



Anomalous 6

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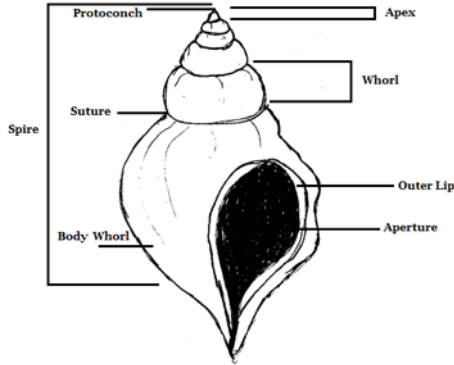
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CONTRIBUTORS

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Around the Bone: A Memoir

Rebecca Ansorge



I. Protoconch

1

*Mostly composed in darkness.
Mostly a footnote of itself.
Mostly a microcosm, distilled.
Fallen but not
fallow, I discover the shell
at low tide. Organic,
mathematically sound. Hear
the rumble. Hold it close to your ear.
Listen.*

II. Apex

After it was over, we went outside
and walked. I counted the sirens and called it
solidarity. I cut my foot on a branch and called it

empathy. Statistics splintered, fractal as the nature
of the tornado outbreak. Existing inside of the event.

There was no light
in the shower later but the beam

from a flashlight. I spun the steam
into tiny vortices with my fingertips,
poetic and dilated to match the
vortex of the tornado, this,
a microcosm, this,
a ghost.

It begins at a peak.

It has been bleached by the sun.

There is a hole sprouting from its point.

Fallow, but not empty.

Listen.

(Alabama on April 27th:
stickygreen pollen falling dense as fact,
rising heavy as ash.

Coated in the stuff.) If we stop to turn back, it might not be true
anymore.

III. Spire

Whorl

Caked with plaster and
outwardly, in a dusty way,
we had become the center of the world.
Electricity in the absence of itself,

pointing into us continuously. Heaps
of normalcy contained by guarded barriers at
night. During the day, in camouflage.

I wasn't there to hear it.

My sister heard it.

My living room took in its light, changed
in its shadow. Became
it inwardly near the chair where I would sit
and say
this light seems wrong. Are the reflections upside-
down on upside-down
cars?

The metal was twisted where it had become
separated from its referent. I contained these events only as
a matter of context,
seem to have paid attention to the wrong bits of the
disaster, the odds and ends,
that tree,
complete,
silver roof growing from its shredded trunk. Bear with me.

3

Suture

*I turn the shell over and over in my palm.
The periostracum is shredded,
hangs in soggy wisps of matter from
the bone.*

Static vortex in the act of condensation,

*emblem of form, mirror of the ways
in which we wrap our skins around the wound.*

Whorl

What ends up getting rebuilt after a tornado is not
the seed of it, the cause of it, the
marrow.

What ends up rebuilding is the proliferation of dump trucks
in a dry spell at the end of May. It seemed to be so much
grander on the radar,
snapping power lines as though reclaiming lightning, or.

When the heaps are cleared there is only civilization lying
fallow. A narrative implies creation implies purpose. There
is very little in writing to imply redemption.

4

I began looking into my body to rebuild a city that was
never mine. I pulled splinters out of myself as large as
mattresses and larger.

What goes wrong
goes wrong in those moments preceding itself and those
which come
after. If it is June and there is no more pollen to be lifted
from the wind-
swept ruins then the things to go wrong
go wrong primarily inside of themselves.

When the losing begins it rolls downhill.

The X's painted on buildings are benign if one of the

quadrants contains a
Zero. Nothing found
is nothing lost, and when the nothing begins growing it can
only refer to itself.

Suture

What goes on growing then suddenly stops.

What calcifies.

What hardens and becomes factual.

What is forgotten.

Though I wash the shell in seawater

*I can't be sure it is empty, that
it contains only my wanting of it.*

Whorl

5

What gets wrapped around the bone, what sinew, what
itch. There is skin in the way the sun rises up over stripped
trees. There is skin in stagnation where mosquitos nest and
swarm. The horizon

a melodrama of itself. Naked and limbless tree-stalks

inside of a winter inside of a snow globe inside of a tomb.
Dust devils spring like ghosts from abandoned construction
sites on the hottest days, when

there were parts of town to go to and not others. We
learned the less disruptive routes. When we passed
truckloads of warped and shrunken cars, we turned our faces.

Simultaneously, things happen. Things dig their fingernails
in, sullen, low. The name for those things
is spelled out in the flyers
littering surviving mailboxes
sent like medicine by concerned psychologists.

What gets wrapped around the bone is the not knowing,
sewn in those first dark moments between
interpretations of *gone*. What is *gone* is being rebuilt. What
is wrong is inside of itself, is a lack of, a future of.

What is wrong is a matter of context, the view through a
leveled wall,
the jeep upside-down on that lawn,
the firefighter's voice rushing down-
hill. *There is a reason we're here.* What is wrong is the
nothing-to-be-done. Observing the cadaver-
dogs led grimly alongside our bodies. *You have to leave
right now.*
A flurry of inward turnings.

Suture

*At its base, at its root
a hole broadening, the promise of a dense body
to fill the void. I throw the shell back into the sea
where it sinks slowly, drowns.*

Body Whorl

A resolution is not in sight. One resolution, a revolution,
perpetually echoing after. What gets lost inside itself is not

a matter of accumulating statistics, is not the implications carved into the differentiation of EF4 and EF5,

is not a matter of what lurked below the shell of a bedroom on which I felt myself grow hollow. What gets lost interrupts the stasis, as context, as a mechanical creation process leading nowhere. To exist in the aftermath is a kind of subtraction, is building order out of emptiness, is feigning the desire to maintain the status quo.

After it was over, we went outside and walked. When we reached the boundary of order we retreated. A proliferation of echoes, signifying nothing but noise, prompting me to pick up my pen for the first time after 26 days. To set it down again. We went in search of food and when we couldn't find any we showered in the darkness of our uninjured bathrooms. The next morning we came in waves to the edge of the world, from which we were turned away, my whole body clinging to itself, asserting that this was never my story.

7

It occurs simultaneously, the confusion and resulting holes in the narrative. Scattered hours have gone missing, during which I sank into a haze by the window. Outside, the National Guard arrived in camouflaged Humvees and helicopters. After a while, we stopped asking ourselves to memorize our location.

I no longer know which memories I meant to keep and which are incidental. What objects in the stew of leveled neighborhoods were more meaningful than others. I no longer remember what happened inside of myself, what

shifted, what clung to my gut like a raised root.

The things to go wrong continue to go wrong, the processes playing out internally. What continued was the dissolution of syntax in each load of debris plowed to sides of the roads like snow.

And those last moments in front of the live broadcast, being struck by the grace of the vortex. It seemed to be a great gray dancer, a silent sweeping eye. Because I could not hear the rumble, I imagined the noise as purring, followed by soft silence.

Outer Lip

8

The periostracum is wrapped around the bone of the shell, is what shelters, what holds, the gauze which allows the story to go on growing. The first thing to be ripped away from a fallow shell at high tide. Without it, I am dancing to a false echo, to a homeless monologue, a torn image of a span of three blocks which is an inversion of itself. (What, then, can cradle the afterimage of my hazy memory?)

IV. Aperture

The things to go wrong become visceral, static, embedded in the atmosphere of that airless room.

The dark underbelly reeks of the rotting food flung out of refrigerators and into the muggy heat. Halved mattresses stirred here with thousands of mismatched shoes. We came to salvage a friend's belongings. We came to dig deep into the shade of the afterimage. What we saw swept out of

us, the dust from a crumbled plaster wall ground into the fabric my shoe.

We lifted up in silence into the air
for days.

I continued to pick up my pens and throw them aside.

On bad nights I dreamt I was carrying a baby who was continually lost, who was born and ran off into a forest, who would not come after days of labor. I continued

to pick up my pens. I continued to watch the dump trucks like an elegy.

On the phone with my mother: I just need some time to float.

9

What spreads? What proliferates? What persists but stagnation?

The funnel spread, underwent multiplication. I dreamed it with a thousand different faces in a thousand different ways. It kaleidoscoped, refused to fade. The children continued to pour half-born from my broken sleep.

The interpretation of a disaster revolves, absolves no one, becomes something one can fall into and grow stone cold appendages from perfectly good eyes.

I dreamed I was standing at the edge of the universe, beyond which there was nothing. Around the bone the nothing holds, funnels down into the soil, begins to grow.

Art Feature: Limbs and Letters

Douglas Degges



Here, There

Valerie Arvidson



Massachusetts 1922, 1942

A pair. A pair of girls, of women: sisters. A pair of shoes, of pearls.
A piano. A pair of woolen coats.

Two scenes, a stage. Broken window, broken branch. Behind the broken window is a cold basement, walls lined with wooden crates. Crates that were once full of hard things like shoe buckles, and whiskey, and tender things, too, like cradles and cotton diapers. Against the wet stone there is your father's piano. Mahogany brown and upright. Keys white as teeth. Perhaps the window isn't broken. Perhaps it is only coated with crackling frost. It is late November, after all.

Here in front of the basement window, Linnea the sister-head, the mad one, she holds your hand, loosely, like a doll would. Here she holds your hand, and there you hide your hand.

There in front of the woods, where it is cold, where they placed you like furniture, a pair of arm-chairs: maybe you warm yourself, maybe you touch lightly a small something.

A yellow photograph, a scratch on your nail, a piece of grass. Do you imagine you are somewhere else, knowing full well that this is it? Your eyelids droop with languor. But your back knows something else and straightens against cold air slicing at your neck and ankles. Your shoulders straighten against guilt. You could be going to church, to a family dinner. Though it is a serious occasion, Linnea is convinced this is a game, a joke she doesn't get.

12

Linnea does not finger anything from the past; she holds tightly to herself. Her eyes are confused about the present, about the future. Her eyes are merry, in that they are quick, skeptical. Her neck pulls away, stiffly, like a scientist's. She does not understand what a photograph is. But she suspects it is some kind of theft. She lurches like a dog, afraid of what they might take from her, what they might make her do.

Here your woolen coat consumes you, and there your white legs emerge like lovely tusks, like soft swords. Your sheer panty-hose are loose, soft, scented with powder. You hide a rip above the knee. You are worried all day that the rip will show, increase.

Linnea wears velveteen pumps, and you your mesh peep-toes. Linnea wears her white floral pin made of ivory. She slides away,

slants away. This photograph is not of her. You look straight on, holding your new leather hand purse. You sit delicately upon the fallen beech tree that is consumed by nests of lichen and mushroom blooms. You sit as if you belong there, in your dress-clothes and overcoat, all upon the forest-floor.

The window isn't broken, the tree is not dead. Here sit, here stand, like a pair of animals, like a pair of twins. Give us the same hair, the same neck. The same ears.

You look to see if you can find something that is yours: if the photo is of you, for you and if so, where it has gone. You notice the white mouth beneath the camera, how it twinges, the lips curling to the side. A momentary smile: a twitch. You slowly close your hand around itself, onto what's yours.

Here, you've been dressed. You know what's yours and what's hers. You've been told. The coat with the white buttons. The boots with the nice laces that go all the way to the top. You look because he is your cameraman.

13

There, those are the woods behind the house. Before you settled into your pose, you looked behind you to see deeply, and try and find the edge, the other side. The trees went on forever, naked, white, and staring. You look and you looked.

Here you are five and she is six. You are twenty-five and she is twenty-six. You have four children. Here she loves you; she protects you. Like a mindless brother.

You watched her hands, and walked inside them as they traveled and touched the world.

Remember. Your father was away. He sent a gift, signed, "For the girls." It was a white communion dress. You did not dare to try it on to see which girl it fit. But you watched as Linnea touched the lace-work, the satin under-slip, the silk collar. You supped on that dress, little drunken eyefuls of that little bride-dress. You dreamt of father, your eternal groom, coming home, all in black wool, pulling you into his coat, consuming you, into his warm quiet power.

Mother put you in the white dress for a photograph you never saw, for a coming-of-age you cannot remember.

It must be Thanksgiving; it must be a Holiday, a ceremony or a celebration.

Here, put your hands together, just like that, hold them. Hold still.

- 14 There, now. Now you are closer. Bodies warming like burning logs, swallowing all the oxygen in the house, laughing and falling down together like ashes. Linnea crackles and chatters, and you are mute, turned grey, like a room without air.





Limbs and Letters by Douglas Degges

Involuntary Memory Sequence

Leigh Phillips

for February 28, 2004 & Marcel Proust

Mother's death :: reconstruction
and
if swimming to the surface of self :: *a la recherche du temps perdu*
and
if an accumulation of time :: accumulation of memory
see

Figure 1:

16

+

What if the accumulation of time destroys the memory of a reasonably young woman and when you have thirty years and the next twenty are slow erasure and then, until then: completed into gone.

In MS, myelin is lost in multiple areas, leaving scar tissue called sclerosis

-

I was only a child, an only child already dreaming of seaweed.

My memory. Learning how to walk with it. The difference being, I can walk. I walked. Am walking, casting shadows, casting spells,

tossing shadows, tossing vowels, cast in the image of your / my /
Polish faces setting as both sides of a sunset in one world.

Figure 2: there is no figure.

Binding ankles down in every dream, my recurring: six-year-old
/ seven-year-old / ten-year-old / twelve always old, always dream-
ing...

seaweed around the ankles holding me deep till I am screaming

“baby what’s wrong” I don’t have a word but I know, I know.

the act of writing memory :: simultaneity of past and present.

Makes it permanent, but is also subject to revision.

In order to write, you must forget something. I am that something.

skin :: nerve

loss of balance and muscle coordination making walking difficult

circumlocution. circumference. 360. How many revolutions does
it take to spin a little earth?

nerve :: memory

all around I dreamed is rise

I cannot rise

I am trying to remember what we were before but there isn’t any

aperture. vacuum. time.

12 o’clock 3

6 o’clock 9

12

Blue-green.

Seaweed.

Nerve.

You were a number divided by itself
and I became your 1

inheritance.

Marburg's Variant of Multiple Sclerosis is a very aggressive form of MS where the disease advances very quickly and relentlessly. It is associated with severe axonal loss and leads to rapid disability and death.

18

I know now. I didn't then. My dreams knew. Music didn't know my
dreams. Everyone's a stranger.

Figure 3 is she, brutal in her silences

I get it:

a permanent object in my throat

leaving me

inch by ink

struck, each letter that becomes you

departs from me and

amplifies the obvious:

she who is not there and never here

was

is the script's scene

made of over there, right here in all places at once—the simultane-

ity of the dead like a dream

“bright bloom of beauty” yes

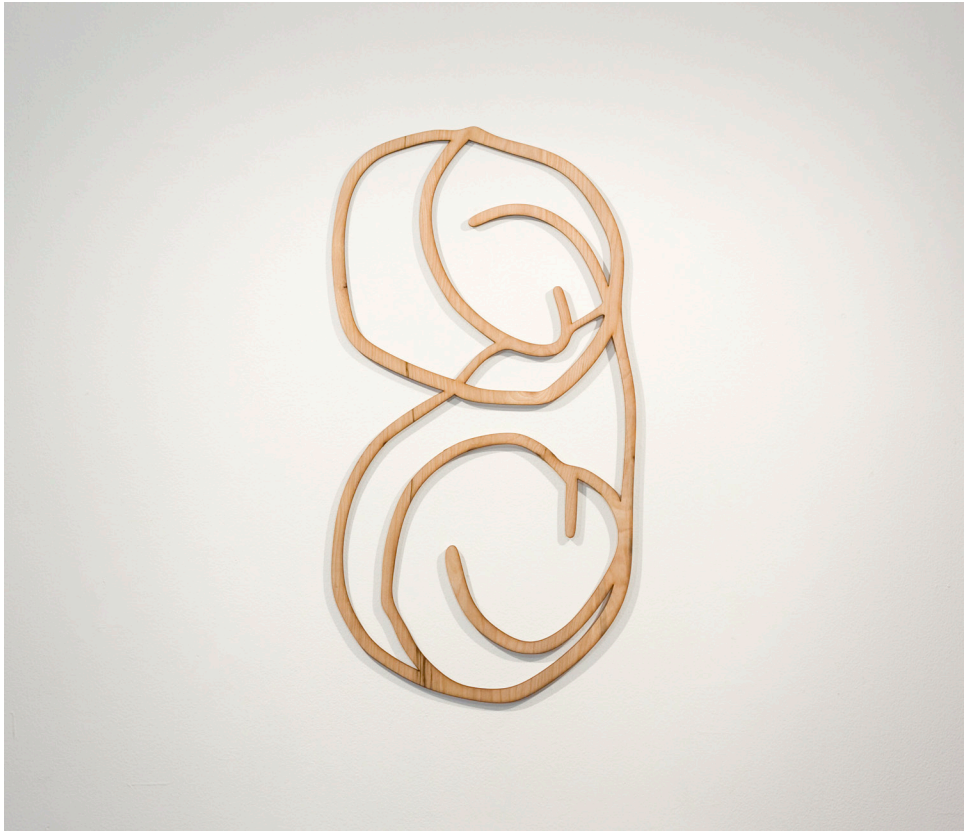
hawAthorn n.

any of various small trees of the genus Crataegus, rose family, with stiff thorns and bright-colored fruit, often cultivated as hedges

“it is face to face with something which does not yet exist”

the scent of gardenias awakened

The particulars: everything breathes.



Limbs and Letters by Douglas Degges

untitled

Phillip Erfan

I came down from my place and I had to wrap the jacket and let it hurt me, for if not the jacket, the wind. And the wind is always left and white and quick and free. He came down in good time, for I did not have to wait long for him. We passed those close and he said to me that he sees them but they don't really see him; he said they don't really see me either. We came away from them and he told me he let them stay. They may have the place he said, we will not return. And though we were walking the way for much time we still remained within the town, and I knew the way was long.

The people, they looked to us, and he told me they thought we knew where we were going; he said he didn't know where we were going. He told me he wondered how we would leave the town, as he pointed to the mountains so near surrounding. But he was not upset for it, for he said he knew, then, how we would come away. He asked if I could see the bridge and did I know the small bridge carries the I-5. It makes the place not right he said, but it is our way.

21

The wind was with much snow, and harsh, for it did build a tall height all upon the road. And the cars moved slow, and we were at even pace, and we all struggled against the wind and its snow and its heft and the water upon our face which made everything worse. He told me to look into the cars, and he asked could I see their faces and what I thought of them, do I see them truly for what they are. I told him it was hard to make them out, and he told

me try another; he said there is many to choose, they are all the same. Farther down he questioned me once more and I was upset for it, and I chose one and looked into the wet window and saw behind it, beneath the portion of the snow I saw a face, and I could not understand it, but it seemed to know me quite well.

Do you see them for what they are? he asked. I said to him I didn't understand his meaning, or why he was asking the question, or why he was so intent on my answer. I said I wanted to shut up my mind and he should do the same. I struggled upon the snow, then the ice, then the snow farther down.

22

I had been walking the way a long while and it was evening settling down over everything, turning to black everything, but the snow had stopped falling. There was land on either side of the way, and I could see the horses being led by a figure of a man to somewhere that didn't exist in the dark. And as I turned to the opposing side, some distance away, the heifers were brown and standing as many figurine. I noticed no movement, and they were left alone, and I wondered about them. They kept their gaze in my direction, and I decided I should encounter them, and I went to and came over the metal railing, which stretched all the way, which was flimsily, was weak and I let my foot come upon on the wet of the snow covering it, and I easily and by the quickest time came over the other side into more of it.

I made a great depression, for I felt myself sink a little, more into the mound of it gray and black and white. I couldn't move, presently, not for want of it, and I thought of the heifers behind me, brown and still and quiet, that they were left alone. I could not make company with them, for I did not wish to move, and felt,

now, worse about it all, for I did abandon them as well.

My jacket was defeated and the white hurt me, a breeze came over me, and its breathing continued until I finally, without consent by mine mind, arose from the hole in the mound hurriedly, and I made a mistake and fell back in. And I made a few more mistakes and came up and down, until I threw myself over one of the sides and out of the mound. But now a tiredness was in my arms and in the stronger part of my legs, and I wished to remain ever still of motion.

He told me it would be warm in my apartment, that my bed was proper for laying, for a warm feeling, for the greatest comfort, and that he had enough of the way and the way could be with itself, that it was a better way with none upon it. And I came up this time with no mistakes and so quite easily and I forgot about the heifers and went over the tin foil railing, and it almost gave way underneath as my stomach put too much pressure on it, and I rushed a little in my pace, now in the opposite way. The dark had released a little its grip over everything, was now a lighter shade of blue, though dim, still with cold wind. Upon the I-5 I saw no cars for many hours and it was empty back and forwards, but when finally one appeared, and it came unexpected and quietly, he would turn to me, with only his eyes asking me once again the question from the previous day; but the cars would move too fast and I felt better about it when it went on past me.

23

And a bird, a kind which I have no idea about, but which had wide wings with reaching fingers on its ends, and which only appeared as a shadow of its true color from my view below, came overhead from behind me. It must have been cold, for the glide

of it was inadequate, the wings oscillating it seemed too many times for it to be called a decent bird. But I still admired its advantage, its way above all, the nearest creature to heaven. And then it went into a slant, taking a slanted direction, for the wind came with new life, but the bird seemed intent on the other way, and I enjoyed the altercation.

24 I knew not who came out winning from the contest as I returned my view to the new way before me. I realized I had made my way back into town and was happy with the idea. I caught the feeling and put on it the strongest grip and tried to keep it going and moved quickly. There were few people about for the hour was too fresh, and only those who like to catch the fresh feeling were all upon their different ways. And I saw a man and woman of great age who were to pass along by me. And they wore their age, and had rubbed it all upon their bodies, and washed their faces with it, and put it in their hair and dried it out, forcing the color gone from their hair.

In approach I no longer watched them but looked to the ground and their feet and mine appearing up and out once and again where my lower vision terminated, and he told me to mark them and he said many times, he said mark it, if one knows who they are. And I looked up slightly so as to not come into them and do harm, and I heard their voice together warm and was low but profound, for they had eaten their age as well. A how are you, after the hello, and a what a handsome young man, and then an enjoy the morning, son; what a beautiful morning. He asked me did I mark them.

And I saw many black birds along the fences, now removed from all the stores and places you eat, the downtown, nearing my place,

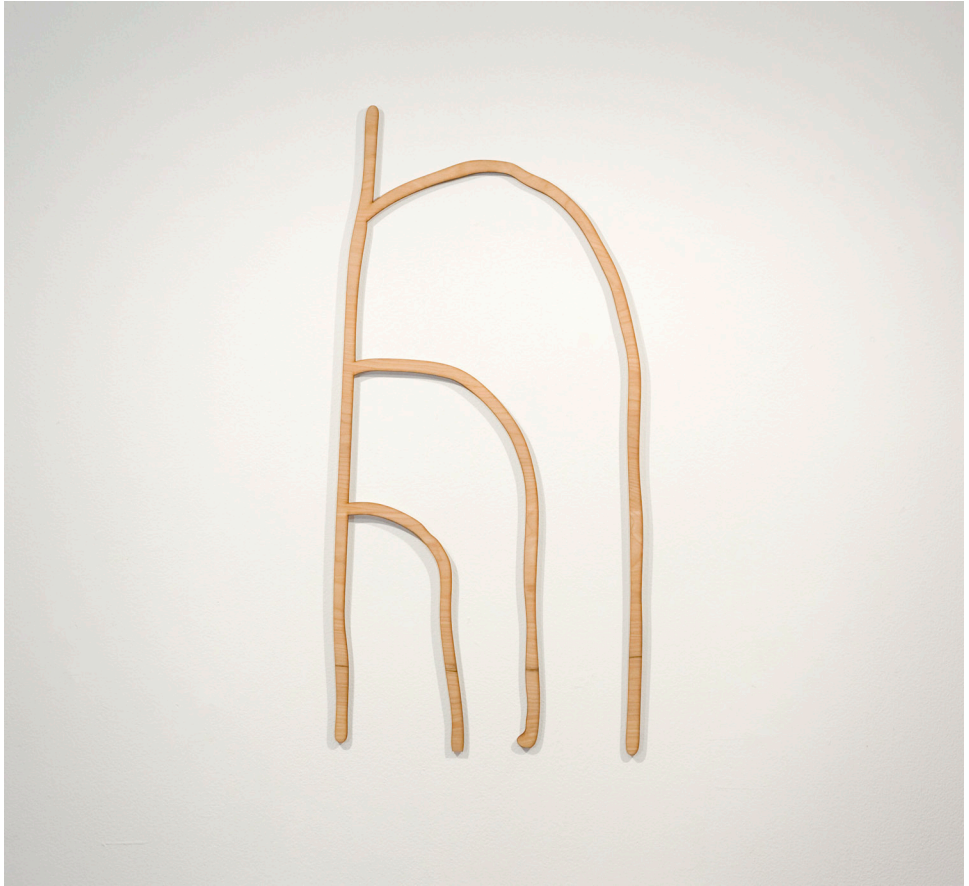
and in the neighborhood there were many houses which block your passage, your view with tall brown fences. And the birds were on the fences and they were talking things like families do and they might be relations I thought. When the fences were behind the bend and the houses were exposed, I saw people by their cars and some were in the wide holes of their houses, with music playing, and some were working machines with music playing, but I was not able to see them as I went by.

And farther along the way, my place a few streets down, past a busy road, I went through a quiet area, and there were homes which were dark and withdrawn and covered by many trees, but there were birches which made noise by the timid wind and made them not mysterious in an ugly way. I heard a child's voice say things like you're dead, remember I shot you and you have to be dead when I shoot you; it's not fun if you don't play it right. And I looked in the direction of the noise and saw the child speaking, and he had hair overgrown, which came to his eyes and he had to swipe it away, the blonde hair that was dirty, and he was very small and had a small voice and had a small blue gun. He had a long table cloth tied in a great big knot around his neck and he tripped many times on the floral patterned cape. The other child would say things as I shot you first, and you never die when I shoot you, and I always have to die and I don't want to play anymore.

As I went past they could not see me, too busy telling each other why the other had to die and how he should do it and why it was he and not the other. And at my place a person familiar, a familiar unknowing about him is what I felt about him, saw me and was waiting for a quick talk and I couldn't give it and I had his mind

and thought like he did, and I saw everything from his view and I could see me and we smiled at how foolish I was and I went away from him because I didn't like what we both could see. Up the steps and at my door I was unable to open it—I had never learned to open it. And it took me too long to get it open and I had his mind again and we wondered why I was never able to get it open as he watched me coming round the railing to the first and lowest step of the ascent to my place. I tried many directions and turned it with each key (there were two), switching again, once again, and I got it finally not knowing how I was able to do it.

We waved and smiled at me and we both knew I was fool as I went inside. I noticed nothing about the apartment and I went into the room, and went to the bed and inside of it. I moved around on it and couldn't find the right feel and when I did the jacket was obstructing it somewhat and I bent back my arms and it hurt for they went back too far. And one came free and I threw the jacket and heard it sink to the floor and I felt a little bit free and searched for the feel but it was gone. The heat came on with a sudden clicking, then a rattling, then the clicking noise again, the sound of a machine droning, and I thought the way was wrong. The warm was rising, was finding its way to me, and I knew I would never find the right way.



Limbs and Letters by Douglas Degges

First Permission

Mary Wilson

It would be best to write something new, full
of characters, and to see them in a world

made not of their making, but its own and take out all
the diction, so the world emerges as
an image of the world not of their making,

but rather nouns for things as such for things
as catalogues and hats and stacks of binding,

frayed as in foliage when the leaf hits down on asphalt
or the skim pond filtered of its thick in fall.

28

I walked along that path last autumn
when it was no longer path,

and just last night I dreamed that someone
took down the entire forest, meaning

all the trees, except a few
to grace parameters of lawn, so it
was not a path then either.

And so the world emerges as
a forest scraped from map.

I think these characters
that hide behind their actions, and I think
they haunt me or perhaps I them.

They move invisible about the lawns whose houses
come in white, gray
and the subdued tones of plant life.

Inhabitants whose secret builds with every gesture,
leveling the hill until the orange

crests through absent trunks of absent trees,
trees as seen across the lawn's parameters
which anyone can guess at.

Sam

Mary Wilson

Though split in two at such an early age, Sam grew up
in leaps long and fronted, and his one would quickly stumble to
forgive his other, though how Sam's forgivability
had morphed into a "new word" none of us could say, Sam
with his fork inside the hand of dinner-table slip-ups was
not naturally a violent creature, blotting out the world according to
his other, Sam, the plum-shaped drops condensing on the table with
alarming speed, and some claimed that a column rose out
30 from the circle they surrounded. However
this forgivability was part of Samuel's ability, his other
was the first to mutter this, and Sam heard in the night materials
like shards would give a shape to time to step
outside of, and he did, Sam, towing
myth and something bloodless as his other
split the day, and Sam, with all his best
intentions walked out into it.

Tom

Mary Wilson

Sublingual Tom persuaded pain-free Tom to try an oral
indwelling or a best-route-to-the bed-pan kind of Tom

our Tom whose limbs raked sore and stiff, and Peri-persuaded
slow-release Tom of a three-day escalation or a three-day

dehydration where we find Tom nigh, at sunrise
on an earth stripped painfully of Tom as out the window

blinds a halo-Tom regards the light in-streaming through
a tube-injected day so mild and impermanent Tom observes

a day with properties of metal although later
when the hand-grasped bed-rail Tom

31

declined the intravenous sun inflected orally
and white-round tablet Tom, some pains, indwelling, visceral

unknown Tom couldn't breathe, not well but wet and guttural
Tom, the Tom of buckets clanking in his depths, the time-

release Tom thrown against his stones Tom was en route
by that time on the third day Tom



Limbs and Letters by Douglas Degges

The Giver

Lindsay Merbaum

It starts when the dog dies, a wheezing Wolfhound with two paralyzed legs. My mother wraps his body in a sheet and puts it in the hearth. Then she packs up his bed and rawhide bones and takes off with them. The house shakes when she leaves it. For days, every room smells of singed hair.

Next, my leather gloves disappear. They aren't in my room, or in the hall closet among the row of shoes nestled beneath the robes and animal furs. I go down to the basement and sift through the stacks of cardboard boxes. The space is full of junk: baby blankets, broken toys and rancid incense.

One night, I wake to the sounds of furtive rummaging. I think there's a rat in the house and head downstairs with a baseball bat. I find my mother pawing through the hall closet on her hands and knees, half-buried by objects that are reduced to vague shapes in the low light. She looks up at me with gleaming, animal eyes and freezes.

#

My sister ate the fruit like a red leather ball, full of bloody teeth.

When she was gone, the dog howled inconsolably. His lament lasted hours, a day. Then he fell down the stairs and ruined his legs.

#

We live in a house with a lopsided tower full of dusty, precious things. All kinds of flying creatures circle the tower's peak. If you

sleep in the room at the very top, their shrieking will keep you up all night. I know because my mother would punish me and make me spend the night up there when I was little.

Fields surround the house with grass thick as a girl's hair and flowers with petals that form tiny lips to drink the rain. There is no one and nothing for miles, just the fields and forest beyond.

My mother used to make corn everything: corn tamales wrapped in corn shuck, corn chowder, cold corn salad with black beans. She planted varieties in the garden and they grew high as the garage: sweet yellow, blue, a black-red, and white with fat kernels. Once, I asked her why she didn't grow roses or tomatoes like other mothers did. She looked at me the way she always does whenever I suggest she do something normal people do. Then she picked at a hangnail, stripping the skin in a curl, and flicked it into the air.

34

#

My sister had hair like pheasant feathers. She was skinny and slightly bow-legged. It made her seem delicate, always wrapped in filmy robes with her nipples visible. She had pearls for teeth. Her laughter was tinkling bells.

#

She takes my clothes. That's how I've come to think of it: not as a giving away, but a taking. She puts them in trash bags while I'm at school and drives with the car full of them to those places where people give away things they don't want and then they are sold to poor people or teenagers. I come home to find only the wire skeletons of closet hangers. A few days later, I see a girl at school

wearing one of my t-shirts.

As the house empties out, it begins to echo. The sounds of the things that circle the tower grow louder. All night they scream. I hear the woosh of their leather wings.

#

Once, she gets drunk and I ask her about my father. She says men aren't worth speculating about. Then she fits her entire fist into her mouth and moans.

#

I get a tattoo of the fruit that killed my sister. It's on my hip, just below the waistline of my boys' Levi's. The lines are red, insinuating the outer form and the bejeweled cavern. I get it done by the mall with my two gold-haired friends who are like vapid, giggling handmaids. They belonged to my sister but they follow me around now for lack of anything better to do.

35

Someday, I'll slip off my pants in front of a lover who will ask me about it. Or maybe not.

I smoke cigarettes behind the school while my handmaids watch. The cigarettes are foul and satisfying. I like holding embers between my fingertips.

#

When my sister disappeared, so did my mother. For months, maybe a year she wandered and I had the house and the car to myself. I took the dog with me everywhere and he filled the entire backseat.

Each day it snowed. The flakes covered everything like dust.

When she came back, she was a hag with swollen, blistered feet. I didn't know who she was.

#

After my clothes, she takes my bed and I have to sleep on the floor. All the other furniture is already gone. I don't know how she got it out of the house—if someone came to take it, if she burned it, or broke it into pieces.

One night, watching me eat, she snatches the food from my mouth.

#

36

My sister's fingernails—soft moonstone. Her eyes, the color shifting in the light.

She was picking flowers in the field when she disappeared. The ground opened up and she tumbled down into it. Weeks later, they found her body in the river that circles the earth and passes like a drain through the dead places, her fingertips stained purple-red.

#

The snow. The clouds of it could billow and twist. If I stared out the window long enough, I saw in it the shapes of faces I could recognize, or not, depending on my mood. And animals: deer, a dove. Once, a poppy, blossoming.

Every afternoon, the sky turned a velvet gray-blue. The color filled the house and made the white of the walls glow. Snowplows scraped past on the narrow strip of road.

#

When she came back, her teeth were gray as if she'd been eating ash.

#

The last thing she takes from me is my breath. Gasping, I tumble backwards and hit my head on the marble floor. She isn't trying to kill me, she says. But she can't tell me why she did it. There's nothing to pack up. All I have are the clothes I'm wearing.

There are cruel words on my tongue like thistle. I swallow them down into my stomach where they will make me sick. She watches me go. She has cinders for eyes. The house shudders behind me.

Outside, the grass ripples. A few snowflakes drift by like afterthoughts and disappear.



Limbs and Letters by Douglas Degges

Variation on *El crecimiento del señor Madrigal*

Oswald del Noce

in a Virgilio Piñera story a man predicts that something
grows inside him and that something is his own self,
a dead fetus, that is his own death, born dead, die dead, is willfully
sucking on the gas pipe of human weakness and exhaustion
a born image in of the self that cannot escape, does not want to escape
like those walruses that go to die among hidden whirlpools and impotent
geysers, close to the sea and mermaids probably watch
from afar, their heads above water huffing and coughing for salt

poems to be read at the cinema

Oswald del Noce

I don't know if you've noticed
there are more shadows in a movie theatre
than in a circus
doors are moving through light projections
casting gigantic butterfly wings
on the slanted red carpets
 those little lights like the aisles of a plane crash
 the last moments in mid-air

40

I don't know if you've noticed
with those distracting heart-attack red lips
moving like crab claws, mirroring the carpet
that the world is a burnt piece of firewood
adrift on a river
no sound survives beneath the surface
 and I guess this is a love poem
 or a horror poem

a poem of murder, and jealousy and rosacea-eaten-nosed militaries
who hide their last cigarette in their asshole—for the country
they say
yes well, whose country

let's make this a poem,
whether love or horror mangle
its gentle lines
to be read at the cinema

where giants with infant hearts beating to make the next beat
can enjoy
the smell of cedar and lavender
and hands will search among velvety armrests and
the dead will teach us something about self-pity, or about the change
of seasons
or about the wind which I've never understood
 Bardot, Sofia Loren, Cantinflas and
 Godard will be there
and Kieslowski's death
will be remembered

by now I've found your
hand hidden among the architecture of cinema seats
the pictures moving boldly across the room
that train-track projection, jelly-fish suspended in air,
patron saints of microscopic dust
and you moviegoers

 Stand up!
proclaim your poetry while the
reel runs dry and the images shout into the dark
and movie star divas pass precious stones
under seats
claws to hooves and on to simian hands



Limbs and Letters by Douglas Degges

asylum anagram

Joshua Daniel Edwin translating Dagmara Kraus

guns in under-burn, time watched her slash sleek dreams.
time leeches her guns · under dreams was knit: slash, burn.

she: sugar bell, sheets in rain. mums drawn under the deck.
ere darker guns bunch, the saltless minders whine · unarmed,

i watch her run under sleet—guns, ass and brims held meek.
drams leeches her time. snug under ashen blurs was knit:

un-wince, mr. denier. gun at arms, she held the ark. un-bless'd.
rain hangs · under trees, she kills. dew. mud. machete burns.

haus des mangels

Dagmara Kraus

ruß schneit regen in dunkel · mehr hadeswust andermal;
im ersten pechmars heulen unken, wehstur beide ruder

verfeuern asthmadill · cassisherz, kess : du zeche der lichtchen,
mengst leckes regenfuder · lausirius, da lasche auch ich zig

-tausend vintreden, die -ruder – boot, leise, der kismetkelch
peilt, kirscht' gernhades' tempel (des' donnern im munde ich feig'). es

sintert der peinkrug pro daune um degan da
sechs fuder *barw* · lanzende · pik tautulpen schreit

phobus eye

Joshua Daniel Edwin translating Dagmara Kraus

medusa's silent hitmen saunter in, tell dido nil in
their frosted menace. i'm benzine linen. i mire
thirteen selves in flame. knifegush sows the brow tic i'd
rather elide. slits, ribs, tidbits: i can't be revised. the wiz-
kid in shock. innate rhythm ignited, chinch cinched. van zan-
te hills. cry. hide in her ionic tomb. bribe me.

ey phoebus

Dagmara Kraus

mainil um nut, stirntosen. indes hallt es, dein lied,
die zeile frost in meinen riemen, manch trieb
hisste konen, fiebergesichte. wallhin isst wer vom duft,
isst das wir (eden blich), bittbildes herziterative tier-
vieh – tyrann; kinnhoch mied ich dich, nachtnest, zickig dann,
todin; rot, irr liebsiech. bleibe : hymne mich

für A. M. H.



Limbs and Letters by Douglas Degges

The Day Whitney Died

R/B Mertz

The Day Whitney Died by Frank O'Hara

It is 7:07 in Pittsburgh on a Sunday
three days after the super bowl, yes, lol,
it is 2012 and I turn on the computer
because I want to take the bus later today to East Liberty
and at 7:15 with coffee I go straight to facebook
but I don't know the other people who post in the early AM
I scroll around the morning beginning to notice the sun
and have another coffee and a coke and click over to
the ugly PHILLY SOUND website to see what the poets
in Ghana are doing these days

I go back to the facebank
and Miss So-and-So-and-So (first name changed I once heard)
is posting loneliness and queer theory in the middle of the night
and on the OCCUPY PITTSBURGH page I get a little lost in photos
of yesterday's snowy march through downtown although I do
click around here and there toward greek myths or news or videos
of art or war or home, so I stick with facebook
after practically falling asleep again with terpenoids

and for nostalgia I just scroll around walls and TIME LINES
until I crave a cigarette and ask for the can of tabacco from Lexi

then I go back to where I came from to facebook Avenue
and I'm rolling myself a cigarette when I look over at the screen
casually notice a flicker of death between links like links to photos
of photoshopped cats and one from DEMOCRACY NOW with her face on it
and I am really glad I'm not an alcholoic but I'm thinking of
learning how to live with myself in the early AM
like back when she made love sound so convincing
while she whispered a song along the keyboard
when media was a kid and everyone drove around crying hard

At War

R/B Mertz

At War

by Russell Atkins

beyond the TV's flat fuzz
a little tenderness
between two guys in a deserted place
until it's filmed and then it's gone!

as our boys and girls forget everything
but guns!

don't ask me again
what it means, why
nobody can explain it—
don't ask me again, please
why they're all so dead—

Listen a moment—! Sh! Listen—!
Listen to the news! Shut up! Listen!
you can hear the coffins opening!!!!!!!

Walking in the School

R/B Mertz

Walking in the School

by Robert Lowell

A night student, a P.S.U. N.K. sophomore,
raises his face from his desk, his drowsy head
propped on *Norton's Anthology of English Literature*.
His legs shake him back to sleep.

Sleepy lids
make my shared adjunct office a little bleaker.
Deer lay murdered on the petrified highway.
Indifference! My heart grows tense
like when the body breaks a fever.
("This is a whole school of under achievers.")

What good is my sense of humor?
I grin at Sydney, a punk still in her teens,
once an all-American prom queen,
(if that still happens!)
she's wearing the face of a wife in her forties
inhaling Salem 100's
with an attitude of steal
she's four ten,
vaguely reminiscent of a Victorian barmaid.
A cop-like, street-tough profile in sweat pants,
worn every day with boots,
she talks only of her men,
of disappointing boyfriends and fathers--
more cut out from words than a blackbird.
This is the way the day goes at New Kensington;
under the hoodie the quick eyes of "Zane,"
Afghanistan, '11,
a replica of Heath Ledger
without the makeup—
silent and brooding as a humpback whale,

as he hands in papers about his dead mother
and horses at chairs.
and being addicted to pills.

These victorious figures of bravado ossified young.
These necessary skins of bravado ossified young.

In between the limits of day,
hours and hours go by under these fluorescents,
and slightly too little nonsensical monk-like twinkles
of the highly-educated faculty.
(There are no country
screwups in the academic world.)

After a hearty New England breakfast,
I weigh a little more than I did
this morning. Chicken with no head,
I shuffle in my NYC hand-me-down camel Oxfords
into the classroom of 24 computers,
and see the shaky future grow familiar
in the wearied, indigenous faces
of these thoroughbred whites of rural places
half my age and twice my weight.
We are all veterans,
and each of us holds a ticket back.



Limbs and Letters by Douglas Degges

The Tower Project

Wolfgang Wright

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After kidnapping our damsel, we of the 25th Order of Royal Gnomes went in search of a tower, but the search did not go well. Norwood, our accountant, had crunched several odd-looking numbers and discovered, to everyone's dismay, that buying an entire tower was not within our budget. We could, he claimed, buy "office space," but nothing was available on a floor lower than the ninth. This would not do, for surely there were no princes capable of rescuing our damsel from such a lofty height. So Norwood proposed an alternative: we build our own tower in the park. We all agreed it was a good idea, except Lionel, who insisted that he had proposed the same thing weeks ago. Jumping up and down, he demanded all the credit and every bit of the praise. Norwood was fine with that; he just wanted money.

* * *

Simon had been in charge of kidnapping the damsel. Choosing from all the members of the 25th Order—including those who wore inferior hats—he put together two elite task forces, to whom he referred to as The Brains and The Brawns. To each group he gave tasks that suited their respective skills. The Brains were to list the qualities our damsel should ideally possess and devise a kidnapping plan. The Brawns, following the list, were to find a

damsel, and then, executing the plan, kidnap her.

At first, everything went well. In only a few days The Brains had compiled a list of qualities, numbered below in their order of importance:

1. The ability to cry distressfully in a pitch loud enough to be heard in lands far away (and preferably in several different languages)
2. A large bosom
3. Good people skills
4. Likes to tickle bellies
5. Experience in troubleshooting
6. Not overly opposed to being poked with sticks

55

But then the trouble began. The Brawns scoured the city for several weeks— searching under rocks, peering into Internet cafés, and interviewing scantily-clad women at street corners—but were unable to find an appropriate damsel. They began to feel overworked and under-appreciated; then they began to question the list of qualities. “Likes to tickle bellies,” they argued, should have been at the top of the list, as this was what they themselves valued the most. And what good was “Experience in troubleshooting,” they wondered, since it was the prince’s job to do the rescuing? Furthermore, they denounced Simon’s method of task force designing, complaining that the standardized test he had administered was biased because it gave an unfair advantage to the more intelligent gnomes.

The Brawns went on strike. It might have ended quickly—The Brains were willing to reconsider their ordering of qualities, and Simon had composed a new test— but The Brawns were having too much fun constructing picket signs and creating witty sayings to paint on them (“Hell nope, we won’t scope!”, “Search this!”) that they were unwilling to negotiate.

A committee was formed to mediate the dispute. After several days of heated deliberation, the committee decided that whatever Simon said must be followed. Unable to discover a loophole, The Brawns set down their picket signs and resumed their search.

* * *

Our damsel’s name was Goldilocks. The Brawns had found her one morning passed out in an abandoned warehouse. At first, they were skeptical. Although she possessed most of the desired qualities, Goldilocks smelled of liquor and refuse and was constantly scratching her crotch. But after the initial interview they became quite taken with her. Somehow she had managed to retain a vibrant perspective on life in spite of having endured a succession of hanky-wet hardships. Most recently she had lived with a family of three bears—a Mama Bear, a Papa Bear, and a Baby Bear. Although Goldilocks got along well with Baby Bear, she found his parents’ constant bickering intolerable. Apparently, Mama Bear was bipolar, which had led Papa Bear to believe she had taken a lover in the south. Goldilocks also grew sick of eating porridge

every day. Why didn't they fish like other bears? Finally, after a dispute about sleeping arrangements, Goldilocks climbed out the bedroom window and ran away. Ever since she had been living on the streets, turning tricks to make ends meet. Her stories of perseverance touched The Brawns in exciting places. Quickly they implemented the kidnapping plan, luring Goldilocks into the park with vials of crack.

* * *

Because so many gnomes were involved in constructing the tower, we were divided into shifts. To pass the time, the off-duty gnomes began making fun of Goldilocks' blue bonnet. In the 25th Order of Royal Gnomes, as in the previous twenty-four, one's headwear distinguished one's rank, and those who wore bonnets—especially blue bonnets—were denounced as the scourge of the earth. Some nasty things were uttered to Goldilocks, things like “bonnet aficionado,” or “little blue bonnet wearer,” or worst of all, “headwear skank.” But none of the epithets seemed to bother Goldilocks, as she was unable to comprehend the hierarchy. For some reason, she thought how much money someone made should weigh far more heavily. Irritated by this suggestion, the off-duty gnomes decided to revive our most-hallowed pastime, and so they began poking Goldilocks repeatedly with sticks.

* * *

An accident occurred in the second week. Harry had come to work doped up on flower pollen and fell into the well of the tower. No one noticed until lunch when someone asked, “Why hasn’t Harry stolen my turkey sandwich on rye?” Searching our lunchboxes, we discovered that none of us were missing food. “Harry!” we shouted. “Harry, where are you?” Harry groaned. “I’m down here.” It was then that we realized we had forgotten to build a doorway for our tower, or, for that matter, stairs.

* * *

58

Officer (of the Law): All right, what’s going on here?

Adam (the PR gnome for The Tower Project): Morning, officer. Care for a muffin?

Officer: Is that a bribe?

Adam: No, it’s a blueberry.

Officer: Say, are you gnomes building a castle?

Adam: Oh no, officer. Never. We’re building a tower.

Officer: A tower? What for?

Adam: Not for imprisoning a damsel in distress, I can assure you.

Officer: You need a permit to build here. Let me see your permit.

Adam: You know, once upon a time in this great nation a person didn't need a permit to build. All you had to do was slaughter a few hundred Indians and the land was yours to do with it what you liked.

Officer: What's that noise?

Adam: Sounds like gunfire.

Officer: Sounds more like someone being poked repeatedly with sticks.

* * *

When we finished the tower we asked our damsel what she thought of it. Goldilocks was pleased with the overall craftsmanship, but felt the tower just wasn't tall enough for human beings. By leaning out the window, she demonstrated how an average-sized man with a fair vertical leap might easily snatch her hair and pull her headfirst smack onto the ground. We had to admit this wasn't the sort of heroic rescue we had in mind, and so we dismantled the roof and continued to build.

* * *

Q: Are you sure Goldilocks is, well, how shall we put this? Are you

sure Goldilocks is the right damsel for the job?

Simon: Why, whatever do you mean?

Q: Some of us were thinking, that is, some of us thought that, well, Goldilocks isn't...she's not as, well, she's not as womanly as some of us might have hoped.

Simon: You are aware a list of qualities was drawn up, and that Goldilocks possesses most of those qualities.

Q: Of course, of course, I'm sure that's true. But there are other qualities she possesses that are, well, for lack of a better word, creepy.

Simon: That's preposterous.

60 Q: Perhaps. But I was, we were rather, wondering if you might explain why she shaves her face instead of her legs.

Simon: She's European.

Q: Ah, I see. And is that also why she stands when she pees?

Simon (laughing): You know women these days, they have to prove they can do everything as well as a man can.

Q: M'hmm. What about her Adam's apple?

Simon: Adam said she could have it.

Q: Well, I think we're satisfied. After all, she is quite a looker.

Simon (winking): And just right in bed.

* * *

Just as we were preparing to cut the ribbon on our newly-elongated tower, we were informed by an anonymous source that Goldilocks was in fact a man in drag. Needless to say, we were all very disappointed, for we had never met anyone who could tickle the way he could. Nevertheless, we were consoled by the prospect of punishing Simon, as it had been under his leadership that Goldilocks had been chosen. Someone suggested we tar and feather him. Unfortunately, the only feathers we were able to find were pigeon feathers, and as everyone knows, only chicken feathers may be used in a tar-and-feathering, lest one wishes to be sued by the Union of American Poultry (UAP). In addition, Norwood, our accountant, pointed out that our tar supply was low as a result of dismantling the first roof on our tower, and because our entire budget had already been allocated, there was no way to purchase more. Norwood *had* reserved some cash for just such an emergency, but Goldilocks had spent it all on ointment. Someone then suggested we buy a guillotine, but again, Norwood objected. He explained that a guillotine was no more feasible than tar. “You don’t have the money,” he insisted. “You don’t have the money.” By then we were all getting pretty sick of Norwood’s practical reminders of our financial situation, and so out of our own pockets we collected enough cash to buy a rope to hang him with. As for Simon, we made fun of his hat.

* * *

In the meantime, our search for a new damsel began. We didn't have to search very long, nor did we search very far, for *she* wandered up to *us*. Apparently she had been on her way to her grandmother's when she received some bad directions about a shortcut and got lost. After spending the night in a large shoe with three pigs whose home had been destroyed in a windstorm—it was the second home they had lost in this way, and their insurance company was none too happy about it—she happened upon our tower and asked us if she could climb to the top so that she might find the way to her grandmother's house. The second she was inside we locked the door.

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* * *

Little Red Riding Hood, as our new damsel called herself, was not the belly-tickler Goldilocks had been, but she did possess what had become the new number one quality on our list: a vagina. And the red hood she donned at all times reminded us that she was of the superior rank.

* * *

Officer: I need to see a permit, or I'll have to shut you down.

Adam: I understand that, officer, but our copy of the permit is locked up in our safe back at our home office in Kuala Lumpur. I'm more than willing to fax it to you, but, as I'm sure you know, it's night there.

Officer: Then it is my duty to—

Adam: I will have you know that we have gnomes on Capitol Hill lobbying with congressmen to ensure our right to practice damsel-kidnapping-and-rescue as part of our religion, and when a law is finally passed, you can be sure that we will be suing you and all of your—

Officer: Did you say kidnapping?

Adam: Another muffin?

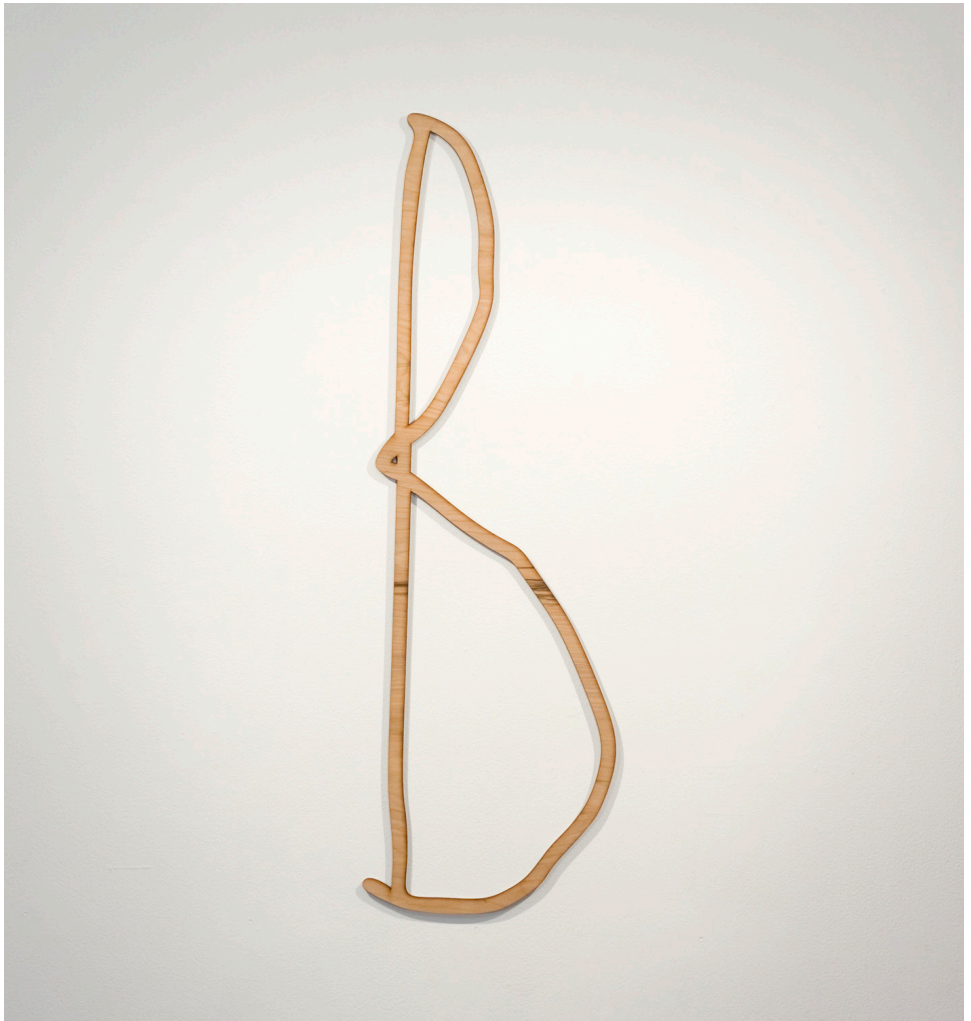
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* * *

We waited weeks for a prince to rescue our damsel, but no prince ever came; it appears ours is not an age of chivalry. Instead, we settled for a group of students from the local community college who busted into our tower one evening, got sopping drunk, and had an orgy, the video of which they posted on the Internet. They were all gone by midnight.

* * *

In the end the police came and arrested us. Though all charges were eventually dropped, a lawsuit was filed by Harry because of the injuries he had sustained when he fell into the tower. This final setback bankrupted the 25th Order of Royal Gnomes. Our tower confiscated, our damsel set free, we voted to dissolve. None of us lived happily ever after.



Limbs and Letters by Douglas Degges

i hope you get ugly then die

Ryder Collins

i hope you get babies then die
i hope you get glass ceilinged then die
i hope you ramen noodles then die
i hope you get garrisoned & then die
i hope you get shabby chic then die
i hope you get fat & then skinny & then fat again
cos that just sucks to be not hot/hot/so not hot
again i hope you get uglier even
i hope you get molehairs then die
i hope you toe jam then die
i hope you get marmaladed
i hope you paddington bear
i hope you get baahed
i hope you barbarian
i hope you get tartarused
i hope you
i'll never help you
i'll be those grapes just out of reach & i will singsong
heard it through the grapevine all day & night & day long
i'll be that rock you're chained to & i'll roll all
sweet down that hill, yo
i will eaglepeck your organ specks

after i steal your fire i hope
you get ugly & die

i am hopscotch without hop

Ryder Collins

you are hoppin john without black-eyed peas
i am the black-eyed peas without fergie
you are fergie without weight watchers
i am the watchmen without costumes
you are masquerade without eyes wide shut
i am open closed and open sesame
you are tahini paste + honey & i dip into you
i swirl & manhandle my flat bread in your honeypaste
& i am a woman so this is all
euphemism. you say, my mother and father are cousins
your left eye goes wandering
we are at a bar
it is our first date & i should run
my first had a wandering eye, too
he had a billy goat's gruff beard & a pregnant ex
you are clean-shaven & chiseled
it makes me want to teach you things
maybe. i say, boy i've got a chalkboard but no chalk
maybe i say maybe

it is after all only a folding

Ryder Collins

city. & it is Goodwill where you left it. where you met
me. where you left me enfolded in that city looking for ramen
& Brahmins. for miso and meditation.
there was neither & you coulda told me if your mouth
wasn't full up with the taste of ether & your hands weren't numb from
making hourglasses out of snow. no
it was lilies out of snow.
no it was lilacs.
no it was
lilies of the valley. no it was
valleys & dewey dells & pharmacists. i jaywalked
towards plucked ducks in a windowfront. they were singing
caution caution gogo stop,
upside down. you were already
nuzzling another tourist. you were already nuzzling
a street corner. you invented stop & go
lights to direct my longing. yellow
yellow green flash red. the ducks
were a chorus & the buildings of your city
all did jazz hands. there was folding
& the snow around me did strange
flower origami or something.



Limbs and Letters by Douglas Degges

Crow Vision

Terri Brown-Davidson

There's no railroad crossing here, no train whistle in the cool gray fog to wake me when I lie down dazed in stubble that thrusts up brown and sere around me, five yards away from the tracks. The dirt smells wormy—a hint of something darker beneath: leaf-matter fermenting. Dung.

I can taste it on my tongue. I can taste him on my tongue: there really is no death.

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They had to cut my father out from behind the wheel of the car; the baby was tossed free. They say that my father neither heard the train nor saw it coming. They say that he flung his arm out to protect the baby—so both of them, unprotected, floated oblivious into death.

What was it like, that blackness? Pure black, jet-black, ebony—or saturated with the red of their blood?

Idle questions. I roll onto my stomach, facedown in the stubble. What did it feel like? What does anything feel like?

A body. I'm a body.

Fifty-nine years old.

The stubble making me bleed.

I turn my face right. A crow wanders toward me. Blue-black feathers, dull bones beneath.

I reach for it. Reach.

Then, a shadow. Blocking the soot-colored light. Helga's face looms near. Porous, reddened. A death mask—right?

She smiles. "Bacon," she says. "I make bacon for you, Andy."

"I've got to keep working."

"Are you working? Or killing crows?"

"I can't even touch one," I say, sitting up; I reach for her hands, let her pull me to my feet. "When Pollock lived on Long Island, they used to come right up, take food from his hand—he could pet 'em like a dog."

"Do you want to stroke crows, Andy? I thought you were going to paint."

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"I can't give it up."

"You haven't seen her in years."

"She's in here," I say, and touch the side of my head. "I still want to do them. Like—Fukase with his ravens. You know?"

"You don't get it," I say, for the hundredth time. "I don't want you to look dead. I want you to embrace death. There's a difference."

I love to manipulate Helga in the leaves, her body unnaturally white in the red-gold pile I've scattered over her. "Look at you,"

I say. "How'd your face get so red?" I want to laugh at her, mock her; I wander in a circle plucking out the front of my shirt, giving myself breasts.

Whenever I tease her, Helga usually laughs. But now she rubs both palms over her face, making her skin blotch.

"Hey," I say. "Leave it alone. How'm I supposed to get a painting out of that?"

"Use your imagination." She picks up handfuls of leaves, scrapes her skin till it's raw. "Is that enough?" she says, and opens her mouth, rubs leaf matter across her tongue. "She lives two miles away."

"Jesus," I say. "You're ill. Sick. Go home."

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"Sick," she says, and laughs. "Because I'm not Chris?" and I lean down, stare; the laughter stops.

"Why didn't she ever come back?" she asks; if she were jealous, I wouldn't answer...but she's not.

Her frozen face in my palms. "What d'you think? It couldn't have gotten better. And so—we left it."

"Like the convent," she replies, and kisses me with swollen lips. "There was that second, scrubbing the floor. Hands and knees, and I thought I saw something. Not an experience. But saw something near the altar—floating. Stupid—it could've been a pigeon! But no, I decide. It was more. And for days I was happy."

"Chris in her black henley," I say. "Helga in her little white cowl,"

and she laughs, and we're together again, warm as an old married couple.

My father taught me to erase particulars from a painting, leave their essence floating like a ghost only sensitive viewers can detect. That way, an apple reminds us of the person who wanted to devour it but wandered, instead, into the barn, where he lay down beside the cattle and slept.

I met her out walking.

She was crouching in the snow. Thick jeans wadded up around her thighs. Pockets bulging as she squatted, fingering a something. Helga was with me that day. Trailing behind me, picking up pinecones, flipping them over in her nicotine-stained fingers, examining them.

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She saw the girl a second after I did, lingered behind me.

She was an Indian girl—twenty-one? Twenty-two? Her hair a blue-black glittering, ruffled up around her coat collar. Rubber boots climbed her calves, ended below her knees. Her skin was poor, red blemishes surrounding her nose. I gazed at her sallow face and the skeletal structure came shining toward me—how white the bones, beneath tissue and arteries, the blue-and-red matter of being.

She was light-complexioned for an Indian. That thing—almost glossy—clutched in her hand. I gazed into her eyes. She gazed back into mine, not at all shy.

“What’ve you got there?” I asked.

She held out her hand. “Crow,” she said. “Found it like that. What

do you think?"

I thought that it was missing its head. I gazed into the neck cavity, dark as her lipsticked mouth, declined to touch it.

"Who are you?" I asked. "Haven't seen you around here before." Helga came up behind me, arms crossed over her breasts, so womanly she embarrassed me.

"Helga Testorf," I said, to the Indian girl.

"Chris Ramsay. I work over there." She jerked her thumb in the direction of a hill.

"Ramsay? Of Ramsay and Sons?"

"I'm the daughter," she said. "The sons already left."

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Helga scraped her boot toe through ice. Chris Ramsay's sea-colored eyes watched the ice split apart, translucent veins, two big chunks. "What should I do with the crow?"

"Don't bury it," I said. "Leave it on the ground. Let animals take it away, piece by piece."

Chris studied me for a second. "You're the painter," she said. "The one whose father died. My dads still talk about it." Helga looked up at that; Chris touched Helga's cheek, stroked it while Helga stared.

"Lotion," she said. "Your skin's dying off."

"Can I have a lift?" she asked me, suddenly. "Dinner in an hour."

I shrugged. "You see a car?" I tugged my ear, glanced over at Helga.

“Should we walk you?” I asked.

“I’d like that very much. Rape country around here.”

She stooped, laid the crow remnant in the snow, scooped white stuff over it.

We advanced through a twilight evening that reminded me of the Aurora Borealis: a wash of pinks, golds, violets igniting the sky. I glanced over at Helga, who walked clutching my hand, and thought how she was the secret: Helga in her green coat, pigeon-toed as she strode; Helga straddling a chair, gazing out a window misted with snow. She gazed back, eyes frosted windows, and I thought, Well, that’s it, then. Who could fathom women anyway? As closed-off as death.

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Chris Ramsay meandered alongside, kicking slush with her rubber boots. She caught me watching, said, “Used to work in a meat-packing plant. Y’know, slinging guts. These boots kept me from slipping in all that blood. Or breaking my bones when a piece of carcass fell on me.”

“But didn’t your...fathers....” Helga ventured.

Chris grinned. One front tooth was darker than the other; her bottom teeth weren’t straight. “Didn’t think I wanted the family business then,” she said. “I mean, be a part of it. Guess you could say I was chickenshit like my brothers— didn’t see the possibilities.”

Ramsay and Sons squatted, a Georgian, two-columned structure, atop the next hill. The paint was fresh and clean; green awnings draped windows rich with a warm yellow lamplight. It wasn't here, this building, when my father and Newell'd been killed.

Then, they'd laid Pa and Newell out in the Quaker Meeting House. I was the only Wyeth who had the stomach to view the bodies. A stain—reddish-brown blood from injured Hessian soldiers—mottled floorboards beneath the coffins.

Fair-haired little Newell, pale lips pursed, in his blue-and-white sailor suit. Pa with those broad black brows, face broad as an Indian's. Magnificent in death.

"Let's go in," Chris said, stepping into the foyer. "We can have a little supper. My dads'll have it ready."

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Out of the gloom, stretched and pale as taffy, stepped the two dads.

"Welcome," one said, stepping forward, clasping my hand: his dry, smooth palm. Unaccustomed to work. Then I thought about what his business was and went cold all over. In the sudden confusion, these two men with close-cropped, dark hair, starched white shirts that buttoned up to their Adam's apples, shiny black slacks, were escorting Helga and me into the foyer, Chris mixed into the confusion. "Hello," they said, "hello," and Helga squeezed herself up next to me, rubbed her palm up and down my arm, though I couldn't tell whether she was enjoying herself or felt smothered.

And the foyer. Like a gilt half-dome or a glorified brothel, red-gold wallpaper, crystal chandelier, blood-colored carpet. A sense of

quiet so profound I wanted to sink right inside it, vanish inside the walls. I wondered if rats were in these walls, if they crept out for viewings, sat on the boots of corpses who couldn't protest their presence.

"You'll stay and have dinner with us, of course," one of the dads said, stroking my arm, his fingertips stained with something beige. "I'm Arthur, by the way. And my friend here's Malcolm."

I'd thought they were brothers, not lovers. Then I looked at them both, sorted out features in my mind. They were different, I realized—only dressed alike.

"I couldn't possibly. You weren't expecting us."

"Venison," Malcolm said, his jaw squarer, darker, than Arthur's, his eyes an impossible shade of blue: I gazed straight into them, leaned back under a vista of summer sky. "How can you say 'no'?"

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I smiled, rubbed my mouth in assent. Arthur cheered.

At dinner, all of us were prim, crimson linen napkins spread across our laps. I pictured Betsy at home, a snifter of brandy at her side as she lounged in her purple housecoat before the fire. I wouldn't call her. She wouldn't understand. She'd think I was still at the studio, struggling to paint, becoming so blocked that I'd paint the same brown landscape over and over, the one that reminded me of my father. She wouldn't get it: no. That's why I hadn't told her about Helga. She'd hated Siri so much—I didn't want more rage in my life: I wanted a snow-sleep. Calm.

We were eating baby peas with a knife and fork, thick cuts of a deer I imagined swinging from a rafter, bleeding out from its throat. Helga devoured her meal with furious appetite; wet dribbled down her chin; if she

were naked, the juice would drip down the line formed by her outswaying breasts, cling as droplets to her nipples.

Chris ate nothing. I admired her restraint, wanted to live on painting, air. Her big boot climbed my calf. She didn't even smile.

The dads insisted we sleep over, gave Helga and me a king-sized bed in a gold-appointed room I suspected guests stayed in when they were too distraught to leave. I still hadn't called Betsy, our life a dream so distant I could scarcely remember it. Sometime after midnight Helga lay curled asleep, her hands under her head, her pale breasts flaccid above the gold-stamped comforter. I was reading beside her—Moments of Sustenance:
78 tepid poems about comfort in communal prayer-groups at times of abandonment, grief.

I'd rummaged in the nightstand, found only this and the Gideon Bible, as if this weren't a funeral parlor but a hotel for potential suicides.

She opened the door with the silence of death. Melodramatic, yes: I smiled.

She didn't say anything. I looked at her, rubbed my chin. She pulled off her black henley, her breasts uptilted, glistening with sweat. She sat down on the floor, tugged off her steel-toed boots. Then the jeans, black-cotton panties. She sat down on the floor, naked, legs spread, her slit wet and dark. I slid out of bed, followed her to her room, let her get on top. I was accustomed to silent women, but Chris screamed when she came.

When she woke me again, I had the sensation of a dream continuing, a dream that could never stop, and her fluorescent clock dial pulsed 3:58 A.M. I was tucked tight in bed, swathed up to the chin in covers; she was standing by the bed, fully dressed, holding out my clothes. Our eyes locked; our gazes stayed riveted as I climbed out of bed, got dressed with her watching.

“You going to paint me?” she asked, and I nodded, biting my mouth.

Then she grabbed my hand, escorted me into the hall.

We were on the second floor of the house. Marble appointments everywhere, fake Greek statues—gods posed in Olympian attitudes—protruding from niches built into the walls. Brass luminaria illuminated the gray-flecked hallway.

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“Can’t believe you live here,” I said, letting her lead me one-handed down the corridor.

“It’s hard,” she said, and I nodded. “There’s an elevator here. We’ll take it downstairs to the basement.”

There didn’t seem much to say. I’d never seen an elevator in a home. But this wasn’t an ordinary dwelling; it was the house of the dead. The elevator was lined with mirrors. We stared at our creased, sallow reflections, at each other as we descended. Walked down another corridor, fingers lightly brushing.

Turned into a cold white room. A silver gurney in the center, tubes, a bottle of fluid. A shelf behind the gurney, filled with bottles: “Jensen’s LifeLike Cream: Bronze.”

There was a sheet-wrapped body on the gurney, the feet uncovered. Ice-white, thickly veined though the veins looked like cords, colorless as some types of snow.

The head of the corpse was covered.

I kept staring at that sheet-wrapping, shroud. I was glad I'd seen my father though he'd looked like a dusky-faced mannequin...like something we could bury.

And Newell—the toddler?

Newell could be forgotten.

Because he appeared only asleep.

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Some people thought Pa a suicide. He'd been so depressed, couldn't sleep, greeted me in the door in a stained bathrobe for months. Started to smell. He was in love with my brother's wife, Newell's mother.

But I knew it wasn't a suicide. Because Pa couldn't take a kid with him into death.

He was my father.

"I used to hate this room," Chris said, her voice low-pitched, weirdly dreamy. "Now I work here, though. Love it."

"What do you do?" I ask, turning toward her suddenly, gripping her shoulders.

"The makeup," she replied, in a tiny voice, as if suddenly shy. "Or—the ones that can be salvaged. I make them look pretty before they

leave. I mean, before they have to leave their families.”

“You decorate them for the worms,” I said, and laughed; Chris didn’t laugh but stared back calmly: no judgment in her eyes.

“Would you like to see her?” she asked. “This one’s a closed-casket. She’s already been embalmed. They’ll start reconstructive work on her soon.”

“Malcolm and Arthur?” I asked, and she nodded.

I touched her hand in reply, eased closer to the corpse. Chris stepped toward the sheet, gripped it, peeled it down.

I crouched closer to the face.

The woman’d been in some kind of an accident. Must’ve been—her face, fortyish, brown-skinned from a tan, was split from forehead to upper lip. Some repair job’d been attempted already—the

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dads?—but the cavity shone wide, dark, deep, though the blood’d been siphoned out of her system, replaced with embalming fluid.

The cavity, though, remained, a darkness split with bone.

“Tractor accident,” Chris said. “Ran right over her. Didn’t stand a chance.”

“Can’t you sew her up? Something?”

Chris looked at her fingers. “We’re not that...sophisticated, I guess. Requires a lot of skill.”

“Are you going to make her up?”

Chris shrugged. "What's the point? Nobody'll look at her anyway."

"It was good for me, seeing my father before he died. He was in an accident, too. His—station wagon was hit by a train. They had to cut him free."

"Oh," Chris said, "I'm sorry," touching my arm.

I squeezed her fingers, massaging the bones. "Years ago," I said, looking right at her, and she rubbed her mouth, went silent.

Then: "But the face wasn't affected, right? That's our problem. The body's not too bad...the face, though, is a mess."

"Still, it helped me," I said. "Got death out of my system for a while."

"Does that ever happen?" Chris asked, and, this time, I looked away.

I hurried her into the dark. Loved this time of night, five-thirty, six, when the moon rolled hazy as memory across sky dreamy with the promise of dawn only hours away.

Everything gray—not black.

And it was the first time, really, that I had the crow inside my head. That I carried it inside me, sharp and hazy as Pa's last photograph, which I used to stare at everyday until I realized that my entire memory of my father was shrinking to the outlines of that sepia-toned shot, Pa standing tall in his old-fashioned painting

smock, an enormous man with tiny feet that—vain—he squeezed into little leather boots.

I had my father in my mind forever, I hoped...and now I had the crow.

The crow that Chris had clasped in her hand, the cavity where the head was supposed to be. I imagined her touching her lips to the tendons where the head had been attached.

Smiling, laughing, we wandered out onto a fresh layer of snow that made the dull ground glow, a shine that forced you to remember how beautiful Pennsylvania could be when you were positive you'd forgotten. Chris pulled the collar of her coat tighter around her neck; she was mumbling as she strode, frozen like me, though she swung her feet aggressively, her steel-toed boots cutting snow, leaving half-moons she abandoned without looking though I did, following her; I saw the pattern moonlight made puddling up yellow inside those emptied snow-crescents, so beautiful they made me gasp.

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"Where're we going?" she asked, breath haloing her pale, pimpled face, half of it gone dark.

"Place in the woods. Thought I'd paint you beside a tree."

"Jesus, it's cold. My tits'll break."

"They'll look good that way. Hard. Won't you use my name?"

"Because you've been inside me?" she teased. "Doesn't matter, Andy. You're older than the dads."

“What were they doing?” I asked, as we meandered between birches pale with moon.

“What? You mean—when we left them?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Don’t you know?”

“Of course I know. I just wanted to hear you describe it.”

She stopped suddenly. I stopped, too. We stared at each other, surrounded by all those trees. “Shit, Mr. Wyeth,” she said, and took a step closer. “I mean—shit, Andy. You really are a perv, you know.” She took another step. Unbuttoned her coat, opened it, her breasts hard beneath the shirt; I curved my hands over them without untucking. “Strike you a deal,” she said. “I’ll take you to a place that’s just a little bit warmer than the one you have planned...and then I’ll show you.”

“Can I paint you there?” I asked.

“Oh, yes,” Chris said, when my hands tugged her henley free from her jeans. “It’s a dream place for a painter. You can do anything you want there—and more.” I yanked down her bra cups, worked her over with my mouth, her tits glistening with the wet from my tongue, her face softening like snow-melt, my spine bowing under the weight of my backpack.

Sex and death, I thought, managing a sweaty smile.

It was a long trek out to “Chris’s Cave”—what she called it. The backpack grew heavier; though it was frigid out, sweat popped out

across my forehead.

“Come on, old man,” Chris said, scrutinizing me as she meandered alongside. “I’m stronger than you. Worked in a meatpacking plant, remember?” I looked at her and hated that she’d called me old. Because—shit—I was only in my forties then.

But I didn’t want to die. Fuck, no. Because I still had so much left to paint.

I unstrapped the backpack. Stooped backwards, let it slide off my shoulders, drop with a thud onto snow. Chris picked it up, dusted it off with the flat of her palm, slipped it on; I tightened the straps once then harder across her back.

We approached the cave. She’d left a lantern glowing inside. Its warmth, its light, radiated hot milk, but orange. Orange everywhere. Orange across the snow, staining it, changing it. A kind of transcendence wafted up through my belly: I felt empty but clean. I thought about the dads, whispering behind the door when we crept past down that gray-flecked hall, little words of love, endearments from Arthur to Malcolm. Murmurs that crescendoed, sounds of a sweaty grapple. I could picture them without their shirts, without their pants, in a bordello-style, gold-and-red bed identical to the one Helga and I’d shared. They were lying back to front, their bodies covered with sweat. Maybe Malcolm reached around Arthur’s chest, fingered his nipples, and it was aggressive but tender, too. And when he pushed into him, he was ready.

That was what I’d wanted to be like my whole life: always open. Always ready.

And they did it in the middle of death.

“Here we are,” Chris said, pausing at the cave mouth. “You have to stoop to enter. Sure you’re ready?”

I looked at her, my smile souring. “Should I be afraid?”

“No,” she said. “Not afraid. Just—” She looked at me, her black eyes glinting. “It’s just...you know...everything.”

I followed her in.

It was what I’d waited my whole lifetime to witness.

I massaged my mouth till it ached: till my eyes flooded over.

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It was a homage to death. A homage to the crows. Who could say which was more beautiful? Crow tapestries, vibrant blacks and golds, were tacked along one earthen wall of the cave. Crows taking flight at dusk, their wings a velvety purple. Crows pecking at deer scraps in snow. Crows curled up in the snow, their feet rigid against their breasts.

And stacks of the dead everywhere. Crows missing their heads stacked evenly along one wall, the cave shining a dull warm black with the sight of all those bodies.

She hadn’t killed them...she’d preserved them. All except for the heads.

Why?

I thought I knew.

Strip away their individuality, and the essence of crow was left.

Big suede gloves lay tossed in one corner. I smiled at Chris, approached, tugged the gloves on, lifted a sleek black crow on my hand.

“Taxidermy,” Chris said. “Amateur stuff. A trick of the trade.” She examined me closely, the crow still on my palm. “You don’t find it...disgusting?”

“Overwhelming. Wonderful. And amazing...there’s no smell.”

She smiled, shyly again; her crooked teeth gleamed the color of old bone. “Thanks,” she said. “Guess it means I know what I’m doing?”

“Definitely,” I said. “Definitely.”

She looked at me then, undid her belt buckle, unzipped her jeans, 87
tugged them down to her knees. Then, the panties, down to just around her knees. “Like the dads,” she said, and glanced up over her shoulder...or tried to; her long black hair kept falling over her eyes. “Everything open—right?”

I leaned down over her curving back, peeled up her shirt. The heft of her little breasts falling forward into my palms. The gleam of her ass before my body blocked it. She’d worked in a meatpacking plant, handling carcasses. Stood in her steel-toed boots in the blood, trying not to slip in the mess, heaved cow carcasses, body parts, until her gloved hands ached. I couldn’t see her hands now; they were braced against the ground; she moaned when I fondled her breasts. One-handed, I made myself ready, pushed in hard. “Oh,” she whispered, and I smiled. Back in the funeral par-

lor, I imagined her dads worked till they sweated, trying to close an impossible wound. “We can’t fix her,” one said, finally, to the other; and I was certain that they cried. But I was deeper inside her now: Chris and I rocked forward, back, silent with a beauty that made my heart startle then quicken, that made me press forward breathless into death until it fled before us like a long black streak of shadow, the crows stacked everywhere, their stiffened wings primed for flight, my father lying trapped inside the station wagon after the train struck him with a force that smashed the car flat, the rubble smoking like a fireball but quiet now, smoldering, Newell lying in the field, his neck broken, snapped, not a mark on his face or body, the neighbors running toward them, shielding their faces as they raced, but there was no hope that day, October 19th, 1945, no hope anywhere, one body in the car, the other in a field, my father’s big body in its coffin, Newell’s tiny body in its coffin, but they’d already escaped, they’d already fled to a place we could never see or even imagine, the last crow’s shadow crossing the sun, and then, the flood of returning light.



Limbs and Letters by Douglas Degges

Spalting

Meagan Wilson

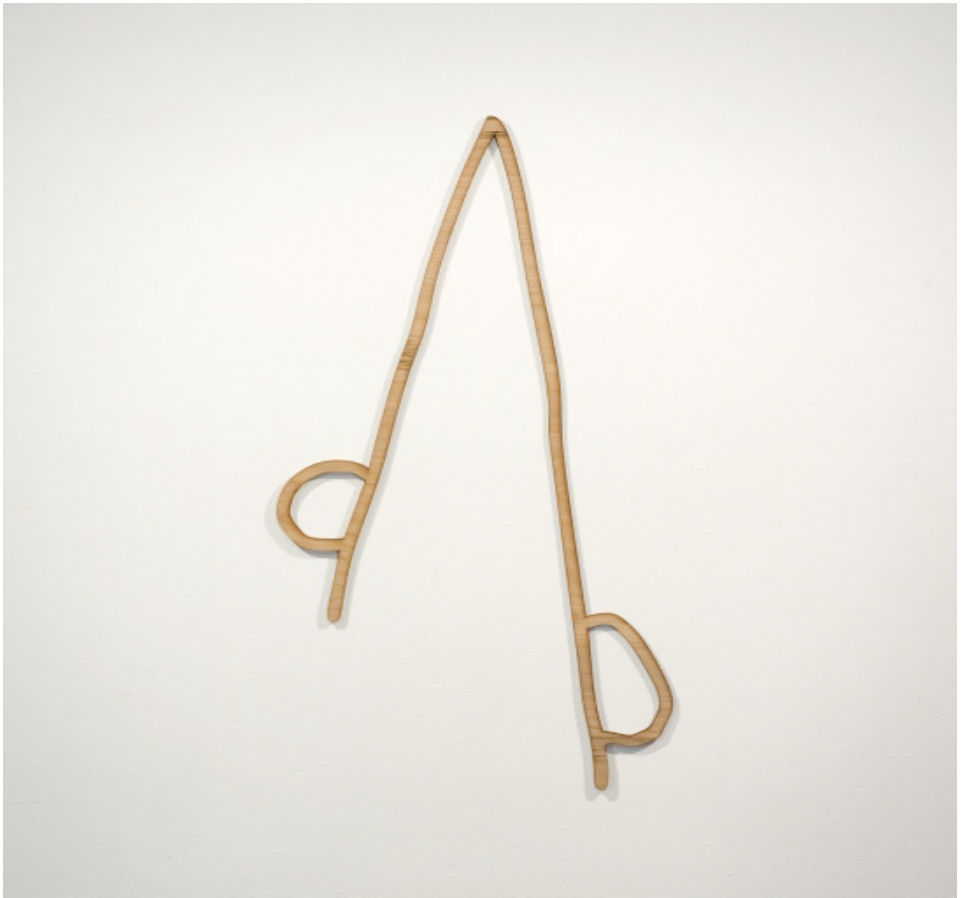
the wooden framing and I don't know what I am doing

Culling for bow she turns
each board upon itself he watches
her study bark and wane imperfections in the
perfect wood. It

nearly overwhelms the senses—
her treatment of it. She'll fit them. Each seasoned
length she leans against the shed its
color to absorb the day to go
purple this heartwood bright bizarrely bright
as it cures in the sun. They are
friendly in a way and shall they say more
waking in her hands will they
wake to those boards full & bright? She'll rise
early to walk the dog into the
low fog. At the end of town. Beyond it
just the fields she loves.

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* "the wooden framing and I don't know what I am doing" comes from George Oppen's poem "Neighbors"



Limbs and Letters by Douglas Degges

Brochure

in the waiting room of Allegheny Hospital

Chanda Grubbs

My younger brother, Ellis, had been on the transplant waiting list for seven years when the call finally came. By then he was twenty-six, a construction worker. We were lucky it was so soon, the woman said, most people wait much longer and I knew that was true from the pamphlets I'd read in the office: 2,000 heart transplants every year and still over 3,000 people on the list. At least it's just my heart, he said, and not my brain. As if to him the choice was easy which was more important.

92

The first time I held a brain I remember thinking: how heavy. How heavy we are to one another. There was something about the creases and the emptiness of it all. Like my grandmother's pie shells, waiting for pumpkin and mince in the early morning kitchen warmth. But it had been drained already, its owner long gone. Whose brain is this, I said, the museum presenter carried on, rattling off facts about the human body. He lifted it out of its bucket and passed it to me casually, continuing his speech. And in my sixth-grade arms it was huge and celestial.

½ hour, time spent as just one cell.

He came earlier than he was supposed to. Father was already gone by that time. This is your baby too, mother told me; in my arms he was warm and small. I had wanted to name him Treehouse. I held

him tight to my chest and watched his eyes slip back and forth beneath his lids, already he was dreaming of miniature cities and the faceless voices of us. Mother slept too. Out the window, the sun started up. And he was mine and we were the last two people alive.

17 muscles to smile.

In the waiting room after Ellis is born I say, grandmother, tell me a story from when you were young. She begins the same as always: ours was the largest house for miles, but my daddy was a good and kind man, even to the coloreds. I am embarrassed because she says coloreds and there are black people in the waiting room with us. She doesn't hesitate. This word means something different to her and wrapped up in it is her youth. Old Mister Bussy from down the road would come over to use our bathroom because he didn't have his own, we had several, and while he was over he gave us organ recitals. I imagine venous pipes running up the walls of her childhood home, carrying music through all the rooms, metallic vines, ivory keys. His gallbladder was always bothering him or his liver or his kidneys. But how did he know that, grandmother, how could he feel those things. I didn't understand knowing the state of inner parts. How does a gallbladder feel, what does it look like?

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1,000 new skins every year.

Home to help her heal from her shoulder reconstruction, I caught my mother's weight on my arm, pulled her from the tub. Her bath-

water made the air dense and I could smell her skin, warm and roses. As she dressed herself to the sound of the drain, I noticed for the first time the way she was loosening in places. At some point we will give way and become our surroundings like vapors. I ask her how old she is. She says thirty-two and holding, just like grandmother says, and I know that one day I will say the same. Ellis is his true age and will always be. He is a man and to him, years are less harmful. He will become distinguished, his hair will salt and pepper. He will not dread cellulite and sagging and the unavoidable gravity of our bodies.

23,040 breaths per day.

94

On the back porch: we drink wine and talk like friends, the bird and bug noise swells as night comes on and summer is turning, you can feel it in the air. She tells us when she was seven she watched grandmother run over her cat, backing out of the garage. There was a mark left over, even after she saw her father use soap and hose, until the next year when the driveway was repaved with asphalt.

In the winter: we sit in the hot tub out back. When we run for the house, our pale feet make dark wet spots on the deck steps. It is so cold that two days later they are still there, our side by side footprints frozen to the wood as though something has seeped from us and stuck.

27 bones in the hand.

At grandfather's funeral, mother makes me rest my hand in his to feel what has left him. She touches his eyelids. She is feeling for movement beneath skin, like fish trapped under ice. I want to pick up his casket and hide it from her, pull away her hands from searching for something already gone. Ellis runs the backs of his fingers against grandfather's tie.

Afterward, in the evening backyard sun of our house the trees bared their bones and stretched capillaries to the sky just to keep the blue and clouds moving. The adults talked inside; we, on our backs in the grass, said nothing.

500 shades of gray can be distinguished by the eye.

95

On the ride home from my first All-State track meet in high school, he kneads my calves without me asking. My legs have too abruptly stopped running; they crave movement. Underneath skin, the muscles wrestle and pull at each other. He knows what it is like to be spent, to have given your all. He gets mother and grandmother prattling and mimics them close to my ear until I smile and stop thinking about the pain. Outside, the sky is bleak and it smells like snow.

Later, we drive the backroads and smoke. We lie on the hood and search the sky, the car is warm against our jackets. It just makes me feel so small, you know, I say. I can't feel my face, he says. We toss empty beer bottles into the vast darkness over the road and wait to hear them fall and burst. We whoop like monkeys or sirens

into the emptiness and our breath puffs out. I think that sound is the same as raindrops or stars falling, if we could hear it amplified, Ellis says. I toss one more up. It hits as the last of my breath dissolves into night.

100,000 beats of the heart in a day.

On the phone, an ex-lover. The place at the end of the line sounds loud, and dark, and distant. His band has just toured Europe. A girl he met in France had an abortion and he owes her three hundred dollars. That seems cheap, I say. He's drunk and the connection is bad. There is female laughter and then he is gone. I wanted to know how far along she was, what three hundred dollars bought in a situation like that.

96

10 days, the lifespan of a taste bud.

Once he moved into his own apartment, he invited me over for dinner: Spam and lima beans. Mother called them special beans when we were younger. When he found out he'd need the transplant, we ate them again and the Spam too, on toast with mustard. It was all he wanted to eat and he said it made him feel poor, in the best way, and thankful. The beans tasted like summer in our kitchen when we ate fast to go back outside. They had always tasted that way and looking at Ellis in his kitchen, different light, his eyes tired from long nights, I knew their taste would never change.

Many years later: a man makes me lima beans for our first dinner

together. And under his kitchen lights, time comes haltingly to my feet and sticks. The refrigerator clicks on and I stare at him suspended in that gelatinous moment, his hand reaching for a wine glass. We become Ellis and me in our summer play clothes, forking special beans and looking into each other's sun-freckled faces. We become Ellis and me at his kitchen table, trying to make each other laugh for distraction, snow falling hard against the windows.

3,600 bits of information processed in one hour.

Ellis stayed at art school in Philadelphia for a year. Mother wanted me to visit to check on him, make sure he was fine. He'd started doing coke with his roommates and when I got there we did lines off a dinner plate in his bedroom. We walked the streets; sun licked hot on our backs. And for a while, in my mind, we were the same. We stayed outside until our skin summered and he said, let's get more. So we did. He cut the leftover with baking soda to sell at a party later and I picked at my nailpolish. They saved Hiroshima for the atom bomb, he said, I read a book about it. I could tell conspiracy made him feel certain somehow, certain of something larger than himself and more in control. Even if his body was already trying to push out and poison itself. And later, I would realize that someone kept the boy breathing long enough, someone saved that body just for him.

97

15 million blood cells destroyed every second.

The donor: twelve years old and bringing in the trash. Something

leaked out from the streetlights and the clouds pulled the rain from the ground. The car lost its grip from the road and forced itself onto their side yard. The old sandbox tumbled to pieces, a popsicle-stick bridge beneath the drunk driver; it spilled its sugary guts. Their yard became a vacation beach. He was still breathing and that's what mattered, all the way to the hospital where they declared him gone. They would harvest.

The brain itself is incapable of feeling pain.

98

Ellis, when they split you open I could see everything. The scalpel etching the path my hands had traveled on your first day in this world, when I felt the bumps of your soft knee caps, your spine a tiny chain of mountains. The team cracked and pried your ribs smooth and gaping. They lifted out your heart. It was passed down the row of attendants and then to me, in the corner observing. Against my glove it seemed out of place, too small it didn't look the size of your fist like we always thought it was supposed to be. Your old and broken piece, I wanted it to pulse in my hand so I would know it was really yours. It was disoriented, as if all the weight of you and all the weight of me sat motionless in my palm. It seemed like we should be worth more than this—slick and failing. Could they throw away our spare parts? It left a print on my glove that made me think of the summers when we ate mulberries straight from the trees, our mouths and fingers stained purple.

Post-operation: while I wait to be called back in, I count the number of times my heart beats in the hour for both of us. I imagine grandmother and mother there, just as they were at the beginning

of you. The nurse on duty explains that we won't know if your body will take or reject the implant, that the days post-op were crucial. My heart pumps against my ribs. And I know that somehow, if they can't keep the twelve-year-old inside you, it will be okay—because I was the first and the last to hold you.

Contributors

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Terri Brown-Davidson served as guest editor in fiction for *The Pedestal Magazine*. She is a Pulitzer Prize nominee and has received thirteen nominations for the Pushcart Prize. In addition, she has been awarded the AWP Intro Award, the New Mexico Writer's Scholarship, and a Yaddo residency fellowship in fiction. Her work has appeared in more than 1,000 journals and anthologies, including *Los Angeles Review*, *Hayden's Ferry Review*, *TriQuarterly*, *The Literary Review*, and *Puerto del Sol*.

Ryder Collins has a novel, *Homegirl!*, available from Honest Publishing Press. Her work has also been published in *Wigleaf*, *> kill author*, *DIA-GRAM*, *The Southeast Review*, and *Fix It Broken*, and elsewhere. She has a chapbook of poetry, *Orpheus on toast*. Some of her work can be found here: <http://www.honestpublishing.com/books/homegirl/>

Oswald del Noce was born in Albuquerque, New Mexico. He dropped out of the California College of the Arts and moved to San Juan, Puerto Rico in 2006. In 2010 he obtained a B.A. in Latin American Literature at

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Mary Wilson earned her MFA in Poetry from Brown University, and is working towards a PhD in English at the University of California, Berkeley. Her poems have appeared in *Everyday Genius*, *Gobbet*, *Sun’s Skeleton*, and (occasionally) her blog: <http://www.lean-to.blogspot.com>.

Meagan Wilson is from Colorado.

Wolfgang P. Wright, though not a gnome himself, would like to build his own tower one day and perhaps live there with a princess who has joined him of her own free will. Until then, he will continue to maintain a residence in the tower-free state of North Dakota, where there are plenty of open spaces in which to wear hats and practice one’s sword work.

Anomalous Press

launched in March of 2011 as a non-profit press dedicated to the diffusion of writing in the forms it can take. Its backbone is an editorial collective from different backgrounds and geographies that keep an eye out for compelling projects that, in any number of ways, challenge expectations of what writing and reading should be.

At the time of its launch, Anomalous is an online publication, available in both visual and audio forms on various platforms. It has its sights set on publishing chapbooks, advancing audio forms and creation, and supporting all sorts of alternative realities of the near future.

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