

could take Jonathan Franzen's  
for a walk, feed it biscuits.  
But who cares? Who remembers?

O, to have been Jean Stafford,  
in the past I idealize, when the world  
was less self-conscious, less

precise. I could be  
dead already, warmish  
beneath a blanket of dust. Joyful

are the faded, the once-greats  
whose afterlives slipped out  
a hole in posterity's pocket:

they are loved poignantly by  
a needy few. O, to be kept  
cozy in the bosoms of those

desperate and proud, forgotten  
for all the good I do. Love  
is sunlight streaming unevenly

through the canopy of leaves  
overhead. We can only grow  
in the brighter patches below, fading

where light is thin. Molly,  
we are with you, nowhere and gone.  
Mostly we are forgotten, too.

*Lelah*

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## ANGELA FLOURNOY

She stuffed fistfuls of her underwear into trash bags while the Detroit city bailiff leaned against the wall and fiddled with his phone. The other bailiff waited outside. Lelah saw him through the front window. He did calf raises on the curb near the dumpster, his pudgy hands on his hips.

She'd always imagined the men who handled evictions as menacing—big muscles, loud mouths. These two were young and large, but soft looking, baby-faced. Like giant chocolate cherubs. It had never come to this before. Lelah had received a few thirty-day notices but always cleared out before the Demand for Possession—a seven-day notice—slid under her door. Seven days might as well have been none this time around; before Lelah knew it, the bailiffs were knocking, telling her she had two

SOME PEOPLE IN GAMBLERS ANONYMOUS, a place she hadn't been in months, claimed the tiny ball, spinning and spinning around on its wheel, was the reason they loved the game.

If Lelah were playing, she would never stand here, so far away from the wheel and the top half of the board, a position where she'd end up asking strangers to put her chips where she wanted them to go. If she were playing, she'd request the orange chips. She could almost feel them, the click and dry slide of them in her palm. But she couldn't play right now. She'd spent the last of her cash on lunch, and she didn't know whether she'd be approved for unemployment, so she couldn't spend the \$183 in the bank.

"No more bets," the dealer said. He waved his hand over the table. People settled back onto their stools.

The ball landed on double zero. There were a few cheers, but mostly groans. It was a crowded night in Motor City Casino.

"The one time I take my money off those zeros they come up," the light-skinned woman next to Lelah said. "I been splitting the zeros all night."

"I know, I saw you," Lelah said. "That's how it always goes. That means you'll hit soon."

"Shit, I hope so," the woman said. Her fake eyelashes made her look drowsy, like a middle-aged blinking baby doll. "All I know is that I'll be back to splitting these zeros from now on."

She told herself she'd come to Motor City to eat. Her twenty-five complimentary tickets for the buffet were the only tangible benefit of thousands of games of roulette. That and a VIP card. She had anticipated a strange stare, or at least a smirk, as the valet helped her out of her overflowing car, but he hadn't seemed to notice. Or maybe she wasn't the only homeless gambler in Motor City tonight.

It was a low-stakes table, five dollars to get on the board. The woman with the eyelashes split the zeros again with twenty-five dollars' worth of lavender chips—an amount Lelah considered risky seeing as how double zero just came up. She said nothing though. Camaraderie was appreciated, outright advice was not.

Lelah knew she was an addict. She'd more or less known four years ago when she had to ask Brenda, her cubicle mate at the phone company, to lend her two hundred dollars, just until payday. That two hundred had bloomed to a thousand in a year's time, and after she had paid Brenda back she had

hours to grab what she could, that they would toss whatever she left behind into that dumpster outside.

It was the end of April, but it felt like June. The bailiff leaning on the wall carried a gray washcloth in his back pocket, and he wiped it across his brow from time to time. He pretended not to be watching her, but Lelah knew better. He had a plan ready if she snapped and started throwing dishes at him, if she called for backup—a brother or cousin to come beat him up—or if she tried to barricade herself in the bathroom. He probably had a gun. Mostly, all Lelah did was put her hands on the things she owned, think about them for a second, and decide against carrying them to her Pontiac. Furniture was too bulky, food from the fridge would expire in her car, and the smaller things—a blender, boxes full of costume jewelry, a toaster—felt ridiculous to take along. She didn't know where she'd end up. Where do the homeless make toast? Outside of essential clothing, hygiene items, and a few pots and pans, she focused on the sorts of things people on TV cried about after a fire: a few photos of herself taken over the years, her birth certificate and Social Security card, photos of her daughter and grandson, her father's obituary.

The second bailiff stopped his calf raises when Lelah walked outside with another box. She imagined that the neighbors peeked at her through their blinds, but she refused to turn around and confirm.

"I'd give you a hand, but we can't touch none of your stuff," he said. Lelah used her shoulder to cram the box into the backseat.

"I know you're thinking, like, if we're not allowed to touch your stuff, then how are we gonna dump everything at the end."

Lelah did not acknowledge that she'd heard him. She took a step back from her car, checked to see if anything valuable was visible from the windows.

"We hire some guys to come and do that part," he said. "Me personally, I'm not touching none of your stuff. I don't do cleanup."

The bailiff smiled. A few of his teeth were brown. Maybe he was older than he looked.

Back inside the apartment, the other bailiff, the sweaty one, sat, legs splayed, on her sofa. At the sight of Lelah he stood up, leaned against the wall once more. What to take, what to take, what to take? It all looked like junk now. Cheap things she'd bought just to keep her apartment from looking barren. She snatched her leather jacket from its hook on the hallway-closet door. That's it, she thought. Leave now, with an hour and a half to spare.

a jumble of sherbet-colored winnings for the casino, because no one bet on her number.

It was awkward, being at a table but not playing at the table. You had to smile, look indifferent and simultaneously interested enough to justify taking up space. She stood up. Took off her jacket.

Several chips covered number twenty-seven this turn. Too late for them, Lelah thought. The woman put the rest of her lavender chips—Lelah estimated twenty—between zero and double zero again. She looked up at Lelah and winked.

"No more bets," the dealer said.

"I knew it! I knew it! I knew it!" The woman next to her jumped up from her stool. The ball was on double zero. Lelah congratulated her as the dealer slid her a small fort of chips, more than five hundred dollars.

If she were a seasoned gambler, this woman would stay put and ride this upswing out. This was what Lelah would have done. But the woman asked the dealer to give her the chips in twenties and stood up to go.

"For you," she said to Lelah. She handed her a blue-and-yellow twenty-dollar chip.

"For me, for what?"

"You said I'd hit and I did."

"You would've anyway, I can't," Lelah said.

"Like hell you can't," the woman said. Then she leaned in closer, whispered, "Roulette ain't a spectator sport."

Lelah closed her fingers around the chip.

"Well, thank you. Here," Lelah looked past the woman toward a cocktail waitress, put up a hand to get her attention. "At least let me buy you a free drink. I can afford a free drink."

"No, I need to run out of here with my money before I get pulled back in." She dropped her remaining chips into her purse, a sturdy, designer-looking purse, Lelah noticed, and headed toward the cashier.

This happened to Lelah sometimes in the casino, a stranger high off a big win gave her money just for bearing witness, and each time she felt like crying. Because a stranger could be so generous, when she'd never once thought to do that after a win. Because she wanted the money so much. Because, truthfully, it didn't take much to make Lelah feel like crying. But feeling like crying was not the same as actually crying, and Lelah was up twenty dollars.

found other coworkers to befriend and borrow from. A few hundred from Jamaal, a sweet, chubby twenty-year-old with dreadlocks who worked on the third floor and maybe had a crush on her; sixty dollars from Yang, an older Chinese woman who used to sell pork buns from her cube before management forbade all sales except for the Girl Scout variety; twelve hundred from her supervisor Dwayne, a fifty-year-old widower with a potbelly and a gold-plated left incisor who absolutely had a crush on her but insisted he wanted nothing in return for the loan. "Now that my Sheila's gone I got nothing and nobody to spend on," he'd said.

Dwayne proved to be a problem. He waited by her Pontiac in the parking deck after her shift a few weeks after he'd loaned her the money, and as Lelah approached the car she realized his pants were undone, and that little brown bump Dwayne was rubbing his thumb over so quickly was not the knuckle of his other thumb, but in fact the head of his lonely widower penis. They fired Dwayne, but at the grievance meeting HR brought up the money she'd borrowed going all the way back to Brenda. They claimed she'd borrowed more than five thousand dollars over the four years, but that didn't sound right to Lelah. She could only account for about three thousand, and she'd paid back everybody but Dwayne. "Jesus, you could've told us you were pumping little old ladies for cash before we got in here," her union rep had said. She had been suspended without pay for over a month now and was still waiting to see if she would be terminated.

When it came to playing roulette, she followed her own code. She never bet all inside, or all out; she spread her chips around the table, she never begged the dealer to let her play out her last chip, and she didn't make loud proclamations, speak directly to the little white ball as if it gave a damn about her, or beg the chips to behave any particular way.

"No more bets."

The pit boss, a busy redheaded woman in a pantsuit, whispered something in the dealer's ear, looked hard at the people gathered around the table, then walked a few paces away.

The ball landed on twenty-seven.

"Aw hell," the woman splitting the zeros said. Lelah always played twenty-seven. Brienne was born on the twenty-seventh of February, as was her brother Troy. Now was a smart time to move on to the buffet, she knew, but she couldn't take her eyes off the dealer. He swept up all of the chips,

She'd been down to less than twenty bucks and pulled ahead before. There was a red convertible sitting on top of the Wheel of Fortune slots, and though she despised slots as an amateur, vulgar game, she imagined winning so much at a table that they gave the damn thing to her; just put a ramp over the front slots so she could climb up, drive her new Corvette down, and pick up the rest of her winnings at the cashier. Or maybe she'd only get a few hundred, but it would be enough to buy her some time, so she'd resist the urge to try to flip the money. No, she'd run out of there, hundreds in her pocket, and check into a nice hotel. Yes, a nice hotel would be a good start, and then she'd take a day or two to figure out what to do next. This was a lot more plausible than the car scenario, she knew; she just had to strategize.

She figured she should eat first, before they ran out of the good stuff at the buffet, then she'd come back and try to make the chip last. Split it into ones at the five-dollar-minimum table, spread it around.

As she piled the green beans onto her plate, she thought she saw half a dozen people she recognized. The woman near the pop fountain with the red sequin hat was definitely someone Lelah had seen before; she always wore that hat and she kept rolls of quarters for the slots in her fanny pack. Lelah kept her eyes on the food.

She knew she should return to the table where the woman won the chip for her, but every open seat there made it so you could see the craps table behind it. Lelah couldn't risk being distracted. She chose a five-dollar-minimum roulette table near the bar. It was bad form to take up a seat when you had so little money to play, but Lelah was determined to make this money grow.

She put ten outside on black, two on twenty-seven, and three in the corner between seven, eight, ten, and eleven. The dealer spun the ball and it landed on eight. This brought her to fifty-four dollars, a much more reasonable amount to work with. She took off her jacket.

Lelah never kept a strict count of her money after every play. The exact amount wasn't as important to her while in the thick of the game as much as the feel of her stack of chips. Could she cover them with her entire palm, or did she have tall enough stacks that her hand sat on top of them, and the colors—the orange ones she preferred, persimmon, in fact—still peeked between her fingers? Yes, this was the thing to measure by. Let the dollar amount be a pleasant surprise. She kept playing inside and out, sometimes black, sometimes red, a few corners, a few splits, but always straight up on twenty-seven.

Her tablemates came and went. She registered their movements—new faces and body shapes—but not the particulars anymore. The camaraderie seduced her in the beginning, it helped her warm up to the task at hand, but after a while, if she didn't go broke, she'd slip into a space of just her and her hands and the chips that she tried to keep under them. A stillness like sleep, but better than sleep because it didn't bring dreams. She was just a mind and a pair of hands calculating, pushing chips out, pulling some back in, and running her thumb along the length of stacks to feel what she'd gained or lost. She never once tried to explain this feeling in her GA meetings. She couldn't even share with them the simplest reasons for why she played. They were always talking about feeling alive or feeling numb. How the little white ball made them feel a jolt in their heart, or maybe how the moment of pulling on an old-fashioned slot handle for the first time in a night was better than an orgasm. Lelah did not feel alive when she played roulette. That wasn't the point, she'd wanted to say. It wasn't to feel alive, but it also wasn't to feel numb. It was about knowing what to do intuitively, and thinking about one thing only, the possibility of winning, the possibility of walking away the victor, finally.

"You want to change some of those for twenties?" the dealer asked.

He's talking to me, Lelah realized, and she looked down for the first time in at least ten plays. Her hand rested on a cluster of persimmon stacks about six inches tall. Three hundred dollars, give or take, she could feel it. Jim, the dealer stared at her.

"Sure," she said. "How about one hundred in twenties, one eighty in fives, and whatever's left in ones again."

Jim obliged, and Lelah slid a cobalt five-dollar chip back to him for his assistance.

She had enough for a hotel room now. She knew she should leave. Slide her chips into her purse like that generous woman did and make a beeline for the cashier. But her watch said eleven P.M. Just another half hour and she could be up six hundred dollars. She could find a place to stay for a week with six hundred dollars, maybe two weeks if she settled for a shitty motel. She could flip the money into something worth leaving with. Not could, she would. She put sixty on black, ten on double zero because it hadn't hit yet, forty on the third twelve of the board, and twenty on twenty-seven.

No matter how still Lelah's mind became as she played, she was never careless; her purse stayed in her lap and her cell phone was tucked in her

## Two Poems by Susan Stewart

### AFTER THE MOWING

I

The season of the cut and clear. The bales squared in the distance, a hollow house, no windows or doors.

The Ns of the fence posts, perforated shadows.

The cupped sky, inverted. A sense of limit

in parallel lines, with no convergence in the distance. The local held fast beneath

a vastness. I thought of the struggle against the angel and the struggle against a stump, for the deepest roots

go into sky and earth alike. What arms and rods can pry them? Inaudible,

*oh why*

*do you ask my name?*

The smallest meet

the fiercest teeth and claws

with soft mouth and

velvet paw.

Invisible, farther,

the ax against the grain, bounced back, ringing, from the heartwood's iron.

front pocket. Vernon was the one to tell her that more than two decades ago, back when they'd taken trips off base in Missouri to the river-boat casinos. "The same guy sitting next to you shooting the shit all night will steal your wallet in a heartbeat," he'd said, and she'd nodded. This was toward the end of their marriage. Neither of them was interested in winning money, but Vernon had an engineer's knack for figuring things out, breaking systems down into their parts. They conceived Brienne after one of these trips, and although they weren't exactly in love anymore, Lelah believed they had created their daughter in hope.

"No more bets." The ball landed on fourteen. She put money on the same spots again, just half as much.

It wasn't Vernon's fault she'd ended up a gambler—she would never say it was. A few years after the divorce and her return home, Lelah started going to Caesars in Windsor on her own, and that's when the feeling found her. The stillness she hadn't even realized she'd needed up until then.

"No more bets."

Lelah looked down. Her shiny red twenties were gone. Cobalt and perlimmon were left—it felt like forty dollars. Forty dollars was like no money at all so she might as well let it play. Straight up on twenty-seven twice and it was gone, and with it, the stillness. She heard the slot bells first, then noticed the stink of cigarette smoke in the air, and found herself part of a loud and bright Friday night in Motor City once again.