

JOELLE BIELE

Birthday Poem

On February 27, 1969, I don't need to look it up, Macy's or Gimbel's was having a sale. Winter or white, it doesn't matter, they had stuff

to sell and they were going to sell it, and I'd bet real money if I opened the classifieds, I'd see someone looking to hire a cook

or Girl Friday, someone offering their services as a handyman or hoping to unload a sofa, cheap. I know Americans were bombing

Cambodia while the Vietcong was bombing Saigon, the sea had not yet begun to rise though temperatures had, and the Grateful Dead

played the Fillmore the first of four nights—the record is still available, you can buy a boxed set. My father was not there, though he was nearby,

nor was my mother, who was at her parents' in the Bronx waiting for labor to begin. It was my grandmother who recognized the moment and dragged

garbage cans into the street to save the space before dropping my mother off at the hospital where she would be shaved, put under, not to meet me

until the next day when the nurse entered the room, muttering, "Poor thing." The earth did not stand still, no one experienced

a grand transformation. The wind outside my mother's window continued to blow as the Number 6 rolled along its tracks in a city

that had yet to emerge from three feet of snow. When I was five or six,
my mother explained how a child comes to be. She made a pencil dot

and said the dot was the egg that was me. When I asked
what would have happened if *that* sperm she also drew did not fertilize

that egg, she looked at me and said, “You would still be you,
you would just be somebody else,” not knowing, I think, what box

it was she opened up. Call it dumb luck or simply chance
as to why a man took one door and not another, why he stopped to read

the headlines or started to run down the platform to catch a certain train,
why he set off one chain of events and not another, a chain that could have
been

long or short or never occurred at all, that I am one set of particles
and you are another, that you are here by a series of events

as equally unlikely as me. It would be nice to say x happened
and *it was good*, but I can’t despite the definite attraction of making

some larger claim. It’s the very tenuousness of each moment
that weighs on me, that I try to ignore so I can go about my day knowing

something as simple as a spilled cup of coffee could keep us from lying
in this particular bed on this particular night with these very particular
children

sleeping between us with the windows and curtains open and morning
about to begin when all of it could, conceivably, have never,

will never, have happened again. Lie with me love, hold me,
grab onto the sheets, batten down the pillows, float with me

in this bed over the treetops and out-of-tune birds, let us sail out
into morning, come what may, over the abyss.