

Gardner-Webb University

Digital Commons @ Gardner-Webb University

The Broad River Review

Literary Societies and Publications

2019

Volume 51 (2019)

C.V. Davis

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.gardner-webb.edu/brreview>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#), [Fiction Commons](#), [Nonfiction Commons](#), and the [Poetry Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Davis, C.V., "Volume 51 (2019)" (2019). *The Broad River Review*. 18.
<https://digitalcommons.gardner-webb.edu/brreview/18>

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by the Literary Societies and Publications at Digital Commons @ Gardner-Webb University. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Broad River Review by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Gardner-Webb University. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@gardner-webb.edu.

THE
BROAD RIVER
REVIEW

Volume 51
2019

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

THE BROAD RIVER REVIEW

ASSOCIATE EDITORS

Morgan Bennett
Caroline Sloan
Annamarie Warley

The *Broad River Review* is published annually by the Department of English Language and Literature at Gardner-Webb University in Boiling Springs, North Carolina. Upon request, this publication can be provided in an alternate format by calling (704) 406-4414.

Acknowledgements

Cover Photo: “Blue Window” by Harold Ackerman, 2019

Broad River Review, v. 51, 2019
broadriverreview@gardner-webb.edu
broadriverreview.org

CONTENTS

| | |
|--|----|
| EDITORS' NOTE | vi |
| THE RASH AWARD IN FICTION | |
| Seth Wieck, <i>Tender Mercies of the Wicked</i> | 8 |
| THE RASH AWARD IN POETRY | |
| Mark Svenvold, <i>Coda: Eurydice as Déjà vu Finale</i> | 24 |
| J. CALVIN KOONTS POETRY AWARD | |
| Callista Eckert, <i>I Never Heard</i> | 25 |
| EDITORS' PRIZE IN POETRY | |
| Joseph Rash, <i>The Comet</i> | 26 |
| POETRY | |
| Maryam Barrie, <i>Transformation</i> | 27 |
| Terry Hall Bodine, <i>Kipling's Tea</i> | 28 |
| Ben E. Campbell, <i>Soup Bean Supper</i> | 29 |
| Abby Caplin, <i>Death of Sound</i> | 30 |
| Carol Flake Chapman, <i>Empty Pedestals</i> | 39 |
| Rosemarie Dombrowski, <i>Concussion with Broken Heart</i> | 40 |
| Jonathan Louis Duckworth, <i>Ducks Sleeping on a Sunny Hill</i> | 41 |
| Renee Emerson, <i>Queen Ludmilla</i> | 42 |
| Terri Kirby Erickson, <i>Soleá</i> | 43 |
| Robert Fillman, <i>The Second Offer</i> | 46 |
| Tejan Green, <i>Another Moon</i> | 47 |
| Eric Greinke, <i>Early Thaw</i> | 53 |
| Ian T. Hall, <i>Foxfire</i> | 54 |
| Linda Flaherty Haltmaier, <i>To the Brink</i> | 56 |
| Carol Hamilton, <i>Granddaughter Soon to Leave for College</i> | 57 |
| Raymond P. Hammond, <i>The Book of Sharon</i> | 58 |
| Kristina Heflin, <i>Star Stuff</i> | 63 |
| Stephen Herman, <i>The Journey</i> | 64 |
| Mike Horan, <i>Rosemary</i> | 65 |
| Michael Lee Johnson, <i>Injured Shadow</i> | 66 |
| Peter Kahn, <i>Southern Centuries</i> | 67 |
| Nancy Kassell, <i>Cuttings</i> | 77 |
| R.J. Keeler, <i>Fork</i> | 78 |
| Angela Kelly, <i>1979</i> | 79 |
| Christopher Kuhl, <i>Evolution</i> | 80 |
| Richard Lebovitz, <i>The Booking, or How We Discovered Our Mother's Dementia</i> | 81 |

| | |
|---|-----|
| Tasslyn Magnusson, <i>A Return</i> | 88 |
| Josh Mahler, <i>The Backyard Where I Lost My Faith</i> | 89 |
| C.I. Marshall, <i>Riding the Trail of Birdsong</i> | 90 |
| Preston Martin, <i>A Quiet Poem</i> | 97 |
| Kevin J. McDaniel, <i>Fred Flintstone's Sombrero</i> | 98 |
| Jim McDermott, <i>Mountaintop Removal</i> | 99 |
| Mary McGinnis, <i>A Better Ending to Our Movie</i> | 106 |
| Alan Meyrowitz, <i>Roll Call at Auschwitz</i> | 107 |
| Sally Stewart Mohny, <i>Fonta Flora Remains</i> | 108 |
| Kathy Nelson, <i>Eighty-Seventh Birthday, Gero-Psych Unit, Parkridge Hospital</i> | 109 |
| Simon Perchik, <i>Untitled</i> | 114 |
| J. Ross Peters, <i>Wetland Sounding</i> | 115 |
| Fabrice Poussin, <i>His Pleasure</i> | 116 |
| Olivia Pridemore, <i>Ghost Island</i> | 117 |
| Phill Provance, <i>Triangle</i> | 128 |
| Greg Rappleye, <i>Winter Flounder</i> | 129 |
| Maria Sebastian, <i>I Heard a Woman</i> | 132 |
| Claire Scott, <i>An Old Woman in a Dry Season</i> | 133 |
| Allen Smith, <i>Missing</i> | 134 |
| Rachel Sobylya, <i>Lenin</i> | 135 |
| Matthew J. Spireng, <i>These Geese</i> | 146 |
| Bonnie Stanard, <i>The Sensuals of Living in the South</i> | 147 |
| Max Stephan, <i>The Return</i> | 160 |
| Rose Strode, <i>On an Evening Walk in the Woods My Sister Asks Me If I Recall the Sound of Our Mother's Voice</i> | 161 |
| Jessica Lynn Suchon, <i>Epilogue</i> | 167 |
| Nancy Swanson, <i>I Know Water</i> | 168 |
| Kelly Talbot, <i>Dusk</i> | 170 |
| Jo Barbara Taylor, <i>The Common Touch of Know-How</i> | 171 |
| Rachel Tramonte, <i>Sylvia</i> | 172 |
| Jason Gordy Walker, <i>Ode to a Dog Park</i> | 173 |
| Bruce Arlen Wasserman, <i>Why I Remember Dad</i> | 174 |
| John Sibley Williams, <i>Sinkholes</i> | 176 |
| Leslie Williams, <i>Friend as First-Class Relic</i> | 177 |
| Nancy H. Womack, <i>Dear Debbie Reynolds</i> | 178 |
| David Xiang, <i>An Unrequited Love for the Directionless</i> | 179 |

FICTION

| | |
|---|----|
| Heather Bell Adams, <i>Three Clicks</i> | 32 |
| D Ferrara, <i>Save the Mill</i> | 44 |
| Brodie Lowe, <i>Not the Man</i> | 48 |
| Dave McNamara, <i>Common Value</i> | 68 |

| | |
|---|-----|
| Mary Lambeth Moore, <i>Emergencies</i> | 82 |
| Ray Morrison, <i>Can't You Say You're Sorry?</i> | 92 |
| Ann Harper Reed, <i>In Paradise</i> | 100 |
| Elizabeth Chiles Shelburne, <i>Any Other Kind</i> | 118 |
| Duncan Smith, <i>Fallout</i> | 130 |
| John Thomson, <i>The Forgiven</i> | 136 |
| C.D. Watson, <i>Lightning Crack, Thunder Roll</i> | 148 |
| Nicholas A. White, <i>Fragments of the Heart</i> | 162 |

CREATIVE NONFICTION

| | |
|---|-----|
| Matthew Maffei, <i>My Father Plays the Guitar</i> | 60 |
| Hali Morell, <i>The Knitting Debacle: When an Armhole Full of Judgement Destroys Your Happy Place</i> | 110 |

ARTWORK

| | |
|-------------------------------------|-------|
| Harold Ackerman, <i>Blue Window</i> | cover |
|-------------------------------------|-------|

CONTRIBUTORS

180

EDITORS' NOTE

Gardner-Webb University has published a literary magazine continuously since 1968. Early issues appeared under the titles *The Green Scribe* and *One Little Candle*, then a long run as *Reflections*, beginning in 1973. Finally, in 2002, we became the *Broad River Review*, when the magazine was also upgraded from side-staple to a perfect bound publication and increased its scope from local to regional/national.

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. We honor's Rash's work in this issue by reprinting two of our favorite Rash poems.

The editors would like to thank Amy Greene and Maurice Manning, who served as judges for the Rash Awards in Fiction and Poetry, respectively. Greene selected "Tender Mercies of the Wicked" by Seth Wieck, of Amarillo, Texas, for the fiction award, while Manning chose "Coda: Eurydice as Déjà vu Finale" by Mark Svenvold, of New York, New York, as winner of the poetry award. Congratulations to both winners, who received \$500 each and publication in the 2019 issue.

Amy Greene said of Wieck's story: "I'm pleased to recognize this vivid, compelling, and poignant father-son story about a young boy's difficult coming of age." Maurice Manning commented on Svenvold's poem: "The poem has a subtle, recurring rhyme scheme and also well-timed and well-placed lines of pentameter. Rhyme and meter—features of traditional verse—but not out of fashion at all when they deepen and add complexity to the poem. Beyond the craft, this poem offers an impressive blend of thought and imagination, persuasively combining classical mythology and a contemporary bus-stop. This is an intelligent poem in terms of its perception, but it rises far above mere intelligence, and moves toward music and sonic pattern, and the ineffable quality we admire in all art."

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 senior Callista Eckert for receiving this recognition for her poem "I Never Heard." Also, Gardner-Webb University senior English major Joseph Rash received our Editors' Prize in Poetry for "The Comet."

The *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, broadriverreview.org. Our next contest submission period will coincide with our regular submission period, which will be September 1–November 15, 2019. Full submission information and guidelines, including profiles of the judges, will appear on our web site in August. 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.

SETH WIECK

Tender Mercies of the Wicked

—for Wyatt and Clark

The dog slinked away from Abel's flashlight beam, dragging the steel trap from a hind paw. Feathers plumed the cur's snarling lips with a bloody mustache. Abel shined the flashlight into the roosts. The surviving hens shivered and clucked. He beamed the fence and discovered the hole where the dog had tunneled beneath the boards, and the circle where it had struggled against the trap. The dog had the markings of a heeler—one blue eye and a dappled coat—but its snout was flat. The teeth set in jaws bred to clamp. Pointed ears laid back over the square head. Hulking shoulders. Abel whistled a note and backed out of the door.

The dawn had begun to blue. He clicked off the flashlight and walked in the near dark and paused beside three elm trees. At the foot of the trees stood a headstone.

"Maia," he said. "Warren's growing. Lost that baby fat in his cheeks. There's a man in there. A capable one. An eight-year-old man."

The lights of Amarillo wavered on the northeast horizon. Due east were the lights of Canyon. A thin stream of cars passed across the plain between the cities.

He continued, "We're reading Genesis now. *Peradventure would ten righteous men be found there? One, even?*" He set a knuckle in his teeth. Seed words moved coarsely in his throat.

A Jack Russell terrier sniffed out from the windbreak cedars and stopped at his feet. "Rillis, did you smell the mutt in the hen house?"

Abel and the dog returned to the house where the boy kneeled in a kitchen chair and copied clumsy sentences across the bottom of a legal pad. The boy had taken up this practice when he began to learn letters. Now, Abel kissed his son on the head as he entered the kitchen.

"Good morning, Warren."

"Dad, what does per-adventure mean?"

"Let's look," Abel said, hefting open the unabridged dictionary he kept on the bread box. He smiled and affected a British accent. "It means: Please sir, may I ask you a question?" Warren mimicked the accent as he traced the word.

The father said, "Get dressed when you finish. I've got something to show you."

“What is it?” asked Warren.

“A dog.”

“A dog,” the boy exclaimed.

“Not a good dog. It killed chickens last night.”

When Warren had dressed, he met his father in the hall as the man retrieved the 12-gauge from the coat closet and loaded three shells.

Abel set his hand on the boy’s head, and the two crossed the yard. The dawn had grown pink. In the hutch, the cur lay still in the manure. Its growl stirred the dust. Warren watched from behind his father’s hip.

“How many did it kill?”

“Eight last night. Eleven the night before.”

“Why?”

“It likes killing. Didn’t even eat these hens.”

“Does that trap hurt him?”

“Yes.”

Abel perched the shotgun against his shoulder, but the boy touched him.

“Dad, can I ask you not to shoot him?”

“No. But you don’t have to watch. Go stand in the yard til this is over.”

Outside, Rillis barked at the door, and the sun spindled the boy’s shadow across the yard to the three elms where, at the hip, the shadow sat upward so that it appeared as a man reclining against the tree.

Then the hutch erupted. The tin walls amplified the dog’s snarl and hiss, and the barking and dragging chain, and the chickens turning berserk, and one gunshot rang the shed like a gavel. The chickens continued their noise.

Warren was crying when the man came for him, and he felt the warmth of the hand on his shoulder and heard that it had to be done. That there was no turning the dog. That it wouldn’t stop with these chickens, but it’d move on to other farms. Or maybe our dog, or God forbid, you boy. Warren nodded and cried, then dried his face in his father’s shirt. It smelled of gunpowder and manure.

That fall, Warren began the fourth grade at the public school in Canyon. On an afternoon in mid-October, he leapt from the school bus steps onto the caliche road that led up to his house. A new black truck basked in their driveway. He ran a finger through the dust which had gathered across the chrome trim. Rillis bounded out to meet him.

“Who’s truck is that?”

The dog rolled over and he scratched her belly, and she followed him to the door. Warren sloughed his backpack into the coat closet, next to the 12-gauge, then went to the kitchen where Abel was filling a glass of water at the tap. A man in a tie, reclining at the table, stood to greet the boy.

“You must be Warren.”

“Yes, sir. I am.”

“I’m Paul Harple.” The man thrust his hand towards the boy. “I work at First State Bank.” The boy felt his own callouses against the man’s soft hands and twitched his nose at the scent of aftershave.

“Y’all have apple cider in the lobby,” said Warren.

“We do?” said the banker. “I just drink the coffee.”

The boy looked at the man’s gleaming shoes.

“Warren,” said Paul. “Your father tells me you’re in the fourth grade. Do you know my youngest, Patrick?”

“Patrick Harple is your son?”

“So you know him?”

“We play football at recess.”

“I didn’t know he liked football,” said Paul.

“He’s fast.”

Abel handed the banker his water.

Paul lifted the glass in a toast, although neither of his hosts held a glass. “To good Ogallala country water. We have that reservoir water in town. Tastes like fish and swimming pools.” The banker tilted his head back and drank a long gulp while the knot in his tie climbed and escaped the rise of his Adam’s apple. Paul was older than Abel. His hair combed professionally. Warren’s father only combed his hair for church.

Abel filled a glass of his own and said, “Warren, go on and get the eggs.”

“Yes, sir.”

In the path to the chicken hutch, Warren hipped a heavy steel basket. Rillis skittered like a waterbug tracing unseen scent trails, doubling back and disappearing into the north row of junipers. He whistled for the dog, but she was lost to her nose. Two of the elms around the chicken hutch were dying. Two bleached trunks shorn of bark like skeleton arms rising from graves. He threw the rock he’d been kicking and hit one of the trees dead center. Dust silted from its grain. A series of notches in the wood marked the months of Warren’s previous target practice. A few misses chinked his mother’s headstone.

Beyond the tree, out in the north pasture, a stampede of cattle kicked up a wake of maize stalks, fleeing some assailant hidden in the dust. The lead cow circled back and the herd turned with her, forming a semi-circle around the calves.

As the spool of dust settled, a pack of dogs emerged, led by a black dog that seemed a lion out in the field. The lead cow swung her horns. The mutt pack forked around the herd.

Warren saw Rillis freeze, head cocked toward the cattle. She disobeyed his call and let out for the skirmish forming in the field. The boy scooped a handful of stones and followed his dog. By the time he'd reached the pasture, Rillis lodged herself between the black dog and the cattle. The dog twisted, surprised by the terrier attempting his throat and knocked Rillis to her side. She rolled and bolted back towards Warren, and the black dog left the cattle for her. Warren launched a stone that fell short.

The other dogs peeled away from the cattle, following the new chase. He squared his feet and threw another stone and hit the black dog in the head, with no effect. He threw his last rock and it hooked and hit a trailing mutt in the feet, rolling the dog in the stalks. Warren turned and sprinted for the house.

Abel and Paul met Warren's screams on the back porch. Abel was loading the shotgun. Father and son tore to the chicken hutch. The giant black dog was shaking Rillis by the back of the neck, and Abel advanced on the attacker until the gun was nearly against its head. It tumbled at the blast. Abel ejected the shell and shot two more dogs before he lowered the gun. The remaining pack retreated to the pasture.

Rillis whimpered as the boy scooped her up. The muscle in her neck lay open to the air, but the bite had only ripped her skin. Her eyes rolled. Warren offered her up to his father, who cradled her in both arms and marched to the barn.

"Can you fix her, Dad?"

"We'll see."

The banker was mute behind them. Dust powdered his shoes. In the barn, Abel opened a rusted refrigerator and retrieved a bottle of penicillin that he used to treat cattle. With his other hand, he put a packaged hypodermic needle between his teeth, pulled off the cap, and handed it to his son.

"Screw that onto a syringe," he said.

When Warren looked up from his task, his father had closed the dog's wound, then holding the flaps of skin pinched between fingers, set them against the concrete floor. With his other hand, he took a staple gun he'd lifted from the workbench and began stapling the skin together. Rillis scratched the floor in mock escape.

“Hold her,” he said. “Hold her tight.”

Warren pinned her against the floor while his father pulled a dose of penicillin and stuck the needle in her neck.

The banker coughed.

“Mr. Harple,” said Abel. “In the drawer, in the workbench, is a tube of glue.”

Rillis snapped at Warren’s hand, so he pressed her harder to the floor. The banker returned, holding the glue. “Squeeze it along this seam,” said Abel.

After the surgery, they passed by the dead dogs, and the black dog lying in the road, wheezing. Its purple tongue instinctively lapped the blood-jelly pooling by its mouth. They carried Rillis to the house and laid her in a pile of towels in the bathroom and ground an aspirin and sprinkled it into a hamburger patty.

“You’ll have to excuse us today, Paul,” said Abel.

“Sure,” he said. He slid into his suitcoat, enlarging his stature as if the coat reminded him of his errand. “You need to find a solution tonight, Abel. Really last week would be better, if that were possible.”

“I understand. I’ll be in town tomorrow afternoon. We’ll resolve this.”

When the banker left, Warren walked out to the dying dog. Half of its face was bald now, with bleeding pores where the pellets pierced the skin. One eye a lidless, chewed sphere swimming beneath a cataract of blood. The rib cage rose and fell slowly, blooming and bursting red bubbles in the dog’s nostrils. From the house, he heard the back door and his father’s heavy steps until the man joined him.

“Why is he still alive?” asked Warren.

“All I had was birdshot. Big dog like this. The blast probably hurt it more than the pellets did.”

“Will it die?”

“It will.”

Warren touched the dog with the toe of his shoe, and a forepaw curled up in reflex. “I called Rillis to come back, but she wouldn’t listen.”

“She’s a Jack Russell. She’s bred brave to hunt dogs. Not dogs this big, but she can’t help it.”

“I was scared, Dad.”

“We’re all scared. Nobody says so, but that’s the fact.”

“You were scared?”

“I’m always scared, Warren.”

Tears wet the boy’s cheeks. “No Dad. You’re brave.”

“Love is brave,” said Abel. A breath chortled through the dying dog.

Warren said, “I hit this dog with a rock, but it didn’t stop. It kept chasing her.”

The father knelt down to look the boy in the eyes. “That dog is bigger than you. You’ll need a bigger rock next time.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Those eggs still need to be got.”

While Warren was in the hutch, he heard the shotgun three more times. His father met him in the road and took the eggs from him with one hand, and they walked back to the house together.

During supper Warren asked why the dogs had been in the pasture chasing cattle. His father explained that those dogs came from town when their owners decided the dogs were no longer worth keeping. “Whims of men change on the wind,” he said. “They love, and their love ends.”

“Wind rhymes with end,” said Warren.

“As do bend, tend, wend.”

“I already said *wind*.”

“No, w-e-n-d, which means: to go on. May I wend with my story?”

“Go ahead,” said Warren.

“When I was boy, I didn’t see so many drop-offs. I’m sure they were around. The cities were just smaller. Further away. Amarillo was a dim glow at night. Canyon even less. When the sun set, the constellations rose over the cities. The Bear to the northeast. Leo to the east. Granddad griped the two cities would grow together. I thought he was crazy.”

Warren observed the cities’ lights through the kitchen window. The eastern sky, a ceiling of night resting on two electric arches, was new to him suddenly with the possibility that the whole hemisphere had once been black.

Abel continued, “Who would have thought the cities would grow our direction? We spoke German out here when Granddad was a boy. And there was the ten-mile border of farmland. Now their language and lightbulbs, even their dogs are encroaching.”

“Croaching?” said Warren.

“En-croaching. Pressing in on us. The dogs now, they scratch at the door, sit at our tables and divide our food. Ask for a bowl of water. They’ll eat everything out here eventually. And they have sharp teeth, sharper teeth than we have, I’m afraid.”

“You think the dogs could eat our land?”

“They might.” Abel laughed. “That’d be a big dog, huh?”

“Dogs can’t get that big, Dad.”

“No. Dogs are dogs.”

“And people own dogs, so we’re stronger than dogs?”

“Owning is a sort of power, yes,” he said. “But, the righteous man regardeth the life of his beast.”

“And we’re righteous men?”

“There is none righteous,” said Abel. “We’re all more wicked than we can see.” The man pressed his fork into a baked potato and split it in half. Steam curled around his hand. “But there are men who take pleasure in hearing dogs beg. Those men frighten me.”

“Rillis begs,” replied Warren.

“All dogs beg. Except maybe wolves and coyotes,” said Abel.

“And foxes.”

“Yes. And foxes.”

“Why don’t foxes beg?”

“They aren’t bred to beg. God breeds foxes, and God feeds foxes. I’ve never heard one ask for food, have you?” The boy shook his head, and Abel sliced a curl of butter and stirred it into his potato. “Would you like to hear a story?”

“What about?”

“The meanest dogs I’ve ever seen.”

“Will it scare me?”

“Likely. But what did you learn about being scared?”

“Everybody’s scared.”

“And being brave?”

“I forgot.”

“Love is brave.”

“Got it.”

“Find the scariest man in this story,” he began, “And love him, then you won’t be afraid.”

“Yes, sir.”

Abel cleared his throat, adopting a performer’s grandeur as he began the story, and Warren sat forward in his chair.

“It was not yet the third hour of the day, if you set your watch to church time.” Whispering behind his hand, he said, “That’s nine o’clock for people these days.”

“The bells at St. Mary’s rang six times a day for prayer. When the bells chimed, Dad stopped milking, feeding, shocking cane, whatever and we prayed. The chimes carried for miles.”

On this morning, we arrived at the post office and were greeted by a flatbed truck with a pair of crates. I mention this for two reasons: First, the truck was strange. We'd never seen it. The second strangeness of this truck was the crates. They each held a dog, if you could call them that. Our neighbors preferred breeds like collies or heelers, sometimes a shepherd. A dog that might be used for work. But these dogs were constructed like gargoyles. Squatting on massive haunches with a steady growl boiling up from their black-haired chests, leering at the world beneath them.

One dog's lips had been torn into a permanent grin. It had teeth like sickles. The other dog had a scar that ran from its missing ear down across its eye. This wounded eye twitched like a hatching reptile egg. Like a dragon embryo watched me from inside the clouded ball.

About this time, the bells at St. Mary's began to ring. I expected Dad to bow his head and pray, but the dogs unfurled against the walls of their crates, as if they had wings, barking and snarling at the sound of the bells. The one-eyed dog chewed the chain that latched his crate; the grinning dog jarred the walls with his shoulder, bloodying himself against the screws that held the cage together. Like a sounder of swine full of demons.

A bearded man flung open the post office door and charged toward us. The beard along his chin streaked with stains of tobacco juice, and down from his belt swung a hatchet. I remember this hatchet flashing in the sun. He ignored the dogs and marched straight for Dad.

'Stay away from my dogs,' he screamed, brandishing the hatchet through the window at my father. The hatchet itself was dull and nicked, but the backside of this hatchet had a spike, like a leather awl, red with blood and patched with black hair.

Warren set his fork down. "This is the scary man in the story, isn't it?"

"Maybe. Does he scare you?"

"His dogs are scary."

"Well, love this man if he scares you, but you can't know until the end of the story who the scariest man is.

"Anyway, this man screamed through the window. His teeth brown with tobacco. I found myself up against my door, but there was no place to hide from our accuser. Dad took my hand, then addressed the madman, 'The bells, sir. They're barking at the bells.'

"Would you believe the man had not even heard the bells until Dad mentioned them? His posture withered when they rang in his own ears, and he called on God to curse the pealing gongs, the chastity of St. Mary, the air, God himself, and the time it took for the bells to stop ringing. And then the bells quit. The dogs sat back down.

“Well, don’t mess with my dogs,’ he said. ‘They aint yours.’ He spit a stream of tobacco juice on our front tire, and waved the hatchet as a final warning.

“That hand holding the hatchet, though, was missing the last two fingers, like a claw.”

“Did Granddad put him in his place?” said Warren.

Abel leaned back and considered the boy’s enthusiasm. He closed his eyes as if he were imagining the rest of the story, then snapped them open. “The man fired up his truck, billowing oil smoke everywhere. Granddad bowed his head and prayed.”

“He prayed?”

“I don’t remember the whole prayer, but I remember that he said this clearly, for me to hear, as if the prayer to God was also a lecture to me, or himself: ‘There is but one judge and one ruler; who, then, are you to judge your neighbor?’”

Abel pushed back from the table and carried their plates to the sink and ran water.

Warren said, “That’s the end?”

“In life, stories don’t have ends,” replied Abel.

“But you’re telling me a story. There needs to be an end.”

“What would you like to know?”

“What happened to that man?”

“I don’t know. He drove off. I never saw him again.”

“Was he your neighbor?”

“The postmaster said he lived down at the old dairy.”

“Did you go out there?”

“To get mauled by his dogs? No.”

“Did Granddad?”

“Maybe.” He winked at the boy. “Most of a father’s life is lived in the shadow of his son’s knowledge.”

Warren wiped the table of crumbs. “What kind of dogs were they?” he asked.

“I’ve never seen one like it. A mix of fighting breeds: pit, mastiff, Rottweiler. He must have been breeding them for generations; one sire’s clout to kill matched to a bitch’s instinct for murder, burst upon the earth by the litter. Anyway, it’s not what kind of dog that’s important. Dogs are bred by people for some end: fighting, friendship.”

“What’s that dog that bit Rillis?”

A Chow. Chows come from wolves. They’re ancient. They’ve existed since people gathered in villages. What sort of person do you think would own a dog like that?”

Warren dried a plate his father had washed. “A man who wanted to be tough.”

“You might be right.”

“What sort of people are we?” asked Warren. “Why do we own Rillis?”

“Do we own her?”

“You bought her from Sean, at the elevator. For twenty dollars.”

“You’ve got a good memory, Warren.” Abel stacked the dishes in the cabinet. “We are not owners. We are husbands.”

The boy scrunched his face. “Like we married Rillis?”

“No. That we tend her. That we know the bend and chief end of her breed.”

“You said she was bred to hunt dogs,” said Warren.

“Foxes.”

“Have you ever hunted foxes with her?”

“I’ve never hunted foxes.” Abel hid his face in his hands. “I bought Rillis when your mom was sick. I liked that she was a hunting breed, but I haven’t seen a fox around here in a decade.” He smiled at his son as if the boy had caught him stealing candy. Warren reached a hand up to comfort his father, but let it fall before they touched.

At bedtime, as Abel knelt by the bed, Warren said, “I can’t love that man. In the story.”

“We love our neighbor,” said Abel.

“As ourselves, I know,” finished the boy. “But I hate him. That man was mean.”

“There is meanness in all of us. Do you want your neighbors to love you?”

“But I’m not mean. Not like him.”

“I hope you’re not. I hope God spares you from knowing that meanness in yourself.”

“You’re not mean like him either, Dad.”

Abel stood so that he towered over the boy’s bed. “We love our neighbor, Warren. This is law between you and me. Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir.”

“It will be the bravest thing you ever do.”

Abel left the boy’s door ajar, as if his final command needed to breathe. He descended the stairs and sat at the kitchen table and read and copied the next day’s scripture onto the legal pad for Warren. Rillis whimpered in the bathroom, so he crushed another aspirin into hamburger

meat and fed her and poured antiseptic along the wound. In the quietness of the house, he heard the pack dogs yipping and snapping on the property, so he took the gun and flashlight and walked out to the dead dogs and found the pack returned and gnawing on the corpses, but the pack scattered at his light. He dragged the three dead dogs to the trash pit and burned them.

* * *

In the morning, Warren found a plate of fried eggs with buttered toast on the table next to the legal pad. He ate and transcribed half of his father's passage before he set the pen down and flipped to the previous day's page. When Abel came in from the morning rounds, Warren asked "Why'd you write the same thing as yesterday."

"What does it say?" said Abel, pouring coffee.

Warren read the half that he'd written: "If your brother becomes poor and cannot maintain himself with you, you shall support him with you as though he were a stranger or a sojourner, and he shall live with you."

"Go on."

The boy flipped the page back to read what he'd written the day prior: "Take no interest from him or profit, but fear your God, so that your brother may live before you."

"Memorize that."

"The whole thing?"

"Yes."

"I don't want to."

"Put it to memory, Warren."

"No," said the boy.

Abel set his coffee down and retrieved a two inch slat of oak hidden on top of the refrigerator. "Come here," he said.

"No."

Before Warren had clipped the syllable, he found himself clamped by the elbow, so he went limp and was tossed to the man's shoulder and carried like dog food to the office. Laying over his father's knee, he noted, as he had many times before, the unvarnished yellow pine under the desk, the four legs planed from split railroad ties.

Abel said, "Because you disobeyed me, you get one swat." Tears came even before contact and blurred the inscription under the desk, and the swat stung but not enough for the volume of tears he cried. Abel left the room and returned a few minutes later with his coffee. He set the mug on the desk and squatted low enough so he could look the boy in the eye.

"I love you," said the father.

“I know.”

“Do you know why I gave you a swat?”

“Because I said no.”

“Yes. Sometimes I suggest something, like try some coffee. Sometimes I command you, like don’t look down the barrel of the gun. Do you understand the difference?”

“Survival,” said Warren, as he’d been told before.

“Yes, survival.” Abel smiled at the boy’s answer. “Now get ready for school.”

During lunch period, Warren was surprised by Abel who stood in the school cafeteria with a pass from the office. Warren waved as his class marched single file down the hallway. Patrick Harple whispered, “Is that your dad?”

“Yep.”

“What’s he wearing?”

Warren noted that his father wore what he always wore: A khaki shirt, jeans, a leather sheath for pliers on his belt, and boots. “Work clothes,” he said.

“Why’s he so dirty?” said Patrick. Warren had never considered his father as dirty, but there he was, covered in dirt.

Abel showed the pass to Warren’s teacher and she motioned for Warren to step out of the line.

“Let’s skip your cafeteria and get a burger at Cope’s?” Abel said.

In the packed diner, sunlight streaked the mist of grease. The hood vents roared ineffectively over the grill, islanding conversations in the noise. While they ate, Warren recounted the morning to his father. He’d checked out a book, *Savage Sam*, from the library.

“Sam is tracking a boy and girl that got kidnapped by Indians.”

“Who is Sam?”

“Sam’s a dog; the son of Old Yeller. He runs so far that his paws start bleeding. Did you know you could put bacon fat on a dog’s feet to keep them from bleeding?” he asked. “I wonder if we could do that on Rillis’s bite.”

“Won’t the dog lick off the fat?” said Abel.

“That’s what happened in the book. How did you know?”

“Dogs like bacon.”

“Can we get bacon for Rillis?” said Warren. Before Abel had a chance to answer, Warren changed topics. “Patrick’s dad bought him a new football yesterday. It’s the kind the pros play with. It’s made from pigs. We’re going to play with it at recess.”

“You’re not going back to school today.”

Warren slumped in the booth. “Where are we going?”

“To see Patrick’s father.”

“At the First State Bank?” asked Warren.

“Yes.” Abel smiled. “Do you want some pecan pie?”

“I do,” he said. “Did you know pecan is the state tree of Texas?”

“Someone in Austin decided that. There aren’t many pecan trees around here.”

“We’re learning Texas history. The state motto is friendship. The word *Texas* is Indian for *friends*,” said Warren.

“Do you know what a motto is?” asked Abel.

“It’s a saying.”

“Yes, a saying of sorts. It’s a mutter. A grunt,” said Abel. “Do you think some Spaniard wandered into Texas and came across an Indian that grunted the question ‘*Friends?*’”

Warren giggled.

“Do you believe that is true, young citizen of Texas? Do you think that friends is the word before all words, the beginning grunt upon which all Texas grunts grow?”

“Maybe. It’s a name, Dad. You name things before you know them.”

“Yes Warren, we do.”

When the pie came, he observed his father stir the whipped cream into the filling, then copied the ritual.

“Warren, do you know why we’re going to the bank?”

“To finish the conversation with Mr. Harple.”

“Do you know what that conversation was about?”

“Money?”

Abel laughed at the boy’s guess. “Many conversations are about money, especially with a banker. But this conversation is not about money. It is about life and death.”

The boy nodded, stirring his pie.

Abel slid pie into his mouth. With the bite stashed in his cheek, he muttered, “Before you are life and death: choose life, that thou and thy seed may live.” Then he chewed.

“Deuteronomy?” asked Warren.

“Good.” He smiled and swallowed. “Did you know your mom was pregnant? Before.”

“When she was sick?”

“Yes, when she was sick.”

Warren shook his head no.

“We knew she was pregnant, but then the doctor found the cancer.”

“Was it a boy or a girl?”

“A girl.”

Warren drilled his spoon into the pie and brought up a bite.

Abel continued, “We had to choose between your mother and the baby.”

“Did you choose Mom?” said Warren.

“We did. Not that it matters now.”

Warren stopped stirring his pie and set down his spoon and folded his hands. “I wish I hadn’t mixed them together.”

“It all ends up in the same place.”

“I like them separate.”

“Do you want another piece?”

“No. Can I be done?”

“Warren, I didn’t mean to tell you that. I meant to tell you why we’re going to the bank.”

“It’s a bank, Dad. We’re going for money.”

“Not today. Two years ago, I went to the bank for money. Your mother’s medicine was expensive, so I mortgaged the farm. Do you know what a mortgage is?”

“No.”

“When someone first spoke the word, it meant *pledge of death*. For you and me, it means I sold the farm to the bank. With the money they gave me, I paid for your mom’s medicine. Then I was slowly buying the farm back from the bank with interest.”

Warren lifted his head. “Take no interest or profit.”

Abel’s cheeks blushed. “Yes. Take no interest. Yet my debts grow each day, and your mother and the girl are gone. And you and me, the living, we’re about to lose the farm.”

“Where will we go?”

“I don’t know, Warren,” he said. “Today, I don’t know. I’ve come to the end of what I know to do.”

Warren took up his spoon and began eating his pie again. “What happened to that man with the dogs?”

Abel straightened, relieved that Warren had changed the conversation. “The mean dogs?”

“Yes.”

“He died. His dogs killed him.”

“Why?”

“That’s what he’d bred them to do.”

“Did Granddad do something?”

“Why do you think he did anything?”

“Because he did. I can tell by the way you told the story.”

“How did I tell the story?”

“You told it the way you tell Aesop stories.”

“How do I tell Aesop stories?”

“Your words change. They get bigger.”

“It’s my weakness,” said Abel. “Some time later, we drove by the old dairy and saw the dogs chasing the neighbor’s cattle, so Granddad pulled in to tell the man his dogs were loose. But I think the man already knew.”

“What did he say?”

“Nothing. The dogs had eaten him.”

“They ate him?”

“All but the skull and hands and feet.”

Warren’s dropped his spoon into the pie.

“Granddad chased the dogs off the man. He hit a few with the bumper, opened the door and grabbed the man’s hatchet and swung it a few times and jumped back in the pickup.

“Granddad killed the dogs with the hatchet?”

“What would you have used?”

“Nothing. I’d let the dogs eat the man.”

Abel paused. “Well, it doesn’t matter much. The church bells began to ring, and the dogs turned on each other.”

“They ate each other?”

“No. They began killing each other. There’s a difference. He’d trained them to fight according to the bells.”

“Did they all die?”

“Most of them. Four or five escaped.”

“What happened to them?”

“What’s anybody going to do with dogs that were bred to kill? It would be better that those dogs were never conceived, but there they were. Alive and killing.”

“I’m glad he died.”

“I’ve made it harder, haven’t I? To love this man.”

They finished their pie and settled the bill. The October sun slid deeply in the afternoon sky, and Warren squinted against the glare that reflected off all surfaces: cars parked along 4th Avenue; dust and pollen flecking the air with gold; the clear sky paling to saltwhite at the sun’s angle. The gold in the bank sign shimmered.

As they entered, oak panels sprouted from the interior darkness. Shallow chambers along the wall housed six stations of flags that had laid

claim to the land in Texas. “Spain,” he recited from the memory of his school lessons, “France, Mexico, the Republic of Texas, the Confederacy, and the United States.” A brass longhorn stood forever-in-stride atop the kiosk of deposit and debit slips.

Paul Harple’s secretary informed them that Mr. Harple was taking a phone call, but they could wait in the chairs outside his door. Warren glanced at the seats covered in cowhide, and Abel led him to the beverage station and made him a cup of apple cider. They waited, blowing steam from their drinks, until Harple opened the door and called for them.

MARK SVENVOLD

Coda: Eurydice as Déjà vu Finale

We live, always, on the other side of now.

A fraction of a second in the past is how
the world and what we think we know
assembles, in a momentary flash
 within the predicate of everything.

 But when this predicate seems foretold—

when you seem to feel it coming on—
before you even know to know
(like an understudy in a show)
anticipating lines that you will speak,

the glance outside the window
just so: a future visible,
and you its stand-in, waiting for the bus

 —so Eurydice arrives

and you, a stand-in waiting for the bus
just so: a future visible.

Her glance outside the window
anticipates the lines that you will speak
like an understudy in a show
before you even think to know
that you can feel her coming on:

 she—a predicate foretold
within the predicate of everything—
assembling in a momentary flash.

And the world we think we know
(a fraction of a second in the past) is how

she lives—always, on the other side of now.

CALLISTA ECKERT

I Never Heard

I never heard my mother's alarm
screeching in the early morning.

I never heard her shower and dress,
even with the blow dryer rushing.

I never heard the coffee pot
sputter before filling her cup.

I never heard her leave in her car
To go lift at the gym.

I never heard her come home
to rouse us from our beds.

I never heard her spray the pan
before cracking the eggs.

I never heard her clean the kitchen
as I changed my frumpy pajamas.

I never heard her snuffle or cough,
if she ever got sick.

I never realized how proud I made her,
until I heard her brag one day.

I never realized how much
I don't deserve her.

I never realized the super
power of my mother.

JOSEPH RASH

The Comet

Watch the comet flow
over the night sky,
destination known.

Its fire shines bright red
against the cosmic blue
as all the people
witness the awesome hue.

Radiance flares an all-mighty display
as lights dance without temperance,
swirls of purple clouds surround the
extraterrestrial vessel of vast
explosive metal.

The sear permeates—
I can only describe it
as the screech of a dragon
so angry at our existence
it manifests to take vengeance.

How magnificent a sight,
how great a sound.
The force of its pulse,
enough to blow me down.

I am engulfed in the glorious flames
as our lesser bodies are strung about.
I bow to the greater being
whose sender remains unknown.

This is destiny,
being able to feel this—
I breathe my last.

MARYAM BARRIE

Transformation

The body of my grandmother lay
in the box, her nose more prominent
than in life, her gnarled hands finally
still, her body radiating cold.

I didn't see the body of my grandfather.
We left him mowing the lawn and by the time
we got back from the store, he was gone.
My mother in law's body, pink spotlight
on her face, makeup and fingernail polish
she never wore, and again the coldness
rising up off the carapace she left.
The body of her youngest, my
husband's brother, four weeks later.

He is the only man I've seen naked and chained
to a hospital gurney, railing at the police
who set him up, the pong of alcohol streaming
from every pore in his drunk-ass body.
His rendezvous with the tree standing
at the curve of the road where he left.
Then another brother of my beloved,
dead at sixty-two from never eating
vegetables. All those small losses, and soon
I will be one of those small losses,
loved by my circle, who will hurt and then
heal. I will be done with this world,
the one I never did learn to get right.

I am the woman who wanted to move in
with him to find a home for my books,
and once I am gone from this world,
gone from the bones and sinews I am
writing with now, the diaspora of my books
will begin. They will sail out into the world
I've left, spreading their words in wide
and churning wakes of language. An ocean
of words that I tried to claim by owning,
all transformative, temporary and beautiful.

TERRY HALL BODINE

Kipling's Tea

Sunlight sticky as marmalade.
The kettle's shrieks mimic macaques
in the trees. Darjeeling, dulled
with a gill of milk, rattles cup
against saucer. Sickle moon slices
of mango, sweet as the curve
of Ayah's arms, fan his plate.
And encircling a dish
of poona figs, biscuits
in the shapes of animals:
jackal—
elephant—
tiger—
bear—

BEN E. CAMPBELL

Soup Bean Supper

One cannot fill a poor
man's bowl by the
harvest of coke and cinder.
Want to feed a ravaged body?
Ladle soup beans over
corn bread so he may
dredge a crumbled mound,
auger hunger just as Grandpa did
by heft of force-bent spoon.
Our last supper I recall
he gorged on mess'a beans,
sharing praise for lifelong bounty
through chomp and singsong slurp.
Father who art in Heaven,
he gave thanks for seasoned kettle,
for souls called gathered 'round,
for light that coal mines fueled
that he may read a diner's work.
Let sustenance rain like
manna on yon hill,
over haunting conjured face,
stored rasp of hard-drawn breath.
No vessel fills his table half.
Only grit of grainy bean,
the breaking our stale bread.
These customs proxy remnants
feeding hunger left by void.

ABBY CAPLIN

Death of Sound

Before digitals
and CDs, records
and cassettes,

before reel-to-reel
tapes, wax cylinders,
the first failed

phonautographs,
so much beautiful
music was lost—

the fully human throttle
of voice letting
loose its octaves

in velocities of sound.
What wasted breath!
Such a crime,

the death of sound,
the silent parades of children's
choruses sucked up

by the vacuum of time.
Outside, the rain throws
its Tuesday wash

against the screen,
sound soaking
through white

vinyl windows pressed
tightly into their fittings,
swishing through the abyss,

around corners of epochs,
threading through the whirling
dervish of a neighbor's

chimney cap.
The calendar lies open,
only the rain

and the Rolling
Stones' low beat
on the radio—

their "Ruby Tuesday."
Look at all the lonely
Billie Holidays

made famous in the last
century,
a chosen few's wildly

lovely good vibrations
on record forever,
but whose song rose

and fell 5,733 years
before this common era?
Redwoods and oaks

come undone, cracking
from dirt moorings,
toppling onto cars.

It's raining outside
and I hear me singing.

HEATHER BELL ADAMS

Three Clicks

Glennon Ridley had never set out to steal anything in her life and this time was no different. She told the police officer as much—tried to keep her voice from screeching—but he handcuffed her all the same. Gave her the warning they trot out on *Law & Order* reruns.

She kept up her defense even as the officer ushered her out to the squad car. “You’ve got to listen to me.” A lifetime, seemed like, of saying the same thing. Forty-three years of trying to get people—someone—to pay attention to what she had to say. Her husband, Dean, never listened unless she was calling him to supper. Their son, Tanner. Sixth grade and already picked on and she wasn’t sure if anything she could do would fix it. “I only need them for a little bit. Like a loan. I’ll—we’ll—give them back.” Glennon reached for the sparkly shoes, just out of reach in an evidence bag.

The officer paused—a good sign. She let herself feel a flutter of hope. But he frowned and shook his head. “More than breaking and entering. It’s burglary. Larceny as a lesser-included. You’re looking at jail time.” He picked up the baseball bat she’d brought with her, now wrapped in plastic. More evidence. “Might be considered a deadly weapon. Could be anyway. Depending on the D.A.” He shook his head again. Looked to be half Glennon’s age. How much could he have seen in his short life anyway? What might he know? Nothing or next to it.

“I get a phone call, right?” She’d call Dean as soon as she could. They’d have to let her call her husband eventually.

“Not until you’re booked at the station.”

Glennon sighed. She couldn’t reach her cell phone anyway, not with the handcuffs, the cheap metal already cutting into her wrists. And Dean would be livid. He swore when he was mad. Stomped around. Sometimes threw things. Never in her direction, only around the house. His wallet when she’d wasted money, the car keys when they were running late. One time the plastic container of butter. She couldn’t remember why, that was the funny thing. Just remembered the greasy globs, pale as the moon, splattered across the knotty pine floor.

She’d tried to talk to him about Tanner. If they approached their son as a unit—that’s what the parenting blogs suggested—they could help him figure out how to deal with the trouble at school.

“He needs to be more active,” Dean had said. “That’s all. Get out of the house more. Take up a sport.”

“I don’t think you really get what he’s—”

“Like I said—look it’s not hard.” Dean had groaned, impatient. All these years later he looked almost the same as in high school. The same muscular build and freckled complexion. A few white hairs in his sideburns. Otherwise the same. Glennon figured nobody would say as much about her.

The interrogation room smelled like sweat, the low ceiling hung with fluorescent lights. Glennon blinked, then blinked again—that blessed darkness. If she wasn’t so worked up, she might could fall asleep. The room tilted a little when she opened her eyes again.

“You on something?” The officer asked. His name tag read “Harris.” He’d taken her handcuffs off and placed them to the side.

“What?” Glennon forced herself to keep her eyes open. “What, you mean like drugs? No, nothing like that.”

“Test will pick it up anyhow. No use lying.”

“But I’m not—I wouldn’t—look, it’s been a while since I’ve slept a full night. That’s all.”

He nodded like he’d heard her excuse before. Like it didn’t really excuse anything.

“Mothers are different.” Glennon realized too late she wasn’t making sense. Dean had been sleeping like a baby. He didn’t let things get to him like she did. And look where it got him—he wasn’t the one being arrested. He might be sleeping still, depending on what time it was, the top sheet twisted around his hips like it always ended up.

He hadn’t noticed when Glennon snuck out. Well past midnight, coming up on dawn, and she’d had no aim but to get to the museum quick as she could. But she hadn’t thought it through, hadn’t been exactly in her right mind.

The ruby slippers in their see-through bag sat at the end of the laminate table. She wished she could touch them.

Maybe it was on account of her name, but when she watched *The Wizard of Oz* as a little girl she always leaned closer to the screen when the good witch showed up.

“Glennon, Glinda,” she’d say in a singsong voice, pointing to her chest and back at the screen.

Mothers are different. She didn’t know she’d said it out loud again until Officer Harris asked what she meant.

“What’s this got to do with being a mother?”

“My son—he’s almost twelve. Always been puny for his age. Small, I mean. I don’t mean anything more than that.” Glennon traced a scar on the table with her finger. At least he was letting her talk.

“Wanted a little brother or sister for the longest time, but we weren’t able. Biggest heart you could imagine. Come Christmas Tanner honest to god breaks down in tears when we shop for the angel tree. Thinking about those kids who only ask for a winter coat.”

The way Officer Harris frowned, Glennon figured him to feel the same.

“Likes mushrooms with his eggs if you can imagine.”

The young officer—she noticed a spray of tiny pimples across his forehead—smiled.

“Likes building robots. Not playing with them. Building them.”

“STEM stuff is what you’re saying?”

“Got into the special magnet school for it.” She didn’t bother trying to hide the twinge of pride in her voice. The school ought to have been a good thing for Tanner. And maybe it was. Maybe he’d have been bullied worse some place else.

Officer Harris took a sip of coffee and Glennon surprised herself by licking her lips. “You think I could have some of that?”

“It’s pretty awful, tell the truth, but suit yourself.” He got up with a shrug and returned with a flimsy cup. The first sip went down easy enough, the burnt taste somehow exactly what Glennon expected. A comfort in that, things turning out how you expect.

When the door opened, she jumped, startled. A female officer slid in and Glennon thought she’d sit down and join them. It could only help having a woman in the room. But the new officer tapped at her watch and asked Officer Harris what was taking so long.

“You want to get out of here at the end of your shift, right?”

He nodded by way of an answer, then pushed a tablet of paper toward Glennon.

“Wait, what day is it?” All this talk of school and the day shift starting and Glennon had to get Dean to take Tanner—

“Saturday,” the woman said. “It’s Saturday the 21st of May.” She jabbed a pen at the paper, like she expected Glennon to write down what she’d said.

Glennon pushed her coffee away. “You said I could call somebody, right?”

When Dean showed up his arms were crossed. He looked so stuck that way Glennon couldn't imagine how he'd managed to unclench them to hold the steering wheel.

"Where's Tanner?"

"In the car. I'm not bringing him in here." Her husband seemed to think she'd lost her mind completely.

He'd thought the same when she and Tanner watched *The Wizard of Oz* together, both of them bursting into tears when Miss Gulch whacked Toto with her rake and again when Dorothy, clutching her little dog close, clicked her heels three times to find her way home again.

The next day Tanner came home from school with tears of a different sort streaking down his cheeks. He wouldn't tell her what they'd called him this time, at least couldn't bring himself to say it out loud. "Rhymes with maggot," he whispered, then gagged.

An ugly, mean-spirited word. Glennon still flinched when she thought of it. All because he'd snuck one of her lipsticks to school in his backpack. Why he'd done it, she didn't know. Just that the latest trouble started when the plum-colored tube fell out in homeroom—rolled right out onto the carpet printed with the solar system.

Glennon offered Tanner a snack, graham crackers with peanut butter and the slightest dab of honey. His favorite. Told him everybody at school would forget about the lipstick. He wouldn't eat though. He left the plate of crackers untouched and slunk off to his room, bringing the door closed with a firm click.

"I need to be by myself." His voice was muffled through the door, but she understood every word. Always had. Even when he was a toddler and not able to do much past pointing and grunting, Glennon could mostly tell what Tanner meant. "By my own stupid self," he muttered and it was all she could do not to fling open the door and scoop her son up and hold him against her chest until he—somehow, some way—quit hurting.

"You can take some time alone. That's fine." She patted the door to Tanner's room, not sure if he could hear the sound, if it might reassure him. "But don't say you're stupid. Please."

"So can we get out of here or what? Obviously there's been some kind of mistake." Dean's arms were still crossed over his chest while he waited for Officer Harris to answer. The room suddenly felt too small to hold the three of them. From across the table Glennon could smell the artificial tang of her husband's dandruff shampoo. She wished there was a window, that she could see Tanner.

“I’m afraid we’ve got a ways to go.” Officer Harris sounded about as tired as Glennon felt. As he sat back down, he glanced at the still blank legal pad.

Glennon took the pen, her eyelids suddenly heavy like they’d been dipped in cement. “What’s he doing in the car? Does he have his library book?”

Her husband nodded. He waited by the door, looked like he was counting on a quick escape.

Glennon wrote how she’d knocked on Tanner’s door right before supper. Found him hunched over an old pair of canvas tennis shoes. A red marker in his hand.

She looked up from the paper. “You see? You see what he was trying to do?” Officer Harris and Dean stared blankly. “Almost every bit of that white canvas he’d colored bright red.”

Tanner had glanced up, jumped when he saw her, like he was afraid he’d be in trouble. But Glennon shook her head. “You’d outgrown those old things anyway. I ought to have thrown them out by now.”

Her son nodded and held up the shoes, drawing her closer, wanting her to hold them. “They don’t sparkle though.”

“Not like the ones in the movie. That’s all right.” Her mind was working, remembering when they’d watched on TV. Tanner’s face had lit up when the ruby slippers appeared like magic on Dorothy’s feet. But Glennon couldn’t imagine her son stuffing his own feet into these too-small shoes. Or what he might take from it, what the gesture would mean. She handed the sneakers back and Tanner tucked them under his bed for safekeeping.

A sleepless night. Maybe two. She’d started to lose count. Helplessness so crushing it felt like a blow.

One day when Tanner got home from school, Glennon gave him a jar of red glitter she’d picked up at the drugstore. He bounced on his feet, a tight grasp on the container of glitter, while she sprayed the canvas shoes with aerosol glue.

She spread newspaper over the kitchen counter, but glitter still got everywhere. Tiny ruby-colored flecks winked from the crevices of the rattan barstools, in the grout lines of the tile floor.

“Guess we ought to have done it outside, sweetie.”

Tanner threw back his head laughing, a high-pitched, unfettered sound Glennon figured she hadn’t heard in weeks.

Whatever glitter she wasn’t able to clean up Dean didn’t notice. By bedtime Glennon was sure the shoes were dry. She told Tanner as much—Dean was in the bathroom—and watched while her son eagerly slid the shoes on.

They didn't fit, of course. She'd known they wouldn't. Still Tanner shuffled around best he could and lifted his heels the slightest amount and sang "Over the Rainbow," a grin as big as Texas spread across his face.

When Glennon looked up, Officer Harris had the evidence bag in his hand. The plastic crinkled as he stood up. She stood too, letting the pen drop.

"You understand, ma'am, that this is evidence. A crime's been committed."

From his spot by the door, Dean sighed.

Glennon nodded at Officer Harris. "I'll sign whatever you need me to."

"I've got a mother too, you know. Says she worries about me every day. Loses sleep no matter how many times I tell her I'm behind a desk mostly."

The slippers were so close Glennon could reach out and take them. He saw her staring and set the bag down, inching it a smidge closer to her side of the table. "I've gotta get my sergeant back in here. See if there's some way to reduce the charges. At least get rid of the deadly—" Officer Harris glanced toward the baseball bat in its separate evidence bag. "I'm assuming—not putting words in your mouth—you were tired and grabbed the first thing you saw, something that might could break the Plexiglass, whatever the display's made of."

"On my way out of the house." Glennon nodded, realizing he'd generously forgotten to mention the shattered back door of the museum. "Would never have touched a soul with it though."

The ad in the newspaper, that was what gave her the idea. Four o'clock in the morning coming up on the third or fourth night, she thought she was imagining things. Misremembering. She crept out to the recycling bin to find it, the page still covered with bits of glitter.

By the outdoor light she'd flicked on, cicadas buzzing in the undergrowth, she skimmed the ad. The picture showed memorabilia from other movies—a tattered looking journal, a chalice encrusted with gemstones—but in the list printed right below she read "Ruby slippers worn by Judy Garland." Not but an hour, give or take, away from their house. On loan from a private collection.

"I'll see what my sergeant has to say." Was Glennon hallucinating or did Officer Harris nod toward the evidence bag? As soon as he left, she grabbed it and tore open the plastic. Dean held up his hand as if to keep her from doing it. But he could no more stop her than stop a freight train.

In the hall Dean went one direction, further inside the bowels of the station, barking Officer Harris' name. Glennon went the other direction.

She was calling for Tanner before she even made it to the parking lot. She could've brought him with her to begin with, but she'd thought to leave him still sleeping. Let him have that at least.

Soon as Tanner saw her, he jumped out of the car. Pale, knobby legs. Shoelaces dangling untied. She held out her arms and next thing she knew her son's head burrowed into her chest. Long as she could, Glennon kept him close. Behind her the automatic door to the station opened and shut with a shudder.

Hurrying now, she held up the ruby slippers. Tanner blinked at first, not understanding, the very idea too far from his reach.

They didn't need much time. A minute or two. Long enough for Tanner's troubles to fade, if only for now. For him to grasp some hint of what might be possible.

Glennon nodded at her son's feet and urged him to take off his shoes. "Quick as you can." She kept herself from turning around to see who was coming. Officer Harris, sure to order her back inside. Or Dean who might throw the ruby slippers across the parking lot. Who back home, soon as he spotted them, had flung the canvas shoes across Tanner's bedroom. A pale red streak, speckled with glitter, staining the blue wall. Tanner's baseball bat gathering dust in the corner. Glennon had flailed under the weight hovering in the room, smothered and dizzy, the nights of broken sleep piling up like so many heavy quilts. The unfairness of it all lodged like a rock beneath her ribs.

Now, morning light blazing overhead, she held out the ruby slippers. The texture and flash of sequins. Her son's upturned face.

CAROL FLAKE CHAPMAN

Empty Pedestals

They never asked
To be remembered in bronze
To be elevated high

Above our common ground
To be placed on pedestals
To be looked up to

They saw enough blood
And death, I imagine
As they led the charge

From in front or behind
To wish that it could all
Be buried so deep

That the grass and flowers
Growing atop graves
Would be what we see

When we think of that time
When brother fought brother
For a cause still burning

ROSEMARIE DOMBROWSKI

Concussion with Broken Heart

I stand behind the glass without a vest.
I breathe into the sidewalk.
An empty wheelchair rolls by
as I dial your number.
I wave my hands and light a flare,
send a mayday through the automatic doors.
My mother is rocking.
My son is rolled in blankets,
strapped with Velcro
and belly-down on a board
that's sliding him into a magnetic tube.
I keep repeating the phrase
he is not a barcode
in my head.
The radiologist touches my shoulder,
says *no bleeding on the brain*,
makes me believe in something good again.
I start thinking that every kind man is Jesus.
I begin whispering
the story of the life jacket,
how it filled with sand
on our last trip to the Pacific.
My son is on a stretcher.
My son is being pounded by the surf.
You hold him the by the straps of his jacket,
keep him close to the shore.
I tell him that you're on your way.
I don't tell him that I wanted to need you
like this.
I tell you that too much sand
weighs everything down.

JONATHAN LOUIS DUCKWORTH

Ducks Sleeping on a Sunny Hill

Sometime many years off
is a version of me reaching for this moment
as if it were the life in his lungs.

Even now as I watch them
I am mourning this moment;
the cruelty of linearity.

Two ducks, sleeping side by side
on a grassy hillock on the campus green,
their shut eyes perfect little commas

framed in their downy iridescence.
Their nest of centipede grass dazzles gold,
while overhead

a billowing exclamation of gnats
drinks sunlight
like a palette welcoming the brush.

RENEE EMERSON

Queen Ludmilla

They ripped the veil from your face
to twist it round your throat
and pull. Grandma Ludmila,
teaching your grandbaby about the Good Lord.
My MawMaw did the same, carting us all
to Vacation Bible School, singing Swing Low
and Johnny Ate a Peanut. He died,
but went to heaven, just like your grandbaby,
who, as a king, clung to the church
doors praying while his pagan brother
ran him through.

TERRI KIRBY ERICKSON

Soleá

a tribute to flamenco dancer, Soledad Barrio

Salome's dance started with seven veils, but Soledad Barrio, fully clothed, is naked beneath the spotlight. From the moment she appears whatever

is not this woman, this stage, this *cantaor's* plaintive voice, the *palmeros* clapping, the intricate riffs on the guitar—no longer matters.

Mesmerized first by her face, we watch her hypnotic hands begin to undulate like sea anemones, her supple, sensuous body telling a thousand tales

of passion and pain, rage and exile, her feet pounding the floor like a barrage of cannon fire as she inhales, exhales, her lungs working like a bellows.

She is magnificent and haunting, the embodiment of *duende* as she dances like a Rom around a bonfire, as if her life is a flame that will soon burn out.

Even Soledad's shadow is alive, pulsing with its own beating heart, her body like a vein thick with heat and blood until the final *braceo*—

her arms extended like the limbs of a twisted tree, reaching beyond the limits of muscle, skin, and bone—the stage hot enough now, to birth a star.

D FERRARA

Save the Mill

He came into my store, in his fine suit, with his silk tie, those good shoes and new haircut. Clean, shiny clean everywhere down to his fingernails, and pretending that my place was the same. Called me “Mama”, like the fact we was both black meant we related.

Mama, he says, my name is Charles and I’m visiting the owners of all the small businesses here in town.

(Huh, I thought. That’s what made me so lucky, getting him here. This is a business and Lord knows, it’s small.)

You might have heard that some folks are trying to close the mill, he says.

I allowed I had heard that.

If the mill closes, he says, a lot of good folk—good hard working people will be out of work. Lots of those folk are your customers. If they have no jobs, they can’t pay their rent, can’t shop in your fine establishment.

He smiled. I knew I was supposed to like that he called this place a “fine establishment.” Like I didn’t know the walls were cracked and the front window’s so dirty you can’t hardly see inside. Or maybe he thought I didn’t know what the word “establishment” meant.

He goes on like that for a piece, talking about my “neighbors” and “friends” and such. All their kids and houses and mortgages and such.

He puts down a long sheet of paper on the counter, with squiggly snakes of signatures on it. There’s a little space on one side—I guess for me to sign, too.

This here’s a petition about keeping the mill open. You can see, all the shop owners along Main Street have signed.

I picked up the paper. Where you live? I asked.

I beg your pardon, he says.

Don’t go beggin’ nothing. I asked where you live.

Ridgeville, he says.

Ridgeville. Nice town. Up on the Heights?

Yes, he says, then: Close. In the vicinity of the Heights.

Nice all the same, I says, looking at the paper. Willy Seizman ain’t signed.

Excuse me, he says.

Willy’s Mattresses. He ain’t signed. You got Fred’s Plumbing and the coffee shop—Willy should be right between them.

Oh, he says, *I don't think he was available when I called.*

Maybe not. I read the names for a bit. You know, my daddy worked in the Mill.

Is that right, he says.

That's right. Forty-three years. In the machine shop, then electrical.

That a fact, he says.

A fact. I remember those fine company picnics. Course, then there was the white picnic and the Negro picnic. The mill owners, they did a good job of making sure we got the same things as the white folk. We knew that, because they told us, when they dropped by at our picnic.

That's... nice, he says.

You could go swimming in the river then.

Really, he asks.

Swimming. If you didn't swallow too much. That green stuff, what you call it? Algae. That stuff washed off easy enough, but it'd give you a belly ache you ate it.

Uh huh, he says.

It was only later, when I was grown, that the smell got so bad you couldn't sit near it. Or walk by it.

Oh, he says.

Not us. Not the white families, either.

Well, he says, *I can see that you need some time to think it over*, and he grabs for the paper.

I pull it back. Those white workers, they got sick, they got hurt, just like my daddy did. They didn't put it together with how the river got slimy and the air stings your eyes and the babies getting cancer.

But somebody else did.

He gets all flustered then, grabs his paper and makes to leave. No "Mama" then.

I call after him, You know that algae, and that stuff in the air—

He stops.

It don't know where the county line is. It don't stop in the Heights. Or even in the vicinity of the Heights.

He turns around, like he's got to make one last try. *They close the Mill*, he says, *you won't have any customers. You'll go out of business, too.*

I gave that a thought. This here's my work, I says. It's good work and I need it to get by.

I stop for a moment. But it ain't my life. It ain't *nobody's life*. If you can't tell the difference, that's nothin' to me.

Then he just leaves.

Nothin' more to say.

ROBERT FILLMAN

The Second Offer

When I want to thaw out
my regrets I can drive
to the house we almost
bought together, exit
the car and descend that
steep hill of memory —
not the flowerless yard,
all rocks and dried weeds, stiff
against the gray shingles
and harsh glare of winter.
Instead, I contemplate
you circling the shade tree
we discovered out back
that April afternoon,
FOR SALE sign no longer
hammered into the lawn,
your hands darkened by dirt,
the prayer you whispered
among the heart-shaped leaves
and first sprouts of blood root
yarrow and chicory,
overgrown with desire,
what you'd do to the place—
contrite that I never
made a second offer.

TEJAN GREEN

Another Moon

At the height of my power I birthed galaxies,
a walk on water investing in miracles.
When you think of me, rest the memory
gently in your palm. Re-work the order of things.
Tone tempered, we waste the evening,
a bribe you fall for.

Today's horoscope
and fortune cookie both vague enough for me
to know this day would turn in my favor.

BRODIE LOWE

Not the Man

Clay popped a squat on a heavy oak desk in the auto-mechanic's cramped office, a trifling electric fan blowing hot air directly at him from atop a white Kenmore fridge. A thirteen inch CRT television, with extended antennas reaching for the ceiling, fought a losing battle with snowy static and played an episode of *Antiques Roadshow*. He watched the jumping frame of a man in a suit marveling at a portrait that slipped and slid out of picture. The man in the suit waved a manicured hand over something older than he was, over something that was made by rougher hands. And he acted like it was the best thing since sliced bread.

Clay looked down at the wooden space of the seat between his legs and noticed an amateur, deeply deranged, engraving of "NO FEAR" and it reminded him of the stickers with curious just-bring-it eyes on backs of pick-ups at Watauga High School football games, and then he saw a lighter shade of brown on the right side of the chair where a bolt had once been and he knew that what he sat on was probably given away a long time ago by some financially floundering school nearby. *Could have been from Middle Fork, could've been from a church*, he thought. He knew that the trajectory of life and even inanimate objects was a funny thing. He knew it well, because of where he now sat and where he once was.

He'd grown up in Dallas, North Carolina, watching movies like *The Faculty* and *Blade* and *Armageddon* at Regal Cinemas in Franklin Square (back when RJ Gators was around). He'd heard stories of high schoolers waiting outside of Eastridge Mall and racing their cars through the blazing red light across from Franklin Square and Hooters, just before Putt Putt. He'd also heard where, at the intersection near Gastonia's Media Play, people would wait on cars that were turning left and jump out in front of them to make a right to collect insurance money since there was no green arrow light for those who were turning left. He'd even hiked Crowder's Mountain a few times with his father. He'd been looking forward to going through school with his friends at W.C. Friday and graduating North Gaston High School, but his parents had divorced while he was in middle school and he moved to the mountains with his mother who moved into her deceased father's house. He'd become acquainted with the rising mountains around him and ended up attending Montreat College where he studied theology.

But it had been five years since he last stepped foot in Appalachia. A bad break-up with a woman that he was sure he was going to marry had put a sour taste in his mouth and so he had started over where he pastored a church in Ranlo. Lately, however, the mountains had been on his mind and so he had made the trek back to them.

Just after passing Asheville, he took a backroad through Marion, looking at the old haunts of his high school years, seeing how things had changed, and had run over a nail in the rode, popping his tire.

Now, here he was at a mechanic shop where he no longer recognized the mechanics and locals. Every face was a stranger.

The hickory brown door that led into the single vehicle garage opened. It sang on its hinges and looked like it had been salvaged at some dump in McDowell County. Once muffled noises budded into clear ones of lugs being screwed on and clicking tight and air pressure being injected into tires and aggravated yells from one guy to another. The head mechanic stepped through, gingerly closing the door behind, the tips of his fingers and backs of his hands smeared in dry black oil. Head down, he eyed Clay, making him feel like he'd done something to the man. But neither man had ever met. A white patch with a navy blue border that read JERRY held on loosely by a few threads from his shirt. Jerry went over and sat at an old Singer sewing machine with a barn wood top that he used for an office desk.

"All set?" Clay asked, patting and rubbing flat hands from thighs to knees and back again as if smoothing out a stubborn wrinkle.

"Almost," Jerry said, sifting through an uneven pile of documents that looked more yellow and worn than others the further down the stack went.

"What's the damage?"

Eyeglasses on the bridge of his nose, Jerry scribbled numbers on a little torn off piece of paper and meticulously tapped keys on a giant Casio calculator that spit out a receipt like a miniature typewriter. After his fingers danced without hesitation, he abruptly stopped and looked up at Clay, surveying the new customer that sat on the school desk that he'd found on the side of the road. "Do I know you?"

"I don't think so, no."

"Shoot. I do. I knew I seen you before. Saw you back in Banner Elk under that big ass tent with them big ass poles."

"Where?"

"You still preaching?"

"I must look like somebody else."

"That's you, alright."

“So what’s it gonna cost me?”

“What happened there?” Jerry asked, running a calloused forefinger, thick nail cut to the quick, from cheekbone to the bottom of his jaw.

“Something from childhood.”

“No, it ain’t. ‘Cause I knew you when you were preaching and layin’ hands on people. And that was about six years ago. And you didn’t have no scar back then.”

For the first time in a long time, Clay thought about the ugly scar that ran crooked along the right side of his face like a dried up piece of gum about half the thickness of his pinky. He thought about how he’d gotten it. How it had happened after the heart wrenching break-up between him and his girlfriend. How he was drawn to a bar like a lost ship to a lighthouse. How the dimly lit bar spun around in circles when a man came up on him from behind with a ball bat to the back of his skull. How he’d turn around on sailor’s legs to face his opponent. And how the husky man that attacked him took on the persona of a magician when he whipped out a butterfly knife, sending the metal in a blur, and charged at his face with it. Five beers and two shots of Jack Daniels had been sitting in the pit of Clay’s stomach and his guard had been down from talking to the woman with the tube top and wedding band on her finger who’d come up and sat beside him and he had no chance of defending himself. He’d gone down hard and woke up in the gravel outside of the tavern, his nose covered in blood.

“Always had it.”

“Shit. Then you must have a twin.”

“No twin. Have a sister. Couple years younger than me. Now, can I please pay you and get on my way?”

“Pastor, my niece needs a healing,” Jerry said, looking deeper into Clay’s gray eyes. “If you’re sticking around, maybe later you can meet her. Pray over her.”

“I’m telling you, I’m not the man you say I am.”

Half an hour later, after weakly convincing the mechanic was sorely mistaken of his true identity, Clay got out of there and drove down the road until he came to a stop at Countryside Barbeque. He went in and ordered a late breakfast, sitting in a booth near the back.

An elderly woman, wearing hush puppies, walked over to him and pointed, saying “I know you. You helped my sister on back a few years ago.”

“Couldn’t have been me,” Clay said, standing and turning his back to her to head to the restroom.

“You’re him. I know a face when I see one,” she said when he was several feet away from her and the booth.

“I’m not him!” Clay said, slamming a fist against the he wall stood by, knocking a framed portrait off a rusted nail that sagged in a loose hole in the wood paneling.

He looked down at the shattered glass and wooden frame at his feet and saw the fallen painting of a composed rooster profiled in a regal stance, staring up at him through one horrified side eye, a menacing spur jutting out of the back of each of its clawed feet like spikes that had been hammered in and left behind. It looked through him with a final warning of something about himself that he, in such a state of anger and fervent denial, couldn’t easily discern. The three dimensional pastel wings made the rooster look as if it were about to come out of that canvas and plod all over him with those weaponized feet. He imagined it stomping and stamping on his chest before standing proudly on his bruised sternum, cocking its head at him, twitching and jerking its unblinking gaze in all directions, trying to get a good hard look at what was beneath that grotesque scar on his face. His chest began to hurt and breath came in shallow spurts as the restaurant closed in around him in a claustrophobic nightmare.

“I – I’m sorry, sir,” she said. “It’s just that you...”

Clay had already made a beeline for the front door, marching past shocked and frozen faces that sat at booths and tables with forks of scrambled eggs and spoons of grits in mid-journey to their mouths. He stopped just before leaving, his right hand gripping tight the door’s copper knob, when his eye caught a news article to the left of the door frame, staples in each corner holding it in place. Its edges had curled and yellowed and the bottom corner of the cut-out article had been viciously torn off like some hurried raffle ticket.

LOCAL PREACHER BRINGS HEALING TO COMMUNITY stood out in bold lettering with a picture of Clay ten years younger, an open mouth of determination, one hand holding a microphone and the other clasped on the forehead of an elderly woman with her arms raised high. In the black-and-white picture, he could see the roof of the tent that he’d helped put together. He remembered how hot that day was and how he had sweated that night in the humidity as people gathered to hear his message.

He was slimmer back then. And there was no scar.

Clay looked over his shoulder at the unfamiliar faces that looked back at him, scared of what he might do next.

Then he turned the knob and left.

He drove for what seemed like hours until he found himself at Bear Lake where he and his ex-girlfriend—the one he’d almost married—had once sat, talking about the future, listening to a CD of Coldplay sing about

there being sparks from his truck whose windows he'd left down. He took in the scenery, thinking about how his innocence and thirst for life had blossomed in the hand of those mountains. How he'd skied on that lake in the summer and how he'd had his first kiss there with her, under the stars where crickets chirped an ovation. He thought of how far away he'd come since then and that there was no escaping his home. It wasn't the place that had ruined his innocence. It had been someone who'd taken advantage of his young trust. The place had remained true to him in all its never-ending beauty and steadfast spirit.

He breathed in the sweet honeysuckle air and began to remember who he once was.

ERIC GREINKE

Early Thaw

The lake-ice is out already
six weeks early, & waves splash
against our beach, true blue & fluid.

Feel for the small souls of minnows
spawned in the warmer water
of the deeper, Southern end of the lake
far from the weedy sanctuary of
the Northern shallows, to awaken
beneath rapidly thinning ice.

Feel too, for the seagulls & ducks
that feast on the fleeing dreamers
inconveniently born in the wrong place
while the sheltering roof of ice
disappeared in a warm wind,
followed by a cold snap that locked them in.

IAN T. HALL

Foxfire

In pictures
an old pensioner holds his spoon
like a shovel. In the stoked light
of the hearth fire he might be a hunchback
bent over a bowl of gruel, or a halfwit
washing behind his ears with fingers
freshened in filthwater. A woman nails roots
to the spindly wall of a shed and leaves them
to shrivel. Inside the shelves are cluttered
with canned goods—small clots of goop
petrified in jelly like pickled stillbirth.
Two men hold up arrowheads, clay-caked
trophies in their scabbed palms. Their shoulders
stooped, their jaws slack
with success.

Strange entries. Slick ceremonies
punched in black type tell of boys
who throw dynamite off rail trestle bridges
to bless the winter solstice. Of sifters
squatting astride gold seams, one of them
holding a gritty nugget the size of the molar
missing from his gumline. Poultices and strongbrews,
guesswork recipes, vapor to treat tinnitus, wet plasters,
ginwhacker remedies, parlor tricks, trinkets and widgets
to wrap in waxcloth and bury
in the fine print of a last will
& testament.

Further on in the white field
of pages, where the deepest rows
of words are ripe with the rank fruit
of hate, hexes drafted in the dark
drippings of a grudge—angry ink, black

blots like acid rain riling the parchment
alive—old veins of the oak popping through
its thin skin. *Mix a dollop of blood
from the thumb whorl with muscadine squeezings
and it'll fix any and all who pester you. If you want
to wilt a man's member pick a night to waste
all his seed and while he sleeps put a thorn
through his wart. Wait for the thunder
to flinch. Wait for the dog to forgive
its fleas.*

LINDA FLAHERTY HALTMAIER

To the Brink

If it is to be
that I end up in a box,
primped and propped,
lips stretched into a Modigliani slash,
while lilies, sickly sweet,
mask the true visitor
in the corner—

Then get me to the ocean,
the carnival,
the park,
the Eiffel Tower,
the farmer's market full
of sweet potato pies
and jams I've never tasted.

Get me to fresh air and dirt,
to dig cozy spots for
bulbs that burst with
the promise of tangerine and fuchsia,
even as spring plays
its deadly hide-and-seek.

Get me to the page,
where I can capture
my daughter's face as she draws,
her determined tongue locked in,
or the way my husband
looks at her sometimes,
punch-drunk with pride and love.

Take me to the brink of exhaustion,
my head bursting
with color and awe,
a sunflower at full glow,
love spilling out of me like
hard black seeds
onto welcoming ground.

CAROL HAMILTON

Granddaughter Soon to Leave for College

I limp along behind you at a Second Friday
Art Walk in the prairie-evening heat

(I once day-dreamed of being a slightly crippled girl,
so romantic, I thought) your short skirt riffing

in our constant wind which keeps the air
rising from this university town pavement bearable

We enter a cool gallery, linger along walls
separate into tiny alcoves, skip the food and wine

ignore the clumps of those seriously chatting
with the artist or others, each group arranged

so highlights lead the eye
to a vanishing point near the entry door

where you will exit soon into an unknown place
behind that pastiche of oil paint and linen

or be hung on the twisted arms of the bone white sculpture
encrusted here with burnished copper and gold

RAYMOND P. HAMMOND

The Book of Sharon

When I was six, Sharon was six
and she had the most beautiful
golden locks of hair that would drape
so gently, lightly brushing
over the wood back of the pew
right in front of me every
sunday morning sunlight beaming
through colorful stained glass windows
my staring could last the entire
sermon--unbetrayed, meditate
into a deep conscious sleep
under an unceasing lulling
monotone drone of a sermon
where I had dreams of our future

And she was a frilly, Sunday-
dress-wearing tomboy who would keep
up with me after sunday school
as we would explore forbidden
and dark areas of the church
together like the vantage point
in the balcony over those
in the sanctuary below
or the steel, dry baptismal pool
centered below the golden cross
just above the choir and pulpit
or those two very secret rooms
on either side of the choir loft
that had latticed covered windows
for spying on people below

But my clearest and most vivid
memory is being seated
right behind her and her golden

hair and her shoulders and her neck
where I could see the rise and fall
inspiration, exhalation
rhythmically in and out in and
out in and out and I would try
to inhale slowly and exhale
as she did quickly inhaling
again until our breaths were matched,
I prayed, perfectly synchronized
so that she and I would remain
connected by breath forever.

MATTHEW MAFFEI

My Father Plays Guitar

Twenty years ago, I was bent over the side of my bed with the waistband of my shorts wrapped around my ankles, the carpet making lines in my knees, and the sandpaper sound of my father's belt being pulled from the loops of his jeans. "Do you know why you're being spanked?" he asked. In truth, I didn't. My older brother Michael said, "It was Matthew," and before I knew what was happening I am pulled by my ear into the bedroom. My father locks the door behind us and I can already hear my mother screaming from downstairs. "Don't you touch him! Albert! Don't you dare touch him!"

Today, my father plays guitar. He has several of them dangling in the corner of his living room of his one-bedroom condo. The place is filled with modern, brown furniture—leftover from my parents' divorce—and the gray/brown color palette is reminiscent of the archetypal cowboy. On the walls there are framed movie posters, some of which include Clint Eastwood westerns, Scorsese's *Goodfellas*, and a picture of my father from thirty years ago.

It's a portrait of him in his New Jersey State Police uniform. The seriousness of his blank, brown-eyed stare is as if someone had said something funny, but the joke blew right over his shiny, bald head. His shaven face is as smooth as the buffed Sergeant's badge on his lapel, and looking at him now, my father is in full old-man lumberjack mode with a thick, gray beard he's grown out to hide Bell's Palsy.

The twang of his acoustic reverberates off the apartment walls into a whirlwind of inconsistent tempo. His rendition of "If I Were A Carpenter" is interrupted by the wrong chords, and him saying, "Oh wait. It's a C, not a G." Although, it is unusual for him to miss these things, and it's not the Bell's Palsy. He continues to be a regular at the open mic night at Saxby's café across the street. I can imagine him on their small stage opposite the espresso machine. He's wearing a straw cowboy hat, whitewashed jeans that taper his leather boots, and the one-size-too-small Johnny Cash t-shirt.

When he muffs up throughout "If I Were A Carpenter," I think it's because he's playing for me, even though my own guitar-playing isn't nearly as good as his. There must be something about being a father that makes you think you've got something to prove to your son. Maybe it could be the meaning of the song that resonates with him. Like he's asking me that if he were one thing, and not the other, would I love him anyway?

I can see him doing the same thing for his father. Messing up on something he's passionate about. Worried that his father wouldn't appreciate it if it weren't done well. I'm not sure if Pop-Pop Maffei ever went to my father's football games in college, or if he would have gone to Saxby's and watch him play guitar. I know neither of my father's parents kept track of his whereabouts, whether or not he was succeeding in school, if he was on track to graduate college. I wonder how other Italian-American parents were raising their kids in the sixties and seventies. In Camden, New Jersey, when my father wasn't pushing Leo's Yum Yum ice cream in the summer, he was roaming the city streets, smoking cigarettes in alleys, coughing up what his lungs couldn't handle yet. He was playing Beatles songs in his friend's garage, and later, in the summer of '69, he was sneaking out the window of his bedroom, escaping to Woodstock to see Jimi play. I wonder if other fathers reacted like Pop-Pop Maffei, grabbing their son by the belt and pulling him back into the house for a whipping.

My father finishes on a drawn-out strum of a G chord and gives me a half of a smile, one I've seen before despite the Bell's Palsy, and laughs off the mistakes. "Yo bud," he says, shrugging it off, "still a work in progress." He calls me bud and pal because it makes him appear to be cool, hip, down with the lingo or something like that. Later, though I'll think it's more of an unconscious act wrapped in guilt. A way to overcompensate for his father's brutal, impersonal parenting.

I see my father more or less five times a year and each time he's working on a few songs to master. Be it Jimi Hendrix, Johnny Cash, or The Red Hot Chili Peppers, his devotion to learning the way these artists played their songs, down to the timing of each note, amazes me. I can almost see myself forty years into the future, basking in the life of a bachelor, tuning my day to the creative impulse I happen to wake up with. Finally, I say. Free to do whatever the hell I want.

The idea of limitations of the self within our relationships and our personal pursuits comes from experiencing secondhand my father's own limiting imagination. The relationship between my mother and father was never on the same level as the one I'm in now. My father could only focus his mind and energy into so many things at once, like a cliched gangster in a Scorsese film. And unfortunately, this resulted in nearly losing what he had been working for in the first place. His family. However, comparing his relationship with my mother to mine with my girlfriend is an essential component to my romantic success. It's like a visual alarm that dings in my ear every time I am confronted with a choice during a difficult tiff with my partner. How am I going to react to this? Well, I could do what my father

did. Simply, not give a damn. Say nothing, or perhaps even shout all the bullshit that had been bottled up. Or I could communicate. Be empathetic. Understand the situation and resolve it.

Regardless of the decisions I make now, regardless of the decisions my father made, he still gives me hope that whatever happens today, tomorrow is there to make up for it. To me, my father redefined what a sixty-something person can do, what they are capable of, and how they still have time to differentiate their present self from their past. Today, my mother and him remain friends. They get along so well that people bet on them getting back together. My father, the entertainer, never ceases to make my mother laugh. And never will he quit validating her as an amazing woman. He's better at communicating. He's empathetic when we need him to be. He is and always will be there for us. Retirement has suited him well.

When he blushes and smiles at me that day after playing "If I Were A Carpenter," I know he's proud of what he's doing. And I'm proud too. The guitar is something I brought back into his life. "Hey bud," he says today. "Let's play something together."

But before we can tinker into a progression, he's already playing the intro notes to "Sweet Child O' Mine," showing off his new abilities at mastering Slash's riff. He looks up at me and laughs. "Yo pal, you know, I just got to get it out of my system."

"I know," I say. "It's a cool riff, Dad."

"Okay," he says, regripping the neck of his Taylor guitar. He cues me in to play. "What d'we got?"

KRISTINA HEFLIN

Star Stuff

They told me in tenth grade science
that everything in the universe
is made of the same stuff.
Atoms, electrons, neutrons.
Matter.
And it all came from the very beginning
of the world and the Big Bang
which means we're all made of
Stardust.
It sounds like too pretty a dream
to come out of a lab;
that we're all somehow connected,
different, yet the same.
I didn't believe any of it
Until
the moment I saw the blazing trail
of asteroids in your eyes,
felt the electricity leap from
your heart, through your fingertips
into my soul, my stardust soul,
that was made of the same
particles as yours, drawn together
at last, two beams of light made
One.

STEPHEN HERMAN

The Journey

—for Maddox

Yours begins as mine is ending
So much to learn like when to pick
The olives the grapes the winter fruit

When to light the burn pile
Once the citrus trees and vines are pruned
And when to check the culverts
So the creek runs clear

The deer will tell you
What you need to know
Without words without emotions
Of sorrow or loss

The right way to proceed
Along the proven path

The flutter of quail through bottlebrush
And the chatter of orioles nesting in the palm

These are the teachings of our ancestors
Who have left their footprints
And their markings
On the land

MIKE HORAN

Rosemary

Rosemary, for the scent of forever it brings
Dew of the sea, watered by ocean fog
It unlocks and I am there, on that shore,
Walking hand in hand with
A woman I'm not sure about
Real or a memory past or
Bits and pieces of all I have loved in life?
It doesn't matter
I pull her close and breath in the scent of her,
Rosemary, from the tangled dark mass of curls
I want to stare into her dark eyes, but I'm afraid
If I break that embrace, I know
The moment will be gone and this woman
I walk along the beach with
Somewhere in Greece
Will vanish.

MICHAEL LEE JOHNSON

Injured Shadow

In nakedness of life moves
this male shadow worn out dark clothes,
ill fitted in distress, holes in his socks, stretches,
shows up in your small neighborhood,
embarrassed,
walks pastime naked with a limb
in open landscape space—
damn those worn out black stockings.
He bends down prays for dawn, bright sun.

PETER KAHN

Southern Centuries

The stars of Alabama hide
no two pair
of lowered eyes.
Beyond lightyears of emptiness

we come a long way
to arrive nowhere
special. Through so many
revolutions
of our sun:

one step forward
a galaxy behind

a hand out of reach
the 50 bright stars
no longer there.

The southern sky says
open up—

split the clouds. Sure,
they say
slice through the secret
sounds:

the centuries
will be silent
no longer.

DAVE McNAMARA

Common Value

The beige floors gleam on a Tuesday morning. Ted Farnam shuffles past the cash registers, trying to get the store open on time. Quickly, he scans the aisles for empty boxes, un-stocked items and forgotten price-guns that customers could make use of. He checks to see if all of his employees are in place, tucking his managerial short-sleeve into restrictive dark-green polyester slacks as he walks; the bulk of his tie still crammed into the gap between the second and third buttons. Ted has been the branch manager of the Wood St. Common Value for just under a year. Luck and the last-straw bender of his former boss had accelerated his career from deli-slicer to key-holder in just a few months. At the last register, Meng's counting in her drawer. She looks up at Ted and waves.

"Meng, how are ya?" he says, hustling towards the main doors.

Outside the glass storefront Mrs. Beaulieu, an elderly woman with a towering black poof of hair, scowls at him as he unlocks the door. He thanks her for being patient and the woman glides past without acknowledgement.

The main office at Common Value is a large vinyl sided box in the corner of the store. It was made to look like a house, complete with shuttered windows and green asphalt shingles for a roof. During the holiday season they string up Christmas lights and tape a cardboard Santa to the door. It is not dissimilar to the house that Ted grew up in on the other side of Lowell, even on the inside with its wood paneled walls and drop ceiling. Ted sits at his desk filling out the weekly payroll spreadsheet. Behind him, his assistant manager Andrea, is shaking a bottle of Whiteout.

The door opens, triggering an electronic 'ding.' Mike Wilcox, the Dairy and Frozen Foods Stocker, walks in. He's a tall man with slumped shoulders, each with an enormous arm hanging down. The sleeves of the largest Common Value parka end about four inches from his wrist. Mike's hair is jet black and neatly waxed despite his dire need of a haircut. He takes off the dark blue parka and hangs it on a metal hook near the stairs.

"Good morning, Miss DePalma—Mr. Farnham," he says, bowing slightly to each.

"Here you go, Mike. We really gotta move those Bellhouse Watermelons today," Ted says, handing him a slip of paper.

Mike ascends the staircase to a small loft above the office. There's a creaking overhead as Mike sits down at the table with the goosenecked

microphone. Ted leans over and cracks the window above his desk. There is a sharp clicking sound as the microphone is turned on.

“Good morning, shoppers. We have a few wonderful deals for you today, starting with Stone Chalet Swiss Cheese...”

Mike’s announcement voice is clear and deep, like a father on an old sitcom.

Ted starts to smile as he listens in.

“...And finally, just for today, we have a very special offer—that’s a buy one, get one free on Bellhouse Watermelons. Nothing completes the summer experience like a delicious slice of juicy watermelon. We here at Common Value understand how hard it is in today’s economy, and we wish to pass any savings we can onto you, Shoppers. So, Bellhouse Watermelons—buy one, get one free in the produce department. Remember, Shoppers—we’re all in this together. One unified body.”

Ted slides the window shut and shrugs to Andrea in a gesture of slight disappointment. The loft begins to creak as Mike descends the small staircase. He nods, puts on his parka, and exits the office walking past the windows towards refrigerated storage. Through the venetian blinds, Ted sees Meng ring up a bag of potatoes.

An hour passes. Mike has yet to return for his second announcement and Andrea is on another cigarette break. Ted is alone in the office and he’s thinking about Janice again. This time when they holed up in a abandoned train-car after stealing half-a-kilo of crack-cocaine from Jason Hernandez. Janice saw him walk out of a stash house on Harris Ave and put a football sized package in the trunk of his Monte Carlo. She told Ted, who snuck a crowbar out of the Jiffy Lube around the corner and popped the trunk. Jason and his crew were in the pizza place. They ran a few blocks up before tearing open the balled-up Glad Bag. Janice squealed, jumping up and wrapping her legs around his waist. Ted laughed, not quite believing what had just happened, his eyes darting up and down the street. They got high for three days straight, having wild sex on the dirty train-car floor. Every half-hour or so the flick of the lighter cast an amber plume against the graffitied walls — across Janice’s face. When it was all gone, they crept out of the car like a couple of gremlins and went back to the street, an eye on every car that drove by.

The telephone rings, waking Ted out of his reverie. It’s Common Value company headquarters saying that they are sending an inventory consultant to the Lowell branch. Ted knows what these two words mean separately, but the combination of them is somehow frightening.

“Something wrong?”

“Absolutely not, Ted. We’re just trying to keep Common Value up with the times, that’s all.”

Ted says he understands and ends the phone call.

The electronic ‘ding’ sounds as Mike Wilcox enters the room, hanging his parka on the metal hook. Ted hands him the slip of paper. The loft creaks and Ted opens up the window. Andrea smiles.

“Good afternoon, Shoppers. We’d like to remind you all about our amazing deal on Bellhouse Watermelons—that’s a buy one, get one free in the produce department. Also, a phenomenal offer just came in on Hertzell Sausage Patties for .99 cents a pound. That’s .99 cents a pound, Shoppers. Now, I know you don’t need me to tell you that this is almost a full dollar less than our competitor’s lowest price. Here at Common Value, we operate on a more efficient level in order to pass the savings onto you. Let me be frank here, Shoppers—the world is a great big, and sometimes frightening place. We must never let ourselves, nor our neighbors feel that we are alone in this life, for we are all agents of a binding humanity. So once again, shoppers, Hertzell Sausage Patties, both hot and sweet, .99 cents a pound in the deli department.”

Ted winces with laughter as he slides the window shut. Both he and Andrea straighten their faces as Mike descends the staircase. He nods to them, grabs his parka and walks past the window towards refrigerated storage.

“I should be recording these things,” Ted says.

Ted knew Mike Wilcox from his neighborhood growing up. Mike was a teenager when Ted was just a boy, running around the Highlands neighborhood with the Sullivan brothers, raising hell. Mike was always alone, hanging around by the baseball fields or the convenience store kicking cans around. His clothes never fit him, and it was rumored that his mother was insane—that he could only go home after she’d gone to sleep. Ted and his friends used to make fun of him, shouting ‘Sam Eagle’ from afar. Years later, while Ted was on the street, he remembered Mike serving food at Pawtucket House. Ted immediately recognized him when he got the job at Common Value, though neither of them ever acknowledged their history to one another.

Dusty shafts of light arrive through the basement windows at St. Michael’s. Nine rows of folding chairs have been set up, and people are scattered around in the first three. Bobby Mahoney sits in the front row with his sawdust covered baseball cap. He nods reassuringly to Ted who is standing at the podium about to speak. This is his first time, after

begrudgingly saying yes to Bobby's request. Ted tells the people his name, and that he's a recovering addict. A dull murmur of recognition rises from the attendees.

"Been clean 15 months. Hardest thing I ever done." Ted pauses, his hands starting to sweat as he grips the sides of the lectern.

"You guys on day one... You just gotta hold on."

In the front row, Bobby Mahoney gives him a reassuring nod.

In his mind, Ted is back at the rail yard, standing on the darkened tracks as the lights of the Bud-liner approaches. Everyone is quiet, waiting for him to say something. The light shifts like a dilating pupil—grows larger.

"It's the hardest thing you'll ever do," he says, trailing off slightly as he realizes that he'd pretty much already said the same thing. The light of the train expands, eating up the center half of his mind's vision. The rails start to shake.

"Sorry. I'm no good at this."

Bobby spins his index finger, telling him to keep going. But it's too late. Ted is blinded, stepping down from the lectern as the attendees offer a sparse applause.

After the meeting ends, Ted stands with Bobby near the coffee and donuts chatting. He's ashamed. Bobby pats him on the shoulder—a puff of powdered sugar escaping his mouth.

"Small steps," he says, through his half-chewed donut.

Ted looks up at the clock.

"Shit, Bobby. I gotta run."

Mrs. Beaulieu checks her watch as Ted unlocks the sliding doors. He is standing between the two handrails as the old woman hustles past. It's 6:02 a.m.

"Again?" she snips at him without turning.

Ted grimaces, mouthing violence as he disarms the other slider.

It's the week after the 4th of July, and there's a sale on charcoal. Ted's working on a display setup just past the registers near the main exit. He heaves the 25-pound bags up onto the windowsill. Sweat drips off of his nose he works. Peter, a 17-year-old stock boy is standing behind him. He timidly asks if he can help Ted arrange the display. Ted tells him that he's fine, and that maybe he could go walk the aisles and make sure they are ready for the mid-morning rush. One thing that Bobby Mahoney has taught Ted, is that it is easier to focus on a physical activity when you're struggling. Bobby had his summer tulip garden over on Gorham Street, which made

his half of the duplex look like a Dutch palace. Ted had no such hobby, but would often undertake the more laborious tasks at Common Value, such as the charcoal displays, or shoveling out the walkway.

The cars begin arriving in the parking lot as Ted's finishing the display. Soon, they will be busy with all the daytime shoppers. Ted sees a woman and her daughter walking down Wood Street towards the bus stop. They're holding hands. He sets another bag on the pile. Ted thinks the woman looks like Janice. Both are wearing pink sweatshirts. The little girl is almost being dragged along by her mother. Ted grabs another bag and heaves it on the pile. The woman looks like she could be Janice, but from ten-years ago. She looks like she might have before her and Ted got together. One of the bags starts to slide down the pyramid, and Ted grabs it while still holding onto another. He needs to fortify the pyramid's base. They walk past the bus stop. She looks like Janice might have when she was a teenager, before she started getting high. Ted sets the two bags in his hands near the bottom of the pile and shimmies them into place with his foot. He looks out the window again. The woman doesn't really look anything like Janice, he thinks. Ted watches as the mother and child walk to the intersection and out of view. He wipes the sweat from his forehead and takes another critical look at the charcoal display.

A man wearing a collarless dress shirt stands at the last register talking to Meng. There's nothing on the belt. Thinking he's another solicitor, Ted walks over prepared to curtly ask him to leave.

"Hi, Geoff Kozak from Retail Re-awakening."

It takes a few moments of him speaking for Ted to realize that this is the "inventory consultant" that company headquarters has sent. Geoff, with the collarless dress shirt. He hands Ted his business card. The address says "Cambridge, MA."

"Now we don't have fortune to work with," says Geoff, looking around the store. "But there's definitely room to enhance the shopping experience."

Ted feels stung by this—an addict's suspicion mixed with a 'Lowell-life's' innate sense of inferiority. But stays quiet.

Ted, Geoff and Andrea begin to walk the store. Geoff points out the harsh lighting, the utilitarian produce displays. The man seems to pass casual judgement and criticism as easy as an exhale.

"These, too," he says, picking up a red plastic shopping basket. "They're too harsh. A green or brown would be better. But very low on the totem pole."

They are halfway through the produce section when from overhead, they hear the click of the PA system being activated. The tinny voice of Mike Wilcox arrives.

“Hello Shoppers. This afternoon finds us yet another thrilling bargain to offer you. But before I reveal Common Value’s latest gesture of goodwill, Shoppers, I’d like to take a moment and talk about the greatest bargain in the universe—the bargain of Love. Whether we recognize it or not, the force of Love is all around each of us, permeating our sometimes thick skins and vibrating in the marrow of our bones. All we need to do is release this energy to those around us—even to those whom some might say do not deserve it. Only through unconditional love can we eradicate our pain. This, Shoppers, is the ultimate bargain. And speaking of bargains, stop by and see Cheryl at the Four-Minute Gourmet table on aisle six for a sample of their delicious chicken pot pie and a coupon for two dollars savings on all Four-Minute Gourmet products. Once again, that’s Cheryl in aisle six.”

Ted has one hand on his knee and the other on Andrea’s shoulder in noiseless laughter. Andrea’s head is cocked back with wide-eyed astonishment—a look that signifies a more outlandish Wilcox-announcement. The two remain in this state for a few seconds. Other shoppers nearby giggle.

“Wow,” says Geoff. “I don’t think I’ve ever heard anything like that.”

Ted tries to gain composure. Tears cling to the outer corners of his eyes.

“That’s Mike, our frozen foods stocker. He’s got a knack for public speaking.”

The three wrap up their walk-through and head back to the office. Geoff says he’s gonna go over the numbers and get back to them after the weekend. Ted says ‘great.’

It’s Monday morning and there are quite a few people gathered at St. Michael’s. Early in the week and late in the month usually draws the most people in. Ted sits in the front row. Every day he wonders what it would be like if Janice walked through that door; he wonders what he would say to her if she did. It’s the end of the meeting, and Bobby Mahoney is talking about the time his father and uncles pulled him off of a bench and kicked the shit out of him in Armory Park. He’d spent another paycheck getting high while his wife and newborn child waited at home, hungry.

“The first in a series,” he jokes. “Gets you thinking,” knocking his head like checking a watermelon.

Ted watches Bobby as he speaks. He’s completely comfortable and everyone seems engaged. It gnaws at Ted that he can’t be the same way. The hard parts of his life are too close to be comfortable with.

“The hardest part of getting clean is having to face what you put your people through. That was half the reason I got high anyway. Now there’s no escape. That’s the hardest part.”

A solemn recognition rises from the attendees. Ted too, shakes his head, but he can make little sense of that process. For him it’s all he has to just keep coming to meetings; to stay away from old haunts.

“Anyone wanna come up and share?” asks Bobby, looking directly at Ted.

He knew that Bobby was going to try and get him back up there. Ted looks down at his feet, cheeks flushed and forehead sweaty. From behind him, Darrell with HIV, gets up and walks towards the lectern.

Geoff Kozak has taken over Ted’s desk with pamphlets, charts and photographs. He’s informing Ted about the “changing cultural landscape” of Lowell, Massachusetts.

“More artist grants have been issued in 1997 than in the ten years before that. And the number of 25 to 35-year-old professionals buying in the city has doubled in the last five. What does that tell you?”

Ted nods, though he’s never even met an artist, nor anyone his age who’d want to ‘buy’ in Lowell. Dracut or Chelmsford, maybe.

“This town is going through a renaissance. These young professionals aren’t going to want to shop at a place that has sawdust on the floor.”

Anger rises up from Ted’s stomach, up through his throat, taking rest in a point above the bridge of his nose. His whole life has been people trying to educate him about things he often already knew. Now this guy from Cambridge is telling him about the town that he’s lived in his whole life. Bobby Mahoney always told him that he needs to take at least one minute to react when he’s angry. One minute to see if it isn’t old impulses trying to get back in control. So he just sits there, listening to Geoff’s spiel.

“Now one thing we can do right now, for very little money, is we can start doing employee profiles.”

Geoff directs Ted’s attention to a photograph of a young woman wearing a beige smock. She’s smiling with haze of blurry light behind her. Beneath the photo is a paragraph of writing. Ted is still so incensed that he could hardly read. Geoff thankfully summarizes.

“Marianna: cashier and amateur ballet dancer.”

He drops another photo on top of Marianna.

“Shamal: grocery bagger and full-time engineering student. You see, the greatest resource for customer attraction is something that you already have—your employees. People love to learn the stories of the folks who bag

their groceries. And I'm sure you've got quite a few stories in this place. I was talking to your cashier—Ming, is it?—did you you know she fled from the Khmer Rouge?"

This is the first thing that 'Geoff with the collarless dress-shirt' has said that doesn't make Ted want to punch him in the throat.

After work, Ted drives home in his '87 Celica. The exhaust is loud and probably in need of maintenance. He turns on the radio to drown out the lawn-mower tones of his automobile, though he's never really been a huge fan of music. Janice was the music lover. Whenever they'd be somewhere with a radio, a bar or party, she'd always start dancing. Especially 80's rock—Def Leppard, Poison. 'You'd make the perfect groupie,' Ted used to joke. 'I'm lucky none of those bands ever come to Lowell.' This made Janice bend down all the way, flash him her tits. 'You be my groupie?' Janice just kept dancing, lost in something Ted both loved about her but was afraid of. By the end, music had become a rarity: something heard from passing cars on boulevard. These days, Ted avoids those old places. He drives around, not through them.

The next morning, Geoff and Andrea sit with Meng in the main office. Geoff asks questions about her life while Andrea takes notes. In the rear of the office a white sheet hangs by a lighting umbrella. Ted's just returned from addressing a seized freezer door in Frozen Dinners.

"Tell me about more about your church?" asks Geoff.

Meng, smiles and leans back in her chair.

"In church, we sing," she says. "*Up to the Lord, who reigns on high; and views the nations from afar...*"

Geoff smiles, and offers a single lingering clap.

The electronic bell dings. Mike Wilcox enters the room and hangs his coat on the metal hook. Meng taps Geoff's shoulder and points at Mike.

"He's a good man," she says.

Mike takes a stiff bow.

Three times a day, every day for the ten months that Ted has been Branch Manager of the Wood Street Common Value, he's handed Mike a post-it note with the latest promotion scrawled on it. This transaction has always been based on roles and function. There's never been an outsider in the room to witness it. Ted moves aside the Retail Re-Awakening material on his desk to find the promotions calendar. He spots it beneath a binder of laminated spreadsheets. This afternoon is "Chelmsford Golden Ginger-ale," two-for-one. He reaches for a post-it note to write it down as the camera flashes behind him.

“Actually, Mike, I got this one. Geoff’s gonna do up your profile.”

Mike nods, and walks over to Andrea’s desk.

Geoff thanks Meng, then turns and greets Mike.

“So, Ted tells me you work in a soup kitchen when you’re not at Common Value?”

The loft is lit by a single desk lamp. There are no windows, only the raw particleboard of the building’s facade. It’s ten degrees warmer up there. Ted sits down at the small table and slides the goosenecked microphone closer. He’s never used it before, but there’s only a single red button on the microphone’s base. He waits a moment, then presses it, hearing the acoustic version of the sharp click for the first time.

Ted exhales, then moves towards the microphone’s grill. He thinks to say the word ‘attention’ but doesn’t.

“Hey, it’s me,” he says, quietly—his breath staying remarkably calm.

He closes his eyes.

“You were the one that was supposed to get away. You’d have no problem with any of this.”

Ted is ensconced in the silence of the loft. He feels empowered by its softness.

“It’s this quickness. I can’t take it. What the fuck am I supposed to do now?”

Ted leans back and releases the button. Some kind of heft seems to have been shed, though he doesn’t know what it was just yet. He sits there for a minute listening as the noise of his mind descends to a dull chatter.

Back the office. Geoff is writing in his note pad as Mike speaks. Meng has left the office and Andrea adjusts the camera. Ted sits back down at his desk and starts to organize his papers. Despite all the upheaval there is still a lot work that needs to be done.

NANCY KASSELL

Cuttings

Scissors, caesura.

At my mother's dress factory,
a cutting machine *szzzes* through folds of fabric,
traces a pattern pinned to the top layer.
Here are sleeves, the skirt.

Not all cuts make a sound.
A cutting from a plant quietly roots itself.

A cutting remark silences;
also a snub by someone who thinks she's
a cut above.

A thousand small cuts can destroy a republic.

A girl cuts herself
to feel pain, to know she's alive.
The unkindest cut of all.

Vicissitude cuts into a life,
leaving bits and pieces or sometimes restoring
a familiar pattern

like conjunction or opposition
like the relative position of the sun and the moon.
Szygy.

R. J. KEELER

Fork

Sullen heat lightning forks and bends down
to spike earth, forks then forks then pounds
a wanton-exposed ground. Forks, like silver,
shatter whole cloth, and, to be candid, split

rod to cleft. A fork, a single one, is a wild, bitter
place in which to be—a salt tributary, all hitlered.
Were limbs to turn to hinge in hard time, each fork
might devise its final no-going-back place, its clock.

The RR junction switch wrenched left, and nearly
instantly then again back right. Two lines of queerly
laden boxcars diverge; all wave fond farewell.
In just a few minutiae, memories fork or pale;

so let them be spit out. Then, microscopically lost
one-siders turn aside, go into gardens, cut dark,
secret flowers from wet-acid bowers, arrange
into cameral chambers of porcelain hearts; gain,

like lean *ex nihilo* veins under skin, some tangle.
Tree-branches, forked into dirt, move the needles.
Time slows for both limbs of *any* forked path;
each limb diminishes the whole body's wrath.

Tangled fields fade away, squash the tyranny
of one single track; both cabooses' lights dizzily
distance out; their path is a stark abandonment,
each from the other. Any fork is an awful ardent

instrument of evil, like a red-hot-metal knife blade.
The trodden path is greener—and so do not be afraid.

ANGELA KELLY

1979

Shakedown 1979, cool kids never have the time
On a live wire right up off the street you and I should meet
—“1979,” Smashing Pumpkins

When we left the Zip Mart
with our filched bottles of cheap wine
Easy Days Mellow Nights
our lips raw and chapped,
our buttons fumbled, our shorts askew,
we stopped at the creek bed to pee and pee.
The water cooled us.
That pimple-faced fumble clerk was no one.
A back room means to an end.

We hid the bottles in our usual spot.
We went home along Altamahaw Street,
like good girls, we had supper with our families,
my brother smacked me, I smacked him back,
we were yelled at. Same as every evening.

But it was summer, Saturday night,
the pool hall two blocks over,
Puerto Rican boys, a jukebox,
disco lights, our prized bottles passed around.
We were doomed, exactly as we planned.

CHRISTOPHER KUHL

Evolution

An inch of wheat field
Tousled by the wind;

A weed clinging tenuously
To a pile of stones,

Then torn off in the storm.

We are born

To arrive
As we are born to leave:

Naked arriving,
Naked leaving.

Our skin has no pockets:
We won't need car keys

Where we're going.

RICHARD LEBOVITZ

The Booking, or How We Discovered Our Mother's Dementia

—In memoriam Z.G.G (1921-2006)

Accused of taking
what you didn't know you took,
you end up here,
staring blankly into a lens.

With no choice in the matter,
you strike your best pose,
though it won't be the portrait
we'll remember you by.

With a deer-dazed look,
you shuffle to the counter,
leaving an inky imprint
memory will quickly efface.

Together, we exit the station,
me slowing to your measured steps,
you squeezing my hand
as though you would hold on
forever.

MARY LAMBETH MOORE

Emergencies

The desk lady squints at her computer and gets everything wrong. She sees I'm a female with a trippy heart; beyond that, her records are a mess. I correct her point by point. "I've never been to this facility before. I'm thirty-eight years old. My doctor is Dr. Stevens." The woman notes this information on a slip of paper. I have no confidence it will ever reach her computer.

A nurse with a very poor bedside manner comes out and fires questions at me. I tell her I was working on a *grand battement* when I broke out in a sweat and felt a wave of nausea and a flutter in my chest. When she suggests that perhaps it was from getting overheated, I shake my head, not patiently. I'm a dancer; I know the sweat of dance.

You, Dr. Stevens... you have a superb bedside manner.

This is the emergency room, your emergency room, at 2:30 on a Saturday afternoon. Outside it's crisp and sunny, but here even the light looks sick—a clammy glare, like the room has a fever. I feel a certain bitter sadness for you, that you spend your weekends in this light.

The waiting room is full. You tell me it's always packed, no matter the shift. Rows of knees stick out from plastic chairs, some in denim and some bare and hairy. I know we're dealing with emergencies, but shorts—really? Most of the waiters stare up at the TV blaring in the high corner. I make my entrance wearing a pleated skirt and linen jacket over my leotard. A few people glance up. Some of the shorts are astonishingly short. This is not the beach, people. More heads turn toward me, as if I have spoken.

A man in white comes out to fetch me and I catch my breath, but he's not you. He takes me back to a corridor lined with curtained rooms. Of course now that they're examining me, I feel perfectly normal. They draw some blood and hook me up for an EKG. I scan the faces of the men who walk by in their scrubs. When the tests are done, a nurse asks if I will be okay in the waiting room and I say of course; I'm used to waiting.

I am not here because of you, even though I'm aware of your schedule. In spite of what you or your pretty little wife might think, you no longer make my heart race. Maybe this wasn't the closest hospital, but you always told me it was the best. This hospital is the one thing that brought out any loyalty in you.

I take a closer look at my fellow inmates. There are eighteen of us, including me. Bad haircuts with brassy dyes. Garish tattoos crawling up beefy arms. Painful thinness seated side-by-side with obesity. There's an exhausted looking woman holding a pudgy baby boy who gazes at me with wide, serious eyes. An old man with a creased face—he's in his sixties, he could be my father—smiles at me. I look away. There's no contest; I'm the most attractive person in the ER.

I cross my feet at the ankles and shift in my seat. That flutter in my chest again. Yes, a flutter and a definite tightness. I feel justified.

Across the way from me a young black man glares at the TV news, which shows another black man draped over a police car. I give him a sympathetic look, trying to convey I'm not a racist, trying to silently say, I DON'T BLAME YOU. He doesn't look at me.

This is only my second visit to the ER. The first time I was four years old and fell on a shard of glass. I was running to see Elaine, my eight-year-old neighbor, who often wouldn't answer when I rang her doorbell. On that day, I spotted her in plain sight, standing in her yard. "Elaine!" I shouted, galloping across the small bumpy field that separated our two houses. Somewhere in my path was a broken soda bottle. I don't know whether I slipped on the bottle itself or just fell, but the glass went deep just below my knee. I don't remember the pain of the cut.

This room lacks air and there are too many smells. I notice the lady next to me is wearing impeccable wool pants, full length. I turn to her. "What are you in for?" I ask sympathetically.

When she looks at me, or at least when her head turns in my direction, I see that her eyes are crossed. Not just a little; their off-kilter focus is startling. She tells me the gout in her foot is killing her. It occurs to me that none of us, nobody sitting in this room, is likely to get their worst problem fixed.

"My boyfriend is a doctor here," I confide, then feel foolish. Not because of any pickiness about present tense versus past, but because I feel, for that fleeting moment, a need to impress a sad, cross-eyed woman. In any case, it doesn't work. She tells me her niece is in med school, and I smile politely.

This is a terrible thing to say, but I don't believe you love your wife. I saw the two of you together once. It was in a crowded restaurant, a casual, noisy place; you didn't see me. I only had a view of her back, just her narrow shoulders and the curve of her over-processed hair. But you I could see: your dark spectacles and broad forehead, your perfect mouth. I watched you study your menu and tried to guess what you would order. How many dinners

did we have together? In six months, at least two dozen. Enough so I know you're a seafood man. I felt a certain satisfaction when the server brought you the shrimp.

The thing is, you and wifey barely talked. You both stared at the basketball game playing on the wall, occasionally commenting on a play. I ordered another vodka tonic and felt sick at heart for the waste of your boredom. And also smug. Not once did you ever watch a game with me. I was the game, baby.

A nurse comes to the doorway and calls two people in. Almost immediately two more arrive for admission. It's like there's a law of nature, like the ER is a microcosm of the world, where I suspect there's a constant balance of people facing emergencies.

My big brother took me to the ER after I fell on the broken bottle, even though he was barely old enough to drive. He carried me to the car and placed a bath cloth over my knee. Sitting in the front seat next to him, I watched a growing splotch of bright red seep through the white cloth. It must have hurt, but I wasn't thinking about that. I was worried because I knew he would get in trouble for taking the car and also for ruining a perfectly good cloth. Later, to my surprise, nobody yelled. My mother asked for the keys back and dropped the wash cloth in the trash without comment. That's when I understood that emergencies involve exceptions.

Actually, the fall on the glass turned out to be a very good thing. Shortly afterwards, I started my first tap class. "The child is clumsy," my father told my mother, and the lessons were arranged.

I pick up a magazine, flip through it, and put it down. After a while, sitting in this waiting room feels like an awkward orgy. There's a forced intimacy and focus on bodies, everyone in some kind of need. We sit too close together and avoid each other's eyes. It's like foreplay with strangers who don't like each other and perhaps don't even like sex.

When my father died, I was sitting in the kitchen, maybe thirty yards away from the bed where he had been lying for months. My mother and I were trying to eat, though neither of us was hungry. My brother refused to join us; he stayed with my father. While my mother and I debated whether the chicken was too pink, my brother called. He called me, not my mother. When I came into the room, he told me Bud was gone. I didn't believe it. I looked at his still, pale face and felt his wrist. I kept looking for another breath that wasn't going to come.

The baby drops a spongy ball and it rolls across the room. The mother starts to haul herself up, but the old man who smiled at me springs out of his chair and retrieves it, returns it to the kid. I see that he's trying to impress me, and I look away, pretending I don't notice.

I've been accused of creating my share of drama, but my biggest acts had no audience. Like the time I came back drunk to my apartment and swallowed a handful of pills. It was my last year of college, when I had the only boyfriend who mattered before you. I could feel that he was moving on without me. Maybe it wouldn't have been so bad, but I wasn't moving at all. I wasn't even dancing then. I was living alone and not dancing.

The next morning I woke up, hungover and feeling like my body had been stuffed with cotton. My throat was so dry I couldn't speak. It turned out the pills were a prescription for allergies. I drank a glass of water. I took a shower and went to my eight o'clock class. Weeks passed, I believe, before I had even the slightest sniffle.

The woman in the wool pants suddenly stirs. She raises her right hand like she has a question then looks down sharply to sniff her armpit. Then she repeats with the left. Does she have emergency b.o.?

Under any other circumstances, none of us would be in the same room. The tattooed guy looks like a survivalist. There's another young man reading a gun magazine and a woman reading a Bible. I'm guessing if asked she would say every word is literally true, even the same stories that have two different versions. Do you believe Flood A or Flood B? I look around at these people of all colors, old and young, broken and in pain, and I know their facts aren't my facts and vice-versa. No, we are not a group that would be caught dead together outside of a hospital.

Try as I might, I can't quite capture the specifics of your kisses. I just know I liked them more than anything that has ever happened to me.

I'm relieved that no one in the room is actively bleeding, though I could take it; I'm no stranger to blood. There was the early experience with broken glass, of course. When I was fourteen I got my period during a recital while wearing white tights. And there was the time when you wouldn't open the door to your house, no matter that you were alone, no matter what I told you, no matter that my knuckles bled and I nearly broke my hand.

You and I met at a bar, but I didn't tell my father that, of course. You visited him, do you remember? You went with me, just that once, before he got really sick. That was nice of you. That's when Bud could still tell stories, and he regaled you with tales of quirky clients and courtroom shenanigans.

When you and I stood up to leave, Bud got down to brass tacks. "So how did you two meet?" He had already heard my version. But out of lawyerly habit, he liked to ask the same question more than once.

Unfortunately, I hadn't briefed you. Before you could speak, I quickly said, "I told you, Dad. A friend introduced us."

I expected you to be baffled, or at least give me a quizzical look, but you were magnificent. Without missing a beat you said, “Cathy. My friend from church. I’ll always be grateful to Cathy.”

Similarly, you once told a maître d’ that we had reservations when I was pretty sure we didn’t. I backed you up, and the snotty man ended up apologizing and leading us to a nice table.

So what else do you need in a partner? Maybe wifey is more reserved, maybe she doesn’t talk so much, but I bet she doesn’t stay in step with you like I did.

A nurse finally calls me, the same rude one. I don’t know how long I’ve been waiting, but I’m exhausted. She leads me to a little curtained room; I’m glad to lie down. Just outside, there’s a lot of commotion: people talking, gadgets beeping, carts rolling back and forth. Somehow it’s soothing, better than the listless waiting room, and I close my eyes.

When I wake up, someone is saying “Ms. Burns?” I open my eyes to an unfamiliar blur. My neck is stiff, and I’m cold and I don’t know where I am. Then I see you.

You’re standing at the door in your white jacket, the stethoscope hanging on your chest. You’re heavier around the middle, your face is fuller, and you need a shave. But there are your glasses, that smile.

“Good news, Ms. Burns. Your scan looks fine. You’ll need to stay on your medication, but you’re good to go.”

For a beat, I look at you, waiting for something more. “My heart has not been fine in a very long time,” I say.

You tilt your head to one side, questioning. “Let me have a listen. Do you mind?” You come over and open my jacket, all business. You place the stethoscope just under the top edge of my leotard.

Your eyebrows lift. “Your rate is high.”

I look at you steadily, willing you to see me. “Have I changed that much?”

You go over to a counter and look at the paperwork. I see you’re stalling, avoiding me. “Don’t say you don’t know me, Don.”

“I believe there’s a misunderstanding...” Your eyes are scanning my records, the papers I don’t believe in, and then you suddenly stop and go still. When you look up, your face is different, softer.

You come back and put your hand on mine. “Dr. Stevens hasn’t worked here in a very long time.”

As soon as he speaks, even before the rest of the sentence, I know it’s not you. The voice is wrong. I didn’t hear it until he said your name and it’s all wrong. “Of course,” I say coldly.

I look over his shoulder and see a mirror behind him. An old woman looks back at me. She's wearing a nice linen jacket, my jacket, but her face is ruined and her hair is a nest of gray wires.

He's watching me, and I feel a surge of shame and hate. "Thank you, doctor," I say. "You can go now."

But he doesn't leave, not right away. He sits next to me and we hold hands. His hand feels solid, a hand that can make stitches or revive a heart. My own hand is trembling at first and then it's not. Beyond the closed door a voice blares over the intercom: Dr. Landis. Dr. Landis. It sounds urgent. I wonder if it's his name. Still he stays another moment before standing. "I'm sorry, Ms. Burns."

I'd like to see him freshly shaven and in a nice suit. Dr. Landis. The two of us sharing a table, no television. "Just go," I say. I will not miss him, I won't.

TASSLYN MAGNUSSON

A Return

Sink into the familiar arms
Touch the well picked furrows on our thumbs

Consider a truce
Let Freckles spell the terms of disengagement

Hear our knees crackle
Feel our jaw pop

We never said reunification could happen
with no consequences

JOSH MAHLER

The Backyard Where I Lost My Faith

Listen for the grass,
melody of spring,
the clouds as high
as the sun moving
like the shadows,
drenching the earth
in a distant relief.

The flowers fold in
like fists, the pale
light of a new dawn
having split the lines
of broken oaths—
I lament the ritual,
the convict's disease.

C. I. MARSHALL

Riding the Trail of Birdsong

in a time when everybody
smelled like Patchouli
folk singers hair outlined
dark chords on C strings

and Bob Dylan whose hair
curled like Corkscrew Rush
opening his mouth to a voice
like a thump-ripe melon
plugged with melancholy

black seed such a sticky mess
he whispering to a friend
I was convinced that I would
be absolutely transformed

by something I could borrow
he glances at Joan awhirl
in a moment of need
night eyes downcast
to boots rubbed red
with railroad rust and lies

this was the every moment
he stole what he could
sealed the bargain
with the devil but not
before asking him if
he could take away the pain
this snaking train this hurtful deed

today he won the Nobel Prize
for all he had to say about silver buckles
begonias dynamite breeds of Scottish cattle

Her hair once ebony turned wave foam
Joan sits under her Woodside oak
sandaled feet nest on a pre-revolutionary chair
her guitar strings hum as angels wait to hear
her sing There but for fortune go you or I

RAY MORRISON

Can't You Say You're Sorry?

I had no idea what you're supposed to wear to an execution. I'd picked out a black dress, figuring it wasn't a funeral but close enough. The dress had short sleeves and the witness room's air conditioner was running full blast so I had to rub my arms to stay warm. I watched more people filter in, sitting scattered throughout the rows of folding chairs. I didn't recognize anyone but for some it wasn't hard to figure out what their connection to Freddy was. A nervous looking man and woman came and sat in the row in front of me. The woman cried the entire time, her face pressed against the man's chest. She clutched a crumpled photograph in one hand. I could see enough of it to tell it was a picture of a young girl. I looked away quickly.

The room was stark and utilitarian, with bare white walls and five rows of folding chairs divided by a central aisle. One side of the room was clearly designated for friends and family of the condemned and the other for their victims' families, a macabre parody of a wedding. I figured I had the choice to sit on either side. With no one to talk to, I stared through the big smudged glass window in the front of the room, at the closed gray curtain behind it, trembling and trying to tune out the nervous whispering of the dozen or so other people in the room. For the first time I doubted my decision to come.

To distract myself, I studied the woman sitting in the front row of chairs reserved for Freddy's immediate family members. It did sting a bit how young she looked. No more than twenty-five by my estimation, which is nearly half Freddy's age (and mine, if truth be told), but I took some pleasure in the fact she wasn't all that pretty. Even from a distance I could see the skin of her face had that tough, leathery look that comes from hard living and hard drinking. She and I had never met, but I knew from articles I'd read that she was Freddy's current wife. I was his first.

At 11:45, when the curtains behind the huge window fluttered open, I counted thirteen people in all, myself included, ready to watch my ex-husband be put to death. All at once the whispering stopped, and the room went silent, except for the soft hissing of the air vent. Behind the window, in the center of the harshly lit execution chamber, Freddy lay strapped on a gurney. His thick hair had been shaved off, making his head look small and his nose oddly prominent. He'd always slicked back his hair with copious

amounts of pomade, trying his best to look like Elvis. His blue eyes, twinkling with mischief when I first saw them, rolled wildly as he tried to scan his surroundings. IV tubes ran into both arms, and wires attached to his chest snaked up to an ECG monitor positioned high behind him. A jittery green line jumped up and down as it moved across the screen. You didn't have to be a doctor to see his heart rate was through the roof. And so was mine. At that moment, laying eyes on Freddy for the first time in twelve years and knowing how scared he surely was, I nearly bolted from the room. But I hadn't driven over two hours just to chicken out. I glanced at the couple in the row in front of me, at the corner of the photograph poking out from the woman's trembling fist, and that helped.

Before the darkness in him squeezed out every ounce of decency, Freddy had been a young man with hopes and dreams, just like anyone. He was handsome in his own way, and funny too. There's never been anyone who could make me laugh like Freddy. Once, on our third or fourth date, he'd taken me to a fancy restaurant, fancier than I'd ever been to or could afford. I sat there, feeling out of place, staring nervously at the menu, trying to figure out what half the things listed were, as classical music played from invisible speakers. The diners around us were speaking in hushed voices when I glanced up at Freddy. He was holding up his dinner fork, but he had the handle of the dessert fork stuck in one ear and his salad fork sticking out the other. Before I could say anything, he proclaimed in a thick country drawl, "What the heck is all these YOU-tensils for?" I began to laugh out loud, and I couldn't stop, no matter how hard I tried. The waiter and maître d' hurried over, saying we were disturbing the other diners and asked us to be quiet. Freddy asked them if there was a rule against having a good time in that restaurant, then dramatically removed the forks from his ears, slammed them on the table and declared we were leaving. I was still laughing when we headed out the door. That night we ended up eating at Taco Bell. Even now, I think that may have been the best meal I've ever eaten. That was also the night I fell in love with Freddy Cook. We eloped two weeks later.

As far as I know, none of the stuff with the children happened while we were together, and I'll always be grateful for that. Hell, if he had tried to lie next to me in bed, to touch me, and I knew about any of that shit, all this hoopla about an execution wouldn't have been necessary.

At five minutes to midnight, two men wearing dark suits with identical navy blue ties walked into the execution chamber and stood behind Freddy. One of the men had a stethoscope draped around his neck.

Undoubtedly, he was the doctor who would officially determine Freddy's last breath, last heartbeat, last moment on Earth. I watched my ex-husband struggle to turn his head to see who'd come in. Even from twenty feet away I could see Freddy shaking like crazy.

Fear wasn't something you often saw in Freddy. In fact, during the five years we were together I can remember just one time. As long as I'd known him, Freddy never held a steady job. He'd bounce from one thing to another, taking whatever work he could find. When I asked him why he kept getting let go from jobs, he'd say, "Freddy Cook don't suffer fools gladly." Then he'd grin and grab me and kiss me and, likely as not, we'd end up making love and somehow everything would seem okay. But Freddy had a temper, and it cost him plenty of good work in those days. One time, he was working a temp job on the construction site of a thirty-story office building going up downtown. Freddy and two other guys were aligning steel beams so they could be welded. They were working on the twenty-first floor, nearly 300 feet up in the air, when a cable slipped on a crane and suddenly one of the beams came flying out of control straight for where Freddy and the other guys stood. Everything happened so quickly that no one had time to react, and the beam missed Freddy by no more than a foot, but it hit the guy standing next to him square on, crushing the man's skull so fast it exploded his eyeball, spraying its juices onto Freddy's face. A few hours later, I got home from my waitressing job to find Freddy drunk and shaking and refusing to say a word to me. That night, I ended up sitting on the couch, just holding him until we both fell asleep. A week passed before he told me what had happened.

Freddy was never the same after that accident; he'd become grumpy and silent, yelling at me for the least little thing. He'd stopped looking for work and spent every day drinking. I'd come home from my own job to find him either passed out or sitting on the sofa with my laptop looking at hardcore porn. We fought constantly. I begged Freddy to stop drinking, to talk to a counselor, and to realize he was destroying himself—and us.

At first, he did try, but it wouldn't be long before things went back to being bad. One afternoon, I received a phone call at the restaurant where I was waitressing. Freddy had been arrested and needed me to bail him out. When I asked him what he'd done, he said he hadn't done anything, he was just sitting in the park and the cops came and told him to leave. He argued with them that he wasn't doing anything wrong, but they ran him in anyway. What I found out later, of course, was that Freddy had been hanging around a playground all day where moms would take their toddlers. He'd keep staring at the children until one of the parents got nervous enough to call the police.

I readily admit that, despite our problems, I was still in love with Freddy, so I gave him the benefit of the doubt. I believed Freddy's story that the mother who'd called the cops was merely being paranoid and overprotective. If there's one thing I learned from Freddy Cook: Love is not only blind but also naïve.

A string of arrests followed—public drunkenness, urinating on city property, disorderly conduct, trespassing. I had enough, so I kicked Freddy out of the apartment. It broke my heart, but I realized he was no longer the man I had fallen in love with. For a while, he'd call me frequently to tell me he was sorry, to say he was done fucking up, but, like I told Freddy, I might be dumb but I ain't stupid. Then, just like that, one day he stopped calling. I'd figured he was back in jail or had found another woman to be his patsy. I moved on with my life, and I got to the point where I rarely thought about Freddy. Then, one day a friend texted me to ask if I'd seen the story on the news. A nine-year-old girl had been found dead, and the evidence pointed to Freddy as her killer. It turned out that Freddy had lured the child into his car, as it was learned, he'd done many times before. But the girl had asthma and couldn't breathe while Freddy was covering her mouth to keep her from screaming, and she died in the struggle.

That was ten years ago. A few years after his conviction, I met my second husband. We'll be married seven years next month. Keith is a sweet man who's content to sell insurance all day and to come home and be with me every night. He doesn't make me laugh, not like Freddy could, but no one's perfect. Truth is, Keith is somewhat boring. But sometimes boring has its advantages.

At the stroke of midnight, the warden walked to the side of the gurney and looked at Freddy. The warden read from a document. The lady in front of me began shaking like crazy and she clutched her husband's arm so tight he had to pry her fingers loose. The girl up in the front row, Freddy's new wife, crossed herself and lowered her head, presumably to beg whatever God might care to give Freddy a pass on his sins.

The blood was rushing through my ears so loud I barely registered the warden's words coming through the speakers mounted on each side of the window. Finally, I heard him ask if Freddy had any last words before the state carried out its obligation. At first, Freddy just lay there, looking up at the warden as if he had no clue what was happening. I heard the man in front of me mutter that he hoped it would burn like Hell when the drugs went into Freddy's arm. Without thinking, I leaned over and whispered to the man to shut the fuck up and let the dying man have his say. He glared at me but didn't say anything. Then I saw Freddy shake his head to the warden.

In hindsight, that wasn't what got to me. It was seeing that adolescent wife of Freddy's holding both thumbs up and nodding her damn head at him like he was doing something noble by keeping his mouth shut. That was too much for me. I stood up and cupped my hands around my mouth, hoping I could be heard through the glass.

"Goddam you, Freddy! What the hell is wrong with you? Say you're sorry!" I heard movement behind me. "Go on, you stupid ass. Can't you just say you're sorry for all of it?"

A pair of guards came over at that point and ordered me to leave. One of them grabbed my elbow hard, hurting me. Through the window, I could see the warden and the doctor looking at me, and I knew then they could hear me. On the stretcher, Freddy strained to lift his head to see what was going on, and for one brief moment, our eyes met. I will remember the confusion and sadness in his forever.

People in the witness room began whispering to each other and staring as the guards led me to the door at the back of the room. The man who I'd told to shut up was grinning and flipped me the bird. As I was dragged out of the room, I glanced once more at Freddy, the condemned man who was my first real love. And before the door closed completely to take away my last sight ever of Freddy Cook, I heard a muffled shout, "I'm sorry!"

I was escorted all the way out of the prison, smiling and crying at the same time. I knew that by the time I'd gotten in my car and had driven past the small knot of anti-death penalty protestors outside the prison entrance that Freddy was gone. In my head, though, I kept hearing the echo of Freddy's last words.

Whenever I think back to that night, I find myself wondering what exactly Freddy was saying he was sorry for. Or, for that matter, what I wanted him to be sorry for. I tell myself I meant for Freddy to be sorry for what he'd done to those children and their families. And most days I believe that. But sometimes, in the middle of night when it's dark and silent, in those rare moments when you're able to hear the whisper of your heart's secret truths, a small voice in my head admits what I could never speak in the light of day: What I really wanted was for Freddy to say he was sorry for breaking my heart.

PRESTON MARTIN

A Quiet Poem

He surrounds her, she lies against him.
Moonlight finds the bed.

Reflected glow
fills the room, lights the mirror.

The mirror holds the walls and window,
the window holds the world outside.

If anyone listened
they heard the hum of furnace, constant,

as if it knew the storm's mind,
crouching low above the suburbs.

Moonlight is smothered.
The town shivers. Early papers delivered,

disappear in drifts.
A stir, a settle, dream-fuzzed eyes squint in darkness

to the sound of furnace, the sound of snow.
The crisp moon shines above the swirl.

KEVIN J. McDANIEL

Fred Flintstone's Sombrero

The day Pawpaw Tommy quit smoking cigarettes,
he shopped

for candy, crayons, and coloring books
at a dollar store.

Instead of playing Dominoes at a hazy kitchen table
with pals from across town,

he sat that night looking down at pale pages
of Fred Flintstone

who struck dopey poses in front of rock adobes.
Fred in an itsy-bitsy sombrero

made him start searching earnestly
for the right crayon.

Pawpaw surprised me when he pulled out
sage green.

He colored patiently within the hat's black lines.
I wondered quietly

why he had not begun with Fred's fat feet
pedaling beneath the stone car,

or why he didn't color Fred's shirt tangerine
first.

His gritty fist worked to fill in white space.
A leathery jaw swelled with lollipops,

tempted by so many shades inside a lackluster yellow box.

JIM McDERMOTT

Mountaintop Removal

Reflected
sound of

truck tires
on dry

leaves

is the sound
of

wood frogs—

masked, damp—

small as
thumbnails

that travel together

crossing

overburden

to reach
the vernal

pools.

ANN HARPER REED

In Paradise

So there we were in Oahu, Hawaii, land of paradise, and my family was just, like, horrifying. This happy Japanese family in a Lexus was parked on the side of the road taking pictures, and like usual I had the impulse to leap out of our rental car and into their sedan. We were right next to the ocean, somewhere outside of Hilton Hawaiian Village and Waikiki. Leslie was trying to text her stupid boyfriend, Shane, and Mom was trying to get her to stop looking down at the phone, but only when Mom wasn't checking her own phone. Gregory kept crying over some Ninjago set he'd seen in the gift shop at the hotel, and why couldn't he pretty-please have it. And Dad was brooding at the wheel, wondering (no doubt) why he paid so much money for us to complain, as we could have done that just as well back in Canoga Park.

Already I was thinking about how I could just pretend I didn't know them. Justifying, the way my half-sister Cynthia used to, that I was basically adopted. It made sense for her; she was so much older than us, and Dad being married to not-her-mom and everything. My theory was that I had been mixed up at the hospital with a different family. To others watching, maybe I could be a neighbor boy they decided to bring along. I could be Gregory's babysitter. I mean, I was, but I could be being paid, hired for the vacation. That's what I was thinking. If you want to know, that was pretty much at the back of my every thought since I was five. I mean, I can remember sitting in my SpongeBob kid-chair, thinking, *I don't belong here*.

"Shut up," said Leslie to Gregory. Which was a relief, because his constant whining was driving me up the proverbial wall.

"Mom!"

"Both of you stop it right this moment. Or I swear," said Mom. "Honey, do you know where it is? This doesn't look right to me."

Dad didn't say anything, beyond a low, grunty sigh. We pulled into a parking lot, right next to the marina and what appeared to be the boat. It wasn't large, but bigger than the catamaran we'd sailed on down in Long Beach. We parked. Mom was agitated that we, or at least our rental car, were going to be robbed.

"I don't like this one bit," she said. "Kids, keep your phones with you. This isn't where the tourists go. There's poverty—and Gregory, stop

that! Grant, grab your brother's hand. Who knows what kind of people are driving here."

Because Gregory had just been digging deep for gold, I did not take his hand. And it was, like, a half-vacant parking lot, and Gregory was seven, not two. For being a kid, he was all right most of the time. But he'd got himself all worked up, and nothing shy of a frying pan to his face was gonna slow him down.

"But why? Why can't I, Mommy?" said Gregory.

"Because I said. And I'm the adult. Don't ruin this for everyone. And Les, for Pete's sake, get that phone out of your face. Look at all there is to see here!"

"Whatever."

"You do not use that tone with me," said Mom.

"Whatever. I mean, I was taking a picture of the ocean, you know, 'cause it's, like, beautiful, and then you're complaining that I took a picture."

"Not everyone needs to have a play-by-play of our vacation," said Mom. "Insta or Snapcrack or whatever can wait. Your friends will survive."

"Right, Leslie," I said.

In a typical display of brutality, Leslie socked me in the gut. And I probably kinda cried. I mean, it really hurt. Plus physical violence can never be the equivalent of verbal sparring. Except for a cretin like Leslie, who could only spar with a fork or by calling me a faggot or queer or something. Which, by the way, I most certainly am not. By then Mom and Dad had made it over to the boat with Leslie and Gregory. I held back, trying to find another family. The idea that my real family was going to be on the boat crept into my head, and I started studying everyone. There was a married couple in their twenties; another even younger couple; a large tour group of Japanese tourists, all around nine hundred years old; a Hawaiian family with girls who looked just like Moana; and then boring us. It was a hard sale that I belonged to anyone other than the Hubbards from Canoga Park.

Once Dad showed the girl our pass, we all filed onto the boat. I sat over by myself with my back to the ocean, nursing my belly where Leslie had punched me, even though it didn't really hurt anymore. It felt important to stand up to violence, if only in principle. From that vantage point, I could watch everyone. The crew was laughing at some joke: I imagined it was them trying to figure out how I belonged with the Hubbards. That made me smile.

Then, at the last minute and to my great relief, my real family boarded the boat. They were perfect. A spry grandpa with curly, graying hair that shot out in every direction and a smile so hard his face lit up red,

his eyes squinted, and his nose sunk down toward his mouth. Somehow, you could tell they were from the East Coast. The parents wore black-rimmed glasses, and they had a girl with red hair and well-placed barrettes and cat-eye glasses maybe a year older than me. I could tell she was smart and that she would go to an Ivy League college like Princeton or Harvard or Bryn Mawr. I could tell she had the life I wanted with her sophisticated parents and her goofy, happy grandpa. You know, I just could tell.

They sat down beside me. Wanting to appear as regular as possible, I moved my hands from my stomach. They were all looking out at the ocean in back of us. Mom signaled to me to come over and join Dad, but I ignored her.

“Welcome to See-Excursions,” said the tan, blonde girl wearing a black bathing suit and a neon-blue rash guard. She was standing in bare feet holding onto the roof as we pulled out into the ocean. I could see some of her pubic hairs on her thighs coming out of her trunks, and it made me feel gross. I mean, how did she not notice that? And why didn’t someone else take over for her until she shaved or waxed or whatever girls do to that area? But for some reason, I couldn’t stop looking at her and those nasty hairs glaring at me. Girls were clean and hairless, not like men, and why didn’t she know that?

“We have heard there’re some whales out today here by Hanauma Bay,” she said. “But if they’ve moved on already, we will find them elsewhere. Don’t y’all worry. It looks like we’ve got some weather ahead, so I hope you brought some rain gear, or don’t mind getting wet. We have a dry bag here, and recommend you put your electronics in it. We have Alison here taking photos for you. And, oh, ha: My name is Kristy.”

I looked around and saw Dad shaking his head and Mom looking mortified. I noticed just then how gray the sky had gotten. The sun had disappeared behind a wall of clouds, and the blue of the water with it. My new family had an umbrella and rain jackets. They even had a waterproof camera like crew photographer Alison, who had cellulite on the backs of her thighs just like Mom.

“You traveling alone?” asked the grandpa.

I didn’t answer. I just gave him my best attempt at a Mona Lisa grin. I wanted it to seem like he was joking with me if the Japanese tourists were listening to us. I wanted them to think it was a game we played with each other.

“You want to use this umbrella? We’re ready for the weather, but you...”

“Yes,” I said. “Thank you. Thanks.”

And no sooner had my new grandpa handed me the umbrella than the rain started. At first it was a sprinkle. I popped the umbrella open. Most other people didn't seem to mind letting the rain hit their faces. Leslie looked like a cat, giving me the stink eye. Mom held onto Gregory, and they didn't seem to mind how the rain was spitting at them. It lasted for a while, maybe ten minutes, but then it stopped. I closed the umbrella and handed it back to the man.

"Keep it for now. You visiting?" said the old man.

I nodded and hoped the Japanese tourists couldn't hear.

"We're from Vermont," he said. "Eric and Vanessa haven't ever been here. But Miss Bronwyn over there, she's been. Alice and I took her when she was seven. She was swimming with dolphins. Weren't you, honey?"

"It was incredible," Bronwyn said, smiling, her red hair whipping around the hood of her white raincoat like she was some kind of yacht commercial. She didn't show the animosity toward the old man or me that Leslie showed to everyone. She seemed happy, and for lack of a better word: well balanced.

"I wish I'd done that," I said, and felt immediately stupid, because I hadn't meant to speak aloud.

"Maybe we'll see a pod of dolphins. Right, Poe?" said Bronwyn and looked back out at the gray horizon.

The old man nodded and his face lit up with a kind of a laugh, "Maybe. We'll just have to wait and see what's in store for us."

It may be hard to understand, but them talking like that, it made me feel awful. Inside I felt sick with the urgency for them to be my family for real. If they were, we could have conversations and laugh for no reason at all and be quiet and watch the ocean with smiles on our faces, like a secret joke between us, except it was just nice and not mean. I looked over at Dad and Mom and Leslie and Gregory. I couldn't hear them, but I knew Gregory was the only one talking. And I could see him obsessing about the Ninjago set, Mom yanking him back from the lip of the railing every once in a while. They all looked cut out of stone, and none of them smiled. You know, none of them would laugh in celebration at the idea of seeing a dolphin pod.

The rain started back up again. This time without a slow warning. And it pelted down this time. I got the umbrella open quickly, but I was already soggy in my hair and the shoulders of my polo. Gregory broke free from Mom and came next to me under the umbrella.

"Gregory, come back here," said Dad, his voice cutting through the rain.

"It's fine. We got him," said Poe.

Dad nodded and looked over at Mom like he was so exasperated he might just jump off the boat and drown himself. Leslie had crowded under the small covering where the crew and captain piloted the boat, and after a moment, Mom joined her. But Dad just sat there getting drenched. I could sort of see the steam rising off of him. With the rain, the ocean got choppy and I started to feel a little seasick.

“When is it over?” said Gregory.

I didn’t say anything, but kept holding the umbrella. Gregory leaned against me, his lousy finger up his nose again. I tried to knock his index finger out of his nostril, but he leaned out of my reach.

“Grant, how much longer?” he said with his loudest whining voice.

“Shh,” I said. “Knock that off.”

“Hey, kiddo, the best part is about to come,” said Poe with his same big smile. “They like the rain.”

“Who does?” said Gregory.

As suddenly as it had started, the rain stopped. Everything was covered in the damp now, and somehow cleaner. And just as quickly as it turned nasty, the waters calmed down. I even noticed a crack of blue sky ahead where the clouds weren’t nearly so gray.

“Grant. Gregory. Get over here. Now,” said Dad, his voice flat against the air.

“It’s okay. From one grandpa to another, I got you. They’re good kids,” said Poe.

Dad stood up and I wanted to disappear. Looking puffed up to ten feet tall, Dad’s face was so red it seemed he might actually blow up, like those spontaneous combustion people. If he hadn’t been so soaked by the rain, I’m pretty sure he would have exploded. At that moment, Mom was looking out at the ocean with Leslie in the opposite direction, and by the time she noticed something was wrong, she couldn’t stop Dad’s forward charge.

“Uh,” I said to Poe. “He’s my dad.”

“Yikes,” said Poe and smiled, but he didn’t laugh that time.

By then Dad was there. I handed the umbrella back to Bronwyn’s Poe and I let Dad lift me up by my shoulder. Poe squinted one eye up at Dad, but he didn’t come to his feet. Dad was the younger man by at least five years and a foot taller. I shrank under the pressure of Dad’s fingertips; his grip on my shoulder was firm and angry. I averted my eyes from Poe.

“He’s just fine,” said Poe. “A good boy.”

I looked at Dad’s face. His nostrils flared out like he was on the attack. My heart had a racing thing going on. I didn’t want him to say anything rude to Poe. Poe was such a cool guy. I wished I could be Bronwyn

instead of myself. Dad reached down to grab Gregory. But before he could grasp Gregory with his left hand, the little punk had moved away from both of us. Everything seemed to happen extra-fast and in slow motion. I spun myself around trying to grab Gregory, because I knew Dad would blame me, but that kid was too quick.

“Gregory,” said Mom, terrified as she watched my insane little brother charge to the other side of the boat with his finger pointed ahead of him.

“Ladies and gentleman, we have some company,” said Kristy at that exact same instant.

I followed the line of Gregory’s finger and saw the last of the thick mist in the air about twenty feet away. One fraction of a second later, a huge pectoral fin slapped onto the ocean, followed by another blowhole clearing the surface. I mean, huge doesn’t even begin to do it justice. The air was filled with the mist this time, as though we were going through a sprinkler.

“Ooooh,” I heard myself saying along with everyone else.

The sky had already opened up. But I doubt I would have noticed it raining. Dad let his grip on my shoulder soften, and I leaned into him. I could feel the girth of Dad’s rain-soaked abdomen against my shoulder blade. His breath rose and fell as we watched the whales come back up to the surface. I counted four whales. Gregory was jumping around and giggling like a madman, and Mom hovered near him in case he decided to leap in, and she didn’t seem to care that Leslie was taking a video with her phone.

It looked like there was a mama and two smaller babies close by, and a little ways beyond, another large whale. I thought it might be the dad. They were performing for us, slapping and puffing the surface, playing with each other. Like Bronwyn and Poe, they were showing us something. I wasn’t exactly sure what, but maybe they were showing us how to be a family.

MARY McGINNIS

A Better Ending to Our Movie

Your mother in a clean flour sack dress
comes back from the dead.
She slips into your hospital room to attend you,
embracing you in spite of the IVs.

She smooths your forehead and pulls at the sheet
so it covers you better. She whispers to you. I hope
she's saying it's okay for you to leave the ground world.

Out loud, I thank you for bringing so much good bread and
sleep into my life. Your daughter and her boyfriend are
at the foot of the bed in a state of shock not saying
anything. Your mother smiles. It's three in the morning.
She must be here to escort you.

ALAN MEYROWITZ

Roll Call at Auschwitz

The man who stands
in front of me
is already dead

nearing the formality,
truncheon hitting skull

He shifts his weight
left to right,
right to left,
violating Rule 3

No movement during roll call

In his way on death march—
lost in his remembering
lives and loves in holy search
for all that God did give us breath

No death march mine
left, right, left, right
but closing eyes
I'm dancing

if only once again

the hora, joyous hora,
at Golda's wedding

SALLY STEWART MOHNEY

Fonta Flora Remains

—Fonta Flora was a village in western Burke County, North Carolina, that was flooded in 1918 to become Lake James.

The sower sleeps—
moored to an iron
bed. The smell of his back
the smell of striped gin
the sound of a screen door closing.

Under the lone cypress, the well
tastes like river rock.

In an orchard mile:
shadowless white barn/
corn/sugarbeet/black
earth. No time to till. Only
seed tick, wire grass.

Tide threads the black gorge
then rips, reams, submerges
the valley road, swallows
the hopyard. Wake portaging

chimney/tractor/chapel
alders & willows/ kerosene
lamp, a train car.

Upmountain, shoals from a low
and quiet creek
lure the geese, who flew
to wait in the covered bridge.

Where are the bank swallows?
Where are the shallows?

one silver ghost in one blue farm

KATHY NELSON

Eighty-Seventh Birthday, Gero-Psych Unit, Parkridge Hospital

Too much paranoia, too many fire alarms, attempted murders.
My mother was here to calm down.

All right to bring a cake? I asked.
No candles, no metal blades, they said.

I arrived with plates and juice.
Frail and stooped, my mother pushed a cart in the hallway,
like the cleaning lady. But she was calm.
She knew me.

Come join me at the table for a party, I said.
Before I thought to hide it,

she swiped the plastic knife, slashed
through *Happy Birthday Mother*.

I wanted to stop her. Wanted
her to cut neat squares and hand them out
with napkin and fork. Wanted her
to be my mother.

By then I'd learned
not to disturb her projects

unless someone's life was under threat.
She cut and cut. I left the crumbs,

the frosting smeared across the table,
took with me the fraction of the cake

that survived. In the car, I pushed it
with my fingers into my mouth, scattered

crumbs across the seats and floorboards,
and did not cry.

HALI MORELL

The Knitting Debacle: When an Armhole Full of Judgement Destroys Your Happy Place

“Okay, look at me. Stop what you’re doing and look at me. In order to knit this armhole, we have to figure out how many stitches we need. So, what’s half of thirty-two?” the calm and gentle knitting instructor with the perfectly toned arms asked.

“Half of thirty-two? Half of thirty-two. Wait, I know this...hold on...umm...”

Why are you not getting this? What’s wrong with you, you idiot? Don’t cry. Don’t you dare cry, Hali. Just...don’t!

Grabbing my haystack of a hairdo (too much sun—not enough conditioner) tightly between newly tanned fingers, I wished I could just rip my whole head off and end it all.

“Half of thirty-two? It’s—um—I went to college, I mean...” I said, desperately scanning for any intellectual thought to come through.

As the “ladies who knit” gathered their expert-level pieces and wished me luck, I sat there, paralyzed...unable to answer a question that, under normal circumstances, I would know.

“It’s sixteen,” the strawberry-blond instructor finally said, her hair pulled into tiny buns behind each ear. “Okay, I don’t want you to get frustrated. Since class is over, why don’t you go out on the couch and try this armhole again and I’ll come by and check on you.”

Without saying a word, I unstuck the backs of my legs from the plastic chair, gathered my things, and assumed the all-too-familiar low-self-esteem position. Head and eyes down, vocal chords silenced, shoulders slumped. And I was invisible. Only I wasn’t. I was being followed by the “I’m Inadequate” spotlight. *Just bail, Hali. Do it fast and they won’t notice.* But I refused to give up. I needed to prove to myself that I could figure this shit out.

I plopped down on the couch in the front corner of the store and stared at this blob of partially knit “thing,” this “creature.” Once beautiful, soft, navy-blue balls of cotton yarn were now transformed into some kind of wretched net, something you’d get caught in and trip over. Stretched out and ugly, I couldn’t even decipher which end was up as I attempted to *once again* “pull” twenty-two stitches to create an armhole in my very first sweater for the fifth time. I didn’t even know what “pulling” meant! *So, you thought you’d try an intermediate piece, did you? You’re not a knitter, Hali. You’re remedial. You need remedial knitting, idiot.*

As customers chatted behind my head about which yarn would be best for knitting a baby blanket, I sat there...in my summer sanctuary...my no-judgment zone, and started to cry.

“I have Wildfiber Tuesdays and Thursdays.” That was my response anytime someone wanted to hang out over the summer. What’s that? You’re running a marathon? You’re winning a Pulitzer? Sorry, Wildfiber Tuesdays and Thursdays.

Working on a knitting project allowed me to lose track of time. I would get so into a project that I’d forget to binge on Trader Joe’s Sweet & Salty Trail Mix!

Excited for this summer’s project, I had selected the Loopy Mango Cropped Cardigan, using nine balls of chunky cotton yarn. An actual garment. Something with sleeves. I was terrified but reassured when looking at the pattern that I knew all of the stitches. Maybe there’s a shot in hell I can actually do this!

I soon realized that I could not in fact do this. With the combination of using circular needles but not in a circle, changing stitches each row, and incorporating my nemesis, the magic loop (don’t ask), the result was a feeling of total inadequacy. Although my instructors and classmates expressed reassurance and a “don’t give up” attitude, having to constantly undo this project was causing me to constantly undo myself. I was becoming undone. My inner yarn was unraveling in an ugly, ugly way.

And now, being banned to the corner couch, all I wanted to do was inhale Ding-Dongs in this place that was supposed to make me feel my very best. I time traveled back, as if in a rocket plummeting to my past, to a nine-year-old Hali, frizzy-haired, short, trying to fight back tears in Miss Bromberg’s four/five combination class when she asked to see my homework that I didn’t complete. Miss Bromberg, the teacher notorious for making even the most confident kids burst into tears with a single look from her navy-blue eyeshadow caked-on, covered eyelids. Her fuzzy face slathered with so much makeup you could take a chisel to it and not make a dent. Let’s just say, she was not the soft-spoken and nurturing Miss Horne who I had in third grade, who serenaded the class with goofy songs and rewarded us with fake money for being on our best behavior. I had excelled with Miss Horne, earning the most money by the end of the year, no thanks to Derek DeBrall, who was a constant annoyance, putting his boogers on the back of my chair. But now, in this witch’s brew of a class, I constantly wanted to disappear. Her method was pure torture, ridiculing me with her screechy, witch-like voice, pointy black boots to match. I dreaded watching her ice-blue Chevy Corvette circa 1979 pull up in front of Lunada Bay Elementary School every morning, clouds of cigarette smoke seeping out her car door. This woman

single-handedly killed any drive I had built up with Miss Horne to do my best, as I quickly became devoid of a brain that functioned properly.

“Hali—what’s the answer?!” Miss Bromberg shrieked in my face. My hands shook as I stared at my social studies workbook, clutching it to my chest.

“Answer the question! What’s the answer? You have the book right there!” She continued.

“The page is blank, Miss Bromberg,” the kid next to me admitted. Probably to put everyone else out of their misery.

“Oh! So, that’s one checkmark for Hali on the board,” she yelled, walking swiftly over to the chalkboard, her witch boots clicking and pounding in my brain. It was my first checkmark ever from The Brom. It wasn’t the first time I showed up without my homework, but it was the first time I got caught. Two more and it was a call home.

Here’s something I learned. When I’m terrified by someone or something, I evacuate the premises. Sure, my body may still be there, but everything else has been flushed out and emptied into some Twilight Zone secret door where only morons are allowed. So, no, I hadn’t done my homework, thank you very much!

That year, Miss Bromberg sucked any sense of who I was or *could* be into a vacuum containing my soul. For the annual end-of-year tradition, initiated by The Brom herself, yet paid for by parents, students showed up to her classroom wearing white baseball T-shirts with red sleeves, the words, “I Survived the Brom” ironed across the center. My mom had ordered special versions for us that read, “I Barely Survived the Brom.”

Since then, The Brom has reared her hideous face, making a cameo appearance every time I feel completely deflated intellectually. She showed up when I couldn’t figure out how to enter someone’s food order into the computer system my first day as a waitress. She popped in when someone asked me to create an Excel sheet using formulas. *Formulas? What?* I’ll get a whiff of her perfume while riding an escalator in the mall and immediately shrink into myself and begin to sweat. And now it was happening where it shouldn’t be happening. At Wildfiber! So, what do you do when your safe place becomes unsafe?

I had to get out. *No one look at me. Don’t ask me anything. Just walk, Hali. Walk, damn you!*

I plugged my earbuds in and listened to Depeche Mode and The Smiths on my walk home. Depression had entered the building and all I wanted to do was eat the entire bag of Peppermint Patties that I was stashing in the bottom bin of the fridge while watching *Real Housewives*. Any city would do.

Back home, I instantly shoved the “project” in a corner, swearing I’d never look at it again. I plunged my ass into my sunken in corner of the sofa, turned on Bravo, and played Solitaire on my iPhone for the duration of the night, occasionally wiping chocolate out of the corners of my mouth. Thank god my husband wasn’t home. It was not a fun household to be in right now. Even the cats bailed on me.

The next morning, I woke up with an odd feeling. It was determination. Determined not to feel like a failure. Determined to prove to my instructor that I, in fact, *did* know the answer to half of thirty-two. Determined to prove to myself that I *could* make things. That I had made things. I quickly lined up everything I had made over the last month: four purses, five pairs of booties, three bowls, and two cat beds (now used for storing yarn, as the cats ignored them). *See? Look what you did!*

But I needed one more thing. Something that challenged me. I had to rinse the taste of cropped cardigan disaster from my brain ASAP.

Two hours later, I was holding “something.” Here’s the thing...I don’t exactly know what I’m doing the majority of the time. These things I create on my own are often riddled with mistakes, and it’s the covering of the mistakes that seems to give it that Hali stamp. *Well, Hali, it looks like what you got here is a little hanging basket.* I threw some succulents in it and hung it up outside, taking pictures and sending them to my husband, texting, “I did something.” He texted back, “Wow! How cool! You’re naturally talented.” I knit two more baskets and three hacky-sacks until it was Tuesday again.

Okay, it was Tuesday. Sitting up in bed, I eyed the corner where I had shoved the “project.” It had been five days since we last interacted. *All right, cardigan. This is it. It’s showtime. You’re not gonna get me. You hear me? I’m gonna get you. You will not destroy me and turn me into that nine-year-old, frozen child.*

I made the bed and set out to find my version of a power suit. Well-fitting cutoff jean shorts and my favorite blue-and-green button-down shirt with the bow in back would do. I strapped on my tigereye stone necklace, the crystal a psychic once told me to wear when I needed to feel empowered and unclouded by emotions. Spotting a dusty bottle of Ginkgo Biloba in the medicine cabinet, clearly leftover from the 90s, I popped one in my mouth and hoped an expired Ginkgo wouldn’t have the opposite effect.

With “Shooting Star” by Bad Company blasting through my earbuds, I burst through the door of Wildfiber, head held high, ready to knit an arm on this motherfucker.

“Let’s do this,” I said, throwing my supplies on the table.

Three hours later, I had an arm and the beginning of a second arm. That’s right, the answer is sixteen! Look who survived the Brom now!

SIMON PERCHIK

Untitled

Half iron, half oak, the bed
all night honed on what went wrong
–it’s an axe, striking upside down

though you sleep facing north
side by side an empty dress
shaped into bulls and chariots

with your mouth wide apart
louder and louder getting ready
for the slow descent –you sit

on the edge, trying to bleed
to open the sleeves
still reaching out in the dark.

J. ROSS PETERS

Wetland Sounding

In the moment before I sleep, I fall through
 Not air but black soil, and I snap to the surface

Between my bed and the top of the water table.
 I am not yet tuned to this flat place—I am lost without

Relief, without the relief of elevation, so when
 I walk in the wetlands, I get turned around

Out of earshot of the Wolf River. Ten thousand
 Years ago, the forest here dropped over forty feet

In a New Madrid Holocene earthquake; the roots
 Lost hold as the ground liquefied before new

Sediment filled in. Thus, I imagine my footsteps
 In the canopy, and I am moving amongst the

Ghost branches and blooms. Think of the trees:
 Chestnut, Overcup, Shumard, Pignut, Shagbark,

Silver, Sugar, Water, Willow, and Bald.
 They are an *arboretum subterraneum*, a forest

Suspended in a roiling wave between the ecotonic
 Space and an ancient violent moment, the stuff

Of First People creation stories. It's movement
 Is the movement of Alpha and of Omega. My sleep

Twists and folds, as I sound the buried forest,
 Its roots adrift as the river bends and digs for them.

FABRICE POUSSIN

His Pleasure

The blade never misses; it knows the duty
of its ancestors, rusty, chipped, broken,
never complaining, screaming, nor whining.

Tireless, it stands at attention for the next call,
to fall, cut, and slice through the dinner of
the farmer who no longer knows to sleep.

Long, hot, hearty portrait of the life he leads,
dry of pork, wild hog, goat or even deer
in its hardened shell of precious entrails,
his meal simple, accomplice to a prize well earned.

Single slice on stale bread, his daily treasure;
in his eyes, the vision flashes to a thankful heart,
for there is no more want in the instant;
he closes his eyes and lives again, content.

OLIVIA PRIDEMORE

Ghost Island

My brother and I boarded
the midnight ferry to Gunkanjima in search of Inari.
I imagined the great white fox
guarding precious ore
at the bottom of a mine shaft,
how it would feel to unearth glory

Churlish skies cast irreverent
shadows on the concrete city, following
us through abandoned apartments, schools,
bars, and pinball parlors, lingering
in the dance hall.

“It must be kitsune,” my brother
said, fearing a demon fox
meant to thwart our pursuit
of the great one—

we never laid eyes
on purity, never held
it in our hands.

As we stood on the shore, awaiting
the ferry to deliver us
home, he didn't notice the tail
reflected in the water, red desire
swirling in the rippling waves.

ELIZABETH CHILES SHELBURNE

Any Other Kind

Jeptha sat in front of the trailer after his shift ended, picking at his mandolin and waiting for Lucy to get home. He'd been on at the plant for three weeks and, for the first time ever, life seemed good. He liked his work all right and had found there was something steady and boring, but in a good way, about getting up to go to work. He guessed it was how normal people felt every day, but since he'd never been sober enough to be a part of the working world in any kind of routine way, it was a new and surprisingly pleasant feeling. He went to work, he did his job making sure the shells were lined up before another machine inserted the shot, and came home to his wife, who was generally a much happier person now that she wasn't working 65 hours a week, especially since she was literally due with his baby any day now.

Jeptha put his mandolin down and watched three deer cautiously nose their way out of the tree line on the next farm over, dusk their preferred time to reveal themselves in search of food. It was growing cold in the shadows where he sat, but Jeptha could still see the sun lighting up the eastern part of the valley. Every part of him—his hands, his lips, his stomach, his mind—craved a beer, but it had been six weeks, the longest he'd ever gone, and he pushed the thought away. Lucy liked him sober and working, and he loved Lucy. So, sober and working he'd be, even if it was a struggle every single minute.

Jeptha looked around for Crystal Gayle. This was usually the time of day when his dog, the best one he'd ever had, nudged her head under his arm and rested her muzzle on his lap. He didn't see her anywhere. She'd taken to hanging out at the bottom of the driveway now that Lucy was so close to her due date, grumpy with concern for her, and he guessed Crystal Gayle was down there.

Just then, brakes squealed on the road. Jeptha heard that high, lonely whelp that dogs make only in the face of a moving car grill. His heart fell into his stomach as he took off running, praying it was some other dog, but knowing it was her, knowing she'd bolted out into the street, thinking she saw Lucy's car. He might have forgiven the driver, knowing how hard it is to see at that time of day, but whoever it was peeled off in a screech of tires and stinky rubber and was over the next hill by the time Jeptha got down to her.

Skinny as he was, and with a haircut so short it suggested a fit military past he didn't actually have, he was out of breath when he got there. He skidded to a stop beside Crystal Gayle's heaving, misshapen body, panting along with her as blood seeped from her nose into a shiny red puddle that slowly soaked into the variegated roadway.

Jeptha knelt down in front of her, knowing from the way her eyes tracked his that it was hopeless. He stroked her head, starting just above her green eyes and going back past her still-alert ears to the top of her neck, trying to soothe her in her moment of bewilderment.

"Hey girl...it's okay, girl," he said. "You're going to be okay."

Jeptha eased one hand under her belly, and the other under her chest, nearly crying as he listened to the whimpers Crystal Gayle made with each movement. He kept talking to her, trying to keep her calm as he struggled up to his knees, her broken body in his arms, and then stood, his left leg faltering under her weight. She cried out then, but didn't make another sound beyond labored panting as Jeptha walked up the driveway, aware of every piece of gravel crunching underneath his feet. He laid her down as gently as he could on a soft piece of earth, carpeted in grass turned soft by last week's rain. It broke Jeptha's heart to watch Crystal Gayle try to nose her injuries. Bested by pain, she gave up and laid her head back down on the ground, her submissive and beseeching eyes turned up to him.

"I'll be right back," he told her.

Jeptha walked over to Deanna's house, just a few hundred yards up from his own. Crystal Gayle had really been his dog, but he felt he ought to tell his brother and sister and see what they wanted to do. Deanna's kids had all loved her too and he figured they'd want to say goodbye. When Deanna came to the door, Jeptha simply said, "I need to talk to you," and walked off the porch to Bobby's house. When he got down the hill, with Bobby in tow behind him struggling into a wife-beater, he saw Deanna standing over Crystal Gayle, her face marked only by an absence of emotion.

"What happened?" she asked.

"Got hit by a car just now," Jeptha said.

"She wasn't never the smartest dog," Bobby said.

"It wasn't her fault," Jeptha said, his voice rising with anger. "She didn't ask to get hit. Some asshole just couldn't see shit and ran her over. Didn't even have the decency to stop."

"Well, what are we supposed to do?" Deanna asked. "I mean, is she gonna die or what?"

"How the hell do I know, Deanna?" Jeptha said, although he did.

"Guess we could take her to the vet," Bobby said.

“I ain’t paying \$500 dollars for some vet to tell me this dog’s gonna die,” Deanna said. “She ain’t gonna make it. Y’all are better off putting her out in the woods and letting her go peacefully.” With that, Deanna walked away.

“Don’t your kids want to say good bye?” Jeptha yelled at her back.

She didn’t even bother turning around. “Nah. I asked ‘em but they said they’s watching something.”

Jeptha shook his head, frustrated with himself for imagining that those kids might be better than their mama. They were mean as snakes, just like Deanna. She had never cared enough about anyone to get involved if it required the tiniest bit of inconvenience to herself. It was a wonder she had ever managed to keep her children alive, given how little regard she had for any life outside of her own. And yet, Jeptha could see them through the window, silhouetted against the light of the television, their faces so fat with McDonalds that their eyes were nearly squeezed shut.

“Well, what do you want to do?” Bobby said. “I’ll take her over to the vet in the mornin’, if you want. Let them put her down.”

“No. I’ll take care of it.”

“You sure?”

“No. But I’ll do it.”

Jeptha watched as Bobby walked back to his trailer, slowly shedding himself of his shirt as he went, so that by the time he mounted the stairs, his corpulent upper body was fully revealed, his shirt crumpled in his hand. The screen door slammed shut behind him, and Jeptha saw the blue light of the TV flicker for a moment as Bobby crossed in front of it before settling himself in his chair.

Alone in the night, Jeptha listened to the cicadas drone around him, their song a low, quiet dirge. He knelt down by Crystal Gayle again, petting her from her nose down to her tail, shushing her quietly and trying to convince her it was going to be okay. She played along, her body relaxing as his hand swept over her in a rough rhythm, but she seemed to know this game was as much for him as it was for her.

Although he had never found himself in this situation before, Jeptha knew the truth of the matter: a real man shoots his own dogs. A real man doesn’t, like Bobby suggested, pay some over-educated, clean-shaven guy, probably a Yankee moved down here for the weather and the hospitality, five hundred dollars to send his dog off into that good night with some namby-pamby concoction of drugs shot through a delicately placed IV. Looking into Crystal Gayle’s eyes, he could see that she knew the truth as well—hidden deep in her wolf-like genes, she knew that the world was violent and

that death, properly delivered, ought to be violent, too. Jeptha thought that dogs, maybe even those pink-bow-wearing lap dogs, felt cheated of the last measure of their long-suppressed feral natures by a drug-induced death. Like his dog, Jeptha would take death at the end of a barrel any day over floating away in a hospital, delirious and confused.

“Okay, girl,” Jeptha said, putting his hands on his knees and pushing himself up. “I’m gonna pick you up now. I’m going to take you up behind my trailer. It’s all going to be okay. You’re not going to be hurtin’ anymore.”

Jeptha carefully picked Crystal Gayle up again and slowly shuffled over to his trailer, stumbling over one of his wife’s sneakers lying in the grass. Lucy had given it to Crystal Gayle in frustration—she thought if the dog had one that was specifically hers, she would stop taking all her others. To Jeptha’s surprise, it had worked. Much as Jeptha knew that Lucy would want to say good-bye, he could not countenance the idea of his dog suffering through the next two hours in excruciating pain while Lucy finished up her shift. Crystal Gayle’s eyes were already beginning to slip backwards in time with the shakes that were racking her body, and her long shaggy coat, the reason for her name, was matted with blood. While Jeptha had been wasting time talking with his siblings, she had begun to hack up a foamy kind of blood, her gums gone pale. It was only a matter of time, Jeptha knew, and he could not wait for Lucy to do what needed to be done.

He gently laid Crystal Gayle down and went into the trailer. He emerged with his pistol in one hand and, in the other, the only dog toy besides Lucy’s shoe that Crystal Gayle had ever had. The squirrel’s stuffing puffed out from a hole in the side, where Crystal Gayle had ripped out the squeaker before she’d had it an hour. He laid the toy and the shoe down beside her nose, and she smelled them briefly before resuming her eye contact with Jeptha. He scratched behind her ears, rubbed down the full length of her body, and stood up.

“Alright, girl. It’s gonna be okay now,” he whispered, as he loaded a bullet into the pistol’s chamber. “You’re gonna be alright now, girl. Yes, you are. I love you, Crystal Gayle. Always will.”

He kept talking nonsense as he crouched down close to her head, the pistol just inches from the spot where her mouth and her ear nearly met towards the back of her head. He took aim, although it was hardly required at such close range. Still, he was determined to do this right, determined to avoid causing his dog any more pain than she already felt. Jeptha took a deep breath. Then he exhaled and squeezed the trigger.

“Goodbye, girl,” he said, tears creeping down his weathered face.

Forty-five minutes later, Jeptha had buried Crystal Gayle, along with her squirrel toy and her shoe, in her favorite spot by the trailer where she could see the whole valley pass before her. He washed his hands, changed his clothes, cleaned his gun, put it up, and made his way to the Minute Market by the highway.

“Hey, Jeptha,” Bill said from behind the counter. “Ain’t seen you in months.”

“Yeah.” Jeptha made his way to the back. He had no more tears. Just a hard-headed desire to be as drunk as possible, as quickly as possible. A row of coolers lined the wall. He pulled open the door in the middle, where the beer was stocked in between Styrofoam containers of night crawlers. It was awfully optimistic to stock bait year-round, but he figured there was some guys who fished every day regardless of their chances of actually getting anything. The upturned dirt in the containers now made him think of the grave he’d just left behind, the dirt still under his fingernails no matter how much he’d scrubbed. Worms just like these would soon be tunneling their way into Crystal Gayle. He straightened his shoulders against the tears that were trying to come back, and grabbed two cases of Old Milwaukee.

“How’s Lucy doing?” Bill asked. The cans clunked against the linoleum countertop.

“She’s all right.” Jeptha withdrew the rubber-banded stack of cards and cash from his back pocket and withdrew a twenty.

“Due any day, ain’t she?”

“Couple days more,” Jeptha said.

“You sure about this?” Bill said, nodding at the beer.

“You want to shut the hell up and sell me this beer, or do I need to go somewheres else?” Jeptha asked. It wasn’t any of Bill’s business what he did. Bill had no idea what Jeptha had just done, how hard it had been. He deserved as many drinks as he could possibly put down.

He pushed the twenty at Bill, who paused for a moment but finally took it with a sigh.

“Tell Lucy I said ‘Good luck.’”

“I will.” Jeptha clenched the cases under his arm and walked out. He threw himself and the beer into the front seat, and ripped open one end of the case. Three beers spilled to the floor. Jeptha swore, knowing he’d forget and spray them all over himself at some point. Still, three beers seemed as good a place to start as any. He grabbed a can from the inside of the pack and popped the top.

The first beer went down so easy, he was halfway through the second before he even realized the first was gone. Jeptha surveyed his body,

pleasantly awed by the buzz that went from fingertip to toes. He reclined his seat slightly, enjoying the comfort of his bucket seats. He drank another. He wished he had his mandolin. His fingers picked at invisible strings and he sang a few bars of “Shady Grove” before grabbing another beer. He checked his phone for the time. A black screen was all he got. Dead. He never remembered to charge it. It didn’t matter anyway. Crystal Gayle was gone. There was no reason to hurry back.

He grabbed another beer. “A road soda,” he said to himself. It was gone before he found the song he wanted to listen to. When he found an old Alan Jackson song that had never failed to make him happy, he cranked it way up. “Way down yonder on the Chattahoochee, it gets hotter than a hoochie coochie,” he sang, laughing his ass off as every time Jackson said hoochie coochie. He felt twelve again, free and the world was hysterical. He pounded two more beers, his months-sober head going straight to hammered. He wanted his mandolin, bad. He wanted to sit on the porch with Crystal Gayle, play some music and wait for Lucy. So, he turned on his car and pointed his wheel towards home.

When he got to his driveway ten minutes later, he realized he couldn’t remember the drive home from the store. There was his father’s old Chevy, still sitting on the blocks the old man hefted it up on so he could spend his Saturdays ignoring his kids and working on a car that Jephtha knew would never run. Suddenly, the car was right in front of him. Jephtha stood on the brakes. His Camaro bumped the rusted body before it stopped. Jephtha hit his head on the steering wheel. All was quiet.

He lifted his head, rubbing the goose egg that was already coming up. The car looked like it was still on the blocks, but it had shifted a few inches off center, seemed like. Jephtha squinted to figure out how bad it was and gave up when he saw two and sometimes three cars in front of him. Besides, what did it matter? His dad was dead and gone, good riddance. In fact, Jephtha was tempted to back up and finish the job. That would show his dad. But he didn’t want to risk denting up his own car, since it was about the only nice thing he owned. He reversed a few inches and shifted to park.

He peered up at his trailer. It was dark. Good, he thought. Lucy was probably already asleep, oblivious to Crystal Gayle’s death. He’d have to tell her tomorrow, but when he was sober. He couldn’t do it like this.

Jephtha saw a flash of white off to the right of the trailer. For a minute, he thought it was Crystal Gayle, toting Lucy’s shoe, her favorite toy, but it was just a rabbit, running off into the woods. If Crystal Gayle was still alive, she’d be standing outside his door, waiting for him to get out of the car, probably giving him that disappointed look. That’d be all right, Jephtha

thought. To be disappointed in someone, you had to expect better in the first place. Crystal Gayle always had.

He could almost feel her chin rubbing on his leg, feel the soft yet wiry hair between her ears, hear the soft harrumphs of her breath through her deep black nose. He wanted to remember her like this, not that broken heap she had been a few hours before. Even though he knew he'd done the right thing, he couldn't rid himself of that look in Crystal Gayle's eyes just before he pulled the trigger—having begged him to deliver her death, she seemed to rebuke him there at the last second for having come to terms with the decision so quickly, as if her last thought was dismay that she should be so easy to dismiss. Even in his drunken haze, Jeptha knew he was exaggerating, probably giving the damn dog feelings she'd never had a day in her life, but still. Her eyes haunted him.

He grabbed another beer, trying to force them from his mind.

"If you were here, girl, it'd be just like old times. Just you. And me. And the mandolin."

Jeptha straightened up, thinking of his mandolin. That's what he needed. He'd play a dirge for Crystal Gayle, say good bye to her the old way.

"I'ma get it," Jeptha said, talking to her, like that would bring her back. "Play us some music."

He moved his feet and tried to rise out of the seat. The ground tilted underneath him and he fell back hard, popping a rib on the steering wheel and his wrist on the gearshift.

"Aw, fuck. CG, I'm drunk," he said, and nearly fell out laughing with sheer joy at the feeling. He lay his head back against the seat and pulled his legs back into the car. "I'm gonna get us that mandolin. Just gonna finish this beer here, and rest my eyes for a minute."

Jeptha could almost feel Crystal Gayle nuzzling her nose under his hand. He tried to get his fingers to move enough to pat her nose, but he wasn't sure if they were obeying his brain. He mumbled something about resting his eyes again and then surrendered to sleep and dreams where his dog sat beside him, ears alert, full of love, fully alive.

"Jeptha? Hey, Jeptha! Are you okay?"

Jeptha's eyes opened and he immediately closed them again against the sunshine. Where was he? Who was talking to him? He opened his eyes just slightly again, and saw an image of Lucy, fuzzy against the morning sun. His head echoed with her voice, the pain shooting off his skull like a bullet off a tree. He groaned.

“You aren’t dead, then,” Lucy said. “In that case, I’m going to work.”

“Wait,” Jeptha said, his voice barely loud enough for him to hear it. He coughed and straightened up in the seat. “Wait.” He opened his eyes wide enough to see Lucy stalking towards her car, as fast as her belly would allow her to go. He lurched to standing. A wave of nausea hit him so fiercely that his knees buckled, and he gripped the doorframe to keep from falling. He swallowed, thinking he’d beat it down, but no. Over the sound of his vomiting, he heard Lucy slam her door. He straightened up as much as he could and ran crookedly, still bent in half, over to her car. She started the engine and looked between the seats to back out.

“Lucy! I’m sorry. Wait.”

She shook her head at him. Jeptha saw tears in her eyes before he jumped out of the way of her front bumper. “Lucy, please. I’m sorry.”

The car bumped down the incline for twenty feet, and then stopped. Jeptha ran to her door. “I’m so sorry. I fell asleep in the car.”

“Yeah. Fell asleep. That’s what we’re calling it.”

Jeptha didn’t know what to say. His head hurt like never before. He couldn’t think. And there was something weighing on him, something he needed to tell Lucy. Crystal Gayle. He suddenly remembered. He stumbled back from her car.

Lucy shook her head, her voice quiet. “What happened, Jeptha? You were doing so good. We were good.”

“Crystal Gaye...” he whispered, leaning his head on his arm at the top of the car. He wasn’t strong enough to look Lucy in the eye.

“Yeah, where is she? I called for her last night for ten minutes and nothing,” Lucy said.

“She’s... she’s gone,” Jeptha mumbled into the fabric of his shirt.

“Gone?”

“She got hit by a car last night. She was dying. I had to...” Jeptha stopped. He gave into the sobs. “I had t-to sh-shoot her.”

“Oh, Jeptha,” Lucy said. He felt the car door ease open and moved out the way. She slipped her arms around him and he leaned fully into her, until they both fell against the car.

“I’m sorry,” she said into his chest. “I’m so sorry.”

They stayed like that for two minutes, until finally Jeptha pulled away.

“I’m sorry,” he said, hesitating. “For this. For me. For drinking. I didn’t know what else to do.” He could see now that there was nothing steady, boring, routine or stable about falling into a case of beer and getting so drunk he passed out in his car. That was something Old Jeptha would do.

“I’ll call Cody and tell him you can’t come to work today. You’re already late. And you can’t go. Not like this.”

Jeptha shook his head and looked up at the sky. Clouds flitted overhead, and a hawk flew by in search of an unsuspecting mouse. He watched the hawk for a moment more, envious of the freedom flying above his head: freedom from his blinding headache, from his dead dog, from his disappointed wife, from having proved once more the kind of fuck-up he could be. The bird flew out of sight.

He looked back down at Lucy. “I’m sorry. I don’t know what happened.”

“It’s ok. I’m sorry about Crystal Gayle. I loved her too.” She waited for a moment and then checked her phone. “I’m going to be late if I don’t get going. You ok today?”

“I’ll be all right. You go on,” he said. Jeptha’s stomach curdled as he watched Lucy pull out onto the road. He clamped his arms around it, trying to stem the involuntary lurch that he knew was coming. Then he let his hands drop to his sides—he’d lost his dog and screwed up, disappointing both himself and his wife. He deserved to be throwing up in a bush.

After, Jeptha walked heavily up the stairs to the trailer, his phone in his hand. His brain and his legs weren’t communicating well, and he walked like a baby, recreating the process with each step.

He saw his charger snaking across the kitchen counter and plugged in his phone. While he waited for it to come back to life, he grabbed a carton of orange juice out of the fridge. After a quick, guilty look out the window, he slurped directly from the cardboard, groaning with joy as the cold juice sizzled against his parched throat, sledging through the taste of old beer and vomit that coated his tongue. He longed for the numbness of the prior night, when he’d been able to forget what he’d lost.

He put the orange juice back in the refrigerator. Behind the milk, he spied a sole longneck Coors, and his body ached for it. The hair of the dog; it had been a while since he’d been forced to endure it, but now he remembered it like it was something he’d been missing. He closed the door so he wouldn’t have to see the bottle. He should call Cody. He checked his phone. Still dead.

He opened the fridge again, this time for food, but there was nothing that looked good. He dug through the furthest kitchen drawer for Tylenol. He had to open the fridge again for more juice. The bottle of beer was bathed in light, the condensation on its sides illuminated like in a commercial. He shut the door. His phone pinged, back from the dead.

He had five messages, all from Lucy, her concern growing stronger and angrier with each progressive message. He deleted them all after he

heard the first few words. Jeptha looked at the time. He was due at work two hours ago. He owed Cody a phone call but, as he dialed the numbers, Jeptha prayed his friend wouldn't hear his phone on the plant floor.

"What?" Cody answered.

"Uh, hey. It's me. Um, Jeptha."

"I got caller ID. I know who it is."

"I'm sorry I couldn't be there today, man."

"Whatever."

"I am. Really."

"Whatever. It's one day. You just can't do it again. Tom don't give many chances."

"I know," Jeptha said. "It won't happen again. It was Crystal Gayle. She got hit last night. I had to put her out of her misery."

"Oh man. I'm sorry. She was a good dog."

"She was."

"You should have called me..."

"Phone was dead. And I was too busy drinking myself to death."

"Jeptha..."

"I know. Can't believe I did it either."

"Be careful, man."

"I will. I'll see you tomorrow."

His throat felt tight and his eyes stung. For want of anything better to do, he opened the fridge, staring at the contents like a death-row inmate at a woman. His eyes rested on the beer. He'd promised Cody and Lucy that last night was a mistake. He wanted it to be. He wanted to go back to that moment on the porch just before Crystal Gayle died. He'd been content, he now realized. That's what that feeling was. He didn't want to be a drunk for his wife, for his kid. He looked down at his jeans, hay snaking up the legs and flecks of vomit splashed up around his ankles. He didn't want to be this man, not anymore. Jeptha pawed the tears off his face. He pulled his hand away and watched the fingers jitter across the air, his body aching for another drink. Just beyond his hand, the beer sweated. He didn't want to be like this, but all he could see were Crystal Gayle's eyes, haunting him. A tear dropped to his dusty shoes. He made to straighten up, to shut the refrigerator door. But his hand closed around the neck of the beer, the glass clinking against a jar of pickles as his hand shook. He sat down in the recliner and opened the beer. He didn't want to be this kind of man anymore. But he didn't know how to be any other kind.

PHILL PROVANCE

Triangle

It doesn't matter—
love, right,
Bermuda—

as Plato reminds us
it exists nowhere
but in thought.

But how graceful
its stark, black lines
traced with a ruler

on flat-white paper,
how nice to see
the contrast

tidy, defined
sharp as a pair
of pruning shears.

And how the numbers'
buzzy infinity
breaks against its sine

its tangent, radials and pi,
unknowable inside
unknowable

as God
become a slice
by which coordinates

and degree combine
into a trinket box
with an edge

as sheer as night.

GREG RAPPLEYE

Winter Flounder

Pleuronectes americanus, Biddeford Pool, February 11, 1924

Ungloved to rig. Ten feet of leader, swivel,
dropper line to a pyramid sinker, hook
muscled through a chunk of cut squid—
awkward the toss-out as a tide begins to run.
Let the milky bait drift. When the squid
grows tattered, give tatters to the sea.
Blackberries plucked from bramble
cane, mashed, juiced, razzled in brandy
and pressed through cheesecloth,
cool in a Ball jar, as scallop boats
chortle through the long afternoon.
The wind grows colder. The sun thumbs
nickels at your eyes. Lower your cap
and turn aside. You want a flounder—
pat-a-cake flat and goggle-eyes up,
its sidelong mouth, its dumbfounded look
if caught, inexplicable as your rent-book,
with its spidery juggles and sub-totals.
Your line is too long. Could it be your bait
has wandered away on shamle-toes
where the river twists across the estuary?
A mess of sculpins, unwanted, lie gasping
at your feet, while the sea stars, purple
as the lung-starved bodies of the drowned,
clamp fast to the weedy rocks. No scallop boats
now. You flop back, fan a flatted angel
into the cold sand, rise, and reel again.

DUNCAN SMITH

Fallout

When Lewis Campbell proposed to her over *WKRY*, Penny grabbed her phone and what was left of Sunday's ham and went straight to the fallout shelter. She forgot to lock the door. She didn't check the stove. Penny didn't even stop to think until she was sitting on the shelter's cot with the ham in her lap and her feet on the floor. Then she began to wonder when it was exactly that the news stopped being background for supper and became something you had to worry about.

It was during Kennedy. Walter Cronkite dropped the threat of nuclear war right on her front doorstep. While the Russians were shipping missiles to Cuba, she and everyone else started fretting about when they would get hit—not if, when. The way thinking went back then was that after Washington and New York, Fayetteville was going to be hit next. The giant military base at Fort Bragg was all around Fayetteville, and sitting on her front porch on a summer afternoon, Penny often couldn't tell whether it was thunder from a coming storm or artillery practice at Bragg.

While their boys were at school ducking and covering, Penny and Frank were pouring over shelter plans trying to find one they could afford to build and that would have first strike survivability. When they started construction, it was just like Eisenhower said. The first casualty of any battle is the battle plan. Seems that all of the plans they had looked at assumed you lived in a place that supported basements. If water had been oil, they would have given Jed Clampett a run for Mr. Drysdale's attention.

So instead of digging down, they built up. They built a double-walled cinder block house—a room, really—and filled the gap between the walls with dirt. If there was one thing a farm in North Carolina had it was an abundance of dirt. Then they pushed more dirt all around the walls until it was thick enough to keep the Geiger counter from going off.

A year or two later when she went with her son Robbie on his 4th grade field trip to the Town Creek Indian Mound, the child took one look at it and yelled at the top of his lungs "Look they had a fallout shelter too!" When Steven came home from State after his freshman year, he told them that they almost had a perfect replica of a hobbit house. All that was missing was two round windows and a round green door. Later, after both boys were off living their own lives, she ran across an old *Sunset* magazine that was

touting berm as the future of housing. Penny just looked out her kitchen window and thought—there it sits. The house of the future ahead of its time and that first million dollars missed.

She reached over, turned on the portable AM radio and tuned it to *WKRY*. Now a days different things were going to kill us. The bird-flu pandemic, climate change, a cyber-attack that shut down the power grid and turned off Wall Street, a dirty bomb—as though there was such a thing as a clean one. So much of what she had hoped and had feared in her life had gone the way of last year’s FCX calendar and nuclear winter.

“Oh Lewis! Why did you have to wait until I was used to being alone.”

MARIA SEBASTIAN

I Heard a Woman

the next caller waited long to get through
if she were her war-torn flag
charred stars would scatter unmarked

I heard a woman whose anguish blazed
red in her throat like a roadside flare
a wailing soon wordless

more music than message
a worry so weary
no setting or dial could silence it

I heard a woman whose plea proved to me
even instrumentals bring listeners to tears
even blank faces even from here

CLAIRE SCOTT

An Old Woman in a Dry Season

—after T.S. Eliot

An old woman in a dry season
 wandering worrying
waiting for rain
 where is the wisdom promised
where is the juice & joy

to moisten my sterile soul
 today Carlota brought me home
guiding my elbow, checking to be
 sure the stove was off, the windows locked
plenty of towels & toilet paper

who cares
 I no longer cook
only dry cereal in expired boxes
 only bits of cheese and stale crackers

no toast nibbled at the morning table
 while doing the daily crossword

quick to find:
 jumpy little bugger: flea
 wool source: llama

now my mind refuses
 bit of muesli: blank
 monk's home: blank

I live on dog-eared memories
 stained scrapbooks
with withered spines
 the present wrapped in

a shroud of the past
 which is slowly but surely
becoming the shroud of the future
 my future
& still no rain

ALLEN SMITH

Missing

I miss the waves lifting me like a shell,
the undercurrent tickling my feet
as I stood suddenly, anticipating
a good wave to ride in.

Mom would come out past the waves' breaking point
and we'd show off what we learned
from her synchronized swimming days,
a high kick here while floating on our backs,
a high kick there.

Dad would never swim,
just walk the shore in the bathing suit
he wore only to the beach.
He'd walk in his feet.

I miss my feet,
walking as far as he and I would,
though rarely together.

I miss my father.

RACHEL SOBYLYA

Lenin

Early morning, Moscow rain in July,
and we huddle for warmth as we wait in line.
Back in Tennessee, my high school history teacher told us
the Communist was encased in a mausoleum,
the revolutionary eternally unburied.

I was a long way from my high school self,
married to a Russian man,
standing with a new family,
listening to their mutterings of decision making,
catching bits of words, pieces of sound
that hold no meaning for me.

We enter, sheltered from rain, finally.
The guards shush the elderly lady ahead of us
as we shuffle down a dim hallway, small set of stairs,
until we arrive at his resting room.

The harsh light above yellows his sallow cheeks,
glistens his forehead, shadows his goatee.
His fingers curl into each other,
gentle fists, as if ready to rise
again, to remind of the first redemption,
eternally, fitfully resting in wait.

JOHN THOMSON

The Forgiven

In the middle of my grief, I moved back into the home in which I'd been raised. For years after I'd inherited the place from my parents, I'd maintained the little stucco house on Grant Street as a rental. Not once had I ever considered returning there to live.

My hope was to restore myself within the space where I began my life. A retreat into the surroundings of my early and innocent years might fill me with the security and buoyancy I'd felt as a kid, and help me overcome the self-destructive mourning of my wife's death. Living again inside the old walls and letting in the ghosts of friendly neighborhood characters would summon my past to conquer my present. My life could be reborn.

Those close to me warned such a move might make matters worse, that it would create an emotional alchemy sure to add to my mental frailness, which had begun to worry some of them. In the beginning I'd dismissed their concerns, until I started having the hallucinations.

The first was in the backyard. Though the house in which I was raised is small, it has a large lot behind it, nearly half an acre, where my mother had magnificent gardens and raised parakeets to sell at local pet shops. There are artifacts of her aviaries out there, rotted planks lying on the ground in disjointed rectangles, coils of rusted wire and shards of plastic from water dispensers and feeders. Somewhere nearby are the gravesites of our pets, the last being our beloved dachshund, Trudy.

Late one evening I'd gone out and stood among those ruins. Then I heard my mother calling out in the distance. "Get that wheelbarrow over to the compost pile, Eddie!" she'd yelled. Her voice seemed too real to be imagined, and my ensuing feelings of obedience too strong to be responding to an illusion. But there was no wheelbarrow. No compost pile. No garden. No mother.

And then, very early the next morning, I lay in bed and heard Mom's parakeets in the backyard and my parents talking in the kitchen. Mom and Dad spoke in a kind of contented murmur, as if they were entirely pleased with their lives, even though in the eyes of the world they were so meager: a man and woman having one child later in life, my mother in her late thirties, Dad nearly fifty and working as a security guard at a shopping mall. Their

voices grew louder. I climbed out of bed and ran into the tiny kitchen and saw they weren't there. I dressed and went outside. Then I heard Mom and Dad in the corner of the garage near where they used to hide my Christmas presents. I pursued their voices and peered up at the shelf where Dad had once stashed a red-ball-shooting *Tyrannosaurus rex* I'd pleaded for when I was nine. But there was no plastic dinosaur. No mother. No father.

I stayed in the garage, still delirious from what I thought I'd heard and seen. Then I turned my attention to the irritating roar of a leaf-blower coming from across the street, and I was fully freed from my illusions.

I marched to the edge of the lawn and stood there with my hands perched at my waist, my chin jutting out as if I were about to use it to break down a door. The operator of the blower was a tall, spidery man in baggy, dirty jeans. He wore a scarf over his face, like a stagecoach bandit in a TV western. He had on a San Diego Padres baseball cap, pulled so low and tight on his head his large ears flared, seeming freakish, unreal. He appeared to be close to my age.

He swept his blower down the walkway of what was once the home of Mr. and Mrs. Coulee, now occupied by an aloof young couple I'd rarely seen. The leaf-blower man's truck was parked in the driveway. "Danny's Yard Service" was crudely stenciled on the pickup's doors. The truck's bed was full of lawn mowers and weed whackers and small chainsaws and a bright orange water dispenser. As I watched the man, I remembered how the old Coulee house had always been a source of distress for me as a boy. Mr. Coulee, long dead now, was a retired Naval officer, and an unrepentant racist. He'd been banished from our home after one of his bigoted tirades about Martin Luther King over a game of Canasta. He used to patrol his front yard like a prison guard, especially when I was playing catch in the street with one of my friends. These reflections made me hesitant to approach.

But I walked beyond the curb and stood close to the middle of the street. Finally the man turned off his leaf-blower and began to take long, awkward strides back to his pickup.

"Hey," I shouted. "Do you know what time it is?"

He pulled down his scarf and looked at me.

"Sorry," he said. "Is it too early?"

"Yes. It's too early." I tapped the top of my wristwatch with two fingers. "It's not even seven yet, for heaven's sake."

"All right," he said. "Like I said, I'm sorry. It's just that it's going to be a real scorcher today and I needed to get going early, that's all."

His voice was beleaguered by a kind of slowness, as if each word he used had to be pressed through a very tight space. He kept looking at me

after he spoke. It seemed he suspected I was judging him in some way. It was when he looked at me like this that I realized I knew him.

This was Danny Everett. In school we'd called him Danny Dumbo, or was it Dumbo Danny? The ruthless name was derived from Danny's giant, floppy ears (like the Disney elephant), as well as his doltishness. He was in my fifth and sixth grade class at Johnson Elementary, until he was placed in special education in Junior High School, and then I would see very little of him. Still, the time I did know Danny, the experiences I'd witnessed surrounding him had left an indelible mark on my conscience. He had been brutally bullied, the worst being once after school when he was forced to escape into the limbs of a pepper tree after having one of his giant ears almost yanked from his head by a flat-faced, demon-boy named Bobby Petty. Once in the tree, Danny was pummeled with a barrage of rocks. I remember how Danny clung and slithered like a sloth up the branches until the fourth grade teacher, Mrs. Elliot, came streaking out of her classroom to disperse the pack of kids and help Danny down from the tree.

Yes, I remembered him. But I didn't want to tell him I remembered him, so that morning I said nothing more to Danny and let him finish his yard work at the old Coulee house. Instead I went back inside and watched Danny from the window. I marveled at how he'd been able to survive all the cruelty shown him during his childhood, and how he worked now at trimming hedges and mowing grass and pulling weeds from cracks in the sidewalk as if these efforts had as much purpose and worth as anything anyone else in the world had done, including me.

In the days following, I began to look for Danny across the street. I thought more about that time outside the school playground when Danny had been driven into the limbs of the pepper tree, and how kids, even some girls, had thrown stones at him. One morning I walked over to Johnson Elementary to see if the tree was still there.

The school is only a block away from my old house. I hadn't stepped foot onto the grounds in at least 25 years. It's no longer an elementary school, but rather some sort of special learning academy. Still, it looked the same, with a sprawling dirt playground behind the classrooms and corridors, which had seemed so vast to me as a child. And there, in a corner and near the street, was the pepper tree into which Danny had tried to escape. I went to the tree and stood beneath it. It was taller and its limbs had grown more twisted and gnarly. I tried to remember which branch Danny had clung to when the rocks were being hurled at him, but I couldn't. Then I tried to climb the tree myself, but was only able to reach a limb no more than a few

feet up. I sat there until a woman came out of one of the classrooms. She looked a lot like Mrs. Elliot, the fourth grade teacher who'd ended Danny's brutal bullying. She walked toward me but stopped at what she must have considered a safe distance. She rested her hands on her waist and stared at me, seeming unsure about what to do or say. Then I slid down from the limb and walked swiftly home, wondering if this woman was yet another delusion.

The next day Danny came back. He arrived later than before. I was on the porch when he drove up. I watched him get out and unload a lawn mower and edger. Just after he did this he went back to the cab of his truck and sat on the passenger side and left the door open. He stayed there for a while. He drank coffee from a thermos and ate a glazed donut.

I'd decided earlier to talk to Danny if I saw him again. I'd tell him I remembered him from school. But the longer I watched him do his yard work across the street, the more apprehensive I became. Then, just after he'd finished cutting the grass, he pushed his mower off to the side and approached me.

He stood in the middle of my house's lawn. He looked into my eyes. My place on the porch was completely illuminated by the morning sun. I felt as if I were under a spotlight.

"Can I ask you something?" he said.

"All right," I said. "Go ahead."

"Aren't you Eddie Timmons?"

I stood.

"I am," I said. "And you're Danny Everett."

"That's me," he said. "You used to live in this house when you were a kid, didn't you?"

"I did."

"So did you move back –I mean, are you living here now?"

"Yes."

"So why'd you come back?"

"It's a long story."

"Is it because of your wife?"

With all of the illusions I'd had, with all of the doubts about my sanity, I had to wonder if the words Danny just spoke were real –if he was real. How could he possibly have known about Jenny?

He kept staring. He realized what he'd said had shaken me.

"How do you know that?" I asked.

He shrugged, and glanced back at the Coulee's yard. "I need to get back to work," he said. "I've got to trim that oleander." He pointed to the

large shrub next to the driveway. “I hate those things. They can send them all back to Australia as far as I’m concerned. They’re weeds. Australian weeds.”

“No,” I said. “Wait a minute. Tell me how it is you know about my wife. Just tell me!”

He had turned to make his way to the bush. Then he stopped. He seemed unaware he was in the middle of the street.

“I read it in the paper. That’s all.”

“You read what? Her obituary?”

“Yeah. I read her obituary. Look, I’ve got to get back to work. These people here, well, they don’t cut me any slack. If I don’t keep their yard looking perfect they’ll fire me.”

He hurried to his truck. In what seemed like an instant he’d fired up some electric pruning shears and began cutting on the oleander. I left the porch and went to the middle of the street and stood in the same place he had stood. His answer wasn’t enough for me. Yes, her obituary had been in the paper, but I sensed Danny had somehow been able to see deeper into my life, even beyond Jenny’s death: he knew about my 35 years of a childless marriage, my mediocre career, the encumbrance of being the only child of older parents. He knew about Jenny’s cancer –how it’d suddenly poured like acid rain into our lives and how I watched the only person who’d really understood me wither and suffer; he knew of the splendid life Jenny and I had together, even in the absence of children. He knew how intoxicating her beauty had been to me: how her voice, her laugh, her intelligence and her compassion gave me an undeserved sense of worth and purpose. Danny Everett, that poor, tortured, bullied, big-eared and daft kid, saw everything that’d made me flee into the past and struggle with what was real and what was not.

I stayed in the middle of the street. I watched Danny prune back the oleander. When he was finished, he went to his knees and began to pull weeds from the cracks in the walkway. He moved up the concrete, stooping and then kneeling to jerk out the plants until he came to the steps of the porch. Then he sat there and put his hands on his knees. He took off his hat and swiped sweat from his forehead. He looked up at me and shouted: “I know about all of you,” he said.

I moved closer.

“What?”

“I know about all of your lives.”

“Whose lives, Danny?”

“All of you.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean what I just said. I know about all of you.”

I became afraid. I remembered Danny in school, how he was thought to be not only stupid and freakish, but crazy, unpredictable, dangerous, though I'd never witnessed any evidence for this.

“But it's all right,” he said. “There's nothing bad about it.”

“Nothing bad about what, Danny?”

He didn't answer. He put his hat back on, pressing it down until his ears flared out even more than before.

I started to walk towards him, but stopped and watched as he packed his tools and backed his truck out of the driveway. He pulled alongside me and stopped and rolled down his window. This was the closest I'd been to him. Somehow his face appeared as I remembered it as a kid, and as he squinted and looked at me I saw the Danny Everett who'd been bullied and savaged those years I knew him in school.

“I keep track,” he said. “That's all.”

“Keep track of what, Danny?”

“What happens to people.”

“What people?”

“People I've known...like you, Eddie.”

He drove off. I stayed in the middle of the street until a car forced me back to the sidewalk. I sat on the curb, near an ash tree that'd been at the edge of my parents' lawn for as long as I remember. There are pictures of me standing in front of the tree when I was very small. In one of the pictures I'm wearing only swimming trunks and am holding a garden hose up to my mouth, the water flowing down my chin and chest.

I wanted to go back to that sensational moment, so I got up from the curb and stood in what I thought was the same spot where the picture was taken. I took off my shoes, my shirt and pants, and stood only in my underwear, my ersatz swimming trunks. I looked out across the lawn and imagined my father there with the camera. I stayed on the grass until I was moved by the piercing stare of a young woman pushing a stroller on the other side of the street. Her silent indignation and shock prompted me to put my clothes back on and go inside, and there I stood at the window and watched the woman disappear down the block.

I remained in the house until early afternoon. I sat on the floor in what was once my parents' bedroom, the room where I was probably conceived. For a long time I hoped for another hallucination, but nothing happened. They were not here. None of them.

I returned to the front yard. I looked over at the Coulee house and thought about what Danny had said: "I know about all of you. I keep track." Then I started out toward Johnson Elementary again to the pepper tree where Danny had been stoned. When I reached the tree, I stood in the spot I'd stood so long ago.

I tried to remember the others who were there: Bobby Petty, Timmy Brown, Jerry Nicks, Toby Diskin, Stella Hornsby.

They were kids I knew mostly from that scene, because they were the ones who'd thrown the most rocks, and thrown them the hardest. But I was there too. Me. Eddie Timmons. And I had done what they had done.

Now I felt the stone in my palm. The cold, rough hardness. I remembered my throw, how it'd missed Danny and hit the branch he'd clung to. I remembered how, after the stone had fallen to the ground, I'd wondered if I'd missed Danny on purpose, but I didn't know. After all these years, I still do not.

I went up to the trunk of the tree and put my face against it. I prayed I could travel back in time to that day and rescue Danny, instead of being one of those who'd hurt and tormented him. I slipped into a deep, crazed kind of yearning. When I finally opened my eyes I knew there was nothing I could do to change what'd happened that day, just as I knew I could never bring Jenny back from the dead.

When Danny returned, I felt more at ease about talking to him about the things he'd said.

He came back very early in the morning. This time he didn't start up his leaf-blower. Instead he pulled weeds along the side of the Coulee place, again crawling on the ground from one weed to another, stopping once in a while to watch and listen to birds on the telephone wires. When he was finished with this, he returned to his truck. As before, he sat on the passenger side with the door open and drank coffee from his thermos and ate a donut. It was then when I crossed the street and went over to him. It was the first time I'd set foot on the Coulee property since I'd discretely retrieved an errant baseball there a generation ago.

Just as I came around the rear of his truck, Danny stood and faced me, holding his half-eaten donut, and smiling.

"Hey, Eddie. Good morning," he said.

"Good morning, Danny."

"I'm not making too much noise, am I?"

"No. You're not making too much noise. You've been very quiet. I appreciate that."

“Good. That’s good.”

He took a bite of his donut. It was a berry-filled. Some of the red filling clung to the corner of his mouth.

“So, Danny, I need to ask you something.”

“Okay. Sure.”

“The last time you were here, you said you knew all about us, that you keep track. Who were you talking about?”

He adjusted his cap and looked around the Coulee’s yard, as if he were trying to find an excuse to end our conversation, just as he’d done before with the oleander.

“All right,” he said. “It’s the kids who used to bully me, especially the ones who chased me up into a tree one day, because, well, that was the worst of it.”

“So you keep track of our lives?”

“Yeah. But it’s not like I follow you around and spy on you. I just look for news in the paper, that’s all. Like, I know that Bobby Petty was killed in a motorcycle accident, that Toby Diskin is the president of some big computer company, that Stella Hornsby is a city councilwoman, and I know about how your wife died of cancer, and...”

“All right, Danny. I understand.”

“That’s good,” he said.

He took the last bite of his donut and shut the door of his truck. “I have to get back to work here,” he said.

“All right, but I need to ask you something else.”

He stood still and waited for me to speak.

“Do you keep track of our lives in hopes that bad things happen to us?” I asked. “Because of what we did to you?”

Once again he looked behind him to the Coulee house, to where he’d been crawling on the ground and pulling weeds. For the first time since I’d encountered him, his face was stern, reluctant. But then, after he’d turned back to face me, his expression softened. He removed his hat and raked his fingers through his hair. His lips stretched into a weak smile.

“No. It’s not that, Eddie.”

“So what is it?”

“I just like knowing that there’s more.”

“More what?”

“More things about people, that a person’s life isn’t just about one bad thing they did, but that it’s about a whole bunch of things put together. Good and bad. That’s all, Eddie.”

He put his hat back on. It pushed his ears out from his head, and it seemed he was trying to amuse me with this, though I knew he wasn't. We stared at each other for a few moments. Again I marveled at Danny's tolerance of what'd happened to him, his forgiveness of it.

"All right, Danny," I said. "But I'm sorry. I'm sorry for what I did that day."

He nodded, but didn't speak. He went around to the back of his truck and pulled out a lawn edger. He started the edger and began to use it on the grass along the walkway leading to the Coulee's front door. While he worked, I made my way across the street to my porch. I sat there and watched as Danny mowed the lawn and trimmed hedges and used his leaf-blower to clean up the mess he'd made.

In the weeks after, I continued to look for Danny across the street. After a while I was able to figure out his schedule. I didn't say much to him whenever I saw him. We'd talk only briefly about simple things, except one day when I went over to him while he drank his coffee and ate his donut.

It was a clear and cold morning. I could see my breath. Danny sat in the cab of his pickup as he always did. He cupped his hands around his coffee mug and searched the telephone wires for birds. He saw me approach, but he didn't move. He'd gotten used to me showing up every once in a while as he worked, and it seemed he'd begun to enjoy my company.

"Hey, Eddie," he said.

"Hey, Danny. It's cold this morning."

"Winter's coming," he said.

I leaned against the fender of his truck. I crossed my arms and ankles and looked up the street. I realized at that moment that I'd never known where Danny had lived when we were in school together, or anything about his family. And so, on that morning I asked him these things and he told me.

He said he'd been adopted and had lived on a street behind the Little League field, in a neighborhood where I used to deliver newspapers. When he told me this, I remembered those times, how I'd get up before school, make strong instant coffee, and then take off in the cool dark of morning with a flashlight mounted on my heavy duty Schwinn bike to do my route. I'd be afraid at first, worried that burglars or mean dogs would spring from the dim alleys, but as I rode on and tossed my papers onto porches, the fear would leave me. I remembered how free and alive I'd felt, gliding down the middle of the street, pushing my pedals and carrying the weight of my papers forward, creating a cool breeze against my face. Sometimes I'd

imagine myself traveling safely between the stars in space, looking down at the sleeping world and seeing things no one else could see.

I shared this with Danny. Then he told me he used to hear the thud of my paper near the front door, and he'd get up and look out his bedroom window and see the figure of a kid riding up the street, and how he didn't know it was me. He said he would stay at the window and watch as my light cut a hole through the darkness.

MATTHEW J. SPIRENG

These Geese

A cool August evening and a small flock
of Canada geese—nine, to be exact—
appeared from over the treeline flying

in a vee due north when, over the cornfield
recently picked, suddenly one after
another rose up in a strange brief flourish,

like marchers breaking stride to start a jig
so quick one might miss it before they settled
back in the line of march. Until then,

they'd always seemed birds that were all business,
flying in order on their missions, no time
to show off, no time for stunts in the air.

But these geese were different, perhaps because
it was August and there was no rush to
go anywhere, or perhaps for no reason

we could know, so one after another
they ascended
into fancy before returning to form.

BONNIE STANARD

The Sensuals of Living in the South

In late August
a dusty vapor loiters
above the millet field
where pigweeds tower
above the withered pearls.

In the shade of turkey oaks
benumbed bullises
fatten and drop from vines,
drunken bees pitch and wobble
in pursuit of overripe fruit.

Crabgrass wilts to a fevered
brown and collapses on the ground.
Noontime swelters
by degrees up the thermometer,
a worm track of mercury
that inches in the afternoon
to a hundred and two.

The crop's cooked,
the cash has run dry,
the pond's down,
and the cow bellows
in the bottomland.
It hasn't rained
for forty days
and we won't
see a cool ninety
until September.

Lightning Crack, Thunder Roll

Bitty weren't three years old when her daddy up and left.

Her mama sat at the eating table, lace-edged handkerchief held to her mouth. Her eyes were squinched shut and her face was wet, and she rocked back and forth against the aged and dingy wood, hitting it in time to the thunder rolling outside, rock, thump, boom, every cycle punctuated by a ragged sob.

"What're we gonna do now?" she cried.

"Hush your caterwauling," Bitty's grandma said. She stood in front of the ancient stove, shifting gristled meat and stringy vegetables together in a massive ceramic pot. Her face was pinched and mean, like a carved apple left too long in the sun, and her shoulders slumped under the thin cotton of her homespun dress. "Joe was just a man, and a bad seed at that. Hung out with the wrong folk, he did, and in and out of the sort of trouble a God-fearing woman ought to avoid, especially one bearing enough trouble of her own making."

The hanky receded from Mama's mouth a hair. "I was happy with Joe."

"Pshaw."

"He worked hard and brung in enough to feed us."

"And not a nickel more," Grandma said, real firm. "Good riddance, I say. You're young yet, and pretty. Even with the babe, you'll find another soon enough."

"I don't want another man," Mama wailed, and off she went, sobbing her sorrow into the hanky.

Bitty sat on an old, ragged quilt in the middle of the floor, atop a charred spot burned into the unfinished wood floor behind the worn settee, over which another, less ragged crazy quilt was thrown. The conversation was lost under the crack of lightning and the roll of thunder, and she liked it that way, liked it when the sharp forks of words and bitterness washed by her without leaving a mark.

She weren't three yet, but she knew. She knew how hard the world was, and when she needed proof, all she had to do was look to the bruise gracing one cheek of the woman that had borned her.

Grandma glanced over her shoulder and speared Bitty with her gaze, and her tongue clucked against the roof of her mouth. "Well, he got what he deserved. Shoulda known better, shouldn't he?"

Mama's watery eyes strayed to Bitty, then she was across the room and on her knees, holding Bitty to her chest like she was lost and Bitty was her only salvation. "What're we gonna do, Bitty?" she whispered. "What're we gonna do now?"

In the distance, lightning popped a tree, and the creak of flesh splitting in two drifted to the house, mingling in Bitty's memory with the salt of her mama's tears on her tongue.

* * *

Folks came around bearing condolences and a small amount of food, trickling in and out of the house like ants scurrying along a Sunday picnic. The preacher and his wife came first, him with Bible and hellfire in hand, her carrying a roast hen, then some family from down in Caney Fork, and more from Speedwell, and finally, Mr. Gibson, the foreman at the factory in Toxaway where Daddy worked, brought his wife and a platter full of glazed ham.

Bitty wondered why all those people came traipsing through, and while Mama forced a smile through the sad gathered on her face, she went all stiff when Mrs. Gibson offered up the sparest of kind words and Mr. Gibson told her that if they needed anything, anything at all, Mama should send word straight to him at the plant.

"You or that pretty child either one, you hear?" Mr. Gibson said, and his wife's hands pinched into claws around the platter she held.

Mama took Bitty to church right regular, even though Bitty was borned on the wrong side of the blanket and everybody from Tanasee Creek down to Tuckasegee knew it, and knew, too, that the situation was rectified a year later. She dressed Bitty in tiny frocks cut from her own worn out clothes, made new with even hand stitching and the teeniest hint of tatted lace along the hems.

"My little angel," Mama said every Sunday morning, then she held Bitty's hand and together they walked down the hard-packed dirt road to the one-room church gracing a verdant slope overlooking the steep, narrow valley carved out of the mountains by Wolf Creek.

Mama's eyes drooped under her Sunday best hat, the one with the fake peonies pinned in a circle around the brim. Now that Daddy done up and left, weren't much to Mama but the sad.

Bitty sat in her mama's lap until she was old enough to settle on the hard pine bench on her own, without the fidgeting of a younger child. The drone of the preacher's voice waxed and waned, filling her with boredom and a restless yearning to fly free and not much else.

One Sunday when Bitty was five or so, the preacher took to sermonizing on the virtues of the marital bed, and the sins of laying with a woman outside of it. Mama's hand groped along the pew and grasped Bitty's among the layers of her Sunday-go-to-church dress, and in the distance, God's tater wagon rumbled across the sky, carrying the Good Lord's lunch to him.

Mama carried Bitty out while the final hymns were being sung, and it was a long, long time before they visited the Lord's house again for anything outside a wedding or a funeral, and sometimes not even then.

* * *

When Bitty was nigh on seven, she went to school like the regular kids, carrying a tin pail half full of last night's cornbread, a cold baked potato, a thick slice of head cheese, and a Winesap picked fresh off the gnarled apple tree squatting outside her grandma's house.

That morning, Mama knelt beside her and put her bony hands on Bitty's shoulders. "Now, you listen here, Bitty. Kids are gonna talk. They're gonna talk up a storm, but you just pay them no never mind, you hear?"

"Yes, Mama," Bitty murmured dutifully.

"They're gonna talk, baby," Mama repeated, and her hands flapped down on Bitty's shoulders like Odin's ravens coming home to roost. "I'm sorry for that."

Bitty wanted to ask what there was to be sorry for in other people's words, but she just kissed her mama's cheek. Together they walked hand in hand down the hard-packed road toward school, and Bitty's spit-shined patent leather shoes crunched the leaves scattered along the road and raised tiny puffs of dust.

They walked past the dam being constructed across Wolf Creek and the workers and machines doing the constructing. A few men noticed them walking by, and one whistled low and long.

A breeze blew across the road, rattling the leaves. Mama looked up at the gray clouds gathering in the blue and her hand tightened on Bitty's. "You ok, baby?"

"Yes'm," Bitty said, the whistle already forgotten. "You gonna teach me to sew today?"

Mama glanced down at Bitty and her eyes sparkled. "You reckon them tiny fingers of yours are old enough to hold the needle?"

By Bitty's reckoning, almost seven was a fine age to help with the endless baskets of sewing Mama took in, little fingers or not, but all she said was, "Yes'm."

"Then I reckon we can make a start on it."

And that settled that, as far as Bitty was concerned.

Her teacher was one Miss Pitkins, from up New York way. Her blonde hair was styled in a soft bob and she wore a pencil dress, and even had on stockings and shiny, black pumps, like she was going to church. Bitty thought she was the prettiest lady she'd ever seen, next to her mama, of course, and she happily settled into a desk near the other younger children and ignored the whispers directed at her, just like Mama said to.

That evening, Bitty told Mama all about Miss Pitkins and her Yankee accent and the tests she'd made everybody take and eating lunch on the playground and...

"Did anybody bother you, Bitty?" Mama asked.

"No, ma'am," Bitty said, and it was the plain truth. Kids had talked, just like Mama said they would, but only to each other, and nobody had even got near her except sitting in their desks on either side of her.

Miss Pitkins came to visit a few weeks later. A home visit, she said, to acquaint herself with the parents. She sat stick straight on the worn settee with her feet crossed at the ankles and her hands in her lap. "Bitty's a bright child," she said, each word crisp and short and strange. "I was surprised that she already knew her letters and numbers."

Mama's cheeks reddened and she looked like she was sitting on a pin cushion rather than on the settee across from Miss Pitkins. "Taught her myself. She can read a little, too, and sign her name."

Miss Pitkins red lips turned up in a smile. "Why yes, and such a good job she does."

"Thank you, ma'am," Mama said.

"I am concerned with one thing." Miss Pitkins smoothed a hand along her wool skirt, adjusting its lay, and she cleared her throat. "I noticed you never bring her to church."

Mama went stock still. "No, ma'am."

"I'm concerned for her immortal soul, and yours, too, of course."

"Of course, Miss Pitkins."

Outside, lightning split the sky and the wind whistled around the house, stealing long, humid fingers through the cracks around the windows and doors, rousting Bitty. She looked up from the line she was sewing on a swatch of scrap fabric, left over from patching Grandma's work dress. Mama's voice was stiff as her spine and her face was all pinched up and sour.

Bitty didn't like that a'tall. "Mama?"

Mama's shoulders relaxed and her hands folded together in her lap, patient like. "I'm fine, Bitty."

Miss Pitkins touched the floppy bow at her neck and peered over her shoulder at the window Bitty sat under. "The weather certainly is unpredictable in the Southern mountains."

Mama's eyes slid to Bitty and a frown pinched her forehead. "On occasion."

A nervous laugh skittered out of Miss Pitkins, like she was afraid to voice it and afraid not to, all at the same time. "Well, as I was saying, church is the proper place for every young lady, whatever her background."

Another crack of lightning hit, so close its thunder boomed in the next breath, and Miss Pitkins jumped. She stood straight up, purse and all, and her face was ghost white under the powder coating it. "Perhaps I should head home. It wouldn't do to get caught on these mountain roads in a downpour."

"No, ma'am." Mama rose and lead Bitty's teacher to the door and the weather waiting for her beyond the uncovered stoop. "Thank you for stopping by, Miss Pitkins. Bitty speaks highly of you and is enjoying your lessons."

"I'm enjoying her, Mrs. Young. Please do bring her to school events at least. We like to encourage fellowship between students and the community."

Bitty waited a bit after Mama shut the door on her teacher and came to stand beside her, waited until the sky split open and rain pattered on the tin roof and she'd reached the end of her sewing line and turned the fabric to start anew. "Why does it always rain when you're mad, Mama?"

Mama glanced at her, eyes wide. "It doesn't, Bitty."

"But it always storms when bad things happen."

"That's not me doing that, baby. That's God letting me know something needs fixing."

Bitty mulled that over for a bit, and as it only made half a lick of sense and she didn't feel like pestering Mama for a better explanation, she changed the subject. "We really going back to church?"

Mama was silent for a long time, standing there at the window watching the rain beat down outside and the wind whip through the trees across the valley. At last, she said, "I don't know, Bitty."

Bitty let it go, but as the dam grew, so did she, and so apparently did Miss Pitkins' determination for Bitty to undergo a Christian upbringing. Two years, Miss Pitkins pestered Mama, and finally Mama gave in.

"If only to save that woman some haranguing," she said, and Bitty bit back a smile as she tied a knot in the hem she was sewing for none other than that woman herself.

* * *

For a while, Mama took in laundry from the workers building the dam, as well as mending, but when the dam was finished, that work was done and the extra money came to an abrupt end. Men came by, begging Mama's favor, but Mama turned them all away, some gently, some not so much.

That old Mr. Gibson came around, too, and brought his wife to the tiny church nestled into the hillside from time to time. "Pretty girl," he said of Bitty and tried to touch her curls, but Bitty hid behind her mama's skirts and Mrs. Gibson clawed at his elbow and clucked him away.

A few weeks after, he came back without his wife and cornered Bitty as she walked out of Sunday School alone. He knelt in front of her and touched her curls and said, "I sure would like to have me a pretty thing like you." Mama came rushing up and shooed him off, her voice a frigid squawk, and that was the last time Bitty wandered around alone at church.

Hard times was afoot, Grandma muttered, but the hard times had always been afoot as far as Bitty was concerned and she paid them no never mind.

One church day, after the Sunday service while folks were mingling in the parking lot, Mama met Mr. T.J. Moore, a young fellow out of Charlotte who'd come to oversee the hydroelectric plant feeding off the waters of the East Fork Lakes. Mr. Moore was up inspecting the dams and had overnighted with the preacher and his wife.

He took one look at Mama, and that was it for the both of them. As soon as was proper, he started courting Mama, or that's what Mama called it. The kids in the schoolyard whispered the words "fancy woman" where they thought Bitty couldn't hear, but she heard all right and went on ignoring them, as Mama said she should.

Bitty loved her Mama, and Mr. Moore was kind. He brought Bitty small treats during his visits and Mama bigger ones. A new hat with a real ostrich feather, a bolt of sheened cotton in the deepest blue. To match Mama's eyes, he said, and Bitty grinned and held his hand, and though he wasn't her daddy, she sure did like it when he came around. Then, Mama was happy for a change and her smile didn't droop with sad the way it had after Bitty's daddy done up and left, and the storms seemed to die down inside and out into the ageless patterns God had laid down upon the mountains.

* * *

Bitty's monthly visited for the first time on the eve of her fourteenth birthday. Mama kept her out of school that week. She called down to the high school on the new phone Mr. Moore had installed for her, and said that

Bitty had the flu and would her teachers please send back her assignments so she wouldn't fall behind?

Mr. Moore dropped by the weekend after Bitty's monthly left and drove them to church, and after, they all sat on an old quilt under the dappled shadows thrown by the forest surrounding the newly formed lake and ate cold fried chicken with Grandma. It was such a beautiful day, Bitty hummed under her breath and plaited asters into a wreath to crown Mama's head.

Later, after Grandma creaked home and Mr. Moore's Bel Air spat twin plumes of road dust into the afternoon air on his way home, Bitty sat next to Mama on the stoop, their bare feet resting on the steps' sun-warmed slats.

"I like Mr. Moore," Bitty said.

Mama smiled and rested a hand on Bitty's knee through her Sunday best dress. "I can tell."

"He's sweet on you and he has a nice smile."

"I know, baby."

"How come you don't marry him?"

"I just can't, not right yet."

"But you love him."

"I do." Mama shaded her eyes and glanced up at the clear blue. "I could switch on the radio for a while."

"And we could dance."

"Only as long as your grandma don't catch us. Lawsy, she's a cantankerous old biddy sometimes."

Bitty laughed and rolled her head back, and caught her mama's eye. "I love you so."

"I love you, too, Bitty bird." An engine cut through their peace, and Mama turned her gaze on the road just as a shiny, red car turned into the narrow drive. "I wonder who that is."

"Not Mr. Moore."

"Oh, hush now. Of course, it ain't Thomas. Look at that car."

Bitty stared at the car with its double headlights and two-sectioned grill and sharp rear fins, and an odd, greasy feeling settled low in her stomach.

"Mama," she whispered, but Mama was already standing up and shoving her feet into her Sunday shoes, laying on a lower step. She reached down and goosed Bitty and hissed, "Shoes!"

Bitty reluctantly stood and slipped bare feet into her flatties, and pressed a hand over her stomach.

The car drew to a stop near the steps, the engine cut off, and a portly man stepped out and pressed a Fedora to his balding pate. "Evening, Maisy,"

and his voice was so oily slick, the sick in Bitty's tummy nearly doubled her over.

"Evening, Mr. Gibson." Mama's hand came down on Bitty's shoulder and squeezed. "What brings you here so late in the day?"

"I've come to visit with Bitty here. Heard she became a woman, and I'm here to take her cherry. Been waiting to since she was knee high." He hitched his britches up and smiled, real pleasant, not a hint of mean in his expression. "Never had a virgin before. I reckon I'd like to try it once before God sends old age down upon me."

Overhead, black clouds tumbled into the sky, hiding the blue, and Mama's fingernails bit into Bitty's shoulder through her dress. "She's too young for such as that."

Mr. Gibson laughed, a nasty little snigger. "Ain't too young for the get of Tom Moore's whore."

Bitty stood up straight in spite of the pain. "You don't say that about my mama."

"I'll say what I like, little missy. You go on in the house now and get yourself ready."

"She'll do no such thing," Mama said.

"Mama," Bitty said, but Mama shook her head firm and whispered, "Go get your grandma. Run hard, baby, through the house and out the back."

Mr. Gibson broke out into a trot, but Mama stepped down onto the hard-packed earth and held her arms out, and Bitty whirled around and fled up the steps and out the back like Mama said to.

Away she ran to Grandma's, along the narrow trail her and Mama's feet had laid into the ground over the years, through brambles clinging to life under the autumn sun and the trees shedding leaves. An owl hooted in the distance, and Bitty cringed.

Death was sure to follow such an ugly omen.

Grandma was hunched over under her apple tree, gathering fallen fruit into the fold of her apron. She glanced up when Bitty dashed into the yard and her fingers slipped along the fabric, nearly losing their hold on its bounty. "Lawsy, child. What's got you wrought up in such a fine state?"

"Mr. Gibson," Bitty panted. "Mama said come."

Grandma's face paled and her wrinkles twisted into a hate so stark, Bitty flinched back from it. Grandma dropped her apron, and apples fell around her heels as she turned around and hobbled inside.

Bitty followed, more out of uncertainty than curiosity, and arrived on the verge of the great room in time to watch Grandma take down a rifle from the hooks suspending it beside the door.

Grandma thrust the rifle at Bitty. “Take this and hurry back to your mama. I’ll be along as quick as these old bones’ll carry me.”

The gun was cold in Bitty’s hands and heavy, and the sick in her stomach leapt up into her throat, choking her.

“Go on, now. Run.” There was something in Grandma’s voice, something ancient and dreadful and wrong. “Your mama needs you.”

That was all it took to get Bitty’s feet moving. She raced down the stairs and along the path, back to her mama and the visitor that’d come for Bitty, and her heart beat in time with the pounding of her feet and the thunder crescendoing above her.

Have to get to Mama, have to get to Mama, it seemed to say, or maybe that was her own thoughts, echoing around inside her head with the acid fear gnawing at her innards.

She heard the scream when she was almost there, a high pitched shrill like the call of a mountain lion. Goose bumps broke out along her spine and her skin tingled, and the rain came then in hard pellets slapping against Bitty’s skin, plastering her hair to her forehead and her dress to her legs. Her feet splashed through the puddles it made, another scream pierced the air, and Bitty bounded up the back stairs and burst into the house.

Mr. Gibson had Mama pinned to the floor, face down, and was shoving his body into hers. Mama’s hands clawed along the floor and her dress was pooled around her waist. Her face was wet over the bruise blooming across her cheek and wrinkled into such pain, Bitty raised the gun and aimed it straight at Mr. Gibson.

He glanced up, and his round face was split in a fixed grin stretched from ear to ear, almost like he was in pain, too, and he kept on shoving at Mama, shoving and grunting, like a boar rooting through the forest floor.

“Get off her,” Bitty whispered. “You get off my Mama.”

Mama looked up at Bitty and her hands flapped along the floor. “Go, baby.”

Bitty shook her head. The rifle trembled in her hands and the barrel dipped, and without giving it another thought, she hefted it up and fired.

The rifle bucked hard against her chest, and the bullet soared over Mr. Gibson’s head and thunked into the wall beside the open door, splattering splinters into the air. Outside, the rain fell so thick, it obscured the world beyond the house, hiding them from the trees and the steely gray clouds and maybe even God Himself.

Mr. Gibson groaned out a long sigh and slumped onto Mama for a second, then he laughed like he hadn’t heard the gunshot and pushed himself off her, his pudgy hands already straightening his pants. “That was a good time, Maisey. I see now why Tom’s kept you all to himself.”

Bitty fired again, but the shot went wide and rushed through the open door, and a metallic clunk came from outside.

“That’d better not be my car you shot, little missy,” Mr. Gibson said.

“Next time, it’ll be you.”

Mama raised her head and shook it once. “Bitty, don’t.”

“No, Mama. He hurt you. He hurt you, and I’m not gonna let him do it again.”

“You can’t stop me,” Mr. Gibson said, and he advanced toward Bitty on a rolling gait. “In fact, I think it’s high time somebody showed you what it means to be a woman.”

“No, Bill!” Mama said, though her voice was scarce above a whimper, and her hands clawed into the floorboard, dragging her toward Bitty. “Don’t you dare lay a hand on my baby.”

Bitty closed her eyes and laid her finger on the trigger. A report cracked out, popping loud, louder than any gunshot Bitty had ever heard, then a hand came down on top of Bitty’s and pushed the rifle down and gently pried it out of Bitty’s hands.

“There now, child. You done enough harm for one day,” Grandma said. “I only meant for you to give him a good fright, but demme, I forgot you don’t need a gun to kill a man, plumb forgot for a while.”

Bitty opened her eyes. Mr. Gibson was slumped over on his knees, his corpse smoking like it was on fire, but he was dead, sure enough, and she wasn’t one bit sorry. She stumbled across the floor and dropped down beside her mama and smoothed a hand over the sweat and tears coating Mama’s face. “What can I do, Mama? Tell me what to do.”

Grandma leaned the rifle against the wall beside the back door and shook out her soaked skirt. “I told you, Bitty. You done enough. Two men dead because of you, and look at your mama.”

“Don’t,” Mama said. “She didn’t do this.”

“Then who did?” Grandma tutted and shook her head and hobbled to Mr. Gibson. “Lawtsy, what’re we gonna tell the law when they come sniffing around?”

“The truth,” Bitty said, and was surprised at the firmness of her own voice. “That man was hurting Mama. Look what he done to her.”

“That man was only here because of you. Don’t think I don’t know it either.”

“Don’t,” Mama repeated. She curled into a ball on her side and rested a hand on Bitty’s lap. “Help me to the sink, baby, and get me a washcloth. There’s a good girl.”

“Pshaw! More like the devil’s get.”

“You keep talking like that and I’ll show you the door myself.”

“Here’s your hat, what’s your hurry,” Grandma said nastily. She knelt beside Mr. Gibson, every move ponderous, her joints popping so loud, Bitty could hear them above the rain. “You’re living with a murderess. I told you to give her up when she killed Joe, but no, you just had to keep her, and look where it got you.”

Bitty froze with her hand on her Mama’s arm. “What?”

“Shush, Bitty,” Mama said, gentle. “Get me that washcloth now.”

“No. I want to know what she meant.” Bitty glanced at her grandma and forced her spine stiff. “Daddy up and left when I was a baby. That’s what you always said. Why’s she saying different now?”

Grandma’s cackle snapped out of her and her face wrinkled into a grin bearing not the slightest trace of humor. “You bring the lightning, child. You bring the thunder. That’s what killed your daddy. Your mam there smarted off to him, and he reared back and knocked her good, and then the lightning came and struck him dead.”

“You told me it was God what brought the weather,” Bitty whispered, and Mama murmured, “It is, baby,” but Bitty shook her head and shoved away from her mama. That sick in her gut twisted up and into her limbs, filling her from stem to stern, and her hands clenched into damp fists at her sides.

“You lied to me.”

“Bitty, no, baby.”

“Lied to me all these years, and I believed you. I loved you,” Bitty shouted. Lightning rippled outside the house in continuous waves, and the thunder boomed around them, rolling like a freight train bearing down on them. “God’s tater wagon, you said. You made me love it.”

“You had to love yourself, baby.” Mama gasped and paled, and one hand snuck into the valley between her breasts and pressed hard. “I couldn’t have you hating what you were.”

“What am I?” Bitty said, but the question was flat and curiously empty.

Grandma’s gnarled fingers twisted into an ancient ward against evil in the air between her and Bitty. “The devil.”

“No,” Mama said, and she gasped again and curled tighter into herself, and Grandma dropped her hands and scooted across the floor and placed her own hand across the one held to Mama’s breast.

“What’ve you done, child?” Grandma wailed. “What’re you doing to my baby girl?”

Bitty glanced down at them, staring at the woman that had borned her as she jerked and gasped and writhed, and at the woman that had borned

her mother as she cupped herself around her daughter. “That ain’t me,” she said, then she walked out the door and into the rain, shedding clothes and shoes as she went.

This was where she belonged, out here in the weather manifested of her heart. It was the only thing that had never lied to her, never left her, never hurt her or let her down, the only constant in a fabric sewn of good intentions and hidden truths.

Bitty turned her face to the rain and spread out her arms, and lightning flashed around her, tingling electricity through her bones. Ozone stung her nostrils and the rain tasted like sweet corn freshly cooked. She opened her arms wide and let the lightning touch her, and in that moment, accepted all that she was, and knew that she was god.

MAX STEPHAN

The Return

“as the fungus grows on their skin from sleeping on mattresses
drenched / with the spit of the hurricane”

—Martin Espada, from “Letter to My Father”

Carrying bleach, ammonia,
wearing N-95 masks,
the evacuees returned
to find water lines
above their heads,
losses of dignity, reason.

All could see the damage done—
but not what crept ahead,
what bred, *was breeding*
on drenched drywall,
in blankets, beneath carpets.

Without tables, without chairs,
they curled up on mattresses
where babies were made,
let tears mix with mildew,
the black mold of disease
resurrected from the dead.

On walls, organic Jackson Pollocks
shapeshifted by the hour,
blazing trails with pathogens propagating chemicals—
cladosporium, aspergillus, stachybotrys atra—
each drip, every splatter
spewing mycotoxins in nostrils,
rendering, and rendering, and rendering
the condemned.

Three days. *Three days*, and
50 inches of rain...
What was left, was taken—all
echoed, unheard, spent,
with none knowing what comes after.

ROSE STRODE

*On an Evening Walk in the Woods My Sister Asks
Me If I Recall the Sound of Our Mother's Voice*

Sometimes I hear music
a tune without a name
but in my body,
as remembering
The music changes

faintly through the wall at night:
I recognize not with my ears
This is not the same
The song I hear this way is not the song,
travelling through darkness and the wall.

Once in these woods there lived
her eyes dark as our mother's eyes.
tender as a bending stem to meet my hand.
bowed.
averted.
but did not move.
but did not turn to look.
holding still, holding
as an offering
a call.
Her breath

a doe I almost touched,
Her head bowed,
My own head:
My eyes:
I ached to move
I longed to look
I waited,
a handful of violets
my silence
Her mouth opened.
warmed the air between us.

Now evening overflows the sky
appears to be a path. My sister
Sometimes the doe returns. The violets
is warm. She calls my name but the path is gone

and every space between the trees
waits for me to answer. I say:
in my hand are fresh, her breath

*and my body ringing
like a tapped
glass.*

NICHOLAS A. WHITE

Fragments of the Heart

The last time Chris was in the theater, Jennifer gave him a hickey while sitting in the back row. Nine days later she came over to his house for the first time. Six days after that, she broke up with him because he cried during class after learning about his parents' separation. He'd made a timeline on his bedroom wall to keep track of everything, using yarn and sticky notes.

"I don't want you having nightmares," his mom said.

"I'm fifteen, Mom. This isn't my first R-rated movie."

Five people stood ahead of them in line. Chris didn't recognize any of them. He wanted wolves to maul each other on screen, the violence calling to him.

"Maybe we should buy tickets for something else, though," his mom said, pointing at a poster. "Look, what about that one."

Chris turned around, afraid of seeing someone from school. Most of the other ninth graders went to the theater closer to town, the nice one, including Zeke and Ick and everyone else who still made fun of him for being Cry Baby Chris.

"I'm not seeing a movie about penguins," he said.

"But you don't like scary movies," his mom said. "They're so—bloody. And you faint at the sight of blood."

"I do not."

His mom sneezed as loudly as she always did, as if challenging herself to the loudest version of *a-a-choo* possible. As a kid he'd found the obnoxiousness funny. Now it was just embarrassing. Everything she did was too loud.

Chris touched the knife, hidden in his back pocket. It was his dad's old pocket knife, and he took it everywhere now after his parents' separation, even to bed. He slept with it under his pillow, blade closed, holding it within his palm.

* * *

The theater was crowded. His mom found a couple of open seats in the middle, the lights already dimmed. Chris and Jennifer used to make out in the two seats in the back corner, the ones that reclined with footrests. He glanced at those seats now, trying to figure out if anybody sat there. He

figured it was time to move on, or face his demons, or whatever. He was tired of feeling this way, like his heart was made of hundreds of floating fragments that collided with each other. It hadn't even been six months yet, though it felt like forever.

"Why do you keep looking behind you?" his mom asked.

"I am not."

"Do you see someone from school? You don't see—"

"No."

Chris looked back one more time. The thought crossed his mind of Jennifer sitting back there with someone else, whichever tenth-grader she'd been holding hands with at school earlier. She broke up with him five months and twenty-seven days ago. But it looked like two guys were sitting there now. Chris recognized their faces. Zeke and Ick waved, mocking him, as if they'd expected him.

Chris touched the knife in his pocket.

He tried to relax for a moment and forget about Jennifer and everyone bullying him at school. He tried to remember what it was like to be carefree in his mom's presence, how they used to ride bikes together in the neighborhood and point at dead snakes on the side of the road and chase ice-cream trucks and *laugh*. She'd brought him here to the theater after he punched a hole in his bedroom wall, right beside the start of his timeline made of yarn. She'd told him he needed to learn healthier ways to process his anger, like screaming into a folded-up blanket. She'd even placed a blanket from the living room on his bed, but Chris didn't know what good screaming would do when it felt like his entire body was going to break in half either way.

During the previews, he looked over and noticed tears on his mom's cheeks. He grabbed her forearm, hoping she'd stop before her crying turned loud and obnoxious, as it always did. He didn't want anyone's attention, especially not Zeke and Ick's.

"What's wrong?" he asked, trying to mask his anger.

A person behind him leaned forward in their seat, looking at Chris.

"I'm sorry," his mom said. She wiped under her eyes with the back of her wrist. "Part of me can't help but wonder, though, if the way you're acting, if it's because your father left, or if I'm doing something wrong."

"This isn't about you," Chris said. He looked around, conscious of people's stares in the dark. He couldn't see eyes, but they were all on him, he knew it. He released her forearm. His mom stared straight ahead at the movie screen.

"You don't talk at home, so why should we talk here," his mom said.

Chris wanted to throw something at the screen. His anger came out of nowhere sometimes, even over the smallest things. He hadn't intentionally punched a hole in his bedroom wall. It just happened after seeing Jennifer holding hands with someone else at school. But he figured anger was better than sadness. Jennifer had dumped him over his sadness.

"It's not that I don't want to talk," Chris said. "It's just—"

A piece of popcorn flew from somewhere behind them and landed on his mom's shoulder, followed by another that bounced off her arm. Behind them, Zeke and Ick covered their mouths with closed fists, laughing with a bag of popcorn wedged between them in the reclining seats.

"Chris, where are you going?" his mom asked. "It's not a big deal. Chris."

He'd taken everyone's shit for almost six months. People still called him Cry Baby Chris. He'd lost a girlfriend over being too soft.

He stood and walked toward the back row, feeling for his knife.

Zeke and Ick stopped giggling when they saw him. They always ran their mouths, trying to piss him off—the two main bullies of ninth grade—never expecting him or anyone else to retaliate. Especially not him.

"Get up," Chris said. "Now."

Neither of them moved. Zeke ate more popcorn, turning a piece in his fingers.

"I said get the hell up." The words came out stunted, unsure.

"Or what?" Zeke said, trying to keep a straight face. "You going to cry?"

People nearby mumbled about the commotion, and Chris realized he didn't know what to do next. They were watching. He looked behind him. His mom had shifted in her seat to turn around. He touched the knife in his back pocket.

"Oh, look at that," Ick said. "Chris came to the movies with his mom."

"Maybe she'll come over here," Zeke said. "She's single now, isn't she? Move over, maybe she'll come sit on my lap."

Chris started shaking. His heart, his hands, everything boiling up from the past six months. He grabbed Zeke's head and pushed it back into the seat as hard as he could.

"Shut up about me," he said. "And my parents. And Jennifer." He moved his hands down to Zeke's neck and squeezed.

His mom was yelling. Someone tried pulling him off, which made him squeeze tighter, everything suddenly primal, the feel of another person thrashing beneath him, the power to take away breath. He'd never been in a fight before.

“Chris, man, stop,” Ick said. “You’re hurting him. He can’t fucking breathe.”

Chris pushed Zeke’s head back into the seat again, still squeezing. He was practically laying on top of him, the seat almost fully reclined. “I hate you,” Chris said. Zeke’s face turned red. “Die, asshole.”

Ick pushed him off, knocking Chris sideways from the seat to the ground. Zeke gasped for air, grabbing his neck. Chris found the knife in his pocket and opened the blade after standing, hiding it behind his wrist.

His mom was in the aisle now. “What’re you doing?” she screamed. “Chris!”

He imagined plunging the knife into Zeke’s neck, right into his voice box.

The lights came on. A security guard entered.

Chris stood motionless at the back of the theater, breathing heavy, trembling. He closed the knife and returned it to his pocket. Zeke and Ick scrambled down the stairs.

The reclining seats were illuminated, popcorn spilled across the leather, the same seats he and Jennifer used to sit in. He’d never seen them in the light before, and he sat down, remembering the only time Jennifer had called after breaking up with him. He’d marked the incident as APOLOGY CALL on his timeline. Her voice had shocked him into silence. She apologized for the timing with his parents’ separation, and that was it. Not like it did anything to make him feel less alone.

The security guard made his way up. The knife slipped from Chris’s pocket behind the seat, a soft thud when it hit carpet. He didn’t move to get it. His chest tightened, a snake coiled around his ribcage—the anger calling to him. This time, though, he didn’t answer.

* * *

Chris sat on the floor of his bedroom, looking up at the yarn and sticky notes of his timeline on the wall. His mom knocked on the door. They hadn’t talked since arriving home.

“It’s open,” he said.

She leaned on the doorframe. “We need to talk about this,” she said. “I didn’t say anything about the hole, but this . . . You’re lucky they didn’t arrest you.”

“I get it, okay? I’m sorry we wasted your money.”

“It’s not about the money. You really think that’s what I care about?”

Chris focused on the sticky note that said BREAK UP. His mom walked beside him and sat on the floor. When she hugged him, he rested his forehead on her shoulder. There was something primal there, some lost

memory of being a toddler and clasping around her neck that had never completely gone away. It reminded him of childhood afternoons, sitting on her lap after kindergarten and plucking the gray strands before she started coloring her hair. Back then everything had been so easy. Now there was a fist-shaped hole in the wall, and he'd almost suffocated somebody. He thought about Zeke and Ick. The word *die* lingered in his mind. He wanted to stay in childhood memories forever, protected from the world, where he could gather those floating fragments of his heart and piece them back together again—a kid with a puzzle, trying to make it all work.

After his mom left, he buried his face in the folded-up blanket on his bed and screamed. His muffled voice sounded like it came from another dimension, from somewhere underwater. He screamed harder, until his anger came and went like a wave crashing on the beach, leaving him completely deflated and completely ready for something new.

JESSICA LYNN SUCHON

Epilogue

In every wave crest, the rumble of his drunken
mythology—*Some god carved man's hands*
from his own breastbone. The first woman: a nest
woven from severed tongues and black feathers.
He was a liar. I knew it the first time
he came home with long hairs tangled into his coat
collar and cracked my skull for asking
questions. Maybe he loved me or maybe my body
has always had a need for sacrifice. I strip the stem
of a cattail with my fingernail until the pulp colors
my skin gold. I have lived a long time in this body. I know
how the origin goes: Adam was dust, first sad boy
without a father. Eve was less than that – bone of his bone.
Some days I believe love is more than blistering
blood or gutted hallelujah, that my heart is a fist unfolding.

NANCY SWANSON

I Know Water

I have swum with jellyfish and dolphins
floated weightless in the arms of my love
shared the Pacific current with hump-backed whales

body surfed in an Atlantic wind-whipped to foam
dog paddled down rock-floored rivers
and waded tide pools digging for clams.

A child, I floated with new-cut grass
in a pond created by Hazel on her journey
from the ocean, 317 miles away.

After the yard drained and grew prickly
I lay beneath the arc of tepid sprinklers.
Today I bow my head for baptism

by the thirteenth hurricane of the season
and remember our neighbor's pool
cement on the bottom, polished tile up the sides.

And the deep end, populated by sun rays
that penetrated the clarity in solid shafts of yellow
while I descended, lingering

beneath clouds until I had to push upward
to gulp a breath of air and descend again.
On weekends, grownups took over

while I trained as waterside bartender, watching
too much to drink wash across the
flat, over-chlorinated pool.

One tipsy summer evening, the neighbor proclaimed
that all dogs could swim and threw my boxer Jerry
in the deep end, where he sank to the bottom

without protest until Daddy raised him up
thrashing from the clear blue spell
the deep, quiet solitude of water

KELLY TALBOT

Dusk

Silhouettes of birds on blue wings
flicker, flutter; gone.
The doe called light takes flight through twilight shadows.

The man's scent fades.
His name is packed in boxes.
The vehicle of his departure exhales
exhaustion.
The man sinks beyond this horizon.
His shadow, the sun, follows.

Motions of birds heard in the darkness...
She drifts, free, terrified.
Then, like the night, she falls.

JO BARBARA TAYLOR

The Common Touch of Know-How

Her hands grow steady as she dips her hook
through walnut-dyed burlap, snags the strip
of woolen rag and lifts, loop after loop
of routine skill.

Clang clang clang clang—
steady hammer on anvil, the sish of tongs
turning, turning. The smith, poised
in everyday practice.

She kneads, kneads flour, yeast, sugar, salt,
and water on the wooden breadboard,
the steady press and squeeze, arms straight,
hands strong in the feel.

The rhythm of footsteps behind the plow, the push,
the slice of the share into earth, each furrow
gapped and repeated like corrugated cardboard,
the steady gait.

RACHEL TRAMONTE

Sylvia

Our feet walked the same Northampton streets.
I followed. I knew how to court; I knew how to woo.

I had already done it with Anne Sexton in 1992.
Then in the NYU classroom was hypnotized by you—

private hauntings every Tuesday and Thursday at two.
Were there other things I was supposed to do?

But in the end, head in the oven,
linen dress stocking calves with heels jutting out,

I had to break up with you, stop writing, and read
when I could about writers other than you.

JASON GORDY WALKER

Ode to a Dog Park

On a Sunday at the dog park when no dogs sniffed rumps and the ditzzy squirrels cracked nuts, I sat on a metal bench listening to the conspiracy of the birds

as people came and went—a pair of power-walking grandmothers, a giggling yuppie couple, a bronzed woman in jalapeño hot-shorts, a texting, weed-sticky student—

while a sedan coughed its way up the hill in front of me, and I thought of Peace, that blur of white noise people kill for, that space with no boundaries, no figures,

not even trees, until a limb snapped, fell into a pile of red-orange leaves, and I saw the trees around me, some oak, some whose names I didn't know and still don't,

their bark grooving, their roots rippling above the ground, and now some limbs slumped their dark green leaves down in what looked like surrender. I, too, surrendered

to their tilting in the sweet breeze, which brought with it the scent of sawdust and chopped grass blades that I passed earlier on my stroll here. Then

the crickets sang enormous hymns to themselves, the music sneaking into my skull, doing away with thought, doing away with the anxiety of thinking

about thought. I had been rattling my gears for weeks, cranking away just to crank away, but this, this sitting on a bench at the start of September as the 5pm

sunlight warmed the upper fullness of the leaves, this quiet, this cooling air was enough to help me forget the onslaught of mosquitoes to come, the losing of blood, the thirst.

BRUCE ARLEN WASSERMAN

Why I Remember Dad

Some things will never change
like pillows on the sofa

always displaced or the piles of
magazines growing in the corners

or my memories of a father in
nerd glasses & his dental smock

or cleaned up in a suit & tie, even
bony-kneed in his Bermuda shorts

when I was six, he tried to farm
the hard pack of our suburban yard.

& even though he never schlepped
me to scouts & even though he didn't

know a screwdriver from & wrench
even though he shouted when showing me

how to drive, he was the one
who swept me beyond my aspirations

he was there when I felt I couldn't rise
from a fall & when his face was all winter

stubble & just wisps of hair on bald, when
his walker sped moving & he tested blood sugar

at every meal, all-of-a-sudden the wall I'd built
broke & he climbed-on-through to be my best

friend, his advice I miss the most this Father's
Day & the way his blue veins showed support

like I was the only thing he take away when
he left & at the very end, finger-squeezes

made my heart freeze silent like 40 below
& the cold snapping of it always comes back

to memory like the slow vanilla foam
in a root beer float, when I was ten.

LESLIE WILLIAMS

Friend as First-Class Relic

For me, ground to a cinder
might be an accurate
description,

or wearing a garment of skins,

smoking
outside the wedding hall,
always the girl

who brought the toaster,
sorry to Chicago
for how ordinary I was,

and readily corruptible,
drinking from
any offered cup.

But my friend
could absolutely
martyr it

and yet next morning
preserve an air
of isolation, her self still

precious, veiled
and carried high
above adoring crowds.

NANCY H. WOMACK

Dear Debbie Reynolds

Long before your troubled child
chose to leave the world,
and your grief-filled heart
over flowed, drowning
you the following day,
I became you for a moment

on a train ride from London to Edinburgh,
steel wheels clacking northward through
hedge-rowed country side
and little towns with castles and cathedrals,
some in ruins from the Blitzkrieg.

At York or Durham a drunken Scotsman
stumbled aboard, sat across from me,
yelled, "Look! It's Debbie Reynolds."
A few passengers glanced my way,
saw my denial,
returned to their papers and books.

For miles, he talked about your movies,
asked about Carrie and Todd,
regaled against that bastard Eddie Fisher,

refused to believe I knew nothing
about either of them.

Finally, without a word, he walked away.
I thought he left the train
but later saw him waiting for a cab in Edinburgh.

As I passed his way, he lifted his hand—
a slight wave, "Bye Debbie,"
sweet sadness in his eyes and voice.

I acknowledged his farewell
with my own little wave, a nearly inaudible
"Goodbye."

DAVID XIANG

An Unrequited Love for the Directionless

Naturally, it is night
Above this concrete bridge with its
Starry eyed river dotted in white, sometimes red,
Pulsing and pushing underneath, a constant sound

Forward, or backward, it does not matter.
Always too fast, and then we are running
Taking all these directions.
Growing old in absence.

Rain falls again to the tune only our ghosts hum
In this silence between breaths
Mingling of afterthoughts and where we think
Home is, cascades into the banks

Only then do we remember these colors
Pulled into the current below and
Painting the runoff with your receding footsteps
Leaving half the picture.

We stay here, we tell ourselves this
Time is always new, vainly look for a familiar face
Circling the path. Yesterday, we planted our echoes
For a conversation to come back to

And in many autumns there will be a forest
Guiding the waters this way and that.
One day it catches up to us, as old friends do,
Takes us anywhere but here.

CONTRIBUTORS

HAROLD ACKERMAN thinks photo art should try to escape cliché, propaganda, and advertising, if at all possible, but also hyperrealism and fantasy. He has published photo art most recently in *Gravel* and has cover art forthcoming in *South Florida Poetry Journal*. His gallery can be found online at briarcreekphotos.com.

HEATHER BELL ADAMS is the author of a novel, *Maranatha Road* (Vandalia Press, 2017), and short fiction appearing in *The Thomas Wolfe Review*, Clapboard House, *Broad River Review*, *Pisgah Review*, *The Petigru Review*, *Pembroke Magazine*, and elsewhere.

MARYAM BARRIE lives in a woods outside Ann Arbor and teaches English at Washtenaw Community College. Her recent chapbook is titled *To Live in This Dark World* and was published by Zetataurus Press. Her work has appeared in *The Huron River Review*, *Belle Ombre*, *The Catamaran Literary Reader*, and *The Wayfarer*.

TERRY HALL BODINE is a graduate of the College of William & Mary in Virginia. Recent publication credits include *Roanoke Review*, *Split Rock Review*, *Scintilla*, and *Wraparound South*. Terry lives in Lynchburg with her husband, Bill, and works with student life at the University of Lynchburg.

A native of southeast West Virginia, **BEN E. CAMPBELL** serves as professor of English at New River Community College in Dublin, Virginia. His poems, stories, and essays have appeared in such publications as *Yemassee*, *Now & Then*, *Roanoke Review*, and *Broad River Review* (Volume 44). He resides in Lewisburg, West Virginia, with his wife and two daughters.

ABBY CAPLIN was a semifinalist for the 2018 Willow Run Poetry Book Award, a nominee for the 2018 Sundress Best of the Net Award, an honorable mention for 2017 Quercus Fall Poetry Book Award, an award recipient of the San Francisco Poets Eleven 2016, and a finalist for the 2015 Anna Davidson Rosenberg Poetry Award. Her poems have appeared in *Alyss*, *apt*, *Canary*, *Catamaran*, *Dunes Review*, *Love's Executive Order*, *Mudlark Flash*, *Paragon*, *Salt Hill*, *TSR: The Southampton Review*, *These Fragile Lilacs*, *Third Wednesday*, *Tikkun*, and others. She is a physician and practices Mind-Body medicine in San Francisco. Caplin can be found online at abbycaplin.com.

CAROL FLAKE CHAPMAN, after a career as a journalist and author of nonfiction books, returned to her earlier love of poetry following the sudden death of her husband on a wild river in Guatemala. She found in poetry the language of healing and of deep connection to the natural world.

ROSEMARIE DOMBROWSKI is the inaugural Poet Laureate of Phoenix, Arizona, the founding editor of rinky dink press, the co-founder and host of the Phoenix Poetry Series, and the curator of First Friday Poetry on Roosevelt Row. She is the recipient of five Pushcart nominations, an Arts Hero Award, the Carrie McCray Literary Award in Nonfiction, and a fellowship from the Lincoln Center for Applied Ethics. Her collections include *The Book of Emergencies*, *The Philosophy of Unclean Things*, and *The Cleavage Planes of Southwest Minerals [A Love Story]*,

winner of the 2017 *Split Rock Review* chapbook competition. Dombrowski can be found online at rdpoet.com.

JONATHAN LOUIS DUCKWORTH received his MFA from Florida International University. His fiction, poetry, and nonfiction appears in *New Ohio Review*, *Fourteen Hills*, *Meridian*, *Tupelo Quarterly*, *Jabberwock Review*, *Superstition Review*, *Flash Fiction Online*, and elsewhere. His chapbook *Book of Never* is forthcoming with Finishing Line Press.

CALLISTA ECKERT was an English major and chemistry minor at Gardner-Webb University. In addition to the J. Calvin Koonts Poetry Award, Eckert also received multiple honors, including the George A. Christenberry Award (given by the Big South athletic conference for career GPA), Gardner-Webb University's Who's Who Student Leadership, Service, and Volunteerism Award, the Presidential Award for Women's Soccer, the Dee "Doc" Hunt Academic Achievement Award, and the University Scholastic Award. Eckert will be working as a medical scribe, a referee, and a soccer trainer until she enrolls in medical school. Her hometown is Newnan, Georgia.

RENEE EMERSON was born in Tennessee and resides in Missouri. She has published poems in magazines such as *Perspectives*, *Still*, and *Valley Voices*, and currently teaches online courses for various universities. She is the author of *Keeping Me Still* (Winter Goose Publishing, 2014) and *Threshing Floor* (Jacar Press, 2016). She can be found online at reneeemersonpoet.com.

TERRI KIRBY ERICKSON is the author of five collections of poetry. Her work has appeared in *American Life in Poetry*, *Asheville Poetry Review*, *Atlanta Review*, *Broad River Review*, *North Carolina Literary Review*, *The Sun Magazine*, *Valparaiso Poetry Review*, *Versé Daily*, *The Writer's Almanac*, and many others. Awards include the Joy Harjo Poetry Prize, Nautilus Silver Book Award, and an *Atlanta Review* International Publication Prize. She lives in North Carolina.

D FERRARA has been an active writer and ghost writer for more years than she cares to admit. Articles, essays and short stories are her continuing obsession, including appearances in *The Main Street Anthology: Crossing Lines*, *East Meets West American Writers Review*, *Storytellers Magazine*, *The Broadkill Review*, *MacGuffin Press*, *Crack the Spine*, *Green Prints*, *Amarillo Bay*, *The Penmen Review*, *At the Inkwell*, and *RIMS Magazine*. *Arvin Lindemeyer Takes Canarsie* won the Oil Valley Film Festival, was a Selected Screenplay (Finalist) in the Hollywood Blvd. Film Festival, and a Top Finalist in the ASU Screenwriting Contest. Her play *Favor* won the New Jersey ACT award for Outstanding Production of an Original Play, while *Sister Edith's Mission* and *Business Class* were produced at the Malibu Repertory Company's One Act Play Festival. Three of her full-length film scripts have been optioned. Her paintings have been shown in group shows, and included in several journals. She is the Editor of *American Writers' Review*. Her paintings—watercolor on Yupo—have been featured in several shows. She recently received her MA in creative writing, where it joined her JD, LLM, and BA, amid the clutter of her office.

ROBERT FILLMAN'S chapbook *November Weather Spell* will be published in 2019 (Main Street Rag Publishing). In 2018, he was a Best of the Net nominee and a finalist for the Gerald Cable Book Award, the Cathy Smith Bowers Chapbook

Contest, and the Keystone Chapbook Contest. His poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *The Hollins Critic*, *Poet Lore*, *Poetry East*, *Salamander*, *Tar River Poetry*, and others. A senior teaching fellow at Lehigh University, he lives in eastern Pennsylvania with his wife, Melissa, and their two children, Emma and Robbie.

IAN T. HALL was born and reared in Raven, Kentucky. He is currently an MFA candidate in poetry at the University of Tennessee, where he serves as the assistant poetry editor for *Grist: A Journal of the Literary Arts*. He has published poetry and fiction in *Kentucky Monthly Magazine*, *The Louisville Review*, *Heartland Review*, and *Modern Mountain Magazine*, among others.

TEJAN GREEN is a cross-genre writer, editor and educator. Her work has been published or is forthcoming in *Platform Review*, *The Bookends Review*, and *Caribbean Writer*, among other publications.

ERIC GREINKE'S poems and essays have been published in hundreds of American and international literary magazines since the early seventies, including *Delaware Poetry Review*, *Gargoyle*, *Ginyu* (Japan), *The Journal* (UK), *Lake Effect*, *Main Street Rag*, *New York Quarterly*, *The Paterson Review*, *The Pedestal*, *Poem*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Prosopisia* (India), and *South Carolina Review*. He can be found online at erickgreinke.com.

LINDA FLAHERTY HALTMAIER is an award-winning author and the inaugural Poet Laureate of Andover, Massachusetts. She is the winner of the Homebound Publications Poetry Prize for her full-length collection, *Rolling up the Sky* (2016). Her latest collection, *To the Left of the Sun*, was released in August, 2018 by Homebound Publications. Her work has earned numerous awards including first place in the Palm Beach Poetry Festival Competition, finalist honors for both the Princemere Poetry Prize and the Tucson Festival of the Book Literary Award, and been shortlisted for the Robert Frost Poetry Prize. Her poetry has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize and has appeared extensively in journals and anthologies including *Ink & Letters*, *The Wild Word*, *Switchgrass Review*, and more. Haltmaier lives on the North Shore of Boston with her husband and daughter.

CAROL HAMILTON has recent and upcoming publications in *Commonweal*, *Bluestem*, *Southwestern American Literature*, *Pour Vida*, *Adirondack Review*, *The Maynard*, *Sanskrit Literary Magazine*, *U.S.I Worksheet*, *Broad River Review*, *Homestead Review*, *Shot Glass Journal*, *Poem*, *Louisiana Literature*, *Haight Ashbury Poetry Journal*, *The Aureorean*, *Blue Unicorn*, *Birmingham Poetry Review*, *Pigeonholes Review*, and others. She has published 17 books, including children's novels, legends, and poetry, most recently, *Such Deaths* (from Virtual Arts Cooperative Press Purple Flag Series). She is a former Poet Laureate of Oklahoma.

RAYMOND P. HAMMOND is the editor-in-chief of both *The New York Quarterly* and *NYQ Books*. He holds an MA in English literature from New York University and is the author of *Poetic Amusement*, a book of literary criticism. He lives near Scranton, Pennsylvania, with his wife, the poet Amanda J. Bradley, and their dog Hank.

KRISTINA HEFLIN is an Arizona State University English major, based in Northern California. She has served on the editorial board of the literary journal *Flumes* and is activity coordinator for the Yuba College Literary Arts Club. She

has been published in the literary journals *Flumes*, *Canyon Voices*, and *Diverse Minds*, the websites *2Elizabets* and the *write launch*, as well as the anthology *The Beckoning*. Future publications include *Canyon Voices* and *Same*. When she's not writing or tutoring English at Yuba College, she enjoys horseback riding and Marvel comics.

STEPHEN HERMAN earned an MFA in poetry at the University of Massachusetts—Amherst. He taught creative writing and Poetry for 12 years at the City College of San Francisco. Herman published *Night Visions* in 2012 and was awarded the Gold Seal of Literary Excellence. He also won First Prize in Poetry in 2013 at the San Francisco Writers' Conference. Herman also served for two years as a San Francisco Human Rights Commissioner.

MIKE HORAN lives with his family in the desert outside Palm Springs, California. He teaches elementary school during the day, writes and does dad stuff in the evenings, and practices kung fu in the spaces between. His work has appeared in *Kindred Magazine* for Anchor & Plume Press, *Mad Swirl Magazine*, and will appear in *Good Works Review* later this year.

MICHAEL LEE JOHNSON lived ten years in Canada during the Vietnam era and is a dual citizen of the United States and Canada. Today he is a poet, freelance writer, amateur photographer, and small business owner in Itasca, Illinois. Johnson's work has appeared in more than a thousand publications, and he edits and publishes numerous poetry sites. He is the editor-in-chief of the anthologies, *Moonlight Dreamers of Yellow Haze*, *Dandelion in a Vase of Roses*, and *Warriors with Wings: the Best in Contemporary Poetry*.

PETER KAHN wallows among the mule deer, here on a small farm in southeastern Wisconsin, tucked in tight between the Pike River and Lake Michigan. His work has appeared in small, rarely read journals of literature.

Text(isles), **NANCY KASSELL'S** first book of poetry, and *Be(longing)*, a chapbook, were published by Dos Madres Press in 2013 and 2016, respectively. The title poem of *Parenthesis Enclosing Empty Space*, a new chapbook manuscript, is forthcoming in *Salamander*, and *The Trees of Cumberland Island* is forthcoming in the anthology *Awake in the World, Vol. 2* from Riverfeet Press. Kassel lives in Brookline, Massachusetts.

R.J. KEELER was born St. Paul, Minnesota. He lived in the jungles of Colombia, South America, up to age twelve. He holds multiple degrees: undergraduate in math (North Carolina State University), graduate in computer science (University of North Carolina—Chapel Hill), graduate in business (University of California Los Angeles), and earned a certificate in poetry (University of Washington). Keeler was awarded a Vietnam Service Medal. He has received a Whiting Foundation Experimental Grant and is included in the P&W's Directory of Poets and Writers. He has been published in *Ploughshares*, *VMI Beachcomber*, *Oak Literary Magazine*, *Typishly*, and *Deluge Literary and Arts Journal*, among others. Keeler's poetry collection *Detonation* will be published in December.

ANGELA KELLY'S most recent full-length poetry collection, *Voodoo for the Other Woman* (Hub City Press, 2013), is a SIBA nominee. Many individual poems have appeared in literary journals and several other award-winning chapbooks.

Originally from Black Mountain, North Carolina, Kelly has won awards and fellowships from the South Carolina Arts Commission, South Carolina Academy of Authors, and the North Carolina Humanities Council. Kelly has had residencies at Virginia Center for Creative Arts, Sewanee Writers Conference, Hambidge Center, and the Vermont Studio Center.

CHRISTOPHER KUHL earned a bachelor's degree in philosophy and one in music composition, as well as two masters of music degrees and a PhD in interdisciplinary arts. He taught English at the Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy. He enjoys reading a wide array of literature, as well as philosophy and history, while his other interests include studying higher mathematics and classical Greek and Hebrew, as well as drawing and painting with acrylics. Kuhl is never bored.

After earning graduate degrees from the University of North Carolina, **RICHARD LEBOVITZ** taught college and high school English before entering the fields of journalism and professional conference planning. His poetry springs from his desire to seize on those fleeting moments of beauty the natural world delivers to our doorsteps and to share those experiences on an emotional level with his fellow human beings.

BRODIE LOWE has a BA in English from Western Carolina University. He has stories published in *Mystery Tribune*, *The Bark Magazine*, *Strange Stories Magazine*, *Cultured Vultures*, *Quail Bell Magazine*, *Antithesis Journal*, *Frontier Tales*, *Gypsum Sound Tales*, *Mad Scientist Journal*, and *Coffin Bell Journal*, and has a forthcoming poem in Arkansas Tech University's *Nebo: A Literary Journal*. He was a finalist for *Still: The Journal's* 2018 Literary Contest in Fiction, judged by author Wiley Cash. He is a recent alumnus of Spalding University's MFA Community Workshop, taught by author Silas House.

MATTHEW MAFFEI is a senior at the University of North Carolina at Asheville, where majors in creative writing. "My Father Plays Guitar" is a personal essay on understanding, learning to forgive, and knowing how to move beyond mistakes.

TASSLYN MAGNUSSON received her MFA in creative writing for children and young adults at Hamline University in Saint Paul, Minnesota. Her poems have been published or are forthcoming in *Room Magazine*, *The Mom Egg Review*, *The Raw Art Review: A Journal of Storm and Urge*, and *Red Weather Online*. Her chapbook, *defining*, from *dancing girl press* was published in January 2019. She lives in Prescott, Wisconsin, with her husband and two kids and two dogs.

JOSH MAHLER lives and writes in Virginia, where he was educated at George Mason University. His poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Puerto del Sol*, *Plainsongs*, *the Evansville Review*, *Exit 7*, *Carolina Quarterly*, and elsewhere.

C. I. MARSHALL has an MFA in creative writing from California State University, Long Beach. Marshall was poetry editor for *ARTLIFE Magazine*, and poems have appeared in *Spillway*, *RipRap*, *The Packinghouse Review*, *Beyond the Lyric Moment: Poetry Inspired by Workshops with David St. John*, *ELKE*, *Redheaded Stepchild*, and *Kakalak*. A Fairhope Center for the Writing Arts and Weymouth Center for the Arts Writer-In-Residence, Marshall's poem, "Myself As a Playboy Bunny" won the 2018 International Verve Poetry Festival Competition in Birmingham, United Kingdom.

PRESTON MARTIN has published, or has poems forthcoming in *New Ohio Review*, *Tar River Poetry*, *Appalachian Heritage*, *Iodine*, *Chaffin Journal*, *Kakalak*, *Snapdragon* and other journals. He has poems in *Every River on Earth: Writings from Appalachian Ohio* (Ohio University Press), and other anthologies. He lives in Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

In addition to two chapbooks, **KEVIN J. McDANIEL** is the author of a forthcoming poetry collection, *Rubbernecking* (Main Street Rag Publishing, 2019). His poems have appeared in the *Anthology of Appalachian Writers*, *Artemis Journal*, *Broad River Review*, *Cloudbank*, *Free State Review*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, *Ocean State Review*, *Offbeat*, and others. He lives in Pulaski, Virginia, a small town named for Count Casimir Pulaski, a Polish nobleman who fought with George Washington during the Revolution.

JIM McDERMOTT lives with his family in Virginia. He is the author of a creative nonfiction book and is a recipient of the Bevel Summers Prize from *Shenandoah*.

MARY McGINNIS has been writing and living in New Mexico since 1972, where life has connected her with emptiness, desert, and mountains. Published in over 70 magazines and anthologies, she has also been nominated for a Pushcart Prize. She has published three full length collections: *Listening for Cactus* (1996), *October Again* (2008), and *See with Your Whole Body* (2016). A recent submission to a *Lummox* poetry contest (2017) won first prize, and publication of a chapbook, *Breath of Willow*.

DAVE McNAMARA is a writer living in Boston. He works as an English lecturer at the University of Massachusetts and occasionally tours with rock bands as a sound engineer.

ALAN MEYROWITZ retired in 2005 after a career in computer research. His writing has appeared in *Eclectica*, *Existere*, *Front Range Review*, *Inwood Indiana*, *Jitter*, *The Literary Hatchet*, *Lucid Rhythms*, *The Nassau Review*, *Poetry Quarterly*, *Schuykill Valley Journal*, *Shark Reef*, *Shroud*, *Spirit's Tincture*, and others.

SALLY STEWART MOHNEY'S poetry collection, *Low Country, High Water* (Texas Review Press, 2016), won the Southern Poetry Breakthrough Prize: North Carolina. Other publications include *A Piece of Calm* (Finishing Line Press, 2014) and *Pale Blue Mercy* (Main Street Rag, 2013). Her work has appeared in the *Broad River Review*, the *Charlotte Observer*, *Cortland Review*, *James Dickey Review*, *North Carolina Literary Review*, *San Pedro River Review*, *Town Creek Poetry*, *Verse Daily*, *Waccamaw Journal*, *The Reach of Song*, *Stone, River, Sky: An Anthology*, *The Southern Poetry Anthology: North Carolina*, *Winning Writers.com*, and elsewhere. She has taken graduate courses at the University of Florida and the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop. She is the recipient of the Jesse Rehder Writing Prize from the University of North Carolina. She was nominated for the Georgia Author of the Year in Poetry. A North Carolina native, she currently lives a thousand feet from the Chattahoochee River.

MARY LAMBETH MOORE is the author of *Sleeping with Patty Hearst*, a coming-of-age story set in small-town North Carolina during the 1970s. Author Anna Jean Mayhew, a winner of North Carolina's Sir Walter Raleigh Award, has praised the novel as "engrossing" and "masterfully written." Mary is a former

fiction editor of Carolina Wrenn Press (now Blair) in Durham, North Carolina. She works as a senior writer for a large non-profit organization in Durham, where she has produced Congressional testimony, executive speeches, opinion pieces and documentary scripts. Mary lives in Raleigh with her husband, Bill Gowan.

HALI MORELL is an actress, writer, and teacher. With a bachelor's degree in acting and a minor in creative writing, she has written and performed two semiautobiographical plays as well as a one-woman show. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Borfski Press*, *Foliage Oak Literary Magazine*, *Forge Journal*, *The Paragon Journal*, *Pendora Magazine*, *The Penmen Review*, and *Tower Journal*. Hali has attended the Santa Barbara Writers Conference and studied with Karin Gutman, Monona Wali, Mark Travis, Terri Silverman, and Frank Megna. Alongside her writing partner, she helps run memoir writing/talking council workshops called *The Missing Peace*.

RAY MORRISON'S newest collection of short stories, *I Hear the Human Noise*, is now available from Press 53, as is his debut collection of short stories, *In a World of Small Truths* (Press 53, 2012). His short stories have appeared in *Beloit Fiction Journal*, *Ecotone*, *StorySouth*, *FictionSoutheast*, *Broad River Review*, *Carve Magazine*, and others. Morrison lives in Winston-Salem, North Carolina.

KATHY NELSON is the author of two chapbooks: *Cattails* (Main Street Rag, 2013) and *Whose Names Have Slipped Away* (Finishing Line Press, 2016). Her work has appeared in *Asheville Poetry Review*, *The Cortland Review*, *Tar River Poetry*, and other print and online journals. Nelson lives in Fairview, North Carolina.

SIMON PERCHIK is an attorney whose poems have appeared in *Partisan Review*, *Forge*, *Poetry*, *Osiris*, *The New Yorker*, and elsewhere. His most recent collection is *The Gibson Poems (Cholla Needles, 2019)*. For more information, including free e-books and his essay "Magic, Illusion and Other Realities," please visit him online at simonperchik.com.

A native of Richmond, Virginia, **J. ROSS PETERS** is Head of St. George's Independent School in Memphis, Tennessee. His interests include photography, travel, hiking in the Blue Ridge Mountains, and somewhat awkward guitar picking. His first collection of poems is entitled *The Flood Is Not the River*. Additionally, he contributed the forward and the photography for his wife's book (upcoming from Punctum Press) on the Sacro Monte di Orta, a Franciscan pilgrimage site in Italy's piedmont region.

FABRICE POUSSIN teaches French and English at Shorter University. Author of novels and poetry, his work has appeared in *Kestrel*, *Symposium*, *The Chimes*, and dozens of other magazines. His photography has been published in *The Front Porch Review*, *San Pedro River Review*, as well as other publications.

OLIVIA PRIDEMORE is a multi-dimensional artist and cofounder of Silver Needle Press. Her works have appeared, or are forthcoming in, *Portland Review*, *Permafrost*, *Sand Hills*, *Bridge*, *The Ocotillo Review*, *The Raw Art Review*, *Round Table*, *Ampersand*, and elsewhere. Olivia teaches writing courses at Austin Peay State University and enjoys spending time outdoors with her two dogs.

PHILL PROVANCE is the author of the poetry chapbook, *The Day the Sun Rolled Out of the Sky* (Cy Gist, 2010), as well as the popular history, *A Brief History*

of *Woodbridge, New Jersey* (The History Press, 2019). His poetry and prose have appeared in numerous publications, including *The Baltimore Sun*, *The Crab Creek Review*, *decomp*, and many others. He has received various honors and awards, including being named a finalist for the 2017 *Crab Creek Review* Poetry Contest by judge Diane Seuss. A graduate in poetry and fiction from West Virginia Wesleyan's MFA program, he lives in Woodstock, Illinois, where he and fellow poet Allison Eir Jenks co-parent the special-est little guy ever, their son, Ledger.

GREG RAPPLEYE'S poems have appeared in *Poetry*, *The Southern Review*, *Virginia Quarterly Review*, *The North American Review*, and other literary journals. His second book of poems, *A Path Between Houses* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2000), won the Brittingham Prize in Poetry. His third book, *Figured Dark* (University of Arkansas Press, 2007), was co-winner of the Arkansas Prize and was published in the Miller Williams Poetry Series. His fourth book, *Tropical Landscape with Ten Hummingbirds*, was published in the fall of 2018 by Dos Madres Press. He teaches in the English Department at Hope College in Holland, Michigan.

JOSEPH RASH is a senior English major at Gardner-Webb University. He is from Bostic, North Carolina.

ANN HARPER REED'S first novel, *Element of Blank* (which was self-published), was well received by critics. Her writing has also appeared in *TAYO*, *Umbrella Factory*, *The MacGuffin*, and *Sou'wester Magazine*, among others. Reed has taken many writing classes and attended countless conferences, and, like many writers, collected a wealth of professional experiences that inform her work, including stints as a heli-rappeller, a pastry chef, an electrician, a factory worker, a massage therapist, a firefighter, and a schoolteacher. Reed can be found online at annharperreed.com.

CLAIRE SCOTT is an award-winning poet who has received multiple Pushcart Prize nominations. Her work has been accepted by the *Atlanta Review*, *Bellevue Literary Review*, *New Ohio Review*, *Enizagam*, and *Healing Muse*, among others. Claire is the author of *Waiting to be Called* and *Until I Couldn't*. She is the co-author of *Unfolding in Light: A Sisters' Journey in Photography and Poetry*.

MARIA SEBASTIAN is an American singer/songwriter and poet living in Clarence Center, New York. She also teaches public speaking and English in the SUNY system and plans to settle one day in Woodstock, New York. She can be found online at mariasebastian.com.

ELIZABETH CHILES SHELBURNE grew up reading, writing, and shooting in East Tennessee before graduating from Amherst College. She was a staff editor at *The Atlantic*, and her nonfiction work has appeared in *The Atlantic*, *The Boston Globe*, and *Globalpost*, among others. A graduate of Grub Street's Novel Incubator program, her first novel, *Holding On to Nothing*, from which this story is drawn, is forthcoming from Blair in October 2019. She can be found online at ecshelburne.com.

ALLEN SMITH'S work has appeared in *Asheville Poetry Review*, *Broad River Review*, *Crucible*, and *Maryland Poetry Review*, as well as in *My Diva: 65 Gay Men on the Women Who Inspire Them*, *Lovejets: Queer Male Poets on 200 Years of Walt Whitman*, and his chapbook, *Unfolding Maps*. He lives in Alexandria, Virginia, with his husband.

DUNCAN SMITH'S poem "New Ground" was a finalist in the 2017 Ron Rash Award for Poetry. Smith is a librarian living in Durham, North Carolina. He is a graduate of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill where he earned a BA in English and a MS in Library Science. "Fallout" is his first published work of fiction.

RACHEL SOBYLYA received her BA in English and history from East Tennessee State University in 2012, and she graduated from Dartmouth College's MA liberal studies program in 2015. She currently lives in Katy, Texas, where she teaches high school English. Her work has appeared in *Headstuff*, *West Texas Literary Review*, and *Gravel*, among other publications.

MATTHEW J. SPIRENG'S book *What Focus Is* was published by WordTech Communications. His book *Out of Body*, published by Bluestem Press, won the 2004 Bluestem Poetry Award. An eight-time Pushcart Prize nominee, he won *The MacGuffin's* 23rd Annual Poet Hunt (2018) and the Common Ground Review Poetry Contest (2015).

BONNIE STANARD draws on her rural upbringing and an interest in history to write novels, short stories, and poems with credits in publications such as *The American Journal of Poetry*, *Wisconsin Review*, *Harpur Palate*, *The South Carolina Review*, and *The Museum of Americana*. She has published six historical fiction novels and a children's book. She lives in South Carolina, and can be found online at bonniestanard.com.

ROSE STRODE is a poet and essayist whose work has been published in *The Gettysburg Review*, *Poet Lore*, *The Delmarva Review*, *Little Patuxent Review*, and, most recently, in *Waxwing*. She is a recipient of the Gulick Fellowship at Valparaiso University, and a student at George Mason University, where she is enrolled in the MFA program in poetry. Strode is also a volunteer gardener at a Buddhist Temple.

In addition to the *Broad River Review*, **MAX STEPHAN'S** writing has appeared in *Appalachia*, *Christian Science Monitor*, *Cimarron Review*, *Main Street Rag*, *Kestrel*, *Kerf*, *Slipstream*, *Potomac Review*, *Blueline*, and *Louisiana Review*. Currently he is wooing publishers with a manuscript entitled *Alice Said*—the first book-length collection of poems, by one author, based on mycology. For the last 20 years, Stephan has also been piloting the most comprehensive textual criticism of poet Mary Oliver to date. The foci of his research include the tedious archival processes of collecting, documenting, and analyzing Oliver's original journal publications as far back as the 1950s. The ever-growing collection of artifacts (500+) is the largest of its kind nationwide. Stephan teaches at Niagara University, specializing in contemporary American poetry. Max can be found online at maxstephan.net.

JESSICA LYNN SUCHON is the author of *Scavenger*, winner of the 2018 Vinyl 45 Chapbook Contest and forthcoming from YesYes Books in 2019. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Copper Nickel*, *Willow Springs*, *Yemassee*, *Muzzle Magazine*, and *RHINO Poetry*, among others. Her librettos have appeared or are forthcoming in works by Stephanie Ann Boyd for the Eureka Ensemble, EKMELES vocal ensemble, Æpex Contemporary Performance with the Dark Sky Project. She was a 2016 Aspen Words Emerging Writer Fellow, a finalist for the 2017 *Indiana Review* Prize, and has received nominations for Best of the Net and the Pushcart Prize. Jessica lives in Nashville with her husband, Josh Myers, and their dog, Gracie.

MARK SVENVOLD, winner of the 2018 Rash Award in Poetry, also won the 2018 Spoon River Editor's Choice Award for Poetry, selected by Li-Young Lee, and the 2018 Beyond Baroque Poetry Award, selected by Matthew Zapruder. He teaches creative writing at Seton Hall University and lives in New York City.

NANCY SWANSON is a retired educator living outside Brevard, North Carolina. Her poetry has been published in *Comstock Review*, *Chattahoochee Review*, *English Journal*, and *South Carolina Review*. She was also the 2018 winner of the Sidney Lanier Poetry Contest.

KELLY TALBOT has edited books and digital content for 20 years, previously as an in-house editor for John Wiley and Sons Publishing, Macmillan Publishing, and Pearson Education, and now as the head of Kelly Talbot Editing Services. His writing has appeared in dozens of magazines. He divides his time between Indianapolis, Indiana, and Timisoara, Romania.

JO BARBARA TAYLOR lives near Raleigh, North Carolina. Her poems, fiction and academic writing have appeared in journals, magazines and anthologies. She has published four chapbooks and most recently (2016) a full-length collection, *How to Come and Go* (Chatter House Press). She chairs the workshop committee for the North Carolina Poetry Society and leads a poetry writing 'funshop' through Duke Continuing Education.

JOHN THOMSON'S novel *A Small Boat at the Bottom of the Sea* was published by Milkweed Editions. His stories have appeared in several literary magazines, including *Collateral*, *Terrain*, *The Raven's Perch*, and others. His story "Out of Good Ground" won *Terrain's* 2018 prize for fiction. He and his wife live in Northern California, close to their two grown daughters.

RACHEL TRAMONTE lives in Cleveland, Ohio. Her work has appeared in *Bluestem Magazine*, *The Broken Plate*, *Common Ground Review*, *Door is a Jar*, *Green Hills Literary Lantern*, *Jelly Bucket*, *Slab*, *These Fragile Lilacs*, and *Third Wednesday*. She received her MA in English and creative writing from Binghamton University. She lives and writes in Cleveland, Ohio, with her partner and their two daughters.

JASON GORDY WALKER, a staff member of *Birmingham Poetry Review*, teaches English at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. His poems and stories have been published in *Measure*, *Confrontation*, *Monkeybicycle*, *Poetry South*, *Hawaii Pacific Review*, *Town Creek Poetry*, and others. Recently, he has received scholarships from the West Chester Poetry Conference and Poetry by the Sea: A Global Conference.

BRUCE ARLEN WASSERMAN assembled his first poetry manuscript at the age of seventeen. He later farmed and worked as a blacksmith and as an editor before and through graduate school. In 2016, his poem "The Wet on Milan Street" was nominated for a Pushcart Prize. In 2017, his poem "Elegy for My Father" appeared in the *Proverse Poetry Prize Anthology*, and a short story "The Almost Living" was selected as a semi-finalist for the Francine Ringold Awards for New Writers. More recent work appears the *Fredericksburg Literary and Art Review* and the *Proverse Poetry Prize Anthology, 2018*. Wasserman received an MFA from Vermont College of Fine Arts, where he served as a graduate assistant, and is a book critic for the *New*

York Journal of Books and the *Washington Independent Review of Books*. At other times, he performs as a musician in a band, trains horses on occasion, works as a dentist in clinical practice, and creates visual art as a potter. His work can be found online at brucearlenwassermanstudio.com.

C.D. WATSON is a former professional genealogist with deep roots in the Southern Appalachians and the author of nearly two dozen novels, including *Tempered* (published under the name Lucy Varna), a finalist in the 2015 Maggie Award for Excellence, sponsored by the Georgia Romance Writers.

NICHOLAS A. WHITE grew up near Charlotte, North Carolina, and graduated with a degree in civil engineering from Clemson University. He's currently an MFA candidate at the University of North Carolina Wilmington, and his stories have appeared in *Pembroke Magazine*, *Necessary Fiction*, *Prime Number Magazine*, *Main Street Rag*, *Pithead Chapel*, and other publications. White can be found online at nicholasawwhite.com.

JOHN SIBLEY WILLIAMS is the author of *As One Fire Consumes Another* (Orison Poetry Prize, 2019), *Skin Memory* (Backwaters Prize, 2019), *Disinheritance*, and *Controlled Hallucinations*. A thirteen-time Pushcart nominee, John is the winner of numerous awards, including the Philip Booth Award, *American Literary Review* Poetry Contest, Phyllis Smart-Young Prize, The 46er Prize, Nancy D. Hargrove Editors' Prize, *Confrontation* Poetry Prize, and Laux/Millar Prize. He serves as editor of *The Inflectionist Review* and works as a literary agent. Previous publishing credits include: *The Yale Review*, *Midwest Quarterly*, *Southern Review*, *Sycamore Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, *The Massachusetts Review*, *Poet Lore*, *Saranac Review*, *Atlanta Review*, *TriQuarterly*, *Columbia Poetry Review*, *Mid-American Review*, *Poetry Northwest*, *Third Coast*, and various anthologies. He lives in Portland, Oregon.

LESLIE WILLIAMS is the author of the collection *Even the Dark* (2019), winner of the Crab Orchard Series in Poetry Open Competition, and *Success of the Seed Plants*, winner of the Bellday Prize. Her work has appeared in *Poetry*, *The Kenyon Review*, *The Southern Review*, *Shenandoah*, and many other magazines.

SETH WIECK grew up on a dryland farm in a region that receives less than twenty inches of rain per year. His father counseled him to leave agriculture, so now he teaches high school literature and remodels houses. He lives in Amarillo with his wife and three children. His stories, poetry, and essays can be found in various publications, including *Narrative Magazine*, *Curator*, and *Fathom Magazine*.

NANCY H. WOMACK previously served as Dean of Arts and Sciences at Isothermal Community College in Spindale, North Carolina. She is a past winner of the North Carolina Poetry Council's James Larkin Pearson Award for Free Verse. Her poems have appeared in several journals and anthologies, including the *Broad River Review*, *Kakalak*, *The Widows' Handbook* (Kent State University Press), and *Widow's Words* (Rutgers University Press). She lives in Rutherfordton, North Carolina, where she enjoys reading, writing, gardening, and entertaining family and friends.

DAVID XIANG currently studies at Harvard College in Cambridge, Massachusetts. He started writing poetry as a freshman in high school, after attending the *Kenyon*

Review Young Writers Workshop. In 2015, he was selected as a National Student Poet, America's highest honor for youth poets. He gave his inaugural poetry reading at the White House at the invitation of former First Lady Michelle Obama, and has shared his experiences with poetry at high schools and conferences all over the nation. At Harvard, he has taken classes with Josh Bell and Jorie Graham, and is on the poetry board at *The Harvard Advocate*. He has been recently published in the *Cordite Poetry Review* and the *Bluffton Literary Journal*.

