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Editor's Note

"I dont hate it he thought, panting in the cold air, the iron New England dark; I dont. I dont! I dont hate it! I dont hate it!"

— William Faulkner

"Winter changes into stone the water of heaven and the heart of man."

— Victor Hugo

The winter has freaked this Florida boy out. This is the best way to describe it. Freaky. Freakish. On the Weather Channel, the forecasters spout off negative numbers up north I cannot fathom, numbers that seem to come from another planet. The pictures and videos of weighty snow and staggering wind seem apocalyptic, like storms that will shift the axis of our planet. This Polar Vortex, I fear, is ready to suck the country up, like the remainder of a milk shake, and then what would happen.

I shudder at the thought.

Oh how my northern friends bemoan the state of their lives! Oh how they take to Twitter and Facebook to complain about the weather! Their fear and complaints are almost euphoric in the bad way; hence the use of the exclamation points, as if a line and a dot can contain their exasperations!

Still, there is something unsettling about it all. We feel it, this weather change, even in sunny Florida, where the winter has been schizophrenic. One day it is in the 50s, and the next the temperature skyrockets into 80s. One day there is a calming cool breeze whistling the trees, the next the dense humidity brings ominous summer-like thunderstorms. The weather here has the geckos and lizards confused. They usually burrow away, hide from the cold, but now some have come up early because of the unseasonable warmth. I saw one the other day, and it seemed to say with its beating throat, "What the hell?" and "I'm really tired, dude."

What's that old adage—we talk about the weather when we have nothing to say? It seems there is a lot to say about the weather. The weather is all we talk about. It is what my mother and I start with on our once a week phone conversations across 8000 miles. "How's the weather there?" she asks. "It's ok," I say. And because she's in Thailand, she says, "It's really hot here." But my mother and I learn a lot about each other in these nothing lines. We learn that we are alive. We learn that we are

surviving. We learn that we think about and miss each other plenty.

So, weather is really not nothing. This year, it's a big bad something. It's causing havoc. It's...well, unpredictable.

What we want from our literature is the unpredictable. What we want from our poems and essays is that sense of the unknowing, that sense of the otherworldly. We want the blizzard to come and take us away. We want the temperature to freeze us in our chairs, but the words we read to warm us awake. Literature, good literature, is our friendly Polar Vortex come to shock us alive.

This new issue of *Sweet* pays homage to this freaky winter weather. Let these poems and essays be your furnace. Let them melt the core of you. Let them take you to that freaky place...but in a good way.

— Ira Sukrungruang, Founding Editor

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Nin Andrews

On the Island where I come from

when I was a boy, I confided in Angelina, the girl next door. I told her all my dreams: how I wanted to be an engineer or an architect. I wanted to design houses, ships, airplanes, rockets. I complained that St. Julio's School for Island Boys had no scientist or math teachers. I had no male role models or education in these areas. When I complained, my teachers suggested I give up any ideas of having a career. Men don't have careers, my teachers said. Women do.

It's so unfair, Angelina agreed. You should be able to study whatever you wish. Why can't you become an architect? A true idealist, she said when she grew up, she'd start a coeducational school where boys and girls were treated equally. Where sexism was not allowed. Tossing back her long hair, sucking on a cigarette, she added that even the size of my wings (or lack thereof) didn't matter to her. Of course, that was before she met a man with extra-large wings and never spoke to me again.

sweet

6.2

On the Island where I grew up

I felt like an utter failure as a young man when Angelina left me. I suddenly knew everything about me was wrong—my blemished skin, my close-set eyes, my small wings. No matter how often I shaved, I always grew an afternoon shadow. No matter how often I worked out, I was never be as thin and muscular as the air-brushed models in fashion catalogs. And no matter what I wore or said, I never looked or sounded all right. No wonder Angelina didn't notice me anymore.

My father comforted me as best he could. *You're better off without her, he said. Besides, she's not your type. You know all she ever wanted was to get into your pants.*

Maybe that's what being a young man is all about, I thought. Keeping the trophy between my legs untouched. But all I really wanted was to be the kind of guy my father called *damaged goods*.

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NIN ANDREWS is the author of five full-length collections of poetry, and six chapbooks. Her latest chapbook, *The Circus of Lost Dreams*, is available from iTunes. Her next book, *Why God is a Woman*, is forthcoming from BOA Editions in 2015. She keeps a blog here: ninandrewswriter.blogspot.com.

Kathleen Kirk

A Man's World

In the grocery store, I see the woman
who blames all the world's violence
and ineptitude on men.
"If they'd just let us do it,"
she used to say, ten years ago,
even eight, before her sweet choir
director husband died of bladder cancer
caused by industrial pollution no one yet can prove,
and/or herbicide run-off into groundwater and stream.
Back then she had more energy and stamina
but she never lost her anger and conviction,
not even in grief. Almost all politicians are idiots
to her, and she's probably right about that
and about the sex trade. But she's tired
and I can see she's forgotten what she was looking for
in the butter and eggs aisle, yogurt, cheese, orange juice.
She's looking around for what she wants,
what she came for. "If they'd just let the women do it
we'd all be better off." Pudding cups, cookie dough.
We move our carts to let a man through.
"It's OK," he says. "I'm just reading the prices."

KATHLEEN KIRK is the poetry editor for *Escape Into Life*. She is the author of five poetry chapbooks, including *Nocturnes* (Hyacinth Girl Press, 2012) and *Interior Sculpture: poems in the voice of Camille Claudel* (Dancing Girl Press, 2014). Her work appears in a variety of print and online journals, including *Arsenic Lobster*, *Menacing Hedge*, *Eclectica*, *Heron Tree*, *Poetry East*, and *Waccamaw*. She blogs “eight days a week” at [Wait! I Have a Blog?!](#)

Jen Ferguson

After The Trial, October 4th 2013

A man holds his child over the welded metal barrier keeping the crowd back from the slope of the Grand Canyon. She dangles there like a leaf clinging to a branch in autumn, screaming or maybe laughing, in the grip of wind, not ready to let go. But from your vantage point it's very hard to tell. You're thinking of the cat you left behind, who's feeding her, who is loving her? Is winter come yet, is she warm? And if there is an afterlife, the man who smiles in the courtroom sketch, that charcoal rendering, when he is told he is guilty, what will he say, now, here at the precipice to the people standing next to him. To the child's mother. To his own tree rooted beyond the next valley.

JEN FERGUSON is a Canadian studying for her PhD at the University of South Dakota. She's head over heels for After Eight dark chocolate mints and will defend the chocolate+mint combo in a bar fight, if needed. You can find her recent writing at *jmww*, *burnt district*, and *Spittoon Magazine*. Recipes for chocolate+mint yumminess and other life changing things can be directed to jenny.ferguson@usd.edu.

*Irene Hsiao***Luna**

Tonight I am building a trap for the moon.
It is made of all the defunct things.
Telephone wires fat with static.
Unbent staples that have lost lost cat notices.
Acrid fig buds kept from fruiting.
They are as effete as I am.
Exhausted blooms.
We have all become convinced we are objets d'art.
Nous nous parlons en francais
to show that it is true
to give us, too,
some calculable distance from the weighted ground.
I acknowledge it is not our calculations that will inveigle you, luna,
mere shard or crust of my desire.
I am learning about radar plotting to find you, moon.
It's something men invented to map positions relative to other moving entities,
which certes you and I each are.
My sources tell me I need to know my speed and direction of travel.
My sources tell me that relative to myself, any other object that does
not deviate from its estimated bearing line poses a risk of collision.
My sources tell me that, with proper plotting, I should know our time
of closest point of approach.
From apogee to perigee, this distance varies from 405,503 to 365,295
kilometers, a distance which increases by 3.82cm, on average, a year,
a distance which, though miniscule on an astronomical level, steadily
decreases our odds of accident.
The heart, however, knows no damper to its longing.
The mind makes its own mathematics.

I know we will meet.
I have plotted it using your own radiance as a measure.
My faith will not go unrewarded.
I will wait until it becomes clear as your own face.
Clear as the vacancy of figs.
Hard as the rust on the wire.

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IRENE HSIAO writes, dances, and worries a lot. Her book, *Letter from Taipei*, has just been published this January. Her writing has appeared in *Word Riot*, *A Clean Well-Lighted Place*, *elimae*, and others. She regularly contributes articles on dance to the *SF Weekly* and is appallingly promiscuous about sweets.
irenehsiao.wordpress.com

Bruce McCrae

The Noble Gases

The voice that is dry leaves and plush essences.
A voice from the dreamworld warning it can't be done.
Time sulking under the willows.

I still hear the wind around the door of your name,
pushing and pulling the snowfelt evening,
delivering its parcels, pining for Phoebe Reggio,
bemoaning the dullard in me.

I can still hear your voice and the doves' language,
speaking the river's lingo and cant,
insisting insisting . . .

The tongue of rare elements and noble gases,
small-talk gnawing on its sweetened straw.
The voice lost among fields of cane,
a few grains remaining
in Mr. Mnemonics' storehouse of plenty.

Where did you go when you went there?
Voice like a swallow's swoop and ship's lantern.
A voice pitched like a memory jarred.
Like a storm coming
and the heart's sailor longing for safe harbour.

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BRUCE McCRAE Pushcart-nominee Bruce McRae is a Canadian musician with over 800 publications, including *Poetry.com* and *The North American Review*. His first book, 'The So-Called Sonnets' is available from the [Silenced Press website](#) or via [Amazon books](#). To hear his music and view more poems visit his website: <http://www.bpmcrae.com>, or 'TheBruceMcRaeChannel' on Youtube.

Lindsey Anne Baker

Weeks later

I missed your body

you said

I heard the sound of it weeks later

in the deepest part of winter

when my body most required rain

What things we chase

standing at the sink at midnight with a bar of soap

I've missed it too

I tell you

I would tell you

LINDSEY ANNE BAKER is a writer and editor in Omaha. Her work has appeared in various journals, including *The Nebraska Review*, *Hospital Drive: The Literature and Humanities Journal of the UVA School of Medicine*, and *burntdistrict*. Her first chapbook, *Fine Warm Pulse*, was published by {dancing girl press} in April 2013. Her favorite sweet is a hearty slice of the sour cream pound cake Omaha's M's Pub has perfected, but she'll settle for little squares of dark chocolate, too.

Simon Perchik

*

For a split-second these steps
are at a loss, half thorns
half holding back just enough

in case you come too close
and your shadow no longer means
you still face the sun

the way this stairway will dissolve
as rainwater, would close your eyes
if there was time

--where you wade is already wood
smoothed by the same descent
streams are famous for

can tell from a single stone
on the bottom for years
following under footmarks then flowers

that stay open alongside the others
till suddenly you are ankle-deep
breathing out again, there.

SIMON PERCHIK is an attorney whose poems have appeared in *Partisan Review*, *The Nation*, *Poetry*, *The New Yorker*, and elsewhere. His most recent collection is *Almost Rain*, published by River Otter Press (2013). For more information, including free e-books, his essay titled “Magic, Illusion and Other Realities” please visit his website at www.simonperchik.com.

Quanta

Susanne Antonetta

-for Jin

There is an undiscovered particle called the graviton that holds our feet to the earth. There has to be, by the laws of quantum physics, which explain forces with an array of bits, photons for light, gluons for strong interaction, bosons for weak. But in the case of the gravity particle, we cannot find it, or equation our way down the chalkboard to it. Along with questions like dark matter and dark energy, it's one of physics' mysteries. What is it, how does it work? It has been a law in quantum physics that energy acts as both a wave and a particle, and this must hold true of gravity. It is also a law of quantum physics that the more you know about the position of a force in one state, the less you can know about it in the other: target a photon in its particle-state, and forget ever pinning down its wave-state.

What is the most primitive physical requirement of a quantum theory? writes Roger Penrose, who is a physicist, and whose notions of the primitive, I notice, diverge startlingly from my own. *Since we are trying to do physics, we require that a really physical concept of graviton actually does exist.*

That means that, as with light, gravitons must be things as well as waves, massless things but things nonetheless. The quantum truth of light's dual life as wave and particle was a breakthrough in physics, largely credited to Paul Dirac, a silent man who loved Mickey Mouse and turned down a knighthood because it might mean people addressing him by his first name, as *Sir Paul*. Dirac drove in only two gears, reverse and fourth, and since he did little highway driving he was always either going backwards or frantically speeding.

I imagine that the physics of gravitons have a corresponding science in the physics of love, another binding force. There's some particle that could be summoned up by an equation, an attachment-ton, a love-ton. Can it, like static electricity, grip, and then wear off? Particles might drift from the bodies of divorcing couples. I wonder, if you had the right lens, if you could see the bits lift away, the way fluff from the cottonwood trees in April fills the gutters and pales cars, as if invisible hands sheared an endless landscape of sheep above our heads.

You are my son, my fourteen-year-old. I would have said you and I were fast together, then you became a teenager, and I don't know anymore.

I hate you, you say sometimes, you're not a real mother. I don't blame you; you face this thing, this primitive physical answer to a charged theoretical need. It's a rule of physics that quantum particles obey a different set of laws than those governing the larger world, laws in which they can be many places at the same instant, can be both an object and a force. A real mother would be a quantum, be everywhere and everything you needed her to be at once. All of us, I believe, have an instinct for quantum law, through the bits that long ago began revolving around one another, on their way to becoming our bodies.

Where have you put my things? I can't find anything. Goddammit. We have this conversation many times a day.

I don't put your things anywhere, I tell you, with a mechanical, Don't swear.

I can't ever find my homework! I'm going to fail because of you.

I do not lose your things. I'm almost afraid to touch your things. But how keenly you feel the conundrum: you may fail because of me, in any number of ways. At one time in your life when you felt upset, or just sleepy or needy, you cried, "Hand! Hand!" or "Hair! Hair!" and I offered those parts of myself, contorting my body into angles to supply my long fingers or my longer hair, and you quieted. Some leap has occurred. Maybe we've become matter and anti-matter, and live in danger of annihilating together.

Surely each graviton carries its own measure of curvature, wrote Penrose, giving gravitons the quality of a face, a turned cheek. Your eyes, leaf-shaped, that flick down on meeting mine. Their curtains drop on so much going on inside, like quiet suburban houses with their inner worlds. Some houses close on violences, though the houses themselves, studded with windows meant to be clear and doors meant to swing open, seem to argue their innocence. But there are secrets we learn: the house down the street where an older boy killed a younger one, a neighbor. We went out that night and left you with a babysitter, a tall twenty-year-old named Joe, and when Joe took you to the park the police stopped you both and questioned you for a long time.

The officers must have been aggressive in their questions; they knew something was up, something involving an older boy and a younger one, and did not know Joe, who was gentle and nice. You were very small and remained scared for a long time, asking, Had you yourself been murdered? Had you *committed* murder? I sensed other questions underlying these constant and seemingly absurd ones: how could you become the center of so much wonder, such seeming risk the police circled you

and asked you in multiple ways if you were safe, while we were absent?

Your mouth burned with a new vocabulary of danger, one that, like the theory of relativity, almost everyone's aware of in some sense but almost no one really knows.

If we could find the graviton particle, we could perhaps bend space-time our way, bring gravity naturally to places like the moon. I imagine this could be true for love gravitons; if we could locate them, we could put them in, or put them back.

Which brings us to you. I want to talk to you like a scientist, say, *infinities*, *renormalization*, *strangeness*, *weakness of censorship*. I want to see if some detritus of the old you is drifting off. You would find me insane. This is in fact one of your weapons: to tell me—accurately—that you have a mad mother.

You don't want to hurt me, or generally don't, you apologize in a fever of penance. You are flickering all over at this age, first one thing, then another. I know you as a wave, a series of invisible urges. Your solid self drifts farther.

Dirac's wife, in a rage, screamed at him, What would you do if I left you! Dirac, who'd once written to her that she made him a human being, paused and answered, Why I would say goodbye, Dear.

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SUSANNE PAOLA ANTONETTA's most recent book, *Make Me a Mother*, a memoir and study of adoption, was published by W.W. Norton. Awards for her poetry and prose include a New York Times Notable Book, an American Book Award, a Library Journal Best Science book of the year, a Lenore Marshall Award finalist, a Pushcart prize, and others. She is also coauthor of *Tell It Slant: Creating, Refining and Publishing Creative Nonfiction*. Her essays and poems have appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *Orion*, *Seneca Review* and many anthologies, including *Short Takes* and *Lyric Postmodernisms*. She lives in Bellingham, Washington, with her husband and son. Her website is www.suzannepaola.com.

The Descent

Bryan Thomas Rice

This is what the man from the chat room wanted:

He wanted me to park in the alley and enter his house through the kitchen door, which would be unlocked, and once inside, I would take an immediate right and find a door leading to an unfinished basement, and because there would be no light, I would need to descend the stairs slowly, very slowly, grasping the rail like a child learning to walk, and grope along the cinderblock wall until I found another door, behind which he would be laying on a sleeping bag, waiting for me in the dark.

No names, no faces: only our bodies. Total anonymity.

He explained that he taught biology at the university and had a wife who was away that weekend. He had the house to himself but he couldn't take chances. The darkness was unconventional but necessary. For all he knew, I was a student of his. For all I knew, he was lying about the wife. Maybe he was living out a fantasy he'd harbored in secret for many years. I really didn't care.

As the man spoke, the telephone receiver shook in my hand, and then there was a long silence that gave me the time I needed to consider the possible outcomes. On the one hand, I could break afternoon plans with my friends and meet up with this man, this stranger, and return to my little studio apartment and resume my life. I would tell nobody.

On the other hand, there were all the people who go missing each year, all the bodies pulled out of rivers and lakes, all the abandoned cars discovered off dirt roads and highways, the drivers' remains never found. Was I willing to take my chances and join them? At that time in my life, my early twenties, I had a taste for sex that was so potent and intoxicating I could focus on little else. And the riskiness—that, too, was potent and intoxicating. But at that moment, I decided I was too young to roll the dice. The roads were covered in wet leaves.

Not today, I told him, and hung up.

*

There were others, but I didn't know their names. I didn't remember many of our conversations. I didn't consider how responsibly or irresponsibly they behaved during the day, what professional jobs they held down, what civic duties they performed. I didn't know what familial obligations they may have temporarily abandoned for my company. I didn't remember the particularities of their bodies, and I didn't remember their faces, either, how some wore glasses, how some had mustaches and others were clean-shaven, how some had smooth jaw lines and others had skin that was rough and scarred.

So when the physician at the health department asked me to provide details about the sexual encounters I'd had, I lied and told her I was always under the influence so I couldn't offer an exact number. I met them at bars, I told her, too ashamed to admit I was a chat room junky and that it was easier for me to seduce men with words than with body language.

Minutes before, in the waiting room, I'd felt breathless, my heart racing, as if I was awaiting a verdict: I knew that I would be punished for the way I treated my body, punished with a venereal disease, and I knew that recounting the story of how I got there was part of that punishment. My own blood would be used as evidence, and all I knew to do was lie. My sexually repressive adolescence entitled me to lie.

But I suspect the physician knew better. She rubbed my hand and said, "This can be a turning point for you. You're only twenty-four. This can be a chance for you to start over." And she was right, because my blood work came back negative. I had a clean bill of health. Returning to my car, I probably should have scanned the parking lot for pennies, because I felt spared and lucky: my journey in this life wasn't over.

It puzzles me still, that breathless anticipation I experienced at the mere prospect of meeting those strange men and the part of myself who is a stranger to me now. It was a mixture of excitement and fear, because even though I knew I was wrong to believe that this rebelliousness empowered me, I couldn't resist: I couldn't resist contacting the man from the chat room, agreeing to drive to his house in the rain, couldn't resist breaking plans with my friends, couldn't resist finding my way to the stop of his basement stairs, looking down into the darkness.

I couldn't resist keeping another secret.

When I reached the bottom of the stairs, I heard him call out, "I'm over here." I followed his voice and knelt to the floor, and the excitement was already beginning to subside, because I could already see myself climbing the stairs, sweaty and exhausted, and I could see myself slipping out the kitchen door into the chilly evening, ashamed, wondering how time had gotten away from me, again.

BRYAN THOMAS RICE has published poetry and nonfiction in various literary journals, including *The Common Review*, *Arch Literary Journal* and *Lingerpost*. He currently lives in Ohio. He can be reached at bryrice33620@gmail.com.

Recovery

Spencer Hyde

The Doctor stands by the monitor and watches the contraction line go up and the heart line go down and says Up the Pitocin and the Mother looks worriedly at the Father but the Father can only see the Baby's vitals and the Mother heaves in pain and the parabolas offset, mirror, and the epidural isn't working. And the Doctor says It has to be now and he pushes a button and five nurses show and wrap the Doctor as he pirouettes and gloves-up and looks at the Mother and she stirrups her feet and the nurses say It's okay we are right here on repeat. The Father says No tears it's going to be all right you'll see you'll see and the Doctor says Push and make it count. The Mother screams and the scream stands in the room and becomes a constant the Doctor must move around to get at the Baby and he says I see hair and the Father sees the black hair and emits a guarded laugh and he thinks Wow it's a real living thing not just those small bumps in the stomach, those small kicks, the hiccups, the imprint of a hand slowly moving over the ribs and showing for the Father to say Hey little guy, you ready to meet mommy and daddy, buddy? The Mother grabs the Father by the shoulder and says I can't believe the Baby has hair and they both look through wet eyes and hurried smiles and the Doctor yells for more fluid for the stress on the Baby and the Mother yells and the Doctor pulls and holds the Baby in the crook of his arm and the nurses spin as the Doctor holds the cord and pushes hoping to get blood into the Baby, the blood that wasn't there because the head is blue and the eyes are closed and the room holds no more screams. The Mother says What is happening and the Doctor is hurried and the Father looks over shoulders and the cord is still connected to Mother and the Doctor isn't offering the Father scissors or saying Go ahead dad, cut it right here and the Mother isn't saying Look at those eyes and the Baby isn't making a fist the size of its own heart, curling, re-curling his fingers in and out and moaning and coughing and working out those lungs and tightening his toes and curling, curling. The Doctor says Dammit and Hurry and mumbles about oxygen levels. The Father holds the Mother's hands tight and looks her in the eyes and says We got this and I'm right here and she doesn't smile and somewhere in the skyline periphery of the Father's mind the clouds are forming and rolling in with distant but deep and lasting thunder. The Doctor cuts the cord without asking and it hangs below the Mother's feet like a gleaming telephone wire and the Father is angry for the discussions about fingernails growing in the womb and measuring the fetus by the size of a different fruit each week. The Doctor wraps the Baby and it is quiet and it is still and the face is not very warm and the hands are not clutching and the mouth is not rooting and the small sighs are not repeating. The floor is covered in afterbirth and the cord is hanging and the Doctor pulls out the rest slithering into a shiny silver bin and says You need

to decide if you want to hold the Baby. The placenta, membranes, and umbilical cord are tested and later the Mother tapes the box and writes Winter Baby Stuff and folds tiny hats and the Father opens a large bill. The autopsy and needing to know only, only he wonders if part of the cost is for the set of smaller tools for the internal anatomy, this cramped universe in its becoming, the Baby's anatomy a horoscope dimly lit with the afterimage of stars already exploded, sewn up and placed in a pocket of black bag. 97 ounces. The sun will go up and down and up and down and the Father's mind will storm and the snow will snow and the Mother will feel this phantom weight in her stomach, in her arms, rocking back and forth, back and forth.

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SPENCER HYDE is an MFA candidate at BYU in Utah, and editor of fiction at *elsewhere journal*. His work has appeared in *McSweeney's Internet Tendency*, and *Inscape: A Journal of Literature and Art*.

Sirens

Anna Vodicka

For years, we played mermaid, my sister and I, trying to approximate the beautiful, fishy women of our stories. We were landlocked, far from the ocean, but we lived at the edge of a quiet lake in northern Wisconsin, and in the summertime we bathed daily in those waters, cold and deep and cornflower blue. Underwater, swimming with minnows and tadpoles, kneeling in the shallows with caddisflies, who live most of their lives in the larval state and carry houses of sticks and stones on their backs, it was easy to believe in the possibility of otherworlds occupied by creatures unknown and humans in changed states: of Heaven and Hell with their winged armies, haloed and horned; of Neverland with its boys lost in flight; of a man in the moon and a sphinx at the gates of Egypt and a watery world where girls like us grew gills. It was easy to imagine that someone, somewhere, figured out how to live like this for good—half-fish, half-human, an underwater bird—and if we practiced enough, if we held our breath, we might learn to do it, might strike a deal with Poseidon and trade our skinny lower limbs for caudal fins, our thin skins for scales.

We learned to dolphin kick. We swam naked. We dove in search of treasure—faded toys, Schlitz cans and firework casings we collected on land—or dove simply to hear the lake make its old attic sounds, creaks and pops, the stretch and yawn of something restless in the shadows. We swam to the other side, as far from home as courage would take us. We made messy impressions of water ballet, sang warbling underwater duets, and pantomimed afternoon tea, sinking our bodies to the bottom until our hearts beat in our ears and our lungs pressed against the cages of our ribs, and we scissor-kicked for the surface where we bobbed, swallowing air in grateful, thirsty gulps.

Eventually, we had to give it up. The sun was setting behind the pines and Mother called from the open window for us to come inside and set the table. Or the weather shifted, storm clouds overhead made the lake dark and menacing, and rain and lightning shot fear into us. Or we'd lingered too long, until our skin tightened to gooseflesh and our lips turned blue, teeth chattered, fingertips paled and puckered, aged, suddenly, like some fairy tale curse, and we could feel it, a clammy hand reaching up from the depths for an ankle, a siren song on the wind, and we thrashed our feet and suddenly longed for the warmth of the house and our shoulders wrapped in terrycloth. How long, anyway, can a girl go on believing she's a mermaid? At some point, the notion sunk in: our bodies were our fate. There would be no kingdom beyond the blue for us. We could no longer live underwater, and so we turned to face the shore.

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ANNA VODICKA's essays have appeared in *Brevity*, Guernica.com, *The Iowa Review*, *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *Ninth Letter*, *Shenandoah*, and other literary magazines. In 2013, she won *The Missouri Review* audio contest for prose and her essays were shortlisted for *Best American Essays* and the Pushcart Prize. She currently lives in the island nation of Palau, in western Micronesia, where she is at work on her first book, and ocean swimming daily. (She had high hopes that salinity would improve her water ballet, but so far the results are negligible.) You can find more of her writing at www.annavodicka.com.

7 Ways of Unfolding

Ashley Inguanta



1.

The first time I saw you, I was certain you were light—itsself—no filters, just light. Your voice, a soft burning sun, your skin—stars.

I opened and you were gentle, your voice, and I knew I had found a sliver of God, that I was safe, that you were, too.

sweet

6.2



2.

The last time I thought I saw you, you were in the grocery store. But it was not you—you were taller, your shoulders broader, you're your step longer, your movement slower.

The last time I thought I saw you, I started to walk away—and then I walked towards—and I walked fast, and my heart, it beat wildly. You know my wild heart well, and the last time I thought I saw you, the woman I saw as you, she didn't turn around to notice.

That's when I should have known.

But she was soft, safe. That was the same. It was as if we were in a dream—you, yourself, but

someone else, the details off, the words almost, almost out.

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sweet

6.2



3.

The last time I saw you--you--everything was light. The room, you—the way you understood my window and my shadow, my light, as you sat near yours, looking out, breathing in.

You spread your arms wide and said, "Get out there," and you wanted to push me but didn't, and then we were in the ocean you drew, years ago, on lined paper; you, a scribble on the page, as was I

And you said, as you handed me the ocean, "Swim," and I did, in a sea near Mexico, and I called you from the road, and you answered, you did, and we talked about how beautiful life is when it is pared down—

And in the ocean near Mexico the sun shone, and the mountains made everything that much more private, silent, and the morning, it was a prayer, Mary, I held her in my palms without knowing she would come, really come, to help, when I would fly to the other side of the country to begin again.

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sweet

6.2



4.

The last time I will see you, I imagine it will go like this:

A hug, the ocean inside each of us, me driving away, alone or not alone, my body becoming something else, the Earth entirely, maybe the universe, the whole thing, spinning and filling my body, you, here, in my belly, the whale, God in the thread joining, separating, your body, God, I will never see you again, God, this is what I imagine, the last time, the last time.

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sweet

6.2



5.

In the moment, I curl, a shell, and the scribbles of us are out there, in the ocean, ready, and as I curl I understand my own body and understand yours too, the way you would breathe, abdomen in and out, and the way I would follow, years ago—with you—and you holding me terrified, beginning, scared, honest.

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sweet

6.2



6.

The transition comes. You push me out. I swim towards another, and sometimes, I look back for you, and you are there.

The last time I saw you, you swam like an angel, your body lifted with salt wings, effortlessly, warm, a light in the ocean—strong, steady, there—waving, seeing me, knowing who I am.

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7.

And now, all I ask of you is this. Remember me, remember how I opened, how gentle you were, how I tried, how you tried, how we both grew, how I gathered and lost and gathered again, as did you. Remember me with you, without you. Remember me swimming on paper, blooming. Remember the way you held me as I opened, how softly you placed me in the ocean,

how I love you as I go.

ASHLEY INGUANTA is a writer/photographer who is driven by landscape, place. Ashley is the Art Director of *SmokeLong Quarterly*, and her first collection, *The Way Home*, is out with Dancing Girl Press (and has been re-published for Kindle with The Writing Disorder). She has translated the collection into a live performance, too, with dancing and music. This year, her poem "San Andreas Fault," which appears in *The Ampersand Review*, was nominated for the Pushcart Prize. Her new collection of poetry and photographs, *For The Woman Alone*, is forthcoming with Ampersand Books in Spring 2014.

Dear Adriana,

I read your memoir, *My Mother's Funeral*, while hunting in Alabama. As I turned the pages with great difficulty wearing woolen gloves and perched in a tree stand in twenty degree weather, I read about your mother's sad beginnings as a young duped bride in Colombia. And as I read, I watched blood-red and drab-brown cardinals court each other down below. *How typical*, I thought, *the bright males out in front, the drab females in the shadowed scrub, unseen, yet moving mountains behind the scenes*. And just as I came upon your description of cardinals and your own mourning, "The cardinal wrapped my grief under its scarlet robe, then off it flew" (23), I thought again to myself, *How chilling, the similarities*. Despite our different cultures, and despite our different geographies, the human experience--as you point out, Adriana--is always the same.

My mother lost her mother, my beloved grandmother, this past year. While I grieved for my grandmother tremendously, watching my own mother's grief is what truly upended me. Your explorations of a daughter's grief in your memoir helped me understand my own mother's pain. In the chapter, "Rigor Mortis," you ponder your mother's "coldness" and mentally time her *rigor mortis* to your frantic flight home to Colombia. My mother also described this fear of her mother's corporeal leaving. She described this experience to me and the way she had felt her mother—already stiffened from Parkinson's disease—become cool to the touch. And as I read "Rigor Mortis," I was in the middle of confronting my own experience with the phenomenon. I looked down to my felled buck lying one hundred yards in the distance and thought, *How long could he lie there waiting for me to pick him up? When would I be able to stroke his soft fur, say goodbye to him in a proper respect, honor him for feeding my family?* My hunting partner said that we would get him later, that I shouldn't climb down just yet, that I would scare all the other game away if I did. But I only wanted to be with him. Sit with him before he fell away from this earth. I didn't want him to die alone.

While cleaning my deer at dusk, I imagined your mother cleaning a whole human skeleton. Gutting a deer was child's play by comparison. But I thought of the same impulse of all mothers--the instinct to survive, to provide, to feed the needs of her children. Whether it is to break a chicken's neck as an "effective hen executioner" (226) for a birthday dinner, or to help her child with a science project, the impulse is always the same: Love. These may be violent images to attach to, but nonetheless, they are the ones that never left me as I read your memoir. The hauntings of life: unrequited love, real or imagined abandonment, the sins of the father. Adriana, you uncover these mysteries not with the swing of a magician's cape, but with the raw visceral scraping and peeling away, as if human flesh from bone, in an attempt to get to the marrow of the truth.

“A thick green onion soaked in oil” made me laugh as I remembered my Lebanese mother-in-law doing the same job with a greased pine nut on her grandchildren. Wherever you are in the world, a mother’s job is always the same. In this way your book transcends all geographical boundaries because this book is the universal story of family, of motherhood, of waking up to who and what our mothers (ourselves?) are as private individuals with very private dreams.

And you remind us of this truth constantly: How universal a mother’s struggles are, how familiar. How broadcasted and common as the sports and music transmitted through radios across the world--like your mother’s obsession with fútbol or boleros. Heartbreaking in any language--well, not quite. Not the Spanish butcherings of Nat King Cole or the Beatles, your mother had thought. But Connie Francis? Well, maybe. Only a woman could hit those harmonics. Harmonize with those heartstrings of longing. Match those chords of pain. Your mother knew this, Adriana, and you were perceptive enough at a very young age to record it in your memory.

Eating whole fish fried, again, communicates across the world. I close my eyes and swallow the image of eating sardines whole, like the *sultanas* from Israel and Lebanon. I can smell the fish frying, I can see my mother-in-law squatted down low and fanning the fire. Again, this book resonates in any language, in any culture--like music does, like food does, like a mother’s sacrifice will always. Your memoir contains the collective memory of all human experience: Loving, suffering, waiting, burying.

Thank you,

Jenni Nance

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Dear Mr. Best,

I have never owned a book of prose poetry. I once asked one of my old creative writing professors to explain it to me. “What’s the difference,” I asked, “between a lyric essay and a prose poem?”

“What the author calls it,” she said.

Then I heard about—and read—your book of prose poems, *But Our Princess Is in Another Castle*. Yours is a book with video game referencing, thought provoking, nostalgia-ridden poems that many would assume as gimmicky and focused on childhood, but no. Not this one. This is a collection about more than games and childhood. It’s about love, both romantic and familial. It’s about philosophy and thought. Death and God. Truth, with a capital T, and fiction. “Do not believe me,” you write in the first poem, “Golden Axe.” “Do not believe me.”

But I can’t help it.

What I loved so much about this collection wasn’t the original thread that piqued my interest—my love of video games, old and new, especially old. It was the world creation, the finely crafted sentences that contained multiple meanings, the heart. And, boy, is there is heart in this book. Reading this collection made mine feel heavy at times. Suffocated, even.

In “Mega Man,” you dropped me in the midst of a young romance with a first kiss on a Ferris wheel. The speaker wants to know his future, wants to know whether this love will last, but a man has unplugged the fortune-telling machine. The man hands the speaker a card that he tacks above his bed: “*Being an electrician is different than being a doctor of light.*” Yes, this references the creator of Mega Man. But it also foreshadows the last section of the book, Light World, which deals heavily with poems about God.

It’s this layering of your poems that brought be back for seconds, thirds, fourths. And each time I read them, there I am in Heart World, Do World, and the other worlds you have made. The imagery is so visceral it’s hard not to feel as though I am riding the Ferris wheel, pausing at the top to stare into the blinking lights beneath. My heart quickens at the thought of that first kiss.

The end of your collection comes with one last section, Game Over. And there I was, again, a kid at an old arcade cabinet, wishing my brothers had more change to spare. Wishing my initials didn’t sound so much like what we use to sit on a toilet. But I will end this letter just like I ended those sessions when I desired to have my initials at the top of the leaderboards, to have my initials

preserved in time, to have my initials mean something.

Yours truly (You Got a New High Score!),

A. A. Singh (AAS)

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