

READINGS

[Essay]

RING OF FIRE

By Jordan Kisner, from “Phone Calls from the Apocalypse,” an essay in the collection *Thin Places*, which will be published this month by Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Nearly every day now, my phone rings from numbers unknown to me. The area codes are always Californian, and always different. The calls started from cities in or near Los Angeles: Culver City, Inglewood, Marina del Rey. Then, once I stopped picking them up, they’d come from farther north: Merced, Turlock, Patterson, Stockton.

My parents still live in California, so when I’d see these unlisted California numbers, I’d think that one of them was in the hospital and I was being notified. I’d pick up, worried, and hear a long silence. Then a man’s voice would say: “First they deceived you, then they oppressed you.”

The voice is clearly a recording—there’s something scratchy about the line, some ambience that sounds canned. The man’s diction is familiar to me from memories of old televangelists and Pentecostal preachers, though I can’t tell from his voice where in the country he might be from. The way he speaks is stylized; every consonant is rhythm, every word is beaten through the teeth. He sounds as though he’s trying to exorcise you over the phone.

“There is a person keeping you in this situation,” he says, every time. “Press the numerical button 1; press 1 now.” From there the messages

deviate, but they’re variations on a theme. Here’s what he said on October 2: “There is someone you must rebuke that is attacking you. Press the numerical button 1 now; press 1 now. There is an individual causing this situation that you must rebuke; press 1, press 1. You must rebuke the snake that is controlling the person to cause this mess; press 1. It has even been affecting people in your household. Press 1 now; press 1.”

The first time I got the call, I was so stunned by his vehemence that I didn’t hang up. I sat there, clutching my cell phone to my ear all the way through the man’s exhortations to press the numerical button 1 until the line seemed to go dead. Then, another man’s voice came on the line, someone who was speaking normally, like any regular telemarketer. “If you’d like to continue, press 1 now. If you’d like to no longer receive these calls, press 4.”

I hesitated. The obvious thing to do would be to press 4, but I was curious. I badly wanted to see what would happen if I pressed 1, but that way lay the robocall deluge. Instead, I did nothing and waited. Eventually, the call disconnected.

I began receiving these calls almost a year ago. Sometimes I pick up, sometimes I don’t. They’ve started to become part of the cadence of my week, a visitation from some other corner of the country. Sometimes my phone will ring in the middle of dinner with friends and I’ll check it, only to put the phone back down when I see the unfamiliar California number. “It’s just the apocalyptic preacher calling.”

The scripts of the calls aren’t always precisely apocalyptic, but they are always formulated as a

[Patient History]

MAMMARY LAPSE

From a testimonial submitted to the U.S. Food and Drug Administration last summer. In July, the pharmaceutical company Allergan issued a world-wide recall of its textured breast implants, which have been linked to nearly five hundred cases of a rare form of lymphoma.

My first symptoms were migraines. They lasted three days and occurred three times a month. Then, weakness in my right leg, numbness in my right arm, tingling in both, a sore shoulder and neck—to a point where I couldn't turn it. My family doctor gave me Maxalt for migraines, inflammation meds, and suggested massage. Nothing was helping. I started to have swelling in my feet and ankles and hands, my doctor said watch what you eat. I then went on water pills—I don't know why. My feet turned blue with broken blood vessels, joints all over started hurting; I couldn't stand up from bed. I had to stop working. I started tripping a lot. My doctor said, "It's your shoes." I fell in the bathroom and bruised my tailbone. I got shingles on my hip and horrible breakouts on my face. Sore joints, even elbows. My balance started to be way off; I fell going down three steps. My doctor then sent me to a neurologist. At this point, I had to get a cane. I asked if my implants could cause this and she laughed at me. Then I went to another neurologist, same thing. I looked up my symptoms online and realized it was breast implant illness. I called the plastic surgeon who put my implants in and his head nurse said, "Oh my goodness, you need them out." The next day she called and said the doctor doesn't take them out. I asked for records, and she said they had been destroyed. She said don't worry about it. I begged her for the name of the brand so I could find another doctor to remove them. She told me they were Allergan textured saline implants. I really thought I was dying. Finally, I found a doctor who would take them out. He said, "You have the ones that cause cancer." After surgery, my feet went back to a normal color. My twitching is almost gone; the numbness in my arms is gone. I'm still walking with a cane. When my implants came out, they were orange with black specks, I'm thinking mold. There are thirty different toxins in silicone shells—that plus saline in a ninety-eight degree body can grow mold. Well, that's my story. I have pictures but they won't upload.

warning. I got a call from Oakland as I was walking up Sixth Avenue in the West Village. "Hello?"

"I saw the spirit of witchcraft; someone was trying to manipulate you. Press the numerical button 1."

Visiting my brother in Los Angeles, I got a call from Fresno. "There is someone who has your name in their mouth. Press the numerical button 1. You have always been uneasy about them and this is why; press 1. You used to be around them and things are coming up now. Ushebe—press 1, press 1. We must break this thing before sundown; please press the numerical button 1 now."

Your situation is bad, the caller wants to convince you. You sensed it, and you were right

Someone is trying to cause you harm, and they're succeeding.

It's all very strange, but there were years when it might have seemed stranger. The news is only vaguely less eschatological. Mass shootings are carried out weekly at schools, synagogues, concerts: eleven dead, fifty-nine dead, seventeen dead. The deceased owner of a brothel called the Moonlite Bunny Ranch is posthumously elected to the Nevada state legislature. Nearly nine million acres burn; "historic" floods; "once in a generation" storms. So many people die of opioid overdoses that the national life expectancy falls for the first time in fifty years. North Korea brags that its missiles can easily reach Hawaii, and the United States dissolves a nuclear arms control treaty with Russia. Climate scientists revise an earlier prediction that a 2-degree rise in the earth's temperature would be irreversibly catastrophic to say that, actually, 1.5 degrees will do the trick—a point of no return for the planet that they're expecting to arrive not in fifty years but in fifteen.

In such days, the phone calls sound almost reassuringly in touch with the spirit of the times: this is going badly.

Even the language the evangelist uses in his pitch for "the numerical button one" sounds familiar. This was the call from Oakland on September 25: "They can no longer mess with your stuff. This has happened because of what they tried to mess with that is *yours*. Press the numerical button 1 now. God is about to go before you to fight what they're trying to do *to* you; press the numerical button 1 now. These are individuals that the enemy is using and institutes that the enemy is using to come against you. Press 1, press 1."

And another, on October 13, from Calistoga: "They will not take anything else from you. They tried to take your family your money your joy your peace your happiness—press 1, press 1—they will not be able to take anything else from you; this is the end of it; enough is enough. Press



The Occult Enthusiast, a painting by Hernan Bas, whose work was on view in January at Lehmann Maupin, in New York City.

the numerical button 1. You thought you would have been out of it by this year, you thought you would have been taken care of by now; press 1, press 1."

This is the era of being "robbed," the year of the con artist, the time of everyone losing out to someone else. Immigrants are coming to take your jobs, Republicans are coming to take your health care, angry women are coming for men's reputations and careers, straight white men are coming for your bodily autonomy, the police are coming for your life, trans people are coming for your bathrooms, the Democrats are coming for your guns, Silicon Valley is coming for your privacy, left-wing snowflakes are coming for your free speech, oil companies are coming for your land, and on and on. It's an incomplete and uneven list—some are valid fears, some are hate barely disguised—but the rhetoric of persecution

has become the national common denominator. The apocalyptic telephone preacher knows this. Someone is taking away from you what is rightfully yours, he says. There is someone to blame for your troubles, and I know who it is.

I keep waiting for this man to ask me for money. It's curious that a call of this nature doesn't come right out with a request, something along the lines of "For only six hundred and sixty-six dollars you can know the name of this usurper and I'll smite him for you." I can only assume that if I were ever to go ahead and press the numerical button 1, I'd be transferred to some kind of donation hotline or my number would be sold to hundreds of other evangelists, since, further research shows, robo-evangelism is its own cottage industry. But he never comes right out and asks. Instead he says simply, I know what ails you. You can know, too.



© THE ARTIST. COURTESY GAGOSIAN. PHOTO: FLORIAN KLEINEHANN

Untitled, pencil and bleach on paper mounted on canvas from the series *Les dessouvenus*, by Tatiana Trouwé, whose work was on view in January at Gagosian, in Beverly Hills, California.

Lately, it doesn't seem like what ails any one of us is simple enough for that. It's a big, ailing world, and like an idiot I keep picking up the phone. Not every day, but often enough that it's irrational. I keep wondering what he'll say.

[Recollection]

KOFTAESQUE

From an account told to Witold Szabłowski by Abu Ali, a former cook for Saddam Hussein. The story is included in Szabłowski's book *How to Feed a Dictator: Saddam Hussein, Idi Amin, Enver Hoxha, Fidel Castro, and Pol Pot Through the Eyes of Their Cooks*, which will be published in April by Penguin Books. Translated from the Polish by Antonia Lloyd-Jones.

One day, President Saddam Hussein invited some friends onto his boat. He took along sev-

eral bodyguards, his secretary, and me, his personal chef, and we set off on a cruise down the river Tigris. At the time, we weren't at war with anyone, everyone was in a good mood, and Salim, one of the bodyguards, said to me, "Abu Ali, sit down, you've got the day off today. The president says he's going to cook for everyone. He's going to make *koftas* for us."

"A day off." I smiled, because I knew that in Saddam's service there were no such words. And because there were going to be *koftas*, I started getting everything ready for the barbecue. I minced some beef and lamb and mixed them with tomato, onion, and parsley, then put it all in the fridge so that it would stick well to the skewers later on. Only then did I sit down.

In Iraq every man thinks he knows how to barbecue meat. He's going to do it even if he doesn't know how. And it was the same with Saddam: people often ate the things he cooked out of politeness; after all, you're not going to tell the president you don't like the food he has made. I didn't like it when he got down to cooking. But that time I thought to myself, "It's almost impossible to ruin *koftas*."

Half an hour later, Salim came back carrying a plate of *koftas*. “The president made some for you too,” he said. I thanked him and said it was very good of the president, broke off a bit of meat, and wrapped it in pita bread. I tried it and felt as if I’d burst into flames! “Water, quick, water!” I threw a glass of water down my throat, but it didn’t help. “More water!” My cheeks and jaw were burning, and there were tears pouring from my eyes. I was terrified. Poison? I thought. But why? What for? Or maybe someone was trying to poison Saddam, and I’ve eaten it?

I am still alive. So it wasn’t poison. But in that case, what was he playing at?

That was my first encounter with Tabasco sauce. Saddam had been given it by someone as a gift, but because he didn’t like very spicy food, he decided to play a joke by trying it out on his friends. And on his staff. Everyone on the entire boat was running around pouring water down their throats while Saddam sat and laughed.

Twenty minutes later, Salim came back to ask if I’d liked the food. I was furious, so I said, “If I’d spoiled the meat like that, Saddam would have kicked me in the butt and told me to pay for it.”

He did that sometimes. If he didn’t like the food, he’d make you give back the money. For the meat, the rice, or the fish. “This food is inedible,” he’d say. “You’ve got to pay fifty dinars.”

I never expected Salim to repeat this to the president. But when Saddam asked him how I’d reacted, that’s what he had said, in front of all Saddam’s guests. Saddam sent Salim back to fetch me. I was terrified. I had no idea how Saddam was going to react. You did not criticize him. Not the ministers, nor the generals, let alone a cook.

Saddam and his friends were sitting at the table. Some of the guests had red eyes; evidently, they’d eaten the Tabasco-flavored *koftas*, too. “I hear you didn’t like my *koftas*,” said Saddam, in a very serious tone. Everyone was looking at me. I couldn’t suddenly start praising the food; they’d know I was lying.

I started thinking about my family. I had no idea what might happen. But I wasn’t expecting anything good.

“You didn’t like them,” Saddam said again. And suddenly he started to laugh. Then all the people sitting at the table started laughing, too. Saddam took out fifty dinars, handed them to Salim, and said, “You’re right, Abu Ali, it was too spicy. I’m giving back the money for the meat I wasted. I’ll cook you some more *koftas*, but without the sauce this time. Would you like that?”

I said yes.

So he cooked me some *koftas* without any Tabasco. This time they were very good, but I tell you: it’s impossible to ruin *koftas*.

[Account]

AT THE MIND’S LIMITS

From transcripts of interviews conducted by David Stavrou with Sayragul Sauytbay, a Uighur woman from the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region of China, where the United Nations estimates that between one and two million Uighurs were held in internment camps in 2018. When Sauytbay was released in March 2018, after five months of imprisonment, she fled to Kazakhstan and reunited with her husband and children. The family was granted asylum in Sweden, where they now live. Portions of the interview were published in Haaretz in October of last year.

In November 2017, I was ordered to report to an address in the city’s suburbs, to leave a message at a phone number I had been given and to wait for the police. I did this, and when four armed men in uniform arrived, they covered my head and bundled me into a vehicle. After an hour’s journey we arrived at an unfamiliar place. I soon learned that this was a reeducation camp. I was told I had been brought there to teach Chinese and was immediately made to sign a document. I was very afraid to sign. It said that if I did not fulfill my task, or if I did not obey the rules, I would receive the death penalty. The document stated that I was forbidden to speak with the prisoners, forbidden to laugh, forbidden to cry, and forbidden to answer questions from anyone. I signed it because I had no choice, and then I received a uniform and was taken to a tiny bedroom with a concrete bed and a thin plastic mattress. There were five cameras on the ceiling—one in each corner and another one in the middle.

The other inmates lived in crowded sixteen-square-meter rooms occupied by twenty prisoners each. There were cameras in their rooms, too, and also in the corridor. Each room had a plastic bucket for a toilet. Every prisoner was given two minutes a day to use the toilet, and the bucket was emptied only once a day. If it filled up, you had to wait until the next day. The prisoners wore uniforms, their heads were shaved, and their hands and feet were shackled even as they slept. There were twenty-five hundred prisoners in the camp, all of them Uighur or Kazakh. The oldest person I met was a woman of eighty-four; the youngest, a boy of thirteen.

During the day, which started at 6 AM and ended at midnight, inmates had to learn Chinese, sing party songs, confess their crimes and moral offenses, and recite Communist Party propaganda slogans like “Thank you to the

Communist Party,” “I am Chinese,” and “I love Xi Jinping.”

We received three meals a day. All the meals included watery rice soup or vegetable soup and a small slice of Chinese bread. Meat was

[Lyrics]

MR. ME TOO

From lyrics referring to Donald Trump in rap songs catalogued by Genius.com.

Rich
Well-known
Over-tan
Orange
Pink
All-American
High drama
Living large
On the links
On the news
Making big money
Stacking paper
Grabbing tits
Running for office
Not equipped to take this country over
Got a lot of votes
Might actually be the president
Our president
POTUS
Ain't deserve that position
Got the nukes
Taunting K. Jong
Tweeted something
Arguing about nonsense
Calling favors
Taking dollars from y'all
Trying to build a fucking fence
Building the wall to stop the dope
Making racist remarks
Supporting white supremacists
Spreading that hatred
Fired his chief of staff
Bringing back the Reagan era
Might bring slavery back
The new Hitler
Not as bad as they say he is
Wants to make everything better
Talks real estate
Trying to make America great
My hero

served on Fridays, but it was pork. The inmates were compelled to eat it, even if they were religiously observant. Refusal brought punishment. There was no medical treatment, and they gave us pills that they told us prevented diseases, but the nurses secretly told me that the pills were dangerous and that I should not take them. Some prisoners who took the pills were cognitively weakened. Women stopped getting their period and there were rumors that men became sterile.

The only room that didn't have cameras was the Black Room, which was used to torture the prisoners. Some were hung on the wall and beaten with electrified truncheons. There were prisoners who were made to sit on a chair of nails. I saw people return from that room covered in blood. Some came back without fingernails.

The fate of the women in the camp was particularly harsh. On an everyday basis the policemen took the pretty girls with them, and the girls didn't come back to the rooms all night. The police had unlimited power. They could take whomever they wanted.

One day, the police told us they were going to check to see whether our reeducation was succeeding, whether we were developing properly. They took two hundred inmates outside—men and women—and told one of the women to confess her sins. She stood before us and declared that she had been a bad person, but now that she had learned Chinese, she had become a better person. When she was done speaking, the policemen ordered her to disrobe and raped her, one after the other, in front of everyone. While they were raping her, they checked to see how we were reacting. People who turned their heads or closed their eyes, and those who looked angry or shocked, were taken away, and we never saw them again. After that happened, it was hard for me to sleep at night.

[Vision]

A WALK TO REMEMBER

By Fenton Johnson, from At the Center of All Beauty: Solitude and the Creative Life, published this month by W. W. Norton.

When I imagine my death, I do not see myself surrounded by loved ones with music gently playing in the background, in a hospital



"A Little Piece of My Heart," a photograph by Giovanni Ozzola, whose work is on view this month at Galleria Continua, in Boissy-le-Châtel, France.

or a hospice or even in my own room, wherever it may be. I see myself alone. Animals, who are so much wiser than we and who so often know their time to die, do not seek out their owners or playmates or offspring, but find a remote corner or glade where they can accomplish this most private act in solitude.

In death I see myself alone, in a landscape where there is still winter. In my imagination I am standing outside the house in Kentucky, the house my parents built. On a cold, clear night after a great tongue of arctic air from Canada has passed through and the stars glitter against the infinitude of dark sky, I set out to walk the half mile or so to the river, the humble Rolling Fork of my childhood, crossing the flagstone patio, past the limestone table and the shop and the dead brown stalks of the frostbitten garden, climbing the fence—some advance planning is called for here, since the aged joints will balk—walking over the frozen, rutted field toward the bare-branched water maples and sycamores that

line the riverbank—trees that have populated my novels. There must be a moon, so let us have a moon, rising full over the frosted fields, their glitter matching that of the stars. Along the way I shed clothes, pausing long enough to fold each item neatly, leaving civilization behind, until I arrive at the river unclothed, naked to the stars. I want to think that I will have courage to do this with no more reinforcement than a shot of bourbon—enough to brighten but not dull the senses—in honor of those who came before and made my life possible, and in hopes that I have accomplished a small measure of the same for those who follow. There you will find my body, come the cold, bright blue morning, leaning against the great mottled sycamore of my dreams, happy to have left this world as I came into it, alone but not alone, content to join the company of those who have gone before, who made me who I am and who welcomed me back with open arms to our true and perfect home.

[Vocab]

TROYS AND GIRLS

By Anne Carson, from Norma Jeane Baker of Troy, a version of Euripides' *Helen*, published last month by New Directions. The play was performed last spring at the Shed's Griffin Theater, in New York City.

τραῦμα: wound

War creates two categories of persons: those who outlive it and those who don't. Both carry wounds.

CHANGING ATTITUDES: An ancient Homeric catalogue of battlefield trauma would include wounds to the eyeball, nose, palate, forehead, throat, collarbone, back of skull, nape of neck, upper arm, forearm, heart, lungs, liver, spleen, thigh, knee, shin, heel, ankle. Lasting psychological damage, however keen a concern of modern research, does not seem to have interested the ancient poet.

CONTINUITIES: On the other hand, Homer has given us Achilles, who went berserk in the midst of battle (*Iliad*), and Odysseus, who went berserk afterward (*Odyssey*), while Euripides makes a hero out of Helen, who was brutalized by merely staring at war too long.

TEACHABLE MOMENT: In Euripides' play *Helen*, we watch Helen watch her husband, Menelaus, as he ambushes and slaughters a boatload of unarmed people. She cheers him on, shouting, "Where is the glory of Troy? Show it to these barbarians!"

DISCUSSION TOPICS: Compare and contrast catching a spear in the spleen with utter mental darkness. Consider ancient vs. modern experience. Consider whether any of these is what is meant in poetry by "a beautiful death."

παλλακή: concubine

How do you define dirt? Here is what the ancient Greeks thought of it: dirt is matter out of place. The poached egg on your plate at breakfast is not dirt. The poached egg on page 202 of the Greek lexicon in the library of the British Museum is dirt. Dirt is something that has crossed a boundary it ought not to have crossed. Dirt confuses categories and mixes up form.

APPLICATIONS: Use this spatial hygiene to explain certain neoliberal neuroses. Because

the spooky thing about dirt, if you're a neoliberal, is that dirt is not passive. Dirt is coming to get you.

CASE STUDY: The noun for "concubine" in Greek comes from the verb that means "to sprinkle." A concubine is a stranger who sprinkles herself into someone else's household—as Helen does when she follows Paris to Troy—hoping to assimilate herself to the texture there. Helen does not belong in the house of Priam. She comes in tracking Greek mud all over the floor.

CAN YOU PASS: Assimilation is tricky. You have to invent a new self in a new household. Even Marilyn Monroe had trouble at the start. "When I signed my first autograph, I had to go slow. I wasn't too sure where the y went or where you put the i."

TEACHABLE MOMENT: Helen's very first appearance in history and literature, at verse 126–129 of the third book of Homer's *Iliad*, shows her sitting in her chamber in the palace of Priam, weaving. She is weaving a vast tapestry that depicts, minute by minute, the battle going on outside her window. Notice that Homer uses the verb "sprinkle" to describe how she embroiders the dooms of men into her web. Helen knows dirt. Helen is a death-sprinkler.

BATTLEFIELD CLICHÉ: Her thread is deep, dark red.

καιρός: opportunity

Think about bronze. It was the Bronze Age when the war at Troy took place (if it took place at all). Killing a man in full bronze armor—helmet, breastplate, greaves—was not an easy task. Two relatively small targets affording maximum bloody access were the neck and the groin, i.e., exposed areas at the top and bottom of the breastplate. A person wounded there would bleed out in a few hours. But for instant, certain death, you would aim your sword or spear or arrow or sharpened stick at the place where the helmet stopped above the eyes, the temple of the head. These three locations were called *καιρία*, mortal spots, from *καιρός*, which means "the exact right place and time for something to happen, the critical juncture, the perfect opportunity."

NOT YET IRONY: Notice *καιρός* has its accent on the final syllable. This same word with accent moved to the initial syllable, *καίρος*, was a technical term from the art of weaving to

indicate the thrums of the web or, more specifically, that critical point in space and time when the weaver must thrust her thread through a gap that momentarily opens in the warp of the cloth.

TEACHABLE MOMENT: We have already reflected on Helen's first appearance in Homer's *Iliad*, where she sits in her room live-streaming the war at Troy onto a tapestry. Her thread weaves in and out of living skulls.

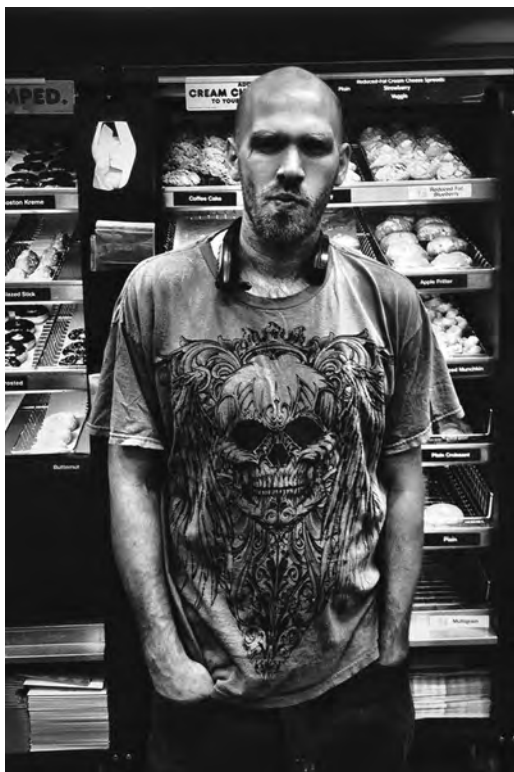
[Profiles]

NIGHTHAWKS AT THE DUNKIN'

By Jeff Sharlet, from *The Brilliant Darkness*, out last month from W. W. Norton. The book is composed of short essays about encounters Sharlet had while photographing strangers.

MIKE

The night shift is for me a luxury, the freedom to indulge my insomnia by writing at a Dunkin' Donuts, one of the only places open at midnight



where I live, up north on the river between Vermont and New Hampshire. Lately, though, my insomnia doesn't feel like such a gift. Too much to think about. So click, click goes the camera—the phone—looking for other people's stories to fill the hours. This is Mike; he's thirty-four, he's been a night baker for a year, and tonight's his last shift. Come 6 AM, "no more uniform." He's says he's going to be a painter. What kind? "Well, I'm painting a church..." He means the walls. The new job started early, too. "So I'm working, like, eighty-hour days." He means weeks. He's tired. He doesn't like baking. Rotten pay, rotten hours, rotten work. "You don't think. It's just repetition." Painting, you pay attention. "You can't be afraid up there." The ladder, up high. "I'm not afraid," he says. "I can do anything." He says he could be a carpenter. "But it hasn't happened." Why does he bake? "Couldn't get a job." Work's like that, he says—there are bad times. Everything's like that, he says. There are bad times.

"Who's the tear for?" The tattoo by his right eye.

"For my son," he says, "who died when he was two months old."

KELLY

Kelly's twenty-seven. She started baking doughnuts when she was seven. "My mother was the night baker before me," she says. "If I was, you know, 'naughty,' she took me with her."

Kelly followed that routine for years. She quit. She returned. She's been working here a year and a half, a night baker like her mother.

She takes her smoke breaks out front, because there's no camera out back. "We've been robbed," she says. A man walked in the back door, emptied the safe. Kelly wasn't working. "I'm just lucky," she says.

She's quitting again in two weeks. She's going to be a security guard, night shift. "Fifteen dollars an hour." The sum makes her marvel. She won't mind the hours. She doesn't like days.

"The night shift," she says, "I'm wired for it." She's a natural. But she'll back, she says. For coffee. "I don't eat doughnuts anymore."

THE NURSE

Night nurse for thirteen years and that was enough, at least for a while. She was good with difficult children. The troubled ones, the violent ones: she knew how to calm them. Night nurse thirteen years; she couldn't take it anymore. "But I'll go back," she says. "This is just for a little while."

She and her wife used to live in the city. Manchester, New Hampshire. "It's a tough town," she says. "We didn't want to do it anymore." They decided to move to the country, roughly speaking; they have an apartment near the highway and the hospital. "What changed was my daughter," she says. "My daughter is three years old. I didn't want



her growing up around that." Manchester, New Hampshire. "It can be a very tough town."

Night shift at Dunkin' Donuts, a few months now. "I shouldn't be here," she says. But she is. "My daughter will be safer."

PERI

Peri likes her curves. When she visits Dunkin' Donuts, she finds she needs to do a lot of stretching. Lean, arch, twist. She smiles; she

flirts a little with Mike behind the counter. I wanted to take a picture of her pretty like that, happy. 1:15 AM.

She's the night manager at the Taco Bell next door. She trades Taco Bell for Dunkin', quesadillas for coffee, two or three cups a shift. She used to manage a Wendy's down in Dover,



New Hampshire. "I'm a city girl," she says. Concord, then New Jersey, then Dover, then here, which is the least like a city of all.

She was at Wendy's for eight years. One night, smoke break, Peri got robbed. "2:38 AM," she says. She wraps herself in her arms. A man with a gun and zip ties. He said there were more men waiting. Peri screamed. He took \$3,000. He took somebody's truck. Peri waited for him to be gone. "I could smoke," she says. Hands zip-tied together, she'd held on to her cigarette. That's what she remembers. And: "I thought about my daughter." One year old. Peri couldn't take chances anymore. That night, zip-tied, she decided to move. That's how she came here. She says they caught the stickup man. "He said he did it for his family." She doesn't believe him.

[Fiction]

SPELLBOUND

By Fernanda Melchor, from the novel Hurricane Season, which will be published this month by New Directions. Translated from the Spanish by Sophie Hughes.

They say she never really died, because witches don't go without a fight. They say that, at the last minute, just before those kids stabbed her, she transformed herself into something else:

a lizard or a rabbit, which scurried away and took cover in the heart of the bush. Or into the giant raptor that appeared in the sky in the days following the murder: a great beast that swept in circles above the crops and then perched on the branches of the trees to peer at the people below with its red eyes, as if wanting to open its beak and speak to them.

They say there was no shortage of people who entered that house looking for the treasure after her death. The moment they heard whose body had been found floating in the irrigation canal, they raced with shovels and picks and sledgehammers to demolish the walls and dig holes like trenches in the floor looking for hidden doors, for secret rooms. Rigorito's men were the first to show up; on the chief's orders they even broke down the door to the room at the end of the hallway, the room belonging to the Old Witch that had remained locked ever since she'd disappeared years earlier. They say that neither Rigorito nor his men could stand the spectacle awaiting them there: the black mummy of the Old Witch lying supine in the middle of the solid oak bed, the corpse that began to flake and crumble right before their eyes, ending up a heap of bone and hair. They say those pussies skipped town, never to return; although some people claim that's not true, that what really happened was that Rigorito and his men did in fact discover the famous treasure hidden in the Old Witch's room—gold and silver coins, priceless jewels, and that ring with a rock so big anyone would assume it was glass—and that they swiped the lot before taking off in Villa's sole police car. They say that, at some point after driving through Matacocuile, greed made Rigorito lose his senses and he decided to kill his men so that he wouldn't have to share the bounty. They say he told them to hand over their guns and then shot each one in the back; they say he cut off their heads narco-style to

throw the authorities off the scent and then sped off with all that money to an unknown destination. But others say that's impossible and that Rigorito's men killed him first, six against one; probably what happened was that those policemen came face-to-face with the first of the Raza Nueva crew making their way down from the north, sweeping up the mess that the Grupo Sombra left behind at the oil fields, and that they were the ones who knocked off those officers and probably also the chief himself, whose body will turn up before long at the scene of some shootout, perhaps

[Poem]

ELECTRIC

By Emily Skillings, from a manuscript in progress.

In the dream I wrote this poem called "Electric."

Somehow I got the *t* in the middle of the title

to wiggle. All the words of the poem

were crossed out with clay-colored lines

that ran through like fences or wires.

I could only see the tops and bottoms of the letters.

When I scraped the words of the poem with a knife

like a scratch card, the text remained hidden

behind opalescent scars

which hovered and shifted, "cloudlike,"

wherever my eyes rested. I put the shavings

under a big lens, and it seemed to me that was the real poem.

I remain unsure of what it said. The sound attached was red,

almost "a berry caught in an engine." I do not think

I want to write anymore. I haven't in many months.

One line occurs to me and repeats. It will not make way.

But here, still, is the knife in my right hand.

also mutilated, showing signs of torture and bearing cardboard signs with messages for Cuco Barrabás and the other members of the Grupo Sombra clan.

They say the place is hot, that it won't be long before they send in the marines to restore order in the region. They say the heat's driven the locals crazy, that it's not normal—May and not a single drop of rain—and that hurricane season's coming hard, that it must be bad vibes, jinxes, causing all that bleakness: decapitated bodies; maimed bodies; rolled-up, bagged-up bodies dumped on the roadside or in hastily dug graves on the outskirts of town. Men killed in shootouts and car crashes and revenge killings between opposing clans; rapes, suicides, "crimes of passion," as the journalists call them. Like that twelve-year-old kid who killed his girlfriend in a jealous rage on discovering that she was pregnant with his father's baby, down in San Pedro Potrillo. Or the farmer who shot his son when they were out hunting and told the police he'd mistaken him for a badger, even though everyone knew the father had his eyes on the son's wife—he'd

even been creeping around with her behind the kid's back. Or that headcase from Palogachó, the one who said her children weren't her children, that they were vampires out to suck her blood, which is why she bashed those kiddies to death with planks of wood that she wrenched from the table, and with the wardrobe doors, and even the television set. Or that other miserable bitch who suffocated her little girl, jealous of all the attention the husband gave her, so she just took a blanket and held it over the girl's face until she stopped breathing. Or those bastards from Matadepita who raped and killed four waitresses and whom the judge let off because the witness never showed, the one who'd accused them. They say he was bumped off for being a snitch, and those cunts are still out there, like nothing ever happened...

They say that's why the women are on edge, especially in La Matosa. They say that, come evening, the women gather on their porches to smoke filterless cigarettes and cradle their youngest babes in their arms, blowing their peppery breath over those tender crowns to shoo away the mosquitoes, basking in what little breeze reaches them from the river, when at last the town settles into silence and you can just about make out the music coming from the highway brothels in the distance, the rumble of the trucks as they make their way to the oil fields, the baying of dogs calling to one another like wolves from one side of the plain to the other; the time of evening when the women sit around telling stories with one eye on the sky, looking out for that strange white bird that perches on the tallest trees and watches them with a look that seems to want to tell them something. That they mustn't go inside the Witch's house, probably; that they mustn't walk past or peek through the yawning holes that now stud its walls. A look warning them not to let their children go searching for that treasure, not to dream of going down there with their friends to rummage through those tumbledown rooms or to see who's got the balls to enter the room upstairs at the back and touch the stain left by the Old Witch's corpse on the filthy mattress. To tell their children how others have run screaming from that place, faint from the stench that lingers inside, terror-stricken by the vision of a shadow that peels itself off the walls and chases you out of there. To respect the dead silence of that house, the pain of the miserable souls who once lived there. That's what the women in town say: there is no treasure in there, no gold or silver or diamonds or anything more than a searing pain that refuses to go away.

[Trash]

MOBY SICK

From items found in the stomachs of dead whales since 2010, as described in news reports.

Fishing nets
Bundles of rope
Corrugated tubing
Duct tape
Shopping bags
Banana bags
Rice sacks
Yogurt containers
Instant-noodle packaging
Bottles
Cups
Plates
Flower pots
Towels
Flip-flops
Shoe soles
Gloves
Sweatpants
Laundry detergent



Heaven Is a Place, a painting by Arghavan Khosravi, whose work was on view last month at Stems Gallery, in Brussels.