TOWERS

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SIMON CZERWINSKYJ

Songs of the First Generation

1.
The sound of my lineage
on others' lips and tongues.
An embrace, a witless kiss.
A tip-toeing flood in the stomach.

2.
The music of my personage,
external and breathlessly realized.
A nuzzle of warmth or perhaps
a shuddering white.

3.
The obvious romance of my namesake.
A pathetic pride or just proud lovely
stubborn letters. Song after song,
I dream of Herman Hesse naming me.

4.
Hardly laughing, mouth my ancestry.

Towers
SIMON CZERWINSKYJ

The Ribcage Protects

A simple blossom of heart-sprung ache (from the trust of one thousand church floors).

The healing process of broken guard rails or melting snow.

Bitten fingernails cling desperately.
The Black and White Crush

Catacombs of awestruck are more than a heart of fist-clenched proportions can handle.

A crooked ivory shimmer sends a flutter down my foolish backbone.

Thought: Brown-eyed beat echoes through my rhythmless hollow.

Said: These words are too small to breathe (I guess it hurts to breathe). Now they
slip through shallow creaks,
exposed life-lines and
the severed narrow.
SONDRA LEVINE  

Pity-Boy

Fuzzy-mittened children,  
marble-bouncers, block the sidewalk.  
We adults promenade like priests on our precious way home  
from mass. We discuss how love  
is not a marble.  
My scarved man murmurs worms for words  
that hope is toasting the bread you’ve earned.

I assume his youth, that he indeed had one—  
a freckled boy with round, bright, simple eyes.  
In class he could estimate  
how the chain-link fence  
was ribboned together, ending in sharp silver bows;  
and observe that the clock’s crank  
was of a tired jack-in-the-box, then wait  
wait  
until the teacher’s mumbling stopped  
so his jaunty limbs could finally spring him out.

Children cross the street  
with tightly closed hands.  
My scarved man comments with slight pity  
that they’re way too silly to be men.  
My dress is not as pretty as the jam upon his toast—  
strawberry jam, sweet as tears, comrade red.  
He kicks the marbles and I cry,

“The metal fence will never end!”
EDYTA D. KANIA

Exhibition

Embracing walls of worship
seep with poison's candies;
masses of tongues gather
to feast on the sweet deceptions:
to eat snow-flake hosts
of subtlety,
to drink burgundy promises
of immortality.

Black beads of prayer lie—
trapped—in pious palms;
dissenting fingers try
but fail to free the dark secrets:
the slimy little worms
that burrow themselves deep
surface but in times of rain—
only to be executed
by marching feet of life
fearing believers.
She sat on a stool in the kitchen pulling hair out of a peach-colored blanket. The little garbage pail to her right was half filled with a combination of fuzzy lint and short black hair. She was only half done with the blanket. She turned the blanket over, carefully folding in the finished side, making sure not to touch the pail. Earlier she had accidentally dipped a corner of the blanket into the pail, and most of the unwanted hair stuck back to the blanket. She wasn’t going to make that mistake again. The other side of the blanket was even worse than the side she had just finished. She angled her chin at the stove and gently pressed her neck backwards. Her neck and shoulders were sore, her forehead and nose covered with sweat. She wished she could turn the fan on, but that wouldn’t be wise. She didn’t want her hardwork to blow around in the house.

She turned a corner of the blanket up, doubled herself over it, and strained her eyes to see if she had done a thorough job on the finished side. A tiny hair appeared half woven into the fabric. Holding the blanket closer to her face, she picked the hair out with the nails of her thumb and index finger. But her palm was so clammy that the fine hair clung to her hand as though it were sticking to a magnetic board. She shook her hand several times over the pail; the hair just rolled around on her hand. Damn it, she cursed, holding in her lower lip, regarding her tired hand in mid air. She remembered brushing him, pulling loose hair out of his body, and ending up with hair sticking to her hand. She stood up, put the blanket on the kitchen table, and walked to the sink. The hair was on her wrist.

She examined the hair under the sink light. She had come to love his curly pubic hair, but at this moment, she wished he had straight hair. She had to find and dispose of all of the curly hairs; she couldn’t leave any evidence. She turned on the faucet and was in the process of flushing the hair into the drain when she hesitated. She drew the wrist to her face and licked the hair into her mouth. The warm running water made her think of going to the toilet, then hopping into bed. She had not realized how exhausted she was. But
she’d better begin the other side; it was getting late. She had to get up early the next morning. She turned the water off and wiped her hands on her hips.

The clock above the stove read eleven. She had started this tedious work two hours ago, after she put the kids to bed. She looked at the blanket and the garbage pail. She needed a break. Her eyes were sore and dehydrated. She tongued the hair between her lower lip and front teeth. She should have asked him to help. She shouldn’t have to do this by herself. She picked up the phone and her fingers dialed the familiar number. She counted the rings, nodding five, six,

It’s me. Guess what I’ve been doing, she said.
Do you realize how late it is, he said.
Going blind pulling hair out of the peach blanket, she grumbled.
Oh, I completely forgot all about it and didn’t remember until this afternoon, just before I left.

Do you have any idea how much you shed?
Well, I warned you I shed a lot.
God, I’m so tired and there is still so much to do, she sighed.
How much have you done?
Only one side of the peach blanket.
Is that all? You haven’t been very efficient. You have to finish the blankets before he gets home.

But I was busy. I had to feed the kids and put them to bed before I could do anything else. You just don’t want to be murdered by a jealous husband. You are selfish.

Can you blame me for being selfish? You wanted me just as bad as I wanted you.

Guess what I have between my teeth? She rolled the little hair around in her mouth.
I wouldn’t know.
One of your curly hairs from you know where, she giggled.
Stop fooling around. Go back to the blankets. He’ll be back tomorrow night. But I’m tired. I need a break. My God, can’t I complain a little? It’s partly your fault that my blankets are covered with your fur.

Alright, alright. I’m sorry you have to do this all by yourself, but you must get them blankets cleaned before he comes home. Did you hear me?
I wish you were here to help me.
I’ll say good-bye now so you can go back to work.
Alright, she gave up.
Bye, he hung up.
She sandwiched the phone between her ear and shoulder and twiddled the cord. His deep vibrating voice was soothing; she didn’t want to hang up. She crossed her arms, held her shoulders, and imagined hugging him. He was right though; she must continue with the blanket. She put the phone back on the wall and returned to her stool.
She wished there had been a better way to deal with the hair. This turned out to be more work than she had anticipated. She pulled up the front of her T-shirt to mop her face. It was her luck that she had to deal with this problem in the middle of the summer. She moved the blanket from the stool to the table. Perhaps it would be easier working on the table.

Standing at the table, she resumed her task. It hadn’t been long before she discovered that standing wasn’t a good position for her task. Her hand needed to travel a longer distance to reach the garbage pail. Also she was blocking light coming from behind, making her eyes water from straining. She stopped to look at her shadow over the blanket. Stupid woman, she scolded herself. She moved the table away from the wall and squeezed in between the table and the wall. The lighting was better, but she soon decided she couldn’t work standing. It was more difficult than sitting. She still had to bend over the blanket, only at a different angle. Her lower back began to hurt.

She straightened her back and squeezed her right hand hard with her left hand. The right hand was a little shaky, and the fingers were stiff. She pressed her eyelids together, feeling a welling behind her nose. She leaned back against the wall. That little hair was still in her mouth, caught between two teeth. She dug the hair out with her nails and laid it back on her tongue. He could’ve been more sympathetic. She was doing this for them, the two of them. She laced her fingers behind her neck and started to cry.

The tears stung her exhausted eyes. She opened the toilet door and reached for some toilet paper. She sat down on the stool, folded two square toilet paper eye patches, and placed them over her eyes. She pressed on the eye patches gently and massaged her eyes. A sour taste dripped down into her throat. Perhaps she didn’t have to find every single hair on the blanket. The short, fine ones couldn’t be that noticeable. But he would be mad at her; he said not to leave any evidence.

She heard the buzzing of a mosquito near her ear. She listened for the mosquito; the echoing buzz drifted in and out of her ears. She felt the mosquito light on her earlobe; she smacked her ear, but missed the mosquito. The toilet paper patches fell to the floor. She gathered the blanket across the table to her side, laid her arms and
head on the blanket, and thought about taking a nap. She could wake up in a couple of hours and continue her work. She was near dozing off when she felt something brush her lower calf. The mosquito was back. She waited for the mosquito to take a good bite before she rubbed her lower calves together. Again she wasn’t fast enough. The mosquito had escaped, leaving her with an itchy spot near her ankle. She scratched and pushed her nails into the itch until it hurt.

She had to continue with the blanket or she wouldn’t be on schedule; she would have to deal with the navy blue blanket after work tomorrow. Hopefully the navy blue blanket would be easier to work with. The hairs shouldn’t show as much. She picked up the toilet paper patches from the floor and tossed them on top of the lint-and-hair fuzz. Tomorrow she mustn’t forget to empty the pail. What if she failed to notice some hairs? What if she couldn’t finish the job?

She stared at the phone. He should be sleeping now, but he shouldn’t mind talking to her. They wouldn’t be able to talk for a while. Again she dialed that familiar number. He answered after the fourteenth ring.

It’s only me, she apologized, I hope I didn’t wake you up.

You certainly did. What the hell is going on? His uneven breathing droned in her ear.

I’m not making much progress on the peach one. And I’m so exhausted. And I’m scared. What would happen to me if he finds out?

If you are scared, there is even more reason for you to quit playing this phone game and concentrate on the blankets.

I’m not playing a game, honestly, I’m not. She sobbed, I’m so scared. I’m tired of being secretive. I don’t want to have to clean up every time he comes home. Can I tell him about us? Can we just run away?

Absolutely not. Are you out of your mind? How are we going to live? I don’t want to be murdered by a jealous husband. Listen, You must go back to the blankets.

But I’m scared. And I’m tired.

Stay calm. You must compose yourself. You still have work to do.

He may find out anyway. She twisted the cord.

He mustn’t find out. You must make sure he doesn’t find out. Be nice to him. How could I be nice to him after what I’ve done to him?

Ok, don’t be nice to him, but he mustn’t find out.

I don’t know when I’ll talk to you again.

It’s alright. Just give me a call as soon as he leaves. Remember, I’m always available. Now get back to work.
Do you love me?

I do. Get back to work. I'm hanging up now. Bye.

She listened for the click, then the dead buzz. Hello, she whispered, Hello. She let out a deep sigh and put the phone back on the wall. She squeezed her eyes shut for a few seconds. When she opened her eyes, she saw the gray mosquito, a big fat one, resting on a crease in the blanket. Squinting, she lifted both arms slowly, then slowly, slowly lowered both stretched palms down toward the mosquito. When she was about three feet from the mosquito, she concentrated all of her energy and swatted down on the insect. She came down with such force that she half lifted herself from the floor. She nailed the carcass of the insect deep into the blanket with her thumb. She considered removing the carcass, but decided it wouldn’t hurt to stay.

She looked at the blanket, then at the clock. It was past midnight. She’d better hurry. She took the hair out of her mouth, wrapped it in a piece of toilet paper, and tossed it into the pail. She moved back to the stool, put the blanket on the stool, and knelt. She would try this kneeling position for a while, until her knees and feet gave out. She resumed cleaning the blanket. Tomorrow she would take care of the navy blue blanket. She mustn’t forget to scrub the tub and the bathroom floor.

Towers
HEATHER L. SZAFRANSKI

Through the Falling

Rain, spring dances with the child
And sunlight shines through both
The picture and the path wrapped
In autumn sky and dusty leaves
She learns to spell her name
With sparklers, dodging fishing hooks
In her youth she smiles, still-life’d,
Into my mother’s laughing camera
Hummingbird shutter shots capturing
The popcorn and lilac filled maybasket
On the doorknob for someone the child
Only remembers from ancient stories
That have all begun Once upon a time
The princess and the jester danced to Pink Floyd
Co-conspirators to the smiles on the wall
And from the ceiling hangs the chain
Of faded construction paper linking
The child to the princess newly crowned
Who wears a ring that doesn’t fit
But she’ll grow into the house and horrid cat.
I talk to my grandmother in my sleep
When the streetlight casts shadows
During the night she whispers to me
The stories of the child but still I cry
Funeral tears and I am trying to go slow
But my hair continues to gray.
The small town of Lundon, Texas had little to worry about. For the past fifty years, commerce and economics remained at a near-nothing level, with the exceptions of the local Diner, the town’s only grocery store, and one prominent farming family. Politics were not a problem for the two-man city council, and the only illegals anyone worried about were the constant flow of immigrants and border police through the town. Besides the border wars there was never an exciting moment in Lundon, and the townspeople (as well as the city council) liked it that way. But everything changed in the summer of ’98.

In early April the last thundershower blessed the plains town with life-giving water. Unfortunately the rains came too early to benefit the crops. The storm was followed by punctuating heatwaves that never receded. By June grasshoppers had invaded the town, carving their path into every niche and corner. Mrs. Hernandez, a legal immigrant, was often seen brushing the “damn chapulines” off her front porch while cursing “this damn town.” The grasshoppers also infected the Diner, much to Eddie Fisk’s disappointment. Sometimes Eddie ordered his waitresses to catch grasshoppers for half the shift. By July, Henry Wayen’s mysterious wife left the water in her house running constantly, but that did not bother anyone since they already suspected the green-eyed stranger was a mermaid.

The few hundred townspeople were scared. The weatherman in nearby Lithe could do nothing, and neither could Guillermo Llano, the town’s only priest and grocer. He was never officially attached to any diocese, but he was the most knowledgeable catholic in Lundon, and he was unmarried, so everybody consulted him as their Padre. After the good Padre the people went to Preacher Man, a mysterious man with no name who always helped the town. He was like a town conscience, but this time he either refused to help the community or ignored it. It was hard to tell the difference.
In late July, the last straw was pulled.

The children found it first. They did not know what to make of the four-foot tall reptilian beast standing on hind legs. It looked like one of the creatures from the old black and white movies, so they showed Mrs. Hernandez since she was one of the boy's aunts and she was an eccentric.

Mrs. Hernandez screamed at the monster, which was eating some overgrown buffalo grass, and herded the children onto her porch, which was only semi-permeated by "those damn chapulines." Since the only college graduate, Henry Wayen, was at a teacher's conference in Midland, Mrs. Hernandez immediately telephoned Padre Llano. The priest drove his old Apache from the downtown grocery store two blocks to the Hernandez house on the residential end of Lundon. By then Mrs. Hernandez had shuffled the children into her kitchen, but they stared out the window at the brown beast anyway. Padre Llano placed some holy leaves a yermero had sold to him around the monster, and, knowing nothing of exorcisms or witchcraft, read several random passages from the Old Testament and commanded the demon to return to its sulphurous lake. The creature ate several of the Padre's leaves and then hovered toward some more buffalo grass. The Padre was confused. The creature seemed too gently to be Satanic. He petted the creature and smiled at Mrs. Hernandez, who frowned furiously at the Padre. Then a small black girl ran up to him. Her name was Keila, and she had escaped Mrs. Hernandez'es kitchen and brought a picture book.

"Look, please," she ordered politely, and showed Padre Llano a picture of a dinosaur that looked similar to the creature standing before him.

By then, a small crowd of homemakers and people who worked in Lundon had gathered across the street at the Hernandez home. The crowd included Lundon's two council members, Ernest Smith and Tuesday Gomez.

Padre Llano smiled broadly as he approached the crowd. "I bring the good news, friends. This is no horrible demon; this is a wayward dinosaur. And look!" he joyously opened the book and pointed at a picture of a dinosaur, subtitled "herbivore," "It only eats verdas!"

This was good news; the town much more preferred a dinosaur that ate plants to a dinosaur that hungered for human flesh. However, when the next day another dinosaur appeared, this one a much larger plant eater with a long neck, the townspeople became nervous. Many of these people either worked in the fields as ranch hands or owned small farms. As devastating as the summer drought was to them, there was no room for these terrible lizards. Tuesday Gomez, the councilwoman, called an emergency town meeting for that Saturday (she wanted to
call it on Friday, but she knew nobody would attend a Friday evening meeting since the time conflicted with Midland’s minor leave baseball).

By Saturday night, two more herbivorous nightmares had appeared in Lundon. Tuesday Gomez wanted to find a solution to their dinosaur problem. She hoped to bring several university men and women into Lundon to study the creatures and offer help.

The night of the council meeting the entire town came to the Diner where Tuesday Gomez and Ernest Smith normally held their meetings. As the Diner quickly overcrowded, Eddie told everybody that they would have to either order a steak dinner or leave. Since it was such a hot night anyway, the townspeople convened in the Diner’s parking lot. There were very few semi-trucks that night, so there was more than enough room for the meeting. People sat on their car hoods or brought table chairs from inside the Diner, stepping over Elmer, the mongrel dog that barricaded the Diner’s entrance and whom everybody ignored.

Councilman Ernest Smith opened the meeting. “You are all here for one reason, and that is to decide what should be done about these dinosaurs. We will first hear a proposal by councilwoman Gomez. Councilwoman Gomez.”

“Two days ago on Thursday, July 30th, four children spotted the first dinosaur on Main Street. Since then three more dinosaurs have been discovered throughout Lundon. Two on Thames Street and one of Pecos Street.

“With the help of local authorities Billy, Jamie, Keila, and Muddy, the city council can now tell you exactly what kind of dinosaurs are here. The first dinosaur is a Parasaurolophus, and the two with long necks are Apatosaurus. The last one, on Pecos Street, is a Lesothosaurus. This last critter is the smallest known dinosaur, about the size of a large chicken. Now, besides the Leso chasing after Mrs. Sorenson’s cats, these animals are not a direct threat to anybody. However, they eat vegetables and things, but they are also eating our crops and our gardens. The local clergy cannot help us on this one, and neither can Henry, even though he has a college degree. So, since none of us know the first thing about dinosaurs, with the exception of perhaps these children, I propose that we invited some professionals here. I have found several scientists, called paleontologists, in all our state’s major universities. We could tell them about our problem, and they could tell us where these creatures are coming from and what they want. That’s all, council.”

Tuesday sat down on the brown stationwagon Ernest had designated as the council’s sitting area.

“What about reporters?” somebody in the back shouted.
"What about 'em?" Ernest asked.

"I don't want no stinking reporters invading my property!" Somebody yelled. Several others voiced similar, though less formal, opinions. At the same time other townspeople vocalized who they thought should and should not be invited to town.

"If Katie Couric shows up, I'll kick her ass!"

"And then I'll kick you ass, you little punk!"

"Hard Copy!"

"Real TV!"

"Tom Brokaw can kick Katie's ass!"

Ernest leaned over to his fellow councilwoman. "This stinks worse than a feed lot, Tuesday."

"They're afraid, Ernest. This town has more holes than the Dallas Cowboys defense and more mysteries than the Catholic Church. That is the problem, not the dinosaurs."

"Yes, Tuesday, but we can't go against our own town. I got relatives out there. And I'll be damned if I'm gonna piss in their wind."

"Okay, okay. Settle down. Maybe we can think of something better to do."

Eddie suggested a special at the Diner on Dinosaur steak and ribs. An elderly woman who had her husband stuffed suggested doing the same to the dinosaurs and then showing the prizes for a fee.

As frustration neared a boiling point and several fights broke out, as they always do on hot July Saturday nights, a very old man stood on his blue pinto and called for silence. Since he used to make bombs for the government, and since it was rumored throughout town that he still made and carried explosives, and since it was also rumored that he would one day blow up the town in his anger, everybody fell silent to let him speak.

"I am getting tired of hearing all this malarkey! I just want to sleep peacefully at night without worrying if dinosaurs are going to eat our crops. I'm just a feeble old man, but is that so much to ask? I would hate to have to get angry about this. So I have an idea. I suggest that our two friends, our councilmen, go out into the world and find us a solution to this problem. Am I right? Huh? I say, these two don't come back until they find us a solution that won't bring every scientist and reporter across the state descending on our fair town! Now who's with me? C'mon, let's take a vote. Raise your hands, everybody. Raise your hands!"

Tuesday and Ernest watched wide-eyed as one after another of the townspeople reluctantly raised their hands. Nobody wanted to be the person to contradict the old
Well, councilmen, it looks like you have yourselves a decision. I recommend that you accept your town’s choice. I for one am going to bed. It’s too late, anyways.”

The old man slowly returned to the ground, where he was shorter than everyone except the children. Then the crowd started to disperse, many people returning to the comfort of their homes and trailers while others drove into larger towns like Stoney Creek or Lithe, or perhaps even Midland to look for a good time. As for Tuesday and Ernest, they prepared to leave Lundon.

Before Tuesday left town, Ernest confided in her. He was going to New Orleans. “I have always wanted to visit New Orleans, and I have some extra money saved up. I’ll come back in November, after the rain and after this thing has passed, whatever you want to call it, but I am not searching for the answer. I advise you to do the same. It is the wise political move.”

“Ernest, there haven’t been politics in this town in almost fifty years, and I’m not going to the one to start. No, I’ll go along with their decisions, even if it was biased. I just hope that I can find the right answer.”

Tuesday left town on Saturday. She spent the next three weeks driving across Texas from small town to small town and inquiring about dinosaurs. She spoke to healers, community college professors, veterinarians, bikers, farmers, and astrologists, but she never spoke to any scientists, especially paleontologists, and she never mentioned apatosauruses or parasaurolophuses. Nobody could give her a good answer. She stayed in the old farmhouses of friendly people, but sometimes she found the kindness less than cordial. One night an old man tried to rape her, and on another occasion a child tried to steal her truck, but since neither could get their machinery to work, Tuesday was relatively unharmed.

One evening while driving along a farm road, Tuesday discovered an old farm on the edge of a playa lake. It was late, so she decided to try to stay there. She was not looking for food, just something to keep the rattlesnakes at bay.

The old Chevy stopped in the middle of its own duststorm outside the house, but nobody answered when Tuesday knocked. She walked around the house, peering through the dust-covered windows. Behind the house a three-grave cemetery shifted in the fading light. Three mounds, three crosses, and one little girl kneeling in front of the furthest grave. Uncomfortable, Tuesday started to leave, but then the girl, who could not have been more than thirteen, called out to her, “You don’t have to leave, Miss.”
“I was looking for a place to sleep when I saw the house. I don’t have any real money—

“We have plenty of room in the home, Miss. Maria told me to always welcome strangers here.” The child walked toward Tuesday. An extremely thin and dusty redhead in ragged overalls and bare-feet, the little child resembled a Rio rat, a child orphaned in the border wars along the Rio Grande river.

Tuesday did not want to ask about the child’s parents, so she only asked her name. “Rosa,” the girl said, opening the door for Tuesday.

“Such a pretty name, but isn’t that Spanish? You don’t look, you know—

“My father used to call my mother a Mexican blackbird, but they died years ago. Don’t look sad, Miss. Daddy always used to say he wanted to die because Texas was hotter than hell and he wanted to get to Heaven.”

“That’s sweet, Rosa.” Tuesday knew she had heard the phrase “Mexican blackbird” before, but she did not know where.

“I once asked him where Heaven was, and he told me Pennsylvania. That’s where he was from.” Tuesday and Rosa did not speak long after the child brought Tuesday into her home. Rosa said, “Oh, well. I’m tired. You can sleep over there on the bed, and I’ll take the floor.” After a small disagreement, Tuesday convinced Rosa to sleep on the bed.

Since she had spent the better half of the day talking to local farmers or driving, Tuesday was exhausted and fell asleep almost immediately, but the child’s words remained in her mind. As she slept, Tuesday dreamed that she was walking down a lonely and dusty road. Due to the drought, there were only three stray clouds floating through the sky. Suddenly a giant blackbird dived from one of the clouds and flew at her. Tuesday ran, but she could not escape the blackbird; it swallowed her whole. Then she remembered where she had heard that phrase before. It was from nights sitting at the Diner, listening to the passing truck drivers and travelers who had stopped at the Diner to rest and drink some coffee. They would mention going to Mexico, and they would mention the beautiful whores with their long black hair. “Mexican blackbirds” was slang for prostitutes.

When Tuesday awoke, she was alone in the two-room house. It was old, and a lot of the boards creaked and moaned under her stop. The water in the faucet worked, though, so Tuesday ran some water over her head. Even in the morning the heat seemed unbearable. Tuesday looked through the window’s broken panes, but she only saw her twenty-year old behemoth Chevy. She walked to the other side of the house. She looked through an octagonal window, and she saw Rosa squatting down at the
Tuesday cocked her left eyebrow. She left the house and approached the small playa.

Rosa stared at the still water with predatory intensity. “Rosa, if playa lakes are waterholes that come and go with the heat, then how is it that your playa has survived one of the worst droughts of the century?”

“You’ve got to be very quiet, Miss.” Again Tuesday cocked her eyebrow. She looked down at the girl and remembered what it was like when she was young and took all the simple things in life so seriously. Rosa reminded Tuesday of some of the children from Lundon.

“I am from Lundon. Do you know where that is?”

“England, right? I went to school once.” She watched the water with hawk eyes.

“No, it’s in Texas. About four or five hours from here, actually. I was supposed to travel all over the state, but I just can’t seem to get very far from home. I like Lundon. I grew up there. But I can’t go home until I can find a way to get rid of the dinosaurs.” Before she realized what was happening, Tuesday confided in Rosa, telling the child everything: the Diner, Padre Llano and his grocery store, Preacher Man, the mermaids, ghosts, lunatics, dogs, and people that were Lundon. Then she spoke more about the plethora of herbivorous dinosaurs that, like the grasshoppers, had eaten their way into the town.

“If only there was a way to feed everybody,” Tuesday groaned.

Rosa did not comment on the town or its people. In fact, she said nothing. She watched the lake. The sun reached its zenith before Tuesday ended her story, so after talking half the day, Tuesday decided she was thirsty and that water from a playa was as healthy as water from a near-abandoned farmhouse.

She walked into the playa and kneeled down to scoop a handful of water into her mouth. “Don’t go in there, Miss!” Tuesday suddenly shouted from the dry shoreline, only a few meters away. Rosa paced back and forth, frantically urging Tuesday to return to land. “It’s dangerous in there until she comes out, Miss! Please leave the lake! Please!”

Rosa’s concern was too cute for Tuesday, who smiled and started out of the lake. Rosa grabbed Tuesday’s arm as soon as she could reach it, and the girl yanked hard, practically dragging Tuesday out of the waters. “If you are going to be my guest, Miss, then you are going to have to learn that there are some rules, and one of them is definitely, definitely do not enter the lake until I’ve got her! She hides, and she gets hungry because she is a mommy, and—
But at that moment a single snapping sound surrounded by crashing waves of water flew over the pair. Tuesday fell out of Rosa’s arms as she was dragged back into the water. In her confusion, Tuesday could hardly think. Nothing lived in playa lakes except for stray ducks and sparrows and sometimes earthworms.

Tuesday watched Rosa leap over her, but in the chaos of the flying water she could not see what happened to the little bare-footed girl. Tuesday then decided she did not want to be sucked underwater, so she wiggled, and she writhed, and suddenly her shoe slid from her foot, and she was free. Tuesday crawled to the playa’s edge and turned around.

To her surprise, Rosa was happily straddling a very large, cardinal red crocodile. As she giggled, Rosa pulled the mighty crocodile’s jaw wide open, and Tuesday’s shoe plopped into the mud. “I’ve got you! I’ve got you!” she yelled gleefully, as if the crocodile was her baby and not a sixteen-foot long menace. Tuesday stared curiously at the phenomenon, cocking her eyebrow, until the red crocodile carried Rosa to the lake’s edge. The small redheaded girl then dismounted her crocodile. From her front pockets she removed several handfuls of large grasshoppers, which she dropped into the crocodile’s open mouth. Tuesday watched as a multitude of tiny rainbow-colored crocodiles swarmed around one handful of grasshoppers and devoured the feast.

Rosa then returned to Tuesday’s side. “I will bring them a rabbit, maybe, later.” Despite the great pain in her ankle, Tuesday found strength to say, “Rosa, that a—um, I mean, uh, you were just wrestling a—

“Crocodile.”

“Red crocodile.” She knew she shouldn’t be angry, but her ankle felt like hell. It was swollen like a softball, and the heat was finally aggravating her. “With rainbow-colored baby crocodiles, and that can’t happen. I mean, let’s start with the simple facts. One, crocodiles do not live in Texas, and two, crocodiles are not that color. It’s impossible.”

“Listen, Miss. You just spent the entire morning telling me about your weird city, and the para-esophagus things, but you won’t believe in my pet red crocodile. That’s stupid. Besides, I warned you she was hiding. Don’t you know that crocodiles stay real still underwater until they are right on their prey, and then they bite them, pull them underwater, and kill them in a great thrashing death roll?”

“Where did you hear that?”

“La Yolanda gets Discovery Channel.”

“But I thought you lived alone.” If adults lived here, perhaps they could drive her to a nearby doctor or clinic.
"No, I just don't have any parents. They died, but now I live with three women: La Yolanda, Maria, and an old Indian lady I call Azteca."

Tuesday watched the crocodile slither back into the playa. She could not stop watching its crimson red eye because she felt certain the reptile would strike again. "And where are these women now?"

Rosa shrugged. "La Yolanda lives in the lake, Maria the sky, and Azteca comes from the South. They usually bring plenty of good food." Finally the pain flooded Tuesday's body, beginning with her foot, and like a monsoon it escalated to insurmountable heights across her legs, her belly, her heart, and finally the pain capsized her mind. Somewhere between the pain and the confusion, Tuesday fell unconscious.

When Tuesday awoke the sun had already set. She was lying on the old bed in the bedroom. Next to the bed was an endtable covered in hawk feathers, strangely adorned vials with sweet-smelling concoctions, and three brilliantly colored dolls. On the side where the crocodile had bitten her, the pants leg was cut at the knee. From the smells she could tell that some salts and aloe vera had been rubbed onto her foot. Several foreign leaves covered her forehead and her ankle. Tuesday removed the leaves from both body parts and noticed that the swelling had receded considerably. Laughter came from the house's other room. Tuesday again cocked one eyebrow when she realized the laughter came not only from Rosa, but from other people as well.

"Hello?" Tuesday called out.

First silence, then a small, dark woman in strange clothes with bright feathers proceeded the silence. She said something in a language Tuesday could not understand, but from the woman's handmotions, Tuesday saw that she was not meant to stand up. The woman smiled happily and sat down beside her. She wore gold plates, well-groomed animal skins, and a loving disposition. She pressed her hand to her chest and said, "Azteca."

Tuesday repeated Azteca's name to show that she understood. Then she also placed her hand to her chest and said, "Tuesday." At that moment the others entered the room. Rosa entered first, then a hard-faced woman in rags followed by a beautiful lady wearing a simple white dress. The three adults glowed phosphorously in the night. Their feet did not touch the ground.

"One of you must be Yolanda, and the other must be Maria."

The woman in rags smiled and said, "I am the woman whom Rosa calls La Yolanda."
“And I am Maria. Rosa told us all about you, but she is afraid. Poor Rosa was frightened by your accident. The little girl feels partially responsible for her pet’s actions. I pray, though, that you are feeling better?”

“Much, thank you, but the heat has made me incredibly thirsty. Do you have anything to drink?”

From the folds of their dresses each woman produced a different drink.

“I have some wine,” said Maria.

“Would you like some water?” Yolanda offered.

But Azteca was closest to Tuesday, and without asking she put her glass of brown liquid into Tuesday’s hand. Tuesday drank thirstily. It was a strong drink she did not recognize.

Maria spoke first, “I have spoken with God, and you will be walking tomorrow so that you may find you way home.”

“You spoke with God?” Tuesday asked. “I don’t want to be rude, but—

She saw the genuine sincerity in the naked eyes of the three women. She could not vocalize her thoughts. “Thank you, friends. You help is very appreciated. I was wondering, though. Could I have a word alone with Rosa?”

“Of course, of course,” Maria said. “We have prepared a meal for you in the kitchen, when you are ready.”

“I don’t know how many times I have told Rosa to keep that crocodile on a leash,” Yolanda said, exiting with the other two women.

“If memory serves me, you like to keep everyone on a leash; that is the reason why you became what you are,” Maria said.

“Don’t start that again, Maria. I confessed everything already.” Azteca was the last to leave, but finally Tuesday was alone with the redheaded child.

Tuesday grabbed Rosa by her overalls. “Do you realize who they are, Rosa? I mean, not who they seem to be, but who they really are? Not just Maria, Azteca, and Yolanda.”

Now came Rosa’s chance to look confused, so Tuesday elaborated. “Every Mexican in the world knows that you are living with the Virgin Mary, the betraying Aztec princess called La Malinche, and it’s not La Yolanda, it’s La Llorrona, the weeping ghost who murdered her children and now must walk through purgatory forever!”

“But they’re not bad people. They’re just misunderstood.”

“Did they tell you that?”
“They didn’t have to tell me that. Now come in here and be nice and sociable, or else you will offend them and me.”

“Before I go in there, Rosa, I want to give you some advice. No matter how weird things get, they can, and will, always get weirder.” Rosa flashed Tuesday a classic “parents are so weird” look.

Using Rosa as a crutch, Tuesday limped into the living room. The room had not been simply redecorated; it was redefined. What once was a living room/kitchen with no table, two chairs, and a bare cupboard had magically transformed into a dynasty complete with slender tapered candles, plastic tupperware containers, chairs, and piles of the best food: giant enchiladas, fresh tortillas, blazing fajitas, chile reynosa, pechuga de pollo, tender strips of cabrito, and Tuesday’s favorite: menudo. The three women had adorned the rich foods across a long, gold-painted table. The five women sat down that night and feasted on the food. Being ethereal, the ghosts and saints ate nothing, but they delighted in the hungers of the living. Maria would not stop offering Tuesday wine until finally Rosa cautioned, “Maybe she would prefer a coke.” So the Virgin got her a coke.

As they ate, they complained about the weather and delighted over the red crocodile’s babies. Maria translated for Azteca, who claimed that the crocodile babies were the offspring of the red crocodile and a runaway rainbow. Then the women told Tuesday about where they were from, whether it was Mexico, Heaven, or the Water. All worlds enchanted and enthralled Tuesday. They all laughed as La Yolanda told the joke about the penguins and the seven dwarves, and then they laughed harder when Maria danced in the living room.

They talked late into the night, even after Rosa had fallen asleep. Too soon, however, the three ghosts said they had to leave. The spirits were needed in their homes. All three women packed away the food, candles, decorations, and tableware, and then Tuesday walked them outside. “Alright, but remember, you all have a room in the Gomez house. If you ever want to visit, please do.”

The three ladies thanked Tuesday for her generosity and promised to visit, and then they left. Tuesday watched the bright feathers descend into the south, the glowing Virgin ascend beautifully into Heaven, and the glow of La Llorona slip into the playa’s waters. Tuesday looked for the red crocodile, but she could not see it. IT was probably hidden.

Then she limped into the house and sighed heavily. Rosa walked out of the bedroom and asked, “What is the matter, Tuesday? I thought you were happy.”
“I am very happy to have met you all, Rosa, but according to Maria, tomorrow I must return home, and I still don’t know what to do about the dinosaurs.”

“Don’t you understand, Tuesday? You have to face your fears. Then the dinosaurs will go away.”

“But I don’t fear anything, except maybe that red crocodile.”

“Stop acting silly, Tuesday. Everybody fears something. Your town fears the outside world, and I think you are the opposite. I think you fear your town. Why else would you be here?”

“I’m looking for help, that’s why I’m here.”

“You should listen to your own stories, Tuesday. If you ask me, the part about the town kicking you out sounds pretty ridiculous. Whatever you do, though, good luck in it. I’m going to bed.” Tuesday watched the child crawl into her bed, then Tuesday walked outside. The heat did not weigh her down like it normally weighed against her body. She felt cooler, refreshed.

As Sunday drifted into Monday, Tuesday stayed up watching the stars. She did not know any of the constellations, and she could not tell the North Star from the Southern Star, but she liked the way the quiet infinity made her feel naked and like a tiny drop of water in a big well. When Tuesday finally fell asleep, which was not until very late, she was leaning her head against the old house. Tuesday did not wake until after noon. But she had made her decision.

As Mary had promised, God fixed Tuesday’s ankle, and it felt better than it ever did in her entire life. From the house, Tuesday could see Rosa at the playa. She was playing innocently on top of the red crocodile when Tuesday woke up. Tuesday did not want to disturb the child, so she did not go to the playa. Tuesday waved goodbye from the Chevy, and then she drove home to Lundon. She felt at peace, watching the fence posts line the farmroads. Several hours later the exit for Lundon appeared, and Tuesday was home again. She did not really know what she had gained from her experiences or what she was going to do about the dinosaurs, but she did knew that she was a changed woman.

Preacher Man was waiting on her front porch, leaning back and relaxing in her swing. As always, his entire wardrobe consisted of black, from the dusty boots to the wrap-around sunglasses.

“Welcome home, wanderer,” he announced. “Have you gained any wisdom from your journeys?”

“You mean about the dinosaurs?”
The problems are one in the same, ma'am. But you better be quick. Folks'll be here any minute looking for the answer to their prayers.” He grinned, “Well, some of their prayers.” He nodded good day to her and walked away whistling.

Mike Stamps, her next-door neighbor, was the first to arrive at Tuesday’s doorstep and, after knocking on her door for a good minute, asked through the door, “W-well, do you, ah, have an a-answer?”

There was a pause with no answer as several other Lundon citizens joined Mike Stamps to form a small, tight crowd in front of Tuesday’s home. They waited. Then her front door opened. She held in her hand a posterboard sign and a used roll of duck tape. She went to the front window that faced the crowd and cleared several grasshoppers from the windowsill. Then she taped up the large sign with the duck tape. She had to bite the tape to cut it, but eventually the sign stood alone in the window, and Tuesday returned inside, locking her front door behind her.

At first the gathered crowd could not read the sign. The sun had cast a glare on the posterboard, and Tuesday had written on the sign with very old markers.

“W-w-what does it say?” Mike Stamps asked.

Padre Llano leaned over the sign and read it carefully. Then he repeated what he had read, saying, “Go home. Tomorrow the dinosaurs will be gone.”

He turned to the crowd and said, “Vayan a sus casas. Manana the problem will be over.” Disappointed, the crowd retreated into the safety of their homes, but throughout the late afternoon and early evening cars and trucks passed by her house slowly as people tried to read the sign. Several people actually stopped their truck in the middle of the street, got out, walked up to the sign, and then read it.

Mike Stamps and several other neighbors set up a team to watch the councilwoman’s movements. Unfortunately for them, however, Tuesday had closed all her blinds and shut all her doors. There was no way to see in or out of the house. Still, the team watched her all day, and then they watched her until midnight when the last team member succumbed to their weariness and fell asleep.

In the slumber of night, Tuesday trickled out of her house and into her garden. She removed her small crop of carrots, peas, and tomatoes under the moonlight, shoving them into two large potato sacks. She then dumped each sack into the back of her truck, spilling the greens everywhere. She then filled a large bucket with water and tied it down with nylon chord into the truck’s bed.

“I have no idea what I am doing,” Tuesday told herself.

While everyone slept Tuesday drove quietly through town searching for the baby dinosaurs. First she found the apatosaurus babies. They had grown considerably, and
they were sleeping against an abandoned farmhouse. Tuesday looked up into the clear, hot night, hoping for an answer. She received nothing. “I hope this works,” she said.

“Okay, little guys, who wants some chow?” The apatosauruses woke up and stared at Tuesday. Then they sniffed the air. Slowly, they lumbered towards the Chevy, shoving their necks into the bed and feasting on Tuesday’s garden.

“No! No! No!” Tuesday argued. She pushed the large dinosaurs to no avail. She pushed them again, harder, and finally they began to move into the truck bed.

With the exception of the one chicken-sized dinosaur that ran away from her, luring the dinosaurs into her truck bed was not difficult. Most of the babies were curious, and they followed Tuesday into the Chevy.

She drove the dinosaurs one at a time out of town. Not far away was a small canyon. Supposedly, Apaches once used the canyon as a stopping point while following herds of bison. It was even rumored that Geronimo once camped in the canyon. Now the Indians were being replaced by dinosaurs.

By sunrise Tuesday had gathered all the dinosaurs and moved them into the canyon. She knew they would be safe there, and she knew she had done the right thing. “But why?” she asked the stars.

“because you are councilwoman Gomez of Lundon, Texas,” the ghost said.

“Hello, Yolanda. How are you?”

“Life isn’t hell; it’s more like purgatory. But how are you?”

“Can I ask you something, Yolanda? I accept my town’s eccentricities, and I am really glad to have met you, the Virgin, and La Malinche, and I am overjoyed to know that the dinosaurs are safe, but one thing still bothers me.”

“After all this, things can still bother you, Tuesday? I thought that word would have left your vocabulary by now.”

“Ha, ha, Yolanda. But tell me this, why did the dinosaurs come in the first place?”

“That is quite a mystery, isn’t it?”

“Yes, it is. But why?”

The ghost placed her vaporous arm around Tuesday’s shoulder. “You are always asking that question, Tuesday. The way you ask it again and again, sometimes I think you are like a child repeating the same letter over and over again. The child does not know what is being said; the child only knows that the letter is pronounced. Then I realize, ‘No, this woman has questions to be answered.’ Stop asking the questions, amiga. Here, I brought you something.” She padded her rags and then said, “Oh, wait. I left it in your truck. Have a good life, Tuesday, and remember to be careful when
playing near the water. Buenas noches.” Yolanda descended into the canyon, and Tuesday entered her truck.

She turned the lights on. Despite its age, the truck was relatively clean. Except for a bit of dust and two used coke bottles, the truck was empty. “Maybe the nothing is the gift. That would be poetic.” She drove into the sunrise, but not before she heard a small piping noise, like a tiny squeaking flute. She could not find anything in the cab, so she pulled to the side of the road and looked in the truck’s bed. Submerged and hiding in the water bowl lay a tiny rainbow-colored crocodile.
MEGAN JOHNSON

Intent and Otherwise

I. Of cuticle revolution
   of Easter egg dye
gone bad beyond the
stoplight; in barely fall
we listen to written
rights on tape. Repeat
after me: Red fades to blue
after intent sleeps in
left-over pastures

II. Moon men are heroes.
    They tell us this. Quiet
atom gods are writing books,
signing up for bestseller
cities. Most oceans have
their parts in tact:
whistling, penniless

II The wish means we all
went crazy like Copernicus,
nestling sun beliefs in
corduroy pockets to use
out of need, of sacrifice.
They did not tell us this

IV Inviting God over for dinner
means the demons try harder.
Some glasses shiver and break.
Some wine retreats back to its origin, settling in vine beds

V. And still. Other mothers lean back and grow full of content, an orange leaf on an empty afternoon lacking much less.

Towers
MEGAN JOHNSON

Beyond Basin Street Blues

There are only little words left for the post-narcissistic city lights, mild conjunctions showing here and other. We faded from white some time ago—started existing once upon a time and then departed to slow yellow. It is possible to map the descent of vulture-like responsibility, impossible to follow. The thing of the matter happened while your mother was downstairs cooking dinner during everyday Thursday: Banshées pounding on your window giving To Do lists wrapped in time, a card inscribed hurry, the realization that mowing the lawn had economic value.

The street lights though, jaded as I wish they were, weren’t—revealing the 9 to 5 Loop, staggering dress shoes, the corner of the crammed bar at 5:01. We remember the but, the or, in darkness, where excuses hide-and-go-seek into memory, pleading with the picket-line heart. We relent. Cannot pinpoint. Continue.

I do not know how to plan the construction of a city light, a single dove bulb; nor does the Fountain bloom in my backyard. If we could unmake then we would, sinking fingers into wet, bare earth.
Some men travel so much
their suitcases wear out fast.
Their hearts go thumpeedeethump
by the anxiety, the anticipation
of the search for the next
perfect suitcase.

Some men save the keys’n price tags
for every suitcase they own.
They treasure the time spent
with each suitcase—
The texture, the smell, the fit—
each equally memorable.

So these men travel on,
awaiting to feel the next
brand new (now and then
they settle for second hand)
suitcase.
I look across the azure water
And I am mesmerized by its captivating personality.
With every wave that hits the shore, I drift
Farther out into the Aegean; farther from the world I know.

I am transported to weightless realm,
Where every drop of water meshes to
Create an incredible life force, a self-contained world.
Like a radiant blossom opening its delicate petals
To the light of a crystal moon, I offer myself
To the mystery above me, below me, around me.
I lose myself to never return
From the depths of the incomparable Aegean Sea.
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Submit two (2) copies of your work.

The first copy must have, in the upper right hand corner of the first page: your name, address (include email if you have it), phone number, social security number, title of the piece, and its genre (poetry, fiction, creative nonfiction).

The second copy must be anonymous: author's name (and personal information) cannot appear anywhere on this manuscript.

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