

Issue 7 Fall 2016

CHEAT RIVER REVIEW



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Elissa C. Huang

Lost and Found Babies

Mei-Lin (or May Lynn, the inexplicably anglicized version of her name on the traveling papers) was walking back to the village, the weight of the water sloshing around in the pails, pulling at her shoulders, when she first heard the sound. At first, she thought it was a bird. There were many strange birds in the jungle. Birds she had never seen in her life, with long, blood-red beaks and dark beady eyes. Some were impossibly small, little bee-sized birds, fluorescent and deadly. There was a bird that chirped like a lost lamb, another whose call sounded robotic, not of flesh and bone.

Setting down the pails, she paused, waiting for it again. A mosquito bit her calf and she obliterated it with her palm, wiping the bug's guts on her shorts. And then she heard it again. This time, it was distinct and unmistakable. A baby's cry. Slowly, she began to follow the noise, a distinct frequency that made her ears vibrate ever so slightly. Mei-Lin had been born with exceptional hearing, almost like that of a supernatural bat. It made up for her foggy vision, but not the burden of having worn impossibly thick glasses since she was an infant, well before she could crawl. As she neared the sound, there was an echo of the first baby's cry. Louder and more urgent.

She began to sprint toward the cries, as she feared it was in danger—perhaps a wild beast had planned on eating it for dinner, or worse, was already gnawing off its arms and legs. Her mind easily went there, for this place still had a savageness to it. The village elders gave her the impression that everyone here was slightly mad. The suppressive heat, the impossible humidity, stripped people of civilities and made them careless. Mei-Lin made a mental note that besides

working on getting clean drinking water pumped through the newly drilled well, she or one of the other volunteers needed to invent the battery-powered air conditioning unit so that cooler heads could prevail.

When she reached the edge of the jungle, she halted abruptly lest she fall head first and plunge to the rocks below. She gasped when she saw the hand. It was a smooth and pudgy little baby's hand, clinging to the edge of the cliff. Mei-Lin leaned over and peered down. Sure enough, a naked baby—no, Mei-Lin squinted harder, a string of babies, maybe seven or eight in total, their arms and legs linked together in a chain—clung to the cliff. Their eyes were clenched shut, their mouths open wide.

Kneeling down by the first baby's hand, she cooed to them, "Shhhh, shhhh, don't be scared."

A sudden force, like wind but more deliberate, bowled her over, flattening her body to the ground, knocking over the pails. The water pooled around her, and the cool mud clung to her hot skin like a pair of hands, holding her in place. She offered her hand. The baby looked afraid and shook his head no. Looking into his eyes, she thought she'd sing him a lullaby, something her mother used to sing to her in Taiwanese, but found that she couldn't remember the words, so she hummed the melody. It seemed to soften the fear in his eyes, so she continued, slowly stretching her fingers toward his until she grazed his knuckles.

She was whispering now, as the babies had all gone silent. The first baby let her plow her hands under the mud ever so delicately, until she could grasp his forearms. "I've got you," she mouthed. The baby seemed to understand, and his tiny fists released their grip on the earth and clung to her. Mei-Lin didn't dare move, but chanced a quick glance down at the other babies. They all relaxed somewhat and each stuck a thumb or set of fingers into their mouths and begun sucking them. Seeing this, Mei-Lin felt a dull ache in her breasts thinking, the poor things must be hungry. But no milk came. Her eyes flooded over with tears and they spilled over the ledge. Tongues hanging out of their mouths, the babies lapped at the salty water eagerly. How strange, Mei-Lin thought, to be able to quench their thirst when she had been unable to do so for her own child.

#

It wasn't as if the hospital nurses had been cruel. They had been particularly accommodating through the labor and the birth when they realized that Mei-Lin was alone. And none of them had looked at Mei-Lin's small chest with any obvious judgment as they each tried repeatedly to smush the baby's mouth onto Mei-Lin's nipple. But seeing how the child had continued to squeal like he was in agony, one of the nurses had suggested that he needed to eat something. Mei-Lin felt that the implication was that she was starving the poor child out of her need to provide something that her body would not allow. Full of guilt, she reluctantly acquiesced and they plucked the babe out of her arms, replacing him with two cold plastic cups attached to tubes that were hooked into a medieval-looking milking machine.

The machine made an embarrassingly loud droning sound, like dying ducks. It was as if to broadcast to the world, now here is a mother who is defective; we must send her back to the repair shop and get her fixed straight away. The tiniest flame of rage sparked in Mei-Lin when the baby's cries were quickly replaced with the eager sounds of suckling from the bottle. She looked down as her breasts were rhythmically sucked into oblong cones and spit out. She had been ambivalent about motherhood, but it had surprised her how humiliated she had felt at not being able to even feed a machine.

#

The sun seemed to be fading quickly as the cooler air of dusk descended. Mei-Lin's back began to hurt. Numbness traveled up the length of her forearms and she panicked, thinking she'd loosened her grip; she could no longer feel her hands. But she saw the little fingers pressing into her skin and let out a breath, relieved. She wasn't sure how long she'd been there, but she began to feel the heaviness of the babies. Parched, the insides of her mouth felt like they were lined with sandpaper. Her stomach growled so loudly, she was certain that it had come from a jungle creature behind her. When nothing tore her legs away, her body softened a bit and she began to dream of noodles and rice, pizza and fries. These starchy dishes all seemed so far

removed from the jungle, where she'd eaten nothing but nuts, berries, leaves, and what looked to be twigs, but were actually—through rough translation—some type of high protein bug.

Wiggling and squirming on the babies' part seemed to be tugging her closer to the overhang. She whistled sharply through her teeth. The babies looked up, curious and innocent. "Hey, hey, hey," she warned. She peeked down at the bottommost baby, the one in the most imminent peril. He was the source of the movement. He had decided to climb up on the back of the baby in front of him and gotten stuck. Now, his one foot slung over her shoulder, the other dangled straight down. His hand gripped the silky fluff of hair at the crown of her head. Mei-Lin knew it didn't look good.

"Hold on, I'm going to try and pull everyone up!" Her feet tried to find a solid place to plant themselves to get some traction, but they kept slipping behind her in the mud. She bent her elbows back, trying to imagine that her arms were made of long strong rope. The first baby began to slip and he screamed in horror, which set off the second baby, and so on down the line like dominoes. It was futile. Mei-Ling froze, but the screams didn't stop; it was as if they were projected directly into her ear canal, and the noise rattled her resolve. "Shut up! Shut up, all of you! Can't you see I'm trying my best?" A bead of sweat coursed its way down her face, hot like lava. It rolled down her neck, over her shoulder, down her arm, and onto the first baby's hand. He wailed in pain as it left a red welt on his soft smooth skin.

When Mei-Lin looked down again, she saw the baby on the end let go, his tiny body drifting down into the darkness, hitting the rocks before blurring out of her sight. It sounded like a sack of wet clothes being beaten against a brick wall repeatedly. Mei-Lin watched in horror as the sound of the babies' howling grew more panicked, reflecting her own fear and desperation. She dropped her forehead to the ground and closed her eyes, transporting herself to an empty space where nothing existed, as she often did in times of duress. And she thought, if I could only rest here a minute. I'm just so tired.

#

Late nights had been the worst. Mei-Lin's mind had dulled exponentially from the lack of sleep after bringing the baby home. She often felt as if she was dreaming while awake. The repetition of walking back and forth in a single line, trying to soothe him while he shrieked endlessly, lulled her into a state of hypnosis. With each passing minute, she felt as if it had all been a big mistake, that there was no way she could handle another second of feeling so utterly inadequate. It was as if he knew her thoughts, and was demanding to be returned to the womb, where he had been safe, warm, and oblivious to this life.

She'd pass by the same pictures on the walls, photos of herself throughout childhood. Pudgy knees and deep dimples of infancy, a toothy smile and scraped knees of youth, awkward bangs and makeup of adolescence, and then the graduation cap and gown, her defiant, pursed lips, her eyes full of uncertainty. Being confronted with a visual timeline of her life as she paced the hall, she had been forced to notice that the pictures had stopped abruptly after she left home. An absence on the walls, equal to the silence she had exchanged with her mother without cause. Mei-Lin's transition to adulthood had made them strangers. Or perhaps it was that she began to truly see her mother with all her faults and vulnerabilities; the realization that her mother was a person, just like her, created a hairline fracture in her foundation that left her uneasy.

Alone in her independence, she experimented freely with whatever came her way. Men were neither a necessity nor a distraction. She happened upon them as she would have happened upon a new way of wearing her hair. She didn't have any illusions that he had loved her; rather, she had been reckless on purpose, letting her detachment dictate the direction her life would take. Still, she was struck with a pang of bewilderment when her period was late, as if she was being awakened from a lazy slumber. With nowhere else to go, she had turned to her mother for help, like a boomerang that always went back to where it came from. Begrudgingly, her mother had opened her door.

The night it happened, her mother was sleeping off a migraine, leaving her alone with the baby for the first time. Mei-Lin barely realized it when he stopped breathing because in her mind, he was still wailing, his hot breath reverberating in her ear. She didn't see that his lips had begun to

turn purple, his cheeks had become drained of their natural flush. It was only when she realized too late, that the screams found their way out of her throat. Her mother dashed out of her room in her nightgown, her glasses askew. She had pressed her ear to his tiny heart, but heard nothing.

#

It wasn't the rainy season in the jungle, yet dark clouds drifted through the skies heavily. The babies were crying again now, and Mei-Lin felt increasingly unable to comfort them. The bottom two now were both clamoring over one another, and she pleaded with them to stay still. They were stubborn and would do no such thing, ending up twisted around a third baby, their crotches wrapped around either side of his head. Miraculously, the skies opened up, letting loose a sudden downpour. The sound of the rain made the babies need to pee, and so they did. Showering each other with urine and feces, it was no wonder the babies at the end of the line wanted to move up.

"Who put you here, little ones? Or did you wander out here by yourselves?" she pondered aloud. Pausing as if she expected them to speak back, the babies only looked back at her, a mixture of blankness and confusion in their eyes. She laughed at herself incredulously. The jungle did make everyone mad. It was true.

She felt the first baby's hands slipping from the rain, so she held on tighter. Her hair fell into her eyes, but it was no matter. The rain pelted her face fiercely, blurring everything. When the knotted trio of babies all let go, she felt as if her insides had been emptied out and the sharp pain both startled and comforted her. Pain like that, she understood and carried with her, even to this remote and strange place.

#

Many years had passed before Mei-Lin even allowed herself to think about babies again. But life marched on resolutely, and the past seemed to fade alarmingly quickly into increasingly foggier images. When time aligned itself with her intentions, she met a guy who was nice enough and

with whom she began deliberately building a future. He would hold doors open for others, say hello to strangers. His hands were soft and his eyes were clear and gentle. All in all, he was comforting and familiar, like a mug of warm cocoa. The pregnancy felt different this time, less of a question. She allowed herself to relax a little more, a small exhale that she hadn't realized she had been holding in. Over the weeks, she imagined that when the baby's kicks came, perhaps she would be able to delight in them this time.

She never got to that point again, though. The first time it happened, she was afraid. A blob of tissue, no bigger than the length of her thumb had slid out of her. It looked like it could be a baby gerbil, but that didn't make any sense. There was no blood, but she knew. She felt a sharp and tiny twinge, as if something was releasing itself from her uterus. Gingerly, she took the fetus and wrapped it in a bed of saran wrap and then a shell of tin foil and stuck it in her fridge. She wanted to take it to the doctor, to make sure. He told her there was no need to come in, and that the bleeding would likely start soon. He was right. She felt silly about the thing in her fridge then, so she unwrapped it and flushed it down the toilet. That night, she drank two bottles of wine before reciting the doctor's words verbatim to her boyfriend, taking him by surprise.

Subsequent times, she felt as if a cosmic trick was being played, and she was the punchline. Her boyfriend had told her that it didn't matter, that they could stop trying, that she was enough. He even took the blame upon himself, but they both knew he didn't really believe the words coming out of his mouth. She hadn't told him anything of her past, so she couldn't explain why she needed to rectify the loss. It always seemed like a bad time to bring it up.

To his credit, he'd try to touch her and give her comfort, but she'd pull back and away to a place he couldn't reach. So like most weak-willed people torn to different places by loss, he gave up and left. And she let him. She was tired of the farce, of her belly swelling and growing, producing nothing. It was only when she heard the final creak of the front door shutting behind him, that she had been able to cry about it.

#

Mei-Lin's breasts ached unbearably now, but her back and shoulders felt less and less strain as one by one, the babies let go. After the initial shock wore off, she began to recognize the inevitable, but something in her wouldn't give up. The rain had gone away just as suddenly as it had appeared, like a mirage in the desert.

She had told her mother before she boarded the plane, that maybe she could do some good elsewhere in the world. Her mother lightheartedly agreed; all things, her daughter and herself especially, could do with a fresh start. A history of unspoken hurts passed between them in their brief hug goodbye. Both women knew that impossible as it was, maybe the trip would change Mei-Lin's insides somehow. Maybe it would scramble and rearrange her molecules, putting everything in its rightful place, alter her and make her more amenable to carrying life. They clung to this idea as if it were the answer to everything.

"I'm sorry, you have to let go."

Mei-Lin head whipped up in disbelief at the young man's voice. No longer a baby—when did that happen? she thought to herself—he couldn't have been more than eighteen or nineteen, a faint shadow of a moustache on his lip.

"No," she murmured, "I won't."

He looked at her then, with great empathy. And then one by one, finger by finger, he did it for her.

The milk gushed from her then, flowing over the cliff in a waterfall mixed with her snot and tears. She looked in vain for his outline, his shadow, but her eyes failed her yet again.

#

Back at the village, Mei-Lin stumbled forth, covered in muck, dropping the two full buckets at her feet with a heavy sigh. The villagers clamored to ladle the water into their cups. A cheer of approval rippled through the crowd. Any lingering mistrust in their eyes began to fade now that

they saw the well worked. A little girl looked at her quizzically, as she gulped down the fresh water. Mei-Lin managed a weak smile at her, and the girl returned it. She filled her cup again, handing it to Mei-Lin this time.

As Mei-Lin drank, the cool water cleansed her mouth of the grit, soothing her throat and filling her belly. There was only thirst, only hunger, water, and relief. The little girl kept refilling her cup, and Mei-Lin could only think how absurd it all was, to drink the water that was supposed to be for the child. But she couldn't stop. The girl's skin was ruddy and smooth, possessing the glow of youth. She wore her hair pulled back like a dancer's, her neck long and graceful. Mei-Lin leaned in so close, she could almost kiss her forehead. The girl cautiously and gently touched Mei-Lin's freshly shaved head, rubbing it like a Buddha's belly for luck.

It was then that Mei-Lin remembered the last line of the lullaby, that endless tune her mother had sang to her, her voice off-key but sweet and pure. Her mother, singing, lost in a reverie. She smelled like mothballs and incense, Tiger Balm and sour sweat. The rhythmic rocking and swaying, a fan buzzing in vain against the oppressive heat. Both their skins sticky, like they were glued to each other; Mei-Lin was a part of her and she was a part of Mei-Lin. They were inseparable in those days, best friends. A hum in Mei-Lin's ear played like a refrain in her head now; the words took shape and formed, a memory recalled, like it had never been lost, "And then I will release you, and then I will release you."

Elissa C. Huang received her M.F.A. in Dramatic Writing from NYU's Tisch School of the Arts, where she was awarded the John Golden Playwriting Prize and the Goldberg Prize in Playwriting. Her screenplay, "My Brother, John," was in the top 6% (of 7,251 entries) for the Academy Nicholl Fellowships and advanced to the second rounds for the Sundance Screenwriter's Lab as well as the Austin Film Festival Screenplay & Television Competition (top 10% of 8,600 entries) in 2013. Her novella, "A Troubadour's Tale and Other Sad Siren Songs," was a short list finalist in the 2014 William Faulkner – William Wisdom Creative Writing Competition and her short story, "West Nothing (and the Birds)," was a semi-finalist for the 2016

William Faulkner – William Wisdom Creative Writing Competition. Her screenplay, “The Dragon and the Lotus: The Anna May Wong Story,” recently advanced to the second round for the Sundance Screenwriter’s Lab 2017. She currently resides in Hoboken, NJ with her daughter.

Robin Wyatt Dunn

Listening at the Edges

1.

I hid in the church after they left. Some of the stained glass had been broken, and the plain sunlight bled into the colored shapes around the pew.

The dust smelled like tired earth. I felt my body go limp, unwilling for the moment to obey me. I could see the church doors standing open, onto blinding sunlight.

I smiled to myself. No one knew what I knew. It wasn't important for other people.

“What’s that, Martin? You’re ready to retire?”

I’m in an office. The sounds of typewriters fill our rooms.

“Yes, on my way out! Hallelujah.” I am thirty-seven years old.

After work, I walk home along the marsh, to watch the ducks. One of them waddles up to say hello.

“Quack,” the duck says.

“Yes, I know.”

“Quack quack.”

I give it some bread from my pocket. The church is still standing, along the same route, abandoned. I stand at the door. The priest is there too, a ghost, moving between the pews, muttering.

In my mind, I call out to him, and he turns, looking at me with his dead eyes. They looked like that when he was alive, too.

He smiles and I shut the church doors. But one hangs on a hinge, and I can feel the priest coming closer, through the wood. I stand there and wait, as I used to do as a boy, for him to approach.

He stands on the other side of the wood.

“What is it, priest?” I say.

He wants something—me probably. But he doesn’t speak.

“What is it?”

Only a low moaning. I go back to my apartment, put on my headphones, strap the rubber around my elbow, and apply the needle to my arm.

Inside, the world awaits my feet.

2.

I was a recipient of thirty-two thousand dollars as part of a class action lawsuit against the Church, when I was thirty-three. I still have the money; I haven't spent it.

I hardly told anyone, even when I had to leave work to testify.

But that doesn't matter. Nothing matters until I can figure out the other . . .

I'm a sick man! Not really. But like I was sick. It's not sickness, but something like it. Something unpleasant, like a curse.

I'm cursed. That's what it is. And it's okay, to be cursed. Like an old friend, who won't leave. Who moves in with you, against your will, and then dies. And then still doesn't leave.

Haunted. Yes.

I allow myself one grain of heroin a week. The money I am saving. I could move to Florida. Madagascar. I could kill a priest.

No, I forgive them. I forgave them then, too. What do they have to do with me? They don't know anything.

None of them do. They don't know what ghosts are. There is no afterlife; it's this life. They're right here, but I don't know where they come from.

3.

It's the weekend and I make coffee. Susanne has been coming around more often lately; I don't really know why. We don't even sleep together. But she keeps coming by. I let her sleep on the couch. She doesn't seem to mind. It's like we're married, but I've never been married. Probably it's not like that. It's not like anything.

"What are you doing today?" she says.

"Nothing."

"Come with me to the park."

"All right."

She works for an old woman who lives by the library; she reads books to her and cooks. She's my age but she looks older. She was born in France. I think she's crazy. (That's why I like her.)

We sit on the bench. I don't see any birds. It's hot. Susanne sighs.

"It's hot," I say.

"Are you too hot?" she asks.

"No, it's nice."

--

I cook her supper. We watch television. She kisses me on the cheek and leaves, back to her house.

My telephone is ringing.

"Yes?"

“It’s Father Martin.”

“Hello, Father.”

“Would you come by?”

“Now, Father?”

“Are you busy?”

“No.”

“We need your help.”

“I’ll come.”

--

Father Hughes is old. But he has a youthful smile. The new church is not as pretty as the old one. But then, this one is technically not a church. Even though it's still occupied by priests. They call it a recovery clinic. It's a sort of prison, really. They're all fitted with tags.

"Father, hi."

"Martin." He embraces me, and I let him.

"What's bothering you, Father?"

He points up at the ceiling. The fluorescent light is flickering.

"I can take care of that for you. Do you have a tube?"

He points to the corner.

"Take me five minutes. Hold the ladder, will you?"

The light makes its light noises, blinking on and off, talking to itself.

I take hold of the tube and rotate it to get it out of the housing.

“That’s it, Martin!” Father Hughes shouts up.

The thing about cylinders is they have a very precise geometry. It’s the same shape science fiction writers have suggested we could travel to the stars inside of. You get a lot of area, and pressure is spread out over the surface. Its curve is like stars too: curves are strong.

I make to toss the thing down to him, and he grins a fake laugh. I go down the ladder and get the replacement.

“See anything up there?” Father Hughes asks.

“Only your ceiling.”

“I thought you might have seen something else.”

“I think the wiring is shot. It’s frying these bad boys too fast. You should call the council.”

“Don’t want to deal with them. You fix it, Martin.”

“Can’t. Not my specialty. I’ll call them, if you want.”

“No, it’s no trouble.”

I put the new cylinder in, and it blinks to life. I see Mirabelle’s face inside of the tube. She’s moving down the hallway. Like she’s dead. Well, she is dead. Like she’s going towards the light of heaven.

“Mirabelle!”

“What’s that, Martin?”

She turns to look at me, inside the glass. Her eyes are dead too, like Father Hughes. I look away and descend the ladder.

“I have to go, Father. It’s late.”

“Martin, take me for a walk, won’t you? Just around the grounds. I’m allowed to go when I’m with someone.”

I step outside with him, and we go around the church—well, the compound. The gardens are happy. Priests seem to understand gardens.

Mirabelle was wearing blue. She always liked that color.

“Do you remember Mirabelle, Father?”

“Of course. Such a sweet girl. Things were different then. A smart girl like that could go far. I don’t know about now.”

“They still can, Father. Half the government is women now.”

“That’s what I mean. Caught up in the same game. No time for anything else!”

“Do you still have her blue dress?”

I’d seen it in his closet.

“Oh, uh, yes, it happens I do. Keeping it, you know. Did you want it?”

“Show it to me.”

We go back inside the church—the compound—and go back into the vestibule.

“Really, it’s yours if you want it, Martin. She was your friend.”

“Yes, I think I do want it.”

“She was a very special girl,” he says, opening his wardrobe and handing me the small dress.

I slap him in the face and take the dress from his hands.

Behind the apartments, I squirt it with lighter fluid and set it aflame.

4.

Cylinders are also powerful musical instruments in the form of water glasses. The physics aren't complicated; the finger vibrates the glass through friction, generating sound waves.

But its eerie song for me has never been as easily explained. I think of it like the music of the spheres, which Shakespearean England believed was the sound the trans-lunar stars made, in their perfect distance.

My friend Tom and I play the water glasses together and make recordings. I have over three hundred glasses of various shapes and sizes. We fill them with water, turn on the recorder, and play.

I wasn't lying when I told my workmates I will retire soon. The government has seen fit to reward me with a house for my services. It's like the sound waves: just a kind of deep listening.

Tom and I make love and afterwards I go down to the compound and stack the wood against the walls and set it afire.

I've decided to spend some of the money after all; I'm going to Madagascar. When I return, all can be settled.

On the plane, I hold the water glass music in my earphones, stringing me out over the thousands of miles over the water.

Maybe I'll even give up the heroin. I should.

5.

It was Tom threw the stone that time, when we were found out, through the top window, and they'd gone out to see who it was.

It didn't matter then, of course. Or not to anyone but me.

Why did it take us so long to see? I still don't really understand it.

But in a way I do: love is so mysterious. It covers a great deal, in its arms.

Susanne is moving in too, to the new house, along with Tom. I have started a garden; I think I am a priest that way.

Tonight is a full moon. We sit out around the fire.

“Father Martin killed himself,” Tom says.

“That’s a shame.”

“Hanged himself in the rectory.”

“It’s not a rectory, it’s a prison.”

“Hanged himself in prison.”

“Did he leave a note?”

“They didn’t find one.”

He takes a piece of paper out his pocket and hands it to me, folded into a square. I don’t open it, but toss it into the flames.

Fire was one of the four primary elements, for the ancients. I’m not sure we’ve come very far since then. Fire the purifier.

“Tom, if you were a Viking, would you have been buried at sea, on a burning boat?”

“Oh, yes, definitely.”

It comes over me, rage so quiet it’s like a fluid, like air, smooth low pressure over the ears and hair and back, a motionless wind. Rage so quiet it’s like a secret frequency, tuned to the chest, looking for knowledge inside my bones.

I put my arms around my people, and we stare into the fire, waiting for permission to know all that we will need.

Robin Wyatt Dunn write and teaches in Los Angeles.

Melissa Fangio

Chop

I follow my father to the backyard just as the sun climbs above the horizon. A thick, greasy haze of yellow pollution drifts over from the city. The air is muggy, cold dew seeps into my sneakers. My father's worn jeans and faded flannel shirt hang loosely on his frail body, drowning him. It's the first time in ages he has donned yard work attire.

He stops in front of the family maple tree, I mimic him. The tree was planted here a little over four decades ago when my father was born. He never left the property. Its crumpled leaves bear scorch-like marks. The trunk, once earthy brown, and then grey, is now charcoal black. In its feeble branches, wisps of squirrel and bird nests cling precariously to hollowed limbs, abandoned.

When this tree was healthy, in my youth, I raced up its branches or laid in its shade on hot summer days. I watched helicopters spin down upon me. My father would stand beneath it whenever we played catch; his skin tanned a deep caramel color. His eyes would brim with energy as we threw, even after a long day of work. The tree has always towered over the neighborhood with enormous strength and girth. The only other tree in the yard is a young oak.

My father sighs, barely audibly, and trudges towards the shed behind us. I notice a slight hunch in his posture. His jet-black hair is not as thick and rich as it should be.

He returns with a saw, its teeth somewhat dulled and kneels before the trunk.

Realizing what he intends to do I rush forward. He shoves me away with surprising strength, the bones of his pale hand digging into my arm.

“But—”

“Can’t you see it’s sick? Don’t you realize it’s dying?”

“But I can—”

“I’m fine.”

With a growl he whacks into the trunk. The saw slides back and forth, splitting the brittle bark. Soon the coughing starts. Doubled over, panting hard, deep, scratchy hacks erupt from my father’s lungs. I sprint inside and return with a glass of water but he waves me away.

He wedges his way about three inches into the trunk. Face covered in a feverish sheen of sweat, he trembles uncontrollably. As he sinks to the ground, his dimmed gaze holds mine. There is despair in his half-lidded eyes, humiliated defeat in the sag of his shoulders. The determined indignation with which he had clenched the saw seems to evaporate. My father wilts under me, against the poisoned tree.

A few days later I find my father leaning against the window in his bedroom, staring at the work I had finished. The maple now lies in pieces, stacked neatly against the fence. All that remains is its stump. The oak tree reigns over the yard.

I hesitantly approach my father. He turns and gives me a tight-lipped smile of approval and a proud grip on the back of my neck. “Will you leave the stump, son?” He asks.

I nod. We blink back bitter tears.

Melissa Fangio is a student at George Mason University and is working for a Master's Degree in Education.

Laurie Ember

Seeking Expert Piano Tuner

Seeking expert piano tuner, must have a good ear – as well as experience with antiques – to tune and restore a beautiful walnut baby grand with original brass pedals, ivory keys, and a chipped ivory *Steinway & Sons* insignia just above the keyboard (this bothers me every time I look at it, being an unnecessary blemish of age) that cannot be replaced because I can't – nor would I want to – purchase new ivory, since the elephants are more important (I see them swaying to the melodic notes that rise from the piano even when they are standing in the savanna or a dusty zoo, remembering everything they never forget) plus, the original bench, which matches the rest of the piano, has a wobbly left leg and needs re-staining, both inside and out, although I'd have to remove my old sheet music, now dated favorites by Billy Joel, Elton John, John Lennon, and even a frayed songbook from *Free To Be You and Me* – free to be me, or at least free to be what once was me, but I need help remembering because now the piano sounds off key and wrong in every way, action stiff and slow to respond (tuner must be willing to help move the books that are on top of the piano – I ran out of room on my shelves and have piled them in stacks of ten, un-alphabetized, but by category of fiction, memoir, short story, poems, essays, and the favorite children's books I once read to my girls – heaps of them, some of which I've read recently and others that I'll get to as soon as I can, along with my notated volumes of classical music – the Mozart Sonatas, Bach Inventions, Chopin Waltzes and Mazurkas, the Complete Works of Scarlatti, Thirty-Two Sonatinas and Rondos for the Piano,

Debussy's First and Second Arabesques – and also there's a mess of photos, including ones of my grandmother (who gave me the piano as a high school graduation present), and her daughter (my mother) on the day she married my father (who never played a musical instrument, other than the washboard, but loved to listen to classical piano), next to the picture of my daughter and new son-in-law, who every time he visits with my grown-up baby girl, plays my piano better than I ever have or ever will (he gently mentions the flatness of the lower registers), and so I'm seeking your expertise to make it sound as beautiful as it once did so that he will continue to bring her home.

Laurie Ember's essays and creative nonfiction have appeared in Huffington Post, CulturalWeekly.com, and MariaShriver.com. The author lives and writes in Los Angeles, CA. She was raised on Long Island and spends as much time as she can in Fairfield, CT.

Jim Ross

"I've shot 63 men and 630 elephants, and I regret the elephants more."

—Arthur Jones

The Man Who Loved Elephants

In summer 1984, Arthur Jones—renowned inventor and owner of Nautilus weight-training equipment—retrofitted a Boeing 707 from his own fleet, rescued 63 orphaned baby elephants slated for slaughter by the Zimbabwean government, and flew them to his 550-acre ranch in Lake Helen, Florida. No stranger to Africa's wilds, Jones previously ran a small, private airline, and a profitable animal import/export business. As an outgrowth of that, he created more than 300 television episodes for *Bold Journey*, *Wild Cargo*, *Call of the Wild*, and *Professional Hunter*

starting in the mid-1950s. Jones also kept and raised elephants and other animals on his sprawling ranch and private wildlife preserve, Jumbolair. If the word existed, he'd begrudgingly have accepted being called an elephantarian.

At 59, Jones was on the Forbes list of the 400 wealthiest Americans. Counting the 63 rescued babies, Jones owned 98 African elephants—more than all the zoos in North America. He also owned 4,000 crocodilians, 500 snakes, three white rhinos, and a gorilla that Terri trained for publicity photos. Widely regarded as an eccentric, impulsive genius—called “the amalgam of Howard Hughes, Vince Lombardi and Indiana Jones” and “the P.T. Barnum of exercise”—I thought it might be mutually beneficial if Jones and I got to know each other.

A maverick businessman not known for altruism, Jones tried to justify for the media his rescue of “63 confused and unhappy baby elephants.” The need for arable land was squeezing elephants onto smaller parcels, causing them to eat themselves out of their own habitat, Jones explained. In response, the Zimbabwean government engaged in a systematic “cull,” not to harvest their ivory but to reclaim the land and prevent elephants from becoming a public danger. “I believe the African elephant is going to be extinct by the end of the century. I love elephants. I simply could not live with myself if I idly stood by and watched the African elephant become extinct.” His stated intent for the rescue: “We’re going to give them an opportunity to survive and to build a self-sustaining herd of African elephants in this country.”

Jones's travel companion for the 1984 rescue mission was wife #5, Terri, whom he'd met as a 15-year-old beauty pageant contestant and married when she was 18. Thus far, all five wives had been between 16 and 20 years old when he married them. Under Jones's tutelage, Terri too was on her way to becoming an accomplished pilot. She was already the Nautilus spokesmodel. After the elephant rescue, Terri and Arthur appeared together on televised news and talk shows. On *Johnny Carson*, Jones said he used to work long hours, but had cut back to 17 or 18 hours a day. “I don't know what I want,” he told Carson.

After watching the 1984 20-20 segment, “The Flying Elephants,” I called Jones to ask for money. I'd directed a national study of the physical fitness and exercise habits of American

youth that had been released in October. The media was enjoying a sustained and pervasive feeding frenzy. I'd been interviewed on CNN right after "the brain guy." My favorite interview was with CBS radio because while Mom was making breakfast 185 miles away she unexpectedly heard my voice. A friend who was showering found himself asking, "Why am I hearing Jim's voice?" I hoped to persuade Jones that his funding a follow-on study of younger kids made good business sense. Based on his reputation, I thought he might be impulsively crazy enough to underwrite the study and become my partner in crime.

I got Jones's home telephone number from the White Pages. In 1985, lots of wealthy, notorious characters like Jones still had listed phone numbers. When I called, Terri answered, sounding out of breath. I imagined Terri feverishly working out on a Nautilus abdominal machine. I was her break.

"Hi, is Arthur there?" I asked, nonchalantly, as if Jones might be expecting my call.

"Oh, Arthur's at the office," Terri answered, and gave me the number without even asking who I was.

"Hello. This is Arthur," he answered his phone after one ring.

Stunned, I couldn't articulate a single syllable. I have no idea whether I breathed loudly or gave other tangible evidence there might be a warm body at the other end of the line.

"Usually, when I say hello to someone they say hello back," Jones said, with the comic, intimidating gruffness that was his trademark.

"Sorry, there was static at my end. Let me introduce myself. My name is Jim Ross. I directed the latest national study of the fitness and exercise habits of American kids. You may have seen something about that on the news."

"What is it you have to sell? If she's 16, blond, and virginal, I'm interested," he said.

"I'm looking for a partner to fund a national study of young children," I said.

“Look, I’m interested in younger women, faster airplanes, and bigger crocodiles, in that order. Which do you have to offer? If it’s none of those, we have nothing to talk about.”

“Here’s my angle,” I began. “By developing Nautilus, you’ve made weight training accessible to a much wider population. Still, most people don’t exercise. We need to hook them earlier. Nobody’s ever studied the fitness and exercise habits of kids in first through fourth grades. That’s what I want to do next. I want to do it with you.”

“How old are you?” Jones asked.

“Thirty-seven,” I said.

Jones said, “When you reach 40, you’ll realize that you don’t know anything and you can’t change anything. Then, you can start over.”

“I look forward to that day,” I said. “For now, with guidance from exercise physiologists over the age of 40, we believe that by getting sound data on what’s up with younger kids, we can help promote a lifelong commitment to physical activity.”

“You sound like someone who wants to save the world,” Jones said. “No one can change anything or anyone. And I don’t particularly like people as a race. The best you can do is try to sell them something and not do too much harm. I don’t want to hurt people. ‘Do no harm’ is the best you can hope for.”

“How can you know what you’re going to do isn’t going to cause harm?” I asked.

“Precisely the point,” said Jones. “You’re not quite as wet behind the ears as I thought when you were breathing into the phone like a stalker. You *can’t* know. All the research and all the fortune tellers in the world can’t give you that certainty. Therefore, you’re entitled to this position: after taking reasonable precautions, do what makes sound business sense until the day you know it’s causing harm. And if you know that before you start, you can’t start.”

“How can you know that people won’t misunderstand or misuse what you create? Can’t that cause harm?” I asked.

“Whatever the hell you do, you can be damned sure it’s not going to be understood the way you intended. It’s not going to be used properly. You might as well reconcile yourself to that.”

“Can’t you increase the odds?” I asked.

“Oh, you can produce training videos, like I do. But in the end, it doesn’t matter what the hell you do,” Jones said. “One in ten million is used properly. And I’m not sure it’s even that much.”

“But can’t you see the value of starting early, so instead of having to convince adults to re-engage in exercise, kids can stay active all along, without interruption?” I asked.

“Kids are interested in two things: sugar-coated cereals and drugs. And I’m not sure which one is worse,” Jones said.

“Here’s my pitch,” I began. “On the study that just got big media play, we had three household names—the Surgeon General Dr. Koop, Sugar Ray Leonard, and Chris Evert—as our national sponsors. Every child, every teacher, school, and every school system that was part of it received a certificate signed by those three. I’d like to add your name as a national sponsor and as funder of the next one.”

“Look, I fly doctors down to Yucatan at my expense every single week. You know why?” Jones asked.

“To sell,” I said.

“Exactly. To sell my product. If they like it, they’ll not only buy it, they’ll tell their patients to buy it too. I have no interest whatsoever in philanthropy. I’m interested in one thing: sales.”

I didn’t want the conversation to end yet, so I asked, “You got any advice for me?”

“Stay away from all the assholes and scumbags of the world,” Jones said.

“I’ll take your advice in stride. I hope we can talk again sometime,” I said, feeling he had little interest in further conversation.

“Look, forget about the phone,” Jones said. “Next time you’re coming down this way, let me know ahead of time. I’ll take you up flying. We’ll walk with the elephants.”

I never got down to Florida to take Jones up on his offer. I’d been barely holding onto my job due to lack of funding. Trekking down to Florida to walk with Jones and his elephants rightly would have been called a boondoggle. The year after Jones and I talked, the Feds gave me the money I needed, Revlon made Terri its Charlie Girl, and Jones sold Nautilus. With proceeds from selling Nautilus, Jones turned his attention to Med-X, a new line of equipment for testing and rehabilitating weakened muscles in the low back and neck.

While the 1986 sale of Nautilus was underway, the dispersal of Jones’s beloved elephants began. Within a few years, all were sold to zoos, circuses, or private collectors. The dispersal of Jones’s elephants became quite the *cause celebre*. In March 1987, *20-20* aired a follow-up to “The Flying Elephants” segment. The new segment, “Save the Elephant,” implied that Arthur was breaking promises he made to the babies he rescued three years earlier by not keeping them together as a herd; and, even worse, failing to exercise control over whether their new homes were suitable. Selling four elephants to a Mexican circus was called “a fate worse than death.” Jones responded by slapping ABC with a three-billion-dollar defamation lawsuit for implying he was “a liar, a cheat, dishonest, a man who breaks promises, an animal abuser, a hypocrite, a wacky screwball, inhumane, and that he acted with ulterior motives.” In September 1988, a U.S. District Court dismissed all charges against ABC.

The same year, as Terri was turning 26, Jones filed for divorce from Terri on the grounds she’d been having an affair with one of his employees for over two years. After contesting the

divorce's terms for nearly a year, the two reached a settlement that Jones characterized as overly generous toward Terri, who also bought out Jones's interest in Jumbolair.

In 1994, Jones broke his mating pattern when at age 68 he married a German woman, Inge Topperwein, whom he originally hired in 1966 to assist him with "filming elephant culling" in Zimbabwe. After that, she lived with Jones, wife #4, and his three children by wife #3. When Inge became wife #6, she had already navigated working with Jones for nearly three decades, making her his longest, continually serving employee. When he created the first Nautilus machine in 1970, Inge painted it blue, hence the name "the Blue Monster." In 1984, when Jones and Terri flew to Africa in a Boeing 707 to rescue the baby elephants, the spotlight was on Terri. However, Inge was on the ground, "living rough in the bush," to coordinate with government officials, pay them off, and house the elephants safely until the plane arrived. In his unpublished papers, Jones talks about Inge as the one whom the elephants loved as Mother. One, he says, couldn't sleep unless his trunk was touching her.

Jones eventually sold Med-X too. He and Inge enjoyed ten years together as a married couple and 38 as colleagues until she died in 2004. Despite claiming "no interest in philanthropy," when Jones died three years later, he left \$8.7 million to the University of Florida, Gainesville. He probably devised a way of rationalizing why it wasn't really philanthropy.

I regret not taking Jones up on his offer to walk with the elephants and go flying together. In that one short phone call, Jones drilled into me a few soundbites that lingered. "Do no harm," Jones's first principle, wasn't too far off from "First do no harm," *primum non nocere*, the fundamental principle of medical ethics and all social interventions. I'd heard "do no harm" before, of course, but Jones threw it in my face like nobody else. I found it far more difficult to accept the notion you can't save anyone. Having come of age in the late 60s and early 70s, I'd assumed that "saving the world" was the whole reason we're here. I'm still struggling with that one, even while many organizations have renewed calls to "save the elephants." In the end,

perhaps it's just as well I never got down to Lake Helen. Had Jones and I gone walking together with the elephants, I probably would've ended up walking home with one.

After retiring in early 2015 from public health research, Jim Ross jumped back into creative pursuits after a long hiatus to resuscitate his long-neglected right brain. Since then, he's published 6 poems, over 25 pieces of nonfiction and over 90 photos in 30 journals, including 1966, Apeiron Review, Cargo Lit, Change Seven, Entropy, Friends Journal, Gravel, Lunch Ticket, MAKE Literary Magazine, Meat For Tea, Memory House, Pif Magazine, Riverbabble, and Sheepshead Review. Forthcoming: Bombay Gin, Palooka, Papercuts, and Souvenir Lit. Jim and his wife are parents of two nurses and grandparents of one-year-old twins, and welcomed a new grandbaby in late October. They split their time between Maryland and West Virginia.

Chelsea Dingman

Damage Assessment

i.

At dusk, fireworks pop in the street. I hear
my brother's old cap-guns, the wind in the leaves
around a graveyard where my father didn't want to be

buried, a cigarette, crackling & snapping
as he took a long drag. Even as a child I knew
the malady of living in a place he refused.

ii.

Then: my mother, swearing
she's overweight, wearing nylon
stockings like second skin
under her clothes. She eyes herself
in dressing room mirrors,
pushing & prodding the skin
around her thighs. I learn forgiveness
can be weighed
& measured. My father's body, hurled from
a bridge, has a heft all its own.

iii.

We drive from Atlanta to Wesley Chapel
& I allow my sons their devices.
I want them to be quiet
enough that my husband & I can talk
like we used to. 30 years ago,
I played car baseball & counted
punch buggies as my father smoked
& my mother read magazines. I picture
my kids telling this story later, how they quiet
in the quiet I've left.

iv.

Once, my father's hands weren't grey
& swollen. I wasn't nine
years old. He's wasn't breathing
water instead of silver smoke
from an unfiltered cigarette. I wasn't
wondering about the scar
that ran lengthwise away
from his left hand. The white dots
where a needle pulled through
skin, left silken threads
to dissolve. He wasn't just another man
who held me, saying *I'm sorry*.

v.

Pray for him, my mother
says, but I won't say
his name when I pray. Nor
the name of a ruler
who might grow us somewhere
safe. Prayer, now, is about the ritual
of moving my lips. Of words that pull like water
at my ribs, as I ask myself,
what is a *father*, if not another word
for suffering?

Chelsea Dingman is an MFA candidate at the University of South Florida. Her first book, Thaw, won the National Poetry Series and is forthcoming from the University of Georgia Press (2017). In 2016, she also won The Southeast Review's Gearhart Poetry Prize and was a finalist for the Auburn Witness Prize, Arcadia's Dead Bison Editor's Prize, Phoebe's Greg Grummer Poetry Award, and Crab Orchard Review's Student Awards. Other forthcoming work can be found in Washington Square, American Literary Review, and Third Coast, among others. Visit her website: chelseadingman.com.

Michael Mingo

Rural Sound Check

after John Brehm

Nothing but pebbles sliding
under my sneakers, nothing
but groundhogs and garter snakes
darting through leaves on the roadside,

the rotating blades cutting
clumps of wet grass, grinding
through pinecones and thick twigs,
my father shouting, "You'll break
the goddamn mower!" while my mother
rips apart the dandelion stems
out of spite and watches as yet
another acorn plummets
and smacks the cracked driveway,
rolling beneath the chassis
of our abandoned station wagon,
tapping the half-deflated tire
like the bumblebee bouncing
against the screen door, who gives up
and zips through the wind chimes
and the window shutters, where bats
are fast asleep for the time being,
but they'll emerge tonight, screeching
as sudden as the doorbell
the salesman hammers across
the street, begging our neighbors
to answer, to stammer straight
from their Sunday siestas, stumble
to the landing and listen, just listen,
I have good news for you.

Michael Mingo is pursuing an MFA in poetry at the Johns Hopkins Writing Seminars. His work has previously appeared or is forthcoming in Harpur Palate, Barnstorm, Cherry Tree, and Isthmus, among others.

Daye Phillippo

Moth

Malpighi's discovery of periodic reversal of direction in the heart-beat . . . has remained almost in oblivion for nearly 260 years. Réaumur held that in the pupa and adult moth the heart beats backward; in the caterpillar, forward.

—HISTORY OF THE DISCOVERY OF PERIODIC REVERSAL OF HEART-BEAT IN INSECTS

John H. Gerould, 1933

If your great-grandfather's name was Orpheus,
and your grandfather's, Cecil, it seems only natural

to long for music and second sight, a paisley
like a female Promethea's wing. Why all this art

when her dark mate finds her, not by sight,
but by pheromone in moonlight? Who can say. . .

Along the curved margins of her wings,
—color of old parchment—stitches of flame,

but this moth is not drawn to flame. Apex
of each forewing, dark eyespots initiating

mysteries as they loom, wide, blind stare.
Capsule of her head, a pair of ferny frons,

a thick crop of burgundy "hair," wild as any rocker's
before a concert of screams.

But silence along the moth's hindwings,
inner margins, feathery scales that draw the eye

yet conceal the striped lozenge of her body.
In the same way, the burgundy covers of the book

—poems Orpheus's sister, Arcella wrote, 1874—
conceal the lines and old parchment of many elegies.

This friend lost to settle the west, that one to war,
another to childbed. Arcella, too, gone

before she was thirty. Sad, ancestral music unlike
my children's music that used to flow

out the open windows of our house
—piano, flute, guitar, djembe, saxophone—

and wrap itself around me in the garden softly,
so that pulling weeds became

Moonlight Sonata, Be Thou My Vision, My All in All,
heartbeat, *Gonna Fly Now.*

Promethea caterpillar

in autumn silks wild cherry leaf to stem, folds the leaf close
as she spins herself within,

waits, suspended until

with a slow, backward beating of her heart, she ecloses
into elegy, into flight, spring's burgundy flame.

Daye Phillippo is a graduate of Purdue University and Warren Wilson MFA for Writers. She is the recipient of a Mortarboard Fellowship and an Elizabeth George Grant for poetry. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Natural Bridge*, *Shenandoah*, *Crux*, *The Comstock Review*, *The Fourth River*, *Cider Press Review*, *Great Lakes Review*, *The Adirondack Review*, and others. She teaches English for Purdue University and lives in a creaky, old farmhouse on twenty rural acres in Indiana with her husband and their youngest son.

Effy Fritz

Protocol for Survival:

1)

a) The underestimated boning knife, made for small spaces, but it peeled me right open,
a bursting orange,
all my thigh meat grinning toothy at the fluorescent
bathroom sky.

The shower painting the tiles scalding red,
the failed bathrobe tourniquet—

18 and lip-kissing death in an empty dorm.

b) 19 years old and they have taken my shoelaces.

Some of the patients thought this was excessive
while I begged for anything shaped like rope.

c) My mother has been in an accident. The car spun, flipped,
burst into flames belly-up. I am 12 years old,
in a hospital waiting room, attempting to fill out forms.

I have forgotten how to read.

I ask a stranger for help writing my last name.

2)

a) Thigh meat and muscle stitched up.

Skin puckered, kissing itself.

When asked about the scars, I tell a wild story.

The sky red and screaming, the horses spooked,
the rain violent like whips before the crack.

My best Palomino with a leg caught on barbed wire.

The hieroglyphic cuts on my body, a story of bravery,
throwing myself onto the fence, freeing the favorite horse. None of this is a lie.

b) Once released, I threw out towels, sheets, the tempting bath curtain,
anything tall enough to touch the ceiling. I dripped dry for 6 months. I burned all the laces in
my shoes.

c) I completed the forms, and woke my mother up every 2 hours
like the Doctors said.

I fed her frozen grapes and asked her to write our last name.

They called back 3 days later and asked about the metal staples in her head.

She said she got them rescuing the horses.

Effy Fritz's poetry has been featured on MTV News and Button Poetry, among other places. Effy was a member of the 2015 Temple University CUPSI team which was awarded Best Group Performance. She holds a BsC in Neuroscience and is currently immersed in immunological research at the University of Pennsylvania.

Amber Tran

Animal

It started with the drought of 1999.
Dead brown. Dehydration. Decaying cattle sprinkled along the hills.
Cicada carcasses filled the rusted gutters, little shells, plastic oil wings.
I brought the summer to my sister that year.
Her window sill received daily gifts of life, death, the interests of a child, a guilty sibling.
She didn't like rotting flesh of blackberries from the roadside.
Her favorites were the jaundiced buttercups with the sour smell.
Flowers from the guts of a rotting whitetail deer.
The month after that, rain. Mud. Sand from the nearest creek bed. A tadpole out of water.
A morning of dew, a crumbling newspaper molded into the shape of Pennsylvania.
The womb of a rabbit, still warm, still beating, empty.
When the summer ended, she pushed everything out of her window.
Bones. Soil with her fingerprints. The ear of a mammal.
I told her I would be back in nine months.
"I'll be here." She fell asleep in her box.

Amber D. Tran graduated from West Virginia University in 2012, where she specialized in lyrical nonfiction and contemporary poetry. Her first novel, *Moon River*, was released in September. Her work has been featured in *Calliope*, *Sonic Boom Journal*, *Spry Literary Journal*, and more. She currently lives in Alabama with her husband and miniature dachshund named Ahri.