.” His faithful editor Most Valuable. When the Company President announced achievement in copy editing Eva rose from her seat. And while she stood, tucking her unruly hair behind her ear, blushing just a little she watched Lindsay walk toward the stage. Was it Sock Puppet who lunged at Lindsay? Did Glen tear her skirt while restraining her from going after SP? It was all so hazy and confusing. She remembered the sound of shattering glass because she – or was it sock puppet? – knocked over a tray-carrying waiter on the way to claim what was rightfully hers. But Lindsay was in the way.

“Step off bitch!” shouted Sock Puppet. Yes, it was *definitely* SP who screamed that. And it was he that knocked Lindsay to the ground. Eva had tripped and landed on top of her. What looked like Eva grabbing handfuls of Lindsay’s blonde hair and tearing at her black dress had merely been Eva trying to right herself. Right?

There was blood down the front of her pink tulle dress. Was it she who turned and broke Glen’s nose with a karate chop? Or was it sock puppet? Eva was standing now, taking slow unsteady steps toward Central Park West, teetering on her mother’s high heels. She had bruises on both arms just above her elbows. Security guards! Two beefy men had held her while she struggled, and dragged her out of the dinner. Slowly she realized, there would be no job for her in the morning.

“Those suckers!” she heard above the traffic noise and the rumble of the subway beneath the sidewalk. It was Sock Puppet peeking out of her evening bag.

“Those suckers don’t know what they lost! Right Eva?”

Eva reached down and curled a strand of SP’s yellow hair around her finger.

“You are a sight baby! Look at you!”

She bent to catch her reflection in the window of a car. Her wiry hair sprung from her head in all directions, her glasses were crooked on her nose, mascara ran beneath both eyes. Her dress torn at the back with blood on the front.

“Let’s go home, Sock Puppet” she said.

“What’s waiting for you at home Eva? A plate of eggs? Come on. I know a place where no one will notice you’re a mess. We’ll take the A train” he said, “to 42nd street.”

“I’m not getting on the train like this” she said. “We’ll walk.” “OK baby, up to you.”

“Hey! Hey! Honey! What’ll it be?” shouted the large bikini clad barmaid at Bar Four One. “I don’t really give a crap if you sit here all night honey, but I’m not asking again.”

Eva straddled her stool, her eyes fixed on her reflection in the dirty mirror behind the bar. She turned slowly to Sock Puppet.

“Hey baby, is that murder I see in your eyes?” he said. Come on! No use cryin’ over milk that’s already spilt, am I right? Just order a glass of that bottom shelf whisky they pass off as bourbon around here. You’ll be alright.”

The brown liquid burned going down, and when it hit her gut Eva's eyes opened wide and her ears popped. She cringed at a cacophony of shrieks and screams and guttural growls.

"Death Metal, baby!" SP shouted.

A greasy teenager was screaming something about cannibal corpses. An obese man with dark close cut hair and a pencil mustache was making a five dollar bill dance on the bar while he leered at the barmaid. In the middle of the room a bone-thin couple of indeterminate gender, both with shoulder length hair, dressed in green army jackets clung to each other and swayed. Eva felt a tap on her shoulder and turned to face a nearly toothless woman, her face and arms covered in scabs the size of quarters.

"I have to go to the bathroom," she said to Sock Puppet.

The floor was wet and sticky. The bathroom smelled of beer, piss and puke. Two toilets sat side by side without even a partition separating them. Sprawled on one of the toilets was the obese man who just moments ago had been at the bar.

"Hello sweet thing," he said. "Hello! I've been waiting for you." He spread his thick thighs and began to heave himself up.

"You are an angel," he said lumbering toward her. "An angel! You are an angel and I am the devil. The devil and the angel."

He moved closer. Eva could see great beads of sweat running from his temples.

"You are a sweet thing," he said. "An angel. Meet the devil."

He took another step toward Eva and reached out to her. His funk overpowered even the wretched stink of the bathroom.

"The angel and the devil," he said. Why don't we"

Was it Eva or Sock Puppet who picked up a discarded beer bottle before he said another word and smashed it on the edge of the sink? Was it she who waved the bottle as a warning but accidentally sliced the guys left cheek? Or was it Sock Puppet? Was itit doesn't matter. They both ran. A straight shot across the street to The Port Authority Bus Terminal.

Who knows how long Eva wandered the terminal checking the destinations of different bus routes? She often lost track of time. How long did it take before she settled on El Paso? El Paso. Just across the border from Mexico. Many years ago, as a young copy editor she worked on a book about Mexican flowers: poinsettias and marigolds, hibiscus and dahlia. Common perhaps, but such extraordinary colors, vivid and alive.

Tucked in her mother's delicate billfold Eva had two twenty dollar bills, her license and a credit card. American Express. Gold. That was all she needed. That was all she took.

A homeless woman retrieved Eva's discarded sparkly purse and added it to the pile of shiny things in her shopping cart. She tossed the lifeless rag she found inside. The bright, primary colored object landed at the base of a sculpture; three tired looking commuters about to pass through a doorway. That's where Melinda — on her way home from her night job caring for an old man who must be the world's most demanding person — spotted it and bent down to take a closer look.

By Proxy

Sheree Shatsky

Two gossip mavens stop my mother on Collins Avenue to ask how is it possible that she could have three children, darling you look so young were you a teenage bride? She laughs as she does every time this question is asked of her, which is often. She is wearing tangerine shorts with pink monkeys splashed across the fabric and a cotton sleeveless blouse, her sandals gold against skin tanned over the Florida summer. Her hair is cut in the swinger style, shorter in the back sweeping long to the front, designed to swish and swing with each toss of her head. What the women don't know is every night before bed, my mother carefully sculpts the look by adhering her brunette bob to the jawline with pink hair tape guaranteed to stay put during the night. Her face puckers against the adhesive and I ask her if it itches. She says sometimes, especially in the morning when the tape is ripped free, but as far as fashion goes, she tells me, often one must endure pain, or at the very least, minimal discomfort. She brushes my bangs to the side and tapes them fast to my forehead. "You're ten years old, a preteen," she says. "No time like the present to put a bit more effort into your appearance." I wriggle in protest against the ensuing flourish of hairspray.

"Yentas," Anna says, shuffling ahead of the group. She is a shrivel of a person in her 89th year and the reason for our visit, our mission to pull her out of the dregs of the apartment where she spends most of her time, watching the black and white *Zenith* through glasses that magnify and distort her eyes as big as tennis balls that serve well in her daily hobby of swatting away cockroaches she calls creeping things. My mother throws open the dark depressing curtains, filling the space with turquoise light and fluttering dust motes. The roaches scatter in the brilliance and my brothers and I help Anna stamp on those momentarily blinded.

She's quite the sight, our Anna. It's ninety degrees and she wears

a lime green turtleneck, lime green skirt above the knee with flat white go-go boots coordinated to match her white pleather engineer cap she's plopped on as an accessory, to pull the ensemble together. If this were not Anna, my mother would point her out as a woman dressing way too young for her age, what could she possibly be thinking? Her miner cut diamond ring dangles from the finger of her left hand, it's too big and I can see she's wrapped tape around the back to keep it from slipping off. Her husband has passed long ago, but the ring remains unique and the cut as distinctive as Anna.

She and her mother escaped Poland during the war, but the stories she tells vary with each telling. They were deported, but not before witnessing her father and brother tied to a tree and shot down like dogs by the Nazis (or sometimes the Soviets, sometimes both, depending on the length of the tale and/or how tired Anna might be). She was a young girl of five but never forgot how they looked in death, their bodies bent in half over the rope cinched tight around their waist, their heads in the dirt and the sounds, she mostly remembered the sounds, the gunfire, the wailing of her inconsolable mother, crashing through the woods with Anna in her arms, the laughing soldiers and the whooshing sound of the life she had known stripped away forever. In other versions, her mother was raped while her father and brother watched bound to the tree, beaten bloody where they stood as Anna hid terrified in the woods, a predetermined safe spot her father had constructed to blend with the surroundings in case child-kidnapping gypsies came calling. Sometimes no one was harmed at all, the Soviets (or the Nazis) knocked on the door and instructed the family they had thirty minutes to get their things before hustling them towards their gathered neighbors where all were escorted by foot to a waiting train, their homes left burning behind them. The tale I secretly hoped as the truth cited Anna as the daughter of wealthy parents who had the connections to flee Poland as a family and immigrate to New York prior to the atrocities forced upon their countrymen with little means to escape. The flecks of gray in her mind, shadows of memory flitting in and out, a listener could

never be certain of what was real and what was not, what might have been a recreation of the past, some bits and pieces accurate, others swapped by memories shared by contemporaries over long afternoons seated in webbed lawn chairs on the stoop of her Miami Beach tenement where aging Jews bided their waning days bathed in sunlight.

Anna wanders over to an outside display of umbrellas, tucked beneath the blue awning of the five and dime. I hurry after her, looking back at my mother, still engaged in animated conversation, my brothers wrapped around both her legs, begging her to leave. She peruses the umbrellas, the traditional type, long and pointy with impressive handles, some carved, others bound with leather. She looks at me and back at the display. “A well-dressed young lady carries a fine umbrella,” and that being said, pulls a beige parasol with a pink flamingo-head handle from the bin and steps inside to pay.

My eyes take a second to adjust in the dim light of the store. A paddle fan pushes humid air down from the ceiling, wrapping me tight in a moist towel of heat, my clothes sticky, damp and clinging to my skin. It’s June, the a/c is off, likely broken and the mildew hangs wet in the air. I cover my nose with my hand and breathe through the filter of my fingers, fighting back the tickle in my throat, a sure sign of damp rot gnawing away sight unseen at the structure of the building. Rugs line the walls of the store, garish floor rugs I’ve seen sold on the side of the road at busy intersections, samples hung from a rope line or spread out on the shoulder to display tigers and sharks and an occasional Elvis hand-knotted into the weave. I study an aqua and white design sporting the Miami Dolphins logo and find myself tempted to take a peek behind to see how black the wall is with mold but decide instead to touch my nose to the rug in punishment for following Anna into this dank den.

“Two bucks,” the cashier tells Anna. She hands him a dollar bill and begins pushing out a dollar in change with one ancient finger. “Don’t have all day, sister,” he says, but his glib comment

confuses her and she starts over, beginning again, counting the change. “Let me,” I say, sliding four quarters towards the cashier and scooping what’s left into Anna’s coin bag. “This is for my young friend,” she says about the umbrella to no one in particular. I guide her toward the door, out of the oppressive heat. The ocean breeze washes over me, drying my sweat, leaving me salty and gritty. Anna opens the umbrella with a soft click and steps in close to shade us both. She smells of Jean Naté.

“You remind me of my mother, something about your eyes,” she says, but I know that’s not possible. Although Anna and I share the same family name, we are not blood-related, either to each other or to our respective family members. My grandfather is not actually Anna’s son, but her husband’s son by his first marriage and I am not my grandfather’s blood granddaughter, but one adopted following my mother’s second marriage to his son, he himself adopted by my grandfather as his own following his marriage to my step-father’s mother, my grandmother with whom I also share no blood. In fact, when I pause long enough to brood the who-begat-who lineage over in my mind, the fact I share half my genetic make-up only with my mother and brothers, causes me to feel like a bystander, a spectator to my family more often than not. I am sometimes introduced as the Gentile grandchild, a girl born in the South who from age three found herself embraced by Eastern European Jews who stroked my blonde hair and planted kisses on my Protestant cheeks with bright red lips, exclaiming to my grandmother, Esther, I just can’t get enough of this darling girl. She is to die for.

“What was she like?” I ask Anna. Her skin is papery thin and she hasn’t broken a sweat, her turtleneck perky as if starched. “Strong, pretty, like you. She saved me after the filthy Nazis shot down my father and my brother.” Anna’s voice is hoarse with age and the dialect from the old country sneaks in as she continues, reshaping the nuances of her English, making me lean in and listen more closely. “Tied them to a tree. Beat them bloody and shot them dead, riddling their bodies with bullets. My mother ran with me

through the woods, stumbling, falling, holding me close, but never looking back, leaving everything, all we had, behind. Without her, I would not ...be." She studies me. "You know these stories of our family?" I nod that I do, that I know the stories of our history in common, strung together by a skeleton of random pairings.

My mother waves at us from her throng of admirers and shrugs her shoulders in an I- can't-help-it sort of way, her cheeks flushed whether from the heat or the flattery, I can't be sure. My brothers have given up on persuading her to leave and busy themselves with scraping baked blackened gum off the hot concrete with what appears to be our mother's car keys. "We might as well sit," I tell Anna, nodding towards the bench where people wait for the bus. Her purse slides off her shoulder and we stop for a moment so she can readjust the strap.

The man came up on us way too fast, the rate of speed giving him away as someone who is up to no good. I see him cross the sidewalk as Anna's fingers slid from the strap to reaffirm her grasp on the handle of the umbrella. I notice too late that her purse is wide open and the corner of her wallet sticks out just enough. I want to yell for my mother, but the words are stuck in my throat. I look at Anna, her face starred in shadow by the metal ribs of the umbrella and she looks at me. For that moment, I share her story, the story of helplessness, of foreshadowing, of the fear someone you care for is about to be violated. He is almost on us, his outstretched hand reaching, almost touching. I'm sorry, Anna, so sorry, I can't help you and then, his hand is on me, shoving me out of the way to get to her.

The umbrella snaps closed and Anna swings it down fast and low. The man trips and he falls ugly, face contorted, hands outstretched, but unable to break the momentum. His head slams into the sidewalk and he's out cold. Anna moves faster than I've ever seen and she is once again the young girl who bore witness to the slaughter of her family. Caught in the strength of another time, she swats the unconscious thief over and over with the beige parasol with the pink flamingo-head handle. "Dirty filthy

Nazi Soviet vermin!" she yells in her old rough voice, each word punctuated with a swat.

I watch Anna, wanting her to stop, but then again, wanting to help, help her vindicate the family she lost so long ago, the family I find myself a member by proxy. A crowd is gathering and I search for my mother. I see her hesitate and her new women friends wave her off, tell her to go already, they will keep an eye on the boys. She breaks into a run, her hair swishing and swinging, never losing its shape. I pull my fingers through my disheveled bangs before she gets the chance to do so herself, using this opportunity to remind of the importance of putting forth a good appearance, particularly in the worst of times, but for Anna, for our Anna and our strange disjointed family, I rear back and kick the man in the leg with the rubber toe of my fashionable pink sneaker as hard as I can.

Stations

Nancy Méndez-Booth

I held my ticket like a jackpot claim. One dollar and thirty-five cents for a one-way adult fare, issued by the Puerto Rico Department of Transportation. It was valid for six hours. My Uncle Martín said it would take less than 45 minutes to go from Sagrado Corazón station in San Juan to Bayamón. He assured me I had plenty of time. The mall was right across from the Bayamón train station, and El Salon de Bellas was near the main entrance.

I didn't want to be late. I woke up before my alarm this morning, like the beauty experts at El Salon were awaiting only me. Life was a drama, their Web site had said, and the three-hour Div-ahh spa package would transform me into the beautiful star. The jewel color of my chip-free manicure would highlight my every grand gesture. I would make sure the polish was dry before I ran my fingers through my deeply conditioned and blown-out hair. In the meantime, I looked like shit while I waited on the train platform in San Juan. Martín stood with me, but he was going to work. We both watched the electronic sign: Monday, April 1. 8:47 a.m. 82 degrees.

I should have been home in New Jersey. I should have been on my sixth week of maternity leave. My baby boy should have been born alive. A baby shouldn't die in his mother's body after nine months of gestation, and more than five years of anticipation. I had done all the right things. I had consulted the best pregnancy guides, but I had never read the page about stillbirth. I had been prepared for a live baby.

Everyone had acted like they knew what I should do. My ob/gyn had instructed me to take the three-month maternity leave my company gave. I needed the time and care, even if I didn't have a newborn. He had referred me to Dr. Berger. Bereavement counseling was one of her specialties. She had said it would take time to recover, but she hadn't known me before Liam died. She couldn't

know if I was getting back to my old self. Twice a week, I wanted her to find the real me in the swirls of words that didn't make sense.

She had said I should get away for a while. Jack had agreed. It took fewer drinks for him to remind me every night that taking care of me was too much. He said I pushed him beyond human limits. I made no sense to him. There was no room for him in my grief. I was afraid we were lost to each other forever.

My family had said I should come to Puerto Rico and let them take care of me. Martín and Rosa didn't recognize me at Luis Muñoz Marín Airport. She had felt my face and hair like she was blind. That night she tucked me into bed in the spare bedroom.

“Mi amor, we'll take care of you.”

Poor aunt Rosa. She meant well, but what could she do? Only monsters gave birth to dead babies and drove their grieving husbands to drink. I wasn't feeling better and was looking even worse. People avoided looking at me or making eye contact when they found out my story. Not Rosa. She told me I was beautiful, even though my bloated, lumpen body and swollen eyes didn't look like the Elena anyone remembered.

Rosa had faith in El Salon's team of aestheticians when she booked my appointment. I had faith in them too. The women smiled at me from the ad posted in the Sagrado Corazón station. They promised to reveal the beauty in every woman. I would reassure them that I was realistic, and my old issue of *InStyle* with Halle Berry on the cover was only for inspiration. The aestheticians were professionals, not miracle workers.

I anticipated Enya would play softly in the salon's reception lounge. There would be a selection of herbal teas and antioxidant-rich snacks to defend against damage-causing free radicals. Each member of my dedicated team of beauty professionals would greet me, and describe the wonders she had in store for me. I would decline the “before” photos, even though they were included in the price of the Div-ahh package. I hoped they would understand.

The body treatment specialist would take the cardigan that hid my post-partum belly and deflated breasts. She could put it in

the trash bin, or donate it to a local shelter. I never wanted to wear it again. The hair artist would remove the scarf that covered my kinkies. I would sit in a swivel chair, maybe as plush as a throne with a massage option. I would spin my back toward the mirror. I didn't want to see the artist's face when she contemplated my strands like dead things in her expert hands. I would submit for as long as necessary until the moment when I would be spun around toward the mirror. I had faith in them all. Somewhere underneath everything that I was afraid to look at, there might be a new woman. My fear might go away. At the end of the three hours, the team would applaud my transformation. They might cry, but I wouldn't because the expertly applied make-up would run.

I stood close to Martín at Sagrado Corazón station. I didn't want to be in the way like the tourists I pushed past on my commutes into New York City. There were less than a dozen commuters scattered along the open-air platform, level with the tops of the palm trees, above the clogged roadways. Martín wore his work identification on a lanyard around his neck, just like the other commuters. It had his photo, name, and the department he'd swipe into at Centro Medico.

I felt like I was playing hooky. I didn't have a lap top bag like Martín. My canvas tote carried what I'd need for my day: my cell phone, water bottle, a snack bag of trail mix Rosa gave me when she tried to slip cash into my bag. I had memorial cards from Liam's funeral mass. There were always cards in my pockets or bags, like receipts of forgotten purchases and transactions. No one knew what to say when I handed them out. My days would have been easier if I could have worn one of the cards on a lanyard around my neck. An ID card like that would let me pass through my black-cloud world wordlessly and undisturbed.

The warning bell rang, and the electronic sign flashed "El tren se aproxima." The morning commuters folded their newspapers into their bags as the white cars glided into the station. The engine whirred and hummed like the flying saucers in the old B-movies I

had watched as a child on Sunday afternoons. A calm, automated female voice announced the present and upcoming stations, and cautioned to please stand clear of the closing doors.

The car was gleaming from underuse. The few passengers had enough room for each to occupy an entire row, and put their bags next to themselves. I didn't have to stand with my nose pressed into a stranger's dandruff-flaked shoulder. Martín sat next to me and announced points of interest in the landscape outside the train window: office buildings, a new Applebee's, construction sites for new gated developments with names like Jardines Reales. He was loud, and I sat there like the retard-niece taken out of the group home by her uncle for a day trip. *See Elena, there's a parking lot. Can you say 'car'? Can you point out a blue car?* I interrupted Martín in a low voice, hoping he would take my cue.

"Will you make it to work on time?"

"Old-timers like me just need to show up. You and me, we can sit here and relax. There's plenty of time before I get to Centro Medico."

I sighed. I was grateful to Martín and Rosa for hosting me in Puerto Rico, but they made me as crazy as I felt at home in New Jersey. My neighbor had said to me after Liam's funeral mass, "There are no words for losing a child." There were obviously no words in Spanish because no one in my family had said a thing about Liam since I'd arrived in Puerto Rico. Some of them avoided me, like they were scared I'd talk about dead babies. Those who talked to me were afraid of saying the wrong thing. Martín told me all about how it would take another \$2 billion and 16 more years to extend the rail system beyond its present terminus, a ghost station at the end of an unfinished line. I was sick of Martín's audio tour. I kept my face toward the window and saw my reflection. The scarf over my hair made me look like the alleluia types who spent weekends pushing Jesus pamphlets and raising their voices to the Lord.

Martín tapped the window.

"See all that construction out there? It's my tax dollars at work."

He chuckled, then tapped my shoulder for attention.

“We can enjoy it all traveling business class, right here, in my semi-private car. Yep, this is progress on the island.”

He continued to chuckle.

“You’ve got a good deal, the whole day to yourself while we go to work. Not a bad life, huh?”

Maybe everything had been a dream: my pregnancy, the birth, Liam’s funeral, and I didn’t realize I had woken up. Or maybe I had been able to wish everything away, and no one had a memory of Liam except me. Maybe it was Martín who was crazy. Perhaps the man smiling next to me wasn’t Martín Martínez like the photo ID on the lanyard said, but was actually a space alien, and I couldn’t let on that his ignorance of human emotion blew his cover because the train car was really a flying saucer, and I might be taken far, far away. My thoughts were crazy, but Martín’s comment just made no sense.

The train stopped at Plaza Colon station, and one man shuffled onto our car. He reached for a pole and took a wide stance, though the train was still stationary. He looked around the car like a grade-schooler separated from his field-trip group. His bowl cut was combed straight onto his forehead. His polo shirt was tucked into his pleated shorts, and his torso drooped over the waistband in middle-aged surrender. I wondered if the man’s fanny pack held a juice box or fun money for candy. He smiled when he saw Martín and shuffled in our direction. Martín felt inside his bag and pants pockets, and jingled the coins collected in his hand.

“Ah, here comes my friend.”

“You know him?”

“No. He’s just on the train every day.”

Martín didn’t take the card the man offered from the fanny pack, but gave him the change. Martín and the man both smiled like Martín had given the guy a large bill for doing something grander than just stand there like an overgrown idiot child. The man put the coins into his pouch, angled his body toward me, and held out a card.

“No thank you.”

I avoided eye contact, but the man kept his hand outstretched. Martín spoke to me loudly.

“He’s deaf. He needs to see your lips.”

I raised my head. Before I could repeat myself, the man placed the card on my lap and turned away quickly, like he had tagged me in some silent game, and I was “it.” He shuffled toward the other end of the car. I took the card from my lap. It was an index card, the kind I remembered from Catholic grammar and high schools. The typed words felt like Braille along the card’s back.

“Hello! I hope you are having a pleasant day. I am deaf and mute. God bless you.”

A smiley face was added in pencil.

“I don’t bother with the card anymore. I just give him the change.”

I wasn’t going to give him anything. The deaf-mute, man-child returned, and stood in front of me. I looked down. His white knee socks and Velcro sandals reminded me of when I was a child. My classmates had teased me because my mother had refused to let me go sockless with open shoes. She had believed it was unhygienic. The toes of man-child’s socks contrasted with my exposed toes, browned and dried like hulls. I held out the card, but his arms remained at his sides. I took his left hand, placed the card in it, and crumpled his fingers closed in my fist. I looked up at his surprised face, and stretched my mouth into the unmistakable shape of no. He looked at Martín, who shrugged and showed his empty palms. I wanted to stamp and shoo man-child away. He returned the card to his fanny pack as if it was a small bird, and transferred to another car.

Martín raised his eyebrows at me.

“You don’t give?”

“I don’t give money or prayers. He’s out of luck.”

“He’s deaf and mute, and I think maybe he’s a little slow or something.”

“Yeah, well, we’ve all got our story.”

I turned my face toward the window.

“I feel bad for the guy. Some spare change is no big deal, Elena.”

I continued to look out the window. The word “no” is the same in English and Spanish. Man-child understood it. I wondered if the space creature posing as my uncle Martín Martínez would understand to shut up if I told him “No more stupid talk.”

“He never bothers anyone. At least riding the train gives him something to do. It’s like state-sponsored day care.”

He looked around the clean, climate-controlled car.

“He’s got it pretty good, too.”

Martín tapped my knee and chuckled. I didn’t respond or turn toward him. He sighed and remained silent until the train approached Centro Medico station.

“This is my stop, Elena. Will you be okay?”

I made sure I smiled when I assured him I would be fine.

“Well, that’s good. Que buena vida, off to the salon.”

He looked at me and pressed my hand when he kissed my forehead.

“Maybe we won’t recognize you when you get home later. You’ll be a new woman.”

The few remaining passengers exited the car with Martín at Centro Medico station. I continued to smile at Martín when he stood on the platform and watched the train pull away and continue south. I had the empty car to myself for the trip to Bayamón, and to wonder about la buena vida.

The train stopped for five minutes at Las Lomas station. The automated voice repeated at regular intervals that the train would move shortly and Torrimar was the next stop. A maintenance worker in an orange safety vest poked her head into my car and glanced around before continuing her patrol. The air conditioning escaped through the opened doors, and thick humidity coated my skin like a languorous lick.

What a waste.

The train car became too hot for my cardigan. There was no good reason to feel self-conscious. All the productive Puerto Ricans had exited the car to get to work. I wanted to wish myself to El Salon, just close my eyes and find myself in the serenity of the spa. The beauty team could restore me. They were professionals. They would know how to soften the deepening crease between my eyebrows. I was ready to be amazed by the small changes they’d make that would reveal a different me, maybe by parting my hair on the right side instead of the left.

Two elderly women boarded my car, and sat across and down the other end from me. Their heavy bottoms spread and touched each other when they sat. They held their purses on their laps, and talked about the one-day sale at JC Penney. I considered switching cars, but I was there first. I closed my eyes, and concentrated on willing them into silence. They continued talking, and I pictured the mall packed and filled with hordes of retirees in search of midday discounts.

I opened my eyes to glare at them. What I saw was man-child board my car. He started when he saw my face. The doors shut, and the train made a gentle curve out of the station to continue south. Man-child and I eyed each other as he repeated his earlier routine: he braced himself and took a wide stance. He took one more look at me before he shuffled toward the two elderly women. They accepted the cards like gifts, with grateful smiles. My jaw clenched with each deliberate, slow slide of his sandals toward me. I placed my tote on my lap, but man-child looked right at me, placed a card on the empty seat next to me, smiley-face side up, and returned toward the women. I heard the jingle of the coins they gave him.

“Poor thing.”

They spoke in lowered voices, even though the cards said he was deaf. Man-child adjusted his fanny pack, and returned toward me. My nails dug into the handle of my tote, and I watched the tips of my knuckles pale. He took the card from the seat next to me, and held it so suddenly and closely to my face that my eyes

crossed. I refocused my gaze on his forearm. The hair was coarse and dark, but the skin fair, as if he rode the train all day, out of the sun and in the face of passengers. I remained rigid when he shook the card, but batted it away when he tapped my right hand with it. The card fell onto the floor between our feet, and man-child bent onto one knee. He held the edge of the seat as he folded over his belly and pouch to pick up the card. The sight of a man's head with a child's haircut descending almost onto my lap sickened me.

I stepped on the card with my right foot. Man-child tugged at it, but I didn't yield. He looked up at me, opened his mouth, and made a non-word noise. I looked right at him, and responded with a wide-mouthed, silent no. He pointed at the card. I ground my toes with bug-crushing intensity and repeated no. I leaned closer so he could see my lips as they formed my response slowly in Spanish.

"I don't want your card."

He knelt before me, pointed again at his card, and opened and closed his mouth, repeating that non-word noise and looking confused. I wondered how well he could read lips. I wondered if he would cry. He was a grown man, and needed something better to do all day than hand out cards with penciled smiley faces and grub for change. He was old enough to know that no one cared he was a deaf-mute, or that he wished everyone a great day and believed that God blessed everyone.

I reached into my bag for one of the laminated memorial cards, and pushed it into his free hand. He looked at both sides, then again at the illustration of la Madonnina on the front side. He looked at my face, my uncovered hair, and repeated his noise. There was no change of inflection to indicate if it was a question or a statement, just a consistent "Dnuh," like a soft thud. I leaned so close I smelled stale milk on his breath. I continued in Spanish, and formed my mouth into wide circles for the O sounds.

"Take it. I don't need your card. No one does. That's my card. You carry that one with you."

He continued to look at me, held the seat edge for balance, and opened and closed his mouth like he was popping his ears.

"Dnuh."

I wanted to know if he made a different noise when he cried. I kicked his knee, but only the same thud came out of his mouth, like an unsuccessful leap toward a word. Man-child tucked my card into his pouch, and reached for the one still under my toes. He wanted his card. I wanted him to talk. There had to be a word inside him, something different than that nonsense. He'd never get anywhere in life making only that thud noise. He had to ask for that card if he wanted it.

I placed my toes on his fingers and pressed down. His eyes widened, and he tried to pull his fingers away from under my foot. He looked at me, and I pressed harder. He didn't try to hit me or fight me. He just held on to the edge of the seat for balance and leverage as he tried to pull his fingers from under my toes. His eyes grew smaller as his mouth opened wider, but no sound came out, not even "Dnuh." He inhaled deeply, and squeezed his eyes shut more tightly. He looked like he should have wailed loudly enough for someone to call 911 and get me arrested, but there was no sound. The older women at the other end of the car continued to chat, unaware. I wondered if man-child heard his cries in his own head.

I pressed on his fingers like a pedal, and watched his face turn redder and his mouth open wider. Hurting him was the first good thing I had felt since I lost Liam. There was no one to stop me. I told him he needed to tell me to stop, that he needed to say please, but his eyes were closed. I leaned forward to get his attention, so close that my heels lifted off the ground. My toes pinned his fingers so hard that his eyes popped open, and a cry did come out. It rose high like a question.

"Mmmaaaaaahh!"

That was not the sound I had wanted. It ruptured us both, and the sudden scream pierced the silence. I jolted against the seat back, and my foot released man-child's hand. The crying began wordless and angry, and it took me a few moments to realize it was me. My voice pitched, cracked, and didn't sound like my own, but man-

child couldn't hear me. He didn't know what I sounded like before or at that moment. I cried for him to stop, to be quiet. Man-child just held his hand to his chest like a small pet. He panted, and the tears and snot that collected on his lips sprayed toward me. I cried and repeated that no one wanted his card. Man-child needed to know he was no more special than anyone else, but I gulped and gasped so hard between words that watching my lips could not help him understand. I wanted to understand what exempted him from life. I reached down for his card, tore it in two, and pushed the halves into his empty hands. The two older women did not move, but I heard one speak.

"Maybe there's something wrong with her."

I told them to mind their own business. They were as slow as man-child if they thought I was the one with the problem. There was something wrong with all of them because they had nothing better to do than ride an empty train to nowhere in the middle of a weekday morning. But my words would have been as wasted on them as much as they were on the deaf-mute.

He remained on one knee, and looked so sadly at the card halves in his hands. Man-child paid no attention to the fingers I had crushed just seconds before. The sight of him and the disapproving clucks of the women reminded me how pathetic we all were. The automated voice announced Torrimar station as the train pulled in, stopped, and the doors opened. It was two stops before the mall, but I exited the car, and stumbled onto the platform as if the train was in motion.

9:42 a.m. Monday, April 1. 87 degrees. Torrimar station. Next south-bound train: 26 minutes. 9:42 a.m. Monday, April 1...

I stand alone on the platform and watch the messages on the electronic sign. The trains run every 40 minutes during off-peak hours, so it's just me and the ticket vending machines until the next train to Bayamón arrives.

I can't believe the facialist and hair artist are fully booked on a Monday morning. How many ugly women are there in Puerto Rico

that El Salon de Bellas can't accommodate me if I arrive late? I'll return to Rosa and Martín's place looking worse than I did when I left. Man-child can't rat me out if he sees Martín, but with my luck, there's security camera footage of me stepping on man-child's hand. Rosa and Martín will be watching it on "Noticias a las Seis" along with everyone else on the island.

Rosa's credit card will still get charged for the Div-ahh spa package that was supposed to transform me. All that money wasted. The round-trip ticket for my Puerto Rico getaway cost almost \$600, but the dollar-thirty-five for the train ticket is the best money either of us has spent. I have the next 26 minutes to myself in peace.

The empty station is reflected in the mirrored windows of the office building across from the train tracks. An empty platform in New York City gives me the creeps, but here it looks surreal, everything so sleek and modern, with palm trees at the edge of the parking lot, and hills just beyond that look almost black. I can almost see myself in the mirrored windows, small and alone. Martín would say it's a sweet deal to have all this time to myself while others work behind those windows. He would say this is la buena vida, and I wonder if he's right.

Tip of the Hook

Robert Bradford

Salvador caught a 1,050-pound tuna, and came home to Rikki with a check for \$5,000 and the tail, but Rikki wasn't home.

He dumped the tail, 35 inches from tip to tip, on the kitchen table. At the sink he quickly splashed some water on his hands, then reached up into the cupboard and took a big gulp of mescal from a liter of Dos Gusanos. He didn't get either worm, so he muttered —“Matra doo beesh” like the old Portagees and took another swig.

Then he hobbled rapidly back out into the narrow lane that led down to Commercial Street. Every muscle in Salvador's five-foot-five-inch frame, in his arms and legs and shoulders and back, was alternately spasming and cramping in be-bop syncopation, and he could barely unclench his fists, but he was driven by Rikki and the fish.

nobody in Provincetown, hell, nobody on the whole Cape, or the Islands or New Bedford even, ever caught a fish like that, well not all alone on a hand line in an open 14-footer with a cranky old outboard, but it was the bait, great bait, I owe Shovelhead down at the Wharf a nice bone, at least a hundred bucks, big fat mackerel, bigger than the trout me and Rikki caught in Maine that first time, when the drummer crushed her after less than a weekend and me, this funny tough horny little roadie, took her to the big woods to heal her sweet sweet soul and angle for her sweet sweet lovin, and she never caught a fish before and I made her gut it and clean it and skewer it over the campfire all by herself and she never tasted anything so good, and she never had The True Linguica before, either, and I said some magic words and she fell in love, ooh, wait'll she hears about this one

The Mayflower was still serving, mostly tourists, but wasn't full this late in the season, and a few locals in the back booth cheered and thrust their fists in the air when Salvador eased in.

Dealinda came out of the kitchen and bowed to him, and had his flippers and linguica on the table in three minutes. She had to cut up the flippers, the fried bread dough, and slap on the butter and slurp on the syrup for him, though, and cut the long sausage oozing spicy dull-red grease. He could just hold a fork fist-wise in his good left hand.

The townies called him The Young Man And The Sea, and peppered him with questions, but his replies were fragmentary.

“It's not a story yet,” he said. “It's like I'm still living it.”

When he asked if anyone had seen Rikki, some eyebrows went up and some eyebrows went down but they all said no, uh-uh, nope.

Then his mouth was full, and three minutes later he wiped his drooping moustache and limped back out onto Commercial Street.

the gloves, they saved my fingers, the line jumped out so fast, if I didn't grab it quick he'd of spit the hook before I set it, they always laugh 'cause I never ever take my gloves off all day, just one maybe for a minute to light a Camel or unwrap Rikki's sandwiches, tuna fish sandwiches for luck, on dark brown bread she baked from Boston to San Francisco to Puerto Escondido back to Provincetown, 12 years, baked it just for luck even in the bad days when neither of us had no appetite, but the fish had an appetite, took that hook deep, musta towed me two miles, all the guys on the big boats laughin and cheerin and gettin outta the way, musta been goin two miles an hour, guys yellin across the water Jeez that's a quiet sumbitch of a motor, and What the hell is that, a Provincetown sleighride? and I hope that fish lets you go when he's done catchin you, and when he got tired I didn't pull him up to the boat, I pulled the boat up to him, but when I got him close enough for the harpoon and he rolled up next to the boat and I snubbed the line but just one bight, good thing, cause when that big eye rolled up and saw me and he knew, and he shivered that humungous tail and ran and would have pulled me right under if I didn't get that line unsnubbed, and ran and towed and fought it all out again until a mile more and that big eye rolled up again and looked right at me and I could feel

what he was thinkin, oh shit, he knew, eyeball to eyeball and I shake the cramp out of my good left hand and heft the harpoon and fling it with all my weight and then he runs again but not far this time

The locals at the end of the bar whooped when Salvador staggered into The Governor Bradford, but fell silent when he asked about Rikki.

“Haven’t seen her” said Peace-sign Patty truthfully; she’d been working all day at a gallery in Harwich.

“Me either,” said Pudgie, who’d nodded fitfully all day.

“Me neither,” said Bones, who’d been crashed beside Pudgie.

Everybody else shrugged vaguely.

Don Two-Bellies, Billy Three-Farts and Captain Zig-Zag, named not for the cigarette papers but for the way he steered his boat after he used them, were exuberant:

“Biggest sumbitch I ever seen!”

“Awreddy in Boston, maybe awreddy onna plane to Japan!”

“Raw lunch for halfa Tokyo tomorrow!”

“Twice as tall as Sal and 10 times as big around!”

Salvador could barely scramble up onto his stool. He smiled weakly at Maddie, the barmaid with the 14-carat heart. She already had a double Cuervo poured, and a saltshaker, no lime. She leaned on the bar, her face a foot from his. He’d kissed her in the second grade, a sweet little kiss, no tongue.

“She’s gone,” said Maddie, slowly and softly and clearly, as everybody in the bar looked away. “I saw her get on the last ferry. She had her backpack. And a suitcase.”

He stared at her for several long moments through wide dark bloodshot eyes.

“Was she with anybody?”

“No,” said Maddie — make that 18-carat — as she pictured Rikki and Lucy waving from the top deck. Maddie scurried away to take an order at the other end of the bar as Salvador lurched off his stool.

and there’s Shaky Shoogie, look at him, eyes dreamy hand in his pocket lickin his lips hand in his pocket fingerin bindles of China White, China China China China White, that’s how many times I can say it before it flashes white in my brain, white-out, oh door, swing door swing

He bursts into the street ragged with stragglers.

for if I do not fish tomorrow I surely will die, oh fill my mind fish please

Ohio Portraits

Erika D. Price

Ohio Portrait no. 64

We had an English teacher in 10th grade that leveled with us about everything. In her room we were proper adults. We watched *Star Trek Voyager* in her class and talked about its rhetorical themes. We got to choose which book we'd read as a class and critique (we voted for *The Da Vinci Code*, of all fucking things). We asked her what it was like to have size H breasts and she told us, and it wasn't weird. She told us how she managed personal and public affairs with her husband, our algebra teacher.

One of us was the son of a Baptist preacher, who'd begun styling himself after his father. Students came to him with religious quandaries and philosophical questions. Once, I mentioned to him that gender and sex were not the same thing. He rolled his eyes, looked at me sadly, and said, "Oh, they've got you believing that crap?"

Our English teacher was religious. She attended a distant, unfamiliar black baptist church with her husband. In most ways they had an egalitarian marriage. She kept her last name. Their first born daughter had her surname; the husband got the second born. But they were traditional when it came to sex.

She came to the proto-preacher student one day, in front of all of us, and asked him about the wifely duty to submit.

"Do I have to do everything he wants to do?" She asked him. "Like...in marital relations, if there is something he wants...?"

Her brow was furrowed. She bent down to the boy's desk. The boy said that yes, biblically it was her duty to keep him pleased. We tittered. Or maybe we didn't. Maybe we were too shocked.

Our English teacher nodded gravely and thanked the boy for his counsel. A month later, she read us a poem she'd written about her husband. Imagine if someone who read a lot of Euripides wrote their own version of Beyoncé's "Love on Top." It was like that.

Last I heard, she was still happily married and teaching at my former high school. Her husband left his post in the math department and re-enlisted in the military. There'd been a skirmish. He'd clobbered the white, skinny geometry teacher in a bar one Wednesday night a few years back.

Ohio Portrait no. 19

My neighbor kept bears, inbred white tigers, lions, god knows. One of his animals was a grizzly that was in the live action, 1994 version of *The Jungle Book*.

You know the story. His son's arm got chewed off. The man himself was killed by the creatures he kept in a shed less than 500 yards from my house. It was all over the news in early 2011.

What you do not know is that the man fed his animals stale cakes from Entenmann's. That he drove an old, purloined Entenmann's truck to the warehouse where my father worked, and filled it up with expired pastries not fit for human consumption. That the animals' blood ran thick with glucose.

You do not know that the man brought his animals to the Cuyahoga County Fair and chained them to tables made of plywood and charged \$20 apiece to climb on top of them and get your picture taken. That 80% of the white tigers born in the US are inbred, blind, physically disabled, and severely brain damaged.

I worked at the Fair, in the Funhouse right across from the man, his son, and their menagerie of chained pets. For thirteen hours a day I took tickets and stared straight ahead at them. So I'm glad the animals finally got to taste protein, even if it was just the one time, even if it was just some white trash asshole's arm.

Ohio Portrait no. 74

He was my first love, though he loved a vague, squishy, happy, simple version of me, not the actual me. It was over. He was leaving to study Yiddish at a school in New York. We were spending

a lot of time in a hazy soup of emotions and hormones; holding hands, referencing years-old in-jokes, staring at each other, sobbing in Taco Bell and Petsmart and on sidewalks.

He had to get his blood checked before he went. A requirement of living in the NYU dorms, or a requirement of the high-dose, liver-damaging SSRI he was on. Either way, there was a stretched, greying band-aid wrapped over a thick wad of cotton on his forearm.

It came off while we were sitting on the couch. He was the type to leave things splayed around the apartment — socks, shirts, wads of gum, dozens of Keystone beer cans, papers written in German and Russian and Yiddish and Hebrew.

I had long ago gotten into the habit of grumbling and picking up after him, resenting it with every step. But I was in the emotional-hormonal soup, so this time I picked up the band aid and the puff of bloodstained cotton without a thought and marched it into the bathroom. I stood over the trash and let the band aid flutter down. But I kept the cotton resting in my palm, with the brown, amoeba-like blot of dried blood sitting up, looking at me. I may have even sobbed a little.

Like a guilty thief, I threw the bathroom door closed, opened the cabinets, unzipped my toiletry bag, and found a small tin pill box decorated with small blue stones. It was empty — unlike him, I took no pills at the time. I stuffed the cotton ball into the little box, latched it shut, and buried it under combs, brushes, concealers, acne cream, exfoliants, hoping against hope he'd never find it, never recognize it.

He never did. He never took the time to pick up a sock — how would he have found it? Instead, I found it — while cleaning out my bathroom eight or ten months later, in my new home in Chicago. I pitched it, gagging at myself.

These portraits are part of an ongoing, as-yet unpublished series.

Bill

Barbara G. Hollowell

I don't know when Bill left. My mother told me it was at my christening when I was three weeks old, but lately I've seen pictures of us cuddling together when I was older, maybe four or so. Who knows? Anyway, I have no visual memory of him when I was younger. His name was never mentioned at my house, but there were rolled eyes, unfinished sentences, and people speaking about "you know who." I remember once being in the bathtub and getting out of the tub to lock the door before I announced that I was going to write Bill and ask him if he would buy me a new bike. My mother was on the other side of the door seething, but there was complete silence.

My mother and stepfather were loving parents, but there were many unwritten rules, fundamentalist Christian ideals, Republican rhetoric and a lack of humor that too often trumped real connection, exploration or just plain fun that I longed for.

Somewhere along the way I became really curious about this man Bill. My maternal grandmother seemed like a natural resource, but when we got right down to it, her response was Victorian. She was shocked, bug-eyed. I think she even choked a little. What had I heard? How did I know? I felt like the boy in "The Emperor's New Clothes." It was interesting to watch and I felt a little power, but I didn't get much of a reading on my dad.

My mother had an identical twin sister. She would usually start out by saying he was a "goddamn selfish son of a bitch" and then move on. We only had a few conversations, but they all started with "I probably shouldn't be telling you this but..." And then there would be renderings of South America and other women. After a little while, depending on how long it took her to see the pain I was trying to conceal, she would throw in some color: he had a loving mother, he was president of his class, all-American

in three sports and a hero in the war. How I wish I could've held on to just the colors. Somewhere along the way, I put the whole mess in a box and closed the lid.

Many years later when I was working on Wall Street, a message appeared on my desk: "Call Bill Illingworth. Would it be possible to meet at the Pierre Hotel around 7:30?" My body went into some form of high alert and when I tried to read the message a second time I could hardly make out the words. Where was my secretary? Could there be two Bill Illingworths? Could it be a client? Perhaps it was a joke. I tried to squeeze every bit of information I could from my secretary. How did he sound? What do you mean it was a woman? Are you sure she had a southern accent? I took a deep breath and called the number and said, "Hello this is Barbara."

A woman answered. "Barbie darling I am delighted to hear your voice. Bless your heart. Bill will be so pleased you can join us. We will meet you in the bar." As I hung up I realized I had not even said I was able to join them. I wondered how he had found me.

I arrived at the hotel a little late. His wife Martha recognized me first, and waved me over to a table in the corner. Her suit was yesterday's Chanel. Her arms looked insecure with too much gold. The dead fox around her neck and the white gloves were out of place. She was trying hard to hold onto better times. It surprised me; I had heard she was very wealthy.

It didn't take long before I realized Bill had not been part of the plan. He had spent the day in Washington on business and would be surprised to find me there. I wanted to run. Martha sipped her martini and alternated between asking cute questions and sharing inflated history. I swear she ended every other sentence with "be that as it may."

"Feel free to call me Mobi. That would be for Martha O'Brien Illingworth. My daddy was a very successful tobacco broker in Virginia. Be that as it may. Did you know your granddaddy was a four-star Admiral and your heritage comes from the Mayflower? You're working where? I know nothing about work. Would you care for an olive?"

Was Bill up in their room? Had she left him a note? What was her plan? After what seemed like hours, I saw him coming around the corner. I don't know how I recognized him. He was handsome and walking fast. I saw him wipe the sweat off his brow. I was pleased. We would be on equal ground.

Before he got to the table he was in full control, a hand on my shoulder and a slap on the back. "God damn what a surprise! Turn around, let me have a look at you."

He was dressed in a dark suit striped tie and a white shirt with a tiny white monogram on the cuff of his sleeve. His shoes were spit polished. The only things that distinguished him from the crowd were his Annapolis ring and 18- carat-gold-football cufflinks.

Mobi mumbled something about checking in on their children and retreated. After a half an hour of trying to catch up on a lifetime, Bill took out a picture of himself, turned it over and wrote his address and two dates, December 25 and July 20, his birthday. He slid the picture across the table. "Write me on these two occasions and I'll set you up." What the hell did he mean, "set me up"? Shit! Had he turned into some ordinary sugar daddy game show host? I walked out like a lady, but I slammed the door in his face.

I continued walking through various jobs, more schooling, assorted relationships and marriage. One day while sorting through scrapbooks I came across a snapshot of Bill and my mother. I was surprised that it pleased me to see my parents in the same picture. I felt my body release tension I didn't even know I had.

I didn't think much about him again until I was eight months pregnant with my first child. I was in my studio painting a portrait of a friend's child when it struck me that my baby could be just like my father. I started flipping through the different versions of him that I was holding in my head—sugar daddy, handsome, goddamn son of a bitch, athlete, hero. I had no idea what was real. I immediately wrote my father and told him about the pending birth of my son, and I invited him to come and visit. When the

baby was born he sent a Tiffany's sterling silver Mint Julep cup with Charlie's initials, birth date and his initials. I am sure that "be that as it may" ordered the cup and initiated the first meeting in New York.

Over the next month there were phone calls and quick notes back and forth. I sent him videos of Charlie. Mobi sent a big box full of long white christening dresses. Finally at Christmas time, they all came to visit. The house was scrubbed and decorated for the holidays. The fire roared, Christmas carols played. For the first time, I met my two half-sisters and an adopted brother. Molly was seven years younger than I, smart and eager to get to know me. Shelley, obviously the star in the family, was competing with Charlie for attention. And Fletcher was shy and quiet. It was amazing how much the girls and I looked alike.

There were several years of multi-generational meals with copious picture taking. The conversation was usually fun but superficial. Periodically Mobi would slip in little digging references to "all the money that had been sent to my mother for my support." I remember being shocked. It was my impression my mother never received a dime.

Eventually I wanted something different. I was perpetually orchestrating group events and never really having time to just share with Bill. Somewhere between the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade and the Harvard-Yale game I gathered my courage and I asked Bill if it would be possible for just the two of us to spend time together. He hesitated at first. A week later he sent an invitation to me to come visit him in Pasadena. I was welcome to bring Charlie if I thought that would be a good idea. He informed me that several of his friends had grandchildren and that there were lots of caregivers around and pools and putting greens and things that Charlie would enjoy. I had no idea how he was going to pull off alone with Mobi seemingly omnipresent, but Mobi did have her own routine. I spent one of the days with her. She invited me to join her at the horse races. Bill and Charlie all but ruined their master bedroom jumping on the beds while Mobi and I drove off

in her yellow Cadillac. She was dressed in her summer equivalent of the fox outfit. The first stop was church for morning prayer, probably some form of confession, a chit chat with the priest, slipping a little cash in the basket for reassurance, then proceeding directly to the race track for a liquid lunch, a little betting with the information from the valet and a peek at her one/one thousandth of a race horse, home for cocktails, tiny bite of something and early to bed. I remember opening the refrigerator and seeing a freezer full of the newest equivalent of TV dinners and a bottle of vodka. Nothing else was there. From then on I didn't see much of Mobi and I did spend every waking hour with Bill.

I understood that he must be very lonely in his home and depended on his friends for fun. Bill told me he had one obligation during that first week Charlie and I were there and he hoped I would participate. One of his friends with a reputation for being a mother hen was having a surprise 70th birthday party. Everyone was expected to come in chicken-related attire. I have no memory of what I concocted to wear but I do remember feeling confident and willing to participate with seniors. Mobi went as a plucked pullet and looked the part. Bill wore his blue blazer with a New York Yacht Club emblem on the pocket, definitely a first class chicken. When we arrived at the party, the hostess answered the door in a see-through negligee, proudly announcing, "I've just been laid." Seeing Bill's friend turning 70 was a lot more fun than anything I had ever experienced in my mother's house. While I don't show up in see-through negligees at parties, I definitely am more spontaneous.

Bill also hired a limo to take us to Disneyland with VIP passes. The three of us romped our way through pirate raids and haunted mansions. Bill was a great sport. Together we managed to curb Charlie's exuberance while also sharing heart-felt information. We made a promise that we would meet every year for a vacation and we have done that faithfully. We have visited sites of the Civil War, driven the Shenandoah Valley, met relatives in Jefferson Indiana. But mostly we've met in Pasadena or Palm Springs.

We do not really have a father-daughter relationship. We are able to be silly and play together. We can banter around intellectual ideas and disagree on political issues. He has shared his experiences at Pearl Harbor. We have made Baked Alaska together and coached each other in parenting. He has creamed me at tennis. And held me when I've cried. We have gotten angry with each other and laughed about it later. There is lots of gentle teasing. I would bet on a daily basis I laugh so hard tears roll down my cheeks.

He is not perfect. I really have no idea what kind of a husband or father he is. But for me he is like a breath of fresh air. He is the perfect antidote for my black and white upbringing.

I remember when I told my mother that I wanted a divorce and she said "I hope you do it right." When I told Bill I wanted to leave my husband, he was sympathetic; he shared some of his personal experiences about marriage. Where he had failed and succeeded, and what he would do differently. He told me about almost having an affair and how that affected him. He suggested I date lots before I remarry. "Enjoy the sexual freedom." He encouraged me to pursue my talents. Get a PhD. Get a good lawyer and call him if I needed help.

When I see him tonight, he will look me straight in the eye and say, "Hi Barbar, how's my number one daughter doing?" I'm sure it's because I'm the oldest, but I like how it sounds anyway. This time, I'm going to remember to tell him how much I appreciate and love him. I think I will also thank Mobi. When Charlie gives Bill a gentle slap on the back, a big hug and a hearty "How is my favorite grandfather?" I wonder if Bill will see how much they are alike.

The Encounter

DeVonna R. Allison

An icy wind threaded its way through the deserted gas pumps, as I struggled with the door to my gas tank. It was January in Michigan and the arctic air had frozen the tank's access door; I needed help. I looked around the empty station before noticing a man crossing the street in my direction.

Even from a distance I could see the man's stained coat was open to the wind that tossed his straggling hair and beard. I hesitated for a moment, but when that same wind set the ends of my scarf whipping straight out in front of me I called out to the stranger.

"Excuse me sir, could you help me, please?"

The man came over and when I'd explained my problem agreed to help me. At this distance I became aware the stranger was unwashed.

Showing him the release lever next to the driver's seat, I took my place at the tank opening. It was then that I noticed my wallet, lying open on the driver's seat, mere inches away from the man's hand, my cash, plainly visible.

Better get this over with quickly, I determined; the sooner this stranger was on his way again the more comfortable I'd feel.

I nodded to him, and while he pulled the lever I successfully pried the access door open with my credit card. I confess I was a little too relieved, as I thanked him for his help. Now, we could go our separate ways again.

But, the man didn't leave. Instead, he stood motionless, silently looking at me. We were only a step apart and the chill traveling the length of my spine now had nothing to do with the weather.

"Thank you," he said, "Thank you for letting me help you." And turning, the stranger continued on his way across the frozen parking lot.

24 Hours After a Tragedy

Amelia Wright

9:00 a.m. April 16, 2013

I have sweet dreams that night, until I'm as young as I feel. In this second life I'm getting ready for a party and I can't choose between a navy cardigan and a purple one. My little sister does my eye make up. We fight and tease and blow bubbles in gum while I comfort her chocolate curls, cooing like a dove into her ear. Eyes open and I see sunlight and severed limbs. The sky is an impossible shade of blue.

I learned that my poetry would be published for the first time the same day pressure cookers filled with workshop scraps peppered Boylston Street and sent Boston running. A California-based literary magazine wants to send my words, bound and tied with other pieces of my peers souls, onto paperback and out into the world. I haven't wanted to write anything since. There is nothing poetic to be said.

1:15 p.m. April 15, 2013

Merciless shoes nip at the back of my heels like angry lap dogs. There's a raw, red, heart-shaped patch of exposed skin kissing back at the chaffing canvas. We walk forward, coaxed by the wave of spring that's liberated our city. We are young and foolish, talking about boys while we walk, minds off of our physical suffering and onto a much different and more potent kind.

"Boston's so beautiful on days like today."

"So many people are here."

The roar of the crowd draws an image of the river behind the house I lived in as a teenager, of its constant applause to the audience of the trees. I used to take grainy Kodak images of the rapid's constant tripping and falling over cool brown rocks because I was determined to be interesting. You could never feel alone because of that noise. We sound the same, nature and humanity;

our difference lies on what you decide to nurture.

"Boston's so beautiful on days like today"

We stop and cheer on the runners breathing heavily in sun. We're proud of them, we envy them but it still doesn't make us want to run. We walk instead. From where we are in Brookline, we can follow Beacon Street all the way down to the finish line. We haven't said aloud where we're going but our feet take us in that direction to follow the current of hearts while talking and tucking hair behind our ears, turning to face the marathon every hundred feet or so to make sure it's still there. A spectator holds a sign, "Don't stop, you're amazing!" I take a picture of the inspirational message and we keep walking. I don't want to commit to Instagramming it yet, in case something better comes along.

Familiar faces spring like flowers out of the crowds to embrace us while we go. They offer us their food or alcohol; they clutch at our backs or drape arms across our shoulders like vines. We're all bone-white toothy grins and love. We all say the same thing:

"Boston's so beautiful on days like today"

4:00 p.m. April 15, 2013

Everything is different and slower than it was in fifth grade, back in 2001. There is no yellow classroom, no teacher closing the door and telling us what we know and to be calm, just the yellow patches of sunlight that invade Meg's apartment and the roar of the television. Names come in waves of people who I need to get in contact with, of people possibly hurt, or alone, or scared. Our parents call, voices rattled and far away. It must have been easier back in that September when they could rush to our schools and scoop us up in their arms, return us to our nests so they could decide the best way to explain terror to children who have it written on their faces. But they settle for text messages and phone lines, for dial tones and silence when the police shut off cell phone service. We don't want to detonate any more bombs, but they're going off all over our city. Suspicious packages scatter over our hub, reports flooding in from Tuffs, Harvard Square, JFK library and no one

knows anything except the constant sound of sirens heard from our window and that the sun is setting fast.

We're too young to really know how to love each other yet, but we're learning how hard—but necessary it is today when we talk to friends and loved ones to confirm safety and wholeness.

Don't stop, you're amazing.

My sister's boyfriend fights fires. He's at the finish line now. I don't know what he's doing; I don't know anything except the sound of all his brothers' sirens outside my window. Tears are quiet reverse exclamation points pouring from our eyes, quiet because I can't hear myself over the roar of the television.

It reminds me of the river behind the house I lived in as a teenager.

I'm just waiting for the other shoe to drop, waiting for the next wave of destruction, for the names of neighbors and lovers and friends to be burned onto my screen, until no one is left. I look for my sister's boyfriend's ladder number on every live feed we see.

Don't stop, you're amazing.

Meg makes us pasta while she fields calls from all over the world.

"No, we're okay."

"No we just missed it"

"We don't know. We don't know."

We can't think of anything else to do—there is nothing that we can do except watch screens and wait. We can't begin to mourn, we can't even fathom grief until the dust has settled and the sun has gone down. So we blink wildly at each other and chew.

11:00 p.m. April 15, 2013

We're quiet now. The burning has stopped, but we're all still smoldering.

3:45 p.m. April 16, 2013

I move like I'm walking through syrup all day. I don't respond when my name is called. My humanity drives me to be with people, to

surround myself with muscles, blood and bones that are still intact. Cartilage. Respiratory systems. Veins like the tangled roots of dead flowers. I crave body heat, like a newborn spider. But I don't want to talk to anyone.

I'm secretly composing this in my head all day. I have so many things I want to say but I'm not sure how to do it yet. I'm older now, 21 years gone, but I wish I were as young as I feel in my dreams. I'm a walking dichotomy of age and youth, wisdom and foolishness. My legs ache and creak underneath me while newborn eyes flutter frantically trying to understand everything I see. Children and animals bounce back from tragedies faster. I am neither. I can't bounce back because I wear these instances of senseless violence on me like tattoos; scars reminding me to lock my doors at night, to trust no one, to see something and say something.

Despite this feeling, Boston has not given up on me. It contradicts my longing to be pessimistic, to be forsaken and broken with every act of faith and kindness reported back at me over these past 24 hours. Carnage is no longer breaking news. Now we tell stories of the goodness of our people, of selflessness and beauty until that's all I see. Boston is beautiful on days like today, despite terror and heartbreak, because Boston embodies the American spirit. We live in the perfect state of grace.

4:25 p.m. April 16, 2013

The underground has been changed into a military state, but I ride along comfortably because I'm moving through syrup today and the calm controlled surveillance becomes me. There are certain songs I can't bring myself to listen to on my Ipod, so instead I swim through the grey in silence over to Lesley University's campus. I crave silence in the wake of so much noise; I chase it all the way to the quad where I'm met by fifty faces of my academic community, all in a circle, all quietly waiting for me to arrive. I melt into the crowd because I'm still craving body heat and I stand there waiting, too. Clouds gather overhead. The thunder has come to pay its respects to the departed. We're the same, humanity and nature.

Someone speaks her anguish. We nod in agreement and look at the stone beneath our feet. Some people are embracing, some people extend their hands to grope towards their neighbors, just to check to see if we're all still there. I don't have anything to say because I don't know just how to say it yet but I nod along with every syllable spoken. I can't hear their words because their pain makes them speak so soft and a chorus of birds has opened their mouths above us. They're the voices of the dead and they have more to say than any of us.

A group of students starts to sing, so quietly at first that it sounds like wind but then it grows until it surrounds us. It's haunting, sad and perfect. The birds join in. So does the rain, matching the staccato beat formed by the union of voices. We have the courage to look at each other now, amid this rush of noise. It reminds me of the river behind my house, of an applauding and silent audience of trees, of poetry.

1:00 a.m. April 17, 2013

I'm drifting into a sleep much sweeter than I expected, just as sweet and young as the night before. In this violet hum, this twilight between unconsciousness and sound, I'm thinking about the finish line. They tried to pervert that image, to bastardize and warp its meaning but we didn't let them. All they did was reroute us; the finish line became Massachusetts General Hospital where athletes and spectators ran to give blood, it became the hotels and buildings where loved ones gathered, it transformed into crossing whatever finish lines, mile markers and hills that we needed to in order to help victims and unite together as a city. They didn't break us. They won't break us. We rewrote the ending to their story.

Blackbirds

G. Timothy Gordon

The way winter twilight folds in upon itself,
Alien, as outcast crows huddling alee,
Cleaving between urban eaves and ledges
Against wind and cold. Day-dreaming maybe
Or making love in some cack-handed way,
Guards against the thick chill of replicate life.
If and when they are finally lifted up like all
The great silver and blond birds of myth and legend
Into the light, blackness etched upon frost-white
Morning ether unlike hovering hummingbird choppers
Or jabbering jays, bathetic robins, timid song-sparrows,
Stoic snowy owls, wholly unto self, innately jawing awfully
At each other over scraps and turf—lowbrow knaves and thugs—
Scuffling, shiftless, conflicted howlers ever wanting more,
Expecting middles and ends, accepting less, but never
The Black Pits of *Whenever*, without agenda, ambition,
Cover letter, *résumé*, kindred spirits, who, if, and when,
They do find me, *if at all*, ascend into light in every weather.

Old Man

Meg Eden

The old man in the park kisses
my hand and hands me his phone
number, the name of his train stop.
No house number. He says,
*I'd love to practice English
with a true American.*

Old man, no more polite
talk. I will never bang
you. If I was a quick thinker,
I would've said, *I'm sorry
but I don't speak English.*
I would've walked into the water
and become a kappa.

But my friend says:
*you are Asian on the inside,
white on the outside.*
I hide my mouth behind my hand,
apologize, tell him that I
am moving and do not know
my new address.

The old man laughs in my face.
He says, *You don't need to avoid me.*
His teeth are so gold, I could pull
them out, one by one, and sell them.

Wake

Jamie Gage

Curbside by the Royall Tyler
under Vedder's low roar:
Black, and the histrionics of night.
And us — another roadside drama
revealed by the backslide of love.

But what love we made
on that last holdover morning,
a carnal vernacular
among colonial ghosts.
They must have known
we would come together
in that battle-stained house,
your caterwauling screams astride
my own guttural rush — white knuckled,
the way it's always been
with lovers diffused, with lovers
forced to find their own way.

These songs of the heart are immutable,
vernal, utterly mortal.
Sing now
in the wake of what's lost.

When She Went to Baba Yaga

Katharyn Howd Machan

after Clarissa Pinkola Estes

my daughter forgot the doll I gave her
so she couldn't sort the poppy seeds
or carry back a flaming skull
to light the house of her heart.
Instead the old witch snorted and chortled
and made her a slave where wind blew hard
white and red and black all over
until she forgot her own true name
and mine, too, mine most of all
while I sat weeping over tiny braids,
a small mouth bright as blood.

Cat

Müesser Yeniay

In the evening
at a cold bus-stop
a huge cat
in darkness
drank all my love

I am his fur
I hugged, did not give up

the clouds fell to pieces
as if they'd suffice for earth

ears were cat's roof
paws were his house

his sorrow and joy
are where nobody lives

and there
I embraced him
with all my arms

About the Authors

DeVonna R. Allison is a United States Marine Corps veteran and freelance writer whose work has been featured in a variety of publications, both online and in print. Most recently her work has been included in a veteran's anthology, *Proud to Be*, Volume 3, published by Missouri Humanities Council with the Southeast Missouri State University, and the University of Maine's literary magazine, *The Binnacle*. She and her husband, Earl, have been married thirty four years, have four children and reside in southern Michigan, where they enjoy spending their free time listening to live blues music.

Robert F. Bradford has won two Bay Area Theatre Critics Circle Awards for Best Play in the Fringe of Marin Festival, and his plays have also been produced by Construct Theatre Company in New York, the Black Box Festival at College of Marin in Kentfield, CA, the Ross Valley Players, the Petaluma Arts Council and Café Amsterdam in Fairfax, CA, and published in *Mused* (Bella Online). His stories have been published in *Carbon Culture Review*, *Pithead Chapel*, *Coastline Journal*, *Bohème Magazine*, *SoMa Literary Review*, *Slow Trains Literary Journal*, and *Long Story Short*. He is an Adjunct Assistant Professor of English and Humanities, teaching Critical Inquiry & Reflective Writing and Foundations: American Pluralism, at Dominican University of California.

Meg Eden's work has been published in various magazines, including *Rattle*, *Drunken Boat*, *Eleven Eleven*, and *Rock & Sling*. Her poem "Rumiko" won the 2015 Ian MacMillan award for poetry. Her collections include *Your Son* (The Florence Kahn Memorial Award), *Rotary Phones and Facebook* (Dancing Girl Press) and *The Girl Who Came Back* (Red Bird Chapbooks). She teaches at the University of Maryland. Check out her work at: www.megedenbooks.com

Jamie Gage is a freelance writer who has published poems or has work forthcoming in *Main Street Rag*, *Inkwell*, *Mountain Gazette*, *Powhatan Review*, *Out of Line*, and others. A husband and father of three, he is also the General Manager of Vermont.gov.

Teresa Giordano writes non-fiction television programming on topics ranging from earwigs to forensic anthropology, to the south-west border, to bad-ass presidents. Her fictional short story "Reina" was published in the March 2014 issue of *Devilfish Review*, and it placed as finalist in the 2014 Pyschopomp short fiction contest. "Sock Puppet" was chosen to be read by actress Lori Wilner in the 2014 Red Hook, NY Literary Festival. She enjoys splitting her time between New York City and upstate New York where there is a thriving, supportive literary community that is kind to sock puppets and other strangers.

G. Timothy Gordon divides personal and professional lives between Asia and the Mountain/Desert Southwest. His *Open House* (fictions) will be published in January, while *Ground of this Blue Earth* and *Under Aries* were published in 2012 and 2014, respectively. An expanded edition of the prize-winning River-Stone Press poetry chapbook competition, *Everything Speaking Chinese*, is pending book publication. Awards include National Endowment for the Arts & Humanities Fellowships and writing residencies, while several poems have been nominated for Pushcarts. Night Company was nominated for an NEA Western States' Book Awards.

Barbara G. Hallowell is a Master NLP practitioner in Northern California. She has spent most of her life involved in creative endeavors and has won prizes for her paintings. Barbara has struggled with dyslexia all her life and only recently had the courage to submit anything she has written. "Bill" is her first published work.

Katharyn Howd Machan, Professor of Writing at Ithaca College, holds degrees from the College of Saint Rose, the University of Iowa, and Northwestern University. Her poems have appeared in numerous magazines; in anthologies and textbooks such as *The Bedford Introduction to Literature*, *The Best American Nonrequired Reading 2013*, *Poetry: An Introduction*, *Early Ripening: American Women's Poetry Now*, *Sound and Sense*, *Writing Poems*, *Literature: Reading and Writing the Human Experience*; and in 32 collections, most recently *Wild Grapes: Poems of Fox* (Finishing Line Press, 2014), *H* (Gribble Press, 2014—national winner) and *When She's Asked to Think of Colors* (Palettes & Quills Press, 2009—national winner). Former director of the national Feminist Women's Writing Workshops, Inc., in 2012 she edited *Adrienne Rich: A Tribute Anthology* (Split Oak Press).

Nancy Méndez-Booth is a fiction writer. She teaches writing and Latina/o literature and culture at colleges and universities in New York and New Jersey. Her work has appeared in print and online, including in *Jersey City Independent*, *KGB Bar Literary Magazine*, *Latina*, *The Packinghouse Review*, *Poets and Writers*, and *Salon*, as well as on Mamapedia.com and RealSimple.com. Nancy is looking for representation and a publisher for *Underbelly*, a novel told in closely linked stories. She is currently at work on a second manuscript and posts regularly on www.nancymendezbooth.com/blog.

Erika D. Price is a writer and social psychologist in Chicago. Her work has appeared in *The Toast*, *The Rumpus*, *Bacopa Literary Review*, *Midnight Breakfast*, and others. She writes the science fiction podcast *Wrong State University*.

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Amelia Wright originally hails from outside Portsmouth, New Hampshire. She has attended Lesley University in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and the University of Richmond in London, earning a degree in literature and education in 2013. She is now pursuing various graduate school opportunities to follow her dream of earning a doctorate in literature. This is her second published work.

Müesser Yeniay has won several prizes in Turkey including Yunus Emre (2006), Homeros Attila İlhan (2007), Ali Rıza Ertan (2009), Enver Gökçe (2013) poetry prizes. She was also nominated for Pushcart Prize 2016 by Muse Pie Press (USA). Her first book, *Darkness Also Falls Ground*, was published in 2009 and her second book, *I Founded My Home in the Mountains*, is a collection of translation from world poetry. *I Drew the Sky Again* was published in 2011. Her poems have appeared in the following magazines abroad: *The Voices Project*, *The Bakery*, *Sentinel Poetry*, *Yellow Medicine Review*, *Shot Glass Journal*, *Poesy*, *Shampoo*, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, *Apalachee Review* (USA & England); *Kritya* (India); *Casa Della Poesia*, *Libere Luci* (Italy); *Poeticanet*, *Poiein* (Greece); *Revue Ayna*, *Souffle*, *Loiseau de feu du Garlaban* (France); *Al Doha* (Qatar); *Tema* (Croatia).