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HYMN & HOWL

celebrating humans and stories



THEHOWLERPROJECT.ORG

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ISSUE ONE // LOOKING
NONFICTION, FICTION, POETRY, ART, INTERVIEWS

issue one

The premiere issue of *Hymn & Howl* Magazine is an honorary publication with words and art from the Howler team and essential friends of the project. Thank you for helping bring this idea to life.

We look forward to featuring stories from the collective in all future issues.

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to whom or what or where

SHYLA SHEHAN



It's been low tide
for a while, the beach
parched. Seagulls search
for salvation from starvation
and move on.

The sky is endless—
immeasurably clear.
I cast my questions out to sea
and marvel at the whole, lonely
Milky Way.

the people who live here

REBECCA ROTERT

Mom is doing makeup for the opera and dad tags along. Beverly Sills has been brought in for the role of Lucia de Lamermoor and she has packed the house. Mom draws wrinkles on a large tenor while the great opera singer is called to the stage. The page is growing urgent. It's clear Miss Sills will miss her entrance if she doesn't show up soon. Mom stops working and listens, wondering what's become of her. A crewmember blows by and says they found her in the green room, apparently smitten to the point of distraction by a big strapping cowboy, my father, who she'd stumbled upon backstage. *Bill Rotert*, mom would scold, later, on their drive home.

He continued to go to the opera with her even after she stopped doing makeup. For the next thirty years he went, even though he dreaded it – the horrible seats, the story he couldn't understand, the required suit and tie – and he never let on. Except to us kids. When they would cheerfully announce that they were headed to the opera, he would make a face like he was about to undergo a spinal tap procedure. But to her, he remained willing, enthusiastic even. It was one of the things I loved most about

their love, the emotional concessions they made. *I will not only go to the opera with you, but I will be happy about it, so that your joy can flow uninterrupted.*

Tonight, mom's going to the opera with an old friend, a fellow singer and widow, and I stay home with dad. We don't leave him alone anymore. Without mom he's terrified, and my presence helps take the edge off, though it doesn't do much.

Mom around here somewhere? He asks. I tell him she's at the opera. He looks at the window then back at me. *Is mom around?*

It's a beautiful evening and I ask him to walk outside. We look at the yellow rose bush, the bleeding hearts and the rhododendron. His face lights up, his mouth opens a little in amazement. *Look at that*, he says over and over. *Isn't that real pretty?* He slowly bends over the irises, as uncertain as if he were on a cliff, leaning out to retrieve a balloon. *Did you see this one here?* He asks.

When he was well, and we would show him something interesting or beautiful his famous question was always, *What does it do?*

And we would say, Oh dad, it doesn't DO anything! It's just beautiful.

Now he is as intoxicated by this old garden as one who has never seen a flower in his life. He doesn't lock up in the face of beauty. He doesn't repeat, get stuck in a loop; there's no terror, anxiety, confusion. He doesn't ask where he is. Sometimes I think, if I could always have beauty on hand for him, he might be okay.

On some level, I understand getting stuck. Lately I've been unable to sleep. I'm sober but I don't feel like being sober anymore, doing the work of it. Nor do I feel like doing the work of being an addict. I circle around this neural cage for hours.

I realize I can't know what his brain feels like but I keep trying to understand how it operates. I've seen the images – the frazzled neurons, the moth-eaten hemispheres – and I can't imagine trying to think, remember and react in this decimated geography. My thoughts travel along the same known roads hour after hour, while his must be a disorienting game of leapfrog.

Beauty pulls him into a brand new place, one that does not require memory. This might be at the heart of beauty: it doesn't require you to remember; it doesn't even require you to be you.

We come to the end of the garden and I decide that we should move to the front yard. There is more to see. I can hold him here longer, give him a break from his sticky, tangled mind.

We walk around the house to the front and I show him the peonies – pink and white, obscenely luscious. He looks at them and nods. He looks out at the street, at the cars speeding by. He looks over at the neighbor's house, at a car full of young men in the driveway, with their windows down, the bass so loud it rattles our screen door. I show him the hydrangea.

He nods without looking at it. I'm losing him to the tangles, I can tell. Let's sit down, I say. He does, tentatively, still the reluctant good sport.

This might be at the heart of beauty: it doesn't require you to remember; it doesn't even require you to be you.

He and mom have sat on this porch for thirty-two years but without her, every move he makes, even this, appears foreign and halting. The chair is uncomfortable to him; he sits awkwardly on the edge. He looks at the men in the driveway next door, he looks at the traffic moving too fast. He is at the opera and he doesn't understand the story.

I point to the huge American Chestnut in our front yard and tell him there used to be a swing on that horizontal branch, that it had been my favorite place, that he had hung it there. He looks up at the branch. I expect, he says, as though it sounds like a reasonable, fatherly thing to do.

These days he tests his memory more against probability than the actual contents of his mind. The question is no longer whether he remembers, but whether something seems plausible.

Have you been inside? He asks.

I look at him and try to think fast. There are answers that comfort and answers that increase his confusion. I'm aware I'm taking too much time. Yes, I say.

Have they kept the place up? He asks, interested.

Yes. It's great, I tell him. Lots of room. Woodwork. I suddenly run out of things to say.

You know anything about the people who live here?

My routine strategy is to go along with whatever narrative he's stumbled upon but there comes a point when that tactic can create a new knot of confusion.

You live here. With mom.

He looks at me like I haven't yet answered the question.

You've been here, let's see, thirty- two years. The tone I have chosen is: Isn't that an interesting fact! I'm careful to siphon out any bit of surprise, anything that smacks of you-should-know-this. I know he absorbs tone if not information. Tone is everything.

So, even though it feels like my heart is shaking, it's important to sound cheerful and certain. My father's entire sense of safety, in this moment, rests on my ability to absorb my sadness, my surprise, and sound like everything is fine. As the Buddhists say, in all manner of all things, all is well.

Have you been inside? He asks again.

When he was well, his brain ticked along incessantly, always hooked into a problem, real or invented. On holidays, when even dad was required to go to church, he would sit there and count things – rafters, fixtures, tiles, pews, statues, people – and on the walk home give a full accounting. Mother would listen to him, smile, and then raise her eyebrows at us kids, as if to say, well isn't *that* impressive.

I don't recognize his mind now. I don't know where it goes, how it works—and don't know why I want to figure it out. So that I can find a way for him to feel safe, I think, discover a magic phrase that transports him, provides a sense of peace. It's what I want for him. It's what I want for me. I want to avoid the hot spots in my own head that fill me with terror and move quickly to the places where I can feel peace and relief, like drinking used to do. What's more, I want to believe that peace is at the heart of our true natures, dad's and mine, that we somehow deserve it.

He wakes up in the middle of the night and



wants to go home. It's his greatest desire, day after day: to go home. It's not a comfort that he is home. He can't trust this because what he sees around him no longer corresponds to his memories. Home is familiarity, certainty, a fixed point, where, in the brutal tide of entropy, nothing changes. Without memory, there is no home. I think of the times I've felt like I was home even though the physical location was foreign to me and I extract that home, then, is certainty of the self, a knowledge that wherever you are, you are home, because the self is the only constant.

At the end of my drinking, I longed for

home and felt it nowhere because I had no home inside myself. My mind, the vehicle of myself, was a runaway train. The only certainty I had then was that I could not stop drinking when I started, and once it began all my boundaries dissolved. I could dance, sing, have sex. And I could count on the holes in my memory the next day. I lay in bed, aching and parched, with the terrible awareness that whole hours had slid into these black holes like a stream of rainwater into the gutter. And all the answers I wanted went the way of the hours. *Where did I leave my car? What happened last night?*

The cat greets us at the door. *Hey kitty*, dad says, and I feel a small flood of relief. I find a nature program on television and we sit down to watch. I need a break. From him, from how I feel, from trying. The low-grade guilt that always accompanies these feelings wanders in, predictably. But he loves the vibrant green leaf filling the screen and he loves the little green worm that the leaf has trapped with its invisible, sticky hairs.

We've watched programs like this together for as long as I can remember, which I love, but that feeling is mixed with terror. For every gazelle leaping expertly across a plain, there's a weak one getting picked off by a lion.

Now we are watching a giant slow-moving water buffalo surrounded by Komodo dragons. They are circling in. It's hard to tell if the water buffalo is clueless, paralyzed or indifferent to what he's got coming. The four dragons wait, watch, advance with slow fluid precision.

I start to feel anxious, upset. I don't want to see this. I look at dad. He is leaning forward in his seat, smiling slightly. When I was young this made me so mad. I'd sit there in a stew of terror and sadness for the animal, and feel angry that my dad seemed to enjoy it. He, of course, would see my little storm brewing and say, *It's just nature, Bec. Nature's a bitch*. This was his version of comfort and I didn't bite. That frustrated him. I know he believed that if I could master my emotional responses, I could do anything. Instead I showed great promise for being

overly sensitive, prone to weeping, too attuned to injustice. Nothing like him, in other words. Just as the water buffalo is about to get *the business*, as dad would say, he turns to me, perhaps to deliver the 'Nature is a Bitch' lesson again. Instead he says, *You know anything about the people who live here?*

I don't, I tell him. *I used to*.



two poems

DAN'L NEWELL



RODGEY POEM

I hope I get the news late
when you die. That I live a while
more with the thought of you
alive. Maybe the paper misses it,
or you're missing for days
and for all we know, you might
return in a week from the woods
hungry and filthy, crawling with stories.

BLACKBERRY PICKING

When I remember my mother happy
I go back to her emerging from brambles,
a loaded bucket keeping her from dancing.
How she'd get into it, thumbs and fingers
purpled from berries that also stained
the cutoff milk jug she carried. Handing me
a used ice cream tub, lugging their dark weight.
Some were sour, not ready for the trip.
But the big sweet ones in hot cobbler
with vanilla ice cream melting over an evening
at the bottom of summer. I'm getting ahead of her.
And her scratched shins and hands. Sweaty legs. Sneaking
over the old Battlefield where the best patches were
without competition. Picking half a day of illegal berries.
Dodging the park ranger, dropping in waist-high grass
when his truck would pass, lying belly-down on the stained
shirtfront she'd sometimes flipped up as a makeshift basket.



art by SARAH EISENLOHR

linocuts

LAURIE TISSIER-VERSE



BALANCE

soft charcoal; ink; cold-pressed paper

FOLLOW YOUR HEART

soft charcoal; ink; cold-pressed paper

burnt plane

JOHN PRICE

As Jason Murphy's mom drove us to the farm, I wondered how it would look now that his dad was dead. It had been almost a year. I pictured man-high weeds and rusty tractors, the house dark and empty, the giant barn rotting with its roof caved in and black birds flying out the broken windows. But my first step out of the car was onto freshly mown grass. Jason's uncle was waving from the front porch of the house. Jason joined me, and we ran toward the barn, which was still standing, and slid open the huge doors. Inside, the light from the upper windows shot down through the dusty air, burning leopard spots onto the floorboards. It smelled of oil and wood and hay, like always.

Jason called me over to the space behind the loft stairs. The frame of an old yellow bike rested on the floor, its pieces scattered nearby. Jason planned to fix it up, he said, so he could ride it that summer. Today he was putting on the handlebars, and asked me to get the tool box.

The box, dented and gray, had been set on one of the mismatched workbenches still lining the walls. Its metallic luster stood out against the dust-covered machine parts lying around it. Here and there I could make out hand prints in the dirty surface, which were



probably his uncle's, but which made me think of Mr. Murphy. Big and dark, part-Indian, he said, ace pilot and WWII hero. Mr. Murphy had always been glad to see me, even after my baby brother died the previous spring, and I spent more time at their farm than usual. He'd never been afraid to put me and Jason, just third graders, to work on one of the junk cars he claimed was not yet beyond hope. That kind of work is good for boys, he'd say, and then place impossibly gentle hands on our shoulders, hands that otherwise swallowed everything they touched, including this box, the one I was now somehow lifting on my own.

Jason held the handlebars out in front of him, twisting them right then left, steering through invisible curves. He set them by the bike and pulled a wrench from the tool box. The wrench

was large and grimy, and when it slipped off the nut, Jason's wrist bent toward the floor, but he didn't drop it.

"Don't you miss him?" I asked.

He ignored me, just like the last time I'd asked, and the time before that. He put the wrench down and walked outside. I followed him down the long grassy airstrip to the sheet-metal shed with the tattered wind sock on top. We walked around the side, stepping through a thicket of tall grass until we reached a big shoebox-shaped something made of interconnected, metal rods.

"This is the plane my dad got killed in," he said, stepping inside the charred, rusty frame. He sat down on the bare steel of the pilot's seat.

I crawled into the space behind him and sat on the wet grass. The last time I'd seen this plane was in a newspaper photo my mom had shown me, its black tail smoking and sticking straight up out of the corn field where Mr. Murphy had been crop-dusting. I was in that same tail, I guessed, but it was hard to imagine that this had once been his plane—no wings, no propeller, no metal skin. Weeds and vines were growing up through it.

"I like to sit here sometimes," Jason said with his back to me. "I see things."

I didn't understand, but then I leaned back on my elbows and let my gaze move up the slope of my friend's skull and launch itself over the shed, the barn, and into the atmosphere. Up there, the plane's skeleton vanished, along with my own, until there was nothing but sky.

Up there, the plane's skeleton vanished, along with my own, until there was nothing but sky.

I wondered if this was the same sky Mr. Murphy saw all those times, and the last time. A sky big enough to carry him over any place or time that ever meant something to him—an ancient Indian hunting ground, a battlefield in France, a cornfield in Iowa. Maybe over our own selves right then, sitting on the ground, looking up.

We stayed there a while, long enough for me to know. Then I followed Jason back to the barn. We had work to do.



spillover poems

JACK PHILLIPS

CURVE

While we sleep the earth rounds herself round
having spun a morning verses slip into view.
We wake on the curve – night trails into
birdsong belly to dawn, saucering wanderers
tuck and curl, mustering sun rolls over edges as
pulls the westering moon, souls take the shape
of daybreak bent in the middle and a little on
the ends.

SEEP

In-breaking wildness or other sort of poetic
rupture makes a lesion some seek to heal
(keep the savage at bay) but this stomate
makes real the passage of breath. In this
spring-fed belly blood-bound bone of bones
gristle and grist the animal gush of our being
gurgles a sylvan seep to write a lune, a
crescent-shaped suture to hold the wound
open.

SWAMP

Autumn bleeds into Solstice the way poetry
soaks before the ripple but comes as wordless
breath that vanishes on composing. Morning
swamp-to saunter taking pause on recumbent
ash soft awash in pondish laughter, bull-
rushes murmur rose hips so tangy to the
tongue, the first word.

BLUE

As with all creatures the flow of my veins carries
a measure of tears in the flat hand of night but in
this light the daybreak wears the skin of my
dreams and holds me, not without her own
sadnesses but in this light she reveals a softer
shade of blue, liquid orange spilling over and
through me.

WEIGHT

The moon in heat plays with mating foxes and
when they call it a night she throws cinders
mostly ashen juncos flinty titmouses pyrite
chickadees and cardinal sparks, finches. Passions
fall on this maiden dawn when gravity proves an
earthly lust the lyric physics of desire, pinkish
lingua on paper in ink, the weight of devotion on
snow.

SHADOW

Canopies draw skylines then veins then a web
then sutras stitch the thin waters of my eyes and
the rest of me. Write bird-songs in the snow a
thumb for a crow a pinky a chickadee frog-song
in mud come spring. Be known by these woods
one flesh among many make shadows with the
same sun lay lyrics on the land.

NUTHATCH

Even on this sharp dawn eleven days
 into the solar year a thousand eyes shine
 images creaturely windows into waking
 being. We can deny our true bodyselves
 but here in cold wildnesses not so,
 stirring earth into bluey-black comes
 orange her original skin and ours.

MUD

The daughters of Atlas escape Orion in
 chase and to the west the crescent cup
 fills with leaking daybreaks, at dawn
 spills claytonia fairy-spuds and fawn-
 lilies asters in the meadow moonseed by
 the creek, a galaxy on the belly of a
 toad, map of heaven in mud.



pizza night on planet fitness

JOHN PRICE

Chris Rondeau, CEO Planet Fitness
Headquarters 4 Liberty Lane West
Hampton, New Hampshire 03842

March 2, 2020

Dear Mr. Rondeau,

It is the first Monday of March and I am once again attending free pizza night here at the local Planet Fitness (a.k.a. “No Judgment Zone”), where I have been a member for six years. I was particularly intent on attending tonight, because I do not know how long it will be before I return. Although there are currently no confirmed cases of coronavirus in Nebraska or Iowa, rumors are that it may soon lead to mass closings and alterations in our lifestyles, including limiting contact with places (like this) where human beings freely touch the same surfaces, exchanging sweat, spittle, high-fives and more than a few tears. And pizza.

I am not writing to debate closing your doors—I know the decision will be a hard one, or if the threat continues to rise, no decision at all. I’m writing only to explain

what this night, this place, has meant to me and perhaps a few others it has served.

But first let me say something about this pizza, which is smelling really good right now. It looks like the teenaged attendant ordered a good variety tonight—pepperoni, sausage, veggie, even a gluten-free option. My favorite is the supreme, and it’s seriously calling to me. No Hawaiian, as usual, which has always disappointed my wife when she’s attended First Mondays, but you can be forgiven for that. The concept of pineapple as a topping has always been a little controversial. Sort of like serving pizza in a health club.

I confess I had mixed feelings when Planet Fitness first came to town. You replaced the Barnes & Noble, which had occupied this space in the mall for about a decade. When my books came out, I gave readings here to local people, mostly those who knew me personally, mostly elderly, some of whom are now dead, but not from COVID-19. I miss them. They were from a generation that valued books enough to purchase them. They didn’t shop online, but at stores like this Barnes & Noble, which was the only store in town to stock my books, because it was the only bookstore. Funny, I used to think of the big

mega-bookstores as the villains, pushing out smaller independent sellers, but then they were pushed out of business by Amazon. I miss all the physical books that used to inhabit this place and the massive magazine stand and, in the café, the scent of espresso and the panorama of famous authors that made you think you were invited to sit among them. I'd give anything right now to join the table with Nabokov and Orwell.

But it's more than that. When this space was a bookstore, my young sons played at the table with the Thomas the Tank Engine track (talk about germs!) beneath the Winnie-the-Pooh Hundred Acre Woods panorama, which was where the leg press machines are currently located. Later the boys dressed up as Harry Potter and Ron Weasley for the grand release party of the final *Harry Potter* book. In the general vicinity of the ab-crunchers, they sat and drank butterbeer, flicking their wet straws at one another and laughing at the big bearded man dressed as Hagrid, but not because he was overweight—even then, this was a No Judgment Zone. The place was crowded and overheated, and people were breathing all over one another, but even then I thought: When will we ever see such a spirited, sticky gathering of generations to celebrate the release of a physical book?

Now this entire section of the mall is

set to be demolished and replaced by a Menards. Even though you've committed to moving only a short distance away, I'm still grieving the loss of the mall. In its prime, it contained not just the bookstore, but other places that meant something to us: the movie theater and the KB Toys and the holiday Santa display and the glow-in-the-dark mini-golf course and the ice cream store and the lily pond-themed play area, where the kids climbed barefoot on the backs of frogs and drooled on giant dragonfly wings, while we sat and took pictures.

I miss all the physical books that used to inhabit this place and the massive magazine stand and, in the café, the scent of espresso and the panorama of famous authors that made you think you were invited to sit among them.

We were totally in love with those children. All of them. The frogs are gone now, but the spongy carpeted area is still there, along with the unimpressive gray tiles. On these same tiles, unchanged in all our years here, our boys toddled at first, holding our hands, then ran to and from our arms. Countless reps.

To watch a child grow up has its joys, but it can also feel like a kind of death. A double death when the physical places those children used to inhabit also disappear. Sometimes, when I am doing another set on the leg press, I think I hear a train whistle and the voices of those little boys. Sometimes I think I see them running at me, and the weight I'm lifting with my legs is their bodies and I'm carrying them. Then I snap out of it, due to the knee pain, and find myself once again

alone with my body.

So change can be hard. On the other hand, despite chasing and lifting kids, I was pretty unhealthy during most of those early years as a parent, neglecting regular exercise and good eating. I consumed a lot of pizza. I was also in the early stages of trying to support a growing family, and failing. I was full of self-judgment. Then, at age 39, I suffered what my doctor called a stress-induced “cardiac event.” I decided I needed something more than my ancient dumbbell set and searched for a health facility I could afford. For a while, I worked out with my students at our old campus recreation center, alternating sets with them at the bench press. They were very kind, never sniggering as they removed most of the weights when it was my turn or when I farted while straining to complete that final lift. When our university decided to build a state-of-the-art recreation center, I got my hopes up. But then it was inhabited mostly by university administrators and professors in the Colleges of Business and Engineering. They are, as a result, a remarkably fit-looking group. Those of us in Liberal Arts were left to dig out our nappy sweatsuits from grad school and hit the nearby Elmwood Park play set, waiting in line for three-year-olds to finish their reps on the monkey bars.

I was discouraged.

Then Planet Fitness arrived. Frankly, I hated the purple and gold colors, which resembled the bruises my ego would no doubt develop in such a place. Yes, I heard it was

affordable, which is important in our low-income town—all school kids get free lunch here, which often includes pizza—but I still resisted because of the whole workout club culture thing. An allergy that started with Richard Simmons and Olivia Newton-John in the 1980s. But then, while I was eating a sauce-dripping gyro in what was left of the mall food court (now entirely empty), I peered through the glass wall at everyone exercising. I saw quite a few bodies my own age and disposition. Some of them had this kind of deer-in-the-headlights look, mouths slack, not at all fit-looking or in command of their bodily functions. I could relate.

Most persuasive, however, was the familiar woman I spotted on the stepping machine, which as you know is super tall and works kind of like a self-propelled escalator that doesn't take you anywhere. I recognized her from the public library, where she often brought her five young kids, unleashing them on the shelves of DVDs, which they stripped like locusts. One of them literally grabbed a *Thomas the Tank Engine* disc out of my hand. This mom did her best to keep them under control, scolding them occasionally, red-faced, avoiding eye contact with other patrons, but inevitably she would retreat to some other, quieter section of the library and let the kids run amok. I was kind of judgmental of her, I admit. But seeing her elevated above the fray, queen-like, on the stepping machine, in her royal blue sweatpants and mis-matched extra-large

camo t-shirt, gasping for life while I ate a giant dripping gyro, I was filled with something that might be called admiration.

So, I took advantage of the “New Year’s Resolution Special” (\$1 down!) and joined. My first night on the treadmill, I dialed up the soundtrack for Saturday Night Fever, and started right in on a heavy sprint, skipping the warm-up because I thought I had to make up for lost time. Halfway through “You Should Be Dancing (Yeah!),” I sprinted for the toilets. Part of it was that I was out of shape, but it was also because I’d read some internet story about chocolate milk being a great pre-workout protein drink, and had guzzled a beer mug full of it just before arriving. So although I did indeed yack during my first night at Planet Fitness, I did not do so entirely because my muscles had atrophied, which gave me hope. Hope is good.

As a new member, I mocked First Monday Pizza Night, along with Second Tuesday Bagel Morning, when I first heard about them. Others did, too, as you know. There was a lot of criticism online, some of it fairly justified—I mean, eating pizza seems to defeat the whole purpose, right? So I actually did a little research and discovered that this whole free food thing started in 1998, at your fourth club location in Concord, New Hampshire. The hot water tank had

broken down and as a way to thank customers for staying loyal, you offered them free pizza. It soon became a thing, expanding nationwide, along with the chain.

Pizza as gratitude. I liked that.

My research has since uncovered at least one health professional who trumpets the benefits of Pizza Night. In an interview for *Shape.com*, Sarah Mattison Berndt, M.S., R.D. stated, “When you train hard, it’s only natural to reward yourself from time to time, even if that means post-workout pizza. Although a savory slice provides extra calories and isn’t the cleanest recovery fuel, noshing on pizza isn’t going to nullify all of your hard work if you aren’t doing it all the time. In fact, it may help you to feel more satisfied and ditch feelings of deprivation that could otherwise build up to a blow-out.” Feelings of deprivation is a phrase we might be using a lot more in the years ahead.

My first night on the treadmill, I dialed up the soundtrack for Saturday Night Fever, and started right in on a heavy sprint, skipping the warm-up because I thought I had to make up for lost time.

As for our particular Planet Fitness, it has never run out of hot water that I know of, but it does frequently run out of hand sanitizer. Given the recent national shortages, I don’t see that coming back soon, like a lot of things that were meant to protect us. So, I’ve gotten in the habit of using the sink in the men’s room to wash my hands between “resistance training” and “aerobic

"training." It seems like the right timing, since my hands have just been all over the bars and pulleys that so many other hands have been all over.

But can the touching, directly or indirectly, ever really be prevented? For instance, there are no paper towels in the men's bathroom, so we all use the hand blower. On the surface, that seems the environmentally friendly and sanitary thing to do. Recently, though, I read an article about how these blow dryers are so powerful, they suck all the pieces of the human body floating unseen in the air—skin flakes, hair, microscopic particles of urine and feces—and blow it all back onto your hands. This offers further proof that bathroom stalls and similarly well-meaning contraptions, such as clothing, may afford us some personal privacy, but do not ultimately protect us from intimacy. That might be something else we become nostalgic for in the coming weeks or months of quarantine. Who knows?

Speaking of news, this may sound weird, but one of the other indulgences I really cherish about this place, besides the pizza, are the TV sets all lined up like hunting trophies at the top of the north wall. I know that almost every health club has them, but at home I only get digital reception, so coming here feels a little like when I go to academic conferences and watch TV all night instead of proofreading my presentation. Sports especially help me ignore the physical pain, unless it's golf. I've watched teams win unremarkable games, now forgotten, and world championships. Tennis, basketball,

football, bowling, cage fighting, and a gazillion other sports. I've vicariously triumphed in them all. Such imaginary victories may become all too common as the actual competitions are canceled.

On a related note, I like to switch back and forth between FOX News and CNN, which feels like mental wind sprints and not always inspiring. Even so, through that double prism I've observed two presidential election cycles and most major world events of the last six years, including at least three major epidemics. Through my increasingly sore, exhausted musculature, my breathlessness, the suffering of the world became something more than emotional. Not to mention the vicissitudes of the human condition as conveyed in all those game shows and reality shows and cop/doctor/bachelorette shows. And in the fragments of countless movies from every decade of my life. I'm not alone in wanting to watch—the machines closest to the televisions are always the most popular with my age group. We've breathed it all in together.

But back to this pizza. It's Domino's, as usual, which always makes me happy right off the bat on First Mondays. There's some history to share about this. In college, I basically lived on lukewarm slices served at the corner Domino's near my boarding house. In the evening, I would walk home from the library or from a pick-up basketball game with my buddies, or just an aimless walk, body aching pleasantly, and grab a slice of supreme and a liter of

Pepsi. The food was cheap, which was good because I was student-poor. I owned virtually nothing—no car, no house, no club membership, just my physical self which was compensation for all that I didn't own and others did, because they didn't have what I had: a youthful body that could run and dance and love and stay up all night and bask in the sun for as long as it wanted and eat and drink what it wanted. Like the first dusting of snow in November or the first combustible engines cruising our roads, nothing in this body had yet accumulated to spoil the landscape and cause regret. So I ate a lot at that Domino's, alone and with friends—so many friends back then—at an inside table under the fluorescent lights after midnight or outside on the curb to watch the setting sun paint the sky. So much pizza. So much youth. Cheap and warm and filling.

Ah, Domino's. It pretty much smells the same, which is wonderful. As I inhale, I can feel that earlier, younger body stir within me, calling, *I am still here. You can find me. If you feed me.* A siren's song, I know, but still it beckons. I watch as someone finally succumbs. It is the older gentleman with the ponytail and grey Santa Claus beard. He regularly wears jeans for his workouts, held up with a broad leather belt. I first met him last year at the chest machine, of which there is unfortunately only one—many of us time our workouts so we are ready to

hit that thing as soon as it opens up. Sometimes we don't even wait for the previous user to wipe it down, but those days may be numbered. Anyway, I was sitting there trying to select some music on my earphones, when he leaned down and asked how many sets I had left. That's Midwestern for, "Will you please get the fuck off your phone and finish working out your moobs so I can start on my own?"

"Sorry," I said. "I'm just trying to find the right ELO song. I'll be done soon."

He paused.

"I love ELO."

As I inhale, I can feel that earlier, younger body stir within me, calling, I am still here. You can find me. If you feed me. A siren's song, I know, but still it beckons.

Instant bond. We've given affectionate yet still manly chin jerks at each other ever since. He gives me one now as he gets ready to shove a slice of supreme into his sweat-dripping face. I give him the thumbs-up, which is Midwestern for "Godspeed, my friend."

When I look around, I see several other familiar strangers who have been with me from the start. They are my involuntary support posse. I don't know what I would do if I didn't see at least one of them every time I come in here, which is sometimes every other day and sometimes not at all for weeks. They don't judge me for that. However long it has been, we always acknowledge

each other in some way, a wave or chin jerk or just a prolonged staring which in any other context would be sort of creepy. We know each other not by our names but by our faces, our bodies—some of which have transformed dramatically since we first became aware of one another. I feel a deep affection for them, these bodies. My teenage son, who used to play with toy trains here, once made a snide remark about a “Boomer Body” in yoga pants taking her sweet time on the chest machine he was waiting to use. I think he was surprised by my harsh reply, for which I later apologized. He’s a good kid, but I needed him to know how much I care for these people, my companions. They haven’t come here to get toned for spring break or the downtown bar scene, even if both get cancelled this month. No, they have come here to save their lives. I will not tolerate any mockery of them.

There is, for instance, the woman with the military tattoos on her arms and the massive scar on her upper left shoulder. She’s in her late 30s or so and sings (badly) at the top of her lungs while on the treadmill, punching the air and cheering for herself. She’s cheering for all of us and our private victories, on battlefields real or imagined—at least that’s how it feels when I’m on a treadmill anywhere near her. It gets me going. There’s another woman about the same age, a former high school athlete whose husband cheated on her with her best friend. Now she comes here with her older brother. The siblings laugh and talk loudly (which is how I know about the husband) and high-five, in between beating the shit out of the

20-minute workout machines, all of which are colored coward-yellow, like her ex.

There is the 50ish, interracial gay couple who everyone seems to know and love. The black man is tall and lithe, and prefers the rowing machines and ellipticals. The white man has a very muscular upper body, but thin legs, which is not uncommon for us middle-aged guys whose knees are shot, but whose arms are still working, for now. For us, working out the biceps, unlike the quads or the abs, is like eating pizza—a more immediate gratification. The idea that it might still be possible for me to have biceps like him is truly inspiring. One time, near the pull-up machine, this same guy walked over to someone he knew and asked if he could listen to whatever music she was enjoying. She pulled out one of her wireless earphones, which was undoubtedly covered in sweat, and just gave it to him. He put it in his ear and laughed. Then they did a little dance together.

There is another middle-aged couple who doesn’t seem to have a lot of money—you can kind of tell these things about patrons by the range and brand of workout clothes they wear. I’m sorry to say such comparisons do take place, even in the No Judgment Zone. This couple wears the same loose, gray sweat pants and long-sleeved Ocean Pacific t-shirts from the 80s—his is white with pink lettering, hers is pink with white lettering. Both have images of palm trees on the back. They always show up together and will only use the same kind of machines and only if they are

side by side (so no chest workout). And they always exercise in sync, always at the same pace and same number of reps and sets. It never changes. Over the last few years, the length and pacing of their exercising has increased—those once tight palm tree t-shirts becoming, on the treadmills, like triumphant flags flapping loosely in the wind—but their ritual has never wavered. Always together, always to the same invisible beat that has bound them from the beginning.

There is a group of young Latino guys who speak rapid Spanish and move together from one machine to the next, taking turns and helping each other with the weight adjustments. If I get behind them, they can slow down my own workout significantly, but I really like hearing the music of their language, the good humor and comradery in their tones, chock-full of the future.

There's a pimply boy, maybe 15, who follows around a super buff guy who I infer is the personal trainer his parents have hired for him. The boy is overweight (No Judgment!) and I've heard him mention something about diabetes. Sometimes he looks a little embarrassed, sometimes scared, but whenever he lays back to do the bench press, his trainer kind of whispers to him: *Ok, buddy, just one more set, you can do it.* Maybe he whispers because he's just a soft-spoken guy, or maybe because the kid he's trying to help gets yelled at enough in his life. Or maybe because he doesn't want to set off the Lunk Alarm.

The Lunk Alarm. It's one of my favorite features here, besides First Monday Pizza Night. As you know, it is literally a siren that goes off whenever a "lunk"—usually a muscle-bound white male—bogarts the free weights and/or squat machines and/or grunts loudly while straining and/or clangs massive amount of weights up and down. This is one of the reasons I have avoided other gyms. They can make us all feel inadequate, these bodies that ripple like sonic waves, veins snaking all over their taut muscles like a map of the Ozarks.

That said, there are times when I've felt the Lunk Alarm was set off prematurely, without a full appreciation of the personal context of the body in violation. For instance, Myron, who is a friend of the family. He's maybe 40 and is a long-time weight lifter, ripped from top to bottom. Every now and then, he clanks a few discs and sets off the siren. But did you know that he also only has one eye and that his mom died recently from cancer? Plus, he's a really nice guy. Just last week he brought in his mom's sister for the first time, who is around 70 and a former smoker. Myron was very patient and encouraging while coaching his aunt on the machines, even though she sometimes couldn't complete one rep. I overheard her engaging in a lot of self-shaming. She actually started talking to me about it, how her body used to look, what it was once capable of doing, as she and Myron waited for me to finish on the chest machine. She started crying. So I gave her a hug, even though we were both pretty sweaty, and she hugged me back and asked

God to bless me. Maybe I'll be telling my grandchildren: This is what it was like before corona times.

Speaking of someone who might need a hug, there is an octogenarian woman who is bent nearly in half from, I assume, osteoporosis or rheumatoid arthritis. She comes here alone and slowly makes the rounds on the weight machines, in addition to the treadmill—an act of incredible endurance. An example to all. And yet, on the way out, I often hear her ask the young attendant, whoever it is, if she might “please” have one of the grape chew candies in the bucket up front, even though there are plenty and they are free. She knows this and yet she makes a point of asking permission of this young person, who can't possibly know what she's been through the previous hour or the previous near-century. Nevertheless, they always talk for a few minutes before she goes on her way.

I'm afraid that in future centuries, when the hot water and a lot of other things run out, we won't be able to send them a pizza of gratitude. So let them have as much as they want right now, okay?

I don't want to get anyone in trouble, but there's a teenager here tonight who is on his third slice. Some of my fellow Boomer Bodies are giving him scolding looks. Personally, I think he and the other teenagers and college-age kids should be allowed to eat as much pizza as they want. In fact, you should encourage them to do so, if you aren't already. Our job at this age is to feed them, because that's always been the job of people our

age, or should be. So I want to correct a false impression I might have left earlier, when I called out my son for his momentary frustration with someone from my generation. As COVID-19 has spread, I've heard a lot of critical terms thrown around about his generation—reckless, indifferent, narcissistic. “Health privileged” is a new favorite. *Privileged* is not a term I associate with most of them. For a variety of reasons we can lay right at the feet of people our age, they're mostly poor, or will mostly be poor. We've left them vulnerable to the future in ways we can hardly understand, since we won't live to see it.

And yet, despite all the ways we've let them down, when the occasional homeless person from my generation comes here on First Mondays to eat some pizza and use the shower, these same young people invariably turn a blind eye. They pick up their wet towels. They feed them. This makes me love their generation even more than I already do. I'm afraid that in future centuries, when the hot water and a lot of other things run out, we won't be able to send them a pizza of gratitude. So let them have as much as they want right now, okay?

But what is the pizza, exactly? What does it *mean*?

Surely, it is more than its individual toppings or crust style. Is it about

self-reward? Self-denial? Whatever it means, it cannot be escaped. Not on First Monday Pizza Night. Wherever you go in the club, you will smell it, even if you don't eat it. Even if they provide, as they do, veggie and gluten-free options. It smells the same, like whatever it is you think you need—youth, courage, health, compassion. Food. The pizza will not be ignored or forgotten. It sings. If consumed, it will do inside whatever work it was meant to do, according to the age and composure of the body that consumes it. According to what that body has accomplished (or not) over the last hour or decades—whether completing an additional set of 15 reps on the arm curl or passing a kidney stone or a baby.

Demonstrating, for all to see, the possibility of individual and collective morphogenesis, like leaves, our bodies becoming the point of abscission, where new growth sprouts from the point of separation from earlier selves, once thought inseparable.

Each slice of pizza, no matter what, will transmogrify into something entirely different inside each of us. A tightening bicep or a loosening layer of belly fat, a self-gratification or self-flagellation. Hate or love, or the memory of love. How many lifelong relationships—friendships, marriages—as well as impulsive carnal mistakes were facilitated by pizza? Pizza, for some of us, has revealed new worlds. In college I once consumed a slice with sausage and

magic mushrooms and it changed my perception of the color green forever. It changed, as well, the possibilities of what I thought a face might become to another face, in perpetual metamorphosis, in waking dream. As beautifully warped and fleeting as spring rain on a candle-lit window. That is the human face, compared to what resides, eternal, behind it. That is pizza.

It is becoming clear coronavirus will change our lives forever. It may, in fact, lead to the permanent termination of First Monday Pizza Night. I hope not. But if so, I would suggest ordering the pizza anyway and keeping it behind the counter. The smell alone might temporarily overcome the stench of hand sanitizer and fear, becoming a reminder of what we used to mean to one another, freely exchanging the sweat of our struggles, wordlessly confessing the otherwise secret longings and courage of our souls. Demonstrating, for all to see, the possibility of individual and collective morphogenesis, like leaves, our bodies becoming the point of abscission, where new growth sprouts from the point of separation from earlier selves, once thought inseparable.

So the pizza smells good and is loaded with essential meaning, but I have decided to deny myself tonight—a small sacrifice ahead of larger ones to come. Maybe it will leave more for the

teenagers. I will instead dial up Led Zeppelin on the earphones and then, perhaps for the last time in a while, join my fellow human beings, my loves, on the stepping machines. Perhaps for the last time in a while, we shall savor breathing in close proximity the scent that calls to our common hunger. Our bodies going through the motions of what we should know as an absolute truth, that whether near or far we are like that married couple, always in perfect sync with one another. Always climbing, together, the stairway that never quite leads to heaven. Trying to save ourselves with each breathless step.

Sincerely,
John T. Price



quotidian moods

THOEBEN P.

THE EVERYDAY

pastel; fine line



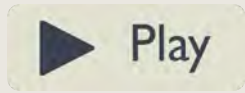


five questions with kevin clouther

STORYTELLER SPOTLIGHT

Below is the transcript from Favorite Storyteller Kevin Clouther's video journal.

You can also watch Kevin's video on YouTube.



Hello to anybody out there watching. My name is Kevin Clouther, and I am a fiction writer in Omaha, Nebraska. I teach fiction writing at the University of Nebraska-Omaha, where I direct the MFA in Writing, our graduate program in creative writing here.

Where do you find inspiration?

I find it in any number of places, which I imagine is true of most people. But one of the places I find inspiration is actually in words themselves. I've studied Latin as an undergraduate, and I think I was supposed to fall in love with the stories

and myths that we were translating. But what I actually fell in love with was understanding how the language itself worked. That's what really stayed with me all these years. And so I see a word like "inspiration," and I can't help but see that root, "spiritus," meaning breath, and the idea of inspiration in English today coming from that Latin word for breath, which was probably first formed 25 years ago, 2500 years ago. There's something really cool about that to me, the way that language stays with us and changes and becomes a part of our lives, and is rooted in the way that experiences move through the body. I find that inspiring.

What is the relationship between the brain and the body?

For me, it's all part of the same mysterious organism, which I don't pretend to understand very well at all. I've been mediating for the last three years or so, and one of the mantras that gets shared over and over is that everything is simply happening, and consciousness... we're just participating in this experience that we can't necessarily understand on a really meaningful level. And we are not behind our faces. We are not inside a brain, inside a skull. We're all just existing in the world. And in that way, I guess I'm not a very good Cartesian. To me, the brain and the body are just one and the same. At least that's how I feel about it now.

What is your favorite word?

My favorite word is the way E.E. Cummings uses "carefully" in a poem that I've loved since the first time I read it, called "Somewhere I Have Never Travelled, Gladly Beyond." And the line is, "the snow carefully everywhere descending." The idea that snow falls carefully is just so exactly right to me. The first time I read that line, I couldn't believe how accurate it was. It seemed like something that I'd been thinking about my whole life, although I'd never put language to it. And that adverb, "carefully," I think the way E.E. Cummings uses that word in that poem

is my favorite word.

Where do you find meaning in life?

I'll reference another poet—even though I'm a fiction writer, I read a lot of poetry—Larry Levis, one of my favorite poets. And he said in an essay that the meaning of life is that it stops. And that's maybe not a particularly unique take, but that particular articulation does seem right to me.

Tell us about a favorite hat you wear?

Directing the MFA in Writing at UNO is the most rewarding career move of my life. For most of my life, I taught undergraduates, but when I came to UNO, I started working with graduate students and directing the program. And the thing that's so meaningful about the role to me is that I'm really able to play a part in the lives of so many different students and teachers, in terms of helping them to actualize their professional ambitions. And as I get older, helping other people to realize their creative projects and convert what's in their minds into something on the page that might then, in turn, be meaningful to somebody else on the other end as a reader... it's the greatest gift that I've been given as an employee, and I'm thankful for it every day that I teach and that I walk on this planet.



strawberries

KEVIN CLOUTHER

Andrea knew it was a bad idea. That wasn't the question. Sometimes you had to go through with an idea, not to confirm whether it was good or bad but to see what happened. That's how you knew you were alive, she decided, watching the suitcases spit out of the wall and onto the conveyor belt.

Why had she checked her suitcase? She never checked her suitcase, preferring to haul it through the whole miserable process, so as to avoid the step she'd arrived at now. Maybe she was punishing herself. That made sense, given the circumstance. The circumstance was this: she was going to visit her ex-boyfriend Nick. They weren't having an affair—she didn't think so, not yet—but they weren't exactly friends either. They hadn't seen each other since high school.

“Excuse me,” a man said. “I just need to get my bag.”

Andrea looked at the man and then the conveyor belt, which was pushing a series of evenly spaced suitcases in her direction. She stepped aside, and he rushed into the space she vacated.

She checked her phone. Nick had offered to pick her up, but she declined, thinking the setting would

lead to theatrics they would regret: a messy hug, hands left too long on shoulder blades, all the unfamiliar smells they'd acquired or learned to disguise. Better to rent a car, to be in charge of when she arrived and departed. That car felt a long way away now, which was okay. She wasn't ready for whatever happened next.

Her suitcase was among the first to appear. She scooped it off the conveyor with one arm. With her other arm she cut through the air, not realizing everyone had gotten out of her way. Was there something frightening about her here?

Andrea knew it was a bad idea. That wasn't the question. Sometimes you had to go through with an idea, not to confirm whether it was good or bad but to see what happened.

She'd taken out her phone to call her husband. It was an instinct. But also she wanted to talk to him. As always, he picked up right away.

“How's Florida?” he asked.

“Is that where I am?”

“That's what you said.”

She winced, not because it was an accusation but because it wasn't. She heard at least one of her boys crying in the background. Or, if not crying, then asking for something in a way that was indistinguishable from crying.

“I’m in the airport,” she said. “I might just stay here.”

“Airports have bars.”

“How are the boys?”

He paused as he debated what to tell her. The longer he paused, the worse the boys’ crimes became in her mind. How much trouble could they have caused since she left? She knew the answer: a lot.

Plus, her husband was permissive. He permitted any number of things she wouldn’t, which made her the bad guy, which she resented. She tried to focus on her resentment as she made her way to the rental car counter.

“The boys are fine,” her husband decided.

“I’ll bring them back something stupid.”

“Bring me back something stupid too.”

Andrea nodded into the empty air. She hung up the phone and placed both hands on the empty rental car counter.

“Is anyone here,” she asked loudly.

Why was nobody else in line? She might have loudly asked that too.

She rubbed the handle of her suitcase and felt suddenly sheepish over its contents, including—humiliatingly—the bra she’d bought. She left on the tags. And there was

—it was so stupid—the plastic bag of strawberries, already swimming in their own tawdry juices. She would throw out that bag before she got in the car, provided she got a car.

She unzipped her suitcase, and it was worse than she remembered. Not one but two bathing suits. Three floppy hats. Did she think that by flying back to Florida she would transform into a wearer of floppy hats? The sandals she didn’t regret. She was momentarily overcome with a desire to plunge both feet into hot sand. Then she allowed herself to imagine—just for one moment—the ocean washing over her feet. She felt the sudden cold, the scratch of salt. Already the sun was restoring something. Her skin? That would be good. She reached for the skin beneath her eyes, which was the skin she worried about most. She worried about a lot of skin.

“Sorry,” a woman said, rushing behind the counter.

“I have a reservation.”

“Of course.”

The woman got to work on a computer. Andrea took comfort in the speed of the woman’s typing. It felt good to be taken seriously. Few things bothered her more than being ignored. She consulted her phone to see if her husband had written. He hadn’t. Neither had Nick. Increasingly, she thought of them together, not as competitors but as different aspects of the

same life. She shared some things with one and some things with the other. There were few things she shared with both.

Hideously, they had the same name.

“Okay,” the woman said, “I see the problem.”

“There’s a problem?”

The woman produced a look of professional pity. “When your flight is more than an hour late—”

“That wasn’t my fault.”

“No, but when a flight is more than one hour late, the computer—”

So the computer was going to take the heat. Andrea was familiar with—strangely comforted by—this strategy.

“When is the soonest I can get a car?” she asked.

“I might be able to help,” a man said.

The woman looked at him. So did Andrea. She thought she recognized him. Did they sit next to each other on the plane? Did they go to high school together twenty—God, more—years ago?

“You let me get my bag,” the man clarified. “From the thing. What’s



art by THOEBEN P.

it called?”

“Carousel,” the woman said.

Carousel! The whimsy was incongruous. Andrea thought, unwillingly, of her boys at home.

“I don’t need my reservation,” the man said.

“What’s your name?” The woman was already typing.

Good news: it was no problem to transfer the reservation.

“How come his car wasn’t given away?” Andrea asked.

The woman gestured toward the computer.

“Glad I could help,” the man said before disappearing forever.

“Do I get the keys from you?” Andrea asked.

“You’ll need to take the shuttle,” the woman said.

The shuttle arrived every fifteen minutes, except when it didn’t.

When Andrea was younger, boys always wanted her to listen to music with headphones. How eager those boys were to share their secrets!

The air outside was thick. Andrea hadn’t prepared herself for how different the air would feel. It seemed a harbinger of all the things she hadn’t considered, which, of course, there was no way to know about in advance. She began to worry about these things, not one by one but all at once.

She’d thought, many times, about seeing Nick for the first time. Or for the first time again. But she hadn’t thought, not really, about the next hour or the hour after that. Her flight back wasn’t until Sunday evening, and it was only Friday morning. The number of hours between now and then seemed larger than anything she’d accounted for at home, where the trip raced from idle flirtation to reality.

She tried, standing at the shuttle stop, to retrace her steps. The only other person waiting was a teenage girl. Andrea wondered why this girl was traveling alone. Where was she going? Andrea

didn’t ask. The girl wore enormous black headphones. She moved her head steadily to whatever music moved through them. When Andrea was younger, boys always wanted her to listen to music with headphones. How eager those boys were to share their secrets! So many people told her then how hard it was being a teenager that she began to believe them.

Now she looked back at those years fondly as a time of colossal self-involvement. It was unimaginable to think of her concerns first without denial or compartmentalization. Indeed, denial and compartmentalization—especially that—had accompanied every aspect of this trip, starting with the purchase of plane tickets.

Are we sure this is a good idea, she’d written Nick.

Of course not, he wrote back, and her heart thrilled.

It was a problem. Because she was married. Because he also was married. Because, worse, she liked her husband. Did Nick like his wife? Andrea didn’t ask. They didn’t talk about their spouses. They talked, almost exclusively, about the past.

The shuttle arrived in a huff of exhaust. It made her tired just looking at the shuttle. The door opened

loudly, and the girl got in first. She had no suitcases, only a backpack, which she wore with both straps, criminally uncool in Andrea's day. Andrea sat across from the girl on the shuttle. They were the only two passengers. The driver was an enormous man squinting beneath a translucent green visor like the ones croupiers wear. At least, they wore those visors in movies. Andrea had never been to Las Vegas or any casino. She'd never been to most places. She could drive the rental car anywhere.

No way the girl was old enough to rent a car. Andrea was pretty sure you have to be at least twenty-five. What would she do to be twenty-five again? She thought about it, though doing so was more unpleasant than she'd expected.

At twenty-five, she had her pick. Men wanted to take her on dates. Friends wanted to meet her for drinks. People were always paying for things. She reached into her purse. She would give two dollars to the driver, one for her and one for the girl, who was really jamming out to the headphones now. Andrea smiled at the girl, which she ignored. Surely, it was good that this girl didn't feel pressure to acknowledge a stranger's curiosity.

Although it seemed a little rude.

The shuttle opened its door in the middle of an expansive parking lot. Andrea handed the driver two dollars, and he thanked her so profusely, she suspected—but couldn't confirm—irony. At the edge of the parking

lot was a little hut. Andrea followed the girl into this hut. Andrea worked her way to another empty counter. The girl sat in the only chair.

"Where is everybody?" Andrea asked.

The girl didn't answer, of course.

"I'll take whatever," Andrea said. "Whatever color, whatever size."

She spread her arms, resisting the temptation to put her hands on the empty counter again. There seemed a finality to that repetition. She might be tired, but she wasn't giving up.

Because things stay the same for so long, it's easy to forget how quickly—how often—they change. Like that, a woman was behind the counter, retrieving the reservation. Like that, Andrea was inside the sedan with all its comforting scents: fake leather, black rubber, disinfectant. All she had to do was tell the car where to go, and the computer pointed the way. The accent of the GPS was unplaceably—British-adjacent, robot-British?—elegant. The highway was wide open. She was at Nick's house before she knew it.

Was his house what she expected? It turned out she hadn't expected anything. You can only expect so much, and she'd directed her attention elsewhere: to his appearance, for one thing. She studied both the photos online and the few photos she'd kept from

high school. He didn't send her any pictures directly, and she didn't send him any either—their exchanges were shy, even polite in this regard.

Nick's house was neither big nor small. It was both nice and not, a single man's house. But he wasn't single. He had a wife. How hard Andrea had worked not to think about his wife! Andrea parked on the street, though the driveway was empty. Absurdly, she almost checked the mailbox.

What was she doing? The enormity of that question roared into her consciousness. She was sitting behind the steering wheel of a rental car. She was applying lip balm in the rearview mirror. She was depositing keys into her purse, but she wasn't opening the door. First she needed to decide a few things, such as who she would be when she knocked on his door. It had been a long time since she made that decision.

She could be fun. Wasn't she fun once upon a time? Didn't she produce joints from her bra and light them in the passenger seat of cars going very fast? Didn't the people in the backseat—beautiful people, men and women, all eighteen-, nineteen-, twenty-years-old—bend their slender wrists to retrieve the joints from her? Not two years before she couldn't hold one without burning her fingertips. She wished she had a joint now, or at least a lorazepam. She considered driving somewhere else,



maybe a pharmacy.

She could drive to the apartment where she'd grown up with her mother. Like most people Andrea went to school with, Nick hadn't moved far. She could get to the apartment, if it still existed, in ten minutes.

Andrea was tired of thinking. She was tired, period. She returned to the rearview mirror to confirm what she already knew, that she looked desperate. That was okay. There was no pretending anymore. Or there wouldn't be as soon as she knocked.

But there would be no knocking because there Nick was, standing before his door. He was taller than she remembered. Or maybe just taller than her husband. Of course, Nick had been watching her. Everything she'd been worrying about, he'd

been worrying about in his own unknowable way.

Andrea hurried out of the car. She smiled or attempted something approximating a smile. He attempted something similar. There were, between her car and his door, about twenty-five feet. At some point he would walk to her, or she would walk to him. Maybe they would walk to each other. Or maybe this was a dream, an entirely reasonable performance of the unconscious mind. She would think, upon waking, that was something.

But it wasn't anything, not yet. She was still deciding who she would be, and he was deciding too. He couldn't control how tall he was, but he could control what he said and didn't. He wasn't saying anything, and she wasn't saying anything either. They remained frozen, almost smiling.

Then she realized she'd expected the seventeen-year-old version of him. No matter how many times they texted—they rarely spoke by phone—she carried the high school version of Nick in her mind. What did he see in his private dream? They still weren't saying anything. Of course, she'd expected to become the seventeen-year-old version of herself, the Andrea who was more than fun, who possessed a brain full of ideas, who wasn't about to spend the rest of her life circling the same half-empty parking lots. That Andrea was gone first chance she got. So what was she doing back?

"You want to come inside?" Nick finally asked.

Andrea locked the car doors with her keys, and the car produced a conclusive *beep*, triggering an unexpected panic over the girl from the rental car counter. Before leaving, Andrea had neglected to make sure this girl was okay. What if she were still sitting inside the little hut, waiting with her giant headphones? If nobody came to get her, would she try to rent a car, or would she start walking? When she got where she was going, would she stay, or would she go back to where she started?

"Let me grab this one thing," Andrea said.

She unlocked the trunk. She hadn't meant to get to this point. Things had gotten away from her. Everyone had flirtations. They were healthy insofar as they kept you from doing something worse. But here she was, on the precipice of something worse. Her husband was at home with the boys. Nick's wife was out of town—girls weekend, Nick had said. All of this effort for what? She shook her head, which was inside the trunk. The rest of her body was outside the car. She was sweating more than seemed reasonable for one human body.

"Do you want help?" he called.

She grabbed her suitcase and thought with horror about the strawberries. There was nowhere to jettison them without Nick's seeing.

“Do you think I could have a glass of water?” she asked. “I’m not used to the heat anymore.”

He disappeared into the house. She closed the trunk and moved quickly to the driver’s seat, where she inserted the keys into the ignition. She turned the radio loud, but only she could hear it. Only she could smell the strawberries. The windows were closed, and she was on her way back to the airport. She could go home, anywhere.

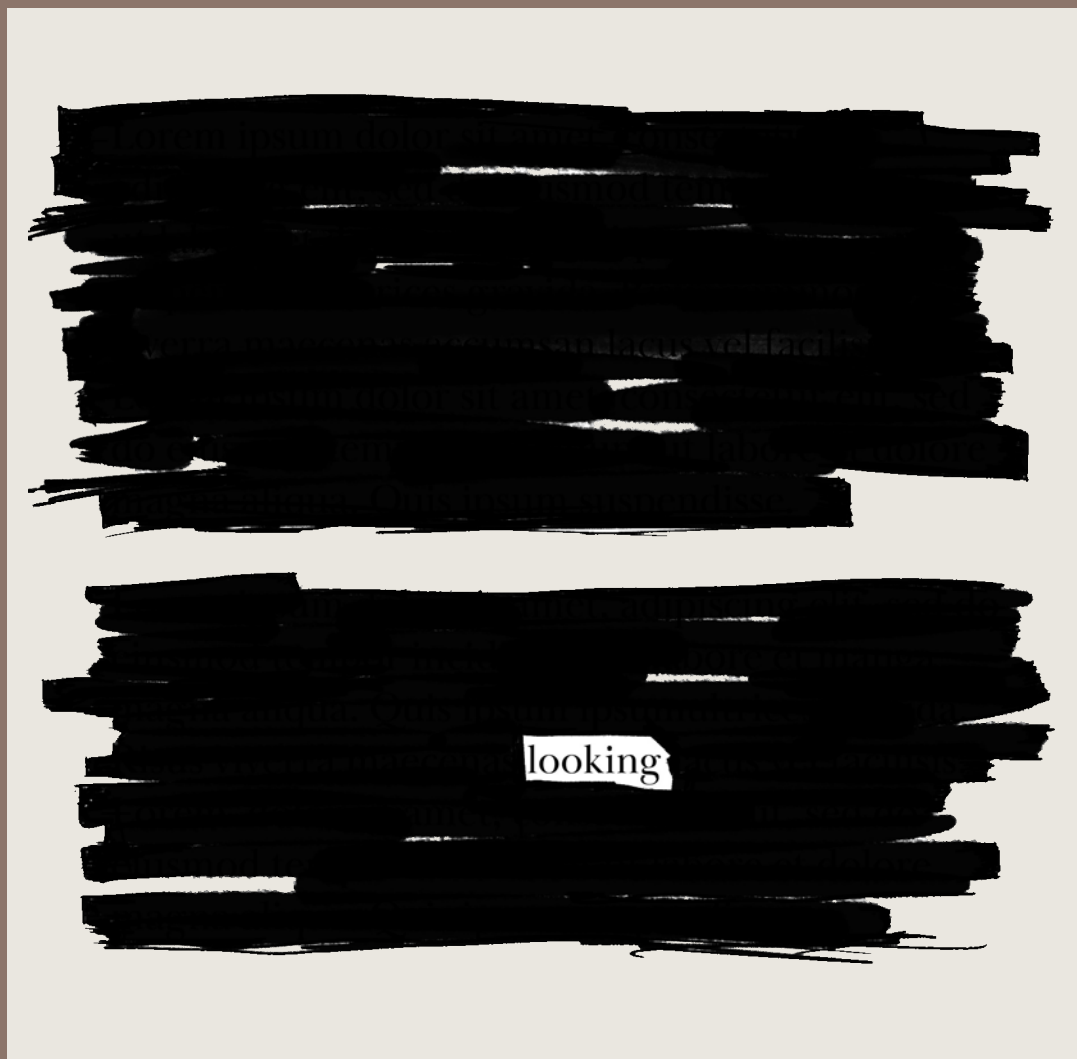
Or she could find the girl. They could get coffee and a donut. Andrea had a few things to say, but first she would listen. The girl had her own story to tell.

Please, take off your headphones. Tell me where you’re going. Tell me what you’re leaving. Maybe I can help. I’ve seen things—I’ve made mistakes! But I’ve fixed them too. Maybe we can help each other.



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