

# Cracked, but not Broken

MICHAEL MCGUIRE

Everyone, or almost everyone, knows that the performer, even the soloist, is, at times, elsewhere or, it could be said, is, at such times, nowhere, nowhere at all.

Just as he, or she, is all sexes and none, all races and none, so he or she, young, old and ageless, is a presence and, at the same time, an absence, putting in, at his or her best moments, a nonappearance, at least as long as the pure notes rise.

Though it would be going too far, or not far enough, to consider the performer, the soloist, mere medium, for he must find his instrument, then, as a dedicated parent might note, make the payments, not to mention tune the thing, play it, learn, with the years, what is within it, and what isn't, if only because he doesn't know how to find it.

Yet.

Now, however, the time has come and, maybe, this is the very moment in which our young man must learn that, as he is nowhere, so he is no one and, within limits, everyone and, with his handful of years—for one can hold onto, for an absurdly long time, the hope that he, or she, will, one day, perhaps in keeping with someone else's hopes and desires, be someone with a capital "s" before the word—see where that leaves him.

Yes, possibly, that is what this is all about.

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Two brothers. Both exceptional. Together, perhaps the *patrimonio* of their not untalented father, they were, very nearly, prodigies if, perhaps, one more than the other.

Xavier, a little less of a prodigy, played, if somewhat systematically, the piano. Ysmael, a little more of a prodigy, played the violin, played it, practically from the womb for, the first time he had picked up his chosen instrument, or, rather, the one that had been chosen for him, he drew a somber melody from it, one that raised, or lowered, all heads within hearing.

For years, the brothers seemed well along their respective paths until, one day, just when Ysmael was about to depart on his first tour, while Xavier plugged away at the regional orchestra, he, Ysmael, disappeared. At first, the

family thought he had been kidnapped, for the country was not without its criminal element. His mother called various agencies and had the police on the lookout for him in several states.

To no avail.

Suddenly, however, he showed up, or was found. Nevertheless, whatever had possessed him during those days of absence, had not let go. Ysmael was not Ysmael. He wasn't really anybody else. He seemed, they said, not altogether there, as if he were that which *mamá* would never have wished for either of her boys, nobody.

Nobody at all or, at the most, a somebody with a very small "s," one who refused to speak to anybody, as if silence had, suddenly, become his chosen medium.

*Mamá*, immediately, for she was not incapable and she loved her sons, both of them, had him put in an institution where they were supposed to know how to deal with these things and she told her other son, Ysmael's brother Xavier, to visit him, to have long talks; to find out, if the experts couldn't, what the matter was.

"No, *mamá*, Ysmael has gone his way, I have gone mine. I'm not going to talk with him. You talk with him. I have other engagements. As you know we, the orchestra, perform every week. Unlike my more talented brother, I cannot be in two places at once...assuming he's anywhere at all. Not, myself, a soloist, I may have a small part in the scheme of things, but it is essential. I cannot let my colleagues down."

*Mamá* could not believe what she had just heard. They were both her sons. Each, in his way, took after his not untalented father, *en paz descansa*, for the man had drunk himself to death in search of the peace she had not been able to give him. The capable brothers, quick learners both, were not that far apart in years and had, as children, played together at children's games, even before they applied themselves to their respective instruments. What's more, they were friends. But, being, basically, a peaceful, agreeable person, *mamá* did not argue. She did as Xavier suggested. She went to visit Ysmael in the institution to which he had been sent.

The bus rides were bad enough, one following another until, deeper into apprehension, into despair, than she had been when she started out, she found herself in a half-built-up area few visited that the powers that be, in their wisdom, had thought might be just right for the nut cases of this world.

*El Hospital Psiquiátrico*, when she found it, was worse. Rough gray concrete on the outside, and inside... Unclean. Didn't the—what did they

call them: the disturbed?—appreciate and deserve, yes deserve—in fact, need, at least as a kind of starting point—cleanliness?

Within its greasy peeling walls it was no wonder she was soon lost. Faded arrows and indecipherable words pointed down endless halls, up innumerable stairways, in a way that seemed designed to confuse. Perhaps they had been added by the inmates themselves. But the building itself was, apparently, empty. Had they escaped? Had the authorities never really accepted any? Had the loonies been pulled in one door, a word or two, perhaps only a number hung round their necks or stenciled on their foreheads, and shoved out another?

*Mamá* wondered, if there might be, since the bus rides had been very close to interminable, perhaps a bathroom somewhere, but no.

Passing one room, she heard a kind of moaning within and couldn't resist a peek in a little window that was hanging half open. There—it took her a moment to identify the sex—was a girl with nothing on, squatting, her arms round her knees, rocking, rocking back and forth. It was her tuneless moaning *mamá* had heard. It did not stop. It continued as long as she stood there staring, and something in its rhythm suggested a desperate composition, one the girl might be working on day after day, night after night, until someone, or something, took pity on her and put an end to it.

Here was a young woman, thought *mamá*, not much more than a child, really, who would never know the lightness, the weight, of love, of motherhood, but was already locked in a kind of absence, one in which there was not, and never would be, any role that must be, if only for the sake of someone else, played.

There was no furniture. The walls, the floor, cold damp concrete, gave the feeling of just having been hosed down.

Repressing an impulse to see if the door could be opened, to go in and put her arms around the girl or, at least, talk to her through the little window, to comfort her, *mamá* pulled herself away and continued down a hall relatively free of fading arrows and indecipherable directions.

She took a turn she had to take, for the hall, at the end, went only one way, descended one unavoidable stairway and ascended another until, at last, she found herself in a passageway lined with patients. Every one of them dressed in the same gray, everyone with something like the same look on his face and every one of them male.

Packed on benches they seemed deadened, if not dead, hardly alert to anything at all, though one or two heard the echo of *mamá's* footsteps and, watching all too closely, as if they hadn't seen a female in years, never mind

her age, rubbed their crotches as she passed. Hurrying, she asked herself how her more talented, her, if not quite prodigy, of a son could, ever, possibly, have arrived at this dead end. It was not a question that would easily be answered, though her first impulse was to blame not him, nor his long dead father, but herself and to wonder what—what?—she could possibly have done wrong—that wrong—or at least done otherwise.

Eventually, a lone male nurse took her and led her to a desk where they were able, after some mumbling among themselves, to direct *mamá* to her son. More precisely, they directed her to a room where she waited until Ysmael, not unaccompanied, appeared. She stood, he paused. They did not rush into each other's arms. His face, though she was sure hers did, hardly changed. Perhaps he blamed her for his present situation. *Mamá* knew, from experience, how children's minds worked, but Ysmael was no longer a child. He had been out in the big world, made his own way, had a tour coming up, one in which he would play a well known stage or two, perhaps, even, stay at one of the legendary old hotels, that is if he could pull himself together. Suddenly, in spite of his reputed silence, her son was all words.

"I was expecting you, *mamá*, why didn't you come earlier?"

Before she could respond, Ysmael continued. "Not that it would have made any difference. I'm no different now from what I was a couple of days ago, no different from what I will be in a couple more." Here he paused, even took a step closer. "Oh, I know. It was really, all, just beginning. My name in lights, on lips in concert halls around the world. But, a couple of days ago, though, really, it had been building for years, the matter... whatever it was, perhaps no more than a shadow, a shadow of something that wasn't even there...overwhelmed.

"But here I am. I am, aren't I?" he added. "You see me, don't you?"

"I do," managed *mamá*, who was close to urinating where she stood and being led to and sat in the hall she would sit in the rest of her days.

"I know," continued Ysmael, "this shouldn't have happened to me until I had, really, given my all for a few more years. Then, in a couple of decades, it would have been appreciated, perhaps even understood, why I couldn't go on, why I lost it. Why I cracked."

"Are you..." *mamá* could hardly get the word out "...cracked?"

"Cracked, but not broken," said Ysmael.

"Well, that's something," said *mamá* encouragingly. Here she looked at the man, a faceless man, if with an undeniable presence, standing against the wall. "Isn't there somewhere, anywhere, we can sit down?" she asked.

“Not permitted,” or something like that, said the man, with the mouth that wasn't there.

“No, they don't want these meetings going on too long,” said Ysmael. “Next thing you'll be asking if guests are permitted at our more formal dinners, whether the tablecloths are spotlessly white, the candles lit, if the accommodations are up to snuff. You want to see my room, don't you?”

“No, I...” began *mamá*, picturing the girl in her hosed down cell, but could only get out something quite different. “How, how, do you know all these things?”

“My brother Xavier, your son Xavier—you remember him?”

“I do.”

“Yes, my somewhat, my slightly, less talented brother, was here before you. In fact, if I have the century right, he was here yesterday.”

“But he...”

“He changed his mind. He knew he'd said some impatient things to you when you asked him to visit me for long talks, to find out what was eating me, but he regretted all that. He came, finally, with open arms, to see how his younger... You remember I'm the younger brother?”

“Yes.”

“...was doing...behind bars.”

“And how are you doing...behind bars?” asked *mamá*, though the small of her back and the backs of her legs were tightening and she could feel the cold of the concrete and something else, like a great hand, slowly rising, reaching for her heart.

“As well as could be expected,” said Ysmael, graciously. “I am, and will always be, grateful for your love. For his too, Xavier's.”

“I'm glad you're aware of that. Listen, Ysmael...” said *mamá*, deciding it was time to take control of the situation, at least in so far as it could be taken control of. “Enough of this nonsense. Have they, since we managed to get you in here, figured out what's wrong with you? And what do we have to do to get you out?”

“Cross your fingers, I guess,” said Ysmael, and added “if they have figured out what's wrong with me, they've kept it to themselves. No, for the moment, there's nothing...nothing you can do for me. Well, perhaps one.”

“Time's up,” said the man with his back against the wall, though he hadn't, as far as *mamá* could see from the corner of her eye, even glanced at his watch which, if he had one, was, probably, as faceless as he.

“The time is up when I’m ready to go,” said mamá to the man. “Tell me, Ysmael,” she asked, taking a step toward her more talented son, “what I can do for you. There is, as you were saying, perhaps one thing I...”

“Bring me my violin.”

“Bring you your... But, will it be safe here? It wasn’t cheap, you know.”

“Oh, I know. I know. You never let us forget the price of our respective instruments, did you?”

*Mamá* ignored, as usual, all references to her...well, yes, of necessity... her perfectionism. How else was she supposed to serve her sons’ talents if not with the best, the best? But she couldn’t help asking...

“And what business has my more talented son, my, yes, my prodigy, got playing in a madhouse? This isn’t Carnegie Hall.”

“It isn’t even *el Teatro Degollado*. I just want to play. *Mamá*, please..!”

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And so *mamá*, promising to bring Ysmael’s violin, backed out of the room, not wanting to lose sight of him until, he supposed, he really was ‘gone.’

And, a few days later, there he was, very nearly a kind of trustee, if a relatively young one—not considered a danger to himself or others—wandering the halls, the stairwells—a little too much reverberation there—as well as the yard out back, wall to wall—and he was beginning to learn what wall to wall meant—concrete, where his associates seemed quite pleased to listen to him play. In any case, they didn’t mind. Nor did they, in the one gray room that had one, turn up the television. Perhaps they were...it certainly appeared to be the case...reflecting upon the music they had never in their lives, however much time they had on their hands, had a chance to listen to.

True, it was not the tour he had lined up, not that many days ago, but it was better than nothing. And playing, whether there were handshakes, deep bows (his hand on his heart) and encores or not, gave Ysmael time to think.

Where, so soon—and so young—had he gone wrong? Where had he, so to speak, taken a wrong turn? It couldn’t have been somewhere between the wrong hallway and the wrong stairwell, for he had been speeding down the wrong road before they put him here. Surely *mamá*, he reflected, for he knew how his mother’s mind worked, had asked herself, essentially, the same question, but it had now, obviously, fallen to him to figure this one out for himself.

Let’s see now, thought Ysmael...

One day, one eye on some of his awards, his citations, that nearly covered one wall, and the other on the calendar, he was practicing. The next... Well, the next, he was walking out the door. Then, somehow, he was on the back road to the coast, the one where the police had been ambushed not that long ago and, as they say, “disappeared.” He might as well, he concluded, when consciousness returned, continue on the road he found himself on. Persevere. That was what he had always done, wasn't it? And it had gotten him quite far, hadn't it? On his way, as it were.

At least until he lost it.

So Ysmael found himself a cheap hotel, one in which you wouldn't know the continent ended in half a block, that, if he walked that way—he knew this, somehow, even before he did it—the unfathomable ocean would rise like a backdrop, only coming out at you in some variation on reverse perspective and, just the way Orozco would have done it, reaching, reaching just for you. For him. He avoided the bars where lost souls sipped tropical cocktails, the beaches where beauties covered little more than a tuft of hair.

Ysmael walked, instead, the loneliest of seashores. He listened to the surf at its most mournful, in the late, or early, hours, when only a determined strip of white could be seen cracking the darkness, rushing landwards, fingering the sand at his feet, emitting a low rumble that merged, imperceptibly, into an intimate whisper, as if confiding to him, Ysmael, the fact that it, the sea, would, in the end, prevail. If he'd had his violin he would have played it, improvising in response to the weight of water slamming into the sand, precipitating a shudder he felt as if it were his own.

What would it be like, he asked himself, to feel the darkness of the sea close overhead? There was no way to know, of course, without trying it. It couldn't be, simply, nothingness, for there was, also, something there. Yes, if not quite a personality, an undeniable presence. Something in it, in the sea, comparable to music. The sea, he noted, was never silent, well, almost never.

As a musician, Ysmael appreciated silence. It was more than golden. It wasn't only there just before and, again, just at the end of the piece he would offer to it. It was there between each and every note. There was more, or less, of it, that was all. For a moment, Ysmael envied Xavier, his slightly less talented brother, his instrument, for surely the piano was better equipped to value silence than the violin.

But what if, he, Ysmael, were to put down his instrument, to never play again? Would a sea of silence rush in to finger the earth he stood on? Or... Would it slam itself into the continent as a shiver rose to, and from, the pit of his stomach? No, a bus would screech, a woman would laugh, some poor bas-

tard, spending yet another night in the street, would moan, the bad, bad music of mankind would rise above it all and, so to speak, drown it.

But who was he, Ysmael, still thinking for himself, wondered, even to raise such questions? He was no philosopher. But...

If, one night, he took a step into the surf, and another, and felt the cold, cold fingers rise about his ankles, his shins, just as he had already felt them... rise and let go...

What then?

*Cold at the surface, yet colder still, and the impulse, the instinct, to inhale ever greater, though he would have to exhale first that from which, he supposed, he had taken all there was to take, and darker, ever darker, a darkness that light itself could only penetrate so far and, strangely, in motion, in motion with a force of its own and who was he to say that that motion, that which, if it had not always had, now had him in its grip, was not, in its way, life itself?*

But, there is motion, too, Ysmael reflected, in the hand that slides the bow or fingers the keys, and the night in which he couldn't close his ears, or wish them closed, passed, as well as the next night and the next, nights in which he stood there, beyond self, looking at the selfless sea with its undeniable presence. Looking at and listening to.

But, having turned his back upon its siren call—for the silence that follows that is all too easily found—Ysmael found himself or, more to the point, his mother and those she had marshaled in his search, found him, and he was spirited—yes, that was the word, spirited—to *El Hospital Psiquiátrico*, though, more likely, it was titled after one of the pioneers of mental health, whatever that is, a someone with a capital letter.

No doubt, there it was, etched in stone over the door... Ysmael just hadn't noticed as they led him in... the man's name on an institution he would never, were he not safely dead, have approved of.

Now Ysmael was in his room, behind a barred window, which had nothing to do with the bars—a way of marking time, of course—of the music he still considered to be the language of life, life itself, if life could speak. *Mamá* had come again and gone again—she wasn't coming back, he knew it, she couldn't stand it there—and Xavier, his somewhat less talented brother, hadn't time.

Considering, once more, time—for calendars, apparently, were no more allowed than clocks in a building which was, like the sea, not without its distinctive sounds, its smells; a building in which your peace with the world must be, if slightly delayed, imminent—Ysmael knew... in his hands, in his



fingers...that the time for his tour had come and gone and...in the pit of his stomach, if not deeper...that it didn't really matter.

It was, there it was, once more, or soon would be, time to begin again. From the beginning. Perchance, as the moment in which the world would come to a stop, the moment in which he would release his spellbinding, his unforgettable, solo, had come and gone, the time had come, at last, for the duet he had always been telling himself that he must, with his brother, one day play.

'You mustn't think of it, Xavier, as accompaniment, the pianist accompanying the real soloist who is playing the violin but, as in a trio, or a quartet, the instruments being equal, equal...'

'Then I must not be,' Xavier most graciously responds, 'the less talented brother, at least for this one night, the night of our duet.'

'I'll be the first to admit *mamá* never got exactly what she wanted out of either of us, when we were young, younger,' Ysmael is about to observe, but Xavier is going on...

'Yes, it will be as a twosome we will wow the world and *mamá* will be forced to consider us—and our instruments—an investment well made and, finally, for she will still be alive, a timely one.'

Here, the silence which, even in the moment before an imagined concert, the silence that is very nearly always waiting in the wings, very nearly falls.

But Xavier, showing his teeth, as he is prone to do when he is about to play his piano and Ysmael is about to play his violin, continues his monologue, his solo, 'yes, a certain opportunity—for you anyway—having come and gone, perhaps forever, it will be in our middle age, we shall do—together—that which prodigies so rarely do.'

Here Ysmael opens his mouth to continue the wordplay, the banter, the jousting that is always there, between brothers, but Xavier, not yet finished, presses on 'and then, arrangements made, the impresario tempted or, at a minimum, the deposit on the hall made, the flyers out, word-of-mouth doing its thing, we, you and I, shall, at the end of our days and better late than never...'

But here, the Xavier of the mind, of the imagination, falls silent, as Ysmael wonders if the time has come to cling to the bars of time and scream, but no, that moment, he realizes, has also come and gone. Now it is time, at last, for the silence, however short-lived, that comes before the gathering of forces that heralds every effort, every note about to be played, in the world out there, as in the world within.

Though perhaps Ysmael, having concluded his fanciful dialogue with his brother is, in his mind, which is, after all, beginning to recover, to, without that much help from those who were supposed to be of help, heal itself, is still going over that last night on the beach, one in which he, with the help of natural sounds, natural silences, began, for himself only, of course, to straighten it all out; to see, clearly enough, the difference between the spotlight others wish for us, that which we have taken in, in some cases, with our mothers' milk, and the relative obscurity demanded by the daily labor, if not by the instrument itself, that which waits, within, for one who, if not entirely selflessly, is ready to find it.

*No, there is nothing really remarkable about taking leave of this earth. Everybody does it. What matters, what is important, is to distinguish that silence from the silence that every performer, every soloist, in that moment, whether he is someone, his name in lights, or no one at all, will, instrument, hopefully, at hand, one day step into...*

*The silence that precedes, the notes that, only now, at last, are ready to be played.*

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Yes, *mamá* made it out that time. She found the bathroom, a different arrangement of buses, somewhat less twisted and, the next day, returning with Ysmael's violin, an even better lineup of cold corners and half empty wrecks. Only the future—*mamá* had always considered the future, if not her own—would tell if she had done something right this time. They certainly didn't look as if they knew what they were doing in *El Hospital Psiquiátrico*... though the doctor she had run into in one of the halls (perhaps, as she, looking for the way out) had assured her to the contrary...but, who knows?

And Xavier, when she corners him between obligations on his all-too-predictable rounds, will assure her...

"Just keep your hands off him, *mamá*, don't say a thing, let my somewhat more talented brother find his way. Let him, since, as he may have told you, as he has told me, that he is cracked, not broken, somehow, pull, at least hold, himself together, for I have a feeling that the stage he is about to step onto is the one in which he plays, not, however dutifully, for you or, however childishly, against me, but, well, just the next stage, the one onto which I would follow him, if I could; will follow him, if I can."

And *mamá*, waiting as, it is supposed, or used to be, as women must, not for the husband who will never return, not for the weekly visit of the son who has found steady employment with the regional orchestra, not even for the release of her more talented boy, the one who was supposed to come home, one

day, trailing glory, from the madhouse, though *mamá* herself may well have decided that the time has come to stop waiting, as it has to stop pushing, to follow no one, not even of the same blood, with that follow spot that is always heating in the hands of a determined parent, perhaps, even, as her less talented son, the one she never expected very much of, has, in his wisdom, suggested, to not say a thing.

# This Is a Fine Place We've Come To

MAUREEN NEAL

I know for sure that things are going downhill for my mother when I find the blue flyswatter in the freezer. Please note that my mother is not senile or demented; she does have severe macular degeneration and serious hearing loss, not surprising in a person who is 92 years old. She also has a stenotic heart valve that she has chosen not to repair. One last important fact: she has chosen to live alone, maybe because of, maybe in spite of, these things. When she was relatively well, she made me promise to support this choice, along with the DNR order taped to the refrigerator. Which I did.

But now the chickens are coming home to roost.

The flyswatter in the freezer is important because when I visit, food—planning (or lack thereof), procurement, preparation, eating, storage of leftovers—has become an important consideration and part of her ongoing care. When I am able to visit, which never seems to be often enough or long enough for either one of us, I sometimes try to cook something up from scratch in her kitchen. I make a weird fried chicken wrap with ranch dressing and iceberg lettuce and store-bought tomatoes one night, which is a total disaster; then I try store-bought chicken salad and English muffins, then scrambled eggs with Velveeta cheese and red salsa, then reheated Meals on Wheels Mexican meat loaf. One night, our most scrumptious dish turns out to be canned pineapple slices with a dollop of mayonnaise and topped with grated cheese. All these things my mother eats, but she isn't really interested in food. On the other hand, I eat everything in sight, including the pineapple, an entire bag of Stacy's Pita Chips, and five chocolate macadamia nut cookies that my mother baked herself, with no help from anybody.

We are fond of picnics, too, or we used to be. But then there is the moment when we are sitting at a table in the park by the river, trying to eat the sandwiches I have brought from the deli case at the grocery store, and my mother asks, very loudly, because she does not have her hearing aids in, *Is that a big dog?* This is in reference to a woman in gray tights who is lying on the grass, stretching after a run along the riverfront trail.

No, I whisper, right into her ear. *That's a person*, and she nods, her mouth full of ham and cheese, and says, Oh. Then she goes back to eating the

sandwich, her eyes fixed on the picnic table graffiti, which she cannot read and which says, in faded black Sharpie, *Angie loves me only me*. For some reason, this breaks my heart six ways from Sunday. The woman gets up and stares at us, rather loudly I think, before she moves off to a safer place.

Food, for me, is an unwelcome marker of decline, because my mother used to be a great cook. I love the story she tells about not knowing how to make anything at all when she was first married, and trying to work her way through the 1945 *Better Homes and Gardens Cookbook* from one end to the other in two years. When my father said that the ham sandwiches she made for his office lunches were dry, she sent him to work one day with a sandwich filled with shredded newspaper and yellow mustard, and he stopped complaining. In her best cooking years, though, she never used recipes. The way she cooked involved ingredients like a handful of flour here and there, a pinch of salt in the coffee, a splash of coffee in the meat loaf, leftover meat loaf in the stuffed cabbage, shredded cabbage in the roast pork, then dry ranch dressing mix and Campell's condensed tomato soup poured over all.

One Sunday morning before I start my four-hour drive home, my mother wants to make me breakfast. Food for the journey. She whisks together eggs and her special secret ingredients, slices cranberry bread, sets out oranges and grapes. I worry when I see her trying to light a burner on the stove and I smell gas. But she succeeds in getting the back burner to ignite, and then she holds up a small plastic spice bottle labeled Salad Supreme® and asks me what it says. I say Salad Supreme, but it doesn't look like the Salad Supreme I remember, with paprika and onion powder and sesame seeds. She sprinkles it over the scrambled eggs in the pan nonetheless.

We say a heartfelt prayer about how grateful we are for our time together and for each other, and she squeezes my hand so hard it hurts. But after the first big forkful of egg, I know something is not quite right. I plunge on, smaller bite by smaller bite. Pretty soon I am asking myself if it will be worth it to have food poisoning on top of Red Mountain Pass rather than say something—I don't know exactly what—about the eggs, which have an unfamiliar crunch and a dusty, greenish aftertaste. Before I take another bite, my mother stops eating, too, and we check the Salad Supreme bottle, which has toasted garlic bits in it instead of Salad Supreme, and I look more carefully at the expiration date on the cheese, which turns out to be three months past its use-by date, the plastic bag caked with mold. Oh, honey, she says, by way of apology. *No harm, no foul*, I say, and try to laugh. She almost cries, but not quite. Then she swears never to cook again.

The food is just the opening salvo in another kind of battle.

Just before my mother and my stepfather, Mike, were married, Mike had let it be known that he was not exactly fond of cats. He told my mother that her house smelled terrible and that they would not be entertaining any cats in their house—not while he was alive, anyway. That was that, for over 35 years. Three days after my stepfather died of cancer, my mother went down to the Humane Society and picked out two kittens, eight weeks old. She put their litter box under the desk in Mike's office and fed them wet food on the kitchen counter, and neither Mike or anyone else had anything to say about it.

A few months later, while I'm talking to her, my mother says, between little puffs of breath, *I've had a little mishap here, and I need to get off the phone. But don't worry, she says. I've got it under control.* Turns out that no one is actually in control, including one of the cats, who has caught his head between the slats of the miniblinds in the bathroom and who is howling and struggling to extricate himself. She tries to pry him loose, which she succeeds in doing, but not without a fight that involves biting her to the bone and lots of old-fashioned kicking and scratching. The mishap turns into tremendous staph infection, major debridement surgery, and an intense three-month home health recovery. The cat ran away or was eaten by coyotes. From a distance, I learn to translate the words *a little mishap* into *a serious accident often requiring stitches.*

There are lots of little mishaps to come. One day when I am visiting for the weekend, we find a dead mouse, still warm, on the carpet of the living room floor, where the surviving cat has thoughtfully placed it for our inspection. My mother can't see, so she asks me, *What is that? Is that a pillow from the couch or is that what I think it is?* I tell her it's a mouse, and I wrap it up in a plastic bag and throw it away in the trash can in the garage. But then we find another body on the back porch, this one in several chewed-up pieces, with the teeth and ears and a few whiskers still intact. My mother says she'll dispose of this one, so I let her. But when I ask what she's done with it, she says she has thrown it out under the hollyhocks, because it will smell bad if we put it in the trash can. *Oh, crap,* I think. *There are bears in this neighborhood, and raccoons too.* After my mother has gone to bed, I take the flashlight out to the hollyhocks and root around in the dark for the body parts. The cat sits on the sidewalk, watching.

Another day: One of my mother's friends calls and says to us, *You need to come down here. Your mom's had a little mishap and is in the hospital. She's fine,*

*but she's in a lot of pain. I don't think they'll want to do surgery this time.* She has fallen over backwards, or maybe forwards, in the garage, she honestly can't remember which, and has dislocated her right shoulder. Under duress from the hospital social worker, she agrees to go to rehab at a nursing care facility, but she doesn't plan to stay there long. And sure enough, she doesn't. After three weeks, she comes home, risen from the living dead.

Another day: My sister starts her email from the emergency room: *Don't worry, she's fine. She had a little mishap with the bookcase last night, but we don't think there's anything broken and the doc doesn't see any evidence of a concussion.*

Another day: A home health aide answers the phone instead of my mother and says, *We've had a little mishap over here, but your mom is all cleaned up now and we've gotten all of the blood out of the carpet.* This time, they don't sew her up with needle and thread but with Super Glue. The ER doctor then carefully braids a little strip of my mother's hair away from the four-inch slice in the back of her head, where she hit the corner of the bathroom counter on her way down.

I ask myself why I feel I need to tell this story.

At first, I think that I am writing this about my mother for my mother, to honor her and her choices, to come to terms with her desire to be left alone and to not ask for help, for tea and sympathy (which would be more dangerous by far than another fall in the garage). Then I imagine reading this out loud to her, in the same way I have read countless newspaper obituaries and *Reader's Digest* profiles, and I think she might be hurt that I have broken our bond, our secret pact, that I would be so willing to share these pieces of her with the outside world. *Oh, honey,* she might say, shaking her head. *This is a fine place we've come to.*

So I sidestep the issue of breaking her heart for a little while by thinking, well, no, maybe this is for me—it's a warning, a lesson, a taste of things to come: surely I need to know (though I cannot imagine it right now) that my mother's falls in the garage will become my falls, her wobbling legs my legs, the cut and clot of braided hair my hair, the blue flyswatter placed for safe-keeping in the freezer my flyswatter. And then I come back again to thinking, no, this is about my mother. No one else. And that's the truth.

# The Statistics and the Silence

LINNET DRURY

The statistics grew exponentially like  
everyone's uncut hair or the hedges  
forsaken by the council or the strangling  
queues round shops. The statistics

couldn't understand why no one appreciated  
their magnitude, why no one was proud of them.  
They couldn't be kept quiet; too young to realise,  
too old to be expected to find out for themselves.

Silence became chewy. Politicians  
began to speak about science and scientists  
began to speak about people, which confused  
the statistics, slowing them down.

But they had already grown too far  
to be reclaimed, like how  
when I next see you you'll be a head taller,  
and I'd have missed it, my cousin

will have learnt to talk without me, my granny  
will have shrunk, and the silence  
will have begun to take root,  
having taken our friends since the first day.



# This Morning Two Police Officers

KATY GIEBENHAIN

This morning two police officers  
elbow the counter of a bookstore café  
in a mid-sized city on the edge  
of bankruptcy.

This morning the bookstore  
is a battleship,  
engines opening up, the crew  
at their tasks  
amongst used books, new books,  
the clunk of the espresso machine  
the steam wand's scream,  
ceiling fans accelerating in the rafters,  
sale carts jostling  
onto the sidewalk  
under a freezing, wooly sky.

This morning, like any  
used bookstore this one's filled with hurts  
with publisher copies bumped,  
smudged, injured  
in one way or another.  
Rooms smell  
of tangled narratives, cookies, dust.  
Hurts on the shelves, hurts outside,  
hurts of bodies  
moving up the back stairs  
with a barrel of coldbrew.

This morning, let the officers drink  
with the Golden Retriever

warming the tiles at their feet,  
big as a pony, calm as a lake.  
Good cops? Bad cops?  
At the moment, who can say?  
Downtown is the book  
that opens them. Downtown is the book  
they open every day.

# My Bird Bill

PHILIP DIGIACOMO

I was always an oddball, or so I've been told, first by my widely respected doctor father, and by various other persons of authority over the years. When I was a child of eight, my father was gone for a year, attempting to cure some disease in Africa. Not a letter, not a telegram, not a phone call to his young son Chris. Upon his return I received a pat on the head and a huge, live African Gray parrot that my mother donated to the Hartford zoo the minute my father left for Patagonia a week later. I had named him Bill, and when my fifth grade class took a field trip a year later, I saw him perched on a high bamboo pole in the aviary. I don't think he saw me, but I knew it was him.

\* \* \* \* \*

Miss Collins, our teacher, arranged us in two rows, boy, girl, boy, girl and even made us hold hands as if we were little kids. When I saw who my partner was I panicked. Debbie Zelf stared at me with clear blue eyes from behind her thick glasses, smiled sweetly and held out her hand. But it wasn't a real hand. It was a contraption that started at her elbow and ended in two curved metal pincers that opened up to accept my hand. I gingerly hooked one finger around them and tried to smile as we ambled along the zoo path. I stared at the ground unable to escape the revulsion I felt at the touch of her cold metal hook. Hours spent pouring over the pictures in my father's medical books had produced in me a fear of human deformity of any kind. When we arrived at the vast aviary, we broke rank and crowded around the high wire enclosure. I tugged at Miss Collin's coat sleeve.

"Miss Collins, that's my parrot way up at the top, his name is Bill!"

Most of the kids laughed and someone called me an asshole. Miss Collins clapped her hands loudly.

"Alright class, settle down, lets keep quiet and respect all the animals. Line up please and we'll go to the reptile house. Come on, find your partners!"

Miss Collins looked at me like I was out of my nut, making me feel worse than I already did, but then Debbie did something so sweet and kind I remember it still.

“Let’s switch, Chris, and walk on the other side, okay?”

The hot blush I felt was part shame and part relief and as I took her real hand in mine, she whispered to me –

“Bill is very beautiful, Chris.”

# Front Porch on a Rainy Afternoon

TAMARA NICHOLL-SMITH

When it all becomes too much  
 I just need to sit and stare  
 at the gray wall of rain,  
 curtain of soft hyphens,  
 and listen to the mild motor sound  
 of town pigeons,  
 dressed down doves,  
 in their come-as-you-are  
                   feathers.

Sometimes;  
 I need the wind's help  
 to cut the power,  
 to shush the wires, cease the clocks  
 so that silence can express its thingness  
 and sit in slow breath at my feet,  
 like a retired sheep dog.

I would like  
 to invite you  
                   here into my room of rain,  
 where we will set aside  
 our petulant  
 ping-ding-buzz boxes.  
                   (For what have they to say  
                   that cannot wait?)

*I could have lost you last year.*

What could be more  
 important than sitting here  
 in our great relief  
 the air hung  
 with the deep scent  
 of hydrangeas?

# What You Missed that Day You Were Absent from Medical School

ERIK CARLSON

A medical student's version of *What You Missed That Day You Were Absent from Fourth Grade* by Dr. Brad Aaron Modlin

Dr. Nelson explained how to use a stethoscope to listen to your own heart, how to find meaning in charting,

how the physical exam can be a form of prayer. She took questions on how not to feel lost during a code.

After morning rounds she distributed worksheets that covered ways to remember your very first patient's

voice. Then the team discussed falling asleep without feeling you had forgotten to check on your patient's —

something important — and how to believe that the name on the white coat is your own. This prompted

Dr. Nelson to draw a chalkboard diagram detailing how to console one another during coffee breaks,

and how not to squirm for sound when your self-doubt is all you hear; also, that you are enough.

The grand rounds lesson was that *I don't know* is an acceptable answer.

And just before sign-out, she made the diagnosis look easy. The one that proves that hundreds of questions,

and feeling frightened, and all those sleepless nights spent looking  
for whatever it was you lost along the way, and each beat of our hearts  
adds up to something.

Dr. Brad Aaron Modlin's poem "What You Missed that Day You Were  
Absent from Fourth Grade" is beloved by many and originally appears in his  
book *Everyone at This Party Has Two Names*. This adaption of his original work  
was written with the express permission of the author.

# Son Worrying About Down South

TRAVIS STEPHENS

I hope that the Texas doctors  
 have been trained in how to handle calves,  
 handle them firmly but slow,  
 steady as a post,  
 not to spook yet not to yield.  
 I hope they've been  
 trained to handle full buckets of milk,  
 steady walk, not to slosh,  
 each one a white dollar bill.  
 How to treat old sick men like the men  
 treated their dairy herds—  
 calm voiced and glad to see them.  
 Open the door and then get out of the way.  
 Warm hands  
 or you'll get kicked for sure.

I try to imagine such a doctor and worry. None I've met.  
 Nurses, that's another story.  
 Some steady on her feet,  
 sassy woman with the hips of fuller living.  
 She would joke with the old farmer to put him at ease.  
 A nurse like a vet he knows,  
 best at giving shots, giving advice.  
 Big animal vets don't need x-rays to know  
 it is time to call the mink farm.  
 I imagine my father talked into sitting on  
 the exam table, milker's hands clutch at the paper gown.  
 He came to Texas to get out of the cold,  
 not to move into a living hell.  
 You'd better be good, doc. Good enough for  
 the milk money, my blood money.  
 Money earned by the day, not by the "visit".  
 Be good or I'll come down like a  
 winter storm all over you.



# What the Mostly Blind Eye Sees

CARYN MIRRIAM-GOLDBERG

Yes, it can see its way out of a paper bag  
but not more than a wavering center line  
on the highway the good eye has to drive solo.  
It sees fast torches where once there were trees  
and later, raining streaks of yellow  
from the tract lighting in the restaurant.

The mostly blind eye isn't bothered by the lack  
of definition between sofa and turquoise wall,  
the rectangle of green punctuated by branches  
filling the frame of the window,  
or the absence of a word on the exit sign.  
Instead, it sees trembling amoebas  
that it swears it saw as a child eye  
falling in love with eddies of dust  
singing the sunlight. It sees right through  
forced forgiveness or hyacinth exploded  
into fragrance and pink too early.

It sees nothing of the future but is smart enough  
not to be perturbed by this, or by the presence  
of floaters that turn into faces full of better eyes  
but not necessarily better views, like now  
when it sees the dark green panorama of cricket song  
turning into lightning bugs, the smell of cedar  
between thumb and forefinger, the heavy drape  
of humidity that doesn't lead to rain,  
and the tumbling blue birdsong roosting  
in the tree tops, begging the sky for long life.

## Short Coat Sonnet

LIANA MEFFERT

I'm peering into your mouth by the light  
of my iphone your pronged pinked muscle  
slick with saliva & freshly stitched I shouldn't  
but I say oh, wow, saliva flies from a fresh hole  
in your trachea when you laugh & I don't mind  
making you laugh I'm timid weaving my stethoscope  
through the tubes making a trellis of your chest you say  
you can't hurt me anymore looking to the skin grafts taken  
from one place to make another whole how many ways  
can a body be a body sucking a spittle-soaked sponge  
blooming on a stem of white plastic that in my  
ignorance & optimism I'd mistaken for a lollipop  
with a bouquet of twenty more on the table  
saying, saying of all things, *what luck!*

# A Long-term Patient Leaves a Veterans Hospital

RICHARD KRAVITZ

I've been here too long, and it's time for me to go.  
Summer's ended, leaves have begun to fall.  
It's almost cold enough to snow.

So thank you for the homemade throw  
I'll use on whatever bed I'll sprawl.  
It's been too long, I know, and time for me to go.

I'm sorry that my mood has been low,  
my face a mask, my voice a growl,  
and my heart puckered like graveled snow.

But I've loved the chocolate and espresso,  
I've mumbled, rather than howl,  
and yes, I've stayed too long, so it's time for me to go,

which is fine. What's left to grow  
but the ache inside, my rumbling bowel,  
and my knuckles whiter than snow?

So forgive me if my bitter tears show,  
or if you think my behavior a stall.  
This has been my home, and time to go  
I know, but it's so cold, almost cold enough to snow.

# Trapped Bird, Locked Door

SHERI REDA

*Iowa City, 2018*

Starlings commonly bang into windows,  
fall senseless, and die.

This one dives and rises.

Uses beak and wing in the glassy well  
of the outdoor parking garage  
to feel its way to the edge  
of North, guardian of safety;  
South, gatekeeper of opportunity;  
East and West, the bounds of play.  
Upward to the limits of soul,  
downward to the cement wall of desire—

It must have got carried away  
by a vicissitude,  
a stream of air  
slipped through an opening  
or closing door  
held back or propped in place  
by one of those wingless, who thump along  
stair steps to go up and down,  
who walk from prison to prison,  
whose flight, even, is enclosed.  
Who walk away.

Tired now, it undertakes a rescue  
by rows like a farmer  
planting an escape from hunger:  
spirals in ascending squares,  
takes an intentional dive,  
begins again. It doesn't defy.  
Doesn't bash against glass and die.  
It flutters a wing against hard nothing,

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taps its beak into warm ice, continues  
flying, oxygen-starved,  
in case a door opens in time.

# After Video Touring the Brooklyn Japanese Garden During the Time of the Virus

GAIL GOEPFERT

—Cinematographer Nic Petry of Dancing Camera

I swoop and swoon with the camera  
through the hill-and-pond garden—  
a slow reveal of lift and slide.

Blue sky, and hanging above the blushing  
cherry trees—cotton-candy blossoms. *Sakura*.  
Only one god's-eye milky cloud.

*No one walks here.*

Cherry blossoms—symbols of birth  
and death—sway in clusters on dark limbs.  
The trunks have learned to dip and rise.

Birdspeak, lilting calls and strings  
of notes without urgency. Lullabies.  
Finch and chickadee and catbird.

*All the people told to stay home.*

Only the insistent Canadian geese  
parade themselves, their honks lukewarm  
as they toddle unchased.

*Media voices toll the deaths.*

Edging the pond, fiddlehead ferns,  
camellias in pink, and a vermilion-red  
wooden *torii*, gateway to a Shinto shrine.

The sun glimmers through the arms of trees.  
*Komorebi*. I revel in this deluge of beauty  
offered up by the camera's lens.

*A swell of sound intrudes.  
From somewhere beyond, a siren keens—*

*the world outside still sorrows.*

# Forever and Ever, Kaboom

DAVID HC CORRELL

When I was a little boy, my family and I celebrated the Fourth of July with the same reverence that other families celebrate Christmas. The three of us, Dad, Mom, and I, would gather every year at a little lake in Iowa to watch the fireworks light up the night, and the water. Since my Cancer — and then his — I look back at those moments, his big hand on my little shoulders, pointing my gaze upward from the airy black toward the color, and the bursting light, as my father's first lessons in how a man handles his own sickness. And since Cancer took him, that's how I'm going to remember my Father: training my gaze upward. Dad was mostly a quiet man. But sometimes, on those Summer nights when an especially big firework would explode against the night sky, he would smile and give my shoulders a genuinely excited shake, and mimic the explosion, “*kabooooom!*”. The Fourth of July was when he started training me to look ever upward, beyond the airy night, toward the color and the light, in sickness and in health, forever and ever, kaboom.

\*

Tonight, I'm sitting at dinner. Across this Mexican-themed hole-in-the-wall's glossy two-top from me is a beautiful blonde woman, perched expectantly over the steaming plate of tortillas and cheese that she's just been served. She and I love places like this, with their unlimited salty chips and so-cold-they're-sweating imported beers. She is my best friend, and my fiancée, and we're planning for our wedding, and pipe-dreaming about all the couples *entertaining* that we'll do in the home that we plan to make together. But, when conversation turns to crockery, to which serving trays and sauce boats we would need for *entertaining* which imagined holiday's configuration of supposed dinner guests, I have to pause myself: *Entertaining? Sauce Boats?*

Contrary to what one might expect, my change was not some sort of gradual maturing and settling down with time; or even some gendered acquiescence to my partner's wishes. Rather, it was an abrupt change of heart



over a painful, year-long re-birthing that transformed my feelings about family and death — and even serving pitchers.

My lesson started early one early September morning, before I had even left my apartment for my new job at a University in the Boston area. At my first appointment with my new General Practitioner, the physician noticed subtle irregularities in the shape of my neck and calmly referred me to a specialist. It could be nothing, he said, but we should probably check. That morning, the specialist had just rung my cell phone, as he promised me he would.

“It is certainly Cancer,” he said.

“*It is certainly Cancer.*” I remember that sentence vividly. I wondered then if he had rehearsed it. Or, if there is a handbook for physicians somewhere that suggests using the word, ‘certainly’ when conveying a Cancer diagnosis. It was certainly right to say it in the way that he did. I needed to know, definitively — to begin to steel myself and my family for the gauntlet now before us.

In my experience that morning, the immediate aftermath of a Cancer diagnosis leads a man to more questions than it does answers. For me, some of these questions were quite banal. For example: *that’s how you find out you have Cancer, some guy just calls you?* Other questions, though, were less silly, like: *how am I going to tell my Mother?*

I’ve always had trouble saying emotionally charged things straight to the faces of the people I love. A lump grows in my throat when I have something personal to convey, and I get choked up in all the cliché ways. So, in those moments, I sit quiet and distant, plotting the most effective and personally achievable way of speaking from the heart. At times, the lump in my throat has made “I love you” awkward for me. “I was wrong,” has similarly struggled to launch from my lips. The morning of my diagnosis, before I even had time to think about how Cancer would change my own life, I remember worrying: “*...Mom, I have Cancer*” — could those words even come out?

But, later that morning, the words did come out, born breech and broken up with snuffles and pregnant pauses over long distance lines. I called my parents back home in Iowa and there was crying and there was gasping and we called each other back later the same day. Exasperated with heartache and fear, my mother said things in desperation that I had previously only ever heard her say reverently in church. My father, being my father, marshalled his and our whole family’s strength and proposed a sensible

plan of action. We would gather more information about my disease and my treatment, re-group later that afternoon, and we would stay positive — whatever Cancer may bring.

We had no idea.

\*

Tonight at the Mexican restaurant, seven months after my Cancer diagnosis, I look across the table at my dining companion. She wasn't expecting my gaze, and looks back with that unintentional wink-and-a-smile that comes when one is caught angling the remains of a beer bottle down the hatch. So fresh. So cold.

Another round?

\*

My beautiful best friend, then my fiancé at dinner and now my wife, was there for all of it. She was the first person I called after I heard, '*It is certainly Cancer*' and, later, she stood with my parents when they opened the curtain on my limp, life-supported body for the first time after my surgery. Survival rates for my type of Cancer are very high, but the treatment could have crippled me, both figuratively and literally. Going in, we planned for what the doctors told us to fear: I could lose my voice as a result of my tumor-removal surgery; I could lose control over half my face. We planned for my limited mobility. We planned for worse. We weren't even then yet married, but we were already steeling ourselves for the suddenly plausible bleakness of my uncertain adulthood — and, without missing a beat, we were doing it together.

As news of my diagnosis spread at work, my wide-eyed colleagues and students came by my office and classroom to nervously offer me hugs. When we touched, I noticed that I somehow weighed more on them — perhaps a burden of having become the tangible embodiment of premature mortality, or universal injustice, in the arms of people who have never had to touch, or stay in touch, with it before. But, her shoulders, so delicate, bore the burden of my new disease so readily.

One night, months after my initial tumor-removal surgery and radiation treatment, she and I were laying in bed. It was early spring and enough residual radiation had left my body that I was safe for her to touch again.

Life was returning to us and to our adopted city after our, and Boston's, most terrible winter. That night it was dark in my apartment, save for the blue glow of a streetlamp outside that shone through the blinds and onto my messy bed, making a *Starry, Starry, Night* scene of swirling aquamarines and blacks on the twisted white bed sheets. I wanted to thank her for carrying my burden, and for being part of the team of family and medical professionals who saved my life. But the lump swelling in my throat would never let me say those things. I wanted to tell her that I understood how unfair my Cancer was to her too, and that she didn't have to take all of this on; and that it hurt me to think of how this stupid disease was changing my role in her life story from a man who once brought with him opportunity, to one who now represented tragedy. But, I could never get any of that out — not in person, not this close. Spooned together in the *Starry, Starry, Night* scene, I got quiet, and found what I thought would be the best, most personally achievable way for me to say all of it:

“I don't want to be a sinking ship for you,” I told her.

She wrapped herself around my arm, like she does when she doesn't want us to get up from some place comfortable, and told me what to this day we keep our fingers crossed will remain true:

“You're going to be OK. I know it.”

\*

Back at the Mexican restaurant, she is entirely uninterested in the shrimp on my seafood plate, but is nevertheless helping me to break off all of their attached tails. We are waiting for her entrée to arrive, and she is arranging the prepared shrimp in a perfect crescent around the perimeter of my plate. There was a time after my tumor-removal surgery when I wasn't able to move my neck or lift my arms. I then desperately needed this help, and more, to eat. But, I don't need it anymore. She offers it now for other reasons; I've proposed marriage and she said yes.

So, it turns out she was right. I am OK.

Hell yes, another round. This beer deserves a coaster.

\*

Cancer is like a Kraken that swims deep in the bloodstreams of each of us, and surfaces, whenever it pleases, just to sink our ships. Six months after

my Cancer diagnosis, my father got one too. And six weeks after that, early one morning, Cancer finished its horrible mission to take him from us, forever. My mother and I sat stunned and helpless in the painfully quiet hospice room.

The morning that your father passes, your swollen heart does not beat, and it does not yet break—first it drones, static and hollow, like the slack-jawed and empty hum of an off-the-hook land-line. Nothing comes in. Nothing goes out. The world, and people's consoling words, and your own ideas about spirituality and afterlife are all washed out in the sad and crushing din of your world forever changing. I had no line to, or from, anyone in the living world—except for her. From the hospice parking lot, I called my beautiful best friend at the job she had found for herself in faraway Boston, just to be near me. I told her that he was gone. And then, when I couldn't cry anymore for the beatless heart and the crushing din, she found her own secret place, somewhere in the ladies' room of an office tower a thousand miles away, and she cried for me.

\*

Shortly before he passed, and only weeks before my wedding, my father and I stood at the kitchen counter to prepare what turned out to be our last meal at home together. While we were chopping and peeling, we talked about the food, and how to cook the shrimp. We talked about the interstate highway system. We talked about college football coaches' exorbitant salaries. We talked about everything; and we did it by talking with each other about nothing. That night, before we finished making our last home-cooked meal, he looked off into the distance and became quiet. I knew that look. He was wrestling with the lumps in his throat too. His hands over an old family cutting board, he gave me his last piece of fatherly advice:

“You know, this has gotta be a wedding, not a wedding-plus-a-funeral...”

I knew what he meant.

He meant that we weren't gonna be sinking ships for her.

\*

We're nearing the end of our Mexican dinner and I've come to the same realization I do every time that I eat at a place like this: that I must be good for about twice as much beer, but only half as much burrito as the average Mexican male. My soon-to-be bride and I are talking about appoint-

ing our future household, and *entertaining*, and serving trays, and all the specialty tools that we've heard New Englanders use for serving shellfish.

All the time, my father's last piece of advice turns over and over in my head. On the one hand, it was specifically about the importance of a woman's wedding day. But I've since taken it to mean something more. Over a year that has given me plenty of reasons to think hard about dying, I've taken those last words as his final charge to me to prioritize celebrations of living first. The man of the house may fall ill, but he must never go dark.

She tells me that she thinks we need real wine glasses because the commemorative plastic cups and coffee mugs that I use for just about everything won't cut it when we're hosting Thanksgiving dinners. "Most people don't drink alcohol from coffee mugs," she says, and I shrug to concede the point. The accoutrements of entertaining, I think to myself — however ridiculous their names, or narrow or specialized their functions might be — all signify reverence for living the shared moments of their use, which is where I've come to believe the man of the house should turn his attention when circumstances surround him with the inevitable and airy night. I tell her that I agree, and quietly decide that I also want an oyster knife — not because I know how to use it, but because I don't think anyone's ever bought one for a funeral before.

Over dinner, I want to tell her all of this. And I want to tell her that she and our future family together is the bright bursting light upon which my father trained my gaze in his and my shared year of adult darkness. But even thinking about that — and the Fourth of July, and Cancer — puts the lumps right back into my throat.

I look across the table at her and my distant, dewy-eyed gaze catches her off guard again.

"You okay?" she asks.

I have so many answers to that question, none of which I will be able to get out — not in-person, not this close. So, I deflect. I add a serving pitcher to my *entertaining* wish list, "you know, for cocktails," I tell her.

She laughs. "Yeah, that's a good idea. But you want to pick out kitchen stuff? What happened to you?"

I get quiet. The lumps in my throat are swelling. I've got to find the best, most personally achievable way to say it.

"You did *Kaboom*."

# The Aviary

RANA AWDISH

At time when it seemed everyone needed me, I chose to be devoted to something that didn't need me at all. I chose birds. As our world contracted, their small, borderless lives became something I could orient my own life around. Within our marriage, we had our individual worlds, and they kept us wrapped in weighty responsibility. I had the vast, blighted hospital and everyone's leaden grief. He had constant emails, pressurized calls, and reopening playbooks to urgently draft for the city. We shared a child—who had gained independence by means of our distraction—and announced himself only when hungry, much like the cats. But only the house and the yard functioned as shared spaces. The birds were a third thing and, I believed, marriages required third things. We had other shared subjects on which our mutual gaze could land, of course, with a pandemic paralyzing the world and Black bodies suffocating on cement. But none that felt quite so unburdened of gravity. The birds provided a focus for escape, an opportunity for unselfing. And I believed that our relationship and our sanity depended upon our unselfing.

The news abstractly reported mounting death tolls, while the hospital ran very concretely short on body bags and large, white, refrigerated morgue trunks parked indefinitely outside, blocking natural light from entering the first-floor windows. Daily actions were resonant with reminders of the frailty of our bodies. The compulsive hand-washing, masking and sanitizing all indicators that we were at constant risk of being overtaken by something very small, invisible and seemingly insignificant. Insignificant or deadly, depending on the case. You couldn't be sure. It felt as if we had stepped off some platform and were suspended in a moment of groundlessness, uncertain of whether we would plummet and crash or instead transcend our bodies, become weightless and limitless.

The birds began as my diversion, but I slowly drew the others in by buying binoculars for my son and supplying a book of North American birds my husband could reference. In the morning we would sit in cushioned chairs at the bay window, watching the sparrows, robins and finches feed in the garden. Those gentle minutes of close attention, warmed by coffee and the early sunlight, softened the frayed edges of our nerves. When

we were feeling playful, we ascribed personalities and narrated mini battles between them. Two mourning doves were clearly in love, and the blue jay was aggressive despite his singular beauty. A vibrant cardinal perched itself so high in the maple, we thought the leaves had begun to change, until we used the binoculars to look more closely. Wishful thinking, that the season would be changing so quickly.

It was essential in those moments not to allow the larger world in. There would be no checking phones, rehashing news reports or discussing the day that lay ahead. We huddled in our cottony pajamas and disheveled hair and for a moment, our apprehension about boundaries was neutralized. The birds came together in the garden, they ate together and they left, freely.

My husband took a sip of coffee and broke all the rules by stating, "I want you to prepare yourself. I have some serious news."

I looked toward him, to study his face.

"What is it?" What news would he have received before me? If someone had been sick, I would have known first. Since the pandemic had started, I'd become many people's first call. Lawyers are rarely the first call, unless they are criminal attorneys, which he was not. Why would he have waited until morning to tell me something he clearly knew the night before?

By the time he said, "The last time I was at Home Depot," I knew it was about the birds. My eyebrows raised with irritation and disbelief that he'd coopted a technique for delivering serious news to families of dying patients for this discussion.

"They didn't have ANY bird food. Fortunately, I have a surplus in my trunk," he said. I was not surprised. It was his character to anticipate what we needed, secure it and then stockpile backup supplies. "But the way the birds go through it..." he trailed off before adding, "Don't worry, I'm sure I can find some online."

As he got up to go to the kitchen for more coffee, he smoothed the right side of his dark hair back with his hand. The uneven haircut was my fault, and it bothered him endlessly, though all he said when he studied it in the mirror was, "Thank you, this is much better than it was." I was more accountable for his appearance lately, beyond even the lopsided haircut. I'd been feeding him out of distraction and boredom, and we all took in more than our bodies needed, as a kind of consolation for being undernourished in other ways.

Looking outside, I thought how differently we approached our shared space. Where he viewed it as his to deliberately plan and landscape, I favored a passive acceptance of what was to be. He ensured each boxwood was

hedged symmetrically and that each miniature spruce was perfectly conical. I favored the untamable wisteria with its tangled vines the animals could climb and encouraged moss to grow in the cracks of the pavement by watering it unnecessarily. Later, when hollows and superficial tunnels appeared in the yard, burrowed by an unseen rodent-mammal, he was offended by its supposed trespassing.

“There is a mole-thing, and it’s going to ruin the yard!” he yelled through the door.

“It’s the outside. The outside is squarely his, not yours.” I tried to remind him without looking in his direction. Then, deciding there was something more important to say, walked toward the door, “Did you ever consider that maybe your need to be in control was actually the problem?”

He stepped toward me, still holding a trowel dripping in mud.

“You’re siding with the mole?” He was incredulous. “It never even occurred to me that you would side with the mole on this.” He shook his head as if I had disrupted his entire belief system.

I shrugged, uncommitted to a side. “Just let him be,” I said.

A month prior, when families of squirrels and chipmunks took up residence in the attic, I’d been entertained by their pattering and busyness above my head, though I couldn’t admit that out loud. The whole world was so still and quiet, except for them. They went on about their business, entirely unbothered, and I couldn’t imagine their presence was at all dangerous, though the word infestation seemed intent on suggesting otherwise. The company he hired to remove them and seal the gaps in the siding promised they would be relocated humanely.

“I won’t stop putting out food for the birds, even if that was the cause,” I thought it should be said, to preempt any discussion.

“We go through a fifty-pound bag of birdseed a week,” my husband explained to the man on the ladder.

The man raised his eyebrows and nodded in a way that suggested he’d been married a while.

“Sure,” he said. “Now that the holes are sealed putting out bird food is fine.” The mask he wore hid his smile, but I knew the expression. It was how you regarded the penguins at the zoo. He knew we were just making the best of our artificial habitat.

When I first met my husband, I was drawn to his secure confidence. I had just begun my fellowship training in critical care medicine and was immersed in a world of uncertainty—and frequently unsolvable problems. I was learning how to be proximate to suffering, and the inevitability of death.



He was working as an attorney in a law firm, where his entire existence was dependent upon his ability to plan for and control outcomes through strategy and negotiations. He was highly skilled, and it gave him a sense of himself and his own agency that was grounding. It never struck me as an arrogance, his belief that he had the right to reorder the world around him. I just wanted him to rewind the reel and talk me through every event and choice that had made the ground underneath him so solid. I wanted to know the nuances of that other experience, and to contrast it against all the moments I'd been taught to fit myself into the spaces the world left available, and not to expect accommodation. To invite others in and not expect that they leave, even if they begin to damage the walls.

When the lived spaces within our home began feeling too familiar, and with the world around us in despair, he repurposed an upstairs bedroom as his home office. In redecorating, he was drawn to the clean lines and sharp, predictable edges of midcentury modern furniture. Needing a large work surface as well as a place to read, he set two substantial Miesian desks at right angles to each other and an Eames recliner in the far corner. That the furniture was sturdy enough to outlast us didn't bother him. He enjoyed the way words like heirloom and legacy sounded in sentences. For the time being, each piece created order and offered some sort of architectural protection against the exigency of threat. In that space at least, he was barricaded against the messiness of uncertainty. As he worked, he was surrounded by reminders of his successes, all the other times things had gone exactly to plan. When he wasn't busy, he could still be reminded that he was sad.

In reclaiming an upstairs bedroom, he vacated the downstairs study allowing it to become solely mine. It had French doors I could close, which seemed essential at the time. We sourced an old writing desk with nooks and cubbyholes where I could tuck away cards, journals, colored pens and spools of twine. I was writing letters to everyone then, sending notes of encouragement that could more accurately be described as distress signals. I decorated the room as a counterbalance to the world. Every surface was cheery and comforting, with a bright cerulean sofa, covered in velvet, and an ochre ottoman. I latticed old Persian rugs on the floor. When he asked what style I was going for, I replied, "Maximalism. Obviously." We covered the walls in my brightly colored, figurative paintings and filled the shelves with my favorite books. I disassembled an old ballgown into yards of fabric and sewed pillows and reupholstered the desk chair in the sunny floral material.

We began referring to it as my apartment though everyone took to it. In the afternoon, the cats napped on the long oak window seat.

Taking in the finished room he smiled said, “Well, this is probably the closest I’ll ever get to knowing what it is like inside of your head,” hugging me from the side so that we could look at everything from the same point of view. It was true, every thought I had developed around was somewhere in one of those books, every dream or nightmare had made it into a painting. It was all there waiting to be understood, for someone to make sense of it all.

Instead of feeling seen or understood, I heard myself thinking, *If I die, you’ll sit in here to feel close to me.* Death felt so imminent then.

The redecorating was a transparent attempt to make myself comfortable at home, when I preferred being at the hospital. Strange that an impersonal, plague-infested, hundred-year-old brick building would bring me any comfort, but there was a coherence there that wasn’t available to me at home. If I felt edgy or angry or grief-stricken, it was contextualized within the experience we were all sharing. Though I felt all those things at home, I was estranged from any experience that could validate those feelings, or anyone who understood my trauma. At home the trivial worries of the neighbors, and the bland unstructured boredom of the children, mocked my grief. I couldn’t bring myself to contribute to their conversations or revise their interpretations of the news. I couldn’t bring myself to care about anything that anyone on the outside cared about.

Also, the garden was blooming which seemed odd, and people took bike rides and casually jogged through the neighborhood. I was glad for them that they hadn’t seen what we had, and I was frustrated that it allowed them to maintain their denial and resistance to the scale of the losses, and the heavy burden we’d all incurred in caring for the sick. It was as if their ability to remain untouched was enough to invalidate our suffering somehow. What was hardest was that seeing them out forced me to acknowledge the thing that had fundamentally shifted in me. It now hurt more to watch people live their lives than to watch people die. It was as if sitting with death and impermanence for so long had created in me a kind of acceptance of death that I couldn’t extend to others simply living. Our lives had become so intertwined, so interdependent, and yet we were unwilling to acknowledge our complicity in each other’s pain.

“The mole has burrowed holes in your vegetable garden.” He was trying to get me to switch sides.

"Probably helps with aeration of the soil. I bet the plants like it," I mused.

"No, the moles eat the roots and then the plants die. You can't want that. It's your summer garden," he said protectively.

"It's just that none of this is a space that I can control." I looked down at the holes in the garden and thought *not here too*.

"They just come together, they keep meeting here, it's not up to us to keep them apart, it's pointless to even try," I said.

"Sure you can, you can try. We can call the mole guy."

"That won't fix anything," I replied, annoyed that everything was so solvable to him. "Everything might still be ruined; you have to accept that. No one can keep it from happening," I tried to keep from crying.

"I'm confused. Are we still talking about the moles?" he asked.

"Possibly not," I sighed. "But it's all the same anyway." I sat down on the grass, releasing my weight into the ground.

"You can't fix everything?" he offered.

"Yep." I took a deep breath in so that I could get the rest out all at once before I lost the will to communicate honestly. "You know, we had a patient who needed a ventilator, he wasn't very old, mid-sixties. Before going on the vent, he wanted to make sure he wasn't taking it from someone else, someone younger with a better chance of survival. He said, 'You don't put me on that unless you're sure you have enough,' and it made me so sad and no one gets it."

"I'm sorry. That's awful," he said, shaking his head as if he already wished to give the story back to me to hold.

"And people are like, riding bikes," I gestured towards the street. "Like how? How can they be doing that? Explain that to me."

"They aren't trying to hurt you by riding their bikes, they just don't know. None of us can know."

"Well he died anyway. But he died in character. He died a good person who was willing to sacrifice for others. Better than these people," I said, throwing my hands in the air and generally gesturing at everyone else.

"Everyone's just trying to get by the best they can. It's hard for everyone in different ways," he said.

"It's not the same! Their suffering is not the same," knowing that wasn't what he was saying but fighting mostly with myself.

We sat quietly and for long enough that the birds and small animals began wandering back.

“How about you sit, and I will fill the bird feeders?” he said, and I nodded.

I watched as he walked between the trees, carrying the heavy tin barrel of birdseed across the yard. I was never sure if it was out of love and a genuine desire to unburden me, or an attempt to be needed, that he chose to keep the bird food in a container that I couldn't lift. Either way it was too heavy, so feeding them had become his responsibility.

Once he'd finished filling the first two birdhouses, a chipmunk emerged from the maple tree where he'd been hiding. He hung upside down, holding onto the feeder's rounded edge, happily filling his cheeks with seed. I thought how difficult it would be for me to eat suspended upside down, how well-adapted he was for his world. He then scurried down the thick trunk and across the yard; I watched as he approached the house. He paused to look directly at me before slowly climbing the drainpipe, deliberately squeezing his way between pieces of siding and into our attic.

**Nothing has happened.**

She is standing in front of me  
And I am without words.

Or plan.

Just do it.  
Say it.  
Push the words  
Past your lips.  
And let them breathe in the world.

It has to be done  
It must come to pass.  
And you must be  
The one  
To do it.

So, let the words fall  
Now.  
We have lost him.

[Lost is an inexact word.  
Does it mean no return?  
Ruinaton?  
Absence?  
Has it simply gone beyond reach?

There's an ownership to lost.  
So then there's a fault.  
How did it come to be lost?  
Did it slip through your fingers?]

It is my duty to be clear

"He died."  
I say, and she screams.

Stop.

This is only pretend.  
We're only playing at grief  
And love  
And hate  
And fear.  
Today is imaginary  
but  
Tomorrow  
it will be real.

No one is hurt today.  
The news I impart  
Has no impact.  
It is an illusion  
Ephemeral.

A scenario  
On brightly colored paper.  
Blue, green and gold.

When I am done here  
The world will reset,  
the next of us  
Will begin.

Nothing of this is true  
Or permanent.

Except for me.

The fear I feel is real  
The dread at creating a fracture  
Of before and after.

Breathe.

When the time comes

For me to tear open the seams of the world  
For a stranger.  
I hope I call on what blood I have From my grandfather -

Whose words these are:  
“We who are finite  
huddle together in finitude  
and we seek to find  
that which is infinite.”

*It is he who has gone.  
Not you who have lost him.*

But more than that,  
“He has slipped out of the window  
of this world and he has gone home.”

*A reflection on learning how to “break bad news” during my M2 year, with quotes  
borrowed from my grandfather, Jay Monroe Jensen, M.D.*

# Vietnam Surgeon

LIANA MEFFERT

Every Christmas I'm surrounded by  
 a thousand pendulous ornaments  
 galvanizing the glow of another  
 Only to return to rice paddies & kerosene fumes  
 to find my Grandpa—where he always is  
 and also other places he won't or cannot name  
 rested in a backdrop of incandescent green

I ask him for the story about triaging soldiers  
 in D'ngang he can't recall so he tells me  
 about fixing mitral stenosis in the locals,  
 mimes sticking a finger through the valve  
 to make space, sewing up the edges  
 like cinching a purse string, shrugs  
 life was as malleable as a heart in two hands,  
 which is to say it took to shape easy as red wrapping  
 or blood splashing on sandals, something to wade through  
 when the pressure wouldn't rise & feeling in the dark  
 for leaky wounds felt like plugging holes in the hull  
 of a sinking ship and was never enough  
 like the cap-full of tequila from Father Perez  
 with plenty of holy water to drown us all  
 even the boy who survived  
 because living was the consolation prize

The story was a riddle. If there aren't enough  
 units of blood or time to save everyone...& I know  
 if he remembers anything at all, it's what he chose