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When I visited the east coast as a child, I couldn’t get over how much was built of brick. An earthquake hazard back in California, the stuff was a rarity, and I imagined how different I might have been if I grew up among blocks of stately, reddish-brown buildings instead of the painted wooden sides I’d seen all my life. Mostly I thought that I’d wear a lot of cardigans. A silly thought, maybe, but then again maybe not so much. We are molded by the places we inhabit—by their geography, by their history. In reading over the selections for this issue, chosen through a weekend of discussion, I was struck by how many places the work takes us—Iceland, China, India, Pittsburgh, the southwestern United States. These places are sometimes specific, known—in Alejandro Nodarse’s *Goodnight, Jedroo*, images drawn from an Israeli photographic archive bring us to the sand dunes of Haifa before the expulsion of Bedouin communities. Other times, like in Rachel Calnak-Sugin’s prose-poem *Direction*, we are led through an unfamiliar, hazy landscape that never comes completely in to focus. It’s tacky to talk about how a book can transport us elsewhere, I know. But the issue you hold in your hands offers a view in to how we are tied to place, how it shapes the ways we see, speak, remember. And in this issue’s scale—only eight written pieces, with works by two artists—you might carry it with you as you move.

Bix Archer
In her dozing ears it took on an incredible note: the sheep had been killed, but had risen now after three hours by the aid of the Devil.

—Halldor Laxness, *Independent People*

when she killed the lamb, the devil stopped bleating within her, and she licked its fat from her fingers, and she drank from its bones, until at her feet were only so many hollow pieces like those of the enormous birds that had devoured her.

the marrow fed the wooly thing that had been growing within her, whose blood was her blood, and hers alone, whose muffled screams drowned in its bed of milk until it learned to swim, and it kicked to the surface where it grazed upon her fingers.

and when she then fell to her death, she released that thing within her,

and it was free for the first time.
at funerals, dad counts cars. this, for him, is the supreme unit for measuring someone’s legacy: *how many people drank so much of your spirit that they’d follow a traian through homewood calling your name?* he cannot remember how many cars followed his mother’s hearse. he says the hearse smelled like leather & the dead&theding & sharp cologne applied too heavily to disguise the scent of tears&hardliquor.

dad says when the cops came knocking he had sought refuge at his gram’s house on inglenook. he is nineteen and it takes two *motherfuckers* for him to lose his mind in the heat. he is no stranger to death; three days in waiting rooms & antiseptic has made him invincible. *say it again. say it again. /motherfucker.* the first two syllables lodge in temple like blunt trauma to the head. that woman who nursed the sun for fire and warmth and sliced the world in eighths with quick tongue. the second two syllables send him reeling. right arm raised like angel’s wing, a crack and a burst of blood. it takes two *motherfuckers* for this boy to lose his mind or gain it. he leaves the wounded to tend to their own wounded just as quickly as he arrived, sun dancing on oakland asphalt as if to say you are already forgiven.

***

in 87’ lex waved my dad into her room and told him she needed a pepsi from the drugstore down the block. there were seventeen empty bottles of brandy on the carpet. broken glass everywhere. 10 pm and she’d been dying for years, but something had ticked or flipped
and suddenly there were red lights down frankstown. body to hospital. three days of sterilized waiting rooms. at work my dad is late & he almost kills a boss who questions him. day 4. three two one. whatsthecall? something in him cracks or gives in fluorescent flashes of lex, his mother:

at five he catches a glimpse of her in the shadows. following him to school. ma. you ain’t think i saw you peeking around that tree halfway down oakwood, barely caught your afro spilling out around the trunk but ma—i saw you and every tree from inglenook to bennet was you...and the branches was your arms, and nothing could hurt me. no one.

seven and he finds a pile of white powder on a record beneath her bed. case of wine. empty bottles turned over.

six and she is swinging up, punching a woman three times her size.

eight. she is birthing a baby. ten. she is birthing a baby.

11. california sun on her face. honey brown heat and afros in watts. eleven. the earthshaking. her voice singing off tune, hints of trouble lodged in her throat like lozenges.

fifteen. blocking his face from her fists.

seventeen. his high school graduation. she is shorter than him, reaching up to wipe smudges from his cheeks with her spit.

there is a sound like a choke and then a whisper.

a-l-e-x-i-s? 36-year old black women w split livers don’t die with wills. so their bodies are given to circumstance and casket colors are picked by wide eyed sons.

what do poor people mark graves with?

***
dad has never lost a game of chess, not even in prison.
dad is always ten moves ahead.
at restaurants, dad loosens the caps on saltshakers and always sits facing the door.
dad goes nowhere without his hammer but will never own a gun. says his hands can do all the damage. says he’s been squeezing pliers for thirty years. says he’ll use his brain to knock a man out. says: see that dude right there. twenty years ago i hit him in the head with a pair of vice grips. says...nothing. just loosens the saltshakers and watches the door. swears to god that if anyone ever hurts me he’ll bust his kneecaps in.

***

just before midnight on tate is quiet and crickets and humming of ghosts. phantoms of those old, dead mills throw shadows of smoke and bodies, steel-encrusted and swallowed by heat. that burgundy behemoth of a truck, illegal and uninspected, haunts the backyard under my bathroom window. yellow siding draws and repels in a dusty misunderstanding: reminds of lemonade and summer, while the spirits in the kitchen assure that this house has stomached blue, brutal winters. dad’s unfinished work lays claim to the corners: bales of pink installation, floor gutted of carpet, half peeled wallpaper, next time you come: we work. dad manages a whole meal without a stove or an oven: potatoes roast in gram’s old crockpot. this summer, i only eat fish, so the hot plate scalds salmon he swiped at the dollar store. pictures on walls remind me of gram’s sitting room: no coincidence.
dad is obsessed with legacy and rebirth; in the wake of death he constructs babel-like fortresses that pay homage to the dead, try to talk to god. this broken house for four thousand dollars, no mortgage, paid flat from savings bonds and secret stashes stored in socks. dad is
obsessed with ownership. this is my inheritance. this and all his tools.

the crests of our neighborhood boast of a stillness that cannot be enjoyed in its vales. somewhere down the hill, someone allows bullets to careen out of a barrel, just close enough for us to hear. dad stumbles outside in the wake of gunshots to feed the birds and in the crux between dark and light we coat tate with kernels in a half-sleep, free-limb dance. we do not sleep this night, perhaps caught up in images of death brewing just below us. in the living room, we play a blend of old school rap about which he is certain, i know nothing. public enemy and grandmaster flash. i introduce him to kendrick chance and noname and he bobs his head to new school beats. there is no need to speak, in this house, but when dad and i get together there is no shortage of words. we bounce poetry back and forth, swap stories we’ve both already heard. did i tell you?/ yup, but tell me again. i ask questions to which i already know the answers. about lex. about shadows and reflections of self. midway through j.cole’s “4 Your Eyez Only” he’s crying and saying how much i look like her. i try to steal his can of chewing tobacco; his puffed-out lip reminds me of mouth cancer and early death. most times, i fail, and we laugh a laugh that holds fear in her right jaw. we set up the chess board; i win or he lets me win. the one finished room of this house is mine, painted my favorite color and bathed in light. a rent-a-center bedroom set he’s almost paid off. we sit in this cove till the sun spills through wooden blinds; the street is bare and dripping with dew or the hungry saliva of birds.
Once, a woman with kind eyes and a sun hat gave me directions in a voice so pure and sweet that I trusted her completely. I would have trusted her with anything; she did not ask for anything, but if she had, I would have given it gladly. She only said, *Turn left, then turn right at the light, then keep going. Eventually you will see it on your left.* I smiled and thanked her and she smiled back, a soft, comfortable smile that kept me warm and safe. I turned left, turned right at the light, then I was in a neighborhood of restaurants: everybody seemed to be out drinking on the street. There was clatter and chatter and it was quite pleasant to walk on that street in the late afternoon with the sun red and lazy at the bottom of the sky.

The restaurants changed to industrial buildings: the stamps factory, then the cinderblock where they used to make shoelaces, then Ginsberg’s. The woman had said, *eventually,* a word that implied you might be walking a long time before you got there. The factories faded into suburbs and I liked the way the land was divided into such quaint little plots. You knew what you were getting into when you thought, house; you knew it also meant car, fence, garage, yard, dog. You knew what all those things were and that school was nearby, and children, and other houses, doing the same house thing, with their same house stuff.

It was beginning to get dark but the woman’s face—no, not her face, exactly, but the essence of her face—shone before me, like a moon. I remembered this place from when I was a teenager and Fruity and I would come down here to touch each other. Everyone called him Fruity, I don’t know why, his name was Sam. At one point, I knew why, and we laughed about it. On the right there was that lake where we used to park; we always stopped just
short of sex and it felt like driving circles around the lake for hours. The lake was the shade of a glassy green eye. I wanted him to fuck me, but he was like a house. I realized, when I noticed the lake, that I had been looking for it so keenly on the left that I had missed noticing so many things on the right. It seemed so great a loss that I almost stopped to cry, but it would be coming up any minute now, on the left. Besides, I consoled myself, on the way back I could look to the right, not so much would have changed. But of course I would not know what had changed and what hadn’t; when Fruity and I came, there were no fish in the lake; now, there were fish, schools of them with their glisteny scales and gummy eyes—or had there always been fish, and had they frightened Fruity?

By now it was totally dark and I was in a place I’d never been before. The road started to curve around, and every so often the headlights of a car would swing by, then the car itself. It must have been very late, but miraculously, I wasn’t tired at all. I began to notice my body, to marvel at it, as if it did not belong to me, for it had not called attention to itself as it always did. For years, I had had a throbbing, relentless pain in my leg that I knew was psychosomatic because every so often it would switch legs. Maybe, I thought—and I had to discover the thought just as I had to discover my body—I had already passed it, maybe it was back by the factories, or before them, just after the turn at the light, where the people filled the air with a hum like cicadas. I listened to the thought politely, and then continued on.

I was in a forest, and I loved forests. I had always wanted to live inside a tree and fish in the stream for trout. I could still hear the woman’s voice: it rang in my head like a telephone at night—dreamlike, persistent. Turn left, then turn right at the light, eventually you will see it on your left. Inside the voice was the woman’s body, and I touched it with my voice. The voice asked to tie me up. I said yes. I wanted it to. It used silk underwear to
bind me to two posters of a four poster bed. Where had that bed come from? I wondered, but there was more silk inside my mouth. We had agreed to a safe-word that I had forgotten. It didn’t matter. I trusted it. I realized I had forgotten to look for it on my left. What if it had been there and I hadn’t seen it? I realized I had forgotten what it was. I kept walking. I came to a meadow. Then it was morning. There was a town filled with cats, then it was afternoon. Then a bridge. The bridge did not end. It was night and I was still on the bridge. But to the left was the ocean, and I loved the ocean.
Sometimes the rain evaporates before it hits the ground. It shows up in streaks down the sky, suspended over the land. And from many miles away you can point to those streaks and say, Look, look, it’s raining.

This is summer. The crops are drying. The river changes color as it heaves toward you because whatever does fall washes the iron oxide down the hills, over the banks.

The horses sweat. The wind picks up and the windmill in the field croaks too ra, too ra, with the voice of an old woman.

She is waiting for the rain to come and she passes the time with her song. Too ra, too ra. She will wait as long as it takes.
because mami never said goodbye
because good sissy never swears except
  on her boyfriend’s soft kisses and tight hugs
because papi works too hard and too much
because i was going to write the great american novel
  but forgot
because i never speak to the tall man with the long
  fingers who sits
  at the bench on the corner
  except in rhyme
because i was never lullabied to sleep
because i am not in the history
because i had a pet rock with two
  googly eyes that sounded
  like an old lady’s beads clinking together
because i can never say yes without sighing
because mami used to pluck
my eyebrows into thin
  black lines
  hair by hair
  for beauty you have to make sacrifices
because my shadow haunts the other shadows
because i want to be immortalized in pictures
  like those 1920s girls who never smile
  whose eyes stare into the camera and suddenly
  become
  two clear crystal balls
because i want to be ocean water
  and i want to take a dip in myself
because my feet have grown roots
because i lie naked on the tiles
  just to give my family enough time to miss me
My mother raises rare blooms
and waters them with tea
her birth waters sang like rivers
my mother is now me.

–Lorna Goodison, “I am becoming my mother”

i have a dream of the sun exploding on a dusk dripping horizon, me and my ma careening down a hill towards a beach of gold. her arm swings out to guard me from the blow. brace yourself. for a long time we both have been running away from your own reflections. me, never going home cause this woman is all the things i want to be and all the things i am afraid of becoming. her in her minivan always going going down some street or highway looking for some peace. every kid from east hills to frankstown knows my mother cause she is the best teacher there is; she knows every kid by name and how to make them know they are seen and how to build worlds out of sweet honey in the rock, drums and keyboards in schools[toprisons] where black kids are supposed to be contained before they are taught. my father waxes poetic about meant to be and about how she might as well and about how he wants his family back and they wasting time, getting old and tries to erase all the years he crowded out her voice. they were sixteen when they fell in love at a skating rink and never looked back; forty when the world begin to crumble in ghosts of mothers and liquor bottles. she nods and says mhm and makes excuses for things she’s got to do as if living and being in this world ain’t already a job and half. i am terrified of the wake. it’s been five years since my stepfather died next to her in his sleep; he’d left Nigeria and
his parents enough years ago to build a home in this nation and was scraping by so much that he couldn’t afford to go back before the rainy season to see them buried in their graves: heart attack at 46. my mother still wakes up at 3 am and replays that hour till the sun rises. i have seen her love while running these last five years, settle cause the earth is not built to hold us. i am afraid of never falling in love and of losing my love to borders or blood and of all the walls i’ve built protecting me too too well. i go home for another funeral and we hold each other past midnight laughing and crying. i realize i am less afraid of becoming her and more afraid of myself, of holding my love up to the light like i hold my words. i am afraid of the sun exploding on a dusk dripping horizon. i am afraid of her not being there to guard me from the blow.
After the storm, we took out our 10 cent brooms and brushed puddles into corners and edges. My people waited for the trees to claim back possessions of the earth that had been thrust upon us, bits of ice and snow and lava. We expected that if we survived the winds prior, we would be welcomed into the sun that kissed our crops and children. Three years came and went and then three generations of women with names more broken, we forgot what it meant to not wade through waters in the morning. We made salty storm soup on Sundays for our sons, mixed in our new sins as seasoning: the way my grandfather gave my father a silver plate and not his sister, as did the family down the road. Because that is the way things are done now, the way things have to be. We told stories of the day we stuffed towels in our chimneys to keep the ground dry and our people healthy, the gold necklace my mother gave me from “before it all,” which is to say, before the British took things. Slowly, we absorbed the floods and our skin grew loose. We forgot that the humid air had once been considered a form of torture, we cooperated and conceded. We bloated, our eyelashes ever-heavy with moisture, we painted self-portraits now, gave ourselves names like “liberated” and “freedom fighter.” As if we had a chance to turn our land back to the tides of dryness and its simplistic chaos, as if we could have a chance punching the rain as it fell upon us, it took decades for the torrential violence to be silenced. As if our anger at the new order could banish the swamp as our home. We became creatures of the swamp, forgot what it meant to exist outside our disciplines, the ways we counted our world the same way the lightning and thunder had, I think we knew, we know, that it whispered to us in its violence, and though it broke windows and cut our loved ones, we
couldn’t help but recall the temporary floods that came and went years before the storm. Things were never dry the way we remembered. Our home had always been a place of wetness. They had just added their extra brand of brine to the mix. In some ways, we thought they became us. You would think we might wonder if we had become them. We didn’t.
It is celebration: a cot hovers.
   Balloons bunch grapelike off
the ceiling, suspend a bicycle in a
   front wheelie. Fifty red ones
say “I love you” in white, and the
   others are spongebob, donald
duck, and starting to wilt. A ladder
   hangs from a cluster,
and a fire extinguisher. Tracing the
   scales of the dragon
from its tail, its paper spines
   brandished in two ridges,
we terminate at a gigantic head.
   It is the century of
the Dragon! The eyes are black
   plastic; its mouth,
wearing gold and baring canines,
   is authoritative—
wants you to crawl into it. I once
   spent a summer in Beijing,
living at the Communications
   University, Gaobeidian station.
I had long hair, which I felt
   self-conscious about,
I read Tang poems, went vegetarian,
   got fucked up at Dada, and
thought about service to humanity.
   With my boss I visited
Wang Qingsong’s house where I met
   his wife and son.
Out of the corners of the dragon’s snout two antennae ending in crystal balls. There is no pearl to be found. The strings suspending it have hurt the dragon’s body, which on the fifth day hangs like skin off the wire frame, which itself uncurls under the weight of the dragon’s equipment. The crux of it all is the extent to which one believes it has revisionist intentions, which Xi’s “great renewal” rhetoric teases, and there was sweat in Beijing unlike anything in gentle Shanghai, on trains more people launching themselves into the tangle of passengers, racing for seats.

Meng’s anyways due to meet princeling Bo—in party prisons the whimper of the once untouchable a shifting hum, unraveling and weaving—but here the deflating balloons suck in together: under this bouquet of disfigured cartoons a christmas tree, another balloon telling you it loves you.
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This issue of the *Yale Literary Magazine* was designed and typeset in ITC Franklin by Julia Ma. It was printed in an edition of 750 copies by GHP Media on Neenah Classic Crest paper in natural white with an eggshell finish. The clear vinyl handles were cut and assembled by Julia Ma, Betty Wang, and Tommy Huang. Special thanks to John Robinson and Rich Nesbit for their support throughout the publishing process.