



Echo: A Journal of Creative Nonfiction

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April 2020

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ISSN: 2574-4569 (online)

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Echo

A Journal of Creative Nonfiction

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The National Institution of Health explains that a heart echo test, also known as an echocardiograph, is a painless test that examines the structure and the function of the heart. We chose the name Echo for our journal of creative nonfiction because we want the work we publish to come from the heart.

We accept submissions for our bi-monthly publications of Echo year round.

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The Assignment

Kim Horner

Our cops reporter found out about the accident late in the afternoon: A woman drove her minivan through a red light, hit a pickup truck and then slammed into a light pole. The worst part: Her 11-month-old daughter was standing on her lap. The side airbag deployed and crushed the baby girl, who died 30 minutes later at the hospital. The mom and the other driver were barely injured.

My coworker was under a tight deadline, so my editor asked me to pitch in.

“I need you to call the family.”

My editor, let's call him “Eddie,” was a no-nonsense, veteran journalist who nobody wanted to make angry. I was a newer reporter on the night desk of a metropolitan newspaper, trying to climb from the bottom rung of the ladder in a shrinking industry with routine layoffs.

Journalists interview people involved in horrible tragedies all the time, and that draws comparisons to vultures. Reporters have an obligation to confirm information, give people an opportunity to comment and show victims as more than names in police reports. No one gets training on how to handle such sensitive and difficult situations. Most of the time, people wanted to tell their loved ones' stories. As bad as it felt to call the parents, I knew that it would be wrong not call them since we were publishing a story.

But I dreaded calling the home of a family that just lost their baby in a tragic accident, especially one caused by a mistake that probably would torment that poor woman forever. The Society of Professional Journalists, a membership organization, advises journalists to “balance the public's need for information against potential harm or discomfort and says the pursuit of news is not a license to be arrogant or intrusive.” This is where things can fall apart. One person's hard-nosed reporting may be another's intrusiveness.

I sat at my desk, stalling as I looked up the family's phone number. As I dialed the number, I secretly hoped to get voicemail.

A man answered.

“Hello?”

I introduced myself, apologized for calling at a time like this and said I was so sorry for his loss. I told him we were running a story and asked if I could confirm several details in the police report. He matter-of-factly answered a couple of questions but didn't want to comment. After we hung up, I walked over to give Eddie an update.

I turned to go back to my desk, taking a deep breath and exhaling slowly, when Eddie said: “Call the neighbors. Find out more about the family.”

Shit.

Interviewing neighbors of people involved in crimes or tragedies was part of the job sometimes. Journalists are able to find stories of resilience after tornados or hurricanes by talking to people affected by the disasters. Or they can highlight the need for more funding to combat family violence by interviewing family members of someone killed by a loved one. This, however, felt different. A mom had just lost her baby in a tragic accident; not a crime. What purpose would calling her neighbors serve? Even vultures serve the greater good. By feeding animals that have already died, they are nature's cleanup crew, removing what otherwise could spread disease. An editor might argue that we could learn that the mom volunteered at a soup kitchen, which would show her as a good person who made a bad mistake. Or maybe we'd find out that she always drove around without putting her baby in a car seat.

More likely, the neighbors didn't even know about the accident, since it had happened only a few hours earlier. I didn't want to be the one to tell them. They may not even know the family.

The newsroom was empty and quiet at night. Eddie, only about 10 feet away, could hear me making calls - or not making them. I bit the bullet and reluctantly dialed the number of one of the family's neighbors, crossing my fingers for voicemail.

A man answered.

I introduced myself, told him about the story we were running and that we'd like to get more information about the family. What was there, really, to ask?

The neighbor didn't know about the accident.

"What? Oh my God! That's awful."

The man said he didn't know the family very well. He did not want his name to be used in the story. I thanked him and said goodbye.

A few minutes later, my phone rang. I picked up.

"My neighbor just called me about the accident. Why the hell would you call my neighbor about this?"

I could feel his pain and anger as he yelled at me. I listened, feeling horrible. I tried to keep my voice from shaking.

"I'm so sorry. We were trying to get more information for the story," I said, trying to explain as calmly, simply and kindly as possible when I knew there was nothing I could say that would sound OK.

"I want to speak to your editor."

I told Eddie before transferring the call. I heard him tell the man that calling neighbors was our routine practice and that as journalists, we have a duty to get the facts. Then he hung up. I walked over to his desk and he told me about the conversation, then went back to editing a story or whatever he was doing.

Once the story was filed, I walked to a bathroom on another floor at the other end of the building, where I could be alone. I wished I had questioned whether we should call the neighbors just hours after a family lost a baby in a horrible accident. I wished I had just lied and said the neighbor didn't answer the phone. I wished I had just said no. That assignment and the things I wished I had done but didn't do that night still swoop into my mind sometimes, circling like a vulture.

Act Your Age

Cyndy Muscatel

Since I was five, people have been telling me to act my age. In my seventies, it still goes on. I realized this when I went on a health kick a couple of months ago.

First, I signed up for Weight Watchers, keeping track of what I ate. That was good but nerve-racking. There are never enough points for my martini. What got me in trouble was the exercise component. I read an article that said interval training was the only way to go—that I should add running into my walk. So I did. I also increased my steps to 13,000, started working out with a trainer, as well as doing Pilates and yoga.

All was good for about two weeks. My shoulders hurt from doing the plank, but it was bearable. Then I got plantar fasciitis. (Now, we're talking painful!) The podiatrist made me a brace, gave me a cortisone shot, prescribed Aleve and a physical therapist.

I got better. Feeling invincible, I went back to my routine. A week later, my left knee and hamstring started to hurt. I ignored the pain even though it woke me at night. When I went to the physical therapist, she kindly explained interval training for a senior.

"Cyndy," she said, "your joints are in their seventies. Leave them alone. At your age, just getting mad at your husband can raise your heart rate enough."

In other words, I should act my age.

She told me to rest my knee, use ice, and get a knee brace. For three weeks, I followed her advice exactly. I became the sedentary couch potato I was afraid of, but slowly the pain lessened.

Meanwhile, I tried making a deal with my Higher Power. "I know I've overdone it. I get it now," I said. "Please, if I can just get better, I won't do it again."

After a month, I returned to my walk—more slowly and less far. But at least I was outside and moving. Even if it hurt, especially at night when I turned over, I could deal.

One day as I was walking the dog, my neighbor stopped to ask why I was wearing the brace.

"I hurt my knee about six weeks ago," I said.

"Have you gone to a doctor?" he asked.

"The acupuncture doctor. I don't want to go to an orthopedic surgeon because they always want to cut," I explained.

My neighbor rolled his eyes. "Go see Dr. Anderson. He's good, and he won't suggest surgery unless you really need it."

Going to Dr. Anderson was **Reality Check #1**. (Truly more like that slap in the face they do in the movies to wake a person up.) First, it was the X-rays.

"See how close your bones are? We call that kissing cousins," Dr. Anderson said, pointing to my svelte bones on the X-ray.

When the MRI showed three meniscus tears plus the arthritis, even I could see positive thoughts weren't enough. The truth? My joints are in the late autumn of their years, even if my mind said they were in midsummer. After having my first Synvisc shot, I left the doctor's office wearing the Medicare-prescribed brace that's so large it needs its own seat on an airplane. Synvisc, BTW, is a gel that supplements my synovial fluid, which has gone bye-bye.

Next stop on my **Reality Train** was going over my physical's test results with my new primary care physician.

"For your age," the doctor told me, "you're really quite healthy. Your carotid artery is only 25% blocked. And your left ventricle is functioning at 65%."

That didn't sound so good to me. I've always been a 100% kind of person.

"For my age, what about any age?" I asked.

"You have to be realistic. You're doing great for your age," she said.

In other words, act my age and don't expect so much.

I looked at her. "How old are you?"

"I'll be fifty pretty soon," she said as if she would soon be the Ancient Mariner.

Okay, I thought, I'm beginning to get the picture. Statistically, I fall into the category of elderly, and that's how the doctors respond. While I was thinking old age started at ninety, the U.S. Census defined it as seventy-four. So if I have indigestion, the docs insist I have an echocardiogram. If I have headaches, they order a brain scan.

In our society, we treat aging as if it's an affliction, like you have something wrong with you. "The English language seems to lack appropriate, positive terminology for referencing aging in a way that recognizes the strength, wisdom, and often privilege associated with chronological age," Alison Taylor, on the October 2011 British Columbia Law Institute website, said. She suggested using the term OLDER PERSON instead of ELDERLY, and presented three categories of aging: younger old (65-74), the old (75-84), and the oldest old (85 plus). "...the practice of dividing aging into three categories reminds us of the diversity of the experience of aging and the misleading aspects of using one term to denote age," she explained.

When I turned seventy, I think it freaked my kids out. They had T-shirts made with a picture of me at forty-one and the slogan, "The Future Is Still Bright." That said it all: They thought I was done for. In their eyes, all I could look forward to was the dimness of senility along with the loss of memory, height, ability, validity, and vitality. I felt ashamed of my aging self and went into denial. Seventy was the new fifty, right?

But **Reality Check Three** was waiting. It occurred recently in Seattle, where I grew up. I was having coffee at Starbucks when I looked over and saw an old woman smiling at me. I smiled back, and she came over.

"I thought that was you!" she said.

My eyes bugged out as I recognized her. It was my old friend Barbara from high school. *The old woman was my age! Could it be that I looked like an old lady too?*

I've fought off the signs of aging for years: a little nip, a little tuck, Pilates, yoga, and workouts to keep me fit and flexible. I eat healthy, and play brain games on the computer to keep my mind sharp. Being a writer, I can continue to ply my craft, which keeps me sharp and engaged. I also try to stay current. (I'm so cool, I text my five grandkids rather than call them.)

But facts are facts. I'm a half-inch shorter and a half a step slower. I can't multitask anymore, I drive like the little old lady from Pasadena, and I'm loving my power nap. When I'm overwhelmed, senior moments aren't far behind. Also, I'd much rather stay home with a good book and watch the sunset than go party.

I guess these last months have been a good learning experience (sort of like the Ice Bucket Challenge). I don't love any of it, but it's made me stop avoiding the truth: I'm older. I used to say that aging was about accepting limitations without letting them limit you. Now I say it's about accepting reality and going with it. In life there's always give-and-take. I'd like to age nicely and sensibly—I don't want to be marginalized. I want to keep being me, not be seen as part of a statistical category. This is where it can get confusing—sometimes I feel that I've lost myself and who I've always been. My self concept didn't include being elderly.

But I can be old without being elderly. I will stay engaged in life and keep relevant. (Luckily I have grandchildren who help with that). I'm also going to learn how to ask for help and accept it. If someone offers me their seat on the Metro, I might even take it. Or if someone wants to help me with my groceries, I can say yes, without being offended.

By accepting I'm entering the winter of my years, I have a freedom I've never had before. I grew up in an era where women had to be beautiful, smart, and as capable in the workplace as in the kitchen. We were Superwomen who thought we had to do it all. Now I can slow down. I don't have to prove myself anymore, so I can stop pushing myself to the limit.

I've found one of the best things about being older is I don't really care what others think of me. My attitude is: *This is who I am. Like me as I am or don't.* My task is to let go of my middleaged self image and embrace the newest version of Me—to act my age. I need to be one of those who likes me as I am. It's a work in progress.

A Language of Numbers

Stanley Zhao

When I was little, numbers were no different from letters. Letters were no different from numbers. A “one” and a “two” identified who I was, who I am, and who I will be. Five rows, five columns of them on a pastel-pink paper pattered with condensation moisture and accompanied with hoarse chidings:

December

Listens attentively: 1

Reads aloud with expression and fluency: 2

Applies spelling words and strategies: 1

Key: 1= Not Yet Approaching Grade Standard

2= Approaching Grade Standard

3= Meeting Grade Standard

4= Exceeding Grade Standard

Those were the glorious days of “report card days.” Our teacher would call us up one by one to her desk to hand each of us a cardstock sheath tucked with several sheets of paper folded neatly at the crease, as if the crispness and the cleanliness of the paper would ever make up for its “dirty” contents. The words “I know he is very capable - he just needs to try harder in English” and “he works very hard and has had a very productive school year, and I’m sure he’ll improve in ELA” written on the report card were at the back of my mind constantly - *you will never improve*. Even without understanding what they mean, I knew those words were of pity and commiseration. Those were the words of sticks and stones that broke my bones.

The gift of language had evaded me ever since I was born. When I was brought back to China, I was the source of affection and praise. My grandfather would always heave me onto his shoulders and proudly announce to his acquaintances, “This is my grandson, everyone. Look at him!” My pudgy cheeks would arch up in recognition. But at the age of three, I became the source of frowns and worries. While other kids began to form five-word sentences, I - on the other hand - continued to gargle and gurgle. While other kids began to greet people with a wave and a “hi,” I resorted to an ill attempt of avoiding people and contenting to scribbling with crayons. Through an extensive examination, doctors finally found what they thought was the culprit: an extra stretch of thin tendon underneath my tongue. *Snip snip*. A *clink* of the tweezer-like scissor. A *clank* of the metal syringe. A cotton ball was pressed vigorously upon the bloody wound, the thin fibers tickling my teeth. Blood leached out under my tongue. I tried to ignore the sickening sensation by focusing on my grandfather who stood to the side sipping on the vapor-like trails of his cigarette.

Still, my tongue laid idle - lifeless, like the overly-sized cow tongue you see at the local Asian supermarket along with the various assortments of livers, gizzards, pig feet, intestines, and oxtails. What use could it be if my tongue’s like a lifeless cut of atrophied flesh from the carcass of a deceased organism? The words that I make usually get stuck in my throat like a clogged drain, and what do come out eventually were like the physical contents of a clogged drain. But just when I thought I may have somewhat taken a bite of that bloody piece of raw meat, I was back to square one when I returned to the States. English proved to be even more of a foe.

The English language still remains a complex concept to me - familiar and foreign simultaneously. The dramatic roll of the tongue, the combination of thorny, prickly consonants and the viscous, molten vowels challenged the agility of my oral muscles, which were already out of synchronization with the slow pace of my brain trying to comprehend the madness and the frenzy. English is almost like yoga and kegels - for your lips. When I listen to other converse, it struck me in both fascination and disappointment. I imitate the voice of others, but somehow, I butcher it with stutters and lisps. In embarrassment, I quickly put a halt to such efforts.

For years, a single number became synonymous with my own existence and my own transcendentalism. Single digits reminded me of my incapability for words and sounds and my utter failure.

A one, uno, ichi, 一

A two, dos, ni, 二.

Language became numbers. Numbers became language. I know numbers only as indicators of language. Sometimes, numbers were nothing at all, because they represent no meaning to me since I haven't learned my numbers. All I knew was that the bloated Four was better than the pot-bellied Three. The pot-bellied Three was better than the scoliotic Two. Scoliotic Two was better than the rigid-spined One. And I've been quite acquainted with the company of One and Two. I see One as the obnoxious - and quite proficient in English - student who snickers at students named "Stanley" as they come up to retrieve their reading books categorized by reading level. I see Two as the student who pretends to be sympathetic, but then returns to her friends and snort at my ill attempts to pronounce the words from the page. To add insult, the numbers were written legibly, with each smooth and sharp curve accented with the roll of the ballpoint, clearly written on the report card to make sure that I understood. Yes, I understood. To show I understood, I picked my sharpest red crayon and vandalized the otherwise perfectly clean paper mercilessly.

According to my elementary school's reading level chart, I place at a level 12....out of 40. There was one other classmate who had the same reading level as I do....but he had just immigrated with his family from Central America. During reading time, I grabbed the book that was assigned to my reading level and scamper for the bean bag situated next to the corner window. I opened the book and started steadily sounding out each word.

"Sam likes to sleep."

Flip.

"Sam likes to walk."

Flip.

"Sam likes to eat."

Flip.

Sam likes to watch t-e-l-e-v-v-i-uhhhh-shun."

My inability to pronounce the word "television" hindered me from progressing to level thirteen. *So close. Just by one word.* This was the epitome of my frustration, and the number twelve reverberates across my eyes, reminding me of my failure. Occasionally, my teacher made a student with a higher reading level read aloud in front of everyone; everyone clapped and cheered in congratulation after he was finished. I clapped along in unison, managing to draw back my lips and show some teeth, but the "30" or "35" rings louder than spoken words. *Sigh.*

My dear mother tried her best to help; at the local general store, mother bought a pack of plastic magnetic letters to stick to the refrigerator along with a student English-Chinese dictionary. Night after night when the stars have already woken and the moon has already risen, I labored over each letter and tried to sound each letter out while mother stood by cutting up pieces of hairy kiwis.

Ahhhh.

Ehhhh.

Eeeee.

Ohhhh.

Ooooo.

When mother starts to combine the letters, my brain cells seemed to have undergone apoptosis. The neon letters seemed to jumble together to create a jumble of chaos and torture. My mind becomes an empty slate. You can see the frustration in mother's face: her forehead would ripple in waves, her lips would tighten like a rubber band, and her skin would flush red. Eventually, her encouraging words transformed to agitation.

I don't understand why you cannot grasp the concept!

I don't know English but even I can pronounce it!

Deep down, a nasally voice would agree - there's something inherently wrong with me. When mother finally conceded defeat and hopped into the shower, I stared miserably at the bowl of overripe kiwis in front of me. On occasions, I can taste the salty moisture of tears on the green surface. To make matters worse, my mother

decided that maybe buying a pack of number magnets would be a great idea.

I, however, couldn't bring myself to unleash my frustration, my anger, my contempt in broad daylight. What I unleashed was my own little mini hurricane within my chest, thumping itself vigorously against my ribcage trying to break free. I clenched my fists till my knuckles pierce through my skin and my veins rupture with blood. My breastbone may fracture and my ribs may tangle and I may yelp in frustration, but it never exceeds beyond that. At night, I vent out my anger directly to my Pikachu plushie.

The only crime he had committed was being my pensive friend, my quiet comforter, yet I seize him by his lightning-bolt tail and thrust him against the wall with a rhythmic thump thumpthump. I clawed at it like a ferocious cat and tried to tear the snow-like stuffings out, but I pause - and stop myself. Calm down. Into a slumber I went, rhythmic crests and troughs overtake my breathing. Every morning, Pikachu always perfumed of sour drool and bitter tears.

On the rare occasions of peace and stillness for Pikachu and me, I would ponder over the constellation of stars sprinkled over the ceiling above me and the side wall beside me. While other kids my age were told to count sheep, I counted glow-in-the-dark stars in the background music of dishes clattering and footsteps echoing. The night sky was, and still is, a fascination; the way that stars can glimmer and shimmer almost indefinitely is soothing. The stars were perfectly identical, with ridges and vertices rearranged into a smiley-face pattern across the skies; I had left aside one lone star next to me, situated comfortably to the left of my pillow. The star had a chip on two of the pointed ends. It was not as vibrant as its fellow mates. It had fallen multiple times, and it was stuck back on with putty multiple times. That star was me.

On these rare occasions of silence and quietude, language no longer matters. Your ability to form words with the movement of lip and tongue is irrelevant because no one can see you. You no longer see. You no longer are. Inanimate objects are your only companions - they don't judge you for being dumb or scold you for being slow. You only hear the sound of the *thump-thump* of your little heart and Darkness is where you cannot find misery and misery cannot find you. The Dark envelopes you into the folds of His clothes, where you can only be *you*, and no one else. This is my escape, my refuge, even if only temporary.

Alas, as the stars subside and the sun rises, Darkness must depart and one must throw back the sheets. In fits of annoyance and frustration, I cannot telepathically will the numbers to change. I let myself fall for the false equivalency of Arabic numerals to the English language and let it control my life while unintentionally letting it influence others. I saw the only time my mother wore a silver cross around the nape of her neck, probably looking to Jesus for my sake. I saw my teacher's face age a decade as she tutored me five days a week, two hours a day, ten months a year. I see a world turned midnight-blue and incandescent yellow as I step out from the school-building at six in the winter. I see the statue of Confucius outside the school, his face stoic and grim as if disapproving of my progress. I try to heal, little by little, Band-aid by Band-aid. I try to regrow my petals and to not let those numbers lash at me, but they leave lasting stings. I willed myself to open my mouth. I saw the other kids jump and play during recess through the classroom windows. I saw the extra worksheets I must complete, usually two or three more than my deskmate. I saw the reserved stack of reading books at the corner of the teacher's desk taunting me. But I also saw a sliver of hope. Hope dropped into my hands by the aid of others. And I clinging on to it, refusing to let one finger go astray. Like Emily Dickinson once said, hope really is the thing with feathers: you cannot take it lightly.

June

Listens attentively: 3

Reads aloud with expression and fluency: 2

Applies spelling words and strategies: 2

Nodding with Angling Piers

Daniel Talamantes

“If you get bites, then I’ll get bites. If we get bites, then they’ll get bites,” explains the exuberant, graceless, and most-likely inebriated Jeremy Holden. Jeremy is the man who immediately assigned himself as mentor to my friend and debutant fisherman Jayme Tauzer when she, my sister Steph, and I first sauntered toward Eckly Pier on the Carquinez Straight in Crockett, CA some twenty minutes ago.

Another, much older man, whose name I hadn’t caught, sitting cross-legged on a wooden bench fixed to the pier, diverts his attention from what sounds like a gory horror flick on his cellphone to correct what Jeremy said about casting out. It’s either by voluntary or necessary custom that Jeremy relinquish his duties to the older man. So, Jeremy takes a break to expound upon his knowledge of bait types and styles of fishing to my sister and me as the old man takes over as instructor for Jayme.

As Steph and I were both sitting on lawn chairs with books, pens, and notepads in our laps, immersing ourselves in the lulling architecture of the water ripples, or cavorting with the huddled whispers of the novels we’re reading, now Jeremy struts before us dangling different hooks in our faces. I’m imagining him demonstrating the medicinal benefits of snake oil at some junction of the Silk Road. “This here, is an important one: a rooster tail. The fish love this one. It is the only on you’ll need. You can fish anywhere with the rooster tail. But, then you have the spinning spoons. The shimmering is attractive to the bigger fish. If I wanted a sturgeon then I’d use the synthetic shrimp. You can touch it.” He has us touch the fake shrimp. He takes the fake shrimp back to the tackle box and returns with a massive living centipede. “You want to hold this guy? Live bait is a whole other game.”

We decline. Meanwhile, the old man seems happy enough with Jayme’s progress.

“By next week, you’ll be pro,” he decides, brandishing the paternal grin we all wanted for her back when we were first deliberating from the car whether or not we should impose our naiveté.

Jeremy appears anxious to prove himself as a legitimate instructor. I can’t decide if he’s new to this or not. He defers to the old man rather quickly, as if a teacher in training himself.

The old man’s now showing every person on the pier one of those family angler portraits of him holding a thirty-nine pound sturgeon as Jeremy resumes his tutoring.

“If only forty... one pound off,” the old man boasts to my sister and me. We nod out of politeness, having no idea what he’s referencing. Through eavesdropping, I learn that he was one pound shy of legally keeping the dinosaur for himself. I also learn that there appear to be a number of regulations concerning what you can and cannot keep when fishing at this pier. None of these seems to offer any source of hindrance or resentment to anyone here. These are the rules. It’s just the way it is.

The old man packs his gear and gives Jayme a few more encouraging words. “See you tomorrow,” he jokes. We all have work in the city tomorrow. But, the idea is enchanting enough.

Jeremy reiterates that he works in the tech industry, that he has a wife at home, and has a daughter who is about twenty-two years old now. He goes on to detail his history in the Bay Area with a list including a significant amount, if not all, of the places he’s lived: Richmond, Alameda, Berkeley, Oakland, El Cerrito, and the “places where I [he] left my [his] heart,” in Rohnert Park and Santa Rosa.

I’m caught up in a web of sunlight buckling in rapidity on the tidal estuary of the Sacramento and San Joaquin rivers as they drain into the San Francisco Bay. Pushkin’s imagery of a million angel footprints frolicking on the water surface comes to mind. Naturally, I would never voice out that connection here. That is, unless I want to get a view of the water surface from beneath. I entertain the thought of these angels and what they could be. What is the general mood of a California angel? What is their temperature?

Jutting from the water, the shoreline’s littered with the corroded, rotting, askew supports of a once ferry terminal which had burned in the 1983 fire. Within the ruins are the boilers and paddle wheel hub of the SS Garden City wreckage which decades later had also fallen victim to the same fire. Just up the straight are the remaining few battleship vessels of the once enigmatic Suisun Bay Reserve Fleet. The Department of Transporta-

tion and MARAD eventually announced fleet closure due to damning reports of significant toxicity leakage. These ships that captured my youthful imagination were gradually auctioned or scrapped. I should say departed for romantic purposes. There is the sugar plant down toward the Carquinez bridge that no one here could confirm as shuttered or not. All of it is primary growth after a fire in a way. These artifacts of the past relent toward their oblivion as the new growth manifests.

An Amtrak train rolls around the bend, its horn and engine echo, and the din steals the moment as if tolling the bells of our reckoning. Steph recalls our taking that train to visit our mom in Sacramento when we were both still in college. This triggers an alien feeling me. The profundity that comes in observing the stark contrast between Northern California landscapes renders a nostalgia I hadn't felt in some time. I remember the salt farms in San Jose with their glistening fields and hillocks of pink crystals; the destitution, litter, and nearly barren land of Hayward; the sprawling metropolis and warehouses of Oakland and Berkeley; the panoramic sublimity of the bay that traces from Richmond toward Martinez near to where we are now; the bridge that crosses over to the long stretches of agricultural fields in Fairfield, Dixon, Vacaville, and Davis populated with small lakes, sunflowers, the strobing light of orchards, mustard plant fields, oak trees, poppies, tributaries; and finally to California's capital in Sacramento.

It's always been a project of mine to see Martinez. Developing a fascination with Sacramento's history and Gold Rush history, this was the next step in my edification of California. So, that morning I drove Jayme, Steph, and I through Martinez with the private motive to learn more. However, my grand intellectual enterprise summed up to Steph using the bathroom facilities at the Amtrak station, pulling two U-turns, judging Martinez's crime rate, and relocating to this pier. After some research on the phone, it was learned that Benicia contained more of the state capital history. I'm not sure what I read or what I heard about Martinez that led me to regard its history with such esteem. Nearly every year I find myself relearning facts that I thought were once true. Sometimes it makes you wonder how much of history is misremembered, fiction, myth, or misinformed.

Due to the advent of Silicon Valley, people are flooding into Northern California at a cumbersome rate. For dramatic purposes, it's California's second Gold Rush. Eureka! Mining again on the land of opportunity. This time its data. Instead of blasting through mountains with water cannons and dynamite, plowing riverbanks with enormous dredges, or panning riverbeds and streams, we've turned our attention to ourselves, and it can be said with equal amounts of force and pervasion.

Once again, there's rampant displacement - ironically, some of it to individuals whose ancestors had performed similar acts decades ago. The same ol' tale: the accommodations of these new frontiersmen engender a harmful demand on the land and its people. It's to a degree that we sometimes can't detect the dissolution. One day it's there, next it's gone. The gradual replacement noticed through what's absent. Transformation perceived as a question. What was there? Where did it go? Was it ever there? It renders a sense of dislocation from the agency of a place. The silent catastrophe of identity is its erasure from memory.

Steph and I grew up in the small mountain town called Rescue, near Placerville but with even less notoriety. There has always been a remote sense of pride and agency in thinking we'd grown up where California, at least the white history version of it, began. This area was what we called "Bush Country" for the extent of George W. Bush's supporters. It's also what made us unbothered by certain genres of conversation that were happening in the periphery of this pier. It made me think that this must be a respite for these men in the Uber-democratic climate of the Bay Area - see what I did there.

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Jeremy is telling us about the time he was almost deserted in Cabo. He indulged a little too much in the liberal offerings of tequila from a bartender. Jeremy removes his sunglasses and we see his ghostly eyes. It's the first time we can really see how old he is, despite all his youthful abundance. There is a certain introspection as well. There is a reminder of the distances between our ages, the distances too far to bridge.

He continues, "I ended up waking up on the beach the next morning. I had to hire a little motorboat and have this guy who didn't speak English drive this thing as fast as possible to the cruise ship, which was at least as far as those hills over there." He gestures toward the hazy hillocks seated on the westward horizon. "Man, I had

a lot of apologizing to do. My mother and my wife...oh boy.”

Meanwhile a new guard of fishermen joins the pier’s crew. They are a pair of buff dudes in their mid-forties who look like they spend a lot of time discussing cars in gyms and sports in garages. They seem to be the new targets for Jeremy. It appears he likes to mingle with the young folk here. Noting the extensive gear they hauled over, I don’t think they have tutelage in mind.

“This is the good quality bait here!” Jeremy announces to the dudes who portray nothing but suspicion for him. I can see their arms and shoulders flexing. In recognition of this defeat, Jeremy returns his attention to Jayme.

“To answer your earlier question, I started fishing in 2008 right after the financial crash. It was something to do while looking for jobs, though there weren’t any out there,” answers Jeremy to an unasked question.

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The pier’s nearly at a slumber. Time seems to have a greater viscosity as Jeremy explains that some days the fish just won’t show. He says you can be at the right place, at the right time, and with all the right gear, but it doesn’t always guarantee you’ll get a catch.

The water is murky. There’s an oil refinery up the road and a few more in discreet locations the other direction. Tug boats towing large cargo ships, gas-guzzling speed boats, and commercial motor-power boats have been frequenting the water this entire time. Even though the water is all channeling in from the Sierra Mountains’s snow melt, there is a quality to the water that seems uninhabitable. If it wasn’t for the old man’s photo of the caught sturgeon, I think I’d have a serious suspicion that there were no fish here. To a degree, it made more sense that way. For, it has never been about the fish. It’s about the ritual. It’s about the space. It’s about chance.

However, as “irony is fate’s most common figure of speech,” there’s a tug on Jayme’s line. Everyone on deck turns toward her to watch the spectacle of laughter, yelling, and awkwardly handled fishing poles. I look around to see a variety of reaction. Most are smiling in admiration while a few seem envious. The two buff bros with sunglasses, motocross tank-tops, and shaved heads give us a thumbs up. Another older man is smiling in the corner while nodding his head.

Meanwhile, Jeremy’s celebrating like he’s just acquired an angel investor for his tech company. Taking off his baseball cap and rubbing his head, asking “how?” to anyone and everything, and offering maladroit, slightly flirtatious, hugs to Jayme. “I can’t believe it. You boosted the morale of the pier.”

Jeremy holds the small trout in his hand. Its eye fixes on this new world. Its lips and gills open and close, gasping for breath.

We huddle around the struggling trout as Jayme expresses concern about removing the hook from its throat. All the pride and excitement is now of concern and slight regret.

“It’s all part of it. It’s okay,” Jeremy suggests.

“How can you tell?”

“My finger here is right next to its heart. It’s relaxing not fluttering as much. As long as I’m gentle I can remove the hook slowly it won’t mind. If it’s bothered I will feel its heartbeat.”

The hook seems to be lodged in its jaw pretty good. He tugs and the fish begins to squirm. “It’s okay, it’s okay,” Jeremy consoles. Jayme and Steph are unsettled. I feel a jolt in my heart and spine. The hook releases and Jayme tosses the fish back into the murky water.

“You are the best student I’ve ever had,” Jeremy announces returning again to his frenetic state. “You have a talent for sinking the hook.”

He’s talking about the importance of sensing the faintest interest of a fish, differentiating that pull from the tidal swells, and tugging on the line to sink the hook into its flesh. This action we learned is essential for successful fishermen. There are hints of mysticism about it, but something more extraordinary in question of her acuity.

“It had everything to do with your teaching,” Jayme offers as some courtesy to Jeremy. It takes a moment for Jeremy to register the gesture. Then, a smile surfaces, as big as a forty-pound sturgeon.

“That’s right! It was presentation. My presentation caught the fish. Remember, it’s always about presentation. That is the point of my whole lesson,” exclaims Jeremy. It’s about presentation. Maybe so.

A large bomber plane flies into view from what I can only expect to be a WWII movie screening. As it passes directly above us, the men on the pier debate the model and make of the plane. One or two purportedly were in a similar plane during their military service. Of course, their distinction holds the most weight in the group.

Just as the one flies out of view, it circles back, and another emerges from the distance to make a round on the developing catwalk in the sky.

“These are coming from Mather, huh? I wonder why,” Steph asks me. Mather is imprinted on our memory because it was the military base all the troubled kids went to in our town. However, one summer when we were kids, our school took us on a weeklong camp there. What I remember from our internment within the portable classroom unit was a uniformed military man with a Stalin-esque mustache who would make us do push-ups for answering a question incorrectly and make us prove we weren’t donkeys when answering a question with “um.” The summation of that class resulted in each of us launching the paper rockets we made into the sky as some sort of graduation ceremony with our families. I recall how the parachute would deploy as they cascaded down from their zenith into the eager hands of the children.

Through the obligatory thanking of service to a few veterans on the pier, we learn that the bombers are putting on an air-show for a D-Day commemoration. We think that D-Day was the week before but they are the men of distinction. Plus, we entered their space. Here, they control the narrative. We are here to observe, to sit in, and learn about angling.

Here’s an angle: we could be in the developing symptoms of heat stroke. Or, maybe the arbitrary time it takes to make strangers familiar, the murmuring of native soundings, the one beer effect, or perhaps a combination of all these, cause me to nod off in a semi-conscious state.

In this blurry vision, I can’t distinguish between the jutting supports, trees, or fishermen in the distance. I can’t separate the sky from the water there on the horizon. Voices, music, the sibilance of wind, a distant train, and the low moan of vehicles from the freeway all coalesce. All motion simmers in a soft distortion.

Another bomber wakes me from this somnambulism, a little bait that catches and drags me to the surface. The light blinds for a moment as I trace its westward passage. The steel cord of the telephone wires suspended over the delta. There are spheres hanging from them. I imagine them as rooster tails or spinning spoons.

I’m jotting down what Jeremy was saying earlier: If you get bites, then I’ll get bites. If we get bites, then they’ll get bites.

“I’m on fire,” Jayme says while wielding the fishing pole. The heat and sunlight is taking its toll on all of us. We decide it’s time to say farewell and head back to town.

As we walk over the train tracks and toward the parking lot Jayme asks, “What’s the time?”

We all look at our phones as the bomber makes its way back. On the pier, the old men are looking and pointing toward the sky, gathering beneath its long but momentary shadow.

“Man, the time has passed,” Steph states.

Therapy Baby

Alyssa Ross

I'm in the kitchen on the phone with my mother when she asks me to stop writing stories about her. There are several in print now and this makes her nervous. Strangers will know her.

"Write about yourself," she says.

I tell her that I'll be teaching English in prison again this summer. It's a gig I got through Auburn University in Alabama where I teach fulltime.

"I wish you wouldn't work at the prison," she says.

"It's fine, Mom. None of my students are serving a life sentence." She doesn't react, so I say, "Okay, some of them have killed people. But none of them are sex offenders."

"That's not very comforting," she says. "But I guess you're making their lives better, making them better people."

"I'm not a saint. I need the money." It's hard to know for sure when I'm doing good and when I'm fucking up, so I hesitate to take any credit for anything.

"You don't need the money," she says, then quickly changes the subject.

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"I think Rocco has the soul of a therapy dog," she says.

"What?" I ask. It's not like her to talk spiritual. Her mother (my grandmother) is deeply religious. She believes that Jesus is her savior and it's dignified and lovely, but I don't think my mother was ever really sure about all that, and I certainly wasn't raised that way. My mother was a defense contractor who knew certainty could be a liability. And so we were only sure about not being sure. We didn't grow up talking about God or the afterlife or anything like that, and when I tell my bible-belt students that I grew up in a secular household they look at me like *What is this weird woman talking about?* I don't think they've ever even heard the word secular. Maybe that's for the best. I mean, maybe they're fine the way they are. They can grow up and be certain. Dignified. Like my grandmother. What seems undignified to me is my mother's sudden spirituality, aimed as it is at her dog.

"Rocco is just like a therapy dog," she says. "He walks right up to strangers. He helps people heal."

"You know any dog can be certified as a therapy dog, right?" I ask. "They just need training." I've had my dog Moose – a rescue, pit mix with a brindle coat that glows orange in the sunlight – for about three years now. My mother just got Rocco about six months ago and she thinks he's Christ reborn. He's a St. Bernard with a grey and white coat that still has that fluffy puppy look. She sends pictures of their park visits, snow days, cuddles with the cat, lounging around the house, naps together. I'd never thought of my mother as competing with me but it seems like that's what she's doing now.

It's endearing, of course, but I still feel like I have to remind her that when we were kids she was a horrible dog owner. When she first bought Rocco, I warned her. "You have to take him to the park." I said. "And for walks. Like every day, every week, mom. Remember those Shar-Peis we had in high school? People hated coming to our house because those dog were downright mean. We never took them to the park. Not once. We never walked them. We just let them out back like that was enough. It wasn't enough."

I've got mommy issues.

"Alyssa," my mother says. "Write about yourself."

"What do you want me to write?" I ask.

"Did you know you were a therapy baby?"

"What exactly is a therapy baby?" I ask. "I don't think that's a real thing." I wonder if she's making it up just so I don't write about her and the dogs.

"When you were three months old, your grandmother and your great aunt Margaret would take you to the nursing home and let people pass you around. It all started because Margaret's mother-in-law was there, but

they just kept taking you even after that. They took you there for a whole year until you started walking. You were such a calm baby, it made people happy just to hold you.”

I’m thirty-two and just now finding out about this. For about a year of my life, I visited the nursing home every week and brought old people joy. They kissed my skin and smelled the top of my head. You know that smell? My niece has that smell: sort of sweet but also somehow moldy, like after it rains in the spring and the wet leaves are decaying and the fresh buds are blooming. It’s only babies that have that smell. My grandmother and her sister delivered the kindness of that scent and the miraculous elasticity of a new body to all the old people who were having trouble remembering why they were still alive.

Now that I’m in my thirties, I’ve realized that I want a child. Sometimes I want desperately to have a child.

But I love old people. I want to become one. My lover jokes, “You’re the only person I know who looks forward to turning forty.” But I felt the same way about thirty, and twenty. I’m always wishing ahead. Always hoping that time will make me *better*.

It’s not uncommon for me to read for hours about human longevity, telomeres, the preservation of the connectome in the human brain, foods that fight Alzheimer’s, the relationship between grey hair and genetic decay, the dark matter that’s possibly pulling the universe apart. I’ve spent thirty years trying to become a writer and I want to spend the next thirty studying science.

I’ve always been interested in science, but growing up there was never any sense that I had the intellectual capacity to go to medical school or become an engineer, an astrophysicist. No teacher told me it was possible. No family member thought me capable. If my mother thought I could do it, she sure didn’t say anything about it to me. I’m standing in the kitchen thinking all of this while I’m on the phone with her, but I don’t say it. I don’t tell her that I want to go back to school or change my career, that I worry I’m not that interested in teaching English anymore, that I think maybe I’ve made another big mistake. My constant instability has always scared her, so I pretend I have it all together. I get back at her – I *reach* for her another way.

I bring it back to the writing.

“Did you catch that essay University of Kentucky published?” I ask. “The one with the list of destructive things I’ve done? You probably don’t remember. I added it at the last minute. Another writer, a friend of mine, he told me to add it. He said I needed to be more vulnerable.” I want to make sure she’d caught the reference to an abortion I’d had in my early twenties, another thing I’ve kept secret from her.

“Oh I remember the list. Papi was upset about it.” Papi is what we call my step-father now that we love him. We used to just call him Dennis. “He was calculating the timing and thinking you had an abortion when you were with Naseem. I told him that it was creative non-fiction. That you might be exaggerating.”

I wondered what kind of experience could be exaggerated into an abortion.

“It wasn’t Naseem,” I say. “It was Nate.” Naseem was my high school sweetheart and long-time friend. Nate is my ex-husband. We’d married (and divorced) young. My mother liked him, I think, but one can never be sure with her.

“I was heading for a doctoral program,” I say. “I have no regrets.”

So now she knows. It wasn’t a lie or an exaggeration or a secret. It was something I did to get what I wanted.

Reverence and Resistance

Elizabeth Reed

I pedaled past the older couples dressed in dark green loden mäntel, the boiled-wool coats that traditional Austrians preferred to wear, especially in Salzburg. At the pedestrian bridge I dismounted my bicycle and half-walked/half-skipped along the metal platforms. The resonant cathedral bells reminded everyone, Catholics or not, that Sunday Mass would start in five minutes. I didn't want to miss my weekly adventure of playing the imposter. The hazel colored Salzach River hurried below the bridge, as if it, too, were running late. I swung my right leg over the bike seat at the bridge's end and pressed up the incline that led to the cathedral square where Mozart had gone to church and heard his music performed. Now I, a student at the international music conservatory *Mozarteum*, was going to that same church. My body shook as I rode over the cobblestoned-square, with horse-drawn carriages waiting for their next tourists. I locked my bike, the bells so loud now that I could feel their vibrations through the soles of my feet. I entered the church quietly, pretending I was just another parishioner. I felt the old pull of reverence and resistance. I didn't believe in sin or guilt anymore. I knew I would not be punished for practicing a different religion during this Mass. I wasn't there to listen to God's word; I was there to listen and to breathe in the creations by Machaut, Bach and Dvorak that were performed every Sunday with full orchestra and choir. Today it was Haydn.

I let the Kyrie engulf me in memories of a friendly first grade nun who oversaw my transition from a half year of kindergarten and a half year of first grade. I felt the soft polyester of my pious white dress at Holy Communion in second grade. In the third grade, Sister Joseph Catherine asked the class to raise our hands if we still believed in Santa Claus. Only two kids did—me and a boy. There was something drastically wrong with the other kids. How could they not believe in Santa? A month later, on my eighth birthday, my parents thought it was time for me to know the real deal about Mr. Ho Ho. When they whispered the conspiratorial secret that generations of parents continue to keep and pass down, I was crestfallen. The magic that had clothed my childhood slid away. I felt naked in the rawness of reality.

"Does that mean the Easter Bunny isn't real either?" I whispered, careful not to let my younger sister overhear.

They nodded, smiling. They were allowing me to enter their adult world, something they saw as a privilege, and something I saw as a betrayal.

"And the Tooth Fairy, too?" I asked, my voice choking.

They nodded again.

My lungs filled with disbelief. I couldn't believe my devout Catholic parents were telling me that what they'd taught me to believe in was a lie. My sisters and I attended a Catholic grammar school. We were taught to believe in God, in Jesus, in miracles and salvation. Was that also a lie? With one divulgence about the man in the red suit, they had crushed my ability to believe in anything that was not tangible. It was the beginning of the end of organized religion for me.

The parishioners shuffled their shoes on the mosaic floor after the reading of the Gospel. Although men removed their hats inside the cathedral, women retained theirs—traditional dark blue, gray or green, thick, felted hats, the crown dented into a point, a band of pressed or braided ribbon holding a treasured dried sprig of Edelweiss, or bird feathers, or the popular goat beard that looked like an upside down shaving brush.

The priest delivered his sermon. How many sermons had I been forced to hear at Masses that I was forced to attend in high school? How many lectures had my parents hammered into my head, pounding one more nail on the closing lid of Catholicism? Breaking away from my parents' beliefs became my own crusade in my teen years. I still believed in a God, but not the Catholic way. During college we established a *détente*. They stopped sermonizing; I stopped harping on the Catholic church's glaring sins of exclusion of gays like many of my musician friends, and of divorcées like my older sister, and the anachronistic dogma which cast out young couples living in sin—which included just about all my college friends.

The congregation stood to recite the Nicene Creed in German. Over the years, my concept of God took

the form of a spirit, and gradually that spirit evaporated. When the strings started to play the Benedictus, I felt blessed in ways that had nothing to do with the church. I had found my spirituality in music. Playing piano was my confession stall where I professed my feelings. Mozart, Beethoven, Chopin—they were my gods.

I listened to the choir singing the Agnus Dei with my eyes closed. The rich bass line provided the groundwork for the altos' and tenors' harmonies, capped with the clear soprano melody, just like the Alps I'd climbed surrounding Salzburg. These immovable foundations supported trails through woods of fragrant pine, larch and fir trees, and opened on to freshly mowed Alpine meadows steeped in the sound of cowbells and lowing, green platforms that exhibited glorious views of the rock-hardened snow-capped peaks. These mountains filled me with strength and awe.

The organist announced the recessional with a sustained major chord that devolved into a prelude and fugue by Bach. I joined the parishioners filing out of the cathedral. Outside, the smell of grilled Bratwurst drifted across the square. I unlocked my bike and pedaled across the bumpy cobblestones again. I drove along the shaded bike path, avoiding the chestnuts strewn over the ground. I wanted to send my parents a postcard, to tell them that I was going to church every week, that even though I was not a Catholic, I had morals and a source of eternal strength. But I knew that would be pointless.

Decades later I told my own children that Santa was a spirit. Some people had that spirit; others didn't. On the ride home from a party, my children sat in the third row of the van; my parents sat in the middle row, my husband and I up front.

Our five-year-old son asked our nine-year-old daughter, "Who do you think God is?"

She stopped singing and said, "I think—he's like a spirit."

Our son thought about this, then asked, "You mean like Santa?"

Our daughter was quiet. After some time, she answered, "Yeah. But you don't get the presents."

I prayed my parents didn't have their hearing aids on.

We had baptized our babies in a Protestant church; it wouldn't harm them, and it made our families happy. Even though we occasionally attended Christian services that were milder than the Catholics' I felt trapped; I couldn't stay. And I couldn't return. My parents rarely dropped hints that our children should be learning about God, but when they did, I cast off my no longer needed rebellion and responded that my husband and I made sure they learned about the values of our upbringing.

Our children are honest with us, because we don't punish them for being truthful about their actions. They have experienced both the voluntary giving and the acceptance of forgiveness. They are kind, thoughtful and caring to us and to their community. They are respectful, risible, sometimes raucous and irreverent, all within comfortable boundaries. They don't believe in a God either, but their spirits are full of life. Those spirits have been tested by life's experiences and have produced invaluable presents—love and resilience.

Every Christmas, Mr. Ho Ho still arrives. I'm one of the persons I described to my kids; I have Santa's giving spirit. I don't have religion, but I have a soul that is replenished with music. I don't have a church, but I have a community of friends and family, parents included, that has loved me unconditionally through insubordination and illness, dejection and joy.

What I have, is what I believe.

Makeup Lesson at 50

Wendy Atwell

I couldn't help but notice my face in my daughter's college graduation pictures: crow's feet, laugh lines, a permanent worry crunch between my brows. That's how I came to be sitting on a tall stool at Saks, getting a makeup lesson from Ricardo, who travels around the country, preparing models for runway shows.

I've had plenty of makeovers, different ways for different eras. My makeup drawer is like a cabinet full of possibilities, all purchased with the best of intentions, but I've imagined the magic more than I've made it happen, spending more time on my mocha than my face, running around town in my workout clothes. I would never catch my mother doing this. She's always made up, trained to be old school (lady-like and turned out) by her mother. This involves matching accessories and actually going to the trouble to wear them. After lunch, she refreshes her lipstick, glazing her smile with Chanel pink.

I, on the other hand, like my lipstick color nude; the effect is that I look like I'm not wearing any at all. I'm not one for matching hats or scarves, either, but I still want to look good.

Looking back, I can see it's been a matter of priorities: I always feel too rushed, like it's not the right time to get dressed up. Even if I'm going out, I don't make the time to apply the product in the way I was taught when I bought it. The transformative aspects of makeup exist only as fantasy.

But not anymore. This time, I vow to myself, it will be different. I'll learn Ricardo's secrets and do them every day. Part of me wonders if his secrets work on regular people, aging mothers who rarely remove their eye makeup at night. But another part of me knows that it's just a matter of effort. I have fought an inertia against trying too hard for most of my life, but now that I'm over 50, my perspective has shifted. Suddenly, doing my makeup right feels like a necessary addition to my day. I need to sharpen my image.

Ricardo wears glasses with bright orange frames. He's catty but sincere; we're about the same age. As he wipes down my face, I feel as if he can see into my soul, and I know he does when he says, "With you, we need to be *specific*." I decide this is a reference to makeup infractions he's already observed on my face; it's a polite way of saying, "*Honey, please just take the time to sharpen your eyeliner pencil to a fine point!*" And, "*For God's sake, use a magnifying mirror*;" That's what I tell myself, too, even as I ignore it.

As Ricardo's practiced hand swiftly moves across my face, tapping me into existence, I learn the details of my new routine. This involves applying a primer before foundation and using a foundation brush, *not my hands*, when applying both; and delicately tapping concealer over the dark circles under my eyes. My favorite tip has permanently changed my experience of mascara's capabilities: I learned that if I swoop the mascara wand both above and below my upper lashes, then they are dramatically lengthened. Then you're supposed to take the tip of the wand and get those little corner areas, where the lashes are shorter. It works so well, I get excited every time I apply it. I can't believe I ever used to walk around with the mascara applied in the sorry manner that I used to wear it, which made my lashes look completely flat.

There's a shameless artifice in applying makeup so strategically, a desperate power grab, with hopes to look my best. It doesn't matter anymore that I appear to be wearing makeup, that anyone can see the trick behind the magic, because at 50, the game's already given away. That's ok; I'm scared more of what I don't see. Once, in my forties, it was a hair growing out of my chin that, to my horror, was plucked mid-conversation by a well-meaning friend. I'm troubled by my mother-in-law, who is renowned for her perfectionist tendencies, but has lately been appearing at family functions with makeup at least four shades darker than her skin, applied in a T-like fashion across her forehead and down her nose to her chin, with a few rubs under her eyes. She looks ready for combat. I've been wanting to tell her, but after much deliberation, I've decided it's not my place. She's 82.

Before my daughter's graduation, I'd been too busy to notice how my face had changed, caught in the blur of life and the duties of motherhood: driving carpool, baking cookies, cleaning house, exercising, fixing dinner, running a marathon, showing my daughters how to boogie board, going on college visits, taking them to doctor's appointments, ballet and acting lessons. I am a compilation of all my ages, beyond just the age I happen to be

now. But seeing myself next to my daughter was like the effect of seeing an old friend at a high school reunion after not seeing them for so many years: the aging comes as a shock. I do look at myself in the mirror, but I hadn't *seen* myself.

In my daughter's graduation pictures, the wrinkles popped out because I was standing next to her; she's beautiful, she's young, and she possesses that stereotypical glow. There's a fairy tale exchange between mothers and daughters: as daughters grow up, mothers grow old. Our youth disappears in the process of mothering, and we gladly give it over in exchange for the joy of watching them flourish. My own mother warned me. In my teens and even into my twenties, she'd say in a wistful voice, "*Ah, youth.*"

I couldn't sympathize with my mother because I considered her to be beautiful still, and the supposed "youth" that she so mourned felt invisible. Yet I reasoned there must be something to it because I could feel I had something that she wanted.

Now at 50, watching my three daughters grow into young women, I finally understand her lament: youth, effervescent and elusive, no longer belongs to me, either. I've blown through my days of supple skin without appreciating a single cell of it. With my daughters, I find myself laughing instead of lamenting, in a shocked sort of way, about how I need readers, how I need them to repeat what they're saying, how a short skirt suddenly feels too short. I tell them, unremittingly and in no uncertain terms, *wear sunblock*, but mostly, they ignore me: they'd rather tan than worry about the distant threat of skin cancer and wrinkles.

Beyond mourning the loss of my youth through my physical appearance, I'm mourning the loss my young mother days, which were lit with a daylight clarity. As life has continued into middle age, the light feels dimmed to an interminable casino twilight. I'm scared of getting blurred—of losing my importance as a person in the world, and also, going blurry on the inside, becoming less sharp, the slippage that comes with age, a fallibility, caring less when I should care more. That's why I'm taking the time to put the bronzer and the blush exactly where they need to go. As I tap, tap, tap the brush, I hear Ricardo's words over again in my mind: *With you, we need to be specific.*

Lifted

Chad W. Lutz

When I was twenty-one, I was in college getting my undergrad in English at Kent State University. The year was 2007. It was the fall semester, my fourth and final year, and as part of my program, I'd signed up for a writing internship with the Greater Akron Chamber of Commerce, located only sixteen miles away in Downtown Akron.

Three times a week I made the trek to the Chamber's offices on the seventeenth story of the 1 Cascade Plaza Building, otherwise known as the PNC Center. The drive took about thirty minutes each way and led me through neighboring towns, small but thriving in their own rights.

My job was to update the Chamber's contact list and tackle various writing assignments as they came up — mostly press releases and blog posts with a couple of grant proposals thrown in for good measure. The job was plenty boring, but not the worst thing in the world. I had a great supervisor named Tony, who allowed me the freedom to wander around the PNC Center complex and even leave the building to walk the streets and get a feel for the area when and if I felt like it.

As fate would have it, I only took Tony up on the offer to leave the building and wander around once and it would change my perception of elevators forever.

Around mid-morning on a Friday in October 1999, a *Business Week* employee named Nicholas White went back to his desk after taking a quick cigarette break outside. He flicked his butt, walked through the lobby of the McGraw-Hill building, and boarded an elevator bound for his forty-third-floor office. He'd even told a coworker he'd be right back and, according to a *New Yorker* article published in April 2008, had left his jacket at his desk.

The elevator he boarded was an express model made to bypass the first thirty-nine floors. However, around the fourteenth story, the elevator jolted and the lights went out. The lights soon came back on, but the damage was already done. The elevator car came to a complete stop with Nicholas White still inside.

White, understanding his situation, first tried the intercom. When that didn't work, he then tried the emergency button. Then, he tried pacing. Ultimately, nothing worked.

After a while, he simply waited; there wasn't much more he could do. He had no food. He had no water. He had no access to a bathroom. Armed only with some Roloids and three cigarettes, he also had no cellphone, and was even without a watch to tell what time it was or how much time had passed. In other words, Nicholas White was living a modern goddamn nightmare. A nightmare he endured for forty-one consecutive hours.

Back in the 1990s, my family used to follow the Cleveland Indians baseball team across the country. One night we were in Toronto to watch the Tribe face the Blue Jays and were staying at a hotel downtown. We were on the fourteenth story when, late the very first night, the fire alarms go off. We all spring out of bed like we're being electrocuted and bolt for the elevators only to realize the elevators don't work in the event of a fire. It's the stair-well or bust. So, we take the stairs...all fourteen stories down. And when we get to the lobby to find the hotel isn't really on fire and the alarm has been triggered faultily, we walk all the way back up those stairs and crawl into bed as ready for sleep as ever, if not a little sweaty.

On a Wednesday in October 2007, I boarded an elevator bound for the lobby of the PNC Center to walk around outside and take in some of the autumn foliage downtown. I'd been working on a novel that morning, as I did most mornings (what assignments I did have were few and far between) and I had grown bored. Walking

around outside seemed like the perfect way to salvage an otherwise dull day. Grey clouds threatened rain all morning, and the ground was still wet from rains the day before.

The elevator arrived on the seventeenth floor as it always had: with a ding. There was an advertisement in the back that rotated monthly. Always for this charity concert at XX location or that special event at the ballpark. The advertisement was framed and centered as you entered the elevator car. The car had big, round buttons that lit up for the floors. Each one with a number on it. Door Open and Door Closed buttons. A maintenance hatch overhead.

Before the doors came shut, a woman rounding the corner at the end of the hall hailed for me to hold them open. I obliged and the woman boarded.

The woman wore a work skirt, navy, with a matching button-down blouse the same color. She had gold earrings in, and was wearing a thick gold necklace. I remember she carried a billfold of some kind in her hands and a purse around her shoulder. White. She was about my height (5'9") with dark hair. She was bigger, but not big. We said, "Hello," to each other and smiled. She nodded appreciably when she noticed the L button lit up. Then, we fell into an idle silence, a silence that lasted until we both felt the elevator car lurch. It did that twice, and then it stopped. Sort of.

Unsure of what to do, I grabbed outward, toward the walls of the cabin, and braced myself. I didn't know what was happening or what might happen and instinct told me to just grab onto something so I did.

My counterpart on the elevator shrank to her knees.

"What's happening!" she cried out. Then, the elevator bobbed, felt like the floor would drop out only to catch, like a yoyo on the end of a string. The elevator kept bobbing; the sound was deafening, like sheet metal being dragged across a steel floor. The noise and the bobbing wouldn't stop until we were freed some fifteen minutes later in between the tenth and eleventh floors.

A similar thing happened in the world's tallest building in 2010. According to NPR reports in January of that year, fourteen people were trapped inside the Burj Khalifa's then brand-new elevator system. The passengers were left stranded roughly 1,400ft. in the air. However, security personnel were alerted immediately and within fifteen minutes the passengers were brought to safety. One passenger told reporters, "It was a nightmare," but there were no other reports of unrest.

Unlike Nicolas White's case, the call button worked in our car and the woman who was with me wasted no time in finding the button. I'd frozen at this point; couldn't think of anything to do but smile and stand there. When the car originally started to fall, I could feel it go. It was a feeling of weightlessness, unlike the traditional pull you feel of the lift. I figured I was going to die and leaned back against the corner, right next to the advertisement, with my arms splayed. "I don't want to die today!" the woman yelled conversely, and rose to her knees. "I've got kids!"

She pressed the button and talked to the maintenance person on the other end who then contacted the fire department. Akron Fire responded within minutes and pulled us out of the broken car.

But, before they got there, things inside our elevator were far from calm. The woman who boarded with me started crying and swore she, "was only going downstairs to get something from her car." She didn't, "deserve this." She dropped back to her knees in the corner opposite and assumed a sort of sitting fetal position while we waited for the doors to open, her hands trembling and covering her face.

Eventually, the doors did open, and we were helped out of the elevator by the fire department, one by one, with coworkers and building personnel looking on. A few people even applauded as we were rescued. We both thanked the emergency responders, glad to be back on sturdy ground.

As it turns out, the jolting we felt were the emergency brakes kicking in. Reading up on the phenomena, I found only one report of an elevator free-fall. It happened at the Empire State Building in 1945. A B-25 Bomber had crashed into the seventy-ninth floor of the building and severed elevator hoists and safety cables in the process. A woman, who had boarded one of the elevators four floors below fell seventy-five stories to the bottom of the shaft. Somehow, she survived.

On average, about 26 people die from elevators each year. Most of these people are maintenance technicians trying to fix broken elevators that malfunction unexpectedly. In comparison, about 26 people die from car crashes every five hours in the United States.

Hearing the story back at the office, my supervisor, Tony, decided I'd had enough excitement for the day and told me I could go home early if I wanted. I went gladly. I'd been looking for a little thrill, but not that much.

As I left, I did, however, hit the button for the other elevator, which had been cleared for use by the maintenance operator, and stepped inside. Tony caught me as the doors were closing and shot me a look that said nothing short of, "Seriously?" and shook his head. I flashed him a smile as the doors came closed and waited for the feeling of the lift to engage.

About the Authors

Kim Horner worked as a newspaper reporter for 21 years. Her first book, *Probably Someday Cancer*, was published by The University of North Texas Press in 2019. Her work has appeared in *The Dallas Morning News*, *Seventeen* and *Ten Spurs*. Kim received a Master of Arts in literature from The University of Texas at Dallas.

Cyndy Muscatel has written features and humor for *The Desert Sun*, *Desert Magazine*, 92260, *LQ Magazine*, and *Healthy Living*. I have also written for many other publications including *The Seattle Times*, *The Mercer Island Reporter*, *The Desert Post Weekly*, *Palm Canyon Times*, and *Westlake Magazine*. A former high school English teacher, she now teaches memoir writing in Kona, Hawaii, and she write a monthly column for *Lake Sherwood Life* magazine. Her blogs, *A Corner of My Mind* and *Writing Do's and Don'ts*, are available at cyndymuscatel.blog. Her fiction, non-fiction, and poetry have been published or are forthcoming in *Westview*, *Foliage Oak*, *The Penmen Review*, *Wisconsin Review*, *descant*, *Haight Ashbury Literary Journal*, *Hektoen International*, *Puget Soundings*, *The MacGuffin*, *Main Street Rag*, *North Atlantic Review*, *Quercus Review*, *riverSedge*, *EDGE*, *Existere*, *Jet Fuel Review*, *Snakeskin*, *Highlights for Children*, *Turtle*, *Phantom Seed*, *The Legendary*, *Wild Violet*, and others. Her short story collection "Radio Days" is available at Amazon and Barnes and Noble.

Stanley Zhao is an emerging writer with a very small resume, but he is looking to build up experience in the writing industry. He enjoys history - especially on modern warfare - and he is greatly interested in analysis of American politics. He currently resides in Tennessee.

Daniel Talamantes is a 29-year-old writer, editor, journalist, and musician from San Francisco, California, 2015 graduate of National University of Ireland's MA Writing Program, and 2012 graduate of the University of California at Santa Cruz's Literature and Creative Writing Program. An excerpt of his novel, *Falla*, can be found in the December 2017 issue of *The Write Launch*. His short stories and poems have been published in *Cathexis*, the *Alexandria Anthology*, *The Galway Review*, *Tract-Trace*, *Skylight-47*, *Elderly*, and various others.

Alyssa D. Ross was born in Guntersville, Alabama, but spent over a decade in Northern Virginia. After abandoning art school in Richmond, she went on to pursue writing. She now holds an MFA from George Mason University and a PhD. from Auburn University. She currently teaches writing and literature at Auburn University, in the community, and in the Alabama corrections system.

Elizabeth Reed is a musician, author, and activist. She has written personal essays for *Entropy*, *Consequence Magazine* and *The Rumpus*, and she will have an upcoming essay in *Cleaning up Glitter*. She has also authored educational articles for music journals.

Wendy Atwell is a published art critic, but she has also published her first piece of literary nonfiction, "Dum Dum's Double D's," in *Gulfstream Magazine*. She received an MA in Art History and Criticism from the University of Texas at San Antonio in 2002 and has been actively writing since then for various visual arts publications, both online and in print, including *Art Lies*, *Glasstire*, and ...might be good. In 2012, she wrote *The River Spectacular*, a series of essays on art along the San Antonio River Walk's Museum Reach.

Chad W. Lutz is a speedy human born in Akron, Ohio, in 1986, and raised in the neighboring suburb of Stow. Alumna of Kent State University's English program, Chad earned an MFA in Creative Writing at Mills College and currently serves as an assistant editor for *Pretty Owl Poetry*. Their writing has been featured in *KYSO Flash*, *Foliage Oak Literary Magazine*, *Gold Man Review*, and *Haunted Waters Press*, was awarded the 2017 prize in literary fiction by *Bacopa Review*, and was a nominee for the 2017 Pushcart in poetry.