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C. V. Davis
Gardner-Webb University

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THE
BROAD RIVER
REVIEW

Volume 45
Spring 2013

The Literary Review of Gardner-Webb University
Boiling Springs, North Carolina

THE BROAD RIVER REVIEW

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EDITORS' NOTE

Each year, the *Broad River Review* recognizes select undergraduate student writers for outstanding achievement by publishing their works. The J. Calvin Koonts Poetry Award is awarded to a senior English major at Gardner-Webb University whose group of poems is judged most outstanding by a committee of department members. The *Broad River Review* Editors' Prizes in Poetry and Prose are selected from among all Gardner-Webb student submissions for a given issue, although a prize in prose was not awarded for Volume 45.

In addition, the *Broad River Review* publishes the winners and select finalists of the Rash Awards, named in honor of Ron Rash, a 1976 graduate of Gardner-Webb University. Rash's first published poem, "Last Night Ride," appeared in the pages of this literary review the year of his graduation. Since then, of course, Rash has worked tirelessly to become a prize-winning writer and *New York Times* bestselling author. So far, he has published fourteen books in all—four books of poetry, five books of short stories, and five novels. Upon the publication of *Serena* in 2008, Pat Conroy said, "*Serena* catapults [Rash] to the front ranks of the best American novelists." Rash's most recent short story collection, *Nothing Gold Can Stay*, appeared in February 2013.

We would like to thank Jill McCorkle and Kathryn Stripling Byer for serving as judges for the Rash Awards in Fiction and Poetry, respectively. McCorkle selected Abigail Lipscomb, of Fincastle, Virginia, to receive the fiction award, while Byer picked Karen Luke Jackson, of Hendersonville, North Carolina, as winner of the poetry award. Congratulations to both winners, who received \$500 each and publication in the 2013 issue. We would also like to thank every writer who entered the contests. A full list of finalists can be found on our website, www.broadriverreview.org. Our next contest submission period will coincide with our regular submission period, which will be August 15–November 15, 2013. Full submission information and guidelines, including profiles of the judges, will appear on our web site in July.

Finally, the editors would like to thank the Department of English Language and Literature for its continued support, both financially and in spirit. The editors would also like to thank university administration for its sustained backing of a literary review, especially during difficult economic times when some university-sponsored publications are not surviving.

KAREN LUKE JACKSON

A Triptych on the First Anniversary of My Mother's Death

in memory of Dorothy Eloise Royal Luke

1

What's heaven like? Mama asked three weeks
before she died. She was sitting
on a red couch, frail, her eyes closed.
Light through the picture window
streaked her white hair gold.

I recalled tales of paved streets and pearly gates,
said, I don't know, but it must be
wonderful, full of love.

Earth's pretty wonderful too, she replied.

2

Mama had come from the womb of a cripple—
a miracle, declared spinster aunts who asked
for the child, if it lived, but predicted the death of both.

How my grandmother, felled by a stroke when her belly
was ripe, gave birth and then lived thirty years
to see me born is a mystery. Rocking on the front porch

to ease her pain, Grandma would fret over her yard,
then rise, hobble down the steps, dragging
a straw broom behind, and with one hand

sweep the South Georgia sand, tracing patterns
that rose in her head, like lines drawn by Navajo
medicine men and Zen masters she never knew.

Satisfied, winded from her work, she would limp
back up the stairs, collapse into her chair
and dare anyone to desecrate the designs.

Whenever Mama was upset she'd bake cakes,
swirling divinity icing into patterns
reminiscent of her mother's swept sand yard.

The night she died, kin and caregivers
surrounded her bed, recited the twenty-third
psalm to bid her farewell.

We dressed her corpse in a blue nightgown,
sang gospel songs, lowered
the coffin into the ground.

3

Sun strikes the bench where I sit staring
at winter grass that carpets her grave,
dates etched in marble's blue veins.
A sandpiper prances nearby.

Love blankets me, just as it covered Mama
the night she left her body for us to bury, just as
it warmed my grandmother when she edged
toward death—then returned to bear life.

ABIGAIL LIPSCOMB

Carousel

The horse struggled. His asthma-scarred lungs and worn-down teeth prevented him from the two things he loved most. He could no longer keep up with the herd, and when he sank his muzzle into a bucket of sweet feed he couldn't chew. Nora had to agree with the trainer, it was time.

Nora drove to the stable on a crystal-blue-sky day, much like the day she took Savannah for her first riding lesson fifteen years ago. The trees had just begun to turn; flame-topped maples and golden poplars bordered still-green pastures along the road. Later there'd been the early morning trips to pick up the horse for shows. AJ, standing resplendent in cross ties, his sleek body edged in gold by the rising sun. He'd stamp his foot with impatience as Savannah, dressed in her already-rumpled hunt jacket and scuffed show boots, brushed his withers. She'd chatter as Nora went behind to re-brush his tail. "You like to look pretty, don-cha, Boy? Mom, can horses tell red? Can AJ have a carrot?" Once Savannah had won enough of the red ribbons she coveted, she lost interest in riding. Nora took over the weekly lessons, eventually taking over AJ as well.

Nora and Peter might have over-reacted when nine-year-old Savannah showed an interest in riding horses. School had already become difficult with friendships going awry and teachers growing impatient. Nora had heard the teacher yell at her daughter when she dropped by the school one day. "Savannah Bowen!" the teacher had cried, "I've asked you three times now to put your pencil down and turn in your test booklet! Can you not hear me?" From the hallway Nora could see Savannah at her desk with her head bowed, the teacher bent over her. "Time's up! Pencils down!" Savannah was still erasing answers when the woman yanked the booklet out from under her hands. "You'll be the death of me yet," she mumbled as Savannah continued to stare at her desk top. Nora couldn't tell whether she was more upset with the teacher for humiliating her daughter, or with herself for recognizing the fury the woman felt toward this inscrutable child.

"You really need to do what your teacher tells you, Savannah," Nora told her later.

"No, Mom," she'd said. "She's a cow and I hate her."

Savannah was sweet enough until something set her off, usually something no one saw coming. She didn't have tantrums so much as

outbursts of despair in which objects or words were hurled, followed by tearful apologies. At age six, she'd used the vacuum cleaner to remove her hamster from the tubing in his cage when he wouldn't come out. They had to take the vacuum cleaner apart to retrieve the tiny pet which died of internal injuries soon afterward. Savannah cried all afternoon, murmuring over and over, "I'm sorry—I didn't mean to."

It had been difficult to know how to discipline her. Did you spank or comfort when your five-year-old put her fist through her bedroom window after being sent to her room? Peter thought they should punish, but Nora felt self-esteem was at stake and hesitated to snuff out what little the child had. So they sold their house in the city and moved to the country where they bought the horse and found Jo to give lessons. They had to dip into their savings and Peter had to commute to his law office an hour each way, but Savannah's excitement about learning to ride her own horse made it all worthwhile. She quickly became a competent rider due to her lack of fear as well as Jo's considerable repertoire of teaching methods. Nora loved to watch the lessons when she could.

"Very-very-well-done-Savannah!" Jo shouted as Savannah, grinning with pleasure, sailed over a series of two-foot vertical jumps. "And yes, it does feel like flying, doesn't it? And we like flying, don't we? Now do it again and this time keep your heels down!"

Nora pulled into the gravel area and parked. The stable, a ten-stall horse barn, overlooked hundreds of acres of horse pasture hemmed in by dusky violet wedges of Blue Ridge Mountains. Usually bustling with horses and riders, the stable was silent today but for clouds of insects circling in the buttery sunlight. When she entered the tacking area, it took a minute to recognize AJ standing in the shadows wheezing softly, his lead line held loosely by Jo who sat nearby. A chestnut gelding of questionable lineage, AJ had always had a changeable appearance. In certain summer light, he looked magnificent with his gleaming honey-brown coat and sun-streaked mane. In winter he was an elderly highland pony, shaggy-coated and common. Now, at twenty-seven, he looked worn and thin, his ribcage made prominent by every labored breath. He'd been brushed and clipped, however. His mane pulled, his feet trimmed and polished. Gray hairs glistened in the sun as a breeze lifted his tail.

"Look at you, A," Nora said, "all gussied up."

"It's what I do for them when it's time," Jo said. It was odd to see Jo sitting down. A tall, spare woman in her late forties, she was usually busy hauling hay, mucking out stalls, or working horses in the round pen. She never hurried, Nora had noticed, but she never stopped either.

“Am I late? I could have helped you,” Nora said.

“No, I wanted to be alone with him. Say goodbye.”

Nora faced AJ. He dropped his big head into her chest as he always had so she could scratch the insides of his ears. He remembered her, though she hadn't been to see him in months and hadn't ridden him in years. She'd told herself it was because of the asthma, which became worse in the spring and didn't let up until a hard frost, but it wasn't just that. Like most things, she supposed the decision not to ride had to do with Savannah. Riding horses was something people did for pleasure—a reward for work well done. Nora's work seemed never done. Or never done well, for that matter.

You-must-choose-what-your-eyes-will-see, Jo had called to Nora as she bounced around the ring on AJ's back. When Jo taught, she stood in the center of the ring and turned as her students revolved around her. She used a loud, chanting sort of sing-song voice, which Nora supposed happened when you had to repeat things over and over. Jo chanted to the beat of the horse's gait. *You-want-to-see*, she said to the two-beat pace of the trot, *everything-and-nothing*. *Relaxing-your-eyes*. *Using-your-peripheral-vision*. *Focusing-on-nothing-you-become-aware-of-everything*. *Beneath-you*. *Inside-you*. *Around you*. *Soft eyes, we-call-it*. *You-must-use-your-soft-eyes*.

If a rider didn't use soft eyes, she was apt to hyper-focus on something to be concerned about, a plastic grocery bag fluttering from a tree branch, a vulture in a tree. She'd worry about the horse shying at such a thing, possibly unseating her, and just thinking about it would make her body tense, which would cause the horse to become uneasy, making shying all the more probable. Nora knew she was doing this with Savannah—focusing on Savannah's tendency to make mistakes before she made them. Savannah was Nora's plastic grocery bag.

The vet arrived, a young woman with tired eyes wearing heavy work boots and dirty jeans. “I'm so sorry, Nora,” she said. “He was a good old boy.”

“Yes, and he's had a good, full life,” Nora said, finishing the maxim.

Nora and Jo climbed into the ATV. Leading AJ alongside, they set out along the farm road, the vet following in her truck. Jo had said it was easier to go to where the horse would be buried. A man with a backhoe would come later that evening. They crept along the fence line at a snail's pace for AJ's sake. Horses in the field lifted their heads to watch the plodding parade and then resumed grazing. When the caravan passed through the gate into

the cattle field, AJ threw up his head and called out once, the long, warbled cry he'd always used to locate his herd. Whether it was *hello* or *goodbye*, Nora couldn't tell.

Unlike her daughter, Nora had been a timid rider. *Remember*, Jo had chanted, *a walnut!* She'd held her arm above her head, thumb and forefinger forming a small circle as Nora jounced around the ring attempting to canter. AJ must have sensed her ambivalence because they bounced on that way for some time, out of balance and out of sync like a rickety carousel with its horses joggled loose from their poles. *A-horse's-brain, is-no-bigger, than-a-walnut. This-is-how-it-is-with-them, all-they-care-about. Herd-and-food. In-that-order: herd-then-food. Not-you. They-want-to-be-with-their-buddies, and-they-want-to-eat. If-you-want-them-to-do-things, you-have-to-change-the-order. That's-what-horse-training-is: changing-the-order.*

The school psychologist had explained to Peter and Nora that their daughter had a spectrum disorder in which incoming information was not processed efficiently. She said that such children missed nonverbal cues and misread emotions, making social interaction, among other things, difficult to navigate. At first it had been a relief to learn that Savannah had a disability because it explained her indifference toward others in a more acceptable way. She couldn't help her tactless, uncooperative behavior. The diagnosis meant she wasn't stubborn and self-centered after all. Then Nora realized she'd have preferred her daughter chose to be difficult and antisocial. Knowing how earnestly Savannah wanted to fit in when she failed was heartbreaking.

After years of arguing about how best to handle the constant flow of poor choices made by Savannah, Nora and Peter had settled on The Talk Method. They had talks with her. Lengthy, repetitive talks about how things might be handled better in the future, about thinking before acting, about considering the feelings of others. So many talks—some of them quite good, really—that Nora thought they should record them, print and collect them since they were giving the same ones over and over. “Good talk, Hon,” they'd say to each other after one had given The Talk Method another go. And perhaps the talks were helping. Savannah, at twenty-five, had made some progress. After high school she'd moved on to college, successfully graduating after six years and three transfers.

Despite leaving home, The Talks had continued. The phone would ring and Nora and Peter would wait, hoping the other would answer. Sometimes there'd be no voice on the line, only wistful sighs, or worse, staccato choking sobs. She'd backed into another car, fought with another

friend, or lost another job. Always a misunderstanding surrounded by baffling circumstances. People disliked her for no apparent reason. Were unnecessarily impatient. Recently, she'd moved into her own apartment in Northern Virginia and was working at a diner. And though Nora and Peter were still helping with the rent, it was a beginning. It might even be said she was doing well if not for the boyfriend.

Climbing across the cattle field, the caravan had to move more slowly when AJ's wheezing deepened into groaning. At the second gate they parked the vehicles and continued on foot into the woods to a clearing surrounded by towering oak trees. A forest cathedral, with a canopy of russet leaves and sun-dappled floor full of dips and swells.

"This is where they all go?" Nora asked.

Jo nodded, looking down at her boots.

"I'm going to give him two drugs," the vet said. "The first will sedate him, make him dopey, then the Rompun, which, you know, will put him out and stop his heart. With older horses, the circulatory system is not so good and it can take a while for the drugs to work."

Nora leaned into AJ's shoulder and slipped her hand under his chin strap, though she knew he wouldn't balk at the shot. He'd always been willing to do whatever she asked, regardless of her stiff and shifty seat. He'd walked beside her without a lead line, his pace matching hers. He'd come in from the field whenever she'd called him. He was obliging—even now.

The vet put the first needle into his neck muscle and released the sedative. His head dropped instantly to his knees. "Don't get too close," she warned as she rubbed his neck to find a vein. She emptied the second syringe. It was going too fast. Nora had pictured herself sitting on the ground, holding AJ's head in her lap as he drifted away.

The vet motioned Nora farther to the side and stepped in front of the horse. Placing her hands on his shoulders, she shoved hard. He staggered backwards, hind legs splaying until his front legs folded and his body sank to the ground. His bony hips bounced once before settling, sending clouds of leaves and dirt into the air.

He looked wrong lying on his side with his legs stretched out straight, his eyes open, muzzle parted. Like a giant, cast-off child's toy. When he'd rested in the field in the morning sun, he'd always kept his legs tucked beneath him and his head up. Nora knelt on the ground and rubbed his still-warm neck.

"Is he gone?"

The vet touched a finger to the cornea of his eye.

He was.

At home, Nora poured herself a glass of wine. She told herself it was all okay. It had to be done. It was a good thing. One more problem gotten out of the way. In case Savannah needed her. It was the boyfriend, this Jake person she had to worry about now. Nora hadn't met him but she imagined a trim young man of faux-athletic build—a body not earned through discipline and exercise. Mable said he smoked. He probably had long hair that would thin and fade soon enough, leaving him with a straggly pony-tail gathered from the shores of a large bald spot. A glib sort of person with a slippery smile who called their daughter “babe,” and who had no desire whatsoever to meet her parents.

“I think he’s seeing someone else,” Savannah had told Nora the other day. “He’s been coming over later and later and his jacket smells like perfume. I followed him, waited outside his favorite bar, but I fell asleep and he was gone. What should I do?”

Nora pictured Savannah sitting outside a rundown bar in the wrong part of town, hunched over the steering wheel of her VW Beetle, surrounded by empty coffee cups and fast food wrappers. “Well,” she said, “could he be, do you think, less invested in the relationship than you are?”

“*Invested?* What do you mean? Who talks like that?”

“Well, did you both agree not to see other people?”

“What? I don’t want to see anyone else!”

What would become of her? Nora tried not to picture Savannah living in an apartment they’d have to build for her over the garage. She tried not to focus on her daughter sitting by the window of that apartment, wearing a bathrobe and eating ice-cream out of the container, waiting for her ne’er-do-well husband to come home.

Nora and Peter had given Savannah most of their best advice concerning boyfriends. Advice about expecting to be treated well, and about waiting for the right guy. About the lovely sense of security to be gained by finding someone who could be counted on. Someone steady, predictable, safe. Wasn’t that what everyone wanted? It was hard to understand why she put up with Jake. It was most likely Peter’s and Nora’s fault, of course, but they didn’t know exactly how. They’d always been there for her, had always protected her. And she was such a beautiful young woman in an unaware way. She lit up a room when she smiled.

“You are a beautiful young woman,” they told her. “Why would you think you had to settle for anyone?”

“That’s your opinion,” she said, “Jake says I’m only a six.”

Nora was pouring her second glass of wine when the phone rang. The answering machine clicked on and she recognized her daughter’s breathing.

“Savannah?” she said.

“I need a check,” Savannah said after a long sigh.

“Well hello and how are you? to you too.”

“Mom.”

“Didn’t we just send one two weeks ago?”

“Yes, but I need more. Sorry. Two thousand.”

“But that’s an awful lot for food and rent,” Nora said.

“You’ll get mad,” Savannah said.

“No I won’t.”

“Yes you will!”

“Does it have to do with Jake?”

“He can’t help it, he owes people money.”

“Well, your father and I are not interested in supporting Jake.”

“But, I already gave it to him and now I need money for rent,”

Savannah said, her voice rising in panic.

“You shouldn’t be paying his bills. If he cared about you, he wouldn’t ask.”

“He does care about me! He’s the only one who’s ever cared about me!”

“How can you even say that?” Nora said, suddenly exhausted.

“I’m the one he calls for rides.”

“Rides?”

“Rides home.”

“From where?”

“Donnigan’s. It’s a bar.”

“You go there together?”

“No. He goes. When he wants to come home he calls me.”

“When? Late?”

“Two or three, I don’t know.”

“AM?”

“Yes!”

“Come home? Is he staying with you?” Now they were playing Pick-up Sticks. If Nora brought up the wrong stick first, the whole discussion would end before she had a chance to save her daughter from more disappointment, or worse, future abuse. If she’d known she was going to have to negotiate for the release of hostages this evening, she wouldn’t have had the wine.

“He got kicked out of his apartment. He had no place to go. I knew you’d get mad!”

Was Nora angry? Yes, but not with Savannah. She was angry with a world where irresponsible men like Jake were free to pounce upon innocent

young girls like Savannah. What if this was the only sort of person Savannah could ever find?

Savannah was sniffing now, crying. When she could speak again, she told Nora she was twenty-five and knew what she was doing. He was fun. Nora would never understand.

“Come home this weekend,” Nora pleaded, “We’ll talk.”

“I don’t know,” Savannah whimpered, “Jake might need me to drive him somewhere.”

“Savannah—” Nora said, but Savannah had hung up the phone.

This time Nora didn’t feel like reporting the call to Peter. She didn’t feel like repeating the conversation word for word while Peter listened, inserting suggestions for next time. *How long has he been living there? How much money did she give him? Did you suggest she come home?* She thought about how her friends looked forward to their children’s calls, spent happy hours chatting about wedding plans and career paths. Joan, for example, was busy fashioning centerpieces out of spray-painted tree branches, wrapping twigs with strings of tiny lights for her daughter’s wedding. Instead of chatting about flowers and cake, Nora and Peter were running a hotline, talking their daughter down from ledge after ledge, searching frantically for the right words, the perfect metaphor, the winning angle, words that would finally, once for all, make sense to Savannah and illuminate her path to a happy future.

Nora poured herself another glass of wine. Soft eyes, she thought. See my daughter with soft eyes. But it wasn’t Savannah Nora saw when she closed her eyes and tried to relax. Instead, it was the clearing in the woods.

Driving her car, being drawn to that clearing. She was navigating the narrow road in pre-dawn darkness, startled by the wall of silver-limned trees at every bend. At the stable, she parked the car on the farm road and hiked up the cattle field through wet grass to the edge of the forest. It was quite dark, a black void with gray tree trunks stretching upward to a lightening sky, but she knew she had found the clearing when the footing became uneven. Dry leaves rustled in the treetops as an owl hooted three times in the distance. Nora sat down on a log to watch the stars fade from the sky. The stable had been in business for years, breeding, training, and boarding horses. Many lovely beasts had spent their lives carrying people around, graciously putting up with anxious women like her who’d loved horses as little girls, then used them for therapy later. How many horses lay beneath the hard-packed, leaf-strewn forest floor?

Near seven o'clock on Friday, Savannah came through the kitchen doorway carrying her yellow backpack and a large Starbucks cup. Her favorite jeans with the frayed bottom edges caught under her flip-flops. She did not say hello.

"Savannah!" Nora said, "You're just in time for dinner."

"I'm not hungry," she said. "I need to pick up some clothes and get the check."

"Sit with us a minute, honey," her father said, smiling his good soldier smile. "It's so nice to see you. You look good. Are you here for the night? We could find a movie to watch."

"Maybe later," she said, heading up the stairs to her room.

"I thought we just sent her a check," Peter said.

"We did, but please, no Talks tonight," Nora whispered, "I'm beat." Peter frowned and nodded. They'd be more rested and clear-thinking in the morning.

During the movie, Savannah sat in her favorite chair with her yellow baby blanket wrapped around her. Now and then she laughed. Maybe it would all work out. Even as a toddler Savannah's laughter had had the power to catch Nora in its tide. When she'd been fussy at mealtime—sat whining in her high chair—Nora had amused her by pretending to trip and stumble about the kitchen as she prepared dinner. Savannah would smile, then giggle, then laugh until she hiccupped.

When the cell phone cradled in her lap rang, Savannah hurried out of the room. "Hello?" she said in a voice so full of hope it broke Nora's heart.

"We have to respect her right to make her own decisions," Peter said, "She's twenty-five."

"But we don't respect her decisions. Her decisions scare us."

"True," he said, turning to stare at the TV screen.

"I'll go," Nora said when Savannah didn't return.

Savannah was on the front stoop, her head resting on her knees. "I need to head back," she said.

"Tonight? You just got here."

"I need to go. I need the check."

"Okay, of course you can go, I'm just thinking you're probably tired. Wouldn't it be better to leave first thing in the morning?" Nora pictured Savannah lying unconscious beneath her flattened car on the highway, having fallen asleep at the wheel.

"No, I need to go," she said, not moving.

"Why? Can't it wait?"

“Jake wants me. We had a fight and now he wants me to come back. I have to go.”

“But it’s late. Driving five hours is not safe. You’re tired.”

“No, I’m not. I’m not old like you.” Savannah rubbed her face with her hands the way she’d always done it—with her palms, fingers curled inward. “You just don’t get it.”

“Oh, I get it,” Nora was almost yelling. “It’s not all about fun, you know, Savvy. Fun has a price.”

The face coming out from behind the hands was blotched. The mouth, a woman’s mouth, pursed and angry. The eyes, wide and lost. Savannah rose and stomped inside, letting the screen door slam. Nora rose wearily. She’d give it one more try.

When Jo set out to teach AJ to load onto a horse trailer, he’d refused. “What horse would ever want to enter a tin box?” Jo had said. They stood facing the open trailer, Nora at AJ’s head holding the lead line and Jo at his left flank. With a long crop, Jo had tapped his hip repeatedly until he’d made some gesture of forward movement, if only lifting a foot. Then, she praised him and started over again. Eventually, he moved all the way up the ramp and into the trailer and allowed himself to be tied. Then, after loading successfully several times, he planted his feet before the ramp and refused to do it again. “There’s a learning curve with horses,” Jo said. “It goes like this: bad, bad, better, better, good, good, got it! Then, just when you think you’re done, they break bad and refuse to do it again. It’s the last of the fear. You don’t give up. You start over. Then, when they get it right the second go-round, they’ve got it for good.”

Nora entered Savannah’s room and sat on the bed. Savannah was picking through a mountain of clothing on her floor. She’d never kept her clothes in drawers or closets. She said she needed to see them.

“Don’t look,” she said as she pulled her shirt over her head and replaced it with another from the pile. Nora looked long enough to scan her neck and arms for bruises. Just to be sure.

“I told you, he’s trying,” Savannah said when Nora asked if Jake had found a job yet. She was stuffing clothing into a pillow case, punching down the contents to make room for more. Savannah also needed the things she touched to be smooth and soft. A suitcase would be out of the question, newly laundered, stiffened clothing, unbearable.

“We had to put AJ down yesterday,” Nora told her. Savannah’s eyes shifted briefly to Nora’s face, then back to the pile. “His asthma was worse. It wasn’t fair to put him through another winter.”

Savannah shook her head and smirked.

“Oh, would you have wanted me to check with you first?” Nora said.

“No.”

“What then?”

“You never stop! You go on and on about the worst things. It’s so depressing, I hate it here.” Savannah crawled into her bed and burrowed under the comforter.

“You’re just tired,” said Nora. No, she was crying, her shoulders rising and falling.

Was Nora depressing? She tried to be fun. What about the trail ride on the coaling road? She’d been on AJ, Savannah on a borrowed Arabian mare. Savannah had ridden ahead, as usual, cantering over fallen trees while Nora trotted around them. They were heading back to the stable on the old coaling road when Savannah urged her horse into a gallop. “C’mon Mom!” she hollered over her shoulder as her horse shot up the hill. AJ strained to follow as Nora leaned back in the saddle and yanked on the reins. But this time AJ prevailed. He took off in a hard gallop and, unable to stop him, Nora had let him fly. What a surprise it was to find that she felt almost safe, tucked inside a tunnel of speed, anchored to the horse. But the best part was the look on Savannah’s face when Nora caught up to her.

“Mom!” she said.

Nora moved closer to rub Savannah’s back like she had when Savannah was a baby and needed to be settled at bedtime. “Sleepy-baby,” she’d said over and over until her breathing had smoothed out into sleep. What could she say now?

“I’m sad about AJ too,” she finally said.

“I’m not sad. He’s your horse, not mine.”

“Well, I hate to see you so unhappy, then.”

It was the wrong thing to say. Savannah climbed out of bed. “You don’t know what you’re talking about!” Her voice rose to a shout. “He’s fun! I don’t want to be like you and Dad!” Grabbing the pillowcase full of clothes, she left the room and clattered down the stairs.

“We-worry-about-you-because-we-love-you,” Nora chanted after her to the beat of the trot.

In the darkened driveway, Peter leaned into Savannah’s car window with one hand on the car door, his face barely visible but clearly pleading. Come back in, let’s talk, he was probably saying. Then he stepped back and the Volkswagen disappeared down the driveway.

“I just don’t know what else to say to her, Nora,” he said when he came inside looking far older than his sixty years. “I’d hate to stop the checks.”

“I know,” Nora said, touching his stubbly cheek. “But it’s probably time.”

In the clearing, from her log, Nora could hear thunder rumbling in the distance. A storm was coming down the ridge. But the ground vibrating beneath her feet made her think of the horses. Horses stirring in their graves.

In the half-light, trees shivered. From root to branch, they trembled, showering the pitted ground with leaves. The sound of rending came from below, the sound of roots breaking free from the earth when a tree topples, though no trees were falling. Throughout the clearing the ground began to buckle and heave as clumps of dirt rose like bubbles on boiling water. Clumps became mounds, and mounds became hillocks, and from the hillocks erupted the horses.

Beneath the ground, horses struggled to gather stiff legs beneath heavy torsos. Stretching forelegs out front for balance, shoving hindquarters up against the earth, they rose to their feet. Scrabbling to make purchase in loose dirt, buoyed by the nodding of heavy heads, they clambered out of their graves. Once on solid ground, they shook and shuddered like dogs after swimming. Fifty, sixty horses or more, stood ghostlike in the morning mist, snorting and rubbing dirty muzzles on forelegs. Then, one by one, they turned downhill and ran for the open fields.

Nora stood balancing on her log as the ground pitched and rolled above a river of horses. Across waves of palomino, gray, black, and roan horseflesh, she searched for AJ. His chestnut coat and wide white blaze. If she found him, she could call to him. The way she used to call him in from the field for dinner. She knew he’d come if she called.

ELIZABETH VAN HALSEMA

Concorde

In 1981, my father traveled through
time from London to New York.
He sat in a leather seat and ate pork sausage
for brunch as the dark blue stratosphere
filled the thick acrylic of his window.
Mach 1 passed silently, a boomless
suggestion nudging the plane like
a skipping stone across a cloudless lake,
ripples forming like the faint wrinkles in
his travel-worn shirt, a gentle east-west
folding of time between his departure and
arrival thirty minutes before he left.
In New York, he sat and watched
white tendrils of steam delicately
drift away from the mouth of his coffee
into the cool airport air, notice the
warmth of caffeine spreading slowly,
heavily through his fingers, legs, then toes.
Time righting itself through minute
mesmerizations of normalcy.
People walked by in hurried blurs
toward nearing departures and wasted
no time to wonder why he sat so still.

ELIZABETH VAN HALSEMA

Grandfather

The night my grandfather died
I lay beneath the stars and,
squinting, watched them flicker and
fade through the fog of my breath.
The dark sky steamed up like a
thin pane of glass. Raising
my hand to touch it, I was
dismayed to feel only the
coolness of the wind. I gazed
at the stars disappearing
and reappearing behind
the fanning of my fingers.

I was ten. I had not cried.
I remember feeling my
toes grow numb and hearing our
neighbors' laughs in the distance.
My mom beckoned me inside
and, as I walked into her
outstretched arms, I tried to white
out the night with one last breath.

ELIZABETH VAN HALSEMA

Streetlights

He is walking when it hits him:
the first drop of a rolling storm.
I've got to get home soon,
he thinks as the sky darkens to grey.

The first drop of a rolling storm
splatters like fragments of dropped glass.
He thinks, as the sky darkens to grey,
The streetlights glow like diamonds.

Splatters like fragments of dropped glass
dam the roads so they're hard to see.
The streetlights glow like diamonds,
headlights flicker in the gathering mist.

Damn, the road's so hard to see,
she says with her hands at ten and two.
Headlights flicker in the gathering mist,
soaked tires spin on the flooded pavement.

She says, with her hands at ten and two,
I've got to get home soon.
Soaked tires spin on the flooded pavement.
He is walking when it hits him.

HANNAH MAYFIELD

A Woman in Labor

Is like an angel in hell.
Blinded by pain, she's told to push.
"Get out!"

But before darkness swallows her,
she surfaces. Beads of sweat as
heralds bearing news of her journey.

With sight restored, her glow
brightens. Her halo intact.
"So beautiful."

From heaven's arms her babe delivered,
a gift from God for the torment borne.

AMY SNYDER

In the Company

As dark as ceiling shadows etched with saints
and angels robed in azure and in gold,
the crypt is silent, echoes fading faint
amid the stone and mortar in the cold
of air so still that candles lit today
will burn 'til nothing but the wax is left
to testify remembering. To pray
beneath cathedral floor and nave bereft
of footsteps, voices, heartbeats is to hear
the song of ancient stone imbued with thanks
and worship silenced by the song of the years
that marched into history in ranks.
Centuries and decades gone like smoke,
preserved in what they wrote in hallowed stone.

PETER BERGQUIST

Pulled Over Outside Santa Fe

The clouds squat hard upon the hills,
sponges squeezed by fat fingers.

Knives and forks stab full circle,
carving up the blackened flatlands.

High beams silver myriad slivers
slanting straight into the throbbing heart.

This is when the earth holds her breath.
We cannot count one-thousand-one
between the crack and boom.

RANDY BLYTHE

Readiness

It's impossible to say exactly
what grackles do by the hundreds,
collecting crow-grist and themselves
in the bustle before fall.

Quiet as black ghosts, except for a dry rustle
and the stray self-naming call,
they shift oak leaves until
a brief flutter is raised en masse,

like eager, neuralgic monks among stacks
from which one sweet booksecret of this life
or the next might be gobbled—
the risks of sultry updrafts

or the Thicket to end all thickets.
Underneath the busyness
is persistence so wild it's demonic,
patterns of pecking within a ground-grid

(as if each bird knows its space),
ornithological ordinances stuck-to
to the last unlucky mite
until, when the sentry clicks danger

at a shoe shifting on concrete,
the time comes to rise
in a ballet of fractal motion,
a dark-matter mirror reflecting

upswept density, loose unison,
swooping arcs full of emptiness,
as loyal to season's end
as a waving hand is to a body.

MATTHEW BURNS

Street Confession

All the way down Main
this morning, toward the store
for a paper and apples,
every light was red.

Let me be forgiven
for running them all
just to watch the lone crow
that flew in front of me
for ten blocks.

And the fingers of its wings
never moved, just lay splayed
out to shape the wind that blew
us east beside the low river
that is already beginning to stink.

For surety of the black beak
I have forsaken the stop signs
and trees half-wrapped in tinsel
shivering back to last Christmas,
I have renounced the used-car lots
where the same nine trucks have sat,
for as long as I can remember,
getting cheaper every year.

And I think I'm learning
how to be sorry, old town,
for every crack I've made
about those trucks and rust,
for the crumbs of pity I heap
on your broke-down rent-to-own
and dollar stores, and especially
for the splash of laughter

in your bars and Sunday-morning
puddles someone left there
the night before
in a little circle of themselves
returning to these streets.

Streets, forgive me and hold me
as the wind holds the crow
whose feet hide folded,
whose beak leads east,
whose wings do not flap
when the morning dapple
of light at every corner
runs over its dark
dark-blue back
like absolution.

CATHERINE CARTER

Forty Years Back

Forty years back you cut clouds
from a dazzling paper sheet
to paste on azure—solid,
sharp-edged, bright white.
With the safety scissors each seemed
to take a year to cut. That was right,
since, when you lay in the dry
spiky field, each took a year
to pass over. They were slow
as summer, you seldom
saw one move. But if
you squeezed your eyes and listened
to the chiming of August
crickets, the cicadas' monotonous
lament, then the cool shadow
swept over, then there
they hung overhead, their heavy
bellies bruise-gray, vaster than you
had understood. And if
you shut your eyes again, even
a blink, then they were past,
gone somewhere outside the glass
salt-dome sky, hurrying before
the wind driven east
by September, quicker than
you could see or remember, swift
and steady as forty years.

RICHARD DOKEY

Match the Hatch

I walked away from Point of Rocks toward the spot where the creek makes that big turn toward the Conservancy. Bill was in his camper, but Doug was out of his fifth wheel leaning against the wooden fence smoking. A trout rose against the far bank.

It was the start of the season on Silver Creek in Idaho. I was here for the brown drake hatch. Anyone who fishes the hatch knows that it is a crap shoot. But when the drakes are up, big trout hold in the channels feeding, all the big trout in Silver Creek.

I reached the bend of the creek, keeping to the left trail and not the right, which leads to the willows further upstream. Fishing the willows is fine, but a wooden plank rests at the water line at the bend, and I love sitting there with my boots in the water on the first day. I am lately not much for the Conservancy, which has a fly shop quality. The Conservancy is in the magazines. Pictures are in the tiny hut at the top of the Conservancy, and someone is there to explain about Silver Creek, so that you become humble, along with everyone else who signs the little book outside.

I like it where the guides don't go. I sit on the wooden plank with my boots in the water. I imagine that everything is the same.

I looked at the water, green and oily smooth above the weed beds. I didn't think about trout particularly or about beauty or even that, perhaps, it was not the same. I thought about Bill, who came from Maine, and Doug, who came from Portland, and me, from California. We were Silver Creek aficionados. We here for the brown drake hatch. We didn't know each other, truly, but we were on Silver Creek at the opening of the trout season, hoping for brown drakes. We were brown drake brothers.

Sometimes I e-mail Doug, or he e-mails me. I am on Doug's generic list for e-mails. He sends regular bulletins about the doctors and how his legs are doing. These are informational Doug bulletins. I'm not singled out. But we are fly tiers, so we exchange patterns, and then he tells me where he is specifically and specifically what he is doing. In the fall and winter he hits casinos in New Jersey and Florida. He parks the fifth wheel in the casino lot. He plays poker. He's pretty good at it. This past winter he won his first poker tournament. Doug is divorced too and travels around living in that fifth wheel. In the summer he fishes all over the Rockies. Doug is a trout

bum. He lives the life of a trout bum, but he can't hike the streams now. He is an ex-lawyer with bad legs. It's hereditary. There's a name for it. It's eating him alive. So he lives like a trout bum until he can't live anymore. He'll die like a trout bum, slumped across his float tube, somewhere on a lake or river, maybe Silver Creek, maybe during the brown drake hatch, but, hopefully, not until the hatch is done. I don't want to come across Doug floating, face down, through a pod of rising trout.

Doug is one helluva cook. He stuffs Cornish game hens. He creates pastry you wouldn't find in any bakery, not even in San Francisco. Doug says he never lost a case, but he can't stand now for any length of time. He can't stand for the defense. He is on permanent disability, without wife or kids, a custom fly-tying bench in the nose of his fifth wheel. He floats in a tube. He pleads his case before brown trout and rainbows. He hopes that the jury stays out until the hatch is over.

I don't know much about Bill. He was a commercial fisherman. Something happened at sea. Doug says Bill still lives in Maine because his kids live there. Bill drives the camper to Silver Creek. Doug meets him sometimes at the San Juan River in New Mexico, sometimes on the Thompson in Montana. I've not seen Bill fish anyplace on Silver Creek except where he parks the camper at Point of Rocks. Doug says it's something about the accident and the current of a river and his spine. Bill uses a wading staff. No one uses a wading staff on Silver Creek because the bottom is silty. But Bill uses a wading staff.

I sat a bit longer. A trout rose in the middle of the creek above the weed beds. The rise turned me away from thinking. But it was only that one rise. I leaned back on both hands. After awhile I stood. I walked upstream about three hundred yards, sat down on the bank and slid into the water.

The current swirled above my knees. The bottom was grassy and soft. I waded out to the middle and faced downstream.

I was using a five weight graphite rod, a furred leader and four feet of tippet. To the tippet I had knotted a size-18 barbless gold bead head with a spiky, moss-green body. I made a thirty-foot cast directly across to the bank and threw a downstream mend after it. I let the mend belly. Then, holding the rod tip low and directly in front of me, I jigged the bead head slowly away from the bank until it reached a position straight below. When the line straightened, I allowed the bead head to hang a moment. I lifted the rod a bit and dropped it back. I lifted the rod again and dropped it back. Then I took a few steps downriver, made a false cast and laid the bead head out near the bank and repeated the process. I fished that way, mending and jigging, the

entire three hundred yards and picked up two nice rainbows about sixteen or seventeen inches in length. I say sixteen or seventeen because my net opening is seventeen inches, and the two rainbows were just shy of that, bowing in the soft mesh of the net. So I'll say sixteen inches, but maybe it was seventeen.

I was satisfied. I was fishing Silver Creek, the best spring creek west of the Mississippi; hell, west of anywhere. This was Silver Creek, and I knew what to do.

I walked back to the parking area at Point of Rocks. Bill and Doug were in their waders, leaning against the wooden fence watching a fly fisherman. I saw from the license plate of the vehicle next to mine that he was from the Bay Area.

Everything about the guy was new. New waders. New shirt. New Tyrolean hat, a bright feather in the band. New net and fishing vest. He was out of an Orvis catalog. A cigar was crimped in the corner of his mouth. He stood in Bill's spot. Bill's waders were wet.

"How did you do?" Doug asked.

I wanted to fill my net. I wanted to say seventeen inches. If it had been anyone else, I probably would have said seventeen inches. Maybe even eighteen. The trout did bow the net.

"Two," I said. "Sixteen inches."

Doug smiled. We watched Bay Area fish Bill's spot. Bay Area's casting was terrible.

"What's going on?" I asked, pointing with my rod.

"He moved in," Doug said.

"He what?"

"He was up above, fishing down. He fished into Bill. It's pretty obvious he's a beginner."

"He's an asshole," I said.

"He doesn't know any better," Doug said. "Look at him."

"He needs to be educated," I said.

Bill shook his head. Bill was five-eight, maybe five-nine, thin, older than his years, older than Doug or I. It was hard to tell just how old Bill was, but he was frail, placed into his oversize waders, which had no belt but were held up loosely by broad, camouflaged suspenders. He looked like an old whaler on the deck of a wooden ship in one of those History Channel documentaries.

"Never mind," Bill said. "He'll be out in a while."

"Look at him," I laughed. "He's standing right where he should be fishing. Somebody should educate him."

Bill shook his head. "If he asks. Otherwise, never mind."

"That's your spot."

"My name's not on it," Bill said. "Forget it."

I looked at Bill. I looked at Bay Area. I hated amateurs.

"Well," Doug said. "What do you say to a couple sandwiches and a bottle of beer. I have an extra tube. Let's put in at the three pines and float down through the Purdy section to the Picabo bridge."

"Sure," I said. "Sounds good to me."

Bill couldn't make it. Bill had that spine.

"I have three steaks in the frig," Doug said. "We'll have steaks tonight, garlic mashed potatoes, carrots and peas and German chocolate cake I made for dessert. Then we'll wait for the drakes. They ought to pop near sunset."

"Are they up this far already?" I asked.

"I've seen some below," Doug said. "They're moving upriver."

"That great," I said. "I've got plenty of duns and spinners tied up."

"I have a new pattern or two myself. Like to see them?"

"You bet," I grinned. "I'll probably be borrowing a couple anyway. Your ties work better than mine." I liked flattering Doug.

Doug grinned. He liked being flattered. Maybe it was the lawyer that couldn't stand on his feet anymore. I was sorry about Doug. It was too bad he could not hike the streams and get back in where the Bay Areas wouldn't go. I was sorry that Bill could only fish where Silver Creek flowed gently in front of his camper. Bay Area continued to splash and foul Bill's spot. Bill removed his waders. He dropped them over the fence, climbed slowly up into the camper and closed the door.

Doug and I walked to the fifth-wheel. Doug cut thick slices of Italian salami from a roll, peeling the gray, marbly skin with the edge of the knife. He cut thick wedges of red onion and thick slices of white bakery bread. He smeared the bread with mayonnaise. As an afterthought he included a thick square of cheddar cheese. He closed the sandwiches.

"You only live once," he grinned.

We ate the sandwiches and drank the beer, ice cold from the chest he kept filled under the fold-down table. We talked about fly tying and the fly shops in Ketchum. We talked about school and other places we had fished and some about women and why they had left. But mostly we talked about Silver Creek and how grand it was when big trout came up for the brown drakes. Doug was all right. He was a lawyer, but an ex-lawyer. He never talked about law, except to say that he could not do it anymore.

“Along with everything else,” he laughed.

We compared flies.

Then we put the tubes and tackle into the bed of his pickup. I followed in my Jeep to the three pines, where we dropped everything off. Then we took both vehicles down to the take-out, left the truck and drove in the Jeep back to the put-in. We picked up the rods, slung the inflated tubes over our backs, holding them by the strap, and walked through the opening in the barbed wire fence down to the creek. It was tough for Doug, but this was Silver Creek.

The water was clear and glassy smooth. We stepped into the tubes, pulled the tubes up to our waists, then sat on the weedy bank and slid into the water. We squatted onto the strap harness fastened underneath the tubes and were suspended, floating like gigantic corks on Silver Creek.

I let Doug go ahead. I wanted him to have the first shot. I did not want to feel sorry for Doug or Bill, but I did feel sorry. I had my legs and my back and my spine. I could fish anywhere anyway anytime. Something was eating Doug. He had doctors and medicine and Vicodin, but something was eating Doug.

The sun moved over in the blue, cloudless Idaho sky and was now at our backs. We floated, fishing languidly. I watched Doug. He was a good fisherman. There was as yet no hatch, so he fished a soft hackle, working it down ahead of him, planting his feet against the silty bottom now and again at a particularly good spot. I liked soft hackles. Besides Doug, I was the only guy I knew who fished soft hackles, which are as old as fly fishing is old. I was proud to know this and that Doug knew this and that we fished soft hackles together.

Doug was all right in that tube. He was as good as anybody else fishing. He was as good as I was. Bay Area, in his Tyrolean hat, his Orvis catalog, puffing a black cigar, did not know that he was a fool. He was no fly fisherman. He was a fool who was fly fishing.

We floated down to the Jeep. It took two hours. I got a couple more rainbows. Doug got three trout, one almost twenty inches, a deep-bellied brown that fell for a size eight soft hackle. The brown took Doug into his backing. We scrambled out of the harness. I handed Doug my rod and slung both tubes over my back, one in each hand. I felt professional climbing up to the truck. I moved slowly so I would not get ahead of Doug. We chattered about the impending hatch, about brown drake patterns and about how we hadn't seen anything yet, how the hatch would bring up all the old grandfathers in the creek and how we would fight them in the almost-dark. I was very happy and very professional.

We drove up to the Jeep. I followed Doug back to Point of Rocks. Bay Area was gone, but a few other vehicles had arrived, all with Idaho plates. Doug got the barbecue going. Bill came over with a bottle of cabernet. We sat around drinking wine out of water glasses and wondering about the brown drakes and if they would come off. It was good talking. Other fishermen sat around in their waders, talking and waiting. Some came over. It was all very good and very happy and very professional. Everyone was here for the drakes. Everyone knew what to do. Doug put on the steaks. Then we sat eating, drinking cabernet from our water glasses, talking about the hatch and all quite professional and happy, veterans of combat, eager for another battle.

Bill was relaxed. He talked about his sons, who lived in Maine, and his wife, who had died long ago. His sons had always wanted him to re-marry, but he had had enough of that, and now fly fishing was all there was. It was all he had ever truly wanted to do. It was all any of us had ever wanted, and though I did not talk about it, everything for me now was the same, except the fishing, which was the first time always and always with the same feeling. Nobody understands who is not a fly fisherman. I was very happy, sitting in the canvas chair, sipping red wine from a water glass, with Doug and Bill and the other fly fishermen, smoking, laughing and talking. The light fell. We waited for dimples to appear on the glass-smooth current of Silver Creek.

Then someone yelled, "There!"

We grabbed our rods and hurried to the stream. The light was a sheen wrinkling the dark surface. I saw a dimple, then another.

We took up stations twenty yards apart, strung out upriver, some ten or twelve of us. I did not like the crowd, but there was no other way, with this hatch. The drakes were coming just here, and the trout were here after them, so here we were.

Someone cried, "Fish on!" Someone else laughed.

I cast my parachute dun carefully three feet above a rise, just upriver of my position.

We fished that way for twenty minutes, hooking and releasing big trout. Headlights appeared in the parking area. The drakes had rung the dinner bell. Other fishermen were coming down for the feast.

I heard a splash upstream on the far side. A fisherman waded down, in a line where the trout were rising. It was Bay Area, in that dumb Tyrolean hat and Orvis catalog. He was hysterical. He waded right through where he should have been fishing.

Doug was just down from me. Bill was on the other side of Doug, standing in his spot.

Doug struggled with pain even to be standing there. Bill's legs were apart. He balanced like a tight rope walker, the wading staff trailing down current behind him, tethered to his vest.

"What the hell!" I called. "You bastard! Get out of there!"

"The trout," Bay Area blubbered. "Look at them. Look at the trout."

He came on like a madman.

Doug pushed away. He almost fell. Bill tried to swing around.

"You're fishing right through us!" I yelled.

"But the trout!" Bay Area said. "Look at the trout!"

I wanted to go out after him. I wanted to punch his goddamn nose.

The drakes continued to pop, a regular flotilla of drakes, drifting like miniature, unmoored sailboats. Bay Area floundered toward Doug and Bill. His fly rod was a whip. His fly line slapped the water. All the trout went down.

"God damn you!" I yelled. I waded out a bit and popped him on the head with the tip of my rod. He was oblivious. He came on, spooking every trout around him.

"Don't," Doug called. He was almost to the bank, struggling painfully. "Let him be."

Bay Area was over Doug's position and heading for Bill's. Bill turned awkwardly. He lost his balance, stabbing with his wading staff. He floundered out of the creek.

Doug and Bill stood watching Bay Area move down into Bill's position, where he stopped, gaping at the water. The drakes, after hesitating, continued to blimp up. Bay Area was helpless.

I strode up to Doug and Bill and said, "The sonofabitch. Right in your spot, Bill. He took your spot again. He screwed everything."

"Let him be," Bill said.

"He crowded us out!" I declared.

"It doesn't matter," Bill said. "You shouldn't have done that."

"But that's your spot," I said. "He crowded you out of your spot again."

"It doesn't matter," Bill said. "He doesn't know. There are other days. Mind your business."

Bill dropped his waders. He laid them over the rail of the fence. He leaned his rod against the fence, climbed into the camper and shut the door.

I looked at Doug. Doug shook his head. He limped toward the fifth wheel.

Bay Area stood dumbfounded among the brown drakes. The trout rose. I wanted to be in the water. I had come all this way. I wanted to fish the brown drake hatch.

My face grew hot. I looked at the camper. I looked at the fifth wheel. I cursed Bay Area. I cursed the unmoored sails drifting, almost invisibly now, upon Silver Creek. Then I cursed myself for being so stupid, so goddamn stupid.

SUSANA H. CASE

Wife and Mistress

In 2010, a cave-in at the San Jose copper and gold mine near Copiapó, Chile trapped thirty-three miners for sixty-nine days deep underground.

Two women keeping vigil at the surface,
Camp Hope;
the wife of twenty-eight years
hears the mistress of five years wailing
the husband's name.
They discover they live a street apart.
Oops.

All OK, he writes, in ignorance, from below.

The mistress creates a shrine for the trapped miner:
votive candles,
a photo of the two of them at a restaurant.
The wife wrecks it.

The wife creates a shrine for the trapped miner:
votive candles,
a photo of the two of them on his birthday.
The mistress wrecks it.

Again and again, the two
are separated as they punch and scratch
over who has the greater right
to be bereaved.

Before he's the twenty-first man brought back up,
he gets the news,
considers staying, dying. Underground,
the ninety percent humidity

is cooler than the surface.
He's worked the mine thirty years,
unsure now if he wants to leave.

The wife stays away from his rescue.
I am a decent woman, she tells the press.
Their lawyers will do the talking.

No big party for the lovers, just chicken,
fries, music and her leopard-
print underwear—an early night.
Go Tarzan! His rescuers shout.

He's not frightened to return to work underground.
After this, he sighs,
I'm not afraid of anything.

If any other woman tries to take him from me,
the mistress warns,
I will eat her eyes.

SHARON CHARDE

Last Poem

I keep trying to feel who I was before you died. Listen to music I listened to then, Beatles, The Band, Rolling Stones. Look through old photo albums. You and your brother now all over the upstairs hall walls, all those young eyes clutching the cul de sac in my mind. I can't put the snake's skin back around its flesh, the snow back into the sky. Your brother said to his girlfriend once, "I wish you'd known my mother then, she was so different." How, I wonder, trying to grasp a flower from the garden of weeds I've become. Nothing shiny, nothing green and holy in me now. She'll never know me. Sometimes just breathing hurts. Things don't go away, they become you. I tell myself I'm safe here, where there is no more careless happiness. And you? Can you hear the sound of yourself as I cannot? Do ghosts get stranded in the pool of their own shadows? Can there be music made of what I've lost? You never answer.

STEVE CUSHMAN

Owls

For the third night in a row we gather
at my neighbor's to see the owls roost.
There are six of us. We stretch out in
our lawn chairs, drink beer or wine and
look up at the hole in the tall oak and wait
for the male to arrive. When he does, we sigh
as he starts his low and steady whoo, whoo,
calling for her. We watch, we wait and when she
does not come we slowly, one by one, stand
and walk back to our houses. An hour later,
I look outside and see my neighbor—an avid birdwatcher
and recent widower—still standing in her backyard.
I walk over and say Barbara, and she shakes her head
and begins to cry, so I hug her, and she says
how could she and I say it's just the way things are
and she says I don't know what the hell I'm talking
about and I think she's right, holding her, waiting,
willing that damn bird to get here and show her face.

DEBORAH H. DOOLITTLE

The Quantum Loon

When the loon calls across the water
you hear the word pond rippling the edge
of sound the way waves tickle the shore—

full of scree and cattail reeds at dawn.
This pond is a memory of a pond
you haven't seen or heard from in years—

its watery voice unwinds inside your mind.
Full of whirling mists and muted birdsongs,
and you realize the sun will rise, but will

not shine into your bedroom window.
Some days, you find yourself at the traffic
light, considering your next move.

You imagine taking your dog for a walk.
Not around the block, past the newsstand
the coffee shop, the line of parking meters,

but into the woods and down a path
You used to take when loons were on the lake.
You feel the tug on the leash and follow

its lead. Some days the cry is loud and piercing;
other days so lonely and forlorn that not
even sirens from ambulances can stifle it.

BRIAN C. FELDER

The Man Who Was My Father

I never asked my father this
but, thinking back on it now,
I have to believe I am right
in knowing what he would have said.
He would have said that he wouldn't have wanted
a real fireplace in the house he raised me in
because it would have made more work for him,
a man who worked hard enough as it was.
He used to say,
when I would break something
or cause him a problem,
don't make work, son,
there's enough of it as there is.
He would not have wanted to split wood
or stack it or lug it in or build a fire with it,
for he did that already,
shoveling anthracite into the furnace
that heated our long ago home.
That nightly ritual of banking the coals
was enough for him, I think,
this man who must have risen before everyone else
to stoke those cinders into heat
for the comfort of us all;
something I never saw him do
because I was still snug in my bed.
I think about that on winter nights like this,
when I make sure the embers are beneath my fireplace grate
before I head upstairs to sleep,
turning the thermostat down as I go.
It makes me remember another time
and the man who was my father.

COREY GINSBERG

Five Stages of Building a Fire

I.

The quickest to burn go first.
Brittle bones
of once flourishing plants
immediately ignite, celebrate the flare
of the self-serving life
before the inevitable fizzle.

II.

More substantial heft, now,
in place of simple
fix. Still buffered
with last week's junk ads.
Hoping to catch. Hoping to spread.

III.

This blazing pit inside
me. The fire, too. An extension
of gesture. Flame as mirror
of branch and trunk as I smolder
from the inside out.

IV.

Gasoline, the drug
of last resorts. The most sincere
attempt to include all
in ruin. I watch
the fickle fingertips
claw through the naïve night.

V.

Looking back into the pit
of ashes, the obvious attempt
to contain. No real risk. How reckless
though, to believe
the conflagration had the potential
to utterly destroy.

JACQUELINE GUIDRY

Learning the Flute in La Paz

This wasn't his idea. Get that straight from the start. One year of almost flunking high school Spanish didn't qualify him as his father's interpreter in Bolivia. Freddie had told the old man that. Told him and told him until you'd think even Harlan Gamble, most successful Ford dealer in the entire Midwest region—ten states and how about that?—could've heard what his boy was saying. Nope. No way, Jose. That Spanish enough for you, H?

Harlan wanted to bond. That's what he'd said as Freddie sprawled across a recliner, comic book in one hand, the other diving into a chips bag for sustenance.

"You heard what I said?" Harlan asked.

"Sure, H. Every word and then some." He flipped a page, looked up at his father on the sofa with the girlfriend, current model, nuzzled next to him. "Don't trouble yourself. We're bonded." He made a fist. "Solid."

"Divorced fathers have to make an effort, work to keep up a relationship with their children." He sounded like a PBS special.

Freddie didn't have to guess at the source for that piece of psycho-babble. The girlfriend, a social worker counselor. She'd finally given up trying to convince Freddie to call Harlan Dad or Pop or even Father, anything but the first letter of the man's name. When she'd been after him, he'd done what he always did with a dumb idea—smiled, then ignored it and the moron making the suggestion. Drove people nuts. That's what Freddie liked most about this technique he'd come upon totally by accident. No shit. Just by accident.

Now, he and Harlan were stuck in a La Paz restaurant. Social worker girlfriend, a delete and gone. Harlan and Freddie, two castaways marooned with most of a long week stretching in front of them.

Freddie reached behind his head with the handle of his spoon to scratch the back of his scalp, digging the utensil between red curls to get at the itch.

"Hey, don't do that. You want these people to think we don't know shit from shinola?"

"Shit from what?"

"Don't they teach you anything in that school?" At last, a topic to chew over and one of Harlan's favorites too. "We know they don't teach you Spanish. We've settled that."

Freddie eyed tourists brave enough to tackle the fresh vegetables at the salad bar. Brave or stupid? Everybody gets the runs in Bolivia. Who'd said that? H? The girlfriend before she decided Harlan and Freddie carried more baggage than she wanted to lift?

"Your mother had to have her way," Harlan was saying, definitely not for the first time. "Couldn't have her kid mixing it with the common folks. Had to send her kid to the most expensive school in the city, probably the state."

"Probably." If Freddie stuck in a comment now and then, his father never noticed he wasn't paying much attention.

"Damn right. Money out of my pocket too. You know how many cars I have to move to pay that tuition? Books? Don't get me started on books."

"More when I start college." How many days before that glorious day? 406, not counting today. Fair since he was eating dinner, the day nearly done. "Room and board too," he added.

"Don't remind me." Harlan marched his fingers to the candle, flickering in a miniature glass lantern centered on their table, then marched them back. "Do me this favor, son. Just this one favor."

A heavy German piled asparagus, creamed potatoes, a couple of buns, and green beans on his salad plate. Did the fool think he was safe because the restaurant catered to tourists?

"Tell me you'll think about a state school," Harlan said. "Just say you'll think about it. You don't have to promise to go there. You don't even have to say you'll think about it seriously."

The German returned to his waiting companion, a little guy who wasn't indulging in any dangerous veggies. Smart.

"Thing is, there're plenty of great state schools. Terrific. Teach you anything you need to learn. Anything you want."

"Spanish?" Freddie asked.

"Spanish," Harlan said and then he was off, running with the regular spiel about how Freddie's high school wasn't worth half what it charged, how if his mother was set on him going there, she could damn well cough up the dough. Freddie could've jumped on the tirade wagon any time, picked up the complaint and hauled it to the finish line faster than H.

The big German offered his plate to the little guy. Friend? Business associate? Partner? His whatever you could imagine and Freddie imagined a lot. Nothing his mother imagined. Or H. Or any of the girlfriends, not even the psycho-babble chick. H liked his ladies clever enough to converse, but

smart enough to understand he had enough ideas rattling in his brain to cover two people, easy. Even with all those tumbling ideas, H didn't have a clue about the ones batting around his son's head. Freddie had no doubts about this. Or about his mother's ignorance, for that matter. The one obsessed with engines and women, the other with her dress shop of faux couture. Polite for fake designer rags, according to H. "How many fake clothes did your mother sell this week?" he'd ask and he and Freddie would laugh and laugh at this rare bit they both found hilarious.

The small German didn't really resemble Arnie as Freddie had first thought. For one thing, Arnie would've snatched both breads off that plate. For a little bastard, Arnie sure packed away the bread. Freddie liked teasing him, saying he'd turn into the Pillsbury dough boy, if he didn't watch out. "Get outta here, Freddie," Arnie would say before starting on another bagel or hunk of baguette or English muffin, anything made with flour. Yet the boy stayed skinny, skinnier than the little German.

"Make sense?" H was asking.

"As much as anything." He'd perfected the art of answers fit for nearly every circumstance. What was H talking about, anyway? He looked away from the Germans and back at his father.

"Valle de Luna in the morning," H said.

"Not too early," Freddie said.

"What are you doing when school starts?"

"Sleeping through the first two classes and hoping teachers don't notice."

"They probably won't," Harlan grumbled. "Idiots."

"Idiots," Freddie echoed, at attention now, alert to catch the best word and fling it back.

"Scumbags getting fat paychecks."

"Scumbags."

"Stealing from people who work for a living. Damn thieves."

"Thieves."

"How many vehicles would any of them, your Spanish non-teacher, for one good, no-good, example, push off a lot in a week?"

"Patterson?"

"Zip, son."

"Zip," Freddie answered. "Zip," he said again. Sometimes H broadened his vocabulary in unexpected ways. Never words appearing on vocab lists, but others that were more interesting. Climber: A seller who can convince anybody to buy anything. How H loved his climbers. Full bore: A

sticker price sale, no discounts eating up commissions. How H loved his full bores. Roach: A buyer with bad credit. How H sneered at the roaches.

Next time Arnie worried Freddie about his grades, asked how much he planned to work on a certain class project, Freddie'd answer zip—nada with flare. Okay, maybe he had learned a few things in Spanish I. Come to think of it, hadn't he deserved a "C-" instead of the stingy "D+?" What about that extra credit report he turned in at Arnie's urging? A week late, but still, and all it did was lift him from a "D-" to a "D+"—hardly worth the effort of googling Barcelona. Patterson didn't like him, didn't like Arnie who wasn't even in the class. Why? Freddie knew why. No doubt on the why. The only toss-up was whether Patterson hated him or Kiki more. Kiki with her Mohawk and tattoo—the ladies last longer—inked around her bicep in tiny purple letters. Patterson was fried chicken shit. That's what Arnie said and Kiki backed him. His good luck was Patterson never taught Spanish II. Freddie had no worries about Spanish II. He'd be okay senior year, thank you.

In the morning, Freddie woke sooner than was his habit at home, either with H or his mom who didn't tolerate that initial business. It always surprised Freddie how often his mother agreed with a girlfriend, as if H couldn't stay away from the same woman, packaged slightly differently. After awhile, the new version grew tired of the same qualities as the ones before her or H realized he'd made another mistake, chosen wrong, again.

Freddie yawned, stretched. The other bed was empty and the bathroom door ajar, but no sounds came from that direction. Maybe H was hunting down food, a good thing, if that's where he'd gone. Their hotel, two doors down from last night's restaurant, served a stingy breakfast they'd eaten on their first morning, bleary from the all-night flight out of Miami. By evening, he and H were racing each other to the john. Lesson learned. They'd crossed off every place they ate that day, their own hotel topping the list.

A sharp sun flooded the room, the reason Freddie, proud of his reputation as a boy able to sleep through anything, had woken on his own before noon. If this was Bolivia's winter sun, he'd hate to see the summer one.

The mural on the wall opposite the beds glowed in the morning light. A dude, Antaro, had signed the masterpiece, claiming credit for the houses, trees, hills, and gray stone gate. To keep someone out or keep someone in? Not a clue. Maybe old Antaro had nothing to do with the mural, just came across the finished piece and scrawled his name in the bottom corner, no one the wiser. Antaro, a bold tourist with a black pen.

Outside, a car honked, then another and another, a vehicle orchestra warming up. Yesterday, as they walked the crowded, steep streets of La Paz, they'd seen half a dozen traffic jams, each of them centered at an intersection where a smart ass had tried to squirrel his way past another smart ass, neither of them willing to wait their turn. Vehicles pushed against each other until a gridlock mess had everybody sitting on horns and yelling, nobody willing to budge, afraid to lose the mysterious advantage eluding Freddie.

He'd stood watching one of these, a jigsaw puzzle of taxis, vans, and smaller cars, while H checked out another shop offering alpaca sweaters, 100% guaranteed. Would we lie? After awhile, a cop came to the rescue, spurting out directions to first one line of traffic, then another. All Freddie understood was "back up" and "son of a bitch," the latter he'd looked up in a Spanish dictionary along with a few other phrases he thought might prove more useful than, Where's the museum?

Freddie looked down from their third floor window, drapes drawn open by H who believed in sunshine almost as much as he believed in the Ford pick-up line. The honking stopped as suddenly as it started and traffic looked to be moving at its regular pace. Pedestrians scurried along, many of them with colorful, bulging cloth sacks flung across their backs. Sometimes you saw what they carried and sometimes not. Yesterday, one lady, wearing the traditional wide skirt of bright primary shades, a contrast to the somber bowler balanced on top of her head, toted seven or eight long loaves. Baguettes peeking out her sack? Where was the party? Or did each person in her family get one of their own for dinner? What Arnie wouldn't give to have his own sack stuffed like that. Freddie was emailing the pictures he'd snapped next time he hit an internet cafe.

By the time he finished showering, H was back, hoped-for food in a couple of plastic bags. Bananas and tangerines—peelable fruit was safe, according to whatever source H had consulted. Bread—also safe, though why, Freddie couldn't figure.

"Bread's always okay," Arnie had said. "Anywhere you go in the world, count on the bread." Then he listed a long string of breads you'd find in different countries—challah, bannock, injera, chapatti, pita, tortillas. The boy was a walking encyclopedia when it came to bread. They'd been in Freddie's bedroom, the one at H's house, the safest one, both of them still naked and sweaty. Freddie had closed his eyes to listen to Arnie's list, happy to hear that sweet voice mouthing what he loved.

"The desk is getting us a taxi for the Luna place," Harlan said between bites of a second banana. "Told them we'd need it in 30-40 minutes."

“They understood?” Earlier attempts to communicate with the front desk had required H pantomiming. You could mimic carrying a spoon to your mouth and chewing imaginary food, rubbing your stomach and smiling your pleasure at what you’d swallowed. But how could you act out Valley of the Moon?

“New gal behind the desk. Her English isn’t great, but not bad.”

“Better than your Spanish.”

“Good enough to get me a taxi.” He reached for a sweet bread with apricot stuffing. “I told her I didn’t want one of those rip-off artists, some guy trying to charge me double what the trip’s worth.” Back home, on some days, H was willing to help out a roach, advance the sad sack loser whatever he needed to drive off the lot, but always on his terms. That occasional generosity didn’t extend to getting stiffed in a strange language.

“She understood all that?” Freddie imagined himself behind a desk, a Spanish version of H yammering at him. He might’ve gotten the part about needing a taxi and even the part about Valle de Luna, a popular tourist spot, but the rest would’ve sailed past him. Would he say that to the guy blabbing at him in Spanish? Nope. Would he smile and nod? Yep.

“She gave me a big smile,” Harlan said, “so she must’ve understood fine.”

Freddie grinned as he unscrewed a second bottled water, then drank down half.

“We’re still dehydrated from the runs,” Harlan said, watching Freddie gulp. Sometimes he managed to sound almost like a regular father, someone you might tell things to.

The promised taxi was waiting. Maybe the desk clerk understood more than Freddie credited. They drove through the streets of La Paz for nearly half an hour, reminding Freddie he was in a capitol, not just the small island where their hotel sat. Arnie was good at that, seeing where he was now, where else he might be if he walked a mile in any direction or if time passed. Freddie wasn’t much good at seeing where he was in a larger frame instead of within the narrow confines of his immediate life. Another thing Arnie was trying to straighten out. “See the big picture, Freddie,” Arnie said. “You’re looking at the ant picture again. You’re not an ant, Freddie.”

That’s what started them counting days until college. They’d agreed to use September 1, next year, as the goal, though many colleges started earlier, especially for freshmen. Arnie had argued for a mid-August target, but this was to help Freddie focus on the bigger picture; Arnie already had that picture mounted and framed in his head. If Freddie wanted September 1,

that's what it had to be. Life wasn't always going to be school all day, one bedroom at his mom's house, another at H's place. Arnie had repeated that too many times. Freddie knew he was only trying to make him feel better and tried not to gripe, leastways not much.

Their taxi wound through wider streets populated by as many passersby in jeans and sweatshirts as in the bold colors favored by Bolivians hanging around his hotel on Aroma Calle, not smelling any better than the streets in the rest of the city, far as he'd noticed. H wasn't babbling in his usual way. On charitable days, Freddie understood the habit wasn't all his father's fault. Not many of those charitable days, Arnie would add, if he were here instead of caddying for the summer. Shut-up, Arnie, he thought. Quiet men didn't move enough cars to be the most successful dealer in a ten-state region (and how about that?). How could H switch off his big-mouth when he left the dealership? Not easy, Freddie saw. Yet here was H, next to him in the back seat of a Bolivian cab and not saying a word, looking out his window as Freddie looked out his. He'd have to remember to tell Arnie—a long ride without H saying a word. Arnie'd be surprised; while he hadn't been around H much, he knew exactly who the man was. Freddie had told all he knew.

As they left the city, the driver pointed out his window, said something. H gave Freddie a questioning look, lifted a palm to underline his confusion.

Freddie shrugged. He didn't understand what their driver was saying any more than H did. "He wants us to look at something," Freddie said.

"No shit."

Freddie expected more, but his father was silent again, staring at desolate cliffs in the distance. Maybe they were drawing near Valle de Luna, those stark mountains the beginning of what they were here to see. Who knew? Not H or Freddie who only knew they were outside La Paz, a place they'd never been, a place they'd never return. How could either of them know how close they were to anything?

The road curved widely, a modern 4-lane highway that would've been at home anywhere in the States. Now, they approached a tunnel carved into the mountainside. "Hope engineers knew what they were doing," H said.

"When's the last time a tunnel collapsed?" Often Freddie thought of himself as the grown-up, the one who knew what was going on in the world, thought of H as the one needing someone to light his way.

"Some things don't flash on Facebook," H said.

“Ooh, the man’s heard of Facebook.” Sudden darkness blanketed them.

Harlan didn’t say anything and that was enough to get Freddie’s attention. He hadn’t meant to hurt his father’s feelings. Really not. Sometimes words jumped out of his mouth and he was as taken aback as if the speaker were a stranger.

“I don’t have a page,” H said, “and don’t know if you do.” He half shifted towards Freddie as if this were a secret, a confidence he was sharing.

“I do,” Freddie blurted, “but don’t use it much.” Then, “Pretty much everybody has a page, but some guys don’t use it much.” Why was he saying this? H wasn’t interested in anything but selling the newest line and wooing the next dame who caught his eye. Wasn’t that what he’d told Arnie?

“I’m glad you have a page like everybody else.”

Ahead, light signaled the end of the tunnel; intense Bolivian sun beckoned them again.

“Sometimes, it’s good to do things like everybody else, to fit in.”

Was he hinting Freddie didn’t fit in? Was that what the man was saying? H was wrong then. Freddie fit in fine. He wasn’t a loser, stuck selling Fords to people who should’ve known better than to throw money down the gas tank of one of the guzzlers on that lot. He had friends. A few of them. Who was counting, anyhow? He had Arnie, a boy who loved bread and maybe Freddie too, though not as much as he loved a hot loaf of sourdough, that being more than could be demanded from someone going places and not places like Bolivia. “You know you’re going to the poorest country in South America?” Arnie had said. Lots of competition for that prize too. No place Arnie was ever visiting, not even for one lousy week. “See you, Freddie. See you when I see you,” he’d said the night before this screwy trip.

They turned into a graveled lot, large enough for 5 or 6 cars if they parked carefully. Today’s haphazard placement of three vehicles limited the options for everybody else. Their driver, taxi half on the lot and half on the weedy divide from the road, stuck his left arm out his window, indicating a ticket booth. About halfway here, he’d given up trying to tell Harlan and Freddie anything useful. They’d ignored every site he tried to show them, but here’s where they wanted to be.

Harlan, first out of the cramped back seat, bent closer to the driver’s open window, jabbed a finger towards the ground as if training a disobedient dog. “Stay.” He took a step away from the cab, twisted his head to eye the driver suspiciously. “You stay,” he called again.

At the ticket booth, Freddie was surprised to make out the charge, even the hours of operation. He handed a ticket to H and led the way through a gate. Three paths veered in different directions. Freddie diverged to the right and H followed without objection, calmed after ordering the taxi driver to stay. Ordering somebody around did that to H, pacified him as much as Valium.

“Slow down,” H said. “We’re not in a damn marathon.” He huffed loudly, his breath still short from the altitude, unlike Freddie who’d basically adjusted by the end of their second day. “Give your old man a break, Freddie.”

“I thought you were getting yourself in shape for La Paz. Capitol with the highest elevation in the world, you said. Exercising, you said.”

“Yeah, well, when a man has to pay for high school, the most expensive,” and he pressed down on those last words, “that man can’t afford to waste time with jumping jacks every morning.”

“I’ll put roses on your coffin. Just promise you won’t keel over until we’ve landed in Miami.”

“You’d bawl like a baby, if I died.”

Actually, Freddie didn’t think so, but knew better than to say that. Instead, he said, “This looked like the easiest way.” The path climbed between jagged rocks with peculiar, jutting undergrowth. In the far, far distance, he thought he spotted Illimani, the mountain they’d first seen from their plane, then from the taxi ferrying them down the mountaintop airport into La Paz’s valley. Illimani watched over the city like a stern grandfather who knew more than you guessed.

“Wait up a bit.”

When Freddie turned around, H was sitting on a wide, flat-topped rock perfect for tired tourists. “Shove over,” he said and H did. An opening in the brush looked out over an expanse of rocky, bare hills, the moon the name promised. Uninviting, yet here they were. Beside him, H took deep, slow breaths.

“Peaceful,” H said when his breathing evened to normal.

“Quiet,” Freddie said and wondered what his friends, his many, many friends were doing back home. He pictured Arnie with a loaf of pumpernickel, mouth opened wide to break off a chunk.

On a plateau to their left, a man played a flute, his notes drifting towards them. He was dressed in bright layers, kin to the outfits favored by the ladies around Aroma Calle, and an indigo wool hat, braided tassels hanging down either side of his head.

“Not bad,” H said as if he were an authority on flutes just as he was an authority on cars, on Facebook, on the whole world. When Freddie didn’t answer, H said, “It’s good to be an expert in something.”

“Probably selling them.” Street vendors offered the instruments for asking prices that were actual charges only for the gullible, for those pathetic full bore buyers.

“The man deserves to make a buck, standing out there all day.” H was happy to defend any fellow seller even when the goods were flimsy instruments instead of substantial vehicles.

“Who knows whether he’s been there all day? Maybe we caught the one hour he performs.” He paused a beat. “Same thing that—selling, performing.” He waited for his father to bristle at the suggestion that his profession was a sort of performance art and was surprised when H said nothing.

“Maybe I’ll buy one,” H said.

“You don’t play.”

“How hard could it be? I could learn,” H said. “I’m not too old to learn. Breath and fingers. That’s all it takes.”

“And you have both.” The distant flutist stopped playing to speak with two tourists. The Germans from last night? He wasn’t sure, but thought so.

“Everything I need.” Harlan clamped an arm over Freddie’s shoulders.

He stiffened, but didn’t squirm away. The man was more given to back-slapping a full bore customer or a climber breaking another sales record than to hugging his son who’d never been either.

“I guess you know I love you,” and at this Harlan squeezed Freddie’s shoulders. “You know that, don’t you, son?” His voice broke and he sounded close to tears.

When Freddie turned to look at him, he was still staring off at the flute player, but his face was flushed and his eyes watery. Both might’ve come from the wind whistling across the moon valley, but had they?

“No matter what, I’m your father and I love you.”

What was the man saying? Was he really worried about dying? Did he have a recent, secret diagnosis? “You okay?”

“Me?” The bewilderment was too genuine to be fake. “Why wouldn’t I be okay?”

His father didn’t plan to die soon, maybe not at all, and Freddie was surprised by the relief surging through him.

“I like your friends too. I’m not saying love. I don’t believe in all that bullshit, love your neighbor, love your friends, love total strangers. People throw around the word like cheap booze. When you say you love somebody, it should mean something. Know what I’m saying?”

“I know.” He was fast growing accustomed to his father’s arm around his shoulders, something he’d puzzle out later.

“What I’m saying is I like your friends, but I don’t love them which you shouldn’t take as an insult. Them neither.”

“Nobody’s insulted.” The flute man took up his instrument again. The two Germans—Freddie decided they were definitely the pair from last night—were walking away with a long package tucked under the small guy’s arm.

“I like all your friends,” Harlan repeated as the Germans made their way to the exit, oblivious to anybody spying on them. “I like Arnie.”

Freddie held his breath, stayed so still, a rare Bolivian bird might’ve taken him for a statue, landed on his head or arm, unafraid. “Arnie’s okay.”

“Sure he is. That’s what I’m saying. The boy’s alright.”

Freddie thought of stained bed sheets at his father’s house. The housekeeper handled laundry. Why would she bother Harlan with news about dirty sheets?

“He’s always welcome.” He stared at the far away Germans, about to disappear behind a stone uprising. “That’s what I’m telling you. Understand?”

Freddie nodded in wonder at the man who was his father, not at all the person he’d always known, but an altogether different one, a Bolivian dad, warmed by a southern sun, serenaded by an Incan flute, transformed into someone greater than the best Ford dealer in a ten-state region.

“You want one too?”

“A flute?” Freddie asked.

“One for you. One for me. We’ll be a regular duo before we reach Florida.” He stood and scratched the back of his neck and kept staring at the flute man as if he might decipher the secret to playing, even from this distance. “Play a song for Arnie. Think he’d like that?”

“As long as he had bread to chomp during the concert.”

“Eats a lot of bread, does he?”

“The boy’s 90% Pepperridge Farm.” He stood next to his father.

“That so?”

Freddie grinned, amazed he was telling his father about Arnie’s quirk. “I tell him he’ll turn into a fatso, but that doesn’t scare him.”

“He’s a skinny kid.”

“He is.” Should Freddie tell about Arnie’s weights in his basement, the ones he lifted every evening, certain they’d pump him up, if he kept at it? So far, the muscles were resisting, but Arnie wasn’t discouraged. It took a lot to discourage Arnie and recalcitrant muscles didn’t come close. Freddie decided to keep that to himself for now, to share it later, maybe on the plane to Miami where he and his father were landing in a few days, flute players extraordinaire.

JONATHAN GREENHAUSE

Elsewhere

She can't see you anymore.

Her ears listen to footsteps running across years long passed

& your last words to her aren't enough.

You stare at her & think this is the last time you'll see her

after so many times, after all those words exchanged,

& now there are only your short breaths by the bedside.

You step out for a moment, & upon returning

you find she isn't there.

You stare into her open eyes that register nothing,

not even seeing illusions, not aware that her life

has been called elsewhere.

JOHN GREY

Waiting for a Daughter's MRI

Instead of worrying, weeping,
I'm expected to read a month-old Sports Illustrated,
where guys born in the ghetto
make it all the way
to the championship game
and the worst that can happen
is to lose with dignity or a big new contract.

But Rachel's in the MRI pod.
Close your eyes and imagine
all your favorite princesses, we told her.
Or a lake with gold fish swimming
just below the surface.
An elephant. A beach ball.
Anything but face to face
with the inside contours of a metal cylinder.
I forgot to suggest
a gymnast recovering from a broken leg,
her eyes still set on the Olympics.

On the other side of the waiting room wall,
the chamber is spinning,
the bed she rests on
is moving in and out.
Someone's taking pictures of her head.
I'm looking at a close-up of a Laker
reaching up through three Piston defenders
to dunk the basketball.
If the game was her brain,
that'd be a keeper.

PATRICIA L. HAMILTON

Portability

“Which way I fly is Hell; myself am Hell.”

—Satan, *Paradise Lost*

Into the sylvan landscape an enemy swoops, unforeseen:
a silver tanker sliding into my lane with a hiss as it passes,
nearly sending me spinning with a careless sideswipe.

The rear of the truck is a convex chrome mirror
that distorts and distends my dismay at mortality,
rendering me smaller as it recedes, a stranger to myself.

I stare at the warning sign: “Danger--Molten Sulphur.”
Here is hell on wheels, careening through the countryside,
a vengeful cargo of liquid retribution. But whose?

PAMELA HAMMOND

Texas

I am ten, riding in the backseat
of a midnight blue Chevy,
Dad at the wheel.

Rolling down the window,
I stare hard at the Texas plains,
a stiff wind scrambles my hair.

Only two more hours, Mom says.
My sister sighs in anguish.
I look out for cowboys.

I run wild on the horse of imagination
under the biggest sky I've ever seen,
shepherding a vast, spare, willful land,
parched and pursed for thunder.

I promise myself:
Always remember.

RYAN HARPER

A Heartland Neighborhood

You can tell it's country because it used to be an apple orchard, and there are a few here who remember the orchard, and everyone remembers it used to be an orchard.

The pavement, hardly seamed, used to being empty, shaves the horizon bald—chalky grids waffling hay-strewn lawns to be mowed one day by first-time homeowners, who you can tell are country because, when they drive their loadless pickups to the plant in the morning, they lift three friendly fingers off the steering wheel at any passing sign of humanity, whistling to the song on the radio, which you can tell is country because someone in Nashville stroked once the mane of a meowing steel guitar deep in a studio booth cluttered with electronic drums and gold records.

You can tell it's country because, at the end of the day, people say “hello” at mailboxes and “good-bye” as they waddle herniated into a living room that you can tell is country because the flat screen beams broad as the bald horizon on a white wall, where hangs a print of a painting of an apple orchard.

TAYLOR KOEKKOEK

In Place of a Younger Man

First I say I'm sorry and then ask if he's okay and he looks down at himself and rotates his hands and says, "I think so." I'm not sure what to say next so I repeat myself and the young guy looks himself over once more and rotates his dirty hands again and says, "Yeah. I think so."

"Thank God."

"Yeah."

"I though for sure you'd—"

"Christ," he says. "Never mind." The guy pulls his hand from his side and it's thick with blood. He cranes about madly to assess his injury but isn't flexible enough. "What's it look like?" he asks, turning his back to me and peering over his shoulder.

"Red."

"Red?"

"Yeah. God, I'm sorry."

"Well what else?"

"I don't know. Wound-like I guess."

"Wound-like?"

"I don't know. Your shirt's hanging over it."

"Should I take it off?"

"Your shirt? What if stuff spills out?"

"Could that happen?"

"I don't know."

"Christ. All right. I'll leave it on."

"How does it feel?"

"That's the weird thing. I don't really feel it. Just warm and sticky."

"That's probably good, right?"

"Shit."

"What?" I grab at my hair.

He points to his shoulder bag in the street beside his bicycle. "This'll be my first late delivery." Then he says he is going to lie down and he does and I ask what his name is and he dies and I'm still asking his name.

Cars pass us slowly, some with children pressed up against the back passenger windows. Residents open their doors and stand at their doormats.

A fire engine shows up first even though there's no fire. The firemen come without their jackets and say, "Yeah. He's dead." They wait for the paramedics who say the same and wait for the police who take my information. I say I was just laid off and my head was someplace else and the bicyclist wasn't there and then he was and then my windshield was all smashed and it was an accident. They say these things usually are. "Always a damn shame. A shame anyway you look at it." In any case, they say they'll need my information now and I'll hear back from them in the coming week about next steps.

Another officer is waving traffic around us all: my car, the paramedics, the poor dead guy, and then me sitting some distance away at the curb.

"And what about right now?" I ask.

"Seeing as your windshield's all busted, probably isn't the best idea to drive. Best get a tow."

"But I don't have to stay?"

"Not unless you'd like to."

I point to the guy's bag. "What about his stuff?"

"What about it?"

"He said he was making a delivery."

"Was he? Like I said: a shame anyway you look at it."

Two paramedics hunch over the dead bicyclist and count to three and heave him up onto a gurney then roll him away.

"Will someone deliver his package?"

He walks over to the bag and picks it up and shakes it at his ear. "Maybe you ought to. You're someone, aren't you?"

"Me? No. I'm nobody," I say.

"Now wait a minute. Someone hit this guy with his car." He holds up the shoulder bag. "You must be someone. You can ride a bike, can't you?" He pulls a thin cardboard package from the bag. "Let's see," he says, dropping his finger down over its label. "Twenty-one thirty, Pinegrove. Ten-minute ride from here. Know the place?"

"I know it."

He hands me the bag. The fabric is dark. I can't tell if there is any blood on it.

"You did kill the guy."

"It was an accident."

"These things usually are."

Then they drive away, the fire engine, the ambulance, the cruiser. They leave me standing in the street by my broken car, holding a dead man's bag near the dead man's bike at the place where he died.

*

I stand his bicycle up and look it over. By the whole, it faired better than he did. Half of the front fender snapped off and left the remainder crooked and jutting into the brake cables. The fork came unaligned from the handlebars. I pin the front tire between my heels and pull it back into alignment then remove the dingleberry half fender and toss it when I'm sure no one's watching. The seat height is too high so I take it down. The strap of the shoulder bag is too loose so I take it in. The seat is still warm.

The ride is more like twenty minutes and takes me through a collection of look-alike neighborhoods. Wayward children sit at their porches with dull dog's eyes, watching cars pass. Old men sit in recliners with the backs of their heads visible in the front windows. Women in workout attire walk in pairs at the edge of the street, swinging their elbows. No one asks me what I'm doing on a dead man's bicycle or why I'm crying.

Before knocking on the door of twenty one, Pinegrove, I reread the address to be sure. I reread the address a second and third time. The cul-de-sac is empty except for a man watering rows of plants and he doesn't appear to wonder what I'm doing here.

I knock.

"Hello," says the woman at the door.

"Hi. I—I have a—" I fumble through the bag, which seems to have grown larger and more full of things, then pull out the package.

"Thank you. Do you need me to sign for it?"

"Sign for it? I suppose so." I go back into the bag where my fingers make out the edges of a half-sized clipboard, which I hand to her. She signs it and dots an "I" somewhere and hands it back to me smiling. She holds the clipboard out, looking from it to me and back. I think about telling her I killed her deliveryman by accident.

"Is everything all right?"

"I'm not sure what I was expecting."

"Expecting?"

"I thought you wouldn't recognize me."

"I don't recognize you."

"I know. I'm not sure what I was expecting."

She puts the clipboard in my hand.

"Well, thank you."

"For what?"

"The delivery."

"Oh. Yes."

I want to ask her what's in the package. She closes the door.

*

I still have his bicycle. Returning it is the right thing to do. I need to spend the rest of my life doing as many right things as I can manage. I never hoped to be a great man, not even a good man, but now I hope to die having done as much good as bad. All I want is to cancel out. When I'm gone, it'll be like I was never here. I figure that's more than a lot of people can say.

Hanging beneath the seat there is a novelty license plate that says, "Greenly's Green Delivery," with an address. Returning the bicycle is the right thing to do. There's no getting around it.

This ride is thirty-some minutes and it's hot outside. I am in horrible shape. That's something I know but don't think about, like dying, like knowing I won't ever have kids or those sorts of things. My thighs burn and my chest goes all hot and rigid. I'm sweating deep V's into my shirt beneath my arms and at my chest. My ass is a swamp.

The store is one of those places you pass your whole life but have never been inside. It could be a façade piece for a movie set. I stop at the street side opposite of Greenly's Green Delivery and consider leaving the bicycle at the door with a note. Then I feel ashamed.

I wheel the bike into the shop. A bell rings as I enter. A man with a short-billed hat is on the phone saying, "Just a second ma'am," and snapping his fingers at another man popping out from behind a doorway. I let him go on talking and snapping and writing things down and wait for a lull that doesn't come. He only goes on answering phone calls and snapping at a man always disappearing behind something.

Then he looks at me and puts his palm over the telephone receiver. "The hell are you waiting for?"

I open my mouth and then close it and think empty thoughts. He says, "Christ's sake," and goes back to the telephone.

"I delivered the package to twenty-one thirty, Pinegrove and hit your delivery man with my car this morning."

"All right," he says, either to me or to the telephone, then pushes a package to the edge of the counter and says, "Fourteen seventeen, Harris street."

"What?"

He taps the package. "Fourteen seventeen, Harris street."

"I hit your delivery man with my car."

He takes the phone from his ear. "What's that?"

"I hit him with my car. It was an accident."

The second man pops into the doorway. "What did he say?"

“This asshole hit one of our guys with his car.”

“And I delivered your package.”

“Is he all right?” the second man asks.

“And I brought his bike back.”

“Is he all right?” the first man says to me.

“He’s dead.”

“He says he’s dead.”

“You killed him?”

“By accident.”

“Christ, that’s a shame.”

“A shame any way you look at it,” I say.

The first man eyes me carefully and asks, “What does that mean?”

“I’m not sure.”

The second man approaches the counter. “Which of our guys did you kill?”

“I don’t know his name.”

“You killed a man and never bothered to learn his name?”

“It wasn’t on purpose.” I open up the dead man’s bag and pull out the clipboard and say, “Here.” The first man takes it and shrugs before handing it to the second man who says, “This was Ian’s delivery.”

“Ian?” the first man asks.

“Yeah. Kid with the cowlick.”

“Young guy, right?” He asks.

“That’s right.”

I ask how young.

“Couldn’t have been out of his mid twenties,” the second man says.

“Of all the men you could have killed today,” the first man says, “You went and killed a kid with a cowlick who had his whole life ahead of him.”

“I didn’t mean to.”

“He was shaping up to be our best delivery man,” the second man says.

“He might’ve made a family someday. Most men do.”

“I never did,” I say.

The first man asks me if I remember what it was like to be a twenty-something year old. “Not very well,” I tell him.

The second man says they’ll need another deliveryman.

“Goddamn.” The first man scratches his nose and looks out the window. “Anyone dropped off an application recently?”

“Not recently.”

“Goddamn,” he says. Then he points at me. “What about you?”

“Me?”

The second man asks me if I have a job.

“Not anymore—“

“Don’t have a job? You can ride a bike, can’t you?”

“I can. But—“

“Then congratulations. The job is yours.”

The second man congratulates me also then tells me I’ll start tomorrow.

“Look, I don’t have a job, but I’m looking for something else. Something less physical.”

“You kill a man and then you come here to say you’re too good for the work he did?”

“I didn’t mean to say that.”

The second man asks me if I think my life is any better than dead bicyclist’s was. I have trouble with this question and consider not answering it, but the first man says, “Well? Is it?”

“No,” I say. “No, I suppose it isn’t.”

“I wouldn’t suppose so either. You’ll start tomorrow.”

“All right.”

“Keep the bike.”

“Sure.”

“And take this.” The second man hands me an envelope.

“What’s this?”

“Ian’s last paycheck. Was supposed to pick it up today. You can take this to his mother.”

The first man says, “You take it to her because we sure as hell aren’t. We didn’t kill her boy.”

I turn it over and back and pat it gently against my palm. “All right,” I tell the two men. “Where does she live?”

The second man flips through a drawer of folders and writes an address down and says, “She’s blind.”

“What’s that?”

“Ian said his mother was blind. So, I don’t know, don’t be surprised if she wants to touch your face or put your fingers in her mouth or whatever.”

“Fingers in her mouth?”

“I don’t know.”

I nod and begin wheeling the bicycle, now my bicycle I suppose, out the door when the first man says, “Just because you’re working here doesn’t me we like you. You still killed our guy.”

“Ian,” the second man adds.

“That’s right.”

“Okay.”

This is me cancelling myself out.

*

My mother died during my early thirties. She died in a different state. She died far away, where she couldn’t waste my visits complaining about never having any grandchildren and worrying that I’d never get married. As far as I know, all mothers worry about these things they have no control over. The only way for us to escape their worrying is by moving away and calling them only rarely and visiting them even less.

Evening comes about slowly like sleep. House lights go on and families sit at dinner tables passing plates and bowls. The sun doesn’t set, but slips closer to the hills, changing color. My tire spokes reel and hum in the wind and no one watches.

I wish she wasn’t blind. I can’t find a good reason for it, but go on wishing anyway.

The house is one story, with a small white porch and chimney coming up from the side and looks just as I imagined. The yard is mowed and healthy and cut through by a curving, brick walkway. There are two blooming hydrangeas set on either side of an ugly birdbath.

An accident is no reason to kill anyone.

After pressing the doorbell there is the quiet sound of feet in socks. The door opens.

“You’re late,” she says warmly. Her ghost town eyes stare over my shoulder at things following in the half light. “Come in, come in.” She has one hand on the wall and the other holding a cane, beckoning me inside. Her socks are mismatched.

I stand at the doormat, holding an envelope she doesn’t see.

“Hello,” I say.

“Your voice. You’ve got a cold coming on.”

“I’m sorry?”

“I can hear that cold a mile away.” She tells me to come in again and begins walking down the hallway with tiny, shuffling steps. “If I weren’t expecting you, I might think you were a stranger, but then a mother knows her son. I’ll put on the kettle.”

“No. I’m not your son. Please,” I say from the doorway but she’s already gone past a corner, leaving behind only the sounds of her footsteps and the careful opening and closing of cupboards from another room.

I glance out desperately behind me, to the dim-lit houses and the red sun after, to the trees and the birds that make no sound except for the abrupt and horrifying beating of their wings. I step in and close the door behind me and have never been more terrified by anything in my whole stupid life.

“I would have called the plumber, but if you believe my luck, the telephone’s being finicky again. I made sure the thing was plugged in, but that’s about as much as an old blind woman can check for. I worried you weren’t coming.”

“I’m so sorry, but—“

“It’s all right. I know you’re a big busy man.” She waves a hand about. “Only you never know how much you need a sink until it’s not working.”

“A sink?”

“That’s right. Like I told you.” She pats the outline of the enamel sink rim. “Since yesterday morning I’ve been without my sink. I don’t figure the problem is all that serious, but once the Lord has taken your sight, everything’s more troublesome. That’s what a woman’s son is for. Her husband and her son.”

“I hit him with my car.”

“Boy, could your father fix up a kitchen. If you’re a handyman now, it’s only thanks to your father. Go on and take a look.” She opens the cupboards beneath the sink then goes back patting around the dials of the stove.

“I’m going to break your heart,” I say, looking down the garbage disposal.

She draws her hands over a row of mugs and pulls two away and brings them to the kettle. “Do whatever you have to do down there. I just want my sink back.” She pours the kettle slowly, with her forefinger dipping below the mug’s rim to feel the tea rising, then takes the finger out and wipes it on her thigh. “Well go on,” she says. “Help your old blind mother, won’t you?” She laughs and moves the mugs one at a time to a small table adjacent the counter, patting surfaces as she goes.

“All right.” I stoop down and take up armfuls of cleaning supplies from beneath the sink and put them out on the kitchen floor then lie on my back and shimmy up under the pipes because I don’t know what else to do.

“Just clogged?”

“That’s right.”

I pull myself out from the sink and rummage through the cupboards until I find a plastic popcorn bowl.

“You’ll never guess what I found the other day,” she says.

“I’ll need a clothes hanger. The wire kind.”

“You know where my closet is. Go fetch one.”

There are only two hallways and one leads to the front door. I take the second, which ends in a bathroom and passes a bedroom. From the other room, she asks me to guess what she found the other day. I say, “Just a minute.” Her closet is open and perfectly orderly and divided into two sides. One side is full of colorful women’s clothing and the other is full with old brown suits and muted polo shirts and cheap blue jeans. I take a hanger and unwind it.

“Harriet was here three days ago, helping me clean out my closet,” she says. I climb under the sink. “It was becoming a mess. Being blind and messy aren’t things that go well with one another.” She laughs. I run my fingers along the curved, steel belly of the p-trap and turn the plastic washers holding it in place. “Harriet took something down from the top shelf and she said, well look at this. Next she’s handing me this big old binder. Guess what it was.” The p-trap comes loose and grey water falls into the popcorn bowl. “It was your sticker book. Can you believe it? I’d nearly forgotten.” Holding the piping over the bowl, I run it through with the hanger wire, dislodging colorless pieces of food pulp. “I put it here in the desk drawer. I wish I could look at it.” I work the wire through the p-trap until it threads through the pipe smoothly and nothing comes falling out. Then I assemble the piping again and return the cleaning supplies.

“I’m going to run this out to the garbage.”

“Did you make a mess of yourself under there?”

I look down at my shirt that is now dotted with light stains. “Not too bad.”

When I come back from the garbage the mother is standing in the center of the room looking like something hung in empty space. “It’s one of you father’s. Go on and keep it.” She extends an unsure arm holding tightly a t-shirt that says, “Hang Loose.”

“I’m fine. Really.”

“Go on. Your father won’t be wearing it.”

She only smiles again when I take the shirt from her and look it over gingerly. “Well put it on,” she says. “I won’t be peeking.”

I do because she asks and because I killed her son.

“How does it look?” she asks.

“Good.”

“I wish I could look at you.” She smiles with her empty eyes. “Come

here.” The mother pulls the binder from the drawer where she said it was and sits at the table and pats the empty chair beside her. “Please. Come here. What does it look like?” She runs her fingers lightly over a corner of the binder.

“It’s blue, “ I tell her.

“And what else?”

“It says: my sticker collection. The letters are all stickers. Most of them are shiny and sparkle. A couple aren’t.”

“And inside?” She smiles dreamily.

I open the book. The spine cracks. “The first page is mostly tractors.”

“Describe them to me.”

“There’s a yellow steamroller with no one driving it and a red crane lifting a steel beam. There’s a yellow dump truck and yellow backhoe. The only tractor that isn’t yellow is the crane. In the corner there’s a man with a jackhammer.”

The mother is holding her hands together and looking forward at something I can’t see. “I remember.” She tells me to go on and I do. The next page is all dinosaurs and I do my best. There is a page of farm animals and then astronauts and aliens. There are two pages of bugs and one page for airplanes. A page of dogs and a page of cats. There is a page of different sports balls and sport equipment. There are six miscellany pages. The mother closes her eyes and says, “I remember. I remember.”

“This page looks like it’s all jungle animals. There is a snake in a coil and sticker of three parrots. There are two monkeys. A lion sticker is fuzzy and soft.”

“Show me.”

And I do because she asks. I wrap my hand around hers and extend her forefinger and run it across the page, drawing it over the raised edges of the stickers until we reach the lion. With my fingertip on top of hers, we trace the lion’s silhouette and fall over his body. “Do you remember?” she asks me.

“I don’t.”

“Don’t you? This was your favorite. You saw this at a crafts store and came begging, wrapping your little arms around my thigh. Cost a quarter. And with a quarter, I made you as happy as you’d ever been, maybe the happiest you’d ever be.” She closes her hand around my fingers. “The hardest thing about your little boy growing up is realizing you can’t make him happy anymore. Sometimes the world is just too much. You’ll understand when you’re a father.” She puts her head on my shoulder. “I wish you could remember, Ian. I bought you the world for a quarter.”

“I do.” I take my hands up to my face and weep. “I remember.”

“Ian, what’s the matter?” She runs her hand up and down my back. “Tell me what’s wrong.”

“I forgot, but now I remember everything.”

She pulls me into her arms and runs her fingers through my hair. “It’s all right,” she says. “Everything is all right. Everything is okay. A quarter just doesn’t go as far as it used to.” She wipes away my tears and draws her thumbs across my cheek and then she goes still. Her fingers tap about my face lightly then pull away. She takes my head slowly from her breast as though to see me carefully.

“You,” she says quietly. “Who are you?”

“It’s me,” I tell her. My face is leaking and slipping out of place. “It’s your boy.”

MICHAEL HOGAN

Beltane

My father didn't know the goddess
(nubile virgin of each spring)
but each May Day found him
on the cobblestone street where
processions of young girls bearing
flowers circled St. Mary's
chanting: *Lovely lady dressed in blue*
a ritual you and I would wink at.
He'd wink back.

Something educated people don't accept
about a center within,
a circle without to make sure
the center *did* hold, he remembered,
though Yeats (who shouldn't have)
and most of us, forgot.

In his days he fingered
the circle of the rosary, too,
bought only blue cars (colour de Notre Dame)
and drove them without dent or scrape
thirty generous years.

The Beltane fires of Ireland protected
druids against forces who
disguise themselves in ordinary ways.
And one day, father
(his customary blue Plymouth
in the shop)
drove a black Ford halfway to Fall River.
The rest of the trip was in
the back of a white ambulance
as red lights flashed like fires
on the shoulder of Route 138
under an indifferent moon.

JUDY IRELAND

Snowbirds

You see them often in airports.
The man says something to his wife, then walks off.
The woman hesitates, gathers up her bags, his newspaper,
an empty water bottle that needs throwing away. She hooks
one arm through the straps of the tote bag, then realizes
she can't put her sweater on. She puts it all down again, and begins over.
He looks back, and frowns. He keeps on going.
She rearranges her bags – the one with the large baggie
full of snack mix she packed in her kitchen that morning,
a smaller baggie with a moist washrag,
and a separate plastic container that holds their medicine.
She refilled his bottle of blood pressure pills before leaving home,
and she brought his reading glasses. By the time she starts
down the concourse, he is out of sight.
She walks on, wide-hipped and listing toward one side.
She parts the oncoming passengers who dodge by her
with their rolling cases, cell phones jammed to their ears.
She hates gate changes. She could hate her life, but
there's no time. She continues on, searching the crowd
for him, his long arms swinging on each side, his wallet
making a subtle square bulge in his right-hand back pocket.
She sees him sitting at the new gate.
He points impatiently at an empty blue vinyl seat next to his.
This gate is crowded, he says. He was lucky
to find two places together. He raises his voice, repeats himself
until she says, Yes, lucky. Lucky we get to sit
together.

ELIZABETH W. JACKSON

Pedaling Back
for Ed and Rebecca Neal

Parkinson's curls his body like a poked caterpillar.
Chin to chest, his head rolls toward his lap. The ladies
are over for a drink, and his wife pulls him upright,
tightens the belt on the wheelchair.

Glasses of Pinot Grigio and shrimp dip topping their crackers,
the women settle into stories of neighbors and friends, laughing,
cooing over some new news, and head down,
he pedals back from their circle until his wife

retrieves him. She locks the wheels, props him back up
and pauses to caress hair from his forehead. She tells the group
that he doesn't understand anymore. They ask,
Do you think he's comfortable, Becky?

Maybe he'd like a drink. Becky shakes her head
and passes the hors d'oeuvres. Did you hear about ...
Again, his feet push at the carpet, his chair rocking back,
and Janie stands to rub his shoulders, tousle his hair.

He stares at the carpet, the spot
where he once stood to uncork champagne,
where he tossed an arm over his wife's narrow shoulders,
kissed her on their 45th wedding anniversary. And he sees beyond,

a blurring into the past:
his mother's Saturday afternoon tea parties and the times,
he slipped out to play quarterback in the park,
to have his girl nearby cheering.

ROBERT S. KING

End of the Line

I can't see the end of this long, long line,
but everyone has joined and so have I.
Ahead I see only wrappers and papers
swirling in traffic wind.

I stand for a lifetime, then finally ask
the blue suit ahead of me what the line is for.

Beats me, he says, but it must be
for something that everyone wants.

That's good enough for me, who wants
just about everything.
What's it cost?
is my blue-collar worry.
Could be free.

Is this a soup line? I ask
the nursing mother behind me
who seems to hope so.
Everyone looks hungry.
Waiting for theater tickets?
Some are dressed for fine dining only;
some are stained for hot dogs and stale films.
A line to the edge of a cliff? I grin.

At last the line is shoving forward.
Maybe the security turnstile is open.
Scans can be sexy!
My pockets are already empty, but as long
as I'm fed or entertained, I'll take anything,
except maybe the gas chamber
or my final walking papers.
I'm still on my feet anyway, and at least
I'm no longer the last in line.

JESSICA LEVINE

My Father's Sleep

The brash smell of sleeping pills
reminds me of my father,
who took Halcion for decades
until he was snacking at 2:00 a.m.
with no memory the next day

of the buttermilk he'd downed
or the sweet bruised strawberries,
or the coffee cake, moist and crumbled,
that a friend had left for breakfast
but which was no longer there—

everything he'd looked forward to—
gone—because the anticipation had
made him dream and the dream
and the drug combined had sleep-
walked him to an unconscious snack.

And so my father sits with me
on nights I can't sleep,
and I reach for an Ambien
which I break precisely in half
to prove I have more control.

I wonder what thoughts kept him up,
whether they were anything like mine.
Was he besieged by secret torments,
sinuous regrets, and worn desires
as he sought to close the day?

I wonder whether he hungered, as I do,
for ways to smooth the rough edges of life,
to complete the unfinished business
standing in the way of perfect sleep,
ruffling the mind with its raw questions.

MARY LARKIN

The Way They Loved

Birmingham, 2009

Kate lay in bed, but there was too much commotion in the room, a body couldn't sleep. She'd earned her sleep and was damned if she was going to respond to these bothersome strangers, like summer mosquitoes, tiny and insignificant but noisome. Sitters, nurses, hospice – all swarmed and hovered. When they called her name she would ignore them. Then Mama! and it was a familiar voice, that of her daughter, her one girl, the youngest of the family. The others had been boys. Beautiful baby girl, beautiful boys, but that had been eons ago it seemed, she was eighty-five now, she knew that, and she just wanted to sleep. Mama! And now she remembered her children, no longer children, but grown—her sons and their wives and their children, her grandchildren, and her daughter's only child, a girl, too. They had all been coming in, going out with their whisperings and their tears, the occasional sob that was instantly hushed. Family, friends. They were all here to watch her die. She could get no peace, no rest. Mama!

She opened her eyes and looked at her daughter who was bent over her bed, her face inches away from her own.

“She's still with us....”

She wanted to laugh at her daughter's keen observation. One of the nurses took up her hand, placed a finger over her wrist, feeling for the pulse. Kate shut her eyes against touch, the noise of it all, the irritation of her daughter's fraught voice.

“Mama, look at me. It's me, Kat.”

Kate blinked her eyes a few times to let her daughter know that yes, indeed, she knew who it was bothering her, waking her, but that was all she could manage. Her still wondrous daughter, finally blossomed into an explosion of being, who'd claimed her own identity, not just shortening the Katherine to Kate, but to Kat. She was as proud as she was puzzled by her daughter, as independent as she, but there the similarities had stopped. They thought differently, which Kate felt was both natural and odd. How could this flesh of her flesh be so foreign to her at times?

“Are you in pain? Do you need more morphine?” All these questions. The stuff made her so sick, and yet it took the edge off. In fact,

she'd had the most marvelous dreams. Oh, they weren't even dreams, they were remembrances, and she did not want to leave them. She closed her eyes.

*

She and Max had been dancing at the country club. Even though it was 1954, the band had been playing a set of Glenn Miller that would never go out of style. They had just danced to *String of Pearls* and he had gone to bring her a cocktail. Kate knew full well which of the other women in the room, which friends, flirted harmlessly with her husband and of which she had to be wary. Max was the tallest and most handsome of the men there, at least to her. He was in a dinner jacket and tie, six feet six, a head above the other men, even the tall men, easy to spot in the crowd. Easy to spot, but she didn't see him. She was wearing her midnight-blue silk taffeta cocktail dress that draped, diving into a deep plunging V from her shoulders across her bust, showcasing the fullness of her breasts. She was still nursing a one-year old, who was back at home across from the Club's golf course safe in her crib, with Viola, the colored Nursie watching over the child. Viola was good and had helped her with the two boys when they were born and had been with the family, cared for her children, put bandaids on their skinned knees the times she herself hadn't been there with them at home, and Viola had fed them their lunches when she'd played bridge or had gone to the village for lunch and shopping with friends. Really, if Viola weren't colored, she'd practically be part of the family. Kate supposed she was anyway. The way her boys ran to Viola hurt in the pit of her stomach. That was understandable, explainable. The boys would outgrow their Nursie. Her friends had had the same problem. She at least could name the hurt for what it was—jealousy. It was not something to mention.

Max had been gone from her side for too long. The band had just begun playing Moonlight Serenade and she wanted to be dancing, her husband's arms around her, she wanted him to be leading her across the parquet dance floor, twirling her and always pulling her safely back to him. She looked to see which wives were missing and she didn't see Sally, but then here came her husband, carrying two cocktails, offering her one.

“Just what I wanted!” she said.

“Another cocktail?”

“No. I wanted you.” She sipped from the glass's rim looking up over the iced drink into his eyes. Had he been kissing Sally, she wondered.

Max, big solid Max, closed his eyes shutting her out for a moment with his first taste of his third or fourth drink. "Fine," he said, tasting the scotch. "Fine."

"Ready to dance?" and he took their two drinks, put them on their table where they'd been sitting with Sally and Tom and another couple, and placing his big hand on the small of her back, he guided her to the dance floor. The music swelled around them and the horns were playing and then the clarinet, and Kate felt drunk with love, intoxicated with the movements, drunk with the dancing, the drinks, the closeness of their bodies, the heat of her husband pressed against her dress, the spinning away and the way he pulled her back to him firmly, securely, pressing himself into her.

"Max, my dress!"

"Damn your dress," he had said. "You're a knock-out tonight."

She blushed, so that her neck and décolleté had flushed.

"Mother of three and you're still the best-damned looking woman at the Country Club."

"Not Sally?"

"Hell no, Sally couldn't hold a candle to you."

She didn't believe him for a minute. Sally was a beauty, but she liked hearing it, liked it when he proclaimed his admiration, liked it when he said the other women were nothing compared to her. And some he'd had affairs with, she knew. But she was the one he loved, the one he slept with every night, the woman who had borne his children, entertained their guests, planned meals and maintained their home. She was his home.

"It's time," she said.

He looked at her breasts as he turned her to the music and said, "Leaky titties!"

"Oh, Max, hush."

He danced her outside onto the terrace overlooking the pool outlined by a necklace of lights and the darkened greens which could only be made out by flickering lampposts dotting the landscape. He reached into his jacket pocket for his handkerchief and slipped it inside her bodice, giving her nipple a tweak, expertly and quietly as he held her against him.

She laughed. "Max, if you aren't the worst."

Together they looked up at the moon, unaware that in fifteen years Americans would be walking there, leaving footprints, marring the surface that looked untouchable from here, this night.

"It feels as if we'll live forever," she said to him, to the moon.

"We will. We will," he promised, kissing her and meaning it—the promise, the kiss.

They walked back to the table, where Sally and Tom were now sitting, talking, toying with dessert spoons. The other couple was still on the dance floor.

“We’re running home,” Max said. “Time to feed the baby.”

“When are you going to give that up?” Sally asked.

“Never!” Max answered for his wife. “She can’t tear herself away from the baby and I don’t mind the milk.”

“My god, you’re drunk, Max!” Kate only pretended to reprimand. She had triumphed over Sally who’d never had children and who was flatter than an ironing board.

The valet brought the car up, dark uniform and dark skinned, blending deeply with the Birmingham night they stepped into. They hardly saw him at all but for his hands gloved in clean white cotton, open for a tip, then closing up on the coins. Inside the sedan with the windows down just a bit to let the cool night air in, she asked “How much did you give him, Max?”

“Not too much.”

“Well, good. You can’t give them too much, they spend it on drink. . . .”

“More’n likely. That or women,” he answered.

As they drove along the drive leaving the club and skirted the property, wound around the golf course passing the houses of friends separated by night-blackened lawns and dim glowing lampposts at the end of drives, Max placed his hand on her thigh, up under the silk of her dress. He felt the heat of her warming his hand. “I like it between your legs.” She took his hand and guided it farther up until it rested against the crotch of her panties, against her.

They drove like this a few moments in the dark night and then they were home. He opened the car door for her and Viola opened the front door.

Kate went upstairs to the nursery, picked up a clean diaper from the bassinet, laid it over her shoulder, then picked up her child who was fussy with hunger.

Max had followed his wife up the steps, softening his heavy footsteps so as not to waken their sons.

She sat in the chair and it was Max who unzipped the back of her dress, Max who slipped the dress off his wife’s shoulders and lifted out her large leaking breasts. They felt heavy and warm in his hands.

“Just in time,” he said. As she lifted the now hungry baby to her right breast, Max knelt down before her and took her left breast in his big hand,

first kissing then mouthing and sucking the nipple, her teat, and her milk was flowing, flowing. It was like dancing again, that sensation of swaying, that dizzying delightful feeling of all her juices flowing, that feeling of life and of its goodness, its richness.

“I can taste the Scotch,” he mumbled into her breast.

“Keep drinking,” she said.

They had made love that night, he swore the baby had gone back to bed drunk on scotch-laced mother’s milk, and it was true, the baby’s sweet little breath did have a whispering trace of scotch as she breathed into her sound, curious, infant’s sleep.

She, too, had slept well that night, they all had—the boys soundly in their rooms, both husband and daughter fed from the same well, her body had nourished and comforted the two of them at once, and then she and Max had finished what he’d started, and she was more than happy to comply, giving her body to him as only she could because she was the woman who loved him, she was the woman who knew him best. No other woman could ever be all that she was. She was his, and despite his philandering, he truly belonged to her.

*

And now this daughter, this same daughter whom they’d joked about getting drunk the night they’d hurried home from the country club so she could be nursed and so they could make love, this little baby who’d slept the sleep of the drunk was calling her out of her own sleep, another sort of drunken sleep, a floating swirling dancing dream.

She’d come home from the hospital with the diagnosis, the certainty of death, which she hadn’t needed them to tell her although of course they had; she’d sensed it, things hadn’t been right, but still it was sudden, home into the waiting arms of her daughter and the hospice nurse, and even Birdy. God bless Birdy, as much as she was a nuisance at times, the woman was as dependable as her own right hand. They’d thought she might have a few months—six, tops—and god how she could use them, but then she’d gone down like a one-armed boxer. Life wasn’t fair. And damn her body for causing her so much grief these past fifteen years. The aches and pains that had drained her and had nothing to do with her dying were only a part of her being old and worn out, would be over soon enough. She’d been trumped. She thought of others. Her friends were dropping like flies; those who were still among the living had come calling. She’d been able the first days home to speak a few words to some of them, but the visitations had worn her out,

exhausted her. She'd felt badly that she hadn't been able to really talk to them – there was so much left unsaid. Those in her set knew, knew what lay ahead for them, didn't press her to talk. She was grateful, even to Sally. She was content having known their presence, but then her body failed her piece by useless piece. No more friends now, only family and the help. She had fallen apart. Forget her damn bladder. It was too much. Indecent. The things she wanted to tell them, and Birdy's dark voice, too, speaking softly yet firmly, calling her to open her eyes. She fluttered them for Birdy, the best she could do. There had been something she'd wanted to say to Birdy.

*

In her half-waking moments there were things she remembered, some of them things she didn't want to remember. She was dying, yes, but that was the easy part. No, the hard part had been the living and the losing. Losing Max.

If only he'd died easily, how she wished he'd had a massive coronary like Sally's Tom had had, years and years ago. No, his death had been slow coming, long-lasting, like the eternity of hell. She didn't think there was any real hell or hell fire, the only hell she was sure of was life on earth when it's hard or painful day after endless day. Her tall, brilliant Max who'd commanded everyone's attention with his huge frame, his deep booming voice and his sly remarks and deep down, his compassion and love of mankind, well and yes, of womankind too. Max her wonderful husband, her life and blood for over fifty years, had been slowly leeched from her by Alzheimer's. Elsie Price's husband had had a stroke and that was bad enough, but a few smaller ones and he was gone within a year. Elsie had had to have round-the-clock sitters for him, too, but he'd been comfortable at home and then he was gone. Or, God bless her, Virginia Mason, who just drifted off in her sleep. What a blessing! How on earth did she merit that prize? If only Max had been so lucky.

To see her big bear of a husband humbled by dementia year after god-forsaken year month by month and day after unending day was too heavy a load to carry.

At first she'd borne it well, she'd risen to the occasion, she was a capable woman, always had been. She was from a line of capable women. She'd done all the right things. Years earlier, before Max was in the Alzheimer's wing, when he was still at home, she'd hired Birdy to help out. And even though he hadn't completely lost his faculties, she'd realized he couldn't be driving and so she'd hired Henry, the black driver. Henry

helped, too, getting her husband bathed and dressed—Max was too large for her to handle. Max didn't mind being driven by Henry over to the Club where he'd lunch with old cronies, life-long friends, a few widowed now, all aged, all complaining, all falling apart. Max was able to eat and talk as men talk with other men then, but he began telling the same fishing stories over and over again. Then the time came when the stories were more disjointed, or begun, then forgotten. His stories became entangled in too much line and he couldn't reel the fish in. He was lost at sea. On the way home one day he forgot where he was and asked Henry, "Where are we?" . . . "You missed a turn," he'd said, when there'd been no turn to miss on the winding drive home that led straight to Kate.

Even those days weren't the bad days. She'd finally taken back her own life—she'd had to, her hand had been forced by the lousy cards she'd been dealt with this go-round. They'd had a good life together—plenty of fights and yelling but that was the way they loved. They were loud. She had to be loud because he was loud and big and she had to stand her ground. Many years ago she'd ordered new striped curtains for the Great Room windows that looked across to the golf course. That was when everyone was adding on a Great Room. She'd looked at fabrics for weeks with a decorator. Max hated the curtains.

"What's that glittery stripe running through them?" he'd demanded, squinting at them from the sofa. "They look like the skirts of a harlot!" She'd taken great umbrage at that, his uncouthness, his coarseness, but she'd learned to dish it back. "Those are threads of fourteen karat gold, Max! The damn curtains cost a bloody fortune! I thought you'd like them!" she'd shouted.

"Oh, I thought they were something tawdry," he'd said, now ashamed of himself. "I didn't know they were real gold." He could see he'd offended his wife's taste. "You know best, Kate," he'd offered. "They're not tawdry at all, they're beautiful." "Beautiful," he repeated, pulling her to his lap and kissing her and not letting her go until she kissed him back. "Beautiful like you."

And the curtains stayed. He'd even pointed out the subtle gold threads running through them to Tom and Sally when they'd come for cocktails before heading over to the Club for dinner one night. "That's pure gold," he'd told Tom. "Cost a fortune, but worth every damn dollar. Kate and her decorator, you know."

*

The misery of it had not so much been losing the great man, but his losing his memory, his mind, their history together. Caring for him at home had gone from her to rotations between Henry and Birdy, to a suite in the best Alzheimer's wing in town where Birdy and another sitter took turns in addition to the staff. It wasn't too far away and she had had some of his favorite pieces of furniture moved into the suite. There was his sailfish with startled eyes, mounted on the wall across from his bed so he could see it and admire it and so maybe he'd dream of deep sea fishing, the marlin running, dream of the Bahamas, or the Keys, and the rum. When they had fought, he'd taken long weeks off by himself or gotten Tom and the two of them would charter a boat with a captain and they'd fish and drink all day and she didn't care to think what they did at night. He liked his fish, he liked his drink, and he had liked his women. She thought how she'd wished she could have Sally's head mounted on the wall, but then she didn't want him remembering Sally. How she'd prayed for that part of his mind to be taken, for those memories to be lost in the oblivion of his other memories, memories of her, their daughter, their sons. Memories, lives, loves, lost . . . gone. Gone for good. Gone to smithereens.

*

Viola was saying something, no, it was Birdy's voice in her ear now, Miss Kate . . . Miss Kate. I'm sitting here with you awhile. Soft, dark, insistent. A comfort. She heard Birdy dimly as she lay there, calling to her, but then she heard and followed the other call, the stronger, more insistent call. And there, too, Birdy was with her. They had had words, Kate had said ugly things, used ugly words. If she could undo it . . .

*

Her daughter was nagging her again. She opened her eyes the best she could.

"Mama. We're going to give you some more morphine. The nurse says you'll feel better."

Had she been moaning? It was the indignity of dying that was so awful. All these people in her room. She wanted to tell her daughter, her sons . . . Kat was nattering on like a gadfly, talking about a purse, or shoes, about the gathering she was planning with childhood girlfriends Sissy and Emily and Jo, without their husbands Kat was saying, up in the Carolina mountains where it would be cool, or talking about the homemade dishes people had brought over or picked up from VJ Richard's, or cookies from

Savage's, and of course she herself hadn't eaten since—she'd lost count of the days and nights in this unclockable time. She was nauseous from morphine, where did this child get her sensibilities? Or looking out the window, talking cheerily about the warblers and finches taking turns at the feeder, remarking on them. All unremarkable, Kate thought, all tiptoeing around the truth, the matter of her dying. As if she did not matter. Here she lay dying and no one mentioned the word death. She would have appreciated someone, anyone, her daughter, a son, acknowledging the simple fact that she was dying, dying, dying. For Christ's sake, hospice was here! Was she so dismissible? Surely not. It was not her they were protecting, but themselves. They weren't only looking at her death, they were seeing what was in store for them as well and they were frightened. So they were still children after all, not brave. It must be hard for them, she thought then. She felt a great pity for her daughter at that moment and wanted to say it didn't matter after all. And she would be missed, she was certain, had made certain all her life. She had refused to be easy or simple.

*

Kate would cut up a summer peach each day and take it to him that last summer two years ago, not knowing it was their last, and spoon feed him as he lay back in the green recliner she'd had brought over from his study at home. "They keep me comfortable here," he'd mumbled to her one day, not recognizing her. Another day, he'd known her and managed to worry, "I must be very sick. Everyone's very nice to me here." She'd cried at that, put the bowl of peaches down, left the room, and the new nurse had gone in to finish feeding him the slippery wet peaches. He mouthed them the way a baby does, juices drooled from the corner of his lips. The nurse wiped his mouth and he'd reached up and grabbed for her breast. She pulled back. These patients didn't know what they were doing, he didn't know, she told herself. Still, you had to keep an eye open. She hadn't known whether or not to tell the wife.

Kate laughed a bitter laugh when the pretty nurse told her. But she didn't say anything or explain who this man was, who or what he had been, how they'd loved for decades, reared children who were grown and now had grown children of their own. What did this young thing know?

She loved him with that love that also hates. Kate hated him for leaving her and yet still being here. Why the hell did he have to do this to her like this? How could she go on with her life, how could she travel, be

with friends, do what she wanted when she had to play nurse-maid to a man over eighty who didn't know how to properly die? She hated him now for the strength she once loved. All his inner and outer strength had coalesced into an impenetrable core of survival. Like a primordial creature with small brain mass, he just was. He could not think or reason. He could only be fed, diapered, bathed and tended to. She hated him for continuing to breathe, for his huge useless body that now just lay there sprawled the length of the recliner. She could not stand to remember the times they'd lain together.

One day as she was spooning rice pudding into his gaping mouth she could tolerate it no longer and took the linen napkin she had placed over his chest and pressed it against his nose and covered his mouth and she held it there and she said, "Die, Max. It's time for you to die." And he'd understood, his eyes had opened with terror and as much as he couldn't reason, he could feel terror, anticipate death. But she'd made her point, or rethought her action; she removed her hand holding the napkin, folded it neatly in her lap then laid it on the bed tray.

*

Those were the bad days, before he finally died, the worst days of her life. She was not ashamed of her hatred for him as he lay there dying forever, nor was she ashamed of her great love or passion for him while he had truly been alive, while he had been Max. She no longer had any desire to, was not willing to stay in the world of whispering people moving around her with their morphine, not even with her daughter calling her. They had no claim on her, no pull. She had only to let go. The morphine washed over her.

She did not want to awaken to her dying room. The room seemed haunted by the living. She felt the presence of her daughter, Birdy, the nurse keeping their vigil, but they had become ghostly, disembodied, their voices fading. She felt Kat walk away, it didn't matter that the nurse followed, or that they stepped outside, closing the bedroom door. Or had they disappeared through a flowing curtain, were there curtains here? The curtains wavered. She sought out the golden thread running through them, a glint. Only Birdy remained at her bedside. "Miss Kate," floated on the air, blowing over her like the curtains of the Great Room, the golden thread found. Kate wanted to stay in the sweetness of sleep, the softness of it, this place between living and dying. Then she heard the music, felt Max's arms around her, his big hand on the small of her back, the heat of his hand. Kate wanted to remain in his arms dancing. The two of them together, the sounds of *Moonlight*

Serenade swelling all around, wrapping them in the slow velvety night, lured by the clarinet. Max, she whispers to him, as they move together, *It feels as if we'll live forever. We will*, he promises . . . *we will*. How a part of it all she feels as the swirls of her dark blue gown spiral out, merging with the night. Becoming the night.

The lights outside the country club are glowing brilliantly now, like the brightest stars in the deep night sky, so far away and at once, so close.

MILES LISS

The Last Time

It was the last time
I wept like that
over anyone
At twelve my heart shut down
like a steel mill
All the workers sent home

JUDY LONGLEY

November Journey to the Horse Pasture

Your dusty jeep rattles across washboard roads,
lines of drought-stunted trees on either side
pantomime anxiety, despair. You disclose your demons

and I mine while Sham, your border collie, rides
shiny-eyed on the back bench. A couple of gates,
fidgety locks one more trial on a troublesome day.

The scatter of horses look up as we appear,
then remain still as Chinese clay statues
awaiting their warriors in the darkening field.

A sky pure enough to drink, distilled of cloud, dust
(the sun dropped behind indigo mountains)
stretches over us, a personal view of heaven.

You tilt your head, cup hands to mouth,
call Rosie, your Connemara hunter, who can bear you
like the wind, sailing over fences, always in the lead.

Sham howls each time you shout, pleased to be united
in this task. Other horses follow to the fence,
ears twitching, curious about our intrusion.

Soon, Rosie buckled into her coat against coming chill,
dog silent, the last carrot crunched, they allow us
to stroke them, silhouettes, dark gods,

the snuffle of their warm breath soothing
as the last measure of light drains away
and the sky becomes stippled with stars.

HANNAH MAYFIELD

A Deep Breath

She calls out to me, “Let’s race!”
In the water I step, slowly and stiff
but before I can grasp a breath,
beneath the surface I slip.

Chlorine water burns my eyes.
By instinct I open my mouth.
Swallow, I think, *swallow*. As
panic and pool filled my stomach

I kick wildly like a fish on land.
Begging for just a single breath or
perhaps a turn in time, to have never
come nor touched the water’s arms.

An arm grasps round my waist
but it pulls me to the surface.
The voice calls to me, “Are you okay?”
I cannot say. I’m taking a deep breath.

HANNAH MAYFIELD

Master of the Sea

Ponder what truly moves the wind and sea
as it rolls, bends, crashes, and screams.
When earth blames the sins of humanity,
for the flurry in the wind that haunts my dreams.

Has Poseidon, god of sea, lost his grip?
Does a greater force than rope or wood
push and pull at the path of our ship?
Such great men upon this stern have stood.

Did all have such questions, pondering their fates?
And should death bring her gentle hands and smile,
will I then learn what lies on the other side of heaven's gate?
The waves crash and I doubt the worth our journey's watery miles.

Myths and whispers have dampened the workings of the mind.
Gathering my thoughts, I assure the captain I stand behind.

JED MYERS

Sure of What's Needed

My brother's period sticks to the air
after whatever he says. Hello.
It won't be possible to meet then. Take care.

Is it the same tiny bottomless blackness
he plants again at the end of each utterance,
or one of a weightless infinity
from his invisible satchel? No one asks

how he supplies himself with so many
seeds of finality. I imagine
they're not hard to harvest. I see them
sometimes, floating in close, between us

in parks and bars. In train stations.
Don't worry, says my optometrist.
Mine, anyway, are just twisted commas.

It's the little solo dot of darkness,
a singularity, absolute, that
my brother drills instantly into the atmosphere
endlessly ending a permanent sentence.

That's what I fear. It won't budge
under any pressure, can't be cajoled
or nudged. Never seduced by love
or anger. It will not disappear.

Maybe it's nailed right into the matrix
that upholds all appearances forever.
Maybe he manufactures millions
of these impervious infinitesimal pellets

in his ultra-tidy apartment. Can he sew them
like buttons to close the lips of those
who would kiss him? Does he keep himself

snapped into the suit of his skin with them,
dry in a full-body splashguard against
the slobbering tide of the world? I can't
ask him. But I can wonder

what spoons flew through his lips' least parting,
what tremulous palms pressed at his neck, whose
voices in ceaseless counterpoint penetrated
his half-sleep from the live opera downstairs.

I can see how a hard point of nothingness might
stop a needle in flight, without
the needler knowing. That would be perfect.

I could've used a device like that too,
but I batted and yelled. I was crude.
I held my own, and left soon.

My brother appears to have cooperated—
he's helped the folks all these years, down
to hospital statements, snow shovels, light bulbs,

and funeral arrangements. Always on hand,
sure of what's needed, he stands
in the kitchen, and from some inner distance,

he listens, takes notes even,
and without quite looking at anyone,
provides his opinion. A plan. Period.

JANET YODER

Do This for Your Friend

Go to Seattle Cancer Care Alliance. Walk up the sloped sidewalk. Don't look at the huddle of patients waiting for the shuttle to cancer housing. Enter the whoosh doors. Move toward the front desk and squirt hand sanitizer into your hands. Rub your hands. Don't look at heads covered with bright scarves or wool watch caps. Don't look at gaunt bodies. Nor gray faces. Don't look into tired eyes. Especially don't look at the little boy, ghost pale, pecking at a game on his iPod, perhaps a gift from his family when he came here to get a miracle bone marrow.

Take the elevator. Find Sandi and give her a hug. Billie and Carol too. Shake hands with Muriel and watch her assess you as you assess her. Sit together on pastel chairs, love seats, and recliners in the sea-green waiting room with tall windows overlooking all of summer-busy, urban Lake Union with Queen Anne Hill, Gasworks Park, and Wallingford beyond.

Stand when Sandi's name is called. Go into the exam room with Sandi, Billie, Carol, and Muriel. Meet Nurse Susan. Watch Sandi take off her purple satin blouse to reveal her brand-new, shiny blue bra that you know she bought for this training session. Turn your attention to the tube coming out of Sandi's chest, right through her bronze African skin, just inches below her neck. Hear that this tube is Sandi's central line. It is her venous access, her port through which all fluids flow: chemo, plasma, platelets, nutrition, hydration, and stem cells. Understand that this line flows straight into Sandi's vein, and the vein flows straight to her heart.

Receive your copy of *Care of the Central Line*. Listen to Nurse Susan tell you that infections can kill, that the way a transplant patient gets an infection is most often from a caregiver. Hear her say if a transplant patient gets an infection, then that patient is no longer eligible for transplant, the last best chance gone. Vow that you will never give Sandi an infection.

Watch Nurse Susan demonstrate hand washing for a full minute, which equals three rounds of Happy Birthday at a stately adagio tempo, say seventy-two on the metronome. Watch Nurse Susan put on sterile gloves before touching the end of the tube—the clave. Watch her unscrew the cap from the clave. Watch Nurse Susan open an alcohol wipe and clean the clave. Then watch her clean the end of a syringe of saline solution. fifteen seconds for each cleaning. Then watch her squeeze a bubble out of the syringe and

screw the syringe into the clave. See her open the tube clamp with her left hand at the same time that she squeezes the syringe with her right. See saline flow into Sandi's central line. Give full attention. Remember.

Your turn. Wash your hands to adagio Happy Birthday times three. Imagine Sandi will have three more birthdays as part of her bargain with multiple myeloma, with transplant, with her own bones and blood. Scrub antibacterial soap between your fingers and under your cut-short-for-this-purpose nails. Dry your hands and put on sterile gloves. Hear Sandi tease you but also hear her trust.

Steady your hands. Unscrew syringe from clave at the end of Sandi's tube. Toss syringe. Clean clave fifteen seconds. Open heparin syringe. Force bubble out. Clean top of syringe fifteen seconds. Screw syringe to clave. Release clamp. Push syringe. Breathe. Look at Sandi and see her grin. Hear Billie say, *Janet, you could have been a nurse*. Know that this is not true. Pretend it is true. Cast confidence around you. Now unscrew syringe. Toss. Take gloves off. Toss. Put on new gloves. Open wipe. Wipe clave fifteen seconds. Cap clave. Breathe.

Look at Sandi. Try to understand why she looks radiant and the rest of you look as if your red blood cells have been sucked out. Realize you do not have what it takes to be the patient in this room.

Accept that you now know how to care for a central line, a little anyway; take the nurse hotline number and place it in your wallet. Keep it there through infusions of killer chemo, of early harvest stem cells, of nutrients, of blood products, of new drug concoctions—cocktails of hope. Keep it there when Sandi is too nauseated to even drink water, through months of neuropathy, night sweats, insomnia, hair loss, and bone pain. Keep it there through these cherished, fleeting years of fighting the good fight.

Hear Nurse Susan ask Muriel if she wants to flush the central line, since she is staying with Sandi first. Hear Muriel decline. Later, tell Sandi you will come over any time she wants. Hear Sandi say she can do all this shit herself. Say, okay, that's great, but make her promise to call you if she needs help. Over time, realize that Sandi can take care of her central line herself, almost always. Know that you were trained because it was required.

Thank Nurse Susan. Watch Sandi tuck her clave into her bra and button up her purple blouse. Listen to her joke about having an extra boob, an extra-high-maintenance boob. Laugh. Walk out of the room. Go down the elevator and out of the clinic. Watch Sandi and Muriel head off in Sandi's Saab. Hear Sandi make Muriel laugh. Imagine they are heading off for Sandi and Muriel's wild and crazy summer, instead of a stem cell transplant.

Call Sandi later, just to hear her voice. Know that you will wash your hands to Happy Birthday, that you will put on gloves, that you will alcohol wipe anything that touches her central line, that you will do this as many times as it takes to keep this woman safe.

Learn to just be with Sandi. Drive her to Cancer Care Alliance. Sit with her during infusion. Pick up her prescriptions. Bring her chicken soup, Thai pad see-ew, or Mongolian beef. Know that Sandi has many helpers. Listen to her talk about each person you both know and people Sandi knows. Receive her deep take on human nature, drawn straight from the marrow. Hold close your time with Sandi. Make her laugh. Write together each Sunday. Keep writing. Always write, even after Sandi is gone. Do this for your friend.

MIKE NELSON

The Resurrection of a Wren

1

I hear the brushes fall.
As if I were the one
scattered awake, saw him reaching for a high shelf
from a stool, the shelf above
his palette and paints, the one he can't
reach
because it isn't there. It isn't because he's standing
in the dark, only moonlight shining
through the window on him, he seems like a trace of something,
like the vague shape of a haggard K ghosting
a blackboard after the words have been erased.
It's because that's all that's left of
almost every word you told me.
The summer I turned five you went home
to your father, my Grandpa McKenzie,
who was dying of cancer. You went home because
Grandma had left, he was too much for her to handle.
You went home because you wanted
to find your father. You were a teacher once,
you'd know what happens to words after
they are erased, how they settle on the floor
and the tray of the chalkboard, a year's first
dust of snow. How they frost
the tips of your fingers, drizzle onto your hair
and clothes. How sometimes they leave a faint haze on
the blackboard, sometimes a fog so thick you
can write on it with a wetted finger
or damp paper towel. You'd have seen the overcast
sky of a chalkboard the janitor
forgot to clean, maybe one in a room that's usually locked,
used mostly for storing outdated books,
art supplies, desks so hacked up they're
useless for writing—nothing on

the board but countless erasings, a whole winter of tired gray afternoons. Then, one day, you find an obscenity, or some half-delirious sweet nothing, or just someone's name wiped clear. You feel an absence with you in the room. The room your father died in, the room you died in, no longer exist. See, I erase them. I erase all the words. I clear a small space for a stool your father can stand on, reaching for something that isn't there—though maybe is, when he turns, reachable finally too. Maybe there's a world of things he wants to say to you.

2

I wish I knew
the words to make things like they were,
but the sunburned face in the photograph of
him holding me is
no one I remember. In my grandfather's hands,
I'm an unkept promise, kept as long
as the camera holds us—this
configuration of us—
in its eye. I'm the promise
your father handed back to you
behind the camera. I can't be spoken.
I look back into his eyes through
yours, looking
back through mine. I'm not
an apology, not an explanation,
and I'm no lie. I'm a promise. And I don't
know the words
in my eyes.

3

It's not like I can ask you
what happened. It's like I ask and find
you bathing him, putting him to bed, finally

laying yourself down, the Pacific he painted looming over
 your bed like...like the bird I saw on the lawn
 when I was five—its gray stillness, gray
 silence, the

still gray silence
 of the November sky—a light rain
 toying with it, poking listlessly
 at a few stiff

feathers of its wing.
 Nothing that came to much. Nothing
 I'd remember the night I called, seventeen more
 years gone, the voice on the other end a recording that had no
 idea it meant so much
 more than it was,
 and in heptameter as broken

and Blakean
 as Whitman hearing the sea: We're
 sorry, the number you are trying to reach
 has been disconnected.

Was it a wren I saw? I don't know. But
 I think I know why it's come back to me now.
 Did you find your father while you were alive? Or are
 you still lying awake in your girlhood room, listening
 to the faucet drip—no voice calling
 from the dark—no
 whisper from the ocean?

4

Nothing like in Wendy's story. The way I
 remember it, you have to imagine her brother and his wife
 side by side in the ambulance, siren grieving its secret
 as ministering paramedics like

traces from a dream hover
 over their bodies. You have to imagine or
 have seen, and become the body fire has baptized.
 And because neither of them could speak—
 and because compassion
 is Latin—you have to hear the voice the dead have
 living

when Wendy tells how he moved his foot
against his wife's,
meaning he loves her, and goodbye.

5

In one of your father's nocturnes,
the viewer seems to be floating out over
the Pacific. Not so high you can't see the swell and
fall and spray of the breakers. Not so high
it looks like photography.
But high enough for vision.
Enough to see the ocean means unquelled
beauty, longing, death.
You told me my grandfather had always
wanted to fly. Told me you woke once at night
and found his bedroom studio a mess, the drawers
all dumped, everything pulled out
from under the bed. Your father not believing
it gone, the helicopter fuel he says he'd stashed
somewhere. Another time
he's flustered, half-dressed, trying to catch his
breath when he sees you: Help me on with
these trousers will you? They're
going to take off without me.

6

Look again, it's morning. Sunlight
on his pillow. Sunlight in the crease between
your neck and shoulder
as you bend making his bed.
Your father's woken hungry.
Though his face and skin look decrepitated
from cancer's carnal fire, he smiles
at the eggs you've scrambled. When you tell him
what a scene he made last night, he
lifts his eyes and holds you
comfortless in their light. This is what you wanted—

KATE LYNN SCHIRMER

Fetal Position

Before history had begun,
when they laid the woman's body
in her grave of sand,

tucking mats of woven grass
and fur pelts around her limpness,
the Egyptians made sure to curl

her in an ess, tucking skull
towards rising knees.
Arranged her limbs like a bowl of fruit.

Sometime in the same era
but a continent away, Neanderthal neighbors
also buried a lady in mid-life.

They wished bon voyage to the next world
by leaving her in a cave in France,
again curved head to shin, her skeleton

the delicate icon of a snake.
To show their affection, her family scattered
perforated bison teeth in the dirt

and colored her with red ochre.
On the stone above her zigzag
someone carved an image of a horse.

In this century, climbing between the sheets
I stack kneecap on kneecap, my femurs
the parallel lines of an electric plug.

Unconsciously my spine wilts to the left,
crustaceous; my hands slide
between my thighs in the chink

where they do not meet;
my hip bone rolls to bear
my weight horizontal.
I have always done this.
I have understood
the need to close up,

cradle the core and let the spine
bear the brunt, ready to roll
downhill if a jolt is dealt.

I place myself for rest
like settling into bedrock,
bones laced to a hug,

something in their mineral
seeking preservation.
In their lightless homes

they uncover the shape
that will birth me to whatever
replaces the dark,

the dawn that follows the sound of galloping.

KATE LYNN SCHIRMER

Scientia Mortis

Like the tiniest body
of a Russian nesting doll,
the piece that no longer
opens, unable to split further,

or like painting
someone else's story
on the walls of a cave
but you can't remember
the ending, or where
you came in,

or like the last candle
mumbling out,

or a numb-nerve path
wrapping around your
neck, channel of air and blood,
linking body to brain,

or a giant eyelid shutting
and you a single mote
of iris wedged
between the slivers
of light darkening,

or like waiting, your skin
turning to rubber,
one hand never fitting the other.

ALICE OSBORN

My Parents' Wedding Day

The ivory lace wedding suit is knee-length,
bought off the rack at Garfinkel's.
Professional, practical for a cold February day.
I dressed up in its hard fabric at age three,
the front all sticky from my cherry lollipop.
His arm touches the fur lining of her wrap,
they smile in mute tones before the cold ushers
them into a waiting Ford.

No photos of their wedding
ever lived in our house—
instead, my parents' single wedding photo,
the height of a coffee cup, rested in kind dust
on my paternal grandparents' mantel for 35 years.

What can explain my mother's aversion
to weddings? She barely attended
her own, on George Washington's birthday,
her day off, telling me at age five she married
to escape roommates. Or was it to fill in
for a dead father or get a Green Card?
She only invited one friend.
She forgot the exact date.

She has a knack
for being sick or staying home
with the dog on wedding days.
By my brother's second wedding
everyone expected she wouldn't show.
Ever the Catholic, she fears God will strike
with thousands of lightning darts
blazed in hot oil
for never loving her husband
of almost fifty years.

MARY SELPH

Prodigal Father

All parents leave
scorch marks

on their children's limbs—
I imagine

my leaving chewed through you
until your ribs split—then you

became like an urn: vacancy
in a marble vessel,

passed from mantle to mantle,
held always at a distance.

I don't know if you pressed
yourself against a window

each time someone slipped
from a house without telling

you, but I imagine you did.
I imagine sometimes your throat

burned with sound
or you ached

to wring faces free
of their strange songs.

And maybe your mouth felt full
of cloth, your arms

tied down. If you ever
went days

without speaking, without food
I wouldn't know, but if I had

a fatted calf, I'd slaughter it for you,
pour its blood into a carafe,

turn its body over and over
a low flame. I imagine

you would like that. I imagine
you would like to see me

with my forehead pressed
into ash.

LAURO PALOMBA

Cambio de Sentido

I made her laugh, she reported early on to her mother and, taking her cue from the surviving parent, Keira married me. At least she can say she has an alibi.

As to why I made her laugh and became an accessory to the marriage, that's not so easily excused. My parents couldn't save me; they liked the match. I suppose the ability to light up a pretty face and a frisky brain flattered me. Though, as I failed to notice, it wasn't a particularly difficult feat.

At my first audition, Keira carried me to their home like a stray mutt that had wagged into her affections. They confined me to a corner of the sofa and started in on the housebreaking techniques. Without asking, I learned that Keira's father was getting by nicely as a malingerer when something mysteriously genuine laid him up in a hospital and delivered him into the care of Keira's mother. She wheeled him to his tests, siphoned off his blood into dainty vials, recorded the surge and fall of his temperature and, irresistibly, he took a turn for the nurse. The diagnosis turned out to be Keira and made her mother a lifelong diseasophile. All this before I'd even been offered a refreshment.

So, meekly scrunched on the sofa and cramping, I was elated to hear mom-to-be, she of the dyed younger hair, leap forward decades to her widowhood and the menace of the prostate. Four months shy of my 23rd birthday, I was understandably indifferent to the menace.

"My husband used to worry a lot about prostate cancer. It ran in his family. Luckily, he died before he got it," she said greatly relieved. I wondered what she'd chiseled on his gravestone. Here's a possibility: I should've seen it coming.

On two robust legs not quite concealing a faint hobble and a gamy hip putting off replacement, she closed the first half of the interview by leaving to help Keira prepare lunch. Grateful for the break, I straightened the stiffness from my legs, afraid I'd release the hilarity that wanted out.

The furniture had a chess-trap cunning, arranged to funnel guests onto the hot seat. The sofa's navy-and-white striped slipcover masked the original gold and the waxed window curtains shone in their pattern of spindly winter branches braced by ice. It was February, I remember, but you could've been deceived into believing that in the light outside the

curtains a South Sea island was holding out its arms. Taking this in, I missed how Keira's mother's knack for unintended comedy had conditioned her daughter, set her up as a pushover for my punch lines.

At the wedding reception, their relatives outnumbered mine three to one. Same ratio as the invitations that had gone out. They redeemed themselves with the choice of menu: crab chowder, a blood orange and shrimp salad in sesame oil, garlic, honey and ginger, Salmon Wellington and a halved peach capped with cream in a raspberry puddle.

With the bride's father dead, his brother, Uncle Walter, took it upon himself to fill in with some sobering words. I didn't mind being taken aside though I'd rather he hadn't done it by the urinals. He'd been dancing for some time and knocked back a shot after each partner. What wasn't slurred was mainly nonsense. Advice about the fun part of marriage being front-end loaded and how, through our partners, we learned about ourselves. It didn't seem dangerous at the time. Besides, he'd always been a bachelor.

"From the squall of birth," he said, sounding drunkenly wise with his fly unzipped, "it's about raw needs."

I humoured him as he swayed towards and retreated from the porcelain. "And what's love? Romance?"

Grey moustache straight, red bowtie not, urging on a burp that refused to come, he said, "A complication?"

Uncle Walter was the family flag bearer but he had his critics and I'd already been alerted to him. After retiring, he'd become a supply teacher for the high school board. He'd been subbing one day when the police arrived on a public relations visit to demonstrate the discipline of their German Shepherds, show how they performed their tasks and nip the kids before they budded into criminals. Uncle Walter had his coat draped over his chair and of course the dogs sniffed out the bag of grass in his inside pocket. So could I really put my faith in any of his pointers?

It didn't take Keira's mother long to clue in that being accommodating is one of my character flaws. Too often she's reminded me how well I keep up Keira's spirits, Keira's needs. As if that was the role I'd been hired for. Don't know why I should object when it's the highest compliment you can slather on a servant.

Two years in, Keira's pregnant though she's not showing it yet. An accident that waited to happen. We should've worked out the hazards for two before bringing in a third. Because Keira now laughs less and it matters less. Because Keira's a tough bird, a hatchling copy of her mother. If it weren't for the ha-has I still get out of her, I wouldn't make a dent. Maybe it's not so odd that I prefer dramatic movies to comedies. Laughter passes

and dusts the tracks clean but tears slide along and then tunnel underneath. Laughter sizzles and vapourizes; tears are weighted.

Even in the Pyrenees, even in September, even in the shade of an evergreen, it's hot after an hour. The team buses in their sponsors' colours and logos have already rumbled by on their way to today's stage finish in Andorra where the gas, we've discovered, is much cheaper. The mountain highway has been swept clear of traffic in anticipation of the cyclists. The sole exceptions are the motorcycle police in their dark uniforms and lime vests. At intervals, singly or in clusters, they appear over the rise and dip towards me, some standing momentarily on their footrests to unknot their muscles, some huddling to careen into the curve like the racers to come. Between the intervals, the hush sometimes makes me giddy.

We drove; no, I drove—Keira was reading about los reyes catolicos and the Civil War—between La Seu d'Urgell and Martinet to scout the best vantage point for the Tour of Spain, La Vuelta. This paved crescent of parking area on the outer arc of the highway could accommodate a dozen cars but it will have to do with only ours. The riders will flash down and masterfully into the bend to the appreciation of one fan. The smarter folks are waiting for them in La Seu, sloshing back wine, having figured out that from the town's constricted streets and level ground they can squeeze more minutes of pleasure from the cyclists' passing. But Keira can't bear mobs.

Keira and I have ended up at this lay-by in Spain through negotiation. Spanish was her major, mine didn't conflict. It's the honeymoon postponed by her promotion. After the fact, I realize I should respect hard-working women without necessarily exchanging vows with them.

Negotiations. Bless them. They're what we fall back on when understanding is in short supply. I've finagled one stage of La Vuelta's twenty-one, today's Stage Ten, although a second may be possible if our separate tours cross again by chance because an actual second viewing hasn't been negotiated.

So far, in the trade-off, I think I've done respectably in limiting Keira's demands.

First, the six hours in the Prado. Keira goes on about the Old Masters—and she knows some things—but once you get past the flat religious preaching, the saintly suffering, the paint-me-cause-I'm-rich portraits, the stuff that sticks is your basic sex and violence; not homage to Biblical and mythological themes as they'd have you believe. Come on. It's about blood and babes in the buff. The Triumph of Death. Judith and Holofernes—lop off that head. The first painting Keira ever lectured me on was Susanna and

the Elders. Practically a peep show. The Garden of Earthly Delights. Danae Receiving the Shower of Gold. Right. I'd get naked too for a whole bunch of coins. Did Rubens ever paint anyone with her clothes on? At least Goya posed his Maja dressed and undressed. And then he couldn't resist Saturn Devouring His Son and the 3 de Mayo. You gotta love Goya. He's got it down.

I also conceded a morning in the Madrid flea market, El Rastro. It's true that you never know what you'll find though it was closer to four, as the siesta was ending, on a treed street nearby, that I saw the black-haired woman on the third-floor balcony. Bare-shouldered, sort of rippling inside her fluffy yellow bath towel. Blowing kisses to the guy striding up the slanted sidewalk. Twisting to look at her again and again before he rounded the corner towards Plaza de Cascorro. Definitely not the husband. But I couldn't say if he was a cherished lover or a valued customer. No second opinion from Keira. She'd been in a handbag and luggage shop haggling.

Next, the sidetrips, and by now I could be a contestant on a TV quiz show with what I've learned.

Trujillo, birthplace of conquistadores. Over six hundred originating there. Orellana, first European on the Amazon. Pizarro, terror of the Incas. From the rocky summit's Moorish castle on down, it was easy to understand how Trujillo's history had been a breeding ground for adventurers and warriors.

Onward to Tordesillas and the fifteenth-century treaty dividing the New World between Spain and Portugal. Keira explained it was the reason why everyone spoke Spanish except the Brazilians. I said the treaty was the reason why Brazil's samba and soccer put everyone else to shame.

By Zamora, the churches were starting to fuse together. But after the procession—a local Virgin Mary feast day with her statue, musicians and costumed figures topped with swollen heads—they served terrific free paella from a huge cauldron in the park behind the cathedral.

Salamanca made Keira's list because of its university's medieval lecture halls. All sorts of famous bums had been planted there, on the floor because benches were a luxury. An even bigger street festival was in progress. Students, tapas and vino tinto under the spotlight architecture. The Plaza Mayor boomed till the small hours with rock groups whaling on Celtic instruments. Bagpipes in Spain. Who knew? Not Keira, staying in the hotel to sleep off her foot fatigue.

I step out of the evergreen's shade and the sun pounces from its cloudless ambush. The two-lane highway is baking its asphalt. It heaves up gently to the right, then ducks out of sight and when I spy it again in the

distance, it's a sliver among the treetops still nosediving towards Martinet. It'll take grueling pedaling for the riders to overcome this tract today.

On the opposite side of the asphalt, it's all pale rock and shrubbery grappling in the warmth to determine which can climb the highest but where I stand the land slides invisibly into valley, the drop camouflaged by both evergreens and deciduous trees. Before the drop, enough scorched terrain remains to support a pair of picnic tables.

The solitary waiting has emptied me of eagerness. I tilt my ball cap to deflect the glare and walk past the tables. I stop at the wooden rails that first defend against a fatal plunge but only a few metres later quit in disregard. Below me, postage-sized, my wife lies beside the spring torrent now evaporated to a stream, so calm she might be murdered.

But I can picture her from my lookout. Her blonde hair reaches almost to her shoulder blades, like a promise of the future that falls short of a guarantee. The primed breasts slope towards the stream as she reads, disarmed by the apricot t-shirt. The stomach is as smooth as the night she conceived. The legs startle out of the white shorts. It's the hometown rather than the Spanish sun that bronzed them.

Legs straight as the files of friars. Another of Keira's bargaining chips. The Abadia de Santo Domingo de Silos. A mahogany crucified Christ suspended from a semi-circular cupola. From behind a screen set up in the altar area, twenty-four black-cloaked Benedictine monks streamed out in twos. At seven on the dot, as advertised.

Accompanied by an organist, they sang vespers before a capacity crowd there to listen to the music stars whose recordings of Gregorian chant had sold millions around the world. Pious and restrained, they entertained from their stalls. Entertained - because we were purely concertgoers attracted by a free concert. After thirty-five minutes, they exited again in twos, like Keira's darkened limbs, singing as they paced down the centre aisle. Their fans spilled from the pews after the final pair. The monks disappeared into one of the side chapels, dogged by their followers until a guardian swung the towering iron, gold-trimmed gate and shut them out.

For the entire recital, while the rest of us sat, a man at the front—in black glasses and sweater, big-eared, bald with his white side hair shaved close—stood when the monks stood and bowed with them. Several times, obviously familiar with vespers, he preceded their next move.

"You think he's showing off because he's defrocked and wants back in?" I whispered to Keira.

The car is defenceless in the open. I whip out my printout of the La Vuelta website from the burning dashboard. Today's Stage 10 grinds for

206 kilometres, terminating uphill in Andorra at 2300 metres. It's the first truly punishing mountain stage. After racing to the Pyrenees from southern Spain, Stage 10 might indicate who'll be challenging for the title in another two weeks and who won't.

It's a very thorough printout. Martinet represents the 114-km mark, La Seu an extra twenty-three kilometers of distress. The organizers have calculated that if the cyclists are churning at 33 kilometres per hour, they'll speed through Martinet at 14:49; at 35 kph, 14:37; at 37 kph, 14:27. It's nearly 2:30 by my North American time. After the solitude of the morning mountains, their wheels will be spinning in an adrenaline fury to the shouts and encouragement of Martinet. In another thirty minutes, they'll have only me as they fly by. Poised like a terrorist. I'm sure that's occurred to some of the passing motorcycle cops.

At the La Seu entrance to the parking area, a tight gravelly track breaks off immediately and begins the descent to the river bed. A half-hour ago—Keira had already staked her claim by the water—a police car pulled off the highway and jounced slowly towards the stream, scruffy bushes slapping against its windows. At the bottom, there's hardly room to turn a car around but that's not why it took them ten minutes to make it back up. When they cruised past me on the crescent, all I got was a nod from the young passenger officer.

A lovers' nook or killer's cranny. A hangout. The garbage scattered about suggests that. Apart from Keira's choice grassy plot, the strand offers only a patch of hard ground like a bleaches stain on a broadloom of ankle-twisting stones. The other side has no shoreline at all. Massive rocks and leafy trees flock from the mountaintop to soak their feet in the stream. It's like an enlarged nature photograph wallpapering the interior of a hunting lodge.

I carefully pick my way down the track to keep from stumbling as I had when I escorted Keira down. In the sheltered retreat and the mutterings of the stream, the highway above becomes non-existent.

She's laid out on the navy souvenir blanket she bought in the alleyways behind the cathedral in Santiago de Compostela. Her superstition is that while she's under it or on it, she's safe.

For a thousand years, from these very Pyrenees, pilgrims have trekked a thousand kilometers to Santiago: as a condition for getting their mitts on an inheritance, to rid themselves of sin, to top off their spirituality. And they're still on the roads, exactly like their predecessors except that they've been converted to tourists and exercise freaks. They have walking sticks and bikes and horses even. Keira and I made do with air conditioning.

Three days of driving through countryside where the Spanish, having stayed up past midnight, keep everything locked well into the morning and you can't get a cup of coffee before nine. Keira's mother, who'd gone on an excursion to Spain decades before and loved it, warned us of the waxy toilet paper that would cut our asses and require a blood transfusion. She has this quality, passed on to her daughter, of being unable to serve you a grand meal without sprinkling a little poison into your meat. We'll disappoint her when we relate that the bathrooms have been on the dwarf side with tiny tubs—Keira and I stood up once to fool around, more experiment than excitement—but all the fixtures have been modernized and the toilet rolls unspool soft paper.

Standing at Keira's feet, I say, "Good book?"

She doesn't look up. Since we're both wearing sunglasses and hats, we can't really reveal ourselves anyway.

"Have they gone by yet?" she mumbles lazily. She might be referring to garbage collection.

"Another thirty minutes at most if they're on schedule. I'll call you."

"We'll see. It's so lovely just to lie here."

When she's like that, waiting me out as I wait out La Vuelta, when she's happily isolated herself, the idea of marching my hands up her stomach and besieging her throat—after a little foray on those breasts—doesn't seem so outrageous.

When I kissed her the first time, her body got in the way and I can't recall where or when. But for the first lovemaking session, I was in pajamas lying on my apartment sofa with the fever she'd come to visit. Hot and hot for her in her summery clothes. The heat was floating off my skin like an aphrodisiac. Don't remember if either of us expressed surprise or how the clothes came off. I had a reason for being delirious but she became a little demented herself with wanting to touch my flaming skin. We wrapped ourselves like mating snakes around the heat and the next morning the fever had broken.

Now I'm finding out that people are usually as self-centered in bed as out. "Lust'll take you a long way on the wrong course," Uncle Walter, oddly sober, told me at Keira's birthday celebration in May. "It just leads to a loss of body fluids. Makes me want to rewind a few years and tape over them."

I fall to my knees on the blanket and sit back on my heels. I stroke my fingers along Keira's ankle and the small bone that didn't heal properly after her sprain and bumps out on her foot.

“Stop. You’re tickling.”

“What did the cops want?”

“Doing their rounds. Usual cop stuff.”

“Young cops the same everywhere. Trying to pick up women on company time with that authority, in uniform thing. Did you tell them it was your husband up there?”

“Why spoil their fun? Maybe they’ll be back with more questions. They’re very social.”

“I wouldn’t count on them. The highway’s a no-go. They’re somewhere sealing off a road.”

Her head lifts off the page and aims itself at some driftwood lodged in the stream. “Where are you going?” My fingers have trespassed beyond the knee.

I try her tone on for size. “Nowhere, I guess. But it’d be something to tell your mother.” She turns her head and drops her chin to look at me over the rim of her sunglasses. “You tell her everything else.”

“I’d hate for you to miss your race.”

“It wouldn’t take that long,” I say with what I think is charming self-deprecation.

She flicks my fingers off her leg, bookmarks the page and rolls on her stomach, laying her head on her crossed forearms.

“Two months ago, the dentist asked me why I was developing bruxism,” I say, my palms on my warmed thighs, staring upstream to where it tapers right. At this low level, I can’t see the highway watching over it.

“What’s that?” she says drowsily.

“Grinding my teeth.”

“Did you tell him?”

“I didn’t know I was doing it.”

“What do you have to grind your teeth about?”

In the last month, I’ve poured tomato juice on my cereal and found my spare house key while knocking the crumbs out of the toaster. But this isn’t the moment to cough up a hairball.

“It’s just to chew my food better,” I say. The remark is good for one chuckle and so her back convulses once and there’s a snort of air.

I study the greenness of the water, how the overhanging trees have stolen its natural colour with their reflections.

Prior to the wedding, I uncovered a photo of a teenager, possibly sixteen, sandwiched between two shorter female cousins. They’re being posed in a garden with a waterfall in the background. A man in a grey windbreaker has wandered into the frame, his back turned, admiring the

water cascade. I'd long since forgotten the photo and I fixed on the boy for a minute, trying to read his attitude, longings, what preoccupied or thrilled him. I recognized myself but he was a riddle to me. I couldn't connect him to anything before or after the photo though I could hardly deny it had been taken. He didn't give off any sense of direction, of having a compass. At the end of that minute, he was as much a stranger as the man frozen in front of the waterfall, a teenager who had yet to cut his teeth, much less grind them.

I catch myself idly eyeing Keira's ass stifled by the shorts. I'd like to hold on to it the way a rock climber would. "How's Uncle Walter's prostate?"

Keira raises her head. "Did you say his prostate?"

"I was wondering about his health. Let's get him a postcard."

"I sent one from Santillana del Mar."

"Oh? That's news. Why there?"

"The book says Sartre thought it the most beautiful town in Spain. Uncle Walter used to be a Sartre nut."

It was a name I might've heard bandied by her college roommates. "Is a Sartre nut anything like a wing nut?" She ignores me. "How come I don't remember any of this?"

"I signed for both of us."

"Good thing to know in case Uncle Walter thanks me."

I spring up and check out the refuse: newspapers, plastic containers, food packaging, fruit peelings, no condoms. Further downstream, the eggshell, partly-submerged stones nearly bridge to the other bank. The minutes flow quietly like the diminished river.

I dawdle back to my wife and purposely block the sun, shadowing her upper body. "Need anything from the car?"

"Uh, uh."

"Do you want me to call down to you or not?"

"Mmm," she murmurs. "I'm cozy."

I sweat up the steep track. The bushes are barren but hint they might've borne berries earlier in the season. I reach the highway. Desolate. Creepy after the contact with Keira. On the autopistas, the motorways, there are signs stating 'Cambio de Sentido'. According to Keira the translator, it means you can reverse course up ahead. But here, on what feels like an asteroid marooned in space, you wouldn't need them to safely loop into a U-turn.

About a quarter of an hour to go if they're hurting on their bikes. I take out the camera I've tried to keep cool under the car seat. After drinking some bottled mineral water, I resume my vigil shielded by the evergreen.

The first tip-off to their coming is the one I've overlooked and least expected to excite me. A helicopter. Then a second. Not roaring in low to assault but ants on a powder-blue cloth whup-whup-whupping leisurely out from between the mountain peaks, keeping pace with the racers and transmitting the television images.

A delay and then I spot the cyclists on the distant sliver through the treetops, strung out like beads and not much larger. I hurry to the metal guardrail, as near to them as I dare, and ready my camera.

It's but a few minutes and electrifyingly they're on the knoll in a stagger of helmeted heads, handlebars and pistoning knees. They're preceded by two media motorcycles, a driver and camera operator on each, shuttling back and forth, playing the cyclists like piano keys, and a police convoy to create a barrier against the upcoming crowds.

There are eleven riders ranged on each other's rear wheel, slender in their combinations of teals and reds, blues and canary yellows. Their hands are gloved, minus the fingers, and one is stuffing a sandwich into his mouth under his sunglasses.

I've barely focused the lens, trying to avoid the trailing team support cars, roof racks laden with spare bicycles and wheels, and they've whizzed by me. I rotate and pan after them as they knife into the curve and then the bustle, the spasm is gone. I find I've neglected to exhale. The highway is as forsaken as ever, sneering at my eyes for the mirage they've seen.

I reposition myself farther down the highway shoulder to buy more time for my camera and improve the angle of vision. There's an almost three-minute gap before the main body, the peloton, swarms over the hump. A hundred and more in a furious snaking train tearing up the asphalt in pursuit of the leaders. Most are packed inside the highway's center line but a half-dozen outcasts rush past me with their own notions of how to attack the turn or, fearful of a pile-up, steering clear.

What astonishes me, fools me into thinking another helicopter has hovered overhead and yanks away my concentration, is their mass chatter in a stew of languages, a gossipy outburst, the commotion of it. In this marathon of agonizing climbs, hellbent descents on a few centimeters of rubber, tireless headwinds, blinding rain and crashes, they're sensible not to add seclusion to their misery. Camaraderie within the rivalry.

When they too have vanished, the silence storms back. Six minutes adrift, three more competitors, shed by the urgency of the peloton but showing none of their own, pass like a languid afterthought. One is bleeding from a gash in his torn shorts. Contenders, perhaps, in another race, in another year.

This time, it's a lengthy interim and there must be other challengers because the highway continues to yawn its void. Was this the deal with Keira? The Prado hours and the Santiago days for the La Vuelta seconds?

Fifteen minutes, twenty, half-an-hour. What's going on?

Losing scads of time, the straggler finally arrives. White-and-apple-green jersey and helmet, green pants. At Stage Ten, the riders have only begun to tackle the mountains but already La Vuelta is racking the unfit, the incapable.

He's likely what's known as a domestique. A fine cyclist not quite strong enough to win the race, he performs useful chores if he can keep up. Everything from blocking the wind for his squad's leader to bringing him food and drink from the team cars to providing psychological support with his presence.

For this domestique, no helicopter, no fanfare, no attention. One of the team vehicles with a single bicycle on its roof has slowed and pulled up alongside him. The sponsor's name on its door means nothing to me.

I sympathize with him. Everyone has dishonourable days. If it's true that you don't become a success on your own, that others play their part, then why wouldn't it be true of failure?

The straggler is the last because at his heels and all down the highway to the sliver and beyond, I see the frustrated, normal traffic bunched up. Yet no one is honking. They know what's happening.

La Vuelta is not like a wedding vow, for better or for worse. La Vuelta is for better or forget it. The racer has stopped pedaling. His gloved right hand is hooked around the driver's open window and, against the rules, he is letting the car tow him as he leans forward on his bike to speak to someone inside. With more heights to scale and eleven stages to come, maybe he's talking about quitting.

TIM SHERRY

Of Fires

August was the best month for melanoma--
when heat made tinder of the grass,
lightning glowed far off in the darkness,
and fires started in unseen places.
It was the year that Yellowstone burned;
and while the news was full of orange nights,
while all the world waited what to do,
a mole began to burn on his back.
The fires and debates raged in Wyoming;
and after we heard the doctor's careful words,
there was no fire policy to be asked.
Tom Carr looked away, and said to let it burn.
It was no fire engine fire with barking dogs
and people turning away to talk about the weather.
We were held by fear and fascination
as his disease burned before us.
The casseroles and cousins came in the back door.
Throughout the house his memories were gathered.
We ushered through the living room where his bed
was brought for the final wonder of it all;
and as we watched, it was over in four dread weeks.
No pictures of fires on the news compared.
It was day to day, hour by hour, and then
minutes each different as he was consumed.
On the last day, when all was gone but his breathing,
the news was still of Yellowstone on fire,
and the debate there had much to say about
the choice to let two hundred years of trees burn.
But after those weeks in August, what we watched
in Tom Carr filled us with such loathing and love,
we knew of nothing to say of fires.

IAN C. SMITH

Estranged

They know scraps of each other's lives,
details blurred by mutual disapproval.
After years of guilty seclusion
he sees them all again, on Facebook,
using a mutual friend's shared email.
Another hour of his life speeds away
as curiosity morphs into fascination.

Recognition of aged faces eludes him.
He thinks of meteorite showers battering
a dwarf planet stranded in orbit
at the distant reaches of our universe,
knows his own appearance would shock.
He is grateful for pop-up tags,
bunches of children as generic as flowers.

One photograph is of him, clean-shaven.
He can't recall where or when,
or the unseen ghost aiming the camera.
He holds a bottle and a drink,
looks strained, prematurely old.
It was a case of then or a fraught never
before outrunning the hounds of banality.

That night, black and wild outside,
the only light on, his reading lamp,
casts a circular pattern on the far wall
while branches claw at his iron roof
like a freezing orphan locked out.
Flashes of memory illuminate his reading,
the chief solace during his days of exile.

AMY SNYDER

Phoenix

I am eternity,
everburning as the sun,
a thousand years flying
over warm, windstirred sand,
this scarlet plume of mine trailing
in the sky. No human command
can end eternity,
turn back the rays of a burning sun.

Nesting in the palm's top,
nestled in sky-kissed fronds,
I sing sweet songs, soft, as the sun drops
according to his Maker's bonds,
sets into eternity.
I lullaby the setting sun,
burning down the same,
sheltered from this desert wind,
to spark and ashes.

Shall I rescind my Lord's command,
defy eternity?
No. I live and die, faithful as the sun
settings and risings. Spark
and ash, I rise again,
and mark the sun's return with song.

Ever rise, ever fade,
winging across the sand,
I sing his glory. Remade
from spark and ash in His own hand
for his eternity
to praise my Maker to the
everburning sun.

JEFFREY TALMADGE

Season Finale

It'd be nice if
at the end of a season
you had a finale,
a day when you could tie up
the loose threads of your life,
bend the arc of your story
far enough to resolve the subplots,
consummate all those relationships
where the tension is all
that kept you interested
week to week.

Or, if you preferred,
you could have a cliffhanger,
not knowing if you survived,
or stayed together
or broke apart.

You could pause
for this message from our sponsor.
You could hope
to be renewed for another year.

JENNIFER TAPPENDEN

Alveoli

My own breath slides along
in time with yours as I watch
you sleep, deep need rising, falling,
repeated, your ribs a cage and a cradle, a roof
and a cloak. Outside a car
cuts through rain, then another,
then the low adagio of a braking truck
becomes your sigh, and I remember how
the border between blood and air
is curved: a cathedral dome of oxygen
and CO₂ crossing each other
in the dark. Who can know
where breath may lead? Awake,
we conspire to fuel a life
by passing in and out of offices, trains,
the corner deli near our house,
the process unknown to itself
except in handshakes and glances,
or a sigh late at night,
in synchrony, asleep.

MARK POWELL

Angel

Before he could walk he walked anyway, with his mother at first, and then alone, feeling her eyes track him until he rounded the corner where he felt them still, her hovering presence that gave way to the presence of his friend, the one who waited for him somewhere along Confederate Avenue before it turned into Lee Street and there was the church, the iglesia, the russet brick and stone angels, the ivy that vined the gate. He was four years old, and then he was five, and then he was sick and age no longer mattered. He clattered down stick-like, a brown-eyed insect unable to eat, and there were hospital visits and hospital stays and a feeding tube that protruded from his pale stomach and some mornings he lay on his back praying the rosary and feeling the milky glucerna dry on his warm skin. That was when the priest started coming, daily, at first, less often as the days progressed. The visitors were no different, faltering, late and vaguely apologetic. There were gifts and flowers and talk that he had assumed an ethereal glow, but that stopped soon enough as well, and he was left alone in his bedroom, his mother fluttering in and out, a rare bird, hollow-boned and nervous. Daily he passed into light. Or felt the light pass into him so that he was reconstituted as something clean and clear and could no longer feel the way his leg bones ached or the way his thin back sank into the damp sheets or the way the ceiling fan spun coolly against his face. Transubstantiation. The body into bread. The body into nothingness.

He had a large illustrated Bible with its ascendant cartoon Christ rising into a sunlit cloud bank and the boy too felt airy enough to rise into brightness, below him his mother and absent father, the ones who waved and called and no longer visited. This was the measure of his days: he prayed darkness into light, light into darkness. The taste of the broken bread and the bodega grape juice. Seventy-nine cents for twelves ounces. He took the savior's blood by the teaspoon while his friend sat in the corner and did not speak. But then he had never spoken so why should that change? They sat atop him, failed to notice him, the visitors when there were still visitors, and his friend made no complaint, opaque and compliant, until one day the boy realized that it was not his own body that glowed but that of his friend, and what the boy—the sick boy—carried was reflected light, not his own, no, but no less radiant. He knew then that his friend had been sent to him, and in his friend's glow, that bright halo that sizzled like a fuse, the boy saw things

beyond belief, so much that his head grew heavy with the weight of glory, and he knew it was beyond him to remember. Miracles went unrecorded, one after another, as he suspected they should.

Later, when he the boy could no longer walk, he realized he had been granted the gift early for a reason, as if his friend had understood it would be soon taken and wanted the boy to know its pleasure while there was still time. There was the sense of a larger directive, a ledger on which the boy's days—his comings and his goings—had long ago been scripted, and at best they might simply attempt to hurry ahead of what was and would be. It was not a question of fairness. The boy had once heard his mother talking to someone outside his door when she thought the boy was asleep, and his mother had seemed tortured with the question of fairness. He heard it over and over but never understood it. It was decided long before he was. All he could do was embody it.

But before he embodied it—before he became disembodied by it—he had walked.

Mornings were loud. Dogs and laughing, the older boys calling to older girls and the sound of the bodega grilles rolling up and locking into place and the Spanish station out of Jacksonville that played from a tienda, the radio right there by the cantaloupes and a rack of Milky Ways. His friend met him in the church until he started walking alone and his friend would be somewhere along the street, waiting as if for the bus, and without a word he would fall in beside the boy and they would walk to the church, silent as light. There were always old women in the church basement, old white ladies with costume jewelery and clouds of silver hair, younger dark-skinned mothers nursing babies papoosed in bright scarves. The first time the boy went they sat in folding chairs and talked about the Bad Man. The Bad Man had been killed and his mother had shown him on TV the cheering, people climbing streetlights and stunted trees and screaming against the Bad Man. Even here was the Bad Man, he thought, among the eight or nine women and a single old man dressed in a wool suit, the Bad Man there on the linoleum and beneath the shelves of canned tomato paste and wheat crackers and the tower of coffee filters that appeared never to lessen.

No one seemed to have noticed the boy and he made his way to the sanctuary. It was full of dead flowers and a priest who seemed to be moving with no real purpose, along the altar rail, along the pews.

“Well, yes,” he said when he saw the boy, “is your mother here?”

His mother was at home watching the Bad Man, he thought. In her chair. When he got back she would be on her way out the door to work and

the boy would be left alone, locked inside for his own safety and don't you dare stand near the windows or touch the curtains or anything, Stephen, because if someone sees you here by yourself they might not understand and might think I'm a bad mommy and try to take you away. He didn't know his father. His father another Bad Man. An unpleasant idea that seemed corked with the Chardonnay his mother drank in the evenings. The priest asked questions, mostly about how the boy had arrived at the church and how the boy intended to get home. He had no answers. His friend had led him here, summoned him out of bed, waved him down the front steps and onto the sidewalk, his mother behind him, half-dressed in a blouse and underwear and wanting to know where on earth did he think he was going and the boy not answering because he didn't know, he was only following, and was it his fault if he alone saw his friend? The next day he followed again, and the day after that, until along the street they knew the boy and seemed fond of him, waving and calling out to him as he passed.

"You won't talk to me, will you?" the priest asked. "Has God sent you?"

Then another day the priest slapped him. The priest was crying and stumbling and drinking the communion wine from the bottle when he took the boy by his arm. "Or is it the devil?" he said. "Has the devil sent you? Answer me."

But his friend whispered for silence and the boy said nothing.

Later, his mother took him to see a woman who made him draw pictures of what he had seen that day visiting his grandmother, and the boy drew a great crow whose golden beak was full of tiny scrunched faces and she said good, Stephen, so very good, how wonderfully creative, but he was silent then too, and soon enough the woman was angry and his mother never took him back to see her.

That was spring. By the fall he could no longer manage without the aluminum crutches that wrapped his upper arms and his mother drove him to the church. By Thanksgiving he had difficulty standing and the priest began his visits, enthusiastically at first, less so as time ground forward. By Christmas he was alone. Then his daddy blew in like a shit-storm, good-looking and drunk, honey, the way I found him and the way I left him and I sure as hell don't want a thing to do with him now. But that evening, Christmas Eve, he was there on the couch with his mamma. Laughing and grab-ass, she told the boy that night after his daddy left, just the same as always. The boy sat in his wheelchair at the front window, curtain down his back like a dingy cape, and stared out into the snowless street.

“He’s gone, baby,” his mother called to him. She carried the empty wine bottles into the kitchen. “Story of his life.”

It went on like this, the days falling out of him like stones, but the day they kept coming back to—the day his mother (as God as my witness there was someone in that room, she swore) and the woman with her colored pencils and all the people who came to lay hands on him and pray wanted to know about—was that sullen winter afternoon when he was sick but did not yet know it and his mother took him to see her mother, the boy’s grandmother. That venomous bitch, he’d heard his mother say into the phone. But she was dying, or said she was, so they drove through the gray afternoon two hours north to the Rolling Oaks Assisted Living Community in Milledgeville, a compound of buildings that appeared as an aging strip-mall, a few empty picnic tables on an apron of brown grass. The day was raw with wind and sleet and his mother seemed to gather about her all the darkness of the country. I want you to be sweet, she kept saying. I don’t care how mamma acts I want you to be sweet. He didn’t know what she expected of him—he had not uttered a word in months—but he suspected she was simply hurt, hurt and perhaps confused, surely lonely. His father was gone, the father he’d never known and his mother moved through dooms of love, dragging her stunted frame from man to man, the city a map of clubs and honky-tonks across which she bled like ink, slurring out only to slur back in, midnight, one two three in the morning and the key in the lock and her shushing whatever drunk had followed her home, laughter, footsteps, regret. The boy said nothing. His leg bones had begun to hurt but he didn’t tell her. He felt composed of joints, knees and ankles, ball-in-socket, but knew she suffered her own pains, her hands scaled red. Her tired fingers on his doorknob while he stared into disintegrated light. She never came in, only listened.

Her mother, the boy’s grandmother, wasn’t in her room, but a nurse told them to try the room of some man the boy had never heard of though his mother had. She seemed to accept this news with a great deal of disappointment and she murmured and pulled the boy down the fluorescent corridors so quickly he almost fell. She found the room and the boy could hear voices within, a man and woman, but instead of going in his mother told him to wait there while she went to the ladies room so he stood there while wheelchairs and carts rolled past, peeking once to see the inclined hospital beds and wheeled oxygen tanks, the edge of a nightstand with an antique rotary-dial telephone and Styrofoam pitcher. When his mother came back she was smiling and brittle and squeezed his hand too hard when she pushed open the door and said knock, knock in a voice he didn’t recognize.

An old man, gowned, nose tubed, sat in a wheelchair. “Well, look coming here,” he said. And the boy’s grandmother turned from where she was fiddling with his oxygen and said, “Well, I’ll be damned,” and saw the boy and smiled and stood to her full height and said, “Stephen, honey, you’re here.” His mother pushed him forward and his grandmother crushed him against her and he smelled her perfume, metallic and flower-bright, and smelled the cool hollow of her throat and what she smelled like was the shaded porch in summer, dry dirt and the honeysuckle that grew up through the rails to twine the lattice, the yellow flowers that wilted in what seemed minutes. When she let him go he saw another man standing in the corner, a younger man in blue scrubs, and he realized it was his friend only grown taller, no older but taller than even the room so that his head bent forward against the ceiling. He put one finger to his surgical mask to signal the boy quiet and the boy knew that though his life was near its end it was also finally beginning.

“Hello, Elmer,” his mother said. “How are you?”

The old man, Elmer, said, “I’m all right, Marsha. Right as rain if you’re mamma here would quit fussing over me.”

“Well, he won’t never tell me one way or the other if he can breath or not,” his grandmother said. “If he’d tell me now and then I’d probably let him be.”

“Well, you look good,” his mother said, “both of you do.”

His grandmother wheeled the old man over so that he was centered between the two beds.

“Take that chair,” she told the boy’s mother.

“I’m fine, mamma.”

“Take it. I’m gone lay here, prop my feet up. Come up here and sit with me, Stephen baby. Come here, honey. Hand me that, Elmer.” She took the hand control and raised her feet, raised them and lowered them, raised them again. “Come here, honey,” she said.

The boy felt his mother nudge him forward and he climbed onto the bed and eased into the space beneath his grandmother’s arm. The bed groaned and he felt them dip backward, deeper into her soft warmth.

“Oh, now that’s it,” she said. “Take me a little nap here. What you doing out today, little Stephen?”

“He wanted to see you, mamma,” his mother said. “We both did.”

This was not true but he could feel his mother’s eyes on him, wet and bright, he could feel them press against his own, as if there was no distance between them, only time.

“Grace, hon,” said the old man, “what happened to that thing he said for us to watch for him? It’s gone.”

His grandmother had shut her eyes. “He came and got it,” she said.

“When?”

“A while back he did.”

“What thing?” the boy’s mother asked.

“Well, he said he was gone check me when he came back. My blood pressure keeps going swoop—” The old man angled one hand. “—like this, swoop like that. 110 over 60 this morning. 82 over 40 after lunch. You sure, hon?”

“He checked you. Now, Stephen honey, look here at this. Watch me act silly with this thing.”

She raised and lowered their feet, up and down, the bed lurching.

“But, hon, he said he was gone check me when he came back.”

“He did check you.”

“It’s a sight, Marsha. 82 over 40 after lunch. I don’t believe he did, Grace.”

His grandmother opened her eyes. His mother was still standing just inside the door like someone passing by. “How was the road’s driving up here?” his grandmother asked. “They was all ice the past few days.”

“Patchy,” his mother said, “a little this morning but that’s all.” She looked around and whistled. He had never heard her whistle before. “Boy, this place is nice.”

“You never been in here before?” his grandmother asked.

“Not this wing.”

“Elmer says they feed him better than the hospital did. Says they feed him all he wants and that man right there,” she pointed to the empty bed, “big old fat fella, they don’t feed him hardly nothing. Mr. Turner is his name.”

“Hon, I really don’t believe they did.

“They did, Elmer. Now don’t you worry about it. Tell Stephen here about the food.”

“Oh, they feed you right here, they do,” he said. “For lunch they give me a big old bowl,” he spread his knotted hands, more gristle than bone, “of chicken pot pie. They got a list down in the kitchen says whether you need to gain the weight or lose it, and yeah buddy they stick to it, too. Fella right there, I get this big old bowl of chicken pot pie and a banana and a booster they call it—”

“One of them Ensure shakes.”

“One of them Ensure shakes. And he gets a sandwich cut in half, no edges. They got a list down there.”

The boy’s mother stood closer now, her fingertips grazing the foot of the bed, but his friend remained hunched in the corner. No one seemed to have noticed him but then no one ever did. The boy understood this would not change, not now and not ever, and that was all right, that was fine. At night his friend shifted into a bird to carry the boy places, his body a small wounded form that bled in a crow’s beak down on the banks of the Altamaha, watching the brown floodstage foam past. With the crow, the boy assumed shapes. He was a fish dying in the shallows. The bird that refused the air. He was a broken limb that existed only in the labored folds of his imagination, torn from the tree and gone downstream, arrow-like, a splinter on waters he would not navigate. When he woke in the mornings his heart felt mishandled but intact. He thought it some kind of holy spirit.

“Well this place is nice,” his mother said. “I’m impressed.”

“It wasn’t no hard sell, I tell you that much,” the old man said. “After that hospital I come in here and seen this place and shoot. I said get me on over there, Grace.”

“I’m impressed.” The boy had never heard his mother’s voice quite like this. “I am.”

“Except you know this was the place where that man they called Angel was,” his grandmother said, “the one killed all them people in their sleep.

His mother batted her eyes, only once. “Here, mamma?”

“Here. Sure was. When was that, Elmer? When was that Angel man doing all that killing?” She touched the boy’s hair, stroked it. “He must’ve killed ten or so people before they caught him. This was years ago.”

“Don’t talk about that in front of the boy,” said the old man.

“Well, it’s true,” his grandmother said. “It was here.

His mother had come closer. She was inching her way into the room.

“Good Lord,” she said softly.

“You know your sister and little Nate was all down here this morning,” his grandmother said. “She spoils that child. Lord, I never seen the beat. Don’t they Elmer?”

“What’s that?”

“Nate. Don’t she spoil that baby.”

“Hon, I don’t believe he ever did come by and check me.”

“I started telling Joy one of my cat killing stories. Gets her so upset.”

“Well, nobody wants to hear that, mamma.”

“Don’t matter if it’s true or not. Now, Elmer, they did come by and I don’t won’t you worrying about it none.” She looked at the boy’s mother. “I want you to bring Stephen’s daddy with you next time.”

“Mamma.”

“What? I want Elmer to meet him. You ain’t never met him, have you, Elmer?”

“Who?”

“Bring him,” his grandmother said.

His mother batted her eyes. Around her head the boy saw a great construction of wheels and cranks, a system of pulleys making their intricate turns. “You know I can’t do that.”

“One visit.”

“Please, mamma.”

When she smiled his grandmother looked younger, but meaner too. “One run off and the other in prison. I never would’ve thought you’d have trouble keeping a man. Is it that you don’t treat em decent?”

“Who you talking about?” the old man asked.

His grandmother kept her eyes on his mother. His mother smiled back. The boy could see veins forking in each arm, as clear as the ones that corded the length of her throat and boy thought how birdlike she appeared, how like his friend.

“You know don’t really look sick, mamma.”

His grandmother looked at her and blinked once. “I knew you wouldn’t believe me.”

“No, no,” his mother said, “I mean you look good.”

“Did I tell you she wouldn’t believe me, Elmer?”

“Mamma, I just meant—”

“Her own mamma eat up with a cancer and her not even believing it.”

“I didn’t mean that, mamma, I just meant that you look so young—”

“Her not even able to keep a man.”

The phone rang. He felt it sound in time with his grandmother’s blood, felt it through the loose flesh of the arm she kept folded over him. Her heart an account of hammers and chisels, something hard and old, a brilliant and brittle cathedral cut from ice, populated once but now empty as a church.

“Lord, Stephen,” his grandmother said, touching his hair again, “you cain’t even remember all the stories I used to tell you about old Boaz. How he used to ride around on a tricycle and whatnot. Rode it till the day he died.”

The phone kept ringing.

“One hundred and seven years old. He was. Get that, would you, Elmer.” The boy felt sleepy now, the touching, the warmth. “And about how he got hit in the head with an acorn and that finally killed him. Had a pump knot out to here. I don’t know why I told ya’ll all that.

“I used to tell it at school,” his mother said.

“I reckon everone of ya’ll I told it to did. Boaz you know was my great-granddaddy.”

“Your great, mamma?”

“Grace.” The old man was reaching over him to paw at his grandfather. “Grace. It’s him, hon. Angel.”

“Yeah. My daddy’s granddaddy. And it was funny because my grandmamma never did like me.”

“You hear me?”

“Elmer, remember how I told you my grandmamma got so mad at me.”

“Cause you ate her grapes, I remember. But listen, hon, it’s—”

“I did. I wasn’t but probably eight years old and I was standing out in the yard and was hungry. I was so hungry, Stephen, so I started picking off them grapes.” She started eating imaginary grapes, offered one to the boy. “Started picking them grapes one after another and then I seen her on the porch and she says ‘Grace, you get away from them grapes. You hungry come in here and I’ll fix you something to eat.’ She used them grapes for making jelly and what not.” She shook her head. “I felt so bad for doing that. I went in and she gave me half a cold biscuit. Half a cold biscuit. Nothing to drink. Just that biscuit. She always loved Marlene and Roland and little Annabelle who wasn’t but hardly a baby, but I always felt bad about eating them grapes. Funny how things like that’ll stick in your mind.”

She touched the boy’s head. His grandmother didn’t appear sick. He could see that she would live a long time. He could see that she might never die, that it might be that his friend would one day simply lift her in the scoop of his face and fly away. “I stole them grapes,” she said. “I most certainly did. Who is that, Elmer?”

“It’s him. It’s Angel.”

“Angel?”

“Who is it?” his mother asked brightly.

His grandmother was no longer touching him. She seemed to have forgotten him. “Well what in tarnation does he want?” she asked.

“Who is that?” his mother asked again.

They spoke at the same time, the old man saying nobody just as his grandmother said Angel.

“Oh, mamma.”

“Calling here at all hours.” His grandmother shook her head. “Well, go on and talk to him. See what he wants.”

“Oh, mamma. Don’t try and scare Stephen.”

“I ain’t trying to scare nobody,” she said. “I ain’t the one calling.”

The nurse came in, blue shawl behind her like a cape, the badge clipped to her shirt. Hey, hey, hey.

The old man put the phone against his shoulder and clapped his hands. “I told Grace it was you likely working the floor today.”

“Got the whole floor to myself,” she said. “I’m hopping. How you doing today, Mr. Walker?”

His mother was batting her eyes again.

“He’s worrying over his blood pressure,” his grandmother said.

“It keep fluctuating?”

The old man angled his hand. “110 over 60 this morning. 82 over 40 after lunch.”

“Well, let me check it, sugar.”

She put the cuff around his arm and he put the phone back to his ear.

“Thought I was back in the service for a minute,” he said into the phone.

His mother looked at the old man and at her mother. “I really don’t think this is anything to joke over, mamma,” she said.

“Hold still, sugar.”

“Mamma?”

But his grandmother was watching the nurse. “How is it?” she asked.

“110 over 60. How bout that?”

“I’ll be.”

“I told him. He’s been worrying over it all day.

“Well, you look all right now, sugar.” She wrote something on the chart and hung it back above the bed where the boy and his grandmother lay. “I’ll check back in a minute.”

“Yessir.” The old man was back on the phone again. “United States Navy. And now you know, Angel, my great-granddaddy and his brother both fought at Chickamauga.”

“Mamma?” his mother said.

“Lord, what, child?”

“Could you make him stop?”

“Who?”

His mother nodded her head at the old man. “Him. Elmer. This is ridiculous.”

“Oh, Angel calls most daily.”

“This isn’t funny,” she said. “You shouldn’t joke about stuff like this. Can’t this not be like always? We came to have a nice visit.”

“We’re having us a nice visit,” his grandmother said. “Isn’t this a nice visit, Stephen?”

The old man put the phone back on his shoulder. “I told you she was likely working the floor today. She keeps it hopping.”

“A fine lady right there,” his grandmother said.

“Yes.”

“Got a good Christian heart.”

He was back on the phone again saying Yeah, I’m sorry, I’m here now, and his mother seemed to be bouncing on her toes, her fingers bunching and releasing the fabric of the comforter and saying mamma, mamma. His friend appeared not to have moved.

“Yessir,” the old man was saying, “Lost his jaw there. Got it shot off... Yeah... Me? Took me right out of the hills of Kentucky and shipped me straight to San Diego, California. Nineteen hundred and forty two it was.”

“Mamma—”

The bulk of an old man stood in the door, leaned against his walker, bathrobe draped over his pajamas. The large man hobbled across room and lowered himself into the wheelchair that sat against the far wall. He had gigantic ears, the boy thought. Ears like dangling fruit.

“Hey, there, Mr. Turner,” said the old man.

The large man lifted a hand to one yellow ear. “Say now?”

“Said hello to you, Mr. Turner,” said his grandmother. “This is my grandson, Stephen, and my daughter, Marsha.”

“But who were you, Angel?” he said into the phone.

“Mamma, make him stop it.”

“Say now?” said the large man.”

His grandmother raised her head. “He’s just talking to Angel.”

“Mamma!”

The phone was back against his shoulder. “Angel says he was just a man. Same as you and me.”

“Is this supposed to be funny?” his mother said. “Is this supposed to be for our benefit?”

“How was your walk, Mr. Turner?”

“Oh. Fine, fine. Went to the end of the hall there. Somebody had the door propped open and I pert near froze.”

“You want to lay down?”

“No, no. I’m all right. Just get settled good and they’ll be calling me to the cafeteria.”

“Angel says he’s whatever I want him to be.” The old man had the phone back against his shoulder. “He says think something—” He snapped his fingers. “—that’s what he is.”

“Mamma!”

His grandmother turned to the old man. “You oughten to sit there talking on the phone like that.”

“What?”

“I said you oughten to be on the phone like that, what with Marsha and Stephen here. It’s upsetting her. Tell Angel to call you back.”

“Call you back?” his mother said.

“After y’all leave, I mean.”

“Are you out of your mind?” his mother said, except she said it so brightly the boy thought it must be a good thing and that perhaps they were all out of their minds and that was why they were here.

His grandmother seemed not to have heard her. “Look at old Turner over there,” she said to the boy. “He’s a fat one, ain’t he?”

“Give me a big old bowl of chicken pot pie and a banana and give him a little old sandwich with the edges cut off,” the old man said.

“Mamma?”

“He cain’t hear us, honey. Mr. Turner? Mr. Turner?”

“Shoot, I got a mind to barter with him.” The old man turned to the boy’s mother. “I’m down to one hundred and forty four pounds you know, same as the day I went in the service.

“Yeah,” the one they called Turner said, “I’ll just get settled good and they’ll be calling me to the cafeteria.”

“Hadn’t been so low since I went in the service.”

His grandmother put her arm back over him. “One time, Stephen, I seen Boaz walking up the road. I was just a girl but both my granddaddy and grandmamma and Boaz’s wife, my great-grandmamma, they was all dead but Boaz was still going strong, out living ever one of us.

“Still riding the tricycle,” his mother said, and laughed the way a kite flies, like it was going away from her, like it was held only by a string and she knew that wasn’t enough.

“Still riding it,” his grandmother said after a moment. “Yes, he most certainly was. But I seen him walking up the road that day. Summertime. Kindly dusty and dry. And mamma and daddy was in the kitchen watching him and I remember mamma saying ‘That Boaz wouldn’t hit a lick at a black snake’ and daddy just watched him. Daddy always wanted him to come live with us so he wouldn’t be lonely but mamma never would allow it. I always felt sorry for him.

“They killed old Angel, didn’t they?” the old man said. “The electric chair. I remember reading about it.”

“We should go,” his mother said. “We’re just gonna go.”

His grandmother was back to stroking his hair. “Said he always had a nickel. Always had a nickel but never did hit a lick at life. Now a nickel in those days was a lot of money.”

“Buy you a quart of milk,” the old man said.

“We really should go.”

“Quart of milk,” his grandmother said. “Loaf of bread.”

“Course if you had cows you wouldn’t have needed the milk.”

“But never hit a lick at nothing I don’t believe.” Her hand capped the boy’s round head. “But he knew how grandmamma had always treated me. Oh, he used to get mad. He’d get so fired up.

“You’d stole her grapes.”

“But this was after, Elmer.”

“Come on and get up, Stephen,” his mother said. “Come on now.”

His grandmother stayed him with her hand. “Grandmamma used to give Annabelle a piece of fruit cake. Wouldn’t give nobody else a piece but would give it to Annabelle. Just the littlest, she was, you know. And we used to chase her. Lord, we used to chase her trying to get a piece of that cake. She’d run and run and mamma would say ‘Child, give them a bite of that cake. Them’s your family.’ But she never would. Grandmamma’s favorite.”

“But she liked Roland too,” said the old man. “He’s always said.”

“She did. She liked him. He always said didn’t matter what time of night he came in she’d always fix him that feather bed. Come in at two in the morning and she’d fix that feather bed all nice like, fix him a glass of sweet milk, a little cornbread. When my great-grandmamma died Roland slept in that feather bed with Annabelle. You know where the rest of us slept?”

“On the floor,” the old man said.

“On the floor under the table. Laying there on a quilt.”

“I need to feed him,” his mother said. “It’ll be late getting home already. The road’s are bad.”

“I thought you said they weren’t,” his grandmother said.

“They’ll be getting bad. We need to go. I need to feed him.”

“Well, I wish you wouldn’t rush off,” his grandmother said. “We could get you a plate from the cafeteria.”

“We need to go, mamma.” But his mother didn’t move, just stood there at the foot of the bed, fingers spread like spiders.

“We could get you a plate.”

She said it as if she meant to convince herself: “We need to go.”

The old man gently returned the phone to its cradle. “I can feel him,” he said.

“Come on and hop up, Stephen.”

“I can feel him,” he said again.

“Who?” his grandmother asked.

“He’s here,” the old man said. “Angel. I can feel him.”

“This is not funny,” his mother said, except she was smiling brighter and brighter and her head was twisting back and forth as if it had worked itself loose, “you two think this is funny? Trying to scare a little boy? You think that’s supposed to be funny after we’ve driven all the way up here not having seen you, mamma, in I don’t know how—”

“Be quiet,” his grandmother said.

“We’re leaving.”

“Be quiet.”

“I feel him right here with us.”

“I feel him too,” his grandmother said.

They were all silent except for the large man they called Turner who kept rattling breath through his nose and his mother gave a little hiccup and the boy thought she might cry but she didn’t and soon she was silent too.

“I have dreams,” his grandmother said after a moment, but her voice had changed and she was whispering, “I dream sometimes I’m back in that old house and I’m just a girl again stuffing paper in the cracks around the window, burning pine knots, couldn’t never keep the floors clean.”

“He’s here,” the old man whispered.

“Sometimes I hear that wind just blowing and blowing through them cracks and I’m stuffing paper and still its blowing so hard I’m like to suffocate.”

“He killed them people because they wanted to die,” the old man said.

“Yes,” said his grandmother.

“It’s not that I don’t want to die,” said the old man. “It’s just that I’m scared of it.”

“Yes.”

“Get up,” his mother told him.

His grandmother kept her hand on him. “Don’t nobody move just yet. He’s right here with us. Can you speak to us, Angel?”

“Stop this,” his mother said, “just stop it. You should be ashamed of yourself. Both of you should be ashamed of yourself.”

“Say something if they’ll let you.”

“Stop it.”

“I feel him,” the old man said again.

“Stop it this minute,” his mother said.

The boy looked up and saw that standing in the corner was a large crow. When it opened its beaked mouth he saw the shapes of faces, all of them, trapped and crying.

I feel him. I feel him.

“I see him,” the boy said.

And then his mother screamed.

JO BARBARA TAYLOR

Hickory Nut Hymn

Along Potato Creek in the month of October,
wind whispers alleluia through the reeds,
wild geese whine an alto chorus
percussed by dropping nuts.

Grandmother walks the creekside
in cotton stockings, old-lady oxfords,
and a ragged wool shirt over her housedress.
She veers to the woods,
kicks pumpkinblood leaves, collects nuts
for brown cake and bread in her apron,
a faded blue calico, old feedsack made useful,
corners clasped in her curled fingers.

She will pick the meat
from the shell's remote caverns,
store in glass jars the delicate flavor
until Thanksgiving, Christmas, next April
for Granddad's birthday kuchen.
Then she will make do with strawberries,
cucumbers, and butter beans while she waits
for October, the turn of the leaves, geese going south
and falling hickory nuts.

KATHLEEN VAN SCHAICK

Too Soon

to laugh about
how she'd always ask,
Couldn't you use this?
then send me home
with a canvas purse,
price tag still attached
four biscuits wrapped in foil
plastic shopping bags filled
with large print mystery books
and a liter of Polar Diet Root Beer.

to take her mother's diamond ring
now wrapped in tissue, from its small
green box and make it mine
sized to slip on my thin finger
or crafted in a modern setting.

to sort through clothes
deciding what to donate to Goodwill
which of her pink sweaters
(all Christmas gifts from us)
I'll keep and maybe wear with jeans
or which to put in one black plastic bag
pull the drawstring tight
then set it at the curb on Tuesday.

to delete her number
from speed dial on my cell phone

GAIL WALDSTEIN

Stark

wild white hair a
horizontal waterfall

her scaffold of bones
sheeted in a chair

between porch and
flybycars

sun stroked face bare
feet purple beside one crocus

her heart an
ampersand

HOWARD WINN

Ghostly

In the woods behind the house,
or in the driveway curving down
to dark spaces under Hemlocks,
I sometimes catch a hint of cigar
smoke on the cool air.
It is there and then it is not,
blown away into evergreen trees.
My father, smoker, has been dead
over a decade.
Shadows moving behind thin curtains
have the shape of my mother,
bent in that question mark of spine
that seems the fate of English genes,
but now it is a stranger in the room.
She has been under a bronze tablet
laid in green grass at the Rural Cemetery
for eight years less than her husband.
The shades of friends crowd the audience
at concerts and plays, milling amongst
the living; even at work ghosts slip between
desks and out of doors just at the edge
of my vision. There is a dim line between times,
faint and giddy as it slips to left or right
without warning. We catch the odors
and the shapes on the edge before they
slip back across the river.
There were no apparitions of this kind
for my youth. Demons wavered
then in faint outline to my naive eyes,
but darkened hallways, unlit cellars,
blank closets are empty now.
This present ghost, neither friendly
nor unfriendly, is a gathering of age.

WILLIAM WRIGHT

Nightmare, Amended

Now it is not a man pinned eviscerated
to a barn door and stretched mothlike
to show his brisket,

the drying jewels of his guts
and his teeth red-tinged, eyes
scapped bald. Now it is

not a plum-colored sky over
foothills of ruined chimneys,
the world forever October.

Instead, I stand in a field where there is no
barn, and the pinned man, my father,
has been let down, sewn back to life:

He walks through his home, his loneliness
a dark carapace. His mother lies
in a pine box in a South Carolina

graveyard. By now her eyes are fused
and sunken. By now her mouth is
a leather smudge. She wanted cremation

but the family would not have it.
The bones of her fingers poke through skin—
The moon impales the night.

The smell of smoke blooms on the sweet-sharp air,
and I feel a joy under the thin arbor
of passing clouds.

I feel a joy, because there is no secret order
of moth or plum, chimney
or bone, only the pungent fact

that somewhere, somewhere beyond my sight,
a fire burns part of this
land gone, gone.

WILLIAM WRIGHT

Nocturne for Cicada

Down where the pines scuff the moon,
they rattle the woods to whirl and static,
scrimps of sound, vatic music so loud

at times it lodges in the ear like a burr,
carries through sleep a soundtrack
of farmhouses under stars, the slant

land's windfall leaves they settle in to scar.
Red-eyed dusk-chisel: they whittle the mind
so sharp it conjures collapsing ice

on a pond at winter's bladed end,
a crack in the attic window. Fork tines
clicking on a clean plate. A silver

pocket-watch unclasped and ticking still
after years locked in an oak-white box. To scrape
and sing the sun down, swell cedar

and elm through wind and wind time
back to earth's first songs. To play
that instrument, counterpoint the night.

CONTRIBUTORS

PETER BERGQUIST earned a B.A. in English from Princeton University and an M.F.A. in Creative Writing from Antioch University Los Angeles. He is currently teaching English in the Los Angeles Unified School District. His poems have been published in *The Queen City Review*, *The New Verse News*, *A Handful of Dust*, among others, and the *Broad River Review*, where his poems were named Finalists for the Rash Award in both 2011 and 2012.

RANDY BLYTHE teaches and writes at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. His poetry has appeared in a variety of publications, among them *Southern Humanities Review*, *Poet Lore*, *Laurel Review*, *Tar River Poetry*, *Black Warrior Review*, *Northwest Review*, *South Carolina Review*, and *Spoon River Poetry Review*.

MATTHEW BURNS is an Assistant Professor of English and Creative Writing at Heritage University in Washington State. He holds a Ph.D. in Creative Writing from Binghamton University, where he was co-editor of *Harpur Palate*. He was the winner of the 2010 James Hearst Poetry Prize from *North American Review*, and his poems and essays have appeared in/on *Folk Art*, *Ragazine*, *Cold Mountain Review*, *Upstreet*, *Spoon River Poetry Review*, *Jelly Bucket*, *Memoir (and)*, *Paterson Literary Review*, *Anderbo*, and others.

Born on the eastern shore of Maryland and raised there by wolves and vultures, **CATHERINE CARTER** now lives with her husband in Cullowhee, near Western Carolina University, where she teaches in and coordinates the English education program. Her new book is *The Swamp Monster at Home* (LSU, 2012); her first full-length collection, *The Memory of Gills* (LSU, 2006) received the 2007 Roanoke-Chowan Award from the North Carolina Literary and Historical Association; her poem "Toast" won the 2009 North Carolina Writer's Network Randall Jarrell Award. Her work has also appeared in *Best American Poetry 2009*, *North Carolina Literary Review*, *Orion*, *Poetry*, and *Ploughshares*, among others. This is Carter's second appearance in the *Broad River Review*.

SUSANA H. CASE is a professor at the New York Institute of Technology. Her many chapbooks include *The Scottish Café* (Slapering Hol Press), which was re-released in a full-length Polish-English annotated version, *Kawiarnia Szkocka*, by Opole University Press in Poland. Other books of poetry she's authored include *Salem In Séance* (WordTech Editions) and *Elvis Presley's Hips & Mick Jagger's Lips* (Anaphora Literary Press). Her next book, *4 Rms w Vu* is forthcoming in 2014 from Mayapple Press. Please visit her online at: <http://iris.nyit.edu/~shcase/>.

SHARON CHARDE has been published over fifty times in journals and anthologies, won many awards and Pushcart nominations for her poems, and has two first prizewinning chapbooks, *Bad Girl At The Altar Rail* (Flume Press) and *Four Trees Down From Ponte Sisto* (Dallas Community Poets Press). Her full-length collection, *Branch in His Hand*, was published in November 2008 by Backwaters Press and adapted by the BBC as an hour-long radio drama. She has also edited and published the prizewinning *I Am Not A Juvenile Delinquent* (2004), an anthology of poems written by adjudicated adolescent girls with whom she has worked for ten years doing a weekly poetry workshop.

STEVE CUSHMAN received an M.F.A. from UNC-Greensboro. He has published two novels, *Portisville* and *Heart With Joy*, as well as the short story collection, *Fracture City*. His poetry chapbook, *Hospital Work*, is due out this year. More information on Steve's writing can be found at www.stevecushman.net.

RICHARD DOKEY'S stories have won many prizes and awards. They have been cited in *Best American Short Stories*, *Best of the West*, and have been nominated for the Pushcart Prize. Stories have been reprinted in national and regional collections. *Pale Morning Dun*, his last book of stories, published by University of Missouri Press, was nominated for the American Book Award and the PEN/Faulkner Award. Dokey also has several novels to his credit.

DEBORAH H. DOOLITTLE has an M.A. in Women's Studies and an M.F.A. in Creative Writing and teaches at Coastal Carolina Community College in Jacksonville, North Carolina. Her chapbooks, *No Crazy Notions* and *That Echo*, won the Mary Belle Campbell and Longleaf Press Awards, respectively. Other recent work may be seen in *Aries*, *Backstreet*, *Ibbetson St. Press*, *Iodine Poetry Journal*, *Main Street Rag*, *Pinyon*, *Poets Espresso*, *The Same*, *Smartish Pace*, and *Wild Violet*.

When **BRIAN C. FELDER** saw his first poem appear in print back in 1969, he had no idea that he would still be wordsmithing 44 years later, but to prove that persistence pays off, he just witnessed the publication of his 250th poem and has vowed to continue writing until he outlives every editor who ever rejected him. This is Felder's first appearance in the *Broad River Review*, and he couldn't be more delighted.

COREY GINSBERG'S prose and poetry have appeared most recently in such journals as *PANK*, *Subtropics*, *The Los Angeles Review*, *Puerto del Sol*, *the cream city review*, and *Gargoyle*, among others. Corey currently lives in Miami and works as a freelance writer.

Winner of *Prism Review's* 2012-2013 Poetry Prize, **JONATHAN GREENHAUSE** has been twice-nominated for the Pushcart and is the author of a chapbook, *Sebastian's Relativity* (Anobium Books, 2011). His poems have appeared recently or are forthcoming in *The Bitter Oleander*, *Hawai'i Pacific Review*, *The Midwest Quarterly*, *New Delta Review*, *Popshot* (UK), and *Regime* (AUS), among others. He and his wife are residents of Jersey City, New Jersey, and are currently being raised by their newborn son, Benjamin Seneca.

JOHN GREY is an Australian-born poet, playwright, and musician. A resident of Providence, Rhode Island, since the late 1970s, Grey works as a financial systems analyst. His work has appeared in numerous magazines including *Weird Tales*, *Christian Science Monitor*, *Agni*, *Poet Lore*, and *Journal Of The American Medical Association*, as well as the horror anthology *What Fears Become*. Grey's work is forthcoming in *Sanskrit*, *GW Review*, and the *Potomac Review*. He was the winner of the Rhysling Award for short genre poetry in 1999. Grey has also had plays produced in Los Angeles and off-off Broadway in New York.

JACQUELINE GUIDRY'S short work appeared in *Alembic*, *Big Muddy*, and *Bloodroot* literary magazines in 2012. Her work has also appeared in other venues, including the *Arkansas Review*, *Crab Orchard Review*, *Louisiana Literature*, *Nimrod*, *Rosebud*, *Spitball*, and *Yemassee*. She is haphazardly marketing the current

incarnation of her short story collection, completing a novel in connected-story form, and thinking about expanding a novella, which was a finalist in this year's Faulkner Society gold medal competition, into a novel. She is addicted to chocolate, Sudoku, writing, and sparkling water, not necessarily in that order.

KATHLEEN GUNTON is committed to literary publications. Her recent cover images include *Arts & Letters*, *Inkwell*, *Steam Ticket*, *Thema*, *Switchback*, and *CQ*. Her photography and poetry often appear in the same journal, as she believes one art feeds another. Currently, she is currently working on a photo essay from her trip to Ireland. When not traveling, Gunton and her husband make their home in Orange, California.

PATRICIA L. HAMILTON is an associate professor of English at Union University in Jackson, Tennessee, where she teaches creative writing and eighteenth-century British literature. She earned her Ph.D. from the University of Georgia. Her most recent work has appeared in *Common Ground Review*, *Ibbetson Street*, *Cumberland River Review*, and *Poetry South*, and she has poems forthcoming in *Iodine Poetry Journal*, *Main Street Rag*, *Big Muddy*, *Illya's Honey*, *Sierra Nevada Review*, and *The Southern Poetry Anthology: Tennessee*. She received Pushcart nominations in 2007 and 2011.

PAMELA HAMMOND received her B.A. from UCLA and taught high school art for a period of time before leaving to raise a family. Simultaneously, she earned an M.A. in art, then continued teaching part-time at the college level. About ten years later, Hammond began writing for the start-up art magazine *Images and Issues*, but eventually resigned in order to found her own periodical, *Eye International*. Hammond quickly learned that she prefers writing over publishing and spent the next decade as a Los Angeles-based critic for *ARTnews* while serving as director of publications and public affairs at California State University, Dominguez Hills.

RYAN HARPER is a graduate student in the department of religion at Princeton University, where he is completing an ethnography of contemporary Southern gospel music. Some of his recent poems and essays have appeared in *The Appendix*, *Sugar House Review*, *Religion Dispatches*, *The Other Journal*, *Potomac Review*, and elsewhere. Ryan is a jazz drummer and distance runner. He and his spouse, Lynn Casteel Harper, live in New Jersey.

MICHAEL HOGAN is the author of twenty books, including the best-selling *Irish Soldiers of Mexico*, which formed the basis for an MGM movie starring Tom Berenger. His most recent book is *Winter Solstice: Collected Poems 1975-2012*. Although born and raised in Newport, Rhode Island, he now lives in Guadalajara, Mexico, with the artist Lucinda Mayo and their Dutch shepherd, Molly Malone.

JUDY IRELAND'S poetry benefits from the verdancy and barefaced authenticity of Midwest working class culture, which keeps her work grounded in the ordinary world, where extraordinary ideas reside with great subtlety and power. Her work is also informed by the lush excesses of South Florida, where she currently lives and works. Her poems have been published in *Hotel Amerika*, *Calyx*, *Saranac Review*, *Cold Mountain*, and *Folio*. In 2010 her chapbook, *Cement Shoes*, was listed as a finalist for the Split Oak Press Chapbook Contest and the *Palettes and Quills* Poetry Chapbook Contest.

ELIZABETH W. JACKSON is a practicing psychologist and writer, who has published in a variety of fields including psychology, the visual and literary arts.

Mainly, she loves poetry, though, and her recent work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Southern Humanities Review*, *Crab Orchard Review*, and *Gargoyle*. Honors include grants awarded by the Vermont Studio Center and the United Arts Council.

KAREN LUKE JACKSON'S background in oral history and leading contemplative retreats provides a latticework for her writing. Her poems and stories have appeared in *Alive Now*, *Ruminate*, *Great Smokies Review*, *Hungryhearts*, *moonShine review*, and *Christmas Presence*, an anthology featuring 45 Western North Carolina women. Karen's awards include the North Carolina Poetry Council's free verse and experimental form (third place), the Janet B. McCabe Poetry Prize (honorable mention), the Ashe Country Arts Council Literary Festival Page Crafter's Prize (third place), and the Rash Award in Poetry (first place). Roaming the Blue Ridge Mountains and playing with grandchildren are favorite pastimes for this transplanted Georgian.

ROBERT S. KING lives in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Georgia. His poems have appeared in hundreds of magazines, including *California Quarterly*, *Chariton Review*, *Kenyon Review*, *Main Street Rag*, *Midwest Quarterly*, and *Southern Poetry Review*. He has published three chapbooks (*When Stars Fall Down as Snow*, Garland Press, 1976; *Dream of the Electric Eel*, Wolfson Publications, 1982; and *The Traveller's Tale*, Whistle Press, 1998). His full-length collections are *The Hunted River* and *The Gravedigger's Roots*, both in second editions (FutureCycle Press, 2012), and *One Man's Profit* (Sweatshoppe Publications, 2013).

TAYLOR KOEKKOEK is writer from the Pacific Northwest. His stories have appeared *Fogged Clarity*, *Neon Magazine*, *Forge Journal*, and elsewhere.

MARY LARKIN is the recipient of *Southern Indiana Review's* Mary C. Mohr Editors' Fiction Prize for "All That Was His." Her stories have appeared in *Shenandoah*, *The Chattahoochee Review*, *The Nebraska Review*, *Cutthroat: A Journal of the Arts*, *The Rio Grande Review*, and elsewhere. She is a Pushcart Nominee, a Writing Fellow of the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, the recipient of Hollins University's Andrew James Purdy Award, as well as their AWP Intro Journals Award nominee. She received her M.A. in Creative Writing from Hollins, and her Ph.D. in Creative Writing from Florida State University.

JESSICA LEVINE'S fiction, essays, poetry, and poetry translations have appeared in *Amarillo Bay*, *California Quarterly*, *The Cape Rock*, *decomp magazinE*, *Forge*, *Green Hills Literary Lantern*, *Poetry Northwest*, *North American Review*, *RiverSedge*, *The Southern Review*, *Spoon River Poetry Review*, *Willow Review*, and elsewhere. She earned her Ph.D. in English at the University of California, Berkeley. She is the author of *Delicate Pursuit: Literary Discretion in Henry James and Edith Wharton* (Routledge, 2002) and has translated three books from French and Italian into English. You can visit her at www.jessicalevine.com, where you will find links to some of her work.

ABIGAIL LIPSCOMB holds a Ph.D. in Marriage and Family Therapy and an M.F.A. in Creative Writing from The Queens University of Charlotte. Her work has appeared in the 2011 anthology *Boomtown: Explosive Writing from Ten Years of the Queens University of Charlotte MFA Program*. She lives in Virginia with her family.

MILES LISS holds a B.A. in English from Brandeis University and an M.A. in Education from the University of the Virgin Islands. After living abroad for several

years, he returned to the United States and now teaches English to struggling readers and writers. This poem is part of a collection entitled *The Secrets of Navigation*.

JUDY LONGLEY of Charlottesville, Virginia, has four books of poetry. Her poetry has appeared in *Poetry*, *Paris Review*, and *Virginia Quarterly Review*, among others. She has served as poetry editor for *Iris: a Journal about Women*, (University of Virginia), *Tough Times Companion* (Virginia Foundation for the Humanities), and teaches poetry occasionally at WriterHouse.

HANNAH MAYFIELD is a senior English major with a creative writing emphasis at Gardner-Webb University. She is from Spring Hope, North Carolina. Mayfield will attend graduate school at UNC Charlotte in the fall of 2013. Her plan is to one day teach writing. This is Mayfield's first appearance in the *Broad River Review*.

JED MYERS is a Philadelphian living in Seattle. His poems have appeared in *Prairie Schooner*, *Nimrod International Journal*, *Golden Handcuffs Review*, *qarrtsiluni*, *Atlanta Review*, *Quiddity*, *The Monarch Review*, *Fugue*, *the Journal of the American Medical Association*, the Rose Alley Press anthology *Many Trails to the Summit*, and elsewhere. He's the winner of 2012 Abbie M. Copps Poetry Prize. By day he's a psychiatrist with a therapy practice and teaches at the University of Washington. By night he hosts NorthEndForum, the long-running music-and-poetry cabaret.

MIKE NELSON was the winner of this year's Stephen Dunn Poetry Prize (*Solstice Magazine*) and of the Pablo Neruda Award (*Nimrod*) in 2009. His poems have also appeared in *Asylum Lake*, *The Chariton Review*, *Cutthroat*, and *Naugatuck River Review*. He received an M.F.A. in Creative Writing from the University of Maryland and is currently finishing a Ph.D. in English at Western Michigan University.

Born in Washington, D.C., the winter after Watergate, **ALICE OSBORN'S** past educational and work experience is unusually varied, and it now feeds her work as a poet, as well as an editor, coach, and marketing consultant for writers. *After the Steaming Stops* is her most recent collection of poetry; previous collections are *Right Lane Ends* and *Unfinished Projects*. Alice is also the editor of the short fiction anthology, *Tattoos* (Main Street Rag, 2012). She has taught classes and writing workshops to hundreds of aspiring authors of nearly all ages (from 9 to 90), both in person and online. Alice lives in Raleigh with her husband, two children, and three parakeets: Woodbird, Birdstein, and Perry. Visit Alice's website at www.aliceosborn.com.

LAURO PALOMBA has taught English as a Foreign Language to government officials and military officers from African, Asian, European, and South American countries, and done stints as a freelance journalist and speechwriter.

MARK POWELL is the author of three novels—*Prodigals*, *Blood Kin*, and *The Dark Corner*—and has received fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Breadloaf Writers' Conference. He teaches at Stetson University in Florida. "Angel" is excerpted from his novel-in-progress, *The Sheltering*.

MARY SELPH is an M.F.A. candidate at Texas State University-San Marcos, where she is also Poetry Editor for *Front Porch Journal*. Her work has appeared previously in *Time You Let Me In: 25 Poets Under 25*, edited by Naomi Shihab Nye. She lives in Austin, Texas.

TIM SHERRY, a longtime public school teacher and administrator, lives in Tacoma, Washington. His poems have appeared in *Interdisciplinary Humanities*, *The Seminary Ridge Review*, *The Raven Chronicles*, *Windfall: A Journal of Poetry of Place*, and *The Crab Creek Review*, as well as others. His work has been featured as part of local art and cultural activities, and he has been a Pushcart nominee.

KATE LYNN SCHIRMER received an M.F.A. in Creative Writing from Columbia University in 2006, and a B.A. from Princeton University in 2003. Her poems have appeared or are forthcoming in such publications as *The Seneca Review*, *AGNI Online*, *The Sow's Ear Review*, *MARGIE*, and *American Literary Review*. She is the recipient of the 2008 *MARGIE* Strong Medicine Poetry Award and the co-first place winner of the 2005 Bennett Poetry Prize, administered through the Academy of American Poets. She currently works as an event designer and producer in Charlottesville, Virginia.

IAN C. SMITH'S work has appeared in *Axon: Creative Explorations*, *The Best Australian Poetry*, *Island*, *Poetry Salzburg Review*, *Quarterly Literary Review Singapore*, *Southerly*, and *Westerly*. His latest book is *Here Where I Work* (Ginninderra Press, Adelaide). He lives in the Gippsland Lakes area of Victoria, Australia.

AMY SNYDER, originally from Winston-Salem, North Carolina, is a senior at Gardner-Webb University, double majoring in English and history. She will graduate from Gardner-Webb in May 2013, and she intends to be both an elementary school librarian and a fiction writer. In her spare time, she enjoys reading the *Brother Cadfael Chronicles* and horseback riding. Previous publications include her short story "Fire" in the *Broad River Review* 2011 and her poem "In the Company" in *Penwood Review*.

JEFFREY TALMADGE is a graduate of Duke University, The Warren Wilson M.F.A. Program for Writers, and the University of Texas School of Law. His work has appeared in *The Texas Quarterly*, *The Greensboro Review*, *The Alabama Literary Review*, *The Atlanta Review*, *Gargoyle*, *Pleiades*, and numerous other literary magazines. He is an award winning songwriter and his 7th studio recording is "Kind of Everything" on Berkalin Records. He tours in the U.S. and Europe. Visit him at www.jefftalmadge.com.

JENNIFER TAPPENDEN is the founding editor of Architrave Press. In 2012, she earned an M.F.A. in poetry from the University of Missouri–St. Louis, where she also served as the university's first Poet Laureate. Her poems have appeared online at *Stirring* and *Terrain* and in print in *Euphony*, *The St. Andrew's Review*, *Bryant Literary Review*, *Slipstream*, and elsewhere.

JO BARBARA TAYLOR lives in Raleigh, North Carolina. Her poems have appeared in *Bay Leaves*, *Ibbetson Street*, *Bee Culture*, *Broad River Review*, on *New Verse News*, and in several anthologies. Her chapbooks include *One Or Two Feathers* (Plan B Press, 2010), *Jake and Jill, the Story of a Marriage* (Ridgeline Press, 2011), *Cameo Roles* (Big Table Publishing, 2011), and *High Ground* (Main Street Rag, 2012).

ELIZABETH VAN HALSEMA is native to Matthews, North Carolina, and will graduate Gardner-Webb University in May 2013 with a B.A. in English and a minor in Spanish. A member of the women's varsity swim team for four years, Van Halsema also enjoys writing. Her poetry appeared in *Broad River Review* 2011.

KATHLEEN VAN SCHAICK'S work has been published in *The MacGuffin*, *The Dire Elegies: 59 Poets on Endangered Species of North America*, *CAIRN: The St. Andrew's Review*, *Listening to Water: The Susquehanna Watershed Anthology*, as well as online at *Puffin Circus* (<http://puffincircus.wordpress.com/>). She has been an elementary school teacher, hospice volunteer, and literary anthology editor (*Le Mot Juste*, Foothills Publishing, 2008-2010). In 2006 she was awarded the S. Portia Steele Award in Poetry. She lives in Victor, New York, with her husband.

GAIL WALDSTEIN practiced pediatric pathology for over thirty-five years and began writing seriously in mid-1990s. Her work has appeared in *Nimrod*, *New Letters*, *Alligator Juniper*, *The MacGuffin*, *Carve*, *Bayou*, *Blueline*, *The Potomac Review*, *Harpur Palate*, *So to Speak*, *Connecticut River Review*, *Pearl*, *Zone 3*, *The Iowa Review*, and numerous anthologies. Two of Waldstein's essays were nominated for a Pushcart Prize. Waldstein was also is also a recipient awards from the Rocky Mountain Women's Foundation (1997/98), Colorado Council for Arts (2001), and the Helene Wurlitzer Foundation (2002). *To Quit this Calling*, *Firsthand Tales of a Pediatric Pathologist*, was a finalist for the Bakeless Prize finalist in 2005 (Ghost Road Press, 2006). *AfterImage*, a poetry chapbook, appeared in 2006 (Plan B Press).

Most recently, **HOWARD WINN** has published poems and fiction in *Dalhousie Review*, *Descant* (Canada), *Cactus Heart*, *Main Street Rag*, *Caduceus*, *Burning Word*, *Pennsylvania Literary Journal*, *Southern Humanities Review*, *Cutting Edgz*, *Borderlands*, and *The Hiram Poetry Review*. Winn holds a B.A. from Vassar College and an M.A. from the Writing Program at Stanford University, where he studied with Wallace Stegner and Yvor Winters. Winn's doctoral work was done at New York University. He was a psychiatric social worker California for three years. Currently, Winn is a State University of New York faculty member.

WILLIAM WRIGHT is author of five collections of poems, most recently the full-length books *Night Field Anecdote* (Louisiana Literature Press, 2011) and *Bledsoe* (Texas Review Press, 2011). Wright is Founding Editor of *The Southern Poetry Anthology* (Texas Review Press), a multi-volume series celebrating poetry of the American South. Wright's work appears in journals such as *AGNI*, *Beloit Poetry Journal*, *Indiana Review*, *Colorado Review*, *New Orleans Review*, *The Texas Review*, and many others. Wright currently translates German and Austrian Expressionist poetry and is co-editing a book of contemporary Southern Gothic fiction by women.

JANET YODER'S writing has appeared in the books *Enchanted Companions: Stories of Dolls in Our Lives* (ed. by Carolyn Michael, Andrews McMeel, 2003) and *Sunday Ink: Works by the Uptown Writers* (Tasseomancy Press, 2010). In 2006, she won first prize for her story "Four Hands" in *Crucible*. Yoder was nominated for the Pushcart Prize in 2008. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Chautauqua Literary Journal*, *River Teeth*, *Tusculum Review*, *Passages North*, *American Literary Review*, *The Baltimore Review*, *Evansville Review*, *Passager*, *The Massachusetts Review*, *Ellipsis...*, *The Texas Review*, *Raven Chronicles*, *Bayou*, *Fugue*, *Left Curve*, *Porcupine*, *Forge*, *Rio Grande Review*, *The Binnacle*, *StringTown*, *HistoryLink.org*, *The MacGuffin*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, and *Pilgrimage*.