



MOSS.

An online journal of the Northwest.

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Contents.

Letter from the Editors.....2
Interview: Rebecca Brown.....3
<i>Your Best Bet</i> , Miriam Cook.....24
<i>Packwood</i> , Jenn Blair.....38
Essay: <i>Four Memories of Breath</i> , Rebecca Brown.....47
Essay: <i>Snap the Whip</i> , Janie Miller.....50
Essay: <i>About the Days</i> , Steven Moore.....55
About <i>Moss</i>64
Call for Papers: Volume 2.....64

Letter from the Editors

Seattle, WA · May 2015

In this issue's interview, acclaimed Seattle writer Rebecca Brown reminds us that "art does not come down from the sky. It comes from here, from us, from the world we live in." At *Moss*, we couldn't agree more; we operate on a deeply-held belief that great art arises from communities that are fully engaged with their place, their world, and their history. Along with the recent rediscovery of Robert Cantwell (whose 1935 story "Hills Around Centralia" we reprinted in our previous issue), Brown's efforts to bring greater attention to the underappreciated poet Denise Levertov remind us that the region's vibrant culture draws upon a rich, storied history. When we're able to look around and see that such seminal writers lived and work where we live and work today, it not only strengthens our sense of identity but infuses our work with new purpose. As the Northwest undergoes a period of nearly unparalleled growth, looking to our history and our community can help us to move forward without losing sight of who we are.

In the stories and essays collected here, we see writers doing exactly that; we see a robust literary community conscious of its past but working in new and exciting directions. Miriam Cook shows us a woman adjusting to life with a 300-pound Sumatran tiger in her backyard; Jenn Blair sends us on an impromptu road trip through central Washington in search of solace; Janie Miller brings a bizarre death in the Texas desert, the troubled history of Wilmington, North Carolina, and an account of her writing process together into a moving family history; and Steven Moore offers an inventive, kaleidoscopic essay that captures the structured incoherence of life as a soldier in Afghanistan. Finally, in addition to the in-depth interview that opens the issue, we're thrilled to present a new essay from Rebecca Brown, a poignant reflection on the simple act of breathing.

Together, we hope that this collection gives you what Brown describes as a "sense of art not being far from you;" a reminder that writers and artists "use the material of their lives, which are our lives too;" a reminder that, in the Northwest, art, creativity, and history are all around us.

– Connor Guy and Alex Davis-Lawrence
Editors, *Moss*

An Interview with Rebecca Brown

Seattle, WA · May 2015 · Interviewed by Alex Davis-Lawrence

Rebecca Brown is a writer based in Seattle. Astonishingly prolific and deeply talented, she has written novels, essays, short stories, articles, criticism, plays, a libretto for an opera, a one-woman show, and more. Her books include *American Romances*; *The Terrible Girls*; *The Haunted House*; *Excerpts From A Family Medical Dictionary*, which won the Washington State Book Award; and *Gifts of the Body*, which won the Lambda Literary Award. A winner of *The Stranger's* Genius Award, she directed the Port Townsend Writers Conference for four years, co-founded the Jack Straw Writers Program, and was the first writer in residence at the Richard Hugo House. She's taught in academic and community settings for more than 30 years.



Interviewer

I thought we could start by talking about how you ended up settling in the Northwest. The search for 'home,' as a place and an idea, is a huge theme that runs throughout your work, from *The Haunted House*, which opens with the narrator trying and failing to navigate her father home on unfamiliar streets, all the way up through *American Romances*, your latest book, where you tie that search to Westward Expansion, and really to America's national identity on a whole. So I'm curious about how Seattle became 'home,' for you—if you would define it that way.

Brown

Seattle is definitely home now. I've been here pretty permanently since '90. I first came here after graduate school, it was '80 or '81. I was living in the

South, got my MFA, and at that time I was living with a woman, and we were like, “Where do we move? New York is too big. Boston is too cold. LA is too gross. San Francisco is like, too gay.” We didn’t want to go to a ghetto. Plus, one of my very best friends from undergraduate school and my high school boyfriend both lived in Seattle, so we had people to stay with, and we’d heard really good things about the place.

As you referenced from my first novel, *The Haunted House*, we moved around a lot when I was a kid, so I didn’t have a sense of belonging in any one particular place. When I came to Seattle in the early 80s, parts of the city I liked a lot, but culturally it just wasn’t happening for me. My work kept not getting published and kept being turned down for grants, but my work and then my first book was accepted in England, so I left for London and lived in Europe for about three or four years, and then came back to Seattle in ’90. And by ’90 there was more writing, more diverse writing, it wasn’t just the university and Red Sky Poetry. There was a really exciting independent music scene, and also an independent writing scene. Seattle’s been a really good place to be since then.

Interviewer

In an interview you gave with the *Sixers Review*, you talked about the challenges of being an out lesbian writing out work in the 80s—that mainstream America would have nothing to do with you, and that your writing style didn’t meet the expectations of mainstream or lesbian publishing. You also mentioned that it was a challenge to be working away from “the big centers of queer work, like New York City or California.” I was wondering if you could expand on that a bit more. How did that difficulty manifest itself in your career, and how have things changed since then?

Brown

Well, my first story came out in an anthology with Faber and Faber, then my first book of stories came out in England in 1984 with a gay and lesbian

press. My first novel came out in the UK in 1986 and here in the US with Viking in '87. And I don't know if I could name another out lesbian who was published in the US mainstream then. Rita Mae Brown's *Rubyfruit Jungle* had been out with a small press and then moved up to a big press, and Patricia Highsmith had published lesbian work with a lesbian press under a pseudonym, but the mainstream work under her own name was the mysteries with no lesbian content.

There was also a really big lesbian feminist writing scene going on in the 80s and 90s. Most of that work was realist stuff, it was very pro-woman, pro-lesbian, like "we're healthy, we help each other, I've come out of the closet and everything is great." Whereas my work was emotionally violent and disturbing, it was surreal, the women weren't all heroes, and some of the nicest characters were straight guys. So my work didn't quite fit in either place. Also I hadn't come up through a community of writers the way, for example, some of my friends had, who were in the big centers like New York or LA or San Francisco, whether gay and lesbian or not. I didn't actually know much about those scenes until I got back to the United States.

So partly it was not quite fitting in either place, but there is also something about the advocacy of a community, or the advocacy of an agent that I didn't have that going at that point. I wasn't formed in those communities, so it took me a while to find people who just wanted to talk about literature in general. Then here in Seattle in the 90s—*The Stranger* started then—were a lot of writers, queer and not, whose work I was excited by—non-realistic, surreal, noir stuff, that was very exciting to me.

Interviewer

What do you think the writing community is like in Seattle today?

Brown

Seattle has a tremendous range of literary opportunities and communities. Hugo House is this tremendous place where people want to study writing, they bring in writers from out of town, and they commission new work. There's the Bent Writing Institute that's worked with queer kids and writers for about 20 years now, and for a while there was a group called Los Norteños for Latino and Latina writers, the University of Washington has groups, SPLAB—and the Jack Straw Writers Program, which I co-created with Joan Rabinowitz, a bunch of different groups. There's also a lot of very successful mainstream writers up here too, like Garth Stein, who started the Seattle7Writers. There's tons of activity and a lot of really different kinds of groups... you can go to a reading any night of the week, right? You can find an open mic, or someone reading from a new book, there's just tons of stuff going on here. It's a pretty exciting time.

What we don't have is the publishing scene Portland does. They have some amazing publishing houses down there. Sasquatch is fine, they do Northwesty books, and have not been a particularly literary press. Fantagraphics does the best graphic novels in the world, and they're expanding out a little bit, but otherwise, we don't have a *Tin House* or a Hawthorne Books or Publishing Studio or Future Tense. So Seattle is a little behind in that.

Interviewer

What do you think is the significance to a writer of having a sense of community, or a sense of place?

Brown

I think it's hugely important for writers to feel loved, or to have at least one other person who wants to read their work. A community is people you share

interests with, or who are excited about your work. Like the APRIL group—they're really supportive, they do readings and events and book clubs, they hang out. The idea that you can share your endeavor, which most people aren't going to pay anything for, with somebody else, that you share that interest with someone else, is hugely, hugely important. Writing itself is so often a private, solitary, lonely thing, but to be able to have friends to talk about it with, or even just one reader, like, if I write this thing, one person is going to say, "Rebecca, can I read that story," or "Alex, you said you were going to work on that, are you still working on it?" It's just hugely important to not be alone.

I think the downside is... somebody at one point said, "pity the writer who isn't part of a community." You hear about Paris in the 20s, or the Stein-Toklas Salon, or Bloomsbury, or the New York School or the Black Mountain School, and there are ways that the group identity can kind of lift all the individual boats. But I also think that sometimes people developing independently can end up doing something really different. I think, retrospectively, I wouldn't have had my history any other way. Plus, you don't want your whole life to be spent running around being a writer/social butterfly. You can't be out all the time. When are you home being miserable and lonely and writing? You need them both.

Interviewer

Something that really jumped out at me when going through your various bios and resumes was your long-term commitment to teaching—things like workshops, residencies, academic programs, there's just an enormous list. How do you see the role of teaching in the community? In your creative practice?

Brown

The last couple years I've been feeling like, "man, I've been teaching for more than 30 years"—part of me is getting tired. Like, if I have to correct another effing there/their/they're spelling or noun-verb-number disagreement, I'm just going to flunk 'em all. I don't get to that point, but I do get tired more easily.

But I also love teaching. I love the engagement, and every semester, every class, I learn something from students, whether they are college students or kids or people who don't really read. And some books I've taught, like, three times, but someone can still say something in class and I just go... "Whoa! That's it. I never saw that." And there is nothing like that. There's also nothing like when someone who comes in who is kind of shy or quiet or not confident and then they write something and you go, "that's really terrific," and then you see them gain confidence—there's nothing as great as that.

And of course it's paid a lot of my bills. At different times in my writing, I've made nice money, but I have not supported myself entirely with writing. So, I don't teach out of the good of my heart as much as the need of my pocketbook. [laughs]

As far as the range of different places where I've taught—libraries, prisons, universities, colleges, workshops, Hugo House, living rooms, summer camps—when I first got out of graduate school, I looked for a full-time tenure-track teaching job and I got turned down a million times. But over the long haul, I'm glad I didn't find one job and then just stick to it forever. I've had to kind of keep jumping, hustling, and you get to know different people if you're out there. I think I have a broad sense of what's out there, because I haven't been full time secure in one location or job.

Now I see young friends who are getting full-time tenure jobs pretty early and I'm like, "watch out." Like, don't become someone who gets so secure in

a job you kind of stop writing. I think sometimes if you lose the hunger, you kind of, I don't know... lose the edge or urgency you need to make your work.

Interviewer

How does the teaching influence your work? Certainly in *American Romances* there is an almost academic feel to a lot of the work—they're essays, you have these footnotes, there's a real research element there.

Brown

I really geek out about a lot of stuff. I geek out about pop music, 60s music, and in that particular book there's some late medieval European church history, which I also geek out about, and Gertrude Stein and Hawthorne and crappy classic horror movies and the Vietnam War. I think that by not being like, in a single job or department or even magazine, I've been able to follow my interests more obsessively. Maybe if I'd been an academic or a scholar I'd have written *a* book about *one* of them. But probably not... I don't have that kind of discipline, I mean, I have discipline, but even my discipline is quirky.

My use of footnotes in that book is partly ironic, but it's also partly serious. I'll be 60 next year and I grew up in the vinyl era, and I was the kind of kid who read all of the liner notes on the back of an album cover. And so I have this interest in bizarre little details, like, "I didn't realize he was playing bass on that third track," which is sort of the same thing with church or medieval history, right? Footnotes allow you to really geek out. Plus the use of the footnotes suggests a kind of authority, and I'm playing with who has authority or authority about what.

Interviewer

I actually had some specific questions about “The Priests,” the story about that obscure religious history that you just mentioned. It just spoke to something that I found really incredible about *American Romances*, which is your ability to see connections in seemingly disparate things—or, to put it a little more politically, your refusal to allow things to be disconnected. Like in that essay, you bring this whole hidden history of sexuality and religion to bear on the Oreos, on this everyday thing—when a piece of writing gets you to look at something like that in a new way, it’s really powerful.

Brown

My mind does jump around a lot, and make ridiculous-seeming but somehow, at least to me, real connections. For that particular piece, I’ve always been fascinated by the Christian church and religious history. And I started reading Gertrude Stein in high school. Several years ago Jennifer Heath wanted to do an anthology about origin stories about food—and asked me to write something, and maybe you could do like matzo ball soup or falafel or southern greens, but I was like, “I’m a white kid from the suburbs,” so I was like, junk food? Crappy, processed, fake dessert? Oreos. And it was just one step in one direction from there to a communion wafer—one step in another direction to Alice B. Toklas’s pot brownies—there I had it—the Christian supper and Stein and Toklas, history and sex and sexual repression, and there I went.

I think one of my frustrations with academia is its separation from the world. It’s like, why not talk about Hawthorne, and notions of the American West and American masculinity, and Puritanism, alongside talking about monster movies? And why not talk in terms that are... not pompous academic jargon, not just dumb, but that are actually terms we use when we talk with one another. I guess it comes out of that.

I don't know that I had any conscious political stance from whence I made that shape for an essay. When you describe it as political, I can go, "yeah, that fits," but my process is much more amorphous and mysterious than it is concept-driven.

Interviewer

I'm curious about another aspect of your writing process. You're working in so many different forms—novels, essays, short story collections, articles, criticism, libretto for an opera, visual and installation work, a one-woman show, plays. How do you come to find the right form for a particular work?

Brown

A lot of these things are just pretty happenstance. The play happened because John Kazanjian of New City Theater had seen me MC a couple of times, when I can be fun, and really lively, and he'd also read some of my theater reviews, and he asked me one time, "do you want to write a play?" And I was like "sure, I'll try that." Literally, it was that easy. An artist's dream is to have someone ask you to just do something and pay you. "All right," he said, and sent me a contract the next week. It was ideal. Whereas I apply for grants and get effing none of them. When someone says "describe exactly what you are going to do and how it will help develop audiences," and I am like, I have no idea exactly how it will go, it's creative for eff's sake. Whereas when another artist says, "let's try this," I'm game.

It was the same thing working with dancers, and eventually writing a libretto for a dance opera. I used to go see a lot of dance. I met some dancers, Alex Martin and Freya Wormus of Better Biscuit Dance, and it turned out they had read my work in high school, and they're like, "oh, you want to write something for us?" And I was like, "sure, love to." So I did. A small piece, then later a libretto for the Onion Twins dance opera. Later I worked with

Ricki Mason, who was in the Better Biscuit dance opera, and Jody Kuehner, before they were Cheronna and Lou! Someone you like says, “let’s make something together,” and if you can, you say, “sure, let’s try to do something.”

I’m slowing down a little, but basically I still try to work a lot in a lot of different ways. And if you put a lot of work out there, some people see it. And maybe someone will say, “she seems like she might be interested in doing such-and-such... let’s ask Rebecca if she’s game.”

Interviewer

I wanted to ask a little bit about your recent work on Denise Levertov. How did that come about?

Brown

I was received into the Catholic Church a few years ago, and one of the churches I go to is St. Joseph. Denise Levertov was a parishioner there in the 90s, and this May, Choral Arts, a vocal ensemble that is in residence there, was commissioning a local composer, John Muehleisen to set one of her poems to music. And our pastor there, Fr. John Whitney, S.J. said, “let’s do a whole festival about Levertov,” and if I would head up a parish committee to plan a festival and I said, “sure.” So about a year and a lot of hard work later, there was this three-week-long festival. So for the last year, to learn about her, I read her work, her biography, really studied her, and I love being able to really chew on stuff. Studying her was great, and meeting people who knew her, and planning events in places where they’re not used to reading poetry, but reading poems there, and working with poets and non-poets too. I just love that stuff. “I don’t really understand poetry,” some people would say, like in a book group or somewhere I went, and I’d say, “well, why don’t you read this out loud to us,” and then they would, and would start to talk about what it said to them. People are smarter than they think they are. And the

festival events happened in the church and at the cathedral, but also at The Project Room, and Elliot Bay, and the Sorrento and Lake View Cemetery, so it was all these very different kinds of venues, sort of saying, “poetry can exist in all these places, and we can all talk to each other even if we seem like really different kinds of people at first.”

So that was really cool. If you give people a chance, and you kind of help people who might be intimidated by poetry all along, it’s like, “oh, art’s not so bad, I kind of like this.” And Levertov was a perfect figure for it. But I’m not a scholar of hers, it wasn’t even like she was one of my favorite poets before, as much me saying, “sure, I’ll pursue that.”

Interviewer

Something that I thought was really exciting about your work on her was the same thing that attracted me to the Robert Cantwell piece that we published in the previous issue. Just this idea of... I don’t want to say rediscovering, because obviously she’s not been “lost”—

Brown

But she’s not taught much in the academy any more. When I sent notices way back about planning the festival, the universities I contacted here did not express any interest.

Interviewer

Right. This idea that someone’s a part of our region, a part of our cultural history, but they sort of fell off the map for whatever reason. What do you think it gives a community to have these types of figures in their collective past?

Brown

I think it's hugely important. But I also think it's hugely important to—and I hate overusing this word—to note the diversity of it. For a while in the 90s, it was all Raymond Carver, Raymond Carver, Raymond Carver, Tobias Wolfe and Raymond Carver, dirty realism. I was on a panel once at some Northwest book festival thing, and the question was something like how do we get out of Raymond Carver's shadow. But I looked around and it was like, "half the people on this panel aren't under his shadow; open your eyes and read more widely!" Maybe two books I've done have that monosyllabic, bare realism, but the rest of them don't. Too often there's this idea that there's one kind of writing, but actually there are many. Raymond Carver can be a patron saint for some Northwest writers, and Denise Levertov can be too, for others. August Wilson can be, Octavia Butler, Joanna Russ, Jesse Bernstein... the idea of someone that you can look up to, and not emulate them exactly, but the fact that they did the work, did their own kind of work, and if there's a range of these people, you don't have to be exactly like any of them; what you have to do is work really hard like all of them.

I went to visit a number of book groups for the Levertov Festival, and I always tried to choose a couple poems that were obviously about the Northwest's physical landscape. Like, there's one poem that's clearly written in St. Joseph's, about a specific ritual that happens there, and when I read the landscape poems to people they're like, "oh, that's about over there, I can see that, I've never thought of it that way"—and it's like they own it. Or the St. Joseph's poem, and people are like, "Wow! I was there that time." And you can get that sense of art not being far from you, that artists use the material of their lives, which are our lives too. It's really... I don't want to say it's humbling, but, you know, art does not come down from the sky. It comes from here, from us, from the world we live in. I'm a big believer in that.

As to the regional thing, I'm like, screw New York. We don't exist to them? We don't need to. There actually is nothing wrong with them—except for the fact that they can't see beyond their noses—but you don't have to look towards there to be a real artist, you can be one anywhere.

Interviewer

Absolutely. So, to get back to something you've touched on several times here, I wanted to ask a little about religion. There's certainly a lot of spirituality in the Northwest, but it's often pretty abstract. And obviously, Christianity and Catholicism's relationship to the gay and lesbian community is historically—

Brown

Horrible. [laughs]

Interviewer

[laughs] It's troubling, to say the least. But, you know, I also notice that the quest to know God is a significant recurring theme in your work, and you don't shy away from the Christian framework. How do you define your religion? How did you come to it? How does it manifest in your work?

Brown

So I was received into the Catholic Church in 2012. But, even very early on in my work, there's a real sense of dark and light. There's a real sense of someone dying, and then getting to live again. One of my books, *The Dogs*, which I started writing in the 80s, starts with quotations from St. Augustine and Francis Thompson, a Catholic poet most well known for his poem "The

Hound of Heaven.” And at the end of my book, someone is buried into the ground, and someone goes and unburies them and lifts up those bones and the bones come back together then go into the river and into the water, and they stand up and they’re clothed in flesh, and move towards the light; it’s totally a story of death and redemption. And I suppose there are parts of me that are specifically Christian because as a white westerner from Europe, that’s part of my genealogical heritage. But really the great mysteries of life and death are part of many religions. Do I become one with the cosmos? Is a bodhisattva someone who’s here to help me? All that kind of stuff, about the longing to understand lightness and dark, and the need to believe in the light when you’re in darkness—the longing for something bigger, that’s part of me in a big way.

For many years, for all the obvious reasons, I thought Catholicism was just the worst. I mean, they don’t allow female priests. The sex scandal is just—the sex scandal itself is inexcusable, and the coverup is—I don’t want to say *as* inexcusable, because actually tons of children and adults were physically and spiritually, intellectually, and emotionally harmed by these priests—but they’re both crimes against humanity. And there’s the Pope who is meant to be a servant who leads the way to mercy, but has as often as not been more of a dictator, though I am very hopeful about Pope Francis... so there were tons of reasons not to be Catholic, but something drew me—and keeps me drawn to it. Some longing, hunger, draw, whatever, to the mystery of incarnation, redemption, mercy. I can’t explain or justify it.

But there’s so much I can’t justify. The story of the church is also a story of human darkness and desire for form. And when I think about it in an even bigger context, I could say the same negative things about being a westerner, a human. I mean, as a white person, as a type, I am, historically, an imperialist, and a slave owner, a Jew killer, a sexist. Or, a lot of feminists in the 70s were like, “men are the problem,” so like, “boom, let’s be separate from men.” Well—I suppose you could do that, but what human creation is not flawed? Humanity is flawed, institutions are more flawed, the Catholic

Church is really flawed, the US is flawed. I have not emigrated from America, which is certainly financially the most complicit and heinous empire that's ever been on the planet, but there's also still good stuff in America too, and it's where I belong. It's all really complex. And the Church, it has this central mystery that is just profound to me, it's a story that draws me. Like where I belong, or what I want. I can't describe it.

Interviewer

And there's also an extent to which it's impossible to separate the history of academia, writing, and storytelling from religion. In many ways they have roots in religious practice.

Brown

It's all really really complex, and the bottom line is I can't reason my way into or out of any of it. People say, "I can't believe you're doing this. Convince me." And I say, "Sorry, I can't." You know, if you really put it down on paper, I should leave America. If you really put it down on paper, I should not believe in marriage, and I'm married to my wife. At some point, you just are where you're drawn, and you're trying to live with both the tension and the integrity of that.

Interviewer

Something I saw a lot in the way you approach the search for God in your work is sort of this search for 'Truth,' or for the idea of truth. Which is also incredibly complex, because you're always sort of moving—as I see it, you have this really interesting relationship between fiction and non-fiction. Your fictional work has really deep connections to autobiography, non-fiction, and your essays, like in *American Romances*, have—

Brown

There are parts that are clearly fantasy, right.

Interviewer

So how do you see the relationship between fiction and non-fiction—as a writer?

Brown

On the one hand, I'm incredibly Puritanical and moralistic about it. If someone's going to say, "this is a memoir," it really should be, to my mind, for all intents and purposes, what they remember or believe to be true. Like the James Frey thing, him saying he spent three years in prison, when he knew and remembered he'd only spent three nights, he was lying and he knew it. Originally, he had tried to sell his book as a novel, but they wouldn't take it, so he sold it as a memoir. And he is responsible for that, but the publishing industry is too. It's slimy to call that non-fiction. Whereas if someone reads "The Priests" from *American Romances* and takes me to task because I'm not specifically identifying that Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas are not actually the royal queens of a secret religious sect that has the Oreos as its sacred snack, I'm like, people, come on. Can't you see that's a joke? I think using the ridiculous, as well as the sublime, as fiction, next to non-fiction material, can be lively, interesting, useful, even fun.

Interviewer

Certainly in a lot of your work, like in *The Haunted House* and in *The Terrible Girls*, fantasy and autobiography are in very close proximity.

Brown

Those stories are so clearly fiction—people don't really go around cutting off their arms, or really send body parts through the mail. But that's what fiction can do, is to get at these extreme forms of truth. And when someone says, "oh, your work reads like a memoir," or "it seems really true," that's because we've lost the sense that fiction can do exactly that. It's not 'this really happened,' in history, but 'this is about or aims to recreate an interior state that people really have.'

Interviewer

I want to loop back a bit, to the Northwest. You were born on the west coast, in California, and you talked in *American Romances* about how you really love what you call the West, which I would call the Old West, the Cowboy West. How do you see the Northwest in relation to all that? Is this region part of America's ongoing Western momentum—the next step after California? Or is there something else going on here?

Brown

When people were talking about, "go West young person," way back when, they were talking about like, Ohio, right? And then further west, when people thought about California, they thought about lettuce and oranges, the sunny orange groves. Whereas the Northwest is dark, and green, it's kind of the furthest away corner, a place you go when you can't go any further.

My sense is that Seattle, as a city, wasn't really here until, like, the late 19th century. And pretty quickly, once white people were kind of established here, it became a jumping off point for Alaska, like with the gold rush of the 1890s, so there's way it was kind of like—there's no where else to go, then we

jump to Alaska. It's like when you sweep a room, and get all this dust trapped in the corner. It's kind of the last place you can go and still be here.

So there's a little bit of that—is it independence, or is it dregs? Mythically, it has a different draw than the sort of sunny California.

Interviewer

Is that atmosphere something that drew you here?

Brown

Not particularly. My brother went to Colorado in the 70s, that's where young people went. In the 80s, people were coming to Portland or Seattle. These places were comparatively inexpensive then, and that's not the case any more. Now people are like, going to Idaho or somewhere, because you just can't afford it any more.

Interviewer

Do you think you would move here now, if you were at the equivalent stage in your life?

Brown

That's really hard to imagine. When my girlfriend and I came here, we were like, "oh, it's so cheap here," compared to the East Coast. We could rent an apartment with one and a half bedrooms and a living room and a dining room and a water view for \$375, and now what's that? \$1500? Whatever, it's very, very expensive. It's very hard for me to imagine being a young person here, with a 'regular job,' and finding my way.

The city's just gotten really wealthy. It's not going to be as conducive to the next art as long as it's that expensive. Poor artists go to poor places.

Interviewer

It's sort of the classic tradeoff. As you said, when you were moving here it was cheaper, but maybe there wasn't as much of a cultural community, and now that's developed, but it's also harder to access in some ways. What do you see, moving forward, as some ways we can help preserve and improve what the Northwest is now—what it has the potential to be?

Brown

I think there really is something to the Northwest. I think there really is something to logging and fisheries, and airplanes and technology. Those are just so opposite, right? I think there's really something about Pacific Rimness, and that we're not from the black migration from the South, we're not from the old old old school of old New York and old Boston going back to Europe. I think there's something about what we are not.

And I think there's something about size—it's like, even when the gay community was much smaller, just by the nature of being small or even secretive, I would hang out with people who weren't like me politically at all, or you know, if there were only ten of us, you hung out with all of them. Even if you didn't dress or look alike... you were all gay, and now there's so many gay people you can sort of balkanize yourselves. Like, the only gay people I know are progressive liberal democrats, or they're all artists, so there's something that, at one point, it seemed like there was more about the Northwest having to come together. And now we're able to balkanize more, and become more cosmopolitan, and less ourselves.

Interviewer

It reminds me of your essay about the Invisible Woman, and this idea in that piece that when you become visible, you die. Which I hope is not quite what happens here, but it's just this, you know—you can't in good conscience dismiss certain gains and benefits of growth, but also there's sometimes this feeling that—

Brown

Something's lost. That there's something, like... you inherited something, you didn't work for or earn it.

Interviewer

And it's happening so fast. I mean, I grew up right here, my Dad's house is on 12th & Aloha, right over there. And I'm obviously a young person or whatever, I haven't seen that much time pass in the scale of the city's life—

Brown

How old are you?

Interviewer

27.

Brown

Huge change over 30 years. Yeah.

Interviewer

And even having been away for just a few years, coming back and living in the city again now... it's just crazy.

Brown

Crazy. Capitol Hill especially. I mean, it used to be like, "let's go to Seattle, let's go to Seattle," and when you'd come here, and you met someone from here, of course they'd never leave. No one would ever leave, and now people are just like "this is insane, I've gotta leave." When I came in the 80s, it was an easier place, but now it's kind of like, it's getting hard in different ways. You wonder, is that success? When does success become failure? When does fullness decay, when does it become decadence?

You can't buy, like, pliers or underwear on Capitol Hill any more, and you're like, I need to buy some socks, and you think "thank God Walgreen's is here," and you're like, *what?*

My wife bought our house here 20-plus years ago, before we were together, and I can't imagine living on the hill otherwise. I have friends who are like, a tenure-track professor, spouse is a lawyer, and if they were to buy, they've got to like, move out to Renton—and this is a professor and a lawyer! What about people who work in a library, or a grocery store, or as a barber? What if you have kids? It's just insane. I don't know how young artists survive here.

Your Best Bet

Miriam Cook

When George died in a crash on the interstate in September, he left Beth the mortgaged house on the hill overlooking the Columbia River, a little less than six-thousand dollars in savings, and a three-hundred pound Sumatran tiger in the backyard. It was a last gift from her almost ex-husband, but what the hell do you do with a tiger?

George had told her about the tiger during a tense phone call, but Beth had never seen it and did not want to now. There were many things she did not want to do: identify the body, sign the papers for his transport to the funeral home, call George's mother. She'd still been listed on all of George's paperwork as next of kin. Probably he'd planned to change it later. He was still relatively young and healthy, a careful driver, always so careful. No one would have guessed that he might fall asleep at the wheel and drift into the median. Now she needed to arrange for George's body to be sent to his family in Montana and also for the small service at a church in town. The lawyer wanted to meet to go over the details of the will, finances, and the house mortgage. He said George had left special instructions for the tiger. She wanted to tell the lawyer to find someone else to take care of it. She wanted to close her eyes for a couple hours and forget this had happened. But George had given her the tiger. The least she could do was go feed it.

The day after George died, she bought a bunch of beef scraps at the supermarket and drove up the hill. The house hadn't changed. Same tarp-covered woodpile out front. Her hand knew exactly where the light switch was on the wall inside the door. George's hunting rifle still hung on the gun rack in the hall. The house was clean and orderly. George clearly hadn't gone to pieces in her absence, and she was glad. A couple of dishes were sitting in the sink. She took the trash out to the bins in the driveway and washed the dishes. Then she supposed she'd better take care of the tiger too.

His enclosure was about fifty feet from the back door, right at the edge of the forest. George had built it out of rebar and chain-link fence. Half

of it was floored with a concrete slab, the other half was grass and rock with a solitary pine tree. At the back of the concrete, George had built a sturdy lean-to of thick beams and corrugated tin. The fence was tall, maybe fifteen or twenty feet high. He'd made the enclosure long enough that when the tiger paced, which it was doing right now, walking from one side to the other and back took a whole minute. She stood about ten feet back to look at it. At this distance the ammonia and warmth of its tiger smell was faint, barely perceptible.

The tiger was smaller than she'd expected, thin, with ribs showing under its stripes and its legs too skinny. When it saw her, the tiger approached the fence. It reared up, hooked its sharp claws in the chain-link, and barked at her. She took a couple involuntary steps back. Stretched out like that, the tiger was nearly a foot taller than her. Its teeth were yellow and pointed, with two canine teeth that curved wickedly down from the top of its mouth to meet two matching teeth curving up from its lower jaw. The top canines were long enough to pierce her hand and come out the other side. Its paws were level with her face and just as wide. She could see the raised knot of a scar on its left foreleg and the thin lines of scars along its head and neck. George had said something about its past when he'd first told her over the phone.

"He's been through a lot, and I'm giving him a good home," he said. They'd been talking weekly since she moved out, part of a plan to try to work things out. George had found the tiger at a circus in Yakima. "His trainer left, and they needed someone to take him. And I have all this land."

"George, why are you buying a tiger?"

"I thought you liked tigers," he said.

She couldn't remember ever saying this. They had never even been to a zoo together. "I hope you didn't do this for me," she said.

He was quiet for a long moment. "I'll be happy to have the company. You should stop by to see him sometime."

She'd meant to, she really had. But the small things always got in the way—there were bills to pay and there was laundry to do. And whenever she had thought about driving up the hill to visit, she couldn't quite summon the

energy. Next week, she told herself. Now, looking at the tiger, she wondered how George had fed it. The entrance to the cage was partitioned, with a space like a mudroom between two doors. The first door closed with a thick sliding bolt. Another door led from the partitioned area into the enclosure itself. In the end, she decided not to risk it, settling instead on pitching the beef bones over the fence. The tiger seized one, teeth cracking the bone. When she was sure it was distracted, Beth pushed the rest of the scraps through the fence. Then she sat down to watch. The chill in the air raised goosebumps on her arms. On the other side of the river, the evening light rolled over the yellow hills. The tiger looked up at her, its eyes golden. She wondered what it was thinking and whether it wanted to eat her. She needed to talk to the lawyer and find out what George wanted her to do with it.

When Monday rolled around, she went back to work. Everyone had heard about George, and they were too nice. They wouldn't let her take any calls. She proofread paperwork all day. She'd taken the job at the cruise line call center five years before. The company had located the call center in Oregon because of the purity of the accent. Northwesterners were clear and true with their vowels, softening their consonants only a little—Allen, her manager, had explained this during the orientation. Beth didn't tell him that she grew up in Montana.

She worked in the customer service department. Allen told them to resolve all calls in two minutes, an impossibility. In person, she had always found conflict deeply upsetting, but somehow with the distance provided by a phone line she acquired greater patience and calm. She learned early on that angry people just need to yell themselves out sometimes. A note pinned up on her cubicle reminded her "It's not about you." She kept tissues by her computer. On good days she could solve problems. On bad days she got called "a lying bitch" or "the rudest person I've ever talked to."

She asked Maureen what she thought about the tiger. Maureen worked in the next cubicle over. They'd developed a sort of comrade-in-arms friendship over the years, united against the angry callers.

“What did the will say about it?” Maureen asked.

“I’m meeting with the lawyer this week to find out. None too soon. Feeding it is already costing me about thirty bucks a day.”

“What do tigers even eat?”

Beth had looked this up online. “They eat guar, whatever that is, and wild boar and deer. Here, though, people usually feed them horse. It’s a good nutritional match.”

Maureen made a face. “What’s it look like?”

“Like a tiger,” Beth said.

Every evening after work, she bought beef at the butcher, or venison and horse meat when they could find it for her, and drove up to see the tiger. While it ate, she used the hose to spray water into a trough George had constructed along the side of the enclosure. Once, feeling playful, she sprayed the tiger. She’d read that tigers love water. But he snarled and flung himself at the chain link. The sight of those teeth bared and those claws extended wiped Beth’s mind blank. She screamed as he hit the fence. Then she stumbled backwards and sat down hard on the ground, the hose still running. After hanging on the fence for a moment, the tiger retreated to the lean-to and licked his fur.

Cleaning the floor of the concrete half of his enclosure proved a challenge. The slab was covered in a thin layer of compacted feces, probably more to blame for the smell than the tiger itself. George hadn’t engineered the enclosure very well. The only way to restrain the tiger was in the partitioned area by the door, but then how was she supposed to get into the enclosure to clean it? In the end, she bought a small pressure washer and aimed it through the fence. The tiger had been skittish since she sprayed him with the hose, and he slunk around the corners of the enclosure while she worked, staying as far away from the water as he could. She spent nearly a whole Saturday afternoon pressure washing. When it was done, the concrete was a clean grey and steamed in the sun. The tiger picked his way cautiously through the puddles.

Caring for the tiger took so much time that she started spending nights at the house. When the title was transferred to her name, she let go of

her apartment over the yoga studio and moved back in. It felt a little lonely living there without George. Often after the tiger was fed and watered, she would drag a chair outside to sit with it until dark.

She had met George in high school in Great Falls, Montana. When Beth's mother had mentioned seeing them together, her stepfather had put down his fork and knife and told her that she wasn't allowed to go out with this boy again.

Beth's mother had been well into her third or fourth glass of wine. "Oh, it's all right," she'd said mildly.

"If you want your daughter making a fool of herself all over town, then she can go right ahead," Beth's stepfather had said. He'd gone outside then, to smoke. After her mother passed out, he'd come into Beth's room smelling of cigarettes, his hands hot and shaky. He was strong and knew how to hurt her.

George didn't smoke. He was kind and patient. When she told him about her stepfather, he held her and stroked her hair. He said, "Come stay in my sister's room. My parents will understand." And George's parents did understand, although they never really warmed up to her.

They were married the summer after they graduated from high school. Then they packed everything into George's car and drove until they hit the Columbia River Gorge. George got a job in construction and they rented a small apartment. With him beside her, Beth slept soundly and without dreams.

They went on one vacation just two years after they were married. Beth wanted to drive to the coast and stay in a hotel, but George said hotels were too expensive. They were saving up for a house at the time and every penny counted. He suggested elk hunting instead. He had all the equipment already. And if they were lucky, they'd come out with enough meat to last a year. Beth wasn't sure she wanted to eat elk for a year, but she gave in.

They staked out a promising meadow in the Coast Range. George roused her at dawn to sit in the bushes in an orange vest. While she might

have preferred a hotel on the coast, Beth had thought the hunting itself would be thrilling. She hadn't known how much waiting was involved. The morning was cold, and her fingers and toes soon went numb. She nodded off a couple times and almost missed the arrival of the herd.

They stepped cautiously from the trees. The meadow filled, maybe twenty or thirty of them, it was hard to tell. Steam rose from their noses. The morning was so quiet she could hear them tearing the grass with their teeth. George slid the rifle from his shoulder. She watched him load it. He leaned forward to whisper in her ear. "Pick a bull. Make sure he has at least three points on his antlers."

She looked at the herd and pointed to an elk with a scarred back. George offered her the rifle. "Your first elk." He put the rifle in her hands. Her fingers were stiff with cold. She'd never held a gun before. He showed her where to place her hands, helped her bring the elk into the sight.

She was trembling. "You do it, George. I'll mess up."

He explained about breathing evenly. She took deep gulps of air, so cold her lungs hurt. She looked through the sight at the elk. She wondered if she could switch her choice.

"Okay, now fire," George said. Her finger obediently squeezed the trigger.

The recoil nearly knocked her over. The herd startled at the sound. Her elk sank to its knees. It struggled up again and staggered a few steps. George took the rifle and fired another shot. The herd scattered and ran. Her elk fell over.

George clapped her on the shoulder. "Good shot, sweetheart." He waded through the brush towards the meadow. She blinked. He was standing over her elk. She went to stand with him. The elk's eye was clouded. Blood soaked its side and head. It breathed in shuddering sighs.

"Please," she said. "Please make it stop."

George raised the rifle and fired. He pulled out his hunting knife. Beth left him there and went back to their camp.

Later, on the way home, George took her hand. "I'll teach our kids to hunt."

“I’m not sure I want kids.”

“Not right now, but someday. When we’re older.”

Beth let go of his hand. “We should take a real trip. Go somewhere exotic, like Mexico.”

“Maybe after we buy a house,” George said.

They ate elk all winter. In the evenings, she sat at the kitchen table and read the travel section of the paper. She cut out articles on Lisbon, Nepal, and the Yunnan Rice Terraces.

The lawyer said that in the event of his death, George had wanted the tiger to become part of a Species Survival Program. “Specifically the Sumatran tiger program.”

“What is that?” Beth said.

The lawyer said he’d looked into it. The programs in the United States were run by the American Zoo Association, and aimed to maintain a sustainable, genetically diverse population of certain tiger species in captivity. “Do you have any documentation of the tiger’s pedigree? We’ll need to establish through pedigree, or maybe genetic testing, if he really is Sumatran, or whether he’s generic.”

“Generic?” Beth said. She’d just thought tigers were tigers.

The lawyer saw her face and changed direction. She could take as much time as she needed, he reassured her. Think about it and decide what to do next.

Beth worried that the tiger might be lonely. He’d become shy, and wouldn’t come to the fence when she approached the enclosure. He watched her warily from a distance. He’d wait for her to back away before snatching at his meals. She still sat with him in the evenings, but she wondered what he did with so much time alone. So she watched him through the kitchen window while washing dishes, or from the dimness of the bedroom. Sometimes he slept, or sat and stared out across the river. Other times he paced in a restless line until Beth couldn’t sit still any longer.

She found she could watch him for hours on weekend mornings through the bedroom window, propped up on her side of the double bed.

Watching the tiger distracted her from the smooth covers and untouched pillow next to her, the ring sitting in a saucer on George's beside table. The tiger had a habit of digging up small stones and carrying them around in his mouth. He liked to gnaw on them. She was afraid of what it would do to his teeth, but she didn't know how to stop him. She couldn't just yell at him like she used to yell at her mother's dog when he chewed her shoes.

Instead, she brought the tiger other, softer things to chew: branches, rawhide dog toys, pumpkins. When she chucked them over the fence, the tiger shied away. His reluctance weighed on her. The way he flinched reminded her of how she still avoided smokers. She'd even been touchy and afraid at first with George. He'd had to draw her out gently. He'd held her hand for weeks before he kissed her. Then when he had, he'd been so tender, so careful to make sure she felt safe. She was used to being the one who needed coaxing, and didn't know what to do.

She started to visit the enclosure in the morning, as well as in the evening. Some days, she threw a beef bone over the fence. The tiger wouldn't touch it while she was there, but later she'd find the pieces pulled apart and licked clean.

One cold autumn morning she went out back. The tiger lifted his head and walked deliberately to the center of the concrete pad. Then he sat on his haunches and looked at her. Beth held very still. The tiger dropped to his stomach. He rolled over. Then he rolled over again. He sat up and lifted a paw, like a dog asked to shake. Who had taught him these tricks? The tiger heaved himself up onto his hind legs and balanced. She didn't know what it meant, what he wanted. The tiger took a step back, then another. He walked backwards in a circle. She thought he looked like he was dancing with an invisible partner, an absence the size of a person who waltzed him around the enclosure. Then he dropped back onto all fours. He bowed, legs stretched out in front of him. He approached the fence.

They regarded each other. Beth reached out a hand. The tiger's whiskers twitched, so she stopped an inch short of the fence. He pushed his nose forward, then stopped, just touching the fence. She could feel the tiger's breath hot against her palm.

Then he snorted and turned back to the enclosure. Beth closed her hand around the fading warmth. She watched him dig up another stone. She did not know if she could let him go.

The winter before she left George, the paper ran an article on teaching English abroad. The rains had closed in and recently the call center had gone through a round of layoffs. Beth had begun to feel restiveness accumulating in her bones.

“I could teach,” she told George. “I speak English.”

“You’d have to quit your job. Besides, some of those places probably don’t even have bathrooms.”

Beth looked up at him. After nearly ten years he looked even better than when they’d married. A little sharper around the chin, just a few laugh lines at the corners of his eyes. He smiled and she wanted to smile back.

“You wouldn’t come with me, would you?” Beth said.

“Would you go without me?”

She didn’t know. She ran her fingers across the names of the countries: Peru, Indonesia, Ecuador, Vietnam, India. “India has tigers,” she said.

He stood and held out his hand. “Come to bed.”

That night she lay awake beside him and thought about strange cities and languages she didn’t know. She thought about mountains and jungles, dense forests of unfamiliar trees. In the gloom there was a flicker of color, a snarl, a flash of motion.

She thought that the tiger knew her now. He stood up when she opened the back door. He watched her move around the yard. She’d begun to talk out loud to him, like she used to talk to her mother’s dog.

“Are you generic or Sumatran?” she said. “George didn’t keep any records from when he got you, but the lawyer says we have to prove you’re Sumatran or we won’t be able to do what George wanted.”

The tiger looked at her.

“I’m sorry about the meat,” she said. “I know it hasn’t been the best lately, but it’s expensive. That’s why you can’t stay with me. It’ll be better if you go to a zoo. You’ll be happier. They’ll know what to feed you and you’ll probably have more room. There might even be other tigers.”

The tiger looked at her.

“I bet you miss George,” she said.

The tiger yawned, showing an expanse of black gum and pink tongue.

“Do you ever wonder what it would be like if you were released into the wild?” she said. “Like if they flew you back to Sumatra and just let you go. Of course, you probably wouldn’t know how to take care of yourself. You’d probably starve or get eaten or something. You might not even go. If I opened the enclosure door right now, you’d be too scared to actually leave, wouldn’t you?”

The tiger blinked both golden eyes. His gaze was hungry. She stood hurriedly and backed up a couple steps. His eyes followed her. She went inside and shut the door.

In the end it wasn’t that George wanted kids and she didn’t, or that she wanted to travel and he didn’t. They were both patient and thought that at some point they would come to a solution. In the end, Beth left because it felt like they were two strangers living in the same house, sleeping in the same bed, eating breakfast and dinner together. They had forgotten how to talk to each other. George cleared trees to expand their backyard and planned additions to the house. On weekends he went out in his aluminum fishing boat for hours and stocked their freezer with salmon. Beth took long solitary drives, up to the mountain or out to the coast. She experimented with cooking new recipes: curries and fresh noodle salads and savory stews with yogurt sauces. In the evenings they sat in separate rooms and did separate things. Even with George’s arms around her, Beth felt vast, unbridgeable space between them. Finally she packed her suitcase. She sat him down at the

kitchen table after work one day and told him she was going to move out. He didn't say anything for a couple minutes. Despite the hunting and fishing, George wasn't a fighter, which was one of the reasons she had married him in the first place. After a while he looked up at her. "What's this about?" he said.

She twisted her ring on her finger. "I think we both need time to figure out what we want."

"Is this about housework? I can help out with that. I can vacuum."

"No, it's not about that," she said.

"If it's about how much I make, I can take on extra projects. You don't have to work anymore, if you don't want to. I know how much your job wears you out." He lifted a hand to touch her cheek, then seemed to think better of it.

"It's not about you," she said.

He slammed his hands down on the table. Beth jumped. "Come on, Beth. Give me a clue here, so I can work on whatever it is."

She said, "I'm just not sure I want to be married anymore."

He put his head in his hands. She immediately hated herself, because this was George and she loved George. He asked her where she was going to go. She said she'd stay at Maureen's until she could find a place of her own. He didn't speak after that, just stood at the door as she loaded her suitcase into her car. Her whole body ached to comfort him. She had to wrap her fingers tightly around the steering wheel to keep herself from reaching out.

The call center always threw a big Christmas party sometime in December, but before that Allen treated the customer service department to drinks. This year they went to McCall's, the bar right off Main Street where the tourists usually gathered. When Beth got home, flushed with too many margaritas, she went out back to feed the tiger. The light over the back door didn't reach very far. She stumbled over the dark, uneven ground towards the enclosure. As she got closer, she saw the tiger come toward her out of the dark, shaking his head and pawing at his face. She hooked her fingers into the chain link and pressed her face against the fence trying to see.

“Tiger?” she said. The tiger whined. She shoved the meat through the fence. When he opened his mouth to pick up a piece, the weak light glinted off the jagged stump of his upper right canine. He ate one, two pieces of meat. Then he rubbed his face on the ground, got up, and paced off into the cage. He’d never left a meal unfinished. She ran back to the house to look up the number for the emergency vet clinic.

“You have a what?” the on-call veterinarian said, when someone finally put him on the phone.

“A tiger. His tooth is broken. He won’t eat. I think he’s in pain.”

“I’m sorry, ma’am, I don’t have any experience treating large cats,” the veterinarian said. “But I can refer you to someone who does.”

The exotic animal veterinarian he referred her to lived in Portland. When Beth called the next morning, a technician answered the phone and said the exotic animal veterinarian had been called down to San Diego to work on a sick leopard. She might not be back for a couple of days. Beth hung up. This was not part of the deal.

Over the next week he seemed to get better, and then worse. On Wednesday evening he ate only a couple pieces of meat before again turning away. By Friday he had grown even thinner and more lethargic. Beth took the day off from work and called the veterinarian in Portland again. She was still in San Diego with the leopard, and although the technician gave her the names of other exotic animal veterinarians, the closest was in Montana. Beth tried the local clinic again, and they put her on with the same veterinarian. He said he was no expert, but agreed to help her however he could. He was fairly sure that breaking a tooth wasn’t necessarily fatal. But it would certainly put the tiger in great pain, he said. If the pain was bad enough, the tiger might not eat and could die of starvation. “I can try to manage the tiger’s pain,” he said. “But if you can’t find someone to fix the tooth, his quality of life is going to decrease steadily. At some point, your best bet may be to put him down. Or you could see if you can place him somewhere with good veterinary care. But that could take some time, maybe longer than he’s got.”

The veterinarian came by and together they laced a steak with painkillers. When she pushed it through the fence, the tiger wouldn't touch it. The fur on the side of his head was starting to wear off where he'd been rubbing his jaw against the ground. Beth wrote the vet a check for the painkillers. Then she wrapped herself in some blankets and went to sit next to the fence. As night fell she tried to coax the tiger to eat the steak. Soon he was just a black shape in the dark. He keened.

"You're going to be all right. I'm here. You're going to be just fine," Beth said. She leaned her cheek against the chain-link and repeated this at intervals. The cold from the ground seeped up through her legs and body. In the night, for a moment, she thought George was beside her. But the next moment she was aware that this couldn't be right because George was dead. He was dead, and he'd wanted her to have this tiger and also to give it away.

At dawn the steak was frozen to the concrete, limned with frost. Across the enclosure the tiger shook his head and whined. Beth knew she had to do something. His suffering could not be allowed to continue. She rose, shedding blankets, and went into the house. She tried the veterinarian in Portland one last time, but the woman was still in San Diego, and now they said she might be there even longer. The ammunition was on a shelf in the garage. She took the rifle down off the gun rack. She loaded it and put on the safety. Outside the sun had just breached the hills. The tiger's stripes stood out starkly, his fur stretched tight over ribs. She tried to get a good angle through the fence. Nothing quite lined up right. So she slid back the first bolt and stepped into the partitioned part of the enclosure. Her heart was galloping. She fiddled with the mechanism, and got the second door open, just a little. The tiger was lying at the edge of the grass. He raised his head. She lifted the rifle and centered the crosshairs on his forehead. The tiger's yellow eyes were focused on her. Or maybe he was looking beyond her, out the open door.

She tried to close her finger on the trigger. The action was simple, didn't even require much pressure. Come on, she told herself, this is a good death. A fierce, swift death. George had died fast, in a flashing skid of wheels. His tiger deserved the same.

She stared at the tiger and the tiger stared at her. She saw his scars standing out on his shoulders, the lump of scar tissue on his leg. The early sun struck the tiger's bulk and his muscles stood out in stark relief. She took a shuddering breath and looked away, out across the river gorge. The wind hadn't picked up yet, and the water was glassy, reflecting the hills. Everything was still and quiet. Even the distant murmur of cars on the interstate was muffled. Beth's chest felt tight. She turned and looked back into the tiger's eyes. The rifle was heavy against her shoulder. She braced her legs.

Allow for the breeze, she thought. Breathe.



Miriam Cook has recently returned to her hometown of Portland, Oregon after earning her MFA at Emerson College in Boston. While at Emerson, Miriam was named the 2014 Ivan Gold Fiction Fellow for the Writers' Room of Boston and worked as a Marketing Assistant at Ploughshares.

Packwood

Jenn Blair

It's tiring, looking at dead people's faces. I guess I'm about the only person in Yakima who gets paid for taking the paper from the front step and reading the obituaries. Who liked digging for clams on the coast and spending time with their grandkids, who had a passion for repairing and painting broken statuary—that kind of thing. When people send in memorial gifts to hospital programs in the names of the deceased, someone has to update the computer records and find the next of kin so we know who to send out thank you letters to. "Dear Mrs. Johnson, Please accept our condolences on the death of your husband. The following gifts have been made in memory of Mr. Edward Johnson to the Children's Fund/Hospice Fund/Cancer Center." That's what I do. That's how I know that Eulalia Smith enjoyed watching squirrels and birds, and Ed Watts had a voice just like George Jones when he called out square dances in Moxee, and Gloria Wilkinson got her driver's license at forty-seven, though none of her four children believed she could.

I've been working here seven months, ever since I went to Professional Temp Services and took the typing test. The job is mostly fine. When I told my Great Aunt about it, she asked if losing my mind from sadness was a serious concern. Not really, I told her, though I'm never quite sure when something's going to hit me hard. Sometimes I cry at nothing (he was a regular fixture at the VFW bingo hall), and other times, the most devastating tragedies (preceded in death by four of her children), do nothing. The protocol is quite clear: when a person dies, we're to leave nothing but the first and last name. Any titles, like Miss, Mrs., Doctor, Col., Rev., or Hon. are dropped. If the person was married, we still have to open a new file and type the name in again. Alone. We can link one record to another, but we still must create two separate records. Sometimes I do have to take an extra breath, though, to steel myself before highlighting a name, and hitting delete. I picture a widow somewhere, sitting at her kitchen table drinking coffee, suddenly feeling worse without knowing why.

Today I leave work around five p.m., my usual time, but as I sit in my car, the thought of going back to my empty house for another night seems almost unbearable. Instead of turning down Summitview, I turn right on Lincoln, and head up to Naches, the small town that's home to Tillie's candy shop—famous for its jars of home-canned pickles and black jelly beans. At work today, the friendly woman down the hall, Shay, said she'd shut all her windows before coming in because of a wind warning on the radio. And sure enough, it's blowing hard already and every so often the car swaysenough to really frighten me. I should probably turn around, but I don't. I keep driving—past Oak Creek and the Game Lodge Motel with its neon antler head and sign for ICE. Traveling along the edge of Rimrock Lake, I eventually pass Silver Beach and its small pier, fully emptied of summer boats. Clouds move low and fast over the land. A few more miles past Rimrock, the wind startles trees out of their pinecones and branches; sometimes, it kicks up a pillar of dirt and dust.

This afternoon at work, Shay looked up from her fiscal year pie chart.

“Do you like this pale yellow color?” she asked me, pointing to a tiny sliver on her computer screen. I nodded.

“It's only two percent of the budget, though. Maybe it doesn't jump out enough.”

At White Pass, the slopes are bare, and the lines of empty chair lifts swing back and forth in the brisk wind. The white truck that's been keeping a respectful distance behind me turns off at Clear Lake. I turn the radio louder while passing through falling rock zones. At last, I realize where I'm going—to Ohanapecosh, a campground just outside the Mt. Rainier National Park, where we went when I was a kid. The upper park might be closed, but I hope I can at least get to the Grove of the Patriarchs. I want to see those huge trees out on the island. Trees with water running all around them, so no fire ever touched them and there was nothing for them to do about it but grow—nothing to do but helplessly flourish. But before I reach the campground and Grove, I find a gate blocking the road—still closed for winter. After I turn around, I head a few more miles up the road to Packwood, a small logging town. The Old Time Inn, on the left side of the

road near the only grocery store, seems nice enough. I spy an indoor pool and a few cars and trucks in the lot.

In the lobby, a lady eventually appears from behind the white lace curtain. She's middle-aged, wearing a pink sweater with gray snowflakes. She says she and her husband are back there watching TV. Yesterday they gardened. But not today, not with all this wind. I answer her questions: No. Just me. Double bed is fine. Only a night. Just had to get away.

“Oh, boy, do I know that feeling.”

My key is for room three. The room is small with cheap wood paneling. I look in the bathroom. The toilet and bath are the color of dried mustard. The shampoo and soap are both discount, “Fine Choice” brands—frustrating because in fact there is no choice at all in the matter. I'm a grown woman, but someone should still probably know where I am. Since I can't call him, I call my mother. She says the power was out at the house this morning. A backhoe hit the line. Eventually, I say I am up in the woods. She seems unfazed by this, and we chat a little more. But just before she hangs up—

“Are you alone?”

For some reason, the question makes me furious.

After I hang up the phone, I put on my coat, lock the door, and walk to the grocery store to look at the toothbrushes. I ask where the cash machine is, then study the BBQ chips display at the aisle-end near a table of wilted apple fritters. When I take my items to the checkout counter, the cashier is telling the lady in front of me that they'll get new registers in June. A young cashier the next row over sighs and says she hopes to be gone by then. In my sack, I have a can of black olives, an orange toothbrush, and a pack of men's razor blades. On the bulletin board outside the store, an extra-large scrap of pale yellow paper flutters: “Strong reliable disabled woman (one leg). Need to get back on my feet (literally).” I keep reading. She will do yard work, house chores, and other small projects, bringing along her husband if the job requires some extra help. It's still windy and cold. But I paid for this room—shouldn't I at least stay for a little while? I like locking the door, tugging the knob tight. I still want to know why.

Walking with my bag, I come to a house with a driveway full of tables piled high with cut rocks. There's also a big wooden cross with nails on the arm-beams leaning against one of them. The sign in the window says open, and there is a table and chair and a business card with a man's name on it. Larry Young. But no one is there. I stroll around the tables. There's lapidary equipment on the floor, an old rock pick on the wall. There are framed pictures of praying hands and the foot prints poem. And in the corner, a statuette of the praying hands, more rocks, and a few vertebrae of some creature that has no name to my knowledge but is colossal and terrifying and gone forever. Under the tables, Darigold and Carnation crates hold rocks. Rocks formed from Mount St. Helens ash, geodes, and petrified wood. Rocks shined and shaped into eggs, sitting in an egg carton. There's a torn out plastic restaurant table with both booths—rocks spilling across the surface and “special” rocks from Wyoming and Utah sitting in old ice cream cases. On top of one case, a side slice of a rock sits. Like a slab of meat, or an ice cave set on fire, Glory speaking loud through a Brillo pad, something that could scrub you clean. I stare and stare. I want that one. But when I pick it up, there's no price tag. And there's still no Larry Young.

You're not that old. Just getting started on middle-age. There's still plenty of time. Shay says that all the time. She doesn't say I'm pretty, she says I'm funny. And so nice. I leave the crates of rocks and keep going. Next, I come to the library and “The Bright Beacon Presbyterian Thrift store.” On my way in, I hold open the door for a man carrying a printer out. As soon as I'm inside, a lady asks me, “You need a printer? They're free. Marty called next door and just unloaded eight of them but there are more.”

The woman must be in her late fifties. Despite the weather, she's wearing hot pink shorts, a tank top that matches, and a nicotine patch on her left shoulder. She used to live in California, but she likes it much better here. The mountain is outside her window, and there are not as many kids up here, and none of them are on skateboards. She figures she became an adult the year after high school, after the summer, when the fall came and her mother eventually said what are you going to do? She took a job in the printing business and kept it for ten years. But there were union dues and the

older people clung to their jobs while the younger ones lost out, and maybe she shouldn't have quit, but why waste time thinking about if you should have gone left or right.

"What do you do?" She suddenly asks.

"I work in a hospital. Just in the office."

"Oh, so you're not working right with the bodies."

"No. Not exactly."

"They have a good cafeteria?" she asks, after a pause.

"Not bad."

"When we were waiting and my brother was sick, we'd go down to the cafeteria. They had the best four bean soup. But the cream of cauliflower. Now that was another story."

She tells me that was down in California. Three years ago. Her brother had emphysema and congestive heart failure and they took the train down to see him. He was already in a hospice, and he said no funeral so they went to her sister's house and just bawled.

"I'm sorry."

"Me too. But it's best he went. He had a good life. And there wasn't nothing left for him here but to drag around that oxygen tank all over the place. Have kids stare at him in restaurants."

She notices me looking at a frame on the floor.

"The other day some man in here asked me if we had any old pictures. Doesn't that one look old?" She points, a mountain.

"Sure," I say.

"He asked me what mountain it was and was it Mt. Rainier," she says, looking at it, "But it's not. Know how I know?"

I shake my head.

"Too much granite."

Then a younger woman behind the counter calls her over. As I look at books, the woman behind the counter pops open a soda. She says its cream soda. She absolutely loves soda, but this is the only one that won't give her heartburn. The older lady tells her, "I'm the only person I know who gets it from watermelon. It could kill me."

“Oh,” the young woman says, “Look at what someone brought in yesterday.” She pulls out something and the older lady reads, then starts laughing. “Show her” she commands the woman behind the counter, pointing at me. When I come close, she unfolds a white tea towel with dark blue lettering. She quickly folds the message inward, telling me, “People sometimes forget we’re a *Presbyterian* thrift store.”

“I guess we could put fifty cents on it and put it out—in case a Methodist happens to drop by,” the older woman says. I laugh, but the woman behind the counter looks confused.

“Is that a joke?” she asks.

“God, lighten up, of course it is,” the other tells her. “Or maybe you could take it home, put it in your and Marty’s kitchen.”

“Well,” she says, eyes dropping back to the towel, “well.” She looks around like she wants to be careful no one else can overhear her, “I don’t think that particular message would fit in our home. Things are a little . . .”

She trails off.

“Oh, that’s too bad,” the older lady says, suddenly serious. I feel like I’m intruding, overhearing something I shouldn’t, so I look down at the booklet in my hands (written by a retired Park Ranger: Lupine, Avalanche Lilies, other local wildflowers). When I look up, the younger woman is smiling again, like the information she revealed doesn’t really matter. “Marty and I have been married for twelve years,” she tells me. “Known each other for thirteen. It’s a long time. But he’s the best.” When she nods her head, I realize Marty must be the man hauling the printers in and out the door.

“That’s my husband.”

Soon, he comes back in to make a sign and says purple is his favorite color, deep purple like the Huskies, all the while looking intently at the marker he’s using. I have enough books. Before I leave, I say, “Twelve years. Good for you.” It’s lame, but I can’t think of anything else.

That’s my husband. Isn’t that what you say? When you come in a room. And there he is already, holding a glass of red wine. Talking intently, with a small group gathered around him, but he’s yours. That’s my husband you say, and any minute, he’ll raise his eyes and look at you like what can we

do about all these other people, and he smiles and shrugs, and you smile and shrug back. You say it casually. Like you almost forgot, like you wouldn't have thought of it if you hadn't just seen him there. Then you walk over to the plate of crackers and cheese. Like it's no big deal and your life isn't bound up in it. Like underneath, nothing's trembling.

I take a nap, then head back out in the rain to one of the few restaurants, a pizza place a block over. The Mariners are on TV. They're holding out over the Orioles, seven to five. Wherever they play it seems grim and cold. Martinez has a warm hat. Boone looks tired. Dashing back through the rain, I see a man out on the covered sidewalk near my door, blowing his nose in a handkerchief. When he says hello, I nod and keep going.

Before bed, I sit in the tub until the water goes cold, my sack from the store beside me. I touch one of my thighs, check for the fat on the sides that dimples your skin and forces you to throw away the shorts that were acceptable just last summer. Then I touch my stomach as if I need to know it can still feel. Who would do it? If I wasn't there to get the paper and read the obits. Who would they hire to sit at my desk? Who would do it in the meantime? Would Shay? That woman with one leg?

Early the next morning, I drop the key in the slot, and start up the road. There, where all the tables of rocks are, stands a man with a beard and a yellow flannel shirt. I stop the car and roll down my window because I have to know.

"Are you Larry Young?" I ask.

"That's me," he replies, coming over to the car. "I think I saw you in the pizza place last night, didn't I?"

"Maybe you did, I was there for a bit," I nod.

"Should have joined you," he said, "Or you me. I just got mine to go."

"Yeah," I reply, not knowing what to say next. When I realize he looks confused, I change the topic. "I came by to see these yesterday. Quite a collection. But you weren't here."

"Oh," he scratched his head. "I'm sorry. I don't get many customers so I'm a little loose about the hours."

“I understand.”

“But,” he said, “I’m here now. Was there something you wanted?”

“A geode,” I say, catching myself off guard.

“Sure thing,” he says, moving over to one of the cardboard boxes. I get out of the car with my purse, rustling around in it to see if I have any change.

“No, no,” he says, when he turns around, box in his hands. “You just pick the one you like.”

“I want to pay you, though.”

“Lady,” he says with a little exasperation but also a smile, “Just take one. And tell your friends about me.”

“All right,” I say, picking a small gray one, “Sure thing. Thanks so much.”

“You’re welcome,” he says. “Have a safe drive.”

“I will.” I get back in the car and put the rock on my side seat. He waves at me like I’m his sister or a long lost cousin and I wave back.

Above Rimrock, steep cliffs inhale sharply against the sky. I decide to stop the car and get out and read the plaque, the one he would never stop for. A few pine needles have fallen on the sign, which is about Tieton Dam. There was a lull in the work during World War One, but during the Depression, the site became a welcome project. A town sprung up. Miners blasting through the granite. Lumber jacks. Men pouring concrete. The nearby store offered ice cream: “a treat made possible by grazing cows and mountain snow.”

I get back in the car. The town is gone now. Nothing is left but the dam and a store down at Indian Creek where you’ve got to be careful of hunters, who like to make dangerously swift left turns. I fly past Wild Rose campground, until I am back to green grass and Balsam Root and spring. In Naches, I stop to use the bathroom, and the Drift Inn is full of gray-haired men chattering over eggs. Near Tieton, kids push through the wind to the school bus. I hurry home to shower, then find an ironed shirt and slacks. At work, I carefully place the geode by my paper clip holder. I sit down and stare at it for a while, before getting up again to grab the purple folder full of the files I didn’t finish entering yesterday.

Shay bustles in a few minutes after me, carrying her breakfast, a spot of grease shines through the paper bag. She sets down her purse by the computer, and takes off her coat.

“You have a nice evening?”

“Yeah, sure.”

“What’s that by your stapler?”

“Oh,” I say looking over, “It’s a geode.”

“Huh,” Shay says, because there’s nothing else to say.

After a few minutes of filing, it’s time to go out front for the paper. Eight today. Glenda Williams did an oil painting that still hangs in the bank at Mabton. Roger Temple inspected B-17s. Millie Frader worked on the floats for the Harrah Sugar Beet festival. Bill Smart was born in a blizzard in Reeder, North Dakota, then shot down forty-three planes in World War Two and saved the three-inch piece of shrapnel that got stuck in his gunner seat.



Jenn Blair's work has appeared in *Rattle*, the *Berkley Poetry Review*, *Superstition Review*, *Copper Nickel*, *Atticus Review*, *Adirondack Review*, *New South*, *Cold Mountain Review*, *James Dickey Review*, and the *Tulane Review*, among other publications. Her chapbook 'The Sheep Stealer' was recently published by Hyacinth Girl Press. Originally from Yakima, Washington, she teaches at the University of Georgia.

Four Memories of Breath

Rebecca Brown

My friend was a very new father. His wife had only recently returned to work, and he works at home like me so he asked me to be with the baby while he went out for a run. When I got there the child was asleep upstairs. They had one of those speaker things so that if the kid cried upstairs you could hear it downstairs, so I could just hang out downstairs and read or whatever, my friend whispered. Everything was still so new we whispered whenever the baby was asleep, but I wanted to be with the baby. My friend went out for his run and I went upstairs to watch the baby. The baby was small. I mean, he was big for a baby, huge for a baby his age, but he was a *baby*—that kind of small. His crib was a rocker his grandfather had made. I had sat by the crib before with his parents and Chris, and we had talked with the baby and played with him, but this was the first time I was alone with him and I was alone with him asleep.

I squatted over the crib and looked as quietly as I could. His nostrils were very, very small. His hands were small and pink, his fingers the size of the ends of tiny carrots. I knew they were soft—I had touched them—and they had little tiny nails. This was before he'd ever had his nails cut; he was still perfect. His nostrils were very, very small and very slightly moving. I could see his lips move. On his upper lip was a little dot of saliva. I could see his body breathing. Did I hear an infant pull of air, did I hear it move across his lips, into his mouth, into the inside and alive of him? I saw his fat baby belly pajama top go up and down and up and down. His fingers relaxed and flexed slightly. Was he remembering being in his mother's body? Was he already dreaming?



One time Ben came up to see us without Kim and the kids. He and Chris spent the day together while I stayed home to work. When they got back that evening, they were pooped, so we were just going to make an easy dinner and

eat in front of a video. It must have been a Miyazaki. Chris had taken *Howl's Moving Castle* down to Ben and Kim and the grandkids a while back so they were all fans now too, and now Chris and Ben and I were sitting on the futon with our legs stretched out in front of us facing the TV screen. Nobody'd been saying much but suddenly it felt different. I looked to my left and saw Ben's eyes were closed. His head was tilted slightly back and his mouth was slightly open. Next to him, on the other side, was Chris, his mother. Her eyes were closed, her head was tilted slightly back and her mouth was slightly open. I know the sound of Chris' breath, and the sound of her when she's falling asleep, then sleeping. I listened to her breathing and I heard, next to her, the breath of her sleeping son. I thought of her watching her son sleep when he was young. I thought of him being inside her once, and then of the way she watched him sleep, the way someone who loves you does. I listened to the sleep of her and of the grown man, now a father, who once had been the baby in her womb.



Chris and I sat by Donna's bed. Donna was breathing but not very deeply and not very much. We were sitting and waiting for her to stop.

I don't know if we saw the last or even if there was a last. But at some point we realized she'd stopped. I remember looking at her pulse, not seeing a last of that, or feeling a last, except there must have been because then there was none.

Her hand was cool. We'd felt it getting cooler and felt the feeling go from it, her grip or response then her lack of grip and cooling. But still we kept on holding it, as if there was still her to hold.

A widower friend had taken Dave for a walk because sometimes a person wants not to die in front of the person their death will hurt the most. When David came back I met him before he came into the room. "She's gone," I said. He nodded and he said, "I know."

We came in the room and Chris stood up and Dave sat by the bed and took the hand of his now dead wife and we left him alone in the room.

When he came from the room he said to us, “she’d already been gone a while.” He said it as if it would lessen it. Perhaps for a while it did.



It rained in the night. We heard it on the roof of the tent. It was like we could hear the single drops. They came not only from the sky but also from the trees.

In the morning Chris woke up early. She was already by the river when I got up and opened the sleeve of the tent and looked. She sat by the river and dipped her hands and then her hands and a cloth into the river and onto her. She was washing herself with the water. The sun was coming up and there was mist rising off the river. It rose from the land and other things and the rain that had fallen the night before was turned back into mist or steam or something more or less than it. I looked and saw as if, for a while, the breathing of the world.



Rebecca Brown is a prolific writer, teacher, and artist based in Seattle. Her books include *American Romances*; *Excerpts From A Family Medical Dictionary*, which won the Washington State Book Award; and *Gifts of the Body*, which won the Lambda Literary Award. A winner of *The Stranger's* Genius Award, she also directed the Port Townsend Writers Conference for four years, co-founded the Jack Straw Writers Program, and was the first writer in residence at the Richard Hugo House.

Snap the Whip

Janie Miller

Through the window is the magnolia tree, but I only know this through reflection. The backdrop is the upper portion of a brick-red house, its columnar chimney like a skyscraper from this perspective. Magnolias bloom twice each year; the fall and spring. The blossoms unfold white bundles of clean slates that spread open like a deck of cards. There's a trick there: now you see it, now you don't; a branch only hangs on for so long, then lets the flower go. Nothing in Wilmington seems to die the way I expect it to.

The landscape is laid perfectly over this screen where my words appear: brick triangle interrupted by tall rectangle, obscured by flat leaf patterns which sometimes move, all this framed by a window, all that framed by my laptop screen. This is how I prefer to write: laying letters across an already finished canvas. One thought on top of another, tangling realities into DNA strands that—twisted together like a wind chime in a storm—create an unexpected music: something like meaning.

My parent's home in Kansas is held together by habits. My dad has woken up at the same time every morning during their thirty-six-year marriage. In cold months, he puts on a robe that is identical to the first robe my mom ever bought him; rusted burgundy, soft material, not too thick. He goes to work after cold cereal and coffee while mom sleeps late into the morning. The first time they see each other will be 6 o'clock.

I am wary of returning home after three years. I sit in a blue airport chair trying to invest some attention in a newspaper, but fidget instead with my nails and the silver zippers on my backpack. Will my parents look old? Will I fall back into my old family role? I feel I might be losing something. I gently bend my metal-rimmed glasses at the nose, and they noiselessly snap into two pieces in my hands, leaving me to travel home with little to see but what's right before me.

I read an article about a man who was murdered in Texas; his body was left to waste in New Mexico. It mentions little of his life, what he left behind. Did he have close family? A wife? He worked as a restaurant executive, and I halt at the word executive, as it swerves dangerously close to execute: a word doubling-over itself with heaviness. It comes to English in the twelfth-century to mean carry out, perform. One hundred years later, the term evolves: to put to death. In 1776 American English applies the word into a judicial landscape: a person responsible for putting laws into effect. Executive and executioner; scissor blades fanning in and out from the handle.

In 1898, Wilmington was the largest city in North Carolina. It was wealthy and destined to fall apart. Cape Fear River snaked through the state and carved a port into the city, driving tobacco and lumber sales. The first black lawyer in North Carolina lived and worked in Wilmington. *The Daily Record* was a small newspaper produced by the local African-American community and was printed in a house on Castle Street. Whites and blacks actually shared some types of power.

But in 1898 in the south, this sort of idealism came with trapdoors. In November, a white supremacy group gathered at the armory, marched downtown with guns and flags. They burned the black printing press, killed black citizens, overthrew local government. They ripped a seam through town that still exists. Today, neighborhoods are segregated by race and poverty, and the black middle class is very small. Many of the white citizens who seized the government have buildings named after them.

A friend of mine lives on Castle Street, across from the printing press. The building still retains burn marks and is littered with broken glass. The press is back up and running, but wary of people asking questions. My friend has an old door in her hallway. You can trace the smooth craters of bullet heads with your finger like a scar, sometimes seeing light through fractures.

I arrive in Atlanta for a brief layover and can see only shapes. The flight departures are written imperceptibly small and are listed fifteen feet from the

ground, so I ask a man to please check my flight for me. He has on a red sweater, which seems festive, and I assume he is friendly. My dad calls and says that the roads in Kansas might be icy and that he will keep me updated. The roads in Kansas are usually icy in winter, the landscape bleak. There's uncanny silence before movement, and always the silence after.

When an event becomes forgotten, the language shifts. The massacre—anywhere from twenty-two to hundreds of black casualties—has historically been called a race riot, and is now being re-labeled a coup d'état. The change in language apparently being more accurate and appealing: the coup d'état in Wilmington was the only one in United States history, and this is how the history books will now write it: a struggle predominantly about government power rather than racial tensions. *Colpus* is Latin, a blow with the fist.

A man, fifty-five-years old, drives out to the New Mexico desert. A landscape nearly invisible at night; cacti poking at stars, the rolling land buffeted by unexpected plateaus. He pulls his car over, probably a black or silver SUV with a Texas license plate, in a place far from city lights, miles from the truck stop, but not far from the road. He wants to be found. After twenty paces, he ties knots around the trigger. The helium balloons should be just strong enough. He points to the back of his head, balloons pull the gun into the atmosphere, blotting stars while leaning into dry, desert wind.

Murder is public because the factors are out of control of the victim. Someone is to blame and answers are sought out. Suicide however, is solitary. Its complication is privately resonant because it exists within itself, inside itself. It is a self-choice, similar to the way getting up in the morning is a choice. I had a conversation with a roommate once about suicide. I lay on the cold, wood floor staring at the ceiling, needing, I suppose, openness to consider the impulse. Her father was schizophrenic. He committed suicide eight years ago. He died at his job—a school—he wanted to be found. My mother, also schizophrenic, has survived one attempt. After a troubling phone call that morning, I worried it would happen again, so I laid on my roommate's floor staring at her ceiling. The people who lived here before us

had stars stuck to the white ceiling, which now existed only as sticky circles. Centers left behind from the glue, carved points removed, inexact.

My family lived twice in Arizona. The first time when I was eight and everything was falling apart. The day my brother fell from his bicycle into the drainage ditch is a surreal memory, one that—visually—fits together: brother is around the corner, I turn corner, brother ascends from the ditch without bike, has goose egg on forehead, brother cries, I get mom for help, everyone goes inside the house. But emotionally I can't understand how it all happened. How my brother could have been so helpless. How angry and out of control my mother looked. Why didn't he carry his bike out from the ditch? Why did he feel guilty for falling?

I unclick my seatbelt in unison with the other passengers; the moment just before the cabin door opens. The sound is a line of dominoes falling into each other; chain reactions of moments setting the future in motion. I walk out of the terminal and look for the shape of my parents: tall, lanky father standing to the right of my mother, heavy with weight and self-doubt. Their faces imaginary until I step right up to them, not sure if the person I was on the plane reflected the one here, hugging my dad, watching my mom cry in relief, despair. Her eye shadow is lavender, our favorite color.

When I was in the third grade, my mom was descending into madness. My brother and I would cry at the dinner table if we detected any change in her mood. We didn't have language for her illness, only grief. My third grade teacher gave us a project: tie a message to a balloon and send it into the sky. We were to learn, I suppose, the act of making something and letting it go. The act of wishing. I wrote a message for my family. I sent my message far up until it disappeared.

I saw *Snap the Whip* once at the Met. Winslow Homer painted the American pastoral the way Mark Twain wrote it. I had always wanted to feel the tension of the painting in person; the way two boys stand in the back, holding the line; another boy in a startlingly white shirt centers the break; a group of boys swing the momentum; two boys tumble into the ground. A

human whip where each individual movement has a purpose in the motion. And when I saw the painting I cried because there we all were. My father holding the line, my brother centering the break, me running ahead, my mother taking the fall. We are all there, and there are flowers and stones all around the frame.

Walking a short distance through New Mexico just off the interstate, someone sees a curious tangle around a cactus. Looking closer, strings are wound around the thorns on one arm of the cactus, where maybe once a wren's nest nestled inside. Maybe once an impossibly small beak broke the egg's shell. Attached to one end of the strings were deflated balloons, which at this point look like used socks. Dangling down the back of the cactus is a gun attached to the string. The man wanted to be found, but not found out.

And the sky. Through the leaves in the computer screen, dappled, waving, shifting, is the sky which is a quiet, easy blue. I just tilt the lens up a bit and it is there. All of this happening underneath some version of it. Something just over every ridge—the landscape holding our losses.

I never stopped looking for the message. I knew that it fell somewhere: a balloon can only float so far. I biked through every street, walked into a multitude of deserts looking. I wanted my message back.



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About the Days

Steven Moore

On certain nights, jackals were shotgunned to death on the mountain by men who waited for them. The morning guards got spoiled with beautiful sunrises. At some point they'd pass around scrambled eggs in Styrofoam containers, cracking each of the lids, searching for a container with no bacon and extra fruit, then handing that one to the interpreter. No one could discern the schedule of the locals' prayers. The border crossing was closed until ten a.m. but our convoys often arrived at seven or eight, then waited, because the army doesn't sleep in, no matter what. The Afghan soldiers played volleyball in a sandy pit near our huts each afternoon. The captain slept each night with a radio on. Printed instructions in the command room listed what type of emergencies warranted waking him. Poker that started at seven lasted until midnight. Poker that started at midnight lasted until the end of the guard shift when the guys took their money and went to breakfast.



1st PLT B-CO IAW 5th Kandak & SWT conducts MTD recon patrol to Kama Daka & ABP/Shilman Pass OP vic. grid 42SXC95739024 NLT 0800 15 MAR IOT perform village assessment and confirm/deny insurgent traffic @ Shilman Pass.



The briefings always included a mission statement and the mission statement always had required parts, just like a story: who, what, where, when, and why. The officers could churn out mission statements automatically. They spoke it as a language, but the younger guys scribbled furiously in notebooks in case they got called on to repeat it back. The lieutenant would say, "Taylor, tell me: what's the mission." And the specialist would look down at his notebook and stumble through what he'd captured. The words *conduct*

patrol had stuck in his mind, because those were the parts that mattered to him. The ‘who’ didn’t matter; it was always the same: our platoon and some Afghans we didn’t know. For the specialist, the ‘when’ didn’t matter either: his team leader would wake him when it was time to leave. The ‘why’ was always fuzzy, the goal never as clear as in movies: Rescue the survivors. Find the secret plans. Take the hill at all costs, or the field, or the town. If the specialist didn’t write it down, he wouldn’t remember, because it wasn’t intuitive. It was a language he didn’t yet understand. He’d trail off. The lieutenant would ask, “Can someone help him out?” and a guy with faster handwriting would read his notes. “Village assessment. Confirm insurgent traffic.”

And the briefing continued: Grid coordinates for emergency landing zones. The challenge and password, number combination, and running password. Vehicle manifests and load plan. Route outline and grid coordinates of the checkpoints. Rules of engagement, escalation of force. Commander’s primary and secondary intel requirements. And on and on. At the end, the lieutenant called on whomever he deemed most likely not to have paid attention, just as a teacher would. And like students, we recited the language in fragments, and later, sentences. Trying to reach that point where the new language isn’t just a referent to the old, but has meaning itself. The point called fluency.



One of the more upsetting dreams was this one: A gruff cowboy approaches a boy lying in the grass of an open field. The cowboy says, “I’ve never shot a boy just to put him out of his misery, but I’ll do it today,” and he shoots the boy, who was asleep. The boy wakes and finds a hole in his stomach. The blood, however, spills from his mouth, which is speechless, and he takes himself to a hospital and lies on a bed but no one comes to him.



One afternoon while working at the entrance to the base, I asked our interpreter Aamir why so many of the locals' names ended in the same suffix *-wali*.

He said it means "flower."

I asked him why.

He said he didn't understand.

Why is that word in everyone's name.

He said he didn't know; it's just the way it is. He said there is a Pashtu expression people use when they don't know the answer to a question and they suspect nobody else knows either. The expression translates to "Because the sky is high."

I asked him if the expression rhymes in Pashtu like it does in English.

Aamir said, What do you mean?

I asked if the words sound the same when you say them in Pashtu. Do the words sound alike?

He asked, do the words sound like what?

Do they sound like each other?

He asked what I meant.

I said, Does it fucking *rhyme*?



Some of the moments appeared to be related. For example, the moment when our convoy couldn't find its turn in the still-dark morning was related to a moment the night before, when everyone in the first truck didn't get off their mountain shift until midnight, and those moments were related *because* they were consecutive, or basically consecutive. But just as often, the consecutiveness or separation of two moments had nothing to do with their likelihood of being related. Some of the moments that happened consecutively seemed to be months apart. And some moments that were months apart seemed consecutive, seemed to cause each other directly. Though causation is a wild thing to go looking for.



Six village elders were ambushed on their way to a meeting. All six were shot in the head. Three died immediately. The others were rushed to our base for treatment.



Some of the guys' last names were so appropriate for them that if it were fiction, the reader would scream.



Another dream: I worked at some kind of military checkpoint. It was nighttime. A man drove up and I approached his vehicle. He opened the van's back doors and showed me the explosives inside. Then he detonated them. I called my fiancée Jessica on a cellular phone. I explained to her that I was dying. My blood was unrecoverable. After hanging up, I summoned a medic who saved me. I couldn't believe it. And my entire life from then on was whatever you'd call the opposite of a miracle.

You give these secrets away all night. You keep them so close to the surface you can see them the moment you close your eyes. Sometimes the dream is what happened that day slowed down. Sometimes it is a grisly act involving someone you love and you are watching from the kitchen table, still eating.



1st PLT B-CO IAW 5th Kandak ANA/ANCOP & SWT conducts MTD patrol to JSC at Bad Pech District Center NLT 0600 29 MAY IOT recon route and escort ANA.



A dead scorpion was found while making the bed. The metal container that stored our chow was left unlocked; a staff sergeant helped himself to a box of steaks and grilled for the whole platoon. Elliot's girlfriend cheated on him. Sinclair's wife cheated on him. Ladies all over America were cheating, and less remarkably, other ladies were not. The enormous spider that was caught so it could be made to fight was released because an opponent could not be found. We took pictures of sunsets, mountains, and faint moons. The sergeant in third platoon who had the vivid dreams finally rolled out of his lofted bed, broke some bones, and was sent to recover in a hospital in Missouri. The guy on my team who talked in his sleep, Roth, woke our squad leader, who slept nearby and yelled to me, "Moore, fix your boy." So I told Roth to shut the fuck up and he did. Roth's bed was also lofted and he fell out of it six times, but Roth was young and resilient and never broke anything. He crawled back up and slept. One night while I was on leave, Roth got hold of some booze, got drunk, fell asleep, and pissed himself. The laptop beside him was ruined. To my knowledge, and quite miraculously, no one was ever caught in the act of masturbating, though certain guys' rooms smelled especially of it, and no one denied doing it. Digital pornography was traded merrily using tiny storage drives. A cheap plaque bearing the Optimist Creed hung on the wall of our hut, left there by the unit before us, or the unit before them. The most optimistic guy in our squad, Sergeant Brice, was the one who'd had all the most awful shit happen to him: His wife cheated on him during a previous tour of eighteen-months in Iraq. She stole all his money and left him in terrible debt. But he had a new wife now, and his new wife was faithful and they bought a house in the country with a barn and a small pasture for their horses. He was the one who found the scorpion.

The Afghans who worked with us overnight in the guard shack got stoned on hash, bloodshot and giggly. They played the song "Barbie Girl" from a dated cellular phone and grooved in meditation to the music.



The platoon medic—wearing shorts, a t-shirt, and sandals—ran from his tent to help treat the wounded elders.

The first-sergeant stopped him midway and said, “Not ‘til you get in a proper uniform you’re not.”

The medic ran back to change clothes.



The vocabulary of the army was exhausting and paranoid. *Friend* was unofficially forbidden. You knew what words were forbidden by the terms that trickled down to replace them, the language of commanders and first-sergeants. The people around you were *battle buddies*. And *routine* must have implied a soldier’s softened attention because it was also replaced. The correct term was *battle rhythm*.



We found our battle rhythm, but you can’t find one rhythm without affecting another. The one you affect is the rhythm of your body: the circadian. A rhythm we only notice when it breaks. A word we only use to describe when it’s lost. When we are trying to find it again.

Split open in Latin, *circa* means *about*, as in, movement *about* a center. Curiously, we don’t use the word like that very often. We say *around* instead. We move around the center. We use *about* to indicate knowledge. As in, *to know about* a subject. “The boy knows about what happened” is presumably different than “The boy knows what happened”. And it is. The difference is an amount of distance. To *know* is very intimate. To *know about* suggests

understanding but also a degree of remove. There is proximity but also coldness. To *know about* is to have studied. And to study is the same as to move about a center—the orbiting of what’s true.

It is no surprise that *circa* comes from *circus*, as in Circus Maximus, the ancient games of Rome. Men racing chariots on the oval track, moving about a center. The games were a study in our violence. What happened at the center: the men fought and killed each other. The public was about them.

The other half of circadian, *dian*, comes from *dies*, meaning *day*. The rhythm is not a linear forward progression: we move about the days.



The wounded elders were in good spirits, which confused the soldiers who treated them. Supposedly, the one whose jaw had been blown off couldn’t stop laughing. Sometimes I try to imagine this.

A call was made to the battalion command at Mehtar Lam requesting a helicopter to take the men to a proper hospital.

A response came: *Roger. Wait one, Bruiser TOC. Not sure on the legality of evac’ing civilians. Over.*

The captain replied. His voice seemed impervious to the distortion of radios. It came over the waves clean and calm and brilliant: *Better make it fast. Or these guys are gonna be dead.*



1st PLT B-CO IAW 5th Kandak ANA/ANCOP conducts MTD patrol to Androl NLT 0700 1 JUN IOT recon route feasibility and perform village assessment.



There were two platoons in the Valley. One platoon manned the guard towers while the other platoon ran little missions in the villages and the mountains, and every four days we switched. Every four days the work schedule changed. The sleep schedule changed. Also, the winds changed. Weather in the Valley was somehow synchronized to us: Four days of strong winds, and four days of calm. It changed as we did. The wind pounded our platoon in the towers, and during our patrols it was tranquil. On patrol days, as we hiked along the hillsides or drove through the mountains, it was sunny and hot and still, and vice versa for the other platoon. All of this was commonly accepted. A rumor had evolved that the winds were part of some particular kind of weather system—one of those occurrences with proper names, like El Nino, except we didn't know the name—and the winds that passed through the Valley every four days were the *same* winds. It was the same air, the same molecules, the same energy—whatever constitutes wind—passing through again and again. It was a legitimate cycle, like night and day. Just as the sun had predictable absences, so did the wind. For a certain while it was elsewhere, and you could imagine it elsewhere, in another valley, rocking another company up north or the French troops to our west. And then it came back around like a beast, the same beast as before. You had to be low to the ground and behind cover just to talk on the radio. Guys trying to open the flimsy doors on their tents looked ridiculous, pressing their whole bodies against the door, against the crushing wind. Then it lifted. It passed through, to the other side of the loop. It was somewhere up by Charlie Company, probably. But it would come back.



The helicopter came and the elders were loaded aboard. A convoy was dispatched to find out about the attackers. The locals had been chasing them across a mountainside. The convoy approached in their trucks. The convoy

leader, a lieutenant, called back over the company net. The transmission was thin and cracked over the distance.

—*TOC, this is Two-six. The local are in pursuit. Do we have permission to proceed?*

In the TOC there was some hesitancy. The initial instructions had been vague.

The first-sergeant got on the radio.

—*Two-six, this is Seven. Have you collected all the intel you can?*

—*Negative, Seven. Negative. We haven't collected any intel. Do we have permission to keep moving outward?*

—*Two-six, do you have as much intel as you can gather at this point?*

—*I say again, Seven, we don't have anything. The locals are saying we need to go farther. They've got them on the run, but we have to go farther north. Do we have permission to pursue?*

—*Two-six, go ahead and bring the convoy back in. We'll debrief your intel at that time. Seven, out.*



Later, a rumor circulated about whether any of the men survived. It was spoken in a new language.



Originally from southeast Iowa, Steven Moore is currently pursuing an MFA in nonfiction writing at Oregon State University. His work has previously appeared in *The Common*, *North American Review*, *Southeast Review*, and *DIAGRAM*, among others, and his piece "Room Where the Story is Told" in *Small Print Magazine* was nominated for a Pushcart Prize. He was deployed in Afghanistan from 2010-2011. He currently lives with his wife in Corvallis, Oregon.

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