

# CHEAT RIVER REVIEW

#14



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**Issue #14 Editorial Staff:** Editor-in-Chief: Kasey Shaw | Managing/ Creative Non-Fiction Editor: Rachael Bradley | Poetry Editor: Vincent Frontero | Fiction Editor: Morgan Roediger | Media Editor: Gabriel Bass | Social Media Editor: Caroline Riley | Webmaster: Edward France

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Cover photo by Laurie Lyn McGlynn

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**Laurie-Lynn McGlynn** is a Visual Artist and Writer. She is currently exploring the beautiful Welsh countryside as research for her next project. As an emerging poet, McGlynn references her written work with that of her visual work, which offers endless concepts for both mediums. Most recently her series "*Every Poem I've Ever Written...*" depicts the relationship between the ethereal and the tangible...the emotive response to the written word with that of a work of art. Our responses to both mediums are interchangeable. McGlynn's paintings have been exhibited in public galleries in Toronto, Halifax and Kitchener-Waterloo, online and in private collections. Her most recent work is on exhibition in the halls of the Queen's Park Legislature Building, Toronto until December 2021. Her poetry and prose has been published throughout Canada, the United Kingdom and the United States.

**Cairo II** Amy N. Pugsley

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Ten people  
From different countries  
On a rooftop in Cairo  
Light pollution from the city below  
Cigarettes in waving hands  
Smoke dancing into the night  
...  
I love it when  
In the middle of a foreign place  
A memory comes back  
From years and years ago  
A moment so quick but so meaningful  
It seems impossible it was ever forgotten  
...  
The call to prayer rings loud  
Vibrating over the city  
Interrupting the revelry  
Someone spills something sticky  
A dog barks in the distance  
Time is rarely this still

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**Amy N. Pugsley** is a Persian-Canadian writer, poet, and educator located in Cairo, Egypt. Her work has previously been published in: International School Parent Magazine, Boom Saloon Magazine, Rigorous Magazine, The Write Launch, Genre Urban Arts, Pamplemousse Magazine, Oasis Magazine, Cairo West Magazine, & Flair Magazine.

**Mother Tree, *Ailanthus Altissima*** Felicia Mitchell

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A paradox inhabits my woods,  
 a tree both ornamental and invasive.  
 The birds do not mind it, but I do.  
 Each spring, I walk these woods  
 looking for morels and wildflowers,  
 pulling garlic mustard before it goes to seed.  
 The sapling Trees of Heaven go too—  
 hacked down and even poisoned,  
 despite my fear of herbicides.  
 I wear gloves and covered shoes  
 as I spray the bark of each hacked sapling.  
 I apologize to every tree, to the soil,  
 to myself for failing to avoid herbicides  
 the way I once failed to avoid chemo.  
 We are not always in charge of what invades.  
 Last year, Dutchman's Breeches emerged  
 where I killed a colony of *Ailanthus*.  
 This year, the Dutchman's Breeches have spread.  
 Violets and ferns want to flourish there too.  
 Maypops dancing across the hill are my offspring.  
 But I am nothing if not hypocritical.  
 I know that every year more saplings will come,  
 the mother root within the soil branching out  
 to compete for a natural habitat.  
 How many years has this tree grown, this tall tree  
 that I stand and look at every summer?  
 How did it end up in a grove of beeches?  
 What else would return to my woods if I killed it?  
 One year, I will chop down the mother tree  
 that sends its roots and chemicals out like toxins  
 that are as bad, I think, as cancer.  
 But she and I are kin, this tree.  
 Both of us are invasive species,  
 my own body a map of colonization of this country,  
 my own survival dependent on weeding my genes  
 and poisoning the cells that take up too much room.  
 It is hard to kill a tree: a sapling or an unborn tree.  
 I know I will die before the *Ailanthus* destroys my woods.  
 But I want to pass this land on, I want its flowers to come.

Bears that trek out back may one day find a pawpaw.  
I want to believe anything is possible if I believe.

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**Felicia Mitchell** has lived in the mountains of southwest Virginia since 1987. Mitchell's poems have been published widely in journals and anthologies, including in the recent anthologies "Mountains Piled Upon Mountains. Appalachian Nature Writing in the Anthropocene"; (WVU Press) and "Rewilding. Poems for the Environment" (Flexible Press). "Waltzing with Horses," a collection of poems, is available from Press 53. She also edited "Her Words. Diverse Voices in Contemporary Appalachian Women's Poetry" for University of Tennessee Press.

*The Names of Streets* Rhienna Guedry

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Behind the Piggly Wiggly—for years I thought it was a bonafide fairy glade—hanging moss and live oaks fern-filled and mysterious, that steady trickle of what I later learned was not a stream, but the irrigation canal that ran adjacent to our Louisiana neighborhood named after governance. So like a dutiful American capitalist-in-training, I skinned my knees on Debit Drive, hopped chain-link fences on Treasurer, and looked for crawfish in the ditches on Council.

To be raised in the same house for twelve years and two floods, then to spend year after year chasing or outrunning something that was neither a hot air balloon nor a hurricane, we moved five times in as many years to new towns in new neighborhoods. This is how I learned to spell Rhododendron and Chrysanthemum: not because I saw their blooms, but that we moved onto streets named after where they used to grow.

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**Rhienna Renèe Guedry** is a queer writer and artist who found her way to the Pacific Northwest, perhaps solely to get use of her vintage outerwear collection. Her work has been featured in *Empty Mirror*, *HAD*, *Oyster River Pages*, *Bitch Magazine*, *Screen Door*, and elsewhere. Rhienna is currently working on her first novel. Find more about her projects at [rhienna.com](http://rhienna.com) or @chouchoot on Twitter.

from *Sophia Lethe Talks Doxodox Down* Robert Savino Oventile and Sandy Florian

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**synchysis**

D: I the sand do relish or the breeze or the bonfire more or the phlegmatic sea the most?

SL: Pungent and grey float the smoke and the whales.

D: The sparkles in the air join the glitters in my eyes.

SL: Just stay lounging you melancholic, or over topple, since neither your shirt, without a collar, nor this scene, or even sleeves, can I believe.

D: I know! Gothic and on a floating stage, acoustic and just off shore ...

SL: The harpist with the ostrich-skin boots and black-feather boa, I must say ...

D: I, when the platform angles a bit, nice touch, just can make out the meadow, vibrantly sanguine, starred with flowers, the carpet depicts, if I squint. A bone pile elevates the drum kit.

SL: I listen and sway, rapt and rhythmic.

D: Silent and null sound the quartet and the instruments. Is this what Homeric dumb show red-eyed for seven hundred and twenty-three miles drove I to witness past innumerable *descansos* if my ears indeed someone did not into sneak wax?

SL: Paranoid and choleric, you speculate and complain. An enchanting musical interlude, more like, from a *commedia dell'arte* improvised with delight.

D: This soundlessness, the tense air, the crows ...

SL: A mask you need wax's opposite to open yourself entire ears blushing fans surging the notes ...

D: ... why I am for I know not how wading forward to orient audition resolution wells up irresistibly Ishmael walks seaward ...

SL: ... alit and aloft mingle cell phones and iPads ...

**paradox**

D: The guidebook says, “Listen for the silence.”

SL: I read pitch darkness gilds the surface with a pleasing radiance.

D: I should bring a camera. Listen to this: “Wonderfully odorous, the attendant mists immediately anesthetize the olfactory nerves.”

SL: The back cover boasts, “A taste unlike anything you will ever remember!”

D: Wait, here’s a disclaimer: “The bracing cold exposed skin will register in no way gives an indication of the waterway but arrives from the desert of ice and snow just beyond, a perennially favorite attraction closed to visitors in perpetuity.”

SL: Go anyway?

D: You bet.

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**Robert Savino Oventile** has published interviews, essays, and book reviews in *Postmodern Culture*, *Jacket*, *symplokē*, and *Chicago Quarterly Review*, among other journals. His poetry has appeared in *New Delta Review*, *Upstairs at Duroc*, and *Denver Quarterly*. He is the author of *Impossible Reading: Idolatry and Diversity in Literature* and of *Satan’s Secret Daughters: The Muse as Daemon* (both with the Davies Group).

**Sandy Florian** is the author of five books and one chapbook. She lives in Washington, DC.

## The Bloody Holly Story *Brett Biebel*

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It starts on youth group night at the Surf, and it's one of them up-till-dawn lock-ins with music and games and pretzels, and this is the mid-90s, but the girls are wearing poodle skirts. Ponytails. Guys have greased hair and white t-shirts with decks of cards rolled up under the sleeves, and the speakers are alternating Tommy James and Elvis and this like soft-rock Christian music where the singers invoke Jesus by his actual name (and all tender and sincere and earnest), and the kids dance far apart (except for the ones that sit close in the booths, and they're looking deeply into each other's eyes and fidgeting with promise rings and saying how they'll be together forever, and just wait till we turn 18, and we can get married right then), and some of them sing with their eyes closed, and there's this low-humming debate about whether you need to say grace before you reach in for a snack. No, is the consensus. But some of them do. And this girl (who they say is named Laura) goes to the bathroom on a dare, and she's supposed to say "Bloody Holly" 59 times while staring at the mirror, and nobody knows what happens (on account of it's just her in there), but when she comes out she's holding this pair of horn-rimmed glasses with the lenses all busted, and they ain't polycarbonate. They sure seem like real glass. Some kids, they think they can see designs in the cracks. A picture of Jesus or the Virgin Mary, or hey, maybe that's a guitar or an airplane (or maybe it's three guys on a coastal train), and, in the meantime, Laura's just standing there shaking and shocked, and she says Buddy Holly appeared to her. Says he touched her shoulder. It felt dead and frozen (or maybe it started to burn). He told her there's nothing worse than dying young, and he's in purgatory and having to relive the crash every single night, and it hurts just the same every time and all the way through. She starts crying. Some of her friends rub her back. The kids don't know if she's serious, and there's a few who think she's a prophet, and some others think she's made the whole thing up, and then there's this contingent that believes it's all just the work of the devil, and what they oughta do is burn those glasses just as soon as possible and before this goes any further. Before it gets out of hand, and they argue over this for a while. The music keeps playing. It gets late. Laura, she bows out or zones out, and it's one of them things where they're all talking about her like she isn't even there, and finally someone says, "Let's pray on it," and they do, and about halfway through the Our Father two kids stand up on opposite sides of the dance floor and say, "We should throw them in the lake," and it's (exactly) simultaneous, and everyone takes this as a sign. The chaperones (who are half- (or maybe fully) asleep at this point let them out. They walk through the neighborhood. Maybe 50, 60 kids. It's all hushed whispers and footsteps, and, word is, if you overhead, it would've sounded pretty damn mystical, and they make their way over to the pier. There's a whole line of them. Standing. Staring at the Lady of the Lake, and Laura, they send her out to the edge of the dock, and she tosses the glasses in like a Frisbee, and (and maybe this is another little miracle) everyone swears they hear them sink. They all just stand there for a while. Dead quiet. Nobody knows what to do, but it's this

collective reverie, and the whole walk back to the Surf is silent, and it's dawn by the time they get there, and parents are lined up in minivans and beat-up SUVs, and the kids, they all look shot. Exhausted. Basically beat to shit, and, of course, that figures (because they were up all night and drinking Jolt or Surge or Mountain Dew by the barrel), and so no one asks any questions, and everyone goes home to get some sleep, but they still talk about it the next day and all through the weekend. All through the whole next year. Laura, she becomes like small-town famous, and it gets bad enough that (they say) she lights out the day after graduation and winds up living somewhere way up in the Nebraska Panhandle (or maybe it's Idaho (or sometimes Utah)), and warm days you can still see kids with snorkels at City Beach. Full diving gear. They'll tell you they're looking for Bloody Holly's glasses, and in the distance they can see older folks in boats, and they're dumping in these old horn-rims they bought from the Dollar General, and so there must be dozens of pairs under the water there (and when a kid finds one the general rule is not to say shit, to hold it close and hide it under the bed, and the whole idea is it'll bring good luck), and the boaters and the divers, they actually wave to each other. Smile. Raise a toast. They salute and pass this kind of mutual respect because the sun is shining, and the lake smells like fish and algae, and this is Clear Lake, and the whole thing is like baseball. Ritual. Legacy. Tradition. It's Cerro Gordo County's favorite summer pastime.

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**Brett Biebel** teaches writing and literature at Augustana College in Rock Island, IL. His (mostly very) short fiction has appeared in *SmokeLong Quarterly*, *The Masters Review*, *Emrys Journal*, and elsewhere. *48 Blitz*, his debut story collection, is available from Split/Lip Press.

*trigger warning: domestic violence*

**Evelyn's Dolls** Barbara Ivusic

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If I was to describe myself to you, I would tell you that I'm like the Cindy doll. I don't have all the perks of the Barbie because I am a cheap imitation. My hair can be brushed and you can still squeeze me into tight clothing. My body is similar to my rival's, except for my legs, which are not made of rubber, but of a type of hollow plastic that can be bent and moulded, easily destroyed. My hair is shiny, golden, and I give you the illusion that I'm the type of doll that can withstand the test of time. Perhaps I'm also a little ahead of myself, maybe even naïve? I certainly don't have the talent to handle criticism and I'll shatter if you throw me across the room with the intention of hurting me.

When Evelyn's children talked about the woman who was here before me, they said that she wasn't always faulty, but that she became that way. They said that she liked to cook, but that she hardly ever ate. When I asked them why she didn't eat, they said that she had lost her sense of smell due to an injury, which is why she could bear chores like cleaning out the cat litter and unclogging nests of hair from the tub. Evelyn never talked about her ex-wife, but I knew that they had a secret, something that had bound them together for all those years.

I met Evelyn at a pathology clinic. We stared at one another in between sips of \$1 vending machine coffee. I was attracted to the look of her teeth when she laughed – she had two jagged lateral incisors on both sides of her palate. When she asked me what I was doing at the clinic, I told her that I was making sure that everything inside me was in order. She decided to evade my question when I asked her the same, then insisted on seeing my bandaged vein. She gripped my wrist with her clammy hand, then used her thumb to press down around the wound to make sure that I could bleed. It hurt so badly, but I didn't tell her to stop. She told me that the colour of my veins reminded her of snot, then made a joke about her children.

I met them, a few weeks later, at a picnic by the river. I handed them half a sandwich each. They nibbled on the ham that had the size and thickness of a tongue. This is when they told me that the other woman left them because she no longer loved them, and when someone leaves you, they are weak. They showed me a photo of her in which she is sitting by the river next to Evelyn. A car is parked where some kangaroos are standing. The sun is out. When Evelyn sees me looking at the photo, she snatches it from my hands, rips it up and lets the pieces fall onto the grass. I scurry to put it back together, because I am curious about what she is hiding, what *they* are hiding. When she is whole again, I realise that her face is punctured with faded bruises, just like mine.

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**Barbara Ivusic** is a writer and editor from Sydney, Australia. She is currently residing in Berlin, Germany and writing her first novel, along with a series of flash fiction pieces that are centered around the theme of isolation and the Australian Gothic. "Thirst" is the first in the series, published in *Tears in the Fence* Volume. 72 in September 2020.

### The Lake House *Garrett Stack*

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Jenny Blatz was ready when she finally hit her trifecta. The market crashed right into a fuel shortage and the skies wept for the lost profits. They kept right on weeping onto Southern Indiana until Lake Lenore leapt its seawalls to flood half the tasteful walkout basements and ruin all the manicured lawns of the pretty-lotted lake houses. It was a full-blown disaster, and like any good profiteer, Jenny was there to sell oars.

When Big Ed Duncan called to unload his dying mother's aging cabin, she was ready with a lawn team to unroll fresh sod, with a contractor to assess the potential structural damage, and with artsy photos of the sheltered inlet locale. These steps were all standard real estate procedure, and she took them as a matter of course with the honestly selfish intent of maximizing her own profits by way of Big Ed's grief. Then she had the dream.

The dream went like this: Jenny Blatz was visited by her younger self, Jenny Valley. They both sat on a dock, dangling their feet into Lake Lenore. Both sets of toenails were the same shade of pink. Jenny B had cuffed the hems of her tasteful grey suit pants, while Jenny V still wore the summer dress code of 1982: jean shorts and a halter that showed her upper thighs and lowermost ribs to best effect. They never made eye contact, only stared at the other's rippling reflection.

"Ugh," Jenny V said.

"I know, I know," Jenny B said. "I use lotion every night. On *everything*."

"They look like driftwood."

"They're your feet too."

"Unlikely," Jenny V said as her tan pair rippled like trout.

"You'll see," Jenny B said, trying to remember a time when aging was as unlikely as a date-free Friday night. Jenny V gave the unconscious shrug her older self had worked so hard to eradicate. Beside the fact that it was unprofessional, she didn't have the shoulders for it anymore.

"Nice place," Jenny V said, nodding up at the old Duncan house. "Is it ours?"

"No," Jenny B said. "We're selling it. We're in real estate these days."

"Mmm," Jenny V hummed. "Why?"

"Good money, honey. Small engine repair doesn't pay the bills." Jenny B shook her head at the quick young feet darting in the water. "You really shouldn't let Wally buy you that ring."

The shrug again, then silence but for the call of a big white crane standing at the inlet entrance, its lonely sound drifting across the water on a breeze that lifted the blonde hair from two identical necks before moving off into the trees.

“Why can’t it be ours?” Jenny V finally said.

“Real estate agents don’t buy the houses,” Jenny B said.

“Why not?”

Jenny B paused, unsure. She could feel her younger self waiting for an answer, so she scraped up an excuse from atop the pile of gradually accumulated adult aphorisms. “It’s a matter of ethics.”

“Ugh,” Jenny V coughed. The famous “ugh,” so topped off with scorn it was flammable, capable of embarrassing everyone equally from her mother right on up to Chuck Bass, the Central High Principal. Now here it was, finally turned on herself.

Jenny B felt her face flush. “I have a reputation now. A different *kind* of reputation.”

“Jesus god,” Jenny V said and stood. “If this is it,” and delivered the shrug as an ellipsis.

Jenny B enviously watched herself pull her top off and shimmy out of her jeans, revealing the same tan skin from head to toe and everything taut, proportional, golden. Her dive was graceful and long and hung in the late evening light. She went under without a splash and Jenny B held her breath with her younger counterpart, waiting for her to come up. She held it until she grew lightheaded, but the cool green water held no bubbles, no ripples proceeded reemergence. Before she faded to black, Jenny heard the crane, calling to no one in particular, one last time.

She woke up next to Wally gasping for air and flailing. He snorted and rolled, taking the tangled sheet with him and leaving an exposed Jenny sweaty and panting and reeling. She got control of herself as the realness of the dream faded and her breathing slowed. Like all dreams, the materiality of the thing unraveled before her eyes as they adjusted to the darkness of the bedroom. Jenny tried desperately to hold onto it just as it disappeared, but she was able to snatch a single thread: Lake Lenore, the Duncan property, the dive, *why not?*

She padded silently out of the bedroom and down the hallway to her home office. She crossed the room and switched on the green-shaded banker’s lamp, revealing walls lined floor to ceiling with photos tacked in evenly spaced rows. In every photo sat a house, snapped by Jenny herself. She called it the Hit List, and it featured every property in Albion and Lake Lenore that she wanted to sell. Here and there were blank spaces, little patches of deeper dark amongst the shadowy Tudors, faux-rustic post and beams, and luxury ranches. These pictures were on her desk now in a little SOLD binder, their spots left empty to track her victories.

Sitting down at the desk, she flipped open her dog-eared INDOT Real Estate Manual and searched the index for a relevant reference. There were over 100 pages of “Buying Procedures,” but she scanned page after page without coming across any reference to realtors buying the properties they were selling. Certainly, it mentioned “Conflicts of Interest.” That was right there on page two, and three, and four. But at no point, with the minutes stretching to hours, did Jenny find any passage that forbade realtors from buying their own properties.

As she worked, dawn crept evenly down both walls illuminating the individual entries on the Hit List. She turned unerringly to the Duncan property, tacked at 90 degrees to her dominant right side, intentionally first in line. She clicked off the desk lamp and stared at the doorknob glinting in the first morning light. She stared at the little golden glow and remembered Jenny V diving lithely into Lake Lenore to never return. She thought of conflicts of interest, of ethics, of Wally, whose faint snoring permeated the room despite the closed door. For the first time in 20 years, Jenny Blatz shrugged.

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Jenny hated her husband’s name. Wally loved it. “Blatz, like the beer!” he’d say, and then give you his trademark elbow nudge. Jenny hated the nudge too. She didn’t hate Wally, per se, but she did loathe his small engine repair shop, their modest cul-de-sac ranch, and her middle child, Fran. The first two she’d admit after three martinis. The last she’d take to her grave.

She loved, too. She loved her maiden name and her little red Miata and selling real estate. She also loved Baskin Robins and schnauzers and the smell of overripe oranges, which reminded her of her grandparents’ backyard in Sun City, Arizona. But she would trade it all, the schnauzers and the ice cream and the wafting citrus memories for a lot at Lake Lenore. Hell, she’d throw Fran in to cover the closing costs.

As one of the first big city slicks to buy lake property, Ed’s lot was one of the last of the modest cabins. He built it in the 80’s for his mother to spend her summers out from under his feet. If the cabin was small but tasteful, Big Ed himself was anything but. A fixture in Albion, he spent most of his time at the Crow Bar when he came south for a visit, throwing his asphalt-empire cash around and laughing like a tickled bear. He liked it so much he bought a second lot and built a much larger, much less tasteful estate so he wouldn’t have to sleep sweating on his mother’s screened-in porch. Big Ed was the boulder that started the landslide, until nothing was left for Albioner’s but the state campground and a rickety boat launch. That was about to change though, if Jenny Valley had her say.

The first step was to convince Big Ed to set the price way too high to scare off the locals, and Jenny did it in one easy phone call. He was grieving and greedy and ready to part with his treasured memories in exchange for cash.

Step two was to gently steer the yuppies away from the property. Given the cabin would be a teardown for all the metropolitans, Jenny emphasized the difficulties of finding reliable

contracting on the lake without breaking the bank. When she cited a few figures, Jenny watched their eyes widen behind their tasteful sunglasses. If she failed to mention these examples came primarily from the palatial Tuscan-style villa, so what? Her clients were just as happy to buy an already built monster and save themselves the trouble. Wally would have called that a “two birder” if he knew what she was up to.

Step three was to keep the Albion crowd out. At the list price, there weren't many takers that could reach that price standing on tiptoe, but a local judge came sniffing around eyeing a fishing cabin and retreat from his wife for his impending retirement. Jenny reminded him of The Flood and offered up some pictures of the crawlspace and foundation sunk under four inches of water, and he decided a lake a little further from home might be a wiser choice anyhow.

Then there was a round of repetitive calls to Big Ed where she'd say they needed to lower the price (again), which she would then fail to advertise in any meaningful way beyond putting a “Reduced Price” rider on the original For Sale sign. If anyone called to check on the price, she'd say she'd have to check with the seller, and then misplace the phone number. Jenny bided her time in the longsuffering way her mother and grandmother and the whole line of Valley women had perfected over generations of stoves, creaking shopping carts, black eyes, used car steering wheels, and perpetually light purses. But unlike her mother, whose moment came on just the right drunken Tuesday when she finally brained Jenny's father with a hammer, Jenny's chance came with one last price drop, the start of fall, and a final apologetic phone call to Big Ed Duncan.

She made the call on a Thursday from her small office, formerly Fran's bedroom, at 4 p.m. when she knew Ed would be getting ready to call it for the week. As she dialed, she fiddled with her sharp little quartz-handled letter opener. She enjoyed the weight of it, the brush of pink on something that was both practical and slightly dangerous, which she liked to think was not an unfair description of herself. When he answered, Jenny sat up straight.

“Hey, Ed,” she said. “It's Jenny.”

“Tell me good news,” Ed said.

She sighed theatrically. “I'm afraid not.”

“God damn, Jenny. I know you're doing your best down there, but what the hell do I gotta do? I'm ready to knock the place down and cover the whole lot in asphalt. I could charge townies for parking.”

She graciously ignored the fact she was one of those townies, but filed it away, folder name: *Ammunition*.

“It’s the season, Ed. Nobody wants to buy a house in October. They’ve got turkeys and Christmas presents and snow on the brain. If we wait until the spring, maybe come down a little more in price—”

“No,” Ed said, cutting her off. “This is rock bottom. I’ll keep the damn house myself before I go any lower.”

“Ugh,” Jenny said, imbuing the single syllable with as much of her former Valley scorn as she could manage. The sound stretched luxuriously as it reemerged from her lips after so long in captivity. “And keep paying for the property taxes, upkeep, lawn services, snow removal, all that bullshit?”

“What are my options?” he said. “If you can’t sell it, no one can.”

“I understand, and I am truly sorry,” Jenny said, glowing a little with reluctant pride, and filed it away too. “You know me. If it’s got a roof and four walls, I can sell it. Hell, I even sold a house with three walls once. Owners called it The Teepee. True story.”

Ed laughed, and Jenny could picture him rubbing the back of shiny head sitting at a big oak desk in some Indianapolis high rise. She imagined him looking down at the little people walking by below, people like Jenny. She pictured herself blending a margarita in Bid Ed’s mother’s kitchen while in the next room the phone rang and rang. She steeled herself for the pivot.

“Listen, Ed,” she said. “There’s one other option.”

“I’m listening,” he said.

“I’ve been thinking about buying a place out there myself. A little retreat for me and Wally to get away weekends.”

“Isn’t there some legal issue there?” he said. “You being a realtor and all.”

“I checked,” she said a little too quickly. She forced herself to calm down and focus on the close. “There’s nothing illegal about it. And it would actually save you money on the closing costs because I wouldn’t take my fee.”

“Is that a fact?” Big Ed did everything loud, so Jenny could actually hear him thinking. She’d learned long ago that often the best tool in her sales arsenal was silence, so she fiddled with the letter opener and let his wheels turn.

“Not to sound indelicate,” he said. “But can you swing it?”

“You know what my fees are, Ed. And you know how many of your friends’ houses I’ve sold. You do the math.”

“Well,” he said, and Jenny felt her chest expand in foolish hope. She was caught in limbo, ready to pop or fly away. She prayed while empty air filled the telephone. Finally Ed cleared his throat.

“Fuck it,” he said. “At least you know what you’re getting yourself into.”

Jenny could feel her chair float right up off the floor.

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Jenny had hung hundreds of SOLD signs in her life, but she’d never felt the kind of satisfaction she received from hanging one in her own name under her own name. It was a perfectly closed loop, like a prayer answered with an immediate miracle. All the times she’d thought, “Sure is pretty, wish it were mine,” as she closed another listing, then gone home to remove a square from her Hit List in her fake office in their little ranch and felt vaguely empty. Now here she was, and it *was* hers, and it felt damn good.

There were some advantages to buying your own listing. For one, the paperwork was simple. Two, there was no need for additional appraisal or inspection. And three, she already had the keys. They jingled merrily as she walked up the little brick walkway from the frontage road, *her* little brick walkway, and let herself in for what must have been the fiftieth time.

In the depths of her scheming, she’d drive out to the lake house at the end of a long day and have a glass of wine, always sitting someplace different. She’d imagine herself hosting in the kitchen, preparing finger foods for her new and better acquaintances. She’d imagine sitting on the back deck reading a novel, something classy instead of the usual romance trash, and watching the sun take a dip in the lake. She’d imagine tasteful sex in the master bedroom, usually with Wally but sometimes not and that really got her motor running. She remembered some untraceable piece of advice she’d read in a self-help book or saw on TV that said, “Perceive and achieve.” She liked that, and it stuck with her even if the source didn’t. And so she schemed and frowned at perspective buyers and called Big Ed until she finally inserted the key and turned. The rasping lock sounded exactly like achievement.

The place would need gutted of course, but Wally was pretty handy and Jenny had a down line to all the best gently used furniture. As she surveyed her new domain, Jenny envisioned the house as it would be and felt the little tingle of pleasure. She could hear the knocking of ice in cocktail glasses, the hushed laughter of intimate gatherings, her new phone ringing with invitations to other, better parties. Out of the corner of her eye, she caught Jenny V’s perfect face pressed to the kitchen window in envy.

She walked out onto the back porch and stared across the lake at the mansions cropping grass like splendid cattle waiting for their owners to return from the golf course or from a tasteful slalom ski. On the other side of her new little brown house, she could hear Wally backing his dinghy down the gravel drive, already eager to get fishing. She pictured her neighbors watching

him grilling freshly caught crappie in his “EAT MEAT” apron. As she sat in the plastic Adirondack chair, she started adding up the money she’d need to come up with in order to get some classier chaise loungers, to replace the weed infested pavers with a real patio, to knock her new house down and build something more appropriate. From the mouth of the cove, she heard the splash of a dive and a crane calling to no one in particular. She waited for the phone to start ringing.

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**Polaroids** Kathryn Ordiway

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There is a man at the county fair who will take a special picture of you if you know how to ask. One from the back. One that shows right where you're going. But only once. No redos if you don't like the image, no coming back next year for more. One and done. He keeps track of his customers in a grubby little notebook. He wears a tattered jacket, eats fish and chips with his fingers on the wharf, shouts "Funnel cake, deep-fried Oreos," when he remembers what he's paid to do.

He doesn't accept money for the pictures, though it is understood that a corn dog needs to be purchased after the click of the camera. Tough if you're vegan, vegetarian, just don't like corn dogs. And you don't get to pick the pose. He'll say, "Hands on the railing," or "legs dangling off the pier" (a pose the boys hate) and you just have to obey.

It's easy to see who's done it. A backglow in the eyes—warmer or cooler based on what they've seen. And some people post them on Instagram, #countyfairpierpic, but they don't upload well. A cell phone picture of a polaroid is never that good. Grainy, faded, splotchy beyond editing. You can never share them, not really. You can try, but what you see fades into the mist that always hangs over the lake, and people call you crazy, call you silly, say come on, the future is yours to control.

No one talks about whether it comes true, what the pictures show. They just pocket the info, save it for later, and try to focus on the gut drop of the Pirate Ship ride, hair sticky on the back of their neck while they throw darts at balloons, a hand in a hand or in a pocket, the stars, the lights, the present. If it doesn't, a carnival hotdog is cheap. And if it does, well, it's the crack at the center of certainty. A fraying at the edge of reality. A dark box with a white frame you tuck in a dictionary out of fear.

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What Goes with Us Jennifer Fliss

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Annie didn't see Leslie's last breath because she'd bitten off a crescent of fingernail and was studying it like it would give her all the answers. Didn't they say that? That the fingernails bely a person's wellbeing? Annie did not look into Leslie's eyes, wordlessly saying, *I'm here*. Annie did not say, *you are not alone*. Annie did not say, *I love you*. Annie flicked the nail and it landed in an open book – a library hardcover that Leslie had been reading before she couldn't anymore. The book had been read so often that the spine, like Leslie's body, had given up. It reminded Annie of a butterfly on display or a woman's body open and ready to give birth.

She had told Leslie this when it first popped into her mind and Leslie rolled her eyes. *We didn't want kids. You didn't want kids. I know, I know*, Annie had said.

In the early months, Annie had watched Leslie in bed, vigilant to every change of breath, every possible ending. She rotated Leslie's body and read to her Rilke and Garfield comics. Turned on music in the early evening for softened non-alcoholic happy hours. She had focused on every labored word from Leslie's parched lips, until those too tapered out. Months passed. Annie sought conversation from the hospice nurses and aids and her mind reeled off to-do lists while she went through the motions and the accompanying dialogue, *turn, open up, hi babe, I'm here, turn again, this'll just pinch, open up*.

Annie thought she would've gasped and clutched Leslie's body when she died, envisioning wails and moans, prostrating herself to a God she didn't believe in. Instead, when she saw that Leslie's chest was no longer rising up and down under the quilt, she held her ear to Leslie's mouth, thought about how the proximity of these body parts once meant something else. She sat back down and stayed there for an hour biting her nails even further down, as if she might find something there, underneath.

It was quick – too quick that Leslie's body was removed, the rented medical equipment whisked from the house, the book returned to the library. Annie wasn't sure if she did this, or someone else, so hazy was that time, the great yawn between relief, grief, and loneliness. The house was so quiet without the hiss of oxygen or Otis Reading playing softly in the background.

After the funeral, Annie thought of the fingernail. It had been thick, difficult to pry off. It had gone too deep; it still smarted a week later. The nail had been bone white and curved into a half moon, quarter, crescent, whatever. She once knew the phases of the moon – tracking them on the calendar with Leslie, going outside on clear nights. The mosquito bites worth it. The bats swooping in the trees overhead. Annie only knew Orion's belt, but Leslie seemed to know the positioning of every star. She could guide them on the seas, if they ever needed it, Annie always thought. Annie wanted the nail back. Proof of life in those dead skin cells. The last time it was attached to her body, Leslie had been alive.

What was the book? Annie logged into her library account. No, no, she hadn't taken a book out in four months it said. She missed when she had the focus, the ability to temporarily leave her own life in a book.

Of course, it would be under Leslie's account. She searched Leslie's purse, hands feeling around in the deep leather bag: chapstick, bus pass with a sticker for a local ice cream shop on it, nail clippers – Annie laughed, a bone stuck in her throat. She eventually found the library card and put everything back, not wanting Leslie to lose the things she needed, once.

Annie looked up the account – Leslie's pin was their wedding date – so predictable that Annie's breath caught. Leslie had no overdue fines. Leslie had eighteen books on her "for later shelf," six books on hold, one in transit. The book that had been her last, Annie saw, was a scientific look at the afterlife. How appropriate, Annie thought.

At the library, Annie found the book easily and opened it exactly where it wanted to open, spine still soft, giving. Nothing was in the pages, which were leather-like, soft but strong. She flipped through the rest of the book, shook it, loosening it from its plastic jacket. Her fingernail was not there. Proof of life, gone. She hoped that that cellular piece of herself went with Leslie wherever she went.

A librarian came over. "You can't treat the books like that."

"I know," Annie said. "Sorry." She sank into a couch and listened to the clatter of people on the computers. The smell of bread and human bodies unique to a library.

The librarian took the book from Annie's hands. "It's pretty beaten up."

"I'm checking it out."

"We can get another copy from another branch."

"No. This one's good."

"This should be taken out of circulation," she said and turned to a young man behind the desk. "Mike, do we –"

Annie snatched the book from the librarian.

The librarian looked back at Mike, for back-up perhaps, but he was already doing something else. The librarian kept looking around the space. Annie held the book tight. The zip of a copy machine, the clickity clack of fingers on keyboards, a child's shout that was quickly silenced by its grown-up.

"I want this one," Annie whispered. With a fingertip she pried an edge of plastic cover up.

“We have a process when the books get too worn,” the librarian said, but she had softened. She was a librarian because she understood the power of a book. “We probably have more copies. I can check for you.”

“No thank you.” She pulled more of the protective cover off, gradually, trying to evade the librarian’s scolding, though her destruction of the thing was in plain sight.

Mike rounded the desk.

“You need help?” he asked the librarian. The librarian sighed and asked for Annie’s library card. Asked for the book.

“Okay, you can take it,” she said. “It’s a good read.” Annie handed it over. She stared at her empty palms. The librarian scanned it. *Beep. Blip.* Handed the book back to Annie who clutched it to her chest, allowing the loose plastic flap to tickle her neck.

She read it in a day. Didn’t return it, let the fines accrue until she marked it as missing. Paid the price. Let her fingernails grow.

Cardinals *Helen Park*

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I suppress another cough because I'm still healing down there. Two inches of stitches, a small squirt bottle and a grocery bag full of hospital-issued sanitary pads. I refuse the painkillers that could help my tailbone (what if they taint the milk?) which I bruised heavily from pushing. Due to the pain I can't sit down. I walk ad infinitum around the perimeter of our garage-converted apartment while I feed, burp and soothe her. I trudge outside, while the warm bean sleeps in the front carrier, through frozen fields and on the road when the walls of the apartment begin to crawl and wriggle. Very soon my feet go numb; they become heavy, plodding hooves. While the world is still dark and mute, I roam to the window through which I watch the cardinals. Just before dawn, the cardinals begin to take shape out of the blur of night. I stand straight-legged, squinting and spying on them even though my eyes throb from fatigue. Inevitably, dread starts to rise in tandem with the sun because this grain of time, this tissue-thin slice, will soon be over. Before long I must stumble on my blocks of wood to the bedroom where she is awake, looking up at the ceiling and waiting for me. I must remember to arrange my face before leaning over and looking her in the eye. I must remember to coo, smile, sing and laugh. She is too young to understand what the flatness of my gaze means. I pick her up and hold her close in order to lock up the screams eking out from my chest. When she latches, I see her tiny jaw click rhythmically as the milk goes down. It might be Tuesday.

I am in the hospital for ten days while she calmly pulses inside. She is in no hurry to leave. Pitocin swims in my veins, the cervical balloon is plunged into me and Cervidil batters my gate. Every twelve hours my body endures a fresh regimen of synthetic agents but nothing phases her—she continues to frolic, hiccup and brush her fingers against the walls. Nothing works until the tenth day, when everything breaks open. I white-knuckle grip the guardrails of the hospital bed while the contractions chew up my hips and abdomen. They finally suction her out after five hours of pushing. What I remember: the painful, strange twiddling of the epidural catheter inside my spinal cord, the dark yellow color of my urine in the bag above me, her tiny bird head stretching out and the carpet of blood splashing onto the white tiled floor.

After playing with her and putting her down for a nap, and after pumping, cleaning and washing all the parts, I wrestle with the eternal dilemma: eat or sleep. Because in an hour it all begins again. Most times I choose to eat because eating grounds the time, turning it tangible, measurable. One bite of a stale brownie: a few seconds. Chewing, savoring and swallowing the chocolate: a couple of minutes. Sipping a carton of Pedialyte or milk: almost ten minutes. I can elongate each morsel in order to gift myself time, whereas an hour of sleep, as everyone knows, never actually feels like an hour. On the couch, I place the suction cups on my chest and stare at

the wall as they chant. My swollen pipes thin out while I try to forget. My increments of sleep top out at an hour since she cluster feeds—she falls so deeply asleep on my breast before she is satiated that nothing I do will wake her. By the time I ease myself into bed, trying not to cry out because of how much each little maneuver ignites my tender tailbone, I must ease out again because she is soon awake with thirst. I pump, bottle feed, breastfeed and freeze extra bags of milk in a semiconscious state; limp, sapped muscles take over any semblance of volition. I pump while we play: I hover over her while topless, a machine whirring away like a second heartbeat. I am afraid to sleep because I am afraid of SIDS—the biggest specter of them all—so I inhabit a hallucinatory twilight while watching her small body through the bars. During frenzied, fretful dozings, I ball up my blanket with sweaty hands. Moments later I wake up startled, my heart hammering, because the wrinkled clump of linen I’m crushing is her, and I can’t find my breath. I force myself to blink rapidly and squint at what I’m holding in the dark. I pull myself out of bed and hobble to the crib to verify. I stand there looking back and forth at what I’m holding and what is lying between the bars, and for a horrifying, nauseating moment, I am unable to distinguish.

My husband buys two steers from Mark on Craigslist. The steers are neither young nor small—they are almost full grown, about 900 pounds each. One of the steers is a Hereford-Angus mix covered in dark brown hair except for his head which is covered in white. The mixed one still has his horns: two slightly curved, pointed shafts about a foot long each. The other steer is a full-blooded, all-black Angus who is larger than his friend. A rapport builds between the steers and my husband since he is the one to check the level of water in their trough and ring the cowbell when he’s about to throw corn over the fence. Most days they hide in the copse of pine trees at the bottom of the hill. My husband has to point them out to me because they remain motionless for so long; their legs are the leaner tree trunks and their faces are the sunlight-spotted leaves crowded in between the limbs. The steers eat and roam the pasture side by side, fur to fur, as though they were yoked to each other. I must sneak up and peek over the hood of the tractor to observe them sifting through straw. I watch them snort and blow dust up from the ground. Their elliptical ears swivel and twitch amidst aggressive circles of flies; their large cloven hooves sink into Virginia’s signature clay soil. How easily those hooves can crush my skull in. They are enormous up close: taut, expansive mounds of muscle in their shoulders and hindquarters bulge and ripple like burrowing snakes or rapid tectonic shifting. Myriad burrs, pollen, bugs, dust, leaves and twigs decorate their coats. Their moist and papillary noses delicately locate the smallest pieces of grain buried under weeds, straw and mud. Although their eyes are perpetually flat, whether grazing in the afternoon sun, glancing at our panting dog or watching us from behind their shelter of pine, I know the fear they carry. I know that it inhabits the steam rising from their backs at night, collects in the excess saliva dripping from their soft ruminant maws and mixes with the half-digested cud in their gut.

My doctor draws a small donut on her notepad. Then she draws a tiny tongue sticking out from the center hole. “This is your cervix, and this—” pointing to the tongue—“is a polyp.” Pffft! The donut mocks me. “It’s benign, but it may have something to do with your infertility.” My doctor is a petite, curly-haired white woman with high, sharp cheekbones and green eyes. For some reason, as my general physician, she cannot remove the polyp for me. I have to find an ob-gyn. At a nearby clinic, I am the only woman in the waiting room without the telltale bulge. I am introduced to someone who also happens to be petite and curly-haired but is contrastingly cherub-cheeked with dark brown eyes and raven-shade skin. The day of the removal, my ob-gyn walks in wearing a fitted white dress, a string of pearls encircling her neck. She sits down on a little leather stool, peering between my legs. “Oh, this will be easy,” she croons. In a few seconds, the polyp is cut out even though I don’t feel a thing. She wraps up something small and dark red in a square of gauze and hands the bundle to the assistant. She snaps off her gloves and smooths back her curls. “All done!” She offers a grin while my husband and I stare at her unmarred white dress.

The cardinals outside the window resemble drops of blood upon the bare branches of privet. I want to creep outside to be closer to them, but the February cold chokes the breath out of you. Every morning, my husband pries the lid off the blue plastic bucket, scoops out black birdseed and pours the seed into the feeder. His mouth issues plumes of smoke as he scoops and pours, scoops and pours. The cardinals and other sundry birds—blue jays, woodpeckers, goldfinches, sparrows, pigeons, warblers—empty the feeder in a few hours. From the window, I can’t hear their chirps and calls. When the cardinals decide to flutter onto the ground to scavenge for fallen seed, the violent contrast between their red feathers and the white snow make me remember...but then my stomach gurgles. Was it before dawn that I was sitting on the couch peeling a hardboiled egg, the albumen tearing off with the shell? Did I inhale that assaulted egg just a few hours ago? Maybe it was yesterday. I forget what I was remembering. I look down at my fuzzy pink bathrobe layered in a Pollock pattern of stains: marinara, breastmilk, chocolate, saliva, mustard, blood.

My bathroom countertop is littered with basal thermometers, ovulation test kits, pregnancy test kits and fertility lube. Every month when I see those spots of blood, those hateful spots of blood, I once again sink into the well; I dive to the very bottom and curl up like a pill bug. From way up above goes about the world in a tiny spot of light and echoing noise. Although previously innocuous, my newsfeed now rains sewing pins over my brow with every baby photo I scroll past, and my heart flops around like a hooked fish. I want God, with his tomb-heavy hand, to remove my eyes. I finally decide to get tested at a fertility center. One of the tests is to shoot dye up through your cervix and track the dye’s journey into the uterus and fallopian tubes to see if there are any structural concerns. Online forums assure me the procedure will be excruciating.

As I lie there with my legs up, I grip the large columns on either side with slick palms. One of the nurses asks me what's wrong. Our eyes lock in that bone white and sterile room. Large x-ray pillars loom over my splayed, bare body and a thin cotton gown covers just my torso. The florescent lights illuminate the angles of the stainless steel instruments and the dryness of my lips. My voice comes out in tight threads: nothing, nothing. After several tests, the doctor tells us that our infertility is due to "unknown factors." I barely suppress the maniacal giggles that bubble and pop inside my throat.

My husband tells me that both steers jumped the fence from one penned pasture to another when the slaughterhouse guys tried to shepherd them up the ramp and into the trailer. The slaughterhouse guys will come by and make one last attempt in the morning. That night, my husband tries again and again to guide the skittish pair to the smallest pen behind our shed, where it will be easiest for them to be herded. Both steers continue to jump over the fence when they see my husband slowly advancing. Night falls early in November and that night the moon and stars conceal themselves. Our land turns into a black strip of cloth. My husband sits on a tree stump nearby while the steers stand right outside the gate to the smallest pen. He knows the steers can gore him before he can call for help. If they do not make it to the slaughterhouse, we don't know what we will do. We don't have the means to feed and shelter them adequately over the winter. Online forums suggest a straightforward execution—bullet to the head—so they do not suffer unduly. We wait hour after hour, the darkness seeping into our psyches; we replay in our minds the worst case scenario and the roles we would have to play. Just before midnight, the steers finally shuffle in of their own accord. We don't know what compelled them at that moment to act. The slaughterhouse calls my husband the next day to confirm successful transport. My husband later asks me to pick up the horns from the slaughterhouse. As I rush up to the counter, the smell of old blood envelops me. I ask the rubber-aproned man while she squirms in my arms. The man nods and points around the corner. When I look down the hallway, I see not a pair of cleaned horns but the entire head on an upside-down barrel. The steer's hair, once a creamy white, is now ash gray. His mouth is slightly ajar, from which his stiff, bloated tongue sticks out like an eel. His eyes are muddy rocks. The head is so much bigger in death. I keep a straight face because the aproned man is looking at me closely. I tell him with a smile that there isn't enough room in my car so my husband will have to pick it up. During the drive home, every time I glance in the rear-view mirror, I see not her but the head, the bloated, gray head.

Green grass appears outside the window. The soil is soft, wet. The cardinals begin to disappear inside the budding privet. I take her outside and we both notice the different smell rising from the earth. Her eyes remain slits in the bright sun. The privet's small white flowers

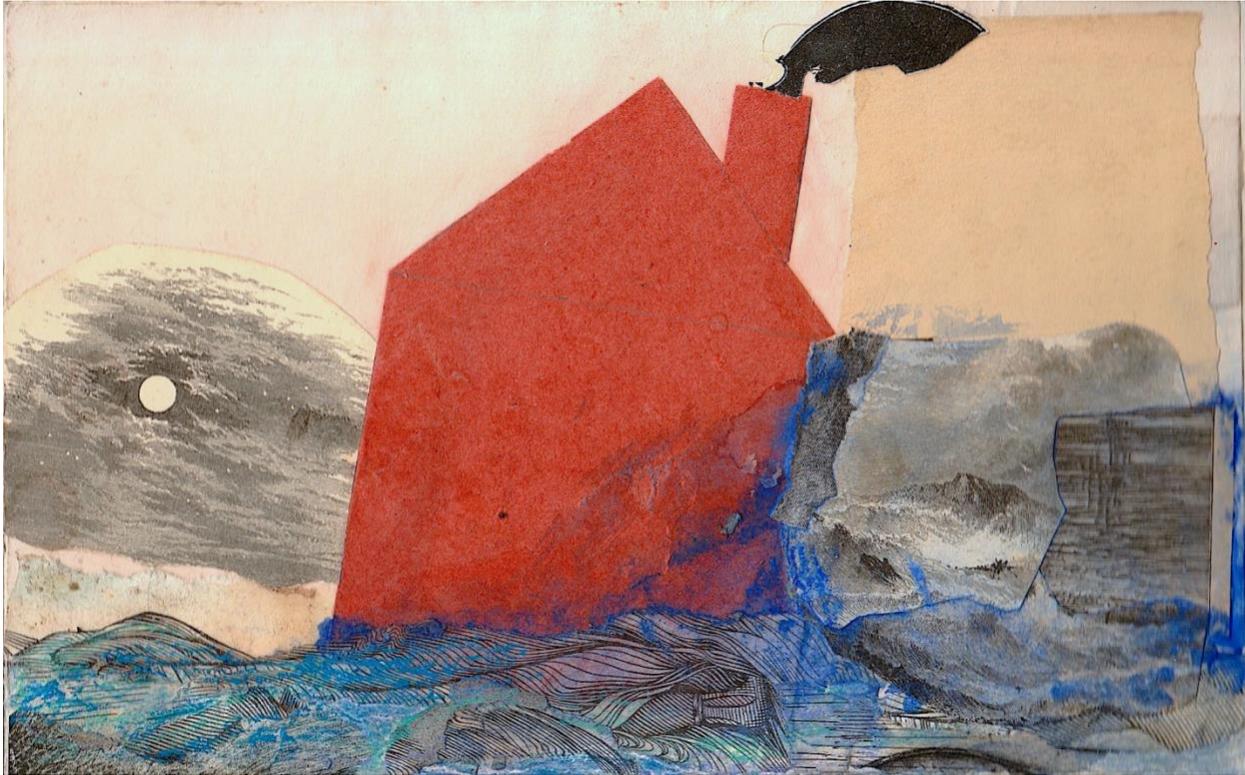
blanket us with a heady, jasmine-like scent. We remain motionless in the fragrance while listening to the cardinals twitch and clean themselves behind the leaves. My eyes tether to her because I am now no longer. I am of her. Only the taut, stinging stitches remind me of a time before this. When we are outside smelling the privet and hearing the rustle of the invisible cardinals, I taste very, very faintly, a note of light, foreseeing a place where I may no longer be in this pain, the roar and puncture of this moment, this story.

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**Helen Park**'s creative nonfiction and poetry appear in *The Flexible Persona*, *Sleet Magazine*, *Inertia Magazine*, *Cleaver Magazine*, *Cactus Heart Press*, *Eclectica Magazine*, *Visitant Lit*, the *Asian American Female Anthology*, *Yellow as Turmeric*; *Fragrant as Cloves* (Deep Bowl Press, 2008) and others. She is working on her first novel.

World Afloat *Michael Thompson*

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**Michael Thompson** is a Chicago-based artist whose artistic pursuits include a variety of mediums including printmaking, decorative kite-making, faux postage stamps, kinetic sculpture, memory jugs and collage. You can find more of his work at [michaelthompsonart.com](http://michaelthompsonart.com)