“It was you that broke the new wood,
Now is a time for carving.
We have one sap and one root—
Let there be commerce between us.”

Ezra Pound, “A Pact”
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JONATHAN HAN

Editorial

don’t know whether to speak for you or to speak to you. It has been too long since The Beacon was last published. But unlike the way reunions go, where there is something you know you were supposed to say, but very little time to recall what it was, I have had weeks, if not months, to consider The Beacon’s first editorial in more than half a century. Let me try.... Back in 1951, the Chinese had pushed the American military back to what we now call South Korea; President Bob Brown was born; and the most recent issue of The Beacon was published.

The practice of contextualization, putting myself into old shoes, does not help much in finding the right words. If anything, the shoes are two sizes too big, and the heel scratches my ankle. Few words are found in shoes. If anything, I have realized what is best said does not often come out of my mouth, but someone else’s:

It will not be the large organs of opinion, or the old periodicals; it must be the small and obscure papers and reviews, those which hardly are read by anyone but their own contributors, that will keep critical thought alive, and encourage authors of original talent.

Although sobered by T.S. Eliot’s pessimism, I hope this new series of The Beacon will prove him partly right. Long ago my predecessors wished for The Beacon to hit the “big-time”; at least we have achieved the “long-time,” longevity having its merits. Over the years, our journal has commented on the introduction of co-education, longed for peace through two world wars, and published the works of hundreds of past student authors. Amongst them, and among those who wrote for this issue, there are surely those of “original talent” keeping “critical thought,” or at least The Beacon, alive.

I would like to thank the Howard Gotlieb Archival Research Center for keeping The Beacon’s past issues well kept, and allowing students to turn (not flip through) their delicate pages. I am also very much indebted to the English Department for sponsoring this year’s issue (the seventy-sixth, some are saying?), and for the faith the faculty have shown in our editors’ abilities. Patronage is a dying art.
Although there are few and far similarities between the devil and a mere attendant, Mephistopheles and Wagner both note the brevity of life, comparing it to the seemingly timeless works of art. Mephistopheles continues on and advises Faust to “associate with some great poet... and let him heap all noble qualities / upon your head,” as though the Faust created by the poet will later supplant the Faust in real life (lines 1789-92). The text, itself a work of art, is self-aware of its longevity and how it contributes to the lifespan of any character. Goethe, as a writer, does not “heap all noble qualities” on Faust, but on the contrary describes a lying, occasionally cowardly, and sometimes despicable character. Although Faust bears the weight of complex “qualities,” he is nevertheless engrained into literary history, survived by art. However, there are moments in the text where Goethe creates a character without sustaining him or her with the longevity of art, namely when the writer portrays the bystanders and passers-by.

In an early scene, “Outside the Gate,” the beggar sings out his plight and is never seen again; the Second Apprentice, at most, has two lines; and the servant girl says eight words (808-59). The many characters crowd the set, each one contributing to the cacophonous atmosphere. For each character, their time is indeed short, but their artistic worth does not seem long, nor extensive. Goethe’s practice of introducing characters without subsequent appearances is by no means, uncommon in playwriting. In the beginning of Shakespeare’s Hamlet, for example, Francisco answers the critical question “Who’s there?” without saying his name, and then later disappears (Act 1.1, 1-14). Francisco is a nobody. If one watched the play without a list of all the characters, Francisco is just a nameless passer-by, walking the parapets. Goethe seems to apply the same practice with the characters outside the gate, their identities and names arbitrary to the audience. Shakespeare and Goethe appear to create the bystanders casually, unaware of how unmemorable each of them is.
However, none of Goethe’s characters have real names, only labels. Goethe’s notion of identity, for these short-lived characters, is narrowed down to their roles in society: the beggar, the apprentice, and the servant girl. Unlike Goethe, on paper, Shakespeare does acknowledge that his first character has a name. Moreover, Francisco’s non-answer to the question “Who’s there?” as well as his following exit, can be seen as a succinct prelude to the existential theme of Hamlet. Francisco actively hides his own identity and name, as he wants to be “just a nameless passer-by.”

Goethe does not enter such depth with any of his bystanders as none of them particularly epitomize a theme in the text. However, the accumulation of the many passers-by makes a different point. Five apprentices, two girls, one young lady, two students, three citizens, a singing beggar, an old woman, and an unspecified number of soldiers: at least fifteen characters stay on set, outside the gate, before Faust and Wagner enter the scene. Like the many stakes holding down a tent during a storm, one could argue that these characters ground the play in reality, contending with the spiritual aspect of the text, such as the appearance of an evil spirit. One apprentice says, “the prettiest girls, the best beer too”; a citizen talks of “war and rumors of battle”; another citizen claims: “I can’t say I care for our new mayor” (815, 861, 846). On the other side of the spectrum, the play begins with a Prologue in Heaven. Similar to how Francisco acts as an early vessel for Shakespeare’s existential theme, the mentions of local politics, wars, and women become part of a vessel through which Goethe situates his story in reality. Consequently, whether one should consider Goethe’s bystanders as characters is a question worth asking. They instead appear like many props and reference points, each doing their small part in their conflict with the spiritual feature of the play.

The delicate balance between realism and the magical continues to flourish later in Goethe’s Faust. The large cast of bystanders and passers-by, representing normalcy, contrast with the supernatural — first introduced by Faust’s summoned spirit, later epitomized by Mephistopheles’ presence. In Faust’s study, Mephistopheles, acting as Faust, meets a student to discuss education (1868-2048). Although the student has a comparatively longer part in the scene, he does not show up again later, nor is he named—similar to the many other passers-by in the play. Moreover, the student represents a larger group of “dear boys” waiting outside Faust’s corridor—an academic
fan-club of sort (1841). The student personifies the values which Faust once held and now discards—the type of student who Faust now “cannot bring himself to see” (1843). Therefore the scene provides another explanation as to why Goethe expends so much effort on so many minute, nameless characters: Faust himself does not care for them. Faust does not want to know the name of the local peasant girl or the old man. The local populace all know and admire the famous Faust, but to the Doctor, each individual is just another member of his dissatisfying past. Instead, Faust wants to shed his past and proceed to “a new life filled with color” (1121). Consequently, the problem of time being short, or art being long should not apply to these temporary figures: the soldier, the citizen or the student. To Faust, the titular character of Goethe’s work, these characters are worth little of his time, and should only have a short part in a play about himself.

WORKS CITED


RU HUANG

First

_Gustav Klimt: The Kiss, 1907-1908_

it is dawn,
amidst the poppy field is a freshly left bed,
slept-in pillows still rising like warm dough,
unmade blankets ruffled like blooming roses.

last night his face came so close to hers
everything else slipped away from the
peripheral of her moonlit cheekbones,
closer, warmer, they touched lightly—like dry static –

fingers sealed into a tight embrace,
faces turned faceless,
meshed patterns of nightgowns shimmered
into a glowing lantern in the dark.

his touch was paint drying
on canvas, on her shrinking skin,
drying to his caress: an end of a beginning,
an anticipation quenched

by flesh, temptations frozen into
metal bedframes, curiosity unraveled into
looming tenderness,
a beginning.

it is dawn,
the first light coppers the sky,
the field of poppies nod in unison,
the bed is emptied, the field, emptier.

VERONICA BOOTH

_A Farewell to My Wisdom Teeth_

The Tooth Fairy does not take kindly to oral surgeons
I do not take kindly to oral surgeons
I was hoping for bare minimum a dollar per tooth but instead
I paid
Four Thousand and Ninety-Five Dollars
For a week of jaw pain

I wonder if I have lost some wisdom
Some valuable trivia answers or the capital of Texas
I know it’s Austin.
Stored in those four chunks of bone now sitting on my coffee table.

I could use all the intelligence I can
But apparently my mouth felt crowded
And made the painful choice for me
Probably in cahoots with my oral surgeon, remember the Four
    Thousand and Ninety-Five Dollars? Me too.
Maybe I’ll be eating a cheeseburger one day
If I am ever able to open my mouth wide enough again.
And a hunk of hamburger hides in the back of my mouth
Where there are no teeth to tear it up
Just squishy gums with hardly any authority
Which allow
The fat bite of food to sneak into my throat and block my windpipe
And now I’m choking.
Probably the oral surgeon’s plan all along.

Thank you for mashing all the cheeseburgers leading up to today.
Thank you for reminding me of the second US president during bar
    trivia – John Adams.

Farewell my four little friends,
I suppose I’ll just have to take smaller bites,
And review my state capitals more often just to be safe.
Maine – Augustus; Washington – Olympia; Ohio – Columbus...
OLIVIA L. WILLIAMS  
*The One with the Whales*

There are some people who get real sentimental about Earth being their “home world.” Kids with big eyes wander past the shop and I just know that they’ve been sitting in Martian Colony IV their whole lives writing bad poetry about unfiltered air and natural greenery. A little wisdom from me to you, as someone who’s lived on Earth for almost a decade now: we’d all be a lot happier if they filtered the air. Just because humanity began here doesn’t make it your home world.

I was born on Armstrong, which is a little slapdash station by Venus with so many layers of heat-shields you don’t get any natural light. My mom’s mining company hit it big with an especially rich asteroid when I was little and we moved back out to Mars space into Glenn. Glenn was big and shiny and new, in a geosynchronous orbit so exact we could send materials back and forth to the planet with a kind of glorified pulley rig.

It was a good place to grow up: a few observatories around the surface, air filtered by real organics, reasonably good school system, and lots of Bots around for a kid like me to tinker with. That was before all these rules about autonomy and stuff—you’d be hard-pressed to find a parent who’d let their kid start disassembling a service Bot these days for fear of some bureaucrat showing up with a lecture about sentience.

Don’t get me wrong, I’ve got no problem with Bots, but at the end of the day, they’re just machines. I’m a mechanic. Our relationship is real simple.

What really gets me is how many Bots we actually service, considering we’re based on Earth, the planet home to every conservationist, hippie, and anti-mod wackjob in the galaxy. Most of these people will look at you dirty if you dare to use basic prosthetics, much less if you’re a full-on robot.

“Androids, you’ll call them androids and be respectful about it,” my boss Andrea always told me. She got along well with our clients. Her favorites were the ones who came in regularly for a tune-up and then stayed to chat about what was going on off-world. She always explained everything she was doing while she worked, and when she
was finished, she’d offer to give their translucent skin a buff and a polish.

Those glass casings had been required by the Solar Union ever since a couple of nasty divorces where one person turned out to be a very well-made Bot masquerading as human. These days, there was much less chance of intermingling, unless you liked being able to see lubricant pumping behind your lover’s mechanical eyes as you stared into them. The minimum was 30% surface area, but a lot of manufacturers just switched right to 100% to try and save their reputations. It kept things a lot simpler.

“I’m just going to pop off the finger at the second joint,” Andrea was saying just then. “It looks like the casing’s been cracked a little, and that’s putting pressure on the hinge. I’ll swap it out for a new one.”

“Thanks Andrea,” whirred Marvin, one of our regulars. He was a quirky one—named himself after a Bot from some old book, and wouldn’t let us swap out his defective voice box for anything. He thought it made him sound distinguished. What it really sounded like was a human who had gargled sand and then beamed their voice to the colonies and back a dozen times without corrections.

Andrea gave me her don’t you dare make one of your comments look, which I wasn’t going to do anyway. I just passed her the drill she needed and started rummaging around for a new hinge.

Someday I might own a place of my own, or I might take over this one when Andrea moves on—or runs off with one of the Bots, which is probably most likely—but for now I just help her out and tinker in the back when I have time. Once I put together a little cleaning Bot out of spare parts, just to get some of the grease off the floors. I was pretty proud of it. When Andrea found out, she threw a fit, even though it was running on a chip so out of date it hardly qualified as sentient. So now it had a name and its own docking station and was properly registered and all that. A lot of useless hassle for a Scrub Bot, if you asked me. But now that it was an employee, of sorts, it did have its uses.

I knocked over a box of magnetic screws and Frank came buzzing out of his dock like a mechanical swarm of bees. “Try to be more careful,” he grouched in a heavy Martian accent as he scooped up the screws and deposited them into my waiting hands.

“Where in Sol did you get that attitude?”
Andrea held out her hand for the hinge I didn’t have ready and I scrambled to find it. “I updated his personality application,” she explained.

“Why would you do that?”

“He asked me to. Who would want an existence of mindlessly scrubbing floors?”

“Someone—something—who’s programmed to! Come on, Andrea, he didn’t need a personality update. You just like pretending that these Bots are hu—”

“There’s work to do in the back,” she snapped, grabbing the hinge out of my hand. “Why don’t you go work on that. We’ll talk later.”

I knew it was useless to argue with her when she was in one of her righteous moods. I scowled and stalked into the back room, just barely managing to slam the door before Frank could follow me.

* * *

After work I headed to my favorite haunt: Maisie’s Place. What a bar. You’d have trouble finding its peer on any world, much less on old granola-crunching Earth. It was everything tech and organics had the opportunity to be when they collaborated: an enormous tree stood in the center, and benches and tables circled out from it like extensions of the rings within the trunk. Its branches had been trained into this gorgeous lattice formation with big, waxy leaves to run off water. At dusk, silky white flowers descended on vines and blossomed to reveal soft glowing lights.

Maisie still refused to tell me how she got the tree to grow like that, much less what the lights were. So every couple of nights I’d go sit at the bar and pester her about it. We both knew it was just an excuse for me to show up and make small talk and stare at whatever new dress she’d ordered from the Venetian textile factories, but it was fun to pretend.

More fun than sticking around to fight with my boss.

As soon as I walked in, Maisie knew that something was up. It was hard to read her expression, backlit as she was by the shelves of glowing liquors behind the bar, but I watched the soft curve of her lips pucker into a frown when she saw my face.

She was absolutely gorgeous, as always; this new orange dress looked like it was made of tiny metallic scales that clung to her hips.
and waist, and the way it draped across the tawny skin of her chest just did things to me. One hand was industriously shaking someone’s drink and the other was squeezing a lime into an empty glass. She looked capable, more capable than you’d expect from someone with her brand of soft beauty. And now she looked concerned.

“So they’re not bioluminescent,” I observed as I sat down, cutting off any questions she might have asked, “but I can’t imagine that you could thread any artificial light that bright into the material of the flower without damaging it. So what is it?”

She shrugged, her expression easily transitioning to a smile when she realized I didn’t want to talk serious. “Some people would just appreciate the mystery of the thing, Derek. Not everything needs to be prodded and examined. Maybe it just is.”

“Yeah, but it isn’t, and you know exactly how it works. I know you do.”

“It’s possible.”

I grinned. It was hard to let any of the day’s frustration weigh me down when I was in the most gorgeous place on Earth flirting with a beautiful woman. “You know what, Maisie?”

“What?”

“Someday I want to see you out from behind this bar.”

A look of confusion passed over her face. “Why?”

“Because someday I’m going to quit, because I’ll be sick of being yelled at by my boss, and then I want you to come with me somewhere new. Somewhere exotic. Maybe one of the moons.”

She laughed, and I couldn’t tell her that I meant it half serious.

“You’re funny.”

“Somewhere there’s no one to tell me what to do, or what to tinker with.” I pushed a hand through my hair. “There’s gotta be somewhere in Sol where people can still just live, without anyone telling you that you’re not acting right or how you’re supposed to be.”

And suddenly her face was lit up more radiantly than her impossible flowers. “You know what? I really like the sound of that.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. Let’s toast to that—to existing how we want to exist.” She turned and reached for one of the bottles on the upper shelf.

The skin of her back was transparent glass. It was smooth, perfectly-formed, but glass nonetheless, and it met her brown skin in a slight seam. Tiny indicator lights flickered along her spinal column.
and faded into the shadow of her low-backed dress. My mouth went dry as I recognized the same machinery I spent all day staring at with Andrea.

“Actually, I’m not thirsty.” I was impressed with how steady I kept my voice. “I’ll see you later.”

“Oh. Oh, okay.” I could feel her artificial gaze on my back as I slid off my stool and walked out. I picked one of the glowing flowers by the door. It flickered into darkness in my hand.

* * *

I needed some time to think. My apartment was a long, solitary walk away, but once I got there I’d have to deal with my roommate and the endless stream of instructional culinary videos they projected onto the kitchen wall while they cooked, so I gritted my teeth and headed back to the shop instead. I had a spare set of keys and I figured I could lock Frank out of the back room long enough to stew for a while.

Unfortunately for me, the lights were still on as I walked up. That was unusual. Andrea was known to pull late nights, but most of the time she took her tinkering home once it got past dinner time. I was still hoping to be alone but I figured she might not mind if I camped out in the back while she worked.

Any hope of that went out the window with the wild expression she gave me as I stepped inside. “Oh, Derek, it’s you! Hurry up, shut the door.”

“What’s going on?”

She gestured to the Bot slumped in a chair across from her and then resumed rummaging through a bin of cables. “Scrappers—picked him up a little after he left this afternoon. I think they were gonna wipe him, they powered him down and I’m gonna have to manually restart. Let’s hope—” She paused, and I could see her hands shaking a little as she clawed past cord after cord. “Well. We’ll see in a minute.”

I looked at the Bot again and was a little startled when I recognized Marvin. His arms and most of his neck had been replaced with an opaque white casing, though it had been a quick job if the scratches were anything to go by. Sure enough, he was slumped to the side in the chair where Andrea had dumped him, completely unresponsive.
I wanted to ask how she had known he was gone, how she had
gotten him back, whether she had fireman carried him all the way
back to the shop, but I suspected that those questions wouldn’t be
welcome in the moment. Seeing Andrea this frantic was a little
unsettling. Worn thin and snappy, sure, but shaking? She was really
worried.

And I’d be lying if I said the situation wasn’t worrying. For the
most part you only had to worry about scrappers on the outer
satellites. If a Bot got grabbed on Earth, it probably wasn’t for parts.
They’d be wiped and then show up on the black market a few weeks
later, illegally realistic and primed to be filled with advertisements
and subliminal messaging to spread through casual conversations
around the city. The opaque paneling on Marvin was probably
prepping him for a silicone layer of “skin.” And if he had only been
gone a few hours, that was mighty fast work—which explained how
shoddy it was. This had been a near miss.

Andrea came up with the wire she wanted and I tossed her the
screwdriver I knew she’d need to open up Marvin’s forearm. The only
thing I could think to do was shoulder open the door to the back and
grab our “first aid kit”: a bag of screws, connectors, and essential tools
that Andrea kept on hand for emergency cases. I was in such a hurry
that I spilled an entire bowl of ball bearings off my desk. Frank came
humming out of his dock but didn’t comment as he cleaned them up. I
wondered if his new personality helped him to sense the tension in
the room.

When I came back out to the front, Andrea was crouched in front
of Marvin biting her lip so hard it looked like she was about to draw
blood. There was a cable plugged into his arm like an IV, the other
end attached to the little screen Andrea clutched.

I set down the first aid kit within her reach. “How long does a
manual restart take?”

“It depends. Maybe a minute or so.”

“Anything I can do?”

She shook her head, eyes darting from her screen to Marvin and
back again. I shrugged and sat down to wait.

I wondered if Maisie’s job had been done by scrappers. If she’d
been grabbed off the streets and reset to factory settings before being
made up with the soft skin and alluring smile I knew so well. Probably
not, if she met transparency regulations, but the thought was unsettling.

Andrea shifted again and I tried to focus more on the situation at hand. There was a bruise starting to form where her neck met her shoulder, not quite hidden by the grimy sweater she wore around the shop. She didn’t seem to feel it but I tried to imagine how it could have happened. Either she had slung Marvin across her shoulders to carry him back, I decided, or her confrontation with the scrappers had gotten messy. I could see her hefting one of the enormous wrenches we kept in the back but never used for anything, maybe breaking a jaw or two in defence of her client. Her friend.

Marvin’s fingers twitched. We both zeroed in on the motion, quick as hawks, and it was followed by a full-body shudder, almost like a seizure. Tiny clicks emanated from various joints as Marvin sat straight up and ran through a series of minute calibrating motions.

“Marvin?” Andrea asked, her voice soft but steady. “How are you doing, buddy? Do you know where you are?”

His head tilted down in a slight nod; I unclenched my fists and felt the sting of the places where my fingernails had been pressed into my palm.

Andrea ducked her head with a sound that was part laugh and part sigh. She settled her weight back to give Marvin more space.

“How do you feel? I haven’t had time to run a comprehensive systems report yet. Anything need fixing?”

“I feel a little strange,” he said, and all three of us stiffened in surprise. Marvin’s characteristic grating was replaced by a smooth, androgynous voice. He clapped both hands over his mouth, but he couldn’t quite stifle a wordless cry of alarm.

“Oh Marvin.” The way Andrea’s face crumpled made me feel suddenly like I was intruding on a scene where I didn’t belong. I wasn’t going to find solitude here anyway. I grabbed my keys from where I’d set them down when I came in and tried not to see Andrea’s hand come to rest on Marvin’s knee, or hear her murmuring reassurances while the Bot shook his head silently. “We’re gonna fix this. I’ll find a way to fix this.”

Neither of them seemed to notice when I opened the door a crack and slipped back out into the smoggy night.

* * *
It was a week before I could make myself face Maisie again. There were so many things to say that I found myself running through endless options under my breath. You’d think I’d have picked up a thing or two from working with Bots all day.

I thought Andrea would have snapped at me for being so distracted, but she was preoccupied too. She’d had the idea to try and manually distress a voice box the way Marvin’s had been after years of use but it was turning out harder than she expected to get the right mix of garbled and coherent. In the meantime, she’d retrofitted Marvin with a text display on his chest since he was refusing to speak. I stopped worrying too much about it after a couple of days when I found them scheming about decal designs for the plain white parts of his casing.

When I finally got my hands to stop shaking every time I thought about her, I walked into Maisie’s Place with what probably wasn’t an especially pleasant expression. She didn’t even notice me until I had slid into my usual place at the bar.

“So what’s a Bot like you doing in a place like this?” I asked casually.

She blinked at me, and even that tiny motion was so perfectly calibrated as to look human. “I own this place, Derek.”

“No, not here here. I mean Earth. I’ve seen the way these people treat Bots. You could set up shop anywhere. I know you’re not from here originally—no one here does craftsmanship like that—so you came here on purpose. Why?”

Maisie looked at me long and hard, and for the first time I noticed how perfectly still she stood. Her dress was green today; I couldn’t stop myself from noticing it. I was noticing it so hard that I almost didn’t hear her answer.

“Did you say ‘whales’?”

“Well, not just whales. But whales are a good example.” She must have seen my confusion because she brushed her hair behind her ear and continued. “They make no sense. They’re huge, and they eat such tiny animals that they have to eat hundreds and thousands and millions of them to survive, but they exist for some reason. And these trees—they just grow here, not because someone made them, not because they serve any particular purpose, but because they just exist.
So many planets and moons and satellites in Sol and this is the one where things are allowed to just be.”

I felt like there was a heaviness to her words, like she was trying to say something more, but I couldn’t quite reach it. I was still trying to catch her in some mechanical slip-up that would justify her as a Bot. But she was perfect.

“So you picked Earth because it has whales.”

“Yeah. Whales and trees and algae and penguins and chameleons, and I can’t figure out why. So I like to play with them in ways I understand,” she gestured at one of the dimly illuminated flowers, “and give them a purpose, sometimes; and other times, it’s nice to—well.”

“What?”

She shrugged. “It’s nice to think that maybe I don’t have to have a purpose either. Maybe I can just be.”

“Huh.”

We looked at each other for a minute. I wondered whether she’d ever had a different voice, if she’d ever been repurposed and remade until she didn’t even recognize herself. If she’d asked for the sensuality programmed into every movement or the sparkle in her eyes.

I wondered what it had felt like to be the one doing the engineering for once as she set up this bar and watched it flourish.

“Huh,” I said again. ✂️
ROY WANG

Drunken Master

Lips met lip; I drank a genie out of a bottle and revealed a magic mirror; Its nostalgic facade pierced me and asked if

I missed the taste of condensation; drops of savory dew that made the room feel like the scent of new winter;

I used to pour fireplaces into a cool glass and watch the solid cold dissolve in oiled heat; ice cream hearts in a searing skillet;

Honey-thick sheets mixed in with quick bitters and an overly sweet iloveyou, off-brand;

Rubbed my hand on the back of a warm neck and whispered all three wishes, but the spirit had long gone.
Tilting Like Planets

Leaning back in a chair should be considered an extreme sport. At least there would be a medal.

But, for now, all we tilters have to gain is the slowly growing satisfaction of the thrill. We inject adrenaline into our feet and throw some purposeful uncertainty into our lives; some chaos we can actually control with only our toe tips and windmill arms. It is so hard to balance a water balloon in your palm when you feel like Edward Scissorhands, so that brief pinch of weightlessness you get when you sit on the fence between forwards and backwards becomes a magical space where you can drop your problems off the edge and forget about the parachutes you can’t cut off; a remarkable Everest-esque view you can summon with just your inner adventurer, a solid surface to spring off, and a chair.
CATHERINE PEERSON

The Pink House

winner of the 2019 Beacon Prize for Best Essay

Around the Black Rocks, on their left,
The marsh lay broad and green;
And on their right, with dwarf shrubs crowned,
Plum Island’s hills were seen.
– John Greenleaf Whittier, 1841

It is 1925.

Out of the Great Marsh has arisen a house. A house as pink as the blush hued paint of dawn as it spreads like watercolor over the Plum Island sky. Looming lonely over the wide tidal flats, it is a solitary thing, disconcertedly compelling in its very presence. It dwells among the grasses and the reeds, the only taint of human development on the far side of the road which traces the sole path from city to ocean, winding its way through desolate marshland. But this is only a house, not a home: it was never meant to be inhabited or to impose human life on the natural world. It was made to be abandoned, consigned even in its construction to eventually return to the very marshes it was built upon.

This is a house born of spite. It is the legacy of a vindictive ex-husband, contracted during divorce proceedings to construct for his ex-wife a replica of their shared home (Bolick). He built it so it sat on the only feasible dry patch in a sprawling ecosystem of estuary, marshland, and tidal flat. An isolated dwelling wired so salt water runs through its veins, it exists in passive hostility to any person tempted to move in (Coffey). The Pink House never fully disentangled itself from the marshes which it rises only a few feet above. An overgrown gravel pathway leading from its door, easily overlooked, provides the only point of access from the road.

A singular sort of estate moored in the midst of an ecological sanctuary, it remains empty for many years following its construction. Occasionally, some idealistic family moves in, captivated by the romantic allure of the pale pink cupola towering over the Great Marsh below. They fetch freshwater to drink from the old firehouse miles away, the house’s own brackish supply being suitable for nothing save
washing up (ibid.). Especially high tides are an unlucky occurrence; they flood the marshland and leave the Pink House stranded from the road. Storms and Nor’easters have the same effect. Still, it is an idyllic life, a nostalgic picture of a bygone era when the untamed wilderness beckoned from the backdoor. Countless artists, poets, and photographers over the years are drawn to the striking building, struck by its haunting beauty and unique story.

The house has sat unoccupied since it was purchased in 2012 by the Parker River National Wildlife Refuge, the same organization which has worked tirelessly since 1941 to protect nearly 5,000 acres of Plum Island’s ecologically diverse landscape (Bolick). As the years pass, the Pink House grows dilapidated in its abandonment. Its nominal rose hued paint, imbued with lead, slowly fades and chips, leaving behind only a pale tinge of color. Asbestos and radon lurk malignantly indoors (ibid.). Whipping winds and torrential rains batter the house’s ossature with each storm strike. The new owners make plans for demolition.

It is 2016, and the house still stands. In response to Parker River’s intentions, a movement is organized: Support the Pink House. Hundreds of people campaign for the cause. They rally and cry, Save the Pink House! They design a logo, sell it on t-shirts and stickers. They wield petitions and passion as weapons in their fight to preserve the beloved local landmark. It works: the demolition is stayed, for the time being. The group turns its efforts to finding a new owner for the property, one who would maintain the house in its picturesque seclusion (STPH). The Pink House lives on.

 Barely a mile away, the beach houses lining Plum Island’s shore crumble into the ocean. The piers that raise them above the water snap and collapse as wounded soldiers fall to a knee with the force of being hit. Ocean waters lay a long siege to the shoreline, ruthlessly eroding at the sand dunes, wearing down the foundations of the houses who dare too close to the edge. Homeowners pile boulders along the boundary, an action both illegal and necessary, in a desperate effort to protect their property (Gellerman). This is the evidence of climate change that they tell you about, the visible manifestation of a world altered for the worse by human actions. The defeated houses lie half buried in the sand, waiting on a demolition crew to clean up their splintered remains. No petition could have stopped this.
A salt marsh is a wonderful, durable thing. It persists. As sea levels rise, the salt marsh follows suit, climbing its way to a higher elevation. It does so by compiling sediment and organic matter to increase its height in a process called accretion (PIE LTER). The area of the Great Marsh which intersects with Plum Island is composed predominantly of high marsh, ideal for the growth of salt marsh hay, interspersed with sections of low marsh, upon which smooth cordgrass thrives (ibid.). It takes a storm or tide of utmost severity to flood these higher areas, which does well for the salt marsh hay, a plant ill equipped to survive in a constant state of submersion. The waters have been rising over the past decades, it is true, but the salt marsh is not bothered: in fact, studies have shown that primary production is nearly twice as great during times of high sea level. The Great Marsh appears to be thriving: plant life is vibrant and flourishing, rare birds swoop and dive over the swaying marsh grass, the tides flow fully in and out as predicted. It is a picture of a perfectly functioning ecosystem.

But even the endurance of a salt marsh has its limits. The rising waters and furious winds pummeling the houses a mile down the road will eventually make their presence known on the Great Marsh. Storms are occurring more frequently and with more force than ever before, contributing to massive erosion and habitat destruction (Gellerman). Sea levels are rising at a rate of four millimeters per year, and the salt marshes simply cannot accrete fast enough. Sediment is washing away just as ocean waters are washing up higher than ever before. Studies have shown that the increase in primary production during high sea levels is misleading: there is a tipping point, and as seas continue to rise, it will soon be reached (PIE LTER). The marshlands, even the high marsh, will be flooded. They will shrink and they will drown, after cannibalizing their own sediment in a futile attempt to rise above the waters rushing in (ibid.). The Great Marsh will no longer be a marsh. It will become a long stretch of open water, and it will never be able to return to what it once was.

The year is now 2125. The Pink House has stood for two centuries, but it stands now with seven feet of water rising over the front door (McLeish). A layer of thick mud has settled over the interior floor, and the walls warp outwards, swelling with the water that gently laps at their base. Mold teems along the surfaces of the remnants of ruined furniture. The Pink House is no longer an enchanting portal into a
lost time, a glimpse into a past full of passion and glamour. The Pink House is no longer even pink. Instead, it has become yet another fossil of a fossil fueled society, a society too dependent on its own ambition and comfort to think outside of itself. We mournfully add its name to the list of the fallen, a list already populated by all of the Plum Island beach houses, the last of which toppled conclusively into the water years ago.

A lone snowy owl is perched on the cupola, which is now slightly dipped, a portent of imminent collapse. The owl keeps an eerie watch on the still night. At one point, nearly 400 species of birds frequented the Great Marsh (Carson 12). Now, the landscape is silent, absent of the caws and chirps that filled the air in previous decades. The saltmarsh sparrow, one of four native species of birds to breed exclusively in the salt marsh, died out long ago, unable to protect their nests and their young from the swelling waters (McLeish). Other species flew elsewhere, in search of a shrinking selection of habitats hospitable to their needs. Black ducks, blue-winged teals, curlews, and bitterns no longer roam the flats; there are no flats left to roam (Carson 8-13).

All of the flora unable to tolerate a waterlogged existence have died off. The deep purple blossoms of the salt marsh hay that brightened the monotone landscape in early spring have disappeared, drowned under the rising sea. It is no longer there to feed the birds, at last able to rest from their long migration, or to be harvested by local farmers (ibid. 11). An unremarkable stretch of uninterrupted water idles where once lay the great marshlands, bustling with life.

As of 2018, the Support the Pink House website proudly proclaims, “The roof has no leaks, there are no cracks in the fountain, her full basement does not flood, even when all of the PI Pike may be covered in water during Nor’easters” (STPH). This may be so, but it will not last. As sea levels rise, violent storms increase in frequency, birds leave, and plant species drown, it cannot last. It may take decades, perhaps centuries, but there will come a point when no petition can save us from the consequences of our own actions. The fallen beach houses a little ways away can attest to that.

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ERICA LANE

Ode to Trees

My Spot is in the forest
Where a rotting log perches
Over a glimpse
Of a scarcely lillied pond.
I go there to be alone,
To clear my head.
I stare at the lake
Until I feel convinced
That the lull of tideless muckwater
Has sucked my problems
Into the pebbled brim of the bank.
I find sweet relief
In sitting on the rotting log,
In watching the clouds look at themselves
In the mirror of the water.
Surrounding the water are the trees,
A thick crowd of limbs
Huddling in leafy gossip.
The trees have questions
And unsolicited remarks;
They say I’m getting older.
I cling to the comfort of sixteen,
Say I am not older, trees.
I came here to be alone!
I feel deep and young
When I look at bodies of water.
That’s nice, say the trees.
I look at my reflection
As clouds do, from above,
But the flit of a fish
Sends tide wrinkles
Through my second skin.
I am here to clear my head.
I am here for the stilted mud
And sapsoaked trunks
To answer my questions.
The trees are here to ask
And I cannot turn them off
As I sit on their decaying brother
And demand something of nature.
Lichen-ridden shells
Of past and present
Line the water like cavalry,
Infantry, releasing sweet grit
Into the frayed afternoon,
Sloughing off a syrup
That binds my feet to the dusk.
I want to syphon the granules
From dripping memory
But the trees take me in their branches,
Tell me I am old,
Tell me I am not sixteen anymore,
That I am going to lose everything
Eventually.
They say I have bills to pay,
And my stillwater crumbles like dead cement
And I am achingly alone.
My head fills with twisted roots,
This sycamore grip
Pounding my soul into the bark
Of existence like a maple spicket,
Wedged in the wrong species
In the wrong forest
In someone else’s spot,
Spewing a sap of nothing
From an arid trunk.
MAGGIE FARREN

Cicadas Are Probably Sleepy

There is the time of the year when the shadows grow lean and lengthy and
I pull skeletons off the playhouse.
Papery and delicate:
cicadas can split their skin at the spine,
leave their legs still grasping at rough wood.

Each autumn,
I collect cicada shells and do not crush them,
keep small shadows of bugs
on my window sill or desk.
Watch the sunlight stream through a translucence,
absence-of-body.

Flaming and Hot

At the party I clench everyone’s hand, not softly at all,
as I pass by to go to the bathroom, then the backyard,
then to find a way home.
I can see the trail I have left because
I’ve been eating hot cheetos all night
and my fingerprints are on the inside of every wrist
and I am wondering if we will be able to come back to this:
cool night air and hot basement and bodies that have
known another frequently.
Fairy lanterns held up by tiny fingers.
Soft light sculpting softer features.

Gentle dusk. No rush for

tuckings-in when there are flowers
in the garden, a miniature teapot on the stove,
and party preparations to make
for cotton guests: tea will be served at seven.

Do you think mother will mind
if we clip some flowers for the table?
Adorn the placemats for each seat:
carnation, lily, lily, rose.
JONATHAN HARRIS

Poem

that I will never show her because she will think it’s strange

You exist only as still frames in my head.

My name whispered with furrowed brow
like a hard question—
drunk balloon tied onto my bed.

Your perfect stillness.

When I said I had reservations I meant second thoughts,
not plans for Friday night,
not these dreams about meeting you for breakfast—

How much does inner warmth cost
in the eye-blurring air,
among the ominous trees,

below the permafrost?

Conversation never gets old
for those who hardly speak.
After all, it is known

that stars are brighter when it’s cold.
I spoke the butterflies out of my stomach
in flying colors, I spoke in tongues of dreams
that were incomprehensible to you,
so I learned that they must not be languages at all
and started talking in default, practical, business blue.
Doesn’t anyone ever get tired of the color of the sky?
I mean sure, it’s nice, but it’s always the same
pleasing color of calm, like a neutral,
even though it’s not one.
Let’s go somewhere with an orange horizon
and debate if it’s angry or excited.
Yes, Jupiter sounds nice.
Sorry, I mean that city
down the road we’ve never been to.
Jahan Ramazani begins his analysis of Langston Hughes in his book *Poetry of Mourning* by describing “the phrase ‘African-American elegy... [as] either a contradiction in terms or a redundancy” (135). At first glance, it does make sense that there is an irony and almost cruel mockery created by combining these two polarized terms. But what Ramazani does not account for in his observation of the phrase is the importance of such seeming contradictions. African-American elegy is not “diminished when placed merely in this [European] genealogy” (135) but heightened because it protests, changes, and redefines notions of traditional elegy to fit its own unique purpose as a compilation of dichotomies and contradictions. African-American elegy both borrows from “this [European] genealogy” and produces its own legacy in order to make clear the duality that comes from opposition. James Baldwin explains this phenomenon of oppositional dualities in his essay “Notes of a Native Son” when he remarks that “[i]t began to seem that one would have to hold in the mind forever two ideas which seemed to be in opposition” (603). Part of the Black experience is “the Negro’s real relation to the white American” (603), a relation rooted in oppression and unimaginable violence. Experience—specifically that which is oppressive and violent—is what separates African-American elegy from traditional elegy. Whereas traditional elegy takes on an observational and distant perspective of the deceased, African-American elegy takes on a personal perspective, where the elegist experiences firsthand what is being elegized. Blues authors such as Langston Hughes, Robert Hayden, James Baldwin, and Gwendolyn Brooks take on the role of both the elegist and the elegized in their work; they mourn the death of individuals, of a collective history, and ultimately, of themselves through experience. Paradoxes and contradictions are an integral part of their work because they represent perpetual and inherited collisions that are not only definitive of African-American elegy, but of the African-American experience in a country founded on the oppression and discrimination of their ancestors.
Ramazani outlines three main types of paradoxes in his essay that guide the way he sees African-American elegy in conjunction to traditional elegy: the blues (Ramazani 143), literary versus “folk culture” (144), and the individual versus the collective (173). We will also use these three types of paradoxes to illustrate their importance in framing the Black experience.

The blues is “already a blues for the blues” (145), a macro-level term made up of micro-level paradoxes, such as affirmation vs. hopeless weariness or melancholia vs. mourning. The blues is “synonymous with melancholia ... [because] characteristics of melancholia are shared by the blues and the modern elegy” (139-140). Melancholia is itself a paradox, for it “opposes” mourning by supposedly being the “diseased” form. But melancholia is not definitively separate from mourning, but instead is an oppositional duality; you need both mourning and melancholy for elegy. The blues thrives off of its paradoxes in order to represent “the sociopolitical experience of African-Americans” (140) within the pathological concept of melancholia. The blues is “diseased” because it is “protracted and unresolved ... [and] self-berating” (140); it is a complex mesh and mess of elegiac and racial history expressed through both oral and written tradition. The simultaneous normality and abnormality that the blues expresses as a genre, that blues poets write about, and that blues singer sing about is a paradox, a unity of two unlike things that prove to be cohesive (140). Affirmation—often referring to spirituals, a form of “normative mourning,” or consolatory mourning (142)—and hopeless weariness are two polarized terms that are united by their collision. Affirmational blues is consolatory and spiritual, while hopeless weariness is disconsolate and melancholic. But despite their opposition, there is a “duality of the blues—the genres [intentional] tendencies toward both affirmation and self-negation, both consolatory mourning and melancholia” (144).

Along with the blues, the paradox between “literary and ‘folk’ culture” (144) is a crux of African-American elegy, for it embodies the racial and historical differences between African-American and European culture that converge and diverge through modern elegy. To begin, there is a historical collision between oral and written forms of storytelling cross-culturally; oral storytelling has its heritage in African culture while written forms of storytelling are historically
based in Europe (143). And yet, African-American elegy transcends this dichotomous history by combining both oral and written forms of storytelling through the blues as a musical and written movement. While the Harlem Renaissance and the Great Migration were both revolutions of Black culture, they were also reminders of the injustice shown to Black people despite the juridical shift towards supposed racial equality. There is dissatisfaction and there is frustration within each of these movements, and from that place of discontent blues poets and blues musicians are born. Langston Hughes writes “The Weary Blues” in 1925 in the midst of a Black cultural euphoria where blues music is the anthem and blues poetry the manifesto. And Hughes becomes not only a master poet but a master elegist by combining oppositions, such as oral versus written tradition/culture. Hughes is able to combine elegiac histories and traditions that are deeply confrontational into a modern form of elegy that is cohesive in its conflict. There is a cyclical nature to Hughes’ poetry, in which he writes poetry about blues singers who are singing about Black history. This is a complicated mesh of oral and written forms of storytelling and culture; blues singers are singing melancholically (an oral form and traditionally African), to which poets respond by writing poetry (a written form, paradoxical because written storytelling is European) about blues singers (oral) and about the Black experience and history (historically told through oral rituals such as call-and-response work songs). Thus, blues poets become a vessel through which these seemingly oppositional forces come together to frame the Black experience in its turbulence and collision, an experience which is both individual and collective.

Blues poetry straddles the gap between the individual and the collective, unlike traditional elegy that creates a distance between the elegist and the elegized. For blues poets, “death is no abstract possibility [as it is in pastoral, European elegy] but an omnipresent and everyday reality” (Ramazani 157). And because of death’s godlike presence, elegy is a means through which death plays an active role, which we see in the paradox of the individual versus the collective. The blues poet writes for an individual that represents a collective, but oftentimes that individual is the poet himself. As in the case of Langston Hughes’ or Robert Hayden’s poetry, the poet becomes like death, omnipresent and able to enter into the role of the individual who is being elegized while simultaneously mourning himself from
the perspective of writer; the poet becomes both the elegist and the elegized, a duality that unites death, perspective, elegy, and the Black experience into one cohesive unit. The individual, then, becomes synonymous with the collective, a duality that seems discontinuous but in reality is continuous. African-American elegy is unique in its simultaneity; it is both self-elegy and social-elegy, a cooperative balance that unites unique perspectives with a greater history of racism, oppression, and injustice. The individual mourns the history he comes from, the present he lives, and the legacy he will bestow in the future, creating a time-transcendence, a dual freedom and imprisonment within the Black experience in America. And unlike traditional elegy in which a chorus mourns the dead, the elegist himself is the chorus, is both a singular and plural entity. And perhaps this form of mourning—as a self-mourner—is the most truthful because the elegist is the elegized, he has lived and died, he has been remembered and forgotten at the same time. He knows the depths of his own death, and is, then, the most reliable source to write the elegy.

We see the paradox of affirmation versus hopelessness across blues poetry but specifically in Langston Hughes’ poem “The Weary Blues.” Hughes begins his poem by creating a rich blues rhythm and drowsy atmosphere through alliteration and diction; the words “droning” and “drowsy” assert a lexical symmetry and continuity, while “droning,” “drowsy,” “mellow,” and “pale dull pallor” evoke an ease and informality that starkly contrast the very structured rhyme scheme. These seemingly oppositional structures lay the foundation for a poem that reflects the dissatisfaction and hopeless weariness Hughes writes about. Hughes continues by creating a divine relationship between the blues singer, his piano, and the song he sings, where the singer, the piano, and the song fuse together into “a [single] melancholy tone” (Hughes 50). The blues simultaneously comes “from a Black man’s soul,” from “that poor piano [that] moan[s] with melody,” and from “the deep song voice [of the song]” (50). Even though these three voices are “divine” in their trinomial simultaneity, they are not affirmational or spiritual because they are “melancholy” and “can’t be satisfied” (50). The very title of the poem—“The Weary Blues”—and the lyrics to the song being sung prove otherwise: “I got the Weary Blues / And I can’t be satisfied ... / I ain’t happy no mo’ / And I wish that I had died” (50). The unsatisfactory nature of the song, along with its isolation (“Ain’t got nobody in all this world”) suggest
that this blues song is not affirmational, but hopelessly weary, and it will perpetually stay weary, as “the Weary Blues echoed through his [the singer’s] head” (50). The very last lines of the poem suggest a kind of blues that is both weary and wary; the singer “slept like a rock or a man that’s dead” (50) because his life is in perpetual danger as a Black man in a nation that legally, socially, and economically has proved him subordinate, forgotten, and to many Americans, already a dead man. Taking the blues into the wary perspective implies a sense of lived wariness, a sense of perpetual danger that is instinctual to the Black experience. Poets such as Hughes and Hayden and memoirists like Baldwin all infuse their work with a repetitive, and seemingly interminable caution for danger because they themselves live that danger. Just as there is a cyclical nature to Hughes’ poetry, there is also a cry for help, a woeful and wary song. Hayden similarly institutes a sense of wary blues through revisiting the circumstances surrounding Uncle Henry’s—“murdered Uncle Crip” (436)—death. Baldwin describes the ways that he lives an opposition and the ways in which he can never truly be a “native son” in a nation that juridically institutes him subordinate through alienation and criminalization.

Hayden masters European elegiac form (a form that is very similar to Hardy’s), but he redefines it and literally reshapes it to become an African-American elegy by using the paradox of oral vs. written / folk vs. literary culture / African vs. European tradition. The separation of the poem into eight sections that function as snapshots borrows from and protests against European elegiac form. Hayden uses eight sections, as opposed to seven—which would be a traditionally biblical number (i.e., seven days of creation)—to literally and figuratively insert African-American elegy into elegiac tradition by rewriting, or protesting, traditional elegiac and theocratic forms. The first of his eight “snapshots” uses sensual language (“alley stench,” “maggots,” and “glistening like tears”) to create a repulsion between the reader and the writing, but also between the “junkie” and “the policemen,” expressing the “hatred for our [Black Americans] kind” (Hayden 436). By using rich imagery, a traditionally European structure, to protest police brutality, Hayden is emphasizing the aforementioned paradox to show the tension of the Black experience, a kind of wariness for the infiltration of European traditional form into African-American historical oral and folk tradition.
The relationship between the individual versus the collective is seen most notably in Baldwin’s essay “Notes of a Native Son,” in which he describes his father’s death as a microcosm for the Black experience, as well as the previously noted paradox. Baldwin explains that “there is not a Negro alive who does not have this rage in his blood—one the choice, merely, of living with it consciously or surrendering to it” (592). In this quote, there are two perspectives going on: the “I” vs. the “we,” and the “us” vs. the “them.” The “I” vs. “we” is a relationship that exists amongst African-Americans and the “we” vs. “them” between African-Americans and Caucasians. The individual and the collective are often synonymous in African-American elegy because the individual is a microcosm for the collective; individual experiences translate into collective tribulations. In the case of Baldwin’s life experiences, he is an active participant in both the “I” vs. “we,” and the “we” vs. “them.” There is a sense of community in knowing that “there is not a Negro alive who does not have this rage in his blood” and yet Baldwin still struggles with the “choice [of] merely living with it [the rage] or surrendering to it.” Neither of the two options offer “getting over” the rage or “moving past it”: just like melancholy, or the blues, “the rage” is disconsolate and unmoving. Baldwin, through the act of writing, elegizes himself as an individual and as a collective entity, finding himself in the position as both historian of his life and eulogizer of his death, for “[his] life, [his] real life, was in danger, and not from anything other people might do, but from the hatred [he] carried in [his] own heart” (Baldwin 594). He faces his own self-annihilation by being both the victim of the dangers of life and the vessel through which the hatred for such dangers is held. But he does not shrink from these oppositions; instead, he turns them into oppositional dualities by which his life experience as a Black man in America is founded. The following comes to fruition in his mind:

It was necessary to hold on to the things that mattered. The dead man mattered, the new life mattered; blackness and whiteness did not matter; to believe that they did was to acquiesce in one’s own destruction. Hatred, which could destroy so much, never failed to destroy the man who hated and this was an immutable law. (Baldwin 603)
Baldwin melds these oppositional factors—which seem at first discontinuous—into a cohesive unit through which he experiences life. Both elegy and the blues have their own unique histories and legacies that seem contradictory but in fact intersect. And that intersection point is African-American elegy. Building upon elegiac tradition and history as well as “folk culture” and the blues, African-American elegy is a duality of supposed inconsistencies. The paradoxes that exist within African-American elegy serve as examples of the opposition and perpetual conflict that Black people experience in America. African-American elegy, then, serves a special purpose in that it mourns both the living and the dead. It, like melancholia or the blues, considers death an everyday reality and living a constant state of mourning. It is both self-elegiacal and social-elegiacal, microcosmic as well as macrocosmic. To use Baldwin’s words, it is like “hold[ing] in mind forever two ideas which [seem] to be in opposition” (604).

African-American elegy, then, calls into question the extent to which the Black experience is like “two ideas which [seem] to be in opposition,” simultaneously within and without of freedom, haunted by a violent, oppressive, and discriminatory past. This haunting is a kind of wariness, which comes to fruition through confrontations; these confrontations between oppositional dualities express a perpetual and a perpetuated wariness that defines the Black experience in America. It is through African-American elegy that this wariness is written into elegiac form as a record and a renovation. African-American elegy is modern elegy because it not only expresses revolutionary combinations of weary-wariness and wary-weariness, but it causes the reader to become wary and weary of their place in the world, “to hold in the mind forever two ideas [weariness and wariness] which seemed to be in opposition” (Baldwin 603) but prove ultimately unanimous.

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I have to tell you something

over the last few weeks I've been cooking a whole loaf of bread into French toast for lunch every time I cook a whole-loaf I use four eggs and a cup of milk two Tbl. of sugar a dash of vanilla and a shit-load of cinnamon right in there and the loaf has ten slices while the recipe calls for twelve so there's always a little batter leftover and I'm ashamed to admit it but once a week for the last three weeks I have had cinnamon sugar scrambled eggs for breakfast

about sunday morning
the crust of the bread
must be trimmed (thirteen times)
before it is convincing
in three dimensions

I score and wet my feet
so that after the kiln of sleep
I will adhere to the floor
and can join in a breakfast of toast

crunch
Caroline’s grandmother had a weathered beach house in Narragansett, Rhode Island, and she hadn’t been there in five years, she guessed. It wasn’t her grandmother’s main house, but she had spent the last few years of her life spending most months out of the year there. Caroline pulled her baby blue BMW up to the little shack, her wheels crunching over the packed white shells that made up the driveway. She sat back in the driver’s seat for a moment, breathing slowly through her nose, bracing for the biting cold outside her humming little cocoon. The house looked different to her. She remembered it in the summer, with its window boxes overflowing with pansies, two American flags stuck in the dirt on either side of the white wood steps to the front door, and Lila. Caroline let out a deep sigh. The last time she saw her cousin she left her sitting on those front steps, arms wrapped around her knees.

Scooting up in her seat to check her reflection in the rear-view mirror, Caroline ran her manicured nails through her straight blonde hair. She tousled her darker roots, annoyed that her hairdresser hadn’t been able to squeeze her in at such short notice. She picked at her mascara, yanking out a few eyelashes in the process. *It doesn’t count if you pull them out,* she heard Lila saying, years before. Caroline blew the dark clump of lashes off of the tip of her thumb, making her wish anyway.

*L*ila was careful not to pull the curtains on the front bay window aside too quickly, peering through the crack with one eye. She heard a car crunch into the driveway so slowly that she was sure someone had pulled in, then immediately backed out. A car was there, though, puffing white clouds of exhaust behind it. Lila let the curtain fall slowly back into place. Her body begged her to sprint up the stairs and hide, or lock the bathroom door behind her, or simply to just bolt out of the back door. Even the hairs on her arms were on edge, pointing straight up as if to point out another escape route. She stood with her back pressed against the front door, bits of
sandy brown hair falling into her face from her poorly constructed bun. She closed her eyes for a moment to the house around her. She could hardly bare the familiarity of it now that she felt as though she were a stranger there. Picture frames, some with versions of herself living inside them, felt like props for a set, artificial and out of place without the woman who so lovingly collected them. Stepping around each creaking floor board used to feel like a game, but now only made her feel silly without that gray head of curls whipping around to half-heartedly scold her for swiping popsicles from the freezer before dinner. Lila heard a car door slam. That sound used to send her running out the door she was still leaning her back against, but those were summer memories, and this time her cousin had to knock.

*   *   *

C aroline’s grandmother used to affectionately refer to Lila and her as “the twins” when they were younger, and when Lila opened the door Caroline was suddenly reminded of this. Same round face, same dark brown eyes, same rounded shoulders, same nervous smile.

“Hi,” Caroline said.

“Hi,” Lila said, tucking a loose strand of hair behind her ear. She seemed to hesitate for a moment, and then she stepped onto the front step and pulled Caroline into a gentle hug. Caroline was surprised by it for a moment, but before she could recover, it was over. They walked into the house as Lila called for her dad. Caroline breathed deeply through her nose, feeling her hands start to shake as she shuffled into the cold little house. She placed her duffle bag on the faded cedar coffee table their great-grandfather had hand crafted. Across from the bay window was a wood-fire stove with logs stacked neatly beside it in a pyramid. She instantly heard her grandmother’s voice telling her never to touch it. Footsteps came tumbling down the stairs as her uncle came to greet her.

“Hey there girly!” he said, holding his arms out to her.

“Hi Uncle Scott,” Caroline tried to say, her voice muffled by the flannel-clad shoulder that crashed into her. He let go and held her at arms length. He’d barely changed, with his loose jeans and scratchy beard, only she noticed the balding spot amidst his fluffy brown curls, and the lines that had never been under his eyes.
“Jesus you look like a proper grownup! It’s been a minute, huh?” he said.

Caroline noticed Lila look down at her socks.

“Yeah, I know. Everything’s just been getting so busy, you know with school and stuff.”

Hardly an excuse to not see your only family for the last five years, she knew, especially in the last year as her grandmother started to decline. She knew they knew as well. The three of them stood there for a moment, her uncle nodding his head and stuffing his hands in his flannel pockets.

“Where are your parents?” Lila tried.

“Oh, they should only be a few minutes behind me,” Caroline said. “I took my car because I have to leave a little early. To study for exams.”

“Right. Of course you do.”

Caroline pretended she didn’t notice the disdain in her cousin’s voice.

Lila’s father inhaled sharply and scrubbed a calloused hand over the top of his head.

“Well, I have to finish getting through Mom’s documents before the service tomorrow. I’ll let you girls catch up.”

Caroline and Lila looked at each other with flat smiles while Scott huffed up the stairs. Caroline could feel her skin crawling. Lila still fit in with this house, this life. Caroline hadn’t in a long time, and she could see it written all over Lila’s face.

“Your dad seems okay, considering,” Caroline said, shifting her weight back and forth between her feet. Lila sighed and fell into the cream-colored couch underneath the window.

“He’s been prepared for this for a while, seeing her deteriorate every day, you know? It’s been a lot on him, especially with the medical bills and stuff and the restaurant being slow ‘cause it’s off-season.”

Caroline noticed for the first time the bags under Lila’s eyes too. She could only nod. They were both well aware of the screaming matches between her mom and Lila’s dad over the phone. About the bills, about the house, about her grandmother’s care, about who would pay and who wasn’t paying enough, about who should chip in more because their husband is a neurosurgeon and can afford to help his family, about who was a single father with a struggling business,
and about just whose fault that was. Neither of them spoke while the faucet in the kitchen dripped rhythmically into its metal basin.

“Does he need any help?” Caroline said, unable to think of anything else to break the silence.

“I think he’s organizing all her paperwork and bills and shit like that, but I do have something to show you if you want,” Lila said, standing. Caroline followed her through a low door between the wood-fire stove and the stairs that led to her grandfather’s old office. Caroline stood in the doorway and couldn’t help smiling at the sagging green couch that she and Lila spent so many hours devising schemes on, or looking at photos and newspapers that lived in the many boxes that were piled throughout the rest of the little room.

“I don’t think I ever saw Nan in here once,” Caroline said.

“That’s what made it such a good hiding spot for us,” Lila said as she yanked an open box out from underneath the desk in the corner. “I found these yesterday.”

She pulled out two identical pink velvet handbags, faded and stained from use and time.

“Oh my God,” Caroline breathed, taking one of them from Lila’s outstretched hand. She held it in both of her hands, thinking how much bigger it had seemed to her all those years ago. She traced her thumb over the little diamond clasp. It was fake, of course, but she remembered thinking it must have been real the way it shined in the light of that June afternoon. Caroline’s birthday was three months before Lila’s, so when she visited Narragansett that summer her grandmother had given the purses to them both and told them every lady their age had to have a handbag. They had nothing to put in them but scrunchies, pennies, and smooth shells, but they would strut up and down the stairs of the house like debutants.

“I thought I lost this,” Caroline said.

“I could have sworn I left mine at a gas station in Connecticut, but I guess not,” Lila said, laughing. “Or maybe it just found its way back to Nan.”

“She had a way of making things do that.”

The faucet dripped for a moment.

“Don’t you miss her?” Lila said suddenly.

Caroline looked up. “Of course I do.”

“You knew how sick she was, and you never came back.”
“Lila,” Caroline sighed. She didn’t want to talk about this, mostly because she didn’t know what to say. “I don’t know, honestly. I just started getting so busy in the summers with school or camp or internships or whatever.”

“You make it sound so awful to have all of those opportunities,” Lila scoffed.

“So you think I shouldn’t have taken them?”

“That’s not what I meant.”

Shells crunched in the driveway.

“That must be my parents,” Caroline said.

* * *

ila didn’t hate her aunt and uncle, necessarily. Her dad’s older sister, Elena, loved her, she knew, but she hardly showed it, at least not in a way Lila recognized. She had none of the warmth her brother had. Lila used to watch and giggle as her aunt and grandmother bickered in the kitchen, Elena always tidying messes and reorganizing shelves, scrubbing or spraying some surface or another. Her grandmother used to poke at her with her big wooden cooking spoon, telling her that she needed to loosen up. She always said that a house had to look lived in, that if it looked like ghosts could live there, then they might as well. Elena had a sharp jaw that she set in a way that made Lila imagine that she could breathe fire like in cartoons. She asked Caroline once if she really could, but she wouldn’t answer her.

“Let me get that,” Lila said as she hopped over to her aunt and uncle’s car in her socks, taking the suitcase from her aunt’s hands.

“Hello honey,” Elena said, wrapping her slender arms around Lila’s shoulders. She pulled away like she was moving through water and slid her round-rimmed sunglasses to the top of her head. “Is your father around?”

Lila should have guessed that that would be the end of their interaction.

“Yeah he’s in Nan’s room,” Lila said, feeling like she was giving away a secret. Elena walked into the house as Lila’s uncle came around the side of the car to help her with the suitcase. She liked Nathan fine, although she liked him more when she was a child, and she suspected he felt the same. He was funny, but he said things that
made her think that he didn’t know how to interact with anyone that wasn’t also a middle-aged neurosurgeon.

“Hey sport,” he said. There it was. Who said that anymore? “How are you holding up?”

“Fine,” she answered as they stepped into the house. Her aunt was already up the stairs and out of sight. Caroline and her father greeted each other before he took the suitcase upstairs without many more words.

“We might have five minutes,” Caroline said.

“For what?”

“Before they start yelling.”

“Can’t they hold off for two days?” Lila hadn’t meant to sound so accusatory towards Caroline, but the hurt expression on her cousin’s face told her it didn’t matter.

“Mom’s really stressed,” Caroline said weakly.

Lila wanted to bite her tongue, but she had never gotten the hang of restraint.

“Oh, I’m sure,” Lila said sarcastically.

“Why do you have to do that?” Caroline said. Lila hadn’t expected her to snap. “It’s not like they’ve just been sitting around drinking champagne. Do you know how many strings my dad pulled to get Nan the best doctors? Or all the nights they stayed up until dawn redrawing our finances to send money to you guys?”

“It’s not about the money!”

“Then what?”

Lila crossed her arms over her chest.

“That, exactly. None of you ever understood what it meant to be here every single day. Every day dealing with finding the money for another bill, every day trying not to feel guilty about being in class or at work when I could be here. I was here too, Caroline. I watched her get worse, get thinner. And that awful oxygen mask,” Lila paused and took a deep breath. “I knew how much she wanted you to be here.”

That was when the yelling started upstairs. The words were muffled but Caroline and Lila had heard them all before, and they realized in the same moment that they had just repeated most of them. They stared at each other with the same horrified expression, and Caroline looked like she was about to tear up. Floorboards creaked upstairs and the kitchen faucet dripped. Lila looked down at her socks.
“If we’re not careful that might be us,” Lila mumbled. Caroline turned without speaking and walked back towards the office. Lila watched as she walked across the floor, stepping over the long plank by the stove, the one that they knew creaked.

* * *

Caroline slumped down on the green couch, hearing the springs underneath her groan. She picked up one of the velvet purses that was next to her on the couch where Lila had left it and rubbed her fingers over the fabric. She could still hear her parents’ voices through the floor. Lila walked in quietly and sat down on a large box facing Caroline. Her eyes were trained on the purse in Caroline’s hands.

“I wished you were here too,” Lila said. Caroline wasn’t sure if she believed that.

“We were drifting,” Caroline found herself saying.

“They were drifting.”

Caroline looked up.

“Nan said to me,” Lila said, “that my dad and your mom always fought when they were little. Seeing how close we were made her so happy.”

Caroline looked back down at the handbag. She had been absent-mindedly fiddling with the fake diamond clasp, and when it popped open she tilted the purse to look inside, expecting to find it empty. Into her hand fell a green twist tie that was tied to itself in the shape of a little circle. It was a ring. Caroline and Lila had made them one afternoon after stealing handfuls of the twist ties from the grocery store to make animal shapes out of. They decided, since all the adults they knew had rings, and that that meant that they loved each other, that they should have rings with each other too. Lila had wrapped the tie around Caroline’s tiny finger, deciding that they should wear them on their thumbs so people would know that they weren’t married but that they still loved each other. They wore them all summer, only taking them off to go swimming.

Caroline closed her fist around the little ring. Lila had seen it. Before she could say anything, Caroline leaned forward and pulled her cousin into a tight hug, suddenly remembering the wish she had made on her eyelashes in the car. Lila was stunned for a moment, but then
she wrapped her arms around Caroline and held her firmly as her father’s muffled yelling travelled through the open office door.
In the same country, the shepherds kept watch over the flock resting in the valley, washing their feet in the hidden ponors. The young man fiddled with his father’s lute, a wandering note led a lamb to stir and then pace away. But then an angel appeared with all of God’s glory glaring over the grounds, stunning the drowsy sheep as they clambered out of the blind valley, slipping on the marl. So the angel said: “Do not be afraid, I bring—” but the son dove into the water and the father threw rocks, aiming for the wings, which beat back as the angel moved on to the next field.
OLIVIA L. WILLIAMS

*Avert Your Eyes, or Robert Landsburg*

*winner of the 2019 Beacon Prize for Creative Writing*

God’s fury is a personal affair;
to watch hellfire rain down is to blaspheme—
the brimstone and the boiling, muddy steam
that sublimate souls into ash-grey air.
At Sodom and Gomorrah Lot’s wife earned
just retribution for her sinful eyes,
and turning, looking at those she despised,
for her base curiosity she burned.
The camera is man’s stubborn will to last,
immaculate witness, blessed memory,
the hands that held it flayed by energy
exploding in a rush of pyroclasts.
Observe the blistering mountain as it slides;
or if you wish to live, avert your eyes.
ABOUT OUR CONTRIBUTORS
The success of a journal depends on the quality of its contributors...

Veronica BOOTH is an English major in the College of Arts and Sciences graduating this May and looking towards a career in publishing or writing. She enjoys various writing styles from prose poetry to short stories to lengthy screenplays always working to foster an emotional reaction or connection with her reader whether humorous or sincere.

Allison BRYANT is a senior studying English. Allison grew up on Cape Cod, has been a writer all her life, and hopes to be for the rest of it

Marissa CARTY is a freshman studying psychology from Hopkinton, MA. She’s been writing poetry for four years, has studied it at BU, and hopes to publish a collection before she graduates.

Maggie FARREN is a freshman English major from the Chicagoland area. She hopes to continue to hone her craft and maybe publish her own book/chapbook someday. You can get in touch with her via email at farrenmaggie@gmail.com.

Sterling GINGERICH is a queer & trans poet with an English degree. They grew up in Alaska, and are ready to move somewhere without snow.

Jonathan HARRIS is a chemistry major with plans to attend medical school.

Ru HUANG is a sophomore studying Biomedical Engineering. She likes to write about the imagination and the people and places she cares about.

Annie JONAS is passionate about learning, advocating for intersectional feminism, and smashing the patriarchy.

Natalie KULICK is a junior studying in the College of Communications.

Erica LANE is a Film and Television major, and is originally from Merrimack, New Hampshire. Her chapbook “Bottomless” was published in August 2018 (dancing girl press). She will be attending USC for her graduate studies in the fall of 2019, and enjoys sunlight and painting in her free time.

Catherine PEERSON is a sophomore studying English and Classical Civilizations, originally from northern Massachusetts, not far from Plum Island.

Abel SHARPE is a classic troubadour. You can find him wandering Bay State Road with a mandolin, singing heart-throbbing songs from the 1950s. He does not speak French, but can certainly sound French, if you ask him kindly enough. Sill vu place, as they say.

Roy WANG is pursuing a degree in English. He is a tutor in the Yawkey Writing Center and has experience in critiquing all types of writing. When not reading essays or comic books, he likes to cook, rock-climb, and write poetry.

Olivia L. WILLIAMS is in the BU Class of 2020 and studies English and Earth & Environmental Science. You can find her @OliviaOnCampus on Twitter for her thoughts on old books and older rocks.
The Beacon (All-U)

The Beacon, founded in 1876, is the University literary quarterly. For years the Beacon existed in a cubbyhole situated on the top floor of 688 Boylston Street, where a typewriter, a light bulb, and a few ideas were the outstanding assets of the magazine. During the past two years the Beacon has shared a room in CLA with the Student Board, the Boosters' Club, and the CLAtor. The Beacon offices are now located at 286 Bay State Road, where a suite of three rooms comprise the new quarters.

Assisting the Editors are the Exchange Editor, Donald Crooks and the Literary Staff.

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Saltz, Wostrel, London

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