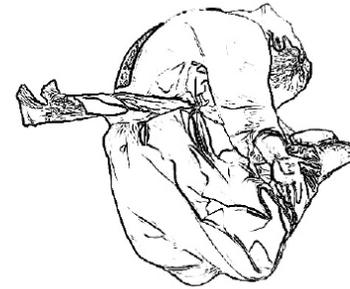


THE COSSACK REVIEW



*meaningful new work
since 2012*

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MASTHEAD

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Set in Caslon Pro

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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Dear Readers,

Our fifth issue features ambitious and remarkable work from twenty-two very different writers. In this book we have everything from a pantoum on the subject of reproduction to a short story about three grocery stores to a meditation on three workers on the I&M canal to an essay in four parts—each 324 words long—to two poems in translation from the Filipino.

Nonetheless, a leitmotif emerges quite clearly as I read these 100 pages. Each writer has handled and made vivid an intangible quality that is exceedingly difficult to capture: personality. Every piece expresses itself with unexpected candor and variation. The deeply personal voice that intones along with us in our thoughts when we read, the voice we rarely notice as we go about the quiet task of reading, will speak more richly than usual when it accompanies this lively and interesting work. 1

Our series Five Questions for Poets continues. This time around, we put our five questions to Javier Zamora, Stefanie Wortman, and Joseph Massey. Find three pages of new book recommendations from the editors and readers at the back of the book. And when you have finished reading this issue, be certain to open our website and read our recent Fall Web Issue for more excellent writing.

- CHRISTINE GOSNAY

Brian Simoneau

Everything Comes, It Seems, Like This

Sudden patter, steady tapping overhead—
 I expect acorns, birds and squirrels, not rain, not
 the ground speckled, drop after drop alighting
 like a murder of crows on a summer field.

Thunder splinters, rattles, fades. The wind shivers
 unclad oaks, ripples summits of yellow grass
 disappearing, daylight sunk behind the ridge.
 Night stretches longer with every setting sun.

2 Everything comes, it seems, like this: it's dark and
 I don't know how winter's descended so soon.
 Everything falls in the end but I hardly
 feel the rain. Once you're wet you can't get wetter.

When my father died I couldn't get enough
 of rain, its sound, this pitter, everything else
 still. Down the valley, thunder cracks. I listen
 in rain's unmeasured rhythm for what comes next.

Triin Paja

Absence

through the kitchen window, the rustling of dry wheat,
 a cobweb of stars among clothespins.

a long time ago
 the wheat was charred. someone's body burned like a field.

I see white nettles through a half-opened door. the lethe-
 soaked laundry hangs in the corridor,

my long skirt falls from my hands, my hands
 grow rusty seeking for you,

I do not find your mouth,
 which was a winter field through which I reeled and reeled.

milk pools around blackened pots. absence touches me like an animal.

*John A Maloney***THREE WORKERS**

They were clipping right along making heady progress on the day's digging when one of the workhorses fell into the mud and died and they were too tired to haul the thing out of the canalbed so they dug it into the canalbed. They decided this through words exchanged singly or not at all. They spaded through muckrock soil the three of them the team O'Connell Darby and Teague the Dirty Irish the Filthy Irish, spaded six feet below what was needed for the bed and they drug the horse's body into it and the horse went down headfirst neck bones crunching. They lit cigarettes and stood over the crunched-up horse there spattered with muck. They looked at one another as conspirators, untrusting, redlit in the gray light of gray afternoon. The conspirators spaded muck into the hole and covered the horse, who'd been a good enough horse but was just a horse. A workhorse. They spaded him into the canalbed and then he was in there. They glanced at one another when they thought one another weren't looking, they glanced sidelong out of their stubbled faces. They went back to carving the canalbed out of the earth a spadeful at a time, bodies lean and tightened, sometimes cigarettes, sometimes hard side glances. When the day's digging was done they put up their shovels and got a day's pay, went to the same tavern and sat separately along the bar in barquiet. Dipped whiskers into ale mugs. Coughed and spat. Trickled out with the twilight to three separate apartments alike in the same neighborhood, a place abutting the canal's origin in the city of Chicago. Triply they came in to sharp words from wives, triply they gave sharp back, triply they tromped to the stove to warm their hands, tear a crust of bread or scoop a handful of boiled potato gone to gum. Triply they belched, and triply they looked in on children asleep or awake quivering with love-fear for their big dark quiet fathers. Triply they went down to dreams of peat fields aswirl with fog and untouched by progress.

They'd come from toiling on the other canal, the one called the Erie. They'd broken their backs and their workhorses' backs on that canal while the ones doing the progressing kicked clods into their faces from up on the dry banks. They'd lived in apartments identical to these but for the names. They'd toiled for the same wages, toiled for the bellies of the same families, aside from

the odd new baby, aside from the odd granddad or blue-faced tyke to mourn. They knew toil. They were toil. The rest was what happened. When the water rushed into the Erie the work dried up, just that simple. O'Connell got wind of the new canal and they all picked up stakes within the week. They moved herdlike from city to city, grazing upon toil where the toil could be found. In some places the grazing was better than others, though it was never good, only sometimes fair. The overseers might spit your way, would not allow you to look them in the eye, might call you anything from dirt to scum, but if they paid fair at the end of the afternoon it was nothing to think on. Wipe your hands on your trousers, pocket the pay, mumble a word and off you go to the remainder of the known, the next part of the script, in silence and sharpness and just enough to keep you braced against the anticipation of the next one. Darby'd broken from the pattern, called the boss a chump. The boss turned beetroot purple.

They had spaded the horse into the canalbed out of respect and exhaustion and they did not for a moment regret it on account of feelings of desecration and spiritual unrest and making the spirit's passage into the next world more difficult. The horse's wandering spirit did not once canter through the foggy peat fields of their tripled dreamscapes. The horse was dead, had once been alive and was dead and they thought as little of it as of the rest of the dead, their ever-mounting numbers.

This canal will be called the Illinois & Michigan and will be another feat of engineering to tally on progress's side of the chalkboard. For fifty years trade comes and goes through the locks, enriching the city, enriching the region, enriching the nation. They dig it out from Chicago to Lockport to Joliet to Marseilles to Ottawa to LaSalle all the same, their view of the country the wall of earth before them, their duty to rend. O'Connell nearly lost his left arm to gangrene after a brush with the black powder. He spades with his right arm mainly and the withered left as support.

Three days after the horse Darby was bending over for a spade he'd dropped when he felt a warm white smiling heat. Smelled copper rust then nothing. A pickaxe had tumbled from the surface above point-first into the base of his skull as he bent and he was stone-dead. There was a change in the air pressure, action. O'Connell calling for help, help, man down, watching the spurt, its pulsating rhythms. Teague stock-still watching the aftermath, watching O'Connell watching, watching O'Connell call, Teague's ears sealed

as with wax.

The area of the O'Connells Darbys and Teagues will be called Bridgeport and the families will remain there for generations enough to have no inkling that the name ever referred to a piece of state of the art engineering, real progress. The name referred to a physical thing and the thing faded away but the name remained tethered to the ghost of the thing, stuck there calling its own name, looking for itself. Darby's eldest boy will grow into a packer, will weary at the sight of his own only boy an anarchist at the fringes of the Haymarket looking for trouble. George Darby the anarchist will hold up the maimed corpse of his grandfather as a symbol of the oppression of the workers. His eldest son will fight in the Ardennes, come home and open a butchery. Butcher Darby's elder son will be 4-F and long for glory watching his contemporaries come home kissed by thin-ankled women in the streets. His son will burn flags. His son will fight fires in Bridgeport, will wear his neighborhood pride on his sleeve. P.J. Darby will never know the fullness of his family's roots, how deep the wellspring of this pride that bursts forth from the base of his young energetic skull. He will know the words but what they refer to is lost.

The company holds a funeral for Darby after the evening whistle. The workmen gather wringing hats in hands around Darby's body calm and shaven and around Darby's survivors, the brood. The overseers' overseer, the section boss, gives a speech on the need for progress, the value of the work. The men watch his fingers with their clean nailbeds tapping at the sides of the podium. They focus on the neat part in his hair. The rise and fall of his white lapel. They disperse to the taverns. Not very far for a pickaxe to drop, to get up that kind of momentum, says one. The point went clean through his skull, half the head of the axe, six inches deep or more. Funny angle too, the crook of the axe come up that way into Darby's neck. That's all. When everybody knows something is a fact and there's nothing to do about it there's no excitement in arguing. Teague heard a lament from the old land in the auditorium between his dead ears, lonesome in the place's musty acoustics, adrift longing for the accompaniment of pub-din and good craic. Teague had heard nothing, was concentrated on carving the water's new route, thinking of the shapes of fiddles, their slender and fat curves, the tautness of their strings, the way they could be made to squeal or to sing depending on the shape of the holder's calluses, how he angled the bow. When he unbent he felt the pressure in the air had changed and turned around to see O'Connell gesturing, mouth working, begrimed with muck and

eyes bigwhite as owl's eyes. He saw the spurts from prone Darby and prayed to God just as his younger son would fall to his knees and pray and kiss the Rusk County dirt as the earth trembled and the oil began to spatter all around him.

The horse had a name too once but died only a horse. Darby died Darby because of Teague and O'Connell there to call him that, and because of his brood and the way they talked about their father. There might be a record somewhere of the later Teague who struck oil in East Texas and became rich for a span of nearly three years before he was muscled out of the claim by the Standard men, but there is no record of Darby. If the newspapers had written about Darby there might be a record of him now. They didn't write about him. There is much too much to write about. So Darby's legacy is his sons and his sons' sons and the bare fact of his own murder forgotten and without notability. Then again his legacy is the canal itself, the two canals one which he built and one which he attempted and was laid low in. It is their legacy and the legacy of the horses who stood and watched their own brother being heaved into the muck neckfirst. When a man called Darby talks back to a man in power the mechanics of that power dictate his death. When a horse strains harder than he can bear the mechanics of his horseheart dictate his death. When there is nothing written about them the mechanics of memory dictate their legacies, whether or not they'd wish them dictated so. The mechanics of history are created by the living to remember the dead, yet the mechanics exist outside the will of the creators.

When they reversed the flow of the Chicago River they erased these men's contributions to the improvement of America once and for all. Their progression reversed with the river's flow, swept down/upstream with the feces and slaughtered carcasses of a city throbbing with life. The I&M Canal shut down completely fifty years after O'Connell, after Teague, after Darby. The locks jammed shut. The river of commerce turned into a mucky destination for desperate young swimmers wringing pleasure out of landlocked summers. The descendants of Teague and O'Connell and Darby built up new families, built them on the backs of the dead men, not knowing they were building on dead men's backs and hoping never to find out that everything they have made is erected atop a great dormant dragon caked with muck.

Teague's family never would know he was an accomplished fiddler. They had known upon a time; Margaret Teague had told her sons and daughter stories from the old land, walking the fields of Connacht, and how of an

evening Geoffrey Sr. would saw away so your feet might move of their own free will, independent of whether you wanted to dance or not. But they forgot these stories, the stories did not attach themselves to the children's hearts the way Margaret might've intended, the way they'd attached to her own. They floated free from their intended tethers, they did not have the weight of tangible memory or ghosts. When Stephen Geoffrey Teague felt the earth's crust tremble its vibration was a bass note through his bones, he got so hard he thought his trousers might come unseamed, and when the oil burst forth from the dig site he opened his mouth and sang out, it came forth from his lungs, was drowned in the opera of the strike. Through this he did not recognize anything inevitable. It seemed more like his own doing, his free-forged destiny come to life. He and his family lived lavishly and when the Standard men brought them down he felt that he had been deprived of his natural due. He raged, Stephen did, raged and tossed bottles against the wall until the ritual of shatter and sweep was the underlying rhythm of their evenings.

8 In Sligo before the famine forced them on boats Teague used to play Furey's every Saturday evening. He entrusted his fiddle to a friend, didn't want to take it with him, didn't know if he even could or if it'd be snatched up by the immigration officers. In New York there was no time, his hands and back ached and twisted up from spading. When the explosives blew out his hearing he told no one, sat silent watching lips move listening to a note like the bow dragging along the A in the fifteenth position. Margaret could tell, would mime things subtly his way. When she mimed bowing he shook his head. Never again would he. By the time of Chicago they suspected he was deaf and would sometimes test him. Walking up behind him to give a sharp clap, the steel clang of shovel on shovel. He never heard. When the boss found out they tried to let him go but Darby threatened the boss, called him a chump, watched him turn beetroot purple. Teague felt the warmth of friendship pass into the air but had missed the meaning of the thing, knew only he was being regarded. Darby must have known the contract he had agreed to. O'Connell had watched it all feeling like a skulker, feeling that he ought to have echoed the threat, ought to have puffed out his chest alongside Darby though he knew the risks of pride. They didn't speak of it during the day, they didn't speak of it when they watched the horse's heart explode or when they dug it into the canalbed or when they sat, separately, along the bar turning their day's pay by alchemy into golden-brown liquid that burnt just right. O'Connell went home triply, singly, alone

and mirrored, to his wife whom he had once married and who had borne for him six children four of which were still upright and hungry, and he scooped mealy mash onto a tin plate and ate by the cold stove, then tromped upstairs to the nightly dream of warm peat, moist rich soil and a gentle breeze bearing myrtle and heather.

Now there's a towpath in Lockport where of a sunny September Timothy Devon O'Connell may decide to pack the Explorer, put some roast beef sandwiches and lemonade in the cooler, call up to his wife and daughter "We're going for a drive," hop on the Stevenson and haul out to 355, windows down doing 70, the girls' hair crazy in the wind, and exit along the water, walk about a little, have a look at the locks, inhale the different air. They enjoy it for an hour or two. Eat the sandwiches with a big bag of kettle chips, sip lemonade and bottles of seltzer. Enjoy the dumb simplicity of taking full, deep breaths. Smile at one another. Heather O'Connell is nine now and thinks of her friends from school doing this with their families, gets unexpectedly embarrassed. She'll go in on Monday and pretend it hasn't happened. When they ask what she did over the weekend she'll say "Nothin', I dunno. Watched TV." "Yeah, me too." When she grows up she wants to be a lawyer, maybe, or a dancer. Tim swells with pride at having created this family, this life in which they are free to be a bit bored out here at the locks, able to effect these small escapes. They sit for ten minutes in silence before Heather starts to complain, then Tim packs it up, kisses his wife and slides into the driver's seat, facing east, away from the setting sun. "That was fun," he says, "wasn't it?" ❧

Olivia Wolfgang Smith

CAMPFIRE

My parents are already here, somewhere in the crowd of everyone's parents and grandparents and sticky-handed younger siblings milling around the camp's dusty main lawn in front of the mess hall, waiting for the campers to come out and perform their—our—skits. I know that Mom and Dad are here not because I see them but because I see the signs of their presence, their accoutrements. Specifically, the horrible mustard-yellow expanse of their Ford Galaxie, amidst the other cars in the dirt lot across the road. The Galaxie's hood—wide as a full bed, hot metal ticking in the sun—is fully visible between the slats in the barn's hayloft, where I'm lying on my stomach, squinting at the crowd and the parking lot, waiting for Ashley, and wishing I'd remembered to grab my glasses.

10 Straw scratches my legs, actually scratches, leaving red welts that either hurt or itch, somewhere in between. Who knew grass could be weaponized.

The scene across the farmyard is a little blurry without my glasses, but not too bad. This isn't like *Lord of the Flies*. I'll make it. The lawn, the mess hall, the edge of the woods—bottlebrush evergreens and anemic birches—the gravel one-lane road—tiny cobbles worming into my sneakers all summer stabbing as I tried to march in time to our songs (*second verse / same as the first / a little bit louder and a whole lot worse*)—the parking lot with its rank and file of post-gas crisis sedans and the one hulking Galaxie. All of it is vaguely fuzzed out and will give me a headache if I look at it for too long without my glasses. That's all, not so bad, which is why I forget them on my bedside table so often. Dr. Vanderslice—which Dad says is a Fucking Stupid name, but I say all glory to Dr. Vanderslice, who has a cartoon face and is blessed with cartoon happiness, every visit spelling something like G-O-O-D-M-O-R-N-I-N-G or H-A-P-P-Y-S-P-R-I-N-G with the eye chart he tests me on, which, maybe it's shoddy optometry to spell out guessable phrases, but I think we should all be so lucky to have yearly appointments with someone so content they go out of their way to craft a special puzzle to wish you a happy spring, to ask how you're doing—Dr. Vanderslice says that I need to wear my glasses even if I can get by without them okay, because without them I'm straining my eyes and making them worse, a little bit at a time. It's like how looking straight at an eclipse

makes you go blind, but it's slow-motion and just from looking at regular life.

Someone breaks off from the crowd on the lawn and heads straight across the road to the Galaxie. I can't see too well, and they're about the same size, but I know it's Dad not Mom because a) the person has white skin, b) they walk fast and don't stop to look before they cross, just kind of check in the couple of steps before they get there, and c) only Dad would go back to the car anyway, at least this early, at least before I turn up missing. While everything's still normal.

He sits sideways in the driver's seat, his feet still on the dirt outside, and leans over to pop the glove compartment. I know that this happens not because I can see it but because I have seen it before. I've been seeing it since before I can remember—there's a picture on our fridge at home from the year he bought the Galaxie, 1973, when he'd only had it for a few months and then the gas crisis happened. That made Dad so mad that he still talks all the time about what a waste of money the car was, even seventeen years later. That's why he hasn't replaced it in all that time. He says he's gonna run it into the ground, so it can make up for itself.

In the picture on the fridge I'm a baby, a real, brand-new baby, and we're parked in the middle of Route 6 and having a picnic on the asphalt in front of the car, blanket spread right over the yellow line, like, *Ha ha, look how little traffic there is these days*. Dad took the picture mid-picnic, when he'd already been eating and drinking, so it's a little wonky—like he accidentally pressed the shutter on the way to holding the camera to his face, but he wasn't shaking yet, because the image is clear. I just look like a baby, tiny overalls and that pouty grimace kids have until they go to kindergarten and learn that they're supposed to smile. Mom has one hand over my shoulders and smiles, fake and tight, but besides that she looks like she always does in pictures—she never looks at the camera, because she's always looking at Dad. In that picture she's got her eyes fixed a little above the camera lens, which is the real way you can tell he took it. It gives me the creeps, the whole scene—I know people weren't driving then, or hardly, so we weren't in real danger, maybe. And obviously everything turned out fine. But I don't remember those days, and it looks to me like Mom and I are in danger, like we're about to get run over, or like the Galaxie's about to get rear-ended and explode.

So I know Dad is doing the same thing now that he must have done at that picnic, and probably a billion times since. He takes out a square-sided

bottle, the size of his palm from heel to fingertips, and drags on it like it's medicine and lemonade at once, crucial and delicious. Then back in the glove compartment—that *snicking* sound of its closing that would be so satisfying in different circumstances, like if these were the days when people kept gloves in their glove compartments. Were they for regular gloves, or dress-up gloves, or those special driving gloves people used to wear, thick leather with goggles and scarves, like cars were spaceships or airplanes or something and you needed a special outfit to operate them?

Dad crosses back over to camp, and I duck a little even though he'd have to have superpowers to see me up here, just a lump in the shadowy hole of the hayloft window.

There are even more people on the lawn now. Must be almost everyone. Someone's little brother or sister starts crying, and it must be awful because I can hear it clear as anything. I look for Ashley in the crowd, think it might be possible to spot her because of her giant hair—like Cher in *Moonstruck*, but the second half of *Moonstruck*, when she's in love with Ronnie and his wooden hand and gets all salon-fancy for the opera or whatever. Ashley loves *Moonstruck*, and does her hair and makeup every day to look like Cher, or a Puerto Rican version of her anyway—always eyeliner and strawberry-scented hairspray, even when we went hiking, even when Julie, our insane jerk counselor who had a million rules and stared at me and Ashley like a freak all summer, specifically said not to.

Julie was right about the hairspray. A cloud of midges followed Ashley everywhere, like a tiny personal rainstorm from a cartoon. "I told you," Julie would say, slapping the sides of her cargo shorts. "I told you." But I stayed loyal to Ashley and rolled my eyes, because Julie is always talking to me and Ashley like she knows something we don't, like she has us all figured out. Which, if there's one thing I hate, it's some twenty-two-year-old acting like seventeen is young and stupid.

And she doesn't know anything. One thing about Ashley that only I know, for example, is that Ronnie is actually her favorite character in *Moonstruck*, not Cher. She can do the best impression of him. In our cabin at night she would brush her hair back and make her eyebrows serious and say, "The *snowflakes* are perfect. The *stars* are perfect." And then some stuff I don't remember right now, and then, "We are here to ruin ourselves and to break our hearts and love the wrong people and *die!*" She would jump up off of her bed and make these

crazy hand gestures, bigger every time she did the speech. By this point I was always cracking up because, if I'm honest, I haven't seen *Moonstruck*. I hardly ever get to see a movie. Dad doesn't like going, and I don't think Mom knows whether she does or not.

But Ashley sees them all, and she assumed I knew *Moonstruck* on the first day of camp, and I wanted to be friends with her because she seemed cool and because we were bunkmates no matter what, so I went along. I like the idea of it, though, the impression I've got of the movie from hearing Ashley quote it, not being allowed to ask questions. It's about reinventing yourself and yelling your feelings and making out, I think. And getting away from people you thought you had to be with, because you find someone better accidentally. At the end of the first night she did Ronnie's big speech, Ashley did this other part from the movie. "*Sonofabitch!*" she yelled, looking up at an empty corner of the ceiling, and picked me up—all the way up, like it was easy!—from the edge of my bed and dumped me onto hers. We were both dying, flailing arms and legs, laughing so hard that Julie came to the screen door with her ugly short hair all piled over onto one side of her stupid head and told us to shut up.

Anyway, I check for Ashley in the crowd, but I'm crazy for trying. The campers are still assembling for the skits, anyway.

Or maybe, I can't find her because she isn't there anymore, circling the long way through the hiking trail to meet me in the barn.

I want to cross the rafters—there are floor/ceiling boards, but *they won't bear weight*, Julie said very sternly on the first day of camp, preemptively answering questions so boring that no one would ever ask them, *so don't even think about going up there*—I want to backtrack across the rafters and check the other side's window for signs of Ashley coming out of the woods, but my feet are far enough away to be out of focus and when I start to scoot backwards to turn around my sneaker hits the handle of some blacksmithing tool. It's one of the ones Julie used on "living history" day, when all the counselors used some lesson plan clearly designed for five-year-olds and insisted on pretending that we'd built a time machine and gone back in time to when the place was a working farm in the 1600s or something. They all still wore their camp counselor uniforms, pale blue shirts and khakis, but they had on bonnets and wraparound skirts over them. They pretended to work the farm, and had us "help with their chores" that were really just crafts in disguise. We carded wool and made cookies and planted seeds. Julie had to pretend to be the blacksmith,

I think because it's a boy's job and she looks the most like a boy out of the counselors. She has big arms and lifted the heavy old tools easily, but she clearly didn't really know what they were, which Ashley and I liked.

Anyway, I can't see well enough and scootch too far, and one of those big old blacksmith tools, like giant-sized pliers, falls over and *thunks* onto the sagging board between two rafters. The handle lands across my calf, and it hurts and might bruise, but scarier is the vibration from the metal part hitting the wood. I look back and it didn't punch through the board or anything, but it left this slash mark in the wood, lighter insides peeking through the old dusty layer on top, and it gives me the creeps to think about if that had been my leg. I won't get far if I take myself out on Step 1.

I stay put. Ashley will get here when she gets here.

Honestly, Julie gets sideways credit for this plan. Which is, if it's not obvious: escape with Ashley. I haven't had a real chance to iron out the details with her, which is why it's important that she show up soon. But probably I'll have her slip me out to her car and go back with her to her house, her family. She doesn't talk about them very much, but based on Ashley's personality they seem to be cool with most things. They might be cool with me. With hiding me—though that makes it sound worse than it is.

Or, if Ashley doesn't want to go home either, we can just escape together. We'll both be eighteen soon; her in September, me next March. Which, I guess you could say, why not stick it out. But after a summer away from all the bullshit, a summer of knowing Ashley, I can't even explain how impossible the idea of going back feels.

I'm not trying to be an after-school special here. If I were, I wouldn't have gotten to go to camp this summer—which yes, Dad paid for. If I were, my parents wouldn't be showing up for to the end-of-summer skit. If I were, I'd be thinking of a way to rescue Mom too, the two of us stealing the Galaxie and burning rubber out of town and into the sunset. But this is real life, which means it's not 100% terrible, and my mom doesn't need rescuing. Or she can't tell she does, which means it's impossible.

She could rescue herself, technically. She knows everything is shitty, and her parents have money and a spare room. She and I have talked about this for real exactly one time, between Thanksgiving and Christmas last year—which is when things tend to get particularly bad, because everyone else is drinking more than usual and saying it's a special occasion and why not live a little,

which makes people like Dad live a little more honestly and not get in trouble for it. I yelled at Mom about it that once, which maybe wasn't fair, the yelling, but she just said, "This is the commitment my heart has made" and that I couldn't understand because I was too young. Which, if there's one thing I hate, it's when adults are wrong and use that as a plug-puller on an argument. Because there's no way to say, "No, I'm *not* seventeen." But that doesn't mean I'm not right.

"Goooooooood *morning* everyone!" some chipper counselor voice sounds from the mess hall lawn. Everyone cheers. The crowd starts a ragged split into campers and families, performers and audience. The blurry campers separate into their counselor groups, sort of. There's a lot of cross-contamination. Somebody blows a whistle. Probably goddamn Julie.

Here's the real reason why I feel like I can't wait for my birthday, for graduation. It's because of this other movie Ashley told me this summer. This was a month in, after we were already tight, so I felt okay saying I hadn't seen it. It was new last year, this time travel movie where a little white kid goes into the future or the past or maybe both and somehow messes things up, makes it so this asshole who lives in his town gets rich and famous. Ashley told me this at the campfire circle two nights ago—the night before Color Days, the giant field day contest that takes over the last weekend of camp. Ashley had shotgunned her s'more and had a smear of marshmallow goo plastered onto her calf. She played with it while she talked, pressing her finger into her leg and pulling it off, seeing how far she could stretch the strings of marshmallow before they snapped. I stared at her while she did it. Campfires make me stare.

So, Ashley explained, when the kid comes back to the present his cute little white boy town is all broken streetlights and rusty metal and smashed cars up on blocks, and his neighbors all have shotguns and his mom is an alkie with a boob job and she's married to the rich asshole—who cheats on her and hates the kid.

"Plus, he murdered Marty's real dad so he could marry his mom," Julie cut in from across the circle. She was poking the embers with a leftover marshmallow stick and had one booted foot propped up on the emergency water bucket. We gave her the death stare. "Yeah, thanks," Ashley said, and made it sound like a box full of "fuck you."

Anyway, the thing about the movie is, the kid ruined his whole life—his whole *town*—just by doing *one* stupid thing. But then he gets to fix it. He time

travels again to back before he fucked everything up, and because he knows how it works now, he can just set his life back on track. Go into the past for a few hours, do one thing differently, and boom, his life is perfect again.

I don't get the time travel part of this very well—honestly, I kind of wish Ashley hadn't shut Julie up, because even though Julie is a royal jerk she probably would have been better at explaining it than Ashley was. Ashley tends to focus on hairstyles and outfits and big quotable speeches when she tells movies, and less on the overall plot. But I get the idea. And the idea is awesome and kind of terrifying—that everyone has one decision they made or thing they did to make everything else happen the way it does, for the rest of their life. Dr. Vanderslice made a choice when he was a kid, some random choice to listen to an album or get an ice cream or walk on a certain side of the street, and now he's the happiest optometrist on Earth. Mom and Dad each did, I don't know, the opposite of whatever Dr. Vanderslice did, and now they're themselves. And I'm their kid. I think we're basically living in the broken streetlight, shotgun-toting, drunken boob-job version of the present, because some time in the past, one or both of my parents did something to help out an asshole.

It's a little scary. It makes you want to never do anything, in case you accidentally help out another asshole and fuck up the future even more.

But then you have to remember, doing just one thing on purpose is also how the kid in the movie *saves* the future. And this shitty present, it's because of my parents' one past fuckup, not mine. I still get to make my move.

So, this is it, I think. Resetting the timeline. I'm feeling pretty good about it. Like I'm gonna close my eyes and count to ten and boom, suburbia, with all the engine fires and diesel smoke gone and not an asshole in sight.

The first skit is starting—the little kids, the thirteen-year-olds. They're singing and doing some kind of goose-stepping dance: *You can't ride in my little red wagon / Front seat's broken and the axle's draggin'*. Dad will be blissed out for now, marinating. Mom will be looking for me in the messy crowd of "backstage," maybe starting to get nervous. Then second-guessing, thinking she's crazy. These are the things Mom does when she has a feeling.

It's like a countdown has started: each of the camp groups will do their own stupid performance, referencing the summer's world, inside jokes that will fall apart outside the world of camp like fish brought up from the deep sea. I imagine Mom when the clock hits zero, maybe twenty minutes from now. Really picture Step 2. And just like that a wave of guilt capsizes me,

makes me feel dizzy even though I'm lying flat. My hands and stomach clench, and a sound comes out of me like getting my wind knocked out. Like getting punched.

I swallow the thought before I can take a full breath with it in my head. Don't give it air. *She'll be fine*, I think, and at the same time, *Screw her; she's fucking me over*. It's like I've got the bad version and the good version of the future inside me at the same time.

I'm not crazy; I know that life is not a time travel movie. But still, I think: maybe this is a sign that it's starting.

What happened was, last night—early this morning—I got up to go to the bathroom. I took one ostrich-step over Ashley, curled up sideways on my bed, and kind of sproing-crashed onto the floor of our cabin. I didn't fall, but I zinged a tendon in the bottom of my foot or something. It hurt like a bitch. But Ashley didn't wake up. Nothing wakes Ashley up.

The trail that runs behind the mess hall from the cabins to the bathroom building was dark and booby-trapped with spiders. I tiptoe-danced through their webs, cursing. It kept me from noticing Julie until I was almost right on top of her: sitting on the concrete steps up to the bathrooms, halfway through a drag on a glowing cigarette. We both jumped a little and she made herself cough. She reached behind her and stubbed out the cigarette on the concrete. Hoping I hadn't seen. "Jesus, you scared me." Smoke leeches out of her mouth; smugness out of mine. Asshole Julie breaking Rule #1.

"Why are you up?" I asked—big, innocent eyes. Wanting her to squirm.

Julie shrugged. She pinched her nose—that part of a person that isn't really there if you look at a skeleton. "I can't get used to the time thing," she said.

That was a bullshit answer. Camp is half an hour earlier than everywhere else, a tiny bubble of its own time zone, because they want to give the dew on the grass time to dry in the morning before we drag our feet through it and into the mess hall. I know enough about math and time to know that what Julie said was nonsense, especially not on the last night of the summer, but I didn't say anything. I just gave her a look, a *can you believe this guy* look, which didn't make any sense in context but neither did she and I had to pee. I flip-flopped up the stairs.

"Hey," Julie said. "Your dad called."

I stopped. The steps tilted under me and I felt almost high, like I had to

try not to lean sideways. Try not to follow the rush of air, the atmosphere of camp sucking out some hole Julie had pricked in the bubble. “When?”

“This...night,” she said, pausing in the way people do when they’re trying to decide how to categorize a time that normal people don’t usually have to think about. “A little while ago. He sounded...” She looked at me like this was a test, like she was seeing if I knew how he’d sounded. Fill in the blank.

I slapped a mosquito and it popped my own blood. I made a face at it and hoped Julie knew it was for her. “What?” I said.

“He wanted to know when the show is tomorrow,” she said. “With the time change, I mean. When it is in the real world. He said your mother was asking.”

“Okay,” I said. “Did you tell him?”

“Is everything—”

“Listen, I have to use the bathroom.”

“Yeah. No, sure. I, uh.” She stood all at once, unfolding herself. The squashed cigarette rolled along the step behind her. She looked at it, then tried not to. “You gonna miss Ashley?”

I stared at the cigarette as hard as I could. I put on a one-woman show called Noticing a Cigarette. Then I pushed by her to the bathroom. She was gone when I came out.

I don’t know. Does Julie get credit for the plan? She tried to wreck camp by talking about the world outside it, and scrambling to put things back the way they’ve been all summer gave me the plan. Do you thank a mosquito for giving you the idea to invent bug spray? Anyway, I didn’t sleep after I got back. I got to see all the blue hours between night and morning, and there was something fresh and magic about that time that made good ideas come naturally. I shook Ashley awake, or half-awake, a few minutes before Julie slapped the official wakeup call on our screen door. We weren’t the only ones up—I could hear other girls jabbering. The last morning of the summer, before the parents come, is a giant game of Capture the Flag. For weeks everyone’s been acting like it’s the most important thing in the world.

I told Ashley my idea. Sneaking out to the barn. Escaping in the rush of the Last Day; me in her car or the two of us together. Just two more people leaving, and by the time my parents figure out what happened I’ll be stable somewhere else and they’ll be too stuck to try and change that either. “We’ll keep going,” I said. “We’ll just keep it going.” Like time travel.

Ashley yawned until I could see her fillings. She raised her fist and garnished the yawn with a smile. She was beautiful. “Hell yes,” she said, and hearing it felt like a mix of dodging a punch and lighting a fuse. “I’m with you. Hell yes.” She thwacked at my arm, guarding her face with the other fist like a boxer. “Hell yes. Coffee.”

We suffered through breakfast and the first half of Capture the Flag and lunch. I was treading water, barely there. Fuzzy. Running on too little sleep, but too excited to be tired. I paced in weird, unplanned circles around the meadow during Capture the Flag. My distraction was like a beacon to the other team’s taggers, and I was constantly in jail. But who cared. Ashley channeled her nerves differently—she was amazing at Capture the Flag. She even set me free once, snuck through the enemy lines tagged the wooden post that sprung the whole jail. And she winked when she did it. Yes, I thought. Yes, yes, yes. It was almost time.

I snuck away during the second half of the game, just before the parents started arriving. We needed to slip off separately, to up our chances of getting away. And I needed to go first. I was too hopped up to play along any longer.

There’s a rush of sound from the crowd on the lawn. The oldest girls are singing now, and the rest of the camp groups are joining in. It’s the camp song. Even a few of the parents are singing, it sounds like. I think I can hear some dads’ voices. *From bright sunrise to summer’s fade / in lake and forest, farm and glade.* It’s awful, but this time it makes my insides hammer the way I think it’s supposed to every time. This is it. This is it. I gather my feet under me and rise to a crouch. I squint at the crowd. They’ll sing and then they’ll cheer and break up, mill around meeting parents and exchanging addresses and packing up lanyards and sleeping bags. And Ashley and I will go, go, go.

*Dear are the moments, dear are the friends / Dear are the memories ‘til we meet again / Each summer we—*clack. A sneaker brushes the big sliding doors on the barn’s other side, and I spring the rest of the way up. Quick footsteps on the dusty floor below outpace mine as I pick my way over the rafters. I take a couple of wild, risky steps and stop, make myself breathe deep. I cannot fall through the ceiling and die right when she’s about to come.

“Ashley!” I hiss at the feet on the ladder, but I’m too soft. Head and shoulders clear the trapdoor, hands braced on the hayloft to pull herself up, blurry halo of dark hair—but not enough of it, not nearly enough.

I recognize Julie at the same moment she sees me—she jumps, almost falls. “Fuck!” she says, and the unlit cigarette dangling from her lower lip tumbles down the hatchway to the first floor.

I stand with my legs spread, my feet on two rafters. My hands are cold. My arms.

Julie stares after her cigarette and then back at me. The campers finish their song: *We love thee ever more / we love thee ever more*. Everyone cheers. Julie slowly pulls herself the rest of the way into the hayloft.

She fishes a squashed pack of cigarettes from one cargo pocket and draws out another. “You, you can’t smoke up here,” I say. “It’s a *hayloft*.” I try to sound as bitchy as I did last night at the bathroom, but it doesn’t work.

Julie looks at me and flicks her lighter. I wince. Even when nothing happens, I keep my eyes shut. It’s less terrible that way.

“I’ve been smoking here all summer,” Julie says in the darkness. “No fireballs yet.”

I open my eyes. She takes a drag.

“Ashley?” she exhales.

Everything tightens and blurs, like a new prescription. “She’s coming,” I croak. “She’s coming and you’re ruining everything.”

Oh, god. It’s happening right now. The clock is hitting zero and they are starting to look. It’s time to go. It’s time to go and horrible Julie is standing over the ladder. It’s time to go and *where the fuck is Ashley?*

Julie takes a drag that seems to burn up half her cigarette at once. She cups her hand under the dangling ash. “You know you have to come back with me,” she says.

“No,” I say. To see.

“You were cleaning up in here,” Julie says, toeing the blacksmith pliers. I watch her notice the gouge in the wood. It’s like all of her pauses for a second—her voice, her foot, her blood probably. “You were cleaning up and you lost track of time.”

I’m battering against the edges of myself. I’m so worked up it feels like a superpower. I take Julie’s words as a sign that what happens next is malleable, up for discussion. “I’m *not* going back,” I say. Telling her the future. “I’m going home with Ashley.”

Julie blinks, sniffs, swallows. “Kid,” she says. “You—”

“Shut up,” I say. “Don’t call me that.”

She nods. “Laura,” she says. “Laura. You know Ashley’s not coming here. She’s packing up. Everyone’s going. You know she’s going.”

I do not know that. I do not know that and I refuse, with a screeching grind of brain cells and lost time somewhere else, to know it now. I will skip this moment.

Another one of those sounds claws out of me. This time I try to stop it and end up almost barfing, teetering on the rafters. In order not to fall I take a giant step, jar myself landing on another beam. I bite my tongue and spit pink stomach-juice onto the hay.

“Shit,” Julie says, and picks her way over to me. “Shit, shit. You okay?” She grabs my shoulders and makes me stand up straight, like she’s getting me ready for picture day. She looks me up and down. “It gets easier,” she says. She lights a cigarette and hands it to me. “It gets less hard.”

Which, if there’s one thing I hate—but I look before I tell her and I can see she already knows.

“Take a minute,” she says, sculpting my fingers around the cigarette. She makes me hold it like a joint, my hand a little claw. “Take a minute and then we’ll go back.”

I flick my other hand against the cigarette’s filter and watch its red tip blur, waiting for the whole place to blow sky-high. ❧