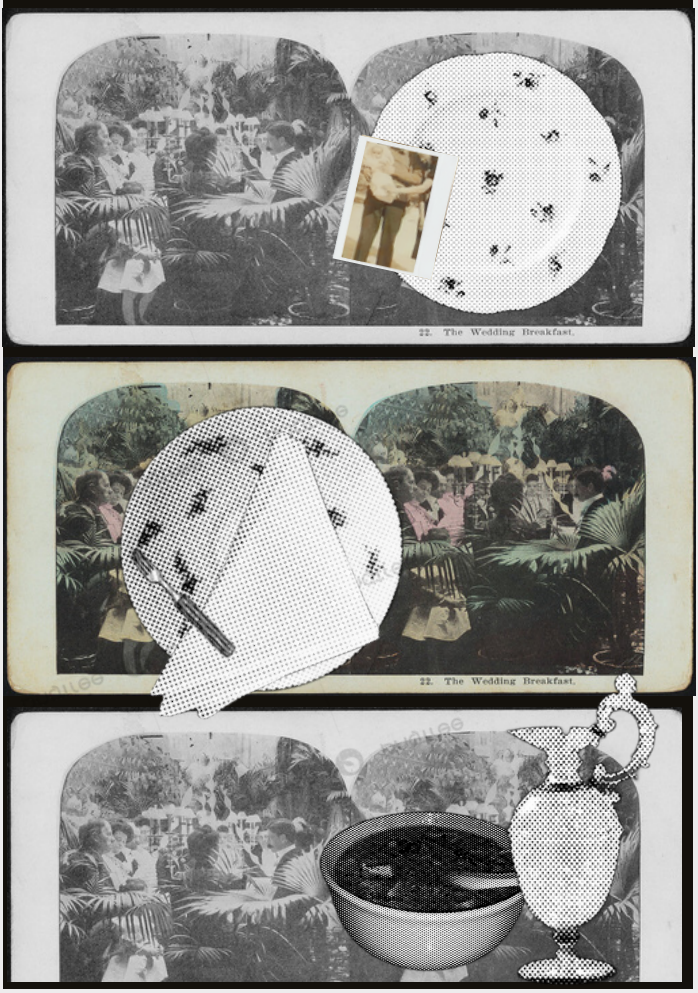
# Palindrome Journal




Revelations at the Dinner Table

*I02*

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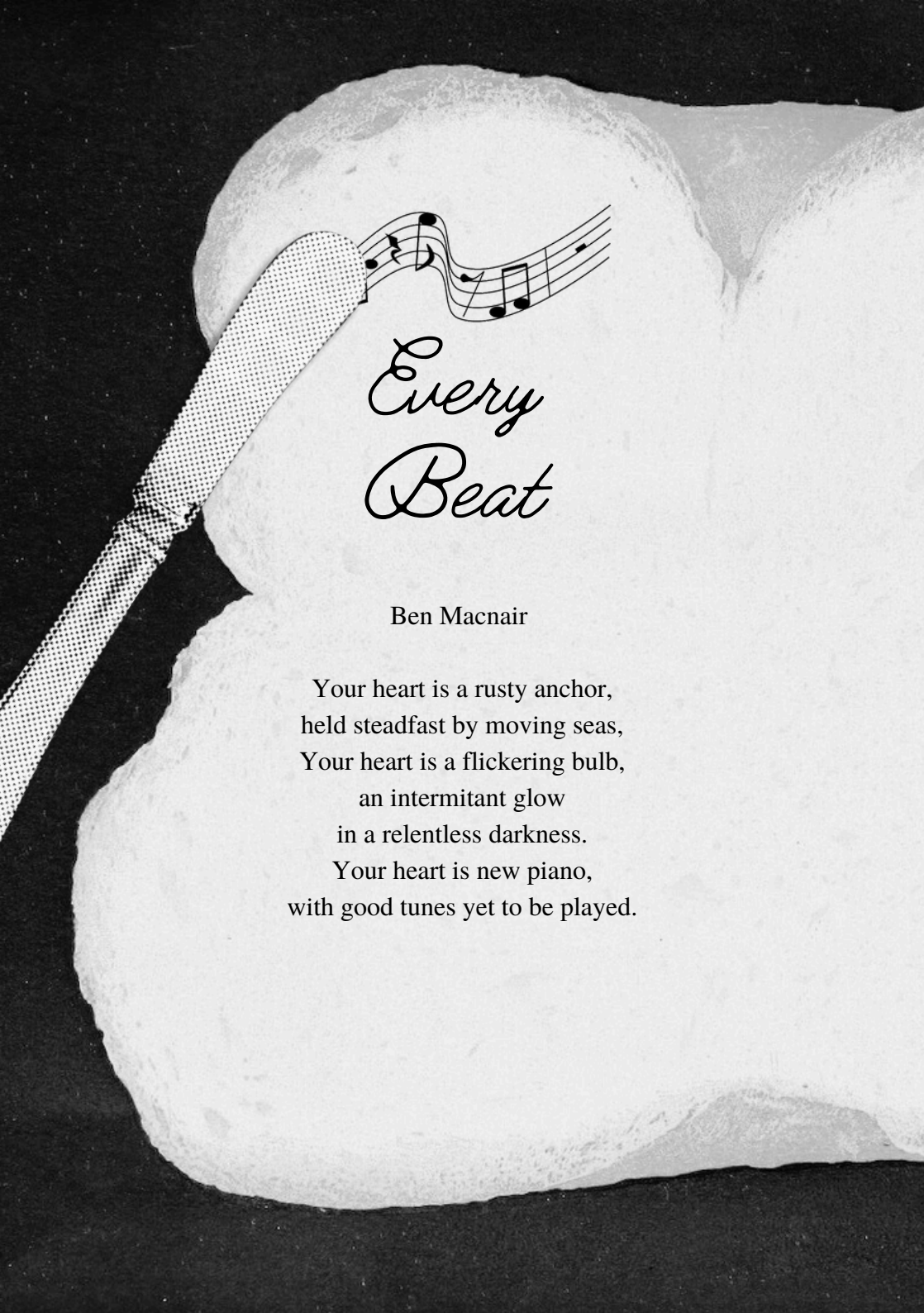
*featuring*

Paul J.L Hughes
Abigail Beattie
Edward Lee
Mark Keane
Jeanne Blum Leskinski
Amanda Hawk
Sarah Frost
Lena Gemmer
JB Polk
Claudia Wysocky
Samuel Spencer
Kelly DuMar
Pauline Leoncio
Elizabeth Santaromita
Mark Morgan
Kushagra Agarwal
Rosalie Hendon
Olivia Kamer
Ben Macnair
Jules Duve
Paul Hostovsky
Jake Price



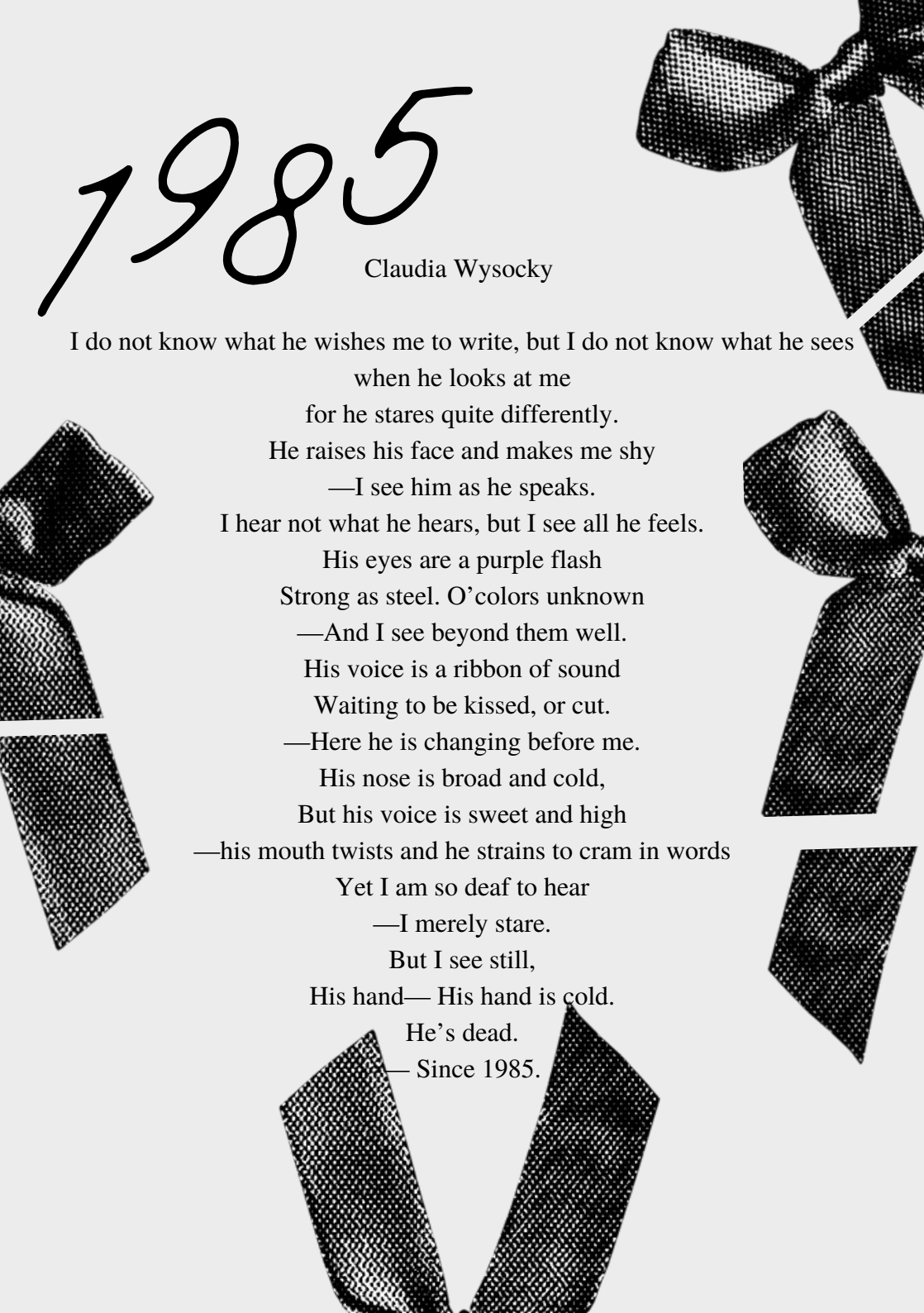
# Every Beat

Ben Macnair

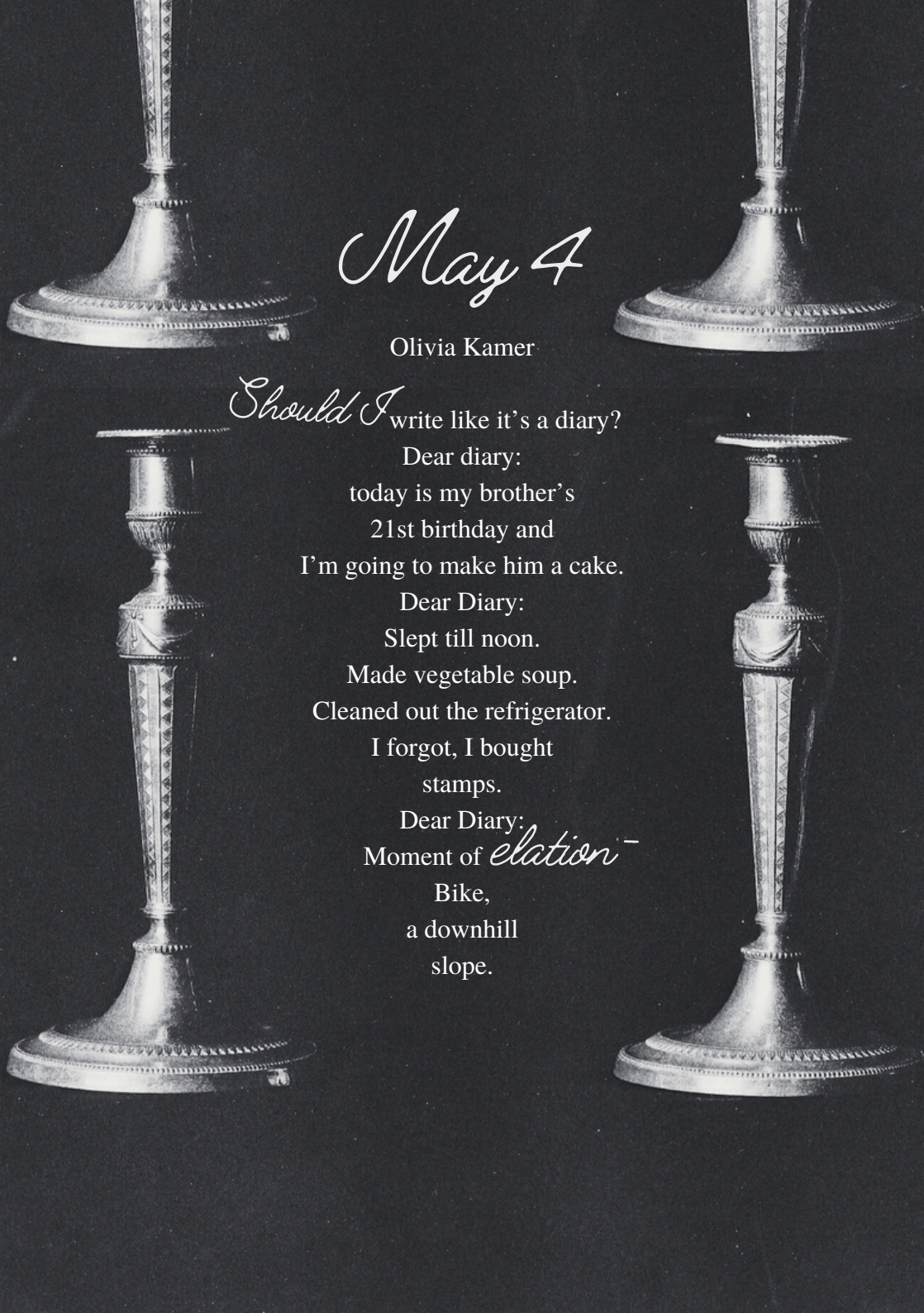
Your heart is a rusty anchor,
held steadfast by moving seas,
Your heart is a flickering bulb,
an intermitant glow
in a relentless darkness.
Your heart is new piano,
with good tunes yet to be played.

# 1985

Claudia Wysocky



I do not know what he wishes me to write, but I do not know what he sees
when he looks at me
for he stares quite differently.
He raises his face and makes me shy
—I see him as he speaks.
I hear not what he hears, but I see all he feels.
His eyes are a purple flash
Strong as steel. O'colors unknown
—And I see beyond them well.
His voice is a ribbon of sound
Waiting to be kissed, or cut.
—Here he is changing before me.
His nose is broad and cold,
But his voice is sweet and high
—his mouth twists and he strains to cram in words
Yet I am so deaf to hear
—I merely stare.
But I see still,
His hand— His hand is cold.
He's dead.
— Since 1985.



# May 4

Olivia Kamer

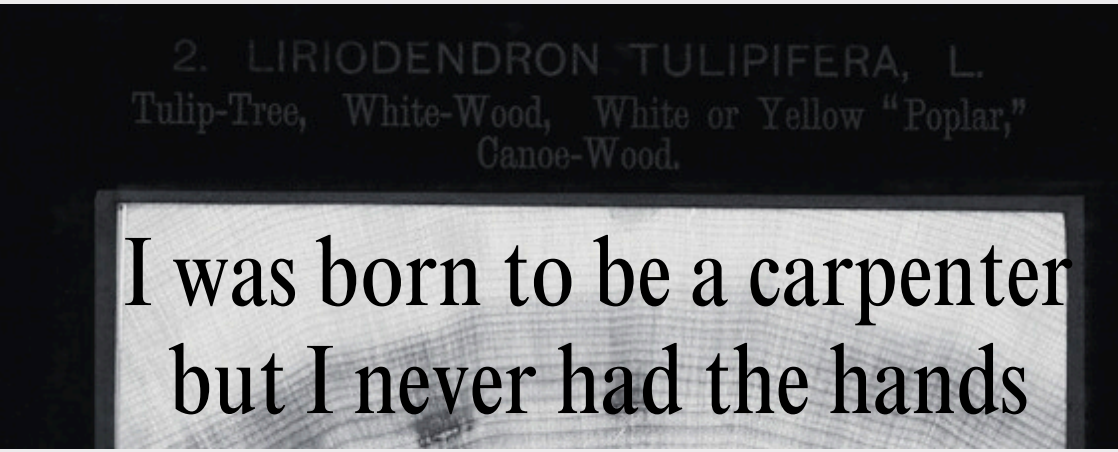
Should I write like it's a diary?
Dear diary:
today is my brother's
21st birthday and
I'm going to make him a cake.
Dear Diary:
Slept till noon.
Made vegetable soup.
Cleaned out the refrigerator.
I forgot, I bought
stamps.
Dear Diary:
Moment of elation –
Bike,
a downhill
slope.

# God's eye

Mark Morgan

when Abraham took Isaac to Mt. Moriah, he established
that a child's psyche is the perfect altar for setting fire
to fear. on Sundays, my father's head is bowed
over the kitchen counter, propped by a monstrance
of elbows and open hands beside a sinkful of greasy
pans. here is the sacristy where my mother's unifying rites
subvert the curse of wounds which never heal with steaming
Italian and Polish aliments. at times, tears scald my cheeks
as my eyes swallow shards of broken plates or glasses
scattered on faded vinyl tiles. gashes on my tongue
flood my throat with blistering blood, melt my stomach
and drown everything around me in acidic dissent
until I am bound and baptized by a gushing aspergillum
of Vernors and thunderous refrain:
I- I- I want OUT
and it is clear what I have done to perpetuate the inferno
that razed this house to the ground beneath the malformed
God's eye crafted by juvenile hands and dangling overhead



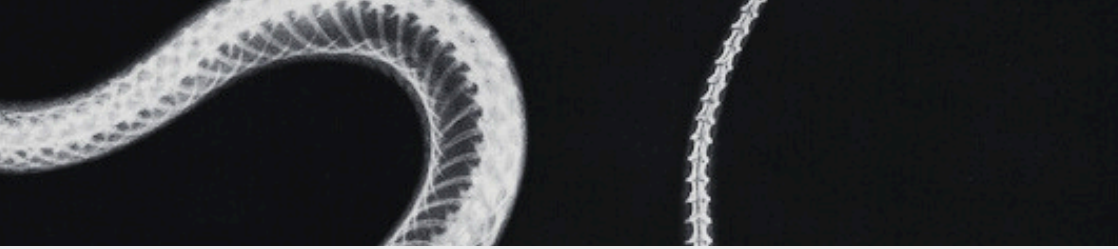



# I was born to be a carpenter but I never had the hands

Rosalie Hendon

I could never appreciate the grain of the wood
or look at the heft and warp and see
the tabletop, the floor board, the oar, the ship's mast
I couldn't tell cherry from oak,
maple from ash
I didn't even like the smell of it
The sawdust in my boots, in my hair
I feared the saws,
imagined losing my fingers one by one
I tried to work the wood, but it
would never have me

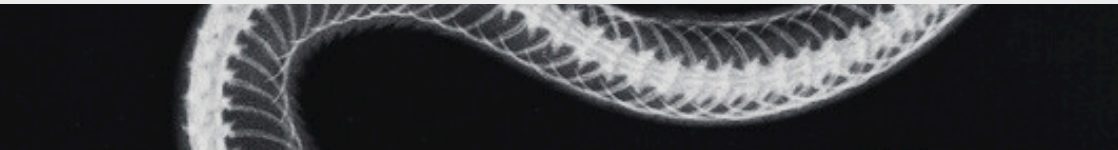
Author's Note: This poem was inspired by a line in the song "The Way I Am," by Shannon Clark & the Sugar:
"Born to be a carpenter / but I never ever had the hands."



# Ars Poetic-etica-etica

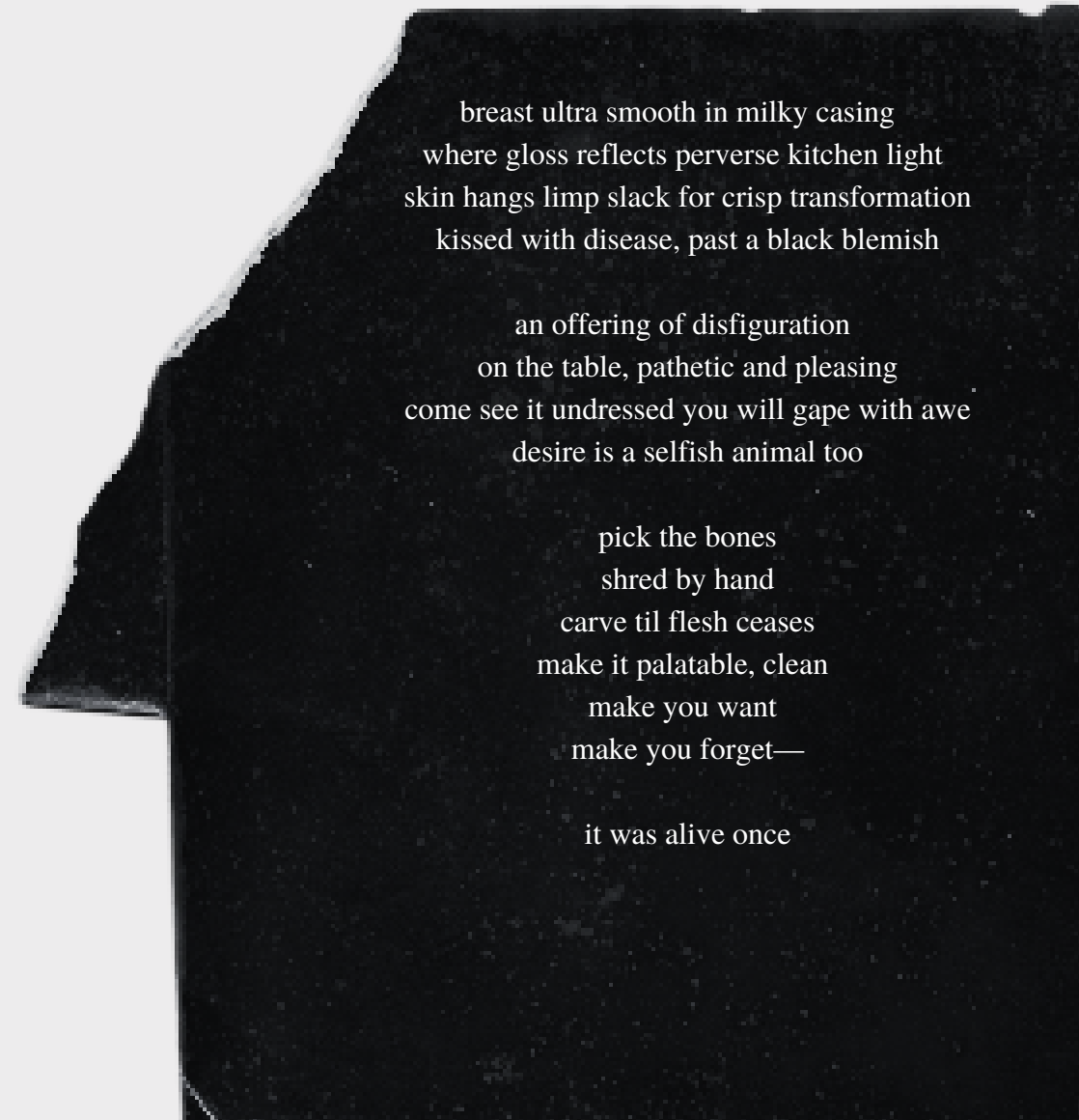
Samuel Spencer

Lately, I have forced myself to stop
thinking of new poems; writing them
in my head with no real intention
of getting it on the page.
It's a bad habit, thinking of titles
and lines, and what others might think of them.
They swirl like particles of dust,
tangible for a moment when caught
in the smallest of rays of light,
and almost inevitably it comes
back to the conceptual conception
of writing poems about poetry,
as if the idea of the craft
is more beautiful than the real thing,
as if the echo is more magnifice
than the original yawp,
as if the echo's echo is more delightful.
Subsequently, I can never remember what it was
I rendered sound because the idea
of the idea, once replicated, is a snake
seasoning the end of its own begotten tail.



# How to Make Chicken Soup

Pauline Leoncio



breast ultra smooth in milky casing
where gloss reflects perverse kitchen light
skin hangs limp slack for crisp transformation
kissed with disease, past a black blemish

an offering of disfiguration
on the table, pathetic and pleasing
come see it undressed you will gape with awe
desire is a selfish animal too

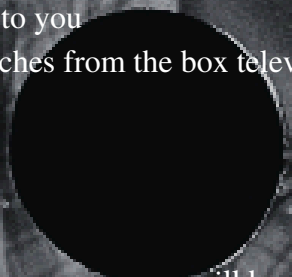
pick the bones
shred by hand
carve til flesh ceases
make it palatable, clean
make you want
make you forget—

it was alive once

# The things that are hard to love about you will not change

Abigail Beattie

This thought occurs to you
when your face is inches from the box television & the static pulls at
your peach fuzz.



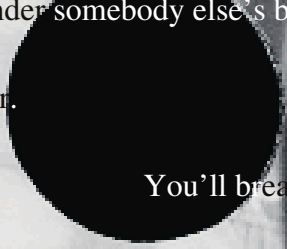
You're 8. It's taco night.
You don't know it yet, but
you will break your pinky finger that night
&
at every new party you attend

you'll hold out your hand,
palm to face &
exclaim



*Look! It's crooked!*

On your 21st birthday. You chew a piece of gum &
find a beer rolled under somebody else's bed—



call it the last supper.

You'll break your pinky toe that night, but
you won't remember it.
It'll be just a sharp, unknown ache
waking you in the morning &



every time you float on your back in a public pool,
you'll submerge your foot &
defeated, say

*I guess it does look a little crooked.*

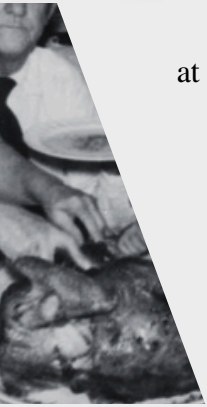
# Constellations

Paul Hostovsky





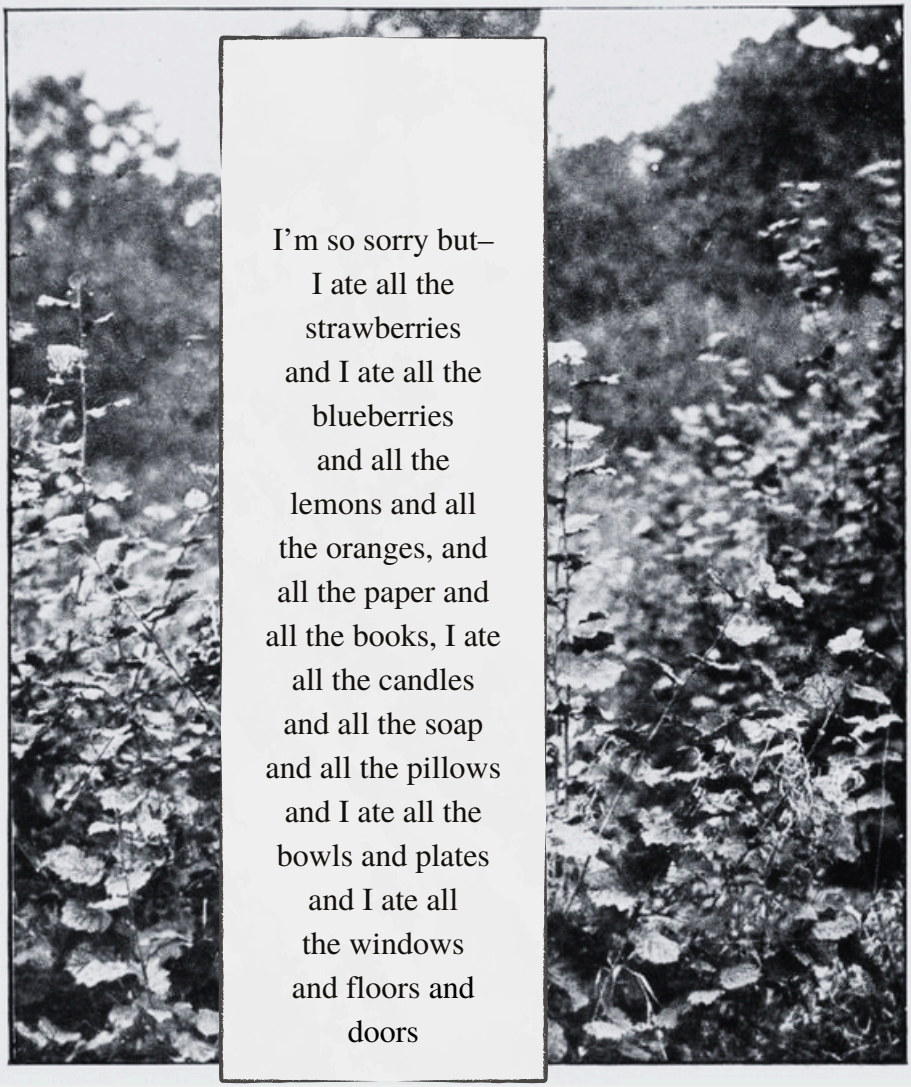
Everything perfectly proper,
down to the clipped flight feathers
of the child's migrating elbows
at the dinner table, hands folded
quietly in his lap. But it can't properly be said
that the family sits around
the dinner table anymore.
That's what the child is thinking
as he sits in geometry class, remembering
how once it was possible for the isosceles triangle
with two big sides and one small side–
the one of his mother and father and him–
to plot itself on a circle and to say
it was sitting around a dinner table
at dinnertime. Even in geometry that was possible. But now
it's just his mother and him. Two points. A line.
And it just isn't possible to say it's a family.
And it just isn't accurate to say they sit around
the dinner table anymore. They sit across.
And his mother's line of sight is a ray. It goes out
and doesn't meet his. And the only triangles now
are her elbows when she cries, her face in her hands.





# A Reminder

Olivia Kamer



I'm so sorry but–
I ate all the
strawberries
and I ate all the
blueberries
and all the
lemons and all
the oranges, and
all the paper and
all the books, I ate
all the candles
and all the soap
and all the pillows
and I ate all the
bowls and plates
and I ate all
the windows
and floors and
doors

# I Prefer Dinner in Bed

Kushagra Agarwal

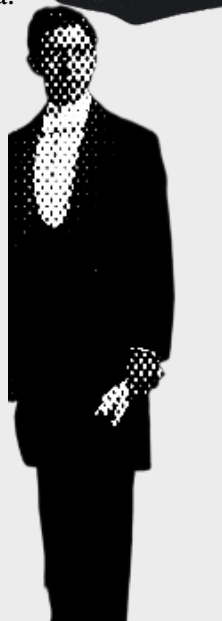


I.
my dad tells my mom he loves her.
she asks him for flowers.
I show them my report card,
my teacher said that I did well.
“you have untapped potential”
my grade is an A.
they ask me why I got a “B” in science.
I tell them I’m first in my grade.
it isn’t enough.
we eat dinner.
we say grace.
my parents refuse my request for dessert.
“If you get an A+, we’ll take you out for ice cream”;
they drink whiskey and fall asleep fighting on the sofa.
I clean the kitchen after them.
wash the dishes and throw my report card in the bin.
save the leftovers in the fridge.



II.
the trees have begun shedding.
I trample freshly browned leaves.
the crisp resonates with the grumbles of my hunger.
we get results for our mid-year exams today.









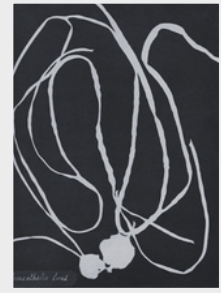


III.
my parents tell me they're divorcing.
my mom has puffy eyes.
my dad looks drunk.
there's empty bottles of beer around the house.
I ask them what that means.
They tell me that marriage is a hard thing to make work
That love isn't enough, always.
I ask them "Why?"
I ask them for ice cream.
They tell me some other time.
I don't show them my report card.
I clear away the bottles.
They fall asleep drunk in different rooms.
IV.
music blares through my earphones.
I'm late for football practice.
I steer clear of the freshly cut grass.
We sweep the inter-school tourney today.







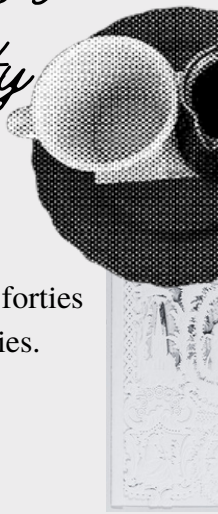




*This poem was first published in Expression Activism Literary Magazine. (https://expressionactivism.com/)

# I Placed A Table Card for Joy at my Birthday Party

Amanda Hawk



Celebrated another year of dog-eared gray hair
and bone chewed wrinkles with my friends.
Smiles stretched down the table, I pulled out a chair for my forties
and toasted a night of loud laughter and megaphone stories.

Positioned table cards for each giggle burst
and guffaw narratives like confetti pop joy.
Each candle lit reminds me of office birthdays
with gift wrapped cubicles and coworkers shaking sparkles out keyboards.

Joy was the months of glitter trails in hallways
that took years to be washed away by rain storms of feet.
It was Seattle downpours that turned the sidewalks into swimming pools.
I stomped my way through the city and the storm clouds clinging to my skin.

I swayed between fanned circles of rippled reflections and liquid poetry.
I weaved in and out of neon doorways to strobe light dance floors,
my body howling to move faster with banging feet and shifting hips.
Each flash breathed life into every gasp and I flitted beautiful

with fangs and shadow kissed skirts. I remembered the first time I danced in the dark.
Little girl balanced on my mother's feet as The Circle Game played for the fifth time.
Her hands enveloped mine, and her fingers curled around my hands
like mini love letters as she cooed to her baby bird.

Tottering to the tempo of her heartbeat,
I became big teeth and open eye admiration to my slow swaying mother.
Joy rattled me alive when I became a mother.
My son rested in my arms clutching my index finger,

and I felt a solar flare of excitement, burning away sagging shoulders and stuttering whispers with every forehead kiss and each one of his sleepy yawns.
I watched him grow into knobby knees and lean muscles
as his eighteenth birthday ticked down with my tocked year.

I bloomed into gray hair roses and wrinkle streaked daisies
knowing I had become the mother minus clawed finger anger and snarl tongue impatience.
Joy is the little girl at the end of the table with tear stained cheeks.

She stared at my crow's feet and upright posture then raised up a glass to toast.



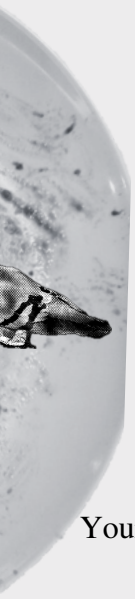

# Remembrance of Treats Passed

Paul J.L Hughes

The aroma of cheap, instant coffee
And stale biscuits that make
False claim to be French,
Breathes life into the sleepy
Neurons of my visual memory,
A painting in the portrait gallery
Of my mind, for years unseen,
Its invisible power incites
A quantum leap of the senses
Back to my first twelve-step meeting,
A remembrance of treats passed,
Of conversations sidestepped,
Of eye contact stonewalled, amidst a
Chorus of chatter, I hover just above
My seat, ready to dart to the exit
Should I be asked to speak,
Never had I heard such honest tales,
Somehow sprung forth from what must
Have been the most pained of lips,
Dried out by alcohol droughts,
Of bedwetting, thievery, nights in
Police cells and weeks in asylums,
At last, my conscience avows,
I've arrived.

# You Made Pancakes For Your Family and I am Melting

Jake Price





Hazel. Whatever that means.

Brown - green - amber pools that exist around a pupil
glowing in the sunlight while you stand here with your hands in
your pockets and tell me about your morning.

Who do you think you are?

You're beautiful in an ugly way, a violent way, the best way.
Your hair is messy, the strands are shining, and your smile lines are carved
into your skin. I just realized I love you.

A couple of months ago we had a conversation I know you don't remember.
You told me you were five and got a slingshot for your birthday and you
shot at birds and cried when they died. You kept aiming at them regardless,
mourning their loss, a robin in your crosshairs.
Loving you is cruel like that.

I was sitting on my fathers' parents' trampoline, also five, and I would
pull the wings off butterflies and rip the legs off spiders.
Maybe your hazel eyes are like a magnifying glass in the hands of a kid
focusing the sun on my chest waiting for smoke. I want to explode.



# Lean Meat

Elizabeth Santaromita

It would upset my mother if we did not come when dinner was called.
Hours I have spent cooking just to be ignored.
Dad found gristle in the leanest of meats.
My sister would gaze into worlds far away,
Never to let me visit.
The food was made, but ingredients were missing.
Food was hot,
But it didn't warm the soul.
Family dinners look different these days.
The gristle is cut.
I face the heat; I am always heard.
My daughter sits;
The world at her feet.



# The Power of Language



Sarah Frost

*I dread the idea of living with you in the city,* he says
while I stare at his shitty apartment blinds, half broken,
stale as his rotting, spent cigarettes outside. I don't live here,
and I no longer feel welcome.
The walls are thin—everything in this building is loud; the booming
steps of the couple upstairs act as my alarm clock, and I'm fixated now
on whether they know what's happening below. Are they as attuned
to my crumbling reality as I am with their intrusive routine?
A dog and its owner walk by the window, and I'm certain
these dozen words he whispered still linger, a poison smog—
the first floor is an unwanted exercise in exposing sacred details
of a life. *Dread* sinks to the bottom of my stomach;
it was foolish of me to think I'd be a choice he would make.
I consider whether five letters felt too bulky to be contained
as they sat on the tip of his tongue. Was this one word too
cumbersome, impossible to hold inside any longer?
I focus on a nail hole in the wall behind him and think
about momentum. Did it leave him with the same velocity
with which it hit the soft insides of my being, a bullet
meant to rip through tissue?
Is the recoil still reverberating through the grey matter of his mind?

# Shaking the Baby

Jeanne Blum Lesinski

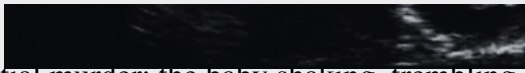
In prenatal prep classes, parenting classes, future parents are warned against shaking the baby. The baby's head is delicate, the fontanel still unclosed, the brain having had to be stressed to get through the birth canal, the bones tectonic plates pushing up into a mountain ridge for them to pass through safely, sometimes making a temporary conehead of the newborn.

Shaking the baby is abuse, a crime, a potential murder; the baby shaking, trembling, fear, exhaustion (doubt); rocking the baby . . . rocking, rocking.

Sleep deprivation: a fact of life for new mothers, even those not breastfeeding, even those whose boyfriends, spouses, promise—maybe even do—their duty during the night when it's cold maybe, and maybe not even quiet but cold and dark or hot and dark with cicadas buzzing as the sweat pools between the breasts of the nursing mother whose back aches from having stretched, from almost decoupling to bring that new life into the world.



Decoupling, uncoupling: some new parents find that new life too much to bear, too much responsibility, life changed forever.



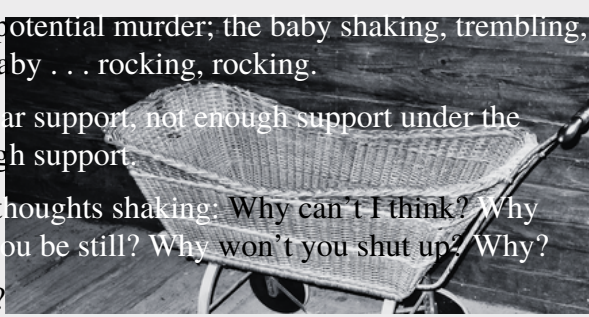
Shaking the baby is abuse, a crime, a potential murder; the baby shaking, trembling, fear, exhaustion (doubt); rocking the baby . . . rocking, rocking.

Unselfishness made mandate: in the night-sighted times the rocker can seem an island (a speck) in the middle of a world, a universe. Rocking, suckling, release of milk letting down—almost a sting—a release of tension in full, taut breasts. Babies and mothers nursing or surrogates with the rubber tipped nipples, look eye to eye, try to fall in love with each other, with baby's nearsighted first gazes.

Spasms: the muscles remember, the uterus contracts during nursing to pull it back into its virgin shape. Thoughts of pouring into, sloughing off pre-pregnancy-sized jeans is a vague consolation.

Shaking the baby is abuse, a crime, a potential murder; the baby shaking, trembling, fear,exhaustion (doubt); rocking the baby . . . rocking, rocking.

Back, forth, not enough support, lumbar support, not enough support under the arms—push a pillow there—not enough support.



Shaking: hands shaking with fatigue, thoughts shaking: Why can't I think? Why won't this diaper go on? Why won't you be still? Why won't you shut up? Why?

Why can't I sleep and just let you cry?

Edward Lee,
“A Lonely Place to Lose”



Edward Lee,
“A Change Sought”





Edward Lee,“A Flash of Meaning in the Dark”



Kelly DuMar,“Stitch”

Lena N. Gemmer,“The Coming Storm”







Kelly DuMar, “Sand Tray Morning II Playa Pelada”

Lena N. Gemmer,“Around the Corner”

# BIRDS

J.B.Polk Prose

Since retiring nearly three years ago, Flora has walked Salt and Pepper, her old Cocker Spaniels, twice a day, seven days a week, rain or shine. Once before breakfast and once before lunchtime. For exactly fifteen minutes each time. There's a reason for this: she needs to get back home quickly to prepare Mama Louise's morning hot porridge and lunchtime pumpkin soup with croutons.

Mama's appetite has undoubtedly changed over the years. Gone are the days when she could devour an XL Burger King meal and wash it down with a sizeable vanilla milkshake. When Flora worked full-time, she would prepare a plate of ham and cheese sandwiches, a thermos of iced tea, and some nutritious snacks for Mama to enjoy throughout the day. Now that she is retired, Mama Louise expects her daughter to cook the meals from scratch.

"Soup and porridge—they're easy to swallow with my dentures," she comments with a hint of annoyance in her voice.

Flora has always enjoyed intellectual activities, such as reading and engaging in philosophical discussions, and walking the dogs allows her to combine physical activity with mental stimulation. She likes to challenge her mind with new concepts, and when she looks at simple things such as trees and houses or even paving blocks, she wonders about their deeper meanings, and her mind becomes a vibrant tapestry of thoughts. The cumulus in the sky brings back images of the fluffy cotton candy she adored as a youngster. And the white picket fences remind her how, in early spring, she used to run barefoot through neighborhood gardens brimming with daffodils and snowdrops, in sharp contrast to the concrete jungle the area is now turning into.

They are not particularly fond memories because Mama Louise strongly disapproved of Flora's sweet indulgences, while the flowers always triggered her sneezing fits.

“Sugar gives you an awful rush and rots your teeth. And with your asthma, the doctor's bills are really straining our finances," Mama Louise would scold, her mouth tightly pressed together in disapproval.

Flora lets the dogs roam but never off the leash because of her neighbor's dangerous-looking Cane Corso, who pees and poops all over the front yards whenever he is allowed out. As they sniff around, her thoughts get caught up by the remarkable balance of nature, where plants and animals coexist in a seamless ecosystem—the birds chirp, the insects buzz, the squirrels scurry up and down tree branches, and the flowers contribute to the tapestry of life she finds intriguing.

Flora Daisy Meadows' mother has always been an outdoor enthusiast, instilling in her daughter a profound love for the natural world and for what she referred to as "communication with the environment." However, the name she selected for her only child was quite a challenge, as the other children in the neighborhood teased her incessantly.

"Here comes Margarine Oopsy Daisy," they would exclaim when she emerged to join in the fun on infrequent occasions.

Margarine, thanks to Flora, the popular plant-based spread...

For a while, she thought she could drop the surname when she nearly married Hank Lafferty. But her mother hated Hank almost as much as, if not more than, cotton candy.

"He is such a wastrel, Flora—a penniless bank clerk who will never achieve anything," Mama warned.

"You have a bright future ahead of you. At such a young age, marriage might not be the best decision. You ought to concentrate on your studies and job rather than getting married so early."

So Flora did, and after a short wait, Hank decided to tie the knot with a woman whose name had no connection to the natural world and who most certainly didn't have a mother who despised him. And Flora remained single, with a name that invited ridicule even from adults.

Flora thinks about things as she strolls around today. Things that make her heart swell with joy and things that weigh heavy on her mind. Like missed opportunities and lost loved ones... She thinks about more than just the clouds above her or the absence of flowers in the gardens. Right now, her thoughts focus on birds because she's always been mesmerized by the world of avian species—their graceful flight patterns, their beautiful plumage, and the songs they sing. She finds solace in observing their freedom and wonders what it would be like to soar through the sky with them, leaving all worries behind.

She often fantasizes about the far-off places they migrate to and the scenery they pass through while traveling. She daydreams about standing atop old ruins, savoring exotic dishes, and immersing herself in foreign cultures—desires that remain firmly anchored in her imagination. In real life, she is limited by responsibilities and obligations that prevent her from going too far. But to be honest, she stays because Mama Louise despises travel and prefers the comfort and familiarity of their own house.

"There's no place like home," Mama once said, her voice reminiscent of Dorothy's from The Wizard of Oz. She delicately sipped her unsweetened Oolong tea as she nibbled on a shortbread or a vanilla wafer. Instead of ruby slippers, she opted for her worn-out carpet skidders, which had clearly seen better times. Flora noticed that her fingernails were

long and a bit dirty, and she knew it was time to clip them, a task she hated because Mama always complained that Flora was not gentle enough.

During her teenage years, Mama Louise objected to her daughter spending too much time away from home. She always cautioned her about the risks of mixing with the wrong crowd. So, instead of contradicting her, Flora immersed herself in books and eagerly absorbed new knowledge, ultimately ascending to the title of Queen of Trivia despite always playing the game alone since she had no friends. She was well-versed in countless irrelevant details, like the identity of Fred Astaire's on-screen companion and the frequency at which Americans accessed their refrigerators. The answer to the latter was twenty-two.

As she grew older, her focus shifted towards facts related to birds. She knows there are 10,906 bird species in the world, of which 2,400 live in the continental United States. She is aware that while many birds gather in flocks, ravens do so in groups known as "unkindness" or "conspiracy"! She also knows that, although turbulence-related aircraft accidents are uncommon, over the past three decades, more than 200 lives have been lost in aerial collisions between planes and birds.

But it is the sheer number of birds that soar above us that gets to her! For example, the gray sparrow, the most common species, numbers almost 1.6 billion individuals! Yet, one rarely finds dead birds on the streets or even in the countryside. So the question is, where on earth do all the dead birds go?

Is there a natural process that quickly disposes of the deceased creatures, preventing them from being seen? Maybe they have a secluded spot where they can meet their demise, hidden from prying eyes. Or perhaps there exists a clandestine ritual within the avian community where the young and healthy ones purposefully eliminate their elderly and

discreetly conceal their remains to evade the attention of predators. It’s been known among humans, so why not among birds?

“I wouldn’t be surprised by the predatory eagles and frightening-looking owls, but what about the lovely, colorful robins and hummingbirds?” Flora thinks.

Yet she has never seen a dead robin either, so perhaps... Appearances can be deceptive, and in real life, robins might, in fact, be feathery psychopaths who hide their true nature beneath their attractive exterior.

Take Mama Louise, for example. She has always looked as if butter wouldn't melt in her mouth, but she's actually a skilled manipulator who knows how to get what she wants. And her "spare the rod and spoil the child" philosophy has left a lasting impact on Flora, who, until today, is a little afraid of her mother's seemingly sweet demeanor.

While browsing for trivia, Flora came across an intriguing ancient Sardinian custom known as senicide, or altruistic suicide, in which elderly or sick individuals would choose to leave their community and relocate to a designated area to pass away peacefully. In the past, thalaikoothal, a practice in certain regions of India, involved giving the elderly a calming oil bath before they succumbed to dehydration, starvation, or poisoning.

It is amusing to explore the potential of deliberate murder among birds as a technique to guarantee the survival of the fittest. Flora recently learned that when birds feel threatened, they leave their nests, sacrificing the current brood to boost the chances of future successful reproduction. So, why not sacrifice the old and, let's face it, useless?

Flora wonders if her mother had ever pondered the idea of an altruistic suicide for a greater cause, in other words, Flora's, given that she has always been a staunch supporter of animal welfare and the preservation of natural harmony. But she doubts it.

When Flora was five years old, a tornado ravaged their hometown, forcing them to relocate to Omaha. She had a pet at the time, a golden-furred Pekingese named Ginger, because she usually names her dogs after condiments. After him came Cinnamon, Mustard, Pesto, and before Salt and Pepper, Wasabi. The little puppy got lost during the storm, much like Dorothy's Toto in The Wizard of Oz. When they eventually found him, his spine was broken. Despite the vet's efforts, Ginger's hind legs were paralyzed.

"Honey," Mama Louise said, "you understand we can't take the poor animal with us to Omaha. He has endured enough, and putting him in a cage and transporting him 200 kilometers would be cruel. It kills me to watch him in pain. I believe it would be more compassionate to put him out of his misery."

So they did, or rather, Mama Louise did—her Glock G43 spat out two bullets into Ginger's head right in front of Flora, forever changing her perspective on euthanasia and the ethical implications of intentional death. That is also the reason that Flora also understands why people sometimes refer to the brain as "gray matter."

The Spaniels are sniffing at something nasty-looking on the ground, and Flora tugs on the leashes.

"Come on! Leave it alone," she calls out, but the dogs ignore her.

She knows that if she does not hurry up and divert the dogs from whatever they are investigating, she is going to have a run-in with Mama. The watch reminds her that it's almost two o'clock. She seems to be taking more time than usual. Her mother, who is 85 and nearly deaf and blind but as demanding as ever, is waiting for her pumpkin soup, which is ready but missing the croutons.

Her heart skips a beat as she bends down to shorten the leashes. She notices some feathers in Salt's mouth and realizes that the dogs have found a lifeless bird—but not just any bird! It's a red robin! Talk about coincidences! Mind over matter...

She takes the mangled body from the Spaniel's mouth and looks for a suitable place to lay it to rest, hoping Mama won't be too upset by the unexpected detour. By now, she is likely pacing around the kitchen in her slow, hesitant gait, poking at the curtain with her walking stick, and calling out for her.

Flora is aware of the urgency of releasing the robin and making a swift departure, for Mama's fury has the potential to intensify rapidly. She delicately holds it in her palm, a wave of sorrow washing over her as she tries to find the perfect spot for the bird's eternal slumber.

Her eyes well up when she realizes the poor robin will never fly again. It will never return to Alaska in the summer or sing its beautiful tunes in the morning.
She feels a peculiar connection to the lifeless animal.

"I am the robin! I am dead!" she suddenly exclaims, feeling an overwhelming sense of sorrow for herself.

"But while the bird traveled and saw things and places, I've been stuck in the same routine for years. Not for years! Forever!" She reflects on her stagnant existence, feeling a deep longing for change and adventure.

"And why? Because Mama has always told me I should be content with what I have. She's never let me soar! She clipped my wings! She killed Ginger!" The last one is a primal scream in her head.

"Staying grounded was never my choice! It was Mama's, and I just did what she wanted me to do! If it weren't for her, I could have been Mrs. Hank Lafferty and not stupid Flora Daisy Meadows! And candy floss doesn't make one's teeth rot!"

She gently places the bird on the grass and releases the two leashes, hoping that the Cane Corso doesn't need to poop urgently at this moment. She starts to dig in the dirt using only her bare hands. It's remarkably easy. After she has finished scraping, she places the tiny corpse in the hole and covers it with the loose soil. Salt and Pepper are trying to dig it out once more, but she urges them to leave it alone.

She gets up, pain throbbing in her knees, covered in a layer of dust. She gathers the leashes and brings the dogs under control. They refuse, but she remains firm. They're going back to their place. Not because Mama Louise will be angry, but because Flora suddenly realizes she isn't dead! She's still alive! Barely, but still alive. She is simply trapped in a cage, and the key is in Mama Louise's hands. Those gnarled, ugly veined hands that used to strike Flora with a stick when she didn't play the piano exercises in time with the metronome's annoying tick-tock.

Smack! Tick-tock… Smack! Tick-Tock…

"Listen smack-to the rhythm, Flora... Will you just smack-listen to the smack-damn rhythm?"

And it isn't even a gilded cage, but a cheap wire one with rusty bars that dig into Flora's ribs whenever she tries to squeeze through. But not today. Today, she is going to open the door and fly out because she will get the key—even if she has to pry it from Mama's ugly, veined hands! And she will go to Alaska! She will skinny-dip in icy waters, howl at the northern lights, and dance with wild wolves under the midnight sun!

She knows that her mother will not yield easily. She is not an elderly Sardinian who would voluntarily disappear for the greater good. Because Mama Louise is selfish. She has always put her needs above anyone else's, including Flora's. She will require a little nudge to release the key and let Flora, the red-breasted robin, out. Finally, out…

So, to speed things up, rather than Sardinian selflessness, Flora will try the Indian thalaikoothal. Some lavender-scented bath oils will help Mama Louise relax. When Mama relaxes, she always falls asleep. And while sleeping, she is entirely unaware of her surroundings...

"You realize, Mama, that I can't take you to Alaska with me. You are old, and you have endured enough. It kills me to watch you in pain every day. I believe it would be more compassionate to put you out of your misery." Flora rehearses what she'll say to Mama.

And then she will get the Glock.

# Friday Evening at Chez Jules

Mark Keane Prose

Simon dashes down Palmerston Place and takes the shortcut across Rutland Square. He sees Kate, in her red raincoat, leaning against a railing, one foot tapping the ground.

"Sorry I'm late." He bends forward, hands on hips, to catch his breath. "I was held up at work."

"What's new?" She gives him the full moue. "I work too, but I always manage to show up on time."

"Sorry. Nothing I could do about it. A difficult student…" He checks his watch. "Do we have time for a quick pint?"

"No." She steps away from the railing. "I'm not rushing a drink and spoiling my appetite because you're late. Let's go straight to the restaurant."

A soft April rain patters the pavement. Once they turn onto Frederick Street, the sign for Chez Jules comes into view. The raindrops grow heavier, the walkway down to the restaurant entrance slick with rain. Simon runs a hand over the wet sleeves of his jacket when they get inside. Kate pats her auburn hair and tucks a strand behind her ear.

"Is it raining again?" the maître d' asks in a pronounced French accent.
"Of course," Kate replies. "Springtime in Edinburgh."

They examine their menus though they know them by heart. Friday evening at Chez Jules has become a mainstay of their married life. They order different dishes, as they always do. Most Fridays, they swap plates during the meal to sample what the other has ordered.

Simon unwraps the napkin from his knife and fork and arranges it on his lap. He looks around the room, scanning the ersatz French prints on the walls, and lingers on the image from George Méliès *Le Voyage dans la Lune*.

"You seem very distracted," Kate says. "Is anything wrong?"

"Just a bad day at work." He lifts the napkin from his lap and folds it. "Nothing important. How about you? How was your day?"

Kate pours water from a carafe. "Remember I told you about one of my colleagues, Trevor Coulson, in the audit team?"

"Yes… well, sort of. The name rings a bell."

A waiter approaches, holding out a bottle of wine. Kate goes through the motions of checking the label and waiting for him to pour some for her to taste and approve.

Simon's thoughts return to the difficult student: Antõnio Souza, rimless round glasses, pudgy sallow face and sculpted beard. In his mid-twenties, older than the other students, an added maturity that he flaunts. He had knocked on Simon's door well after office hours. Simon told him he was about to leave, but that didn't dissuade Antõnio. He had come to query his exam mark. There were extenuating circumstances—he was separated from his family and hadn't been back to Brazil for over a year. Something about a sick grandmother and visa complications.

“It’s a really tragic story.”

Simon looks up to see Kate eyeing him. “Really?” he says.

“Yes. I can’t imagine anything worse.”

“What happened?”

“I told you before that Trevor was seriously ill in hospital.” Kate holds her glass by the stem and swirls the wine. “Do you listen to anything I say?”

“Of course I do.” Simon picks an olive from a plate of oddments served as an appetiser. “Trevor, your colleague—I remember you saying he was in hospital.”

“Our office manager, went to see him.” Kate spears a cornichon on her fork. “Trevor was in a coma, hooked up to a machine. She said he was barely recognizable, just skin and bones. Hard to believe. Trevor was such a fitness fanatic, always looking for sponsorship for 5K or 10K runs. You know, he ran five London marathons.”

“So, what happened? What landed him in the hospital?”

“Nobody is sure, not even the doctors. Exposure to some sort of toxin. They think it has something to do with his flat refurbishment. He was having it completely renovated. Something in the paint or the flooring. It’s being investigated.”

“Sounds strange.”

The waiter brings their first course: moules à l’étuvée for Kate and soupe à l’oignon gratinée for Simon.
“Bon appétit.”

Antõnio Souza is special. He always carries a briefcase. At the start of each class, he makes a big deal of laying it flat on the desk and snapping it open. He asks questions while other

students yawn or check their phones. Questions that are intended to catch Simon out, like the *anthropogenic* question.

"Sir, I wish to seek clarification. I do not understand what you mean by *anthropogenic*. From my understanding it means man-made pollution. But the way you present it makes it sound like something natural. I am confused."

At the time, Simon knew he'd made a mistake, which he tried to correct, and ended up contradicting himself. No one took any notice, apart from Antõnio.

"It's easy to be confused." Simon directed his response to the class, and not specifically to Antõnio. "The term is often misused and can be misleading. It very much depends on context. Strictly speaking, you should take *anthropogenic* as referring to non-natural phenomena rather than the natural environment."

He moved on to the next slide, but couldn't stop himself from glancing in Antõnio's direction and seeing the knowing grin on that pudgy face.

"How's your soup?"

Simon shifts in his seat. "Fine, same as ever."

Kate drops an empty mussel shell onto her plate. "You didn't answer my question."

"What question?"
"You really are distracted this evening." She wipes her fingers on her napkin. "I asked you about additives in paint. Can they be that toxic?"

"I don't know. I'm not a medical scientist. I'm just a lowly chemistry professor."

Simon considers telling Kate about Antõnio, the meeting in his office, even the mix-up with the definition of *anthropogenic*. He recalls Antõnio's grin and decides not to say anything.

“Isn’t it dreadful about Trevor’s wife and daughter?”

“What about them?” Simon takes another mouthful of soup, then lays the spoon down.
“Are you not finishing your soup?”

“I have finished it.” He moves the bowl so it’s out of her line of vision, hidden behind the water jug. “What happened to the wife and kid?”

“I knew you weren’t listening. I told you. Trevor’s wife and daughter died.”

The waiter approaches their table.

“How is everything?”

“Perfect,” Kate answers.
The waiter turns to Simon. “Have you finished?”

“Yes.” Simon gestures to have the dish removed. “I need to leave space for the next course.”

He watches the waiter sidle between the tables, and avoids Kate’s stare.

“You really are acting strangely,” she says. “Very detached, like you’re not here.”

They sit in silence. The waiter returns with the second course.

“*Boeuf bourguignon* for madam. *Steak frite au poivre* for monsieur.” He smirks at Simon. “*Bien cuit*. Bon appétit.”

Simon waits until the waiter is out of earshot. “Bloody cheek. I never noticed that attitude before. Maybe it’s time to find a new restaurant.”

He waits for Kate to respond, but she keeps her eyes on her food. No exchanging dishes this time—if she suggests it, he’ll refuse. He cuts into his well-done steak and loads his fork with a chunk of meat and three thin frites.

Antõnio had demanded that Simon go over his exam paper and explain why he'd deducted so many marks.

"You're the only one asking for this," Simon said. "No one else haggles over marks. Just you."

"It is my right, sir." Antõnio sat with his briefcase propped on his lap. "I have read it in the student handbook."

"I see." Simon fiddled with a pen, anger fizzing in his veins. "If that's what you want, send me an e-mail and I'll arrange a time. But remember, it can go both ways. I'm quite certain I was very lenient when I marked your exam. If I find I should have given you fewer marks, then I may have to lower your grade." Simon tapped the pen on the desk, and felt the urge to slam down his fist. "It can go both ways. Think about that."
Antõnio shook his head. "I am not intimidated by you. I have learnt to be independent, living in a foreign country." He adjusted his glasses and puckered his lips. "You do not care about your students."

Kate says something that Simon doesn't catch. He fills their wine glasses.

"Yes, terrible." He shakes his head. "Both wife and daughter dying. That's terrible."

"Of the same thing that put Trevor in hospital. The toxin in the paint, or whatever." Kate sips her wine. "But that's not what's so tragic. It's tragic, of course, but what's going to happen to Trevor is the real tragedy. That's what I've been trying to explain to you."

Simon cuts a fatty edge from his steak. "Yes, of course."

He had shouted at Antõnio, releasing his rage in a surge of unbridled freedom.

“You know what? You’re a slimy arse-licker and a cheat.”
Antõnio recoiled in his seat, mouth open, cheeks wobbling. Simon was sure he’d start crying, blubbing like a fat beardy baby. Instead, Antõnio stood and puffed out his chest.

“You have no right to speak to me in this way. I will take the matter higher. I will go to the university administration.”

“Go ahead. Be my guest.” Simon waved him away, making the gesture as dismissive as possible. “Just get out of my sight.”

“Attention, please.” Kate pings the glass with her fork. “I’m trying to tell you the real tragedy.”

“Sure, sure. I’m listening.” Simon chews his last piece of steak without tasting the peppered meat.

“When Trevor went into a coma and was taken into hospital, his wife and daughter were fine. Nothing wrong with them whatsoever.” Kate pauses, and runs a finger along the rim of her glass. “Trevor came out of the coma yesterday. The doctors think he’ll make a full recovery. He’s still very weak and in no shape to deal with what’s happened. The doctors are monitoring his condition, deciding when he can be told. That’s the real tragedy. When he’s strong enough, someone will tell him his wife and daughter are dead. He survived and they died, and he never even knew they were sick. He’s been brought back from the dead to face that.”

Chances are Antõnio will go to the university administration. After all, he’s so mature and knows his rights and deserves to be heard and coddled and rewarded. Or he’ll go to the students’ union and they’ll encourage him to kick up a fuss. Or else he’ll back down, too

cowardly to act on his threat, worried his plan will backfire. Simon can see no alternative but to wait and see what happens.

"So, what do you think?" Kate pours more water for herself. "Can you imagine anything worse? Doesn't it put things into perspective?"

"Yes, it's terrible, no question about it." Simon empties the wine bottle and wants more. "Are you having dessert?"

"No, I'm full."

"How about coffee?"

"Nothing for me. You have something more if you like."

Simon signals to the waiter and orders one espresso and one Cognac. He turns to Kate. "Are you sure you don't want anything?"

"Yes, I'm sure."

Simon sits back in his chair and looks over at the Méliès print, taking in the moon's disgruntled expression and the space capsule embedded in one eye. He swallows what's left of the wine, aware of Kate's watchful glare.

The waiter returns with his coffee and *digestif*. Simon sniffs the Cognac, and holds the glass aloft. "Puts things into perspective."

"You know what?" Kate wads her napkin into a ball and drops it on the table. "It's not that you're detached. You're self-absorbed and insensitive."

Simon shrugs. "Maybe so."

"No maybe about it." Kate turns to take the red raincoat from the back of her chair. "Leaving so soon?"

“You really don’t care about anyone but yourself.” She buttons the coat with exaggerated slowness. “I suppose you’ll stagger home at some point.”

“Hmm… probably.” He nods his head and smiles. “You may be right. I’m insensitive. But I can appreciate tragedy.”

“And I’m not particularly interested in what you can appreciate.”

Simon watches her walk away, and stop for a moment to share some banality with the maître d’ on her way out. He finishes the Cognac and orders another.
Monday morning beckons, the ten o’clock class, Antõnio snapping open his briefcase.
The waiter brings his drink. He gathers the cutlery, plates and wine glasses, and brushes crumbs from the tablecloth.

Alone at the table, Simon thinks about Trevor and savours the burn of Cognac in his throat as he imagines that moment when Trevor is told.

# The American Holly Wood Table

Jules Duve Prose

An engineer, a responsible eldest, a wild child, a nurse, and a forgotten favorite sit around a spread of marsala chicken, white rice, seasoned string beans, sliced mango, and baby potatoes placed on an antique, adjustable, and American Holly Wood table.

"Let's pray," says the nurse, and the group interlocks fingers and recites the common Catholic prayer, united around a glorious meal gifted by God. This may be the most they ever touch. The nightly news on the television in the adjacent room and the active cicadas chirping in the trees under starlight are drowned out by conversation of the eldest's day at school and giggles at the wild child's antics. She dips the string beans in her chocolate milk and subsequently gobbles them down, her lips seasoned by salt and her chin dripping soon-to-be stains on her pajama shirt. The responsible eldest gasps, the forgotten favorite shrieks, and the nurse chortles a rare genuine laugh. The engineer simply smiles and shakes his head with fondness.

The dinner wraps up as the eldest does to the food, and the wild child and forgotten favorite gather the plates and bring them to the sink. The children are sent to bed. The engineer and nurse wash the dishes, together and happily.

At the next memorable dinner, one of five seats (made of the same American Holly Wood as the table) remains empty–the engineer is absent, and has been for a month.

"Don't worry," reassures the nurse to the others, seated around spaghetti, garlic bread, gangly asparagus, and corn, "He'll be back soon." After the meal concludes, the group will call the groggy engineer. They will learn that his presence from the table will be gone two more weeks than expected;

"My trip," he will say, "it's been extended."

Back at the table, the incomplete bunch pray and feast as they typically do. Talking is sparse in the first minutes; conversation is generally prompted by a daughter-directed question from the engineer.

Tonight, the prolonged lack of chatter from the television, the silence of the cicadas, and the omission of a key member are interrupted by an odd question. "Mommy?" asks the forgotten favorite. The nurse hums in response, casting her a small glance while puncturing a spindly asparagus left uneaten with her fork on her skinny child's plate.

A pause, and then she continues: "Why do you cook food like Grandma and not like Tita?" The pause that follows and the nurse's swallow is more anticipatory than the one before.

After a beat, she responds, "Well, honey, that's what your dad likes. And you kids, too."

"But that's not what you like eating, right?" the favorite inquires.

"Maybe not."

"Then, why–"

"Stop!" exclaims the responsible eldest. "You ask too many questions. It's annoying."

The nurse sighs, the eldest puffs, and the favorite holds their tongue. The wild child only watches. Dinner concludes.

The American Holly Wood chair legs screech against the tile as the eldest pushes her seat from the matching table and seals the food into their proper tupperware. The favorite and the wild child place the dishes in the sink.

They call the engineer, and the nurse heads upstairs. After the favorite child is tucked in, the wild child stands in front of the sink, a soapy sponge in her still-developing hands, and washes the dishes alone.

The green-topped bag the engineer digs from the freezer crunches alongside the other frigged food contained in plastic. The hollow sound of frozen pasta being poured into an orange non-stick pot is barely heard over the movie at thirty volume–either one of a channel-featured marathon, or one much too old or perfectly appropriate for the little ones with their eyes glued to the screen.

A salting, a sizzle, a stir, and a statement: "It's ready!" The bow-ties and spinach dished out in four bowls, each member settles on their specific sofas; the engineer lounges on the long couch, and the responsible eldest and wild child split the shorter horizontal one.

"Can you make some room for me?" requests the forgotten favorite.

“There’s barely enough room on here for the two of us!” answers the eldest with a shriveled nose.

Adding on, the wild child retorts, “You’ll be fine on the ground. It’s like you’re in Floor City!”

The favorite sulks, sitting crisscrossed with her bowl in her lap on the scratchy carpet, before the engineer moves his legs to confine to one cushion. The favorite smiles, hops up, and joins him in the spot typically reserved for the nurse.

The eldest and the wild child share a look.

The movie ends. The engineer takes charge in clean-up. He washes the dishes while the eldest and wild child swivel themselves dizzy on the spinny chairs at the counter, and the favorite lies fast asleep beneath the scratchy yarn of an almost-ancient crocheted blanket. Once each is asleep in their own bed with a soft smile (the favorite carried up to her room), the engineer checks the locks and lies down, missing someone.

The next morning, the missing nurse returns, in dirty dark blue scrubs and tired eyes. She showers, the engineer cooks a modest breakfast, and the group sits to eat together to make up for the night spent apart before.

“She’s either out of the house or locked in her room! What happened to eating dinner together as a family?” the nurse declaims regarding the not-so-responsible anymore eldest.

“Dear, she’s tired. She has school, then clubs, then work,” the engineer gently chides, his voice soft and his movements slow as he pours milk into each glass.

With an affronted gasp, the nurse snaps, “So what? I worked at her age too! I was able to allocate time for school, family, and work just fine.”

“Honey…” the engineer cautioned, his tone transitioning from soothing to accusatory.

To the wild child and forgotten favorite, the nightly bickering turns into blurred warbles. Their mouths open solely for their forks, not for conversing. The white glass plate set before the eldest’s usual seat looms from its corner of the table, and the milk in her tall glass grows lukewarm.

After a tortuously drawn-out dinner, the young ones' plates create a triangle of connected points that couldn't be more disparate; the eldest's place setting remains clean and untouched, the plate of the wild child is full of the now-cold sides, and only remnants of sauce linger on the favorite's plate ensuing her hasty gobbling of the entree.

The nurse eventually rises silently, leaving her dirty dishes be, and her quiet footsteps and tense presence follow her up the stairs.

A beat passes, and the engineer begins, "Can you–"

"Yeah," respond both children in unison. The wild child grabs the cling wrap and the forgotten favorite guzzles the eight ounces of unpleasantly warm milk. The three clean up in solemn solidarity. Once the forgotten favorite has done her part and is snugly asleep, the engineer teaches the wild child how to load the dishwasher (at least, he thinks he does).

In the future, the forgotten favorite finds that dinners with the responsible eldest as a high schooler and dinners as a college student weren't all that different. She realizes the same with the wild child–well, with the exception of nights like these. After a late school event that the engineer was too busy to attend and the nurse too tired to care, it's up to the wild child and forgotten favorite to obtain their own food. No more meals are waiting to return home to on these past-ten nights now that the wild child has relieved her parents of being the family chauffeur. Passing through the drive through and ordering from another groggy teen via a low quality speaker, the center console and the favorite's leggings act as their replacement of the American Holly Wood table. The favorite chows down with her right hand, her nugget carton in her lap and her left hand occupied with the wild child's chicken sandwich bag. The passenger worker (not a princess, never a princess) hands the bag to-and-fro the driver with grabby hands and garbled hums as indicators. This, of course, prevents the steering wheel and blinkers from becoming greasy–sound logic expounds the wild child.

As the two cruise down a typically-crowded roade, the wild child points out the street lights, "Notice how they're blue, not white?"

"Hmm, yeah, I didn't see that before," the favorite spots.

The wild child informs, "They're all supposed to be white. Dad told me that the blue ones are faulty lights. He says he'll show me how that works someday, you know, get me familiar with electrical engineering."

"What? That sounds really cool, actually."

Clean up is simply comprised of gathering the trash into the take-out bag and stepping into the grass from the driveway to dispose of it in the outside garbage can. The siblings' only hurdle is to enter the house without awakening their parents. The favorite treasures nights like these. Slow, amble, unfiltered and unmonitored conversation paired with a pleasant drive and the tired buzz following a rushed day. Private car dinners with the wild child seem to surge at the end of the school year, with awards nights and special club events–then, they stop altogether. Maybe these nights are what make the wild child's absence far more noticeable to the favorite than the eldest's.

Only months later (Or has it only been hours? Maybe years?), the three remaining members surround salmon, rice, and buttery brussel sprouts. The nurse is infuriated with the emptiness, while the favorite discreetly basks in it. The engineer slightly sorrows in silence.

Unknowingly, the engineer queries, "Have you spoken to her recently?"

The nurse, eerily calm and without looking up from her plate, responds, "I spoke with her earlier today."

"...Is she doing okay?"

The nurse blows. "She better be doing significantly more than just 'okay' after maxing out the two hundred dollars on her debit card for the month!"

"She did what now?"

"She called me asking for more! It's only the eighth, how could she possibly spend it all?"

The forgotten favorite grabs her phone from where it's tucked underneath her thigh and pulls up her messages. She types: mom and dad are mad, maybe don't call for a while.

The engineer rages, "She's buying us out of house and home!" And the age-old complaining about the family budget continues. The forgotten favorite keeps her ears keen, as much as she would like to tune it out; she must inform the wild child of the conversation's happenings.

The tense meal concludes as the heated discussion carries on. Within minutes, the nurse's anger runs itself dry, and she stomps up the stairs with traces of worried exasperation lingering behind. The engineer plops himself on the couch and searches for another sci-fi movie to watch.

With only alien noises from the television to accompany her, the forgotten favorite seals the leftovers in containers, carts the dishes to the sink, and heads upstairs for bed. She checks her message thread a final time before settling into her sheets; it simply reads *delivered*.

Now adapted to the vacant seats around the American Holly Wood table, the forgotten favorite sits at its head alone.

"I'm sorry," says the nurse softly, placing down bowl of rice and a plate of fried spam.

The favorite cannot recall a single instance where the nurse has apologised to her. Baffled, she replies, "What for?"

"I always told myself that I would never feed my children spam," the nurse mutters, scrutinizing her work before her in shame.

"I don't understand why not! It's quite good," comments the favorite cluelessly and scarfing down a spoonful.

"It's cheap!" exclaims the nurse.

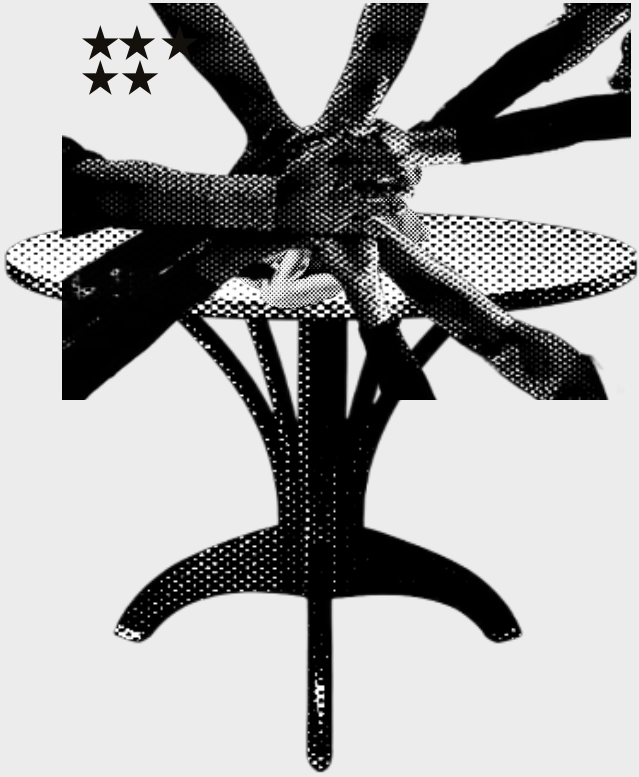
"What?"

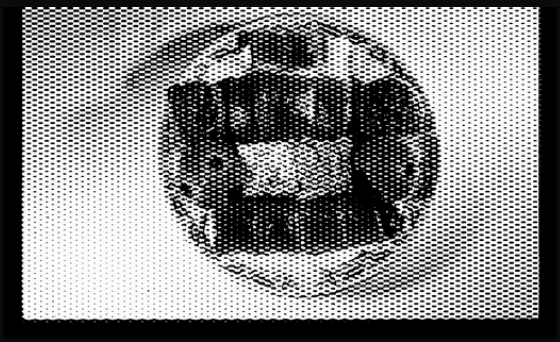
"It's sad and pathetic. Maybe it's because he's gone on another work trip, but this?" she rhetorically asks, jabbing the piece of spam on her plate with her spoon, "This is the food we ate back home. It's for poor people. I just– I can't provide for you like I used to. We don't even have any vegetables!"

The favorite is taken aback. "It's okay," she promises after a moment of processing, "It's only the two of us. And besides, I like spam."

Gratefully, the nurse raises her head and smiles. The pair eat quickly and clean up just as efficiently. They share a twinkle in their eyes before deciding to retire early for the night.

As the favorite ascends the stairs, she realizes that maybe she didn't hate her childhood dinners; she hated the hostility. She hopes, one day, that her family can unite for a dinner with fresh minds from their time apart. The favorite drifts away into dreams of roasted chicken on an American Holly Wood table enveloped by a circle of conjoined hands.





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