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THE
BROAD RIVER
REVIEW

Volume 49
2017

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* publishes a number of contest winners and select finalists. The Rash Awards in Poetry and Fiction are 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, Rash has worked prodigiously to become a prize-winning writer and *New York Times* bestseller. His latest novel, *The Risen*, was published in the fall of 2016. Rash was also named a Guggenheim Fellow in early 2017.

Additionally, the J. Calvin Koonts Poetry Award is awarded to a senior English major or minor at Gardner-Webb University whose poetry is judged most outstanding by a committee of department members. Congratulations to Elizabeth Erhartic for receiving this recognition. Ilari Pass received the *Broad River Review* Editors's Prize in Poetry for "Death Sentence at Birth" which was selected from among all submissions by Gardner-Webb University students.

The editors would like to thank Alan Michael Parker, who served as judge for the Rash Award in Poetry, and pinch-hit for Lee Smith to judge the Rash Award in Fiction, too. Parker selected "Occupational Therapy at a TB Sanitarium, 1952" by Priscilla Webster-Williams, of Durham, North Carolina, for the poetry award, while picking "Red Light, Green Light" by Linda Heuring, of Carpentersville, Illinois, as winner of the fiction award. Congratulations to both winners, who received \$500 each and publication in the 2017 issue.

Parker said of Webster-Williams's poem: "Vivid observation and subtle music combine in this keen, plangent poem. In the photograph described, work and sickness—and the need to be needed, illness notwithstanding—are expertly presented and then left to linger, the poem trusting its material, the poet trusting her or his reader. I love the sounds of 'bobbin looping thread after thread,' and the slight nod to the unknowable, how the women are 'bound together by illness, / and perhaps by friendship.' Then the curious ending brings all of the ideas together adeptly and surprisingly, as etymological play facilitates a nuanced feminism, 'women's work' a haven for the afflicted in 1952."

Parker commented on Heuring's story: "A tale of twins, and a relationship built upon assumption and myopia, this beautifully written story manages to be about people in extremis—the flooded Mississippi, a

flotilla of rescuers, a church turned into a post office, a plague of frogs, and a wedding – all without losing sight of the characters. That’s an enormous accomplishment: despite so much misfortune, and the distractions of so much atmosphere, the writer nonetheless keeps us caring about who the characters are, rather than what’s happening to them. In sizzling sentences punctuated with a bravura sense of dialogue, ‘Red Light, Green Light’ reads like an Alice Munro cast of characters floating through a Cormac McCarthy setting.”

Broad River Review would also like to thank every writer who submitted to us or entered our contests. A full list of honorable mentions and 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 September 1–November 15, 2017. Full submission information and guidelines, including profiles of the judges, will appear on our web site in July. We also appreciate our subscribers and those who have donated to us.

Finally, the editors offer sincere appreciation to the Department of English Language and Literature at Gardner-Webb University for its continued support. In addition, the editors would like to thank university administration for its sustained financial backing of a literary review.

LINDA HEURING

Red Light, Green Light

Phillip sprawled in the bow of the National Guard boat, the one with the camo paint and the gun mounts, like this was a family outing and any minute one of the kids would fling himself over the side into the water to ski. The rest of us, crowded onto metal bench seats hot enough to sear the backs of our legs, faced forward, looking out over water the color of cheap hot chocolate. The horizon was broken by treetops bending in the current and a line of telephone poles with sagging cables so close to the water you could touch them if you stood up. But no one did. Not even Phillip. He mostly looked at me and smiled.

“I can’t get over how much you look like Neenie,” he said over the sound of the engine. “I recognized you right away. You could be twins.”

I just nodded. We are twins, you dolt, I wanted to say, but I’d known how my sister operated since she elbowed her way past me in the womb. I knew she must have some reason not to mention that we were created from one single egg, just like she had some reason for deciding to marry Phillip, a man ten years our junior. He looked even younger. He wore his Cardinals cap backwards, the plastic strap tight against his wide forehead. His baggy cargo shorts and pink high tops were specked with mud. His T-shirt? Well, let’s just say it didn’t become him.

I rubbed the knot that driving long distances always ties in a muscle at the back of my neck. It seemed to twist its way up into my brain like a rubber band on a balsa wood airplane. A migraine was lurking. I’d seen peripheral sparks of light. I just wanted a Vicodin and a glass of wine. Maybe a little cheese. Then I wanted to slip between some sheets that didn’t smell of cigarette smoke and Axe. I’d spent the last three days and 2,000 miles driving I-40, slipping plastic key cards into identical hotel room doors. Red light, green light. Just another children’s game like follow the leader. LA to St. Louis, like the storms that thundered across the plains, west to east, emboldening the Mississippi and the Missouri to explore outside their banks.

Phillip tapped me on the shoulder and pointed.

“See where the power lines cross? That’s the old highway and Interredin Road. Over there with the tall trees, that’s Poverty Hill. Where the truck is. You won’t believe it. It’s the coolest truck. The tires are huge. Like a tractor’s.”

Phillip grinned like a six-year-old showing me around his tree house, as if I hadn't spent the first seventeen years of my life here. Of course, it's possible that Phillip didn't know that, either. Anyway, what did I know of a town I'd only seen during holidays for the past fifteen years, and a town underwater at that? I did know my sister had poor taste in men. And when she didn't listen, the guys usually did. A few words here, a few knowing glances, and they were history. Someone had to save her from herself, especially once our parents were gone.

The guardsman cut the engine and eased the bow up onto the shore, which on an ordinary day was someone's yard. Mud-spattered zinnias lined the porch. Phillip scrambled out first, and a boy in fatigues grabbed my bag and took my hand.

"Watch your step, ma'am. It's slick."

We, the incoming, walked up a knoll covered with beaten-down grass that looked more like a golf course fairway crossed by too many spectators during a rain delay. The outgoing had already started toward the boat, clutching bulging garbage bags or plastic buckets crammed with anything they could salvage. A boy with an iguana on his shoulder stood by a shaggy sycamore.

"Can I pet him?" Phillip said, reaching.

"I don't know," the boy leaned into the tree. "He's hungry. Been hiding in the house for days."

Phillip stroked the lizard's head with one finger. The reptile closed his eyes as if settling in for a hundred-dollar massage.

Good with animals, I ticked off a list that rattled around in my head with no real point of origin. Maybe it was Neenie's list. She was always the one calling the shots, and I could rarely tell where she ended and I began. Her breath was my breath. As teenagers, after tears and threats and slamming doors over borrowed CDs or undelivered messages, by morning our heads would be sharing one pillow. It was always hers.

Phillip was right about the tires. We sat on the truck bed, our feet dangling over the side like we were on a Halloween hayride. When the road dipped down, the water level rose, and I tucked my feet up into my lap in the Lotus pose. The soles of my deck shoes were caked with mud. Little zigzags of dried earth crumbled out onto my linen shorts. Near the house the corn plants stood on bent legs like spiders, but here, in the deeper water, the silks trailed away from the ears, the hair of miniature freshwater mermaids flowing with the current. The road was lined with steel stakes of re-bar, tips painted day-glow orange and flattened by sledgehammers swung with muscle. When the water reached the truck's axles, the smell washed over me, and a backwash of vomit stung my throat.

“What is that?” I pulled the collar of my polo shirt over my nose and mouth.

“Fermentation,” Phillip said. “All that corn going to waste. You’ll get used to it.”

The woman next to me rolled her eyes upward and shook her head ever-so-slightly. She pulled her T-shirt over the bottom half of her face. She had been here before. Behind her improvised mask, she kept glancing at me. Did I know her? Should I know her?

“First trip?” she said when the corn fields gave way to more height-challenged crops. Soybeans? Wheat? All I could see was water and round-capped silos in the distance.

I nodded.

“Get ready. The first time is always the worst.” She squeezed her eyes together really tight. “All I could see was my roof. I thought for sure...” Her voice wavered, then she pulled a tin of cat food from a plastic bag. “They’re in the attic now. I can’t get in there to get them out, and they won’t come out on their own, so I put some food up inside the vent every day. As long as they’re eating, I know they’re okay.” She fiddled with the bag.

“You look familiar, but I can’t place you,” she said. “What street are you on?”

“I’m just visiting,” I said, realizing how ridiculous it must sound, visiting in the middle of a natural disaster. She’d probably seen Neenie at the post office or a store somewhere. It had been a while since I had been mistaken for my sister.

“You one of those reporters? Maybe I’ve seen you on the news.”

“No, I’m just...” I didn’t know what to say, so I did what I do so well. I changed the subject. “How many cats do you have?”

Neenie and I had a cat once. We found it hiding behind the milk crates in back of the IGA, so skinny that when he got his motor running to purr we could see his rib bones vibrate. She wrapped him in her shirt and rode him and me on her bike all the way home, steering with one hand and pedaling like mad. I told her I would hold him, but she gave me that look, the one that said she knew I was afraid of getting bit. She carried us both.

Phillip leaned against the cab, talking to the guardsmen through the open window. He looked at me and winked. Then he gave me a thumbs up, raising his eyebrows in a question I felt forced to answer with a nod. Okay, I nodded. I rubbed my neck. I should have been in bed, but my room wasn’t ready, even though I’d made my reservations weeks ago, right after Neenie had called me.

“You have to be my maid of honor. I mean, who else?” she said over the phone. “Promise me you’ll be here. No stupid dresses. Just wear

something like a sun dress. I know you have a sun dress. Everyone in California has a sun dress.”

“Tell me about this guy, Phillip,” I said. “What possessed you to rob the cradle?”

“Not now. Later. When you get here. Come early, and we’ll stay up all night and talk about him. Just like old times,” she said.

“Does he know...”

“Janet, I gotta go. We’ll talk when you get here!” she said, and she hung up. That was before. Before the levy broke, before the storm sewers blew their metal lids, before the governor’s helicopter hovered over Main Street and she declared the state a disaster. I could have told her that without the aerial view. It had always been a disaster. And this wedding? Another one waiting to happen.

The truck geared down when we arrived in town. Brown water lapped at the lettering on the STOP signs and at the door handles of the post office. The open jaws of the blue collection boxes outside were level with the water’s surface, their flaps banging and swaying like the skimmer-box opening on the side of a swimming pool. The United Methodist Church was the lone building above the water, an island surrounded by sandbags. Water swirled around the lower ones, leaving brown stains on white fiber-reinforced bags.

“Some post office, right?” Phillip said.

This had been my church as a kid, and the white wood siding was as smooth and shiny as ever, except for the muddy line where the river had left its mark. The bell tower and the double front doors looked like all the other Methodist churches around the Midwest, one-size-fits-all plans of white clapboard and black shingles. The church yard, where we had sat under oak trees and cranked the handles on barrels of ice and salt for ice cream socials, where we had played Red Rover during vacation Bible school, was dotted with boats tied to trees like horses in a TV western. Canoes, jon boats, yellow inflatables, even dime store rafts with their inevitably deflated pillows were tethered in ones and twos, bright against the dark water.

Phillip bounded up the stairs ahead of me and ran through the open doors. Before I could pick my way across the sandbags to the steps, he reappeared, dragging my sister by the wrist. He stood there grinning like a dog who’s brought home a special offering, a limp squirrel or a dead bird, but for the life of me I didn’t know which one was the prize.

Neenie’s waist had gotten thick, and her legs were covered in scabs from mosquito bites. She always did hate insect repellent. Some kind of tattoo made a blue circle around her ankle, and I felt a twinge in my own

ankle, as if I, too, had been under the needle. Her tennis shoes were brown with mud. Her hair was red again, but not the Bozo the Clown orange from a few years ago. This was more of a Susan Sarandon red. Subtle. It suited her.

"I'm all sweaty," she said, hugging me only with her fingertips. "I'll give you a proper hug later."

I bent over slightly in response, tapping her back with my nails. She smiled.

"God, it's good to see you." She stared at me with those eyes that could have been my own, except they were wide open and seemed to smile independently.

"Check out my new office," she said.

Inside the sanctuary it was cool and dim, the light from the stained glass windows dropped splotches of greens and blues on the canvas mailbags scattered over the pews. A row of folding tables sat near the altar, the same tables we'd used for church suppers, but no one had bothered to cover them with rolls of white paper. Two women were sorting mail, walking past each other in a simple ballet, reaching and dipping, and depositing envelopes in shallow plastic trays. Along the front pews the few returning residents, captains of the craft nudging tree bark outside, gathered to share what news they could and wait for mail. A man in a Farm Bureau hat stained with sweat held up a small package.

"Lot of good this will do me now, unless it's one of those underwater hard drives," he said. "Whole damned computer's four foot down, and everything else with it."

"We got what was important, Billy," the woman next to him said. She ran her palm along the spine of a tiny Maltese who slept nestled between her breasts. The dog sighed in its sleep.

Where the choir normally sat, there were three tables set up in a U-shape with a folding chair in the middle. There was a grey cash box, a clear plastic storage container with stamps, and a flat kitchen scale. A hand-lettered sign said "Postmaster." Beside it was a single cut zinnia in a plastic water bottle.

"How do you like the flower?" Phillip asked.

"Looks like it came from the house at the landing," I said. Phillip frowned, then laughed.

"Guilty as charged. I thought she needed something pretty in here."

"Why don't you call the district and have them send the mail over to Waverly instead of making you do all this?" I said.

"It was actually my idea to move into the church," Neenie said. "Keeping things together, you know?"

I knew all about keeping things together. While Neenie was on her wild rides, smoking at fifteen, drinking at sixteen, coming in at all hours after parking with boys down dirt roads, I would be waiting there at home for her, running interference with Mom and Dad, getting the skinny from her afterwards.

I rubbed my neck. Flashes of light jumped in front of my eyes. The air was even heavier than before. It was pushing down on my shoulders, and I sat, hard, against a wooden pew. I pressed my hands on either side of my head to equalize the pressure. I should never have come out here. It was all Neenie's idea. I should have been in my hotel room with clean sheets and a mini-bar, but no, here I was surrounded by diluted sewage and sandbags.

"What's wrong?" Phillip stood over me.

"It's a migraine," Neenie said. She rummaged through my purse, then cracked open the seal on a bottle of water and curled my fingers around it. She touched the side of my cheek, and my lips parted slightly like a baby's when touched by a nipple. She dropped a pill onto my tongue.

"Take your medicine," she said. I washed down the capsule, and she tucked my feet up into the pew and slid a rolled up a sweatshirt under my head. All around me I could hear a buzz, all the sounds rolled into one constant humming like a refrigerator running or a plane engine drone. I clamped my arms over my head and waited to float away on the familiar chemical fog.

It hadn't been easy getting a week off. The Radio Shack I managed was too close to the beach, and no one could keep employees, at least good ones, in that environment. Someone told me there was a statistically proven inverse relationship between proximity to the beach and employee retention. There were just beach bums and airheads, and the store owner wasn't much better, breezing in every two weeks to drop off payroll checks and lean on me for more sales. She sent over a manager from another store for the week.

"You should be grooming your replacement," she said. "How do you expect to move up in the organization?"

"What organization?" I wanted to say, but I held my tongue until I got home, practicing what I would have said in front of the bathroom mirror. No wonder I had migraines. I'd had them all my life, but they got worse when I left home. I had found jobs for Neenie, and she refused to even talk about coming to California. I felt abandoned, alone. I wanted something, I didn't know what. It was like eating a candy bar then a box of Cheez-Its, and then some ice cream, a cracker, alternately snacking on sweet and salty yet never feeling filled up. Frustrated, my shoulders would tense up, and my neck, and the lights would start to flash. Like today. The pew was hard, but

the sweatshirt smelled like home. Like Neenie. I slept until she smoothed my hair away from my forehead.

“Sorry I had to wake you. You don’t want to spend the night out here. It’s supposed to rain again. It’s the last boat for the day.”

The seats were cooler now, the metal unyielding. Stragglers picked at their clay-streaked legs and arms, peeling away bits of home that stuck to their hairs like wax. I gripped the side. Was it just me or was the boat rocking more?

Phillip sat on a bench this time, a pile of empty plastic mail trays and an official USPS canvas bag beside him. Even through my narrowed eyes I could see his daft grin. A drop of rain hit my nose. Another landed on my arm. When we got to the parking area it was raining steadily, like one of those flat shower heads that soak you good without stinging. Neenie tucked me into the passenger seat, and the windows fogged.

“We’ll check you in and get you in the tub. Make you all better. Phillip’s picking up something Italian and some clothes for me.”

Did anyone ask me if I wanted Italian? She was calling the shots, like always.

The rain stopped when we got to the hotel, and the low-hanging sun left streaks where it burned through the haze. Evenings like this we would play in the yard, play until it was too dark to see. Capture the Flag. Simon Says. Red Light, Green Light. Neenie loved being it. Green light, we’d advance on the finish line. Red light, we’d stop with a foot in the air, an arm extended like a swimming stroke, frozen until Neenie decided we’d had enough. Green light, and we were off.

Funny, it was me who finally took off. I was the cautious one, always hanging back, waiting to see what would happen to her before I moved. It was me, though, who abandoned our little town and headed west. Me who traded the Mississippi for the Pacific, brown for blue. Who knew the water would be so cold?

I emptied the hotel’s miniature bottle of bath gel under the running tap and sank into a tub of bubbles. Neenie sat on the toilet, combing her wet hair.

“You’re not really going through with this wedding tomorrow, are you?”

“Yes.”

“Don’t you think this flood means you should postpone it?”

“What, like a sign from God? If anything, it’s shown me just how much I can count on him.”

I wasn’t getting anywhere with that tactic.

“Who’s going to come?”

“My friends. The town. I don’t know. It’s an open-invite kind of thing.”

“But really, Neenie, why this guy? You could do so much better.”

She stopped combing and pulled red hairs from the thick plastic teeth.

“It’s complicated,” she said.

“Are you pregnant?”

“No. Not complicated like that. There’s not just one reason. It’s the combination. The whole package.”

“But you don’t trust him enough to tell him you have a twin?”

Neenie blushed. She perched a foot on the toilet lid and rubbed at some mud on her toes.

“Neenie? I asked you a question.”

“I just wanted him to know me as me, not as your sister. Like I was one, not part of a pair. No history.”

“But don’t you think he should know your history? Doesn’t he ask about the lines up your wrist?”

“Why are you so obsessed with that, like it’s some defining moment. It was a huge mistake. Not my life now.”

“One with no history, right? It’s this place, I swear. I tried to get you to come to California, to get away from this stinking town, but you wouldn’t budge. If you had, things might have been different. Now look at you. Marrying this, this kid. This Peter Pan.”

I flipped the lever on the bath tub, and the water began glugging its way down the drain.

“That was uncalled for,” she said.

“I’m finished with my bath,” I said.

“You know what I mean,” she said, handing me a towel. “You’ve always pushed me out ahead of you. Made me go first. Then you tell me I’m doing it wrong.”

“That’s not true,” I said. “You had to be the one out front. In charge.”

Neenie took a deep breath. I bent over and swung the towel around my head to make a turban.

“I love you,” she said, “but I was glad when you left.”

Neenie closed the bathroom door behind her. I wiped a space on the mirror with the side of my hand. My hair was plastered to my head and my eyes were rabbit-red. How could she be so blind about herself? I could hear Phillip in the bedroom setting out the food. I wrapped myself in my robe and opened the door. Neenie held a bottle of wine between her knees, tugging at the cork.

Phillip tossed salad in a plastic box with a plastic fork.

"I hope you like lasagna. It was the special," he said.

Neenie poured wine into two drinking glasses and a coffee cup. Phillip cranked open the window. The night came inside: a damp breeze, the smell of wet rock and asphalt, the hum of car tires rolling on the highway and the croaking of frogs.

"Did Neenie tell you about the frogs?" Phillip said. "Every morning the church, or I should say, the post office, is full of them. It's the highest ground, you see, so they go there, I don't know, to rest or something. Anyway, they must hop up the steps and get in through the cracks in the doors or someplace. If I don't go shoo them out, people get all freaked."

"You should see him," Neenie said. "He runs around flapping his arms and hollering and these frogs just hop along in front of him, headed for the door."

Phillip demonstrated his technique by running between the room's two double beds, hopping and waving, while Neenie laughed between bites of salad. Laughed like I had never seen her laugh.

Neenie captured the last bit of sauce from her lasagna plate with a chunk of garlic bread and leaned back in her chair.

"If I don't get out of these clothes soon, they'll be stuck to me permanently," she said. "I'm going to hop in the shower."

She looked at me. "You two be ok out here?"

I rolled my eyes. "I think we can manage."

Steam came rolling out from under the bathroom door as did Neenie's voice in a slightly off-key version of "Midnight at the Oasis."

Phillip smashed the takeout containers into the room's undersized trash can and poured me more wine.

"So, how'd you meet my sister?"

"Post office. I was getting my mail general delivery, and every day I'd ask her about something, like where to get this or that, or where was a good place to eat. After a while, she offered to show me around."

"So you're not from here."

"No, I'm not really from anywhere. My parents moved me so many times I lost count. It was so good to meet someone who'd stayed put. I always wanted to do that. Now I can."

"Why is that?"

"The right town. The right job. Right woman."

He grinned when Neenie switched to "Muskrat Love."

"What year is she living in?" I said.

"Whatever one she wants." He put his feet up on the windowsill and looked out toward the parking lot.

I chugged the last of my wine.

“You know she and I are twins.”

“Yeah, she told me while you were sleeping off your headache. No wonder you look so much alike.”

“Aren’t you curious why she didn’t tell you earlier?”

“Not really.” He leaned closer to the window screen. “There’s a bird out there dragging a worm big as a small snake.”

He must have the attention span of a cocker spaniel, I thought.

“There’s a lot more you should know about my sister.” Neenie was winding up with “Live and Let Die.” I didn’t have much time. I leaned closer to Phillip and balanced my chin on my hand. My elbow was wobbly on the table. Pain pills and wine will do that. He leaned toward me, too, and he took my hand.

“You just don’t get it, do you?” he said. “All I need to know about Neenie I already know. Anything else she decides to tell me is just gravy. I know all about how the past shapes who we are today, but who she is today is exactly the woman I fell in love with. And proposed to. And who I’m going to marry at 2:30 tomorrow afternoon.”

“But you don’t really know her. She’s reckless. She’s always been that way. She’s not going to be happy sitting out there in that Podunk town forever.”

“That’s where you’re wrong,” Phillip was no longer grinning. “Neenie never wanted to leave. Why do you think she refused to go with you to California? She’s a part of things here. People count on her. She likes things the way they are.”

“No she doesn’t. She’s always looking for the next best thing. Always pushing the envelope. She even elbowed past me in the womb. It’s true. The doctor told our mom. We changed positions at the last minute.”

The water stopped running in the bathroom.

“I don’t know much about birthing babies, especially twins,” Philip said. “But did it ever occur to you that maybe you pushed her out?”

After Phillip left, after Neenie jabbered on about the wedding tomorrow scheduled in the church/post office, transportation provided by the National Guard as a special favor to the postmistress bride, after she had turned out the light between us, I lay awake. I remembered a little trick we used to play on our friends. I’d give a secret signal to Neenie during Red Light, Green Light. When I’d pull on my left earlobe, she’d switch lights. That way I never got called out. I always knew when it would happen. It was me who called the shots.

On the wall across from me the light of the smoke detector blazed red. As I stared at it, it turned green, then it disappeared. You can do this at

home. It's an optical illusion—red light, to green light, to nothing. Truth is like that, especially your own. Life, like light, plays tricks on you, and then one day, no matter how hard you stare, it's gone.

PRISCILLA WEBSTER-WILLIAMS

Occupational Therapy at a TB Sanitarium, 1952

from a photograph

How odd these women appear to a far-off eye—
rows of patients, dressed in hospital pajamas,
their heads bent over sewing tables that sag
under the weight of pedal-powered machines.
The women sit, facing old Singers begging
to be switched on. Coral-colored fabric
patterned with fish is passed down the rows,
and the women, bound together by illness,
and perhaps by friendship, take up measuring
tape and scissors. Intent on their work, eager
to be of use, the women guide carefully-cut cloth
while persistent needles stab and whirl.

Ancient gold and black Singers chug on,
bobbins looping thread with thread. The walls
of the work room seem to breathe and expand
as cloth constructions take shape. Swirling air
fans and fuels a mix of mechanical clatter
and woman-chatter—interrupted by coughs
so fierce they require bloody phlegm be spit
into sterile white handkerchiefs.

Witness if you will this macabre chorus
of illness and industry in a Sanitarium.
The dictionary definition of the word: *health*.
The citation also advises: *See sanity*.

ELIZABETH ERHARTIC

Mediterranean

How do I describe the sea's waters?
They are like your eyes—
sometimes blue,
sometimes green,
sometimes worried,
mostly calm.
Always breathtakingly gorgeous.

ELIZABETH ERHARTIC

Scylla or Charybdis

And I will always choose Charybdis because I'm all in.
Swept away by the current of love, stuck between
heartbreak and heartbreaks, I choose only one.
Better to be broken just once than mended six times
and shattered again, my heart left a hollow shell.

I'll drown in this affection I offered, affection returned
with a mouth full of salt water. Scylla offers chances,
but with each one, part of me will disappear. To love less
each time or love all just once? Love all. All in. Just once.
With a whole heart, I choose my fate. And fall to Charybdis.

ILARI PASS

Death Sentence at Birth

At birth, a page turns—
without choosing to.
And with certainty, the sun
lowers bashfully, hosting
the color of rays
long since departed,
marking the glitter
in the gloom of dust,
embedded images—
there but not *here*,
displaying the existence
of their sojourn,
until no more.

JUSTIN ALLEY

The Nightmare and Her Nine Foals

“Swithold footed thrice the old;
He met the night-mare, and her nine-fold;
 Bid her alight,
 And her troth plight,
And aroint thee, witch, aroint thee!”

—William Shakespeare, *King Lear*

“Specters and fears, the nightmare and her foal,
Drown in the golden deluge of the morn.”

—A.E. Housman, “Revolution”

Across the maria of the nightscape,
the sunken, fecund moors of deepest sleep,
the nightmare prowls, with claw-like hooves that scrape
and mar the rich dark silts which like banks heap

the mind’s wizened, meandering furrows.
Hardly a horse, she bores dank dens in holes;
Sheol’s incubus, she furcates burrows;
there births and buries nine near still-born foals.

Midnight the harras breaches from their lair,
with earth-devouring maws imbibing loam.
First mare skirrs plain; come dawn, foals in full tear,
all churn wild dust-storms while they direly roam

and turn to drought and famine what was rich:
the dross that washed ashore in day’s labors;
such peat stove-pipes as smog to gruel-nourish
a country sunk under roving horrors.

But that genius who gave our specters form,
as mare and foals, hears how, in verse design,
as Maya soul, with throes at flare of morn,
those ghouls at last must drown by Sol’s purled shine.

PHILIP ARNOLD

Brushy Fork Sequence

1. The Meadow

That summer, when the air
would not cool the blade
and the meadows seared,

a strip fire sloped smoke riverward
to Nolichucky.

That evening
our curious fingers root through
the burnt sod, loosening the dead seeds
from the dying.

With smoke still in our raked throats,
we dream our bodies wed
with the unrisen weed,

and the next morning
when we rise to each tongue cindered,
we tell no one

how we carried the singed seed
as a song
over the unspeakable ash.

2. The Knoll

Each morning
my sister and I would climb
the pitch of the cow path to the knoll.

On those days when there was nothing more
to be done, we bore the slope

onward, the nettles blazing
our bodies awake
with their prick and swarming.

The venom in the vein heightened
our throne. We were mad,
irrefutable, pained to have our heath.

Yet we knew before darkness
to gather up our gestures
and their token rant,

that it was silence
we would not have to explain,

and that our way back
should speak not of our shadows
or their fevered blooms.

3. The Forest

On Vilas the rain fell.
The clouds kept wet the season,
and where the loam darkened

beneath the brim of the field,
the worm grew sweeter than the corn.

When the red muck of summer
leeches to our legs

we took cover in the cove forest,
working the trees with our penknives,

carving out our initials,
traced and retraced,
the soft bark of the poplar giving way
to our youthful shorthand,

our blades free
in each letter's depression,

as fluent
as our slithering tongues.

4. The River

From Brushy Fork Ridge
we tumbled
over Watauga's edge
and held in the river's current,

braced by the strange possession
of our father's morning hymn.

But in the water we were blind,
nor could we hear
fish or fowl to spare us song,

so deep our bodies lunged
bottomward, the soft sap in our lungs
strained into a crushing stone.

What kept the bottom
kept our downward
dive:
 the tongued seed burning into song.

We dove his old blood to know
where his body ends
 and our bodies, silted and bruised,
begin.

HEATHER BELL ADAMS

The Ghost of Charlton Street

On our wedding day, even the smallest details seem to affirm my decision to marry Edward—gilding what might have seemed rash with a brilliant sheen. The Gregory Peck-like wave of Edward’s dark hair when he takes off his hat. The fine weave of his white dress shirt and the snug fit of my bouclé suit. The way he cups my elbow with his hand. I am twenty-two years old and still relatively new in town.

Inside Savannah’s City Hall, I pause in the tiled entryway. Around the corner, someone pecks at a typewriter. I point at a newspaper discarded on a velour bench and clear my throat.

“Just because we’re getting married, I don’t want you to think I’m giving up on finding a job.” The idea of being a housewife—only a housewife—makes my lungs constrict.

“I wouldn’t ask you to give anything up, my dear Teresa. I want everyone to see how lovely and spirited you are.” Edward winks. “Before long you’ll have this town turned on its head.”

I fall in step beside him, confident in his promise. After all, we met when I interviewed at a boys’ preparatory school. Instead of a job, I ended up with a supper date with the headmaster. I’d wanted a job first, then a husband, but I was convinced switching the order didn’t make a difference.

Our marriage certificate is presented in a clear plastic sleeve, the date—April 2, 1954—printed in italics below our names. When we take pictures outside, the building’s gold dome glints behind us like a halo. I tilt my chin up, smiling, wishing my mother could see us. Since I ran away to Savannah, I’ve barely been in contact with my family.

Back home, my only prospect for a beau talked of nothing but baseball and I wondered if I would be stuck in my childhood bedroom forever. My proudest moment came when my letter to the editor stopped a developer from destroying Melrose Plantation’s historic gravesites. It seemed anything was possible—especially if I could get out of small-minded Sumter, where my mother insisted I become a Southern lady who voiced an opinion only if it concerned casseroles.

The day I ran away from home, I watched from the bus window as dry-looking fields gave way to wet, grassy marsh until, at last, we climbed over the bridge spanning the bronze-tinged river and plunged down into the enchanted, hidden garden of Savannah. Excitement buzzed in my chest as

I soaked in the white church steeples, the elegant townhouses buttoned up next to each other, the long arms of oak trees linked across the streets.

Now Edward is my new husband, my new family. I have known him for mere months, but I know the important things. He is successful and kind, a man who tips servers generously and remembers my favorite color. Movie star handsome and so charming. He winks at me and leans forward when I speak, like he wants to catch every word.

“You’re not like other girls,” he whispers into my hair. “You have a kind of spark. I saw it right away.” I am swept off my feet—a cliché as worn as the moth-eaten cardigan my old maid aunt wears on her shoulders.

Since I’ve been in Savannah, between looking for a job and going on dates with Edward, I’ve walked all over downtown, tapping my foot on carriage blocks for good luck. Everywhere I look, I marvel at how ordinary things can be made in such extraordinary ways. Limestone seashells at the points of arched windows. Sterling silver doorknobs. Street names carved in script. Downspouts shaped like fish. And on almost every house, the black ironwork draped like necklaces. Sometimes I can’t help pressing my thumb against the intricately carved leaves and rosettes.

And yet I keep coming across houses that are falling apart, their color fading, roofs covered with mold, shutters dangling crooked. The ones with laundry hanging out to dry on their balconies have been turned into tenements. Every day, Edward explains with a frown that matches my own, people abandon antebellum mansions for the new suburbs. I can’t imagine casting off years upon years of history like it means nothing.

After our wedding, we head out of town in Edward’s Cadillac, anxious for the honeymoon. Some of the houses we pass boast crisp black shutters and gurgling courtyard fountains. But others are dark and pitted, the cobblestone sidewalks littered with trash.

Once we arrive on Tybee Island, we leave all that behind. Edward gets us a room at the DeSoto and, as soon as we’re inside, he pushes up my skirt and unclasps my girdle, his fingers warm against my thighs.

Afterwards, I lay awake, astonished at the almost infinite world of touching I had never imagined, the almost magnetic rush propelling us closer, the frantic need for more, deeper, again.

The following evening, Edward takes me to the tall, narrow Italianate house on Charlton Street where he’s lived for all of his forty years. Built in the late 1800’s, I’m relieved to discover that, unlike others on the street, it has been impeccably kept up. Smooth stucco the color of watered-down iced tea, flickering gas lanterns reflecting the last of the day’s sun. The elaborate stone carvings around the windows remind me of a palace and even the brass

doorknocker is polished until it practically glows. Suddenly, at an upstairs window, the glass wavy with age, the drapes shift. I gasp, pointing, just as the movement stills.

“What’s wrong? Did you see a ghost?” Edward laughs as I try to compose myself.

“I thought you lived alone.” He’s told me his parents and twin sister, Dorothy, are dead.

“Now I’ll have my wife. Let’s go, silly girl.” He ushers me up the granite steps. Inside, I find ceilings trimmed with bands of plaster like buttercream icing. Oil paintings in thick gold frames. Crystal chandeliers tossing off diamond-shaped shards of light.

Upstairs, Edward points to a closed door. “There’s no need to go in Dorothy’s old room.”

I shrug, unconcerned. The other two bedroom doors stand open, revealing four-poster beds and faded Oriental rugs. He shows me to the largest room along the back. As he explains to hang my clothes in the armoire, I shudder, remembering the drapes rustling. But when Edward unbuttons his shirt, I forget everything but the feeling of his skin against mine.

Over the next few days, I find traces of Dorothy around the house—a box of handwritten recipes labeled with her name, a black and white picture of a young girl, her hair pulled back with ribbon.

“How old was your sister when she died?” I ask at breakfast, flipping through the newspaper.

Edward sighs and starts the percolator for coffee, something a good wife would have remembered to do. “Seventeen.” He points to the Frigidaire. “I’ll leave money for the supermarket.”

“I was also thinking I might see if the Morning News or Evening Press has any job openings.”

“Are you sure you’ll have time for something like that?”

“Between the cleaning and cooking, you mean?” Instead of reminding Edward about his promise, I stand up to kiss his cheek. “Somehow I’ll manage. Who took care of you before I came along anyway?” I ask, tracing my finger along his jawline where something pulses.

Edward pats his thick hair, styled with Brylcreem. “Dorothy always looked after me, even when we were little and I was trotting around in a sailor suit.” His face darkens as he continues. “Later on, once she left me, a string of housekeepers did what they could.”

I notice the odd wording—the reference to Dorothy leaving him as though her death was a personal affront.

“How did Dorothy die?”

“It was an accident.” Edward’s voice turns clipped, impatient. “Our father was dead, Mother addicted to morphine. Dorothy was all I had.”

“I’m sorry,” I whisper.

That night, we’re so hungry for each other that we make love in the parlor on the damask wingchair. I shift my weight and the framed picture of Dorothy tips over on the side table. The next day, I discover a crack in the corner of the glass, curved like an ear or half of a heart. When I show Edward, worried about his reaction, he shrugs and tells me how lovely I look in my new gingham shirtdress.

For a while, it seems that we are a perfect match. Even as the neighborhood crumbles around us, Edward and I sit and sleep and love in the last shining house on Charlton Street.

During the week, while Edward is at work, I write letters to the editor and ideas for opinion pieces. How the new bridge should be named for someone worthy like James Oglethorpe. About the ill-conceived plan to destroy the old City Market. Anything that strikes me, that I have strong feelings about. Edward claims he’s proud of me—until I’m offered a job by the newspaper editor. Then he draws himself up taller and says if I take the job, people will think he can’t take care of me. He bends to kiss my neck in apparent apology.

“Since when have I worried about what people think?” I tease, turning him toward the pedestal table in the dining room where I’ve laid out supper. In time, I’ll change his mind or he will remember his promise.

After supper, our neighbor, Mrs. Patterson, stops by.

“We’ve bought a place in Groveland, one of the new subdivisions,” she says. “A one-level ranch with a nice backyard. There’s even a community pool.”

“What will happen to your house here?” I ask. Edward’s eyes meet mine and I know we’re filled with the same disappointment, the sense that time is running out.

Mrs. Patterson frowns. “Same as the others, I’m sorry to say—renters. I guess that man from Virginia will split it into apartments.”

I manage to nod politely even as I imagine the approaching decay—the paint flaking off the Pattersons’ Greek Revival, the double porch sagging until it collapses.

Once she’s gone, Edward says the houses in Groveland might as well be cardboard boxes. “They’re the worst thing to happen to Savannah. Someone ought to burn them down.”

He stomps down the front steps and I watch from the parlor window as he approaches a bum on the sidewalk. I lean closer. Edward gestures

wildly and the other man stands up and stumbles away, leaving behind a mat made from old newspapers. Edward bends down and suddenly the mat is on fire. I bang on the window as if I can make it stop. Edward doesn't look up. He shoves his lighter in his pocket and watches the meager pile of belongings burn. Darkness gathers as I realize, with an abruptness like a punch to the stomach, that I don't know my husband at all. By the time he covers the flames with wet leaves, I hurry upstairs so I can pretend to be asleep.

The next day is Easter Sunday and I don't know if it's a sense of mercy or optimism that keeps me from mentioning what I saw. At church, I belt out the words to familiar hymns, swallowing away the doubts rising like nausea. Beside me in the pew, Edward raises his eyebrows and looks around to see if anyone is staring. I square my shoulders and launch into the next verse.

After the service, I start to introduce myself to an older woman on the front steps.

Edward claps the man beside her on the shoulder. "Mr. Crawford, have you met my lovely wife?" He beckons me forward, smiling and handsome.

We exchange pleasantries and Mrs. Crawford says they would love to have us over sometime. "Let us know when you're free, and we'll have supper out at the new house." She clamps down her hat as the breeze picks up.

This is the start of our swell social life, I realize, already anticipating oyster roasts and double dates to the Roxy Theatre. I'll make friends, maybe join the garden club.

"You've left Jones Street?" Edward asks.

"It got so seedy," Mrs. Crawford says in a lower voice. "Such a shame. Now we only come downtown for church and occasionally to the shops on Broughton."

"Well, I'm sure your new place is very modern." Edward says as their driver opens the car door.

"We'd love to see you. I could bring potato salad." I call out, realizing I sound just like my mother. Mrs. Crawford waves as they drive off.

"Potato salad?" Edward frowns. "Sometimes I forget what a small town girl you are."

My cheeks burn as I hurry to follow him across the tree-lined square. He looks up to wave at someone climbing into a Packard, a smile stretched across his chiseled face. His charm, I see, is only half of a two-sided coin—shiny on one side, blackened on the other.

As we walk home, I distract myself by trying to memorize the names of the squares—Wright, Telfair, Orleans, Pulaski. I've been studying an

architecture book from Edward's bookcase and, as I look up at the rooflines and stonework, I try to match what I find with the book's sketches. Somehow I wanted to absorb everything. The fanlight windows above the front doors, the keystones over the windows, the wide cornices. Words like veranda and piazza and portico glimmer in my mind like tiny fish I want to catch.

Over the next week, I push aside the image of Edward staring at the flames, the way he didn't even seem to blink. Despite the possibility that I made a terrible mistake in marrying him, I try to be a good wife. I keep myself from mentioning the newspaper job or asking any more questions about Dorothy.

And yet one day, shortly before Edward is due home from work, I find myself drawn to her room. At the door, I pause, then turn the knob, releasing the scent of perfume. Inside, peach taffeta drapes pool on the dark wood floor. On the bed, a powder blue coverlet is tucked under the plump pillows. A thin film of dust coats the furniture. What did I expect to find? Her skeleton under the bed? A young girl locked in the armoire?

I creep toward the chest, not sure why I'm tiptoeing or why my stomach flutters with nerves. A bottle of Moonlight Mist stands next to a silver comb and brush, a few dark strands still clinging to its bristles. The first drawer holds cotton nightgowns trimmed with delicate lace, the next, stockings. I shove the drawers closed, shaking, just as Edward's key scratches at the front door. I hurry downstairs to meet him, realizing too late that I've left Dorothy's bedroom door open.

At supper, Edward watches as I push the meatloaf around my plate, its pepper mingled with the floral smell of Dorothy's perfume.

Later, when we're upstairs, he slams the door to her room closed and whirls around to face me, spots of red on his cheeks.

"Did you go in my sister's room?"

I shake my head, wishing I could skip over his question as easily as changing the song on a record player—lift the arm, place the needle gently somewhere else. "I thought about dusting it, but I changed my mind."

Edward's nostrils flare and I wonder if he smells the perfume too. He grabs my wrist. "Dorothy was supposed to take care of me, but she betrayed me."

I stare at him, unsure how to respond, my heart thudding in my ears. Behind Edward, Dorothy's door creaks open an inch.

"Teresa, you can't leave me. You made a vow."

I look to Dorothy's room as though her ghost will emerge with answers. "Edward, I need you to tell me how she died."

Seconds tick by. Edward still holds my arm. Finally, he bends closer. "She went to clean the oven. I offered to get the pilot light." He rubs

his cheek against mine. “She might’ve only been scarred—enough to keep her new beau away.”

I flinch and pull back, almost dizzy at how different he seems, at the devastating mistake I made in marrying him.

“You can’t control explosions though,” Edward says, meeting my eyes as I back away from him.

All night I sit stiffly on the davenport, his words twisting in my mind, my breath harder and harder to catch, as I think of ways to undo all this, to start over somehow. I should never have married him, this stranger.

The next morning, Edward forbids me from leaving the house while he’s at work. But as soon as he leaves, I hurry to the bus station only to find that he has taken the money from my change purse.

Back at the house, trying not to cry, I rummage through the drawers in the secretary looking for money. When I come across a leather bound address book, I flip through the lined pages until I find the family doctor’s phone number. I explain why I’m worried, but the doctor assures me that I’m overreacting. He says my husband might feel better if I try a new recipe at supper.

More frantic every minute, I try the police next, twisting the phone cord around my finger and letting it spring back. Edward’s rage must be coiled like this, a snake in his chest ready to strike at the slightest provocation.

“He hasn’t physically harmed you, is that right?” the dispatcher asks.

Again I try to explain, but the dispatcher merely sighs.

“We don’t get involved in domestic squabbles.” He tells me to call again if I’m in actual physical danger.

I call a law office. But divorce, they say, requires proof of fault.

In the parlor, I pick up Dorothy’s picture, the frame still cracked. I trace over the ribbon in her hair, wondering what she might have become if she’d lived. When she was a little girl, twirling around these rooms in smocked dresses, what did she dream about? Now that I know the truth about Edward, now that I’m trapped, the dreams I once harbored feel impossibly far away, our wedding day a sickening joke. Somewhere in the house a hidden clock chimes—Dorothy’s ghost warning me that time is running out.

I have no choice but to call home. I imagine my mother unfastening her clip-on earring as she comes to the phone. When she answers, her voice is breathy and younger-sounding than I remember. I tell her everything, begging her to send bus money.

“Teresa, your place is by your husband’s side. Surely you see that,” she says with a sigh. “In your letter, you mooned over him. You said he was a catch.”

We argue until I slam the receiver on the base, defeated. Crying, I slap the plaster wall over and over again. I imagine what she might tell my father, my aunt, anyone who will listen. Teresa ought to see that being married is the best thing to happen to a girl like her. I sink down to the kitchen floor and draw my legs up under my chin. Maybe I brought this trouble on myself. I've always been brazen. Even at the debutante ball, I argued with my date about segregation until he stormed off in a huff. And I rush into things without thinking. I ran away from home on a whim, straight into the arms of the first stranger who glanced my way.

Maybe Edward only married me because he saw a wild creature he wanted to tame. I cry so hard I can barely breathe, digging my fingernails into my knees, until outside, beyond the back door, I hear the trickle of water. Confused, I pull myself up from the floor and go to investigate. At the bottom of the spiral staircase, the courtyard appears unchanged—the only part of Edward's house left neglected. Overgrown with weeds, moss-covered stones underfoot. But still I hear—or is it my imagination?—the soothing sound of a fountain. When I flick off my kitten heel, the moss feels damp and soft under my toes. In a daze, I see the garden alive again with clematis and evening primrose. Pink and white verbena, roses, camellias, gardenias, jasmine. Irises as big as my palm. I blink and the images disappear. Minutes ago, nothing good seemed possible. But now, in some larger way, I've seen what might be.

By the weekend, Edward brings home a chocolate sampler, a new pair of gloves, a silk scarf. He urges me to come back to the bedroom instead of sleeping downstairs.

“I won't force you,” he says. “All I want is for you to want me.”

I tell him I just need some time—a lie—and shrug away his attempt to kiss my cheek. Lying awake on the davenport, a needlepoint pillow scrunched under my neck, I come up with a plan.

The next morning, wearing a smart dress with a patent leather belt, I flip through the newspaper until I find the right page.

“Edward, maybe we need a fresh start. Something modern. It says here there's an open house tomorrow. I know you don't like the new neighborhoods, but—”

“What are you saying?”

I try to keep my hand from trembling as I hold out the newspaper. “See, it's the one—”

But Edward is already bending down to the fireplace, pulling the lighter from his pocket. I've never noticed how the marble is shot through with so many veins of color. The paper catches and he flings it toward the back of the fireplace.

“Did I tell you it has a carport? You wouldn’t have to park on the street.” I purse my lips, shiny with cherry red lipstick. “No bums either. It’s on a big corner lot. Central heat instead of radiators. Built-in closets.”

“You’re being ridiculous.” Edward stares at my hair, my cheeks, my mouth. “You’ve never said anything remotely like this before. I thought you noticed the right things.”

I cough, aware that I have no choice but to plow ahead. “The more I look around, I see doorknobs that rattle and drafty windows and steep, uneven stairs.” I leave unsaid what I really see—the lofty high ceilings, the curved arch on the windows, the history ingrained in the coffee-colored floors. I turn away, making sure my breast grazes Edward’s arm. He shudders and reaches for me, a second too late.

Minutes later, he leaves and I scramble to call the fire department in case I’m right.

Before long, a police officer arrives to take me out to Groveland. Once we arrive at the new subdivision, the streets are clogged with people. They make way for the police car as we pull up to the new house I’d shown Edward—now a sodden, smoldering mess, its roof charred and caved in, the brick walls smudged with black and barely standing. A fireman ropes off the front yard.

As soon as I’m out of the car, Edward rushes toward me. His hair is wild, his eyes bloodshot.

“Teresa, you have to make them understand.”

The officer standing by Edward asks if he admits setting the fire.

“Of course I did,” Edward snaps. “Someone had to.”

As the officer handcuffs him, Edward barely seems to notice. “Teresa, tell them this is all your fault.” His voice comes out in a growl. “If you’d taken care of me, none of this would’ve happened.”

Shaking my head, I blink back tears. By the time I’m safely back in the police car, Edward’s protests peter out like he’s suddenly tired, his strength gone, and I turn around in time to see him bow his head as he’s led away.

Over the next few months, Milledgeville State Hospital, where Edward has been committed, calls with reminders about visiting hours, which I ignore. Briefly, I go back to Sumter, drinking RC Colas in the den with my parents and shaking my head at Ozzie Harriet on the television. In her ruffled apron, she makes everything seem so easy.

Before long, I tell my mother it’s time for me to leave. Despite everything, I miss being in Savannah. The feeling of possibility around every corner, glimmering like a firefly in the limbs of the gnarled oaks. The history coursing like a river underneath the brick and cobblestone sidewalks.

“I want to get back. I miss it,” I explain. “Once the divorce is final, I’ll be able to start over.”

Mama snaps her gold compact closed. “Don’t you think that’s begging for another mess? After all the mistakes you’ve made?”

I shake my head so furiously a bobby pin falls from my hair. “I can take care of myself.”

When I get back to Charlton Street, I find the house as I’d left it—the chalky ceiling medallions and ornate crown molding, the graceful staircase, its handrail rubbed ebony black from years of hands. But the air no longer holds the smell of Dorothy’s perfume. Maybe now that Edward is gone, her ghost is as free as I am.

Every day, I walk around Savannah’s downtown, wondering what might still be saved. Already City Market has been bulldozed, its hundred-year-old bricks re-purposed for a shopping mall. But I remember something my mother said when I was little, before she was constantly sore with me. Teresa, you could sell water to a drowning man.

The following autumn, I sit waiting on the front steps of the Isaiah Davenport house, my full skirt fanned out around me. This time of year, Savannah glows with color and all around town the bougainvillea and day lilies flash red and golden orange. Back home, in my new courtyard garden, the coral-colored roses are at their peak. Here, oleander bushes line Columbia Square, the season’s last dark pink blooms still hanging on.

Even though I know the house’s history by heart, I keep the most important details in my notebook. Built in 1820 by Isaiah Davenport, master builder from New England, as his family’s residence and a showcase of his craftsmanship. Architectural style: Federal. Two-and-a-half stories on top of a raised basement.

“By 1955,” I say to myself, “the Davenport house was a rundown tenement. Laundry hung on the front railing. The columns and millwork had been painted black. One of the fireplaces was ripped out, the wallpaper torn. But the architectural significance could not be overstated. The house was a piece of history.” I add a note—“To walk up these front steps is to walk back in time.”

That evening when my new friends from church and the garden club first toured the house, mosquitoes and no-see-ums swarmed around us. We held our breath against the smell of mildew and urine as we looked around. We bounced around different ideas, our cheeks flush with excitement. What if we raised enough money to buy the house? If we restored it and showed people what could be done, it would be the start of something important.

As the sun begins to set, the crowd gathers on the square, their murmured conversations mingling with the vibrating cicadas in the ivy. My friends stand in front with bright eyes, squeezing each other's elbows and turning to wave as people call out to them. Stopping to hug Lucy McIntire, I walk up to the podium in front of the house.

Facing the crowd, I settle my notes and clear my throat, resisting the urge to grip the sides of the podium. Once the noise dies down, I thank everyone for coming.

After explaining Isaiah Davenport's background, I describe the arched opening in the house's central hall, meant to divide the front rooms from the private quarters. I look up and smile at the crowd of people, nodding and fanning themselves against the heat. "We'll open the house in a few minutes and you'll notice the staircase right away. The way it's curved, rising all the way up to the attic—you can't imagine a more dramatic effect. And every tenth rung is made of cast iron. To this day, the stairs don't creak."

I struggle to find my place in my notes, then realize I don't need them.

"July 6, 1955." I nod and take a deep breath. "The house is slated for demolition. The courtyard too. The owners plan to construct a parking lot in their place. But a group of women step in, refusing to let this happen. Enough is enough." In the crowd, Anna Hunter raises her hand in a silent cheer.

"The Historic Savannah Foundation is formed," I continue. "The banks say buying the house isn't a good investment. But we're not content to sit quietly and let it be destroyed. We're loud and insistent. We knock on doors. We call anyone who might be ready to make a difference. And here we are today." I stand up straighter. "September 30, 1955. The foundation has raised \$22,500 from the people of Savannah—local business owners, citizens, people like you. Thanks to you, the foundation was able to buy the Davenport house on the eve of its demolition. Together we saved a piece of history." As people clap, I sweep my hand across the front of the house, its red brick still standing after wars and hurricanes and the lesser storms of those who have lived within its walls.

When I step out from behind the podium, a group of supporters is already gathering and I greet them smiling.

As the sun lolls behind the oaks looped with silvery Spanish moss, I glimpse at the edge of the crowd a girl with Edward's dark eyes, her hair held back with ribbon. Even though I no longer believe in ghosts, I nod at her, this girl, this almost-sister, before I turn to go inside.

MICHELLE ASKIN

Wreckage

In that town I did not have a friend; I had the wintery forest backed up to my house. Light from a laundromat, sometimes the pizza mart. For a while though, even in the sadness, I was happy, that is living in a past memory of what— I can't remember. Except, I felt strangely wanted and overwhelmingly open.

In that town I did not have a friend, and the tub's faucet was broken and there was no one to call about such a thing, so I boiled the water. I was always boiling the water. But I loved it for the warmth, waiting to feel myself within the steamy air rising. Sometimes, compassionate relatives came to visit. They said kind things like, *I am going to make you a fresh meal*. And sometimes with reassuring glances and hands on hips, *Don't worry about who you are; you don't have to be anyone but who you are*. Then I would help them scrub the fish skins, the scallop cream sauce off the plates while they would tell me how grateful they were not to be alone in life, to have someone to talk to. But I wasn't that person. *It's nice*, they would say, *when you can just have someone like that*. Their eyes welling, missing their companions already in my home, where I could be no comfort to anybody.

Most nights, though, I was alone. The radio dial was loosened, unworkable, so I always listened to a station that sounded like icicles draining or maybe it was by then only rain. Because one night when I pulled back the tan curtain, I knew I was back to motel living and saw the world drenching. There were some willow trees in wet hazel-green. Where was my sad home? Some wrote me to say, *I remember you were quite happy in your sad home*. *We are sorry we made you feel there was somewhere more to go*. There were some travelers too in the parking lot,

wearing yellow rain slickers and humming
doo-wop refrains. I believed for a while they were
ghosts, that I was a ghost now hearing the wind
crash the shoreline of the frosty northern village
just past the bridge. I was a ghost from a different time
than my own. Even my death, I could not get right.

And then I remember him telephoning. Where was I now?
He was asking for someone else. I knew he was dear to a loved one
from my past, but when I heard him, when he spoke in such
beautiful kindness, there was a welling of warmth within me
for him. It was friend-like. Yet also lover like—
also, *you are far away and I wish you near.*
He kept saying, *Remember when I visited you there.*
You were so good there. I knew he had visited me
with someone else. I knew she was the one he wanted
to talk to. That it wasn't my beauty he was remembering
but that of the river's silvery rapids under a shadowy moon,
the damp logwood he so carefully chopped, like rich copper
in his hands given to me to fire, to heat the shivering.
He then had me look to the snowy mountain
surrounded by lush clouds in the navy dark wading above
enchancing wilderness raised to the heavens and the far away.

MARIE-ANDREE AUCLAIR

Gasping for Time

expresso-maker growls
oven releases the aroma of scones
baby gurgles
jagged talk with you
today's to-do list
steam hisses
will you froth the milk?
notes plaster the fridge
dishes tower in the sink
toast explodes from the toaster
butter too cold to spread
jam jar bone dry
sweetness displaced
I wish for hands
in lieu of time, yours
busy lacing your shoes
roaming your pockets
fingers scanning for keys
you frown at the clock
grab an apple
lob air kisses
in your slipstream
shouting:
I'll call you
baby spits oatmeal
swipes bowl to floor
giggles at his power
decodes pride in my gaze
my stomach tenses, sick
as the clock sneers at me
punching seconds faster
to add up more losses.

MILTON J. BATES

Defiance

Paris, 2016

Never mind the braying of police sirens,
their incessant hee-haw, hee-haw; nor
the bells of Notre Dame intoning hour
and half-hour as though nothing is amiss,
as though there are no soldiers patrolling
the great square in front of the cathedral
and the gated park behind. They move
silently among the tourists in squads
of four or five, weapons at the ready,
watchful, yet looking no one in the eye.

Listen instead to the ruckus that rises
from the quai across the Seine, where
a marching band, high school kids in blue
and gold, have taken a stand. People squeeze
between bookstalls, lean over parapets,
and crowd the bridges for a better view.
Those closest to the band link arms and sway
from side to side in time with the music.
The brassy blare of trumpet, trombone,
and tuba drowns out the low rumble of
patrol boat outboards. *Go ahead*, the horns
shout into the brazen light of early fall,
sifting through the aspens. *Go ahead
and plant your bombs. We refuse to hide,
refuse to live as though already dead.*

MARGARET D. BAUER

Watching the Evening News with Daddy

“after the people are dead, ...taste and smell alone, more fragile but more enduring, more unsubstantial, more persistent, more faithful, remain poised a long time, like souls, remembering, waiting, hoping, amid the ruins of all the rest; and bear unflinchingly, in the tiny and almost impalpable drop of their essence, the vast structure of recollection.”

—Marcel Proust

He would come home, fix a drink, go into the den,
sit in his big leather recliner,
olive-toned-khaki-colored with matching ottoman,
which one of us would sprawl across
and roll closer to the t.v.
We were all drawn to him in there.

Some days he asked for quiet, peace,
to watch the news or read the paper,
sent us upstairs to take our baths
if we were too rowdy.

But most days he watched and read
around the chaos of his children,
often around one of us, then another
sitting on his lap.

Mom, quiet on the couch,
the seat closest to his chair,
needlepointing maybe,
her drink next to her.

We always asked for the olive.
“Not this one,” Dad would say
and fish another out of the jar,
one for each of us, sometimes a second.
My preference was — still is — the almond-stuffed.

But apparently, he drank Scotch too,
I realize forty-plus years later, settled
into the sunroom
to share the evening quiet
with Andrew, to sit and sip,
no t.v., though we scroll
our screens for news.

Usually a bourbon drinker,
I ask for Scotch this evening
(I can't remember why),
and as I bring the glass to my mouth,
I inhale
and smell my daddy.

He is in the room with me,
so palpably here I am taken aback,
elated and overwhelmed at once.
I've been waiting for him, looking for a sign
he was still
somewhere.

I remember
the first holiday season after my grandmother died,
I bumped into her,
in my kitchen, of course,
as I was cooking for a New Year's Eve party.
"Hi, MaMa," I said out loud,
breathing in the smells of her legacy.
She came again the next year,
but not the next.

I try again and again each evening, but
no matter how much Scotch I drink,
he doesn't return.

JOHN BRANTINGHAM

Playing Chess with Gary Snyder

Up at Elizabeth Pass, up above 11,000 feet and above the treeline, Mary drops her pack and watches Guy and their son Lance do the same. She knows that even though Lance is still only fourteen years old, the marriage is done. When they get back, she's going to tell Guy. She's going to move out of the house and into a little apartment down on the beach. She doesn't know why she's come to this idea right at this moment. Maybe it's the last two hours of silence and meditation coming up this hill or that she can see fifty miles of forest and lakes from here, and she has a perspective she hasn't had in a long time. Maybe it's just time for her to come to a decision.

Before they left, Guy found out that Gary Snyder, even old as he is, would be in this part of the High Sierra. He went into the garage and dug out his old copy of *Dharma Bums*. Mary could hear Guy's voice echoing through the house as he shared it with their son. Lance is too old to be read to, of course, but he loves it, and between chapters they talked about the novel. Mary caught their excitement and looked Mr. Snyder up online to find an older man with a trim beard, his eyes lonely and joyful at once.

Guy ordered Turtle Island, and this week in camp, he recites it to his son. When he does, she finds some other place in camp to be. It's been either Turtle Island or chess, and she's kept her mouth closed about it, but she's relieved when it's chess because lately Guy's voice bores straight into the center of her head.

Now they plop down, and Guy starts digging through the pack.

"Why don't you take a moment for the view?"

He flashes a quick smile. "It's the perfect place for the god of environmental writing."

"It would be good just to sit and listen for a while, Mom."

The two of them stare at her with that same tight-lipped expression they've always shared so both of their mouths disappear into single lines. Their eyes are the same brown. Now that Lance has a peach-fuzz mustache he's proud of, he's beginning to look like the Guy she fell in love with.

She nods, but when Guy starts in with his nasal poet voice, she stands and walks away, wandering along the flat table that is the spine of the mountain. On one side, she's looking at what must be Ranger Lake, and that in the distance must be the Sugarloaf, but she isn't sure. Over on the other side, she thinks that might be Triple Divide Peak, but then realizes that it

probably isn't. She was never good at direction or identifying. It's something Guy would know, but she decides she's not going to ask him. She's going to call this her Sugarloaf and her Triple Divide Peak, rather than ask him because he's off reading. Only, she realizes that he's stopped.

She comes back to find Lance playing chess with an older man, gray hair, the two of them sitting cross-legged, and the board between them on a rock.

Guy sees her coming and pops up to his feet. He jogs over to her. "It's Gary Snyder," he whispers.

"What?"

"Lance, our Lance, is over there playing chess with Gary Snyder in the High Sierra."

The man is older, but Mary can see from here it's not Mr. Snyder. He's bigger than the man. He's shaved his head, and he looks nothing like his pictures on the Internet. The ears are wrong. The body shape is off. He doesn't have that joyful loneliness in his eyes. "Did he tell you he was Gary Snyder?" she asks

Guy smirks. "No." He shakes his head like the idea is ridiculous. "I didn't want to violate his privacy or anything. Lance and I saw him coming and thought it would be cool to beat Gary Snyder at chess in the High Sierra."

Mary pushes a smile and tries to share his enthusiasm and between them there is the acknowledgement of something. She wonders if he knows it's over. Twenty years ago, they had couple's ESP. Most of the time lately he's unreadable except for this moment now.

"Mr. Snyder said that we should just camp up here tonight," Guy says.

"Won't it be cold?"

He shrugs. "We have sleeping bags, and there's a full moon."

She struggles down the argument in her throat. She wonders if he thinks a full moon will make things warmer. "Sounds wonderful."

So, while they play chess with their Gary Snyder, she sets up the tent and makes dinner for the four of them. They play in silence, and she listens to the wind. They speak the language of boards and pieces, and Mary looks out at her Sugarloaf and her Triple Divide Peaks in the moonlight. Up here above the treeline, the moonlight is nearly as bright as the daylight, and she wonders if she walked away, any of these men would notice. She wonders how long it will bother them when she moves out next week. Will they mourn her passing for a month? Will they mourn it for a day?

ROBERT BAYLOT

Racing Geese

Business done,
A windowless conference room left behind,
I drive through a strip-mall parking lot,
Rocks cracking beneath the tires,
Cross parallel parking lines,
Avoid the crossing vehicles,
Hesitantly I accelerate,
Home in on my escape,
My true north, migratory.

Ahead of me—
Target, Kroger, Barnes & Noble,
Behind me—
Drury Inn, Pier One,
My bearings.

A slow safe crossing
Until I see not a Ford Explorer
But a flock of geese
Also crossing lines
Sticking necks out
A gawking, honking photo-finish,
Geese winning by a neck
This race we are having.

PETER BERGQUIST

The View to Valhalla, British Columbia

Past black ravens
sentineled on spears of spruce,
low cloud levitates
above a lake's green sheen.
Eyes, blinded by the pop of sunspots, rise
to find fog's fingers
drifting thin across the fir-filled slopes,
up to alabaster thunderheads
bubbling over passes,
to rock and snow and finally sky,
where one might meet the gods of old
and die willingly.

MICHAEL K. BRANTLEY

Cooking Collards

Last fall, after the first frost, I called my mama and asked if she would help me cook some collards. I knew she would tell me to come on over, but since the greens aren't her favorite, I thought I should at least try to sweeten the pot a little and make it sound adventurous, if the collard can be such.

"I want to do it old style, and I'm not talking about common collards, I'm talking about cabbage-collards," I said. I may or may not have mentioned that I also did not have a stockpot large enough, or as she would say, seasoned enough, for cooking those big, leafy, stereotypical, Southern greens. Mama had taught me the way around a kitchen from the time I was old enough to see the stovetop. Back then it was a performance every night, squash and onions in one pan, cucumbers and tomatoes sloshing in vinegar in another, and just the right amount of seasonings to keep the harmonies tight. I miss those days more as the cooler days begin to signal year's end.

With the help of another first-rate cook, my sister, Jane, I managed to source a couple of shapely, robust heads and drove over to Mama's on a cool Saturday afternoon. After a little prep work on the back steps, I brought them inside, greeted at the door by the familiar smells of my childhood. Traces of something baked and chocolate always lingered in the long, dark, hallway leading into the main part of the house, up to the kitchen on the left. A generation before, Mama would have been in the groove she'd worn in the linoleum floor, flitting her small, energy-packed frame between the oven, the sink and the table, mixing something, chopping something, stirring something, so there would always be plenty to eat for whoever might drop by, be it me, my siblings, or the preacher.

We pulled the loose, yellow-green leaves apart, and washed them over and over in the large, stainless steel sink, and then I took them to an old oak cutting board to trim away the bitter center stem, as advised by Jane. This seemed strange to Mama. Waste was never permitted by her mother. Granny had suffered through the Depression, and then widowhood the last fifty years of her life. Long after the hardest of times, Granny still served every part of a chicken on her table, including the feet. In her eyes, removing collard stems would have marked me as not having good sense.

That worn and tarnished silver and black pot, the starting point of countless meals of chicken pastry, and the blanching of thousands of

vegetables prior to canning or freezing, had been retired. Mama informed me that it sprung a leak some time back, but in a nod to Granny's ways of re-purposing, she of course had not disposed of it. It was now used to transport vegetables from her small box of plantings, the evolution of time and age and practicality from our farm days passed.

Ironically, Mama upgraded to a stylish Paula Deen model, an ample, if slightly undersized replacement. We considered using the traditional ham bone or sausage as seasoning, but decided against it since we had a vegetarian and others with dietary restrictions in the family. We opted instead for extra virgin olive oil, and homegrown crushed and dried red pepper. We didn't even use the collards I remembered growing up with, those that varied from dark green to darker green, bitter smelling even when fresh, and downright foul, almost sulfur-smelling when cooked and chopped into mush.

No, these were the now poor man's-gone-chic-cabbage collards, grown from closely guarded seeds, so valuable as to be included in some farmers' wills. Offering a tantalizingly sweet aroma, they offered a smooth taste, and required very little table seasoning. It was a dish even a non-collard eater could appreciate, something expected from a cook with some sense.

* * *

"Go out to the smokehouse and get me an armful of new potatoes."

This was a common order directed at me, from when I was a young boy until I left the house after college. Often, other directives would follow such as, "And then go back to the freezer and get a bag of corn" or "Bring a jar of squash and some snaps from the pantry." Sometimes I'd be sent to get a country ham, put it gently in the boot of Mama's car and ride with her to town so she could get the butcher to carve perfect slices for supper.

The butcher shop was cold and smelled funny, but meant my favorite meals were on the way. The only conflict was thick versus thin slices, as our house was divided. Ever the blessed peacekeeper, Mama directed the counter man. She and I were firmly in the thin camp, and we were ones doing the dirty work of getting the ham there, so it seemed as though the scales of equality tipped ever so slightly in our favor.

Our first smokehouse was an old shack that was a holdover from the previous owners of my parents' farm, and its appearance hinted it was the last place anyone would want to store food. It tilted towards the field away from the house, not by design, but by evolution. Myths alleged by my older brothers asserted that many varieties of deadly snakes and other exotic creatures lived in the deep shadows. Whenever and wherever those two found a snakeskin, they'd be sure to place it in plain sight, near whatever they knew Mama might send me after.

Smokehouses were standard in the end of our rural county, even in the 1980s. We cured hams and sausage and stored potatoes; others did the same, but some left space for corn liquor and the occasional still. When my folks finally got around to a remodel, they had the old outbuilding torn down. From that pile, a sturdy modern replacement arose, and included a smokehouse in the back, complete with worktables, shelves, and hooks for hams. There was even a drain in the concrete floor for easy cleanup.

I could be critical of Daddy when I was a child, but the man knew how to make sausage and cure a ham. I don't even remember one going bad, which was always a risk. Other than a brief flirtation with brown sugar curing, Daddy always preferred working with salt. His touch was deft, hams were never over seasoned, never bland, instead, just right, tender and ready for that old black frying pan. His recipes remain in pencil, sketched on the unpainted wall, this much salt, that much pepper. The sausage was savory, several links done mild, others hot with red pepper, with just enough sage. Some local labels make a fine product, but nothing tastes quite like home, a flavor long gone from an empty curing room, but still lingering.

* * *

As we minded the collard pot, peeking too often, I asked Mama if she remembered how often we used to have country ham, and how it was our version of a steak dinner.

"What's country ham?" she asked me dryly. "We haven't had that since Buck was a calf," another expression she's often used. "Can you even buy it anymore, other than that mess in the plastic packs?" She was referring to the tough, sinewy, vacuum-packed lumps of unknown provenance tossed on tables near the meat section in chain stores.

Country ham was in regular rotation on our supper table, with plenty of vegetables. We never thought it to be a delicacy, or that one day we wouldn't have it. Good country ham is hard to find now, and countless articles can be found listing it as yet another villain in the lineup of deadly Southern victuals.

A few weeks after that conversation, I found a church booth at the State Fair serving homemade biscuits with country ham. At two dollars, it was worth the gamble, and I was handed a hot, moist, pouch of fluffy goodness, warm to the touch, not hot, stuffed with two just right, thin slices of country ham. The only thing it was missing was a dab of Duke's mayonnaise, and maybe a thick hunk of too-orange hoop cheese on the side. I sat down on a bench and let my mouth savor the memory, a trip back to another time, a taste of the past. It was divine.

* * *

I did not grow up loving collards, because we didn't have them often. It makes sense that the kitchen serves the preference of the cook. After all, who wants to stand over a reeking pot of greens, in a house with no central air, cooking a dish that very often might be paired with a main course of hog chitlins? My daddy liked collards, and every once and awhile, Mama would relent and make dogbread, hominy, collards and chitlins. Dogbread can come in many variations, but at our house it was cornmeal and water mixed and squashed into a baking pan and oven cooked to a crunchy crust. Mama and I would pick out the sausage or ham used to flavor the greens, or she'd throw a couple of pieces of cubed steak in a pan, as neither of us could negotiate the consumption of hog intestines.

Even with seasoning, the collards were often bitter (or "earthy" as critics on TV like to say), still better than turnip or mustard greens. It all looked like weeds to me when pulverized for the table, and could only be dealt with by generous amounts of vinegar, red pepper or Mama's homemade sweet pepper and onion relish. A quarter inch layer could make anything edible that was supposed to be good for you.

* * *

I developed a taste for collards because my sister once decided it was the one thing she hadn't attempted to master. She's never revealed much about that culinary journey, but she figured it out by slipping them onto the menu of a family gathering one year. Soon she was bringing them to our immense family Thanksgiving meal at my parents' house, before eventually taking over the whole operation in the 1990s.

While I really did want some collards last fall, I mostly wanted to cook with Mama again, just the two of us in her kitchen, like it was after my brothers and sisters had all married and moved out, and she showed me how to coax palatable miracles out of whatever was on hand. I asked a lot of questions, and Mama had answers for all of them, and her wisdom and patience always extending past how to make a snap bean casserole or chop okra.

The tools in her kitchen, which I took for granted until I too moved out and started my own kitchen with my wife, were relics that knew the recipes by heart. A cast-iron frying pan, solid black from generations of use, was used for everything from country ham, to hamburger steak, to fried chicken, corn fritters and fried green tomatoes. Ceramic mixing bowls, an old time tin sifter, a couple of weathered butcher knives and a variety of wooden spoons did the yeoman's work.

Mama seemed excited, too. By the time the afternoon was over, the best tasting dish served was the conversation, the memories, the aroma of good times past that neither of us knew then, would be such a delicacy now.

* * *

As the afternoon wore on, Mama and I considered the foods fading not just from our family's tables, but from existence. Why didn't anybody make apple jacks anymore? Had anyone written down the recipe for sliced sweet potato pie, in both lemon and spice versions? How about those passed down things like tea cookies, homemade peach ice cream, sourdough bread, cinnamon rolls, blackberry cobbler, and chicken pastry? Did the grandchildren know how to make the family barbecue sauce?

The same pot I had hoped to cook the collards in was the one Mama used for chicken pastry. "It ain't nothing to it," Mama said. She'd boil a chicken in that pot, shred the meat, set aside three-quarters for chicken salad, and the other quarter, plus bones and skin, would go back into the pot of newly created broth. A couple of ladles of broth into a mixing bowl of Red Band flour, and in just a bit, there was a sheet of dough, ready for the trimming with the butcher knife. "Don't roll it too thin, keep 'em thick and it won't get slimy." Mama always made this al dente, an expression we never would have used, calling it "half raw" instead.

* * *

The problem with the good old days is that they don't seem all that good when they are actually taking place. Looking back, I was a complainer in the good old days. It was a time when there was always something to do, and the low man on the totem pole, me, the youngest, got the jobs no one else wanted. This meant silking the corn when everyone else was shucking, or fetching this bucket from the yard, or dragging that one to the field. It meant dumping the enormously heavy pickling crock's awful smelling green juice as close as you could without splashing the grass in the yard. Any spillover would convict me in just a few days, as the mixture was more effective than Roundup. Sweet pickles were great, but were they worth the trouble? Corn was essential, but how much could we really eat, and what exactly was I supposed to do to with a cubic ton of cobs, fleeced of their kernels, and how could I prevent the various critters of the night from inevitably dragging them back into the yard?

We laughed about how, even after everyone had moved out, Daddy never accounted for a smaller household when it came time to plant the garden. The allotment of the farm that had gone to tobacco in the 1970s was

just right for corn. A suggestion that a quarter acre each of beans or potatoes might be a bit much, would be answered by, “You like to eat, don’t you? You won’t complain when you have it in January.”

Tomatoes were a serious business, and I finally achieved some level of self-proclaimed prestige the first year I was placed in charge of the crop. This was by default, since no one was around, and coincided with Daddy’s decision that we upgrade our technique. This new and improved method required me to drag out the old tobacco sticks, those splinter shrapnel sharing, black widow spider harboring stakes and drive them into the ground between each plant. That was to be followed by using a spool of itchy, skin wrenching twine strung under the bottom leaves of the plants and then adding additional strings as the plants grew. It was labor intensive, annoying and more aggravating to take up when the season ended. However, management had spoken, and labor did not get arbitration.

Admittedly, after all that, picking the tomatoes was easy, and Mama canned enough to make any Italian grandmother proud. This was an essential element for spaghetti, soups, any number of sauces, and sometimes as its own stand-alone dish, garnished with crushed up saltine crackers. My harvest happened in stages. Anything mostly red was picked with the top left in place, that green, odd smelling piece of the stem closely resembling a court jester’s collar. The tomatoes went stem down on the picnic table to continue ripening until Mama called for them. The best time of the summer was when the green onions, tomatoes and cucumbers would all be ready at the same time. A bowl that was never big enough was filled with chopped versions of each, floated in apple cider vinegar and dusted with generous helpings of pepper and salt. About twice a month, I’d pick very large green tomatoes to be sliced, dredged in flour, and fried to go with that night’s dinner. In season, yellow squash or eggplant or yellow onions were done the same way.

This was everyday fare. With the exception of hominy and pork and beans, I don’t ever remember eating a vegetable from a commercial can until my 20s. It never occurred to me that this was unusual. I remember my disappointment at tasting my first baked sweet potato in a restaurant, when such an item was rare on menus. It was stringy and I realized why the waiter had brought so much cinnamon, brown sugar and butter — to make it more agreeable. I couldn’t figure out how something as perfect as the sweet potato could reach such a condition, especially in this part of the world. Later, I realized the supplier had skipped the essential curing stage. After all, there were many occasions when Daddy and his friends sat in the yard with pocketknives and eat sweet potatoes raw, pulled from the smokehouse.

I live with my family on what was a piece of the old farm, but I don't remember when the field shrunk to a garden and then shrunk to a box. I suppose it coincided with a diminishing labor force and my parents' decreasing mobility. I worked hard to do my share of planting and weeding and harvesting and storing, but they worked harder. Mama's freezer and shelves now sport grocery store cans of vegetables and there are commercial packs in the freezer. She favors a stir fry mix now, which is ironic. While we grew loads of peppers and carrots and broccoli, we never once cooked them together in one pan, or had soy sauce on hand. She likes to buy produce in the grocery section, but only the Lord knows where that stuff comes from, and sometimes she's able to source things from local farmers, but so many have had to grow too large and focus on just a couple of crops, that selection just isn't what it used to be. People who think food comes from the grocery store, not someone's dirt, want it easy and fast to prepare, already clean, and most importantly, cheap.

I can't blame them, really, for not thinking about the sweat both from physical labor and mental worry of the farmer. I'm the son of farmers and didn't consider it in my childhood. It was just what we did.

If you look hard enough, you can find good vegetables and meat, but it is not as easy as it used to be, when I only had to walk out to the freezer, or the pantry in the storage building, or the smokehouse and grab what was needed for that night's table. Nostalgia says it all tasted better back then, and I think mostly that it did. Maybe it is because that food never touched any hands, in the entire course of its life, that didn't love me. All those days with my hands in the broad diversity of the soil that made up the land where I ate and slept and dreamt of escaping seem so long ago. There was red-orange clay nearest the road, where hardly anything flourished, but it quickly dropped off to darker and richer and deeper ground, the kind that held water and kept roots, nourished them and provided a bounty unmatched.

BARBARA BRANNON

The Rock Chip

started
as a sandspur
where the safety glass
collided with a road-flung stone.

So it remained for twenty thousand miles.

Till one hot day it bloomed and spread,
a blade with spikelets striking at the air,
its rhizomes rooted where the wiper met the hood.

I watched the inflorescence slowly grow,

then freeze with unpredicted speed.
It shot into a wicked scythe, a slice
of nothingness dividing nothing clean in half.

Its sickle mowed my field of vision short.

In one last brilliant crack it arced toward earth,
a bow, a graceful seed, airborne,
and paused mid-flight,

fermata,
holding breath

as though the show were not quite over yet:

It's stuck there still, the windshield on the right intact—
the traveler's view as clear as virgin light,
the driver's shattered stars,
the highway indivisible
and infinite and
bright.

JOHN BRANTINGHAM

The Novelty of Water

In February, the monsoons
would come to Los Angeles,
and I would walk up the street
to the concrete river
and lace my fingers in the chain link
and watch the torrent carry silt,
mice, tires, bicycles,
and once even a door
out to the Pacific
so that someone strolling the beach
of an Aleutian island
could wonder if a whole house
had been torn apart.

I thought about that too,
imagined our yearly flood raging
down the foothills
smashing through a three bedroom house,
everyone gone except for a little boy
who loved the rain that was
about to kill him,
entranced in his last moment
by the novelty of water
in a dry world.

NANCY BROCK

Cotton

I hadn't lived in the country during the spring of 1956, when Granddaddy planted cotton with the help of my uncles Liam and Harold. When I was thirteen, my small family—Daddy, Momma, and I—moved here after Daddy's discharge from the Army, into our just-built house standing on a parcel of land carved out from the cotton fields. Down the road stood the house where Granddaddy had lived most of his life and my aunt Zenobia had lived all of her life. Liam and his family had a house along the same road; Harold lived alone. Daddy agreed to locate in a rural area to please Momma. He was city-born, with a bank job, and not used to country life. We moved to a place I'd never been, never heard Momma talk about in all those years of migrations from one military base to another, yet it was the first place she mentioned when Daddy asked where she wanted to settle. I wonder now, thinking back, if she wanted to return to a place or to a certain time in her life.

Those first mornings, when I looked out my bedroom window, I had to remind myself the snowy expanse I saw was cotton. The white fields stretched to meet the darkness of the hardwoods and pines. All this land, as far as the point where the curving horizon met the sky, belonged to Granddaddy. I walked barefoot down a red clay road instead of wearing out shoe leather on a hard cement sidewalk. The distance between Granddaddy's house and ours took about five minutes to walk. I traveled more than the short distance when I made the trip; I also passed back in time. The white-painted wood of the farmhouse, with the welcoming arms of the front porch, contrasted with the stark red brick of our ranch-style house. In front of the farmhouse, the twisted trunk and branches of the dogwood promised shade during the summer months. A fringe of azaleas peeped below the porch, reminding me of lace on a petticoat. Our house had a carport on one side and a concrete-slab patio in back. Our bare brick walls were unrelieved by any shade or shrubbery.

I'd discovered the feed room in Granddaddy's barn offered a perfect place to hide. The barn cat raised his head when I eased the door closed, gave me a disdainful stare, and dropped his head back onto his front paws. The harnesses and bridles for the mules hung on wooden pegs fastened to the board walls, and a saddle rested on a sawhorse. Although never used, the leather was supple to the touch and smelled faintly of saddle soap.

I swung one leg over the saddle and eased myself into the seat. I rocked back and forth in the saddle, and imagined I sat astride a horse.

"I figured no one else might wander in while we talked." Liam's voice came from outside the closed door of the feed room. Even though he couldn't possibly see through the plank walls, I crouched behind one of the feed sacks.

"What's so important and private we have to hold this meeting in the barn?" Momma's voice had an icy edge.

"Ruth Ellen told me Harold took Daddy into town a few days ago to talk to a lawyer. I'm figuring he made out a new will. You know anything about this?" His voice was angry.

"Daddy's more likely to tell you than me, and he won't tell you unless he thinks you should know. Why don't you ask him directly, instead of relying on your wife to spy for you?"

Liam said, "He treats me more like a hired hand than his oldest son, as you well know. After all these years, I want to be sure I get my due."

"What bothers you so? Daddy's not going to pass over you." Hot anger replaced the ice in Momma's voice.

"The land my house sits on is still in his name. I don't reckon on being a farmer the rest of my life. I'm thinking more money can be made other ways."

"Daddy holds title to enough land so each of us can have a share." Momma sounded calm.

"Depends on whether that land gets divided up four ways or five."

I heard the sharp intake of Momma's breath. "You mean—?"

"Jack's got no right to any of the land."

"He's our brother."

"We don't know who his father is. Rachel disappears for a whole year and returns with a baby boy in her arms, and we're to pretend the child is Daddy's."

"You've gone too far. Jack's been raised as Daddy's son. I don't want to hear any more of this talk ever again."

Liam's voice, when he spoke again, had a softer sound. "You're my sister, and I won't be the one to forget. Others might wonder if Rachel played Daddy for a fool twice."

Momma made a choking noise. I heard the sound of her running footsteps. I held my breath until Liam's heavier footsteps signaled his departure.

* * *

Daddy opened the world atlas, and pointed to the place where we lived. His finger covered the lower half of Alabama on the map. This wasn't

necessary, because I knew we lived in the southeastern part of the state, ninety miles due north of the Gulf of Mexico. He put another finger on a spot all the way on the other side of the world. "Here's Korea where your Uncle Jack is stationed."

He took the salt and pepper shakers and the sugar bowl, and moved them across the kitchen table as he explained the Korean Conflict. Korea looked so far away. What if Uncle Jack never came home? After a while Daddy got tired of Korea, pointed his finger to France, and started telling his stories about World War II. I tried to act interested, even though I'd heard all these accounts so many times.

Daddy finally said, "Don't you have schoolwork? Your momma and I need to talk."

I left without protest. I waited awhile before I crept back from my room as far as the bathroom, where I crouched in the doorway. As soon as I heard footsteps, I'd be able to retreat into the bathroom and flush the toilet. I strained to catch the low conversation between my parents.

"—can't make any money from cotton these days," Daddy said. "Harold has some good ideas. The few words he says make sense. Maybe you can convince your father to listen to him."

"When Jack comes home—" Momma began.

"Trust Jack to throw away money on a broken down racehorse. I understand why your father keeps his mules. I don't see the sense of having a horse around gobbling up a fortune in feed. No one rides him, no one gets any work out of him."

Momma responded in a voice too low for me to hear. The low murmuring between them continued for a while. Just when the soft voices lulled me into a sense of safety, I heard my name.

"Frannie does well to get on her grandfather's good side. He's on the other side of eighty now, and might be thinking about how to divide up his land, if he hasn't made those plans already."

"Frannie loves her grandfather," Momma said loud enough for me to hear. "Have you noticed how she follows him around like a little shadow? He took her to the family graveyard."

Granddaddy had waited for me one morning. He'd hitched one of his mules to the wagon. "Frannie, I want you to come with me."

I clambered up beside Granddaddy on the wagon seat.

"You know which mule this is?" he asked.

I took a guess. The two mules looked the same to me. "Cass."

He nodded. A flick of his wrist sent the mule moving at a fast running-walk, her hoof beats drumming one-two-three-four against the hard clay. We passed the rutted trail leading to the woods past the fields, and

the mule slowed her pace as we traveled through the trees. The hoof beats made a ringing sound as we crossed the narrow wooden bridge over the creek. Another stretch of woods, and we left the tree cover behind, traveling once again through cotton fields. Granddaddy gave Cass some signal I didn't detect, or she knew the way to go. She turned off the road and climbed a small mound swelling above the fields.

A cemetery covered the crest of the hill. Granddaddy hitched Cass to the rail of the iron fence surrounding the graveyard. I followed him through the gate. He stopped before the most ancient of the headstones, a marker weathered gray from age, with the writing worn almost illegible. I placed my hand on the worn letters etched in the stone, and with my fingers traced the name of Hugh O'Donnell.

Granddaddy bowed his head before the headstone. "None of those school teachers understood me when I told them my name was Malachi O'Donnell. They made me write my name with the O as middle initial. After a while I got used to it. My father came out of Ireland, and few were the times he talked about the land of his birth. If he left kin behind, they're lost to us forever."

He stopped again before the grave of Elizabeth Jones Donald, with the words 'Beloved Wife and Mother' carved on the headstone. "A man should have a wife to grow old with him. I've been denied that blessing. Elizabeth was mother to Liam, Harold and Zenobia. Jack and your mother's mother was Rachel; walk straight ahead and you'll find her."

I wandered away, giving him some time alone. I read the other headstones, names of children who had died at birth or not long after, looking for the one with Rachel's name.

I found her grave in the back, tucked away like an afterthought, separate from the other family. Only 'Rachel' was carved into the small marble headstone. No need to bring flowers for her. A rambling rose bush climbed over her gravesite, small buds clinging to the branches. I stood beside the headstone until Granddaddy joined me.

"Come back in full summer, and the bush will be covered with pink roses. The prettiest thing you ever saw. Just like her." Granddaddy placed his big hand on my head. "I come here on Sundays. There's a Godlike peacefulness among the dead that fire-and-brimstone church goers don't seem to understand."

Granddaddy began walking back toward the gate. He paused at the gate, pointing to Cass. The mule's head drooped, her eyes half-closed.

"You recollect the nice running-walk gait she's got? That's because her horse mother was a Tennessee Walker. Her breeding makes a smooth riding horse as well as a hard worker."

Mules and horses were not what I wanted to hear about right now. I gave an impatient sigh.

Granddaddy untied Cass and climbed into the wagon. I scrambled up beside him.

“Your mother was barely three when Rachel died, Jack only a few months old. Your mother has no memory of her mother. Zenobia raised your mother and Jack.” He turned the mule around.

“Here.” He handed me the reins. “Let’s see if you have the hands for driving.”

* * *

My kin rarely used the telephone. Living so close to each other, they found walking from one house to the next a more convenient means of communication. A low rap on the side door signaled a relative. Only company came to the front door.

The event I’d waited for all these months turned out to be quiet one, instead of a dramatic thunderclap. The reality of Jack overwhelmed me. Here he stood, flesh and blood, no longer merely a name I heard whispered. Jack had the look of family, with black hair, dark eyes, and cheekbones sharp enough to slice tomatoes. Momma gave a delighted scream and pushed me aside in her haste to reach him. She threw her arms around his neck. “Jack, Jack.”

When she recovered, she said, “Martha Fran, you need to water the tomato plants.” I started to remind her I’d watered those tomatoes first thing this morning. Something in her voice told me I’d best go water the plants again, and leave her alone with Jack.

He rode Battle the next time he came. The black stallion pranced up to Momma and me, his mane and tail streaming. Momma laughed, “Battle’s flying all his flags today.”

“Come riding with me, Maureen.” He grabbed Momma’s arm and pulled her up behind him. He turned the horse, and they took off, leaving me to deal with the wet laundry to hang on the clothesline and the burning jealousy in my heart.

“Anything new happen today?” Daddy asked at supper. I caught the pleading look in Momma’s eyes, the little shake of her head he didn’t see.

“We washed the laundry,” I said before Momma put in a word. “I like the way we hang everything out on the clothesline to dry. Sunshine makes the sheets smell nice and fresh when we make up the beds.”

That night they shut their bedroom door, a sign they had something private to discuss. They kept their voices too low for me to hear, even when I dared tiptoe to the closed door to listen.

The tomatoes on our plants ripened in abundance. We spread juicy slices over white bread smeared with mayonnaise. We ate so many Daddy finally asked, "Can't we eat something other than tomatoes?"

"I reckon we can. I just have a yearning for the taste of tomatoes, and can't seem to get enough of them." Momma had a little smile on her face, like she had a secret she was dying to tell.

"Tomatoes sure have been good this year." Daddy forked several slices onto his plate, in spite of his previous complaint about the overabundance of tomatoes. His face now mirrored Momma's secret little smile.

* * *

Jack danced the stallion near to me. Battle's hot breath grazed my cheeks and the warm scent of horseflesh flooded my nostrils.

"How's your Momma? I'm mighty sorry I haven't been to see her lately."

"She's fine." I stood my ground as horse and rider slowly circled me. "She can't go riding with you these days."

"So I hear. You happy you're going to have a little brother or sister?"

I shrugged. "Makes no difference how I feel. Nobody asked me."

Battle stretched his neck and butted me in the chest with his nose.

Jack laughed. "He likes you. Want to go for a ride?"

I nodded, too excited to speak. Jack stretched out his arm, I grabbed it, and he swung me up behind him.

"Hold on to my waist. Grip with your legs. Don't dig your heels into him or he'll buck."

I pressed my knees and thighs into Battle's sides. My arms encircled Jack's taut waist. Battle took a few prancing steps before taking off like a shot, running with ground-eating strides. I closed my eyes, concentrating on the pulsating sensation of the powerful animal between my legs and the hard muscles of the man's torso.

The stallion slowed as we left the road and entered the woods. I heard the crunch of dry pine needles as the horse threaded his way through the tall trees. Jack brought the horse to a standstill when we reached a clearing beside the creek.

"We'll stop here awhile." Jack eased me onto the ground before swinging from the saddle. He took a length of rope draped around the saddle horn, tied one end to the bridle, and knotted the other end around a pine tree. I silently watched him remove the saddle and untie a rolled blanket from the back of the saddle. He kicked the sand on the creek bank, found a spot to his liking, and spread the blanket on the ground. He settled on the blanket and patted the space next to where he sat.

“Sit down. I like to spend time here watching the creek flow. No one else comes here, least not to my knowledge.”

I carefully eased onto the blanket. We sat silently listening to the sound of the flowing water and the rustles made by the stallion.

“You can swim here, if you like.”

After the quiet, the sound of his voice startled me. “I don’t have a swimsuit with me.”

Jack laughed. “You don’t need a swimsuit. Just strip down to your underpants.”

The heat rose in my face. “It wouldn’t be proper for me to undress in front of a man.”

He laughed again. “I’m your kin. There wouldn’t be anything improper. Here, I’ll go first.” He removed his shoes, pulled his cotton shirt over his head, stood up, unzipped his jeans, and stepped out of them when they fell around his ankles. I held my breath, taking in his muscular leanness and the bulge in the front of his white briefs. He waded into the creek until the water reached his waist.

“Sure feels good. It’s not too cold.” He had his back to me.

I carefully unbuttoned my blouse and shrugged off my jeans. Jack kept his back to me, giving me privacy in my undressing. I waded into the creek. The water swirled around my ankles, my knees, my thighs still throbbing from gripping the horse. I kept my arms crossed in front of my bare chest.

Jack turned, laughing at the sight of my protective self-embrace. “You got nothing to be ashamed of. You’re going to be a lot of woman one day, Frannie.”

I relaxed my clench, and let my arms drop to my sides. Jack splashed water. I gasped as the cold spray hit my nipples. “Feels good in this heat.”

He kept a distance from me, never trying to touch me. When we tired of wading in the cool water, we sat in the dappled sunlight until the summer heat dried our wet skins. Jack talked, slowly at first, telling me about the Army. He planned to take advantage of the GI bill and attend college somewhere. “No hurry on that. I’ll at least be here through cotton picking. At least until I teach you how to ride.”

A sorrow swept over me when Jack said, “Time for us to head back.”

On our return trip, Jack held the stallion to a prancing walk. Beneath me the powerful muscles coiled and uncoiled.

Momma sprawled in a lawn chair next to the rose trellis, basking in the sun like a ripening fruit. She rose from the chair as we approached the house. “Martha Fran, where have you been? You should have been home

hours ago.” She took in my wet hair, the white sand on my jeans. “Get off that horse and go inside.”

I left the two of them alone, with whatever words they’d have between them. I marched straight to my bedroom, slammed the door, and beat the pillows on my bed with my fists. Why hadn’t I stood up for myself? I stayed in the room the rest of the afternoon. Later the door eased open with a gentle creaking. I buried my head in the pillows.

Daddy asked, “Frannie, do you feel like coming to supper?”

I didn’t answer. Daddy sat on the bed and stroked my hair. “I need your help.”

He got my attention with those words. I turned over and sat up.

Daddy continued, “Your momma may act a little moody these days. She may say or do things without thinking. She means no ill will. The pregnancy affects some women in a peculiar way.”

“What do you want me to do?”

“It’s not what I want, it’s what I need. You’re my big girl; help me with your momma. She needs both of us to help her have this baby boy. Your momma told me she gave you a few cross words because you stayed at Granddaddy’s longer than expected.”

* * *

Momma never mentioned my riding with Jack. If she told Daddy, I’d have no reason to keep silent about the times she’d gone riding. So Momma and I had an unspoken agreement. These days she concentrated on growing my baby brother. She never asked where I’d been, and I never told her.

Jack never took me back to the secret place by the creek bank. We stayed on the roads, in full view of any one who cared to make our rides their business.

* * *

Momma’s kin didn’t use the calendar; they had a different way of measuring the passage of days. They told time by the growing season. Granddaddy might say, “It’s coming on near tomato planting.” Zenobia reminded us, “Be pea-shelling time soon.” Even Momma lapsed into telling time by the growing season. “We’ll have blackberry picking when the sun’s so hot you can’t stand it.”

Daddy measured time by the calendar, his little boxes of days lined off into hours. He didn’t understand when Granddaddy told him, “You can’t mark a date on your calendar and say, ‘This is when the cotton is ready for picking, or this is when the corn is ripe.’ These things you know in your bones. If you don’t know in your bones, you don’t need to grow things. Cotton comes up when it’s ready. Nothing to do with the Lord, even though Zenobia thinks so.”

Zenobia never measured for cooking; she instinctively added ingredients. “A pinch of salt for cornbread,” she’d say. “You need a scatter of flour for gravy.” She labored long over her prized Lane cakes. I watched her throw flour, eggs, butter, and sugar together without consulting a recipe, and pretended not to notice when she took a sip from the whisky bottle before pouring a generous amount into the batter.

Jack put in a garden for us. Green sprouts of corn and beans broke through the soil, more staked tomato plants grew heavy with red fruit, and the rambling rose trellis climbed one side of our house. I had a funny feeling every time I looked at the rose bush. It was the same kind of rose growing on Rachel’s grave.

Liam regarded the rose trellis. “Lot of work for something you can’t eat.”

Granddaddy and I walked out into a plowed field. He knelt and scooped up a handful of dirt, held his hand to his nose, and breathed deeply. He thrust his hand under my nose.

“What do you smell?”

The dirt had an acrid scent. “It has a kind of burned smell to it.”

Granddaddy flung the dirt toward the ground. “Liam uses too much fertilizer. You smell the chemicals in the soil. Come with me.”

We crossed the road to the field near his house. “I hold this land back and farm the old way, to remind myself what farming used to be. This area gets plowed by mule, with manure as the only fertilizer. Scoop up a handful; tell me what you smell.”

I scooped, closed my eyes, and inhaled a rich, loamy scent. I searched for the right words. “Reminds me of Zenobia’s Lane cake.”

Granddaddy smiled. “Good choice of words. You can get drunk off the smell of the earth. You’re going to make a farmer.” He let the dark soil shift through his strong fingers. “Mind, I’m not recommending we go back to plowing with mules. You can’t use the old ways and make a living from cotton. What if you came by some land?”

I considered the possibilities before I answered. “I might look and see how other people use their land. Liam uses too much fertilizer because he gets impatient; he’s tired of cotton and wants to go on to something else, maybe chicken houses.”

Granddaddy regarded me thoughtfully. “So you listen sometimes.”

* * *

The cotton picking had already started by the time I arrived. No one suggested I help Zenobia in the kitchen. The hired field hands, a crew of men and women, slowly worked their way down the rows of cotton plants. Some of the pickers looked about my age. Granddaddy insisted on handpicking

one tract. I expected the workers to sing their way down each row. Instead they worked silently, dark hands pulling the white fiber from the plants.

Jack sat in the driver's seat of the cotton picker. Liam stood nearby, probably giving instructions on handling the machine. Jack waved to me, and Liam shrugged, obviously not annoyed by Jack's inattentiveness. Harold walked over, removed his glasses to wipe them on his shirt, and said something to Jack. The thought struck me, watching the two men's faces, how much they looked alike. If I hadn't known them, I might have mistaken Harold and Jack for full kin.

Harold handed me a burlap sack, and showed me how to coax the cotton from the tight boll without cutting my hands. "You got nothing to prove to us, so quit when you get tired," he said. "When you finish picking, you can help me weigh. Just pick enough to be grateful you don't have to do this for a living."

I became grateful very quickly. I worked my way down half a row before I dragged the sack back to the weigh station. I'd barely covered the bottom of my sack. Harold took my load without comment, carefully set it on the scales, and announced, "One pound." He recorded my name and the weight in his ledger. "You get paid one quarter." While he wrote down my wages, Granddaddy fished a quarter out of the cash box and presented the coin to me. Harold dumped the contents of my sack into the back of the truck.

"You got a clear handwriting?" Granddaddy asked. When I nodded, he said to Harold, "Let Frannie record the weights and wages when you call them out. She says she wants to be a farmer."

Liam joined us. He looked pleased. "See you got promoted to a foreman, Frannie."

Now we had to wait until the pickers reported with their loads. Granddaddy patted me on the back. "Let's see how Jack's doing."

We walked around the house to get a clear view of the field. The green picker kicked up a dust cloud as it worked its way down the rows. We watched the machine take a turn and stall as the front wheels caught on something in the path. Jack jumped off the picker and bent to inspect the front wheels. "He should have turned the machine off," Granddaddy said. The picker lurched, wobbled, and the man disappeared. The machine shook as the wheels churned into the soft dirt.

"Liam! Harold!" Granddaddy bellowed. The men ran to us, saw the stalled machine, and raced past us toward the accident scene.

Granddaddy gripped my shoulder. "Martha Fran, I want you to go home."

By the time I reached the house, I was crying so hard I could only make choking sounds when I tried to talk.

* * *

Liam and Harold took Granddaddy to the funeral home in town to make arrangements. Harold told me before they left, "Don't come out tomorrow unless you're up to it. We'll understand if you stay home."

"You think I'd miss the funeral?"

"The funeral won't be for another two days. We have a cotton crop to bring in, so tomorrow we pick cotton. We could use your help."

My mind refused to wrap around the idea of picking cotton when Jack lay lifeless in a coffin at the undertaker's.

Zenobia desperately wanted company. She asked for Momma to sit with her. Daddy told her Momma couldn't be disturbed in her present condition, and sent me, a child to comfort a grown woman.

I found Zenobia hunched over the kitchen table, head buried in her hands. The nearly empty whisky bottle kept company with the mixing bowl, the flour canister, broken eggshells, and a melting pool of butter.

She raised her head from her hands. Her face was streaked with tears and flour. "I'm making a Lane cake. We're bound to have company after the funeral."

"Course you are. Looks like all you need to do is pour the batter in the pan and put the pan in the oven. I'll do it for you." I went through all the steps, even though this sad cake would never rise. For good measure I washed the dishes. I ignored the bottle.

"Sit down. I got to tell you something. I did a bad deed and the Lord will never forgive me." Zenobia dropped her head onto her hands and began sobbing.

"Zenobia, you're the godliest woman I know. What could you possibly have done?" I pulled up a chair beside her.

"I loved that baby from the moment Rachel put him in my arms. None of her family came to her funeral. Maybe they didn't know of her death until after the burial. I was alone in the house with Jack when the car pulled up a few weeks later. The woman driving looked so much like Rachel I thought she was a ghost. Rebecca, Rachel's sister, had come for Jack." Zenobia gave a start. "Did you remember to set the oven?"

"I did."

"I told her Jack wasn't here, even though he was asleep inside the house. As best I know, she never tried again to claim the child." Zenobia's shoulders shook. "I denied the boy his rightful heritage for my own selfish

reasons. Now the Lord has punished me by taking him away from me. I'm like a mule tied to the cane press. I have to keep going around in circles.”

I sat beside her and held her while she continued to cry. We changed places; she became the child and I the older, stronger woman.

BILL BROWN

Evening Song

*Put your mouthful of words away
and come with me to watch...*

— Anne Sexton

A bright mauve has stolen the horizon,
brilliant thievery will not last long.
Night's dark angel will open her book,
slowly turn the pages as the whippoorwill

sings her song, then hunts the sky with bats.
Come away from the table where day's
habits crowd *to dos* to hide the marvel
of grained maple patinaed with life.

Earth sails the Milky Way, her little sun
turns our world toward darkness, but
gives us its moonlight. Wind in leaves
stutters pink and navy before the rain crow

tocks her hollow pipe, and the heart's
small details come to haunt our house,
try to make it once again a home. *Put
your words away and come with me*

to listen.

JUDITH WALLER CARROLL

In the Silent Hour

This time it is only the flu,
but watching you sleep,
your face pale against the pillow,
I can't help but remember
those days after your surgery—
the fever spikes, the abscess—
how fear would grip me at midnight,
then slowly ease up toward dawn.
How hope would waken inside me
in the gradual way a fist unclenches,
the way the peony outside our window
gently uncurls its soft-pink petals
in an early slant of sun.

STEPHANIE KAPLAN COHEN

Senior Marathon

There I am,
running shoes, shorts,
sleeveless polo,
walking, puffing
panting up the hill.

Passed by pony-tailed women
On a casual stroll,
who walk and talk,
pass me as if
I were standing still.

One guy
running the other way,
looks at me,
really looks at me,
grins and says,
You Go, Girl.
He makes my day.

KEN CRAFT

Here and Gone

excluding a war zone
human death remains
the mad relative
hidden from sight
while nature
files and catalogues
its dead on the public
narrative of roads

why then
looking down on these shallows
at this same school of minnows
hanging in the same green-peg balance
as last month,

looking at
this same dragonfly
stutter-flying the water's stippled surface
as last summer,

looking at
these same three smallmouth bass
swimming over their soul shadows
against gold-gilled sand
as ten years ago,

am I reminded of you
and why would this moment
choose me to endure the eternity
inherent in minnows, dragonflies
and soul shadows

SHELLY R. FREDMAN

The Sound of Her

My mother swept around our bright kitchen, humming the opening bars of “Camelot.” She kept things immaculately clean, so all that was left were the last touches: decorating a block of cream cheese with parsley, nudging the lox into rows, taking steaming poppy seed bagels—Dad’s favorite—from the oven.

I’d seen her performance a dozen times, and some part of me knew that her face, Old World Modigliani spilling toward Elizabeth Taylor, no longer moved him. I went to wait in my yellow bedroom upstairs, where I could listen for the sound of his convertible pulling into the drive.

An open copy of *Franny and Zooey* lay before me. We’d been studying Salinger at Parkway East Junior High. This was 1971 in Middle America, and even here, in St. Louis, our suburban parents had been swept along in the dismantlings of the sixties, so much so that they’d torn down the walls of our junior high. Open classrooms, where Mr. Cease, in sideburns and shoulder-length hair, taught us history while, a partition away, Mrs. Shipley read Flannery O’Connor out loud, her Southern drawl and languor oddly bumping up against Cease’s stories of survivors in World War II.

I was a dreamy girl, raised on Mom’s fairy tales and Dad’s legends of Pocahontas. The boy in my class who had my heart, but didn’t know it yet, wore a dusky blue coat that skimmed his ankles and a Jewish version of an Afro. Just now, I was binging on Salinger. Like Holden Caulfield, some part of me had seen through the lies we tell each other, and I craved something real.

“It’s only a separation,” Mom told my sister, Lesli, and my brother, Gregg, and me when Dad moved out.

Before he left, Sundays had been just Dad and me. Lesli had Mom’s face, and her uncorrupted joy too, and they’d been aligned from the start. So he was mine. We would take off together sometimes, racing down county back roads toward boat shows and auto clubs, the wind playing in our hair, Tom Jones blasting on the tape deck. I didn’t care for the gleaming metal of Corvettes, and the boats’ cold white hulls did nothing for me. But being next to him was everything.

Now, as the tinny sound of Dad’s music floated up from the driveway, I bolted out of my bedroom and down the stairs. Dad hugged me to his barrel chest; I breathed in his black jacket and English Leather cologne.

“How’s my baby?” he asked, but there was an odd distracted tone in his voice. He didn’t wait for an answer as we headed into the kitchen.

Mom poured coffee; she prattled and smiled as she ladled out scrambled eggs. The smell of her was fierce and acrid though. Something musky beneath her red blouse.

“How’s the business going?” she asked.

“Fantastic,” he replied, scanning the table to be sure we all heard him. “New accounts in Decatur and Carbondale too. Keeping busy.”

Mom had taken a job as secretary at our junior high, and she seemed more tired than ever to me, but she would never let him see that. She smiled and laughed at his jokes, acting as if she was fine with the idea that he’d left, and he, in silent complicity, pretended he belonged here.

Later, after breakfast, Lesli and Gregg and I scrambled into his car. I got the front seat. Dad took us to my cousin’s birthday party, but we hadn’t been among the stacks of presents and clatter of aunts and uncles twenty minutes, before Dad rounded us all up.

“I need to talk to you guys downstairs.” He always called us “you guys,” as if he were just hanging out with his army buddies.

We left the bright balloons and noise, and followed him down into the dank basement. We were supposed to be at a party. Why were we in this dark, cramped place with the misshapen boxes stacked along the wall and a mildewed smell coming off the carpet?

We sat in a row on an old plaid couch, knees pressed together. He sat across from us in a brown corduroy recliner, only he barely sat in the thing at all. He leaned toward us with his fingers laced in some odd parody of prayer.

“Your mother...I...” he said. Moments passed. I pulled my back up straight, felt the sharp spine of the couch through the worn-down cushion.

“I love you guys a lot,” he said. “I just want you to remember, no matter what happens, I really love you.”

“What are you talking about?” Lesli said. She was ten, and lacked the patience I’d been born with.

“Something has happened,” he said. His leg began to shake up and down. “I’m in love with someone. I didn’t mean for it to happen this way, it just sort of...happened.” He shook his head, as if trying to coax more words from his throat, but they wouldn’t come.

My brother began to squirm.

“I can’t tell you who it is,” Dad said. “It’s a friend of your mother’s. She’s going to be upset...it’s for her to tell you if she wants to.”

I picked at a knotted thread of material, pulled it free. “I wanted you to know...in case your mother is upset.”

Panic began to churn inside me, the same breathless panic I'd once felt on the Tilt-A-Whirl ride at a penny arcade in the Ozarks. My parents had taken Lesli and me there when we were kids. They loaded us into these orange vinyl seats, locked the bar, and stepped away. They waved like we were going far away, to someplace wonderful. The thing began to whirl and groan, its mechanical arms dashing back and forth, flinging us from one side of the earth to the other. My sister giggled and bounced. I scrunched my eyes and gripped the bar, somehow unable to scream, praying it would just end.

Who could Dad possibly mean? A friend of my mother's? Clarice Greenberg, who did yoga in those awful spandex pants? Nancy Patterson, who lived next door, and mowed her lawn in red short shorts and high heels?

Lesli began asking him questions about who it was. Gregg slipped to the floor, grabbed a toy truck with a broken wheel. He scooted it against the edge of the couch, making "rhhyymm, rhhyymm" sounds.

"Can we go up now?" my brother finally asked.

"Sure," Dad said, and Gregg bolted. A rush of noise flew in with the opening of the basement door.

"What are we supposed to do?" I said.

"Right now, I just need you to take care of your mother. She's going to be upset."

I didn't know what to make of what he was saying. We trudged up the stairs behind him. Somehow there seemed to be more stairs than before. As if we'd descended beyond the basement to some rabbit hollow, dense and dark and interminable.

After the party, he took us to see *Easy Rider*. As motorcycle wheels screeched past, accompanied by the constant drone of the air conditioner, in that cavernous, fantastic place, I fell in love with the hero in the black leather jacket, wishing he'd take me away with him on his motorcycle, passing by all of this like so many leaves in a breeze.

When we got home later that night, Mom wasn't waiting at the door, as she usually was, ready to grill us on how things went. The breakfast dishes were strewn across the counter; only a few had made it into the sink. The grease from the salami congealed in an iron pan. I took up the dishwashing soap, stood at her place, and wiped down each plate in a kind of frenzy, trying to complete the task exactly as my mother would. If I could keep things in order, maybe everything would be okay.

Later, upstairs, Gregg had fallen asleep on the white shag carpet in Mom's bedroom. He clutched her pillow, fingers glazed with chocolate. I turned off the TV. A bar of light shone at the edge of my sister's door. She was at work at her desk, or maybe asleep. Since Dad left, she'd grown accustomed to tucking herself in at night. But we all slept with a light on.

I put on an old T-shirt, propped my pillows just so, and shut my eyes tight, trying to fall asleep. But I couldn't.

He was never coming back.

I lay there, listening for the late-night sounds of my mom, the muffled pounding of her feet on the carpeted stairs. I lay for a long time, and eventually, to the droning sound of the cicadas outside the window, I fell asleep.

In the middle of the night, I was awakened by a scream. I ran into the hall, shading my eyes from the light. My mother was slumped at the top of the stairs, and my sister and brother clung to her sides. She clutched the wrought iron bannister, and dug her nails into her soft pink palms. Her head rested against one arm, but now and then she lifted it, threw it madly backward, and let out a long, low, eerie kind of sound that was more a moan than a shriek, more animal than human. The stairwell filled with the sound of her.

JULIE CYR

The Hybrid of Luther Burbank

after Frida Kahlo's painting 'The Portrait of Luther Burbank'

He's a hybrid of his own making,
not a plumcot or a blood lime
but half man, half acanthus.
Feet of roots and skin of chlorophyll,
a conversion to energy
with no need of digestion.

He grows from a skeleton,
fertilizer from death into life,
bug chewed, flooded out, worm tunneled.

The risk of green flesh
worth the experiment,
a magician of the exterior
creating the white raspberry
mastering the trickery of fruit,
a botanical albino.

If he's successful,
he could hide behind his leaves,
blending in like a beetle on a leaf
or regrowing a shoot.
If failed, remaining planted
with a solid trunk
feeding off parts of himself,
cannibal or carnivorous plant.

MICHAEL DOOLEY

The Lost Tongue

The bones picked of his story
For a visitor, hands eyed for nails,
He smiled at floor tiles; etches of boot-nail
Whites, loud as surrenders, marooned
On the peninsula of talk.

Up from darkness came mudded
Dredge: the '68 All-Ireland Medal,
Construction sites in England,
'Some man he was' to sign into a dry-out,
but sign back out for Christmas.

Passing cars spluttered.
Stout archaeologists praised at noon
The artefacts of his life,
For these were Public House Rules—
The quiet incant bringing grass up through the floor.

Light as a cattedog, his footing on the path—
Eyes rounded to nocturnal sounds:
Hedge-bristle, bat-pitch,
The susurrate of slaughtered Danes
Heaving under meadows. As did he

When all unsaid came up to fill his lungs—
An oral tradition choked out in chorus—
A symphony for unchanged linen.

JONATHAN LOUIS DUCKWORTH

Brain

The flabby gray seal
sloshes within
the smooth walls
of its cave, forever
seeking out its
reflection in the brine,
but sees only ripples
blooming from
its endless search.

BD FEIL

Memory

There are many things I remember
they insist I shouldn't
the old trestle bridge on Main Street
skating in the Green Mill
the milk wagon drawn
by the last horse in town
its slow clop echoing each morning
the hard life along the flooded river
the city before streets when swamp
covered everything to be
all my future memory
my mother cradling me after a fall
talking softly until I cried it out
oh my brothers and sisters
have always been so jealous

RUPERT FIKE

In Those Days

I.

Late afternoon and Sheetrock Harry's
sitting on a mud bucket, saying he's tired
as his mother must have been back when
she picked cotton, and even though I know
white girls in those fields was not the same thing,
I can't stop myself, it has to come out,
"Wait, my mother picked cotton too!"
Harry perking up at this, less tired now,
and soon we're in a rush of shared details,
passed-down stories from Sunday dinners—
both mothers pulling long bags down long rows,
both with hands torn up by prickly stems.
Even the water boy with his pail and ladle
had been described to us as the same boy,
but, no, Harry's mom picked in Rockdale
while my mother stooped in Elbert County
not that far from *Tobacco Road*.

II.

Air-conditioned combines pick cotton now,
nothing but stubble left in their wake.
The boy who used to earn dimes toting water
down shimmering rows to dog-tired girls,
where is he today? In some food court?
And so what if he is? He'll still have stories,
they just won't be as tied to the earth,
each new group of us further from dirt.
There will come a time when no one's mother
will have picked cotton, and no one will care.

III.

When our daughter flew down from Syracuse
for the funeral of her favorite great aunt,

she did not find the backwoods lay preacher
 colorful as he shook her hand with,
 “Pleased to make your acquaintanceship.”
 Nor did she care for his twangy eulogy,
 his off-key “In the Garden” solo.
 But what did we expect? We were in
 the break-away church of a break-away church
 on an old sea-floor plain outside Fitzgerald
 close by the Jefferson Davis capture site.
 The funeral procession had wound through town
 past a pee-wee foot ball game that stopped
 while each boy held his helmet over his heart.
 “These are your Aunt Pauline’s people,”
 I told our daughter. “These are your people.”
 She shook her head, “No. No, they’re not.”

IV.

I was eight when I saw my great aunt laid out
 on the dining room table in a house
 that smelled of ashes even in summer.
 I had eaten at that table, but now
 I never wanted to eat there again.
 But this story’s nothing next to my mother’s
 memory of her very first “Coke Cola,”
 how she pulled it herself from the ice tub
 under her dead granny on that same table.
 In those days, she said, if you died in summer
 grieving had to go fast, ice was expensive,
 so why not put cold drinks in the tubs,
 three of them needed to cool Granny Maxwell,
 a large woman, for even though her spirit
 had left its body, the body didn’t know.
 It kept on working. Things kept happening.

REE DAVIS

Fine

The room is fuzzy and bright. There is a clamoring at the edges—voices, metal, plastic, footsteps. You are queasy, agitated and uncomfortable, yet immobile. You black out, come to; fade in, fade out. You hear voices in the distance as someone comes close to your side and then moves away again. The room starts to take shape with forms glowing in the midst of the dark hole of your brain. You can see the ceiling and walls now. There are nurses bustling about. One comes to the bedside.

“DO YOU KNOW WHERE YOU ARE?” she yells as she fusses with tubing near the bed. You feel pain like a wire shoot through your hand. “DO YOU KNOW WHERE YOU ARE?” she repeats, leaning her face into yours.

“Yes,” you say through the parched flesh of your mouth. Your cheeks drag across gums and teeth. “Surgery.” Your tongue moves in a pointless attempt to create lubrication.

You fade out again, only to be pulled back by the nurse’s persistent hollering, “DO YOU HAVE ANY PAIN?”

You want to say “Keep it down,” but instead do a fast scan for possible pain sites. Your body feels like it’s laden with bricks. The flesh of your stomach is pierced, swollen, and stiff. Your throat is as dry as your mouth and it catches. You choke out rough coughs. Not painful, until they rake across the inside of your stomach like a web of spikes. You want it to stop. “Yes.”

She messes with the tubes again. There’s a burning in your hand and up your arm. The nurse disappears. The pain fades into the distance, beyond your concern.

The next day, the doctor visits. She is seven months pregnant and sits heavily at the end of the bed. You flash to an image of her reaching over her swollen abdomen and into the open cavity of your body. She is noticeably tired, but glowing with the hormone surge of pregnancy.

“No wonder you were in pain, I had to take the right ovary and fallopian tube. They were one large solid mass, the size of an orange, with lots of scar tissue. Couldn’t really tell what it was, but I can tell you it was benign. That’s the good news: Once you have one benign tumor, they usually all are.”

You mean there will be more, you think as you stare at her expectant belly.

“You should consider not having children. Hormonal changes might bring on more of these growths.”

You go home, where you recover. Your mother rejoices at the news the tumor was benign. You wince when you move, bend, reach, cough. Alone, you run a finger along the thin pink scar on your stomach and contemplate a childless life. There’s never any real explanation: there was mass, they took it out. It was benign. You will be fine.

One day, your foot begins to ache with a dull pain that becomes stronger with each step. You start to limp. A new doctor gives steroid injections into the site of the pain. Over the next months, you have many shots and the effect dissipates. A nerve is damaged and must be removed. Again, you are in a surgical arena, this time with a tourniquet tight on one leg. The doctor sits at your feet. Through a fog of Valium, you can see his head, neck, and shoulders: struggling, digging, cutting. You hear the wet slicing of flesh and smell the burning of cauterizing. Suddenly you feel a pull deep in your foot, as if its very core is being wrenched out.

“Ow.”

“You felt that?” The doctor looks up from his work, horrified.

There is fire in your leg and the pain subsides. You want to reach down and undo the tourniquet, but the Valium holds you back. You stare at yellowed ceiling tiles. The nurse yells, “IS THAT BETTER?” You close your eyes and let the Valium take over.

Days later, in his office, the doctor is apologetic. “It was something I’ve never seen. A mass around a nerve, solid and hard. I had to take the whole system. Portions of your foot will be numb, but it was benign. That’s the good news. Usually, if you have one benign tumor, they’ll all be benign.”

You go home again. It’s weeks before you can walk normally. You fondle the new pink scar between your toes, a slice right down the middle of one foot, and are fascinated by the numbness underneath. Life goes on. You are down one ovary, one fallopian tube, some foot nerves, and the ability to bear children. You will be fine.

Not long after, at a routine dental exam, you have a panoramic X-ray. The resulting film causes anxiety in the dentist and his staff. They hustle by the room, glancing in with greater interest than before. He comes in and clips the film to a lightbox. You can see a white form the size of a pecan just to the right of your chin, with dense veins meandering out from it, earrings dangle at either end of the picture. He sends you to a surgeon.

The surgeon and his assistant question how long it has been there, how it might have occurred. They discuss options of what to do. You are excluded from the conversation. You sit in the exam room gazing up at the

illuminated mass, transfixed by its presence and wishing you had worn posts. The surgeon tells you of not being able to completely extract it, of possible complications, facial numbness, and facial paralysis. The nurse stares flatly, her half smile exposes tips of overly white teeth. You leave the office, a manila envelope with the X-ray in hand.

You change dentists.

At your grandmother's funeral, in a cemetery shrouded in the bleakness of winter, you notice fingers of pain wrapping around your skull. She was a nasty woman, so perhaps it's just a headache from standing in frigid and foul weather to honor her. You dip your chin into the neck of your coat, but this only exposes your head to more cold, increasing the clamp of agony. At the end of the service, you help your mother to the car. Your head throbs. You want it to stop. You say nothing.

While the pain becomes unbearable, you study the symptoms of migraines in the medical books your mother collects. You recite them accurately to the doctor. He gives you a six-month prescription for Vicodin and you go home with a small vile of the drug clenched in one hand. The grip on your skull is brutal. The Vicodin provides much needed indifference.

One day you feel lumps on your neck. At the doctor's they are poked and prodded. You explain a lack of soreness as he pushes the forms into your flesh. He refers you to a surgeon and, once again, you are in a surgical arena. There are doctors and nurses at your side, needles in your hand, burning fluid in your veins, and plastic tubing forced down your throat. Once again, you wake in recovery to pain and nurses screaming, "DO YOU KNOW WHERE YOU ARE?" And your mouth is tight and parched and your throat is constricted and rough and you can barely speak. "ARE YOU IN ANY PAIN?" And you try to croak a response, but can only nod and feel the tug of stitched flesh along your neck and behind one ear, and you wonder about facial numbness as you pass back into oblivion.

Later, the surgeon is apologetic for being so rough. He thought it was a reactive lymphatic system, but it was something else, a mass of hardened nodes and scar tissue—tough, chewy even, with a long string of tentacles seemingly emanating from your jaw that was a struggle to remove, but he was able to avoid the jawbone and thereby prevented facial paralysis. Thank God the biopsy came back and the thing was benign. That's the good news.

You go home. You stare into the mirror and fondle the pink scar snaking around your neck. The back of your head is shaved. You wear interesting hats and scarves. Life goes on. You are down one ovary, one fallopian tube, some foot nerves, one grandmother, seven lymph nodes, and a lot of hair. You have forgotten about having children. You never experience

facial paralysis. The numbness in your foot persists and your neck is tight, but you will be fine.

You are resigned to your body's agenda, subjugated by flesh in constant flux. You play on the sympathy of a medical field incapable of actually helping. The doctor provides Vicodin just to keep you off his back. You go home from the pharmacy with a new supply. Through a haze of drug-induced apathy, you consider the morphing collection of cells that your body has become, bent on its singular yet unknown plan.

The thing in your jaw continues to grow. It reaches into your body like tree roots in the ground, weaving and wrapping its way between ribs and around organs. Weight collects on your chest, increasing everyday like a dense leaden blanket, crushing and full. You imagine a mass to dwarf all previous masses. You dig at your ribcage, but the bones obstruct your probing. The thing's heaviness amplifies, making it difficult to breathe. You lie in bed, feeling it resting within, wondering if it too is benign and you will be fine. You want to tell someone, but the ongoing onslaught of Vicodin in your system quells your fears even though you inhale in light gasps, fighting against the load on your chest.

The room is small, fuzzy, and familiar. There are muffled sounds and movements at the edges of your field of vision. You are uncomfortable yet immobile. Your mother stands over you, her face in yours, "CAN YOU HEAR ME?" You feel her try to shake you, but you are leaden. There are strangers at your side, wearing navy blue nylon jackets with the orange letters "EMS" embroidered on them. Under a cloak of narcotics your smile is nonchalant, like you are meeting at a cocktail party, but you gasp for air and welcome the mask closing over your mouth.

You are in the emergency room. Nurses and aids bustle around you, connecting machines with wires and tubes. A faint beeping beats in tune with your circulating blood. Beneath your skin, you feel ribs cracking—brittle and fine, like the shell of an egg.

A doctor with a stethoscope leans over you. "Are you in any pain?"

You try to nod but your neck is frozen, your mouth secured around a plastic hose. You plead with your eyes, but the doctor withdraws, reappearing seconds later wearing a mask and gloves. He lifts the sheet covering your body.

"What the hell?" He looks at your torso with a mixture of awe and revulsion. You want to look too, but cannot budge.

A nurse comes to his side. She bends her head. Her face wrinkles in confusion.

The doctor motions for the nurse to hold the sheet. His hands disappear.

“Doctor.” The nurse is almost reprimanding as she watches.

Suddenly the doctor braces himself against the table. Then he pulls his arms in arcs over his head. His eyes almost rupture with surprise, while the nurse collides with the equipment.

You want to speak, to say, ‘What the hell?’ too, but you know what it is. Something you’ve made, something bigger and stronger than you.

D. G. GEIS

Cenotaph

When I consider
the suffering

that life occasions,
I remember the stars.

How badly they must sleep
to turn continuously

in their vast beds.
The gratitude they must feel

to have given themselves
so completely—

and finally collapse
in heaven's arms.

How when their fever breaks
and the light goes out of them,

the light still reaches us;
and that what we see

is not the star itself,
but its memorial,

a luminous confession
of what is no longer there.

And while we worship the
light,
the stars themselves

prefer to reverence darkness,
for whom distance is love;

and endless praise,
a canticle to emptiness.

EVAN GURNEY

This Is Your Head

he growled and punched
a hole in the drywall.
Its hollowed face stayed there,
gaping, until the day we moved.

He jokes about it sometimes,
how he might have hit a stud,
but I will never forget
the warm sweaty feeling of fear,

something trickling down my leg.

MARY LOUISE KIERNAN HAGERDON

La Seduzione

Luglio (July) 1998

Of all the fruits—
melon wrapped
in marbled prosciutto,
sliced grapes carried
from the *alimentari*,
pearl-like berries
(desired yet untaken)
—it was the nectarine,
his description of
the nectarine,
its ripeness,
its velvety skin,
its testicular shape,
which aroused her *appetito*
on the *ristorante* balcony in
the blessed *porto* of Assisi.

CYNDY MUSCATEL

Of Pinafores and Satin Bows

The summer I was five, I had a lot to worry about. We moved into a new house when my sister was born. Two big adjustments—the house and my sister. But that wasn't all. Every Wednesday at noon an air raid siren went off. President Eisenhower said on the radio that the siren was to help us, but it scared me. I had to hold my breath the whole minute so we wouldn't be attacked.

I'd been so happy living at Edgewater, but my parents said three kids couldn't fit into a two-bedroom apartment. I'd loved sharing a room with my big brother, Steve. He knew lots of things, especially how to keep the night monsters away. And I had a million friends. Mother even let me walk to my friend Chi Chi's house by myself.

All that changed at East Boston Terrace. I can't tell you why, but it never felt like a friendly house, even though my parents loved it. "It was designed by the architect Paul Thiry. He's called the father of architectural modernism in the Pacific Northwest, you know," my mother told Auntie Lil, using her Queen of England voice.

In the beginning my sister was in my parents' room. I had my own bedroom and Steve had his. I didn't like it. During the day my wallpaper was a pretty design—bunches of flowers on a blue striped background. But at night the flowers bordering the ceiling turned into skulls and crossbones. My parents were so busy with a new baby, a new store, and a new house that I didn't want to add to their problems. And Steve seemed so far away, even though he was in the next room. So on the nights I felt too scared to close my eyes in case one of the skulls grabbed me, I slept in the hallway.

Then there was the baby. When they first told me about it, I thought a baby in the family might be fun. Boy, was I wrong. First of all, she cried a lot. Second, I thought I'd be able to hold her and maybe feed her a bottle. After all, I'd had a lot of experience doing it with my doll, but my parents and Allie Mae wouldn't let me near Pamela.

Allie Mae was our maid. We didn't have much money, but, on and off, we had a maid because both my parents worked. They'd bought a jewelry store in downtown Seattle and worked long hours to get it going. It didn't give them much time for anything else. Before the baby, no matter how busy she was, Allie Mae always had time for me. I remember sitting in her lap and playing with her hand. While the outside was brown, the skin of

her palm was white, the lifelines darker. I'd trace those lines with my white baby fingers, feeling the softness of her skin and the sandpaper roughness of her fingertips.

But those days of cuddles were gone. Everyone forgot me unless someone said, "Shhhhh, don't wake the baby."

One day I decided I'd had enough. "Daddy," I said, "I don't like how the baby cries. It's so noisy."

My dad patted my head absentmindedly. "Give her a chance, Cynthia. If you still don't like your sister, we can mail her back."

"How would you do that?" I asked.

"We'd put her in that big mailbox at the top of the hill."

That gave me pause. She was a pain, all right, but I didn't want Pammy stuffed into a box.

"Okay, I'll give her more time," I said.

After another few weeks I knew it wasn't going to work. "Daddy, I gave her a chance, but now I'm ready to send her back," I said.

Daddy looked up from his newspaper. "Well, the thing is, it's too late now. We can't send her back—we have to keep her."

"But you said we could."

"I know but I can't do anything about it now. If you'd said something sooner..."

I went to bed that night thinking life was so unfair. I was so mad, even the skulls and crossbones didn't bother me.

I wasn't much of an eater in those days. One night Allie Mae put a plate of pot roast, peas, and potatoes in front of me. I could only stare at it. She'd cut up the meat for me, and I finally put a piece in my mouth. I chewed the stringy chunk until it was a glob that I moved from one side of my mouth to the other. "Sugar, you be sure to eat up your roast and those peas, you hear," she said from around the corner of the kitchen.

Swinging my legs, I chewed the beef and worried about how I'd eat the peas. I didn't want the little pea girl to feel lonely as she slid down my throat. I decided to put five peas on my fork so the whole family could go together. Since I couldn't stand the mushy feel of them in my mouth, I began to swallow them whole. But no matter how hard I tried, I could never swallow the meat. It seemed to grow larger until it crowded my tonsils. I spit it into my napkin when Allie Mae wasn't looking. That worked well until she found the wadded-up napkin in the trash can in the bathroom.

"Shame on you. Why, there are starving children in China," she said, swatting my bottom and sending me to my room.

I sat on my bed, hugging my teddy bear and sucking my thumb. Nobody loves me, I thought. Nobody cares.

The next day was Sunday. Daddy always made pancakes and little piggies on Sunday. I got up and started for the stairs. Somehow I tripped and rolled from the top to the bottom. I lay there, unhurt but stunned. Then I started to cry.

“What’s the matter?” Daddy called from the kitchen.

My brother came to look. “Oh, she fell down the stairs again,” he said. “Come on, baby, get up.”

He held out a hand.

“I’m not a baby.” I ran back up the stairs to my bedroom.

I got onto my bed and held my teddy tight. The Swensen girls, who lived four houses away, had told me about a girl who knew her family didn’t love her.

“She was adopted,” Linda said.

“Yeah, and they were mean to her. So she ran away,” Barbara added.

I put my thumb in my mouth. Maybe I was adopted. Everyone always asked me where I got my blue eyes because no one else in my family had them. Mommy told me to tell them I got them from the milkman. When I said it, it always got a big laugh. I didn’t know why.

Had they wanted to send me back but waited too long and had to keep me? I wondered.

“I bet that’s what happened,” I said aloud. “Just like with Pammy. They’re stuck with me.”

I sucked my thumb and thought. Then I stood up. “I better run away like that other girl. They’ll be sorry when I’m gone.”

In the wardrobe closet I took out my black and white checked case and threw some things in it. I put Teddy under my arm and carefully walked down the stairs.

At the front door I called out, “I’m running away from home.”

No one answered. With a heavy heart I opened the door and stepped outside. I walked very slowly out the front yard and past the driveway.

I was sure Mother would come out to scold me for making her nervous. “You get right back into the house this minute!” she’d say.

But no. No one came.

I kept walking, Teddy in one hand and my suitcase in the other. Halfway up the hill I started getting scared. I had no plan. Well, my plan was that someone would stop me. I wasn’t allowed to go farther than the top of the hill. And I didn’t really want to. I could get lost. Or there could be a bomb. Steve told me if Korea threw a bomb at us, he’d throw it back. But if I was alone, I wouldn’t be able to throw it back myself. What was I going to do?

I sat down on the curb and started to cry. I knew it, I thought. No one loves me. Nobody cares about me. They don't even care if I run away. They're probably happy I'm gone.

After a while I trudged back down the hill. I let myself into the house and climbed the stairs as quietly as I could. I didn't want them to know I'd backed down. I unpacked my overnight case and put it away. Then I got under the covers. I held Teddy very close. It was just him and me.

When Daddy tapped on the door and came in, I turned my face into the pillow.

He sat down on my bed. "You're having a tough time, aren't you, Cynthia?"

I shuddered back a sob but didn't say anything.

"Aww, sweetheart." He began to pat my back. "Don't cry. It'll all work out. You'll see."

The next Saturday, before they left for work, Daddy took me aside. "Cynthia, Mommy and I have a real treat planned for you," he said.

"What is it?"

"Steve is going to stay overnight at his friend's. You know, Harvey?"

I nodded. "Uh-huh. He lives by Volunteer Park."

"That's right. So he'll be at Harvey's, and you get to go to Allie Mae's tonight. Then tomorrow you'll spend the whole day with her."

"Really?" I clapped my hands together. "Can I go pack right now?"

He smoothed back my bangs. "Sure can."

In August the sun sets late in Seattle, so even though it was after my bedtime, the sky was bright as we set off from home that night.

Daddy was in the driver's seat, Allie Mae next to him. I was in the back, practicing snapping my fingers. I'd been working on it for a while and was getting close.

It was quiet in the car except for the radio playing a jazzy tune. Every once in a while, I heard Daddy murmur something to Allie Mae.

When we got to her house, it was getting dark. Daddy walked up the wooden stairs onto the porch with us, but I got to carry my suitcase by myself.

"Watch your step here," Allie Mae said, pointing to a place where the wood was splintered.

We walked around the hole to the front door. Allie Mae had her key out and she unlocked it. When we stepped inside, the air felt thick with heat.

Allie Mae turned to my father. "You go on now and don't worry about Cynthia. She'll be fine here."

"Okay, but call us if you need to," Daddy said in his worried voice.

She patted his hand. "We won't need anything, Mr. Thal."

Daddy smiled at her and then leaned down to me. “Now, be good and mind Allie Mae.”

I put my arms around his neck and he hugged me tight.

By the time he drove off in the Chevy, Allie Mae had rolled up the Venetian blinds to let in a little light.

“Follow me and I’ll show you where the bedrooms are,” she said.

We walked down a short hallway, and she led me into a bedroom that had pink curtains and a pink bedspread.

“This was my little girl’s bedroom,” she said.

“Where’s your little girl now?”

Allie Mae began turning down the spread. “Ella moved down to Los Angeles.”

“Do you miss her?” I asked.

“I do,” she said. “I surely do.”

I moved over to where she stood and hugged her around the waist.

“You’re a sweet child,” she said.

In the morning when I opened my eyes, Allie Mae was standing right by my bed.

“I was just going to wake you up,” she said. “Breakfast is on the table and we need to hurry. Church starts at ten o’clock.”

Breakfast was delicious. Bacon and eggs and something Allie Mae called grits. I ate every bite.

Then Allie Mae took me into the bathroom to clean up. She brushed my hair one hundred strokes and bobbypinned the blue, satin bow into place. She helped me into my white dress and starched blue pinafore she’d ironed at my house. I put on my Mary Janes, which had been polished to a shine with Vaseline.

Allie Mae was already dressed in a gray suit. She pinned her straw hat with the matching gray ribbon into place before she locked the door, and we started down the front stairs.

“Goodness gracious. I don’t know how we got so late,” she said, hurrying me along the sidewalk.

The church was pretty far away—at least four blocks. When we walked up the stairs and inside, the vestibule was empty. Allie Mae looked me up and down to be sure I hadn’t gotten mussed along the way. She refastened the ribbon on my head, and then she pushed open a swinging door. We walked into the church. The walls were painted white, and there was a large cross behind the pulpit in front.

The service hadn’t begun yet, but most all of the people sat on benches in rows.

As we started down the aisle, one lady called out, “Allie Mae, is that your sweet little Cynthia you talk about?”

I turned to beam at her. She had on a straw hat that was twice as big as Allie Mae’s. And it had flowers all over it.

Several people stood and called out greetings as we walked by them. Many touched me on top of my head. Allie Mae smiled more than I’d ever seen her smile.

We moved into an aisle just as the pastor started the service. I liked the way Allie Mae stood so straight, the strap of her pocketbook over her wrist. I liked listening to her voice when she sang the songs.

“They’re called gospels,” she whispered to me.

I managed to sit quietly for most of the service. Some of the time I practiced snapping my fingers and some of the time the choir sang. When they did, we got to stand up and clap to the music. A woman swayed her arms back and forth so I did too.

The pastor’s voice got real loud when he talked, and I scooted closer to Allie Mae. Sometimes people shouted out, “Amen! Amen!” after he said something.

“Amen,” I said, trying it out.

When I got fidgety, Allie Mae slipped me a Lifesaver.

After the service Allie Mae led me to the line where people waited to greet the pastor.

Several people patted my head as I came near them.

“Look at those blond curls,” a man said.

A woman who had a fur around her neck smiled at me. I leaned into Allie Mae when I saw little fox feet on the fur.

“How sweet,” the lady said.

I basked in all the attention, but soon after we’d said our hellos to the pastor, Allie Mae wanted to leave. “Let’s go,” she said, taking my hand.

As we stood on the sidewalk, she straightened my bow. “I surely didn’t like all those people patting your head,” she said.

I tilted my head back so I could see her face. “How come?”

“I just didn’t,” she said.

I knew that voice. It meant I better not ask any more questions.

Because we weren’t in a hurry, we walked home at a leisurely pace.

“Look, Allie Mae. A leaf just fell off the tree.” I pointed to the brown and green leaf floating to the ground.

She sighed. “It’ll be fall before we know it.”

She sounded sad so I held her hand tighter.

When we were on Allie Mae’s block, I saw a Chevy parked in front of her house.

“Goodness gracious,” I said, “my daddy’s here.”

Allie Mae clutched my hand for a second and then let it go. “Yes, it surely looks like it.”

Up ahead the car door opened and Daddy got out.

“Daddy!” I called and ran to his open arms.

He scooped me up and hugged me.

By then Allie Mae had reached us. “Hello, Mr. Thal. I thought Cynthia was staying ’til this afternoon.”

“We missed her so much, I had to come get her early,” Daddy said.

Allie Mae nodded. “I see. Well, come on in while I gather her things together.”

Daddy put me down and we followed Allie Mae into the house. Daddy and Mommy missed me, I kept thinking. They missed me!

Allie Mae helped me out of my dress and into play clothes. Then we went into her kitchen, and she packed up fried chicken and potato salad from the refrigerator.

“I’ll never eat all this by myself,” she said, handing it to Daddy.

When I kissed her good-bye, I thought I saw tears in her eyes. I hugged her extra hard. She must be lonely with her own little girl so far way.

In the car I sat right next to Daddy. “Me and My Shadow” was playing on the radio and we sang along.

At a stoplight he looked over at me. “Did you have a good time?”

I nodded. “It was fun. And all the people in the church were so nice to me.”

“Of course they were,” Daddy said. “You’re a special girl.”

I smiled a smile as wide as the ocean.

“I felt Allie Mae was sad that I was leaving,” I said after a minute. “I think she misses her daughter.”

“I can understand that. Mommy and I missed you in one day,” he said.

As the light turned green, I leaned against his arm. I didn’t feel so worried now. I was going home with my daddy, and I felt safe.

BENJAMIN HARNETT

You Do Your Best

The faux battlements
of the Kingdom Hall take on
a dramatic silhouette.
A tarp in a stiff wind
rippling, or some planks
dropped by workmen clap
together. Rain-wet concrete,
sawdust, and bits of nail.
The earth is bared
of green, and speckled
like a whale.

The great, fleshy tulip,
battered by the storm,
yellow petals each
as big as your palm,
is only half a shattered
Snapple bottle,
cradled like your only
treasure on a tuft
of city weeds.

JOHN HORVATH, JR.

Together, Awaiting a Bright West

We were tasting sunset—
sweet ripe orange and
deep purple grape of it.

Loving that vanilla bean
cream of the clouds and
tart blackberry heaven.

Her satisfaction, a jet stream
while I spoke the straight and
evaporating, the short-term

nonsense
of contrails.
She knew it.

HADLEY HURY

Acting at the Ice Cream Parlor

In mid-afternoon there are no other people about,
and he sits as anyone might on a hot day
at one of the three or four tables,
each shaded by its big umbrella,
alongside the homemade ice cream parlor.

At first I think he is reading a magazine,
but as I walk toward the door
and pass within a few feet I see
that it is a crumpled flyer or newspaper insert.
It is upside down, and he bobs his head in animation—
looking down at the ragged pages and then up, back and forth—
and mouths unvoiced words with vigorous expression,
as though perhaps someone sits across from him.

If this were a short story
the narrator would stop at the table on his way in
(perhaps recalling Fitzgerald's line in *The Last Tycoon*,
"There are no second acts in American lives")
and, with tremendously casual off-handedness,
hold out a couple of dollars and say,
"Will you let me buy you an ice-cream cone?"
"...It's pretty warm out here" —
not staying, not even lingering, just a quick passing offer,
a small thing, something cool to accompany one's reading.

Instead, when I leave a few minutes later,
he has just risen and is beginning to walk
in sandals patched with duck tape.
Our paths cross diagonally,
and there is the briefest, very civil, exchange of glances.
In the unforgiving glare of the sun one of us
— lines forgotten, out of character — withdraws toward a car,
while the other strides down the street, a spring in his step,
pages furled neatly under one arm like a jaunty broker's *Journal* —
face open with a daring smile.

ROBERT LEE KENDRICK

Lightscape

Star glint soaks the valley's green
cleft, varnishes night with isotope music
older than Earth's molten marrow,
each one keening a fission aubade
across the expanding dark until burnt
cold and black, crushed from within
by what once burst with brilliance.

KARA KNICKERBOCKER

Sixteen

Slow, now
before embers of Newports burn
out like leaving the body unchained,
before being baptized in wet cement
next to everything that is breakable.

Quick, now
after drinking dusk with windows down,
after crossing bridges built by new tongues
while we still taste a summer
that is not yet ours.

RAY MORRISON

Custody Battle

The banging in my head takes on the same beat as the rapping on my door. I squeeze my eyes tight, hoping that someone knocking so early on a Saturday is merely the tail end of a hangover-driven dream.

“Open up, Joe! I’m in a hurry and I don’t have time for this.”

When I crack open the door, the bright late spring sunlight burns my throbbing eyeballs. My ex-wife, Jeanette, is standing on the porch looking at her watch. Her blonde hair is several shades lighter than I remember and frames her face in elegant waves. She’s all made up and I can smell a hint of some delightful perfume I don’t recognize. She looks amazing.

“Christ, Joe,” Jeanette says, “Were you still sleeping? It’s after noon.”

“It’s my day off.”

“So I smell,” she says.

That’s when I notice Carter standing behind her. Our son is fifteen and lives full-time with his mother. Jeanette doesn’t like him to spend much time with me because of what she refers to as my “bad habits.” It’s tough to argue that point.

“Oh, shit, Carter, I forgot. I’m sorry.” Jeanette had asked me if Carter could spend one night at my place because she had some work-related thing that’s supposed to run late. Over Jeanette’s shoulder I see Carter nod and flick a brief smile.

“Really?” Jeanette says. “I asked you just two days ago about this and already it’s slipped your mind?”

My stomach roils, filling my throat with a sharp, rancid burning.

“Easy, Jeanie. It’s all good.” I look at my son and grin. “When do you need him home?”

“Get him home no later than six tomorrow,” Jeanette says. “He’s got a big chemistry final on Monday and he needs to study, which I doubt he’ll do here.” She glances over her shoulder at the patchy scrub grass in front of my shithole of a rental house. “Although out here in the boonies I’m not sure what else he could do. I’ve never understood why you want to live out in the middle of nowhere, Joe.”

I pull the door fully open so Carter can come inside. I watch him step around and give his mother a quick kiss on the cheek.

“You guys have fun, Mom,” Carter says. “See you tomorrow.”

I lift my eyebrows at Jeanette, who frowns at Carter. She flips me the bird and hurries back to her car. I watch her smooth her hair and check her makeup in her car’s rearview mirror before backing out of the driveway.

When I shut the door and turn around, Carter is smiling. Carter is tall, a good inch taller than I am, and good-looking, on the cusp of becoming handsome, with a thick mop of dark, curly hair (my contribution) with Jeanette’s bright, intelligent green eyes.

“She’s got a date with a new boyfriend,” he says. “Or should I say ‘sleepover’?”

“That right?”

“Yeah. She didn’t want me to say anything to you, but I figured you didn’t really care.”

“Don’t worry. I don’t,” I say. But I know that’s a lie and I once again experience regrets I’ve felt often in the five years since I lost Jeanette. Other than Carter she was easily the best thing I’d ever had and I screwed it up. My temples begin to throb again.

“Sorry the place is such a mess, kiddo. I would have straightened up if I’d remembered.”

“No worries, Dad.” He unslings his backpack and tosses it on the end of the couch.

“You hungry, or want something to drink? I haven’t got much, but I’m sure I can find something.”

“How about a beer?” Carter asks.

I gaze at him to see if he’s joking. I don’t think he is, and in that moment I realize how much my son looks like me. And how badly I stink of booze.

“I don’t think that’d be wise.”

We both nod. Carter unzips his bag and slides out his laptop computer.

“Figured it didn’t hurt to ask. Got any soda?”

“There’s probably some ginger ale. Help yourself.” Carter starts for the kitchen. “Hey, son, do you mind if I grab another hour or so of shuteye? I’m feeling a bit rocky. We’ll figure out something fun to do later, when I’m a tad steadier.”

“I’d like that,” he says. “You still got WiFi?”

I nod and ignore the unspoken implication of his question. Carter walks down the hall to the kitchen at the back of the house.

My bedroom is bright despite the shades being drawn. A band of sunlight sneaking in at the edge of the window cuts across the bottom of my bed. I figure at this point I won’t be able to sleep long, if at all, but I lie down just to ease the pounding at my temples.

Two hours later, Carter shakes me awake. The light in the room has dimmed and the line of light has crawled halfway up the wall opposite my bed.

“Dad, wake up. There’s someone here.” I smell beer on Carter’s breath.

“Who is it?”

“He wouldn’t say. Just said I’d better get you fast.” Carter looks quickly over his shoulder toward the bedroom door. I can see he’s scared.

My head doesn’t hurt as bad as before, but sitting up takes considerable effort.

“Did he say what he wanted?” Carter shakes his head. I snatch a pair of crumpled jeans that are draped over the end board and slip them on. “What does he look like?”

“Big and bald,” he says. “And scary.”

“Does he have a thick scar crossing over the bridge of his nose?”

“Yeah. Who is it, Dad?”

“His name is Holt. I need you to stay in here while I talk to him. Do you understand me, Carter?”

“Sure.”

In the living room Holt is sitting on the couch looking at the screen on Carter’s computer. When he sees me, he stands up and moves one hand around his back and leaves it there. I’ve no doubt he’s got a gun. Holt’s not the type to take chances.

“We need our money, Joe,” Holt says.

Holt is the collector for the bookie I’ve used for the past year. He’d be scary looking even if he didn’t have that damned scar across his wide bulldog face. At six-foot-two he and I may be the same height, but he outweighs me by at least a hundred pounds.

“I thought I had until next week.”

Holt grins. “Well, you thought wrong. Now give me what you owe and then you can go back to playing with your kid.”

“Listen, Holt, I got most of it. Just give me until Monday and I’ll have it all.” I glance down the hall toward the bedroom. “My son’s here. I don’t want him to have to see any more of his old man being a loser.”

“That’s your problem. Mine is, if I don’t go back with all of what you owe, then I’m the one in trouble. I don’t plan on bein’ in trouble because of a shitbag like you.” He reaches up and slides a cellphone from his shirt pocket. “If you’d prefer, I can call Jenkins and ask him how he wants me to handle this?”

Jenkins is the guy I owe the money to. Holt and I are equally aware of what the answer to that would be.

“There’s no need for that, Holt,” I say. “I’m sure we...”

Just then Holt’s gaze shifts abruptly to the right and he whips out the handgun that was in his waistband and points it down the hall. I turn to see Carter standing there with his eyes wide, his arms extended with his palms out.

“What the hell’s going on, Dad?”

I turn to Holt. “Put the gun away. He’s got nothing to do with this.”

Holt’s eyes shift from Carter to me, then back. “It’s simple, Joe. Give me the money and no one gets hurt.” He drops his phone back into his pocket and grips the gun in both hands.

The pulsing in my head amps up and I can feel my heart pounding like I’ve just run a marathon.

“Come on, Holt, let’s talk about this calmly,” I say.

Holt then cocks the hammer on the gun and edges the barrel up so it’s aimed at Carter’s head. Without hesitating, I step forward and kick my leg hard, knocking the gun with the sole of my bare foot. It flies out of Holt’s grip. The pistol arcs away, bouncing off the wall to land on the floor a foot or so from Carter. He darts to it and picks it up. Carter aims the gun at Holt. I can see Carter’s hand is shaking like crazy.

“Get out of this house, asshole!” Carter shouts, his eyes glued to the big goon in my living room.

Holt starts walking slowly toward Carter. “You’ll want to give that gun to me now, boy. We don’t want anyone getting hurt.”

“Stop where you are,” Carter says. Holt keeps advancing.

I hurry over and grab Holt’s arm to pull him back. It feels like I’m holding a steel pipe. He swings the fist of his other hand but I manage to duck underneath the punch, letting go of my grip on his arm. Holt swivels and grabs my neck in a headlock. I flail weak punches at his midsection, which makes him squeeze down harder on my neck. I struggle to get air. Tiny bright dots fill my vision and I’m getting faint. My legs buckle. Then I hear a shot and the pressure on my neck is gone. I fall onto my side to see Holt on the floor next to me, moaning and pressing both hands over the inside of his thigh. Blood oozes between his fingers and runs down his leg onto the faded green carpet.

“You shot me, you little prick!” Holt says. He’s glaring at Carter, who stands frozen with his arm extended, the gun still pointing straight ahead.

I manage to scramble up and take the gun away from Carter. He is pale and trembling all over.

“I think we’d better get out of here, Carter,” I say.

Holt tries to push himself up. “You and your kid just made a big fuckin’ mistake, Joe. I hope you know that.”

Holt gets onto his good knee and attempts to stand. I walk over and drive my foot directly onto the bleeding hole in his other leg. While Holt screams, I tell my son to wait outside while I grab my car keys and wallet from my bedroom. Carter hurries out of the house and I run over and snatch Holt’s cell phone from his shirt pocket before running down the hall. I hear Holt’s moaning, and when I return his leg is gushing blood. He’s panting, worried, as he looks to me with pleading eyes.

“This is bad, Joe,” Holt says. “At least dial 911 before you leave. I need an ambulance. I could bleed to death.”

I glance at Holt’s leg and see he’s likely correct. Underneath his leg, spreading fast, is a huge puddle of blood. More blood than I’ve ever seen.

Carter pokes his head through the front door. “Come on, Dad. We gotta go. Just leave him. That asshole was going to kill me, remember?”

I stand there in my living room, frozen, unsure what to do. Finally I hurry toward the door. Before shutting it, I take one last look at Holt.

Once outside, I lock the door. I figure if Holt ever manages to scramble up, he’ll have at least a small obstacle getting the door open, which in his weakened state might be difficult. When I turn away from the house, Carter is already standing next to my beat up Malibu, his hand gripping the door handle. I hurry over and unlock the car. When we get in, I lean across Carter to open the glove box and toss Holt’s gun inside.

“We’ll get rid of that as soon as we get a chance,” I say.

Carter nods. “Where will we go?”

“I have no idea. We’ll have to figure that out on the road.” I jab the key into the ignition.

Holt had parked his Expedition right behind my Chevy, nearly touching bumpers. I’m guessing he didn’t want me escaping before he got my money. I have to pull up and back several times until I get enough of an angle to drive across the lawn toward the dirt road in front of the house. With each change of direction I glance at my front door, expecting it to fly open and Holt to limp out. I lower the car’s windows. I can hear Holt yelling for help. I guide the car onto the road and accelerate, a cloud of dust and pebbles kicking up behind us.

I head west on the I-40 and we drive for a good half-hour without speaking. I keep glancing over at Carter who is silently staring out the passenger window at the rushing landscape.

“Thank you for saving my life, son,” I say at last. When he turns to look at me I can see his eyes are moist and red. “I know you didn’t have any other choice.”

“Am I gonna go to jail?” His lower lip is trembling.

“No. That’s not going to happen. It was self-defense. Nothing is going to happen to you.” The words sound hollow. Fact is, I have no idea how this is going to play out.

Up ahead I glimpse a billboard advertising a motel near Lake Lure called The Amity Inn. The ad shows a row of cabins in front of red and yellow and green mountains lit up by an idealized sunset. The lake is another forty-five minutes away. I’d taken Carter fishing up there once when he was four or five, back before I mistakenly thought I was a good enough poker player to give Jeanette and Carter the great lives I felt I wasn’t giving them. The lake is far enough away to give me time to think. I decide we’ll hole up there and sort things out.

“Hey, kiddo. Remember when we went fishing at Lake Lure? You were pretty small.”

“Hell, yeah. I remember it well,” he says. “I had my green Ninja Turtles fishing pole that you made fun of, but I was the one who caught the big fish that day.” He smiles at the memory.

I can’t help but grin, too. “Somehow I don’t recall that. You must be making that part up.”

“Figures. But it was a big deal to me. That was one of the best times I had as a kid.”

The regret I feel at missing so many opportunities with my son these past few years hurts worse than any hangover.

“I’m gonna head up there so we can figure out our next step, okay? It’ll be good to be in the mountains again. Maybe we can hike up to Chimney Rock.”

When I look at Carter he is nodding but no longer smiling.

“Too bad we didn’t come up with this idea before that guy Holt showed up,” he says, then turns and leans his head against the window.

Suddenly, Holt’s cellphone, which I’d tossed on the seat between us, begins to buzz. The screen IDs the caller only as “J.”

“Should we toss the phone out the window?” Carter asks.

I consider that, but then think better of it. Cellphones can be traced with GPS. A sign on my right indicates two miles to our exit. The phone stops buzzing.

“Text him back,” I say.

Carter picks up the phone.

“Jenkins is the guy who sent Holt to my place,” I say. “He’s probably wondering what’s taking him so long. Text him back and say everything’s cool and it won’t be much longer.”

As I slow the Malibu to take the exit for 221, Carter slides his finger over the phone's screen. "He's got it password protected."

"Shit."

"Hang on, Dad."

Carter bites his lower lip and stares down at the phone. He tries entering a code, then another with no luck. On the third try, he smiles and holds up the phone triumphantly. "H-O-L-T. Some people are so stupid."

"Okay, send Jenkins the text."

Carter types out the message. "Do you think he'll buy it?" he asks.

"I don't—" There's a loud ding as Jenkins reply text comes right back. "What's he say?"

Carter holds out the screen for me to see. "Read it to me. I'm driving," I say. In reality, I've started having to wear reading glasses and the prideful part of me doesn't want my son to think of me as old.

"It says, 'OK. Hurry.'" Carter types something on the screen. "I told him, 'Yes, Sir.'"

I wonder for a moment if Holt is likely to ever call Jenkins "Sir." I press on the accelerator and push the Chevy up to sixty.

There are only a couple cars in the lot of The Amity Inn when we pull in. The high season is at least a month away so we're able to rent a cabin easily. After I get checked in I pull the car in front of our cabin. I retrieve Holt's gun from the glove compartment and hide it under my shirt before climbing out of the car.

The air is cooler up here and directly across from the motel the Blue Ridge Mountains edge the sky in brilliant green. The air holds a lush, woodsy scent that is so pleasant that I forget for a moment the reason we've come here.

Once inside, I hook the door chain and double check the lock. I pull the curtains tight. Carter turns on the lamp sitting on the small table between the room's two beds and then sits on the edge of one, looking at me.

"What do we do now?" he asks.

I go and sit across from him. "For now, we rest a bit. Why don't you watch TV?"

"I don't really feel like it, Dad. I'm pretty scared."

"I know, Carter. I'm sorry I got you involved in this." I start to say more, but don't really know what to say.

I lie back on the bed. I try to focus on what I need to do next but all I can manage to think about is how unlikely it is now that I will get to spend any time with Carter from here on. On the wall across from me, above

the television, is a cheesy watercolor of Lake Lure. Staring at it, I can see Carter and me standing on the lake's soggy shoreline, and I'm helping him fit a nightcrawler onto his hook. He's grimacing as it wriggles wildly, and I assure him that it's not in pain. Some things, I tell him, don't have the same feelings as we do. Carter nods and after counting down from three, we toss our lines together into the lake. I remember thinking he's not likely to catch much with that toy rod, but soon enough he gets a strike. I help him reel it in and after we unhook a small crappie and release it, he starts jumping up and down, telling me to hurry and put more bait on his hook, all the time grinning like a fool.

If there's any way to find that connection again, I need to figure it out now.

I stand up and empty my pockets. In one are my wallet and keys, which I place on the nightstand. In the other are two cell phones—Holt's and mine. I put my own on the bed and look for a moment at Holt's. I look around the room for something heavy, then remember the gun under my shirt. I take it out and empty the bullets onto the gold quilted bedspread. I walk over to a small desk opposite the bed, lay Holt's phone down and use the gun's butt as a hammer to smash it. I hit it once. A spider web crack spreads across the glass screen.

"Dad, why don't you just take out the SIM card and destroy that?" Carter says.

"Take out what?"

Carter comes over and picks up Holt's phone. "I need a paper clip, or something I can poke in a tiny hole with."

We scavenge through all the drawers. In one of the dresser drawers I find an abandoned safety pin. I hold it up and Carter nods. I watch him insert the pin into a hole on the side of Holt's cell and a small door pops out. He slides it all the way out and lifts free a bitty black rectangle with gold stripes on one end. He holds it up for me to see.

"This is a SIM card. It's what identifies this particular phone and allows access to it from his service provider. We destroy this, no one can know where this phone is."

Carter walks into the bathroom and I hear the toilet flush. He comes back and sits back in the same spot on the bed as before. I sit next to him and put my arm around his shoulders. He's trembling.

In my mind I try to frame all the things I want—I need—to say to my son. Nothing seems right.

"Carter, I'm going to do my best to get us out of this mess. But at the very least, I'll make sure you're not involved in it any more. I promise."

He looks at me without saying anything and then nods. At that moment he looks to me no different than that little kid with the Ninja Turtles fishing rod.

“Listen, son,” I say. “What happened today is something that should never have gone down. Today has shown me that I’ve allowed myself to sink to a level so low I wasn’t even aware I was there. But when it was just me rolling around in the shit, well...I guess I deserve that. But now I’ve let that shit get on you. And I can’t forgive myself for that.”

“But if I hadn’t been there you might’ve gotten hurt. Or worse.”

The earnestness of his words hits me harder than any punch from Holt ever could. I stand up. “Come on, son. I’m taking you back to your mother’s house.”

“No, Dad. It’s not safe back home.”

“It’ll be fine, Carter. You have my word.” I put my hand on his shoulder and squeeze. “C’mon, let’s get out of here.”

Carter doesn’t protest. We get back in the car. I don’t bother checking out, just drive back toward the highway.

By the time we get back to Mocksville, the sky has darkened with only a hint of orange-pink at the horizon. As we pass the exit for my place, I subconsciously inch up my speed. Two exits later, I get off the interstate and navigate through the town center, and when I turn onto Jeanette’s street, Carter puts his hand on my arm.

“What are you going to do, Dad?”

I park at the curb in front of my ex-wife’s brick ranch. I turn off the engine, the click-click-click as it cools matching my own heartbeat. I scoot sideways to face Carter. Past him, through the window, I see the drapes in the front window push aside and Jeanette looking to see who’s pulled up.

“I’m going to do my best to fix this. But you don’t have to worry about it anymore.”

“I want to help. This is my problem, too.”

Behind Carter I can see Jeanette in her robe, arms folded tight across her breasts, striding down the driveway. On her face is an expression that’s equal parts anger and confusion.

“You can help. Don’t tell your mother anything about Holt. Give her some story she’ll believe. I’ll take care of the rest.”

Carter pulls the door handle and starts to get out. He stops and leans back in and hugs me tight. “I love you, Dad. At least our day together wasn’t boring.”

“I love you, too. I’ll be in touch soon.”

He gets out and holds his hand up to stop his mother. He slams the car door and I watch him talking to his mother, who bends down to give me

a dirty look. Carter puts one arm behind his back and signals with a wave for me to drive away. I do.

When I pull up to my own house, my car's headlights reflect off the shiny black finish of Holt's Expedition. I lower my window and look at the front door, which is intact and unopened, and that tells me pretty much all I need to know. Still, just to be safe, I grab Holt's gun from the glove box and shut off the engine before walking cautiously to the door. When I turn the knob, I find the door still locked. I point the gun at the door and slide my out my keys to unlock it. I ease the door open but only get a few inches before it bumps against an obstruction. Something big. Through the crack I spot Holt's outstretched arm. The skin of his forearm is gray, making the colors of the tattoo on it (crossed, bloody daggers) vivid and brilliant. I can just make out his wrist and hand, coated in drying blood.

I tug the door shut and leave it unlocked. I plop down on the small cement step and pull out my phone. When the 911 operator answers I tell her I need the police and an ambulance. She presses me for details and I tell her that I was home alone when someone knocked on my door. When I answered it, a man pushed his way into my house to rob me and we struggled. I managed to get his gun away and shot him. I'm pretty sure he's dead, I tell her. The operator tells me to stay on the line until the police arrive, but I press the END button and power off the phone.

While I wait, I work on my story, repeating it over and over in my head so it'll come out naturally when I tell it to the cops. I'm doubtful they'll buy that I hid in my tool shed for two hours until I was certain it was safe to come out, but it's all I can come up with. I know they'll wonder why I didn't just call from inside the shed, and forensics being what they are these days they're sure to know I drove my car across the lawn today. The bullshit I'll spin has more holes than a block of Swiss cheese, but I don't care. All I'm concerned about is that they accept I was home alone when Holt was shot. There's no reason for them to even consider Carter was here today.

I pat the pockets of my jeans and find my pack of cigarettes. I shake one out and light it, the first deep drag calming me a bit. I blow the smoke out slowly. When I go to drop the pack in my shirt pocket, I notice there's something in there. It's the key card from The Amity Inn with a photograph of Lake Lure on the front. It's gotten dark but there's still enough light to make out the picture. I pretend I can see on it a tiny version of Carter standing at the lake's edge holding a tiny green fishing rod and I'm unable to keep from grinning.

Blue and red lights appear down the road as the first of the cop cars arrive. I watch a sheriff's deputy get out and walk cautiously toward me, his hand on the butt of his gun. I take a final glance at the room card, slide it back in my pocket, and wait.

RICHARD LEBOVITZ

Roots

A fence means nothing to a tree.
Long ago, our neighbor's cherry
thrust its brawny roots beneath
into a tangle so complex and deep
it took days of dig, saw and chop
to pry loose its grip and clear a bed
for new shrubs and plants to grow.

Yet, even after the roots gave up
their thickest parts, disembodied
appendages remained, groping
into darkness beyond a shovel's
reach to host what feeds on death
and decay or to sprout anew,
sending hopeful shoots through
weight of soil toward light of day.

STEPHANY L. NEWBERRY-DAVIS

The Seahorse

Sleep never came easy to Ruth. Even as a child, when her Aunt Sissy stayed the night, Ruth would sneak the comb from the gold leafed pages of her momma's bible, climb into Sissy's bed, and comb her hair, fine threads of rusted cornsilk soft and slippery to the touch. Now, most nights, Ruth's daughter Emma need only whisper "Momma" and Ruth would lift the sheets for Emma to fold herself in, or she would lie awake counting the kicks of her unborn child, whose bottom appeared like a foothill at her tummy's center, hard and knotty. She reached down and gently shook her husband, a simple action that made her happy. Some nights the baby stirred so much Ruth couldn't sleep; her little Mexican jumping bean, she secretly called it, reminded of those she saw on country gas station countertops between the hoop cheese and pickled eggs. She envied his sleep. Sometimes, out of meanness, she pretended to accidentally kick Graham so that he'd wake, if only for a moment.

"Wake up," she said. "It's time. I have to jump in the shower."

"I'm awake. What time is your appointment?"

"Eight. But, I'm supposed to be there a few minutes early. The ultrasound is first; then, I see the doctor."

"Are you sure you're okay if I don't go with you? I can try again to get someone to cover my lecture."

Ruth wanted to say, "Please go with me. I don't want to go by myself." But she knew that Graham admired her independence, her ability to focus only on what needed to be done. The truth was she didn't need Graham by her side, but she wanted him there. "We have our girls and our boy," Graham had said days before. "Either way, we're prepared, so there's no real surprise. No real need for me to be there unless you really want me to be."

After twenty years together, Ruth understood that for Graham some things were better left unsaid. He didn't have to say that he wanted another son and that he'd give anything to avoid the tension of not knowing. Ruth felt the weight of his absence and his words.

"Fine. When I find out, I'll call you before I see the doctor. Just please make sure to keep your phone on."

* * *

Hours later, Ruth positioned her back against the leather table and lifted her shirt to expose her abdomen. In the room's darkness, Ruth heard the lull of her baby's heart, strong and steady. It reminded her of the white noise machine in her daughter's room. Some nights, when the baby kicked so hard she couldn't sleep, Ruth would sneak into Emma's room, climb between the cool sheets of her bed and swaddle the quilt around them. She smelled the top of Emma's head, felt the coolness of the fan as it slowly rippled in half moon motions and tickled the toes of her feet. She was settled in such moments when the house was silent and life was still. Before the commotion of changing soiled diapers, peeling syrup stained pajamas from little ones' legs, and tugging tangles from nested heaps atop toddler heads. The sonographer's voice transported her back to the small corner room of her doctor's office.

"The baby's heart sounds good. 148 bpm."

"Is that good?"

"That's normal for 19 weeks."

The sonographer guided Ruth from one organ to the next as the probe glided over her skin's slippery surface to record measurements. Ruth tried to focus on what she was explaining, but the cursor's movement on the monitor hypnotized her, and she could only lie still on the table entranced by the pulsing heart on the screen and how gentle the fetus rocked along like a seahorse in a swell.

"So, would you like to know the baby's gender?" the sonographer asked.

The question brought Ruth back to the present, back to the moment she would recall for the rest of her life. "Yes, please."

"It's a girl."

Ruth felt the lump form in her throat. Tears began to well and burn as she tried to blink them away and choke back the disappointment of another daughter.

"Thank you."

"I'm just going to take a few more measurements for the doctor."

The sonographer stopped and looked closer at the screen focusing intently at the baby's head. With a few swift strokes of the keyboard, she abruptly stood up and turned on the light blinding Ruth's eyes.

"Dr. Byron will see you next. You can get dressed and wait in the lobby until she's ready." The bang from the door as the sonographer left surprised Ruth. She didn't even say congratulations.

* * *

A half hour later, after dozens of text messages from Ruth to Graham and to family and friends, Dr. Byron pulled up a chair and held in

her hands Ruth's ultrasound pictures. The pen drew circles around the back of the baby's head. "We found something on your ultrasound. Something that shouldn't be there. See this thick white area here? Behind the neck?"

At first, Ruth hesitated, then nodded her head, "Yes."

"That shouldn't be here. It's called a nuchal fold. It's a thickness behind the baby's neck. It's a hard marker for Down Syndrome."

Ruth tried to focus on the linoleum tile whirling below, but the squares of beige and white blurred and blended into one another. The words Down Syndrome reeled in her head making her dizzy. A ringing started in her ears and grew louder, drowning out the doctor's voice. Now, she heard only bits and pieces of conversation. Words she didn't know, had never heard before—pleural effusion, duodenal atresia. She knew these words meant something, and she told herself to sit up, pay attention, take note. But she could not. She clutched the table, held her breath and felt her back curve and her shoulders hunch.

"Ruth, did you hear what I said? We'll schedule a high risk ultrasound to look for other markers and take it from there. We can do it today."

Ruth couldn't speak. Memories of Sissy flooded back. As a child, she would visit her aunt on holidays. She remembered the large aquarium in the parlor of the assisted living facility where Sissy lived with other concealed members that society wanted to bury behind walls of institutions or nursing homes. Sissy's aquarium was the only place that Ruth recalled ever seeing a seahorse. They were tiny mythical creatures that hovered above the pebbled bottom. They were magic in the middle of the forgotten. Ruth knew what the words meant: Down Syndrome. They were words she heard in family conversations when talking of Sissy, what she needed, who would visit; she was an obligation. But, Ruth loved her. Loved her seahorses.

* * *

By now, Graham had left work, abandoning students in their seats without an explanation, only a text from Ruth wife reading: "I need you. Please come soon."

When Graham arrived, Ruth couldn't believe that he brought his laptop.

"Did you have to bring that with you?" she asked.

"I left in the middle of a lecture, Ruth. I have to email my department head, so he knows what's going on and so students don't complain."

Ruth felt slighted. She wasn't sure how she expected Graham to react, but to go on with his work duties angered her to no end.

"My responsibilities to work don't stop while we're here. I know you're worried, but let me do a couple of more things, and I'll put it away."

There's nothing we can do now except wait for the nurse to call us. Relax. Everything's going to be fine."

* * *

Ruth convinced herself while she waited in the lobby that the first hard marker was nothing, but when the high risk obstetrician, Dr. Ramsey, found the second marker on the ultrasound, the echogenic bowel, Ruth's shoulders shook with heart-rending sobs. She needed to find composure in a room filled with black and white photographs of perfect, healthy babies in baskets; she knew Graham was not proud of the way she was handling herself. Others in the room stared with sympathetic, curious eyes. She needed the tears to stop, the heaviness in her chest to diminish, the catastrophizing to go away. She stared at the monitor and the bright white spot of her baby's bowel amid the gray and black.

"With two markers, Ruth, we're at the point when we should consider an amniocentesis. The chances of the baby being born with a genetic disorder considering your age and family history are 1 in 100. The amnio does come with risks that you should consider as well, particularly the risk for miscarriage."

"What are the chances of miscarriage?" Graham asked. He stood by her side, cupping her hand in his. The beads of sweat traveled from his palm to hers.

"1 in 400. You're more likely to have a baby with a genetic abnormality than you are to have a miscarriage after an amnio. You could wait to deliver, or you could know in the next 48 hours."

Ruth knew she couldn't wait five more months wondering if her daughter would be born healthy. Normal. "When can we do it?" she asked.

Dr. Ramsey's voice was confident and controlled. "Now. It will only take about thirty minutes."

* * *

The earlier interview she'd had with the genetic counselor before the second ultrasound made the unforeseen circumstances of the morning actual, tangible to Ruth. She tried to recall each limb of her family tree, the medical histories of cousins she'd met only once or twice, worrying with each memory that she'd forgotten something or someone or how her omission would shape her present circumstance. How would she cope if their life took such a turn? How would she and Graham handle having such a child? How would their other children be affected? How would their daughter be treated? What other abnormalities would she be born with? These were all unanswered questions, except the most important: Would they keep the pregnancy?

Yes. The baby was hers; she was real. She moved in ebbs and flows in Ruth's body. She kicked at the touch of her hand and rolled at the sound of her mother's voice. Tiny eruptions under fingertips each time her mother traced the creased lines of blues and purples across her expanding belly.

Dr. Ramsey cleansed Ruth's belly in circular motions with cold iodine. The baby was still. A medical resident's hand replaced Graham's; it was easier to look into the eyes of a stranger than that of her husband. The resident was a nice distraction. She felt ashamed that at this moment, she found him unusually handsome. Her cheeks reddened, and she clenched his hand tighter as the needle penetrated her flesh deep into her abdominal wall, her uterus, and finally the amniotic sac. She didn't look at the needle only at his eyes. He never blinked. Never looked away. He stood solid reminding her to breathe. She inhaled and exhaled aloud, counting to herself the puffs of air that slipped to and from her puckered lips.

"Be careful not to move, Ruth," Dr. Ramsey said. "The baby is cooperating. She's not moving. She's positioned in the corner of your uterus which is where we want her to be until the procedure is over."

The cramping was immediate when the needle was withdrawn from Ruth's abdomen. "How long will the cramping last, Dr. Ramsey?"

"Only a few hours. You should go home and rest. Take a couple of Tylenol and let your husband take care of you and the little ones for at least the next 24 hours. We'll have the results in a couple of days. If the cramping doesn't subside, then call us immediately."

When Ruth arrived home later in the afternoon, Jude, Grace, and Emma were napping. She heard only the soothing noise of her daughter's sound machine luring her up the stairs to Emma's bed. Graham helped her climb the steps to Emma's bedroom. "Are you sure you don't want to rest in your own bed?" Graham asked.

"I'll be fine. I haven't seen the kids all day, and I just want them to know I'm here and that everything's okay."

Ruth eased her tender, throbbing body between Emma and the mounds of stuffed animals that protected her. Without delay, the lids of Ruth's eyes, heavy in the aftermath of the day's events, drew, and she fell asleep cradling her unborn child.

Ruth no longer believed in God. She couldn't recall the exact moment when He ceased to exist; maybe it was when her mother pushed her to the front of the congregation during "Just as I am" to accept Him as her personal savior when she'd rather be sneaking shots of grape juice from communion cups in the fellowship hall. Maybe it was when she was submerged by liver spotted hands in the pool behind the altar when she'd

rather be doing flips into its cleansing coolness. On Sundays, she preferred to be anywhere else and longed for the mornings when Momma awakened her and said, “We’re going to visit Papa and Granny.” She wanted to touch the tangled webs of muscadines that sheltered the chicken coop and savor their sweetness, to lean against the walls of the pumphouse and dig her toes into the damp black earth, to count the neat rows of tobacco and imagine her grandmother hunched over in those fields with aching back and soil stained hands harvesting while little ones racked one another with tobacco sticks and snarled their enemies with string.

It was unseasonably hot for an Easter Sunday, even for the South. In church, Ruth worried that everyone could see the sweat stains of her white dress. Her period started before Sunday school, and she was afraid the boys knew. Their eyes studied her over scripture, and it made her feel uneasy, like a secret had been exposed, and she wanted to run as fast as she could down the plush red velvet carpet and out of the heavy white doors where the preacher shook her hand after worship and into the arms of her Sissy.

Ruth always spent the afternoon with her aunt after Easter service. Her thighs stuck to the vinyl couch that sat in the lobby where she waited, and the old men stared at her like the old men that sat on egg crates at Ivey’s Market. She tugged at her shorts and shifted from side to side hoping to free her thighs from the cushion and wished she had worn pants. Her stomach cramped. Across from her, Mr. Albert sat with six watches on each arm, and she wondered if he knew that it was her time of the month. She wondered if Aunt Sissy has a time of the month and if Sissy understood. The hum of the aquarium soothed Ruth deeper into her daydream. Bubbles escaped at intervals from the tank’s treasure chest and rose to the surface as the diver drifted nearby. She imagined air escaping from her lips, like the tiny circles of color she saw when, with her eyes shut tight she rubbed her finger across her eyelids, watched the shapes dance like atoms in motion, and opened them to penetrating light.

The severe pain in her belly wakened Ruth a couple of hours later. Emma had climbed from bed and sat on the floor beside her mother reading, waiting for her to awake. Ruth, still holding her belly, felt amniotic fluid leak down her legs and onto the sheets of her daughter’s bed.

“Mommy, does God wear underpants?” Emma asked.

“I don’t know, love. Do you know where your daddy is?”

“He said he was going to nap with Jude and Grace. Mommy, if God doesn’t wear underpants, then what’s under his robe?”

“I don’t know, baby.” Using the wrought iron headboard, Ruth lifted her swollen belly and sat a moment at the edge of the bed to find her balance before heaving herself off the mattress.

“Emma, can you go get your daddy? I have to potty.”

“Because I don’t think there’d be a person in the sky that doesn’t wear underpants. I think God wears undies like Tarzan.”

Ruth sat on the toilet seat. A sharp pain stabbed her ears and her head spun as she looked between her knees at what lay underneath. She didn’t know what was happening, if this was normal, to be expected. She heard her doctor say that there may be spotting like just after a period’s end. Teaspoons. This much seemed unusual. Her white cotton panties were soaked red. Slick congealed globs slipped from her body. Clots lay in the bowl’s bottom like liver in a pan after a pig’s been bled for slaughter. Her stomach clenched and vomit spewed from her mouth as she folded in pain.

She heard her daughter call her name, but Ruth didn’t have the strength to answer or the will to move. Her pants lay twisted and entwined in a bloody heap shackled around her ankles. She felt the warmth of life stream faster now down her legs, gooey and gummy to the touch and felt her body stick to the bathmat. Her breathing shallowed, and Ruth felt her body grow heavier and heavier with each hallowed wheeze.

MARTIN H. LEVINSON

Overcoming Inertia

I'd rather watch the Sunday news
shows than write this poem, for I
can't think of anything to say and
the yard needs mowing, the car needs

washing, the tub needs scrubbing and
I think I'll make myself a cup of tea,
have a bit of the bran muffin I bought
this morning at Briermere Farms, fresh

out of the oven and at the finish of a
two-mile stroll along the banks of the
Peconic where I watched a vesper sparrow
circle lazy in the sky, a cumulus cloud

hang low on the horizon, a dark green
kayak sail slowly past a McDonald's
parking lot that abuts the water upon
which floated a white plastic coffee lid,

a red French fry box, and two cigarette stubs
that seemed horribly out of place in a place
where fluke, flounder, and striped bass hail
from and swans, geese, and Carolina ducks

also call home.

SHILO NIZLOLEK

The Art of Leaving

We were young kids and it was late at night when we heard mom's keys jingling and the front door slam. My older sister asked in a whisper, "Where is she going?"

I was three and in the hollow darkness, with my deep, raspy voice, I replied, "She's leaving and she's never coming back." Matter-of-fact. I was possessed by the ghost of a villain: tired, awake, and tyrannical. Then the door clicked back open, keys were placed on the hook, and we fell asleep. The next day my mom washed my mouth out with soap. Not washed, drowned. That bar of soap sat in my mouth for over an hour. Mom was furious, I was gratified. *Look at the destruction I can cause, and I only did it with seven words.* My sister had been upset that night because she had believed me, and, for a moment—though I knew my mom would never leave us—I believed me too.

There are people out there who do this. They pick up and they leave. Sometimes they were never really there. Other times they are with you, but in their minds they are a thousand miles away. They are taking a walk down an endless road; they are standing in a field of daisies on some unknown cliff; they are floating through space.

When I was sixteen, I fell in love. It was volatile. It was insidious. Our love was toxic and it seeped into my bones. When I was seventeen, I snorted my first line of Morphine. It burned. It seared a hole through my brain, but it offered relief—it gave me escape. I left, but I was still there. Morphine turned to whatever I could get my hands on from the metaphorical medicine cabinet, a feat that was not as difficult as it should have been for a teenager. I finally settled on Oxycontin, my drug of choice, my poison. Nothing allowed me to leave my body more thoroughly. As it dripped down my nasal cavity, it became my companion. My boyfriend and I would have sex for hours, a process which used to leave me in tears and him angry at me, but under the influence I was an empty vessel. I wasn't even there. He spoke the harshest words; they used to break me, crumple me to my knees. But I was no longer there. I was so far away, he could not touch me. "What happened to the innocent girl I fell in love with, he'd ask, and in the same breath he would say, "You are worthless. You are weak. I made you. You need me. I don't need you. I hate you. I'm sorry. I love you."

Sometimes I would wake up—the pills made me brazen, they made me strong, they gave me back my voice. I'd say, "Do you feel tough? Does that make you feel like a big man talking to me like that? Bet you feel real powerful now." Then he would rage. My anger fueled him, and together, we fueled our drug habit, his very old and mine brand new.

We'd get high and he would say, "We're meant to be together, even if we drift apart, we will always be together. I will always find you. Watch. I will be some old hobo pushing my cart of cans, but I will find you, even if you are states away. We will always be us. You can't leave me." He would smile his angel smile, and I would feel at once our togetherness and our deep separation.

One day he called my phone after being MIA for over five days with some unnamed girl doing God knows what, while I lay around at my parents' house, reading books I will never remember and being high to take away my pain. He yelled as if I had been the one who had disappeared off the face of the planet. I yelled back. I hung up, and then I went and changed my phone number. He waited at the baseball field behind my backyard the next morning until everyone had left. I went out to my car to get something and he raced up to the porch. I saw him coming, but he was faster than me, his feet powered by his obsession. He blocked me from going in the door, and he apologized profusely. I had heard it all before. I told him he needed to go, but he wouldn't budge. I began to cry, and he loved that. He knew that he was my weakness—he was the drug he thought I couldn't stop. I spoke through sobs and told him I needed to get ready for work. He guided me into the house and walked me to the shower. He ran the water and cared for me as if I was an upset toddler or an elderly person who could no longer care for herself. He washed my hair and gently washed my body, while I cried as if the world was ending. For me, it seemed it was. He left, and I went to work. Then I went camping for three days. When I came back I left him the only way drug-induced, 19-year-old me thought best: I started dating his closest friend. His friend was a man who had just as bad a home life as him, who had slept under bridges with him when their parents kicked them out. I committed the ultimate betrayal by being with the one person who he considered family.

It was in those moments that I became one of them, one of the leavers. *I'm leaving and I'm never coming back*, I thought. It felt powerful. I finally felt in control. Is this how it felt to all the others, the leavers, the takers, the breakers? I became what they were. I could *disappear*.

I dated his ex-best-friend for a year and a half, and I felt safe there for a time. I knew as long as I was with him, my ex would not come for me.

I was protected by my self-righteous anger and by the wounds of his and my betrayal. I was shrouded in layers of darkness; my ex could not find the “me” he knew in the “me” he had helped me become. I thought so many times, *I will leave this man too.*

About a year into our relationship a girl from our apartment complex, a girl who had often slept with my ex while we were together, came to my door looking for her boyfriend. I didn’t know where he was, but she didn’t believe me. She had a big black smear of something streaked across her forehead. Later I told a friend about the experience and he told me what that the smear was black tar. She had switched from doing pills, a town-wide craze, to heroin. I went to the mirror, I imagined myself as her, and I cold-turkey quit taking pills that day. It took five excruciating days to detox. I could barely eat. I did not sleep. At night, my legs thrashed. I was stuck in a life I was not meant to live. Sober, I regained something: me. I saw myself for what I was. Logic and reason slowly returned to me. Shortly after, I dumped the best friend of my ex-boyfriend. I broke his heart. He cried. I did not. For this, I will always be ashamed.

A week later I ran into the original heartbreaker at the store. We did not say a word to each other, but our eyes connected. That was it. The day after, there he was, at the friend’s house that he had seen me with. For a moment he was shy, but I was not. I stared into him, right inside. It was almost like looking at my reflection. I thought, *You see me now—you see my black heart.* He said, “I’m sorry I came, but when I saw you, I knew it wasn’t over.”

I kept staring into him.

I said, “It’s never over.”

Three weeks later we were up on the logging roads. It had not taken long for him to go back to exactly who he was. He told me he was addicted to crystal meth, but I accepted him, as I always did. On this day, up on the logging roads, he tried to break me down again. But I was already broken; he didn’t stand a chance against who I had become. I was a volcano waiting to erupt. He tried to talk me down. I fought back. He looked at me as if I was a total stranger, and he got out of the car to blow off his steam. I drove away, leaving him up there, twelve miles out of town in the fog and rain on an early December morning. *I left, I left, I left,* I thought as I zoomed away. Later, he called me screaming like a demon. “How could you do this to me? I loved you! How could you be so cold?” I hung up the phone.

That night, I died. Within 24 hours, I died two more times. My heart stopped. I had an ectopic rupture pregnancy—my insides exploded. Getting back together with him had nearly killed me. The baby that I had prayed for

as a desperate, love-sick girl—who thought, that if I got pregnant too, like his other girlfriend had been, it would make him keep me, love me—came and went. In its hasty exit, much like so many of my own, the pregnancy tried to take my life with it. My body said, “I’m leaving and I’m never coming back,” but my mind said, “No.”

And just like that, I became one of the “we”—those people touched by death, those half souls, with half hearts, and one foot out the door, one hand reaching for the light. I scribbled in my notebooks, *I was born for leaving, and you were born to be left*. I wrote it over and over and over again. *I was born for leaving* croons in my mind like a country song.

There have been others, other places and other people. I have left them too. They wanted me to love them, they wanted me to stay. But I was born for leaving. I am with a good man now. He does not need me to love him or to stay, and I do not require those things of him. That is why I love him. That is why I stay. That is why we work. He is from the same small town. He knows who I am, what I am, he sticks around anyway.

But, sometimes, especially late at night, when only the wind is awake with my thoughts, I feel an urgent need. I think of lacing up my tennis shoes and stepping out the door, already in a half run. I think of running and running forever, until I become a part of the night sky. Are you out there too? Are you one of those that feel the way I do? Are you one of the “we”?

Are you one of the half souls, the leavers, the runners, the flyers? I see you out there. I see the stars in your eyes.

KATHLEEN BREWIN LEWIS

The Girl Who Married the Dying Boy

held her bouquet tighter than most.
No baby's breath, she'd told the florist,
No tiny flower sprigs to betray
her trembling.

They honeymooned with his parents;
she couldn't care for him alone.
He touched her breasts, slept thinly
in the crook of her arm, gazed upon
her luminous skin, which made him
want to live forever.

She reminisced about his baseball games,
that basket just before the buzzer,
their first dance, first kiss. The night they'd lain
naked on the hillside, not allowing themselves
to touch under the blue moon.

They spent mornings on the beach, where she
wheeled him down to the sea, helped him
into the water, held him as he floated,
whittled frame light as balsa wood. He cracked
old childhood jokes, spouted water like a whale.
Again and again, she bent to kiss him.

The last night there, he was able
to make love to her,
his tears falling on her face
as he moved inside her.

Back home six weeks, he pales, shakes,
takes to the bed for good. She keeps trying
to say something that will make a difference,
but all she can do is sing "Blue Moon" softly.

He skips breaths, slackens, stills. She cannot tell her own wailing from his mother's.

She learns a new word: irrevocable. At eighteen, she becomes the oldest teenager on the planet.

CARLA MCGILL

Magnetics

for Eleanore, age 3

Visions of golden dirt in Fontana,
era of your grandmother,
and long fields lined with eucalyptus.
The North Pole moves
farther north, and auroral
displays extend down to the mystery,
invisible places we all feel.

Water runs beside the trees
in Alabama, places you will find
in one season and the next.
White dwarf stars explode
in distant galaxies, supernovas
bright as a billion suns,
while we raise a glass at the party.

Some cross northern ice sheets,
open coconuts on the islands, turn and step,
as if no action has a reaction.
But this is our magnetic moment.
To circumnavigate the globe, to find,
like a compass, the natural magnetic field,
this is me, taking you to school on occasion,

ruffles on your dress a topic of conversation,
the zoo, a congregation of books, and more
than seven wonders of the world as you
have come to know it. Each instance
has a magnetic moment, reveals
the distance between the poles.
Yet this is when north and south align

and the compass is exact; points
to your laughter, you and Ginger Rogers,
you waving the dance scarf, you

like sunbeams showing through
the shadows, like light from another
place, sparkling like champagne, like stars,
like the best star, gleaming in the night.

KEVIN J. MCDANIEL

On Looking at Polaroids

Stashed far back
in the kitchen cabinet,
behind the canned goods,
a red, rusty cookie tin
houses old Polaroids.
From time to time, I sit
at the kitchen table with random piles
that I organize into
what looks like decks of cards
from which I draw off the top and study
backgrounds and clothing styles,
while poking fun at facial expressions
before turning them over to search
the flimsy tea-colored borders
for handwritten dates
that give proper context
to my recollection,
but some have faded.
Then, imagining the stacks
illuminated on an iPhone screen,
I push my fingers to widen the frame
so that I can squeeze into the scene
to ask frozen people
whether lines
in their faces tell stories of the moment,
or bear signs of disintegration
that sets in
after the shot.

LISA MECKEL

This Tree

an ancient coastal oak
grows below the back deck
scratches the big window
with branches that reach
toward forever

in the spring
deer grasp and pull
on its fresh, spiny-toothed leaves
eat the hanging seed-blossoms until

over the years
they've carved an umbrella-oak
under which we crawl, hide
lie on our backs
and gaze up through the leaves

to the rising moon, to the stars
that crowd our galaxy, all this
while the sunset rinses the sky
with pale red rosewater

SANDRA RAMOS O'BRIANT

Treasure

Their mothers still slept even though it was late morning. Lydia's mom worked at night and usually didn't get home until after 3 a.m. Gary's mom took pills. The cousins roamed free in Santa Fe. Their favorite playground was the warehouse district where they dug through huge trash bins and occasionally struck it rich with dented cans of Del Monte corn.

Today, they had a different plan. They stood near the train switching station where giant railcars were added or removed. Most of the nearby homes huddled together in a line apart from this stark area of gravel and broken glass landscaping. One small adobe house stood alone.

"That's it," Gary said, breathless, pointing across the rail yard. He looked up at his cousin. Lydia knew he was trying to read her expression.

"It doesn't look so special," she said.

Gary turned his good ear in her direction. His mother had blamed dodge ball for his burst eardrum, but Aunt Frances had real strong arms from her wheelchair. Lydia knew she'd slapped him too hard.

"You'll see," Gary said. He sounded less sure than before, when he'd bragged about finding treasure. He carried his canvas bag with him just in case.

Lydia raised an eyebrow and yawned. She was almost eleven, and Gary was only nine. She'd followed him out of boredom, but he shouldn't get used to it. It was the way things were between them: she was the leader. Besides, she'd played her whole life in this area and never paid attention to any of the houses.

To reach it they had to cross a wide maze of railroad tracks laid out not only in the usual parallel lines, but with occasional diagonal rails. The heat rose off the tracks in wavy patterns that made them look soft and undecided in the distance. The hot smell of tar-drenched railroad ties baking in the sun was familiar and comforting to Lydia.

They balanced on the rails with their arms flung out, walking slow and then fast, backwards and forwards, eyes closed and open. First one to slip off is a rotten egg! Lydia always won, but Gary didn't expect anything different. They arrived at the house. Shades covered the windows on either side of the front door.

"It's never locked," Gary said. He wiped his nose with the back of his hand. His nose flowed non-stop year-round. In the summer, his hands,

and forearms when he really needed them, were covered with a crosshatch of dried, but still shiny, mucous trails. Lydia noticed new bruises on his upper arm, four perfect ovals on the outside just above the elbow. She knew that if she looked closely she'd find the imprint of a thumb on the inside of his arm.

"Well, open it!"

Gary did as he was told, took one step in and stopped.

Lydia stared down into a cavern filled with rubbish. The living room floor was completely gone except for a narrow ledge around the walls. The light from the open doorway sliced a narrow diagonal line through the trash. On top of the rubble was a rusted tricycle lying on its side.

"We have to walk around the edge like this." With back and palms flat against the wall, Gary edged sideways, feet forward, toward an open doorway to their right. Lydia pressed her hands into the wall and followed him, right foot and then left.

They reached the solid floor of a sunny kitchen. The starched curtains covering the window over the sink were pretty, ruffled and trimmed in red, not the least bit yellowed or droopy. A stove stood along one wall and a small refrigerator hummed in the corner. The same ruffled curtains covered the window on the back door. Lydia turned the handle; it was locked from the outside.

The kitchen was clean and ordinary except for the wooden trunk in the middle of the room, where a table and chairs should have been. The domed lid of the trunk rose almost as high as Lydia's chest.

"What's in it?" Lydia asked. She wished for pirate treasure, but a rotting body or skeleton would have been okay.

"I couldn't open it by myself."

They lifted the heavy lid together. Nothing looked as if it had been disturbed. On the top lay an American flag carefully folded in the military three-cornered fashion Lydia remembered from old war movies on late-night television.

The drab, scratchy-looking uniform of some ancient soldier lay beneath the flag. It was just like the uniform she'd seen her grandfather wear in pictures from WWI. Below that she found a bundle of letters tied with a faded ribbon. The postmarks went all the way back to 1940. The one on top had no postmark. She set them aside to read later. A cigar box held black and white photographs of bare-chested GI's smiling recklessly, their smooth, muscled arms flung around each other.

"It's all war stuff," she said. Lydia dug deeper, past more old clothes and some heavy leather boots. At the very bottom lay a heavy bundle of oily flannel. Gary wheezed like he'd been holding his breath. The cousins held

the bundle between them, and unwrapped the folds of cloth as fast as they could. A gun fell to the floor with a thud. They gasped and stepped back. Gary picked it up and turned it over several times, rubbing the shiny metal with his fingertips as if it were silk.

“Put it back,” she said.

He gave her a wary look, like he expected her to snatch it away. “You’re taking the letters.” He wrapped the cloth around the gun and dropped it into his canvas bag. Lydia returned the letters to the trunk. Gary crossed his arms and wouldn’t look at his cousin. He didn’t put the gun back.

She took a deep breath, the kind she’d heard come out of Gary’s mom. Sometimes the sound alone was enough to scare him into doing whatever it was she wanted. Lydia studied the kitchen again. “I wonder if he sleeps here?” Her eyes came to rest on the back door. “Are there any other rooms?”

“There’s a closet.”

Lydia lowered the trunk lid, but at the last minute she reached in and grabbed the topmost letter from the bundle. She folded it and stuck it in her pocket. They walked along the edge of the devastated living room again, this time skirting the other side. She hadn’t noticed the door opposite the entry when they’d come in. They had to sidestep past the door. Lydia turned the doorknob with her left hand. The door opened easily enough, but then they had to swing around backwards to get in. The closet had a floor and a pole to hang things on and a shelf above. The cousins stood side-by-side staring up at the shelf where two shiny toasters and a bruised leather satchel were stored. Lydia was tall enough to reach the bag if she stood on her toes, but it was heavy and she dropped it with a loud clang. Inside was a mass of tarnished silverware.

Lydia and Gary didn’t touch the ornate silver. Colorful jewels were treasure, and they would have taken advantage of a thief’s paradise if the bag had contained them. Their mothers would have been agog for years to come at Christmas when they opened their presents. Sterling service was another matter; it was serious grown-up business and not the work of a romantic pirate.

Lydia wanted to understand what they’d found. Her eyes traveled from the closet toasters to the silverware and back again. A tingly feeling started at the back of her neck. The hairs stood up on her sunburned arms and she felt cold. It was a mystery to be solved. She smiled down at her cousin. “*This is interesting.*”

Gary’s shoulders relaxed a bit. He smiled back, almost up to the worried edges of his eyes. He turned and looked out at the blighted living

room. The sun was going down, and its light filtered through the drawn shades on the windows. "Something bad happened."

"Yeah, and now he steals stuff," Lydia said.

Gary nodded, looking like a whipped dog, as if it were his fault. Lydia hated it when he did that because then she felt sorry for him and that took away the fun.

"Let's get out of here." This time she led them around the edge of the living room. They reached the front door and ran as if they were being chased. They headed for their grandfather's house several blocks away. Gary and his mother lived there, and Lydia and her mom had supper with the family every night. Both their mothers were divorced. On the way there, Lydia had to wait twice for Gary. He kept stopping to check on the gun.

They stood outside their grandfather's house. Gary's bag bulged, but he was always carrying stuff home, even rocks or broken toys he'd found. "What are you going to do with it?" Lydia asked.

"I dunno." He touched it again, and they went inside.

"It's about time," Gary's mom said. "Wash up." Frances removed a pot of macaroni and cheese from the stove, wrapped it in a towel, and wedged it under the arm of her wheelchair.

"Hi, honey," Lydia's mom said. "Are you hungry?" Nellie worked nights at the only jazz club in Santa Fe. She'd be leaving for work soon.

"Uh huh," Lydia said. "Where's grandpa?"

"Lodge meeting. He won't be back till late."

"Never around when there's work to be done. I could have used some help with supper," Frances said. She wheeled herself to the table and set the pot down.

"I'll cook tomorrow," Nellie said. "We didn't get out until 3:30 this morning. I got home and slept the minute my head hit the pillow. Next thing I know the day has blown by just like that." She snapped her fingers.

Frances grimaced. "Gary, get my medicine."

"The pain ones?"

She didn't look at him, just winced and rubbed her thighs. "Yes! Yes! Hurry."

Gary ran to their room fast. On his return, still on the run, he tripped over his shoelaces and crashed into her chair. The pill bottle flew out of his hand scattering little blue and white pills all over the floor. Gary scrambled around on hands and knees trying to get them as fast as he could, but the canvas bag on his shoulder slowed him down. Frances reached down and grabbed a handful of his hair. Her muscled arms were white and shiny with sweat. She shook him like a rag doll. Gary screamed and reached up to her

hand. She let him go, and backed her chair away from him. She panted, still angry, while Gary collected the pills under the table, whimpering.

Lydia studied her mother. Nellie turned her face away from her sister and lit a cigarette. She had that tight-lipped sneer she got whenever someone's behavior disgusted her. She said nothing. No one ever said anything to Frances, at least not that Lydia had heard, because she was the oldest sister, and crippled, and mean.

Gary handed the pill bottle to his mother. She took it from him with shaking hands and gulped down several.

"Go easy on those, Frances," Nellie said.

Frances rubbed her thigh again. "You don't know what it's like."

Nellie exhaled smoke across the table. "The doctor says—"

"I don't care what the doctor says. I feel my legs, the pain in my legs. All the time."

"You shouldn't feel anything from the waist down—" Nellie stopped when she caught her sister's glare from across the table.

Lydia had only known her aunt in a wheelchair, but she'd heard stories of when she was young and danced. She loved hearing about the olden days, when her aunt was practically a movie star.

"Tell me about when you danced Flamenco in the plaza, Aunt Frances."

Her aunt never tired of telling the story of how popular her dances were and how many boyfriends she had. This time she frowned and jumped ahead in the story . . . to the bad part.

"I was coming home from a party. Remember, Nellie, it was after I'd performed in the plaza."

"I remember. You were a big hit. Everyone wanted more. You were dance crazy. Party crazy. Crazy crazy."

Frances was quiet a moment, the serving spoon poised in the air, like she was listening to something only she could hear. She dropped the spoon into the pan and sat up straight, pulling her shoulders back and thrusting her breasts out. She pursed her lips in a movie star pout. "I had long, strong legs, didn't I, Nellie?"

"Beautiful legs."

"I was sitting in the back seat of the car. There were about eight of us crammed into it, coming fast down Apodaca hill." Her shoulders drooped, her torso caving in.

"Your back got crushed?" Lydia asked, though she knew the answer.

"Shh!" her mother said, tapping Lydia's hand.

"It's too hard," her Aunt said. She covered her face with her hands and cried, her shoulders heaving.

Gary put his arms around his mother and cried with her. She smoothed down his hair and reached into the corner of her chair for a tissue. She wiped his nose. "I'm sorry I hurt you, sweetheart. Go sit down now. Let's eat."

They ate in silence. Frances barely touched her meal. She got out her cigarettes from yet another hidey-hole in her chair. Tapping out the cigarette from the pack was easy enough, and she got it to her mouth, but bringing the flame to it seemed hard. Her movements were slow and deliberate.

"Nellie?" Frances held her cigarette across the table for her sister to light. Her eyes glittered, unfocused. She sat back in her chair. She looked in the general direction of the children, but couldn't seem to focus on them.

"What did you do today?" Nellie asked.

They told their mothers about the house, the trunk and the silver and toasters, and the stack of letters, but not about the gun. Lydia laid the letter she'd taken on the table.

"It was the one on top," Lydia said. "The others were way older."

"Probably the last one he wrote," Nellie said. "You shouldn't have taken it, Lydia. What if he'd caught you?" Lydia looked down at the letter. She heard a delicate pop, the sound her mother made when she snapped a cigarette away from her lips to speak. "Well, since you have it, what does it say?"

It wasn't really a letter from or to anyone. There was one sheaf of paper folded in a plain envelope without an address. On the paper were four sentences written in pencil. Lydia read it out loud: "I got the Luger off a dead German. His way out was to use it on himself. It's a ticket to heaven or hell. My treasure." She looked up at her mother. "That's all." Lydia glanced at Gary hoping he would show the gun now.

"Did you get anything?" Frances asked her son.

Gary shook his head, but he looked down at his bag.

"Let me see what's in there," Frances said.

"It's mine."

"Nothing is yours. Come here!"

Gary moved the bag next to her chair, head hanging down. Frances reached into it. Her eyes widened when she felt the gun. She pulled it out. Nellie let out a heavy breath.

"Put that thing away," she said. "Lydia, did you touch it?"

"I told him to leave it," Lydia said.

Frances rubbed her finger across the metal in the same way Gary had done earlier. She tucked the gun into a corner of her wheelchair. Gary watched, a hungry look in his helpless eyes.

Lydia and her mother cleared the table while Gary emptied his mother's bedpan. It was one of his chores. She sent him out of the bedroom they shared for water. "Wash your hands first," she screamed. "And don't spill any."

But he did. Lydia heard the glass crash and then Gary's screams. "No, Mommy. No!" followed by a sharp thwacking sound. She was using the belt on him.

Lydia's mother stood there and twisted her hands together. Then, she looked down at her daughter, and Lydia saw her fear. Gary screamed and begged, and the beating did not stop. Finally, Nellie walked to her sister's room and opened the door.

"Frances, please stop!" Lydia peeked around the corner of the door. Her aunt was sitting on her bed holding Gary by the hair again. His nose and mouth were bleeding.

She shoved him away, breathing hard. Gary fell to his knees in front of her wheelchair, and buried his face in the pillow she sat on.

"Get him away from me before I kill him!"

Gary hugged the pillow to his chest, crying and shaking his head, "No Mama, no Mama, no Mama."

Frances wiped her forehead with the back of her hand. "Come here, baby."

Gary got up slowly bracing his arms on the inside of the wheelchair under the pillow. He turned to her. He had the gun.

Frances smiled, but she was looking at the Luger not at Gary. She held out her hand for it. "Treasure," she said.

He held the gun with two hands and pointed it at her. "My treasure."

The gun clicked. It clicked again, and again, and kept clicking until Nellie reached around Gary and took the gun out of his hands.

"C'mon baby, let's go in the other room." She turned Gary away from his mother and guided him out of the room. "C'mon, Lydia."

Her Aunt Frances stared straight ahead. She pulled her shoulders back and arranged her lips into a sexy pout. She smiled and bowed her head to an invisible audience.

CAROLYN MOORE

Korea, Dano Festival

Cork squares topped with spring
scenes by eighteenth century master
Shin Yoon Bok.

Souvenirs from a place and time
you'll never see or know:
coasters to catch chilled sweat
of tumblers caging ice.

A woman glides on a swing
along a brush-stroked stream
where women wash their hair.
The one whose braids reach
her knees? She needs a growling dog
to warn her: young monks crouch
behind that boulder, men who leer
when loosened gowns reveal breasts.

What of this will you remember?
You embrace your shivering flesh,
the stream so cold, your sodden braids
so heavy down your spine.
At your breastbone, ties loosen.
Silk slips off one shoulder.
A dog barks, lopes your way,
your dog now.

JED MYERS

What You Sought

We stood here, Dad's birthday in June,
his name looking stately in stone,
you and I arm in arm, your tiny form
bonier than just months before.

And you spoke once more of the ways
that devoted man left you alone,
gone on the train by dawn
and home so late he'd wake you. Wasn't it

plain to see, the abandonment? You
sang the standard complaints to yourself
downstairs, believing your two sons slept—
I've Got It Bad (and That Ain't Good),

your nightclub listeners visible
through a curtain of cigarette smoke.
Never treats me sweet and gentle....
And you made the little house beautiful,

the late hours arranging antiques,
scones and frames, fringed lampshades,
ornate brass boxes, your silver
never polished enough. You pressed

the old bitterness out again here
on the grass, our breadwinner's bones
just feet below us. You needed this
chance, more minutes of witness,

some hope in the beech tree shade
cast onto us and the grave,
to discover the missing forgiveness.
As if when you arrive beside him

you'd offer it. You hinted you knew
he'd tried. That he couldn't help being
the driven provider, Mr. Necktie,
nor could he stop the tumor taking

his brain by the day down the last
months. Like your papa couldn't help
absenting himself, his long farewell
through a cancer's mouth in his abdomen.

*I end up like I start out, you'd sing,
just cryin' my little heart out,*
while I was upstairs listening. Now
you can't help but enter the ground

as we lower you under the stone,
your name to be carved in the same
plain font to the right of his. Here
it is, a life gone to past, your love song

now a silent resolve in whose quiet
you won't have to relive the old hurts—
what you sought when I steadied you last
time on this grass, it's yours.

JED MYERS

These Arias

It swells and breaks through the beeps
in the packed checkout zone after work,
spills from a crosswalk's crowd of heads,
echoes off window glass on the bus,
and, at the bar now, I'm awash in this
harsh talk-music. Hurt's waters gush
and flood, collapse down unparted onto us
far from any far shore. I say we are
born for such drowning. *Then he actually,*
how could she, can you believe...
No one's making it anywhere near
the manna. We manage a nostril
or two in the air. The crash comes
cold and familiar, old shock we know—
oh, we see it coming. Another
Manhattan? *All men are, aren't all women...*
It's louder here than the tall surf slapping
the cliffs at Cape Flattery. The plaint surges
wherever we congregate. There aren't measures
to fence these notes. And we can't cork
this roar—it starts after all as the earth's own
cry. A dark-matter moon of love's
urgency draws the wound-fluid
up through our cores. Listen—can't hear
Pandora's speaker cones pumping what is it
Madonna or Macklemore into the churn?

Neither can I, though the bass shivers
the populous mirror behind the bar. This live

choral turmoil, tide of tossed wishes,
collides with itself all about us, thunder

enough to muffle the digital schlock.
Look—our tongues stir a spume thick

as the head on that quick-spigotted Guinness
just slid past in the slosh. Why

did he hide it, she tried to wreck my life,
he isn't worth it, it blasts. But who,

if anyone, gets it? Fitful ritual
din of lament—mouthfuls pour from us

only to swirl away down the great storm drain
out of the present forever. There

in the glow of the liquor shelves' rows,
stoppered and screwcapped red gold and clear

comforts, the hipster at work drops
a splash of amaro to blood-tinge my bourbon,

tests it himself with a fingertipped straw,
and, as his eyebrows rise, I'm encouraged—

I'll ride a stretch of ease even while
the chop's this wild. Listen. All of these

lonely arias aloft and caroming
off the walls—he never told me,

I knew she would—a consonance, one sea's
constant harmonics, one dream's song.

JACK NAISH

Birthday

I turn thirty
tomorrow
so to celebrate the passing
of my roaring twenties
I stand over a pot
making us dinner while
you flip through a magazine.
We go to bed
after watching the news
but not before I remember
to start the dishwasher.

DAVID POSTON

Home Movie

for Patty

It's the corner house,
home of Madame Hyperbole and O He of Little Faith,
where the grass is lush with crowns of clover
and the robin has nested again above the lattice.

No one can see the future, they agree,
but O He has climbed the ladder
to see one blue egg in the nest,
and Madame H has been talking to Mother Bird
in that sweetest little voice
she uses for likeable animals
and all children, likeable or not.

She wants O He to be the prince who courted her.
He buys her dishes, fragile and delicate
as that blue eggshell, more beauty to worry over
at the kitchen sink, and remembers
to tell her that he loves her.

She watches his every step as he
descends the rickety ladder and heads out
through the clover after the last beer can
tossed from some neighborhood kid's Saturday night.

She knows he'll slosh it,
say it pisses him off
they didn't even drink it all.
Such a damn sin
to waste beer, he'll mutter
as he comes in to dry the dishes.

J. STEPHEN RHODES

Alone

Monday

I made the bed, took out trash
and folded clothes. The dogs
followed from room to room.
I bought food, drove to my studio.
I watched the tide come in, fill the marsh,
then drain away. A live oak's fingers
reached for the breeze. The wind turned
sawgrass into tousled sheets.

Tuesday

I put away dishes and fed the dogs.
At the polling place, they marked my name,
not yours, and pointed to the machine.
I voted. Later I watched a movie you like.
The young woman dressed in black wept
when her friend was killed.
In an instant she thought herself alone.
The wind outside made the house creak.

Wednesday

The quiet grew. Time slowed;
sped up for you, there, with friends.
Every dish waited to be washed,
every spill, all the shirts and socks.
The dogs could not get enough of me,
even the one who clings to you.
For a while I sat by the ocean.
Gray, unending and flat.

ROBERT RICE

Endings

Water's surrendered the streambed, mostly
to moss and drying rock. Bits of brown
stick to work clothes,
and grass, old now,
if crushed or broken, stays
crushed or broken.
Life thins.

Three hours ago it was heat we suffered
up on Noonmark. Smell that now?
She's lit the woodstove.

I have believed in October
most of my life, warmed in the light
of infinite noon.
Now it's the hard time: air
cold as earth, spare
singing of stones, that faint
stain of sun up on the ridge.
Though cottonwood trees
would sleep, their leaves,
caught in some rhythm old as God,
rustle, disquieted,
cling a little longer to green.

She's pulled the kitchen door shut
against the evening chill.
Shall we go in?

We've lost the last whispered light.
Look. Star out.

ROCHELLE JEWEL SHAPIRO

En Masse

Plucked, penciled brows,
scarlet lips, topknots, bound breasts,
shaved heads, those in hormonal transition,
those whose gender surgeries had begun,
those who stayed at the edge, coltish, watching.

From top to toe, feeling Other,
yet at Pulse, feeling One. Straight folk,
mothers, fathers, daughters, sons.
Four hours till dawn.
O, Orlando, your air spiced with a salsa beat.
The moon laden with love.
Friends, knocking back shots.
The shots.

Whitman walked the battlefields.
The ground puddled in blood.

MAUREEN SHERBONDY

Sadness

I carry sadness in my pocket—
currency that buys no thing, rather
sadness is a red mark
in the debt column—
it takes away from what
has been saved for years.

With its fire mouth, it burns
a hot hole in my pocket,
so all valued currency diminishes.

Sadness keeps me anchored here
even during blissful nights,
when a lover holds me, whispers
warm love breath into my ear,
it loiters beside the bed

Like the flicker of fire casting
shadows upon every single wall.

DANNY NOWELL

The Value of a Dollar

I ran into my old friend Pace earlier tonight. We'd been close a long time ago, as kids. Pace had captained our high school soccer team, and I rode the bench to have an excuse to ride to games with him, and also with Christian and Kyle, the two twin-like goons who rounded out our little foursome and supplied weed to most of our school. After high school, we four were almost living together: Christian and Kyle kept a bleak low-rent apartment at which we spent nearly all of our time, though Pace and I were actually living with our parents, taking what were then being called "gap years" ostensibly to save for our futures. At this, Pace was more or less succeeding; I, less so. I was as overdrawn and in arrears as you can be when you're twenty years old and living with your parents with no credit to ruin or responsibilities to be shirking. I maintained a checking account whose balance hovered in the negative double digits except for every other Friday, and I had two and a half strikes against me at the business park restaurant where I waited tables. My parents were trying to foist upon me an arrangement by which they would give me the money to get my own place if I started meeting certain requirements: paying for my car insurance, reimbursing them the tuition I'd wasted, and so on. They offered up a kind of monthly payment plan, but I preferred my petty debts to anything even resembling responsibility.

All of which I was bitching about at Christian and Kyle's one afternoon after pulling a lunch shift. Pace and I were plastered to the cheap near-leather sofa while Christian and Kyle sat in wicker chairs transplanted from one of their family's living rooms. The apartment had pilled-up tan carpet and vertical plastic blinds that clacked in the air from the vents beneath the windows. It was a cave, but it was our cave, where we were free to loaf unmolested.

"Retail is just not my shit," I was saying, or could have been. My father had by this point been trying for a few years to entice me over to the family furniture store, which I then regarded as an unbearable indignity.

"I heard that," Kyle said. "I could never work for my folks." Kyle's father had done well as an electrician, and his mother kept the books. Until recently, he and Christian had done alright delivering pizza and weed, but that had ended when two men with ski masks and shotguns entered their living room one night and dispossessed them of their entire supply. An alternative line of work would have to be found. "Actually though, *all* of our parents got money," he said through the smoke of his menthol.

“Dog, I can’t borrow any more money unless it’s for bail,” said Pace, and we laughed.

“No, but check it out,” Christian said. “I got, like, all my dad’s codes in case he needs me to take deliveries. Safes, doors, all that shit.” Christian’s father had gotten rich off of a chain of department stores in the state. “And all that shit is insured, you feel me?”

“You want to rob your parents,” said Pace.

“Well, like all our parents,” said Kyle.

“Hold up,” said Christian. “It’s not even really possible to rob your parents, you know? They’d give me whatever shit I needed,” he said.

“And they just don’t know how much we need, like, a lot of shit,” Kyle said.

“It’s a perspective difference,” I said.

“You mean, robbing our parents,” Pace repeated.

“Dog, we’re already robbing our parents,” Christian said. “Let’s just, like, rob them *more*.”

I was on board more quickly than I’d like to admit. I had been having a private war with my circumstances, bursting at the seams with a sense that my true purpose was hidden from me. It wasn’t ambition—I had none—but a feeling that my secret value, whatever it was that made me worth so much more than my surroundings, was just a short push away from being revealed. Here, it seemed, was a push.

So we agreed to start with Christian’s father’s stores. The plan was to hit four in one night later that week. It was early fall, one of the last warm days, the kind of clean vacuumed-out blue that moves in after a storm. Portents of our success were everywhere: at work, my customers seemed to regard me more kindly, to tip larger, as if provisioning me for some kind of great adventure. In the mirror by the beverage station, I noticed that my deltoids had gained a little definition. My only fear was that it wouldn’t work; I wasn’t afraid of getting caught as much as I was afraid that the plan somehow wouldn’t be enough, that after all was said and done we four would be sitting around at Christian and Kyle’s wondering what next and if our mouths would ever stop tasting like smoke.

When I got to Christian and Kyle’s place, I could tell they were in the throes of the same ecstatic nervousness. They were playing some game with baseball bats and a soccer ball, whaling on each other’s shins and the ball alternately, squealing like children. I sat on the couch to have a beer.

Pace showed up before too long and the four of us sat down to go over everything one last time. The four stores were a total of maybe thirty-five minutes driving; we were hitting the North Raleigh locations, starting on Capital and heading counter-clockwise on the beltline coming back home.

There would be no weapons. Briefly, Kyle had expressed enthusiasm about carrying a “Desert fuckin’ Eagle,” but on account of the fact that we were burglarizing our own family’s businesses—and our collective unwillingness to keep Kyle’s face on ice after he blew it off—we quickly outvoted him.

“This should be, like, two hours tops,” Christian said.

“Are there cameras?” Pace asked. Ah, Pace, great question. I had wondered in the back of my mind whether he would go through with this. We could already feel that he was gathering his things, getting ready to leave us behind for one of the better lives we professed to scorn. Every so often someone would mention a party or something, and he’d have something else to do, some other plans or a job or some studying, and a little fog in the room would burn our eyes and we’d blink without discussing it. I could tell he wasn’t as excited as Christian and Kyle were—as I was—and I guess his participation was a final act of charity toward us, as if it were easier for him to let us beach ourselves on this foolishness than it was for him to keep rowing on past us.

“Cameras,” Christian said. “Good call. Yes, there are cameras.” Christian had dark, shaggy hair, and a lean face that he kept barely obscured behind wisps of beard. It was not always possible to distinguish his concentration from his being stoned. “There’s always a camera on the loading dock and at the front door,” he said. “We’ll go in on the loading docks, but I’m almost positive that if you come up the shorter stairs and hug the wall, they can’t see you.”

“You’re almost positive?” asked Kyle.

“Yeah. Like, the camera will see the door open, but it won’t catch us if we come from the one side. I’ll show you when we’re there. If anybody wants to bitch out, go ahead.” He looked around like a kid pirate with a sandbox treasure map. It was dark outside now.

“Well,” said Kyle. “Let’s do it.”

I’ve come to accept that you think about other people much more often than other people think about you. I find it comforting: sometimes you mess up a bit shaving or you have one more beer than the rest of the party and the only thing that can get you to sleep while you’re lying in bed thinking about every glance that lingered a second too long is to remember that everyone else is doing the same thing in their own bed. This was my wife’s wisdom, actually, something she’d tell me when she could see I was agitated about something I’d done or said, which used to happen more than it does now. “They’re not thinking about you,” she’d say. “They’re all worrying about themselves.”

I should say that I don't avoid Pace and the rest of them these days. Or I should say that I don't avoid them particularly. In general, I keep pretty well to myself when I'm not at work—I kind of get my social fix talking to customers at the store, and when the day's done I either just want to see my wife and my kid or read a little bit in my bed. For a little while after the time I'm telling you about I moved out to the West Coast, and there are still things I miss about it. What I liked best was being somewhere I hadn't grown up; nobody ever stopped me in the grocery store or joined me on the way into a movie I was seeing alone. I could just slide out of my apartment in Portland dressed however I was dressed and go about my business. You get lonely sometimes living that way but it's lower baggage, too. You don't have to remember if you asked somebody where their kids are in school last time you saw them, or whether they know more stories about you than they're letting on.

So I don't go out much, but today I had a little itch. I had to go to my kid's school earlier today. She's nine now. We get along. She's smart, but she lies—I've been waiting for it to blow over, but it's getting out of hand at school. We catch her at it all the time, and sometimes I just laugh: it's like she thinks she's the only person in the world who can see straight and the rest of us idiots are just here for her amusement. My wife does not laugh. She met me at the school, and the news wasn't great.

"Mr. and Mrs. Givens," her teacher said very seriously. She was wearing a grave expression but sitting at a short table in a room plastered with cut out pumpkins made of construction paper. "I'm sorry you had to come in this morning, but I think something's going on with Sarah."

It turns out my kid had told her classmates my wife and I were dead. It was recent, earlier this week: she said there'd been a car crash and she was staying with my wife's parents. The news eventually made its way to the teacher, of course, and then to the guidance counselors, who hadn't heard anything, and then back to Sarah, who was denying that she'd said it, though all of her little classmates had given her up.

"And when we asked some of her classmates if there was anything else going on with Sarah," the teacher continued, "more things came up. She said that Selena Gomez—" the teacher looked at me skeptically over her little glasses, which was unbecoming because she's still pretty young—"Selena Gomez is a very popular singer. Sarah told Matthew Black that she'd spent the last long weekend on tour with her. She told Catherine Andrews that she was related to Steve Jobs," she sighed. "Of course, kids fib sometimes, but this seems like significant behavior."

"She said we were *dead*?" my wife asked.

After the conference, I had to get back to the store, but my wife went home. She was distraught, so I promised I'd talk to Sarah tonight. But on my drive back all I could think about was how stupid the lies were. I wanted to skip the punishment part and get right to the forgiving and laughing: Steve Jobs! A car crash! But of course you owe it to them to punish. I tried to say to myself: "She is a liar." "My daughter is a liar," I said it out loud, and felt stupid because it was melodramatic and anyway produced no change in my thinking. I was torn between thinking the lies didn't matter at all and thinking they were evidence of some kind of enormous defect, which of course would have started with me. But of course you can't show any of this to your child. You have to present a unified front, a made-up mind. She would hate me for a little while, of course, and I knew that we had years in front of us where she'd hate us more and worse and push away and everything you read and hear and other parents tell you with survivors' eyes on the sidelines of soccer games. And I just wanted to skip it all, this punishment, the next decade, all of it, just skip straight to those adult years of understanding and maybe even some gratitude on her part if we were lucky. But of course you can't skip to the understanding, and of course I know you maybe never get there at all.

Anyway it turns out that stealing, when you have the keys to the building and the codes to the safe from which you are doing so, is not labor-intensive. Christian had this ludicrous yellow truck that his parents had given him for his sixteenth birthday, and we sat in it smoking cigarettes and hoping something would happen to make us turn back around. Christian reached into his glove compartment for more cigarettes and I noticed his hands shaking. Eventually, after twenty or so minutes of stillness, he cut the engine.

"Alright," he said. "Let's make moves."

We walked across the parking lot single-file and slid along the brick wall with our hands touching the wall behind our backs, pantomiming stealth. We were all wearing hoodies, ski caps, and gloves—it was cool, but not that cool, and sweat gathered on my forehead. Christian unlocked the door, which opened with an incredible squeal, and for a moment I was certain we were caught. Not so much as a breeze came in response. Inside was a storeroom: pallets of flip flops and single-serving cereal boxes and off-brand cold medication stacked further than it seemed the building could possible hold. It was silent, and we were, too. It took us maybe thirty seconds to reach the small manager's office where the safe was, a particle board cubby dugout type structure with a tempered glass window that looked out on the warehouse. Christian knelt and punched in the code and the safe popped

open. We had been inside for almost a minute. I looked at the ceiling and in the corners of the office—nothing. Pace laughed first.

“So, uh...good work, team,” he said.

“Dude, shut up,” hissed Christian, still on his knees, with his head in the safe.

“For what?” Pace said. “There’s nobody here.”

There were a few fleeting seconds where I felt cheated. They came to an end when I heard Christian say: “Holy shit.”

“What?” Kyle said.

Christian laughed again. “There’s six grand in here,” he said. “It’s already counted and everything.”

“Did you think it would not be counted?” Pace said. That’s when we broke. Relief, gratitude, shock—we laughed like it was the funniest thing we’d ever heard. There was nothing more to it than this. I’m embarrassed to admit how far guilt was from my mind when Christian pressed fifteen hundred dollars into my hand. At the other stores, we let him go in solo. We were back at the apartment by ten. We cleared seven grand each with an extra thousand for Christian.

“Finder’s fee,” he said. That laugh again. I’ve searched my memory over and over for even a pang of—what, guilt? Remorse came later, but not until we’d been caught. They would have given it to us anyway, we said. It took several more years before that fact made me feel worse.

I couldn’t keep my hands off my cash. I kept it in rolls in my dresser drawer. Nights and mornings I’d unroll some of it and stack it on top of my dresser or press bricks of it between my palms. I moved creased, pawed-over bills into the middle of each stack so that only fresh, gleaming bills were visible. Once, I took a two inch stack and held it in my teeth like a cutlass, and I was grinning at myself in the mirror when my mother knocked on my door.

“David?” she said. I fumbled to get the bills I’d been molesting into my dresser drawer. She cracked the door open and said: “Sorry to bother you.”

“Not,” I said. “Not bothering. I was just getting ready to go to work.”

“Oh,” she said. “Well, that’s good.” She was in the custom of asking me, hopelessly, if I’d be having dinner with her and my father. “So no dinner then, I guess.”

“Not tonight,” I said. “But I can do tomorrow night?”

This surprised both of us. I suppose I was nervous, having been nearly caught with the money, and of course she was thrilled, though her mother-martyr mask took a second to drop.

“Oh,” she said. “Oh, wonderful. Yes, great. Good. I was going to see about a special at the Costco on lamb chops. You like lamb,” she seemed to be declaring.

“Lamb’s great,” I said.

“Well, great,” she said.

“Great,” I said.

I left the house sort of dazed, a few minutes late for work. An idea occurred to me. I called Pace.

“Dog,” I said. “What’s good?”

“Chilling,” he said.

“My parents been asking about you, man. You trying to come to dinner tomorrow?”

“Uh,” he said. “Yeah, I guess I don’t have anything going on.”

“Cool, man. Mom’s all excited. She’s gonna cook lamb. Says it’s been too long since they’ve seen you and told me to invite you over.”

He snorted. “Yeah, man, I know that dance.”

I was attempting to anchor him to me, to the rest of us. His reticence about our theft had worried me. I hadn’t heard from him in a few days. Possibly I was afraid that he would bail on our plans and leave an extra portion of guilt for the rest of us to swallow, or possibly I was simply resisting his moving on from our little clique generally. These decisions come out of nowhere, and it’s best, I think, to accept that we can’t always know why we do things.

Dinner came the next night. “The prodigal son,” my father said when I got home from work, Pace behind me. When we weren’t talking about “my situation—” my debt, my education, and so forth—my father always seemed only half-serious, playing this sitcom dad character I half-hated. We couldn’t seem to be able to reach through the act.

My mother was pouring wine. “Boys?” she said. This was a first—my folks hadn’t been particularly strict about drinking and certainly were no longer deluded about how I spent my time, but as far as I can remember this was the first real offer.

“Sure,” I said.

Pace sort of laughed. “Yes, please,” he said. “Only if it’s a 2003 though. That was a good year.”

We all laughed, all surprised. There was a ceremonial glow in the room, for which I credited Pace.

We sat, and began to eat. My parents asked after Pace’s parents, who were doing well. It occurred to me that he was, by now, my oldest friend. We were having an old friend sort of encounter. I was getting a little drunk—

wine, I thought to myself, who knew?—and my parents were acting as if it were all perfectly natural. How much I owe Pace, I thought. Years of riding to soccer games and making pipes out of apples to get high and listening to profoundly stupid rap music in hand-me-down cars seemed to accumulate all at once as a radiant charity that I felt in my chest. This is my oldest friend, I thought.

At the next lull in the conversation, I said: “Actually, I wanted to talk to you guys about something.”

Immediately my parents looked concerned—I’d ruined the moment, and hurried to put it back together. “Everything’s great,” I said. “Really good, actually.” Pace was watching me the way you watch a child struggle to lift something twice their size. “Me and Pace are gonna get our own place,” I said.

“Really?” my mother asked, incredulous. “That’s wonderful,” she said.

Pace went blank for a moment, and then smiled at her.

“Really,” my father said, sipping his wine.

“Yeah,” I said. “I’ve been saving for a few months now.”

“And what about your plans?” my father said. “Why didn’t you tell us this sooner?”

“I guess I’ve just been, like, really committed to doing something for myself,” I said. Pace was focusing on his plate, not looking at my parents. He wasn’t going to give me away, but he wasn’t going to help.

“Well,” my father said, with an expression I’ve come to recognize. He was trying to decide whether to believe me. I’ve gone back and forth on whether he truly did, but he seemed to reach some kind of resolution, and it seemed to even please him. “Have you found a place yet?” he asked, finally.

“Not yet,” I said. “Pace and I were hoping we could come down to the store tomorrow and maybe look at some stuff we could use, you know, to see what kind of space we’d need.”

At this, my father nearly beamed. “Well!” he said. “Of course you can, of course. This could be a very good thing,” he said.

The money we’d taken so far hadn’t been much missed. We could have stopped and I could have just continued on whatever path I was on more or less unchanged. But a bizarre thing had happened during dinner. The money we’d stolen I’d begun to feel almost proud of, as if it were the thing that had brought us together, having this family dinner with my oldest friend. A few more stores and these were the kinds of nights that would make up my future,

Part of the reason, of course, that I wanted to head to the furniture store was to check things out, refresh my familiarity with the back rooms,

and so forth. I picked Pace up the next day. He got in the car and we didn't speak for several blocks, though I was eager to go over our plans.

Finally, he said: "So are we supposed to be roommates now?"

"Oh," I said. I laughed. "Nah, man. I mean, we could, but that was just some old bullshit."

"Yeah, I mean, I'm pretty sure I'm going to get back to school next year," he said.

"Word," I said. "No, definitely. Just, like, roll with this for a little while for me. I can get my own spot and we can just say you decided to go back to school. Everybody's happy."

We drove the rest of the way to the furniture store in silence, smoking as always. When we arrived, I barely recognized the place. There had been renovations since I'd last been in: skylights, a coat of paint on the exterior. It gleamed. My father shook Pace's hand, smiling broadly. "Gentlemen," he said, "I've done extensive consultation with our design team, and I think you'll be very pleased."

"Nothing pricey," I said, trying to sound frugal. "Probably, like, a futon and some kind of TV stand."

"Absolutely," my father said. He looked around beaming. "Actually, we probably don't have anything on the floor that makes perfect sense for you. Let's go back to the office and see what I have in catalog."

We followed through the showroom. There were young couples with wives wearing leather boots that climbed their calves. There were older couples whose clothes were made of fabrics I couldn't have named. I was feeling better about things with every step.

In his office, my father took out a few catalogs and showed me and Pace some wood-frame futons. I did some yessing and no-ing and haphazardly settled on one that I liked, the whole time keeping my eye on the ceilings and doorways.

We went out through the back. My father clasped my hand in both of his. We passed through the bookkeeper's office, and I saw the safe where it always had been, under the old antique punchclock. The door to the back lot was heavy iron with a deadbolt, but I could copy the key off my father's chain with no problems.

"It was good to see you boys," my father said as if he didn't usually see me on the stairs before breakfast.

"You too, Mr. Dowd," Pace said.

"Call me Dean," my father said.

Pace and I walked around to the side parking lot and I kept my eyes open for anything that could be difficult. At his car, Pace said "I didn't know the store was that nice now, man."

“I guess I didn’t either,” I told him.

He sighed and found his cigarettes in his pocket. “You know, man, y’all are gonna have to do this one without me.”

“Nah, man, it’s no big deal,” I said. I was conscious of trying not to plead. “We made out great on Christian’s places, and we’ll cover me and Kyle’s in two nights. Two nights,” I said.

“I’m good,” he said.

I didn’t feel mad at him, but a rising panic about his absence began to form. I waited a second for my own morals to jump in, to make me realize he was right. I was aware that I should want to back out, but of course I didn’t. As he drove away, I thought at least my own share would be bigger this time.

So we drifted apart, Pace and I, but when we see each other we always put on a chummy affection as if it was inevitable that we would have anyway. But of course it’s strained, or at least it is on my end—too much territory to steer around. But when I left the store today, I was thinking about him, I suppose, and when I stopped at the bar it flashed in my mind that he lived just a few blocks away. I couldn’t have been expecting to see him, but I was thinking about my kid and the whole thing with Pace and Christian and Kyle and I suppose I wanted to pity myself in closer proximity to somebody who might have gotten it. So anyway I was glad to see him.

“Whoa,” he said. “Look who it is!”

“What’s going on, brother?”

“Living the dream,” he said. “The oldest has a basketball game. Kate took the kids out to Garner to watch.”

“Ah,” I said. “Seventh grade?”

“Eighth!” he said. “And starting!”

Already we were in the dance, saying things like our kids had gotten taller than our wives. We shot the shit for a couple more minutes and I became aware that the night was getting away from me. I was supposed to go home and talk to Sarah, but it was getting a bit later, and already here I’d had two drinks. And I started to feel tired of the charade, years of wondering what Pace really thought since we’d parted ways in that parking lot. And I thought that it had been long enough—I’d gone back to work with my father, here Pace and I were both fathers ourselves—and I guess the beer got the better of me a little bit. There was a pause, and a great swell of feeling overtook me, and I said something like—God help me—“We could have it back like it used to be, right?”

Pace didn't miss a beat. "Sure," he said. "Start a diet, lose ten pounds, start running triathlons, quit drinking, no sweat." He laughed heartily and despair set over me.

I pushed one more time. "I mean, it's good to see you," I said. "We should get together more."

"Absolutely," he said. "We should take the kids over to see the Pack play."

"Sure," I said. I took out my card and insisted on paying for all of the beers. We shook hands, I drove home a little buzzed, purposely too late to talk to Sarah. I decided I'd let her skip school the next day. I couldn't let her face her classmates, that smug teacher. I know that most people aren't thinking about you most of the time, but sometimes they are, and sometimes you enter a room and you're faced with how much they've thought about you that they can't say. It's too much for a kid. I'll talk to her in the morning, and we'll go get lunch or something.

Three nights after Pace and I visited the store I was back there at the edge of a streetlamp's halo, this time watching from Christian's truck. We were all pretty relaxed. The one thing was the safe code, but I had ideas: my father's debit card PIN, our street address, my mother's birthday, my birthday. I was pretty confident we'd get there eventually.

We walked along the side of the building and up to the back dock. I'd had the key copied and was a bit surprised to find that it turned. I kept wanting there to be some sign that would bring me to my senses. But of course, worst of all, I had my senses, and in we stepped.

The sliding door from the back room to the showroom was open, and the skylights on the showroom floor lit up the crates and palettes around us like monuments in a cemetery. It was perfectly quiet and our footsteps sunk into the cardboard boxes all around us. In the bookkeeper's office, I knelt on the floor. Kyle and Christian stood in the doorway behind me. I tried a code: the numbers blinked red, the safe beeped a low tone. And then there was a boom that knocked my elbows out from under me. A crack that rang between my ears that sent my hands flying to my face. The light came on.

I looked at Kyle and Christian first, who were looking behind me, where my father sat, behind the bookkeeper's desk, with his shotgun in hand. He was looking at Kyle and Christian, and when they looked down at me, his eyes followed. His face went slack.

"Amadou from the station next door called me," he said, in a flat voice. "He said this yellow truck had been sitting in my parking lot at nights."

I looked at Kyle and Christian. They didn't say anything.

“I parked over there,” my father said.

There is still buckshot in that ceiling, stuck in the lumber over my head at work. We painted over it, my father and I, before he retired. And we worked a lot of days together, many good, and I can usually convince myself it brought him some peace to have me back there. What I remember most, though, is not the shot. It's my father's face. Or, it's the way I remember feeling when I saw his face, when he found me on the floor. It's how I felt tonight when I ran into Pace, and it's how I feel any time I forget myself or I'm tired and let my mind get the better of me. I thought that I would give up everything to make everyone I'd ever known forget me. I didn't see how I could possibly get back on my feet.

KIMBERLY SIMMS

Lost Stand of Daffodils

The last chicken scratched amidst mosquitoes,
dandelion greens, parched dirt. The raccoon
perched some paces back in the forest
snacked on remnants of stale bread. The sun rolled
across the pink sky like an overdyed
Easter egg in May. In the red dirt yard,
kids ran loose, kicked clods, beat sticks, threw gravel.
Trash danced across the porch like a long

forgotten parade. A man was busy
lining the sagging windows with wrinkled
tin foil. A half-naked woman snored
on the mattress on the floor. The soup can
was in the six-year-old's quick grubby hands.
She could not write her name but was expert
with the opener and a battered spoon.

The rust-speckled refrigerator whirred
at a great speed to preserve one bottle
of ketchup and a jug of ammonia.
The yellow phone hung mute like a cruel
moon on the spattered wall, severed, alone.
Outside a lost stand of wild daffodils
pushed green necks up but never had the strength
to bloom.

MATTHEW J. SPIRENG

Friends

(after a photo by James Neiss, *The Niagara Gazette*)

The photo from across the lake, which perhaps is narrow, or perhaps narrowed by a lens, shows several firefighters and police officers on shore

standing in a patch of snow, the police officers looking as if they want to be of more help, one firefighter—a woman—at the edge of the lake

holding the end of a ladder that has been pushed out onto the ice, and another firefighter lying on the ladder helping others splashing in the water

where ice has broken. The 70-year-old man who has fallen through while trying to retrieve one of his dogs is not clearly seen. There are two dogs in the photo.

One that seems a golden retriever sits in the snow staring at where the man is being rescued, or would be rescued if he were to survive, which he

does not. The other, maybe a mutt, appears old and stands wet and wide-eyed on the ice near the hole. It looks like a dog that has done something wrong

and is worried and needs reassurance from its master. It holds a pair of dark gloves in its mouth and looks intently at where the man would be.

BRADLEY R. STRAHAN

For Judith Leyster

(The best known of the few woman painters from the Dutch Golden Age
whose self portrait hangs in the National Gallery, Washington, DC)

Hello, I've come to see you again.
You, hardly noticed by the passing crowd.

It's a pilgrimage. After so many years
and so many painted faces

why does yours flicker
through the dingy corridors of my mind?

Why not the Lisa or a Botticelli beauty
or any of Rubens' sumptuous maids?

There you stand in simple Dutch garb,
four centuries gone yet those eyes hold me fast.

Yours is the ironic smile of a victor
that no frame can hold.

ANGELA SUNDSTROM

What Is Grief?

A circle, a corridor of trees,
a lung swinging in the distance
from a willow branch,
the fine bones of trout
lining the walkway.
An oak. An oak.
The cardinal shrieking
red, a ghost honey-
suckled to earth, no traveling
among the carp this year.

LUKE ROLFES

Being Thirty

I'm thirty years old, and I'm about to step onto a foam rolling log in the middle of a swimming pool. There is a fat kid with spiky hair on the other side of the log, and he is the champion. He's been undefeated for the last fifteen minutes. No kid in the universe could be better at log rolling. Boys and girls keep lining up to take him out, but no one can compete. I'm wondering if I can, a man full grown, fifty pounds on this sausage of a tween. I've run a marathon before and an Olympic distance triathlon. I should be able to take him. My weight alone gives me the upper hand.

The kid holds up a finger, "one," as I set a foot gingerly on the log, nearly losing my balance before the challenge gets underway. "Christ, hold on," I say, and then I re-center myself, ready to do this. Now it's time to roll. I raise my fingers and we count together, "one, two, three," and then we both pigeon step in fast forward, the log spinning underfoot, and I think I have him—he's going over, isn't he? But that's not right at all. It's my legs that are splaying in opposite directions. The log is rising, and it's me that's accepting the log full in the groin, and it's me that is getting deposited unceremoniously into deep water. I sink for a moment, liquid up my nose. When I surface, the kids are laughing their heads off. Did you see that? The thirty year old dude just took the log right in the nuts.

The chubby champion and my younger brother, twenty-seven years old but looks seventeen, are laughing the loudest. My brother is next in line, and he mounts the log to challenge the throne, but before he can settle his feet the little porker sends him into the drink. My brother is instantly out of the water, surfer dude hair and board shorts dripping, getting back in line. He wants to go again.

"Get out of the pool," he yells at me.

* * *

My son turned two at the beginning of the summer. He was born when I was twenty-eight, and now he is here, he is there, and he is everywhere. In the pool's locker room, I was supposed to change him into his swim diaper and bathing suit—a simple process in theory. This time his regular diaper was to-the-brim-full of poop, and the wet wipe sleeve contained exactly one half of a bone-dry wipe. Damp toilet paper only made the situation worse.

Finally, I scooped my child up naked and held him by his armpits in the shower amid cries of “No, Daddy. No shower. Shower scary.” “We’re out of options,” I yelled back, all the while thinking: I’m torturing him. I’m killing him. I’m ruining this child’s life. By the time the swim diaper was securely fastened I had shit all over my arms, and the floor looked like poop had declared war with toilet paper.

I wonder: How did I get to this point in my life? What stage is this exactly? A thirty year old is too old to roll on a log, but he is not too old to use words like poop, poopy diaper, bad poopy, bitey (that’s a pacifier), pee-pee, potty, butt cream, sad butt, toilet butt, pee-butt, and night, night. Sometimes I forget and tell my wife: I’m so tired all I want to do is turn on The Food Network and go night, night.

Where others move forward, I find myself lagging. I still like to watch *The Charlie Brown Christmas Special*. I never threw away my favorite stuffed animals. I still have Sprocket Dog, tucked in a box underneath the stairs. Mr. Duck, Greatest Ape: they’re all there. I didn’t think it was possible for people my age to get married until one of my friends spent his summer savings on a princess-cut diamond ring. I didn’t think people like me could have kids, and then a cousin my age handed me a cigar that said “It’s a Girl!” Divorce was an abstract concept that didn’t compute, and then two of my best friends told me they would be infinitely happier if they admitted their mistake and paid a lawyer two thousand dollars to decide whose stuff was whose.

As a thirty year old, I’ve spent a good deal of time contemplating and defining the stages of life. I’m past the ‘all my friends are married stage,’ and the ‘all my friends have had a child stage.’ I haven’t quite reached the stage where my friends are getting medical procedures not to have more kids, and I’m a few years shy of the trend where friends get married a second time. Some people I know are contemplating a second or third child or a first divorce. Friends talking about divorce is stage one. Friends talking about divorce with lawyers is stage two.

* * *

When searching the internet for an activity to do in class one day, I randomly clicked on something called “Pirate Game.” “Pirate Game” is a mathematical challenge presented in game theory. Basically, five pirates discover 100 bars of gold buried in the sands of some desert isle, and they need to determine how to divvy up the gold in a way that is most rewarding. Pirates follow a specific ranking system: Captain, First through Third Mate, and Swab. The captain decides how to split the gold, and then the entire

crew votes on whether or not they accept the captain's allotment. If there is a majority or tie, then the gold is divvied up how the captain saw fit. If a majority of the crew rejects the plan, the captain is thrown overboard and eaten by sharks. The first mate becomes the captain, the second mate becomes first, and so on and so forth. The new captain will try, again, to divvy up the gold in a way that is fair. The game continues until the surviving pirates agree how to split the booty.

After playing the game several times, you realize that the lower crew mates are at the mercy of the captain if he plays his cards right. They take what he gives them because one bar of gold is truly better than no bars of gold. The optimum solution is complicated, and it banks on the premise that the crew will act rationally and in their own best interest—like pirate robots.

I play the game with my class as a kind of social experiment, and our results vary widely from the optimal solution. I notice that my students and I have trouble roleplaying greed, let alone acting the part of scallywags, even in this theoretical pirate world. We say we don't care. We won't take charge of our fates or discuss in a tangible way the killing of our captain or the gerrymandering of gold away from those who outrank us. There's an undercurrent moving between us that says don't make waves—a force existing outside the context of pirate game that has followed me for the last twenty-nine years.

I figured by the time I turned thirty I would deal with the fact that somebody in my son's high school class will likely die in a drunk driving accident; that my relatives will continue to bicker about who has more money or who gets more love and respect than whom; that my daughter (should I have one) will stand a one in four chance of being sexually assaulted before she graduates college; that several of my friends will choose to spend the rest of their lives with somebody who makes them miserable; and that I will be retired by the time my student loans are paid in full.

One day in the future I'll turn forty, and then fifty, and then sixty. At some point, you'd think I'd become the captain who makes the tough decisions, but I can't stop being the pirate with his hand out, waiting to see how much gold I get.

* * *

"We're doing the high dive next," my brother announces. "The road to hell is paved. Whatever."

He and I step through the throng of sunbathing parents next to the pool. They are spread motionless on towels and lounge chairs like elephant seals asleep on the Pacific coastline. Some are in their late forties, early fifties.

Some are the same age as me. There's a line of kids at the high dive, eager to take the plunge. The ladder reaches up toward a platform surrounded by a façade of artificial rocks, maybe twenty feet off the ground. It's supposed to simulate diving from a real cliff. It might as well be 100 feet. The sight makes me dizzy. Heights and I are not friends.

"I passed the swimming test this morning," the kid behind me in line says. He might be seven or eight. "I've already done this thing a hundred times."

I look across the cement to the splash park area where my own child wades in and out of cartoonish water spouts and fountains with Grandma and Grandpa. He's wearing a yellow, pond-hopper life jacket, and from this distance he looks like a miniature figurine waving his arms at the pool's edge. He's blissful, having fun, as any two year old would.

The sight of my child makes me wonder if age is not so much about what you can and can't do. Maybe age is better recognized as the fear of getting nut-racked in front of an army of kids while their dads and moms in one piece bathing suits look on through sunglasses. I'd like to think the parent crowd is whispering how it's nice to see another adult participating with their children, but when I climb the ladder to the high dive I know that's not what they're saying. They're thinking about their own age, whether or not they should be up there with me on the high dive, or if it is safer down on the towel or the chaise lounge where they can become part of the landscape. Should they be snapping pictures of their own children in yellow lifejackets? Should they be playing, scolding, or worrying? Where, in fact, do people our age belong? If they joined me on the high dive or the rolling log would we become a strange collection of oversized kids, or would we come to the tacit agreement that we are just too old for this nonsense, too big, too thirty? I wish I could tell them we're really not that old. I wish I could say that age simply doesn't matter.

When my brother takes his turn off the high board, he yells something ridiculous like "Spring Break!" and backflips into the air. His bronzed body twists and contorts before landing with a tremendous splash that ripples through the deep end of the pool. Some of the little kids watching on the cement cheer. I'm holding tightly to the edge of the ladder. My hands are shaking. I've never been off a high dive before. And yet here I am.

I step to the edge, peering at the blue water two stories below. I need to be down there, somehow, splashing around like I have no shame. I just don't know how to get there.

* * *

Thirty year old me still likes to run. I've been running for fifteen years, half my life, and it's kind of difficult to explain why. I go through periods of good running and bad running, but, for the most part, I remain roughly the same. This summer, my thirtieth, is projected to be the hottest summer in the history of Kansas City. We've had twenty-one days of triple digit temperatures, and by the time the farmers harvest their burned-up fields, this summer should be the hottest to date. At the beginning of the season, my son and I would jog the trails of Weston Bend State Park along the Missouri River, and he would babble happily about trains and water and birds, but by mid-July he would scream bloody murder every time I placed him in the running stroller. Outside became off-limits between the hours of 11AM and 8PM. We resorted to, after a while, taking heat breaks at the abandoned mall on the northeast side of town, or eating chicken nuggets at McDonalds Playland. Even going to the grocery store was a trip to be savored—a way to get out of the house, out of the heat, a moment's respite from cabin fever.

There is part of me who thinks heat breaks are undeserved and complaining serves no purpose. The end of the trail always arrives, so long as you keep running. But now there's a reason to stop—a two and a half foot tall reason who looks a lot like me. And I think I'm okay with that.

TONY TRACY

Googling Emily Dickinson at The Drake

Left on the desk — words rewritten in the dark
hour, images “touched up” from solitary walks
by The Lake. Nothing heady or fussy, esoteric

musings I thought might impress some editor’s ear.
Just brief moments that spoke to or through me,
stanzas that felt mostly fresh on arrival, poetry

pressed like palimpsest upon the hotel’s regal parchment
then abandoned to lamp’s glow as wife and boys
slept and I slipped out to be near the water again.

But upon return, an addendum scribbled beneath
my short composition, another poem-in-progress,
cryptic verse penned in somebody else’s hand:

The lassitudes of contemplation/Beget a force/
They are spirits still vacation/That him refresh
My son’s words written as if to improve upon

my dour mood, to offer critique or direction, or maybe
just to one-up the old man. And though its language
feels old-timey, is composed of distilled, end-stopped

lines, is but only a small working sample, it’s voice
sounds so singular and transcendent I blurt out to
my waking wife, “Honey, our boy’s in touch with

the muse! His stuff is off-the-chain!” But before I can
settle into this welcomed state of literary grandeur,
before I can allow myself to be bathed by its epiphanic waves,

before I can willingly concede my life's work as nothing
but a prelude, poetic shadow to his eminent greatness,
Nathan retrieves his I-Phone with a "cat-eat-the-canary"

smirk, the accomplished satisfaction of knowing
I've been punk'd spreading across his face when
he reveals his last Googled entry — two lines omitted

from the haute couture stationary because he heard
my clamor at the door: The dreams consolidate in action—
What mettle fair And though a certain joy has died,

another emerges as I recognize a simple truth in
the statement; not a hunger for perfection, publication
or notoriety, but a call to the pleasure of writing,

the act of making, living the creative life its own reward.
Nothing waiting on some critic or publisher's
qualifying word, just the joy found in doing the work.

What sustained Emily as she thoughtfully composed
those lines one winter morning by candlelight
waiting for the sun to rise in her bedroom's eastern

window, for the golden disc to fill her Amherst
home with a more suffused glow so she might take
her weekly bath, lower the mossy bun hidden behind

the hard-part of that famous daguerreotype, visage
that looked nothing like her living flesh, to the kettle-
warmed water waiting below.

GENE TWARONITE

Faith

*Faith is the bird that feels the light and sings
when the dawn is still dark.*

—Rabindranath Tagore

you call it.
I fear a bird
who sings
without reason.
Give me a bird
with clock
and compass
in her head
who sees
the dark
and knows
what it once was,
who sings in
celebration
of light's daily
resurrection
and the dawn
she knows
will come.

JOHN URBAN

At the Coast

The light comes in on wings
Over a flat, farm-checked valley floor.

*Down a brown, earthen path;
Through the dew-sprinkled grass.*

A hillside's blush of blue,
A tawny beach's graceful flanks.

*To say life arose in the ocean
Is not to say life came from the ocean.*

Wisps of coral-colored cloud.

CAROL ROAN

Porch Talk

“What goes on in the new people’s house is a mystery, no two ways about it,” Flora Hart’s mother said at breakfast one morning.

Flo nodded, and changed the subject. No point in arguing. There were two ways of thinking about the Lawlers. That was the mystery. Or maybe Mrs. Lawler was the mystery. Because there seemed to be at least two of her.

One was the woman who could be observed from the Jacksons’ front porch.

All summer long, neighbors stopped by that porch after supper to talk about the weather, and if anyone had been down to the railroad tracks to see whether the wild blackberries were ripe yet, and who was sick, and other news. That sort of talk had bored Flo as a child, and still did. But she didn’t mind helping her mother walk over there in the evening because there was always a chance that Mr. Jackson might feel like telling one of his stories.

He didn’t need any questions, just a nod now and then to keep him going back into his younger years. About catching eels in the creek when it had flowed full all the way down to Trenton, about how farming used to be, about the fire that had nearly torched the whole town. Children leaned against the porch railing to listen, while their mothers sat on the steps, and the old people waited in the rocking chairs for their turn to keep the town’s history safe by telling it.

When Flo had been one of those children, Mr. Jackson had been able to lift her out of her sneakers and grubby shorts and set her down next to him in some long-past year. She had watched the creek fill up from his memories, had seen the light from the fire and the men with buckets of water. And then he’d pause, and swat a couple of flies while Darby Street became lined with its serious men, never running, not even then, but walking at their same steady pace. No words, as they passed the buckets down the lines, just their grunts when they transferred weight from one to another.

They had worked all night, Mr. Jackson said, and near dawn the women had come with pots of coffee and sandwiches, their talk somber underneath the sharp, hungry noise of the flames and the thud of falling timbers.

Flo loved how he told his stories. She had worried, from time to time, that she was becoming a Marian The Librarian. But after she had come back to town and wrestled the library into the current century, the old urge to

write that had been buried by workshops and classes, by Roger, had begun to surface again. The longer she was out of school, the longer she was away from Roger, the more she wanted to write like Mr. Jackson talked. Forget tension arc and conflict and denouement. What she wanted was to lift her readers out of their subway seats, or their beds, and carry them with her inside her characters, into how they thought and who they were behind their masks.

Not that conflict didn't exist on the Jacksons' porch. Mr. Jackson might be in the middle of his fire story, with everyone watching the collapse of a shed, holding their breath for fear someone would be killed, when Mrs. Jackson would begin to tell a story, maybe about the colicky baby next door and how it had kept her awake the night before. Mr. Jackson, who had been somewhat deaf for as long as Flo could remember, kept talking, but Mrs. Jackson talked louder and asked questions that had to be answered. She waited for a little cluck after she told how many times she had looked at the clock, and she wanted to be told she'd done the right thing when she complained to the mother, and then she wanted agreement with her views about how children ought to be raised.

Mrs. Jackson got ears to her side of the porch every time. The past, with its full creek and the stolid, blackened men, flickered out, and listeners were left with only the dull present and colic. When she began to theorize about parenting, the children sidled away from the porch railing and headed off to the vacant lot down the street to play war, their mothers excused themselves to do the supper dishes or set bread, and the older people sighed themselves up out of their chairs and murmured that it was getting late.

The broken stories piled up inside the old man until they were pushing against his throat, and a night would come when, before the scattering neighbors had reached their destinations, the Jacksons' screen door clapped shut and he let out a yell at his wife. He'd tell her he was going to kill her if she didn't shut up, and then he'd carry on about women who didn't know enough to hold their tongues. Giggle-smothered children and smiling grown-ups stood in clusters under the trees to listen until his throat had cleared out and the street was quiet again.

The Jacksons' fights were strangely reassuring. No one had to worry as long as the old couple knew how much they needed each other. Not just to fight with, though that was part of it. Everyone on Darby Street was supposed to need each other. Need made death hard, of course, but it made life solid and peaceful.

The porch talk changed as soon as word circulated that outsiders had bought the house across the street. Darby Street's houses had been passed down from one generation to the next. The flow of life there had been a river

that narrowed and rushed when there was a death, widened and smoothed for a birth. The rumored advent of outsiders muddied the water considerably.

Then Esther Lapham stopped by the porch to report that she'd had it straight from Jim van Arsdale that the outsiders were from New York. She might as well have tossed a pile of rocks into the river. New York? New York people on Darby Street? Beyond comprehension.

A number of neighbors chose to work in their front yards on moving day. That evening, Mrs. Carpenter, who lived only one house away from the new family, reported on its constituency. As to the wife, her bones were too heavy for the size of her, but otherwise she was ordinary to look at—hair and eyes of a plain brown, a chin that she kept tucked into her neck. The husband acted like he was the boss, just stood there pointing to where everything was to go. Slight as a string bean, he was, so they'd brought along another man to help the woman with the heavy lifting. Three children—a toddler and two others of school age—who seemed well-behaved enough, if a bit loud. No evidence of a dog, cat, or canary.

Mrs. Jackson had had the best vantage point, and was able to supply a full furniture inventory. The orange sofa was so oddly constructed that she had to use her hands to describe its shape to those who had not seen it come off the truck.

Mr. Jackson, who had become quite deaf, yelled, "What're you wavin' your arms around for?"

"And then there was a chair covered—you're not going to believe this—in what looked like gray flannel. And some of the other chairs had black corduroy seats on 'em. Who ever heard of such a thing?"

Flo had been silently amused at the consternation on the porch until the cantilevered sofa was described. "Was it solid orange?"

"No, now that you mention it. There was black and some other colors, sort of like slubs in shantung. Why?"

"I think I saw it—or one like it—in a shop window in New York."

"I haven't seen shantung in an age. I wonder if they make it any more."

"Whatever were you doing in New York?" Flo's mother asked.

"Research," she said. "When I was in grad school."

"You never told me you went there."

No, Flo had never told her mother that she'd spent a weekend in the city with Roger. That was before her father's heart attack, before she'd come back to Darby Street. Before the funeral, when she had realized that Roger would never leave his wife. She had sobbed more for the loss of him than for her father. In retrospect, she supposed she had been a coward to use her mother's health as an excuse to leave school. But at the time she couldn't imagine sitting through another of his classes, pretending to be his student, not his lover.

God, she was becoming a Miss Havisham. “Time to get you into bed,” she said to her mother.

During the next week the porch talk was given over to planning a visitation on the new woman, an old custom that had been used when grandsons had moved back to town with a wife. They were not social calls, with expectations of tea and a chat, but assessments of the training that would be needed before a new wife could be accepted.

Five women from the oldest families were chosen. They reported that evening that they’d found Mrs. Lawler—“That’s their name, Lawler”—in the barn, where she’d propped open the doors for ventilation while she stripped the varnish off a harvest table.

Mrs. Carpenter said, “You should have seen her. Clothes all streaked with paint. Any self-respecting woman would have tossed them in the rag bag years ago.”

Mrs. Jackson reported that, yes, the Lawlers had come from New York. That the husband had been working on a doctorate there. “I said, ‘We already have a doctor.’ And she said, ‘Not that kind of doctor. He’s a professor over at the university.’”

She paused and let “university” chill the evening air.

Flo’s mother was the first to recover. “But,” she spluttered, “that’s not how they told us it’d be. ‘No university people,’ they said. Somebody ought to talk to Judge Martin about whyever he’d let such people move in here.”

Mrs. Prentiss said she’d already stopped by the Judge’s office. “He said that the husband was a bit offputting, but Mrs. Lawler had been raised on a farm—somewhere out west, he couldn’t remember where—and that she’d gone to a one-room school when she was little. That’s probably what struck a chord with him. You’d think the Judge had gone to one himself, the way he carries on about how we should go back to the old-timey schools.”

Mrs. Wiley, who tended to be the porch peacemaker, said, “She did say she was going to put in a vegetable garden soon as she got settled. And she asked us how to go about bringing the raspberries back into bearing.”

“That’s true,” Mrs. Carpenter said, “she did. That’s a brambly mess back there by the fence and, if I remember rightly, those raspberries are ever-bearing.”

“Berries, you say? I remember the time...” Blessedly, Mr. Jackson was off on one of his stories.

Although the porch consensus was that she was an odd duck, the Darby Street women found little to criticize in Mrs. Lawler’s behavior over the next weeks. The children were a little wild, but more polite than most,

and she kept their clothes clean and mended. Mrs Jackson said that she didn't know when she'd last seen darned socks on a child, and she didn't know what the world was coming to now that nobody knew how to darn.

And the woman was a hard worker. Too hard, some thought. Mrs. Carpenter said, "I warned her that mowing that half acre with a hand mower was likely to bring on women's troubles, but she just smiled, with that little chin tuck that's her way when spoken to. She said the oldest boy wanted to do the mowing, but he wasn't big enough yet, and it had to get done somehow."

"Which wasn't what I meant at all. I don't know what her husband does over there. He bought that old lawn mower at the Williamson auction, but it's her that pushes it in the hot sun. And her that put up the new clothes poles, and looks like it's her that's starting to paint the front porch."

"There's something wrong with a man that lets his wife do men's work," Flo's mother said. "I said so from the beginning."

But Mrs. Lawler had been quick to accommodate to Darby Street ways, everyone could see that. She never used the dryer in the basement on good days, but hung her wash on the lines she had strung up. And, after a few weeks of hanging sheets together and shirts together, she changed to the Darby Street way of hanging by color, the whites together and the blues together, without even being told.

Mrs. Carpenter did have to speak sharply to her once. "I brought her a bushel of Montmorency cherries, and I warned her she'd have to call early to get on the list next year."

"It's a pure shame there's only one Montmorency tree left in the Valley," Flo's mother said.

"Mountains," Mr. Jackson said. "I'd like to see the mountains before I kick the bucket."

"But when I went back to see how she was doing with the canning and the jam, the cherries were still sitting there in a corner of the kitchen, and there she was, painting the inside of a cupboard. I told her. I said, 'If you don't get at those cherries before they go bad, I'll wash my hands of you.' I will say, she did climb out of the cupboard real quick and go hunting for a big kettle."

Mrs. Lawler should have been absorbed into the flow of Darby Street but, although not another word could be said against her cleaning or her washing, her gardening or her mending, she seemed unaware that she could—was expected to—step off the bank. Perhaps, thought Flo, the woman was afraid of where the current would take her. She never came up onto a porch, even when she was invited. If she brought some baked goods to share, as was the custom on Darby Street, she'd hand them over the

railing, and then scurry back to stand at the edge of the sidewalk, right at the edge, so she wasn't stepping on the grass. And then she'd shuffle her feet and shake her head. "No, thank you. I have to put Neil down for his nap." Or, "I have a stew in the oven."

If she was coming back from a walk with the children, singing and laughing, with weeds they'd picked, or pine cones they'd found, or sticks they were dragging along behind to hear the scritch and feel their hands bumping along the sidewalk, the singing would go out of her as soon as she caught sight of the porches, and a scared and hungry look would come into her eyes. She'd stop to say hello, and the children would say hello all around without needing a nudge. Then she'd do that little shuffle, and they'd cross over to their house.

The uneasiness about Mrs. Lawler that had primed so many discussions on Darby Street porches faded into watchful silence. It's their helplessness, Flo thought. No one knew how to help her. If she'd come from a Spring Valley family, her neighbors would have been able to ascribe her strangeness to similar traits in a grandmother or a cousin. Stories would have been told, allowances made, and Mrs. Lawler would have been accepted into Darby Street life with compassionate, knowing nods.

But she was an outsider. Whatever she was afraid of was buried deep beyond their reach. Whatever she was hungry for was greater than they could offer.

It was a different Mrs. Lawler who stopped at the Hart porch one late afternoon. She and the children had come up the street, sucking the nectar from the heads of clover they'd picked. They all said their hellos at the edge of the sidewalk.

Flo asked, "Did you enjoy your walk?"

"We went to the old cemetery today to read the inscriptions. And we talked about the continuity of life, and the paradox of it always ending and yet always going on."

Flo told her mother about the encounter that night over supper. "I was so surprised to hear her say more than two words that I must have stood there with my mouth open. Because she stopped in the middle of a sentence, and her eyes slid back and forth across the words she'd said, like she was proofreading how she'd just answered an exam question. And then she tucked in her chin, and whispered, 'Maybe paradox isn't the right word,' and almost ran home.

"It's like there are two of her, the one we see from the Jacksons' porch and the one who stopped today."

"There's something wrong with a woman who doesn't know how to be neighborly," her mother said. "I said so from the beginning."

Ah, Flo thought, it was the porch setting. That's what had thrown her off. Because the Mrs. Lawler who spoke of paradoxes was nearly the same woman who came to the library each Thursday.

There her children picked out any books they wanted, even if they were from the adult sections. She chose two books for reading aloud, one that her husband had told her to read to them and one that she liked.

"He says I should read them Babar and Curious George and Seuss, but I get so tired of those. And, anyway, they like English books better—*The Secret Garden*, and the Mary Poppins books. And the Oz series. And myths. We love myths."

She seemed free to talk in the library, as long as the subjects were children or children's books. Flo had even heard her laugh. Once.

"I asked for *The Child's Garden of Verses* at a bookstore, and the clerk said they didn't stock it anymore because it wasn't relevant to today's children. So I said, 'Well, it must have some relevance because my children have worn out two copies.'" Then she laughed.

But the day Flo offered her a Muriel Spark novel, Mrs. Lawler tucked in her chin and said, "No, thank you. My husband says fiction isn't good for me. He brings home the books he wants me to read."

In good weather, Flo worked on her stories on the Hart porch after she'd closed the library. If she wasn't too deep in thought, she would hear the Lawlers chattering along the street, would look up and offer an encouraging "Hello." The brief visits were always the same, not worth reporting to her mother at supper. A rush of unchecked words that the woman read back to herself to find something wrong, then an apology and a dash for home. Flo would have liked to have had a conversation about some of Mrs. Lawler's thoughts before they were canceled out, before the woman switched from one person to another. But she could see that her interest wasn't expected, perhaps wouldn't even have been comprehended.

On one of her library visits, Mrs. Lawler inquired whether an inter-library loan would be possible. "I've found a reference in a footnote that I'd like to follow up, but my husband is too busy to look for it at the university library. I love footnotes, don't you?"

Flo stared at the woman. Mrs. Lawler's usual sallow complexion glowed pink across her cheekbones. She had a chin. "We don't have access to the university library, but I can get you anything in the state system."

"Really?" Her eyes were alive. Not the warm mother-eyes Flo had seen before. Not the familiar frightened, opaque eyes. They were clear, intelligent, almost sparkling. "Actually, I have a list. A long list."

Her eyes changed, her chin drooped. "You're sure it won't be too much trouble?"

“No trouble at all. I’d welcome a little research.”

Mrs. Lawler paused before she said a “Thank you” that was strangely tinged with suspicion. Then, “I’d only want one book at a time. I have to do a lot of reading for my husband’s work.”

“You just bring me your list and let me know which book you want first.”

After the children had checked out their books and were laughing toward the door, Mrs. Lawler lingered at the desk. “I was wondering if...I don’t want to bother you, but...sorry.” She turned to scuttle away.

A moment of indecision, then her back straightened, her head lifted, and she looked directly at Flo. “Would it be possible for me to keep my list somewhere in the library? Sometimes my husband...sometimes my lists get lost.”

“Of course.” Flo pulled open a lower drawer of her desk. “I’ll give you a folder in back of this file. Notes, anything else you’d like to leave here, would be safe with me.”

Those new eyes again. And the woman smiled. A fleeting smile, but Flo was sure she’d seen it for a moment.

Flo stared at the door long after the Lawlers left. There aren’t two Mrs. Lawlers, she thought. There are three women inside her, maybe more, and she’s holding them all together with nothing but string. And the string is fraying. That’s what she’s afraid of, that she’ll come apart. Flo knew that to be a slippery world, with each step maybe the last, and the dark pit of madness waiting. But that wasn’t a fear to talk about with her mother at supper. Or at any other time.

Nor were the screams, when they began late at night. Flo wasn’t sure what the sound was, that first night. She dropped her book and went to the window. The screaming didn’t sound human. Maybe a cat in heat? No, the wailing held more despair than passion.

The screams rolled down Darby Street, bouncing off echoes of themselves. Screaming was so unknown, so unthinkable on Darby Street that Flo expected to see lights flick on in the dark houses, expected to see husbands appear in pants pulled on over pajamas, expected to see a shotgun or two.

But no lights, no men, no guns, nothing. Hers was the only bedroom shining out onto the dark grass. Except up at the Lawlers’ house, where half the downstairs was lit.

They were Mrs. Lawler’s screams, lowering from their high-pitched flight into gut-deep moans, and then trailing off into silence.

Flo turned off her light and got back into bed, but she had trouble falling asleep. When she finally did, she had a nightmare of being lost among

the reeds of a swamp, not knowing which step would find a firm clump of sharp grass and which would find nothing underfoot. Overhead, the moon was obscured by swirls of clouds that turned into a witch's thick, black cape. The witch-clouds dropped ever nearer until they brushed her face and threatened to suffocate her.

She woke with a start, saw daylight, saw the soft, breeze-blown, white curtains that must have touched her face. Perhaps the screams, too, had been part of her nightmare.

Over breakfast, she asked her mother if she had heard anything during the night.

“Like what?”

“Maybe a cat?”

“I didn't hear a thing. You know me. Once I'm down, I'm out.”

Which Flo did not know. Many a breakfast conversation had been filled with Mrs. Hart's arthritis and how lightly she slept because of the pain.

No one mentioned the screams on the Jacksons' porch that night, but they hung heavy, so heavy that no one could think of any other news to tell. Mr. Carpenter tried to prime Mr. Jackson to tell them a story, but he just swatted at flies in the silence. Flo turned to Mrs. Jackson, expecting her to complain of the noise that had disturbed her sleep, but she had retreated behind her eyes into some other grief.

Finally, Mrs. Wiley cleared her throat and said, “I saw Mrs. Lawler out staking her tomatoes this morning. She said she was trying the Big Boys kind. They ought to do real good if we get some rain.”

LESLIE WILLIAMS

Vanishing Lake

My interior paramour
when last we spoke
anything further was foolish
to say, having exhausted every
course, witnessing the ease
with which great fires
can be extinguished
and anyway down to eating
just a little, surviving
in secret— what awes me
now, the brute naïveté
that powered us, lying in
meandering streams until
they cut off to oxbows,
isolated ear-shaped lakes—
but then I felt the swell
of an emergency, and only
one of us could swim.

JOHN SIBLEY WILLIAMS

That Is the Light

Old mangled moon like an animal separated from its skin. Autumn cut open along the seams, bled upside down into puddles of hills with men moving sheep along their spines with a whistle. These woods, or what were woods, and these smoky pillars that once meant something substantial was burning. Dead as they are the stars keep beating their bodies against the stumped border between this and that light. I know the trick to gathering all the light into tiny jars. Celestial or candle, sex, fury, or how tearfully our fathers held us when no one was around to witness. That is how I want to remember holding you: son, daughter, lamb, smoke. What a wolf dreams when all the foxes are gone, a backfire once it's consumed the forest entirely. That is the light our bodies give back to the world.

HOWARD WINN

Certainty

The poet is never sure
and the word chosen
may not be the precise
one to catch the moment
and its meaning if it
actually has any for
it may not make sense
except to find a better
word or just silence.

LISA ZERKLE

The Place Where the Answers Are Kept

—after Stephen Dobyns

I want to know what it takes to grow wings.
A winter spent inside the silent factory
of a chrysalis spun of silk and zipped shut

against weather. Inside, the fine dusting
of scales arrange like shingles into colors
of warning, patterns meant to distract. Tricks

of light made in the dark. The pattern, followed,
then broken. I want to know what to expect, what
will emerge next. This hidden transition from terrestrial

to airborne. I know the host and where
to check for evidence. The feathery leaves of the fennel
have all been eaten, nothing left but stripped stalks,

seeds already cast to the ground. Someone has come
before me and given everything a name, sorted
this abundance into tribes. I want to witness transformation.

It's happening now. In the spring, the swallowtail may
air out new wings and adorn each flower it visits,
drawn to beauty and sweetness. But inside

its tight case—none of that—only scales
overlapping into pattern,
the slow growth of a huddled form.

CONTRIBUTORS

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KEVIN J. McDANIEL lives in Pulaski, Virginia, with his wife, two daughters, and two chocolate Labs. In recent years, he has taught University Core at Radford University and English composition at New River Community College. To date, his poems have appeared in *The Sacred Cow, Lavender Wolves, Axe Factory Press, The Bluestone Review, The Clinch Mountain Review, JuxtaProse*, and *The Cape Rock*. He was a semi-finalist in *Heartwood Literary Magazine's* annual Broadside Contest, which was judged by poet Diane Gilliam. In addition, his first poetry chapbook, *Family Talks* (Finishing Line Press), appeared in 2017.

CARLA MCGILL earned a B.A. in English from California State University, San Bernardino, and an M.A. and Ph.D. from the University of California, Riverside.

Her work has been published in *A Clean Well-Lighted Place*, *Atlantic Review*, *Shark Reef*, *Crack the Spine*, *Westview*, *Common Ground Review*, *Caveat Lector*, *Inland Empire Magazine*, *Vending Machine Press*, *Cloudbank*, and *Burningword*, with work forthcoming in *Atlanta Review*, *Schuylkill Valley Journal of the Arts*, and *The Penmen Review*. McGill's story, "Thirteen Memories," received an Honorable Mention in *Glimmer Train's* MAR/APR 2016 Very Short Fiction Contest. As a member of the Poetry Society of the Huntington Library from 1991–2012, her poems have appeared in three of the group's chapbooks: *Garden Lyrics*, *Huntington Lyrics*, and *California Lyrics*. McGill writes poetry, fiction, and is working on a novel and stage play.

LISA MECKEL'S work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Rattle*, *Reed Magazine*, *Schuylkill Valley Journal Of The Arts*, *Nimrod*, *Carmel Valley News*, *Mirboo North Times*, *Victoria*, *Australia*, and *Monterey County Weekly*. She is also a three-time winner of the poetry award at the Santa Barbara Writers Conference.

CAROLYN MOORE'S four chapbooks won their respective competitions. Her book, *What Euclid's Third Axiom Neglects to Mention about Circles*, appeared in 2013 as winner of the White Pine Press Poetry Contest. Moore taught at Humboldt State University (Arcata, California) until able to make her way as a freelance writer and researcher. She now works from the last vestige of the family farm in Tigard, Oregon.

RAY MORRISON'S debut collection of short stories, *In a World of Small Truths*, was published in November of 2012 by Press 53. His stories have appeared in *Ecotone*, *Fiction Southeast*, *StorySouth*, *Aethlon*, *Night Train*, *Carve Magazine*, *Word Riot*, and others.

CYNDY MUSCATEL'S short stories, poetry and essays have been published in many literary journals. A former journalist, she now writes two blogs. She teaches fiction writing and memoir, and is also a speaker and workshop presenter. She is writing a memoir of her years teaching in the inner city of Seattle.

JED MYERS lives in Seattle. His poetry collections include *Watching the Perseids* (Sacramento Poetry Center Book Award), the chapbook *The Nameless* (Finishing Line Press), and the limited-edition handmade chapbook *Between Dream and Flesh* (Egress Studio Press). Among honors received are *Southern Indiana Review's* Editors' Award, the *Literal Latte* Poetry Award, *New Southerner's* James Baker Hall Memorial Prize, and, in the UK, the McLellan Poetry Prize. His poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Prairie Schooner*, *Nimrod*, *The Greensboro Review*, *Crab Creek Review*, *Painted Bride Quarterly*, *DIAGRAM*, *Crab Orchard Review*, and elsewhere. He is Poetry Editor for the journal *Bracken*.

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SANDRA RAMOS O'BRIANT'S first novel, *The Sandoval Sisters' Secret of Old Blood*, won first place in two categories at the 15th annual ILBA, 2013: Best Historical Fiction and Best First Novel. Over 20 of her short stories and creative nonfiction have appeared in print and online journals. There are links to her work online on the 'About Sandra' page at www.sramosobriant.com. She grew up in Santa Fe, New Mexico and now lives in Los Angeles.

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DAVID POSTON is retired from full-time teaching and still lives in Gastonia, North Carolina, where he leads occasional writing workshops, edits a poetry column for the public library newsletter, and does church and community volunteer work. His most recent poetry collection, *Slow of Study*, was released by Main Street Rag Publishing (2015), and he has work forthcoming in *The Well-Versed Reader* and *The Rain, Party, & Disaster Society*.

Poems by **J. STEPHEN RHODES** have appeared in over sixty literary journals, including *Shenandoah*, *Tar River Poetry*, *The Texas Review*, and several international reviews. Wind Publications has published his two poetry collections, *The Time I Didn't Know What to Do Next* (2008) and *What Might Not Be* (2014). Before taking up writing full-time, he served as the co-director of the Appalachian Ministries Educational Resource Center in Berea, Kentucky, the Academic Dean at Memphis Theological Seminary, and as a Presbyterian pastor in Georgia and Kentucky.

ROBERT RICE'S poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in many journals, including *Dos Passos Review*, *Evening Street Press*, *Grey Sparrow*, *Hayden's Ferry Review*, *New Letters*, *North American Review*, *Quiddity*, *The Saint Ann's Review*, and the anthology *Many Lights in Many Windows: Twenty Years of Great Fiction and Poetry from the Writers Community*. He has published several novels, including *The Last Pendragon* (Walker & Co. 1992), which *Publisher's Weekly* calls "a winning tale of heroism, glory, and romance." Since 2008, Rice has studied under Jane Hirshfield, Ellen Bass, Dorianne Laux, Sharon Olds, and Jan Zwicky.

CAROL ROAN has graduate degrees in vocal performance from Indiana University and in business from Columbia University. She has sung in the television premiere of a Ned Rorem opera and has testified about gold trading before the Commodity Futures Trading Commission. Her first nonfiction book was commissioned by the publisher, and two more nonfiction books followed, as did three co-edited anthologies. Roan's first short story was published in the inaugural issue of *Minerva Rising*, and seven others followed or are forthcoming. Currently, Roan teaches voice and public speaking in Winston-Salem, North Carolina.

LUKE ROLFES' book *Flyover Country* won the *Georgetown Review* Press Contest, and his stories and essays have appeared in magazines such as *North American Review*, *Bat City Review*, and *Connecticut Review*, among others. Rolfes is the co-editor of *The Laurel Review*.

ROCHELLE JEWEL SHAPIRO'S novel, *Miriam the Medium* (Simon & Schuster, 2004), was nominated for the Harold U. Ribelow Award. Her short story collection *What I Wish You'd Told Me* was published by Shebooks in 2014. Shapiro has published essays in the *New York Times* (*Lives*) and *Newsweek*. Additional work has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Iowa Review*, *Stone Path Review*, *Bayou Magazine*, *Poet Lore*, *Los Angeles Review*, *The Louisville Review*, *Pennsylvania English*, *Rio Grande Review*, *Peregrine*, *Gulf Coast*, *Midway Journal*, and *Willow Review*. Shapiro's poetry has been nominated twice for the Pushcart Prize and was awarded the Branden Memorial Literary Award from *Negative Capability*.

MAUREEN SHERBONDY'S most recent poetry book is *Belongings*. She has eight additional poetry books and one short story collection. She lives in Raleigh, North Carolina.

KIMBERLY SIMMS has poems forthcoming in *AjiMagazine*, *Poems2Go*, *O Dark Thirty*, and the *Petigru Review*, while current poems appear in *The South Carolina Review*, *Phantom Drift*, and *Tulip Tree Publishing*. Simms was also the 2016 Carl Sandburg Writer-in-Residence, and her work has been published in a number of print journals and magazines, including *Eclipse*, *The Asheville Poetry Review*, and *Poem*.

MATTHEW J. SPIRENG'S book *What Focus Is* was published by WordTech Communications. His book *Out of Body* won the 2004 Bluestem Poetry Award and was published by Bluestem Press. He was first place winner in the 2015 Common Ground Review poetry contest and is an eight-time Pushcart Prize nominee.

BRADLEY R. STRAHAN taught poetry at Georgetown University for 12 years. From 2002-4, he was Fulbright Professor of Poetry & American Culture in the Balkans. He has six books of poetry and over 600 published poems in journals such as *America*, *Confrontation*, *Christian Century*, *The Hollins Critic*, *Poet Lore*, as well as many anthologies. His recent book, *This Art of Losing*, has been translated into French. His latest poetry book, *A Parting Glass*, is about his year in Ireland and has also been translated into French.

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TONY TRACY is the author of two poetry collections: *The Chistening* (Center Press Books) and *Without Notice* (March Street Press). He is a Pushcart Prize nominee whose work has recently appeared or is forthcoming in *Tar River Poetry*,

North American Review, Hotel Amerika, Rattle, Southern Indiana Review, Poetry East, Coe Review, Potomac Review, and many other journals and magazines. He lives in Urbandale, Iowa, with his wife, two boys, and two dogs.

GENE TWARONITE is a Tucson poet and the author six books, including two juvenile fantasy novels and two short story collections. His first book of poetry, *Trash Picker on Mars*, has recently been published by Aldrich Press. More of his writing can be found at his blog, TheTwaroniteZone.com.

JOHN URBAN was born at Fort Jefferson, Missouri. He attended schools in Alaska, Wyoming, and California, graduating from San Jose State College, California with a degree in Physics, minors in Philosophy and Creative Writing. He presently lives in San Jose, California. His poems have been published in the *Common Ground Review, New Vision (UK), The Story Teller, Reed Magazine, Jet Fuel Review,* and *The Rolling Stone*. His interests and influences include Classical Metaphysics and Modern Spirituality—he considers his work to be in the Romantic Tradition of Emily Dickinson, Hart Crane and Wallace Stevens, but distinguishes it as Transcendental Romanticism.

PRISCILLA WEBSTER-WILLIAMS enjoys being a part of North Carolina's vibrant poetry community. Her poems have appeared in journals and anthologies published by *Soundings East, Ad Hoc Monadnock, Yankee, Pinesong, Bay Leaves, Jacar Press, Main Street Rag, Iodine,* and others. Her poem "Barn" was set to music by composer Fred Malouf, and her poetry has been featured in art exhibits, at festivals for cancer survivors, and at the recent Disappearing Frogs Project at Weymouth Woods in Southern Pines. Her manuscript, *The Narrative Possibilities of Coral*, was runner-up in the inaugural 2016 Cathy Smith Bowers Chapbook Contest, and is scheduled for publication by Main Street Rag in 2017.

JOHN SIBLEY WILLIAMS is the editor of two Northwest poetry anthologies and the author of nine collections, including *Disinheritance* and *Controlled Hallucinations*. A five-time Pushcart nominee and winner of the Philip Booth Award, *American Literary Review* Poetry Contest, Nancy D. Hargrove Editors' Prize, *Confrontation* Poetry Prize, and Vallum Award for Poetry, John serves as editor of *The Inflectionist Review* and works as a literary agent. Previous publishing credits include: *The Midwest Quarterly, The Massachusetts Review, Poet Lore, Columbia Poetry Review, Mid-American Review, Third Coast, Baltimore Review, Nimrod, RHINO,* and various anthologies. He lives in Portland, Oregon.

LESLIE WILLIAMS has published poetry in *Poetry, Slate, Salmagundi, The Southern Review, Gulf Coast, Shenandoah,* and many other magazines. Her first collection, *Success of the Seed Plants*, won the Bellday Prize, chosen by Lucia Perillo, and was a finalist for the Eric Hoffer Award. Williams has received individual artist fellowships from the Illinois Arts Council and the Massachusetts Cultural Council, and the Robert Winner Award from the Poetry Society of America.

HOWARD WINN'S work has been published in *Dalhousie Review, The Long Story, Galway Review, Antigonish Review, Chaffin Review, Evansville Review, 3288 Review, Straylight Literary Magazine,* and *Blueline*. He has a novel published by Propertius Press. His B.A. is from Vassar College, his M.A. from the Stanford University Creative Writing Program, while his doctoral work was done at N.Y.U. Winn is Professor of English at SUNY.

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