We Too Abhor a Vacuum: A Collection of Poems and Stories

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Jessica L. Alexander
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This thesis titled

We Too Abhor a Vacuum: A Collection of Poems and Stories

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ABSTRACT

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The thesis is a collection of short stories and poems. In the critical introduction, I point out some thematic intersections in the work of both poets and fictionists who have influenced my writing. I further illustrate similar technical devices deployed by writers in both genres. I argue that while these techniques are similar, the effect depends upon the conventions and expectations within the respective genres.

Approved: ______________________________________

Darrell Spencer

Professor of English
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CRITICAL PREFACE

In the *Bow and the Lyre* Octavio Paz describes *the word* as a bridge by which man tries to traverse the distance that separates him from external reality. Yet that distance, as Paz explains, is part of human nature. To obliterate it, man must either renounce his humanity and sink forever into animal innocence or free himself from the weight of history.

Paz argues that poetry is the only medium through which this obliteration is possible. According to Paz poetry liberates the word from its utilitarian function and gives rise to a proliferation of meanings and associations, whereas prose constrains and confines words to singular and contextual meanings. Ultimately, Paz argues that poetry can liberate consciousness from history, while prose reenacts historical existence.

The idea is compelling: that we can renounce historical existence without becoming animals, or reverse the relation between history and consciousness, so that consciousness determines historical existence, rather than the other way around. However, if we accept that historical existence pre-determines and fixes our modes of expression, then the reversal seems unlikely.

Nevertheless, many of my favorite writers, regardless of genre, seem to achieve something similar to this: a perspective, outside of inherited forms, from which to view their inherited worlds. The stories of Nikolai Gogol, Donald Barthelme, and Franz Kafka, and the poems of Carl Dennis, Elizabeth Bishop, and Wallace Stevens all leave
me with the distinct sense that the quotidian, the historical and the cultural has been challenged or transformed.

These authors challenge the rational or historical world by juxtaposing it with the anomalous, the irrational or the mysterious. As a consequence, reason can no longer claim sole proprietorship of the real, nor can it assimilate or explain the strange. However, anomaly cannot achieve this transformation alone, since the rational worlds that these authors disrupt are equally unique. In other words, the historical, the inherited, or the common may not be as common as Paz imagines. Transformation depends upon the juxtaposition of two constructions. The challenge posed by the anomalous is only as strong as the writer’s ability to furnish an invented world with decorum, etiquette, convention and consistency. For example, in Gogol’s The Nose, a clerk plainly sees that Major Kovalyov’s nose is missing. Yet the clerk denies Kovalyov’s request to publish a report of the missing nose on the grounds that it is too absurd to print in a respectable paper. Gogol creates a world where a nose climbs from a carriage, wears suede breeches, and a plumed hat. He also carries a sword. His attire suggests he is a state councilor. Clearly, this is an ordered world with strict social codes. For example, Kovalyov knows he should not accost a state councilor, even if the state councilor resembles his missing nose. Here social decorum and order, occlude the actual and in so doing illustrate the fragility of the ordered world. A similar development occurs in Donald Barthelme’s “Me And Miss Mandible,” when a thirty-five-year-old claims adjuster is returned to the third grade. According to the records, the narrator is officially eleven years old. Despite the apparent error, fault is never found in the system of classification but rather in the
narrator’s failure to embody the characteristics of a third-grader. In both examples, social
order and abstract reasoning overshadow perceptual and apparent truths. The logic
behind these organizing schemes is exposed as irrational.

Elizabeth Bishop addresses this on a much more basic level, when she illuminates
the constructed nature of human shame. In “Five Flights Up,” Bishop describes a little
dog bouncing cheerfully in the yard as his owner looks on and says, “You ought to be
ashamed.” She opens the poem by staging the onset of morning, claiming that questions
are answered simply and directly, by day itself. She concludes the poem with the lines:

--Yesterday brought to today so lightly!

(A yesterday I find almost impossible to lift.) (lines 25-26).

In both examples, it is not Kovalyov’s lack of a nose or the dog’s lack of shame that seem
strange, but rather the rational world with which these anomalies are at odds. In
illuminating the rational by means of the irrational, Bishop simultaneously confines her
readers to and liberates her readers from human shame, while Gogol and Barthelme
depict the logic of bureaucracy as both immutable and arbitrary. Both authors posit the
irrational alongside the exclusionary logic of quotidian life and thereby call the
production of cultural truths into question.

The above examples illustrate disruption on a thematic level. A way of
perceiving becomes a naturalized subject, an exclusive or absolute truth. Then, by means
of contrast, systems of classification simply become other ways of perceiving among
many, the idea mistaken for the real.
While I acknowledge that poems, novels and short stories operate within sets of distinct conventions, I am not convinced that themes and techniques native to poetry cannot cross the boundary and be successfully deployed in works of short fiction. Although a theoretical interest in style, technique and structure has led me to experiment in ways that push against narrative convention, my interest is not in technical innovations alone but in finding new ways to make meaning. Convention and innovation must be balanced in order for fiction or poetry to offer a purposeful challenge to conventional thought.

In *The Art of Recklessness*, Dean Young proclaims: “I believe in the simultaneity of a changing environment and changing responses to and in that environment and those responses becoming part of that environment” (29). I believe in this too, but I am also interested in looking at how this operates on a technical level in both prose and poetry. What creates an environment in prose and poetry? What constitutes a change in that environment? What registers that change? I think change and the incorporation of change has a good deal to do with the dialectic play between conventional ways of making meaning, and syntactic or linguistic disruptions to that meaning.

In the *Bow and the Lyre*, Paz argues that man exists between extremities, “[…] at one extreme [is] the reality that words cannot express; at the other, the reality of man, which can only be expressed with words” (20). Again, Paz suggests that to obliterate this distance, man must renounce his humanity, either by returning to the natural world, or by transcending the limitations that his condition imposes on him. I don’t find Paz’s solution particularly helpful. For one thing, I’m not entirely convinced that language can
transcend language, or that man can transcend himself and live to write poems about it. More importantly, I don’t know what this would look like in writing. I like the extremes that Paz poses, although I don’t know that I would articulate the problem in quite the same way. For Paz the problem seems to be that the real can only be expressed as an idea. For me, the problem arises when ideology occludes the real. Dean Young posits similar and perhaps more useful extremes:

People use language for two reasons: to be understood and to not be understood. The first goal aspires toward perfect lucidity, the transparence of a universal idiom, the ability to refer uncluttered by any peculiarity of referent […] the second transcribes the impossible terms of intimacy, resides in strangeness, its signs opaque in that they refer not so much to the outside world as to an inner origin of utterance or to themselves in a play of disconnection and discord. (28)

Like Paz, Young considers a certain form of speech to be original, natural or internal. Yet, unlike Paz, Young also adds discord, strangeness and disconnection to his description, which suggests contrast and presupposes order. I also prefer Young’s description because it allows for the articulation of both extremes. I want to suggest that meaning proliferates in the space between the articulation of these extremes, between the transparent and the opaque, in the breaks between convention and innovation.

I want to look first at the use of anaphora as an organizing principle in the surrealist poems of Louis Aragon and Andre Breton. Next I want to explore the similar deployment of lists and anaphora in the fiction of Djuna Barnes, Lydia Davis, Mary Robison and Donald Barthelme. I want to suggest that the list, despite its technical
similarities, has strikingly different implications when it functions as a disruption to an overarching narrative structure.

Andre Breton’s “Free Union” is an example of anaphora as an organizing principle, but also an exercise in free association, in which the over-proliferation and contradictory nature of the metaphors undercut the stability of the poem’s subject. Ultimately they illuminate the transformation not only of the wife, but the speaker’s union to the wife. Rather than fixing the subject, through appeals to fusion and unity, the metaphors destabilize and disrupt the unions they enact. The contradiction in the poem’s title functions dually, both as a contrast that calls into question the legitimacy of marital vows and as a rhetorical nod to the free association at play between the tenors and vehicles.

*Free Union*

My wife whose hair is a brush fire
Whose thoughts are summer lightning
Whose waist is an hourglass
Whose waist is the waist of an otter caught in the teeth of a tiger
Whose mouth is a bright cockade with the fragrance of a star of the first magnitude
Whose teeth leave prints like the tracks of white mice
   Over snow
Whose tongue is a stabbed wafer
...
My wife whose shoulders are champagne
...
My wife with eyes full of tears
With eyes that are purple armor and a magnetized needle
With eyes of savannahs
With eyes full of water to drink in prisons
My wife with eyes that are forests forever under the ax
My wife with eyes that are the equal of water and air and earth and fire

The metaphors of Breton’s “Free Union” enact a breakdown between image and meaning. While the clashing implications of each vehicle liberate the wife from fixed meaning, her liberation depends upon her fusion to a new vehicle. Breton’s free-play of metaphor transforms the wife, a supposedly stable entity, into shifting imagery. In a passage from *Nightwood*, Djuna Barnes over proliferation through simile achieves a similar effect. Yet, rather than dissolving the stability of a concept, Barnes enacts its reification.

As the altar of a church would present but a barren stylization but for the uncalculated offerings of the confused and humble; as the corsage of a woman is made suddenly martial and sorrowful by the rose thrust among the more decorous blooms by the hand of the lover suffering the violence of the overlapping of the permission to bestow a last embrace, and its withdrawal: making a vanishing and infinitesimal bull’s eye of that which had a moment before been a buoyant and showy bosom, by dragging time out of his bowels (for a lover knows two times, that which he is given, and that which he must take)—so Felix was astonished to find that the most touching flowers laid on the altar he had raised in his
imagination were placed there by the people of the underworld, and that the reddest was to be the rose of the doctor. (34)

The tenor of this passage is an imagined altar raised to a declining aristocracy. The invention and subsistence of this altar depends upon the collusion of an entire culture.

The tenor operates in a similar fashion. It is not offered until the end of the passage. It is not an entity that we can recognize or acknowledge without first submitting to a complex system of signs and meanings. The altar is a meaningless abstraction, without the concrete vehicles at its service; the people of the underworld still paying homage to a ruined aristocracy.

In the following excerpt from “Poem to Shout in the Ruins,” Louis Aragon builds on and undercuts the conventions deployed by Breton’s “Free Union,” by doubting, disdaining and disrupting metaphor.

Yes let’s spit
On what we loved together
Let’s spit on love
On our unmade beds
On our silence and our mumbled words
On the stars even if they are
Your eyes
On the sun even if it is
Your teeth
On eternity even if it is
Your mouth
And on our love
Even if it is
Your love
Yes let’s spit.

Aragon’s poem is a shout from within man-made structures that are no longer inhabitable. The disparate items in the list are fused by three sets of repetitions; 1) it is your, which attributes these items to a beloved; 2) even if, which posits this attribution as equally rejectable; and 3) on, which categorizes the items as things to spit on. If we remove the second and the third sets of repetitions the poem operates under an altogether different organizing principle. The world is suddenly fused by love and you. The ruins are returned to a state of repair. It becomes a poem, in which the natural world is fused with the beloved. The stars are your eyes, the sun is your teeth, and eternity is your mouth. Aragon disrupts the convention of a beloved you as organizing principle, by casting doubt and disdain upon it. Even if you are the world, we should spit on it. The poem is both a shout at and from within a set of conceits that are uninhabitable. Yet the repetition of even if suggests that we should spit on such conventions whether they are habitable or not. Aragon thereby acknowledges that the poem may be the very act of destruction that turns old forms to ruins. It is at once a re-articulation of, a disruption of, and a memorial to a lost world.

If anaphora in poetry sometimes functions as a tribute or memorial to a lost world, an absent other, an organizing principle, then this is all the more apparent when anaphora is deployed in narrative prose. In Charles Dickens’s famous opening to A Tale of Two Cities, anaphora juxtaposes antithetical experiences by positioning them within a common temporal framework:
It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was
the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it
was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope,
it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before
us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other
way…(1)

While the anaphora, much like lists, collects disparate items under a single heading, it
constructs a hierarchy by abstracting a referent from the narrative. Anaphora, in
narrative, often points to a position in time outside of itself, a time now past and open to
analysis. Anaphora in narrative prose can function as both an organizing principle and a
disruption to the narrative progress. In Lydia Davis’s “Mothers,” the word mothers does
not exactly function as an anaphora, but the reiteration of this word both organizes and
interrupts the narrative (in this case, a dinner party).

Everyone has a mother somewhere. There is a mother at dinner with us.
She is a small woman with eyeglass lenses so thick they seem black when
she turns her head away. Then the mother of the hostess telephones as we
are eating. This causes the hostess to be away from the table longer than
one would expect. This mother may possibly be in New York. The
mother of a guest is mentioned in conversation: this mother is in Oregon,
a state few of us know anything about, though it has happened before that
a relative lived there. A choreographer is referred to afterwards, in the car.
He is spending the night in town, on his way, in fact, to see his mother, again in another state. (79)

Mothers, in their sudden ubiquity, disturb the linear progression. The narrative circles back and circumscribes itself. Mary Robison similarly disrupts the first-person narrative of her novel, *One DOA, One on the Way*, by inserting to-do lists and renunciation lists. While these lists point to an identity that unifies and contains the string of otherwise arbitrary imperatives, it is unclear who their author is and therefore what identity holds them together. Although it seems fair to attribute them to the narrator, Eve, their lack of contextualization raises questions about the separation between narrator and author, as well as questions about identity in general. Robison’s to-do lists illustrate Eve’s desire for consistency by constructing a self and projecting it into the future. Robison also makes use of the renunciation list. Unlike the to-do list, renunciations record a series of acts Eve will no longer commit. While the to-do list points towards a future that the narrative has yet to arrive at, the renunciation list references a past prior to the narrative. Both lists abstract from a source that exists outside the temporal framework of the story, and thereby call attention to the linear progression of the narrative and its constructed nature:

- No more phone calling the archbishop in the wee hours.
- No more going out dressed in leaves.
- I’m through popping out of the car trunk at revival meetings.
- I’m mostly done with cutting nipples out of bras.
- Never again wearing the Trotsky t-shirt or a newspaper sailor hat to church (99).
In playing on the tension between “no” and “more;” the implicit contiguity and its denial, Robison situates the list in a temporal landscape. However, this contiguity depends upon a character that assumes responsibility for past acts even as she differentiates herself from those acts. Eve’s negative imperatives mix presence and absence in such a way that the validity of the present depends upon the validity of the absent. The absent is a foil against which we measure the present. Yet simultaneously Robison resists the reader’s instinct to imagine character by constructing a list so arbitrary and outlandish that not only do we have trouble attributing these acts to character, but we can construct no consistent foil or repudiated self to measure her against. They seem ironic; a figurative commentary on the human yearning for a stable and predictable identity; a literal series of negated behavioral patterns that, by their absurdity, resist attribution to a credible identity. *I am done doing what makes no sense to me. I am done being inconsistent, done lacking definition, done having no limits.* The irony depends on our familiarity with the conventions of to-do lists as well as our impulse to construct identities and patrol their boundaries.

Robison also groups missing items. She describes what is not there in order to show us what is. The list of missing items takes inventory of items Eve no longer possesses. Both sets of lists situate Eve in a temporal context that juxtaposes the missing or the past with presence or the present. For these lists to inform character, readers must see presence and absence as codependent. We cannot define Eve by what she no longer does and what she no longer has without first defining her as committing these acts or possessing these items:

- My address book is nowhere to be found,
- nor my jean jacket,
- the box of coffee filters,
- the good cookbook,
- the tiny ballerina from my childhood jewelry box,
- my gymbag,
- a rhinestone-studded belt,
- the globe!

The transitional word “nor” functions much like “also” insofar as it signals addition, yet unlike “also,” “nor” negates or takes away. This negation or subtraction depends upon a ground from which things are taken away, a somewhere where things are to be found. The entire construction depends on the reader’s ability to imagine a place where things once were and now are missing.

Donald Barthelme achieves a similar juxtaposition of presence and absence in the short story, “Kierkegaard Unfair to Schlegal.” The story is formatted as an interview. The characters are Q and A. The story begins with an answer or with the interviewee describing a fantasy of a woman on a train. The description follows the linear progression of narrative. Then the story departs from this narrative and the interviewer comments on the fantasy, questions the interviewee and analyzes the answers:

Q: That’s a very common fantasy.
A: All my fantasies are extremely ordinary.
Q: Does it give you pleasure?
A: A poor…A rather unsatisfactory…

The questions and answers range from politics to irony, occasionally interrupted by narrative and the almost obsessive return to the fantasy of the girl on the train:

Q: Of Schlegel?
A: Of me.
Q: What is she doing now?
A: She appears to be—
Q: How does she look?
A: Self-absorbed.

Barthelme pokes fun at the assumption that the fantasy continues, whether the interviewee describes it to us or not. The fantasy is the narrative that takes place alongside the interview. Also Barthelme constructs a tension between two equally appealing human impulses: on one side the impulse to analyze, to categorize, to abstract; on the other side the impulse to progress, to move forward, to develop, and to arrive somewhere as a consequence of this development.

Lists and anaphora in narrative epitomize these experimental, post-modern, modern and minimalist moves. They call attention to the production of meaning and the operations of narrative through a series of disjointed associations and dialectical tensions. Lists call attention to the way that placement becomes temporal and the way temporality demands progress. Such ruptures in meaning call attention to the selections, abstractions and omissions inherent in any act of story telling.
OUR DEPARTED

leave
no witness
by the bird bath,
the clump of wilted grass,
the branch,
broken by the impact of
an aim that stays imperfect.
No one will correct it.

They are missed the way
wallets and keys
can be
a noticed absence.
The shock of the hand,
found free,
now swiftly
clutching at
the empty pocket;

suddenly missed like
the punch line of a lewd remark.
How common,
how discourteous,
how indecorous,
how dare they
vanish
like symptoms
of an undiagnosed illness that,
we suspect, will stay.
I WOULD BE THE DAY

of the Macy’s parade and the floats before they sagged in rain
and the black umbrellas before opening and the fat arms resting
on road blocks and the traffic jam on Lexington and the static on
a radio and the game and the field goal and the convertible escort-
ing Ms. New York and the hurrah she took for a catcall and the cat-
call and the kiss blown to a delivery boy and the skirt snapping
taut to a thigh and the awning cracking in the white sky and the
truck easing under a traffic light and your love loading and closing
like lips on my collar or fists in my pocket and the arch of your
foot rocking how a samba rocks bones in their sockets and that flick
of your wrist as your hands dismiss my want to give everything and
to never say don’t, please or please don’t forget me.
AS RABBITS REMEMBER CATS

I remember pigeons perched on fountains at Penn Station,
scattering as I chased them,
and my mother’s eyes flinching at sunlight.

I remember only my life knocking around in my chest,
like a firefly in a glass jar.
Surely, forgetting is like remembering death.

Of course, my mother kept her own pigeons.
She said, they leapt, feathers spread,
their wings burst to flight.

Surely, forgetting looks like sun spots.
Someone asks what
scattered in the light, who shouted?

And you look and listen for the shape of it—
trains, maybe wings, flapping, you heard
her voice catch— or did you hear something else?
THE BLESSING OF THE ANIMALS

Now that I am older
and know names are only
prayers and propositions
flung at some unknown,
I watch the blessing of the animals
on the steps of Saint John’s Cathedral
and wonder if it’s any different than

when you clipped a bullfrog
with a lawn edger and left it bleeding.
I pelted rocks at summer dust and twitching legs
and missed and hit
the head.
I shouted, die, and thought
how soft their underbellies
when I held gently.
You called me brave.
I told the bullfrog we did not need the names
you gave us, your blessings and commands
were prayers and propositions flung at some unknown.
You needed us.

Now that I am older I let
webs collect and catch
summer moths in corners
and cabinets.
I tell myself if you are somewhere,
and something still,
the moth will fly free.
But I grow impatient,
break the web,
watch the moth
flutter, flap, and then fall dead.
KRISHNA, I TRIED

So hard to live
without words for naming it,
to see trees and not think tree
or leaves in gutters and not think
clogged and unclean.

I almost lived without
impatience—
why did I call it
this--my red fist
swinging at my side? Why call panic
my darting eye?

You said die
each day. I tried.

And liked crying for
a sign saying
ungarian café
the song on the juke box,
that kept playing,
my hand
shaking from two Turkish coffees
and verb conjugations-
*tu vas, nous allons, vous allez.*

You said I lived
with a black sack
over my head.
That sounds, I replied, bad,

Like I read
*open* what said *closed,*
those days I sat sipping
Turkish coffees,
thinking *it will be enough
if like a rabbit you come to me,*
like I didn’t know you
would be
too much.
Like I didn’t know
nothing could be enough.
NEWTONIAN ROMANCE

At the picnic Newton forgot
Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, all history
    would need a question when gravity came dressed as all of the above.

Nevertheless, the light felt nice, the breeze was mild.
Gravity ate all Newton brought and said nothing
the way something
becoming everything falls
silent.

True, she did not love him
on black afternoons
fat on unborn rainstorms,
and when she threw his books
out the window
he knew how they fell,
not why.

He still invites her
to cocktail parties,
if only to stand aloof
and watch her break
champagne flutes.

How strange,
he found
the broken glasses,
could be
one thing
and then so many.
ONE SPRING AT THE SWITCHBOARD

Yes, the daffodils are still in bloom.
No, the late snowfall did not kill them.
Mangled, yes, and yes,
the pianos are still out of tune,
and the athlete’s uniforms
are still damp,
and their sneakers beat the dryers
like kick drums all day long.

Yes, all spring
the phones rang, incessantly.
I muffled my voice with my sleeve.

And yes and yes and yes
was torn gently from the strings;
and out of key
and opening and closing
on this white spring—
as if you’d called and
asked for me.
WHY NOT TO SET YOUR ALARM TO NPR

Because the rain in Machu Pichu won’t stop,
you’re convinced the floods block
roads and rails to work and you roll over.

Because the starving lemurs
start eating children, you’re eight again
and belly down below the bed.

Because Bernie Madoff is your husband.
He enters in slippers pleading, Dear, please, dear,
but you stay beneath the bed, elbows in the carpet.

Because 1.9 trillion dollars
is your debt and collectors climb your steps
as you watch your teeth drop, one by one, into your coffee cup.

Because the satellite stuck on Gusev
got sick on loneliness and sent bomb threats
to your apartment complex.

Because Madoff will say,
Dear, we cannot stay here,
and you won’t want to leave

because lemurs, debt collectors, and rain wait and
when the garbage truck and red sun
burst your nightmare like a blister
you will miss him.
WE TOO ABHOR A VACUUM

Days when the ice cracks our sidewalks
and the sky acts the still-heft
our heads and chests have known so well,

we stay late to over-tip the waitress
   to fold on last call and laugh want out
until our throats are raw.

And we are grateful for the waitress
   who leaves her shift coatless
she has taught us that urgency begins

not in waiting to love
   but when leaving coatless becomes what
we’ve waited to love.

And we have always known her name was Shelly
   the way the mouth knows
the shape of a word we have forgotten.

When we could not find her, we wondered
   if another waitress would do
but our tongues stuck to the l in her name—

It could have been anyone’s name
   and then
it was hers.
THAT SCHEELE SKETCH

Like an oyster might hug, 
after drinking too much, 
or that Schiele sketch

of Edith, on the ground, 
wrapping her legs around 
his torso. Her chin bore 
into his bare shoulder.

She makes the grimace 
of a defeated samurai, 
cleaving symmetrically 
and unwittingly.

A little too much like 
she didn’t want to know 
which head might move 
that arm, that leg.

Her limbs had never been 
so necessary, yet so ungainly. 
Those oysters 
might struggle too and grow confused.

Their muscles slick with 
pheromones and anesthetics. 
The signals mixed. 
It’s no wonder he looks

like a defiant child, 
whose friends watch as he 
fends off 
a mother’s proprietary goodbye.

Yet he wanted us to know this: 
Edith held too tight, 
from behind.

When Edith saw the sketch, 
surely, she wondered, 
*am I making too much of this,* 
*is it only a poor likeness?*
ANGELS FALL TO CONFUSION

Having lost and forgotten nothing, angels fall to confusion when they fly by our windows and we raise our eyes from books to tap-water skies and see nothing. Or when they drop between us on crowded subways and we stop and look like our keys went missing.

Angels adopted this habit of ours and watch, like this, when we put on red lipstick or when walking to work we smile at our feet for no reason, then look around and hide our mouths behind gloved hands.

Angels are troubled by our appetites, large at times we eat and eat and lean back in our seats and look sleepy and pleased. Troubled too, when we don’t eat and jump when the phone rings.

And when we are alone for long we hold our sheets like we hold people or press pages from printers to our faces to be closer to their heat.

Or when we stumble home alone and drop our keys in dirty snow and press our forehead to our closed door and whisper, You have always been so stupid.
AT THIS HOUR

No one calls back at this hour. Some talk to telemarketers. Some take comfort in metaphors. Some are hummingbirds taking windows for other hummingbirds.

Some do dishes. Some blow fuses. Some look for extension cords. Some are sure the flagpole looks discouraged.

Some wonder who said You must bend or be broken And who said you can bend and be broken and some open a bottle of wine they hoped they’d save for a special occasion.

At this hour some believe there is no out of this hour, only an in that narrows like a drill bit.

Some know they must back out of this hour, slow.

As the roofless beams replace the rooftops, some reseal envelopes, walk backwards to mail slots, and return sentiments of love letters, unread.
At bus stops,
arms are flung from
necks like palms
are flung from hot stoves.

In the art house cinema,
where they run French films
on reverse,
a celluloid soldier
kisses bruises off
the nurse’s throat
and kicks their bedroom
door back open.
BY CALL ME, I MEAN SHOUT MY NAME AT BUILDINGS

Sally’s husband played show tunes at parties on the grand piano. After his guests got drunk on cocktails, they crowded the sitting room and sang too. Sally sat on the fire escape and kissed someone until the piano stopped playing.

Sally will kiss Nora in a bathroom stall. Nora will not approve of this. Nora will wonder how she could have been so shameless.

Sally’s husband once hit a German bouncer in his throat at an open bar on a riverboat. It was a Jewish wedding and the German wouldn’t dance the hora, but stood in the circle, turned to Sally and said, nice intuition. Intuition? Sally asked. Surely she’d heard him wrong. Surely that wasn’t what he meant. Intuition, he said. Her husband dropped one leg of the bride’s chair, crossed the dance floor and hit the German in his throat. The seated musicians and old women, stood. Sally looked down at the German and started laughing. She said, I didn’t see that coming. When her husband leaned in and said, We have to leave, she asked how? She’d had enough champagne to imagine the riverboat was sailing. They weren’t even guests at that wedding.

Nora’s baby brother, Harold, was a drug addict and a nymphomaniac. He had soft blonde hair, big blue eyes and a gentle, slow smile. He was dealing drugs at home and fist-fighting his father the summer Nora said come live with me. She got him a job at
the pizza shop where she'd been working. She trained him with stifling precision and
impatience. When they fought, he took his white apron off and threw it in cornmeal. Nora
picked it up and threw it back at him--their wide-eyes locked and static as frozen glass
before it cracks—he swatted the flying apron from his face. He always picked it up and
put it back on. She always won and waited until the strings were tied to say, calmly and
without taking her eyes from him, *Now take it off and get a clean one.*

Sally’s husband bought a cottage on the finger lakes, upstate. The kitchen nook
was lined in craftsman windows that opened outward like doors on hinges. In
windstorms she sat alone in that room, while the windows beat against the frames. She
mistook the banging for people running up and down the staircase. It was late. Her
husband woke and fastened the windows to their latches. *How did you not notice that?*
he asked. *Darling,* he cupped the crown of her head in his broad palm, *what exactly are
you looking at?*

After her shift Nora drank tecate from a can on the red-topped stools at the pizza
shop. At midnight the pretty waitresses came from closing shifts at the Cow Girl and
how pretty they were Nora classified irrelevant, a section of her mind she never liked to
visit.

Sally’s husband was an art critic. He smoked thin cigarettes. She met him at an
art opening. She was drunk on the cheap white wine they were serving. She invited him
back for spaghetti. She lived only over the Palaski. He hailed a cab immediately. He poured her a large glass of a fat cabernet she’d been saving. He put *Linda and the Del Rios* on her record player. He asked to wear one of the shirts in her closet. They danced and giggled and then the record ended. He grew silent and serious. He said he should tell her he was—*Honey, I know*. She couldn’t stop laughing. *A Christian*, he said. And she grew silent and serious too. *I have friends*, she nodded, *that are Christian."

After closing hours, Nora’s brother locked himself in a bathroom stall with a six-pack and called their mother. Nora mopped the bathroom tiles and heard him say, *you know how Nora is, Ma*—and then a long silence and then, *Exactly*. Nora shifted her grip on the mop, *irrelevant."

Sally told her husband that the cosmos brought them together. They were at a cocktail bar in Prospect Heights. The lamps were box-shaped and the ceiling was tiled. In the far corner of the bar a group of women in evening gowns and men in tuxedos stood around an old piano. They looked like they’d just left a wedding reception. A man kept spilling his drink and swearing and laughing, as his friend pointed at the piano and shouted, *I play. Can I play?* The bartender ignored them. Sally’s fourth husband said, *the cosmos had nothing to do with it*. He ordered another sazerac and her eyes glided from his profile to the man in the tuxedo, who’d grown tired of asking permission, sat down unceremoniously behind the piano and began playing. He’d be Sally’s second husband.
Harold had a friend named Flow. They needed sex like Nora needed relevance: to the exclusion of everything else. It turned them smooth as arrows soaring to their targets. Nora was sympathetic. She imagined it could keep them clean. She helped them. She played intrusive drunk, when Harold and Flow could not find an entrance. She interrupted girl’s nights, slurped hi, asked their names, spilled their apple martinis. Flow apologized for his drunk-friend, jammed a hand between them, said, name’s Flow, he’s Harold. Please, let me get you another, what was it? Apple Martini? Having played her part, Nora sat at the bar and faded under the ambiance, the wine glasses refracting dim lights across the red walls, the laughter yielding, cresting and ebbing, the faces upturned, the open mouths, the night like so many, perfectly irrelevant.

Sally’s fourth husband gave her a book called On Desire. He’d underlined a sentence that said, if we can convince ourselves to want what we already have, we can dramatically enhance our happiness. She’d already chosen her fifth husband. Perhaps, her fourth husband had noticed.

The waitresses liked Harold. They brought bottles of bullet from the cowgirl. He gave them pizza and tecates. They sat on the stool tops, took shots, and called him generous. Nora said, none of this belongs to him. Harold was a sociopath. He was a liar and he stole stuff. Even the stories he told, he stole. He stood moon-eyed behind the register, grinning at the girls and telling lies.
The neighbors, he’d say, never liked our goddamned father.

Nora said, the goddamned neighbors never liked our father.

Harold said, The goddamned neighbors never liked our goddamned father.

Have you no allegiance? Nora asked.

Can I tell a goddamned story how I goddamned want?

Let him tell the goddamned story, the waitresses said.

Nora was certainly not a sociopath. She never stole, except from the neighbors, whose cats she fed when they went on vacation. She stole things they’d miss and never guess anyone would take an interest in: photo albums, home videos, journals, disks, drawings or letters. It was a compulsion, a totally irrelevant compulsion.

The goddamned neighbors didn’t like me either, Harold said.

What’s not to like? the waitress asked.

You don’t know the half of it, Harold said. I fed their cats and stole things they’d never miss, or stole exactly what they’d miss just to tick them off: flash drives, drawings, family photo albums, wedding videos.

Sally and her husband sat in the window of a trattoria, waiting for the rain to stop, when she told him at a certain age everyone looks like someone you’ve met already, or married. Which is why I’m often ducking into doorways. Often, she confessed, I am mistaken and hiding from or waving to a perfect stranger. My eyes are bad. She said, I don’t see leaves, just green. If she were brave, she’d say at a certain point in any
marriage, there is no common subject. Her husband was unaware of this and assumed that she was changing it.

He said again that he saw her in Long Island City.

Sally said she saw everyone she’d ever met maybe once a day. *And when I wave, they never wave back to me. I can never be sure if it’s because their eyesight is better or worse than mine.*

Her fourth husband said that when he saw her in Long Island City she had not seen him.

Sally said, she was suggesting, perhaps, he was mistaken.

But he wasn’t. She was under an umbrella with the man that would be her second husband. It might have been a former lover. Of course, she’d had so many. He knew, but had not imagined her hand on another man’s back, her profile up-turned to his, or that he could say something and she’d laugh or get mad.

*My eyes are bad.* She said, *So bad. In winter the bedroom windows are white, they look like the bedroom walls. I think what’s the point in windows then? What’s the point in looking?*

*Please, he said, let’s not muddy the subject.*

Nora found that lists were a good way to keep the irrelevant at bay. She found all kinds of lists were useful, but most commonly relied on To Do Lists and Not To Do Lists. The items under these headings included: Do not meditate. Do not listen to sad music alone. Do not ride your bike downhill or drive with open windows in spring; the
sense of freedom you will experience is, at best, fleeting. Do not tell coming of age stories. Do not share childhood memories. Do not watch romantic comedies. Do not indulge in sadness or regret. Clean the bathroom, instead. Always take the stairs. Do not use abstract nouns like love, passion, fate or freedom. Do not use abstract verbs like deserve. Find out what’s wrong with Harold.

Sally and her second husband moved to the 22nd floor of a building in Long Island City, Queens. Huge windows stretched along the walls of the apartment and she could see the ferries, traffic on the bridges and the trains crossing to Manhattan. In the fall her second husband threw a party. Sally hadn’t any friends, so she invited her first husband, who respectfully declined her invitation. Mostly, Sally smoked on the balcony. The East River was lovely and lonely black water with a single light from the ferry flashing. She made an excuse and left her party early. When she got outside it was still daylight and her first husband was waiting on the street, as if she’d asked him to meet her.

Nora did not love anyone like everyone loved Harold. She was sure she loved some, and then she wasn’t sure. She loved a man and a dog that slept on the Boulevard. They’d never spoken. The man and dog were always sleeping. She thought they had an understanding. She left day old slices in a brown bag on a bench for them.

You can’t help yourself, can you? You want the whole world to love only you, don’t you? Isn’t it lonely? Isn’t it like being alone? This was outside the apartment.
Sally’s fourth husband was shouting. It was autumn and he was shouting because Sally was walking too fast for him. A nice breeze was coming through the trees. She was walking laps around her apartment complex. The sunlight hit her face when she came out from under the shade. Sally didn’t want him to follow her in, and she didn’t want to tell the doorman that she didn’t want him to follow her in. Her fourth husband thought she’d never stop walking around the apartment complex. Then she stopped and told him she didn’t doubt for a minute how he felt, but she was behaving in strict keeping with her own philosophy.

*Which is?* her fourth husband asked. *Doing exactly what you want with everyone? Keeping everyone perfectly replaceable, by not noticing they want things too? Why did you invite me to this party?*

She hailed him a cab, gave him twenty dollars, and apologized for any offense he may have taken.

Nora suffered from a lack of imagination. She couldn’t imagine what *deserve* meant. The waitresses said Harold didn’t deserve that. Nora could not imagine what *that* meant. The bottle of bullet was empty. They closed the pizza shop and crossed to the Cowgirl. Flow and Harold were drinking in a booth with the waitresses. Nora sat alone at the bar.

Sally decided not to think about her first husband and then she did. She was in the elevator. She had to remind herself that she was in the elevator. She must push a
button. Then she must take her keys out, she thought. No. She must press the bell. Her third husband must buzz her in. She meant her second husband. She pushed L for lobby and because she had not gone anywhere the doors opened immediately.

Flow and Harold had been buying drinks all night for an older woman at the bar, named Sally, with blonde hair, a blue dress and earrings that matched her necklace. They went out to smoke and argue over which one of them Sally meant to go home with. They left Nora and Sally holding their drinks. Nora was having trouble telling the difference between the drinks. Sally did not seem to mind this and was drinking from all of the glasses. The bartender was stacking chairs. A man in cowboy boots kept leaning pool cues against a table, and they kept clattering to the ground. A woman in black heels was racking balls for another game. The bar back was hunched over the jukebox. Outside the traffic lights flashed red and reflected off the pools of water that collected in potholes. Nora sat down on a barstool and told Sally that Harold and Flow didn’t know which of them she wanted to go home with. The pool cues clattered to the floor. Sally said she didn’t want to go home with either one of them. She said Nora had pretty eyes though. Nora said her brother, Harold, had the same eyes as her. Only his were blue and most people liked blue better. And if Sally married Harold, then she and Sally could be sisters. Nora wasn’t sure why she said that. It suddenly struck her as obvious and irrelevant.

Sally sipped her drink through a stir straw and watched Nora.
Nora was unaccustomed to this fixed attention. *But then,* she added, *I think he has narcissistic personality disorder. I was reading about that the other day on the internet.*

Sally adjusted her necklace. *I think your obsession with your brother is unhealthy.*

Nora was mesmerized by the movement of Sally’s hand across her collarbone.

Sally noticed this and smiled. *And I like brown eyes best.*

Nora stood with her back against the bathroom sink. Sally followed her into the bathroom and Nora turned to face the mirror. The glass was cracked and someone had scrawled in black ink, *By call me, I mean shout my name at empty buildings.*

*I don’t think I ever mean that.* Nora said, *I don’t think I ever say call me.*

Sally cupped Nora’s hip and turned her. Outside the bathroom someone shouted, *Finish up, get the fuck out.* Nora stiffened.

Sally read the glass and said. *Oh, that. It makes sense to me.* She cupped Nora’s hips, leaned closer and said, *Relax.*

Sally’s whole hands worked Nora’s thighs, arms, torso, hips and shoulders over like knotted dough. *Do you want this? Do you hear me?* Sally asked and Nora saw her own gnarled fingers like bird’s talons, or baby bird’s hungry mouths closing and opening on the necklace and fabric below Sally’s collar bone, then go lax, *yes,* her whole body sighed, *yes.*
Once Sally cried for a whole hour in a bathroom stall at a hotel bar. And a friend of her first husband, maybe Olivia, followed her with cocktails. Sally was crying because she was drunk, and he’d hit a German, and she did not know anyone at the wedding. Olivia’s silence, from the other side of the stall, was encouraging. Sally went on. She did not know her husband, she did not know herself; why had she laughed? She did not know how to get off the riverboat and she was sure her husband had somehow left without her. She was sure this was not Tennessee but a dream. Where else could a bar be a riverboat, a hotel and a wedding? Where else did so many strangers demand so much of her? What right had he, or anyone, to want anything? And expect it? She’d never felt like this before. She was sure if she’d said this to her husband he’d call her selfish, or self-absorbed or something worse. Then she said it and was sure she’d felt it all her life, and was sure saying this had everything to do with-- what was her name? Olivia? Sally fixed her eyes in a compact and hurried out of the stall. But the bathroom was empty, save an old woman handing out warm, damp hand-towels. She asked the old woman, when Olivia left, why Olivia left. The woman smiled, handed her a towel and said, yes. Sally wondered why she thought of that now. She loosened Nora’s fingers from her throat. She said, relax, and knew then she was speaking to herself, as much as, no more than to Nora.
LOUIS, LOOK AT YOUR BOOTS

When I was your age the Americans turned our schools to infirmaries. The students ran to Champagne or joined the military and the Red Cross stuck banners on all we abandoned. The buildings, the streets, the pines, and the skies were white. The days went silent save the clack, clack, clack of my contact on the spark board, sending messages to Aisne that no one ordered.

Why don’t you admonish me for my digressions? Why don’t you say, “I did not come for a lesson in history or your biography.” Then I would ask what you and Serge come for, when you don’t bother listening to my lectures anymore and all the other boys went south, wearing nametags. I can’t decide, Jean Pierre, if you are simple or nervous. I notice Serge bit his thumbs all day. Now his nails bleed and his eyes dart between me and the doorway. But you sit in the front row with your fist curled against your cheekbone. Outside a vendor shouts, Poles seize Sender Gleiwitz. Perhaps, that’s why I opened the arched windows, not to let the air in, but the warnings. So you would stop asking when class will end and I could stop saying, it will end when the war ends, and when Serge stops kicking you under the desk, and when the vendors stop shouting, and when my head stops aching, and when we all stop confusing our desire and our desperation. Of course, you don’t comprehend or listen.

I had a friend in Rheims, who, like you, could not comprehend a command. He jumped, when his officer said “fire.” Rumor had it he drank and asked soldiers to duck in
closed shops and alleys with him. He deserted at Aisne. He couldn’t remember his own
name but he had a mustache like the General and so we called him Joffre.

Do you know what his real name was? Jean Pierre. Like you.

He wouldn’t go to the trenches. His officer led him to the woods and tore him
with bullets. Some French shot Germans, some French shot French and some French ran.
You wouldn’t know the difference. They never taught you this and I won’t either,
because I want to give it to you simple and pretty.

I was saying, “Thus the experiment shows that however we twist and deflect,”
and heard animals. I turned to the frost-covered window. Dogs, cows, pigs, horses
crossed the white hills like a herd. Next the men and the women came, carrying rugs and
trunks. I dropped the chalk, which hit the floor and cracked in half. I ran my tongue
along my teeth, felt the rotten molar at the back, the incisor, loose but intact. The boys
rose from their desks and wandered away from their lessons. You remained seated with
your chin cupped in your palm. I turned and asked, “Jean Pierre, is there a problem?”
Your smile was slow and sleepy and you said, “No.” My tongue lingered, too long, on
the r’s in Pierre, I know, and my eyes lingered too, between your arched brow and the
curve of your lip. There wasn’t a day I didn’t stop on the steps, covering my eyes and
wishing I could undo it. Surely, your classmates noticed the stillness in me when I
looked at you.

Did I tell you that before the war’s end, I worked for the Americans? I sent
telegraphs from the Eiffel Tower. By 1920 all the British, the German and the French
wires had been cut. With nothing to do but intercept Italian telegraphs, I left my post and
wandered to La Rue’s. I drank with a British officer and a French lieutenant and sometimes a soldier came from Aisne with news from the front lines.

Around that time I met Joffre again. He was stranded in Paris with a head injury. He’d forgotten everything. On piano Joffre played the Golliwog Cakewalk perfectly. He couldn’t remember where he’d learned to do it, but when he played he started calling things out between the crashing keys: “Schatzie,” he’d shout, “is German for honey, like baby. I let slip something about her stained teeth, then she wouldn’t smile at me or she’d draw her lip down.” And all the soldiers slammed the bar top and shouted, “Who was she,” and she would slip under the four-note theme. She took with her the tablecloth, the empty plates, the champagne flutes, the table and the rooms we’d all imagined for him. We thought Joffre had a swell life somewhere, if only he’d remember.

I met Joffre in 1917. He spilt bisque in his lap at La Rue’s when I came in firing eyes on the room like brace shots. The first over his head, the second at his boots, then I blinked and opened eyes on him—he dropped his spoon and spilt his soup and grinned at me—my lids clicked shut and my heels snapped past. Adieu la vie, adieu l’amour, the soldiers sang. I angled my elbow between the infantry lining the bar and ordered a scotch. I asked the bartender, named Louis too, who was on leave. He said a regiment in the second division from Aisne. I nodded. A slack-jowled officer talked of Nivelle’s plan for an offensive, “blood bath,” he hiccuped. I pretended to listen and watched over his shoulder, where Joffre was seated. Around midnight Joffre got up to leave. I knocked my pipe out and followed him to the street.
A white sky reflected light. Boots clopped slush up the Rue Vaneau. A snowflake descended, sparkled and disappeared. A dog barked. I turned and the lamp dropped my shadow in an alley. Joffre knelt, rolling a cigarette. He licked a flap of paper between his fingers and looked up at me. I cleared my throat and smoothed the buttons down my coat. He stood slowly, like a man with a gun pointed at me. He reached into my pocket. I stood still as my ears burned. I raised my arms up. I felt the muzzle of a gun in my gut and when I looked down I saw no gun but a cold hand close over my ribs. He stood on his toes and leaned in, his breath on my neck and his lips opening and closing on the collar of my coat.

“Do it,” I said, “to me.”

Then the alley door opened. Light dropped down three steps. Then shadows of helmets, bodies, bayonets came next. Then black boots in the brown snow. Joffre pulled a book of matches from my pocket and his boots stomped out the alley and the ice cracked loud and drowned under shouts when he joined his regiment on the Rue Vaneau. Inside the lights dimmed and the music finished.

* * *

This morning, you appear to be muttering to yourself, Jean Pierre. “Jean Pierre,” I ask, “is there a problem?” You laugh and turn your eyes away. You smile and say you were singing, *Adieu toutes femmes. C’est bien fini, c’est pour toujours.*

* * *

I saw Joffre a month later. I couldn’t sleep, so I went to pace the Rue du Bac. He didn’t notice me. He stood on the far side of the street, swaying under a street lamp
outside a cafe. Some English soldier stood a yard from him. He shouted at Joffre and Joffre laughed. Then the trolley came between us and I couldn’t see them. When the trolley passed, the English soldier pulled his rifle butt back and hit Joffre behind the knee caps. Joffre’s legs gave like springs. His knees turned in and he crumpled. Some drunk Americans swung up the block under one another’s arms; singing into cobblestones. I hurried across the street and helped Joffre up. He pointed to a sign on a closed chemist’s that said, “Monsieur is with his regiment.” I broke the lock with a rifle butt and nudged him to the steps. A hole had been hacked in the boarded window. We could see the street and the fires in trash bins swim orange in melted snow, lighting the bare tree limbs from underneath. Joffre slumped on the bottom step. He looked so tired. He draped an arm over my thigh and left his hand hanging limp between my legs.

* * *

Today chalk shakes on the board and breaks then hits the floor. Outside plane trees drop yellow leaves to the sidewalk. At night rain will wash them to the streets. By morning brown plane leaves will clog the drains. Now the clouds collect in a south sky. Out there, on the boulevard, a window opens. A radio tunes to the news. Honoik shot dead. A Paris sparrow cries. Fire on Danzig.

At recess Serge pins your arms down with his knees and spits. At lunch I find my portrait, Louis fou and an arrow carved on the wall of the cloakroom. I skip dinner, return to my rooms. Outside you talk to yourself beneath the horse chestnuts. You slap your forehead. You stop beside my window. I drop the blinds and withdraw for a glass of wine. When I return, you have gone.
I saw Joffre under the arches of the British Consulate the day the Germans shelled Rheims. Shopkeepers leaned in doorways and watched the shells drop like they were stones skipped across a pond. Joffre sat on the top step with his head hanging between hunched shoulders. His collar was turned up and he held it closed at the neck like he was waiting out a rainstorm.

I rolled him a cigarette. He said he had a three day leave, wanted a change of clothes, wanted lobster soup, wanted to see girls dance in Paris and never go back. He wanted a woman too; thick of thighs. He might remember his swell life, if a thick-thighed girl would wrap her legs around his neck. A British regiment came up the steps. An officer told us to move on. I told Joffre I was headed to Paris. We passed a tobacco shop with boarded windows. The Red Cross had stuck its banner over the entrance. I touched Joffre’s elbow and nodded at a cafe. We ducked under its awning. He said he hadn’t any money and maybe I’d let him ride with me. I said I’d tried for a car all morning. He clapped my shoulder and pointed at a car plowing over busted crates. I leapt off the stoop and ran alongside the driver’s window. I slapped the glass with the flat of my palm. The driver’s lips moved but I could not hear what he was saying and the cab sped away. In the back two children sat on a woman’s lap. Beside her, a man sat on a trunk with his knees tucked up to his chest. He held his hat and head down. Three rugs were rolled up between them. All four watched me running from the side window and then craned their necks to watch me out the rear window, their lips moving one beat off synchronicity like a school of fish. The children screamed and I was on my hands and
knees in the still street, my skull pulsing. Women ran from the chemists with gloved hands held over their heads. A car stalled and the skyline dropped two stories. I stood up. My left ear drummed. I could not find the café where I’d left Joffre. An officer pulled my arm. He shouted. A dog barked. An air raid siren whined. A woman said, “Only this morning at the dressmakers.” I looked up the street and down the street. The officer tugged my coat sleeve. “Boots,” he said. A door swung between the chemist and the consul. A door and a few floorboards, nothing more, closed and opened, on the shell-blown street. “Your boots,” The officer pointed at my feet. I looked at him. “Look at your boots.” I blinked and I looked up the Rue Vaneau where the mortar lay in piles, and the streets were strewn with so many unmatched shoes. “Where’s the café?” I asked and looked at the solitary swinging door. “Look at your boots,” he shouted.

* * *

In spring the sky was white, the dirt was frozen and the line went silent. I plunked the lever to the contact, AC AC AC. My belly pressed against the waistband on my trousers. I went to La Rue’s every night. I fell asleep at the key in daytime. The Italians were the only ones with wires that weren’t cut from the ground. Their telegraphs were weather reports. A thirty percent chance of war. I stopped intercepting. I drank with British officers, French lieutenants, and infantry in head bandages. I waited for word from Aisne. They said Nivelle will have his offensive. Haig and Pétain know it’s a bloodbath, but he threatens retirement, so they’ll give him his bloodbath, if that’s what he’ll have. I plunked, FAAGDAGG. Joffre allez! Allez! Run, Joffre!

* * *
Late autumn is a trick I fall for every year. I believe I am on the brink of a
discovery and walk fast, with a crisp flush fanning my face, to find it. I unlock the west
wing that’s been unused since the war. The sitting room with its high back chairs,
oriental rugs, and dusty pictures of old masters on the mantel rests in the scent of unaired
trunks. I open the windows. To the east the seeds have ripened and fallen from the
chestnut trees, and the green capsules litter the parkway. You can see them through the
foliage, menacingly glinting, like mines or grenades in the lamps’ yellow light. I imagine
you don’t care much for chestnuts either. I’ve seen Serge aim them at your eyes and hit
your face. But don’t fear the autumn for it, they are softer than rocks and lighter than
snowballs. To the west the sound of scuffling feet carries up the stone courtyard. When I
run down the steps and enter you scatter like crows at a gunshot. I catch you under the
arm and catch Serge by the scruff of his neck. You both try tearing free. I spin you
around to face me. “What have you done? Who was with you? Why aren’t you in
tutorial?” Your lip bleeds. Serge scowls at frozen dirt. I pack you to your rooms without
dinner.

Your eyes do not harden against me, when I order you off with Serge, but like the
valley by Aisne where the French advanced under the cover of a foggy night and the mist
evaporated under a bright morning sunlight—how the valley looked—exposure and
recognition without blame—before it was mercilessly cross-raked by German fire. I
imagine Joffre looked much the same after he heard the first smokeless shot, followed by
eight rounds and reloading. “A Lebel rifle,” he must’ve smiled, “friends.” Or maybe it
happened after the officer led the deserters back the way they came, promising food and
an end to the offensive. Then the officer stepped from the clearing, raised one arm and let it drop. However it happened, it was not what you expected. I know. Serge will hang you from a fence post by the seat of your pants and leave you. He’ll trip you down the aisles. He’ll trail you with his eyes, like a dog before it bites or like the tip of a sight blade on a French rifle trailing Joffre and the prone soldier waiting for a signal and the officer dropping an arm and calling “fire.” “Why, fire?” Joffre must have wondered. “Laurent, Jules, Eugenie, Constant.” They stepped back, tripped over tree stumps, raised guns and cried, “Don’t come too close. Don’t come any closer.” But you don’t know yet, do you? You figure it, dimly, when Serge moves away from you.

* * *

At mid-night a rock shattered my window. I caught you on the parkway and cuffed you across the mouth. Your glasses fell off and cracked on the cobblestones. You ran off with knees and wrists unstrung and the grass in the valley and the gravel in the boulevards rose to meet you but your legs were unsteady. Soon the mist cleared under a bright morning sun and the vendors said Germans invaded Poland but for you the trees stayed swathes of green with no limbs or leaves.


This morning is the silence between the massacre at Aisne and Nivelle’s forced retirement. Blood in a brown fade stains your collar. I imagine you soaked it in the bath all night and then this morning, while Serge banged on the barred door, you tried to wring it dry. It’s damp and clings to your skin. Why, don’t you have another? I have your cracked glasses in my shirt pocket. I won’t return them. I put half of Schrodinger’s
equation on the board. I order you to complete it. You don’t move. You frown down at your index finger poised in your book.

“Jeane Pierre,” I ask, “is there a problem?”

You nod. “The window.”

I lean across you and close your book.

“He made me do it,” you say.

I lift you by the collar, place my palm between your shoulders and push you gently to the chalkboard.

You would not understand, the act has no significance; only consequence. How do I tell you, I let dust and cobwebs collect? I watch the spider catch the moth. I root for the moth but what can one do? In winter the window will be broken and the shards of glass, though a nuisance, will stay scattered on my parquet floor.

* * *

In the spring of 1917 I saw a soldier from Joffre’s battalion at La Rue’s. I cornered him by the bathroom. “Is the battalion relieved?” I whispered. He stepped back. “Where’s Joffre?” I asked. I stepped forward and touched the left cuff of his coat. He quickly brushed my hand off. “Do you know anything?” I asked. I grabbed him by the lapels.

* * *

Winter came in cold stone and frozen dirt. In the morning we broke ice and washed our faces. The bare branches of trees shivered in the wind; scratched the windows. When the BBC said, “France capitulates,” the white streets filled with
refugees, Poles, Brits, French soldiers, wandering. Parents pulled boys from the school and shipped them to the countryside. You and Serge, still haunt the cold classroom, turning the eyes in your pale faces to the arched windows and the closed door. “Who,” I ask, “are you expecting?” You do not answer.

Lately, I can’t understand your relationship with words. Your lab reports include illustrated cannons, horses and notes copied from the chalkboard. The ink in the inkpot is frozen.

* * *

In the summer of 1917, French lieutenants twisted mustaches at La Rue’s and argued over General Nivelle’s fate. They said he’d be dismissed, shipped to Africa with his deserters. That is, they laughed, the ones he had not shot. The next day, in the telegraph office, I plunked the key hard. AG AG AG. DAAGFAG. Joffre, Joffre, stay in Aisne! My commanding officer stood in the doorway.

* * *

You stay after class, with your lab report in your hand. You are learning to save your questions. You are learning to stay late. You’ve made a friend of Serge and it surprises me. I think you love him. What’s worse is you let him copy your lab report. He hangs back and lets you speak for both of them. You apologize. You say, “We were confused. We are sorry.” You have told him, maybe, that I can do nothing but forgive you and thus, Jean Pierre, you betray me.
I drop the chalk. “Ahh, we?” I ask and look at my boots. “We cannot be sorry.” I swing my arm. It hits the chalkboard. Chalk falls and cracks on the floor. “We cannot be anything.”

* * *

Rheims looked like bloodstains in snow. The Red Cross was everywhere. The General sat cross legged, in the back of a cab, with his gloved hands folded in his lap. He watched the empty sidewalks and closed shops pass with tired eyes as if he had a premonition of 1918. He caught the driver watching him in the mirror. His eyes snapped shut and glided back to the window. This is all I know of the most hated man in France and I know it only second hand.

* * *

You ask if you can meet with me and discuss the experiment, as if you know how to discuss anything. I refuse to meet with you in its plural sense, but yes, I will meet with you, Jean Pierre, I will meet with you.

* * *

Today we review for the final exam and the steam is so thick on the windows we can’t see through it:

“What was it like?” you ask.

“What was what like?”

“A photon,” Serge says.

“A photon was like the winter sky in Paris; dull, duller, dullest, darkness.”

The vein in Serge’s forehead throbs and you, Jean Pierre, grin.
“What was a measurement like?” you ask.

“A measurement was like the schoolboys who split the heads of bullfrogs with slingshots to watch their legs twitch, their chests thump and their lungs croak blood.”

“What was evidence like?”

“Evidence was like knowing you could have stroked the soft underbelly gently but fired pellet after pellet into leaping red dust; shrieking, “die, just die!”

“What was a simple calculation like?”

“A bird that someone shot the wings off. It’s frightened and wants to fly off but flaps a couple stumps.”

“What was an atomic system like?”

“It was like waiting for Joffre to come back to me and then he did, again and again and again.”
IF IT LOOKS GOOD, SHOOT

Nobody smiles in the picture from 1945, but Josephine. Her hair is caught on her cheekbone and stuck to her lipstick. A breeze blows some branches around. The light shifts and her eyes flinch. Roe’s brother, Jack said smile and she did, with ease and civil urgency, like Miss Scarlet at a Christmas ball, detained by pleasantries, en route to Ashley. The balls of her feet are slightly suspended. Her weight tips to her toes, her fingers balance on her husband’s bent arm. Her eyes are impatient and angling over the frame of the photograph, but it keeps her one gesture from waving and calling, “wait.”

* * *

Her husband, with graduation cap intact, if at a jaunty angle, will collapse to a knee after the shutter’s snap of release. He will rise winded and red-faced to offer his apologies.

He turns his mouth to his wife’s ear and says, “Suck it in, Jo.”

It’s difficult to tell whether she disobeys or ignores him. He remembers it will or will not be sucked in on Ralph’s behalf, and imperatives are anxious aftermaths.

His brother, Ralph, paces the perimeter of the photograph. Roe’s sure Ralph’s in the chapel, where Josephine says she left her purse or in the parking lot, where Josephine’s eyes bob about like the needle on a compass. Roe scans the black Cadillacs, the graduation caps, the green blur of leaves lacking edges. His chest tightens and loosens. The sunlight spreads against the backs of his closed eyelids, like a bloodstain
blossoming on bed sheets. He stands transfixed by it. Josephine’s hand moves to his and he clenches against her like a fist.

* * *

The photographer told her son he is too old to cry. Roe’s hand digs and twists into his shoulder. Her son cannot comprehend when or why he grew too old to cry or find an adequate expression to replace crying. He cannot comprehend why his suits are bought too big and everyone else’s fit, why the sleeves swaddle his fists, why the hat is too large for his head, why he is in trouble for treading on his dress pants, when the fabric drops below the heel on the bent leg with every step. Why must he be still? Why did she oblige a stranger who said smile? She acquiesces with an ease and a grace that makes him angry over the black cat she shooed away, when it leapt from a fence post and chose to rub against his shin, and the bird feeder built of cedar, she left to rot one mild winter on an elm limb, and the birds’ return in spring and the stray cats stalking birds and leaving broken bodies on the front porch. Her corrections, her amendments make little sense to him and what she permits is unforgivable. If only she’d put her hand on his shoulder.

* * *

Her son stows old armchairs, bed frames, tables, mattresses in the home she swore she’d return to someday. Her furnishings have gone—save the heavy curtains, the decorative, though not so functional light fixtures, the wood paneling—all of which, her son says, makes the house too dark to inhabit.
But here in the year that the heat wilted all the roses, the light blinds them to the tips of tangled elm limbs; look at them flooded in luminous whiteness. Here on the campus lawn, they do not look at the photographer, the green leaves, the telephone poles poking from yellow grass, the black caps, or the gowns sliding casually into parked Cadillacs. They look fearfully at themselves looking back. They look at a fiction that has not finished with them yet. They look like they expect to be looked at. The husband’s hand rests on the son’s shoulder, like the helm of a ship, but steers him only to the stillness of this image. And Josephine is poised to wave and detain a self that has forgotten how this white light pierced her eyes and swelled inside her.

* * *

Roe would like chocolate cake in this picture, a urinal, a hot bath, a cigarette, a postcard, a phone call, a nap, slacks that are not so tight, a graduation cap that fits right, a wife with a tranquil smile and a hand on an arm that wants more than mooring. He would like something to enter that has no business being here; her hand curled around his forearm, fingers stroking an exposed wrist, or an exposed fist. He wants her head tilted to his, languid eyes angled at him. He wants this picture to resemble promises they make, because they will break them.

* * *

Roe said the bullet did not kill the Archduke, but the Archduke’s suit, tight as a fist around a toothpaste tube. Like the Archduke, the picture has a pressure waiting for a wound. Josephine always knew she’d marry one of the three brothers. Why Roe instead of the others? Jack could juggle. He’d flip quarters off his thumb, say, “think quick,”
and wink, and sulky Ralph read the funny pages with her head in his lap. Later, she began to believe she did marry Ralph. So much so that when the good nurse asked what Roe was like, she said, “Tall, handsome,” then sucked her teeth and added, “like Ralph.” It was not right of Ralph to skulk around that un-husband house.

Roe said, “Don’t ask him in. Don’t smile encouragement. Don’t jump to his defense.” But under her every “won’t,” he imagined a will glowed like an ember, blown to life.

* * *

This picture would be impossible if it weren’t for the fissures forged by his perfect ignorance and her perfect imprecision. Roe tells himself, she speaks of Ralph to hurt him. He tells himself, she speaks of Ralph to feel his name fill her mouth. The fissures are her size, which provides a space to dream inside.

At night her husband abandons them. He walks in and out of other family photographs. He smokes below the bell tower, or he sits on the steps outside the chapel. At night the cicadas fly into the lamplight, hit the bulbs and buzz on their backs until the morning. From the background, the father notices the foreground, the son’s shoulder still flinching under the weight of his now absent hand, the wife’s fingertips still positioned at the level of his arm, the son’s posture still subtly suggesting a preference for the wife’s un-offered hand. In the morning he will respond again to the shoulder’s evident need, inappropriately, but firmly and inexplicably. The land is still uneven. The grass still grows in yellow patches. At night the picture seems arbitrary. Why Korea? Why the Army? Why college? Why engineering? How did silk stockings make the sky feel like
a giant gun barrel aimed at him? Why couldn’t that hand touch him enough? When did all the other hands stop mattering much? Why that pigeon-toed son? Why those knock-knees and this *dear to me*? Why that clumsy command? He still wants a postcard, a phone call, catfish, or aspirin; an inoculation that re-adjusts this eye-sore, this chest pain, this headache, this composure, this clutching self.

* * *

Now ice is on the phone poles and the power lines. It’s Saturday and the men, behind mowers, won’t stain their white shoes on frost-covered lawns. Ralph said the yellow grass looked like a dog with psoriasis. Ralph said the phone poles lean like drunk soldiers that march nowhere.

“Josephine,” he said, “you’re looking fine as a rose-finch.”

He was leaning on a fence post and turning a toothpick between his lips. Josephine spoke through the screen door and told him not to come back anymore.

* * *

If this picture has been taken with the deft certainty of a surgeon, then it will solve the problems that it causes. The wife wears black high heels and black stockings. The husband looks on them and opens like a bloodstain on a bed sheet. He could not afford them and is sure he’s not the reason she has worn them. He looks away. He imagines her letters to Ralph contain everything that has been kept from him. He tries to find them, half written, in the book of hymns, the glove compartment, the lining of a coat, the cigar box, the knitting bag, the spice rack, the laundry basket, under the dish rags, among gardening tools or recipes. In the fire pit, he imagines they are the ashes. He had been
disappointed. In the winter a letter will drop from a cookbook to a kitchen floor. It will not be his, or hers, or Ralph’s kitchen, but Dot Thompson’s. Who will be ill and out of work and Roe will come to drop off biscuits and blackberry jam. She will ask that Roe kindly return the cookbook his wife lent her in autumn. By then, he won’t want to know anymore, but it will flutter to the floor, the letter she never sent Ralph that likened elm limbs to antlers on elk, something uprooted, a pulled tooth turned on its head.

“Ralph,” he will read, “are my metaphors a sign of upset?”

She was so thoroughly herself, Roe knew nothing in the world had been kept from him and nothing in the world was his. But there are no love letters in this picture. There is only the absence of chocolate cake, of snowfall, of rain, of shade, of attention, of eyes on him, of palms on 1,500 square inches of skin, of satiating or vanquishing a want so poignant he might whoop or howl if she touches him. And then she does.
KING LYLE

One. We blame John Lewis. We loved hard-eyed Omi Wise, and Pete says she never loved us.

She bites her lower lip and looks out the bar window. “I did love King Lyle,” she says and twists a lock of hair around her finger. “In my way.”

Pete says “that way” would never do.

Before John Lewis came we had many hard-eyed women. Wild hogs got fat on fallen chestnuts and we got fat on wild hogs.

Then John Lewis came, the hickories got diseased and the hogs went missing. Pete planted corn and made us work. John Lewis left and took all our hard-eyed women with him. He left some women, mostly droopy-eyed and soft-eyed women. We don’t know where he took our hard eyed women or what he did with them. Omi is the only descendant of the hard-eyed line John Lewis did not take because she was, and to our collective shame remains, a child.

Two. In July Gus, the blind banjo player, wrote a song about John Lewis. It went like this: John Lewis is going to shoot you in the back, King Lyle. And in August Pete found us dead. He took the dog to the woods in the autumn freeze and followed hog tracks to the dried out riverbed. The hogs were huddled in the red clay, their heads bowed and their snouts stained. At the center of the hogs, Pete saw a socked foot kick the dirt. The dog barked. Pete whipped his hat off and swatted the hogs in their sides until they
scattered up the mountainside. Then it was Pete, and the dog barking at our socked foot, that’s dead, and the sunlight slanting down the trunks of bare trees.

Pete called the coroner from Asheboro. The coroner looked at the dry riverbed and asked just what the problem was. Pete scratched his head, he swore the king was dead. Then Pete and the coroner came to the tavern. They found us drinking bourbon and asking Omi why anyone would kill such a nice guy. Omi sobbed, dabbed our neck with a rag and said “nice guys lose craps to rail yard workers, even when they win.” Pete and the coroner wiped their hands on their pants and guessed there wasn’t a problem. We shook our head. We said if it was up to us, we’d let bygones be bygones, but we smiled sadly, we didn’t guess it was.

*Three.* The night we died, we’d won all John Lewis’s money and that was enough to marry Omi Wise. We sang and beat the bills against our thigh. By the river the black birds circled the white sky, rising and swooping from one blue branch to another. We leapt for a low limb, swung with it. But when we dropped to our blue shadow the wind stopped and the crows froze mid-flight in a broken spiral.

Then we heard his foot drop and our heart stopped. Our fist unclenched and the bills blew off, got caught, flapped on twigs and chicken wire. We ran for the mountain. We leapt for a hickory branch that broke off in our hand. We doubled over and hit the ground. We knew then we’d been shot by John Lewis.

It made sense that we’d die. Our wrist hurt, when we flicked dice. Our eyes saw no difference in a hard six and an easy ten. Our ankles went soft as sandbags, made us
wobble, drug us down. Had to walk like cowboys, a horse-sized not knowing between our thighs; all in a rush to find out what it was.

Above us cardboard birds hung like wind chimes in a cardboard sky. We guessed death was the not knowing we rode in on. We guessed some more about what we couldn’t know for sure. Then we guessed this not knowing was enough like living that we got up and went to the tavern.

*Four.* We sit on a stool with our fist curled in our cheekbone, watching Omi run a rag across the bar top.

Pete asks what we hang around for. No rain or snow falls. No nettle snaps, no leaf spine cracks, no blade of grass bends where we are walking. The summer heat stays. The season won’t change. The July flies mistake our arms and legs for tree limbs and try feeding. Squire Adams, the old man that is Omi’s guardian, says the stultifying sameness of our posture invites this. Pete agrees rigor mortis is setting in.

“And look at Omi.” Pete points behind the bar. “She strips the wood of its enamel with that rag, chewed her nails down to the fingertips.”

“Have not,” she says.

“But stays practical,” Squire Adams nods, “as hardened dust on a hot bulb.”

*Five.* Gus, the blind banjo player, sings to the single bulb above the pool table.

Outside John Lewis drives a truck with Elliott’s ice cream painted on the side. Hettie Eliott sits in the passenger side. He does seventy-five up our single street. A
broadcast about our murder blares out the open window. John Lewis pulls on the curb and cuts his engine.

“This humid night,” Pete sighs and covers his eyes.

John Lewis saunters in, lean and stiff as a matchstick. He asks for an ice water. Omi sets his water on a napkin. He thanks her and calls our heat some violence. Omi says violence is nothing like heat and bets he’s never won craps against a rail yard worker. He drops to his stool and smiles. He takes a cigar from his breast pocket and raps it on the bar top. “I am a rail yard worker,” he says.

Omi crosses her arms over her chest and looks out the window. Outside, under the single street light, a woman purses her lips at the truck’s rear mirror.

Inside John Lewis shoves his hand across the bar and says, “I’m John.”

Omi looks down at John’s hand and shrugs one shoulder. “Who’s that?” She nods at the window.

John hitches his thumb over his shoulder. “Oh that’s Hettie.” The corner of his lip curls like the tip of a waxed mustache. “She’s my mother.” He winks and lies. “So be nice.”

“She loved us,” we tell Pete.

“Like a pickaxe,” Pete says, “chips and chips until the rock cracks.”

Six. When we were alive boys did right. We told Squire Adams that Omi was no child. Squire Adams owns the tavern and our soft-eyed women frowned on it, but he let her
serve our drinks. We were grateful and, to avoid deceit, confided sentiments that seemed of the utmost consequence.

“Her promises made us blush,” we told Adams. “Her condition was a wedding with no shotguns.”

Pete called this a formative desire and winked at Omi.

We did not know who it formed or what form it would take. We were afraid.

Omi stood behind Squire Adams smiling. The collar of her shirt slipped off a shoulder. She poured a shot. She winked at us and drank it.

We winced and leaned away like when the flat back of a hand was raised. Those winks were the seed of a sadness known well to us.

“She is a child,” Squire Adams said, “learning what moves you. Where is your shame? Where is your sense?”

We looked at our feet and turned our palms to Omi. “There it is,” we said, “our shame and sense.”

Omi winked. Our shame and sense were gone again.

Seven. Outside Hettie stands and smoothes the wrinkles in her skirt. Her high heels click on the concrete and she opens the tavern door.

Her skin sinks in hollows below her cheekbones.

“She may have twenty years on Omi,” Pete spits, “but she’s nobody’s mother.”

“Find your man yet?” Hettie asks.
John’s grin hardens and the smile lines around his eyes vanish. He turns his head to face Hettie, slow as crosshairs to a target.

He opens his mouth to speak and Omi sets a second glass of water on the bar top.

“You looking for King Lyle?” She points down the bar at us.

John turns his head. His jaw drops open. He puts his fist in his mouth and clamps his teeth down on his knuckles. “What’s the matter with King Lyle?” he asks.

“He got killed,” Omi says. She walks over to us and strokes our forehead. She frowns down at her hand and wipes it on her apron. “I guess he owed you money.” She sighs.

Hettie holds her fingers over her lips.

“King Lyle’s not good for much now,” Omi says, “I guess, he never was.”

“I expect,” Hettie says, “we won’t need to come back here anymore.” She gives Omi a hard look. “Will we, John?"

Eight. Squire Adams sits in the empty tavern with his red forehead in his thick fist. “I did my best with you,” he sighs.

“Don’t worry, daddy,” Omi says. She lifts and turns an empty stool up on the bar top. “John will marry me.”

“What if he won’t?” Squire Adams asks.

“He’s the father,” Omi says. She tilts the tip jar on its side. “I’ll say so in court. I’ll get fine things and money.”

“And if he marries Hettie Elliott?”
Omi counts pennies into her palm. “I’ll get finer things and more money.”

Squire Adams rises from his stool and his old knees crack. He shakes his head at the bar floor and says, “Good night, Omi.”

Nine. Try telling Omi, John Lewis does only what John Lewis has already done and John Lewis has never done any good for anyone. John Lewis is not reckless. John Lewis won’t take chances. We played street craps with John Lewis in August. You rode the stray’s bike off that night and stayed away for days. Our shot missed the backboard, hit the floor. We stooped over and switched the die. That vein in his temple twitched. He saw us do it and said nothing. We tried to switch the die back but when we dropped the die again he picked them up, held them in his hand and said nothing. We knew then he kept two scores and one was unspoken. We took all his money. And coming home through those woods, beating those bills against our thigh felt good. We guessed it was that easy, we guessed John Lewis was that stupid. We guessed wrong. We haven’t got a cent of it. You won’t find it by the riverbed. You hear what we’re saying, Omi Wise?

A rag hangs from the fist curled to Omi’s hip. The lights are off, save the bare bulb above the pool table. It does not sway.

“Omi,” we say, “why do you stand like a cardboard cut out of a girl? You’ve had one fist on your hip and you been looking at that window for five minutes. Omi, why don’t you gasp or laugh or say things back?”

Outside the ice cream truck pulls into the post office. The wheels spin and shoot gravel up.
A car door slams shut. John stands in the halo of head lights. He cups his hands around his mouth and shouts, “Horn’s broke, Omi. Come out.”

Omi points her chin at the window. “My ride’s come.”

“Don’t you want to know how it ends, Omi?”

“I know the end,” Omi sighs. “Only heard it thirty times.” She sweeps the pennies off the bar top and puts them in her pocket.

“Omi, do you love us?” We reach across the bar and touch her wrist.

“Yes.” She shrugs. “I do.”

“Who is your ride?”

She shakes her head slow. “When you get in my head, and Gus says hello, it’s like a nail in my temple. Every time they drag a chair across the floor, break a glass, clear their throats, more nails in my head. I get so mad I could scratch their eyes out for smiling, but it won’t do. I can’t be both in my head with you and here.”

“Omi.” We rise on the stool’s bottom rung and clap our hands over her’s. “Do you want to die with us, Omi?”

“No,” Omi says. She blinks like she got something in her eye. “No,” she says. She pulls her hand back and puts it in her apron pocket. “I want to stop thinking of you.”

Our heart flutters and splits like poppies taken by a breeze. We fall back on our stool top and watch Omi leave.

A moth circles the bulb swaying over the pool table. We think maybe we’ll get the vodka by the register. Sweat tickles the backs of our necks like a moth that won’t land but brushes wings on us. We understand how the bare bulb feels too hot.
Ten. If we look hard we can see his mother, rocking on a front porch, when John Lewis comes up the steps.

“Morning mother,” John says. He stretches and yawns. He hooks a thumb under his suspenders and leans against the fence post.

“Omi Wise says you plan to marry her,” Mrs. Lewis says.

John’s teeth clamp down on the end of a chewed toothpick and snap it in half.

“Who told you that?” he asks. He cuts his eyes at a couple dead leaves, somersaulting in the sunlight across the dirt street, “I haven’t got,” John says, “a thing to do with Omi Wise.”

Mrs. Lewis rocks forward, “You’d do well to make sure Hettie Elliott knows that.”

John starts into the house, the screen door slams shut behind him.

“John,” his mother calls over her shoulder, “I notice you aren’t driving that nice ice cream truck anymore.”

Eleven. Squire Adams works the taps at the tavern. We order vodka. We ask for the bottle. Omi’s been gone three nights. Squire Adams says she’s run off. We talk of organizing a search party.

Pete says, “When John Lewis first came, Omi stole a bike and rode away. She wanted no part in it. It won’t be,” he reminds us, “the first time.”
Twelve. If we listen hard, we can hear the twigs snap and Omi’s palms slap the river. We can see John’s fist spread on the crown of Omi’s head. She bites the hinge of his thumb. She comes up for breath and screams, “King Lyle, wake up!” John’s thumb is leaving bruises on her neck, “You don’t want to rule a kingdom that John Lewis drowns me in.” But will this happen? Has this happened? Are we willing this to happen? We have such an awful headache.

* * *

In August we played street craps with John Lewis.

“You ever tire, King Lyle,” John Lewis said and shot the dice against the pool table, “of trying to find out what you don’t know about yourself?”

We stood and stretched. We walked to our window and surveyed our kingdom.

“I bet your people are tired of it.” John Lewis said. “Sick of you and your not knowing.”

Omi had taken the strays’ bike again. They were chasing her over the hill, this time yelping like dogs with firecrackers tied to their balls, ours broken, ours stolen, ours taken. The wind snapped her skirt taut to her rising thighs and she flickered by.

“Ours what?” John Lewis smiled. He fanned bills on the pool table. The bike tires cut the gravel like a knife. The telephone poles and wires tottered along the crooked horizon. The sun burned our eyes.

“If I were King it would be ours nothing,” John said. “My people wouldn’t wonder what they were. I’d tell them they were mine.”
The bike rattled off. The wind shook the glass. We turned from the window and looked at the bills John Lewis fanned out.

“We haven’t got anything to bet with,” we said.

“That’s what you think.” John Lewis smiled.

*Thirteen.* We wake in the woods. We remember going to piss in the dry riverbed. We remember we dropped to our knees and heaved in dirt and dead leaves. We remember a headache about late evening and a general sadness about early dawn.

We walk west to the tavern.

Pete pulls his car up on the uncut grass, leaves the engine on, and climbs out.

Pete says we shouldn’t blame our self but John Lewis. We sit on the back bumper, kick gravel, watch grey clouds rise and drop to dust. Pete straddles a guardrail that overlooks a dry creek. He aims a busted rifle at the rocks below. He shuts one eye and pulls the trigger. “Pow,” he says but the gun won’t go off.

He turns the rifle to the woods behind us. “Look,” he says.

We twist our necks and turn our heads. John holds Omi’s hand and leads her under the dead hickories. Every so often John pulls his hand free, bends a low limb back and shoves Omi up the path.

Pete hands us the rifle.

“Omi,” we say, “want a ride?”

Omi doesn’t answer.
“Omi,” Our eyes brush down her profile as she passes. Our grip tightens on Pete’s rifle.

We slip off the bumper and hand the rifle to Pete.

Pete raises the rifle to his shoulder and aims at John’s back. “Pow,” he says, then lowers his gun. He turns his palm up, “Looks like rain,” he yawns. “Let’s go.”

Fourteen. We bounce in the backseat over the rumble of rocks at our feet.

“Don’t you get the feeling,” Pete turns his head and shouts, “all this already happened?”

We nod. “Yes. Like a bug in a jar.”

“Want to know what your problem is, King Lyle?” Pete asks.

But we don’t. The sun breaks the branches of trees and our sleepy eyelids shudder gently. The light pries the clouds open and it feels like the blunt edge of a pickaxe rocking the hinges off our chest.

Fifteen. In July Omi followed us to the river.

We said, “we only ever treat you like a child, Omi Wise. What do you follow us around for?”

She called us nice.

“And boys your age aren’t?” we asked. “Why don’t you find a nice one, fumble around?”
She said, she did and it was different. She said, “with them I’m always thinking now touch his neck, now drop a hand in his lap, he’ll like that. With you I’d think, don’t touch him, he won’t like it, only I don’t think, I do. It feels right like I’ve got a fork in my fist and someone gave me pie. I feel like a wild hog, doing just like I’m supposed to.”

We pushed her hard little hands back and asked where she learned that. She asked who the old lady was, comes around and bawls us out.

“Old lady,” we asked, “how old do you think we are?”

“Too young for old ladies.” She clucked her tongue. “Too old for me.”

“How did we get in this dry dirt and briars?” we asked. “Slice us up, ruin our shirt. What do I tell my old ladies?”

She said, “don’t laugh, King Lyle, you tell them you’re with me now.”

Sixteen. Our head bounces between the windows in the back of Pete’s car. Pete doesn’t ease off the accelerator and when the car bends down the rise, he pivots in his seat and shouts over the engine’s groan. The gravel pelts metal and glass. The dog bawls out the open window.

“Your problem is you don’t know how to blame anyone.” Pete laughs, “If you love Omi and she loves John, why don’t you kill John?” The car bends off the road. “Why don’t you wake up, King Lyle and find out if Omi loves you or not?” The low limbs snap on the fender and fly at the windshield. Rain drops pelt the glass. “Why don’t you wake up, King Lyle,” Pete shouts, “and find out if you’re dead or alive?”
Works Cited


