

New Fiction from Thomas Mixon: “Strong Feelings of Sympathy and Horror”



A little stoned, on the screen porch facing the invisible grunts of New Hampshire spring peepers. Something night, something woods, something long sleeve. Lou looks down into mostly darkness. They can barely see the plaid pattern. One of Alex's, figures. You can swear off a person, but still wake in the middle of the night wearing her damn shirt you swear you didn't go to bed in. You can be a person, listening to thawed frogs, little creatures literally frozen the month before, and only hear her voice, though it's been two months since she's been gone, only taking half her clothes.

The two of them made it through the pandemic, the election, Lou's own thaw, cracked egg, the fucking whirlwind of body and mind and for once in their fucking life not having to deal

with it alone, coming out stronger on the other side, all those cliches. Alex going back to school, Lou moving north for her, buying a house neither could afford separately, making fun of the debt, together, making fun of work, leaving work, making fun of the Olympics, fuck you Intel, fuck you AI, fuck you 2032, working off a little laptop in the forest, tall trees on all sides swaying in the wind like they're bound to fall, but they don't, or, OK they do sometimes, but not on the house, far away. The turbulence of the 2020s transitioning to perpetual hurricunt of the new decade, tyfool, all puns but no groan, Alex gone.

Gone over such a stupid thing, compared to everything before. Lou gives the finger to complacency, somewhere in the nearby vernal pools, with one hand, undoes the buttons on Alex's flannel with the other. They open the door and throw the shirt into the yard. Half-dressed and shivering, they root around in the dark for the rest of their ex's wardrobe, tossing pants and hats out the windows. Living up here, can't even have a proper blowup scene, end of a dirt road, no chance of anyone driving by and wondering why the mess. Had they broken up in Mass, they could have given the suburbs the expected show. But no, they were fucking bulletproof, made it through everything, only to lose it after all the hard things. Now it's all soft things, mud, rain, hurt by flannel, hurt by others' smiles, smiling back, pretending to everyone at their new job that they are this quirky and fun kid who happens to be in their mid-thirties. It's cool. Yeah, I love New Hampshire. No, not born here. Why'd I come? You all have the best maple syrup. Change the subject. Hey, look at my new piercing!

#

The unicopters paused over the New Hampshire State House, longer than planned. There were just under 200 in the sky, hovering quietly above the gathered, applauding, crowd. They had left from Hanover that morning; another crowd, a set of speeches, the procession of the chosen students, standing

before the doors of each aircraft as they opened automatically. June, the semester had just ended, the passengers mostly undergrads heading home. These models could make it safely to Michigan, to the west, the Carolinas, down south; all autonomous, all single occupancy, electric, and irritatingly plastered with Live Free or Die, on the sides.

That they had to pass over the State House first, before scattering to their destinations, was ridiculous, political, unnecessary. The design had come from two Dartmouth grads; for years they had tried to get the state to invest, no luck. New Hampshire only kicked in a little bit, at the end, once it was clear these things were special, were getting buzz. The state stamped their motto at the last minute, so the football field still reeked of paint, as everyone waved the unicopters off.

Downtown Concord was a mess of closed streets and temporary grandstands, so Lou drove in from the east, parked in a strip mall lot across the Merrimack River, and walked along the Route 9 bridge toward the ceremonies. They wished they had a hat, even one of Alex's, lost to the forest; it was hot and stupidly muggy. They wished their camera worked; their phone was cracked and stupidly old. Mostly they wished they could have thought of a good reason not to attend. They were not, and had no desire to be, a real journalist. But, they had forty pages of magazine to fill by end of summer, and this little show was sadly the biggest thing in New Hampshire.

At least since the legislature passed the latest round of abortion restrictions, at the end of their spring session. A month ago, GOP clowns barely containing their glee, emboldened by the new governor, leaning in to the fucking circus mentality of the campaign, egging on the protestors, begging for a pie in the face, wearing chunks of banana cream on their foreheads for days, defiance kink, ringmaster high. The opposition did their best, showed up, filed lawsuits. But it wasn't looking good.

Lou passed a small band of them, protestors holding signs, snakes in the shapes of uteri, Margaret Atwood-inspired bonnets, homemade everything. The demonstration was being kept far back from the festivities; even most of them stopped chanting, when they saw the first of the copters take its place downtown, waiting with the clouds, for the others.

A small square past Storrs Street. Eagle something? Atrium? Umbrellas, brick, a good enough view of the sky without Lou needing to push further on, close enough to the action.

Of course, in retrospect, it was still too close. The swarm of machines dipped in unison. Just a little bit; the cheering turned to one collective gasp. Then faint clapping again, as they all ascended back to their original altitude. Hmm, didn't think that was part of the program. Lou tried to check their phone; stupid thing, too slow. Then the things dipped again, but seemingly at random. The little vessels jerked groundward, then back up. Something wasn't right. No one was clapping anymore.

The Republican Speaker of the House found a microphone, started asking people to remain calm and – wasn't able to finish his sentence. The unicopters started plummeting, on the crowd, on the State House, on the street. There were explosions, fragments of bone and tar, screams. Lou was knocked down some steps as the crowd ran. They dragged themselves as far as they could to the side, under the lone umbrella that hadn't yet been overturned. They covered their head and heard the parade of impacts, all down North Main, panicked footfalls of those separated in the confusion, survivors moaning and circling tragedy in real time. They stayed down until someone (a medic? not in uniform) shook their arm. Lou swatted the hand away, limped past people running in all directions, until they reached the highway, crossed the median in a daze, stupidly, and sat with their back against the guardrail, facing away from the disaster, toward the river.

#

By the time their leg feels good enough to cross the bridge back, they've forgotten which lot they've parked in. To Lou, it seems at least an hour must have passed since the mayhem, yet firetrucks are still streaming in, the echoes from shouts and glass breaking still bouncing off, one can see even from the river, an unrecognizable downtown.

It may as well be a different country, the other side of the Merrimack, though. Plenty of cars in all the lots, people walking into stores. Lou's got the vague sense they should call someone, but no names pop into their head, let alone a string of digits. They follow a family into Books A Million, hypnotized by the group's normal gait, the unfazed parents, the unpretentious children.

When they see a photo of the newest iPhone on one of the magazines, amongst the periodicals, they get the bright idea to look at their own phone. Still unsure who to dial, Lou tries someone named Mary it looks like they tried to call fourteen times this morning. Line disconnected, odd. They then pick a name at random from their contacts, Lionel. No luck either, but wow the guy's timbre is soothing, on his voicemail. Lou's lucky it's one of those long ones, where the person must be wonderfully eminent, conscientious, and leaves a ton of info, who else to reach out to in case of something urgent. Considerate, beautiful. They are murmuring into the device, mindless appreciations, without hearing the beep, not realizing they are leaving a message.

They see someone wearing a "Tamra" name badge, in a Books a Million polo, watching them with concern over the racks.

"Excuse me, where is Lionel."

"Lionel? Are you lost?"

"It's just, he's got a, very sonorous."

"There's no Lionel working here."

"Tamra though, that's a pretty name..."

And then they pass out.

#

Smell of burnt coffee, Bates Motel cushioning. Must be in the cafe section.

Lou shifts from slumped to sitting, unnecessarily dusts themselves off. Tamra is holding a phone.

"There's no need, I'm fine."

"Er, you fainted."

"I haven't eaten." Lou blinks, scans the cafe menu without taking in the words.

"I wouldn't," Tamra warns. "But, water."

She's back in second, somehow, with a glass of mostly cubes, and a little piece of paper.

"What's that?" Lou asks, chewing the ice.

"From the community board." Tamra hands them a card. "If you need it."

Lou reads aloud. "Crisis Center of Central New Hampshire."

"You can use my phone if you're in trouble."

"I was, it was." They look around for a TV. It's a cafe, not a sports bar, so. "Are we, under attack?"

"OK I'm definitely calling the police."

Lou scoffs. "I think they're busy."

Tamra hesitates, puts the phone away, looks out the front

window. "It's awful."

"Yeah, I slept bad before, so, this will be fun."

"Wait, you were there?"

"Barely, I was lucky."

"Um you look like shit."

"Um yeah it was a fucking horror show."

"Sorry, I mean, sorry. You just, I wasn't sure."

"If I looked like shit?"

"No, you do."

"Thanks."

"You kept saying something about Lionel."

Nice voice, Massachusetts, Cultural Council. Ah, all coming back now. "Someone I used to work with."

"Yeah. I thought like, abusive boyfriend, and..." Tamra trails off.

"Not quite, or, never."

"You're not in trouble?"

"I think I just strained, pulled something."

"Or, you know, PTSD."

"Time will tell, Tamra. I'm Lou."

"I already know. I'm crazy."

"Crazy like clairvoyant crazy?"

"Almost. I remembered your septum piercing."

Lou lifts their hand to their nose. Barbell still there, no tearing.

"Where?"

"Aren't you, working at *NOM* now?"

"Interesting, it's, not that big a publication..."

"I flip through every page of every magazine we get."

"Is that your department or something?"

"Nope, just control freak type thing."

Lou tries standing. Nope. "Do you still have a copy?"

"Blah, it was last month, so no," Tamra says, sitting down. Finally.

This is nice. "That's OK," Lou says, instead.

"You don't have one?"

"I do, plenty. I was just going to tear my photo out."

"What! You looked cute."

"It's insane, that they'd do a profile on me."

"I think sweet, you looked cute."

"I was just *supposed* to be the tech grunt, website content."

"K, you already get a promotion then?"

"Sort of. The Editor, she just, up and left."

"For real, forever?"

"Absconded to Massachusetts."

"Smart lady."

"Mary, yeah, that's who Mary is."

"You're doing that mumbling thing, again."

"You said I was cute, two times."

"You were, are."

"Sorry. I'm mad with power." Lou stands, stable enough.

"I like it."

"I don't. I think I'm the new Editor."

When Lou leaves, they're still holding the Crisis Center card, Tamra's number penned on the back.

#

The details on the malfunction are released within days. It may not be a malfunction. A young postdoc fellow at Dartmouth, Cindy, is being held in federal custody. Suspicious syntax in her code, an unusual amount of commented sections. She says it's poetry. But officials are wary. They have avoided releasing anything thus far, but today a few sections were leaked to the press.

*nh failure / experiment that only ends / with everyone
pretending / autonomy means just for men*

*sycophants pull down / their pants to check who's hardest /
whose dick swells most for hurting girls / who's the best bad
bill / filer the granite state / has yet to spawn*

*i wish the adamantine beasts / below the flying blades / meet
some sunny day / and crushed concrete / is indistinguishable /
from their meat*

Oof. That last one. Sounds damning, but, what does Lou know about verse?

They are looking up the word “adamantine,” when the first submission comes in. It arrives from the contact us link on NOM’s website. Lou still doesn’t have access to all Mary’s folders, inboxes, and has been dreading getting a complaint via the generic comment box, or a question they have no idea how to or if to respond to.

The submission’s not a complaint. It’s, more poetry. From someone “South of Manchester but with a White Mountains ethos.”

They say calamities insist

The weakest parts of us

Fall from our souls

And leave remaining

Only our best

To wrest the metal

Back in place.

This time, we rest

Only when our roads

Sparkle with a diamond

Shine, and we remember

Them, the blessed,

Who gave their lives

Without knowing why,

So we could attest

To undivided spirit,

Present, stressed,

Yes, but unbroken.

Lou is thinking, that was, sincere? Then they get another submission. And another. Some with real names attached, others anonymous. Lou wants to write each back, make sure they know they're writing to a quarterly mostly food magazine. But, they make a new folder on the desktop, arrange them by time received, start playing with the layout, for a few, just in case.

By the end of the week, they have more than enough to go cover to cover. It would be a departure, but Mary's run a few pages of poems before, when no new restaurants were opening, when the magazine couldn't feasibly do another feature on the same corn maze or apple orchard it had already covered extensively, multiple times during previous seasons.

The question still remains, is sincerity enough? There are some obvious bad ones, but the majority seem, just fine, maybe a little trite, but how original can you be about a bloodbath that's captured the entire country's attention? Lou could get away with this, devoting an entire issue to these remembrances, these little poignancies, in honor of everyone injured or dead. Lou needs to get away with this, they've got literally nothing else. Accounts locked, Mary missing; shit, this is really how it is.

They send an email to the lawyer representing Cindy, why the hell not. Maybe she'll elaborate on her leaked lines. Certainly not expecting an exclusive, her freshest criminal justice metaphors, not to *NOM*, at least. But, Lou's thinking of a front cover. If they could get permission to use something from the villain (plaintiff...) herself, that would definitely get some attention, sell some ad space for the fall.

They make a call. Tamra answers.

"I was wondering how long you'd take."

"Tell me everything you know about poetry."

#

Turns out, not much. But, Tamra suggests an outing. Flyer she's seen tacked to the Books a Million community board, picture of a peace sign, open mic night in Warner, thirty minutes north or so, at a cafe called Warless, local poets promised.

Warner, interesting. Lou may not be a reporter, but some easy searches show that's where Cindy grew up, graduated high school from, a decade ago. If she wasn't being held in federal prison, who knows, maybe the kind of place she'd hang out, congregate with rural creatives, farm type beatniks.

While Lou's driving up there, Lionel calls.

"Please tell me you are not still in New Hampshire."

"I am still in New Hampshire."

"Come back to civilization, Lou!"

"Don't you know I'm very important now."

"How bad was it?"

"Twisted ankle. Lots of smoke. Things I can never unsee."

"Jesus, Lou. I really thought, when Alex left."

"I'd rather not say, the mortgage, a lot."

"Mass real estate is insane."

"Yeah I'm stuck here. Got a date, though."

"Hot damn! Go get em, tiger."

"Tyger, tyger, burning bright..."

"Impressive. All the readings I invited you to."

"I know. I'm late to the game."

"Poetry is very serious, Lou, not a game."

"I'm headed to an open mic night, right now."

"For your date?"

"Yeah, work maybe, too."

"Good luck, have fun."

"If I need some like, line break, advice..."

"You call me. You call me if you need to escape south, also."

"I did call you, your voicemail saved me, I think."

"I'm not kidding. Your state is devolving."

"They just copy Texas, Alabama, we'll get a heads-up."

"Do you think that kid fucked with the code?"

"Fuck if I know, Lionel. I wouldn't blame her, though. Is that OK?"

"Suffering aside, in a vacuum, lots of people would agree."

"New Hampshire's worse than devolving."

"Seriously I know some well-off jerks, love to have you, however long Lou."

"New Hampshire's a fucking hole, a black hole, it for real sucks in all the loonies nearby, your state, the Berkshires aren't all Tanglewood and roses."

"I know, there's a new gun shop, down the road from the Norman

Rockwell museum.”

“Idiots in Vermont, idiots in western Maine, pent up rage from worse people in better states than mine, who come here, to fulfill their worseness.”

“I pray for women, every day.”

“Gonna take more than prayers, Lionel.”

“Amen. Have a fun time tonight.”

#

Warless Cafe is attached to the back of the town’s Unitarian Universalist church. Lou meets Tamra outside, little hug, both squeeze onto a bench near the order counter. Inside, the place is packed, mostly because it’s small, probably thirty people or so. Lou’s steadying their coffee as the barista keeps walking past, delivering drinks. Tamra’s balancing a BLT on a plate, on her lap, it falls, she lets out a big sigh and eye roll.

They talk briefly between poets reading elegies very similar to the ones Lou’s received since the tragedy. Maybe it’s the setting, this unsubtle conscientious objector vibe in here, lots of protest photos on the wall, that makes each recitation feel tired. Like, how terrible how terrible the wounds, but also how strong how strong we must be, we must not meet violence with violence, we must acknowledge the pain, but seek counsel with our better angels.

You know. No details of the shards of glass and human flesh bouncing past the bystanders’ faces. Where’s the poem like that? For sure, it would kill the mood in here, but Tamra already seems bored. Maybe Lou’s paying too much attention to the acts? They try to ask Tamra about the bookstore, or her life, or anything. Is she still mad about the BLT? Wasn’t this her idea, what else did she expect from a small town? Lionel

wouldn't be caught dead in here. It's nothing great, but again, it never promised to be, the cafe name is a bad pun, should be a warning, right off.

Lou's about to suggest maybe they go out for drinks, real drinks, somewhere else, instead. But then the barista passes them again, delivering nothing but himself to the microphone stand. He's about to speak, puts a finger up, behind the counter briefly, dims the lights, giddily reappears. A ham, yeah, so Lou's expecting something very melodramatic. But the guy starts performing a, poem? Something, from memory, or he's making it up on the spot. It sounds, a lot like Cindy. Bits about the hopelessness of men, how they're the dregs, some strange metaphors involving sediment, gathering up useless matter, setting it ablaze. It doesn't make a ton of sense, it contradicts itself. It has hushed the crowd. Even the what-seems-to-be regular knitting club clique near the back, stop their work, listen.

The barista excoriates the state. Begs for annexation from Canada, Mass, New York, anyone. He speaks of his hometown and the shame, the shame of still being here, and strangely the people here, in this very hometown, are nodding their heads. At the end, he references Cindy's last name, in a long list of names, of those working towards disMENbering the status quo, misquotes her leaked code:

anyone defending / autonomy for men / is good as dead / already

When he's done, the lights go back up, it's intermission, Joan Baez on the speakers. He thanks the other barista, is about to make someone a latte, does a double take. He walks right up to Lou, bends down, peers close at their face, rummages through the book rack near the entrance, comes back to the bench holding the previous month's pages of *NOM*.

"Please don't do a feature on us."

"Jesus, if I knew a nose ring would, do this."

"I beg you. The food is terrible."

"Wouldn't know, you knocked my date's sandwich over."

He appears to notice Tamra for the first time. Gives her the once over.

"I may have saved you from diarrhea, for real."

"Refund, apology?"

Tamra is standing up, is adjusting her bag as she gives a weird wave.

"Soooo I should be heading back."

"You sure?"

"Yeah, I'll call."

"Um OK."

She leaves. The barista sits down next to Lou, who is still processing the goodbye.

"That's some shitty customer service."

"I'm not kidding, the bread's stale."

"I kind of do now, wanna write something."

"This is me, imploring you."

"We're technically a lifestyle publication..."

"The owner, he's delusional, cheap."

"...with merely a heavy focus on food."

"So *NOM*, like Not Only Meals?"

"North of Manchester."

"That's classist as fuck."

"You're rude as fuck."

"I'm Zeke, I'm sorry, where's your friend?"

"My date, probably blocking my number."

"Could be worse, in federal prison."

"You know Cindy?"

"Know her? We were practically the same person."

"So you should be locked up, too?"

"Maybe, if anyone would publish me."

"That why you never left home?"

"Low blow. I did move out, last year."

"You stayed here, though, in town."

"Yeah. Cindy was always way smarter."

"She's on trial for conspiracy."

"Wait here."

Lou shouldn't. Zeke seems like a tool, Tamra's stormed off, they already have enough material for the fall issue, last thing they need are angry musings from a semi-eloquent hick.

What Zeke brings back to the bench, though, aren't poems. They're pictures. The first ones he pulls out he says aren't the best; it's Cindy being presented with medals, trophies, in various auditoriums, in her teen years.

"She was, is, a genius. Math bowl, debate, spelling bees."

He shows Lou more. The good ones. Photos of Cindy writing in the hallway of some school building, head down, in a notebook. Apart from the awards photos, and a few with her laughing next to an awkward looking younger Zeke, she is alone. She is jotting down something furiously, or gazing off into a distant space. She is walking her dog in the dark, lost in thought. She is in her car, arms straight out, but chin thrust to the roof, exasperated. She is someone New Hampshire was bound to lose, one way or another. She is presented first place ribbons, pinned to her by quote reasonable men, who denounce very obvious evils, like the Confederate flag, but who then, since they are so quote reasonable, take their self-assessed moderate cred, and come up with quote sensible voting restrictions, laws for female bodies, lower taxes to make the schools quote earn their place in the community. They were going to lose Cindy. They have her in custody, but they've lost her.

#

The state loses Lou, too, shortly after Zeke gives them the albums.

They accepted the photos, the good ones, decided to scrap the poem content, publish a whole issue with portraits of Cindy inside. They left Warless, Warner, tried to call Tamra, had no luck, emailed Cindy's lawyer again. Zeke swore he had permission, owned the copyright, everything was taken with his camera, but Lou wanted to make sure.

A week went by, nothing from the lawyer, simplistic texts from Tamra, she saying no no all is good, just busy, maybe in a couple weeks? The New Hampshire Legislature, in a special session held in honor of their fallen colleagues, doubled down on the abortion law, no exemptions for incest, rape. Then, they passed a real Rumpelstiltskin of a state terrorism bill, everyone who read it said it couldn't pass federal muster, everyone who didn't read it chanted its talking points, loved

it, considered it law already.

The lawmakers must have directed the state troopers to their positions, as well, comprehensive strategy, scary version of safety. Lou hadn't been keeping up with the local news. They were stressed, they were picturing overturned cars as they showered, as they slept. They were out of weed.

Down to Massachusetts, since it *still* wasn't legal in New Hampshire. As they crossed from Nashua to Tyngsboro, they noticed the brown and yellow Dodge Charger, not hiding at all, parked right behind the *Bienvenue!* Lou assumed they were being paranoid, pulled into the gas station instead, but sure enough the state trooper pulled out, as soon as the first NH plate to leave the dispensary did, crossed over the border, lights on. Oh fuck that. They tried Methuen, same thing, even goddamn Salisbury, little beachbum Salisbury had a cop on the north side of Lafayette, ready to pounce.

They couldn't go more east, the ocean, didn't feel like going more south, so headed back towards Concord only to collect their things and call Lionel, to ask for his wealthy friends' numbers.

#

A little stoned, in the basement of a retired college president's harborfront villa, Boston, board member of the Humanities something. Lou gets an email from Cindy's lawyer. No, the defendant does not authorize any use of her writing or likeness, for any popular culture publication. Furthermore, the defendant has no idea who any person named Zeke is, strongly advises that any purportedly consensual images be immediately destroyed. Anything less than full cooperation will result in...

Lou zooms in on the photos, the ones with Zeke and Cindy together. Shit, of course those are photoshopped. Of course they almost went to press with the collected works of a

stalker as their total content. Of course they try Mary again, line still disconnected, decide to leave a rabid voicemail on a completely rando person's number.

They could reinsert all the mediocre poems, still make the printer's deadline, but they draft something for *NOM's* website, instead.

The resignation is not necessary, will not be read by many. Lou types up their account of the devastation. It lacks sentiment, dwells on the lone umbrella left to them to shield their body, their head, from debris. They work themselves into a sweat, remembering. They take off their shirt, it gets stuck on their septum piercing. They yank the cotton and accidentally rip the ring out. It bleeds, it hurts, Lou curses, Lou cries. Lou takes a picture of their own, uploads the wound underneath their homepage statement. They google "great disaster" and find this, from a 1912 *New York Times* op-ed:

"...the hundreds and hundreds of people who have sent us verses about the loss of the Titanic...may be moved to share our own wonderment at the audacity they showed in attempting to deal with such a subject. For very few of those hundreds and hundreds of people had any other excuse for trying to write, other than the fact that the great disaster had excited in them strong feelings of sympathy and horror. They all took it for granted that, being thus moved, their verses would give poetical expression to their emotions."

And then, below the picture of their inflamed nostrils, they list the names, actual and fake, of every person who sent the magazine some stanzas. Just the names, no comments about or excerpts from their work. They close their laptop, dial Alex.

"Why are you calling me." No pleasantries, icy. She left in winter and forever wrapped the season around her.

"We're both on the mortgage," Lou says, throwing up in their

mouth a little.

"We had an agreement."

So did we, Lou wants to say. "I left, I'm never setting foot in New Hampshire again."

"Good, don't blame you."

"You must know someone in real estate."

"I'll get on it, this weekend, Lou."

"Handle it, everything."

"That's fair, thanks."

"Just take care of it Alex." Also, I still love you, but better to be all business, aloud, and romantic on all the silent frequencies, where it doesn't count for shit.

"Fine, Lou, but I'm not splitting –"

"And don't ever call me again."

"What? You called me –"

They hang up. Another edible. They ruin the retired college president's towels. They make good on their word; in the future, they don't so much as cross the Ipswich River. Cindy is found guilty. Zeke moves back in with his parents. Tamra takes off for Burlington. Lionel passes away, respected and loved. There's another attack, another draft. Warless in Warner goes up for sale, is turned into a tanning salon. Unicopters become ubiquitous, but are called something else, and look different. Amateurs write banal but mostly harmless rhyming couplets. A few idiots are prosecuted for incitement. Many idiots are not prosecuted for upholding the "law," denying human rights because a bunch of doofs wrote down their discrimination and got some other doofs to sign it. The UN is ignored. The Supreme Court's expanded, but it doesn't go well,

it gets worse. A lot is ricocheted, lobbed through the air without much force, returns stronger than anticipated. A lot of people don't like this, a lot do.

On the next major anniversary of the sinking of the ship, the *New York Times* reprints the op-ed Lou found. With every tragedy, more and more of us investigate our mood, as if that mattered. We pencil our enthusiasm, wonder how a thing could happen, wonder at the pieces put together, afterward, as if our words were stone, and supported anything, except their own created tension.

New Nonfiction from J. Malcolm Garcia: “The Forced Disappearance of Sombath Somphone”

Ng Shui Meng speaks of her husband Sombath Somphone in the present tense, with a firm matter-of-fact tone about his disappearance, a way, I presume, for her to maintain control in a situation where she has none and knows nothing but heartbreak. Yet I hear the deep sentiment behind the words. To her, Sombath is much more than the internationally acclaimed, award-winning development worker who vanished one night years ago. He is her partner, companion and mentor, a man with a quiet presence whom she relies on even in his absence. Although short and thin, he stood out in a crowd partly because of his shock of silver white hair. Most older Lao men dye their hair, she explains. Government officials all have black hair but Sombath has this head of white hair, and he

always wears a cotton peasant jacket and yet there is something about him that makes everyone feel deferential toward him. That may have been a contributing factor to his disappearance, Shui Meng muses, this deference, the tranquil influence he has. He would never call himself an activist. He is not confrontational. Sombath believes in cooperation and works with Lao officials. In private he can be critical of the government but never in public. He's a pragmatist and strategic about what he does. Although he is not political, he inspires people. Perhaps that is what led to his undoing.



Sombath Somphone's wife, Ng Shui Meng. Photo: J. Malcolm Garcia.

On December 15, 2012, Somphone was stopped at a police checkpoint in Vientiane, the capital of Laos, and was never seen or heard from again. Lao officials denied any involvement. Officials with human rights organizations believe Somphone was the victim of a forced disappearance by the government. Then-U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton

demanded answers and the European Parliament expressed its concern but to no avail. The Lao government insisted it knew nothing. Almost nine years later, his fate and his whereabouts remain a mystery. His friends can only speculate on why he was taken.



The police checkpoint where Somphone was stopped. Photo: J. Malcolm Garcia.

“There’s an expression I first learned from Shui Meng,” one of Somphone’s colleagues told me. “You cut off the head of the chicken to scare the monkeys. It means you make an example of somebody. This is how the Lao government operates. They find an example and hit it hard to give it publicity and shut everybody up, and they did that with Sombath, and its consequences are still in effect.”

Laos is not alone in its use of forced disappearance. Phil Robertson, the deputy director of Human Rights Watch's Asia Division in Bangkok, Thailand, told me its use remains common throughout Southeast Asia. Thailand has abducted people over the years but less frequently than outright assaults and assassinations. Vietnam insists on taking people through a kangaroo court. The Philippines and Indonesia also use abductions to crack down on dissent. Some governments are quicker to use it than others. Laos is very quick. Robertson estimates about 22 Lao people have disappeared in recent years.

The night before he and I spoke, two Khmer-speaking men tried to drag prominent Cambodian dissident Chamroeun Suon into a van outside a 7-Eleven in Bangkok. "The boss needs to catch you, to arrest you, you have to come with us to the van," one of the men told him. They tased Suon but he escaped, running back into the store. The attackers tased him so many times that their batteries ran out. Robertson presumed, with a hint of detached humor, that they had not used a very good taser. The two attackers may have operated without the authority of the Thai government, he said, but they certainly felt emboldened to try to grab him in a public place.



Sombath Somphone,
who disappeared in

2012. Photo:
Wikipedia.

"There's a lot of these cases in the region. A prominent Lao activist disappeared recently," Robertson said, referring to the 2019 abduction of Od Sayavong in Thailand. He is affiliated with Free Lao, a group of Lao migrant workers and activists who advocate for human rights and democracy in Laos.

"We don't know if there was Thai cooperation or not. The Thais have gone after their own dissidents in Laos so there very much could have a quid pro quo: You guys have targets, you go after them, and we'll go after our guys."

Robertson described the use of forced disappearance as one of the cruelest practices used against dissidents.

"Groups like Human Rights Watch, we raise the issue with governments but don't get a reply," he said. "When diplomats get involved they will get this sort of, 'We're investigating, yes. We're concerned; we don't know what happened. Isn't it horrible?' That sort of thing. 'We don't have any information. We heard he had a mistress and he ran off.' Or they'll say some other scurrilous excuse and accuse us of being naive to think something happened."

Robertson did not know Somphone, but he has worked with Shui Meng, who continues to demand answers about her husband's disappearance. At first, she was confident he was alive and being held, but Robertson thinks her attitude over time has changed. For an advocate like Robertson, questions about what happened to Somphone become sensitive. He has his opinion but it's not for him to impose his thoughts on the family. That, he said, was Shui Meng's call.

The more I read and heard about Somphone the more disturbed I became. The idea that someone so accomplished could be abducted without consequences other than rote international

condemnation struck me as terribly wrong. I know that sounds naive, but some things are just not complicated. You don't rip someone from their family for no reason other than a skewed notion of social control. To dismiss with a cavalier *Well, these things happen* didn't sit well with me. During my research into Somphone's disappearance, unidentified federal agents began arresting Black Lives Matter protesters at the urging of then-President Donald Trump. It seemed my own country was becoming less and less removed from totalitarian impulses. I became determined to write about Somphone, and to, in a small way, join the diminished but still vocal chorus of human rights advocates demanding answers, because one day, I thought, I might be insisting on similar answers for the disappeared here.

"I don't want fear to grip my life," Shui Meng told me before I flew to Laos. "If they want to target you, they can. That is the factor of uncertainty. Nothing is normal. Since Sombath disappeared, I don't know what normal is."

*

Sombath Somphone was born in 1952 and grew up in Done Khio, rural southern Laos, the eldest of eight brothers and sisters. He was curious and innovative even as a child. Shui Meng recalled one story when as a boy he decided it would be easier to raise frogs than catch them to sell in the market. At that time no one in his village bred frogs, but Somphone did and they multiplied. They also escaped because he did not have containers big enough to hold them. Still he tried. He was always experimenting.

At sixteen, Somphone enrolled at a French lycée in the town of Savannakhet, boarding with relatives in exchange for doing chores. An American teacher, Sylvester Morris, became his mentor and enrolled him in night classes at a local American school.

"He was in one of my English courses," Morris recalled from his home outside Kansas City, Missouri. "He looked like he was 12. He was a very nice kid, very humble, respectful. He was not boisterous. The other kids looked up to him. He wanted to learn as much as possible."

Morris helped recruit students for the American Field Service U.S. exchange program and in 1969 Somphone was accepted and spent a year with the family of Oscar and Phyllis Bardon in Wisconsin, where he attended Elkhart Lake-Glenbeulah High School.

"We called him Sam," one of the Bardon children, David, told me. "He was so easy to talk to. He did his chores and fit right in. I can remember him laughing and always having a good time. We loved him to death. It was a sad day when we took him to the airport to return to Laos. We all cried. We had gotten very close."

Somphone was impressed by the things many Americans take for granted, especially food. He saw stacks and stacks of packaged chicken and meat in supermarkets. He had never eaten steak before he went to Wisconsin, he told Shui Meng. Boys and girls played sports. Somphone's only sport had been physical labor. Children yelled at their parents, shocking him. No Lao child would shout at their mother and father. He wondered how to take the good aspects of American culture back to Laos, especially technology. He was in awe of technology.

In 1971, Somphone studied agriculture and economy at the University of Hawaii. After he graduated in 1974, he returned to Laos but then traveled back to Hawaii and earned a master's degree in agronomy. He also met Shui Meng there in 1978. A Singaporean, she was working toward her doctorate in sociology. They married in 1983. Shui Meng became a senior research fellow at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies in Singapore and then worked for UNICEF in East Timor and China. In 1986, she joined Somphone in Laos.

Shui Meng recalled that he was always clear he wanted to return home. His intentions were modest: to be with his mother and father and siblings and use his skills and education in agriculture to improve the lives of farmers. He believed that the life of a Lao farmer is rich despite its typical poverty. Farmers have everything they need, he said: food, fish, water. They grow enough rice to sustain themselves for a year. He thought that there was much wealth in this kind of simplicity. A farmer lived with very little and was quite content to pick fruit, gather mushrooms, swim in the river. Many of them did not have running water or electricity yet they seemed happy. Somphone was always curious about nature and the relations between different plants. Shui Meng was a city girl. She couldn't recognize one mushroom from the next, one animal from another, but Somphone taught her to value the diversity of a forest and what it provided. He wanted to improve the lives of farmers without violating their attachment to the land.

"I adjusted," Shui Meng told me. "I was also curious about Laos. It was very different from anything I'd known. When I first came I saw that farmers had very little, but they had a contentment that I admired."

Throughout the 1980s, Somphone struggled to secure Lao government approval for projects promoting community-based sustainable agricultural development. He offered to work with the department of agriculture on the use of organic fertilizers. However, officials did not know what to make of his ideas and were suspicious: Why had he returned to Laos when so many others wanted to leave? Abandoned to his own devices, Somphone used his family's farm to implement his ideas. He experimented with azolla, a water fern that can be used as an organic fertilizer. He also encouraged the use of rice-based farming systems, in which rice is the major but not sole crop. Farmers diversified by planting vegetables, beans and fruits. They also began raising fish and fowl rather than catching them in the wild. In addition, Somphone introduced

the use of fuel-saving stoves and rice mills, and large clay pots to collect rainwater for the dry seasons. He developed a recycling center in Vientiane.

In 1996, with the permission of the Lao Ministry of Education, Somphone founded the Participatory Development Training Center, better known as PADETC, to promote education, leadership skills and sustainable development buttressed by Buddhist principles. He trained young volunteers and local officials in community-based development, including sanitation, recycling and agricultural production. PADETC became perhaps the best-known civil society organization in Laos.

A woman who worked with Somphone at the center in the early 2000s, and who spoke to me on condition of anonymity, remembered him as zen-like. He was always smiling. The co-worker enjoyed watching Somphone and Shui Meng together. They teased each other. Shui Meng would tell funny stories about the two of them. They just looked happy together. She was the one who was more outgoing. He was calm, composed, thoughtful, and reflective, but he didn't drone on. He could make people laugh when he wanted.

Much of Somphone's work, the co-worker said, had to do with changing school curricula to better represent Lao culture. He was very focused on getting children involved with local customs. True happiness, he told them, was founded on one's culture and the environment in which they lived. Cooperation with the government and the education of young people, he believed, would bring progressive change to Laos.

Somphone retired from the center in June 2012 to spend more time with his family, meditating and writing. Six months later, he disappeared.

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Before I departed for Laos and between calls to Shui Meng, I spoke with a number of Somphone's associates. Like his PADETC colleague, most refused to let me use their names. No, don't print that, they would tell me. Even without my name, the Lao authorities will know you're quoting me. As one man told me, the mystery of a disappearance is what makes it so effective. "It's a strategy of repression through fear," he said. "As long as there is no information about Sombath it will have this chilling effect. No one will talk to you because no one wants to be next. If they can take him, they can take me."

Everyone I interviewed remembered how Somphone loved driving around in an old army jeep and how he enjoyed relaxing on a log, drinking beer and eating sticky rice and grilled fish. He cooked little pizzas in a toaster oven and told stories. He was very centered except when he played ping-pong. He was mad about ping-pong and would play for an hour or longer. He insisted it was good exercise.

His friends told me that Somphone often spoke about the use of communication technologies to empower communities. He believed in developing people and then letting them create their own organizations. He could be quite forthright about his opinions but he wasn't an alpha male, as one friend put it. He didn't raise his voice to be heard. He spoke softly when he offered a different point of view yet he didn't mince his words. The considerate way he made his point impressed his colleagues. He was unassuming—his presence felt through his humility.

In the years before his disappearance, Somphone had been concerned about families losing their farms to government land seizures for industrial projects. After years of political and economic isolation, the Lao government began soliciting international investment in the 1990s. It agreed to hydropower dams along the Mekong River financed by the Thai government and to a high-speed railway connecting Vientiane and Kunming, the capital and transportation hub of China's southern Yunnan province. Somphone talked often about these developments to

friends but he didn't make public statements. He never slammed the government. He wouldn't do that, was always careful, but he knew he was walking a fine line. But the line always shifted. Who knew where the line was? Who knew when it was crossed?

There was one friend of Somphone's whose recollections may offer a window into his disappearance. The friend had been involved with a weekly talk radio program. Listeners called and raised concerns about government corruption and other issues affecting their lives. In 2011, farmers spoke on the program. They opposed government confiscation of their land for commercial development. The show's producer opened the lines and callers made strong statements in support of the farmers. After the show aired, the deputy director of the state-run Lao National Radio called the producer and told him his show had been canceled effective immediately. Somphone unsuccessfully appealed to the government to restore the program.

Around this time, a sympathetic, low-level official warned Somphone's friend that he and Somphone, among others, were on a government blacklist. None of them thought they would be disappeared. Perhaps imprisoned for a short time but nothing more. And given the official's minor status, the blacklist might be nothing more than a rumor. But the official insisted. Somphone, he said, was the first one on the list, but no one believed him.

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I flew to Vientiane in February 2020 expecting to enter the grim urban decay of a totalitarian state, something out of a dystopian movie. Instead, I found a city that despite its population of 683,000 people felt very much like a small town. Men and women paused at vendor stalls picking through fruit and the aroma of bread rose from French bakeries and Buddhist monks in orange robes strolled past parked tap-taps whose

drivers slept sprawled across the front seat. Barefoot farmers watered crops near roads that meandered through parks where women sold flowers. Travel bureaus promoted tours to other cities.

"There are a lot of tourists," Somphone's PADETC colleague told me, "and you kind of forget the regime. The totalitarian aspect is not overt. It's smartly managed. You don't feel the regime."

The day after my arrival, I met with Shui Meng at Common Grounds, a coffee shop on a posh narrow street that included restaurants and stores filled with overpriced wood carvings and supposed antiques. After spending months talking to people who had asked me not to name them, I felt nervous, their paranoia becoming mine.

"Don't keep looking over your shoulder, otherwise you'll be more suspicious," Shui Meng scolded. "Nobody is listening to you. If they want to target you they can and you wouldn't know you are a target. Nobody tells you anything."

That did not make me feel better, but the stern look she gave me through her wide glasses kept me focused. Her dark hair, streaked with gray, came down almost to her shoulders and she leaned back in her chair, legs crossed, as if nothing was amiss. She pointed across the street to TaiBaan, a shop she and Sombath founded a year before he disappeared. It sells handcrafts made by hundreds of Lao women across the country. The women receive all the profits from their work.

Shui Meng described Laos as living in a fishbowl. Everybody knows everybody and everybody sees everybody. It is not necessary to use the power of the state. It's just knowing you're being observed. Maybe you're not, but you think you might be.

"I really do believe that 95 percent of the time and 95 percent of the people are not being watched because the state

does not have the resources,” Shui Meng said. “It’s that five percent chance that keeps everyone guessing.”

We left Common Grounds and drove to the police checkpoint where Somphone was last seen. The crowded roads teemed with cars and tap-taps and a few wagons loaded with vegetables. Storefronts on both sides of the two-lane highway appeared to be doing a brisk business and I saw half a dozen signs offering dental services. Nothing remotely suggested a police state. In fact, I did not see any police officers.

“Because it can be so easily controlled, the oppression does not need to be very overt,” Shui Meng explained. “You don’t see police because you don’t need to. Everyone monitors himself.”

After about 15 minutes we reached the police station on Thadeua Road, in Vientiane’s Sisattanak district not far from downtown. We stopped at the intersection and I snapped a photo. There was not much to shoot. The sidewalk had crumbled into a dirt path and ran past the station, which was little more than a hut. When the light changed, Shui Meng told me to put down my camera and we passed the station immersed in the flow of traffic. Shui Meng continued for about five minutes so as not to draw attention before she turned around. We drove back the way we had come and again passed the station, which appeared vacant.

“Sombath’s disappearance is an invisible wound,” Shui Meng said as she took me to my hotel. “It’s not like a cut where I can stop the bleeding. There’s no recourse for justice. The police say they don’t know. The government says it doesn’t know. How do you make a case against a state system that has all the power to lie and there’s no independent press or judicial system? Where do you go? Nowhere.”

In 2012 Laos was chosen to host the Asia-Europe Meeting, an annual gathering of leaders to discuss the relationship

between Asia and Europe. From October 16 to October 19, the ministry of foreign affairs asked Somphone to co-chair the ninth Asia-Europe People's Forum, a parallel three-day convention of grassroots activists and nongovernmental organizations, or NGOs, to discuss matters affecting their communities such as land and water rights, religious freedom and other issues. About 1,000 participants attended, the biggest civil society event ever held in Laos.



The cultural hall where the forum took place. Photo: J. Malcolm Garcia.

The popularity of the event scared more conservative elements of the government. Plainclothes security police took notes and photographs, intimidating many of the participants. A statement by Somphone, about promoting understanding, was translated into Lao and English, but not released. Somphone would never be critical. He was encouraging and inclusive but never confrontational. However, the Lao authorities thought differently. Despite his good relationships with various

ministers, there were others within the government who always viewed him with suspicion because of his U.S. education and his close working relationships with international NGOs.

Tensions between the authorities and the forum's organizers soon emerged. The government had no experience dealing with such a sizable number of people descending on Laos from Europe and Asia, some of whom were activists within social movements. People were speaking openly about life in Laos. The ministry of interior and the public security forces had planted minders everywhere. Anger over little things spilled over. The security people might say, You can't sit here. Why not? an organizer would demand. We can sit wherever we want. These small clashes became problematic because the authorities were not used to people arguing with them. As co-chair, Somphone had to sooth irate officials. What he may not have understood was what a facade the government had put up pretending the forum would be a safe place to speak freely.

Security people confronted one woman for raising concerns about land and housing rights in her village in southern Laos. The police intimidated her family. According to one source, the woman complained to Somphone, who became upset. He had given participants his word that they could say what they thought, based on the government's assurances to him if he agreed to be help chair the forum. He felt responsible, this source said. Somphone asked participants to compile a list of those who were being harassed. No one knows if the list was made. If it had been, knowing Somphone, the source said, he would have spoken to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Not in an in-your-face manner, but in his quiet way.

"Maybe this made him seem like a threat to the government," the source told me.

Another friend of Somphone's recalled that he was not looking forward to the forum. I'm ready to tend my garden and not deal with this, he said. He complained it was going to be a big

headache. Somphone didn't anticipate how big a headache it could be until an NGO administrator, Anne-Sophie Gindroz, was thrown out of the country.

Gindroz had been the country director of Helvetas Swiss Intercooperation in Laos, an international NGO that works on agricultural development and land issues, from 2009 until her expulsion. She and Somphone worked together to organize the forum. They were in constant negotiation with the government about what they could and could not do. Still, she believed they had made progress. But she now believes the government took advantage of their trust and used the forum to observe the most outspoken participants, something neither she nor Somphone had expected.

In preparation for the forum, Somphone led a survey to measure happiness throughout Laos with the cooperation of local authorities. The findings of this consultation were incorporated into a video, "The Lao People's Vision," promoting an alternative development model based on consultation with rural communities. It was not a critical discussion about policy, but many issues came up, including the use of land and how development was conducted, as well as government corruption. People were very vocal. In a country where denunciation of the government is not tolerated, such an exchange of ideas would have been perceived as dangerous.

During the forum, the authorities would not allow "The Lao People's Vision" to be distributed. Some officials realized the potential consequences of people openly discussing their concerns. It was as if an alarm had gone off, Gindroz said, a wake-up for conservative elements of the government. They didn't want this in their country.

Gindroz described herself as very outspoken and along with Somphone had expressed concern for the harassment of forum participants with the Lao government even after the forum had concluded. On November 21, 2012, she submitted a letter to

international NGOs and donors critical of the government's interference with the forum and the repercussions people had suffered. About two weeks later, on December 7, she was called into the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for a meeting she thought was about partnering her agency with local aid organizations. The meeting, she recalled, actually began with a discussion about her work, and at times she thought she had a good relationship with the ministry. But then an official said, You know, I've had a very bad night. I couldn't sleep. What happened? Gindroz asked, and then the official handed her a letter notifying her that she had to leave Laos within 24 hours. Her husband and children, the woman said, could stay if they chose.

"Of course, I will go," Gindroz said, adding, "I think it's a pity. What you are doing now is proving what I was saying was right. You are putting restrictions on freedom of speech."

The official gave her a pained look.

"That was it," Gindroz told me. "I left. I was thrown out."

This was eight days before Somphone disappeared.

On Saturday, December 15, 2012, Somphone and Shui Meng left his office at 5:30 p.m. He got in his jeep and drove behind her. She last saw him as she passed the police station about a half hour later. When he did not come home for dinner, Shui Meng became concerned and called his phone but received no answer. Then she contacted friends to ask if they had seen him, but no one had. She drove on the road leading to their house to see if his jeep had broken down. She went to hospitals. Nothing. The local police said it was late and no one worked on Sundays. Come by on Monday.

Friends of Somphone called everyone they knew to ask if he had been seen. People were worried because he had worked closely with Gindroz and she had just been banished. Paranoia set in. Sombath, they took Sombath! Be careful, save yourself, his

friends told one another. Many of them hunkered down in their homes. One man told me that he would tell his family and friends where he was going and when he would be back. He advised his wife: If I do not return, go to the nearest embassy and ask for asylum. Or cross the Mekong River and flee to Thailand.

Friends had to decide: Would they be afraid and not help Shui Meng or would they stand with her? For Lao people it was very hard, and in the following days Shui Meng lost many friends who did not want to be seen with her.

On Monday, December 17, Shui Meng reported Somphone missing to the police. She had noticed security cameras around the police station where Somphone was last seen and put in a request to view the footage. To her surprise, the police agreed without hesitation and allowed her to copy it to her phone. The footage showed a jeep slowing to a stop at the police station shortly after six p.m. Somphone stepped out and appeared to speak with an officer. No other vehicles were stopped, and traffic on the road continued unhindered. A few minutes later, an unknown motorcyclist stopped, got in Somphone's jeep and drove away, leaving his motorcycle behind. A short time later, Somphone and at least two other men, in the presence of police officers, got in a truck and drove away.

Shui Meng was stunned. Surely, she thought, it had to be a mistake. Why would the police stop Sombath? She asked various government administrators but no one admitted knowledge of the event. Then she showed the security camera footage at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and officials there appeared shocked but claimed ignorance. Still, Shui Meng remained hopeful Somphone's detention was a mistake. They'll ask Sombath a few questions and then he'll be home with his quiet smile. I was held up, he'll tell her. They let me out. Don't worry.

On December 19, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced it

had begun an investigation but about a week or two after Somphone's disappearance, Shui Meng noticed that government officials avoided her and replied with hostility to her questions. She soon became convinced that Somphone's arrest was more serious than she had realized.

About two weeks after Somphone disappeared, three members of the Asian Parliamentarians for Human Rights met with Lao officials about Somphone. Walden Bello, one of the parliamentarians, told me the officials denied knowing what had happened and refused to even confirm he was missing. They insisted their investigation had revealed nothing.

Bello told me that he believes the Lao government made a cost-benefit analysis: Shall we silence this guy and risk reactions from the world or let him go and allow his voice to get louder and louder? In Bello's opinion they chose to silence him and take the heat. Bello feels sure the decision was made by senior government officials. He doubts too many people outside the ruling party knew about it.

Almost a month after he disappeared, Lao police issued a statement that the activity at the police station the night of his disappearance had been routine without any reported disturbances or detentions. Police insisted Somphone had not been taken. They suggested, without evidence, that he may have been involved in a personal dispute. No information, the police concluded, had been discovered to suggest what happened to him. The government-backed Vientiane Times English language newspaper published the police findings on February 4, 2013.

There is a risk of mythologizing Somphone given the circumstances of his disappearance, Somphone's PADETC colleague told me. He lived by principles we can all aspire to. She continues to work with farmers and thinks he would be happy about that. She feels confident that people involved in development work still remember him. When she is alone with a

colleague she'll talk about him—his work and philosophy. Sometimes she meets with adults who had been involved with him as children, pleased they mention him. She has no doubt she is watched and trusts only a small group of people. Every time she attends church she prays for Somphone and for the truth to be told. She once thought he'd be found; he was just so kind, a gentle soul. Surely, he'd talk his way out. His decency would prevail. Despite everything in some ways she believes it has.

These days, Shui Meng sees herself as the voice of remembrance for Sombath. His memory persists, partially because the government's own security cameras filmed his abduction. The new technology can be a double-edged sword. The state surveils people, but people can also surveil it. The government certainly didn't expect that. The audacity of taking him without turning off the cameras angers her almost as much as his abduction. The arrogance.

She knows people believe Sombath is dead, but she has stopped being disturbed by what others think, their pity. She can't control the feelings of other people and won't lose energy over it. Sombath remains very present for her. Friends say, What a shame, a man like that who had so much to offer to have been disappeared. How can Shui Meng respond? She can't, other than to agree. Every minute of every day she worries about him.

"I miss Sombath," she told me on the last day of my trip. We were sitting in a back room at TaiBaan surrounded by colorful tapestries. Her voice quivered for the first time in our many conversations. Shui Meng still hopes Sombath will return to her but uncertainty has become her shadow, an unwanted escort. Sometimes she sees him in a dream. Come back, she tells him. I can't, he says. I'm leaving now. And she wakes up. Come back, she says again in the emptiness of their bedroom.

But by then he's gone.

New Poetry from Nicole Oquendo and James A.H. White

The following poems are reprinted with permission from the anthology [*Pulse/Pulso: In*](#)

Remembrance of Orlando (Damaged Goods Press 2018), edited by Roy G. Guzmán and Miguel M. Morales.

to be born

by Nicole Oquendo

my spine is queer, curved enough
to hold me up while the news bends
and sways us. every day we die, and
one day it will be me, though statistically,
according to these headlines,
it's more likely to happen soon.

but there's new life to look forward to.
last year, my family taught me how
to press my chest and sculpt my own form.
i make love now by giving and taking in equal measure.
my brothers and sisters and those in between
see me standing next to them, signing all of my names.



Stained Glass

by James A.H. White

Fifty—the number of years my mother has lived. The number of paper clips currently interlocked in a small tin bucket on my work desk. According to motivational speaker Gail Blanke, the number of physical and emotional ties you should throw out of your life in order to find it again.

Some say many of them knew each other. It's often like that in our community. It's often like that in a nightclub. We recognize each other. There's no darkness dark enough to interrupt that.

The Orange County Medical Examiner's Office, with assistance from Florida Emergency Mortuary Operations Response System, identified, notified, autopsied (if needed) and released all bodies to next of kin within 72 hours of the incident. That is, all but one victim, whose father wouldn't claim his gay son.

Phonesthesia is the term for sound symbolism, or, relating shapes to sounds. I see shame played like tetherball, see it shaped like the tennis ball as it flies, bound, around that metal pole, hear it on the slap of the child's open hand or deeper-chorused fist. I see shame falling on that victim's burial like the kind of rainstorm written into movie scripts—dark and heavy. I think of it registering unfairly on the faces of the closeted's families when they saw their loved one's body and recognized it for the first time.

An installation at Chicago's Contemporary Art Museum featured a row of bodies lined across a gallery and blanketed by white sheets that peaked at the noses and toes hidden but assumed molded beneath. A girl nearby says it all makes her sleepy before she falls to the floor and pretends to sleep—like the dead. On the morning of the shooting, I think of my brothers and sisters inside, not lined but scattered, sleep I imagine made clearer to the young as something much nearer, perhaps much whiter.

I break down hearing about the group that hid in the bathroom but were found then fired on, a couple in a stall injured not only by bullets but

shrapnel from the wall and
door. Suppose the bathroom stall like a closet. Do you
remember huddling? How about
holding onto yourself beneath a traditional Jibarro straw hat
or flower bonnet? How
long did you wait before the car horn outside announced it had
come to take you out
dancing?