

KENDRA ALLEN, from the essay "FRUIT PUNCH"

I used to think my Granddaddy was Jerome from *Martin*. There really ain't a reason why I thought my Granddaddy was Jerome from *Martin*, but I did. Until I was about ten. I pictured him a washed up mack daddy type with young adult girlfriends. The only way I could remember him alive was with a tight curl shining from all that grease and a gold tooth accompanied by a color-coordinated— sometimes animal printed— ensemble. In actuality, I didn't know him that good to remember full details of his face. I didn't know him at all to be writing about it, but I know he had none of this slip, and most likely it was just the beard that connected him and Jerome's temperaments in my mind, but it felt right to assume and sometimes still to imagine—it's all there is to do.

Early December of 1999, "1999" by Prince probably played in the background somewhere and I turned five. On December 30 of that same year, Granddaddy died of everything. Liver and lung cancer mostly, but a lil bit of all the cancers lived and died in him too. If I was a writer then, his obituary would say he lived around the way, about forty-five minutes west of his kids, drunk to death on a porch and got along with my father.

They called Granddaddy, Pig. And most formally—Pigalee. Lee is the family name. I'm one of the few people without it. Between Vietnam and the alcoholism, nothing created from his bloodline really stood a chance. Maybe war outweighs the alcoholism or is it the same thing. Maybe alcoholism is a symptom of war or are we all the same things, only learning how to sink in order to get rid of the weight. I wore a murky velvet dress to Granddaddy's funeral and sat in my father's lap.

He was said to be a sun up to sun down kinda addict, lazy laying and liquor and lying, and I believe it. If him and Jerome shared anything, it was looking hud out and it was a big mouth. I know, because most of us talk first and ask questions later. Most of us always got something to

get off our chests. We had to get it from somewhere, and Granny sits even toned and to the point. Him and her met at a high school. They weren't sweethearts; she was a student and he was the janitor. It seems as if someone would interfere, the age gap predatory and doomed, but there's no consequence for snatching up the black youth. He sweet-talked her right out her mama's house and right into marriage—twenty years her senior.

When he died, they weren't married. Granny had raised their four kids during the seventies with no daddy. I only mention it because people tend to think it matters. I used to think so too, but that's way besides my point. Granny raised four kids during the seventies with no money and this is way worse than no daddy. They lived in Oak Cliff, a neighborhood in Dallas that extends through four generations of women. She raised hers all high as the street lights and when they came on around six-thirty every night, they had better been back in her house whether she was home or not. The streetlight, I'm told, was the indicator of tardiness in times where camera phones and watches weren't an option. The streetlight is a yell, a warning, and responsibility. The streetlight is a burning man.

When Granddaddy began beating Granny, she was forever young. When Mama was three—the third born child, she saw her daddy slap her mama in their kitchen. Granddaddy told my daddy to slap my mama once so she could shut up, like her name was Ms. Sofia or sum. Mama told her daddy her husband ain't no woman beater like him, and I guess not being a woman beater is enough. The same day she saw him slap her mama, she had her first fig newton. She went to their neighbor's house and confessed what had happened was... & the neighbor gave her the tart because she ain't know what to say. Granny divorced him less than a year later. Each time she would try to leave before, her mother—my great grandmother— would tell her to go back home to her husband. But that's what we do too. For some reason we equate suffering to perseverance and misinterpret the weight of shame, the duration of its presence.

When me and Granny sit in front of the TV one day to catch up on her shows and a singer's mother is telling the world how her daughter was hit upside the head and punched and bruised, we're both adults and Granny's lips tighten up so hard the few wrinkles she got straighten out. She shakes her head side to side like somebody farted and stunk up the spot as she states more than she asks, what is wrong with the men. As if her being able to get this answered could save us all. I laugh a little but when she say she could never figure out what it is she did wrong or what it was to make him snap, how'd she'd just get hit for being an alternate battlefield.

The young men weren't no better. Granny married both. Her second husband moved in with her and the kids—fifteen years her junior; so young her kids couldn't care for him. When he finally decided to rummage up his drug-induced courage to swing on her too, my mama'nem—bout as old as they step daddy—jumped him. Granny grabbed a knife. As she brought it down, she missed, and instead inserted the blade into my mama's left hand, which was swinging for his face. The scar still glistens today. Both of Granny's husbands—no matter the age or pedigree—couldn't keep they hands from around her neck no matter what she did, even if it was nothing. Even if all she did was clean they dirty drawls. All she did was clean somebody's dirty drawls, cleaning up after white folk's filth for over thirty years. She worked long hours but she would still send the kids to church every Sunday where they sat until the pastor announced what he would be preaching on, and then they would sneak out, scripture embedded somewhere between the four of them. Eventually, cleaning up at home and cleaning up at work took a toll on her body. All that bending over backwards trying to keep food on the table feeding the kids beets and beans and beating them heads under mattresses, nobody's heads above water—broke her hip. Literally. It happened well into her adult life, early fifties still looking like a brick house. She hadn't made a dent into any kind of real life—she was just surviving still. Never learning how to drive, never allowed the time to think about what it was she was good at let alone being able to pursue it. She sung, but stopped, because again, who got time for dreaming when you ain't got no babysitter. This breaking sat her down flat, sending her straight into retirement, a well-deserved break. But even now, she still don't know how to sit down. Finding dishes to wash, beds to make, food to cook. Her kids were already grown. They had kids who had kids who had kids and all she got was a JC Penny's card, great-grandchildren, her god, and the gout by the age of fifty-five. They put the young one back on the block after that one fight though and out of their house. Only they daddy get first dibs at disrespecting they mama.

MY  
TRAN,  
from  
ESSAY ON  
KINDS OF STAIN

PART II

I like to set most of my stories in the 1800's. Bloodletting scalpel and a bow frame saw. There is also some blood-on- napkin, but not much for the queasy animal, and that, being the difference between tuberculosis and vampirism, proves to be an important detail. Important details are time, date, a place, a face, a coincidence. Things that simply jump at you.

In 1892, New England, there was a vampire panic. I will call her Mercy Brown. The joke is funnier if you are from around here and if you are from around here, you know how evenings blend. Things take shape of other. Words also be expected to give off its own shade. Expect nothing to jump here. There is only the slow, drooping terror of bad stains, bad breaths and beautiful sentences.

So I live with a person who likes scary movies. Thriller, psychological, nothing too bloody. But if there is to be blood, she is not likely to flinch. Scary things are for her, spiders, centipedes, ants, fathers, congestions, (by proxy) spring, rats, neighbors and windows. I do not like scary movies. It is difficult for the person to persuade me to the theater. Scary things are waiting, hot rooms, big knives, hair knots, red rooms, fishes, small knives, watching a thing gutted, slanted ceilings, watching people cut stone fruits, rooms without windows, touching elbows, rooms with only small windows, wet glass, bathrooms, and unexplained bruises. Mostly, having to watch. So when Quay, 1080 Brussels it was for both a kind a sharpness leaving the theater. Then back Liquors stores, restaurants, bars, the local

we went to see Jeanne Dielman, 23 Commerce of sloping terror. All senses dropped off into in Providence. At night, Providence is stilted. pool yard. Nothing surprises.



When I say it is not surprising, I mean it happens very slowly. As a flower shifting its neckbone and by evening, has the perfect view of your heart's large ventricle. Begin small, with a confusion. Perhaps something to do with language, such as forgetting a noun and then having to use its verb function. Consumption instead of consuming. Then confuse night sweats for bloodstains, shadows, soaking up this evening. Then suddenly it is

the wrong time in the evening. Wrong time perhaps you can. An hour. A different day. there. You have dinner at the same table. You bottle of digestif and some sugared fennel. street. It is late now so you've probably been to the head—if you're from around here. the dishes in the morning and the radio—did

\*

But that evening everything was sharper. states—doing dishes, folding clothes, peeling making her son's bed, combing her hair, potatoes,—it does something to you. Quiet sets hum of hot tar and traffic lights. Gravel, bell, someone knocking but it is not for you, Ira took out his own appendix. Young man. A the surface is hot. I could feel it as intimately on that evening. By gravel, the person I live We walked through the low hum and sweated

\*

Morbid stuff happens everywhere all the time the coffee shop you go to every Sunday after bludgeoning slipstream of rage. No, more like you cannot be sure if they have the same face. Did you read about them in the local newspaper?

\*

Miss Lena Brown of Exeter, who has been suffering from consumption, died Sunday morning.

\*

Who is Lena Brown is also question about Mercy Brown. It depends on how close you were. Mercy L. at school, which was also what they settled on for her headstone, Lena by her father's account, Mercy Lena Brown in the Exeter Death Records on Sunday 17 January 1892, Miss Lena by those she never met and what names the dead mom and sisters and brother had were never mentioned in the local newspaper. Things mentioned were the details of her exhumation, her bloody heart, the liver—which in Ancient Greek would have been prophetic—which in 1982 New England meant vampiric, which they burned and which her father watched burned and her brother ate, with a bit of water to wash it all down.

[Images from: Jeanne Dielman: 23, Quai Du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles (New Yorker Films), 1975.]

JESSICA LASER, from the poem **BERKELEY HILLS LIVING**

*This is not virtue in the current sense of moral rectitude but in the older sense of effectiveness, as when one speaks of the healing virtues of a plant. -Alan Watts*

I

Eliot's window. The glorified hallway that served as his room. His bed with one pillow.

Another night, it was raining too hard to drive home and his bed had two because a woman had visited. Eliot and David talked upstairs while I slept to the cadence of their voices through the ceiling. When I woke, I put on my jeans.

From his window, I could see the eucalyptus trees' wild gestures punctuate the fog. The green, the gray, and nothing beyond it. You could look at or print or write something like it. Something you could paint.

When I woke, I put on Lucinda Williams. Eliot said, Aren't you happy to spend your birthday with me? I'll remember this with sadness, I thought, because of what a nice moment it was: Lucinda playing, the trees waving, tea, but I remember it now and feel happy.

II

That rustling in the driveway turned out to be a deer.

III

I couldn't eat. I leaned against a counter, asked Max if he remembered something we once did together with olive oil. He showed me a picture of his children. Someone passed me bread and I was asked to slice it. I don't know where a knife is. I took a knife out of the indicated drawer. I don't hate the program, I told Michael, who'd asked. It's something I've chosen. Then Michael came up to ask about the program. I don't hate it, I said. I just have to figure out how to be better. How's yours? OK, he said. I'm ABD. Wow, I said. The bread pure texture, the knife pure control, I lamented privately that I was done cutting it. Tyler was stirring the soup I'd been asked to provide. I brought that, I said.

Nice, he said. Yeah, I said. Then to Michael, I just have to figure out what I want. It's not in the books, Michael said. Yeah, I said. Then I added, Maybe not for you.

IV

I am done cutting this bread, I announced. Someone arrived with a basket. Eve. She took the knife from my hand and put it in the sink. I stirred soup and focused on the aromatics of the steam. Isn't it funny? In a way, it seemed like sex to me, sex with life, breath moving in and out of my body, the most effortless love I'd had.

is hard to put back in place. You wait it out A face not supposed to be there is suddenly turn on the radio. Take your time. Here's a Go on a walk. Take a sharp turn on Prospect murdered. A blow and then seventeen more Eighteen axe wounds murderers. No one to do you remember to turn it off?

Watching a quiet woman in various quiet potatoes, making the table, making her bed, eating soups, having sex with clients, boiling in. There are sounds everywhere else. The low thumper, leaners, bakers, sleepers, sweepers, Glass, the radio, talking about a surgeon who clean mustache. Without gloves. Sounds on as it were coming through the cracks I had put with had already settled on her distant planet. badly.

happens in your bed your garden your kitchen a swim at the local pool yard. No not some seeing someone for the second time today and



If I were a preacher—if I  
a protester, a radical in the  
self—if I were fearless enough  
to break out—if I had a voice with  
screamed—then I'd scream you a  
That sweet fluffy thing.  
That white, pearl-white thing.  
That cylindrical, softened at the edges,  
That squishy, that melty, that swells-up-  
That corn-syrup thing. That gelatinous,  
the experimenter's office, where one child's parents are  
She is four years old. He is four and three quarters, or four and a half, or six, or five. The year is 1970, they  
live in Palo Alto, and they are—they are not—they are—NOT—they are not, not, not—they are notnotnotnot,  
definitelydefinitely not—  
—because if they wait for fifteen minutes, or for forever, *then!!!!*: they will get two.

had a sermon—if I were  
totalitarian regime of the  
to be jailed—or fearless enough  
a dream, the kind of voice that  
song about—

toasted-brown or burnt-black funny thing.  
in-the-microwave-then-turns-to-dust thing.  
horse's-hooves thing. That thing on the plastic table, at  
now getting paid—

“It’s called the marshmallow test, and it can predict the future.” “Those who could resist the marshmallow did better in school, and not only that, they were less likely to fall ill or get divorced.” “The ability to wait for the second marshmallow was an amazingly strong predictor of their adjustment, their happiness, even their popularity.” “They are more likely to achieve their life goals.” “They have better relationships.” “They are less likely to have low self-esteem, to engage in bullying behavior, to be overweight.” “They score an average of 210 points higher on SATs.” “They have better adolescent coping mechanisms. Higher educational attainment. Better resistance to drug abuse. Fewer law violations. Lower BMIs.” “It’s a very simple and direct way of measuring a competence that makes an important life difference.” “The most important factor for success.” “The ability to say no to themselves.” “A primeval battle between man, or woman, and their own desire.”

For years the test was read as a measure of self-control, or willpower, or impulse control, or the ability to delay gratification. Walter Mischel, the original experimenter, believed that children who succeeded in not eating the marshmallow were able to resist temptation because of “strategic allocation of attention.” “The key,” he wrote, “is to avoid thinking about it in the first place.”

But the experiment can also be read as a measure of environment. Kids who have reason to distrust their surroundings—kids who are primed for distrust by experimenters who initially promise some other treat, then return empty-handed—are far more likely to eat the first marshmallow without waiting for the second. The implication is that the original marshmallow-resisters are not the ones with better self-control, but the ones whose caregivers showed up on time and made promises that bore out. *If you clean your room, you can have ten extra minutes of TV. If you study, you’ll get good grades. If you refuse to give up, you will succeed. If you keep looking, you will find love.*

I am certain I would not have eaten the marshmallow. But this isn’t because I did excellently in school and on the SATs, have a robust immune system, hardy self-esteem, and a healthy BMI, and have always exhibited a stubborn will. It’s because, when I watch videos of the group who didn’t, I recognize in their childhood faces the qualities of my own: a wide-eyed shyness around adult strangers, an absolute good behavior, a trembling desire to please. I know how I would have felt—that it was only a marshmallow, for god’s sake—and why I would have waited: not because I cared about getting the second one, but because I knew it was what the experimenter wanted me to do. It was so obviously what you were supposed to do.

This is the failure of any test on human subjects: to experiment is to assume it’s possible to control the conditions of experience, so that the psychologists who administer the marshmallow test must blind themselves to the fact that it’s completely obvious, from the instant they enter the room, which kids will not eat the marshmallow. You see it on their long, somber faces.

Which is not to say that the test is flawed, only that the correlation between adult “success” and childhood marshmallow behavior can be interpreted in infinite ways. Besides self-control, besides trust in one’s environment, for instance, the test measures hope.

Hope. Because during those long fifteen minutes, there is always a point when a shadow of doubt, of fear, muddies the child’s expression. Maybe no one is coming back. Maybe she has been forgotten. The time ticks by in slow, painful seconds. Some children succumb to their own consternation and mouth-stuff the marshmallow with doleful faces; others buck up—you can practically see the private pep talk, the reminder, she promised two—and their faces clear.

Maybe this hopefulness is actually evidence of imagination: the dull and daily capacity to envision a better future. The capacity to believe in such a future, to convince yourself that a purely imaginary, hypothetical thing—the double-marshmallow dream—will come true.

SASHA DEBEVEC-MCKENNEY

I FEEL LIKE IF I'M NOT WRITING  
POLITICAL POEMS I'M WASTING MY  
TIME SO I MADE THIS CONTAINER FOR  
MYSELF IN WHICH NOT TO BE POLITICAL

Whenever anybody in my life travels anywhere the only thing I ask them is what was the best thing you ate? Tobias keeps a clog keychain that reminds him of the French fries he ate in Amsterdam.

On Saturday he dumped a bag of individually wrapped chocolates onto my bed and not thinking we laid down and crushed all ten pieces. Repeatedly. Then we shared a melted, flat Ferrero Rocher.

Outside my apartment someone set a tin of breadcrumbs and rocks, the breadcrumbs to eat and the rocks to hold down the tin.

I was wearing the knit sweater with the purple whales and I was warm. A woman screamed: Your hair! Your sweater! A texture paradise!

Someone told me they're calling the other Sasha at work White Sasha.

Windsor, Connecticut was one of a handful of towns in the country where, in the 2000 Census, median income for black households was larger than white households and I was a girl.

The men working at the barber shop called the hair braider and turned up the light so I could read while I waited. When I'm getting my hair braided I get to miss my grandmother and be in physical pain at the same time.

Colleen called, I'm in town, my Dad had the best possible heart attack. He walked over to the trainer, sat down and said, I'm having a heart attack.

My fingers pruned the second I stepped in the shower and it scared me. All my other fears are political. I was never a girl.

The first thing I thought this morning was mayonnaise would be a good name for a dog. I could scream Mayonnaise! Mayonnaise, Mayonnaise! into the dark of my backyard.

My sister is visiting on Tuesday because she has Lincoln's birthday off. Did he even do anything other than get shot? I was so proud of myself I said not really, I'll see you soon, I can't wait to show you my apartment, I'll tell you all about White Sasha.

DOING KARAOKE IN THE DESERT

Merging onto the highway that morning it said TAKE TURNS!  
We had planned to have a No Kill day—all vegetables—  
and then we ran over a lizard. And at that point  
you may as well eat a burger. And I let myself get drunk  
because I'm on vacation. And I don't allow myself  
to mourn the time I will lose. Nobody will remember me  
but at a karaoke bar that's a good thing.  
“Don't be nervous” says the other guy picking a song,  
“This is all a shameless trainwreck.”

I'm learning. I always thought Joshua Tree was one big tree  
where people held hands and found themselves.  
But it is thousands of trees, and this is the only place  
they survive. Every creature in the desert takes  
from the joshua tree until the trees crumble into the earth.  
When they grow, they grow two inches per year.  
The more I see of my country, the more I realize  
how much of it does not look like where I grew up.  
In another life I might have seen a forest and thought,  
this is what the desert would look like wet.

I'm in the desert. The animals survive by burying  
themselves and burying their water.  
I hate to be enjoying the same earth as the white man  
leaning against his Mustang pulling cactus quills out of his arm  
outside the cactus garden but what else can you do  
when you realize at the end of the world  
it will be even hotter than this?  
And you will be thirsty.  
And you see every one of your selves dying out.  
It doesn't matter that I can't sing. I sing anyway.

# COMMUNITY WRITING

The Mastheads has focused on supporting active writers and writing both within and outside of our community for our 2020 season.

While our five writers-in-residence: Kendra Allen, My Tran, Jessica Laser, Helen Betya Rubinstein, and Sasha Debevec-McKenney will not physically be in their studios in Pittsfield this July, we have installed their work at 11 locations throughout the city, including billboards, produce sections, stairwells, storefronts, and more. You will find their voices paired with those of Pittsfield elementary school students, as well as authors from the Berkshires' literary history. Follow the map below to find them across Pittsfield.

In addition to highlighting the voices of our five writers-in-residence, we will also run a series of virtual events this month. These events will invite our community to hear the 2020 residents read their work, encourage and support local residents in producing their own written work, in a series led by poet Christian Schlegel, and reflect on *Black Writers Who Found Their Voice in the Berkshires* with Frances Jones-Sneed.

To participate in the events listed below, please register at [www.themastheads.org](http://www.themastheads.org) to receive a Zoom link. All events will also be recorded. For those who take part in our Community Writing Workshops on July 5 and 12, please consider sending us your work! We may publish it in our next Mastheads Fold!

Lastly, The Mastheads has chosen for the first time to support 10 Mastheads Finalists with stipends this year to support additional working writers during this difficult time. Our Finalists are: Lucas Baisch, Madeline Court, Sonia Feigelson, Shaina Jones, Ally Harris, Mark Mangelsdorf, Douglas Piccinnini, Molly Reid, Catherine Weingarten, and Sara Wintz.

Warmth from the growing Mastheads team:

Tessa Kelly, Sarah Trudgeon, Chris Parkinson, Jeffrey Lawrence, Christian Schlegel, Alicia Mireles Christoff

## JULY 1

Wednesday @ 7:30PM, [Mastheads Writers-in-Residence Kickoff Reading](#)

## JULY 5

Sunday @ 7:30PM, [Community Writing Workshop: Haibun](#), with Christian Schlegel

## JULY 12

Sunday @ 7:30PM, [Community Writing Workshop: Chance Encounters](#), with Christian Schlegel

## JULY 19

Sunday @ 3:00PM, ["Black Writers Who Found Their Voice in the Berkshires,"](#) with Frances Jones-Sneed

## JULY 26

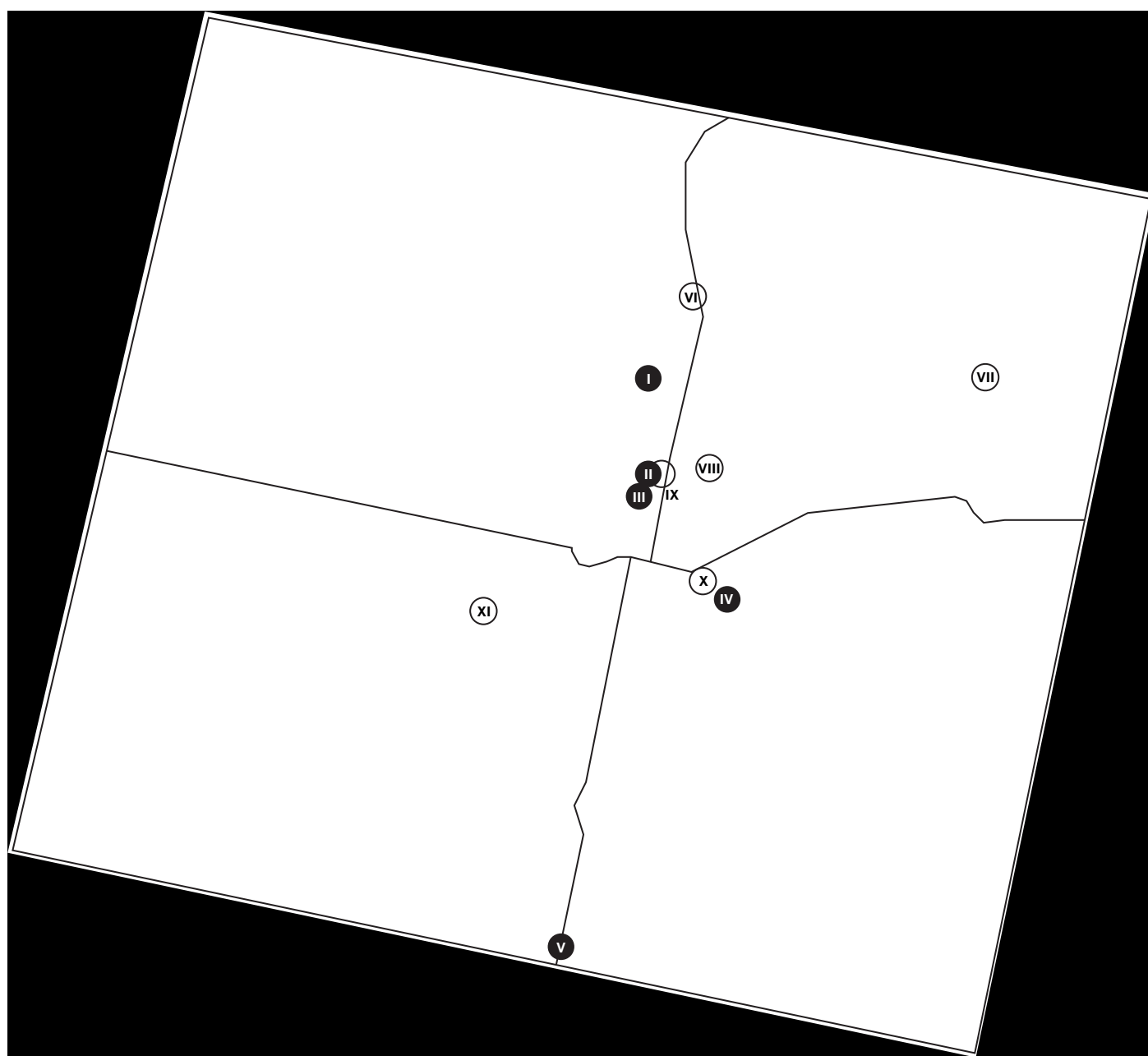
Sunday @ 7:30PM, [Mastheads Writers-in-Residence Final Reading](#)

### Mastheads Text Installations in Locally-Owned Essential Businesses

- I Harry's Supermarket: 290 Wahconah Street
- II Carr Hardware: 547 North Street
- III Pittsfield Health Food Center: 407 North Street
- IV Elm Street Hardware: 129 Elm Street
- V Guido's Fresh Marketplace, 1020 South Street

### Mastheads Text Collage Billboards

- VI 541 Wahconah Street
- VII 794 Dalton Avenue
- VIII 307 Tyler Street
- IX 540 North Street
- X 17 Elm Street
- XI 438 West Housatonic Street



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