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Letter from the Editors

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Sincerely,
Jack Brisson and Edward O’Brien
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In a Check-out Line at City Market
Isaac Ducker

Elevator music plays.

Unce unce unce beep unce unce unce beep
Unce unce unce

Don’t you just love these tunes?

I would rather listen
to my child’s
fucking death rattle.

Beep
beep
beep
Vermont Pastoral
Will O’Neil

One can’t help but smile,
Walking with a love’s hand in hand,
At such bucolic scenes as these:
Bovine faces complacently cudding
In endless waving fields;
A picturesque white steeple standing
Tall among trees just changing from green;
Those stores presenting the same fronts
Now as in time immemorable;
And the wrinkled face of a kindly old man who,
Rolling down his car’s window,
Hollers out his cheerful salutation:
“Burn in hell, you faggots!”
One simply cannot help but smile.
Millie von Platen
Imaginary Cigarettes
Jack Brisson

Saturday, March 26th 2005

He flicks imaginary cigarette butts outside the grocery store and watches the people pass. He thinks it may have something to do with dad. It could have to do with mom too. He wonders if he started writing about himself in the third person when he realized the disorder was genetic.

He sees streams of people gush back and forth into the grocery store. They pluck bags of fruit and handle packages of sliced deli cheese into carts. The creak of the wheels are annoying. People push too slow or too fast. He wonders if he’s writing about himself in third person to stall.

He stopped for a moment of rest in between upstate and the city. If he doesn’t hit traffic, he’ll be downtown by 7:00 or 7:15. Knots coiled in his stomach since noon as he worked the gas pedal across the highway. He’s only finding respite in pressing his back against the dusty walls of this supermarket and pretending to smoke.

He’s glad he kicked the habit in 2003. He likes riding his bike to the radio station at 9 and 5 and he not coughing up old smoke each time. He misses the habit though. His lips might always be half-flesh and nicotine and he wasn’t sure he could ever hate the elegance of a cigarette balanced between two fingers.

He didn’t like his first three cigarettes. Ian gave him the first two after school. He remembers the dates. They were the Wednesday and the Thursday before the homecoming dance. He tried to smoke behind the bleachers and Ian invited Liza to join. She never showed and he was been angry at Ian and choked on his cigarettes until his face purpled. He was glad only Ian saw him in those two days. Why did he stick with it? Is he genetically prone to a tobacco fix? He read an article on a quasi-dependable scientific research site that claimed

...
that the irrational behaviors of rats come from imprinted memories of their ancestors. Rats are stimulated and their unstimulated young are instantly separated from them. Despite familial unfamiliarity, the rat offspring behave concordantly with the stimuli of their progenitors as if they shared memories, conditions, weaknesses, passions, fears. Did dad smoke?

He doesn’t know and he supposes he’ll find out soon. Hopefully 3.5 hours until dad’s place.

Sunday, March 27th 2005

Dad’s confused again this morning about why mom’s gone and he fell off the toilet.

He heard dad’s inarticulate sounds from the bathroom. He guesses leaving him alone for too long isn’t wise. It took a while for him to clean his liver spotted body and fit the diaper on. Dad gabbled and pawed at the toilet rim with shaking hands.

Later that day, dad says three words of polish. **Chleb. Trawa. Pamiec fotograficzna. Bread. Grass. Photographic Memory.** Each word is separated by intervals of above ten minutes and dad ignores the sun which is shining through the window.

Monday, March 28th 2005

Today he wakes up early and lies in bed thinking about when dad taught him Polish. He listens to the pattering of rain on the window and sees his father as a younger man, before his mouth was all gums. He sits by him and his mother hums and rocks in a chair at their old apartment uptown. **Jashu, that is your name. You are maybe being called Johnny or John by friends of yours. No. Your name is Jashu.** His father’s voice used to be strong, thickened with the strength of a simple English. **Potatoes? No. Kartofel!** He always gave food its Polish name. **Good food is good food in all countries.** He stopped recognizing the taste of salt a few years later.
In the afternoon he feeds his father a yellowish food supplement that reeks of carrots and peaches. He lets him hold the spoon but it slips through his stiff fingers and splatters all over his lap. Dad yells and rocks back and forth as powerfully as he can. Blood is rushing to the inelastic veins in his forehead. He hurriedly tries to clean it up with a dishrag. Dad’s hand grabs and pinches his arm with surprising strength and old fingernails draw blood. He winces. He grabs dad’s arm roughly. He tears it away without a thought and the old man gasps and his dusty eyes regain a flash of crystalline color and his pupils dilate with a glimmer of fear. Ewa! He says. Of course he says mom’s Polish name. His son grips the grey wrist. Ewa!! Dad echoes.

He shakes his head and loosens his grip on dad’s arm. His head slides up to meet the arthritic fingers. He kneels down he draws his father’s hand to his heart. Jashu. The sons says.
Like My Mother When I Was Little
Isaac Ducker

She washes me
in swift
efficient circles,
when she slips
her hand over
my groin
she cleans it.

I do not rise,
but her eyes do

they say
I love you,
but I am tired.
I’m probably too judgemental about other people’s clothing

because I put a lot of time and effort into what I wear

Charlotte Reider-Smith (Series)
My clothing makes me feel confident. I want to project that confidence.
This is so unlike everything I own, but I've kept it cause I wore it on the first day of college. That was me projecting "I just want to belong."

Now I wear it with a black velvet skirt.
There's a certain type of person I want to get to know.

My clothes are a way of introducing myself without even saying anything.
I will wear the sandals if that's what works with the outfit...

regardless of the weather.
In the Suburbs
Maria Bobbitt-Chertock

Barely any stars, sure
But the sky glows muddy
Orange, kind of strange, yes,

Like Lipton tea
You’ve seen on TV these
Lipstuck women drinking sexy.

The pipes keep you up
If missing sirens,
Missing gore, sure.

The homes come in
Three styles, fewer colors.
Take shapes, yes,

Take legs, take
T-shirts for granted.
Strut down the lawn

This your playground,
This your jungle.
Bearing helmet, schedule, safety-gate.
Investments, mistress, safety-net.
in any language  
Nia Robinson

“God, I’d love fly up there in that sky.”
“God’ll let you fly when He gives you your wings up in heaven,” Gus said

—*Native Son* by Richard Wright

My mother fears
that I won’t come back.
That the Adirondacks will teach me
how to say home in too many languages.
That they will show me what freedom looks like
and I’ll believe them.
Most of the people I have known
and loved have left,
so why can’t I?

Under a January sun,
I think about all of the places
I am going to leave part of me.
Spread my flesh over places 20 years ago
I couldn’t pronounce.
Maybe I’ll leave home in 20 languages.
Watch them morph into one.

Stretch out plane rides and loop around airports.
Maybe I’ll keep running,
use Chicago as a checkpoint,
and checkpoint,
and checkpoint
and don’t think about why.
College Board’s Introspection Test
Jack Brisson

Turn to Section 2 of your answer booklet to answer the questions in this section.

The passage below is accompanied by a multiple-choice question. For this question, consider how the passage might be revised to improve the expression of ideas. Consider how the passage might be edited to correct errors in sentence structure, usage or punctuation.

Make sure to fill in the circles on your answer sheet with a #2 pencil. Make sure to fill in the circle completely. Partially filled in circles will not be accepted.

“You are scared and roll #2 pencils around your desk. It looks like it’s made of fake wood. No real wood is that slippery. You know that the man proctoring the exam is a teacher in this school. But it’s not your school. You don’t know him, but he doesn’t look like you. In fact you know no teachers that look like you. His clothes fit and he sips vitamin-c supplement from a stainless steel water bottle. And this school is cold. It smells strongly, as if the rubbing alcohol from the infirmary slithers from room to room, purging the dirt that children tend to track in on the floors. The floors don’t look like your floors and the pencil sharpeners watch you from the teacher’s desk with their cyclopean holes. Your proctor stands and barks out commands. His voice rings with sureness although he misreads the section number at first. He reads from a sheet he holds in one hand, and winds a rosary around his other hand like a good-luck charm. He clenches it in a fist, even though he had taken it from the girl sitting next to you; because that sort of thing isn’t allowed here. He speaks as if he’s a holy man. He’s proselytizing, worming his orders into your brain so your pencils will shout his language onto paper. He says that you can cancel your results but he knows that you won’t because you want to print them out and fit them to your body like his clothes.”

After reading the passage, choose the answer to the question that
most effectively improves the quality of writing in the passage or that makes the passage conform to the conventions of standard written English.

Question 1

What choice improves the following sentence: “You are scared and roll #2 pencils around your desk.”

A) “You are scared so you move #2 pencils around your desk.”
B) “You are scared. So you move #2 pencils around your desk.”
C) “You are scared. So, you organize your #2 pencils on your desk.”
D) “You are scared. You organize your #2 pencils for the test.”
E) “You are excited. You organize your #2 pencils for the test.”

Question 2

What choice corrects the following sentence: “You don’t know him, but he doesn’t look like you.”

A) “You don’t know him but he doesn’t look like you.”
B) “He doesn’t look like you, but you don’t know him.”
C) “You don’t look like him, but you know him.”
D) “You don’t look like him, you know.”
E) “You don’t look like him. You know your place.”

Question 3

What choice improves the thought of this sentence: “He says that you can cancel your results but he knows that you won’t because you want to print them out and fit them to your body like his clothes.”

A) “He says you can cancel your results but you won’t because you want to print them out and fit them to your body like his clothes.”
B) “You can cancel your results. You won’t because you want to print them out and fit them to your body like his clothes.”
C) “You can’t cancel your results because you want to print them out
and fit them to your body like his clothes.”
D) “You can’t cancel your results because you want to print them out and fit them to his body like his clothes.”
E) “You can’t cancel. You want to fit you to his body like his clothes.”

You may not leave this test at any unauthorized time or your scores will be **voided without refund.**
Babylonian
Matthew Blake

I will be buried
in honey because I am
Babylonian because

after it ends I fumigate myself
like Herodotus says the Babylonians
fumigated themselves

and did not use utensils until
the purification was complete.
After it ends, I do not touch forks

or knives until I enter the bathroom,
crank up the shower, light the candle,
lock the door.

I do not eat until I scrub away the sin
under my fingernails, rinse my tongue,
wash away every stain with water,

wonderful water, goddess of relief,
spirit that never fails to absolve.
When I am clean, I leave the bathroom

and I can use utensils
so I eat. I find a spoon and dip it
into a jar of honey.

I am Babylonian, honey will be my tomb—
set for eternity in the amber glow
I will be clean, forever pure.
Inverse Relation
Matthew Blake

As Adam early in the morning light
you enter the lecture hall

with your hazel eyes, dark curls,
mouth running over with sun

in your steps walking forth from the bower
refresh’d with sleep your eyes every moment

but the bower calls, back to bed
before you behold me

where I pass, hear my voice,
approach you I do not see

nothing in your eyes, your hair in my hands
cannot touch please do not touch me,

touch the palm of your hand to my body as I pass
over, pass away, my hands do not work

your body will infect me
with touch please your skin

is sin hands be not afraid
of my body but your eyes

only ask me to stay
away will you be afraid of

my body lies
it says no.
Phoebe Mitchell
Saturday Night Song
Matthew Blake

We write poetry in the dark.
Under the linen quilt
there is no lamplight for us
to see the stanzas we summon.
Only the pen’s voice on the page
and the moon along our lips.

Fingers tire,
ink begins to dry:
at the window, eighth notes
of soft summer rain.
We fall asleep with pens
resting in our palms.

I wake before dawn.
Air hums with expectation of sun.
The bedroom is an empty church
filled with a silence
that is not mute,
but august as I open

my eyes to scribbles
and words dangling
between light blue lines
of notebook paper—
script of infants with untrained fingers,
cursive of children with fading patience

but for me
a record that tells
of our communion,
a song that safeguards our speech,
as it was in the darkness,
under the linen quilt.
On the tip of my tongue
Matthew Blake

words tremble, but my mouth runs away when I tell you

I am not the boy I was, how I chip away at the silence stuck to my
tongue flees every time I try to tell you I love illegally according to your law but
the body does not choose to be something other, something else

if I only could be the boy with the tie so tight my lungs beg for air when I say

those three words float in the window, my hands reach to take them to tell you

but with your shadow at my throat how can I speak the truth does not matter even when there is only five thousand feet between us words

behind the bars of you at the kitchen table talking about what is wrong with me?

you made this me, you are guilty for your day at court and the criminal

who pled not guilty before the jury of
your eyes mute I am
sorry I love

you turn away
in silence.
Ivan Valladares
Ivan Valladares
the night doesn’t end (inspired by charles simic)
Hannah Habermann

the fear fed the printing press when the ink ran out – the people on the train waved goodbye and then didn’t once their bodies turned the corner. even cleopatra stopped taking her tea with sugar.

silence was gold until the fireplace went cold. the loose bolt in the radiator creaks when the cupboard is empty – it is always creaking. she’s started scraping the bowl with her spoon in the darkness.

as a child, I tried to count the fog in the alleyways. I failed and made no attempt to try again later. the crows in the trees were calling too loudly. the keys on the typewriter stuck and stayed there, too stubborn to move.

the candle burned down until we couldn’t remember the shapes of our bodies; we learn how to hold our hands in front of our faces until we forget whose is whose and what is what.

each day the children in white uniforms trudge to school and come out just as monotonous. we talk about the broken glass in the street but can’t find a way to sweep it up. even the littlest ones smudge charcoal over their faces.

the display in the philosopher’s shop stays the same no matter the season; the man standing in the windowsill upstairs hasn’t blinked since he heard the city drop. the mice in the cellar ate holes through all of her dresses – nothing was saved.
The Magic Carpet
Akhila Khanna

Threads pirouette around his fingers,
tip-toe between wrinkled passages of time,
carve crevices in familiar places,
leave imprints that run
with lines of age on his hand.

Dust particles stuff the space
with no window to escape
and instead settle on his eyes
blurring the little light
that finds an opening through a crack
on the tarnished wall.

Yet focused fingers do as they have done-
weaving carpets to the sound
of heavy breathing,
mumbles of an error in judgment,
hollers of unexpected precision,
drops of trickling sweat
loud enough only to be heard
by he who weaves.

His carpet will fly across the world
pageant across my floor
to protect my sole
against all that is hard and cold,
distract my eyes
from all that is dull and black,
oak in surrounding colors
with intertwining threads,
fill up my room
with a familiar sandalwood scent,
soften my landing
as I tumble out of bed.
Magic created just for me, hiding the story of he who weaves.
February
Leo Stevenson

There is blood on the cool white marble of the kitchen counter and blue-white light diffusing in off of the snow outside, through the paper birches at the edge of the field by the house. The sun has just slipped behind a pine-topped hill, and I carefully cut a line down the center of the hare’s thin body. This is no ordinary rabbit, no soft defenseless thing created to nibble at gardens. It is a snowshoe hare, nearly two feet end to end, thick fur mottled white and gray, now spattered here and there with pink blood. Its wary brown eyes are still open as if in mindless fear, scanning the room, and there are needlelike claws poking out from its long back feet. I don’t think Beatrix Potter ever saw one in her life.

The hare is starting to smell—seems that a couple of shotgun pellets have punctured intestines or gallbladder or one of the other organs I don’t want to break as I feel my way into its body cavity and start to pull. Liver, lungs, a musclebound pebble of a heart fall into the white porcelain sink. They come away easily. Not much more than a lightly breakable membrane holds them together, fragilely attached to the wiry bag of ligaments and bones and soft tissues that only a few hours ago they were keeping alive, self-repairing and self-preserving, the peak of evolution in its niche. I peel off the skin, leaving the animal naked and glistening on the veined stone. It looks smaller. The fur sits by itself, a small set of warm pajamas discarded, no longer of use.

Around me is a wooden floor, a fireplace, a vase of dried winter flowers on a kitchen table, and my body, held together just so, still warm. My own soft wet levers and fragile valves fit together and function in their places, unseen. I rinse this small limp body, which until only hours ago was not mine but belonged deeply to some other practical being. I wash it clean of blood and fur and I place it in a pot. Death is loud and ringing, and then it is quiet, a little blood in the snow. I dry my hands and sit by the fire to watch the light fade beneath the trees, feeling the slow rise and fall of my chest as I do.
His hands play with red paints,
but easy, soft, gentle—
eyes of glass do not see.

Take a bite, rupture the pink skin,
bitter in the mouth blood sticking,
rinsing pearls of teeth.

Now read
each page, delicate, like skin:
Abraham Isaac Moses
and Father I have sinned—
plastic does not bruise but feel, the
turtleneck-noosed throat
stained with fingertips.

Upon You I place my Transgressions upon him
I scatter the words that fight across my teeth—
but now the hand with the blade it stays,

and so still he moves, and I plead,
like water to floods,
resurrect me.

But dolls do not breathe either.
Collected Poems
Erin Winseman

you are like a day
dream that
i keep seeing even
at night
you run and run through
my mind and your
feet make
no noise because
it is not pavement
you are running
on
it is joy

~rhapsody

i make excuses the way you’d make
love to a stranger, rigid at first
before relaxing into the ambiguity

like when their skin
becomes a lever you can steer
with, without

knowing what
you are steering towards or

veering away from

~ambivalence
you are like a rainstorm
mist and water
washing history
away

our past is past
now you are life
to the trees

and i roll up
my sleeves and dance
in you

like what we have is
freedom
and steam

~fresh start

but there is only
space
only the hollow dome
in the bell
where the tongue strikes
that the sound
erupts
and announces itself

how can i present
myself to you if
you take your fingers and
slip them into
the spaces where
my tongue should be

~talked over
if i am one
thing but
you see me as
another

if i decide myself
a cardinal, fire with
a crimson head

but you say that i’m
a liar because
only males are red

then does it mean
less
to be what i am

if each color fades
when the birds
are dead?

~semantics
A lullaby from the crusaders
Tyler Belmont

is tumbling in its lilt
as the prelude to our indulgent sleep,
this vindicated drowning.

Undone, the domes of Abraham
that shepherded Jerusalem.
The iris rests on fruit among these orchards
by the banks of the Barada. And we listen
to the waves of the false Prophet,
he who calls for the inevitable union
from besieged Damascene minarets. One step
further into avarice’s waste could have yielded
the Abbasid Baghdad, if only this…
Revered Levant: its intimacy we crave
could be obtained, could be compelled
just as the pearls of Phoenicia
and all their maritime trades. But it is here
in the orchard that we tumble.
We begin to find ourselves undone.
Beyond this fruit, the impenetrable prayer
and visions of divinity’s ruin – they beckon
reminiscence of the faith’s past primacies
exposed to be ephemeral as the reprieve of closed eyes.
We are herded by our kings of flesh
towards that from which we come.
The earth rises to meet us. Gives exoneration
to the descent beneath deaf ears.
Damascus is an island beneath deaf ears.
Lucy Pappas
Lucy Pappas
Morels
Tom Dils

mô rel : an edible fungus that has a brown oval or pointed fruiting body with an irregular honeycombed surface bearing the spores; demonstrates an unusual propensity to grow abundantly in forests which have been recently burned by wildfire

The air was so thick
that it tasted of char
when the wind sifted through the burn forest,
and as I remember,
it did so often.

She’d spoken
of nitrates and microorganisms,
and the hollow tones of her voice
nestled between remnants
of organic matter.

Below the burn
spring had arrived,
and above on the mountainside
the pine shrubs had not yet released
their winter brace—

and in the space between
she followed her own bearings,
kneled and felt the blackened earth
in the cool shadows of dead half-trunks,
saw color in the landscape
that wasn’t there—

and plucked up
a morel.

Though I
had followed blindly
I now felt the whimsical spontaneity of it all,
and the darkness of the burn lifted
as spring rose up the mountain.

And she placed the morel
in my palm
and traced my wrist,
a promise answered,
a prayer renewed,
a sooty touch now rooted
in the infinite hyphae
beneath our feet.
Zhou Bang-yàn (1056–1121): To the tune of “Un masque turc”

subtle incense    smolders away
summer damp      dawn, intruder
bears witness to rooftop talks
birds of song    call for the sun
night rain drying in newborn rays
    on lotus leaves
    above the waters
    petals arise
    in rising wind

far, far is home    when may I go?
a wanderer in    the city of Chang’an
returning to    creek-side gates
O fisher-boy    in month of May
do you not    remember still?
little oars    a nimble boat
    through shallows full of water lilies
    slowly, slowly
    into a dream

\(^1\)Chang’an, modern day Xi’an, was the ancient capital of imperial China and is used here liberally to refer to the political center during the poet’s time.
Untitled
Wentao Zhai

青玉案賀鑄
淩波不過橫塘路。但目送、芳塵去。錦瑟年華誰與度。月橋花院、瑣窗朱戶。只有春知處。
飛雲冉冉蘅皋暮。彩筆新題斷腸句。若問閒情都幾許。一川煙草、滿城風絮。梅子黃時雨。

HÈ Zhù (1052–1125): To the tune of “Table en jade vert”

her dainty steps dainty as ripples
hesitate to tread the pond-ward passage
looking afar my sight follows
lingering dust traces of fragrance
the golden days passing forever
a silk-bound zither with whom, together?
across moonlit bridges and gardens in bloom
across crimson doors and ornate windows
(she left)
unbeknownst to all except
the lady of spring

the rising clouds rise with darkness
little by little over vines and ginger
I jotted down with the brush of Iris
my newly written heartbroken verses
“What is this?” you might ask me
“How much more of longing that’s fruitless?”
like streams filled with mist-like grass
like flying catkins overflow the city
(I wonder)
like incessant rain when
plums turn yellow

²The zither (sè) is a traditional plucked string instrument that has a range of up to five octaves. Its number of strings (around 50) often serves as a metaphor for the age of a grown man in Chinese poetry.
SUSAN REALIZES SHE FORGOT TO INSTAGRAM HER MORNING BUN AT VERGENNES LAUNDROMAT.

I ONLY DRINK CRAFT BEER WITH AESTHETICALLY PLEASING BOTTLE LABELS

I CARE ABOUT LOCAL ORGANIC NON-PROFIT TURNIP FARMS

I AM VERY SUPER EXTREMELY OUTDOORSY

I AM (KIND OF) POLITICALLY RADICAL

CELEBRATING INDIVIDUALITY AT MIDDLEBURY

Millie von Platen
Woodwinds
Ellie Eberlee

I could, if I chose, work through the logic; talk our way around Chinatown traffic, dinnertimes and summer weekends to arrive at some thick sigh, but what would that help my father— help me—in the corner of this bar? They don’t seem forms enough from my stool, not any more solid than he and Claire giggling by the fridge, keeping time on their cellphones because the oven timer is broken, and has been for years but I am, I know, forgetting, focusing only on the warm glint of their wine glasses, pulling it tight about me. Kinder, surely, to let him digest in silence.

We had smiled, the two of us, when we both ordered the burger. It didn’t seem so impossible that he’d once driven me home from hockey practice early on Sunday mornings; that we’d sung along to Supertramp and opened the car window, giddy, to let in January air and sounds of slush. My father sang in and out of the lyrics at whim, relaxed in knowing we had already made the day’s meaning. I liked more than anything to listen, to watch; did I know even then, that he was singing from somewhere far away?

—No. I was ten years old then and hopelessly present. To me then, family was all in all. I thought of and liked only the way my brother’s jersey stuck, cool and blue, and to my chest, as though I had persuaded it by sheer strain to join my ranks. I wonder, sometimes, if the Grange Sideroad has as many hills as I grant it in memory—if we really did so much rolling up and over and winding around, driving with the slow sureness of an afternoon to come.

This column of yours, my father asks, Every Thursday, you said?

I raise my eyebrows, surprised to find he hasn’t followed my thoughts home from Caledon Central arena, doesn’t have at least one hand on the steering wheel. I am taken aback by the question, the bar, the traffic circle outside.

Thursday, yes—and Tuesday, I manage, Tuesdays too.

Tuesdays too, he echoes, and we smile, sigh. Small town, he continues, You’ve really got something to say about it twice a week?

I shrug, make the good-natured sound I am accustomed to
making in conversation about my job.
  I manage, I say.
  Hm, he grunts from far away, and we watch our waiter for a bit.

  He says I look good. Grown up. I say I feel it. We watch our waiter a bit more, watch him disappear behind the kitchen doors.
  She’d liked to have come, my father says after a moment, twisting his wine glass, fixed on the stem.
  I know that, I say, and for the most part I do.
  It just doesn’t make sense at the moment, he ploughs on, and we just uh—we aren’t so sure anymore.

My father seems older, his speech rustier, as though more than four months have passed since I left him in the airport security line. In the meantime he’s been stripped of an essential something, as though what he wears isn’t a woolen vest but his own grey insides, laid plain in stripes across on his chest. I remember how his voice used to rise up with the Grange side road, sweet and lofty, touching on words and tune with irreverent grace. Like wind: rearing good-naturedly to toss stray grass there and there, to gather up green seedlings and chestnuts and scatter them on sidewalks and front lawns—a woodwind, my father.

  She did message you today though, right? he asks, as though the question only now occurs to him.
  I hesitate.
  He nods, works his tongue along the inside of his lip. Something has been confirmed.

  And then I am desperate, destroyed. The bar has grown black and sour around me. I want to walk the pond. Talking was easier there—god, how simple! to know with confidence that conversation, any conversation, would carry us easily around the pond and up behind the swing set. How unfair, that I’d had no idea then.

  No idea; took walks with my father and our lab George (how his face has gone white now says my father, he can hardly make it out twice a day to pee) and marvelled only at how hot it was for July; no idea that not all descents would be so steady, let my feet pick at grass and slanting ground, step soft onto what was muddy, slip, laugh, be at ease. I am so tempted to go back now, tonight, to run back over bridges and borders and circle our pond, pass lavender and golden-rod and the two birches set apart in their casual V. The aunties, we
used to call them.

Tonight, remembering is easily justified— still, I am torn. Evening remembering now feels precious, dangerous. Walking our pond from here? from this blackened bar? I’ll leave some clumsy smear, I am certain, or worse, blur the thing entirely. Already I’ve lost a sun. Now when I remember upwards the sky stews, grey, like soup you might get a grim pleasure from picking up in your ladle and then watching it slink, ugly, back down to its pot. I didn’t see that sky at ten, or even eleven. Skies like that exist only in the city, appear only to high-schoolers trudging through slush. I must have put it there, worked it in sometime after. How unfair, that I had no idea about remembering back then; no idea even about getting older. The instant the last leaf jumped I whined for summer again, and fast. I want to whisper now, back at myself. Say, Step slower.

How’s James, my father asks suddenly, and smiles something like he used to.

James? I say, like that topic is somehow a surprise. He’s good, I say, things are good. A minute later I waver. Things are tough, I say, Prague is awfully far away.

Shit, says my father, and I laugh. I will never get used to him swearing. He laughs too, but stops soon. Shit, he repeats, I wish you’d have told me.

I don’t hear him; I am far away. I should leave ponds alone, leave my ten-year-old self alone, young, unthoughtful and feeling, I know it— but I ache, so badly, to feel again. How can I resist the lull of the later path, where the sound of crickets thickened with the thrush and steeper hills called for real breathing? There was promise at the top of real conversation, the kind bent over to the knees, red-cheeked and panting.

Sometimes he’d turn left— my father— to the bench, and I’d follow with pleasure, knowing he was choosing to extend our walk, to take a little longer just him and me. How they’d fought over that bench! in its insensible place; I don’t think my mother sat on it once, and she certainly didn’t help lug it out there. We’d sit on the thing, side by side, and think (at least I would) how uncomfortable it was, how pretty it looked, and how truly wrong my mother had been. I’d straighten my back (god, how my posture has gone) and square my feet in the grass, and, following my father’s lead, cast out my eyes. It must have been sunny, once. One day must’ve been something other
than hot, thick July. Still—even under grey—it looked more like a kingdom from that angle. Seen from the side, our path and the pond and the hill were just strange enough to lord over anew.

I hadn’t met Claire then. Then I had a mother (I still do, as four missed calls kindly remind me), and not so much time had passed since she’d flanked my father at the dinner table. My father’s girlfriend, Claire, existed only in careful conversation; my mother met me at the bus stop on Mondays and Tuesdays. I hadn’t met Claire then, but I loved her. Here, in this blackened bar, I still do.

I loved how my father cast out and caught her somewhere between the birches, reeled back a smile in her place. I hadn’t known he could smile like that (I wonder if he still can). And then he’d start to talk, to apologize first, for last night’s dinner debacle—he’d have burnt the chicken again, inevitably—and the real estate agents troop-ing in and out. I didn’t care. I wanted to hear about dancing until one in the morning, about the pasta Claire could make with peas and cream sauce. I wanted to hear about the ice cream shop two blocks up from her house, about just how many toppings you could get for seven dollars. Which subway stop did she get on at, I wondered, and which would my sister and I use to get to school? I wanted him to smile like he smiled when he told me about how my brother hugged her when they met, how we might make it down to the city for dinner next Tuesday if the timing worked out. I wanted to hear her name for the first time again, right after asking my dad if adults fell in love anymore. I wanted him to smile, to keep smiling, at me, at the bench, at the birches—

So that was it then, I ask, logistics? It all just became too much over time?

Something like that, he says after consideration. I was only seeing her twice a week at the end, really, what with your sister—

But didn’t you ever talk about moving in? Couldn’t that have fixed things, maybe?

He looks at me sadly. Says, It’s your birthday. This isn’t what I came all this way to talk about.

But it is, I know. There was something sad the whole time, something sad about his having gotten up at five in the morning and driven seven hours to visit his daughter in rural Massachusetts on her twenty-fourth birthday. The burgers were good and we laughed, initially,
when I showed him my apartment this afternoon (I made him drive twice around the block while I my roommate Anna and I shoved papers into drawers, pajamas beneath beds). We walked along the coast and talked about my job, about graduate school and my sister’s new boyfriend (he had another girl’s named tattooed on his calf). But my father could have called, for that much. He drove here for a hug, and I am desperate, now, to leave this bar so I can give it to him, so I can do more than lay a lame hand on his back every so often. When the bill has been paid and we reach his car I do, but it falls short.

Happy Birthday, he says.
I say, You’re sure you don’t want a piece of this cake?

Back at my apartment, the kitchen smells like weed.

How’s your dad? Anna asks, and when I don’t answer she says how sweet it was of him to make the trip.

Anna has been smoking with some boys from Montreal. Explains they’re grad students at McGill, doing a road trip for graduation. She met them in the line at Hannaford’s, buying beer.
I’m going to bed, I say.

Bullshit, says Anna. It’s your birthday.
I’d have gone to bed anyways but I am too sad and far from home to pass up fellow Canadians. One was born in Toronto like me, and we pass terms like Yonge Street and Eaton Center back and forth like coins while I take long sips from a beer can. I tip the thing over at one point, spill it all over my carpet. One boy asks if I’d peed. I say I wish, that at least would have been somewhat cathartic. They all laugh, invited me to go get fries at the twenty-four-hour diner in town. Call me their favorite fake American.

I don’t want to be an American tonight, fake or real. I want to walk the pond. I end up at the diner anyways, with one of them. He asks if I want to have sex. I tell him what the hell, I don’t believe in love much these days. He asks why not, and because it’s my birthday I tell him. I tell him Claire is leaving my father. I tell him I love her, tell him how she used to bake a chocolate cake for my birthday, place raspberries all along the sides and stick in striped candles. I tell him I thought they would grow old together, ask him if anyone grows old together anymore.

He says, We could, and laughs.
I wonder if we’d end up any better than my father and my mother, or my father and Claire. What I really wonder is if we’d end up any
worse. I tell him thanks for the offer, but I’ve got someone overseas I’m trying hard to hold on to. He says, Shit, and I laugh. We finish our fries, and he walks me home.

I meet my father for coffee the next morning, early, before he drives back. I am hungover, so we sip in silence and watch them spread salt on the sidewalks. I start thinking about a story, something with the boys from Montreal. I am trying to remember what color his eyes were, the one who sat across from me at the diner. My father clears his throat. The sound is tinny and set with ridges, like a tin can. From his wallet he procures two plane tickets, one from Boston to Prague and the other coming back. I blush. Dad, I say. He’s a romantic, my father.

I wasn’t sure, he says, after last night. But I figure why not? They’re refundable, he adds, placing them beside me on the bench. Thank you, I say, and place them in my pocket.

It makes sense then, why he drove all this way, and it wasn’t for a hug. It was for an arm around the shoulder, to look out over a strange new kingdom and be reassured that there’s still something, still someone waiting. He needs me— an adult— to be in love, at least for a little while, and I don’t think it’s so bad complying.

Thank you, I say again as he is getting into the car. He looks at me, a little lost.

Not so sure what to do with the rest of my life, he says, and neither of us knows how much he is joking.

We hug again. I hold up the tickets as he drives away, make sure he can see them in his mirror. He winks. I wonder if he’ll drive all the way home like that, elbow on the window, fingers and nails clutching at his hairline as if to say,

No. You will not recede with the rest of it.