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BROAD RIVER REVIEW

Volume 52
2020

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



BROAD RIVER REVIEW

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“One More Cup of Coffee Before I Go to the Valley Below”

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EDITORS' NOTE

Each year, the *Broad River Review* publishes a number of contest winners and select finalists. The Rash Awards in Poetry and Fiction are named in honor of Ron Rash, a 1976 graduate of Gardner-Webb University. Rash's first published poem, "Last Night Ride," appeared in the pages of this literary review the year of his graduation. Since then, Rash has worked prodigiously to become a prize-winning writer and *New York Times* bestseller.

The editors would like to thank Crystal Wilkinson and Dorianne Laux, who served as judges for the Rash Awards in Fiction and Poetry, respectively. Wilkinson selected "Lake Peigneur" by Matt Yeager, of Edmond, Oklahoma, for the fiction award, while Laux chose "Blood Mountain" by Jenn Blair, of Winterville, Georgia, as winner of the poetry award. Congratulations to both winners, who received \$500 each and publication in this 2020 issue.

Wilkinson said of Yeager's story "Lake Peigneur": "It kept floating back to me—the deft engaging opening, the history of the region and these characters' place in it, Jacob, Michael, the mystery of Loraine's death and the mystery of Michael's death, and the eloquent ending grounded in apt description of the natural world. I kept thinking about the characters and their lives and their circumstances. That's what a good story does. It makes you fall in love. It haunts you and doesn't let you go. And of course, that reveals the talent of the writer."

Laux said of Blair's poem "Blood Mountain": "This poem remembers, in fine detail, the 'peculiar roughness and grace' of parents caring for an infant, a childhood of freedoms 'thrashing Adder's tongue ferns' and tearing away spider webs. The boy also remembers the first time 'A hand smacked my jaw' and how that shock caused him to consider his 'heart and its contents.' That first wounding also propelled him into becoming a poet, cobbling 'words and shreds of thought and feeling...together with nails and pins.' The question he leaves us with is why? To what purpose? A question left unanswered but demonstrated powerfully through image, language, and memory."

We 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 February 1–April 15, 2021. Full submission information and guidelines, including profiles of the judges, will appear on our web site in January 2021.

EDITORS' NOTE

Additionally, in 2020, the Department of English at Gardner-Webb University sponsored a regional poetry contest for high school students, the Foothills Poetry Contest. Myla Athitang, of Kings Mountain High School in Kings Mountain, North Carolina, was named the winner for her poem, "Sticky Rice." Athitang received a prize and publication for her winning poem.

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 and national.

The editors offer sincere appreciation our subscribers and other supporters who have donated to us. We also thank the Department of English Language and Literature at Gardner-Webb University for its continued support, as well as university administration for its sustained financial backing of a literary magazine.

MATT YEAGER

Lake Peigneur

Winner, 2019 Rash Award in Fiction

The first time Michael was struck by lightning, he lost his shoes. Pieces clung to his feet, some charred, some melted and joined to flesh. Other parts had been scattered, strips of leather fluttering down like confetti from the Spanish moss suffocating southern Louisiana. The soles of his shoes were never found. Days after he was released from Lafayette General, his nephew, Jacob, suggested that God had taken them as payment for leaving Michael alive.

Eleven years later, Jacob was back in town for the first time in ten years. He pulled up to the Brown Brother's Funeral Home at 10:54 a.m., focusing on the time, around the hour and minute that the medical examiner estimated lightning had struck Michael for the second time in his life, killing him in his aluminum boat out on Lake Peigneur. Jacob watched the slow procession of his shambling, somber relatives flowing into the funeral home and figured that Michael might have been lucky the first time, but the second one definitely took.

The family had discussed for days why Michael was out on the water in the first place. He had to have known there was a storm overhead, he would have seen the lightning strikes on the shore. He knew being in an aluminum boat was incredibly dangerous. His motivations that day remained a mystery, although Jacob had a theory. Jacob believed Michael was looking for Lorraine.

Inside Brown Brother's, Jacob took a seat in the second row next to his mother, Rebecca. He hadn't been in a church in several years, and remembered how she used to scold him for not paying attention to the sermons. The pastor would be recounting the lessons of Job or some apostle while Jacob pretended to fish off the edge of the pew. He had fashioned a makeshift pole out of a pencil and some loose thread from his sweater, and was trying to reel in "the big one" that darted between the legs of the church parishioners.

"Jacob," he remembered Rebecca whispering, confiscating his rod and reel, "stop flailing your hands around like that. People will think there's something wrong with you."

There, in Brown Brother's, Jacob didn't fish. His hands were neatly placed atop his mother's, to keep them from trembling. The services had merely started and Jacob already knew there'd be trouble. He had sensed it

from the moment he walked into the chapel. Michael had never been much of a God-fearing man, neither was he particular on sentimentality or fond-remembrances. Jacob patiently listened to the pastor, wincing every time he heard something like, “Michael’s gone home,” or, “he’s with Jesus now.” Jacob prayed there wouldn’t be a slideshow. When the lights dimmed and he heard the projector’s hum behind him, he knew that Michael wouldn’t be caught dead at a funeral like this.

* * *

The last time Jacob and Michael had gone fishing together was shortly after he was released from the hospital and just before he had decided to go back to roughnecking that sent him around the country. He had little time to fish after that. The morning of that last fishing trip, Michael had recovered all he had the patience to do, and desperately wanted to get back to the smell of lake water.

Rebecca had just sat down to read *The Odyssey* when the doorbell rang. Twelve year-old Jacob rushed into the room with his backpack. He was wearing a pair of thick canvas shorts and a yellow t-shirt, his thick, black hair half-combed into a hung-over Elvis pompadour. He held the strap of his bag in one hand and a fishing pole in the other.

“You look ready.”

“I packed my stuff last night. Uncle Mike said we were going to a new fishing spot today, somewhere different,” Jacob replied.

“Knowing Michael it’ll probably be some bubbling swamp no one’s ever heard of. Hope you have some bug spray in there.”

Rebecca opened the door, peering out at her brother. Michael had his back turned, looking up at the morning sky, his scraggly blonde hair lying across his collar like a cat stretching its paws.

“Good fishing day, from what I can see. Hint of rain in the air but not enough that it’s gonna drench us. Fish like that.”

“Morning, Michael,” Rebecca said.

“Morning, Becka,” Michael replied, turning around. “Boy ready yet?”

Rebecca glanced behind, “I think he went to get some bug spray. Where are you two headed today?”

“Now, I can’t tell you that, then you’d know my secret fishing spots.”

“Fair enough,” Rebecca replied, “know when you might make it back home?”

“Hell if I know. When we get tired of fishing and come back. Sometime before midnight, I imagine.”

“That sounds about right.” Rebecca stepped onto the front porch. “I’m surprised you’re going out fishing again, so soon I mean, all things considered. You’ve only been out of the hospital for what, three weeks?”

Michael grinned. “Hell, been nearly four. It’ll take more than one bolt of lightning to do me in. Take at least two, I’d bet.”

Jacob grabbed a can of bug spray from the kitchen, stuffed it into a side pocket of his backpack and slung a strap over his shoulder.

“Hey, Uncle Mike! I’m ready to go.”

Michael messed Jacob’s hair. “Well, let’s get on then.” He waved to Rebecca in the doorway as they left. “Hey Jacob, think we can catch a fish uglier than you?”

“You’re ugly!”

“Never said I wasn’t.”

Rebecca lingered in the doorway, watching the two stow Jacob’s fishing pole and climb into Michael’s truck.

* * *

During the hymnals, near the end of Michael’s funeral, Jacob thumbed through a few lake pictures his uncle had given him several years earlier. Most of the photos were of the lake, taken during the Lake Peigneur sinkhole disaster, where the water churned and swirled like Charybdis had found a new home. Michael was in a few of the pictures, as well as one with a woman Jacob didn’t recognize. His uncle had told him her name was Lorraine, but in the one picture Jacob had of her, he couldn’t see her face.

* * *

Michael breathed in the heavy, lake air as if he’d sorely missed it. The two set up their chairs and ice chest on the tip of Jefferson Island, its long arm jutting out into Lake Peigneur like a finger, as if the land were trying to close its fist around the deep, salty water.

“Are you paying attention?” Michael asked some forty minutes later after casting their lines.

“Yes,” Jacob replied without looking.

“You should be looking at the thing you’re paying attention to, boy.”

Jacob turned his head and peered out over the water, past the wide ring of ripples around a bobber. He sat Indian-style with his hands in his lap, his back curved more than proper posture should allow. Flecks of pollen peppered his hair as though he had just taken a tumble through the tall, bluestem grass. His fishing pole lay beside him, the hook and line entangled in the lakeside reeds.

“See, when you’re casting—well, it’s how you do it that you do it right. It’s easy to land your line right up near the bank, and then you run the risk of getting all tied up in the reeds and pickerelweed,” Michael said, gesturing towards Jacob’s tangled line, “Hell trying to get that all loose. But you might cast it too far out, over in the deeper, cool water where the fish you’re baited for don’t swim. Depends too on what kind of reel you’re using, and the gauge of—dammit boy, look here!”

Jacob turned his attention back to Michael to see his uncle cast a line, the hook landing precisely where Michael had said it should. Jacob watched the bobber nodding in the water and waited.

“What’s pickle weed?”

“What’s what now?”

“You said the line can get caught in pickle weed.”

Michael reached to the cooler and grabbed a beer before sitting in the new orange-and-red lawn chair the two had bought on the way to the lake.

“Oh, pickerelweed. No, it’s not pickles. Just sounds like pickles.”

Jacob fidgeted in the grass, pulling up handfuls and letting it fall down to the surface of the water. The blades of grass spun like compass needles on the slight ripples at the bank.

“How long do we have to wait?”

Michael smiled. “Well, that’s the question, isn’t it? That’s not up to us, how long we wait for the fish. He’ll come around when he’s hungry. It’s our job to be ready for him when he does.”

Jacob lay back against the ground.

“So we don’t do anything but sit here?”

“You can pick up your pole and cast a line of your own, if you want.”

Jacob sighed and sat up. He thought about fish swimming in the lake, darting around hooks and bobbers to snatch up the minnows wriggling through the weeds.

“Uncle Mike?”

Michael tugged on his line, teasing the hook through the water.

“You should have gone before we got out here.”

“No, it’s not that.” Jacob hesitated, “my mom told me that you went to jail once. Is that true?”

Michael reeled in his line and cast again.

“Tell you that, did she? She say what for?”

“No.”

Michael nodded. “I’m surprised. Seems like she goes on about me to everybody she meets. Most everybody around here knows the story, and

most of them heard it from her. When we were growing up together, wasn't nothing I could do that she wouldn't go run off and tell somebody. Biggest damn mouth on a woman I've ever known."

"What story?"

Michael checked what remained in his beer then threw the empty can behind him.

"Yeah, I was in jail once. I wasn't convicted of nothing, but when you're charged with something they put you in jail unless you can pay to get yourself out. I couldn't pay, so I had to sleep in a cell for a couple weeks."

"What did they say you did?"

Michael set down his rod, even though his line remained in the water. Jacob began to untangle his own line from the reeds.

"Someone I cared about, someone who I thought cared about me, she went missing one day, and the police thought I had something to do with it."

"What was her name?"

"Lorraine," Michael replied, "she and me used to fish out here all the time, almost every day."

"Where did she go?"

"Nobody knows. She just up and left without telling anyone. The police picked me up, said they suspected that I had something to do with her disappearing. I had my police interview and they never could find any evidence that proved nothing. Let me go." Michael picked up his rod, reeled in his line, and cast again. "Damn right, too. I told those people I had nothing to do with her leaving and that was true. That woman never cared about me. They never did find out where she went, though. She's probably a long ways away, shacking up with some other fella." Jacob freed his fishing line from the reeds and began to bait it. "Anyway, that's grown-up stuff. Ain't nothing you need to worry about. Yeah I was in jail for a bit, but I didn't do nothing bad to end up there."

"Oh. Okay, uncle Mike."

Michael and Jacob continued fishing until the sun hung so low in the sky that the lake obscured half of it. Jacob smiled, thinking that it looked like an orange split open and spilling juice across the floor. They packed up and left with just a sliver of daylight remaining, not having caught a single fish all day.

* * *

On the way to the gravesite, Jacob told his mother all the different ways Michael would have hated his own funeral. She laughed hard at some things and less so at others, seeing as how she had organized most of the services herself. Jacob seemed to have forgotten that part.

“Maybe we should have had the service out on the lake, or at least draped some fishing nets across the casket,” Rebecca said.

Jacob smiled. “Now you’re talking. Remember that charity auction dinner Aunt Mary threw and Michael showed up in waders?”

“He smelled like bass,” Rebecca said, laughing, “I remember I caught him at the door and said, ‘Get out of here, Michael, you smell like fish!’ and he replied, ‘I smell like bass. Get it right’.”

“He tried to get a plate of hors d’oeuvres,” Jacob continued, “and Aunt Mary caught him by the hand, saying, ‘You get your ass out of my dinner right now, Mike!’ and he just threw his plate in the air, yelling, ‘I paid my door fee, woman! I should be allowed to eat!’”

“Aunt Mary treated him like a rotten fish until the day she died,” Rebecca added, “never let him eat again, not while she was around.”

A few minutes passed in silence before Rebecca said, “He smelled like bass.”

* * *

On the drive away from Peigneur the evening of their last fishing trip, Michael took the long way home. The road, really no more than a clearing through the trees, had been topped with gravel more than once and concealed potholes that rocked the truck’s old suspension like depth charges. Michael always drove too fast, especially at night, and a treacherous gravel road wasn’t about to change that. Jacob held the door with his right hand, while his left kept him from tumbling all around the bench seat of the truck.

The windows were down and the sweet, wet Louisiana air mixed with Michael’s secondhand smoke. Jacob could see the cherry flickering between his uncle’s fingers like an angry firefly. He could tell Michael’s hands were mottled with dirt, even in the darkness. The only thing he could smell was lake water.

“That’s alright, you know,” Michael said, “some days you’re just shit out of luck.” His expression changed, as if he had made a mistake and hoped his nephew hadn’t noticed.

“I don’t mind. I like the fishing part. I like the fish part too, but the fishing is the fun part.”

Michael reached over and ruffled Jacob’s hair. “Hell, boy, I’ll make a fisherman out of you yet.”

The truck bounded across a trench and rolled up onto the highway towards town. Jacob glanced over to see the branching, raised scar that spread across Michael’s forearm. His mother had told him it was a Lichtenberg scar, caused when the electricity burst the blood vessels inside Michael’s arm. It looked like lightning beneath his skin.

“Uncle Mike?”

“Mmm.”

“Do you ever think about her? Lorraine, I mean. Do you still miss her sometimes?”

Michael took a long drag from his cigarette, sucking the cherry down so near his fingertips that he had to flick the butt out the window.

“Me and Lorraine, we went way back. I met her when I was not much older than you are now. Pretty girl, that one. Not a knockout like some of the girls in town, but there was something about Lorraine, something that you just couldn’t get off your mind, you know? She was special.”

Jacob nodded.

“Oh sure, we had our problems, that went both ways. But we were in love and there wasn’t nothing that could have changed that. Now, you ask me why she left, and I don’t have an answer. Maybe she got tired of this town. Maybe she got tired of me. One day you might meet a girl, you think she’s just another mess of curls and perfume, but even after she’s gone she stays with you. Some girls are like that. You think you’re past all that nonsense, then she’ll show up in a dream one night and ruin your whole damn week.”

“I bet she’s still out there, and she’ll come back someday,” Jacob said.

Michael smiled, keeping his eyes ahead of the truck. “You ever hear the story of that lake? Peigneur. Your mom ever tell you what happened there?”

“No.”

“Used to be a lot smaller, you know, about six years ago. Maybe a quarter as big as it is now. Hell, whole thing was ten feet deep at most. Damn near could just up and walk across it.”

“Did you fish it, back then?”

“Yeah, me and Lorraine” Michael replied, “course the fish are different now.”

“How did it get bigger?”

“Oil company was drilling into the lake and accidentally poked a hole in a salt mine underground. Caused the whole lake to just drain out like a bathtub, boats and trees and buildings all sucked down to Hell. The water was swirling down for a few days while more water was pulled in from the Gulf by the canal. Changed the whole thing from freshwater to saltwater.”

Jacob glanced out the window at the fat, white moon listing low above the tree line. Its reflection on the water rippled outward in arcs, as though it were being pulled from the sky.

“I didn’t hear about that.”

“Yeah, I bet you didn’t. You were only about two at the time.” Michael placed a cigarette between his lips but didn’t light it. “Anyway, the lake’s some 200 feet deep now and about a thousand square acres large.” He paused, as if he were trying to remember something. “Some of the boats and barges pulled down into the water never came back up, you know, just—disappeared.”

“That must have been scary,” Jacob said.

Michael switched the radio on, lighting a cigarette and accelerating on the highway. “It was long enough that damn near everybody went down to see it. I got some pictures back at the house. I’ll show them to you sometime.”

Jacob waited for Michael to continue, but after a few minutes it was obvious the question he had asked would unanswered.

The two had dinner at Turk’s Country Store on the way home. Michael ordered baskets of fried catfish for the both of them, “Might as well catch some kind of fish today, anyhow!” he said to the cook, grinning and giving Jacob a shove.

* * *

When the coroner’s report came back, the official cause of death was “drowning and other indeterminate factors.” The police report suggested that Michael’s aluminum boat had been struck by lightning, electrocuting him and sending him tumbling into the salty water of Lake Peigneur. His body did not show any signs of paralysis, however, and it was left undetermined why Michael did not make more of an effort to clamber back into his boat. It was the family’s belief that Michael had been too drunk, hit his head or in some other way become incapacitated.

Before he left town, a few days after the funeral, Jacob made one last trip out to Lake Peigneur, all the way out to the tip of Jefferson Island. He had his uncle’s pictures with him, stashed in a coat pocket. Before the sunlight could quit on him, Jacob held each of the pictures up against the lake, trying to position the landmarks around the frames so they would create a seamless image. The last picture, with Lorraine and the turbulent waters of the Lake Peigneur sinkhole disaster behind her, lined up perfectly with the trees on the shore and even the cloud cover above Jacob. When he lowered the photo, the lake behind it was calm and still, the soft lapping of the waves against the bank like far off thunder.

JENN BLAIR

Blood Mountain

Winner, 2019 Rash Award in Poetry

Those first puzzling mornings
and evenings someone else
washed and carried my body,
a peculiar roughness and grace
in their movements, as if they
were privy to my pain but also
must make me understand that
the day's demands continued.
So I learned to be still. In fits.
As a boy I tore over the hills,
ripping branches from trees
then pressing fresh victims
to murder, toppling over rocks
where white grub-worms cowered,
thrashing Adder's tongue ferns
til they bled, tearing away the
jagged swaths of silk black
and yellow garden spiders wove
in the dense abdomens of their
intricate webs, delighting (as only
a child can) in failure. The first
time a hand smacked my jaw
I sunk to the ground, forced
to, for the first time, consider
my heart and its contents.
Then one night, the fool's dream.
That I could take some scraps
of word and shreds of thought
and feeling, cobbling them
together with nails and pins
into a startling new arrangement,
but whether that was to make
men and women glad that they
had lived upon the earth or merely

JENN BLAIR

fashion a name for myself I hardly
dared to look into, my hot brain
spinning wide in a pent up valley
with sides so steep, I barely noticed
the light already going. Ringing round
every honest object. Asking it to speak.

MYLA ATHITANG

Sticky Fingers

Winner, 2020 Foothills Poetry Contest

Dried white crumbs, crackle and bare,
Sticky grains in tangled, battered hair;
Red dirt crusted under beds of nails,
Where the gunshots fire and the river wails;
Rubber soles hang on the little girl's feet,
Choked on humidity and scalding heat;

Sun-dried fish, salty and sharp,
Rainfall seeping through the tattered tarp;
A hunger that growls as loud as the hills,
Silent breaths and a mouth full of pills;
Tiny toes dipped into pitch-black shallows,
Distant patrol boats, floating gallows;

Knee-deep in darkness, blinded by the light,
Two distant worlds under the same night;
One foot stepped in front of the other,
And arms wrapped tightly around the mother;
The Mekong River, tar-like and deep,
Little child hushed, not a sound or a weep;

Breaking the surface, head bobbing the waters,
Surrounded by peers, parents, sons, and daughters;
Silhouettes of death, eyes dark and blind,
Their figures bold, uniformed, defined;
But, as our sacred feet return to skid the floor,
We escaped our prison, the land lost in war;

Soft and sweet; white and steamy,
Refugee camps with eyes so dreamy;
Kids with laughter, so innocent and pure,
Their eyes glossed over with promise and lure;
Distant gunfire ceased to exist,
On the land of hope, too hard to resist;

MYLA ATHITANG

Yet, delicate fingers graze the dirt,
No longer scratched, scarred, bruised, or hurt;
Kissed the land that gave them life,
Conflicted by men who gave them strife;
Grainy, soggy mud that covered their hand,
Unable to let go of the home upon land;

Although, we're patient people, who are grateful for our givings,
For a new home of freedom, our bright new beginnings;
When sticky rice comes cold, hardened, and filling,
We savor the bittersweetness our lives have been clinging.

JAMES ADAMS

There's a Lime Lying

—for Iris Rosencwajg

There's a lime, lying
in my wall—
on a table
 like a picture
in my hall.

The sun walnuts the light light green
to twinned rotundas open
voice verdant, in an incandescent sheen
glistening to the littered juice.

White spokes divide
its ranked fruit and bittered meat
staring in open triangles
from last knife's curled skin's
loose.

There's a lime, lying
in its halves—
on my table
 in a picture
on my wall.

JEFFREY ALFIER

Granite County Pastoral

Light breaks into open fields, over the Clark Fork
where cutthroat slide deep into currents.
Footpaths scoured by storms down to stone
trail uncertainly over dusty, radiant miles,
past faltered barns that show their mottled ribs,
crossroads to shuttered mines eaten by wildflowers.
Crows in coveys follow tractors to the borders of fields
soaked bright with sun. Hawks bank hard
to make sense of wind, eyeing the world in hunger.
Houses are blushed with overgrowth. The congested scent
of barns shuttered too long — padlocks gleaming in the sun,
paint etched away in wind — front thorn-twisted fences
winding through worked earth, ground rustling
with the ghostleaves of last winter.
You hear water over river stones, the rush of wings,
everything a glaze shaken in the sun,
wind sharpened cold by the raw bite of river.

Late in the day, a child skips through the shadows
of her backyard. Tonight, the mercury
will drop that yard into false autumn.
A stranger, broken down, will tap insistently
on the heavy bolted door of a farmhouse,
his face nearly visible on the dusty pane.

TOBI ALFIER

The Solace of Arizona

Mama's anger still blooms from the kitchen.
Papa frozen, head down, deserves it all.
I make a run for the squish of swamp-mud
calm between my toes. I can hear mama
as she peels the wallpaper with her voice.
He claims he can't even recall her name,
but the stink of cheap perfume says it all.
Another morning after dark payday—

The fluttering lacework of wind-swept trees
and shadows of birds as they catch the breeze
are calming, along with the here-and-there
splash of a fish, safe from anyone's hook.
The distant rumble of a passenger
train reminds me— it won't be long before
I will be on that train. I have an aunt,
she lives somewhere west in Arizona,

and although the spring lights and early dusks
will bring uncertain and strange times for me,
no evening storms will mark the night outside
my window, and no calming mud will cool
my feet, the nights will not be shipwrecked by
sleeplessness, no kitchen fights on brilliant
sun-lit dawns, I will have the blessed chance
once more to learn to love the smell of rain.

DEVON BALWIT

Vintage Photo

Who they are is as lost as the landscape,
a patch of field, no landmarks, apart from
their love, planted like the stick that marks
the center of the world, the door to dreamtime.

They hug on a stone pile, but neither looks
put off by edges, no metaphor there for hard
times to come or buried troubles. These
are hearty folk. He grips her with his big
hands, and she grips back, used to slinging
bales and tugging udders. She knows
what goes on in a barnyard. It makes her
laugh. Nor does she fear a well-whet knife
across the jugular. That's where chops
come from and the bacon whose fat-spatter
pulls one from between warm sheets
on frozen mornings. The story's
in her frank gaze. This is her forever.
He feels her certainty. It stirs him.

ACE BOGGESS

Shadow People

“Where the commissary is, that used to be the morgue,” said C.O. Bennett, his mostly bald head sparkling as one of the florescent bulbs flickered. His chest-out posture and hooked nose reminded me of Sam Eagle on *The Muppet Show*. “So, yeah, I’ve seen things.” It was a crapshoot with Bennett, who could be a hard-ass C.O. one day, lazy and lenient the next. We had to be careful with him, try not to set him off. If we could get him talking, things seemed to go better for us. “Felt things, too,” he said. “I got shoved one time. Nearly fell backward. It was like I ran into a wall.” He paused, looked away, then back. “Another time, I swear it felt like somebody pinched me on the...” He cleared his throat. “...pinched me on the ass.”

I laughed. Couldn’t help it. The joke came out before I heard it in my head. “That was probably Ms. Zita lurking in the shadows.” Ms. Zita was the eighty-year-old woman who ran the commissary. Nice lady. Almost immobile. Hard to picture her having a frisky sex life, but now that I had, I couldn’t put it aside. “Come on, Bennett. You know she wants you.”

Bennett blushed, grinned. For all the bad things about him, at least he had a sense of humor. That couldn’t be said for most of the guards at Boone County Correctional. A lot of them took their newfound power seriously. They snarled and grimaced. They loomed. They gritted their teeth in spite. The worst of them stalked us like we were foxes and they the hounds, the riders, or maybe the rifles. Not Bennett. He had the aw-shucks laugh of a goofy sidekick from some black-and-white fifties’ sitcom. When his embarrassment cooled, he loosed those chuckles, sounding like a slick fish flopping on the shore. “Supposed to be a secret,” he said. “How’d you know we was making out behind the Little Debbie cakes?”

This time, my cheeks warmed. I hadn’t expected him to take the joke and run with it. “Hell no, Bennett. That’s not right. I’ll never be able to look at a Nutty Buddy the same way again.”

“If we had more time, I’d let her ride me on a bed of cheese puffs.”

I feigned disgust and looked away so I wouldn’t see it if he started to thrust and gyrate the way some guys do when they talk about sex. This conversation had gone too far now, but I needed to keep it going. My job was to distract Bennett while my cellmate Arn was in one of the other cages having his ex’s name inked into a flaming skull on his bicep. Everyone knew I handled Bennett pretty well. I could get him riffing on any topic: sci-fi

movies, James Patterson novels, President Obama, the escaped drug lord who had been on the news for the past few weeks. The C.O. enjoyed talking, and I suspected that no one really let him. Once he started going off, I could keep him in front of my cage for an hour, having forgotten that he had meant to walk the POD.

“And you wondered why those bags are filled with more dust than puff. You know they don’t come that way from the store.”

I stared at him, pretending to be speechless while I thought up a reply.

“Want to know what she’s like?” he said.

“No,” I said.

“She’s like...”

“No,” I said again.

“...one of those...”

“Stop!”

“...gloves you all use for lifting weights.”

“Too much information,” I said.

“All cracked and sweaty.”

I had to shut him up. “You know what, Bennett?”

“What?” he said.

“Ms. Zita’s a real sweet lady. Hearing you talk about her like that, all I can say is, well, good for her. She deserves a little joy in her life, whatever’s left of it. Having a strapping young man like you in her bed—well, young to her—that makes me kind of happy.”

There was a pause between us as we stared each other down. It had a tension to it, as if Bennett’s mood could go either way. Every second felt like the time between that moment when two cons decide they hate each other and when they throw fists, while all of us squeeze our shoulders tighter and stand there like walls refusing to step back or let in air.

The C.O. broke first, then my laughter joined his. He bent over as though his gut muscles tore, then actually slapped his knee. “Mr. Arbutus, you kill me,” he said.

I help up my palms as if to calm the situation. “Whoa, whoa, Bennett. Take that back. I don’t need you writing me up for murdering a C.O. Wait, is that even a rule?”

He squinted as he thought about it. I knew he had the inmate rulebook memorized and loved to threaten us with violations of obscure policies. “Come to think of it,” he said, “it’s not in the book.”

“It’s okay, then, right? We’re good?”

“Wise guy,” he said.

“Just curious is all. You know, for future reference.”

He glanced at his wristwatch as though he suddenly remembered he had forgotten to do something, but didn't recall what. This was a natural place for the conversation to end. I'd have to work harder to get him to stay put.

When the cops came for me, I was sitting in my little blue Ford Escort, staring out the passenger's-side window at the front of an apartment building. My friend Doug had gone in there ten or fifteen minutes ago. I knew what he was doing: dropping off some meth that he cooked in an abandoned trailer off Route 60 out past the old Waffle House. I didn't think he'd be stupid enough to sell to an informant wearing a wire, though. But I was stupid, too, not realizing that when I gave him a lift, I committed a crime the same as if I dealt those drugs myself.

I didn't do meth, or pain pills, or cocaine. I tried ecstasy once, but I didn't like it. It made me want to touch people, which left me feeling hopeless because there was no one in the bar that night to touch. I hung out in small country-western bars where three or four folks twice my age sat around nursing tap beer in mason jars as Hank William (Sr.) screeched from the jukebox. Not the right place to do X. Good place to drink, though. That was my thing. I liked George Dickel—an inherited taste from my grandfather. Whiskey was a nice, safe drug—one not likely to run me afoul of the law as long as I didn't drive home afterward.

That said, the knock on my Ford's window more than startled me, jerking me out of my trance. I turned to see eight police officers wearing camouflage vests. They stood in the middle of the street with weapons aimed at me. If I had looked back the other way, I would've seen another ten officers heading into the building to collect Doug.

The nearest officer motioned for me to roll my window down. I hit the button, and before the glass lowered all the way, he said, “Put your hands on the steering wheel and keep them where I can see them. No sudden movements.”

I did as instructed, too numb to speak.

The officer reached in and unlocked my door, which he opened without lowering his gun. “Any weapons in the vehicle?”

“No, Sir,” I said, or thought I did, my voice so faint that I might have imagined it.

He leaned forward and grabbed my arm. “Exit the vehicle slowly.”

I did and was thrown roughly to the ground. I grunted and tasted concrete as my hands were bound behind my back.

“You’re under arrest for delivery of a controlled substance. Methamphetamine.”

“I didn’t...”

“We watched you pull up. We watched your pal get out and go inside. We’ve been waiting for you behind those trees for an hour. Everything your pal said and did inside the apartment is on tape. I’m going to read you your rights now.”

While he did that, I wasn’t listening. All I could think about was how inept Doug and I must have been, not to have seen eighteen police officers hiding in a copse of trees no larger than a gas-station parking lot. What a fine pair of criminals we made.

“Do you understand these rights?” he said.

“I...” I stopped, gagging on the taste of dirt, gravel, and old motor oil.

“Do you understand?” he said.

I grunted a word that might have been yes.

At that moment, I heard Doug shouting obscenities as the cops brought him out the front door. Something about the officers’ mothers, I think. Doug never understood that remaining silent was more than a right; it was generally good advice.

If Bennett figured out what I was doing, he could’ve written me up for compromising an officer, a class-I violation which carried a possible loss of good time. I did what I could not to let on, because I intended to go home in about three months. I had pleaded my case down from the delivery charge to conspiracy, which carried five years flat. In West Virginia, half the sentence got shaved off the top for good time. As long as I didn’t lose any, my two and a half years would be up.

Still, I promised I’d keep Bennett occupied as long as possible. Before he went off on that tangent about Ms. Zita and the cheese puffs, I had asked, “Hey, Bennett, you ever see anything, you know, *spooky* in here?” It was all I could think of at the time.

Bennett stopped at my cage and stared at me, eyeballs straining over the tiny glasses that barely clung to his nose. His lips quivered, then relaxed. “This whole town’s spooky,” he said. “It’s a ghost town.” He laughed at his own joke.

“I’m not talking about Rock Haul, West-by-God Virginia, Bennett. I mean right *here*...in the prison.”

“You want to know if the prison’s haunted?” he said. “I assumed you already found out the answer to that on your own.”

“So, is it? Haunted, I mean?”

“Yeah, yeah it is.” He explained about the commissary and yucked it up.

Time to get him back to the real story. “Seriously, you experienced all that?”

He sucked in a breath as if about to sigh, holding it as he nodded. He looked like a plastic canary pecking at its stand. “I’m not the only one. We’ve had officers quit because they said they saw stuff.”

“What kind of stuff?”

“Mists and shadow people. C.O. Burgess on the Security Team called a lockdown once because he thought he caught one of you guys trying to escape. He said he spotted a man clear as day on the video monitor. He was wearing the prison khakis and everything. Problem is, the guy he thought he saw was inside a locked sally port. When Sgt. Ventura went back and watched the video, he didn’t see nothing.”

“That’s crazy,” I said.

Bennett shrugged with his lips. “Meh,” he said. “The sergeant didn’t give him any guff about it. He’s seen things, too. But you’ll have to ask him about that. You didn’t hear it from me.”

“Got you.”

“Just like you didn’t hear how Sgt. Ventura screamed and ran out of the armory one night when he saw a kid in there.”

“What, like a...?”

“Like a *kid*,” Bennett said. “A flesh-and-blood kid. Only, he vanished when Sgt. Ventura took one step toward him.”

“Ain’t that some shit?” I said.

“Like I said, you didn’t hear that from me.”

“So, if commissary was the morgue, what was the armory?”

Bennett took on a wide-eyed, intentionally-creepy look as if telling tales around a campfire. “The A.W. Arthur Pediatrics Wing,” he said. From the wink he gave, I thought he might have been screwing with me. “Bunch of cancer kids. Lot of cancer around the mines when they were up and running. You got all the chemicals they used to use, and you got the acid drainage still oozing out from the abandoned shafts. The streams have been a mess for decades. Used to be folks would straight-pipe their sewage right into the creeks. Still a little of that out in the hollers. You get out of here, you head over to Jamison’s Run. You’ll see. Nastiest creek I ever witnessed. It’s sort of nightcrawler brown most of the way, but when it breaks around a rock, you’ll see streaks of orange from the mine drainage going one way and greenish yellow from the—well, you know—going the other.”

“That’s gross, Bennett. Why’d you tell me that? I’m gonna have nightmares about that shit.”

“But not the ghosts?” he said.

“Don’t believe in ghosts.”

“Then why we talking about all this?”

“Curious, that’s all. I heard stuff. People talking. They said what you said about the morgue. Doesn’t mean I believe any of it. Wanted to know what you knew. Thought you might have some insights.”

“Well, you should believe it,” he said.

“Why’s that?”

“You’re living on POD 2C.”

“So?”

“You never asked what POD 2C used to be?”

“Okay, I’ll bite. What was it?”

“Sanitorium.”

“What’s that mean?” I asked.

“TB ward. All kinds of tuberculosis cases when the mines were booming. A lot of folks that ended up in the morgue spent their dying time here. If there’s a ghost in this prison, you’re gonna see it face to face.”

My friend Doug blew himself up while he was out on bond. He couldn’t wait to get back to that abandoned trailer and cook more meth. He never told me how it did it, but I gathered from news reports that he had some sort of shake-and-bake lab set up. He skipped a step, let the pressure get too high, or knowing Doug, decided to smoke a cigarette while the trailer was full of gas. One second he was there; the next, he was everywhere.

I heard about it on the news while stuck in court-mandated pretrial rehab. That felt weird enough. People around me worked their twelve-step programs, discussed all the wrongs they did to others, and invoked their higher powers, begging to be guided away from temptation, and there I was, saying, “I’m Terry A., and I tried X once. I didn’t like it.” I guess I could’ve talked about my alcohol problem, but it had nothing to do with my charges and never got me in any trouble, so really I had no problem with *that* problem.

When I saw the news about Doug, it was after I sat through an hour’s worth of this surfer-looking counselor explaining to our first-step class what the word ‘powerless’ meant, while I shook my head and tried to stay awake. When it ended, I went out to the smoking area and bummed a USA Gold off an older woman with an oxycodone habit. I filled my lungs, then headed into the dayroom to search for something on TV. The noon news was on, and

the first thing I heard was the short, dark-haired reporter mentioning Doug's name. "Pratt was out on bond after an arrest last month on distribution charges," she said. "Neighbors were startled by the three-a.m. explosion, which rattled windows and spewed a chemical scent into the air. The ones we interviewed said they had no idea there was a meth lab practically in their back yard."

My first reaction: I wanted to call the TV station and say, "Bullshit." That trailer had five hundred feet of trees between it and anybody's back yard. But yellow journalism was a scapegoat for me. It kept me from facing the real story: my childhood friend Douglas Pratt had turned himself into a bottle rocket, whistling through the sky and ending with a loud, unwelcome pop. I hadn't even gotten the chance to tell him, "Fuck you for getting me arrested, Doug." He beat his charges and left me to take the rap for both of us.

If I were to see a ghost, it would've been Doug. It'd be just like him to follow me all the way to the penitentiary. But if that happened, it meant I was haunted, not the prison.

Yet Bennett swore the place kept phantoms as if they were pets. He said the warden heard screaming once when no one was being beaten. A city councilwoman asked whose adorable child she had seen playing jacks outside the armory, though of course no one brought their kids to work at a place like this. Then there were those shadow people that employees saw at their peripherals. Bennett said the only person he knew who hadn't seen them was Ms. Zita. "But she's almost blind in one eye," he said, "and she never senses cold spots like the rest of us because she says she's always freezing on the inside."

I had stalled Bennett for forty-five minutes, letting him tell ghosts stories. That was long enough. He could do his cell checks now. If Arn's tattoo wasn't finished, someone else would be down there to yell "Fire!" and warn the artist to hide his gear. The most Bennett would see would be a blur at his peripherals.

We were the shadow people here: insignificant phantasms that staffers secretly were afraid of, but laughed about when they thought none of us were listening. The cons were the chain-rattlers, fiends with foul breath stinking up the night. That included me. I gave a friend a ride once, and I was an honorary ghoul because of it. The khaki prison uniform made monsters of us all.

ROY BENTLEY

A Good Kind of Leaving

A bunch of us young guys (four, counting me)
hit upon the odd notion of driving to New Mexico

from Ohio. We were in high school, and would be
in *immense* trouble. Nevertheless, we packed a car:

my mother's '64 Ford Galaxie with bald tires and
an AM radio on the Galaxie's curving dashboard.

"A Hard Rain's a-Gonna Fall" warned of Slaughter,
fallout from ICBMs the hard rain under discussion—

woozy with adrenalin, I drove all night that first
night-into-morning. Saw shapes in the headlights:

tiny drive-ins in the glow of the beams: screens
showing sci-fi films—lots of flying saucers and

death-dealing by untransfigured alien militaries.
There would be consequences for our truanancies,

if we went back at all. We wouldn't be driving.
There'd be penalty buzz-cuts for the long-hairs.

Questions as to mental health, the consensus
that there was something not-right about us—

I remember Texas going on and on, opening
a forever-highway of dark-then-light while

the AM radio played Dylan and birds with
foreign-sounding songs started and America,

betrayed of souls young and old, and of birds,
sold its sweet apostasies from the billboards.

L. R. BERGER

A Long and Overdue Letter to Wendell Berry

I needed what was lost,
although I love as well
the flow that took it...

—Wendell Berry, Sabbath Poems 2008 III

This morning in a late Adirondack September, I walked the mile path to the lake through the woods, your Sabbath poems in the pocket of my old denim jacket. When I say, old, you can rest assured I'm pledged to words keeping faith with their actual meanings, these pockets have weathered hands and paperbacks curled and stuffed into them through decades of constitutionals.

I know it by heart, the trail's rises and bends: a rutted, stone-studded passage of filtered light and layers of shadow. And I know how it ends, suddenly, spilling you out, the wide eye of the lake startling no matter you knew what was coming.

When I get there I usually sit cross-legged on the bank until my rear can't take being any sorer. I read to the lake whatever mood it's in: wind-riffed, rain-pocked, tranquil glassy sky-mirror. But this morning a motorboat was tied to the nearby boathouse slip.

It had been sitting unriden long enough for the spiders to have accomplished weaving their embodied sermons on interconnection; pail to wheel, wheel to bow, bow to port, port to pail. Their day to day work refuting the gospel of private and property. So I pulled the boat and its vinyl

stuffed seat toward me, climbed in and floated guiltless in its welcoming hull. I dispatched your poems to the then silent loons, the teeming lake and the crow's unfettered accompaniment. I read to the venerable turning trees and ever greens and all the lives they go on sheltering here.

Of course, stepping into the liling boat I wasn't thinking about the getting out, which reminds me of a hike

I climbed in these woods with the poet, Eve Merriam.
Did you know her? We met when youth was ripening in me
and death was ripening in her but she wasn't telling anybody.
We headed up Lookout Trail, picnicked and took in the peak.

On the way down it was getting dark when we began
reassuring each other— this juncture, no that, must be the trail
we'd climbed in on. It was a good hour of restraint
before one of us uttered the word, lost. I remember her
saying later within sight of the trailhead, The woods,
like everything. So easy to get into so hard to get out.

Meantime the wind had whipped up, the boat knocking
harder when I decided I'd better get out. I was lower
than the slip the boat was tied to, so had to pull
and grasp the slip, maneuvering one leg up and across.

That's when your book fell between the boat and the slip
into the crack always opened between one world
and every other. Except for my moan, there was only
the sound of weightless hitting weightlessness, your pages
soaked and swallowed, sinking utterly out of reach.

Probably it won't surprise you, but I wanted you to know,
your poems gave themselves up easily—less a drowning
than a homecoming, less an accident than the shared desire
of lake and language for each other. Even our own words
never belonged to us.

It was a perfect ceremony of surrender.
It was a loss and after loss, it was an offering.

PETER BERGQUIST

At the Beach

Honorable Mention, 2019 Rash Award in Poetry

How unique can a bikini be?
Those trunks have all been worn before,
every body built and browned
and crumbled into dust.

Under the pier,
there with the detritus
and the stink of ages,
two people intertwined
lean on a splintered piling
which will tar them both.

They're looking for
what everyone is looking for
and don't care where they find it.

JOHN BLAIR

Under the Volcano

Honorable Mention, 2019 Rash Award in Poetry

I have no house only a shadow.
—Malcolm Lowry, *Under the Volcano*

Above the Bay of Naples the hammered bowl
of Vesuvius glisters ruptured in the moonlight
and you alone
or someone very much like you is through
a window of the Grand Hotel Le Galassie gazing
unstirred
& everywhere is in its place and all you
want is all of it because you've loved
the obvious the near-at-hand already given
it your unconsidered heart & like the Romans
you've pledged to live the quid pro quo of *do ut des*
you give, that is, so that the world gives
and then you go on in the same way the night
anywhere is always waiting for the dawn
to come and drive it away in this life in which
every step you take every breath is away
from something you never wanted to leave.

(*Lettere, Italy, 2012*)

KATIE ELLEN BOWERS

The Heat of Summer

We spent our early morning to evening
cleaning up and out the faded-blue
1920's Craftsman you'd bought in Heath Springs.

Fingers raw from scrubbing the small-apartment sized oven—
caked on layers of grease.

Backs sore from bending and reaching—
dust and dirt in cracks and corners.

Which didn't stop you or me
from pressing our bodies together
in a small shower that night.

Quietly and tiredly lifting my arms to massage the suds of shampoo in your
curls—so much more black than grey then.

Your fingers cascading down my belly and hips, trim and unused—
not thinking of the child that, years from then, would grow.

When the heat of summer creeps into the evening,
your knee pressed against my leg, you ask:
“Do you think you would like to live in Heath Springs?”

BETSY BROCKETT

Fist

For as long
As I can remember
I've held in my stomach tight

As if there was a fist growing forward from my spine
Grabbing my navel
And pulling it back

Tight
Tighter
As clenched as it could get

The fear of fat
Kept my core recoiled
A talisman of physical success

So many resources
Were pulled down to that ache
As it grew tighter
Squeezed harder

Who knows
But maybe
That's why the cancer grew there

A rebellion from my organs
To rid me of that grasp
No choice but to let go

My insides scoured
Plundered by the surgeon's knife
Washed with chemo
Healed

And yet still
The fist holds on tight

JENNIFER BROWN

Memory Is a Body Concealed

This is the way the clouds filled in the valleys —
soft humps of mountain surfacing
like a long-believed-in Loch Ness monster's spine.
We thought we'd been driving on mainland
& were moored, but here were only beachheads,
as far as we could see, islands connected
by a body — concealed — below us.
It was a place we'd never been, the hush of water
gathering up as rain, water making itself
a white sea in the air. The sky was still sky.
We clicked pictures with simple cameras to prove
we'd been there truly, that it was no Olympus
of our minds' eyes —
white & blue & separate from us
by a veil of mist we felt on our skin.
It was not dreamed, though we would wish our dreams
were that full of the stilled shapes of waves
& a sense of having risen
from a worn network of roads to a sky
that laps at our feet like ocean.
Our pictures would be small, dim squares
that hinted at what we'd seen, darkening
from the edges as if to admonish us that a moment
is only ever ungraspable.

JENNIFER BROWN

But I can phone my brother, hold his voice to my ear—

so like my own, the roar of sea in a shell—say
*Do you remember when the cliffs on either side of us
gave way to a cloud-Atlantic dreaming of its old bed,
to a brief & unfathomable Pacific?*

NATHANIEL CAIRNEY

In the Garden of Immigrant Children

Hedge sparrows call a shrill staccato warning—
a hawk near the maple, reminding me

of my father's father's father,
who thought this thing untenable,

and my grandfather,
who thought this other thing unassailable,

and my father,
who thinks this third thing is unconscionable.

The bruise-colored magpie bounds
through wet grass toward fallen apples,

chiding others near the blueberry bushes.
I know so little.

Except for, yes, yes—
whatsoever I do

to the least of my brothers
and so

the squat brown-feathered robin
builds a nest above my door.

She fills it with eggs.
I leave them in peace, loving each as my own

until every deserted shell is broken
and the twigs and mud turn to dust.

BARBARA CALDWELL

First Car Last Car

My parents' first new car smelled September
fresh paid in cash with milk money
a 69 Chevy Impala, kindergarten sky
blue with a vanilla cloud white top.
It set sail. With waves of nausea I swallowed yellow
syrup but felt safe without a seatbelt law yet. How
late at night returning from rare trips
I'd stretch out in socks on the back vinyl
seat and pretend to fall tired deep asleep
hoping once home I'd be carried
heavy in my father's arms upstairs to bed,
my eyelids flickering.

Their likely last old car smelled August
aging mildly sour, a rusting 09 Ford Future
beige as coffee with years of cream from
tops of unshaken unhomogenized milk bottles.
In their 80's my mother doesn't drive and my father
maybe shouldn't, so safety is discussed the keys.
Even seatbelts agree and shake their heads.
He can almost doze standing like his cows once could.
I worry he will pretend to be awake
someday a paramedic's arms might need to carry him
on a stretcher inside an ambulance,
his eyelids not flickering.

SARAH CAREY

Meanwhile, America Is Losing Its Memory

So-and-so is out with the flu or on leave,
plus I'm told I look *secretarial*—

conjure your studious grandmother,
that's me in my tortoise-shell frames, pencil skirt—

cultivating timeless, record keeper, poised pen-in-hand,
when, absent their usual scribe,

the chair asks me to capture the long wind
of his council's diatribes. Pigeonholed,

I can't say no, so take my seat, and go
to work: note composition, purpose for new

members, then agenda items, consent first,
approved, then to new business: landscape photos

by a local artist, purchased for halls.
The unisex bathroom discussion stalls.

The cricket club's adviser raises the cost
of student insurance, an issue all lament,

in voices I've learned to listen for,
to capture dissent, or agreement.

No motion is made, so I key
action item, rolling, for the list I'll soon append,

reassess my flow of words, *delete, delete*,
to verify who spoke, of what,

and when, count heads again—
who showed, who sent last minute regrets.

SARAH CAREY

Now to merit raises, a budget overview.
A spreadsheet shadows white-washed wall as I type:

A good year for the enterprise
should anyone seek to review

our tedious balance: how we paid
our people for their days,
shorthanded what no record could convey.
Imagine what we know, but cannot say.

JOHN BRANTINGHAM

Santa Monica Mountains

Kelly wakes up in her car three miles down the dirt road thinking that dawn has come, and it's time for her to go to the university gym to get a shower and make it to class to study an hour before her midterm in Professor Connelly's class. She's been sleeping here for the last two weeks since she had to make the choice between dropping out of school and looking for a second job or moving out of her apartment onto the street. Only, it isn't sunlight that's awakened her, but the light of the wildfire coming over the ridge above Ventura, a fire that was so far away when she fell asleep she thought it would never reach here, that surely the firefighters would deal with it. She thought even if it did move this many miles across the Santa Monica Mountains it would take weeks.

She steps out of the car to find that the fire is in front of her.

She turns around to find the fire is behind her. It is not on top of her yet, but she cannot imagine a scenario where it will not be.

This same fire does not wake Professor Connelly who cannot sleep because her father also has no home too, and who knows where he stays at night.

Nate, her father, is safe, however, sitting on a park bench near city hall. He watches the fire helicopters circling and thinks about his buddy Brewster. Once in Vietnam, the two of them thought they were going to be captured, but the helicopter came, and they were airlifted out of that place that smelled of gasoline, burning feces, and laundry detergent.

Brewster is thinking of Nate as well. He's sitting in his hospital room, an I.V. dripping into his arms, waiting for the end. Outside, it looks like the apocalypse, he thinks to himself, but Vietnam did as well. It was, he supposes, for so many people.

Brewster's nurse Karen takes a moment to watch the fire out the window too, not that she has many minutes. She's thinking about the ER, which she no longer works, thank God. Today is going to be chaos with too many people coming in and not enough time to work with them all. She wonders how many there will be. She wonders how many will die.

Meanwhile, Kelly gets back in her car and sits there staring at the parking permit for her college that dangles from her rearview mirror. In this moment, she is not frightened. For just this moment, she feels nothing, thinks nothing, and hopes for nothing. She sits, unable to move forward or backward, unwilling to make a choice.

PATTY COLE

Lines, Margins, and Spotlights

A woman with chestnut hair, alabaster skin,
drives a light-green Prius with ski racks
through a 4-way stop sipping something to go
in a white cup, mocha or skinny latte,
while talking through her Bluetooth?

She gets up at 5:00 a.m., does yoga
for an hour then gets her bonny boy up
for homework check and breakfast and hugs
all before she showers for work.

During the day she teaches second grade.
At night she sings at The Infinity, wears
a light gray sequined dress, pulls her
impossibly, curly hair up with a blue ribbon
which spills all over the tie. She stands 6'1".
Her eyes mirror oceans in greens and blues.

Sway, sway with a slow rhythmic pat to her hip.
She opens her pouty mouth and words
pour out in sultry melodies: Lilted and throaty,
endearing and erotic. When she sings,
she escapes her world, fluttering upward
like butterflies escaping a cave.
Its fire. Its shadows.

She performs at all times: Mommy, teacher,
singer, inside perfectly constructed margins,
under every spotlight. She does some coke
at intermission in the dressing room.
When her seven-year-old is with his Daddy
on weekends, she pulls the curtains,
releases the blinds, draws the needle
between her toes, shines like constellations.

NIK BRISTOW

Gail Patena's New North Star

Helped level that peak, me and Leroy did. On the nitroglycerin crew, shooting rock for Precession Mining Company. What Gail Patena always called “mountaintop removal.” But Gail took everything personal. She was a little off balance, too. No joke, she claimed to worship the nature goddess Gaia. So whenever I felt like teasing her I called her ‘Nature Goddess Gail.’

When it came to the progress of man, Gail only ever saw the downside. What me and Leroy saw on the mountain was opportunity. Not only through our occupation, which amounted to making fireballs deep in the darkness. But also afterward, when the coal was stripped and the holler fill was spread back over, when them mountain peaks was flat and empty as supper tables. Leroy and me agreed they was the perfect places to pour smooth black asphalt. Plenty of room for two lanes running side-by-side for almost half a mile.

Sure enough, some fellas with big money to invest come along and done just that. The dragstrip they built on Mt. Cosmos seemed like a dream come true. A track meant just for us. Our two-lane blacktop patch in the sky.

We needed Gail up there too, of course. She was the only audience who mattered.

When we's kiddos, me and Leroy told Gail we both wanted to be circle track drivers. First time we heard “pole position” we knew that was the position for us: on top of the world, with everybody following and Gail watching.

But the stars never quite aligned for either of us driving professional stock cars. Turned out, I was better at staying put, better with a wrench in my hand than a steering wheel. Leroy was the real driver. He was serious about being somebody in the racing world, too. Though he wadn't much better around a circle track than me. Made for straight line speed, Leroy Phar was.

He had this Starlight Blue 1974 Chevy Vega. By the time they started building the track on the mountain, he'd already raced and beaten most of the local competition with that car. Those were unofficial wins, though. Bridge runs. Bridges being the only straightaways out here long enough for a drag race.

I helped with the car, of course. Built the motor up for him in my garage: a Big-Block hydrogen bomb of an engine. And my TIG welder

fused the frame and mounts to hold it. After we tuned her up, the Vega was clocking 12-and-a-half-second passes running high-test pump gas. And still street-legal. Barely. But also a death machine, no doubt about it.

When the track finally opened, Leroy was on the mountain every Friday night of the season. I'd follow him up there with Gail, who by then was Leroy's wife, sitting across from me on the bench seat of my Dodge Polara, account of Leroy's Vega having no passenger bucket.

Gail had always been nice to look at. But on race nights she looked extra good. She may have been a hippie, but she was first and foremost a West Virginia gal, and she knew how to dress sexy. Always showed lots of skin. Got her blonde hair done up big. She'd also bring along her blue-green cooler, the round one with the white lid molded into cup holders, iced top and bottom and full of goodies, perched on the seat between us.

We'd have a fine night, the three of us. Leroy'd run his Vega against all comers, defending his position as local racing's rising star. I'd serve from the sidelines, holding steady as Leroy's chief mechanic. And Gail? Well, Gail'd twirl around, get tipsy in the bleachers with the other girlfriends and wives with their kiddos in orbit, and not fuss too much about all the noise and pollution. She'd been around our kind since the beginning. Made of similar stuff. She liked getting drunk and riding around mountains in cars, but mostly for the views. She was into the natural world more than the world of machines. Like I said, a hippie. She even had a hippie way of understanding drag racing. Said she always felt that, in a cosmic way, the showing off by Leroy and his Vega was supposed to be for her, and that all the explosions and motion were not only a natural part of his charm, who he was, who she'd married, but natural to the laws of the Universe.

Now I'm not dense. Pretty bright, actually, considering I dropped out of high school. I figured Gail suffered from a problem like my own. She was happy enough with her current life, but she also wished things could've turned out different. Maybe wished she hadn't fixed herself to a redneck gearhead like Leroy, or anyway, wished she hadn't married him so young. Or maybe she wished they could've found some way to make a baby, given her more purpose, something to do besides worry about the planet and watch Leroy try to be a star.

After all, *what was so special about Leroy?* Gail asked that question on the drive home from the track one night, her eyelids droopy with bourbon. Leroy was in the Vega, out in front of us, with a new trophy wobbling on his dashboard. Gail kept saying *Leroy ain't so bright. Ain't so hot, neither. Bunch of hot air, maybe. Big ball of gas.* Then she laughed. That's all her husband was, she said. *Just gas and balls. Like every other man on the mountain.*

I'd learned long before, back when we's all kiddos, that whenever Gail Patena got moody, if I flirted with her, just a little bit, gave her a wink, she'd start feeling better. Gail was the type who needed to be the center of attention. No, that don't quite say it. She needed *adoration*. Daily, if she could get it. And nightly for sure.

One of those Friday nights, middle of the summer, me and Gail were riding up the mountain together, following behind Leroy's Vega, back seat of my Polara loaded with tools and tires. Gail was tracking the sunset on the Kentucky side moving from the windshield, along the side windows and around back, as the road curved. She kept saying how pretty the fireball was, sliding down between the mountains. When the sun finally disappeared her mood turned south. She said when Leroy and I were setting off those charges underground, using nitro-glycereen, we made tiny, temporary suns inside the mountains. She said it wadn't right to put stars inside mountains. It was *unnatural*. She said that stars stayed in the sky and mountains stayed on the ground and bad things happened when the two were mixed. I mumbled something about how strip mining was safer than deep mining but she cut me off. Said she knew it was safer for the miners—said she didn't want nobody hurt, or out of a job, that it was nice for Leroy to bring home those Precession Mining Co. checks—but she felt sad for the mountains that lost their tops, said she felt their pain, like her own body was being scooped out, from the top of her head all the way down to her shoulders.

Gail was always dramatic like that. A hippie, like I've mentioned. A nature lover. When she was done with her hippie rant I laughed, and asked her: *Exactly how many mountains did a West Virginia Nature Goddess need to be happy?*

She stared through the passenger window at the darkening horizon. She said someday there wouldn't be no more mountains, because of what Precession Mining Co. was doing. She said someday, when everything inside of every mountain got blasted and dug out, the mountains would crumble to rubble and dust, and the whole countryside would be flat, and every place would look the same, and stars would be our only guides. She told me the planet was like this mountain road. Sometimes we faced the sun, our home star, and sometimes we turned our backs. Said the same thing happened with all the stars. Said she'd read in her astrology magazine even the North Star wadn't always the North Star. She went on and on, telling me about the cycle between Polaris, in the constellation Ursa Minor, and Vega, in the constellation Lyra, how it lasted 26,000 years; and that while Vega was the North Star long ago, the planet had changed her mind, and for a while now she'd been pointing to Polaris.

I said 26,000 years was a pretty long lap time.

She said men ain't got no appreciation for time, that mountains been around millions of years, and in the span of just a couple centuries men had figured out how to destroy them. Told me for the umpteenth time how the Earth's real name was "Gaia." That Gaia was a goddess. And that when men were foolish enough to challenge goddesses there were consequences. She said *how would you like it if somebody blew you up? Or blew up your best parts?*

I said I wouldn't mind somebody blowing me up with *nitro-glyceereen*, long as my best part stayed intact. Then I flashed her my most winning smile and winked.

She laughed, and swatted me good, and said I was a rascal, like an ornery little bear cub. But then Gail done something she never done before. She moved the cooler to the floorboards, unbuckled her seat belt, and scooted over my way.

If there's one place Leroy Phar was meant to be, it was up on Mt. Cosmos, on that race track, living his dreams and trying to be a star. So when his light was snuffed out, on the last Friday night of the season, it was fitting that it happened up there.

I was spyglassing Leroy's final competitor of the evening, this Canary Yellow Mercury Comet, driven by some old boy come over the state line from Halleysburg. Gail says comets are frozen balls of dirty ice. But this Comet was hot. Had a shiny Roots blower and eight upturned exhaust headers poking through the hood vents, shooting flames like anti-aircraft guns, the open exhaust popping like quarter sticks of TNT. Fella drove a long way just to race on Mt. Cosmos. So I figured he planned to dominate heaven and earth, to steal Leroy's star. Did a pretty good job of it, too.

Leroy was acting like he wadn't bothered by the boosted Comet, as it blew the doors off everything else. When it came time for the finals, he was sitting in the window of his cool blue Vega's welded door with his back turned, waiting for me to give him my spyglass report and wish him luck on this, his last run of the night.

We never talked much, him and me, except about work, or about racing. Gail said I was better at conversation than Leroy. *Shined a little brighter*, was how she put it. But I doubt most folks could tell a difference between us. Maybe with the lights off.

I was about to have my talk with Leroy, give him my observations on the Comet, when I spotted Gail rise up from behind the concrete safety barrier. That night, like most nights, she was the prettiest thing around: her

little green shorts, blue tube top, skin all browned like a nature goddess's should be, and her hair frosted blonde-white. But looking good or not, as she made her way around the safety barrier I could tell she was spiraling for trouble—on a collision course with Leroy.

Stumbling toward the Vega, Gail shot me a glance. I gave her my best wink back, a reference point, to get her bearings. But she ignored the wink, didn't give me a second look, and kept hurtling right on toward impact.

I was close enough. Maybe I could've stopped her. But that ain't what I done. Objects were already in motion. Forces already at work. Even with the distance between us, and even in competition with a manifold of flammable vapors and the odors of sweaty mountain men, I could *still* smell how much bourbon Gail'd found herself in the bleachers to drink—I'm talking an *unEarthly* amount. Like if anybody had struck a match too close, she might've spontaneously combusted.

The PA system buzzed to be heard, and from a speaker mounted high above the track, the announcer's voice sputtered in and out. Over my shoulder, the Comet's driver made his engine roar, cut with the sky-high whistle of his spooling supercharger and the gunshot-cracks of backfire from those exhaust headers.

All that noise kept me from catching what Gail said over the Vega's roof to Leroy. But I knew Leroy could hear it fine. I watched him sitting there in the window, the metal-flake blue paint of his helmet sparkling under the track lights as he shook his head, like he couldn't believe what he was being told, like he was not Leroy Phar, local drag racing legend, but some astronaut getting last-minute commands about the space capsule's self-destruct mechanism or the cyanide capsule.

Gail and Leroy's duel only lasted ten-and-a-half, maybe eleven seconds. Then Gail spun off, quick as she'd come, drunkenly tumbling through space, twirling blue-green on her unsteady axis, giving every indication she might never look at Leroy Phar or his Vega again.

Leroy sat in the window: half-man, half-machine—half-giant, half-dwarf—then he slipped off the window lip and into the racing seat, a lonely figure dropping into a deep, black hole—like an old-time coal miner, or a space monkey, doomed. He revved the Vega to redline and back. Then revved it again.

Wadn't time to let him cool off. And no point delaying what fate and physical law had planned for us. Behind me, the Comet driver from Halleysburg revved his boosted engine, the exhaust *pop-pop-popping* on the overrun like a firing squad. I stood at Leroy's window. When he didn't acknowledge me, I shouted: "Hear that? When the blower spools? Comet might've cracked a header flange on his last pass."

Leroy kept his eyes down the track. Didn't nod his head or make like he'd heard me. I was about to repeat myself when he shouted: "You and Gail can fuck-off to outer space, Paul. Get the hell away from my car."

So then I knew for sure. Leroy's wife had delivered the news—news that his best friend had wanted to spare him. That Paul Harris, that's me, was Gail Patena's new number-one midnight man—her new guiding light. That I'd turned his wife's head, and there was no turning it back to the driver of the Starlight Blue Vega.

I made for the bleachers to find Gail, making sure, as I walked behind the Vega, to toggle the switch I'd hidden by the tail lights.

The PA speakers buzzed and blared with the announcer's voice: *Lane One... a man who needs no introduction... Leroy Phar in the '74 Big Block Chevy Vega.*

The crowd cheered and whistled. Leroy spun his racing slicks to get them hot and sticky. I stood behind the concrete safety barrier to watch him go. I couldn't see Gail anywhere. Turns out, she wasn't even watching. She was passing out in the front seat of the Polara. Too clouded over with bourbon. I was thankful for that, after what happened.

When the tree lit green Leroy punched it. The Vega roared, twisted, squealed and launched, flying down that blacktop lane like never before, winging its way to a record-setting run.

Meanwhile, the blown Comet in Lane Two was leaned-out and backfiring, like I'd predicted, and eating Leroy's dust. What can I say? Paul Harris knows his internal combustion.

When Leroy passed the trap, the board lit up: 11.90 seconds.

Cheers rose from folks in the bleachers. But those cheers turned to cries a second-and-a-half later. Because Leroy wasn't stopping.

Another whole second passed before the announcer was hollering: *Kill it, Buddy! Kill it!* But from where I was standing, it looked like Leroy never even triggered the brake lights. Doubt he even tried. Leroy knew you can't stop a runaway like that, even if the brakes do work.

What rubble was left from all that rock we shot, working for Precession Mining Co., got left in this great big pile, north end of the ridge. Race track owners used it for a sort of last-chance-safety-stop, a berm at the edge of the world.

The Vega's front end was already lifting when Leroy hit that pile, fast as a fighter jet on take-off. The crowd gasped and screamed when they saw, in the lights at the edge of the strip almost a half mile away, sparkling blue paint flashing into the night sky, a shooting star in reverse, rising instead of falling, the sound of the Vega's redline roar like a nuclear rocket launch.

But it wadn't no shooting star. Wadn't no jet. Certainly wadn't no Polaris nuclear missile. It was a twinkling, Starlight Blue Chevy Vega with Leroy Phar at the wheel, ramping off those rocks and rising into the night sky, mocking gravity, with nothing but twenty-five hundred feet of clear mountain air between him and the bottom of the holler. And so down he came—down, down, down, like a falling eagle—shredded steel and high octane remains flaming along a half-mile of Stranger Creek.

Ain't done much harm to the creek. Still sulfuric from the mine tailings. But Leroy's death disoriented the whole community, left everybody sick. A fallen star. Victim of a tragic accident.

But it wadn't no *accident*. Gail and me both knew the truth, in our separate ways. Betrayed by his childhood sweetheart and replaced by yours truly, his best friend in the Universe, Leroy Phar had nothing left to live for, and so he'd made a suicide run. Gail was sure of that. She was real twisted up for a while, too, her mind spinning and spinning.

But me? Well, I was never more clear-eyed about things.

See, Leroy Phar turned Gail Patena's head when she was a fourteen-year-old girl, and him and me was even younger. We had this car we put together, a Ford Galaxie 500, that we sometimes drove down back roads, neither of us old enough for a license. One night, Leroy's out driving that one-eyed jalopy by himself when none other than Gail Patena flags him down, standing in the road with his dust rising around her in his one headlight. The way Leroy told it, Gail climbed in, said 'Leroy Phar, I wish somebody would take me *far* away,' and even though he only drove her across the state line and back, that was that. She hadn't had eyes for nobody else since. Nobody except me, that is. Least I don't think so.

You understand, now, how I couldn't *never* tell Gail the truth about Leroy. How I'd rigged that hidden switch, kept the throttle plate stuck wide open, turned Leroy's Vega into a shooting star, and made a wish.

Nope, not even after me and Gail got married. Not for a thousand years. Thirteen thousand. A million. Maybe longer. You can't *never* trust a woman like Gail not to change her mind again.

BARBARA CONRAD

Another Category 5

By now you know what to do.
Second storm of the season bearing down,
number three churning in the deep.
Slow and strong, the forecasters warn.

So goes the drill—stock the kitchen
and car, lug provisions from the basement—
flashlights, candles, water jugs—stash the art,
bring the dogs inside and wait

to see if it turns.

You know it won't, the air already thick
and salt-laden, palm fronds clacking gloom,
clouds the color of mold.

Life brings no guarantees—since the death
of your pet parakeet in preschool, you've lived
with the dark shadow of extinction.

Flip a coin.
You make it out of the storm—pop a cork.
If not, nothing left to dread.

All the while you pace. Even the dogs
won't eat their plate of table scraps.

No one wants it to be their last supper.

ROGER CRAIK

Waverly Street

—for Graham

One by one, like tiny ghosts,
the milkily-glowing screens move down
the darkening street, past the Victorian
arboretum gate, along beside the graveyard wall
and on towards the town.

The eye can barely, if at all,
make out the figures, stooped as if to prayer,
as down the darkened street there glide
the tiny screens, remote as satellites.

JIM DANIELS

Favorite Drug

The breath of my sleeping children.

I couldn't help myself. *Just checking*, I said
to the faint buzz of the electric clock

I'd held onto out of superstition and greed
for continued survival back when I needed it.

Bending close enough to feel the tiny push of air
made holy by having been inside them.

Trouble? It was no trouble. No trouble
in the gifted silence of the room they shared
until they were too old to share. I cried the day

they moved into separate rooms, then doubled up
on the breathing thing.

No rehab for shunned listeners. I unplugged
the clock. Somewhere in this house

they abandoned, I take it in and breathe
for us all, but mostly for myself.

Oh, the faint buzz of my heart.

BRETT RILEY

Just Talk to Her, Dude

My wife and I were visiting my old friend Gene, along with his wife, Sara, and their two children, when Gene suggested we play quarters. For us, the game usually approximates dropping a lit match into a barrel of gunpowder. Once, those explosions seemed fun and exciting. More importantly, they were usually aimed at other people. Now, they just gave me headaches.

The typical battle started with some ill-considered comment or an errant glance, ephemera most couples would breeze right past. Gene and Sara raged like twin tornadoes, curses and insults and physical blows flying like debris, and then Sara would retreat into their bedroom, slamming the door while Gene begged her to chill out and I'd pretend I hadn't heard or seen anything.

Silence for five seconds or five minutes. Then Gene would say what he always said: "Can you talk to her, dude? Come on. She listens to you."

Until my early 30s, that sentence echoed throughout my friendships. Big fights, missed dates, poor gift choices, careless words—whatever the cut, I was the balm. *She listens to you. Talk some sense into him.* Forget all my own relationships' rotting corpses, two divorces and countless breakups and drunken-blackout weeks and fistfights. People saw me as the answer to their problems.

As well ask a serial arsonist to tend your fireplace.

On this night, at Sara and Gene's musty, ashy house, over another case of beer, after another fight and another instance of Sara's cursing and screaming and storming away from the table and slamming the bedroom door, Gene and I bounced the quarter back and forth, taking our drinks, not talking unless someone made a rule. Unfortunately, the fight started so early I had barely gotten buzzed. Gene was in worse shape. He had been on a hot streak, so he hadn't finished his first beer, leaving him sober and miserable.

As the game continued, even my wife, Kalene—who doesn't drink, and who had long since grown weary of these scenes—said little. The weight of someone else's life settled onto my shoulders, as tangible as bricks, because I knew what was coming. I dreaded it more than usual, but Gene asked anyway.

"Dude, can you talk to her? Get her to chill? She listens to you."

And, for the first time, I said, "No. I don't want to."

I could no longer save my friends' relationships. I could not, in fact, figure out why they wanted me to try. *I cannot save you when I have so often fucked up my own life.* After I said it long enough, they believed me.

It wasn't a clean break, though. That night, Gene kept asking and pleading, cajoling and begging, ignoring my "no" until I got drunk enough to open their bedroom door one last time.

As soon as it shut behind me, Sara exploded. "What are you doing here? Get out!"

We had been close for years. I wanted peace and happiness for her. It was pretty to think I could fix her relationship, her life. But after years of dancing those same steps every time I saw her, I just felt an enervated, hellish *deja vu*. And she had ordered me to leave.

"Okay," I said, opening the door.

"Wait," she called, sounding shocked. "You can stay."

I didn't answer. I marched through their living room, told Kalene we needed to go, and walked out the front door.

"Dude," Gene said, "I need you to fix this."

"I can't," I said, walking through the yard. "And frankly, I don't think either of you really want me to."

"But—"

"Look, you clearly get something out of living like this. Both of you. You're only happy when you're miserable. Otherwise, at some point, you'd change."

Before he could think of a reply, we got in the car and drove away.

After that, whenever Gene and Sara's drama unfolded, I'd bail. When they implored me to intervene, I used the magic word: "No." And I no longer related when he kept asking.

I don't know what made that night different. Perhaps my spine had simply bowed from carrying others' burdens over the long distances of years.

"No" can save your sanity, remove stressors, even prolong your life. If you've got a full, open heart, it's nearly impossible to say for the first time. You want to believe that helping is possible. But like they tell you on airplanes when explaining how to use oxygen masks, you've got to take care of yourself first, or you're no good to anyone else. And saying "no" gets easier with time. It doesn't mean you're abandoning your friends or Other-centered acts. You don't have to say "no" every time. Doing it when you need to just means you recognize your limitations, your needs, and your right to a life free from high-school drama.

Besides, a year or two after that first "no," Sara and Gene separated. They moved on to other relationships, and, as far as I know, they are both

much happier. Sometimes love isn't enough, and sometimes well-intentioned help, such as my calming Sara down over and over and over and over, enables people we love to keep hurting each other long past a relationship's natural sell-by date. How much damage might they have done if I had kept helping them feed their toxicity? In saving myself from all that stress, did I inadvertently save one or both of their lives by letting them drift apart?

I'm not sure. I only know that sometimes the hardest part, the first miserable step that feels like selfishness and even betrayal, can also be the most necessary.

JOHN DAVIS, JR.

Ode to Southern Gray

Paint Color #35791 at Jones Downtown Hardware

Pencil-lead cursive in Flannery's journals
Ernest J. Gaines's trimmed mustache
Untrapped mice in Eudora's Corner Store
Clouds over Zora's tin-roofed houses
Steam from John Hartford's *Julia Belle Swain*
Fretting of B.B. King's Lucille
Andy Griffith's date-night sport coat
Dust motes turning in Ryman lights
Not battlefield haze over Shiloh or Sumter
Not sweltering wool of a brushed uniform
Not generals' beards on marble statues
Not musket balls or cold bayonets
Cows in the fog of the farthest pasture
Barn boards curled and weather-split
Uncle Ray's after-dinner pipe smoke
His new-used tractor covered in primer
Aunt Doty's hairdo for Sunday service
Spanish moss waving from cemetery oaks
Number two washtubs where pea hulls clang
Back porch steps and dusk goodbyes

STEPHANY L.N. DAVIS

Beasts and Bloodlines

Brother built box traps
of metal cloth, wood and twine,
to tramp possums, coons and rabbits,
that ravaged mama's garden.
Later served with persimmons and sweet potatoes.

From behind a sapling,
I watched my brother pull the vermin from the hallowed box.
Stroke their silky pelts.
Speak softly to them.
Then let them loose,
to find shelter among the moss of musty oaks
amid the backwoods from where they came.

Yet,
there was relief knowing my brother was not my brother,
that his blood was not my blood.
Most of our time together was in silence,
a stillness that left me unsettled and spooked,
like one of daddy's horses.

Daddy said never walk behind a horse.
I heard how his voice could be,
without spitting sharpness and sacrilege.
Don't startle it,
With quick moves or loud noises.
Let it know where you are.
Lest you might get kicked and not live to tell about it.
Then, daddy placed a hand on the horse's shoulder,
walked beside the beast,
rubbing his hand down its back, to its hip and on around behind.

I learned to read my brother like daddy's horses.
Most of the time, my brother was so tense
I saw it as he clutched his fists.

STEPHANY L.N. DAVIS

Smelled it as he sweat.
Heard it as he clenched his jaws
like the crunching of cicada shells.
Same as daddy.

I learned to move quietly and with respect,
at home and in life.
I learned to tighten my small body into a spiral shape,
like the coil of a millipede when threatened,
held my chin to my knees, until all was silent
and still and my frame went limp.
Because they can all hit with full power.

MARY CHRISTINE DELEA

After Re-Reading Willa Cather's My Ántonia

Driving through Nebraska, I think of Cather. Her unreliable narrator.
The love story that isn't. The wolves in Russia charging through forest,
setting upon the wedding party traveling in their sleighs. As I drive in winter,

as the day wanes, as shadows skulk on the plains, it seems those wolves
have moved through time and space and into the Nebraskan sand hills,
the fossil beds, the grasslands. I stop for gas and a late lunch, take a break

to decide if the falling snow should make me stop for the night or drive faster.
I scan my surroundings from the parking lot. Darkening sky pressing on the bluffs,
north to South Dakota and the nothingness for miles, yet Highway 83 hasn't

frozen over and my gas tank is now full. I picture steam trains and sod houses,
barn dances and the town mercantile. I smell my own fear as I imagine wolves,
hungry and cold, waiting for a lone driver to skid on black ice, go off the road,

break down in between far-apart towns. The quiet is from another time. I get in
my car, drive to the nearest chain motel, and fall asleep, dreaming of transplanted
happy Russian revelers screaming as wolves attack them on the Nebraska plains.

BARBARA DEMARCO-BARRETT

Meditation at Laguna Beach

after Robert Hass

Breakfast was fried eggs on the deck
by the bay. Light so bright everyone
needed sunglasses. At night, windows
thrown open to let in the sticky salt air.
That August vacation at his parents' house
on the Jersey shore.

Three thousand miles away from that ocean,
decades ahead of that time, and yet
there is so much I remember.

A green calico sundress. His hands
smoothing Noxema on my sunburnt shoulders,
the tuna his father caught and cooked and we ate.
And always fruit, yellow, blue, red,
juices dripping down our chins.

Before the sun sets in Laguna, I'll go to the market
for watermelon and peaches.
There's always apples.
There's not always watermelon and peaches.

The wind rattles the eucalyptus.
Leaves chant: remember. *Remember.*

Last night I wrote to him. I miss you
I said, no one compares. No one
has a chin like yours. Come back.
Bring your chin. There is room.

TIMOTHY DODD

Our Convenience

“Well, I wish we had better news, Jerry, but I don’t think they’re expanding like we hoped,” Denny says, yanking the door open, dusk at our backs.

I walk into the Sheetz behind him, my knees and elbows muddy, still dusty with limestone after a day of searching for Virginia big-eared in two caves we had hoped they’d colonized. “I’m still hopeful,” I say. “If their numbers will keep increasing, they’ll get there eventually.”

I don’t need to tell him that white-nose syndrome hasn’t ravaged the big-eared like it has all our species of mouse-eared bats. In fact, big-eared numbers have quadrupled in West Virginia the last ten years. Good thing because it’s the last substantial hangout spot of the cute little critter, an endangered specie.

“Well I’ll choose to believe you’re right,” Denny replies, standing inside the door with his hands on his hips and looking around as though this convenience store might be drastically different than any other. “I guess you’re usually pretty good at predicting. Unless it’s sports.”

I laugh. “You’re the one who loves to tell people you’re from Wise.”

“Better than Dead Hollow. By the way, you locked it, right?” he asks, his southwestern Virginia twang getting stronger. “Remember, we’ve got detectors in the back seat.”

“Of course.”

Since afternoon in the caves, Denny’s been raving about getting a meatball sub. He’s worked for the West Virginia DNR for more than ten years so he’s de facto leader and gets to decide on dinner and about everything else when we get paired up. That’s why I’m the one who has to crawl all the way to the back of the cavern where the ceiling rock has loosened while Denny acts as “emergency eyes,” waiting near one of the mini-entrances—one at a time in the danger zones.

Denny nods toward the sandwich station at the back of the store. “You’re getting one, right? Remember we can write off twenty-five dollars each for food.”

“Nah. I don’t eat that stuff,” I reply, watching a steady flow of customers as they hunt down their munchies.

“What do you mean *that stuff*? They’ve got pizza, breakfast sandwiches, non-breakfast sandwiches, spicy chicken hoagies, hot dogs, corn dogs, bean dogs, cheeseburgers, subs—whatever you want.”

“Bean dogs?”

Denny chuckles. “I just made that up.”

“Denny, I try not to eat fast food, junk food.”

“Just because it’s fast doesn’t mean it’s fast food. Get you one of them new Korean BBQ tornado things then—lean as Virginia Tech’s new quarterback. What’s his name?”

“I don’t know. You know I don’t follow football.”

“And I don’t know what’s wrong with you either, Sizemore. No football, no meatball subs. You don’t hunt or fish or ride motorcycles. What do you do in your free time? Crochet?”

I laugh to avoid answering; stick to food talk instead. “I’m not too hungry anyway, Denny.”

“Well why didn’t you say you wouldn’t eat nothing here? We could have gone to Shoney’s or something.”

“That’s okay. Not a big deal.”

“Lord, it’s after 8 and I’m so starved I might get me two of them. You ate too much of that trail mix. That’s your problem. Always nibbling on birdseed and marshmallow puffs.”

“Yeah, maybe.”

Denny wanders over to the sandwich area and plops down on a stool in front of one of their little automated ordering machines. There’s a level of comfort in the way he sits that makes me think he might stay there awhile.

I walk in the opposite direction, past the checkout counter to a wall of refrigerators full of beverages—mostly soda. There are four kinds of Dr. Pepper, five flavors of Mountain Dew now, four different brands of root beer, on and on. Next to the sodas are teas, coffees, juices, energy drinks, sports drinks, and flavored milk.

I stand in front of the refrigerators and start to count how many types of soda are sold as the customers walk up, open a refrigerator door, and pull out plastic containers of their favorite drink. I’m up to sixty-seven when a middle-aged man in his Orkin uniform, name-tagged Tom, appears next to me. He’s breathing heavy as he takes out a 20-ounce Mello Yello and unscrews the lid right in front of the refrigerator, drinks almost a third of it in one long swig.

“That hits the spot, don’t it?” he says to me, his tongue circling his lips.

“I guess so,” I say, losing track of my count. I start over, but halfway through I recall Dad talking about granddad’s country store out Shady Lick. “Nickel for a bottle of RC Cola,” he’d say. “You’d drink it on the spot cause of the bottle deposit. That was the only option. RC Cola and a packet of peanuts or a moon pie.”

I used to drink probably five or six glasses of soda daily, starting right after breakfast time, but began cutting it out two years ago. At first I just replaced the soda with other sugary drinks, but eventually I learned to drink water instead. Even now it's not easy to avoid the sodas. You get weaned on the stuff as a kid and never lose the craving.

I start counting again, hit the hundred mark when Denny shows up.

"What's wrong, Jerry? Can't decide?" He pulls the refrigerator door open beside me and grabs a bottle of Mountain Dew.

"No, I was just counting how many kinds of soda they've got, Denny. Me, I just stick to water."

"Yeah, I was wondering about that cause that's all I ever see you drink. July's a half-hell, we been at it all day, and you're drinking nothing but water. I don't know how you do it."

"You get used to it. Don't need all that sugar."

Denny puts one hand on his pot belly. "No wonder you're straighter than a rail." I suppose that's another reason I have to do all the crawling in the caves.

"How come you're getting a Mountain Dew anyway?" I ask.

"That's my drink; I always get it."

"Yeah, but there are over a hundred different sodas. How come you don't get something else and mix it up a little?"

"I don't know. That's just what I like and what I always get." Denny grips the top of the twenty-ounce plastic bottle like he's got a black snake by the neck, but looks down at it like it's a beagle pup. "I'm so thirsty I might have to open it up before those sandwiches come out."

"Go ahead," I say. "Tom the Orkin man just did."

"Man, I wish we had a Sheetz down closer to Charleston. Supposed to put one in Cross Lanes soon and a couple more out I-64." He pauses. "I'm already looking forward to our next trip up here in September."

"To check on the bats?"

"No, no. I mean coming up here to get me another one of these sandwiches. You know I can see bats anywhere, but these Sheetz are mostly out of state or in the eastern panhandle. Those damn 7-11s are a step short of terrible, and Go-Marts are worthless too. Speedway is all right." Denny pauses, leans his head in a bit. "Did they just call number 42?"

A teenage boy in a Megadeth shirt, skateboard under his arm, walks up and takes out two Monsters. "I wasn't really listening, Denny. Sorry."

"I believe they did. Boy, they're fast here too. I better go ahead and pay. They won't give you the sandwich until you've got your receipt stamped."

“Right, right.”

“So you’re not getting a thing? Not even something to drink?”

“Nah, I’ll pass,” I answer, tagging behind.

“How about I get you a bag of chips or a chocolate milk?”

“No, don’t worry.”

“Beef jerky?”

“No, I’m fine, Denny. Thanks.”

Denny joins a line behind six others: customers holding packs of Camels and Chips Ahoy, bags of Doritos and Styrofoam cups of Sheetz coffee, twenty-ounce plastics of Pepsi and thirty-two ounces of Gatorade fruit punch. It’s a quiet line except for a little girl in an oversized, baby blue Lisa Simpson shirt who is yanking on her mother’s chubby hand and whining for candy.

The line dwindles quickly and Denny pays with a twenty-dollar bill for two meatball subs, a Mountain Dew, and two bags of barbecue Fritos. He collects his change and a stamped sandwich receipt, then trots back to the zone where his meatball subs have already been laid on the counter for pick-up. I walk over to the entrance of the store and wait.

“All right, I’m all packed, Jerry,” Denny says as he walks up to me at the door, plastic bag in hand. “I still feel bad you didn’t get nothing.”

“No, don’t worry about it,” I say again, holding the door open. “I’m not even hungry.” An elderly man in an Amoco cap, oxygen tubes running under his nose, scoots into the store. Denny gives him space to enter before exiting the store himself. I follow.

Outside, nighttime means store lights are blasting their illumination onto the parking lot. Beside the doors, an oversized trashcan stands against the front glass overflowing with plastic bags, bottles, and packages. An opened Styrofoam container lined with a couple chicken bones and a small squirt of ketchup rests on the ground at the base of the garbage can. It feels like we’ve been in the store for much longer than fifteen minutes.

I get in the passenger’s side of our state vehicle parked at the end of the store. Denny turns on the ignition and his classic rock station picks up where it left off.

“Wasn’t Styx playing when we got out of the car too?” he asks.

“I thought it was Foreigner, but not sure,” I say.

“Probably a rock block.”

Interrupting the music is the rustling of Denny opening and unwrapping his food. His soda bottle hisses as he unscrews the cap. The greasy corn smell of Fritos fills the car, followed by hot meatballs and tomato sauce.

Denny chomps down on his sub and chews. “Every bit as good as I remembered,” he says. “Glad I got wise and got two. That bun is as soft as a baby’s bottom.”

I don’t look over or say anything. “Too Much Time on My Hands” repeats its chorus.

An old Chevy Nova pulls up beside us, and a bearded twenty-something in a Reds hat steps out, flicking his cigarette into the narrow space between our vehicles. Denny takes a couple more bites of his sub, washes it down with a fizz.

To the sound of his munching I think about the bats: the almost complete decimation of the little browns here, the Indiana bat that we hardly see anymore, the fact that people don’t know why we need them—the ultimate in pest control and pollinating—or that we’re losing them in crazy numbers. I think about the one I banded and fed, held in my hand last week: a Virginia big-eared squirming around like there’s no tomorrow—its long, wondrous ears, the outline of red in its wings, the sweet sound of it chewing down juicy grubs.

The young man in the Reds cap exits the store a few minutes later with a Snickers in his hand, peeling back the wrapping. He throws it toward the garbage can where it lands on top of the pile, then blows out onto the ground. When he pulls out and the parking space next to me is empty, I look out the window and up at the sky. The stars aren’t visible in the glare of Sheetz’s powerful lights.

I think how the little creatures would enjoy feasting on all the moths hovering around the store’s lights, but the light itself is a killer: hurting their eyes, ruining their feeding patterns, making them vulnerable to predation.

Denny gulps down a mouthful of Mountain Dew and burps. “Excuse me,” he says. “Man, Jerry. You’re missing out.”

He’s digging into his plastic bag again, a blob of tomato sauce shaped like Florida on the side of his mouth. It’s so bright in the parking lot I could probably locate Tallahassee. Meatball juice has fallen onto his white, Charleston 5K Run t-shirt, and his belch stinks like old meat.

“Ah, Jerry. I’m sorry to do this, but it looks like I forgot my napkins. Would you mind going back in and picking me up a few? I’m a little too involved here.”

“Sure. No problem,” I say, quick to get out of the truck. I close the door, step onto the sidewalk and walk toward the door. From the corner of my eye, low in the night sky, I see motion: an object jerks and angles in flight. It’s not a bird, but a mammal, and I stop and turn to look out, into the glare.

Inside our vehicle Denny's head is down, bent toward the steering wheel and buried in his second sub. I look back up and find more intermittent streaks of movement. I can't see the creature clearly or know exactly what kind, but I know it's a nocturnal marvel eating hundreds of insects for every hour of darkness.

Denny cranes his neck and looks out the window at me, sees I'm stuck on the sidewalk. His lips move behind the glass. I read them and say okay, then look back up at the sky one more time: a little creature doing its own miraculous cleaning.

HOLLIE DUGAS

This Story Is Not in the Bible

I board a small plane
to see you again, imagining myself
as Jonah in the belly of the aircraft,
the beige inner frame exposed
like a sagging carcass of bones
as I eat peanuts and drink samples
of gin. There is no need to repent
my sins— I have dreamt of burning
myself to ashes and being claimed
by you. A disciple of love,
I am eating within the beast
that has already swallowed me
whole. And as if pulled
by invisible line, I am lured
back to a land without water
where you'll recover me
once more from this small fish
of a plane like the song from a vessel.

PATRICIA L. HAMILTON

Ghost Planes

Honorable Mention, 2019 Rash Award in Poetry

Near midnight, through the wide kitchen window
of our darkened Memphis rental
we watch a dim light materialize in the mist,
mesmerizing us like a UFO dancing in the distance.

Its gleam separates into three white beams
intensifying with each pulse of a trailing red blink,
the monster rumbling closer, sound rippling
as if from waves crashing against a steep shingle.

With its smooth belly and angled fins, the behemoth
glides over us, deafening us with its bellow.
Behind that bulk spread-eagled against the city-glow,
a nascent light-fuzz glimmers, next in line.

One after another, the giant carriers soar past,
a scattered flock returning home to roost.
For hours we lie awake, listening to each rush
of wind, picturing wings cleaving the roiling air.

Finally, a respite. Rain drifts in, its patter
soothing, inviting deep sleep. At dawn
the great migration resumes, but invisible now,
the milky sky dense with low clouds.

Our hearts race at that unseen clamor
roaring aloft as if the heavens hold highways
for ravening beasts and archangels,
for ghostly agents of mercy and desire.

STEPHANIE DUPAL

Yields of Harvest

Honorable Mention, 2019 Rash Award in Fiction

When Ben Salvato was seventeen, he picked fruit for a living. The work was good and he lived with a family in eastern Quebec. For five months, he boarded and worked with the Parsons, a family consisting of John and Fredda, parents to three teenaged children: Charlotte, pretty and round; Timmy, shy and sandwiched between these gregarious girls; and Gertrude, bony and decided. Ben started working in early May, in snows of apple-blossom petals. He prepared the soil for vegetable rotation crops with homemade fertilizer (cow dung, horse droppings, food scraps, autumn leaves, rotting pine cones, and copper powder from the abandoned Capelton and Albert Mines, an excellent natural bug repellent). John Parsons, a believer in biodynamics, had lately taken to reading books on anthroposophic thinking by pioneer scientist Rudolf Steiner. He rotated crops in different patterns that year and he concocted horticultural solutions and theories on natural composting versus chemical treatments. In June, they picked early strawberries, a proud yield for the Parsons who were first in fruit. Then late July rains fell in patterns. The weather was calculating. It rained when the workers weren't out in the fields, while the sun scorched at lunchtime. By September, that summer of 1962 had broken multiple harvest records.

One of Ben's tasks was to drive the old pickup truck, bumping along dirt roads, and to carry loads and bushels to Dunham and Cowansville at four o'clock when he completed his regular chores. He'd lied to the family and told them he was eighteen so he would get the job. He quit school the year before and his parents approved the work. The farm was a family business, yet the older girl, Charlotte, felt sure her future lay somewhere else, and she dreamed not of crops but of war and soldiers. She'd spent her youth harvesting and she'd learned her skills at triage with apples and cabbages. She was ready to attend nursing school at Notre-Dame Hospital in Montreal and her decision to leave the farm allowed Ben to board with the family and take the space of her bedroom. Her brother wasn't old enough to drive, her father said, when the matter was, as in any small community, the boy was allowed to drive not by provincial law but by rural concession. In some families even twelve year olds were seen plowing fields. Timmy, though now fifteen, had once ruined one fourth of an acre of newly overturned soil by driving the truck through it. So the Parsons had chosen to hire Ben.

The pay was low but Ben's work had earned him a few friends and invitations to supper from neighboring mothers displaying eager daughters. Though he enjoyed the dinners, he never asked any of the daughters out. He felt too preoccupied with his work to bother with girls, who seemed without experience and without verve. *Little farm girls*, he thought. Perhaps because he saw himself as wiser and more mature than he actually was that he was unprepared for the attentions of a woman more than twice his age, someone for whom the world held little mystery. He'd first met the Tahitian woman while unloading out of the dusty pickup the *cinquante casseaux de fraises* that Alphonse Laporte had ordered. She'd come up from behind, and he'd put down his load. He smiled at her. Her name was Nanihi O'Shea. She was a rare phenomenon for the town of Dunham. Townsfolk said she could revive any sort of plant. She'd even been called Lady Lazarus.

"You're more of an attraction than I am," she'd said to Ben. She added, "How do you like it over there at the Parsons' farm?"

They talked for a while on the side of the street, in front of the co-op grocery store window. The women inside turned their heads once in a while, pretending to read can labels. They looked up at the pair, and then faced one another with inquisitive stares. He'd taken her home and she'd made him some tea. She was lonely. She'd married an Irish-Canadian tourist in her home country when just a girl, thinking of the wonderful adventures she would have in America. She soon discovered the unending months of snow and darkness and she regretted her marriage.

When Ben said it was a good year for harvest and trees were overflowing and cornfields growing high, she furrowed her brows.

"You know, in my country it isn't so good to have so much fruit. A plentiful year will bring many deaths." She laughed and said, "Of course, a year of disastrous harvest also brings death, but I doubt the beliefs of my people. This year the fields are overrunning."

She had an accent when she spoke. Her husband had settled in the English-speaking part of the province, which excluded her even more, and she'd stayed on because everywhere else was just as foreign to her anyway. She had nowhere to go. "Why do you speak English?" She asked. "I thought only people from these parts and rich city folks were Anglophones."

"I kind of speak both," he said, "not awfully good with French. I was brought up Italian, born here, my parents immigrated and got stuck on the north side of the island like everybody else, and, you know, everyone follows."

The evening had been good. When the time came for him to go back to the Parsons' farm, she gave him a plant of irises for Fredda and some of her homemade rhubarb jam and raspberry butter for the girls.

“The youngest is just sickly thin, *trop maigre, c’est pas joli*,” she said.

He left and drove home in the dirty pickup with the seldom-working brights, humming some tunes to the beat of puffing exhaust. The stars were magnificent and numerous that night. Much like the trees of the bountiful season, they bloomed in the black sky.

When Ben walked up the stone path to the house later that evening, John motioned to sit with him on the front porch. “She’s a nice woman, Nanini, but she’s lonely. Sometimes it’s best to leave women to comfort each other. Fredda’s there for her, you know,” he said, and when Ben stared ahead blankly, the man of the house smiled and stood to go back inside. Ben didn’t quite know what to say to John, so he followed him into the house and handed Fredda the irises and the jams. He believed John meant to tell him that he should accept Mrs. O’Shea as the family did. Ben knew Fredda had remained kind to a woman who ten years earlier had been so aggrieved by the harassment of her peers in their discussion of her character that she’d left the province altogether to make a fresh start out in Newfoundland. He could learn from this family in the way of kindness. He resolved to talk to the Tahitian woman and perhaps again keep her company.

Many months after he left the farm and returned to his family’s apartment in Montreal, where he worked loading docks at the old port like many of the men in his neighborhood, Ben received a letter from Lottie Parsons when she was studying at Notre-Dame, just twenty minutes from where he was. She was full of news about the techniques she learned: how she found blood at the first prick on a woman whose veins were hardly visible, how this had gotten her praise, and how she could assist in just about everything without so much as wincing. On the last page she wrote that her brother had broken his ankle trying to walk the planks over some marshlands and he’d fallen in. No one else would have broken a bone by falling in mud water, but Timmy Parsons could and did.

She signed in that great signature of hers, and added this postscript: *Madame Tahiti—what was her name? She died late November when the harvest was well over. They can’t say what took her. They just found her in her bed. The woman next door (Remember Mrs. Ketting?) came over because she noticed some plants in the garden hadn’t been winterized. Anyway, you’d think it would have been a disgusting thing to find, a dead body like that, for who knows how long, but the miracle of it is, she didn’t even smell. The ones who saw her said she just had a look of having dried like a wildflower. No one ordered an autopsy and the husband didn’t make it back on time for the funeral. It could have been anything, maybe an aneurysm, or the thrombosis*

of a vein, or viral pneumonia, or an ectopic pregnancy. There might have been men in her life. I assisted a woman whose tubes burst and that's the way she died. Wish I could have been there for Madame Tahiti.

Ben took the letter and pressed it between his palms. His heart pumped loudly. He felt guilty to have missed the obituary and then the funeral. He sat down at the small desk in his parents' apartment and tried to answer Lottie's letter. He started to write several times, bunching up page after page, which he sent sailing into the toll painted bin in the corner of the room. In the end, he didn't know what to write and he marveled that Mrs. O'Shea could be dead. He regretted never saying goodbye, though at the time he felt both ashamed by and righteous in this decision. He was plagued by thoughts that she might have used him, yet he also wondered if it had been the other way around. He'd been nervous and unable to handle the situation and he remembered not knowing how to leave. Perhaps she'd done this before and he was only one among many. And now this woman he'd spent time with on no more than four or five occasions was dead.

He'd last seen her in early September. He'd been driving the old pickup on his usual route when further ahead construction workers laid the foundation for a thick coat of asphalt and blocked the road. He turned onto a small dirt lane that leaned out to the right. After crossing Ruisseau Selby, he saw a lake on the horizon and drove toward it. The temperature was furiously high. He wanted a break. The truck bounced on its wobbly suspensions while long blades of flax and wild wheat whipped its sides and crackled under the tires. Near the water the ground became unstable and marshy. He spun the wheels deeper by putting the vehicle in reverse. A pit of mud, which shot out under the wheels in flying bursts, bogged the pickup. Ben got out of the truck and bent over to shovel under the tires with his bare hands. He then used a plank from one of the fruit boxes.

While putting together a makeshift lever out of box slats, he paused to look up toward the lake, of a stone blue color and flat as glass—the trees mirrored on the water's skin. There were willows and firs, cypresses and pines. Small swallows were busy swimming the sky like minnows. Ben savored the accidental detour, and picked out the best plum of the bushel.

If he were lucky, he could still deliver to Dunham and Cowansville and be back at the farm by sundown. He felt like fate was on his side. Long trilliums and blades of flax swayed. He heard the slip of a snake, and turned toward the sound. Her skin glistened on her arms. Two thin straps knotted at the shoulders held her white sundress. Her hair, tied at the nape, fell about her face in long wisps.

“Well, what are you doing in these parts?” Mrs. O'Shea asked.

“Scared me stiff—”

“I’m sorry,” she interrupted, “I didn’t mean to scare you. I heard the truck. Thought I might help. I’ve never seen you coming this way. You’re lost? Too close to the water.” She pointed at the truck.

He noticed she looked happier out in the middle of nowhere. Maybe she’d looked this way in her youth, on her island, where everyone was like her, brown and beautiful, and where they spoke and understood who and what she was, and not the things he and the other townsfolk thought she could be. She was not the coming winter, she was not the Atlantic, and she was not Canada. Her presence mystified him. Around her the willows became Ati trees and lake water turned salty.

“Well, don’t just stand there, come down, there’s not much you can do but keep me company,” she said holding out her hand. He noticed her white palm, how much like the underside of a seashell. He thought of the things and the men she had touched.

Ben walked by her side. Her feet were bare. Her dress stopped above her knees and she held her canvas shoes in one hand. The other hand rested on the inside of his left elbow. He’d taken off his shirt and left it hanging on the side of the truck. With the rhythm of walking her hand stroked his side, much as a child would caress the flank of a sleeping dog. She took him to the best part of the lake, on the opposite side of where the truck sat. There it was dry with a clearing of smooth dust on the ground. Her bicycle leaned on a tree. In its basket were flowers of all kinds, wrapped in silk paper while the roots were enclosed in gauze cloth. *My mother does the same*, he thought. Yet she was so different from the woman who baked afternoon bread in a Montreal apartment at that hour.

“You came all the way out here, on your bike?” Ben asked, his fists on his hips.

“I ride my bicycle every day when the weather’s warm. I can’t stand the cold. It’s very hard for me to live here in the winter. So now, I try to be out as much as I can. I go everywhere on this bicycle. I know all the lakes and the rivers, the hills, and hidden trails.” She looked at her bicycle. “Have some cherries,” she said, taking out from underneath the flowers a small container filled with fruit. “They’re imported from France. Look at the color. It’s so much deeper than the kind they grow here. I’d like to think they come from Provence. It’s a romantic thought to think something so good grew in a beautiful happy place, don’t you think?”

“I guess,” he replied, accepting her offering.

They were the best cherries he’d ever eaten, and he told her so.

“Why do you stay?” he asked.

“Because I can’t go back. Now that I’m here, I have to stay. I’m tired of moving. My husband is a sailor. And we sailed from Polynesia to Hawaii, to San Francisco, to Panama, and when he got sick, he wanted to come home, so we did, and I stayed. He’s better now, and he’s gone again. I think he’s in the Pacific right now though he could be anywhere. I receive a postcard once in a while. It hardly matters. We’ve both drifted apart—sounds like a joke, doesn’t it, drifted apart.” At this she smiled, and she sat down in a sunny spot on the ground, spitting cherry pits in the water.

“Where are you from?” he asked, not wanting to think of the man who somewhere on a far ocean might have the picture of his wife hanging by his bed.

“Bora Bora, the Pearl of the Ocean. It’s far off the main island. When I was three, my family moved close to Papeete, the capital. My father was a fisherman and my brothers also. My mother stayed home to cook and clean and sew, and I sat by her and learned.” She thought of her family. She added, “And you, what about you?”

“Me, there’s nothing much to me, normal life. Born in Montreal, raised in Montreal,” he paused, “but my dad’s family is from Italy. Now there’s an interesting story for you. He’s Sicilian, from Syracuse. It’s a port on the sea, close to Catania, on the south side of the island. His father was a fisherman, too, though he was famous not for the fish, but the treasure he caught in his nets.” Mrs. O’Shea listened with her eyes closed, her face turned to the sun.

“You’re not gonna believe this but one day as he was off the coast to the east somewhere out on the Mediterranean, he fished up in his nets an original bronze from the Hellenic period, real old, half eaten up by the salt and covered up with all sorts of sea stuff. It was worth a lot of money and when museum people got there, he became the town hero. They even called him old *Giuseppe degli Argonauti*. I guess they didn’t know their Greek mythology too well back in Syracuse. At least that’s what my mother says.”

“Well, that’s not you, tell me about you.”

“Like I said, there’s nothing much to say.”

“I don’t believe that,” she said, always with a long drawn out ah—I don’t believe d-ah-t—and as she said so again, she put her hand on his shoulder.

“How old are you, Benjamin?” He felt the pressure of her hand. A moment later, she dropped her limb.

“It’s Benito. My parents left Sicily in the Forties, when Mussolini was big and people thought he would save them from poverty and ally them with the winning side of the war. So that’s me, named after a dictator. I go by

Ben, just Ben. I'll be eighteen in a few months, but I told the Parsons I was already that age. You can't tell them, please," he implored with his hands clasped in mock pity.

"I see. If I could go back to being your age, I would have done so many things differently." She sighed before laughing in a youthful way. "Yes, differently, although my people don't believe in looking back. It's bad luck. You take what you have done for what it is, and that's it, go forward on your road, always forward." She laughed again, though more quietly. To him it did not seem so funny.

"Would you," he hesitated, "have stayed home?" He felt inappropriate.

"I don't know. Although I would change things, I don't know what I would have done. I had many possibilities. I could have married the young man my parents preferred. I could have maybe studied or learned a trade, perhaps my father would have let me—I'll never know since I never asked," she continued, moving her position so she lay in the sun, "I just don't know, but I know there was so much more. Maybe that's the feeling of regret." She took his hand, motioning for him to stand up.

"I should get the truck out of that mess. I still have to deliver the fruit and go back to the Parsons', you know, before dark. I wouldn't want them to think that—" he fumbled for words, "something happened to me. You know how they are."

"You can't leave yet," she said, "it's maybe four-thirty or so, and the water, we haven't gone swimming—don't you want to swim with me?" She undid the straps of her cotton white dress.

He stopped her hand.

"No, really, I should be going. I'm not a good swimmer anyway, and you know what they say about getting into cold water after eating. I wouldn't want you to get sick."

He lied. He was an excellent swimmer. Somehow, she seemed to know. She did not listen to his protests. Instead, she continued to undo the small bows of her dress. It fell to the ground and she wore a swimsuit, a corset-like suit, held by her breasts. She looked like Esther Williams in a movie he had seen about an island girl whose lover whisked her away in a helicopter. He remembered the ending particularly and the scenes with all those swimming bodies curling and expanding like the pieces of a kaleidoscope.

"Okay, sure. Twenty minutes, that's all. I don't want to be too late."

"You're not afraid, that's good."

He took his jeans off, and stood there somewhat ashamed in his briefs. He'd not been out to swim or to tan since the summer last.

“Come on,” she said.

The water was cold. He took a few strokes. Graceful, but not as strong as he would have thought of a woman who grew up by an ocean, she swam *à la grenouille*, as she said.

“You should see the water of the Pacific by our islands. It’s nothing like this. You can see your whole body in the water, even very deep, and we have so many fish, all the colors.” She continued, “And for the tourists they have young boys feed the sharks. It’s always such an attraction, you would like that I think, seeing the sharks.” She tried to keep still in her spot.

“Sharks? How do they do that? Not me, no, I wouldn’t want to go near a shark. Those tourists could pay me a fortune, I wouldn’t do it.” He thought how it would feel to have a shark nearby, circling him.

“It’s not dangerous. Sharks only attack if they are hungry. Our sharks are fed. It’s like a circus show with the lions—same thing, they put a long rope in the water, and the sharks know they have to stay on one side and the boys dive in and feed them. It’s a show really. Think of the *dompteur*, what is that called, the man who will put his head in the lion’s mouth at the circus, just like that.” She held both her hands out as if they were jaws and put her head in them.

“How do the sharks know, I mean, how do they know not to cross the line?” He asked.

“They just know. How does the lion know not to bite off his master’s head? It’s instinct. They’ve learned food comes their way if they stay there—it’s natural to them. Sharks are not that bad and I think they would make Dr. Pavlov very proud.”

“Dr. Pavlov?”

“Yes, the Russian scientist. You know the one with the dogs and the little bells. He would ring a bell and this dog would come eat dinner as soon as it heard the sound. Then he would ring the bell without having a plate of food and the dog still came. So the sharks stay behind the rope because they want to be fed—no different from the dog or the lion for that matter.”

“Well, still, I wouldn’t trust a rope. It’s not going to save any of those boys when one hungry traveling shark comes along from somewhere else, not knowing all his friends have learned not to cross the line. Really, what would happen if another shark, maybe lost, or just one of another species, just happened to drop by? Oh, what’s this? A boy wanting to feed me a little fish, I think I’ll eat his arm instead!”

He pretended a shark had pulled him under and disappeared with a scream.

After about thirty seconds, she swam towards him and called out to him.

“Ben, come out, I understand, come out, I’m serious, please.”

She kept turning from one side to the other and cried, “Ben, please, come out.”

Just as she was about to go under, he emerged and pretended to bite her. She splashed his face. He dunked her under water. She swallowed too much water and coughed a great deal.

“Are you all right, I didn’t mean, you know, I was just playing.”

“Come on, let’s get out,” she said, still coughing.

He helped her out of the water, holding her shoulders. He patted her back and kept saying, “*Ca va?*” As if somehow she would get better if he spoke French.

“I’m fine, thank you,” she whispered.

“Thank you for drowning me, yes, no problem, any time.” Sarcasm was somewhat out of his reach.

“No, thank you, for...well, the company. *Pour tout. Merci.*”

She looked up at him with her eyelashes wet and clustered like the tips of stars and her hair falling to her elbows, almost blue in the sun. He looked at her and felt rather old and important.

His hands were on her arms. He thought himself a hero. He had kissed girls in his neighborhood and at school. He had even had a girlfriend for the whole of six months, though he’d failed to go all the way. At nearly eighteen, he was crushed by the combined weight of her experience and of his ineptitude. She kissed him right there on the shore of Lake Selby. She drew him down. He knew what she would do to him, and he let her. Weeds poked his back. So still above them in the silence of the afternoon, a humming bird hovered near her head. Its green body gleamed in the light.

After it was over and their bodies came apart, they both got up. He was shaken and he avoided her stare. He didn’t want to know what this meant to her, if it had been good. He didn’t want to know if she picked hired help every summer and worked her magic like the best of sorceresses or whether he was special, the first to break her wedding vows to a far-off sailor. He didn’t want to think of the husband. He was afraid.

They half-dressed while turned from each other. She took his arm and said, “You are a very interesting person, Ben. You say that you have nothing to say about yourself, but I believe you can do anything you wish.” She stared at his reddened face and added, “*Vraiment, tu es un bon garçon...*”

A boy. That was it. To her he was still a boy.

“Well, I better go,” he said.

He turned around then and walked in the brush of weeds, his mind full of words he didn’t want to say. He left her there by her bicycle and she

didn't follow him. He thought he heard her laugh. When he got to the truck, he noticed the crud around the wheels had dried off in the sun. The terrain appeared more manageable. He picked up his shirt and put it on without buttoning it. He staked the fruit box slats behind the tires. On the first hard push of the accelerator, the truck jerked back. Yes, the slats had worked. He was going home. He wouldn't have to look back and he was glad.

The way back to the Parsons' homestead confused him. He'd forgotten about the bushels and, halfway to the farm, he remembered, cursed all the saints in his religion, and turned around. At almost nine o'clock that evening, he walked up to the Parsons' door. Fredda came out of the house, telling him how worried she'd been when he hadn't come home at six o'clock. She'd even called the grocery store in Dunham, and they'd said Ben never showed up. "Worried sick," she kept saying, "worried sick." For all her chiding, she rubbed and tapped his back the way his mother would have.

He did the best he could to reassure the Parsons everything was all right. He explained his version of the story. He got lost after the detour, the truck deep in mud, and he fell asleep in the hot afternoon sun. He said that when he woke, he wanted to deliver everything as fast as he could. He didn't think to call. He excused himself and went upstairs.

Alone in his room, he kicked the metal bed once and he started to cry. He pushed the quilt to the side, smoothed the bedclothes. Fredda had changed the sheets. They must have been Timmy's, patterned with tiny looping cowboy lassos. They looked like nooses. He was overcome with shame. He pushed the images of her body from his mind. He felt he'd succumbed to something he didn't want or perhaps the opposite: he'd yielded, but thought it unnatural. Or perhaps he had wanted her to come to him. He felt a fool. After much tossing, during which the objects in the room seemed to grow large and ominous in their half-lit shadows, he fell asleep in his clothes, his face deep in the pillow. That night, he dreamt he was a pilot, wise and experienced, and of Esther Williams in her island girl getup. His slick helicopter carried her to a distant land. He'd be a man who could keep anyone safe, because in the dream he could.

TYLER WHITNEY

My Dad: Found Within the Grey

The Whitney brothers show both sides of the American dream. My father began his career in finance as a custodian, sweeping floors and cleaning the crap of the wealthy. Undaunted by the reek of wealth, he persevered through two master's programs with his new wife and children. Long days and longer nights spent in the cheap cold were filled with studies and finding time to make wonderful moments with his family. Through old western grit, he eventually rose to the position of CFO in the same building he once swabbed late into the morning, now commanding those who left him trash to dispose of. His brother, my uncle, was the proverbial hare in the unspoken rivalry. Working as a CPA right out of college, he rubbed elbows with the wealthiest men and women in town, but their greed was his downfall. 2008 saw the collapse of the financial sector, and with it, my uncles' entire means of providing for his wife and three kids disappeared into the pockets of shadowy creditors. Looking for a scapegoat to grease a good reelection campaign, the state prosecutor threw the book at my uncle, and locked him away on charges that were later dismissed at his partners' trial. These are the two sides of the same coin, the prosperity of and unforgiving nature of capitalism. What then, is the path that I should take? Do I reject the system as one of suffering or embrace the system as one of success?

Perhaps my torn nature comes from my father. He loves his career. And though he works long hours, suffering away on spreadsheets and five-year goals, at the end of the day he finds fulfillment in what he does. This does not stem from some love of money though, as some might decry, but rather from a genuine love for others. You see, my dad didn't start in finance. Before the idea of sweeping floors dawned on him, my dad aspired to be Atticus Finch. He grew up near the poor part of town, where many families could barely buy the necessities in life. Fresh from graduating with a degree in counseling, my dad opened a family therapy clinic. He would work long days with families destroyed by drugs, abuse, and apathy. In return, sometimes he would receive no payment, only a desperate, or perhaps a begrudging, thank you. Other times his clients would bring apples or firewood or whatever they had a surplus of back home. My dad would never complain, and he always received the payment with gratitude. Even though he and my mom struggled financially, this was his calling in life: to alleviate the suffering of others. When he did finally decide to change his life goals, he brought that passion and love with him wherever he went. Even now, twenty odd years

later, every conversation I have with him is always about how excited he is to help some community thrive or how he had to extend this loan or reduce this payment so that those in debt could survive and find a way out.

For those who don't know my family, this may seem all a bit grandiose. Here I am singing my dad's praise. Of course, I am going to do that. He's *my* dad after all and I have benefited from his prosperity quite a bit. Don't bite the hand that feeds you and all that. But maybe I should explain our relationship and why what I say goes beyond patriarchal bonds. My dad is not a perfect person. He will be the first to say he's the worst of us all, and perhaps that stems from his demons that none of us should ever wish to carry. But that is his story to tell. My story is growing up thinking my father was perfect. Sure, he would work late, take long business trips to far away cities, and constantly push me to get the top grades in my class, but that wasn't him to me. For me, my dad was someone who made the moments we had together the most special in the world: dinners at the table were conversations about life, days-off were adventures that deceptively ended at the theater, late nights were movies and pizza, weekends were Taco Bell and video games, holiday bonuses were random purchases of vinyl, used boats, or cheap plane tickets. But getting older, that changed a little. Our relationship was there, but I grew up, and I began to understand that my dad was just as human as any other man: he made mistakes, forgot things, said the wrong thing, made poor choices. He wanted me to be him and better than him all at the same time. But I just couldn't do that.

I'm not the man who takes action, who's athletic, who's built like an ox, who wants to work in an office making and executing plans. I want to make art, learn, explore the world, enjoy the world and live in it. I'm fine being a stay at home dad and having my wife make more money than me. I see the world through the millennial lens; aware of my privilege and the proclivity towards entitlement over women, property, and the world. Perhaps that makes me timid, or maybe just more aware. Either way, the life I will live will be different than my dad's. But then again, that rests entirely on him. He was the one who made me read Ernest Hemingway in fourth grade. He was the one who made me apologize to girls in class that I had treated poorly. He was the one that showed me that family comes above all else. He was the one who told me to give to the man on the corner regardless of his appearance. I am the man he built. And in the end my dad suffers from the greatest conflict of any introspective father: the clash between what he wants to do and what he feels he should do. I wouldn't go so far to describe this as a dichotomy of *ego* and *duty*, though I'm sure he would. He would say that his selfish human nature sinks him in bias. But I know a man who is ready to acknowledge his own faults couldn't be bound by concepts as simple as ego

or duty. Rather, the shadows of those two ideas are the fatherhood of his son and brotherhood with his son.

Ultimately, I'm proud of what he has made me. He pushed me to read and learn when there was no reason beyond the act in of itself. But a love for learning can lead anywhere regardless of the initial direction. It started with the dystopias; the adventure found at the end of paradise. He first gave me *1984* and *Brave New World*. But then that lead to Anthony Burgess' *A Clockwork Orange*, Ayn Rand's *Anthem*, and then Jack London's *Iron Heel*. It was then London who showed me the plight of the working man, of the destructive nature of capital, and of debilitating constraints of greed. I understood how labor is alienated from the producer through commodification and mass production. I saw the nine to five job suck the passion from life and reduce the joy of family and community to an occasion only so rarely experienced after work. My dad, always the sympathetic philosopher, engaged in my newfound discovery. His questions would probe my understanding and my knowledge, and ultimately discussions would always end the same way. He would know so much more than I, and though he liked my intention, I was missing the reasoning, the practicality, the every-day impact. Philosophy and unanswerable questions can't feed, clothe, or save anyone. I was living 20,000 feet above the world, he would say, far away from any real person.

And here I am now. I've done the reading, listened to lectures, discussed the ideas of charity, economics, and justice with those who disagree with me. I can answer the questions that my father asked me as a kid. I can even ask him questions that he has no answer to. If it were a fight we were engaged in, I could win. But then, was I missing the point? I picked up listening to podcasts some time ago, and I remember one episode on the life of Ayn Rand. First and foremost, before she was heavily criticized for the tenets of beliefs, she was assailed for trying to come up with an all-encompassing philosophy of the universe at a time when grand theories had been abandoned. The world had become just too big, there was simply no way to explain everything. Even if you tried, you'd have to forget large swaths of people or ideas and you'd miss all the little things that tied us all together. That had me thinking. It doesn't matter if I can prove my dad wrong on this or that. Nor is it of some grand importance that I embrace a stance between Smith and Marx. Instead, I choose my dad; the man who chose me, who loved me, who cared for me, and who continues to do so now. Life isn't found in absolutes, philosophies, and universal codes, it's found in the grey parts in-between filled with the people who impact our lives. Living in the grey may not bring certainty, but it brings me to my dad, and that will always be far more worth it to me.

LUKE HANKINS

Synapse

Honorable Mention, 2019 Rash Award in Poetry

To hypothesize
is the luxury
of philosophers and poets—
a privilege the man in Beirut
who tackled the suicide bomber
last week did not share
when he made
the decision
to die
for those around him.
To be
or not *to be*—
synaptically
the quandary lasts milliseconds—
in it is no philosophy,
only an instinct
greater than any poetry.

ROBERT W. HILL

Seascape

—For S.H., who gave me a small print of
Bruegel's "Landscape and the Fall of Icarus"

I.

I had a student once who surely feels
he's to blame for two dead boys. He
was mostly carefree when I knew him,
loose-haired blond like a Santa Cruz
surfer on North Georgia whitewater,
a river guide who dried his wet raft

out his sixth-floor window on campus—
a marvel to behold from below, draped
there, luffing like a happy sail, a wing
of adventure suspended over the everyday,
pausing mid-air for a run down the
Chattooga. He never failed there, far

as I know, amiable odd-ball in class,
always seeming to think somewhere
away from desks and bricks. So when
he got a job at a private school in the soft
green mountains, it seemed both good
and wild, and when he took some kids

to kayak off the Florida coast, it was
a gift to everybody in the fluid sunlight.

II.

When things went wrong that day, he
might have wished for wings, to soar
the air searching for them, hours lost
scudding, paddling like mad, scanning
the salty air from blind low vantage, his
kayak caught by physics, unable to hurry

more than it could or to multiply like magic,
to send out questing spawn. No way to sail
on beams of light. No way to melt the waxen
truth. When the Coast Guard breached that

claustrophobia of vast distances, it was Ahab's
Pip again, mad for radical tininess, infinitesimal
frenzy of his bone-bare space, no outcry returned.
I imagine that grey and yellow raft, deflated,
drying out, watch it flare in the breeze, grow full
and soar as if with breath inside, cloudlike to rise,

tug loose from window-ledge tethers, lift above
the parking lot, the trees, the hills around the town,
across the lake, the highways between, as if to
search afresh for the lost, to breathe its airy self
into their two lives, parched and salted in the gulf,
their souls twin-scuttling the gales, skyey influences

to lend feathery trust again that things might not
end badly, that southing waves not threaten, that
breakers on white subtropical sands not break
our hearts, a raft no longer musky across the sills,
but slipping into the thinnest skin of blue, rampant
summer currents vacating where they were for parts

unknown, fading-out vectors of low-in-the-water
vessels, holders-of-lives, angular kayak walls fluttering
on the deep-surge firmament of that relentless sea.

WENDY J. FOX

Pivot, Feather

In her apartment, Sabine sat on the sofa, between her current boyfriend and her former coworker. The boyfriend, who went by Sebastian but whose given name was Ryan, lived in the apartment with her, and now every time she pronounced the first *S*, it felt like a hiss. The former coworker, Michael, had surprised her when he had called, and since they were both unemployed and being careful with money, she had invited him over instead of meeting him somewhere out.

She and Michael were talking about the office, and about how they should have known layoffs were coming. The temperature in the physical space always ran hot or cold, but it was more that the management waffled between supportive and distant. Sabine had lied to get the job, and Michael had a family connection, which now she thought didn't seem to matter either way.

Sebastian did not seem to be listening. He was wearing the new kind of earbuds, the ones without connective wires, and Sabine thought they looked stupid, hanging there, attached to nothing but his head, but what really annoyed Sabine was that she knew Sebastian/Ryan could hear her through the earbuds, but he pretended that he could not. His leg was just barely touching hers. The sofa was the only place to sit in the apartment, and she didn't feel like she could move farther away, and Michael was already hugging the armrest. Every couple of minutes, Sebastian's pant leg would rustle up against hers, and it felt like a warning.

Before, Sabine had been working as a barista and making the collages she called bird-scapes—feather and glue and found bits—and she'd been helping Sebastian/Ryan with his own mixed-media work. From the beginning of the six months she'd had the cubicle job in an office, she'd barely had time to help her boyfriend, and she had also stopped caring. Not about art, she knew—even if she rose to VP at a corporation, she would always care about art—but she had stopped caring about *his* art, and in particular, she had stopped caring about being his helper.

His latest and, she thought, probably last installation piece was in the apartment's living room, hardly touched. It was panels of fabric, drizzled in candle wax, and then crumpled up while the wax was still hot so the wrinkles were bound together. Each was around a square yard, and there was a stack of close to forty. These were meant to be stitched together with thick,

visible threads, heavy string, twine, or yarn, and the idea was to represent the unpredictable ways in which lives fold: *Even the same medium on the same material can produce very different results*, Sebastian's artist's statement read. All that was left was the actual stitching, which Sabine had once said she would do.

It had been difficult to describe to Sebastian how the office made her tired, even though the hours were not so many more and the work certainly less physical than being a barista. She would not say that either one was harder, but at her desk job, though she made a great deal more money, she also had far less autonomy, and that was a challenge.

"Actually at work I spend a lot of time finishing up the last details of other people's projects," she had said, when she was again explaining why she was not going to stitch his panels. "It has shown me how important it is to me to work on my own things. I think that's what I liked about pulling coffee; each order was me, from start to finish."

"Not true," he had said. "You needed a customer there, to pay for it and to drink it. Otherwise, it would not have a reason to exist." He said this as a pronouncement.

Sebastian had some money from his parents, a large sum, but it continued to dwindle because he did not earn. He said he could always ask for more, if he needed to. There was a time when Sabine found this to be enviable. The night after she was let go from her office job, though, she had drunk too much wine and told Sebastian he should think about getting himself off of his parents' teat.

"What?" he had said.

"Teat," she had said. "Get off of it."

"I feel like I barely know you," he had said.

"It's mutual," she had said, angry that the first thing he'd done when she came through the door, her desk things in a cardboard box, was to get excited that now she would have time to finish the stitching. It was possible she had bared her teeth.

In the days that passed, she had offered to teach him to sew, and she had offered to borrow a machine from a friend or the makerspace at the library if he didn't want to do it by hand. She had told him that sewing was not actually all that hard, if you just wanted to join two items together. What was hard was making it look nice, and for his installation, looking nice was antithetical. Sebastian had said she was killing the collaborative nature of the project. She had said it wasn't a collaborative project; it had never been intended as a collaborative project. It was that he just didn't want to do the sewing.

Over several consecutive nights, they had fought again.

“It won’t take you that long,” Sebastian had said. “And it will take your mind off being fired.”

“It won’t take you that long either,” Sabine had said.

“But ten thousand hours of practice, that concept from that guy—I just think you could do it so much more quickly. It’s a better use of time.”

“Whose time,” Sabine had asked. “And I don’t have that much practice. My mom taught me the basics so I could fix my clothes when they ripped. I’m not a pro. I’m not so fast. I do not have ten thousand hours, and it’s Malcom Gladwell, and I need to look for a new job.”

Now, from the sofa, sandwiched between him and Michael, Sabine eyed the stack of fabric squares. She knew Sebastian would never finish his project, and when she considered his catalog, meager as it was, she realized she’d always absorbed the domestic labor of it. He’d usually been game to scissor or cut or drizzle, but she’d been the one to heat the wax; she’d been the one to measure out the fabric panels in the first place; she’d been the one, in his prior project—dolls suspended from the ceiling, in different states of undress, some with missing limbs or heads, each with the strip of paper from a fortune cookie affixed to their delicate parts—who had gone at the torsos and in between their legs with a hot glue gun. She’d been the one who had visited the restaurant wholesaler and who had purchased the massive bag of cookies; she’d been the one to crack them open; she’d been the one who had sorted through the phrases and who had chosen the messages for the project.

The one who would be constant in happiness must frequently change.

You are known for being quick in action and decisions.

Be tactful: do not overlook your own opportunity.

She had also been the one who smoothed the papers, and had misted them with a spray of starch so the press would hold, ironing all the fortunes flat.

“Want to go to the coffeeshop where I used to work?” Sabine asked Michael, from her middle place on the sofa. “I haven’t been there in ages.” She saw Sebastian frown, just slightly, but he kept swiping at whatever he had been swiping on his phone and listening through his earbuds, rustling his pant leg.

“Yes,” Michael said, as he popped up from the sofa.

They walked out into the late autumn. The leaves had long since dried out and blown away, and the sidewalks felt matte, a simple palette of grays and browns, the red of Sabine’s scarf a pretty accent.

When they opened the door to her old shop, none of her regulars were there, and the barista didn’t know her.

“I honestly don’t want any coffee,” Michael said. “I only wanted to get out of your apartment. That guy is weird.”

Sabine considered if she needed to defend her boyfriend about being called *that guy*, but she’d never defended Michael when Sebastian used it for him, *that guy you work with*, even though they both knew one another’s names. She nodded and acknowledged. “It’s awkward right now,” she said.

They were both bored, without the office. For Michael, a college graduate who thought he was on his way to corporate greatness, it was a real crash of identity, but Sabine had wondered if the universe was sending her a message that it was time to return to her art.

For better or worse, do not misinterpret the intentions of a stranger.

Before they left the coffee shop, Sabine picked up an application. She folded the paper and stuffed it into her pocket as they walked toward a neighborhood park. The sun had come out, and though Sabine’s shoes were not the greatest for the gravel trail, it was flat and so she didn’t worry too much. They discussed their shared former boss Kate’s erratic behavior, their peer Melissa’s aloofness, and how it felt for Michael having to be fired by his own father, Dave, the COO. They decided there was some metaphor in there, only they didn’t know what it was yet. Sabine said there was another metaphor with her between Michael and Sebastian on her sofa, but Michael didn’t say anything. He kept his eyes on the gravel.

She and Michael had been flirting around one another since they were both hired, right around the same time, in a period of rapid growth.

“Do you have a car, Michael?” she asked. “I’m sure you’ve told me before, but I can’t remember.”

“I have an old Camry,” he said. “It runs okay. I was going to get a new one, but I’m holding off now.”

“Do you want to help me look for feathers?” she asked, not sure how it sounded. “I used to make collages out of found feathers. Bird-scapes I called them. I sold one, once.”

They drove toward the foothills of the Rockies, not so far really, but Sabine thought again about her shoes. She wasn’t dressed to be hiking the forests, but she hadn’t wanted to go back to the apartment to change.

She started to tell Michael everything she could think to tell him about Sebastian, about how she thought his adopted name was ridiculous *His name is Ryan. Fuck, what the fuck*, she said, and the earbuds, and the way that he tried to rope her into helping him with his installations, and she did not want to help with his installations.

“What fortune is that, starching and ironing the fortunes,” she said. “When I get back, I am going to go into that apartment, and I am going to take my things, and I am going to call him Ryan, and I am going to tell Ryan that I am leaving,” she said, and the force in her voice astonished her. The dark was starting to fall, but Michael just kept driving, and she wasn’t sure if he was headed anywhere specific, but it didn’t matter.

“I’ll take you back whenever you want,” he said. “You can stay at my house tonight, if you need to. My dad won’t care; he knows you. The couch has a pullout bed on it.”

It was such a simple offer, but it crushed Sabine, realizing how easy leaving Ryan would be, if she simply had a place to go. It had been her apartment initially, but she knew it would be hard to get him out, and she didn’t think she could force him, at least not tonight.

“I could go to my mom’s,” she said, and she was not sure why she hadn’t considered this before.

“I can take you,” Michael said.

Sabine was crushed again. Her mother lived almost as far as they had driven, an hour’s worth, in the opposite direction, but Michael didn’t care, and he refused her offer of gas, saying he had gotten his unemployment check that morning.

“Yeah, so did I,” Sabine said.

It was startling how much Michael’s small kindnesses worked like grease on a stuck hinge, a slick of wax on a sticky window frame. Metal on metal, wood on wood—the grating feeling she had when she thought of how to handle her coupling with Sebastian, bone on bone, started to slip.

She and Michael decided to stop by the apartment, where she would pack her suitcase as fully and as quickly as she could, and then he’d drive her the rest of the way. She texted her mother, *Staying for a few days with you if that is cool*. Her mother texted back, *Sure, of course*, and said she could make dinner if Sabine could bring her a couple bottles of a nice white wine. Sabine thought that meant they’d probably drink the wine and then order pizza later, but that was okay with her.

It felt good to have an errand to do, something simple on top of the problem of leaving Ryan/Sebastian. It felt good to have the very beginnings of a plan.

When Sabine first opened the door of the dark apartment, she thought he was gone, but then she saw him, sitting in almost the exact same place on the sofa. She was not sure if he was asleep or simply had his eyes

closed. When he was very anxious, Sebastian could fall asleep on demand. The earbuds were still placed in his ears, and she thought she made out his phone loosely resting in one hand, but it was dark and she couldn't be sure. She stood very still in the entryway, waiting for the sound of a snore or any sign of movement, and then when there was nothing, she forced a cough. He did not stir, and she decided he was just ignoring her, since typically any small sound disturbed him.

Pulling her suitcase out of the closet, she packed quickly, some clothes, some things that were important to her, mementos and photos. Michael had asked if she was worried Ryan would trash her stuff, but she said she didn't think he was ambitious enough to make the effort, and even if he did, there was very little she had that was not replaceable. From her dresser, she took the photo of her and her mother when she was first born, a cheesy ceramic unicorn she'd had since she was a child, and a small clay sculpture that was meant to be an eagle but looked more like a penguin, given to her by a favorite uncle.

As she rolled her suitcase across the floor, the racket of the wobbly wheels on the worn-out hardwood would be enough to annoy the downstairs neighbors, but her almost ex-boyfriend did not budge. For a moment, Sabine wondered if he had had a heart attack or an aneurysm, but then she was sure she saw his eyelid flutter.

"Are you asleep," she asked, stopping just in front of the door to the apartment. When there was no answer, Sabine reached into her purse and dug for the small LED flashlight strung among her keys. She clicked it on and shone the light toward him.

"I said, 'Are you asleep,'" she repeated.

"Yes," he said.

She felt an anger rise that he would sit there, inert, while he had to have heard her packing, when there was no way he couldn't have heard the wheels of the suitcase. She wanted to leave—she was leaving—but it hurt her that he wouldn't at least fight a little to keep her.

"I'm not coming back, except to get the rest of my things," she said. "This is the end."

"I know," he said, and he kept his eyes closed to her flashlight.

For a moment, she had administrative concerns—the lease was in her name, the utilities—but she decided she could figure this out later.

Stacked near her feet were the fabric squares for the installation piece, and then the apartment and their entire relationship seemed terribly sad. How could she have loved someone who would just let her walk out, let her roll away with her suitcase with the lumpy wheels, let her go so easily,

not even complaining that she'd left earlier with another man. How could she have loved someone who wouldn't try to sit her down and argue that they still had art to make together. Real art, not just picking up the administrative slack. Someone who could not offer her anything that showed whether she stayed or left was more telling than any of the fortunes. Someone who could not even open his eyes.

The drive to her mother's seemed very long. Sabine and Michael stopped at a liquor store to pick up the wine, and she puzzled for too long over what her mother might define as a "nice" white, at this point in her life, before settling on two mid-priced bottles of chardonnay, a pinot grigio outside of her current budget, and a box of sauv blanc.

She paid the total, and carried her purchase to Michael's car. The rest of the way to her mother's, they were silent, and she questioned if she should invite him in, if he would want to be invited in.

When they pulled up in front of the house, Michael didn't leave his intentions to question. He jumped out of the car, running around to the passenger side to open it for Sabine.

Who knocks at your threshold; do not ignore.

She had hot-glued this fortune to the crotch of one of the dolls, and she felt ashamed as it came back to her.

They approached her mother's steps, and the door was cracked open. Sabine called out, "Knock, knock," and her mother said, "Hey! Come in!"

The wine was put on ice, and Sabine immediately wished she'd thought to get flowers.

"This is Michael," she said. "We used to work together."

"Oh, honey," Sabine's mother said. "I'm so sorry. I'm Julie." She reached out her hand but then folded Michael into a hug. The kitchen smelled like oregano and garlic, and Sabine was relieved that there was actual cooking taking place. "Stay for dinner?" she asked Michael, and he caught Sabine's eye over Julie's head, asking permission.

"He'll stay," Sabine said. "Thanks, Mom. Smells great. You didn't have to do this."

"I know how a transition feels," she said. "Oh, Beenie, it's so good to see you."

Sabine winced at being called *Beenie* in front of Michael—it was the last two syllables of her name, and her mom over the years had called her first Bina and then Beenie—but she understood her mother was not trying to embarrass her. And she also realized, perhaps for the first time since she'd

been on her own, that really, who cared. Her mother had an affectionate nickname for her. It meant she had a mother. It meant her mother had affection.

“Mike,” Sabine’s mother was saying, “listen, I’m not so traditional, but Beenie is here after just leaving SRyan—you know that’s what I called him, SRyan—so no hanky-panky. You’ll be in the living room, though you seem like a nice guy and no offense. Or you can go home. But I won’t let you go home if you’ve been drinking. Not worth it, trust me. Wine? Yes? Great. Hand me your keys.”

Michael reached into his pocket and dug out his keys, and Sabine’s mother, Julie, put them on the counter. Sabine let herself float into her mother’s tendency to monologue, her mother’s tendency to give advice. She had missed that about her mom, the way she was always so sure.

They did, eventually, finish dinner. A garlic-soaked chicken deglazed with the box wine—by the time it was ready, they’d worked their way through the bottles.

“No matter,” Julie said, and laughed and laughed and laughed as the steam from the oven fogged her glasses.

Michael took over, inserting the meat thermometer and making a salad.

“Oh, you keep him,” Julie said to Sabine. “A man who eats greens. Your father thought broccoli was a sign of the apocalypse.”

Sabine didn’t think of her father that often, and she certainly didn’t think of him in terms of vegetables.

At some point, Julie dumped a heap of sheets and pillows in the living room and then hustled herself off to bed. Sabine helped Michael make up the couch before she turned to her childhood room.

They’d never been intimate, but now the intimacy was implied.

“It’s funny, who my mom thinks you are to me,” Sabine said.

“Who’s that?” Michael asked.

“I don’t know yet,” Sabine said. “I don’t know if she is right or not.”

The hug of his arms around her felt good, but she wasn’t sure if it felt correct.

In the morning, when Sabine woke, her mother and Michael were already on their second cup of coffee, joking in the kitchen. Her mother was making waffles, and Michael was whipping cream.

“You’re making him do it by hand?” Sabine asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Oh, you know, honey, you know I think it’s better that way. Fluffier.”

Michael had driven her close to a hundred miles, if she counted their first jaunt north, to get to her mother’s home. He had slept on the sofa, and now he was whipping cream for their waffles with an old whisk and palling around. Sabine could see how her mother was ready to choose him, and Sabine could see that if it was a choice between her ex, who she couldn’t even name—Sebastian? Ryan? SRyan?—and Michael, she’d choose Michael too.

The way the steam rose from the waffle iron seemed inexplicably hopeful. It seemed like the way smokestacks puffing smoke once felt like progress. It seemed like a curl of mist rising from a thawing pond. It seemed like a finger of cloud she could float on, like one of her birds in one of her bird-scapes.

The waffles were piled onto plates, the whipped cream into a bowl. Sabine’s mother microwaved syrup, and the three of them layered it all on, sprinkling even more sugar on out-of-season strawberries.

It was a gift, this meal.

Still, by the lunchtime dishes, Sabine pushed Michael out the door.

“How are you getting home?” he asked.

“I am home,” she said.

She looked at her mother and looked at the kitchen, messy from cooking but bright, and Sabine wondered if there was a fortune for what she was feeling, something like *Why did you rush to leave the house of your family* or *You can return to the past if you try*, but mostly she could not go back to the apartment; she could not bend to pick up Ryan/Sebastian from the floor or the sofa or wherever he had slept. She was sure he would have found their bed too dark and damp, and while she understood this, she could not take care of him. Would not take care of him.

Michael crossed the lawn to his car, and for a moment, Sabine wanted to go with him. He had been so kind to her, and now he was going to his own home, with his dad and his mom.

They were like moons, orbiting different planets.

I only need a few weeks, she whispered, not loud enough for him to hear. *Michael*.

Inside, her mother was doing dishes.

“He seemed nice,” her mother said. “I certainly had fun with you two.”

“I’m glad,” Sabine said, though she didn’t think any of it was about fun.

“Invite him over again, Beenie Girl,” her mother said. “Nice-looking kid, too, if you want my opinion.”

Sabine chatted some more with her mother, talking through how to handle the apartment, working out how long it would be okay to stay, and then Sabine went for a walk.

Almost unconsciously, she scoured the ground for feathers, even though she didn't think she really wanted to return to the bird-scapes. She had mostly liked the light quality of the presentation of her work, even though the actual canvases were quite heavy. Her mother said she could stay as long as she wanted. Her mother said to give the property management company proper notice, pay whatever she owed, and then to let SRyan get evicted if he couldn't take it from there. Her mother said that when she'd left Sabine's father, she had thought she would never care for a man again. Of all the things she'd been wrong about in her life, her mother said, she had turned out to be right about love.

JO ANN HOFFMAN

Her Fragrance

It slips in on a swell of air
from the restaurant door,

a whiff, no more,
but the memories it stirs
are swift and sharp
as a lance to a bubble
of feeling that spills
from my head to my heart.

A trace of her fragrance
is enough to wrap me
in a shawl of sentiment
for a mother dead for decades,
enough to return me to my child-self:

to hear the rustle of maple trees
on Parkwood avenue, the ring
of cathedral bells three blocks away
from the worn white house
where she gives me spongy marshmallows
when I stay in the lines of my coloring book,
watches me fly down leafy sidewalks
on my birthday blue two-wheeler,
teaches me how to iron Dad's shirts
under the lattice window in the dining room.

How is it enough to know only
that she preferred gardenia,
lilac and lily-of-the-valley,
that she thought her breasts
were too large, her feet too long,
that she had migraines?
A widow at forty-five, she

JO ANN HOFFMAN

raised three teens alone,
hid her illness until
we were all on our own.

I am barely twenty when she dies.
What soft scent sweetens that story?

GARY KEENAN

Apothegms in Aspic

When the tough get going, there's room to sit down
And wish for more comfortable places to sit.
You don't need to thank anyone for your spot in the food chain;
Appetizer or aperitif, you'll be finished off soon enough.
So, save your speeches for species that hunger for words alone
And would gladly skip a meal to be mesmerized
By phraseology, yours specifically.

The history of signs is full of signs of history,
And that can make for an excruciating seminar
In semiotics or semantics if left in the wrong syllabus.
Go Children Slow, the old yellow and black favorite
Hanging like a badge of shame along Scotland Street,
Seemed sinister to the very children it tried to protect,
So strange the syntax, so absent the punctuation.

Lessons lie in memories, safe from forgotten truths:
That you really don't have a lovely voice; that everything imagined
Was once impractical; that life is for the dying.
Don't be so proud your moment looks like it lasts forever.
Every day has its ravenous dogs snapping
At the heels of yesterday, devouring tomorrow.
You never did teach them to sit on command. Poor things.

VICTORIA SHANNON

Kith and Kin

Honorable Mention, 2019 Rash Award in Fiction

Every Christmas, one gift in our family repeats itself over and over, like a suitcase on an airport carousel, through some unconscious quirk of like-minded buying.

One year, it was socks. My niece gave me super fuzzy socks, I gave her boyfriend superhero socks, someone else gave my nephew, James, the family jock, socks that heated up for his snowboarding. Another year, it was all about plants: an air fern, two identical hanging strawberry planters, a bonsai tree.

But last year, there was only one double present—my younger sister, Becky, gave me a DNA test, and 10 minutes later, she opened the one I bought for her.

“You’d think we were related or something!” she squeezed out amid our laughter.

Becky and I are as close as twins, and not just because we both put ketchup on cottage cheese. But the bond mystifies us, and everyone around us. She is tall, blonde and physical; I am dark Irish, like my father. She walks into a room like a bright light, while I prefer cursing the darkness. Ever since she was a teenager, she had always wanted a bunch of kids; I chose dogs. She was drawn to nursing, a social calling with service and sacrifice. I was more comfortable behind a shield of academia, where only words could hurt. Even our bad habits don’t agree—wine and pot (her), beer and tobacco (me).

But the contrasts mean we can help each other in practical ways. I tell her what stocks to invest in, and she tells me what sweaters not to wear.

“What do you think, Beth,” she said to me one day, “would be the nicest way to tell you that’s the worst haircut you’ve ever had?”

A few years ago, Becky actually cried when I told her I was moving three states away for another in a long string of research jobs. “I can’t believe you’re not going to be here to watch my kids grow up!” she wailed. I worked very hard not to roll my eyes and insisted I would visit. But she didn’t call me for weeks. It made me think of something Mom once told me when I was away at college. Becky was in nursing school, and we sisters were sparring over something forgettable.

“Becky is a very loyal friend,” my mother told me on the phone.

“But don’t cross her. She’ll be a bitter enemy.”

Becky had a different bond with Mom. As a child, my sister had a heart condition. Amid the doctor visits and surgeries, mother and child clung to each other for support and healing.

As Mom predicted, my sister could be bitter—not to me, but to her husband. He was always a bit bossy with her, but he grew mean and ugly as the years went on, bordering on abusive to both her and their kids. He wanted them to be terrified of him.

By that time, she referred to him only as “Fart-Face.” It was for the kids and her own sanity that she decided to divorce. He was more than willing.

That DNA Christmas was the first holiday at her new apartment across town, hosting her kids in a house they didn’t grow up in. She made up the place in her typical sea of red and green and white, everywhere a stuffed Santa, wreaths, a manger scene, even a snowman cover on the toilet. No one mentioned Fart-Face, and we watched bad movies and played party games all day. The kids—Cara and Nicola were home from their respective colleges, and 16-year-old James was there from his dad’s place—were almost giddy. We all drank too much eggnog, and even let James get a happy buzz on.

A month later, it was pretty cool to see science confirm in my DNA test that I was 48 percent Irish. It explained why, as if I had any doubt, when I looked into Dad’s eyes, I often saw myself looking back. A motley mess of Eastern European-ness from Mom made up the rest.

I wasn’t expecting my sister’s call. “Hey, Beck,” I answered the phone.

“What’s this Scandinavian bullshit?” she replied.

I made her email me her DNA grid. No joke, there it was: a whole lot of Nordic. It was little like mine. *What gives?*

There was no one to ask. Dad had died a horrible cancer death 15 years earlier. Mom had suffered a fatal heart attack not long after returning from her favorite upstate Indian casino two years ago.

When I drove out from Maryland to see Becky in February, she was still rattled.

“I’m adopted, aren’t I?” she joked with a laugh after the kids left. But her eyes flashed dark with doubt when she looked away.

How would I know? No one would have confided something like that to me; I had always been the more distant daughter. But I was also the researcher, the academic, and the one with the predictable genetic chart.

So I threw myself into it. After I got home, I hunted down her school papers in my parents’ safe, untouched in my closet since Mom’s death, and

reluctantly called relatives still in Pennsylvania, where we were born. Uncle Rob and Aunt Betty were perplexed and had nothing to offer. Mom's friend Barbara sounded insulted. "What are you trying to say?" she asked me. I tried to get birth records from the state before getting mired in its touch-tone bureaucracy and giving up.

The next day, I managed to reach Joey, my mother's second or maybe third cousin, something-or-other removed. I'd last seen him, a good-looking man with light hair and a gravelly voice, at my father's funeral, along with his older brother Bobby. The brothers were long retired from insurance sales.

"I'm not sure I should say anything," he said over the phone from Harrisburg. He had an old person's rasp now. "If your mother didn't want you to know, there was a reason."

I blinked in surprise, and then straightened up. *Come on, Joey. Don't do this to me.* I put on my best seeker-of-the-truth, do-the-right-thing impression.

"So your folks are living here in Harrisburg," Joey finally gave in, as if it were happening right now, "and they're both teaching at Penn State."

My mouth slightly agape, I sat on the other end of the phone, scribbling it down.

"She goes away for a couple of months in the summer to take care of a sick friend and comes back with a baby. That's Rebecca," he said.

Holy mackerel. It's true. My sister was adopted. She isn't my sister.

"She tells me and Bobby she doesn't want to talk about it," he went on. "But one night after a party, she admits to us it was the friend's baby, and this friend isn't married and can't afford the hospital bills for the kid's heart thing. You all move to Virginia soon after that."

Virginia is where we grew up, where Dad taught at the county college and Mom worked at the library. It always felt like our home, like where we were supposed to be: a house with room to grow, a creek out back fringed with cattails, a good-sized school with a healthy mix of redneck kids and city refugees. Becky, ever the homebody, still lived there.

"Your mom doesn't bring it up again. At all," Joey said. "She won't answer any questions. So we drop it. I'm not sure who else knows besides me and Bobby. Maybe no one."

"Why the secrecy?" I wondered out loud.

"For sure, I don't know. But this is 40 years ago. It's a different time," he sighed. "You shouldn't talk about it, either."

Copper and I went for a long walk that February afternoon, my thoughts scrambled as he pulled at the leash. Of course I would tell Becky—

that was a given. I refused to be the one to continue this outrageous cover-up. I also thought, more than once, raising my eyes to the heavens, that I was sure glad it wasn't me.

And I worried about us, me and Becky. *Adopted?* Lord. I didn't want to not have a sister. She'd always been a rock for me in a way that neither of our parents ever was. How could we not be related?

* * *

I was four years old when we moved. My memories of Pennsylvania up until then were scattershot. A neighbor named Frances would watch me after nursery school until Mom or Dad came home, I knew. But I drew a blank on other parts, like an oft-told story about my falling off a pony at a birthday party and screaming to kingdom come. The pony existed in my mind only because of an old photo. The baby Becky, I realized, didn't exist in any photos at all. Did they just stick her in a closet? I also couldn't conjure up an image of a family dinner with all four of us there. Dad was often the house chef. *Where was Mom?* I wondered. *Was that when she was gone to her friend's?*

In Virginia, we became a family, and the memories were stronger there. Part of it was because of Becky's heart. We spent a lot of time at hospitals together. She was coddled and cooed over and indulged, by doctors and Mom and Dad. When I would protest, she'd turn around and stick her tongue out at me. I couldn't win, not against a heart condition.

When we would get home from school, Mom always gave her a big bear hug. *What did she do right?* I wondered then. Did I not get one because I shied away from affection? Because I was the older one? Or because I wasn't the fragile one? I never knew, never asked. I just watched their caresses from across the living room.

After the last operation, when she was seven, we finally learned to be friends.

The first time I got caught running away from home—which I did for no good reason, except to make something happen in my life—Becky was waiting in our bedroom after my beating. It was Mom with the belt; Dad refused, instead punishing me with stubborn Irish silence.

Becky came up to me after I threw myself in bed in tears.

"Are you okay?" Her face was drawn, worried.

"What do you care?" I said to the wall.

She looked at my backside. "Does it hurt?"

I turned to face her. "Of course it hurts!" I yelled. "It hurts! Okay?"

She stood there, mesmerized.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"Yeah, I know," I sighed.

She stuck something in my arm. It was Softee, her favorite stuffed bunny. I looked at her, wiped my eyes with the fur, and lay down with my back to her, whimpering.

In college, I called her in a panic after a visit home on spring break. She was still in high school. "I left my birth control pills," I told her in a panic. "Mom's going to find them. You've got to get them for me!"

"Oh, God, Beth. You're such an idiot!" she said laughing.

"Yeah, I know," I acknowledged. "Can you just find them?"

They arrived in the mail at my dorm three days later, with a note. "Don't get caught with your pants down! Idiot!"

Becky came through again after Tom dumped me. I spent all morning refusing to answer the phone, wallowing in heartbreak and self-pity. My voicemail was choked with desperate messages—my mother, my sister, my best friend, even my boss. *Leave me alone*. But I said it only to the dogs. I couldn't face another soul.

That afternoon, the doorbell rang and Becky stood on the stoop, carrying a bag of pretzels and a six-pack. We lived two hours apart.

"Don't you dare shut me out," she said sternly, barging in. She cringed at my tear-streaked and pajamaed state. "Oh no, you don't. Get dressed. We're going out."

I didn't in the end, despite her best efforts. Becky finally agreed that my fuzzy pj's weren't fit for public consumption. So for hours, she let me blubber and vent. We outdid each other dumping on the male species. "Idiots!" we screamed in unison from my deck, neighbors be damned.

But I kept thinking, *What would I have done without her?* Somehow, she had known that my misery needed her company.

"Becky..." I started after we had moved on to beer and wine from bloody Marys around sundown, "I can't believe you're here..."

"Beth, knock it off," she said. "You'd do the same for me."

I stared at her, and she stared back. "Okay, you wouldn't," she laughed. "I don't know what you'd do, but you're right—not this."

She left at midnight, dismissing my thanks with "Oh, for pete's sake" and "Get over it."

"Yeah, I know," I said in farewell. Despite the drinking, I was more sober than I had been that morning. It was like she had given me Softee all over again.

* * *

The weekend after I found out she was adopted, I drove out to her house with a six-pack and a bottle of wine. It was my lack of eye contact that made her wary long before I poured. We cozied up on either end of her overstuffed couch, each covered with a corner of the blue-and-white afghan Mom had crocheted.

“So?” she said, pulling out a half-used joint. “What’s up? Something’s going on, Beth. I can tell. Who’d you break up with this time?”

Momentarily helpless, I looked at her soulful green eyes and wispy golden bangs. With one arm slung around the back of the sofa, she seemed the epitome of serene, secure. This was the last moment, I knew, before everything would change.

“You *are* adopted,” I finally said, quietly and firmly.

“Ha, ha, very funny,” she smirked.

Yet her eyes darted around my face. I knew I had her.

“Remember Joey? I found him in Harrisburg,” I started.

She was bewildered as I unfolded the whole conversation.

“I don’t believe it,” she said, taking a drag. “Why wouldn’t they tell me?”

She didn’t expect an answer, and I sure as hell didn’t have one.

“I think it’s true,” I said. “You gotta admit, it makes sense—Mom would do that. She would feel like she had to take some friend’s baby. Like God had chosen her to be a savior.”

“That Catholic guilt,” my sister sneered.

She suddenly threw off the blanket and paced the room.

“Then who am I?” she said, pausing in front of the mirror over the mantel.

I was not usually in the role of consoler, but I made an effort. “You’re the same person. You’re still Becky. Still a mother, a nurse. Still yourself.” *Still a sister?* I wasn’t sure. “You just have a different history than you thought you did.”

When she turned toward me, she was crying. “Mom...What about Mom? She was my friend. How could she do this to me?”

Again, I had no answer. I’d been wondering the same thing.

She moped around the room and stopped short at the shelf filled with family photos, seizing the one of Mom with Becky’s kids.

“I’m going to kill her,” she spat out, turning the photo to the wall.

“Do it,” I urged. “I’ll help.” She couldn’t help but laugh. We both became a bit hysterical, until she dissolved again into sobs.

“But I’m *like* her!” she cried in confusion. “I feel like an idiot. She tricked me, she lied to me. My whole life is a lie. What a traitor. What a coward.”

In her own way, Mom was indeed a chicken. She was never a disciple of honesty. Sure, every mother is entitled to a fair share of white lies and omissions, but Mom was a master. I remembered her skipping over parts of family stories that she found unpleasant, never being open about money, ending fights with my father with total capitulation, dismissing direct questions.

“What am I supposed to do now?” Becky sputtered. “I’m 41—I have a family. I’ve got things to do. I can’t start over after all these years.”

I couldn’t imagine being in her head just then. But I knew she couldn’t stay there. “Look, you know they must have had the best of intentions.”

Her green eyes turned fiery. “Screw that.”

I let her be pissed off. She veered between crying jags, bitter outbursts, and moments of quiet the rest of the night. We fell asleep on the couch, drained and drunk, the striped afghan draped across our legs.

We got together again around St. Patrick’s Day at her place for the usual toast to our heritage. She hadn’t put up her decorations, not the sticky four-leaf clovers on the windows, not the leprechaun dish towels in the kitchen. The kids had come for dinner, but she skipped the corned beef.

After the kids left, Becky and I packed the dishwasher together.

“Are you okay?” I asked her.

She sighed. “Do I look okay?” she said wearily. “I feel a big hole inside. It’s unfinished business. It’s like I’m floating without any rudder. I feel hollow.” She stared at me. “Are you getting the picture?”

“Look, we’re not our parents, either of us,” I said, knowing it was a doomed effort. “*Any* parents. Look at me—I spent my whole life rejecting them. At least you liked them. I don’t know which of us is more damaged at this point.”

She nodded. “I know. You’re pretty screwed up. I just never thought I would be,” she said with half a smile.

“Me neither,” I said, deflecting her missile. “And your kids aren’t. You gotta take credit for that, Becky.”

She came back to the empty table with drinks. “No, they’re not. And they won’t be. As long as I can keep them away from their father,” she frowned.

“I told the kids, and they were fine with it. They thought it was cool,” she laughed. “They all want to be adopted, too. ‘Wouldn’t that be *awesome*?’” We chuckled.

“Do you want to find out?” I asked.

She knew I was asking about her birth parents.

"I don't think I do," she said slowly. "Does it matter? Besides, everybody's probably long since dead."

Becky looked me straight on. "What do you think?"

"At least we know why you're the only one who doesn't like chocolate ice cream."

"Come on....That's not what I asked."

"Of course I'd want to know," I blurted out. "You know me. Information is power. I'd need to know the truth. And the curiosity would be killing me."

She shrugged. "I guess. I'll think about it."

The need to fill the hole eventually overwhelmed her. But she kept it at arm's length, making her older daughter, Cara, do the research. I didn't blame Becky for not doing it herself, or asking me. It was her family she needed to find, not mine.

Two weeks later, Cara called me from college. "Something funky's going on, Aunt Beth," she said, perplexed. "I think I did everything right. But Pennsylvania insists her birth certificate is real. Gram and Gramps are on there as her parents. It seems legit. I got a digital copy and it doesn't say anything about an adoption. I don't know what to tell Mom. I don't think she's really adopted."

"That's pretty weird," I agreed. "I guess I wouldn't say anything yet."

"I don't get why it's such a big deal, anyway," Cara went on. "We're all mutts, aren't we? I mean, I don't know my DNA for nothing and it doesn't matter. So what?"

"How's your mother, really?"

"I don't know," Cara said. "She seems fine. And then sometimes on the phone she just goes quiet. That's why I was afraid to say anything to her."

"I'll get on it, I promise."

What the hell? I stared at the cellphone after we hung up. *Is she or isn't she?*

Damn it, now I had to know. The two-hour drive to Harrisburg that Saturday gave me plenty of time to ponder and plan. The answers had to be there. Joey had one story; the records had another. I figured I would press Joey, maybe Bobby, neighbors, anyone still around who might know what really happened.

With the internet and GPS, it was easy to find Joey and Bobby's house. Lifelong bachelors, they lived side by side in a two-family ranch in the same part of town as before. It almost seemed familiar when I pulled up. But maybe not.

Bobby was home. I would have recognized him anywhere, despite his cane. His body was shrunken, but his face still kept his good looks of years ago.

“It’s Beth,” I offered as he stood at the door. Just in case.

He knew. He looked like he had expected me. He was not smiling.

“Joey said you called,” he finally grunted. He led me through the cluttered house to the back, waving me onto a windowed porch that spread across the back of both homes.

“Bobby,” I said, “I’m sorry to surprise you like this. But it’s good to see you. Really.”

He was always the more subdued of the brothers. I suddenly remembered sitting in his lap, watching in awe as he did the disappearing-quarter act. Or maybe it was Joey.

A teapot sat on an iron table and a long-haired cat rubbed his chin along a chair leg. Bobby rested his cane against the door and poured me some tea.

“Becky’s good,” I soldiered on. “Getting divorced, but the kids are doing great. Cara and Nicola are in college.”

He didn’t quite scowl, but I felt that he wanted to.

“Joey just left,” he eventually imparted after settling into a beat-up armchair that molded to his spare frame. “He does the shopping since I’m not driving anymore.”

“Bobby...” I stroked the cat. “You know why I’m here.”

“Rosebeth...” he said, and stopped short.

“Bobby, come on. I don’t know what’s going on.” Face to face, I found I couldn’t pull off any guilt trip. “All I know is that what Joey told me can’t be right. He’s got Becky thinking she’s adopted, and maybe that’s not true.”

He wriggled his curved back into the cushions.

“Is it true?”

Bobby looked at me for a long time. I started to squirm. He looked out to the leafless trees. He watched the cat stretching on the floor. I waited.

“What she did...What they did...”

He rubbed his eyes. I suddenly thought he might cry.

“Bobby, you gotta tell me.” I touched his knee. “It’s okay, it’s okay, I swear it’s okay.”

He drew in a long breath and glanced back into the house. “They shouldn’t have. We were all young. And foolish. Having fun. Your mother and Joey, they were close. They were too close. I knew it was wrong. They knew it was wrong. They wouldn’t stop.”

I gasped, then quickly swallowed it back in fear he would shut down. “Joey would never tell. He swore to your mother,” he said into his tea. “He was....He was... so ashamed after the baby. He almost killed himself. It killed him inside, anyway.”

And then he was done. “You can’t tell Rebecca,” he pleaded, folding his fingers together as if in prayer.

He was right. There was no way I was telling Becky that Joey was her father. I finally let my gasp out.

Anyone else would have jumped up and screamed in anger and horror and sorrow. Instead, I spewed questions at him.

“It wasn’t a friend? She went away to have Joey’s baby? Did Dad know? What did he say? Is that why we moved? Did he forgive her? Is that why Becky was so special to Mom?”

We were both quiet after my outburst. Bobby’s mouth was clamped shut. He rubbed his arm. He looked at me once and turned away. He was an old man in pain. Pain from knowing, pain from decades of secrecy, pain from telling. He wasn’t going to say any more.

I suddenly wanted to get out of there before Joey came back. I think Bobby wanted me gone, too. I knelt before him and cradled his clenched hands in mine.

“I won’t tell,” I said, looking into his watery eyes. “I won’t tell anyone. Thank you, Bobby. Thank you, thank you.”

He just shook his head. The cat paced, filling the silence with a yowl.

I made him stay in his chair and ran back through the house. Another time, I would have stopped for a smile at the family photos on the wall. Not now. And I knew there would never be another time. The drive home couldn’t go fast enough.

When I called Becky that night, she was delighted with my report. The most important part for her was that Mom was still her mom. Waves of relief overcame us both.

“Well, well, well! So Mom had an affair with a grad student!” she chuckled. “Who’d a thunk it? That explains so much!”

“Yeah—the blonde hair, the heart thing, the move to Virginia,” I said carefully. “She was probably right to lie on the birth certificate. But you gotta feel for Dad. What he must have gone through.”

There was a pause. “You were always his favorite,” she countered, with a pout in her voice.

“But hey, we’re still sisters,” I veered.

“*And* I’m still adopted,” she said. “I think I like it both ways.”

So did I. My lie of a tryst with a grad student made Mom cool, romantic. Unfaithful, yes, but daring, and human. And it made Mom hers. It was my Softee to her.

Becky chattered on. I looked at Copper crashed on the couch while she burred away on the phone. Cara's right, I thought. We're all freaking mutts.

As we hung up, I told her, "I'm coming for Easter. You better have your decorations up when I get there. Idiot!"

"Yeah, I know," she said.

CANDICE KELSEY

Closed Caption for the Hearing Impaired

Is shockingly slipshod
on YouTube's DVD2DivX
of The Hardy Boys/
Nancy Drew Mysteries
Uploaded by lise engen haugan
A Norwegian with 2.14K subscribers
And a shared love for 1977's
Mystery of the Ghost Writers' Cruise

Where a total lack of punctuation
Is the least of the problems
Which include an introduction to
Mr. Addams' *niece, Catfish,*
Shortly before the announcement for
Mrs. Ferguson, whose husband
is the main lout
And the sound of ocean waves
[Music]
Or doors opening on the Captain's bridge
[Applause]

For some of the captions
That are painstakingly correct
Despite the complexity of
Often using chess terms as veiled threats
And the wordy retort
You certainly are liberal with your plurals

While the easier phrases
Remain a ghost writers' mystery
Such as Miss Rivers who
Throws darts like a chimp
And famous Mr. Addams who
Coffin takes a nap in the after-pool

CANDICE KELSEY

I find it cruel – the confusion of
Hearing-impaired viewers
Who think George Fayne rude
For labeling the Activities Director
Very attractive (in the wrong way)
Before he announces his
Mr. Olympics contestants for the title
Of Miss Regulars Lying
And Nancy congratulates George for
Already scoring a big cancer report

Which begs the question
Whether it's the English-Norwegian
Language barrier
Or some drunken stenographer
With no regard for the needs of the deaf
That should be held responsible

Although I like to imagine
Some sober moonlight poet
Trouncing the language-sound barrier
In an effort to haunt the decks
Or merely improve the script

VICTORIA KORTH

Berries

Blue, though perhaps
I hadn't really seen them,
high bush planted years back just beyond
the deck, as I was listening
to fledglings gathered even higher
begging for food, and thinking of my children.

Two days before, they had been texting me
at the same time. One was selfish,
the other righteous, mean.
It unfolded clearly
as it had many times from the beginning.
Fingers held too long near the freezer
hurt like that, cubes filling a huge white
container underground—
there they go one day
unable to find each other
surprised by the fierce cold.

But this morning
they sent me a selfie, arms linked
somewhere in Brooklyn,
tables and an ivied wall behind.
He replete, triumphant.
She quiet, soothed.

We love you.

Which was not what I had felt so wretched about, no.
But whether I'd taught them urgency—
his arm around her shoulders,
yes, just like that—
taught them
without having hurt them.

And the berries were bluer, I swear.

MICHAEL KREGER

New Mexico, 5:43 AM

Death had left
a waxed cotton jacket
under the seat. It was something,
a perversion
given the blue sky.

His touch was pine scented
real and chemical
merely (Can one still say that?)
a phantom vibration.
Out here, there is no service.

And yet, there are still beast
who run along
movements in sync with
peripheral vision. Now gone.
Only sky above and plastic below.

And blood is still there.
Inside.
A million vessels collapsed
into a single point, a stone.
No, quartz, pink.

RANDALL SHELLEY

Little Dog

“Without wolves,” Spencer said, “there would be no dogs.” He glanced into the rearview mirror toward the backseat, but Aaron didn’t respond.

“Wolves are canine ancestors. Like cavemen are to us,” he continued. His eyes met Aaron’s in the mirror this time. The eleven-year-old eyeballed him, crossed his arms, and looked away.

Spencer had been matched with Aaron three years ago through the Big Brothers and Big Sisters Program of Western North Carolina. Aaron was a Sixth Grader at Black Mountain Elementary. He was Aaron’s “Big,” and Aaron was his “Little.” The Bigs and Littles from the program got together regularly for pizza nights, ballgames, and bowling. They raised money hosting a 5K race each Thanksgiving and sold Little League raffle tickets during the summer. Each Friday afternoon, Spencer went to Aaron’s school where they met one-on-one for tutoring in the library, followed by a short recess on the playground. Aaron had come a long way, from being orphaned and passed around by trailer park relatives like a church offering plate, to a decent student with plans of becoming a zookeeper when he grew up.

That afternoon during the drive to the wolf sanctuary, Spencer had become concerned that someone from the program or school had prepared Aaron that Spencer would be leaving. He’d wanted to be the one to break the news. The boy hadn’t spoken in the fifteen minutes they’d been in the car. Aaron hid underneath his red hoodie, staring out the window past empty fields and into the shadows of the Blue Ridge Mountains like he’d rather be somewhere else. But Spencer knew that was not the case. After reading *White Fang*, Aaron had been looking forward to seeing Little Dog, constantly nagging Spencer to take him to Full Moon Farm in Asheville to meet the famous wolf.

It had been six months since Spencer Finley’s nervous breakdown. During that time he’d thought about how he would break the news to Aaron, how he would explain he was taking a long trip and probably not coming back. His troubles started on the night of his mother’s funeral when he walked in on his fiancé with his older brother, Mark. He’d gotten up during the middle of the night to pee, and when Gina wasn’t in bed beside him, Spencer went downstairs where he found her in front of the fireplace

with her head bobbing in Mark's lap like a fishing cork. Ever since, a vein throbbed against his temple, as though it were trying to claw its way out of his head. He'd quit his nursing job at the hospital and purchased one of those tiny houses on wheels that he'd seen on the HGTV channel. All he needed to be comfortable was four hundred square feet and a trailer hitch. He had found a job as a travel nurse with short-term assignments out West, allowing him to drift from town-to-town with his tiny house in tow. *Next stop, Denver. Then on to Sante Fe*, he'd said to himself in the voice of a train conductor. This had become Spencer's mantra, an avoidance that allowed him to run away—his very own messed up version of the American Dream. He'd travel to Yosemite and Zion National Parks, tour wine country, and see the Grand Canyon. At forty, he no longer felt captive by the idea of marriage and family. Aaron had become collateral damage, just another piece of his wreckage and Spencer felt as though he were abandoning a stray animal, mangy and underfed, leaving it to fend for itself as it returned to a dangerous, unknown world.

A large hardwood sign marked the entrance to the farm. It was dark and grainy with a hand-painted yellow moon and shadow of a wolf. Spencer veered off the two-lane state highway onto a dirt road that fed them down a long and winding driveway toward the wolf sanctuary.

"Did you finish reading *White Fang*?" he asked, itching his chin. Its patchy gray scruff had the texture of a tennis ball.

"Duh," Aaron sighed. "We talked about it last week."

"Well, have you started the other one?"

Aaron unzipped his hoodie and removed a novel. Spencer had given Aaron his copy of *Call of the Wild*. He watched the boy study the book's cover, tracing the howling wolf's face with his index finger. The book's edges were tattered and curled like a newspaper. Aaron removed his black Carolina Panthers toboggan and let the hood of his sweatshirt fall to his shoulders. His long messy brown hair clung to his scalp, full of static. He huffed on the lenses of his thick glasses and wiped them clean with his shirttail. Spencer noticed dark circles under the boy's eyes and that he appeared to be in need of a shower. Aaron's teacher had told Spencer that boys at school teased Aaron for being small, calling him "Half-Pint" or "Tiny Tim" because he was living at the Presbyterian Home for Children. His leaving would be difficult for the boy at first, but Aaron would be fine. That's what Spencer told himself. Aaron would age out of the program in a few years and start a journey of his own.

At the end of their first year together, Aaron drew pictures of the two of them standing in front of his school. His art teacher had posted the

pictures outside the classroom. His classmates drew stick figure families with pets, holding hands in front of their homes. In each drawing the sun was shining, the grass was green, and everyone was smiling. But in Aaron's drawing, there was no sun, no grass, just a plain building, a boy and a man. It was simple and sad, now part of Spencer's broken promise. He worried about the progress they'd made, worried that it was for nothing and that Aaron would get hooked on drugs or turn to crime—that he'd get lost in the system. Spencer hated to think what Aaron would draw after he left.

Spencer's station wagon bounced along the dirt straightaway of Full Moon Farm, passing brown fields with white three-rail horse fencing. At the end of the drive, a small log cabin and welcome center waited. The parking lot was empty. A middle-aged woman in a flannel shirt and blue jeans raked leaves into a series of small piles on the lawn. She kept her head down, continuing to rake as their car doors slammed. The wind blew stray leaves off the tops of the piles. Some collected in new piles, others scattered, combing the coarse grass as the wind carried them away.

"Your leaves are escaping," Spencer said, approaching her.

"This wind's awful. I can't keep them in one place," the woman said.

Aaron climbed on the railing leading into the welcome center.

"I know what you mean." He watched as Aaron swung on the underside of the railing the way a monkey would from tree to tree.

The woman leaned on her rake, pausing as the leaves scattered. She combed her hair away from her eyes.

"We're here to see Little Dog."

"Go on in. I'll be right with you."

The woman tidied up a small pile of leaves, then raked them into a larger one. Spencer continued to stare at her as he held the door for Aaron to go inside. She turned slowly back at him and they traded smiles. Her shirt was light-checkered, and her hair was long and dark, fixed in a ponytail. Cool air stirred and blew under Spencer's shirt. He felt as though he was seeing someone he should recognize. He tried to place her, but could not. As the wind blew him inside, he braced himself at the entrance, feeling like he was staring at one of those 3D patterns that required time and focus before revealing the true image.

The welcome center was vacant. Spencer drummed his fingers against the front desk while Aaron shopped in the souvenir section. It looked like a convenience store: a snack aisle by the souvenirs, a shared bathroom, a pair of rocking chairs, and a coffee maker. Aaron returned wearing a coonskin hat and reading a glossy brochure, while Spencer twirled a postcard rack at the counter.

"It says here that wolves can break through bones and hides with a series of small bites. Did you know that?" Aaron asked, glancing up from the brochure. A water cooler gurgled behind him.

"I didn't."

Spencer was relieved to see Aaron had perked up. Maybe there was a chance for him to explain things, to reassure him the program would find him a new Big Brother. The thought of being replaced held little appeal. It wasn't the outcome he'd planned on when he began volunteering. But they couldn't stay together forever. Following through with things had long been a problem for Spencer. He'd changed majors three times in college and switched rotations from Neurology to Geriatric Medicine at the hospital. And before that he tried Urology and Orthopedics. He'd walked away from his brother after the incident with Gina. This restless stirring comforted him. He felt alive with urgency. Maybe everyone was right about life being too short. It was high time Spencer turned the focus back on himself and stopped caring for others. He needed to let go.

A bell rattled against the glass of the entrance as the woman came inside.

"I'm sorry for the wait. Those leaves will be the end of me." she said. "They never stop falling."

"No worries," Spencer said. "One adult, one student."

Aaron squeezed a squeaky stuffed animal in the souvenir section, startling them.

"Cute kid," the woman said, as she took his cash.

"Thanks. He's not mine. We're brothers. Not real brothers. Just friends. It's a community outreach program."

"I see," she nodded.

"How much for the raccoon cap?"

"Twenty."

He handed the woman a twenty.

"Have you been here before?" she asked, stepping around the counter to lead them to the door.

"We haven't," Spencer said.

"I'm going to walk you out to the sanctuary. But you can do the tour on your own. Looks like you'll have the place to yourselves."

"I need to pee," Aaron said.

Spencer and the woman stepped out onto the front porch while Aaron went to the bathroom.

"So you run this place?" he asked, pushing his hands into the pockets of his jeans.

“Not exactly. I’ve been here for a few years. It started as a temporary thing.” She turned away from him, leaned against a wooden post, and looked out toward the sanctuary in the distance.

“How so?”

“Community service. It was part of my parole-work agreement. But I stayed on. I like the wolves. I live on site as the caretaker.”

She broke eye contact, giving him a second to let it sink in.

“I’m Spencer,” he said, extending his hand.

“Suzanne.”

They shook hands.

Suzanne’s confession surprised him. She didn’t strike him as someone who caused trouble. He’d mistaken her for one of those country girls, who enjoyed farm labor and animals, a shy and sheltered woman who hid their looks under overalls and frumpy sweatshirts. Suzanne wasn’t the type he had been attracted to in the past, but there was something about her that he couldn’t look away from.

“Did you know wolves communicate telepathically?” Suzanne asked.

“I didn’t. To be honest, I know very little about wolves. I’m just along for the ride.” Spencer’s hands felt cold and clammy. He stuffed them back into his down vest.

“Wolves share functions while they hunt: one gives chase, another herds, and the third one lies in wait. They communicate by looking into each other’s eyes to share their thoughts during the hunt.”

“How interesting.” Spencer wanted to ask Suzanne which one she was, but didn’t. She struck him as the wolf in waiting. He felt her eyes on him again as he stared at the empty parking lot. Suzanne impressed him. He couldn’t think of anything to say, but he wanted to continue their conversation. Being alone with her made him feel like he was receiving a rare privilege.

Aaron returned, wiping his hands on his pants. Suzanne flipped the black and orange sign on the door over, closing the sanctuary store.

“All right, Davie Crockett, let’s go see the wolves,” Spencer said. “This is Suzanne. She was just telling me about how wolves communicate telepathically. Did you know that?” He put his palm on the boy’s shoulder, and they followed Suzanne toward the wolf den.

“Of course. Everyone knows that,” Aaron said. “When they attack larger animals, like bears, they don’t think about what might happen to them. They only think about the other wolves. They put everyone else first, you know, to protect their family.” Aaron still had the Jack London paperback

curled in his hand. Excited, he flattened the novel out, jabbing his fist into the cover the way a baseball player does his glove.

Suzanne walked ahead of them as they proceeded along a stone path wrapping around the welcome center. Spencer watched her closely, pretending to listen as Aaron went on about Little Dog. She pointed in the distance toward the sky, so soft and blue, Spencer felt it could make anything feel at home.

"I'm sorry. We usually carry visitors out here with the golf cart, but it's not working today."

"A little exercise won't hurt us," Spencer said. "Besides, it doesn't look far."

"Quarter-mile." Suzanne picked up fallen branches and snapped them over her thigh.

He could see by the way she kept herself busy, the way she spoke about the wolves, that her time in jail had done her some good. Whatever her troubles had been, they were long gone, like tumbleweeds skirting across an empty highway. Spencer envied her spirit, her simple life and role at Full Moon Farm. It seemed clear to him and he knew he was doing the right thing to simplify his life.

When they arrived at the wolf den, Aaron seemed to have the energy of six children. He trotted up and down the fencing, running his fingers through the chain links. Spencer and Suzanne walked along a paved path behind him. The enclosures were not what he had expected—manufactured like a zoo. Rather, they were shaded by thick rows of tall black-green pines. The dens were built into craggy cliffs and pocked with large stones. There was no grass, only hard, cold earth.

The late afternoon sun ran low behind the trees, flowing through in soft golden bands. Walking alongside Suzanne past the enclosures, Spencer felt like they were on a blind date. He picked up a crisp leaf and slowly peeled its edges off.

"Where are the wolves?" he asked.

"They are shy. They hide in their caves." Suzanne stopped, hitching her fingers through the fence. She seemed upset, as though she was trying to unlock the wolves' mistakes, why they had been exiled. Spencer wanted to comfort her. He wanted to slide in behind her and pull her close to him. For a moment, he'd forgotten about Aaron, who'd wandered ahead.

"What about Little Dog?" he asked. He said it slowly, with care, as he moved next to Suzanne. She shot him a sideways glance before returning her focus to the enclosure.

“Captivity hasn’t been good for Little Dog. He is scared of our visitors. The other wolves here haven’t really accepted him into the pack,” she said. “He became anxious when he wasn’t free to roam. His fur fell out and his teeth went bad from chewing on rocks. He only comes out for me in the evenings.”

“Is that when you feed him?” Spencer asked.

“No. He eats in his cave in the morning. He comes out at night sometimes to sing, calling for other wolves.”

“Do they answer him?”

“They haven’t yet.”

Little Dog was no ordinary wolf. He had briefly been a celebrity in the area. A runt unaccepted by his pack in the wild, he chose to live close to humans and often tried to socialize with their pets. Hikers encountered him regularly on the Appalachian Trail or in trail towns. He instigated playful behavior with people out walking their dogs. He came close, juking and jumping, making curious animal noises like he wanted something. He brought offerings, too, laying down branches and souvenirs he collected from dumpsters for those he met. After a few local chicken coops had been raided and a pair of Yorkies went missing, some residents in town felt Little Dog had gotten too close. He was captured and brought to Full Moon Farm to live out his days in one of the artificial enclosures. For a time, an animal rights group advocated on his behalf, but they’d lost traction and had moved on to a new cause, leaving Little Dog at the farm.

A gray wolf stepped out of the darkness of the enclosure’s rock line, with a pup behind her.

“That’s Sherpa, our only she-wolf. The little one is Tum-Tum, her pup,” Suzanne said. A small smile came to her lips. “The females are usually the alphas. She’s showing herself as a sign of protection.”

Sherpa stood quiet-eyed like an inmate. Her coat looked dirty and matted, and she was so skinny it occurred to Spencer she might be sick. Her bony shoulders were hunched forward. Tum-Tum appeared fresh from a bath, fluffy and clear-eyed. Seeing the wolves’ confinement made Spencer feel shameful for being there, like he was cheapening nature. Tum-Tum seem unaffected, he didn’t know anything different. But Sherpa anchored her gaze on him, as though her soul had been damaged and taken from her, the same look you see from those mothers in third world countries being brave for their children.

“Do you ever think about freeing them?” he asked.

“I wish I could. They shouldn’t be here. This isn’t what was intended for them.”

It was quiet between Spencer and Suzanne for a minute. An evening shadow stretched across the enclosure like it was trying to reclaim it.

"I'll be in my trailer if you need anything," Suzanne said. "When you finish the tour, the trailer is at the end just past Little Dog's enclosure if you have any questions."

Spencer saw Suzanne was teary-eyed and he wanted to tell her not to go, not to leave him with Aaron. Instead, he blurted out, "Why is he alone?"

Suzanne tilted her head in uncertainty. "Who?"

"Little Dog."

Suzanne stepped closer to the fence. "Because it's less."

"Less what?" Spencer asked.

"It's less stressful for the other wolves," she said. "It's the best we can do."

Suzanne seemed to be considering her life, evaluating why it hadn't worked out a certain way. The way a child dreams about a future, then waits for the things that never come. Spencer thought about Little Dog's exile, an outcast punished for his curiosity, searching for contact—a quiet corner of the world that had not been abandoned. He looked up at the sky. His problems seemed somehow smaller than before, separate instead of part of a whole. His tiny house, his plan for on the road felt like a trick. The places he'd planned to visit were excuses—blank faces carved in rock canyons, eroded by wind and rain forever staring into an empty abyss.

Suzanne backed away from the fence and lowered her head as she headed down the path toward her camper. She stopped and turned around. "Just knock on my door before you leave so that I can lock up."

Spencer stood on the concrete path for a few minutes, dreading his conversation with Aaron. He remembered the first time he took Aaron to the movies. The boy had never been to a real theater. Standing outside the little theater, they had their picture made. It was night. The theater's marquee was lit up behind them, flashing gold against red and white. They had seen "Zootopia." He was not crazy about animated films, but the story touched him and Aaron had begged to visit Little Dog ever since.

On a bench in front of Little Dog's den, Aaron waited, kicking his legs and staring at the ground as Spencer approached. He sat down beside Aaron. "Any sign of Little Dog?"

Aaron didn't say anything. He pulled his hoodie back over his head. Spencer removed the brochure from the welcome center from the inside of his down vest pocket. He ran his thumb and index finger along the scruff on his jaw. The veins in his temples and neck tightened.

“I know you’re leaving,” Aaron said, looking away.

It felt like a breakup, the moment when a spurned lover faces that emptiness of the unknown.

“Who told you?” Spencer asked.

“My teacher Miss Fran said you were moving away.” Aaron sniffled. His jaw tensed up, trembling. “I don’t understand why you have to go. There’s not even a real reason. It’s like you just don’t want me anymore.”

“It’s not that at all, Aaron. This has nothing to do with you.”

But it did. It had everything to do with Aaron. Spencer recalled his joy each Friday afternoon when the front office called Aaron down from his classroom to meet him. He waited at the bottom of the steps, listening as Aaron’s sneakers scuffed the floor as he raced down to see him. Spencer pictured them in the library flipping through flash cards of spelling words and multiplication tables or shooting hoops on the playground blacktop. He remembered the dozens of letters he wrote the school board to secure funds for Aaron’s vision therapy so that he could overcome his dyslexia. He thought about the empty-headed bullies calling Aaron names, and how alone this boy had been in the beginning, and how alone he would be when Spencer left.

“How come you never look me in the eye?” Aaron asked.

Spencer was caught off-guard. He tried to look at Aaron, but fumbled his words.

“You’re just like everyone else. No one ever looks me in the eye. It’s like they’re afraid of me. They think it’s okay to lie to me because I’m a kid. But I can see right through it.” Aaron dropped his paperback on the ground and stomped on it. “I thought you were different, Spencer. I thought you were my friend.”

Aaron was crying and began to storm off. Spencer reached for his arm, but Aaron pulled away. Spencer leaned forward with his elbows on his knees, dipping his head into his palms. Aaron turned back, stopping as Spencer began to cry. He sat back down at the far end the bench. Spencer hadn’t noticed him their at first until he slid closer, their legs touching. He put his hand on Spencer’s back and drew something. Spencer was unsure of the shape, but it felt like a heart.

He shut his eyes and hugged Aaron tight, but sensed the boy pulling away. Aaron squirmed free and went to the fence. Little Dog stepped out of the shadows of his den where two boulders stood together like a teepee. The wolf was mostly gray, with brown and black markings around his face. He was small, too, like a pup still growing into an awkward body. The wolf’s

mouth widened, panting to show he had no upper teeth. He climbed up on top of one of the boulders and sat perched like a boy king.

Shadows began to fill the enclosure, camouflaging the area in front of Little Dog. He hopped down into a sliver of sunlight, circling it twice before curling on his side. The wolf rolled onto his back, kicking his legs the way a circus animal performs a trick. Suddenly, he flipped over and came close to the fence. Spencer looked on from a visitors' bench along the path as Aaron knelt down to slip his hand into the enclosure. Little Dog stretched his neck forward, uncertain of Aaron's offering. When he got within a foot of the fence, the wolf sat on his bottom like any dog waiting for a cookie, placing his paw in Aaron's hand.

Suzanne's trailer door slowly opened, and she stuck her head out. She smiled at Spencer—a knowing smile that understood something rare and beautiful had taken place, something only animals can make possible. She walked toward them.

In the distance, there was howling.

"That's Sherpa, the she-wolf," Suzanne said, as she approached Aaron. "This is a first. I think Sherpa approves of the new friend you've made."

"There are two wolves singing," Aaron said.

"The higher notes belong to Tum-Tum," Suzanne said.

Aaron grinned at her. It reminded Spencer of the way he looked at him on Friday afternoons, running down the hall. Only this smile seemed bigger, one that might never go away. There was a wildness in his bones, too, like something had been exchanged between him and the wolf—a kind of excitement among close friends. Little Dog returned to his den, turning back once to say goodbye to Aaron, knowing he'd be back. Aaron watched him go into the shadows, then raced down the path running his hands through the fencing like he was ringing a dinner bell.

Suzanne sat down on the bench next to Spencer. She leaned forward, crossing her legs and rested her chin in her palm. "He seems to like the animals. Do you think he'd like to help out some around here?"

"I don't know how he'd get here. I'm leaving town for a while. That's why we're here. This is goodbye."

"That's a shame," Suzanne said. "Why are you leaving?"

Spencer itched his eye. "I'm not sure. I need a break from things. I'm burnt out."

"I can see that." Suzanne put her hand on his knee. "How long have you two been together?"

"Me and the boy? A few years."

“And he doesn’t have anybody else?” Suzanne asked.

“Not really.”

“What’s the most important promise you’ve ever made?” Suzanne walked closer to Little Dog’s enclosure. She faced Spencer, leaning back against the chain-link fence, studying him.

Her question made him uncomfortable. “I don’t know. What about you?”

“Mine is to these wolves. Without these wolves, I don’t know who I’d be.” Suzanne said. “Why don’t you talk it over with Aaron on the ride home, tell him I could use a hand around here, that I’ll have my boss run it by the community outreach program you’re with.”

“Why are you trying to help me?”

“I don’t know. Just because.”

“Because what?”

“Because if I’ve learned anything in my time here, it’s that we are all at the mercy of something else.”

Spencer felt as though he were standing at the door of something important. That curious sense of freedom he longed for on the road seemed less urgent. Life’s connectedness was more than just a linkage of moments and events. It was about recognizing a destination, a place that held the things he’d been waiting for. He liked Suzanne. Liked everything about her. She’d found her place in the world. She was brave and free, not tied to any sort of guilt. Whatever past disgrace brought her to the farm she had accepted it as a blessing, and found her pack. She was no longer passing through, heading for trouble. Her life had ended up exactly the way she designed. With wolves.

“Tomorrow night is the super moon. Why don’t you join me? We can talk more about Aaron,” Suzanne said.

“I’d like that,” Spencer said. It had been so long since a woman had invited him to do something. He could see the evening sun in her face as it slid behind the trees, its shadow stretching along the enclosure’s rock wall and could not look away.

“Most people think wolves howl at the moon because they don’t understand it. But that’s not it at all. They are fascinated by it. They use it to communicate emotions and exchange information with other wolves. Almost like a phone call to the ones they’ve lost.”

The following night, when he returned to Suzanne’s trailer, she opened some wine. She was dressed comfortably like a girlfriend who might

be expecting him over to watch a movie. She wore black leggings and a sweatshirt. Spencer sat on a barstool across from Suzanne in her kitchenette, studying her figure as she leaned over to pre-heat the oven.

Suzanne caught him looking. She smiled and went to him. She grabbed the wine bottle and parted his knees, moving into the space between his thighs. Since they met, he'd wanted to get close to her. But there was more to it. He wanted to know her, to know the things about her she kept a secret.

“Do you like it here?” Spencer asked.

“It’s my place. It’s where I belong.”

“How did you know?”

“I don’t.”

Suzanne cupped his face in her hands and kissed his forehead, then moved down to his lips. He pulled her against him and Suzanne held him as he rested her face against her chest. They finished the bottle of wine and Spencer woke hours later on the couch, wrapped in a heavy quilt. He heard the camper door close and saw that Suzanne was gone. He cloaked the quilt around him and went to the window above the kitchen sink. The moon’s glow had turned the sky a dark purple. He watched Suzanne as she moved through the darkness in her nightgown, crawling on all fours across Little Dog’s enclosure. She climbed up on the wolf’s rock. Little Dog’s yellow eyes peered out from a cave, moving closer until his head came into view. The wolf stepped out, hopping onto the boulder next to Suzanne. With their backs to him, he looked on as they tilted their heads and spoke to each other, then releasing a howl, softly at first before joining together like a chorus.

Spencer walked out into the cold night wearing the quilt around him. The howling grew louder as he opened the gate to the enclosure. Little Dog hopped down from the rock. He paced around in a circle before returning to his cave. The wolf stepped out with a large tree branch in his mouth and laid it at Spencer’s feet. He knelt to pick the branch up, carefully watching the wolf. Satisfied, Little Dog jumped back onto his rock. Suzanne held her hand out and slid close to Little Dog to make room for Spencer to join them. He took her hand and sat in the space she made for him.

Spencer closed his eyes and opened his mouth to howl. He tried to let go of the stirring he kept inside his heart. He felt the shame of leaving and was angry with himself for being so naïve, for running and thinking he could forget life’s little betrayals. He knew he could not be with Aaron forever—could not reach through the doors that separated them to rescue or protect him. Survival and escape did not have to mean the same thing. They

could be two, a before and after, the way wild dogs cross paths in the forest, deciding which will walk away.

Suzanne and Little Dog did not move a muscle. Looking through the tall trees at the night, Spencer followed the warm mist of their breathing as it trailed toward the sky. His hands and feet were numb. He shivered. Their howling stopped, its faint echo bouncing among the rocks until only a whisper remained. Spencer reached his hand out, the moon was so big and so close, brimming with blue light, he thought he could touch it.

STACEY LAWRENCE

Lisa

Lemongrass and cannabis
float down as I tread
up parched stairs
into the attic of
my grandfather's
farmhouse, where my uncle
lives with
a hippie.
An art student.
A runaway.
It is 1976.
Long blond hair,
tight blue flares.
Spiders and
Ferns sunbathe
near the window where light
spills onto
her peasant blouse, her face,
a torn postcard of
Picasso's Child with a Dove taped
upon her gilded mirror, Golden
Hair Surprise kneels by her bed,
unearths caves of lemon markers,
pots of flaxen glitter and glue sticks
stacks of fresh white paper,
like crisp pillows on a hotel bed,
we draw, glue and cut, make things
better.

YVONNE HIGGINS LEACH

Fear of Abrupt Endings

The leaves and dirt blown in
through the broken-out windows
crunch under our feet. The squeak
of the splintered stairwell startles us.
Are the rotting beams complaining?

The bed blankets are turned down
as if someone rose quietly
after a calm night's sleep.
A man's maroon robe
hangs on the back of the door.

Old magazines piled haphazardly
near the fireplace.
Couches and recliners staged
below the cliché of the crooked
pictures that adorn the walls.

A china hutch displays
a fanfare of family relics:
wineglasses, chinaware,
a few vases, even a graduation announcement
for Thomas tucked behind a strange knickknack.

In the kitchen a few dishes
dumped in the sink. Two photos
on the fridge—clearly Dad and daughter
fishing off a rowboat;
Mom sitting alone. Who took that photo?

A hand stopped flipping
the calendar on the wall
in September 2008. The black nubs
of cigarette butts attest
to the dull and inconsequential air.

YVONNE HIGGINS LEACH

We walk right by the basement door.
We've had enough of objects
leaving us with a terrible lack of fully knowing.
We shut the door quietly
as if not to disturb them.

BETSY LITTRELL

Backwash

He walked slowly
in the middle of
painted lines on a
four-lane road—
palms facing down,
fingers fanned, dirty
blond hair days away
from being dreads, scraggly
beard a shade darker,
open flannel shirt, bird
chest that looked finely plucked—
near a yellow drive-thru
taco shop with red lettering
advertising their quesadillas
and burritos, and he was probably
the lead singer in a ska band,
or maybe a surfer; the air
smelled like industrial
glue or paint as
light fell out of the sky
and I wondered if he
could taste my salted
bitterness and spice
as I continued driving
to soccer practice,
seatbelt tightly buckled.

ROBERT McCALL

The Spectral Forest

We are inhabited by the dead
The way a forest is inhabited by the dead timber of itself,
Spread beneath the greatest reach of its deepening shade.

No radiant destination awaits this lingering detritus
Seeping backwards against the onslaught of weather,
Raising the sea of sky into heaven one body at a time.

The dead spoke for us long before we were born,
Like new leaves mouthing their needs in the rain of sunlight
Repairing the depletions of winter soil,

Only to speak to us again from that spectral afterlife,
Where our shadows intersect with the hands of the dead
To pinch closed the suckling roots, and steal the last breath of air above.

It is not time that wears us down, but generations;
The voices multiply to overcome the silence of the living,
Like that creak and rustle of stalwart memories

Outlasting every wind that time spins to tear them down.
The blank limbs of the dead spread those names unwritten by time,
Trellising the earth to seek the light they have missed

Until their harvest is made in the reflection of those eyes
Whose glow of leaves is wider than the sky,
Leading us not to extinction, but to everlasting light.

KEVIN J. McDANIEL

Eye of a Needle

The patience to sit threading a needle is lost
handwork found

now only at a dry cleaners. I recollect
Daddy's material,

spools, orange thread, stacked silver thimbles
on a coffee table where he sat

suturing rips in hand-me-downs.
He wet the end of a strand,

shepherded it through the eye, tied it tight
like a fisherman's knot

before he stuck fabric to sew on a patch.
Today,

I ask a stranger at the front desk
if somebody can repair

the tear in a seam of my hard-shell coat
costing as much as new.

DAVID ALEXANDER McFARLAND

Wind

The October wind blows
like a lover who is leaving,
not in a huff but determined,
showing you how much
you will miss her warmth—
how cold the house will be.

JOSHUA McKINNEY

Betrayal

My wife tells me it's tacky to buy my own books. But when I find one, tucked away on a narrow, dusty shelf marked "Poetry" in some used bookstore, it looks so alone, so thin and waifish, that I must take it home and place it in a box, where it will stay, waiting with its siblings until that day when I'll sell it again, inscribed with my name.

But I'm always a little ashamed to find one of my forsaken children. And I wonder, as I peel back the cover, where it's been and with whom. What if it's already been signed in my hand, with uncharacteristic candor? What if it begins, "To my dearest friend..."?

NATHAN MILLER

Exposure

What would I look like aged through
the lens of an iPhone Xs
with a filter on Facebook to make me
look the way that I should in decades
from now and the NSA can file it
away in their little drawer of things
to remember when I am unable to
remember the time when I took a photo
of myself on Facebook and ran
it through a filter that made me look
older than I am now and here I am
now older and regretting the fact
that I took a photo of myself on an iPhone
Xs so many years ago as I
drive through a traffic signal camera
flash signaling me away from a place
that I thought that I knew and the country
I thought that I lived in
to a place now where I am not
a person in a place where I thought I was
and I am no longer and I am here
now looking at the picture of myself
from an iPhone Xs so
many years ago with a Facebook filter
that filtered me into this place
where I am now, captured

DUNCAN SMITH

Reunion

Sitting on Penny's porch Lewis watched the hint of a moon begin to silver the tops of the pines at the back of the field fronting her yard. She was in the kitchen making coffee.

They were just back from their sixth visit to *Mekong* in two months. Lewis was keeping count. Phan Huang's Asian-fusion place had become a big hit since the *News & Observer* had given her an over-the-top review. Farm to table foodies were driving from Raleigh to Fayetteville in droves to eat at her place. Huang's Szechuan collards with roasted sweet potato cubes smothered in Thai peanut curry gravy had the state's vegans swooning. There was even talk of a cook-book deal with the Press up at Carolina. *Mekong* had a three-month wait list but Lewis had a table any time he wanted.

Penny had worked her way up to dipping her spring roll in the mustard instead of sticking to sweet and sour. Picked at pad thai had evolved into three pepper hot pad prik pork. Solid progress for someone who insisted that she didn't care for foreign food.

He heard her get the milk out of the fridge and stir two teaspoons of sugar into half a cup of coffee. It was the way his granny had taught him to drink it. It was the only way he could stand coffee. Even with only half a cup, he would be tracking dawn's progress across his bedroom ceiling. How anyone could drink two cups of black coffee in August at night and sleep was one of Penny's many mysteries.

She sat the tray down on the metal table between them. Took her place in the glider, had her first sip and began the slow, creaky rhythm that she would keep as long as he was allowed to stay. He had forgotten the WD-40 again. He really needed to remember that next time.

After another sip, Penny smoothed her gray hair and sighed, "Now this is the way to end a day. A full belly and a cup or two of black coffee on a porch."

Lewis noticed that he didn't make the cut. "Martha McMillan came by the junk yard yesterday. Wanted to know if I'd be interested in coming to our 50th high school reunion."

"Martha is like those bugs that come out about every 17 years except she is on a 10 year cycle."

"Seems like she was working mighty hard on it. Had a place picked out, a sample menu and she was even talking about getting the *Spirits of Emotion* back together to do the music."

“Lewis, she has had the same place picked out and I suspect the same sample menu for the past 49 years. Those boys that made up that band aren’t interested in getting back together. They barely speak to each other these days and none of them speak to Denny Drake since he sold the band’s van and went off to Florida right after we all graduated.”

“I don’t ever remember hearing about a reunion.”

“Because one has never happened. Not a 10 year, a 20 year, a 30, or a 40 and I don’t have high hopes for 50. Why in the world would I want to spend \$65 to have dinner with people I have seen every day for the past 50 years and pretend that there is something about them that I don’t already know?”

“I gave her my \$10 deposit.”

“Then you were the first person in 49 years to do it.”

Penny’s glider creaked. Lewis rocked.

“Well what about some of the folks that don’t live here anymore. Some of them might come back.”

“There are only three reasons anyone comes back here. To bury their mother or father. Sell the family house or farm. Be planted six feet under next to the rest of their kin.”

“No other reason?”

“You came back. How’s that working for you?”

“I came back to save the family business.”

“I guess that makes four.”

Keeping his dad’s salvage business going was the reason most people used to explain why he had come back home. He was fine with that. He had lived through Nam. Been shipped to or stationed anywhere the Army needed someone to quickly pick up an enemy combatant’s or shaky ally’s language. Spanish for Nicaragua, Serbian for the Balkans, Dari for Afghanistan, Arabic for Iraq. 40 years of service, a promotion to captain and a spot at the Monterey Language Institute couldn’t keep him from responding to his dad’s one and only ask.

Coming back home, he managed to slot himself into a seat at the counter of the Dew Drop Inn for an orange juice and a sausage biscuit every weekday morning. He always sat next to Mark Chason who came in at 6:30 and left by 7. At 7:10 Doug Sealey plopped down in the seat that was still warm from Mark. The two ex-best friends hadn’t spoken for 20 years. Ever since Miss Johnson died leaving a confusion of second cousins to fight over who owned the Johnson place. Both of them being second cousins.

He took his daily walk to work down Main Street by the Corner Grocery where people still wondered about the balance of those meat

counter scales. A wave and a hello to Dan as he opened the FCX. A Buenos Dias to Hernando at the tienda where the dime store had been. A wave to Mr. Bukhari as he hosed down the Mini-Mart. Then unlocking the gate at the junk yard where he and the rest of his family had tried to make a living getting people what they needed from things other folks threw away.

“You want another half- cup?” Penny poured her second.

“You trying to keep me up through next week?”

“How can coffee pack such a punch for a man who lived through a war and has a hankering for foreign food?”

Penny creaked. Lewis rocked.

“Don’t you think a reunion would give us a chance to remember the good old days we had together?”

“You mean the ones where we were all being slowly killed by boredom?”

“I remember Miss Johnson’s six week slide show of her tour of Europe in the fifth grade.”

“Old Maid Johnson, her old maid sister and her bachelor photographer brother’s six weeks in Europe meant only one thing to me. Six weeks with no math and no grammar.”

“I think she was the one that helped me see that I could go places.”

“How many of those places have you marked off your list?”

“About all of them.” But the path he took to get those tickets punched was not the one his eleven-year old self or the almost 70-year old man rocking on a porch on a summer night would have mapped out. “Maybe someone would like to redo our reading of *Romeo & Juliet*.”

No creaking.

Boston born Mrs. O’Neill had been married to her college sweetheart just long enough to see him shipped off to Nam as a helicopter pilot and herself housed at Ft. Bragg. She found herself teaching English to a bunch of small town kids some of whom might grow up to be a mayor, a lawyer, a county commissioner or Holy Mary Mother of God governor. If and it was a big if, she could get some of them into college. Not trusting the state’s future leaders to actually read their assignments, she had her students read them out-loud to each other in class.

When they came to *Romeo & Juliet*, Penny was cast a Juliet. Lewis was the Prince. Doug Sealey was Capulet and Mark Chason Montague.

The full moon crested the pines.

“Didn’t David McMillan play Mercutio?”

“I believe he did.”

He had always liked David. They had never been close friends but got along. He would have been someone Lewis wouldn’t have minded being with out on patrol.

“Where is he these days?”

“He died trying to break up a bar fight up on Hay Street. Buried along with the rest of his kin out on their place.”

Penny sat her empty cup down. “Romeo, Romeo, Wherefore art thou Romeo?” She said the line the way Mrs. O’Neill had taught her. Not Romeo, Romeo where are you standing Romeo but what makes you Romeo. What part of someone makes them an enemy? What is the part that makes us love someone? She went on through the entire speech without missing a word, with no more or no less feeling that she had all those years ago in that classroom with Mrs. O’Neill sitting at her desk, eyes closed looking like she was 30 seconds away from the Rapture.

“By yonder blessed moon, I swear...”

“I don’t believe that was your line back then.”

“I wasn’t Romeo back then.”

Penny slapped her calf “Damn mosquitoes!”

“Why don’t you plug in your bug light?”

“Because all it does is draw more of every kind of bug there is including mosquitoes.”

Penny stood up and picked up the tray. Lewis jumped up and opened the door for her.

He stood on the porch studying the moon trying to figure out what was different about it tonight. Growing up he had looked up at it waiting for someone to put a man on it. Truth be told, in his more silly moments, he had hoped to be that man. Tonight, he felt that what Huang said was true. In the light of the full moon, you see the soul of things.

“Are you going to stand out there all night and be carried off by mosquitos?”

He came in from the porch. Penny was backlit from the kitchen as she stood by her bedroom door. She was the perfect image of her eighteen-year old self. Her hair down and flowing over her shoulders. It could have been any color instead of the gray, straw it was now including the jet black silk that is was back then.

“Well don’t just stand there. Go ahead and lock the door—unless you are planning on leaving—Romeo.”

K.G. NEWMAN

Pitching Lessons

Beside a white rubber
on a small mound of arcana,
I explain the great labor
is to focus without
thinking too much.

My son and I are pitching
straight into the sunrise.
The mesas stand guard
and we pause between heaters
at the rhythm of the geese
circling local parks
to call balls and strikes.

Who knows how much he hears
with all the light in his ears:
I remind him it takes decades
to master this craft. That
the idea is for the pitch
to come out of the hand
and reappear at the plate
as something entirely different:

The mirror of a young father
trying hard, a cutting yarn cake
pretending to be a meatball.

DOUGLAS NORDFORS

Never

has my spirit belonged
to any age.
Now, for instance,
it doesn't so much process information

as winnow down
all the pieces,
and take two to be the eyes and mouth
of a wooden mask

as rusted as dauntless
iron, while the orange,
unsuspecting sun is warned to look up
as an eclipse forfeits

stored fire after becoming homesick
for computation—
such strangeness speaks
to how my spirit

isn't a product
of industrial emotion, to how it lives
far from the impact
of any era's errors

or achievements, to how
it's neither humanized nor dehumanized
by a bronze crown,
or a skyscraper,

or an economic, global microheart,
to how it's like
an unprotected throat
that doesn't feel

like experiencing
what it never knew
it was cut out for.

ILARI PASS

Planted: From the Mind of a 7-Year-Old

Curiosity is the blank canvas she imagines her unnamed relatives
Start with time and empty space—waiting.

The whole right side of the tree
Gone.

Her mother is the only root
Balancing everything all on her own.

Her father's family on the left side of the tree
Bears only enough fruit for two.

Mother, father, stepmother,
Four children between them.

Eight grandchildren. Too many
fruit the tree folds to the ground.

BARRY PETERS

Riptide

You're sitting on the beach among the thousands
facing the big blue screen of sky and ocean

as if waiting for a movie to begin.
And then it does: a man splashes

into the water, jumping the tide, yelling
to a pair of arm-waving, head-bobbing

children in the distance, caught in a riptide.
A woman runs up and down the sand, back

and forth, frantic as a gull. You shade your eyes
as if saluting the flag. The rescue unfurls.

Lifeguards in action. Other first responders,
obscenely clothed among the flesh. You,

your family, all the spectators, anchored
under the klieg of sun.

After the man and children disappear,
and the woman crumples, you gather

silently, wondering where you'll have dinner:
Applebee's or Olive Garden, Goodnight Pizza,

the all-u-can-eat buffet at Captain George's.
Later, when the family is full-bellied

and safely ensconced in the hotel room,
you return. Chilly, windy dusk. The beach

empty except for an older couple
ocean-fishing from chairs. Poles,

wedged into the sand, lines taut. Their
beer-colored dog plays games with the surf.

BILL SMOOT

Clearing the House

On the flight from Portland back to Kentucky, I tried to prepare myself. Mother was dying of lung cancer, and I had not seen her in two months. When I opened the front door, I saw an old woman sitting at one end of the sofa wearing my mother's favorite sweater, a thick red one with a shawl collar. Only when she spoke did I realize it was Mother. I tried to disguise my shock. Her round face had morphed into the shape of a skull, and when I leaned over to hug her, all I felt were bones.

She asked if I were hungry. She had cooked me a pot of vegetable soup, and I could smell it simmering on the stove. The realization that she had cut up all those vegetables to make soup from scratch tore at my heart. I turned my head so she would not see the tears welling up. I had not talked to my ex-wife in a year, but later that night I called her and broke down on the phone. She was kind, at least.

After Mother went to bed, I took a slow walk in the warm, humid night to the sounds of peepers and crickets. Moths swarmed beneath the street lights. I passed houses in which decades ago my playmates had lived. Typical for a small town, those who went away to college settled elsewhere, and their parents were now passing.

Work had always been Mother's preferred therapy, and the next morning she said, "We have a lot to do." She was determined to arrange as much as she could in the time remaining. "I've marked off the garage into four areas: dump, give-away, sell, and ship to you in Oregon. Do you want to start at the bottom or the top?"

She had put on rouge and lipstick and she seemed perkier than the night before. Trying to match her positive spirit, I said, "I'll start at the top."

"You take the attic," she said. "I need to lie down for a few minutes."

I grabbed a couple of empty cardboard boxes and headed upstairs. Though it was early, the attic was already warm. There were plastic clothes bags smelling of moth balls and containing winter coats not worn in years. Some had belonged to my father, who'd passed away a decade ago. There were small appliances in doubtful working order—a floor fan, a canister vacuum cleaner, an early model turntable and stereo. There were boxes of books, two lamp shades, a metal Christmas tree stand, and a wooden tennis racket in a press. There was a cedar chest I remembered from boyhood.

I started with the cedar chest. It used to sit in my parents' room at the foot of their bed, holding an extra comforter for cold nights. I opened it. The hinges squeaked with the same sound they'd made decades ago. I recognized the familiar smell of cedar. I sneezed twice. I lifted out a blanket. That would go to charity. There were a couple of sweaters and a woman's maroon hat with a veil—more charity. There was a leather holster holding a gun, likely my grandfather's. He had been a cop in the town. I carefully lifted out a black .38 revolver with a wooden handle. I found the release button and let the cylinder fall open. The chambers were empty. It seemed grossly out of place in the cedar chest, in this attic, in the house in which I grew up. I slid it back into the holster. A shoebox held greeting cards, postcards, and letters. Lying in the bottom of the chest was an unmarked manila envelope. I opened it and a folded newspaper article fell into my lap. It was from the local newspaper, dated August 12, 1958. The four-column headline read, *Patrolman Kills Negro Prowler*. Beneath the headline were two headshots, one of a black man named Eugene "Chick" Miller and one of Patrolman Buck Butler. Buck Butler was my grandfather.

When I came downstairs, Mother asked, "Did you finish the attic or did you sit there for two hours and look at everything?"

Remarks like that used to anger me, but since Mother had been diagnosed, her formerly irritating traits now seemed endearing.

"You know me too well, Mother."

"You didn't finish?"

"Let's just say I made progress."

She grunted, and then began to cough. I could tell her coughing was painful. She wore an intravenous morphine pump on her belt, and she pressed the button to administer another dose.

She said she believed she could eat some tapioca pudding, so I drove to the store for some package mix and milk, and I made a double batch on the stove and poured the thick liquid into desert cups. By noon it had set up, and I asked if she wanted one.

"You heat up the soup. I'll try the pudding while you eat your soup."

We sat at the kitchen counter and she took a spoonful of pudding. Her skin looked like parchment.

"How is it?" I asked.

"Not too bad. A little metallic, though. That chemo really screwed up my taste buds. My sense of smell, too. You know what I can't stand? The smell of paper money. It stinks like oily rags."

I asked her about the clipping.

"Oh, God. That newspaper story is up there?"

“In the cedar chest. Grandpa’s gun was there, too.”

“His gun? Throw it out right now.”

“I’ll get rid of it somehow. But you don’t just throw a gun in the garbage can. I never knew Grandpa shot someone. Do you remember it?”

“Yes!” she said emphatically. “I was in junior high, and it happened during summer vacation. It was awful. Daddy was put behind a desk for a few weeks and he hated that. He and mother wouldn’t talk about it—at least not to me, and that made it seem worse. For a while it seemed like Daddy talked on the phone a lot in a low voice. I remember that.”

“So what happened?”

She swallowed a spoonful of pudding. “It blew over, like things do. But whenever I hear on the news that a white cop shot a black person, I remember. There was an investigation of some kind. Daddy was cleared. But back then... I mean, he was a white policeman. It was before civil rights and all that.”

“1958,” I said.

Then she said, “You don’t remember him at all, do you?”

“Barely. I think I remember visiting him. He was in bed at their house.”

“You were only three or four when he had his last heart attack. They didn’t have treatments back then like they do now. Stints and bypass surgery and all that. Pacemakers. Not even any drugs that helped.”

“I think I remember him in his uniform.”

“You couldn’t have. He retired before you were born. After his first heart attack.”

“Oh. False memory, then. It’s hard to remember what was a photo and what I saw in real life.”

She finished her tapioca. “That went down pretty well,” she said. “I think I’ll go lie down now.”

During one of mother’s naps, I went back to the cedar chest. There was a second newspaper clipping in the envelope I hadn’t seen before. It was a photo of a group of black people standing in front of the police station dressed in their Sunday best. The caption said they had presented a petition asking for an investigation. I reread the original article. It said the man was trying to break into the jewelry store and Grandpa shot him. The photo of Chick Miller was haunting. He was beaming with a boyish smile, as if he could not suppress his own happy grin. Though he was thirty when he was killed, it looked like this might have been his high school photo. I took the revolver from its holster again. It was heavy and cold. It was hard to imagine that something so inert had killed a man.

A couple of days later I took a carload of things to Goodwill with instructions from Mother not to stop and look at everything when I unloaded. On the way home I stopped at the police station. There were two uniformed officers sitting at desks. I introduced myself and explained that my grandfather had been on the force and I wanted to turn in his gun. Could they take it? Though Grandpa had been dead for a half century, the older of the two officers, an Officer Crum, knew his name. Officer Crum's mouth, nose, and eyes seemed gathered at the center of his face in a way that gave him the pugnacious look of a bulldog. I placed the holster on the counter.

He took out the .38 and looked it over, its barrel pointed in my direction.

Jesus, I thought. Don't they teach gun safety at the police academy here?

"It's in good condition," he said. "You don't want it?"

"No, sir," I said. "I don't have any use for it. I live in Oregon."

He shrugged, holstered the gun, and put it in his bottom desk drawer. I had just dropped two notches in his estimation.

"One other thing," I said. "I was really young when my grandfather died of a heart attack. I'm kind of researching his life. You know, family roots. Could I see the police files, please?"

He cocked his head. "What for?"

"Well, I'd just like to read about my grandfather. I know he was involved in a shooting once. I wanted to read about that."

There was a long pause. Officer Crum frowned. He did not like me, grandson of a cop or not, and he did not trust me. I had found out on the internet that these were public records, but I knew if I pressed that point, it would only antagonize him. I could tell that the younger officer was interested in our exchange.

"I'd really appreciate it," I said, trying to sound full of deference.

He paused and then, without saying anything, walked over to a keyboard, tossed a large key on his desk so I had to pick it up, and told me where to find the storage room in the basement.

The room felt like a dungeon—the walls were stone, the floors concrete, and the ceiling was about seven feet. It was lit by overhead bare bulbs, several of which were burned out. There were aisles of metal filing cabinets. A separate area designated by a sign that read "evidence" was protected by chain link fencing and a padlocked gate. The filing cabinets were labeled by year. The tops of the cabinets were littered with rodent droppings. I wondered what dread diseases might be caused by breathing the dust down here.

Since I knew the date of the shooting, it did not take long to find the file. The first document was Grandpa's handwritten report:

On routine patrol at about 1:00 AM I saw a Negro male trying to break into Taylor's jewelry store at 78 West Second Street. I exited my patrol car, drew my revolver, and ordered him to put his hands up. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a knife. I ordered him to freeze. He lunged toward me with the knife and to protect my life I fired three shots. He fell to the ground. I radioed for an ambulance.

There was a one-page coroner's report, giving the man's name, address, date of birth, weight, height, and race. He was 5'8", the same height as me. Under cause of death, it said "pulmonary contusion and blood loss caused by three bullet wounds to chest."

Written on a printed card were Chick Miller's possessions: *Shoes, socks, trousers, belt, shirt, one Timex watch. Contents of pockets: billfold with three dollars and driver's license, key ring with rabbit's foot, two house keys, 42 cents in change. Two wrapped prophylactics, three toothpicks. One Bower Fisherman's Friend sawback knife, five-inch blade, found in suspect's hand.* It was a strange choice of knives unless you were going fishing.

There were two 8x10 black-and-white glossy photographs. Like every crime scene photo I've seen, they looked lurid. One was a close up of just the body, and the other was shot from the street and showed the store front and the body in the doorway. The man's torso was slumped against the door, his legs crossed at the ankles, his short-sleeved white shirt soaked with blood. His right hand still held the knife. His eyes were closed and his chin was tucked awkwardly against his chest. My absurd thought was that the position looked uncomfortable. The body in death did not look human, but like a broken manikin left at the curb for trash pickup. I would not have known this was the same person whose smiling headshot appeared in the newspaper clipping.

On impulse I tucked the photo shot from a distance down the front of my shirt. I replaced the file, slid the drawer shut, and climbed the stairs. On my way out I laid the key on the desk and thanked Officer Crum. He was writing a report and did not look up.

Back at Mother's, I looked at the photo. I studied the knife in the man's hand. The recent controversies about police shootings put me into an investigative frame of mind. If the man had lunged at Grandpa, would he have been slumped against the door? Would his legs have been crossed at the ankles? Would he have continued holding the knife in spite of taking three shots to the chest?

That night mother and I sat in the den. I asked her what Grandpa was like.

“He worked hard,” she said. “Maybe these days you’d call him a workaholic. He fought in Korea, and when he got out of the army he got the policeman’s job. It didn’t pay much, but there were overtime opportunities, and he always took them—you know, when someone needed a patrolman on hand at a basketball or football game, the roller rink on Saturday night, things like that. If another patrolman was sick he would pull a double shift and get paid time and a half. He wanted to provide for us. He wanted to send me to college—and he did.”

“Do you think he had to shoot that man?”

Mother frowned. “I never really thought about it. It was just something terrible that happened, like a car accident. I sure don’t feel like thinking about it now.”

“Do you want me to get you some juice or something?” I said.

She shook her head. “I think I’ll just close my eyes for a while.”

Mother declined rapidly. During the next week, she spent progressively more time lying down. The following week the hospice nurse came by daily and took care of the things like a catheter when Mother could no longer get out of bed at all. One afternoon Mother closed her eyes and sunk into something like a coma. The next morning her hands and feet were cold, and I knew from reading the hospice booklet that the end was near. Over the next few hours her breathing slowed, and then I saw her swallow hard and exhale. That was her final breath.

Mostly what I had thought about during those two weeks was Mother. But I also thought about Chick Miller. His ghost moved into a part of my mind and would not leave. I kept seeing his smiling boyish face in the news clipping and his dead body slumped against the door in the police photo. It was not guilt I felt. I bore no responsibility for the actions of a grandfather I barely knew. But I did feel connected, somehow, as if Chick Morton and I were now soul neighbors in some corner of the moral universe.

Mother’s death hit me harder than I had expected. On the way back to Portland I bought a book on grief in the airport, and I read it on the plane. There was a chapter on “unfinished business,” and I realized that Mother and I had none. I had told her I loved her. I knew she loved me. We had no unresolved quarrels or standing resentments. Still, it was achingly sad. Back in Oregon, I dreamed about her almost every night. One of my friends said, “It’s much harder when the second parent goes. Suddenly you’re something you’ve never been before—an orphan.” I think that’s true.

I continued to ruminate on Chick Miller and Patrolman Buck Butler. *That* seemed like unfinished business, though I couldn’t say why. It just gnawed at me. I don’t know why I looked at that 8x10 crime scene photo so

often. Maybe it was that morbid voyeurism that compels us, after we have looked away, to steal one more glance at the accident scene. I was obsessed with the question of what really happened. I doubted that a man lunging forward with a knife would end up slumped against a door with his legs crossed at the ankles. At the library I checked out a photography book of crime scene photos, and I noticed how often a gunshot victim bled onto the pavement. Why was Chick Miller's blood confined to his shirt? Could this mean he had been shot somewhere else?

One day I stopped at the downtown Portland police station, introduced myself to a homicide detective, and offered to take him to lunch if he'd answer a few questions. I told him I was writing a short story based on an old photo I had picked up at a garage sale. I asked him to name a restaurant, thinking we'd end up at a steakhouse or an Italian joint, but he picked a sushi place. He looked at the 8x10 black-and-white and smiled wryly as I explained my theories.

When I finished, he shook his head. "There is some good science for things like blood splatter patterns, but not to how a body falls," he said. "There are too many variables, including unpredictable havoc to muscles and the nervous system when someone is struck by a bullet. This is why people still argue about the direction of the shot in the Kennedy assassination."

He pointed to the photo with his chopsticks. "The guy could have fallen like this. Or he could have fallen another way. The same with the bleeding. I don't want to spoil your lunch, but a gunshot victim can empty a gallon of blood on the sidewalk, or he can bleed to death internally and barely stain his shirt. For your story, it can be either way. The same with a weapon. It can go flying from his hand or he can die still gripping it. In 25% of gunshot suicides, the weapon is still in the victim's hand. We have to pry away their fingers."

He handed me the photo. "The only thing that gives me pause is the knife. How was he carrying it? A sawtooth knife would chew up his pants pocket real quick."

That had not occurred to me.

He shrugged. "Of course, all you'd have to do is turn his pockets inside out and look at the fabric."

It was a half century too late to do that.

Then he chuckled, "When you write your story, just make sure the homicide detective is handsome and smart." I assured him I would.

Walking back to my car, I felt deflated. I had wanted to solve the mystery, but believing that I could was stupid—and irrelevant. The connection I felt with Chick Miller—the debt I felt—would not have been

paid by solving the mystery. My duty was to bear witness to what had happened. It was like that old philosophical question: if no one hears a tree fall in the forest, does it make a sound? I don't know about trees, but a falling man must be felt. It wasn't enough to know the fact; I had to hear the sound.

A couple of months later the real estate agent called to say she had a buyer for Mother's house, so I flew back to Kentucky to clear out the last of the furniture and to sign the papers for the sale. I had tried an internet search to find out if Chick Miller had family; only one name came up—Beatrice Miller, maybe his wife—but I couldn't find an address. She would be over eighty, if she was even still living. When a black man came by to look at the furniture, I asked if he knew her. No, he said, but he told me of a preacher at a black church who knew every black person in town. "Ask him," he said.

Still on some quest, I stopped by the church the next day, and I found the minister in his office in the church basement.

"Why, yes," he said. "I know her well. Beatrice Miller's in my church. Comes every Sunday. Everybody calls her Aunt B. You know her?"

He offered me a Coke, and I told him my story of reading about the shooting in the attic, my mother's death, and my feeling that I had some duty to Chick Miller's memory. I realized I had never told the story to anyone, and he listened carefully.

When I finished, he nodded slowly. "I know about that shooting. In fact, I remember it, even though I was just a boy then. Aunt B wasn't Chick's wife, though; she was his sister. Chick wasn't married." He paused and said, "Let me ask her first. I'll find out if she is willing to see you."

I noticed the broken down easy chair in his office, and I offered to give him the one from Mother's den that I was trying to sell. He came by the next day in a pick-up truck, and he told me he had talked with Aunt B. I could visit her any morning. She took a nap in the afternoons. I asked if there was something I might bring her, some small gift. He told me she loved blackberry wine; there was a man out in the country who made his own and sold it out of his house. That afternoon I picked some up. It came in a Mason jar.

The town was long and narrow, following the river valley, and Sixth Street was the last street before the hill became too steep to build on. It had been a black neighborhood when I was a boy, and it was a black neighborhood still. The narrow street was mostly one lane, the asphalt broken up in spots. The houses, small and close together, were set above street level on one side and below street level on the other side. On many the paint was peeling and faded. A couple had aluminum siding. Small as they were, most had covered front porches.

Pulling up to the address I had written down, I saw an elderly black woman sitting on her porch. It was a house on the up side of the street. She was wearing lavender pajamas, lavender bedroom slippers, and a pink terrycloth robe. Her brown toothless face gave her the look of an ancient tortoise.

“Aunt B?” I asked.

“Come on up, young man,” she replied in a strong, raspy voice. “I know who you is.”

The wooden steps groaned a little when I stepped on them. It was a warm, humid morning under milky skies.

“I brought you a little something,” I said, and I carefully handed her the jar of wine.

“I thank you,” she said, squinting at the label. “Mr. Vance does a right good job making this. I’ll have a glass with my supper.”

She was sitting on a wooden porch swing with mismatched cushions, and I sat down in a wooden rocking chair. She tucked the wine securely on the cushion beside her.

A small brown dog opened the screen door with his muzzle and walked up to sniff my pants. I reached down to pet him but he crossed the porch and lay on a small rug.

“That’s Leroy,” she said.

“He looks like a fine dog,” I said.

Aunt B looked me over. “What you want coming up here?”

It was part curiosity, part challenge. I wasn’t ready for the question.

“Well, ma’am, I want to say—I know it was a very long time ago—that I’m sorry for what happened to your brother.” I was surprised to feel a hot lump rising in my throat. I massaged my Adam’s apple.

“That policeman your daddy?”

The pastor had apparently briefed her.

“No, ma’am. My grandfather. I wasn’t born when it happened. I didn’t know about it until I found a news clipping a few months back in my mother’s attic.”

“They had the newspaper, did they?”

“Yes, ma’am.” I hadn’t said “yes, ma’am” to anyone in decades.

We both watched Leroy scratch one ear.

She said, “It near to kilt our momma.”

I took a breath. “Yes, ma’am. I can imagine that it did.”

“Um-hmm,” she said. “You wasn’t alive then, so it ain’t no fault of yours.”

That was true. I don't believe in inherited guilt. For all I felt, Patrolman Buck Butler could have been someone else's grandfather. But still, I was attached. I had heard a call.

"Do you know...did my grandfather ever say anything to Chick's family members? To you, or Chick's mother?" I swallowed. "Did he say he was sorry?" Before I spoke this question, I did not realize I had wondered it.

She shook her head and then held her chin high. "He did not."

"I wish he had," I said.

She pushed with her slippered feet to make her porch swing rock.

"Did you know your granddaddy much?" she asked.

"No, ma'am. I hardly remember him at all. I was really young when he died."

"I remember when he died," Aunt B said. "I used to pray he be punished some way. That's a wrong way to pray, but prayed it. I confess that."

"I don't blame you."

Under her chin the skin drooped. She must have been a large woman at one time, but her flesh had melted away leaving her skin with the sad hanging look of Spanish moss. Her hair was white.

"I used to wonder about your granddaddy. Why he make up that story? Chick didn't carry no knife. Not no thief, neither. Besides, who try to pick a lock with a fish knife?"

That had not occurred to me. If he was trying to break in, where were his burglary tools?

"I'm so sorry—about all of it," I said.

Aunt B looked away from me. I followed her eyes and realized that she was looking at the river. The town had built a flood wall when I was young. It was hailed as great progress because there had been terrible floods before that. But it cut off a view of the river for most people. You had to be as high as Sixth Street to see over the flood wall. Aunt B had a great view. There had been a lot of rain lately, so the river was muddy. A few hundred miles downriver, it would join the Mississippi and then flow through the South all the way past New Orleans to the Gulf.

We watched the river for a time, and then, for no reason but to fill the silence, I said, "old man river."

A moment later, Aunt B began to sing, in a voice sad, sonorous, and clear:

He must know something, but don't say nothing.

He just keeps rollin, He just keeps rollin along.

Then she stopped, and silence enveloped the porch.

“You have a very good voice,” I said.

Aunt B paused, and then she said, “You want to atone.”

I nodded. “Yes, ma’am. I guess I do.”

“You got to talk to Jesus about that. Not me.”

Not being religious, I didn’t know what to say.

“You know where that word come from?” she asked.

“Atone?” I tried to think of a Latin root and drew a blank. “No,” I said, “I don’t believe I do.”

“At one. They just put them two words together. At one. Be at one with Jesus. At one with Goodness. We all got to atone. Figure a way to get with Goodness.”

There was an air of finality to what she said, and it meant it was time for me to go, even though I wasn’t ready. I could hear Mother asking me if I was going to sit there all day. I stood up and walked over to her swing. I wanted to give her a hug, but I sensed no acceptance of that, so I offered my hand. We shook hands. I felt I should say more, but we both knew there was nothing more to say.

I told her goodbye and I gave Leroy a scratch under his chin. He wagged his tail. I walked to my car. As I pulled away from the curb, I looked in the rearview mirror. Aunt B had stood up. She watched me go.

PAULANN PETERSEN

Dried Whole Persimmon

Peeled, your gold and ochre flesh
folds in on itself—desiccation
having chiseled your roundness
into an oblong that's scored lengthwise
by deep uneven grooves.

Small piece of sculptural art,
you are a maquette—surely destined
to grow into a work
massive and gleaming.

The Japanese have a name for you: *hoshigaki*.
The Chinese, too: *shibing*. I will call you

my poem who lies, heavy-hipped,
on her side. Naked in the museum courtyard.
Poem who—having oozed
her sugars outward—flaunts
a pale, moon-crusting skin.

EUGENE PLATT

Love Poem for a Dying Wife

Do not slip away while we sleep,
your frame faltering from months of medicine
and malignancy, your slenderness curled into an S
beneath a floral quilt we found on our honeymoon
so long ago at that sweet little store in Savannah,
the quilt like a sampler of the real bouquets
that much too soon will be strewn around an urn
of your ashes in an otherwise sterile funereal room.

Do not slip away while we sleep,
before I can say I love you once more.
Although in all the years we've slept together,
back to belly, belly to back,
I never heard you burp or snore,
now at night I worry when dwindling hours pass
and you do not make a peep or keep still
when normally you would stir.
Do not slip away while we sleep.

I could not bear having to fear
I had missed a sigh of goodbye;
I could not bear not to hear
a weak, whispered final farewell.
Do not slip away while we sleep.

I need to know the moment you cross the bar—
as Tennyson (one of the poets whom with wine
and candlelight we read together, entwined in bed)
said so eloquently to console the bereaved.
Do not slip away while we sleep.

It is a journey each of us must take alone, I know;
but please just let me go with you to the boat.
I would truly dread not being there for you

EUGENE PLATT

as you put into the deep to join the dead.
Do not slip away while we sleep.

Although the faith we share assures us
we shall meet again “In the sweet by-and-by,”
the interim of absence, the pain of being apart,
would be magnified and I inconsolable
if denied the solace of saying goodbye.
Do not slip away while we sleep.

Would that I could stay awake all night.
I need so much to know the moment you leave,
to savor those last precious seconds
before I must begin to grieve.
Do not slip away while we sleep.

*Note: lyrics from “The Sweet By-and-By,” S. Fillmore Bennett

JOHN THOMSON

Julian's Army

These days my home is on a nature preserve near the confluence of a river's three forks. I live in an old miner's cabin partly concealed in the woods. There is only one road in. It's narrow and rutted, and winds for three miles beyond the asphalt surface of an almost forgotten highway.

On this morning I'm meeting a woman at the junction of the good road and the bad one. Together she and I will find a place on the preserve to put a memorial bench for her son. I've forgotten her first name. For now I think of her only as the mother of the young man who died, and whose name I do know:

*In Loving Memory of Julian Aaron Blake.
Our River Lover*

When I spoke to her over the phone, she said she wanted to find a spot where there was a good view of the river, but where no one would deface the bench. I remember how her concern about vandals left me stunned and sick with anger. "I think we can find such a place," I'd told her.

I try to force the mother's name into my mind as I drive to our meeting spot. It seemed there was a "y" at the end of it: Stacy, Mary, Kelly, Judy...? Soon my guesses become desperately jumbled, pointless. I stop trying.

It's mid-September. There are thunder clouds over the Sierras, but they are far away and seem immovable over the peaks. So we will not be rained on.

I swerve to miss a deer just before I get to the junction of dirt and paved road. Our meeting place is a turnout at a sharp bend. The mother told me she knew of it, but she's not here, and I am late.

As I wait for her I consider the story I'm now forced to be a part of. First there was the news in the paper: another fatal crash on Highway 49. This one involved a male teen who'd just been accepted into UC Berkeley and wanted to study Environmental Science or Forestry or Biology, who'd played on the high school golf team, who had a contagious smile and laugh, and who loved swimming, kayaking and fishing, especially on the Yuba River. It was a driver with alcohol and drug levels sky-high above the legal limit, and then crossing a centerline at 80 miles per hour and ending the exquisite and promising life. Julian Aaron Blake was on his way home to Grass Valley from a benefit golf tournament in Sacramento. Tragedy wasn't

enough of a word to cover what'd happened. The thought of it was like the thought of any human being vandalizing a memorial bench on a nature preserve.

I hear the rumble of a vehicle and get out of my truck and stand in the open near the edge of the turnout. It's Julian's mother, in the little Hyundai I told her wouldn't suffice on the road we'd be taking in to the preserve. "Not enough clearance," I'd said.

There is no insignia on my truck. I wear no uniform. Nothing designates me as the on-site caretaker of the nature preserve. Still, she forthrightly gets out of her car and marches toward me, as if there is no question about who I am.

"You're with the land trust?"

"Yes."

Could it be she has forgotten my name?

"I'm Sandy Blake."

"Ken Deason."

When we shake hands I see she is a young mother, unless –even after so much grief –she's been able to defy her age. Still her grip is weak. During that moment I consider the way I squeeze her fingers as my first gesture of sympathy and condolence.

"Thank you so much for doing this," she says.

"Of course."

Her hair is long and brown and falls freely onto her shoulders. Her face is round and gentle and her eyes are large and hazel and she wears pendulous earrings I can't help but notice. She is nearly as tall as me and has on jeans and a flannel shirt that seems too big for her.

"Let me get my pack and I'll be ready," she says.

"Sure. Do you have water? Might get a little warm later."

"Yes," she said. "Plenty."

My truck is an older 4x4 Dodge. The land trust bought it used for me. It's high off the ground and Sandy has trouble swinging herself onto the passenger seat, but she makes it before I reach out to help her. Then I ask her if she'd ever been on the preserve before. "No," she says. "But Julian loved it."

We drive onto the dirt road. In our first moments of silence I recall what I came to learn about Sandy Blake from my boss at the land trust. She is a nurse at the hospital. A single mom. She ran in the local triathlon at Scot's Flat Lake and once finished first in her age class. Julian was her only child.

"So do you live out here?" she says.

"Yes."

“Like in an actual house?”

“Well, I’m not sure it qualifies as that. It’s just an old miner’s cabin I fixed up. Pretty basic.”

“Are you alone?”

Her voice rattles as we hit the first of many sets of washboards. “Yep,” I say. “Just me.”

My answer closes some of the awkward space between us. In that narrow confine I think she is wondering: “So what sort of middle-aged man lives alone on a 3,000 acre nature preserve in the middle of nowhere? Does he hate people? Is he a hermit? He doesn’t seem like one. He doesn’t wear ragged, dirty clothes and have an unkempt beard and brown teeth. He seems normal. So what’s his story?”

But she doesn’t ask the question. Instead she looks at the road ahead and braces herself against the dashboard.

“I didn’t realize this road was so bad,” she says.

“Yeah,” I say. “The people who hike the trails out here think it’s worth the drive.”

“Julian used to ride his mountain bike in here,” she says.

When she speaks of her son, I tell her about the first spot I had in mind for the bench. She says it sounds perfect, but it isn’t. The second spot, farther upstream, is much better. I’d spent a full day hiking the trails looking for that perfect place, feeling the heaviest weight of responsibility since I’d moved onto the preserve. What if the mother didn’t like either location? What if I couldn’t please her? My choices, right or wrong, became a part of her grief. If I failed, I’d add to her suffering. If I succeeded, I might help ease her pain.

We come to our first view of the river.

“So I have a request that might sound silly to you,” she says.

I say nothing. She lifts her day pack off the floorboard and reaches into it and pulls out a plastic bag filled with little plastic Army men, the kind I used to play with when I was a boy. She sets the bag on her lap.

“Julian loved playing with these little guys, even when he was older. A boy thing, I guess.”

“I can vouch for that,” I say. She smiles her first smile. “I had quite a collection myself,” I say.

She reaches into the bag and pulls out one of the Army men, unchanged since I was nine: dark green plastic, legs spread, full combat uniform, bayoneted rifle poised for action. Then we pull up to the first bench location, and she says, “Would it be all right if I put up a few of these out here, like on the rocks over-looking the water, or maybe up in some trees? Or would that be considered littering?”

“No, it wouldn’t be considered littering. You can put them wherever you want.”

We get out of my truck and walk the trail to the place I’d picked out for the bench. I’d stabbed a small stake in the ground to mark it.

“I’ve always loved this spot,” I say. “It’s near the trail, but...”

“That’s all right,” she says. “I want people to sit on the bench and look out at the river. I know Julian would like that.”

She walks to the edge of the little clearing, too close, I think. She carries the bag of plastic Army men.

“Careful there,” I say. “That’s quite a drop.”

She stops, but not because of my warning.

“I can’t imagine a better place than this,” she says.

“Well, I personally think the next location is better, but let’s wait and see what you think.”

I look at the bag of Army men.

“Do you want to put some of those out here?” I ask.

“Yes. I do,” she says.

I stand back and watch her as she looks for the best places to put the plastic figures. She searches the ground and trees and rocks like a child on an Easter egg hunt. I don’t know how many she leaves, or where she’s put them.

* * *

The next place is another mile upriver. We drive only half way, and begin to walk the trail for the rest of it. I stay close to her and we travel side by side when the trail is wide enough.

“So how long have you lived out here?” she says.

“A little over a year.”

“And how did you get a job like this?”

“It’s a long story,” I say, and she lets me get away with not answering.

“Well, you see...” I might have said, “...a friend I’d known since fourth grade is director of the land trust and he came to my rescue after my life’s apocalypse: a divorce, drugs, bankruptcy. But this friend came to my rescue and let me be the caretaker of one of the land trust’s new nature preserves. Here, I’ve been able to stay clean and sober and find God in nature. I look out for shooters, litterers, dirt bike riders and illegal pot groves. I drive the hard road into Grass Valley every Monday for my therapy, my rehab. My friend checks to make sure I’m doing that. He’s a good friend. If it weren’t for him, I may not be alive.”

All unsaid. All unrevealed.

She stops on the trail and I stop with her.

“I’d like to put out some more Army men here. Is that all right?”

“Sure.”

We are at another lookout over the river. It’s not the other place I’d picked out, but here the river gets your attention, narrowing into the longest and most fierce reach of white-water on the preserve.

“The water really rips through there in early spring,” I say.

“I bet,” she says.

For all of our time together, she has done her best not to show her grief, though I’ve sensed it concealed inside her. But now, as she pulls the plastic bag out of her pack, her chin trembles and her hands shake and she turns away from me.

“Sorry,” she says.

“Don’t be.”

“Here,” she says.

She hands me two Army men. One is on a knee with a bazooka mounted on his shoulder; the other is slinging a grenade.

“You put these two out.”

She goes one way on the trail and I go the other. And then I’m nine-years-old again. I’m with the same childhood friend who has given me this second chance in life. We are in his back yard, crouched in the fort made of old trash can lids and pallets. Each of us has taken a turn putting the plastic Army men at their posts, some outside our fort, some inside. We are in a protected and timeless world. There are no failures to torture me. I’m a kid. Adults make my decisions about everything: school, clothes, God.

For a time I just hold the Army men Sandy gave me. I squeeze down on the plastic figures as if letting go will lift me back to the present.

Finally I wander off the trail and begin to search for a place to put the men. I find a crook in an oak tree and there I firmly secure the soldier holding the bazooka. I point his weapon over the canyon. I put the other soldier in a crack between two rocks. Then I wait for Sandy to return.

Her bag of Army men is down to half full.

“Did you find some good spots?” she says.

“I did,” I say.

For a moment I wonder if she wants me to show her where I put them, but she gives me a trusting smile and says nothing. Putting out the Army men here has been good for both of us.

“Could we put Julian’s bench here?” she asks.

“Sure,” I say. “But let’s go to the other place I had in mind first and see what you think.”

“All right,” she said. “Onward.”

We hike on. I stay just ahead of her. The trail narrows. There are places where I have to pull aside the limbs of shrubs so they don’t slap at her. Once, I stop and show her what poison oak looks like.

We approach the other site I'd chosen. When she sees it, she reaches for my elbow and stops me.

"Oh my goodness," she says.

It has become my special place on the river since I became the steward here. At times, the rock in the canyon seems alive. Some of the edges and contours are shaped like the crudely carved angels in the nativity scene my parents put on our piano at Christmas. Trees, mostly gray pine, grow and hang out of the vertical stone, defying all we know about gravity and life. And somehow, even when the flow is down, the river still resonates. I've wondered if I could hear it if there were no water at all.

Closer, I let her go past me. She picks up her pace and again I have to warn her about getting too close to the edge.

"Careful," I say. "That's straight down."

As before, she seems to ignore me. She bends to peer into the canyon. She dislodges a rock and it spins and flies down like a meteor.

I take her arm.

"Please! You don't have to do that!" she says. "I'm all right."

I let go, but stay close to her.

"Sorry," I say.

She looks away and then rubs at her eyes.

"No. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have snapped at you like that. It's just..."

"Forget it."

She steps back and takes in more of what is around us and below us.

"Does this place have a name?"

"Not that I know of."

"Well," she says. "I want Julian's bench here. I can't think of a better spot."

"All right," I say. "Then this is where we'll put it."

She sits on the ground and draws her knees to her chest and puts her hands on them. She closes her eyes and leans her head forward and stays quiet for what seems a long time. I step back from her and leave her to whatever it is she is doing. Praying? I don't know. It doesn't matter.

She stands and immediately pulls out more plastic Army men from her bag.

"I'll put the rest of them out here," she says, and she goes off on her own to station the remaining soldiers.

* * *

We walk slower on our way back. We say nothing until we are in my truck and driving to our meeting place at the paved road.

"So what did you do before this?" she says.

"I owned a music store."

“Oh my gosh. Deason’s Music? Right downtown on Main Street?”

“Yep. That was it.”

“I bought Julian a banjo there once.”

“Is that right?”

“Yes. But he never learned to play.”

Her voice rattles when we hit a stretch of washboards on a sharp curve. My truck fishtails a little and I feel her eyes on me. Then, it’s as if the rock and swerve of the pickup has jolted free her grief, like the rock she’d dislodged on the dangerous edge of the canyon. In her quavering voice she goes on about how Julian loved nature and the river, how when he was a boy he came home with lizards in his pockets, how he could identify all the trees and wildflowers, how she raised him on her own and how whenever he was feeling down he’d go to the river and dive in and come back a new person. “It was as if all his troubles were washed away,” she says.

I say nothing until we reach her car and she climbs out of my truck. She stands with the door open and stares in at me as if it is understood, then and there, that I have done something for her and she has done something for me.

“We’ll be putting the bench in next week sometime. I’ll let you know when it’s done.”

“All right,” she says. “Thank you so much.”

She walks to her car and I watch her drive off. Then a week will pass. A team of AmeriCorps volunteers and I install Julian’s bench at the place Sandy Blake and I chose.

The day after, Sandy and I meet again at the turnout and we drive and hike to Julian’s bench.

*In Loving Memory of Julian Aaron Blake.
Our River Lover*

She sits alone on the bench, but after a time she asks me to be next to her and we stay there until the chill and softening light warns us about the approaching darkness. We hike back and again she thanks me and we say goodbye. I don’t want to believe I may never again see Sandy Blake, or hear her voice.

Weeks pass. I begin to find the soldiers here and there on the preserve. Some are no longer upright. A few are partially buried under dirt and leaves and pine needles. Whenever I encounter them I remove them from their graves and stand them on their feet, facing the river.

JAMES RAMSEY

Under the Haze of Oldest Mountains

While I wandered the Cherokee National Forest
I've seen tight families of graves, of white,
of black, laid among trees—no shard or shell
to sift to guess where loved or grieved,
histories lost in decay and leaves, most stones
rough carved to name quick lives of children.

Markers lean and sag under varnish of moss,
coal soot, and pollen at heads of squared
settled weeds that still dimension the dead.
Last words of winds haunt hemlock limbs
but give scant sense of stillbirths, infections,
winter hungers, and fevered thirsts.

The earth holds energies and genealogies
too close and tight for me to cipher stories
found in these encamped names, who multiply
mysteries of hallowed ground with Cherokee
who lie in mounds facing same skies; who
never foresaw forced sharing of spirit places.

Any child's death today proves grief thrives
despite harder laws or softer graces. Whoever
escapes boundaries and pains must retrace
trails of tears left before by those pushed away.
Small lives fail behind hatred's walls and fences,
then echo in old mountains where more guileless
lie hidden, souls stolen never named to stones.

What strange game to guess whose breath
defers, how onerous the Stygian fee, to judge
people passing when death asks each age,
fair or no, to displace earth with lives gifted.
Cemeteries still fill voids, and crematoriums,
efficient, fast, cough ash and compound dusts
to obscure vintage bodies and bones of interest.

CHOYA RANDOLPH

Carry.

I am my ancestors.
Their stories are my soil.
Their dreams are my birth marks.
Marks that sparkle like chewed stars
Shining brighter with each generation.

When I can't figure out what color the day is
I wonder who made the ink that writes our stories.
Who wrote our curses in cursive?
Who figured out how to find the circumference to our circles?
Who chose for it to hurt here and not there?
Who decided for it hurt us but not them?

Today's color is mahogany.
The brown of wood.
The brown of us.
Today I don't need to learn my history.
I can open my own book and
read the same plot of my ancestors.
I can trace the circles in our curses.

When massa hit my great great great great grandfather
He hit us all.
His whip a wand.
So when daddy hits mommy
And mommy hits me
The pain is plagiarized

I like looking at my reflection in rivers.
The ripples reveal a truth.
I can see my dad in my chin.
My grandmother in my nose.
Her grandfather in my cheeks.
I can see the hereditary chains
Rusting into the brown of dry blood.

CHOYA RANDOLPH

The trauma trickles down through rocks.
Filtered into something that hurts less
But yet feels the same.
I carry what they've been given,
Wondering how to break our circles,
How to make myself lighter,
How to make today blue.

GREG RAPPLEYE

Detox

At 2 AM we drop him at the Salvation Army.
Eighty miles of rum, of cigarettes and rain
to leave him the place he hates most.
In the car he was slurring words, popping caps
of Librium, muttering of seizures.
Now he lights a Winston,
slow-wags his head, has second thoughts.
Says he won't go in because the nurses don't like him
and last time here, a meth-head stole his jeans.
He can't stand the shakes. Maybe he'll take a day
to dry-out; but unless he gets back to work,
the bank is coming for his truck.
Listener, our son is forty years-old, has no job
to stave off the bank, is on a month-long jag—
found shoeless, wandering beyond the parking lot
the addicts call The Oval, out toward the famous pier.
He's out of chances. If he wants to live, he must
quit again. At dawn, I'm in the backyard.
Wanting a sign, I see two wrens
trilling at the foot of the gnarled box elder.
A call and response; the birds flutter up
to a low branch, then drop to feed on whatever
might sustain them, a sustenance I can't see.
Years ago we thought this tree was dying.
Then it was struck by lightning—
a great flash of wire-crossed plasma
that panicked our dogs; ozone and a lash of thunder
not quite simultaneous. After, we saw that ridges
of dirt circled the tree's base, like ripples
on a darkish pond—three feet out, six feet,
nine, until they vanished in the cotton-grass, as if this bolt
had shaken the box elder to its roots.
And the tree began to grow again—more green leaves
each year and lush with seeds, a meteorologic one-

GREG RAPPLEYE

off that must serve for now as mawkish, half-cracked parable,
unless God phones tonight from Detox,
unless a herald has been sent for us,
bearing better news.

DEVIN REESE

Snarge

Nasty little word, like snot, bulge, or mange,
no meaning to me before, nor did I care.
I was getting along fine without snarge,
until Carla Dove revealed her dose of daily mail.
Small Ziploc bags with brownish bits inside,
each labeled with a Flight No. and date.
Emissaries from around the world,
clogging her bin to overflowing.
Each bag of snarge the remains of a bird,
hapless, chewed up by an airplane engine,
bones, feathers, beaks, innards, whichever parts
encountered the whirring, persistent blades that
catapulted humans along in a metal capsule.
Carla sleuths the identity of ill-fated birds,
comparing snarge to whole birds and feathers,
matching game of colors, patterns, DNA, origin.
Snarge helps us direct our big pseudo-birds on paths
to avoid collisions with the former masters of the skies.

LINDA NEAL REISING

Horsman

The inn-keeper tells me that after the war,
he was never truly afraid, not even
during those years when he and Blossom, a shepherd mix,
traveled the backroads in his rusty Ford LTD,
spending nights at rest areas or roadside parks,
where they pitched a plastic tarp over ropes
hung from tree limbs, before sharing a beef jerky
breakfast and heading out to search for treasures
in dim shops and dusty garages, ferreting
random pieces of china or silver that he struck
from the list.

And before that, when he hitched a ride
to Sarasota, joining the Royal Hanneford Circus,
pitching in to raise the tents, winds sometimes roaring
across the grounds, flapping the canvas
until it snapped like a whip, he was never afraid.
Nor did he fear the animals—
majestic Lippizzaner stallions with hooves of steel,
white tigers swiping away the trainer's crop,
elephants with their wise resentment.

After the war, he was never truly afraid
except at one place—the Horsman Doll Factory—
where he mixed the plastics to be poured,
formed into dolls. All around, their eyes,
waiting transplant, rolled inside trays,
while stacks of arms, legs, heads—
pre-capitated, brought to mind a time
he'd long ago tried to forget, especially
when the workers pulled new babies
out of the molds, and each let loose
one long, horrifying squeal.

CLAIRE SCOTT

I'm Working on It

Towels folded in thirds, lined up on shelves, folded edges facing out
top firmly screwed on my Tom's toothpaste
only even steps to the car, thirteen, start over
some days an hour to get to work, my boss not so happy
but feels sorry for me sleeping alone in that big house
invited me to dinner, not a chance, not interested
in an overweight man with side burns and bum hip
who can barely walk a block without wheezing
he doesn't know that soon enough you will be back
shoes waiting in the closet, Warrior's cap on your desk,
Corona in the fridge, your bookmark on page 341
of *The Mueller Report*, right next to your reading glasses
I have cleaned up the syringe caps and the cotton swabs
they left behind when they strapped you to a gurney
and sired you to the ER and the doctor said *I am so sorry*
if I can keep this up just a bit longer I know
the goddess of magical thinking will provide a miracle
and I will hear your footsteps on the porch.

MAUREEN SHERBONDY

Going Home

When we return home
we walk backwards.
By the time we reach
the front door,
we are children again.

Our parents call us
in for supper
by those names
we long before
threw into the river.

Squabbles between siblings
start by dusk with tiny hands
punching and scratching
over that last cookie
or who won at Parcheesi.

The morning we leave
we gain twelve inches
in height and decades of wisdom.
By the time we reach
our adult homes,
scratches are barely visible.

MARK SIMPSON

Illuminated Building, Darkening Cave

In the illuminated building janitors
make a silence their brooms interrupt,
a silence soothed by mops wrung
nearly dry.

Silence of the cave where philosophers
have taken refuge with canned
food and bottled water, enough to wait
it out although it remains in play,
a moth with sense enough to remain close
to the sputtering candle, but far
enough away.

The janitors call out to one
another and even that a heavy quiet,
hardly music among the hallways.

They were told that it would pass although
they've forgotten what it is.

The janitors ply the illuminated silence,
each alone and working, and come across
discarded tins of food, the music
of empty water bottles.

Except for the janitor and on the fourth
floor, who listens to lesson five of
Let's Learn English on a Sony Walkman
the thrift store couldn't sell.

RACHEL SOBYLYA

Elegy for Handwriting

Soon, no one will praise
neatly penned sentences,
chastise poorly scrawled illegibility,
hope for a letter in the mail,
recognize the sender just by reading
their own name on the front.

All will have forgotten
the anticipation of reading a love letter,
the frustration of deciphering
a too-quickly-written word,
the deliberation between skipping it, but
ultimately refusing to sacrifice its meaning
for an unjust, half-understood skim
because so much went into its formation—
so much depends on an illegible word.

There will be no locker letters,
no origamically folded gossip,
no childish scribble on holiday cards
to show everyone cared enough to sign.

Instead we will have e-vites,
emojis for emotions,
snips of snaps
video edits,
texts.

C. D. WATSON

Decoration Day

Riley stood at the edge of the cemetery, bracketed by his parents. The sky was a cloudless azure and the air crisp and cool. His mother's fingernails dug into the back of his hand, she gripped it so tightly, and his father's fingers flexed spasmodically against Riley's shoulder.

He'd been here before, last fall after his tenth birthday. A right of passage, cousin Derrold had said, his broad face pale and pinched like he'd seen a ghost. Maybe like bones had crawled out of the graves and chased after him, that's how Derrold had looked, just like the ground had burst open on a bunch of rotting corpses.

Riley shrugged under his father's grip, ignoring the jacket tightening across his back. Hand me downs and no money for new. That's what Papa said. Mama called it serviceable and left it at that.

He glanced across the mounded graves stretching out behind the tiny rock church, past the tombstones standing dully under the noonday sun, to the copse of oak guarding the creek bordering the churchyard. Another month, two at most, and him and Derrold and the other church kids would be out there playing in the creek while their mothers spread out picnic baskets full of cold lunches and their fathers gossiped together in the meager shade, sweating in their Sunday best.

A light breeze blew across the congregation standing silently in a half-crescent on the verge of the cemetery. A Carolina wren chirped, and Riley shook off the anticipation of the summer yet to be.

The preacher strode out among the graves, his Bible tucked tight against his chest, and placed a clawed hand along the top of a tilted tombstone. Riley knew that one, the grave of Arminda Joiner, his mother's great-grandmother, born and died so long ago, the dates were worn crevices in the marble, home more to lichens than remembrance.

Except on this day.

Today, they would chase out the names of their ancestors and study their memorials, if they were legible, and the dead would be honored by the tending of their final resting places. Today was for stashing away old flowers, faded under sun and rain, and putting out new, and for raking the dirt over each grave into a sharp, mounded line.

"Friends," Preacher Tuttle said, his voice a sonorous boom drifting over the gathered crowd as his sharp, blue gaze flicked between them.

“Today we gather to care for those who have gone before us into the eternal love of our lord and savior Jesus Christ. The Bible says, ‘Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints,’ and truly, those who are interred here are God’s loyal saints.”

Riley’s parents murmured amen, dutifully, like a clock chiming the hour, and Riley let his attention wander. Preacher Tuttle seemed determined to deliver another sermon, though they’d filed out of the little stone church not ten minutes before.

Across the crescent shaped crowd, to the preacher’s left and only a few feet beyond Arminda’s tombstone, Derrold shifted from one foot to the other and swiped a forearm across his nose. His chubby face was pale and his eyes were glued to the grave in front of him, to the untidy pile of orange-red dirt covering it. No grass grew on the graves here. They were tended too well and too often, though some, the babies’ especially, were covered with small pebbles taken from the river.

A row of such graves stretched out behind Arminda’s, bracketed by her husband’s, tiny graves no more than three feet long from one end to the other. Derrold had counted them once, so he claimed, and found twenty-nine babies resting in the churchyard.

Riley figured his cousin had exaggerated, but now that he was forced to stand there under the mid-April sky while Preacher Tuttle praised the virtues of the dead, he wondered how far off Derrold’s count had been. There were an awful lot of tiny gravesites in the cemetery, maybe more than twenty-nine, maybe as many as a third of the older kids and adults buried there.

The dirt over Arminda’s grave shifted, drawing Riley’s errant attention, and a rust-stained pebble rolled down the side along a rivulet created by the last rain. A sharp wind gusted along the treetops and a cloud boiled across the sky. Low murmurs burst out among the adults, and Papa’s hand clamped tight on Riley’s shoulder.

The Bible held snug against Preacher Tuttle’s heart started shaking and his words faded away in the middle of a recitation of a passage from Isaiah 26.

They are dead, they will not live; they are shades, they will not arise.

One by one, the families broke from the group and headed to the plots where their ancestors were buried. Mama made a beeline for Arminda’s grave, softly singing an old hymn as if the dead could hear it and be soothed, like a colicky baby.

Papa’s hand rose and fell against Riley’s shoulder, nudging him past Arminda’s grave, where the babes rested. “Tend them well, son.”

It was a familiar refrain, one repeated often for as far back as Riley remembered, in taut voices among the older boys after Sunday lunch, in hushed whispers between his parents, overheard when he was supposed to be sleeping.

Tend the dead well. Let them enjoy their sleep.

Riley hadn't quite figured out what one had to do with the other and he'd never thought to ask. Just seeing the thin lines wrinkling his father's brow tamed his curiosity, not laugh lines worn into grooves along his cheeks from smiling too much, but worry lines. Pain lines. Today, Papa's shoulders hunched together under his homespun shirt and his head bowed, baring his nape to the sun.

Yes, pain lines, Riley decided, and his heart crimped into a knot in his chest.

He knew his chore this day. It was his duty to gently scrub away the moss and grime coating the tombstones of his ancestors. Papa had shown him how last fall, and it was easy enough, though hard on his hands. They would cramp by the time he finished the row of infants while his parents tended the graves of adults, and more would need doing before the day ended.

Riley shrugged out of the too-tight jacket, folded it neatly, and laid it at the foot of Arminda's grave. He picked up the pail sitting there, already full of creek water and a brush, and stepped carefully around his mother kneeling at the stone footing of her great-grandmother's grave. Her singing was breathless now, sharp and high pitched, and she interspersed the words with those of her own making as she plucked worn flowers from the dirt and replaced them with fresh.

"There now," she murmured, prayer like. "Rest easy."

Her words had little effect on the uneasiness resting heavy in the air around her. Papa was already stooped over a wooden rake, scraping dry, rusty dirt into a sharp line over the center of the grave. He glanced up at Riley, his eyes dark and wary under his hat's narrow shade, then glanced just as quickly down, intent on his work.

A disquieting wind whirled around Riley as he passed. He shook it off and knelt in front of the resting place of the first baby, Arminda's eldest, his great something aunt. She'd barely seen life before the croup had taken her, but she was at peace now, happy. He fished his brush out of the sun-warmed water and hummed a hymn for her under his breath. Her favorite, he just knew it, the way he knew she would've been called Joycy, though no name was scratched into the stone marking her grave, nor had his parents ever told him.

He just knew, the way he knew that the sun was always in the sky, even when it rained.

“There now, Joycy,” he told her where nobody else could hear. “I’ll get you all cleaned up today.”

Her girlish laughter tickled his inner ear, and he smiled and scrubbed all the harder, just to please her.

Joycy’s stone was small, no bigger than half his shin high, and easy to clean. His parents were still working on Arminda’s grave when he finished. A dervish had settled atop the dirt, near the tilted tombstone, and his mother’s hands had clenched together around her own brush.

“Please, not that,” she said, so low Riley almost missed it. “We did what you wanted. We made the sacrifice.”

Riley paused in his own cleaning. What sacrifice? What did she mean?

Her words became harsh, whispered across the grave to Papa, and the dervish jittered and shook, shedding a fine dust across them both. Riley caught odd words.

“So much money...new stones...soon.”

Well, now, there was never much money, and as for new stones, they sure were needed, but to everything a season. The Bible said so.

Riley shrugged, stood, and picked up his pail. “Going to your sister now, Joycy,” he said, then he turned and skirted the next resting place and set his pail down again, near the stone so small, the grass nearly covered it.

A shudder ran through Riley, shaking his teeth. This was the one grave he hated tending, the spot where Joycy’s eldest sister rested. Stillborn, she was. No breath had she drawn after birth, so Joycy said, and the stillborn soul was resentful of it. Riley could feel her envy of the living running through every wisp of wind swirling along the top of her pebble-covered grave.

Shivers ran down his spine, raising goose bumps on his skin. This was his duty to the dead, his offering to them, his remembrance. Didn’t mean he couldn’t hurry through it, as long as the job was done well.

He knelt beside his unnamed aunt’s tiny, tiny grave and pulled the grass back, then scrubbed the stone good, going as hard and fast as he could, careful not to miss a single inch for all his speed. For good measure, he scraped the pebbles off the eroded mound marking the length of her body, leaving it bare for his father’s rake.

No coffin for her, merely swaddling in a blanket Arminda had pieced together from scraps and hope. Joycy hadn’t told him that. He’d seen it himself in his mind’s eye last fall and done his best to forget the sight of the flaccid infant slowly rotting in her red clay mud tomb.

When he was finished, Riley stood and nodded, trying to shrug off the tingling along his nape, the feeling of being watched, of being measured and appraised. He'd done the best he could do, and that's all a mule could do.

Mama was rocking back and forth now, still kneeling at Arminda's side, and Papa's hands were white knuckled on the wooden rake. The dervish had taken form, drawn dust from the orange-red clay and the occasional stray pebble and other detritus scattered about his parents. It looked almost human, with arms twisting out of the wind and a long skirt plastered to what could've been legs, and a gaping hole where a mouth would've been, if the dusty figure had been whole.

He blinked, and the dervish was once again merely dirt and wind.

The crowd around the grave, that was the real puzzle. Others had abandoned their work and gathered 'round, watching silently, their expressions almost grateful. "Not us this year," someone murmured, and Riley couldn't have said who, though it'd sounded an awful lot like Derrold. His cousin stood there facing Riley's mother, straight and tall under the hand of his own mother, but his eyes were on Riley and they were bright and wide and full of a terrified pity.

Riley picked up his pail, ignoring the tableau and the pleas spilling from his mother's mouth, a litany so sharp and formless, he could scarce pick out the words. He turned his back on them. *Tend them well*, Papa said, and that's what Riley aimed to do.

The next spot was blessedly free of troubling thought, longer than Joycy's by thrice, and the tombstone tall enough to bear words.

Daniel A. Joiner, son of James and Arminda Joiner, it read above the dates of his birth and death, then the epitaph, *We shall meet again*.

Riley's shoulders relaxed under the homespun shirt Mama had cut down from one of Papa's, and he stood for a moment, communing silently with his uncle. Daniel had been just nine years old when he'd fallen off a mule one muddy March day, during the planting time. He'd landed funny, right on his head, and his neck had snapped in two. Three days later, his body had given out, ejecting his soul into the heavens, and his mother had wailed for days at his graveside, inconsolable over the loss of her eldest son.

So inconsolable, she'd set their tiny cabin on fire in the middle of the night, while her husband was away looking for work to pay the doctor who'd sat with Daniel during those three days while he lingered here on the earthly plane. The fire had taken Daniel's three youngest siblings, now laid neatly in a row between him and his father. Arminda had stood in the flames and laughed while they consumed her, laughed and cried and screamed a curse at the god that had taken her beloved son and her first two daughters before they'd had a chance to live.

James and Daniel's next oldest sister Ara, Riley's mama's grandmother, had returned home the next day to smoldering ruins. He'd always believed it was an accident, Daniel's father, but Daniel had told Riley the truth last fall and sworn him to secrecy.

Some things were better left buried.

A hand fell on Riley's shoulder, startling him, and he looked way up. Preacher Tuttle stood beside him, his Bible still held to his chest.

"Suffer the little children to come unto me," he said, his voice grave and strained, "and forbid them not, for such is the kingdom of heaven."

"Yes, sir," Riley said. He knew that verse, out of the Gospel of Mark. They'd learned it in Sunday school not long back, though why the preacher was speaking it now was beyond Riley's ken.

Still, knowing or not, Riley knew better than to be disrespectful to the preacher. He dropped his brush into the pail and straightened his shoulders, then looked Preacher Tuttle right in the eye. "I been scrubbing hard, sir."

The preacher patted Riley's shoulder once and his mouth trembled into a smile. "Yes, you have, son. You've done a good job, and now it's time for you to go."

Riley cocked his head at that. "Where to, sir? I still got graves to tend."

"No more today, my child. No more today."

The preacher guided Riley around, turning him gently. Mama sobbed hard and touched her work roughened hands to her mouth while Papa held her tight in his arms, and there was that figure again, formed out of the clay by the wind. It had drifted past Mama and faced him now, staring him down, and in the dark abyss of its eyes, an unholy light burned.

The wind slipped down Riley's neck and chills broke out along his skin, though not only from the draft of cold, spring air gusting through him. God had created man from clay, like a potter, only that figure there, standing on his great-something grandmother's grave, that wasn't God's work at all.

He didn't need another Bible verse to know that truth.

Daniel's ghost solidified and came to stand beside Riley, and an icy touch brushed Riley's hand. "Don't worry, Riley. Me and Joycy got you now. You'll be safe with us."

"Safe?" Riley said, but he already knew. His heart thumped into a full-out run in his chest, and for the life of him, he couldn't look away from the figure approaching him. A swaddled infant rested in its arms, as still as the wind was fierce, crafted from the same dirt as its holder.

A stillborn babe hungry for a soul's energy to feed on, in order that it, too, might live.

Mama screamed, “Run, baby!”

But it was too late. The figure was upon him and his feet were rooted to the very earth. He shook his head slowly as Arminda raised her hand and the sun passed behind a cloud. Joycy’s laughter died in the crisp spring air, and Riley finally understood.

The dead had never slumbered in their graves, merely waited for a chance to arise again, reborn.

MATTHEW J. SPIRENG

Letter to My Grandmother

I was adopted and never knew
your daughter, much less you.
I can only guess that when she
became pregnant, you knew and
sent her away to have me where
neighbors wouldn't gossip, though
doubtless they did, because what story
covers up such lengthy absence
as hidden pregnancy would require?
She was no child. Married once,
husband killed in World War II,
from what little I know. So had she chosen,
and had her family been supportive,
she might have kept me to raise
as hers, the father be damned,
whoever he was. But circumstances
were not that way, and I was given up,
never knew her or you. And now, given
that I am 56, she may well be dead,
and it is likely you are, so this letter
is as futile as a note in a bottle—though
recently parents whose son had died
as a young adult were given a note
from a bottle set adrift when he had
still been a child, a message from their son
found long after death, so if this letter serves
a purpose, it may only be discovered
far in the future on an unfamiliar shore.

MAX STEPHAN

Clearing Out the Bomb Shelter, 1979

When Mom went back to work
after 26 years of raising eight kids as a full-time-stay-at-home-mom,
I guess she hadn't taken summers into consideration—
who would keep an eye on her last kindergarten-graduate
after the school year finally came to an end.

But when Jeffrey won the bid to clear out the city's bomb shelter
(tactically hidden beneath the downtown public library)
she talked him into letting his little brother tag along.

For weeks on end, it was a twenty-one-year-old
working a five-year-old's butt like a drill sergeant
barking out orders to drag the never-opened cardboard boxes
stamped and dated and sealed with government approval
soon after Kennedy heard Khrushchev scream *We will bury you*.

The details one didn't need to know
were printed on the broadside of each and every box:

SURVIVAL SUPPLIES

Furnished by

OFFICE OF CIVIL DEFENSE
DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE

CIVIL DEFENSE

SURVIVAL RATION CRACKER

CONTENTS: 42 POUNDS

NO. OF CRACKERS PER POUND: 62

DATE OF PACK: SEPT 1962

But not just crackers – anything that had no taste:
bulgur wafers, dehydrated biscuits, carbohydrate supplements,
even bundles of pamphlets which read *If War Should Come...*
all inside aluminum canisters sealed air-tight—
never opened, not even touched
until two brothers—one big, one small—were hired to clean house.

Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon, Ford—they saw no mushroom cloud;
and by the time the 70s were wrapping up,
the Soviet Union found itself wrapped up in a Vietnam called Afghanistan.
So after eighteen years of being disregarded, collecting dust,
Carter decided that it was time to call it quits.

Every day for two whole weeks, my big brother worked me hard—
but there was no question of who was working harder:
for each box I hauled, his blue-collar muscles must have moved twenty,
all the while never taking one eye off of me,
not once distracted (as far as I could tell)
by the high heels 'round the corner on Chippewa.

When the basement was completely empty,
swept and dusted barren,
all gray-and-yellow fallout shelter signs removed,

the two of us, together, climbed into the eighteen-wheeler one last time—
climbed in, sat in the cab with confidence,

but said nothing—

knowing something new, something unnamable, had come to an end;
just listened and listened to the rising and falling sounds of diesel
as we hauled pure American History on over to the city dump.

ALEX THOMAS

There Are So Many Things That Happen in Empty Places

A meteor shower over the empty desert between
the lights of Malibu and Las Vegas. The sun coming

up and reddening the fog on the abandoned ocean
with the water so still, you can see all the way into

the bottom where the ships are quietly rusting. I think
a lot about shipwrecks and about the sort of ghost

that would choose to haunt them. I think a lot about
the first time I saw a snake moving through the water

in some southern river with the trees hanging over it.
My girlfriend says that she has lived multiple lives.

She has died in three shipwrecks but she has never
been in a car accident. She says that the first time she

drowned, she remembers watching the light of the ship
swallowing the darkness beneath her. I think about

shipwrecks and how they exist in the same world as
Time Square — all those people in the middle of it all

and only a few hundred miles away, the rusting ships
and the fish moving through the windows and the ghosts.

EMILY TOWNSEND

The Storm on Interstate 10 to Florida

It leaves an impression on you, the rain.
How the semaphore from Mack trucks
beams into the drenched night, how the tires
crash into flooded dips of the highway,

how he panics from lightning cleaving
the sky like a TV waking up and fading away, how
terrified he is, his eyes quivering into a breakdown,

how when we finally pull over and streak in the rain
to the doors of an East Texas Waffle house, surrounded
by stale coffee and 2 AM friendliness and doppler radar conversations,
he says "I love you so very much,
for keeping me sane."

We are waterproof yet we still drown
even if we're inside the vehicle's backseat running
toward the storm, even if we look over at each other and see
the other rattling, head in hands, chest puffing
and caving in, even if I offer a temporary solace
to something that will never go away.

LAZARUS TRUBMAN

Flowers for Elizabeth

I love September mornings,
dew-gray-blue, sun as though behind smoke,
houses in the country look as though
they were wrapped in tissue paper,
the lake flashes, the opposite bank
is as though wrapped in a haze,
autumn, I stand among the greenhouses,
among the beds of a rural market-garden,
without my glasses in order to see
the colors of the flowers correctly,
and I have taken my dark glasses off,
so that the friendly gardener
shouldn't think he can sell me wilting flowers.
His knife flashes like the lake,
Delphiniums, yes, or whatever it is,
I nod and every stem, which I greet with a nod,
meets the knife and falls with a low crack;
flowers for Elizabeth, crack, crack, crack,
a whole gardener's arm
full of blue delphiniums;
crack, till I say: Enough! I'd like
something yellow to go with it,
no, something paler, not too much,
and a few red blossoms, asters,
yes, also dahlias, yes, wine-red,
a lot of wine-red, a lot...

ALLEN TULLOS

Old Finch House

Noses, shoes of Neighborhood Watch
find spongy porch rot's more
than spring tongues unbuckling thawed grooves.
"Power's still off."
"Sherlock."

"Y'all step back now."
A deputy shepherds with yellow scrim.
Another scouts the locked sills, jimmys the door
into a rainbow strew of hallway feathers,
rows of Mason jars tight screwed
with impeccable seeds and Fruity Cheerios.

"Stink's parrots!"
"What?"
"Law says the floor's covered up."
"How come him to want so many?"
"More'n that for sure. Come away."

The ladder to a roosted shape below the ceiling peel
leans against a tower of electric polyester blankets
lampshades ripped grocery sacks of clothes
stolen mail cardboard boxes newspapers molding shoes
wooden crates flower pots coffee can screws bolts
pecked-over rinds deputy gagging for light kicks
choked coupon Quaker boxes rips festering curtains
crowbar crushes a nailed window.

Stirred awake, waving rainchecks and royalty statements,
Ewell, crawlspace wolf, coming close as the chain allows,
wants a word.

BOB WICKLESS

*The Only Image Left in the Camera from My Mother's
Visit to Yosemite in the Summer of 1938*

Was it there simply by accident?
Wait. Let me remember. She
Had just sat back on the bed
To remove the day's used film
From her camera, a new Agfa Selecta,
She'd bought especially for the trip—
Winding the full roll back
And snapping the camera open
When someone unseen—perhaps
One of her companions—
Rapped smartly on the cabin door.
They had wanted to eat dinner,
To take a brisk walk
Along the lake's glacial edge,
To watch the moon rising
Over unsuspecting Yosemite
And wait for Ansel Adams,
Not my inexperienced mother,
To snap that remembered print.
So she closed the back gently
And left her new camera
Unloaded on the bed.

The next day, gathering her luggage,
She scooped up the Selecta
And decided, spur-of-the-moment,
As the first strong light
Spilled past the cliffs,
To take one more picture—
Last Day in Yosemite, Summer, 1938.
And only as they left, driving out
Toward the Giant Sequoias,
Did she realize her error,
Thinking, *Well, it was just one picture,*

As she reloaded her camera
With a fresh roll of film.

I explain all of this now
Because you may have seen
Those reproduced prints—
Merced River, Cliffs, Autumn;
Gates of the Valley; North Dome,
Arches, Winter; Moonrise Over Yosemite;
Half Dome and Clouds, Glacier Point—
Not the yellowing shots
Taken by my mother, each identified
By the specific place and date
On the album's black page
In her thin, white script—
But no one, except my young mother,
Has seen this one,
As I open her camera
Sixty years later
To view the last photograph
Lingering without film,
Its pale and silvered light
Finally escaped,
This ghost of a photograph
Dissolving as I hold it
Because no one, not even a son,
Can long hold on
To the photo of death.

CYNTHIA YANCEY

From Asheville to Africa: Sarah in Sabawoori

“I will never be a doctor, Moma!” Sarah angrily retorted. Then, to be more explicit, “Because doctors have NO TIME for their families,” came from little Sarah’s throat, to express her dire disappointment at her mother’s absence from a school event early in her elementary school life. In retrospect, I fear my daughter has longed her entire life for the utterly dedicated parent/child bond that a mother’s profession would never supersede.

My precious little family had been up early in the cool, crisp air of Asheville, North Carolina, on a typical day in our newfound mountain town because my workday started at some ungodly hour at the hospital. This particular morning, dropping off my three elementary-aged children at the YWCA for their preschool care, my daughter, Sarah, hugged me as I pulled her down from her seat in our big old family van and said, “Moma, I forgot to tell you, but we’ve got a really special lunch for all the parents of my class today.” I listened somewhat incredulously to my little girl as she asked me to squeeze something really special into my already cram-packed day. She held me at arm’s length and looked up into my face as her feet touched down to the ground, saying with her most pleading little-girl eyes, “You’ll be there, won’t you, Moma?”

I had recently left their father with his lover back in Jackson, Mississippi, to move to our mountain metropolis in Western North Carolina, officially making myself a single parent. So I was the only possibility for my little girl that day. I also had chosen to work in the public health sector of the medical field, and had bought into the notion that female doctors had to behave as their male counterparts. I knew in my mind I was not going to leave work undone. And I knew how much my little girl wanted me to be there with her.

I looked down into those pleading eyes of hers and said, “Darlin’, I’ll work as fast as I can. I’ll do my best to be there, but I’m not sure I’ll be able to make it. Next time, please give me more advance notice, all right?”

Off I went to the hospital, then to the health department, where I indeed worked as fast as I could. And of course it was not fast enough for the steady, unrelenting line of broken-down patients. In fact, I worked all through lunch, leaving Sarah, who wanted nothing more than to have her mother beside her at this special school lunch, to go it alone.

At the end of the day, finally having finished work well, I headed back as always to my three little children. As much as I hated not having gotten away in time to be with my daughter, I imagined, quite erroneously, that all parents worked, even that perhaps all parents worked instead of being with their kids at school functions, especially when they only heard about them the day of the event. So, at the end of this particular day, I asked Sarah, with apparently insufficient guilt, "Hey, sweet girl! So sorry I wasn't able to be there with you today. Did any of the other mothers come?"

Sarah, not missing a beat, nor an opportunity to wake her mother up, responded in her firmest little-girl voice, "AND fathers, Moma. They all came except YOU!" Then, in an attempt to drive her message home... "I will NEVER be a doctor!" choking on her disgruntlement with her only choice for mother.

* * *

Upon graduation from high school, Sarah had no intention of further formal education. Instead she planned to spend some time in Africa. She began as an exchange student, yet because she was no longer actually a student, she taught English as a Second Language to preschoolers while living with a family in Ghana.

Her family in Kumasi was not the typical African family she would have chosen had she been able to look at a cross section of all the choices. The parents of her African family were bankers who lived in a gated community. An African gated community is not the same, mind you, as an American one; still, it was not what Sarah had hoped for.

In middle school, Sarah had occasionally called conferences where she put her teachers on the witness stand for their insidious racist actions toward her classmates in her very public school. Sarah's friends at that point were mostly African American; she went to their homes and churches; she spoke Ebonics as an apparent act of rebellion against her own race. Her little-girl heart had fallen in love with many of her classmates of a different color, and she would not sit by quietly while her teachers mistreated them, no matter how subtly.

In Kumasi, Ghana, she also would not remain in that gated community for long, but rather would find a place for herself in a small village to the north during Ramadan where she could live in a hut with a far poorer family, join in their fasting and festivities, and begin to find herself in that far corner of the world.

* * *

On her return home a few months later, I believe she noticed, even if at a subconscious level, that she had not yet been able to break through the intellectual pecking order of her own three brothers, who placed her on the very bottom rung. She also knew from her times working out of the country with me, doing volunteer medical work, from the jungles of Guatemala to the cities of the Dominican Republic, that she easily thrived in other cultures. At fourteen, she had functioned as the head pharmacist of our Remote Area Medical Expedition in Central America. She was the only other one of us with language enough to tell the villagers how to take the medicine we were giving out. She loved the simplicity of developing nations' cultures, and she knew she had yet another trip to take, but on her own this time, and back to Africa.

The feistiness of this young woman that was needing so desperately to break loose from its bondage began to wait tables at a Japanese restaurant in downtown Asheville to save money for that trip. At the same time, she was making her way into the community of West African drummers and dancers that was developing in Asheville, North Carolina. Before long and all on her own, the kid had arranged to live a year in Guinea, West Africa, at first studying dance with a private instructor in Conakry, then dancing with a local ballet, performing with other Guinean dancers all around the region. Eventually she would buy a plot of land, dig a well, build a house and an outdoor kitchen, privy, and of course, a dance floor down by the river.

* * *

Sarah's African friend Kanke was one of those human beings one fears is too good for this world. She was radiant in every way. Her African Black beauty, the veritable sun shining through her smile. Her demeanor, the way she held herself tall as she walked across Sarah's yard. Her glow came from so deep within, I didn't know if I would ever fathom it. I don't remember if her first language was Susu or Malinké, but I do remember that her West African French was easier to understand than most. She sat many times with me my first trip to Guinea on a bamboo bench on Sarah's farm and looked dreamily as she talked about Sarah. Kanke seemed to love my daughter; this admiration seemed perfectly mutual.

In West Africa, people don't know how old they are. There is neither purpose for them to that knowledge, nor the luxury of ticking off years by celebrating birthdays with parties or presents or cakes. They simply don't know. Once, in discussion down by the river at Sarah's home in Sabawoori with a young Black man who looked to be an adolescent himself, thereby of a younger, different ilk, I imagined that he might know his age. But the truth

struck home for me after the two of us had bantered a bit about all of those whose ages I had asked who didn't know, when I asked him, "*Entonces, quel age as-tu?*" ("So, how old are you?"). An utter blank came across his face. *Of course*, I said to myself. *They really don't know.*

We didn't know how old Kanke was, just that she had miraculously survived some severe hepatitis. Sarah told me how her eyes had turned yellow, how she had not been able to eat for a long time, how she had gotten so painfully thin. The doctors at the hospital and in the clinic had done all of their tests without discovering her malady, but then she had little by little begun to recover to the point of being this absolutely radiant, apparently adolescent African queen. Mornings she would try to help me make my coffee. "*Je voudrais t'aider, toi la mere de mon amie Aicha.*" ("I would like to help you, the mother of my friend Aicha.") Guinea had given my daughter "Aicha" as her African name. Aicha, like Maria in Latin cultures, is the most common Guinean name for girls.

On this first trip to my daughter's farm in Sabawoori, the villagers prepared an Islamic celebration in which they asked Allah to bless her land. We bought a goat to kill; they all brought their cauldrons down to her riverbank to cook their spicy sauces to put over the rice and meat. For them, Sarah brought her ballet troupe from the capital.

The people of her village knew their white-skinned Aicha danced, yet none of them had ever seen a ballet. Sarah was arranging for her troupe to do it up big for them, with a PA system, lights, a stage, and the best of costumes and drums. And finally, she had her mother there to perform for, in all her glory. I filmed the ballet for her brothers back home to eventually see.

After we had all prayed and filled our bellies. After the hot equatorial sun had set and the night's relative cool had settled in, Sarah's dance troupe began their performance. Though the villagers had not witnessed an actual ballet before, they certainly knew its story well. The everyday life of the polygamous farmer husbands with their many wives all fussing with them about relationship and division of household duties was played off saucily, with contrivance, dance, and drumming skill beyond my wildest expectations. As I watched my daughter that entire day and night, and savored the exotic uniqueness of the life she had established there, I realized Sarah had made a place for herself in the world. I also knew the footage from their sister's *National Geographic* sort of stay in West Africa would surely send her brothers to rethink her tremendous strength and worth. Sarah could come home now and hold her head up high, even among the most arrogant boys in her life.

After the last dance was done and the din of the drumming finally stopped, still the villagers chanted with full enthusiasm, "Aicha! Aicha!

Aicha! Encore, encore, encore!!!” When my daughter went up on the stage for the last time that night to thank her adopted African family in her blend of West African French and her village’s dialect, I knew this was her day in the world, and that from here, she could do anything she chose. My chest tightened as I looked up to the starry heavens and thanked God I had been there with this bright beacon of light in my life that night.

Also so proud of Sarah, Kanke curled up and slept in the bed with us that night. The attraction between my daughter and her dear West African friend Kanke was real and strong.

* * *

After my first trip to Guinea, Sarah was in closer contact with me, frequently emailing to ask my advice about her buddies’ illnesses, so that she, in fact, had a practice of medicine all her own. Then, one ill-fated day, I got a call. Sarah’s voice was wailing on the other end of the line as she cried in a cracked, squeaking, helpless voice, “Moma, Kanke has died!” No one knew why. Then, after more desperate sobbing, “We will wait for you to come before we bury her.”

So I prepared to go back. What they actually needed was someone to come with an extra hundred dollars to cover the expense of the rice, meat, and vegetables to feed the entire village. I had that for them, but I also wanted to be there to mourn the loss of such a beautiful, wonderful soul of a young woman named Kanke. I was reminded of my own mother, an angel in disguise who died at twenty-six. *Some of us simply graduate early* has been my supposition all these years.

* * *

Sarah’s home in Sabawoori was a one-room roundhouse with a thatched roof, situated about halfway between the river and the path to the other villagers’ homes. Sarah’s closest African companion, Ibro, had made her a simple four-poster bed of fresh hardwood. A plain piece of foam was its mattress. A single sheet was all one ever needed at night to cover oneself from the occasionally cool night air.

The night before we were to go for Kanke’s service to Forecariah, the city just across the river, Sarah and I were under that sheet together in her bed when she confided in me, “You know, Moma, the only person I really trust here is Soriba.”

“Is Soriba the old man I brought glasses for when I was here before?”

Sarah had asked me to bring some of my strongest eyeglasses to help Soriba with his vision. She also wanted to try my contact lenses out on him.

It only took one look at Soriba and the thick scars over both of his corneas to know that no amount of refraction was going to help poor Soriba's vision. Still Sarah hoped that she might help this trustworthy, aging African friend. When I tried to put one of my contact lenses in his old eye, he squinted and blinked so that I couldn't get it in, but Sarah, with all of her loving patience and will to help her buddy, managed to get my contacts in both of his eyes.

Poor old Soriba stood up, stretched his arms out in front of him with his hands up as if to block anyone in his way, and teetered a bit in disorientation, but then settled into some, "*Ca va bien...*" ("That's pretty good...") without a lot of conviction. He kept those contacts in his eyes overnight, but the next morning asked Sarah to take the lenses out, saying the glasses would be enough. Nearly every time I saw old Soriba, he was wearing my super-thick coke bottle bottom glasses from my college days, not really to help his vision, I don't think, but as a sign that there was a lovely American girl who had tried so hard to help him.

On the day of the memorial service for sweet Kanke, Ibro took Sarah and me to Forecariah on his recently resurrected motorcycle. Ibro always drove. I rode in back. Sarah was sandwiched in between us.

When we got off the bike at the edge of town to walk the rest of the way in, another of their friends ran to us saying, "*Soriba est tres malade.*"

Damn, I thought, the one Sarah trusts most in this West African world is "very sick." *What will we do if we lose Soriba too?*

We all ran through town and back a narrow passage to a dark, dank apartment to find Soriba. He was prostrate in the bed, covered with musty, brown, dirty clothes and covers. Upon our entering, he lifted himself up on one elbow and, in a very weak, gruff voice, in mixed French and African dialect, Soriba said, "I haven't eaten for seven days. Even water comes back up. I have had so much diarrhea, my butt is falling out."

Sarah turned to me frantically, asking, "What can we do, Moma?"

Feeling a huge responsibility and knowing how frail Soriba was, I said, "Oh, darlin', Soriba is old. He needs to go to the hospital so they can run tests and give him intravenous fluids to nurse him back to health."

I knew that in Africa, there is a common belief that one only goes to the hospital to die. Often for lack of funds or for waiting until it really is too late; in fact, the hospital ends up being the place a person goes to die. Soriba sat straight up in bed and, in a still gruffer voice, said, "*Non! Je ne vais pas a l'hopital!*" stern in his conviction to not go to the hospital. Soriba was not ready to die.

Sarah was adding the Susu words to the conversation that were necessary for understanding, but then she turned to me and emphatically

said, “Moma, you didn’t make me go to the hospital when I was sick like Soriba. You told me which medicine to buy to make me well!” Also stern in her conviction to get her medical mother’s help.

“But, Sarah, you are likely fifty years younger and that much sturdier than Soriba!”

I also knew most dysenteries are acute and treatable.

Feeling the weight of the moment, the risk of taking on the role of physician to Sarah’s trusted, super-fragile friend, I said, “If I were to be your doctor, Soriba, I would need to do an exam,” thinking I would need to use every possible resource to get him well.

Soriba’s eyes seemed to light up as he lifted himself up on one elbow again and said, “*Il n’y a pas de problem avec ca.*” I could examine him all day long as far as he was concerned.

With a deep sigh as I accepted the challenge to cure old Soriba, I looked at Sarah and said, “I probably don’t really need to see his butt falling out. Let’s go to the pharmacy.”

On the way, I calculated the probability of which gastrointestinal infections were the likeliest culprits of Soriba’s illness. Whipworms cause rectal prolapse, and their eggs are in the soil all around them where they daily prepare their food. That lesson I had learned well as a medical student studying in the Himalayas. Water-borne illnesses are as likely parasitic as bacterial, and their water is terrible. So at the pharmacy, we purchased Mebendazole to kill whichever roundworms he might be harboring, Metronidazole to cover giardia and amebic dysentery, and Ciprofloxacin to get rid of whichever bacterial diarrhea he might have, all for the equivalent of seven dollars.

Leaving the pharmacy, I remembered that since nothing had stayed in his stomach for an entire week, all of that strong medicine might need some help staying down. So on the way out the door, we went back and purchased Promethazine, an anti-nausea medicine, and a bottle of clean water.

First Sarah dosed Soriba with the nausea medicine, which also causes sleepiness, then, thirty minutes later, she gave him each of the three medicines to fight his dysentery. They had postponed Kanke’s service. No rush to mourn the dead. More important had been to help an esteemed member of their community and family back to health.

Although Sarah never expressed this to me, I believe she may have at that moment, at least at some level within her, been thankful for her old moma to have worked as hard as she had needed to in order to be who she was, a mother doctor who would come to her in Africa and help her help at least one of her friends back to life.

The next day the African women, in their nicest, brightest dresses and head wraps, were in the courtyards with their huge mortars and pestles smooshing the hot peppers to make the rice and vegetables spicy and delicious. Their huge black cauldrons were steaming with their food cooking over open fires; the scent of burning wood filled the air. Children as always were everywhere, running, playing, asleep on their mothers' backs. We all congregated to honor Kanke, the best of us, gone to Heaven from this very hot spot on Earth, a place that would never again be quite as warm as when innocent, precious Kanke had walked among the citizens of Forecariah.

And Sarah's beloved old friend Soriba was dressed and standing at his door, wearing his hat and his glasses. He was on the road to recovery.

In the end, the girl who would never be a doctor herself had doctored quite well her most trusted Guinean friend.

JAN WIEZOREK

Saw

He stood outside the stoop
to reveal himself as used,
wanting work, a saw
in the yard, jagged as jaws

& fierce whiskers. Denim
two sizes too large. Fabric
swaying, underneath
bones, & cotton under-

shirt, ribbed in sawdust.
This carpenter wanted
work & took hold
of a window, nailing it

shut. He bore openings,
& the woman birthed
in this shed where he
worked, supporting

walls, making a home,
teaching their son,
with wood & pain,
to become a saw

for poor, old souls.

ELAINE WILBURT

How to Leave Your Child at College

“Father – from the Latin: to fetch and carry”

—Bruce Dimon

Climb the porch steps,
overflowing diaper bag shouldered,
porta crib tucked, suitcase
in hand, swinging the car seat
in gentle arcs with the other.

Don’t look back.
Lug this
awkward load
up the stairs, one
foot after another.

Set the refrigerator
on the polished floor,
there, where he tells you.
Plug it in.
The compressor whirs.

Hug him. Manly pats.
He has everything
he needs, everything
you’ve taught him. So, go.
Don’t look back.

D.C. WILTSHIRE

Testament

Do not bury me. I do not want six feet
of depth or length, when God sought
to make my body only five-and-a-half feet tall.
You may cremate me, but only if you scatter my cremains
across the windy greenscape in springtime,
or autumn, so my friend the looming chill
may cup me in his palms, beneath
a sickle-lonely moon. Place no marker of my life
in stone to remember long after hearts will.
If my face is not writ on a heart, it is not my face,
but an etching in invented language,
invented and forgotten. You may lock me in a seed pod,
and plant my entrails deep, so birch or oak
may sprout and humbly stand. Do not visit her
in throngs; do not spook her. She, like you
and I, will live a lifetime under hard expectation
always unspoken, and therefore all the harder
to live up to. If you come, tell her who I was in gentle voice,
that she may plunge her roots and drink a simple joy,
like bare hands deep in a sack of dry beans.

JOE WOODWARD

What Was Left Was

What was left was
A single white
Nike tennis shoe

The woman gave you
At the shelter
In Pomona

Just the left one
Trampled flat
But still tied

Half a teenager's
Carry-on suitcase
Covered in yellow daisies

Two black trash bags
You made each night
Into a house

JIANQING ZHENG

A Fleck of Warmth

The flautist, like a spirit,
is playing center stage. A tune
of remoteness she blows
brings back my rusticated years—
the rugged road to the village
where I was reeducated,
the irrigation canal lined with
weeping willows where we
swam and washed clothes,
the ripe golden wheat waving
an autumn scent at sunset,
the wrinkle-faced blind man
who taught me to speak
the local dialect, and
the bamboo flute I gave
to a schoolboy when I
left the village. Forty years
are long gone, eroding the flow
of consciousness with no
noticeable movement, but
there's always a chunk of rock
to strike a spark in the mind,
like the beautiful flute tune,
so close, so far away.

CONTRIBUTORS

JAMES ADAMS was nominated in 2007 for a Pulitzer Prize for his collection, *Noble Savage: Poems*. His poems have appeared in or are forthcoming in *Rattle*; *Light: A Journal of Photography & Poetry*; *The Muse* (India), and other publications. He is a co-editor of the anthology *Elusions: Refugee Poetry* (WaterWood Press, 2019). He was lead judge for the 2019 Carolyn Forché Prize and is a Siegfried Sassoon Fellow. He participated in several Inprint Workshops in Houston, the Colrain Poetry Manuscript Conference, the Split Rock Mentorship Program (Univ. of MN, with Carolyn Forché), and the UCLA Writers' Program.

JEFFREY ALFIER'S most recent book, *The Shadow Field*, was published by Louisiana Literature Press. His publication credits include *The Carolina Quarterly*, *Copper Nickel*, *Emerson Review*, *Permafrost*, and *Southern Poetry Review*. He is co-editor of Blue Horse Press and *San Pedro River Review*.

TOBI ALFIER is a multiple Best of the Net and multiple Pushcart nominee. *Slices of Alice & Other Character Studies* was published by Cholla Needles Press. *Symmetry: earth and sky* was published by Main Street Rag. She is the co-editor of *San Pedro River Review* (www.bluehorsepress.com).

MYLA ATHITANG, a first-generation born Laotian American, published her first novel, *Annalise*, at the age of 17 during her senior year at Kings Mountain High School. As a imaginative fanatic, her fingers itching at the sight of pencil and paper, she scoured her life experiences to piece together stories that would bring not only readers but also dreamers together in a lasting impression of her life on earth.

When not teaching, **DEVON BALWIT** chases chickens in the Pacific Northwest. Her individual poems can be found in *The Worcester Review*, *The Cincinnati Review*, *Tampa Review*, *Barrow Street*, *Tar River Poetry*, *Sugar House Review*, *Rattle*, *Bellingham Review*, and *Grist*, among others. Her most recent chapbook is *Rubbing Shoulders with the Greats* (Seven Kitchens Press, 2020). For more regarding her online poems, her collections, and her reviews, please visit her website at pelapdx.wixsite.com/devonbalwitpoet.

ROY BENTLEY, a finalist for the Miller Williams prize for *Walking with Eve in the Loved City* (University of Arkansas), is the author of eight books, including *American Loneliness* (Lost Horse, 2019). Poems have appeared in *Crazyhorse*, *The Southern Review*, *Shenandoah*, and *Prairie Schooner*, among others.

L.R. BERGER'S collection of poems, *The Unexpected Aviary*, received the Jane Kenyon Award for Outstanding Book of Poetry. She's been supported by the National Endowment for the Arts, the PEN New England Discovery Award, the New Hampshire State Council on the Arts, and The American Academy in Rome. With Kamal Boullatta, she assisted in the translation from the Arabic of *Beginnings* by Adonis (Pyramid Atlantic Press). She lives and writes in New Hampshire within earshot of the Contoocook River.

PETER BERGQUIST earned a BA in English from Princeton University and an MFA in Creative Writing from Antioch University Los Angeles. His poems have

been published in *Rougarou*, *The Queen City Review*, *The New Verse News*, *A Handful of Dust*, and *Broad River Review*, among others. His poems “Gristle on the Bone,” “The Easy Winter,” “Pulled Over Outside Santa Fe,” “The Memories Always Win” and “The View to Valhalla, British Columbia” were finalists for the latter journal’s Rash Awards. He has published three novels in his Manifest Trilogy: *Where the West Ends*, *A Wild Surmise*, and *Destiny’s End*.

JENN BLAIR’S work has appeared or is forthcoming in the *Appalachian Review*, *South Carolina Review*, *Chattahoochee Review*, *New South*, *Cold Mountain Review*, *Copper Nickel*, *Berkley Poetry Review*, *Atticus Review*, and the *Southampton Review*, among others. Her poetry book *Malcontent* is out from Press Americana and her poetry book *Face Cut Out for Locket* is forthcoming from Brick Road Poetry Press. She currently teaches at Lander University.

JOHN BLAIR has published six books, most recently *Playful Song Called Beautiful* (University of Iowa Press, 2016).

ACE BOGCESS is author of five books of poetry—*Misadventure*, *I Have Lost the Art of Dreaming It So*, *Ultra Deep Field*, *The Prisoners*, and *The Beautiful Girl Whose Wish Was Not Fulfilled*—and the novels *States of Mercy* and *A Song Without a Melody*. His writing has appeared in *Harvard Review*, *Notre Dame Review*, *Mid-American Review*, *Rattle*, *River Styx*, and many other journals. He received a fellowship from the West Virginia Commission on the Arts and spent five years in a West Virginia prison. He lives in Charleston, West Virginia. His sixth collection, *Escape Envy*, is forthcoming from Brick Road Poetry Press in 2021.

KATIE ELLEN BOWERS was raised in Charleston, South Carolina, but is now sowing seeds with her husband and daughter in the small, rural town of Heath Springs, South Carolina.

JOHN BRANTINGHAM is the first poet laureate of Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Park, and his work has been featured in hundreds of magazines and in *Writer’s Almanac* and *The Best Small Fictions 2016*. Brantingham has published 11 books of poetry and fiction, including *Crossing the High Sierra* and *California Continuum: Volume One*. He teaches at Mt. San Antonio College.

NIK BRISTOW might still hold the record for the fastest land-crossing of the contiguous United States in a vehicle not powered by petroleum. But that’s a different story. He is a self-taught—and thus, slow-to-emerge—writer and poet, whose stuff is starting not to suck. He currently resides in Charlotte, North Carolina, with his wife, baby, dogs, and wheels. Bristow can be found online at nikbristow.com and on Twitter @nikbristow.

BETSY BROCKETT lives outside of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, on 12 acres with her husband and their two dogs. On the acreage is their young perennial nursery, Foggy Blossom Farm. Betsy holds a BA in Art & Visual Technology with a concentration in Photography from George Mason University. In addition to creative writing, she pursues conceptual photography and sculpture, as well as all content creation for the farm.

JENNIFER BROWN lives with her partner and a funny-looking dog in North Carolina but is itching for the day when they hit the open road and land in Vermont,

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Alaska, and many points between. She has taught creative writing and literature in high schools, colleges, summer programs, and festivals and has held residencies at the Weymouth Center for the Arts and the Vermont Studio Center. In 2018, she won the Linda Flowers Literary Award from the North Carolina Humanities Council. Her essays and poems have appeared in *North Carolina Literary Review*, *Atticus Review*, *Cagibi*, and are forthcoming in *L.A. Review*, *Copper Nickel*, *Cimarron Review*, and *Cinninnati Review*. Her first poetry collection, *Natural Violence*, is forthcoming from Brick Road Poetry Press in 2021.

NATHANIEL CAIRNEY lives with his family in Belgium, where he writes, cooks and hosts podcasts. Originally from the United States, his poems have been published in *Midwest Review*, *Sixfold*, *California Quarterly* and others. He holds an MA in English Literature from Kansas State University.

BARBARA CALDWELL, originally from upstate New York, grew up on a dairy farm and in a public library. She is a graduate from Cornell University, studied English and Creative Writing at San Francisco State University and later received a Master's in Library Science from the University of Buffalo. She has worked in school and public libraries. She lives with her husband and two children in Toledo, Ohio.

SARAH CAREY is a graduate of the Florida State University creative writing program. Her work has appeared recently or is forthcoming in *Atlanta Review*, *Grist*, *Yemassee*, *Frontier Poetry*, and elsewhere. Her poetry book reviews have appeared or are forthcoming in *EcoTheo*, *Tinderbox Poetry Journal*, and the *Los Angeles Review*. Sarah's poems have been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and the Orison Anthology. Her poetry chapbook, *Accommodations* (2019), received the Concrete Wolf Chapbook Award. She also is the author of another chapbook, *The Heart Contracts* (Finishing Line Press, 2016.) Visit her at SarahKCCarey.com or on Twitter @SayCarey1.

PATTY COLE is poet and essayist who lives in the Piedmont of North Carolina. Her book of poetry, *Away I Sing*, was published in 2015. Her other works have appeared in several journals and anthologies. Her goal as a poet is to write poems that resonate with readers and leave them high.

BARBARA CONRAD is author of three poetry collections: *The Gravity of Color*, *Wild Plums*, and her most recent, *There Is a Field* (2018). She is Editor of *Waiting for Soup*, an anthology from her writing group at a center for folks who count themselves lucky to own a sleeping bag. Her poems have appeared in *Tar River Poetry*, *Atlanta Review*, *Nine Mile*, *North Carolina Literary Review*, *Broad River Review*, and numerous anthologies. Her subjects range from ironic takes on life to hard truths about social injustice—hopefully with a bit of attitude.

ROGER CRAIK is English by birth and educated at British universities, and daily considers himself tremendously fortunate to live in America. His poems have been published in England, Australia, and America, in translation in Bulgaria, Romania, and Belarus, and he has written four full-length books of poetry, of which the most recent is *Down Stranger Roads* (2014). A new book, *In Other Days*, is in press.

JIM DANIELS is the author of many books of poems, including, most recently, *Rowing Inland* and *Street Calligraphy*. His sixth book of fiction, *The Perp Walk*,

was published by Michigan State University Press in 2019, along with the anthology he edited with M.L. Liebler, *RESPECT: The Poetry of Detroit Music*. A native of Detroit, he currently lives in Pittsburgh.

JOHN DAVIS JR. is the author of *Hard Inheritance* (Five Oaks Press, 2016), *Middle Class American Proverb* (Negative Capability Press, 2014), and two other books of poetry. His work has appeared in *Nashville Review*, *The American Journal of Poetry*, *Tampa Review*, and *The Common* online, among many others. He holds an MFA and teaches college English classes in the Tampa Bay area.

STEPHANY L.N. DAVIS lives in Asheville, North Carolina. Her fiction and poetry have appeared or are forthcoming in *Broad River Review*, *The Great Smokies Review*, *The Pisgah Review*, and elsewhere.

MARY CHRISTINE DELEA is a former university professor of English and Creative Writing. She is the author of one full-length poetry collection, three chapbooks, and over 200 journal publications. Originally from Long Island, New York, she now lives in Oregon.

BARBARA DEMARCO-BARRETT'S work has seen print in *Belle Ombre*, *Inlandia*, *Cutbank*, *the Los Angeles Review of Books*, *The Writer*, *The Author's Guild Bulletin*, *Poets & Writers*, and the *Los Angeles Times*. She hosts *Writers on Writing*, a public radio show on KUCI-FM (broadcasting out of UC-Irvine). *Pen on Fire: A Busy Woman's Guide to Igniting the Writer Within* (Harcourt), was a Los Angeles Times bestseller. Demarco-Barrett's story, "Crazy for You," was published in *USA Noir: Best of the Akashic Noir Series*.

TIMOTHY DODD is from Mink Shoals, West Virginia, and is the author of *Fissures, and Other Stories* (Bottom Dog Press, 2019). His stories have appeared in *Yemassee*, *The William & Mary Review*, *Anthology of Appalachian Writers*, and other places. He has placed poetry in *The Literary Review*, *Modern Poetry Quarterly Review*, *Roanoke Review*, and elsewhere. Also a visual artist, Tim's most recent solo exhibition, "Come Here, Nervousness," was held at Art Underground in Manila, Philippines. His oil paintings may be sampled on his Instagram page, @timothydoddartwork, and his writing followed on his "Timothy Dodd, Writer" Facebook page.

HOLLIE DUGAS lives in Louisiana. Her work has been selected to be included in *Barrow Street*, *Reed Magazine*, *Crab Creek Review*, *Pembroke*, *Salamander*, *Poet Lore*, *Watershed Review*, *Whiskey Island*, *Chiron Review*, *Louisiana Literature*, and *CALYX*. Hollie has been a finalist twice for the Peseroff Prize at *Breakwater Review*, Greg Grummer Poetry Prize at *Phoebe*, *Fugue's* Annual Contest, and has received Honorable Mention in *Broad River Review's* Rash Award. Additionally, "A Woman's Confession #5,162" was selected as the winner of *Western Humanities Review* Mountain West Writers' Contest (2017). She is currently a member on the editorial board for *Off the Coast*.

STEPHANIE DUPAL is a Franco-Canadian writer who teaches composition and literature in Virginia. Her work most recently appeared or is forthcoming in *Stonecoast Review*, *Eastern Iowa Review*, *The Northern Virginia Review*, *Maryland Literary Review*, *Broad River Review*, and *Orca, a Literary Journal*. She is the recipient of the 2017 Best Prose Award from TNVR and she was named a finalist

CONTRIBUTORS

for the 2019 Rash Award in Fiction from *Broad River Review*, for the 2019 Sonora Review Essay Contest, and for the 2019 *New Letters* Publication Award in Fiction. Two of her short stories were nominated for the Pushcart Prize. She earned an MFA in fiction from Fairleigh Dickinson University, where she is also an assistant editor for *The Literary Review*. She hopes to publish her novel and short story collection soon.

WENDY J. FOX is the author of *The Seven Stages of Anger and Other Stories* (winner, Press 53 short fiction contest & finalist for the Colorado Book Award), *The Pull of It* (named a top 2016 book by Displaced Nation) and the novel *If the Ice Had Held*, named a Buzzfeed top pick for in 2019. Other work has appeared or is forthcoming in *COG Magazine*, *descant*, *Euphony Journal*, *Green Hills Literary Lantern*, *Hawaii Pacific Review*, *The Madison Review*, *The Missouri Review online*, *OxMag*, *Painted Bride Quarterly*, *Pisgah Review*, *PMS poemmemoirstory*, *The Puritan*, *The Tampa Review*, *Tusculum Review*, *Washington Square Review*, and *ZYZZYVA*, among others.

PATRICIA L. HAMILTON won the Rash Award in Poetry in 2015 and 2017 and has received three Pushcart nominations. *The Distance to Nightfall*, her debut collection, was published by Main Street Rag Publishing in 2014. She is a professor of English in Jackson, Tennessee.

LUKE HANKINS is the author of two poetry collections, *Radiant Obstacles* and *Weak Devotions*, and a collection of essays, *The Work of Creation*. A volume of his translations from the French of Stella Vinitchi Radulescu, *A Cry in the Snow & Other Poems*, was released by Seagull Books in 2019. Hankins is the founder and editor of Orison Books, a non-profit literary press focused on the life of the spirit from a broad and inclusive range of perspectives.

Born Anniston, Alabama, **ROBERT W. HILL** was raised in Charlotte, North Carolina. Hill has taught at many college and universities, with the most recent being Marshall University. He has published poems in *32 Poems*, *Appalachian Journal*, *Ascent*, *Birmingham Poetry Review*, *Broad River Review*, *Cathexis Northwest Press*, *Chants*, *Cold Mountain Review*, *Davidson Miscellany*, *EMRYS Journal*, *Grand Central Review*, *Main Street Rag*, *McNeese Review*, *North Carolina Literary Review*, *Old Red Kimono*, *Phi Kappa Phi Forum*, *Shenandoah*, *South Carolina Review*, *Southern Poetry Review*, *Southern Review*, and elsewhere. Hill co-authored *James Dickey* (Twayne, 1983) with Richard J. Calhoun.

JO ANN HOFFMAN'S publications include a children's book, short fiction and numerous poems in literary journals, including *The Merton Quarterly*, *Pinesong*, *Kakalak*, *Prime Number*, *Flying South*, *Red Clay Review*, *Snapdragon and New Verse News*, among others. She has received contest awards from the Palm Beach Poetry Festival, Carteret Writers and Pamlico Writers. Her non-fiction book, *Angels Wear Black*, recounts the only technology executive kidnapping to occur in California's Silicon Valley. A native of Toledo, Ohio, she and her husband now live in Cary and Beaufort, North Carolina.

PETER KAHN lives in Wisconsin, the land of bucks and whitetail does, where the pinewood grows and the cold beer flows. His photos and poem have appeared in various journals and anthologies across the United States and the United Kingdom.

GARY KEENAN lives in New York City. His book *Rotary Devotion* won the 2016 Poets Out Loud Award and is available from Fordham University Press.

CANDICE KELSEY'S poetry collection *Still I Am Pushing* just released with Finishing Line Press. Her poetry appears in *Poets Reading the News*, *Poet Lore*, and others. She won the 2019 Two Sisters Writing's Contest, received Honorable Mention for *Common Ground Review's* 2019 Poetry Contest, and was nominated for a Pushcart. Currently, she is working with the O, Miami Poetry Festival on an exciting project. Find her at www.candicemkelseypoet.com.

VICTORIA KORTH is the recipient of the 2020 Montreal International Poetry Prize. Poems have recently appeared in *Jelly Bucket*, *LEON*, *Ocean State Review*, *Tar River Poetry*, *Spoon River Poetry Review*, *Barrow Street*, and widely elsewhere. Her chapbook, *Cord Color*, was released from Finishing Line Press in 2015. She is an MFA graduate of the Warren Wilson College Program for Writers and holds an MA in Creative Writing from SUNY Brockport. She lives in Western New York State, where she has a psychiatric practice caring for the chronically mentally ill.

MICHAEL KREGER is a Philadelphia native who attended Temple University, graduating with a degree in English Literature and Philosophy. He has been teaching in public schools for the past thirteen years. Most recently, Michael has been working in leadership development and academic for a charter network in Denver, Colorado. Michael is interested in the intersection of the artificial and the natural and how the incongruent nature of those two powerful forces shape our lives on a daily basis. Currently, Michael is residing in Denver, Colorado, and working on his first manuscript.

STACEY LAWRENCE teaches Poetry at Columbia High School in New Jersey. Her work can be seen in *The Comstock Review*, *Eunoia Review*, *Street Light Press*, and others. Nikki Giovanni says of Stacey's work, "It's so seldom a book of poems can contain both love poems and acceptance of grief. Take Stacey's poems to a couch, curl under your great-grandmother's quilt, and understand love and loss are one."

YVONNE HIGGINS LEACH spent decades balancing a career in communications and public relations, raising a family, and pursuing her love of writing poetry. Her first collection of poems is called *Another Autumn*. Her latest passion is working with shelter dogs. She splits her time living in Vashon and Spokane, Washington. For more information, visit www.yvonnehigginsleach.com.

BETSY LITRELL is a whimsical soccer mom to four boys as well as a writing instructor at San Diego State University, where she received her MFA in Creative Writing. When she's not writing (or when she is), she enjoys a good cup of tea, a glass of rosé and peaceful moments by the beach with a book in hand. Her work has appeared in several journals, and her first full-length collection, *This Woman is Haunted*, comes out in December.

ROBERT McCALL lives in Tryon, North Carolina, and manages the public library in Saluda, North Carolina. He was the 2015 winner of the Sidney Lanier Poetry Prize and gave a poetry reading at the Tryon Fine Arts Center with other past winners. He has been a finalist for the N.C. State Poetry Prize, and the Longleaf Press chapbook prize. He was also a past finalist for the Thomas Wolfe Fiction Prize.

CONTRIBUTORS

KEVIN J. McDANIEL is the author of three chapbooks and a book of poetry, *Rubbernecking* (Main Street Rag Publishing, 2019). His poems have appeared in *California Quarterly*, *Cloudbank*, *Free State Review*, *Ocean State Review*, *The Aureorean*, *Valley Voices: A Literary Review*, and others. He is the founder of *Speckled Trout Review*.

DAVID ALEXANDER McFARLAND is an internationally published writer of short fiction, essays and poetry. His poetry has appeared in *Coe Review*, *Marathon Literary Review*, *Sheila-Na-Gig Online*, and *Cathexis Northwest Press*. He lives in northwestern Illinois where the Mississippi River runs east to west.

JOSHUA McKINNEY'S most recent book of poetry, *Small Sillion* (Parlor Press, 2019), was short-listed for the 2019 Golden Poppy Award. His work has appeared in such journals as *Boulevard*, *Denver Quarterly*, *Kenyon Review*, *New American Writing*, and many others. He is the recipient of The Dorothy Brunsman Poetry Prize, The Dickinson Prize, The Pavement Saw Chapbook Prize, and a Gertrude Stein Award for Innovative Writing. A member of Senkakukan Dojo of Sacramento, California, he has studied Japanese sword arts for over thirty years.

Originally from rural Western Pennsylvania, **NATHAN MILLER** is a non-traditional undergraduate English and Creative Writing student at the University of Iowa, and studies in the Undergraduate Writers' Workshop.

K.G. NEWMAN is a sportswriter who covers the Broncos and Rockies for The Denver Post. His first two collections of poems, *While Dreaming of Diamonds in Wintertime* and *Selfish Never Get Their Own*, are available on Amazon. His third collection is forthcoming from Nasiona Press in November. The Arizona State University alum is on Twitter @KyleNewmanDP and more info and writing can be found at kgnewman.com. He lives in Castle Rock, Colorado, with his wife and two kids.

DOUGLAS NORDFORS is a native of Seattle, and lives in Charlottesville, Virginia. Since 1987, he's been publishing poems in journals such as *The Iowa Review*, *Quarterly West*, *Poetry Northwest*, and *Poet Lore*, and recent work has appeared in *Burnside Review*, *The Louisville Review*, *The Red Wheelbarrow*, *The Write Launch*, *California Quarterly*, *2River*, and others. His three books of poetry are *Auras* (2008), *The Fate Motif* (2013), and *Half-Dreaming* (2020).

Originally from Maplewood, New Jersey, **ILARI PASS** holds a BA in English from Guilford College in Greensboro, North Carolina, and an MA in English with a concentration in literature from Gardner-Webb University. Her accolades include a two-time Editors' Prize in Poetry recipient and a finalist for the 2019 Ron Rash Award in Poetry from the *Broad River Review*, an Honorable Mention in the 2020 Spring Issue of *JuxtaProse Magazine*, an Honorable Mention in the 2020 Tom Howard/John H. Reid Fiction & Essay Contest, the 2020 *Cream City Review* Summer Poetry Contest finalist, and a Runner-up for the 2020 Doug Draime Poetry Award from *The Raw Art Review*. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Brown Sugar Literary*, *Kissing Dynamite*, *Red Fez*, *Unlikely Stories*, *Triggerfish Critical Review*, *Rigorous Magazine*, *The American Journal of Poetry*, *Drunk Monkeys*, *The Drunk Daily*, *Free State Review*, *American Writers Review*, *Common Ground Review*, and others.

BARRY PETERS and his wife, the writer Maureen Sherbondy, live in Durham, North Carolina. He teaches in Raleigh. Publications include *The American*

Journal of Poetry, Best New Poets, New Ohio Review, Poetry East, Rattle, and The Southampton Review.

PAULANN PETERSEN, Oregon Poet Laureate Emerita, has seven full-length books of poetry, most recently *One Small Sun*, from Salmon Poetry in Ireland. Her poems have appeared in many journals, including *Poetry, The New Republic, Prairie Schooner, Willow Springs, Calyx*, and *Poetry Daily* online. A Stegner Fellow at Stanford University, she received the 2006 Holbrook Award from Oregon Literary Arts. In 2013 she was Willamette Writers' Distinguished Northwest Writer. The Latvian composer Eriks Esenvalds chose a poem from her book *The Voluptuary* as the lyric for a choral composition that's now part of the repertoire of the Choir at Trinity College Cambridge.

EUGENE PLATT, an octogenarian, was born in Charleston, South Carolina, a city that tends to engender in writers a strong sense of place and which continues to inform much of his work. After serving in the Army (paratrooper), he earned a BA in political science at the University of South Carolina, an MA in English at Clarion University of Pennsylvania, and a Diploma in Anglo-Irish Literature at Trinity College Dublin. His published collections include *An Original Sin* (Briarpatch Press, Chapel Hill) and *Summer Days with Daughter*. Poems have appeared in *Tar River Poetry, Poet Lore, Crazyhorse, St. Andrew's Review, Poem, South Carolina Review, Southwestern Review, Poetry Ireland Review, Boyne Berries, Icarus, Into the Void, Old Hickory Review, Negative Capability Press*, and some have been choreographed. He has given over 100 public readings of his work at colleges and universities across the nation. He lives in Charleston with his main muses: Montreal-born wife Judith, corgi Henry, and cat Keats.

JAMES RAMSEY is an emerging poet and writer living in Greensboro, North Carolina. This past summer, based on submitted work, he was invited to participate in the online Poet in Residence mentoring program of *Arc Poetry Magazine*. His poetry's inclusion in *Broad River Review* marks his first publication.

CHOYA RANDOLPH is an adjunct professor at Adelphi University with a BA in Mass Communications and an MFA in Creative Writing. Her work has been published in *Rigorous Magazine, midnight & indigo, Her Campus, The Crow's Nest, Haunted Waters Press*, and elsewhere. She is a proud Floridian who lives happily on Long Island in New York.

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.

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CLAIRE SCOTT is an award winning poet who has received multiple Pushcart Prize nominations. Her work has appeared in 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*.

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MATTHEW J. SPIRENG'S 2019 Sinclair Prize-winning book *Good Work* was published in 2020 by Evening Street Press. A 10-time Pushcart Prize nominee, he is the author of two other full-length poetry books, *What Focus Is* and *Out of Body*, winner of the 2004 Bluestem Poetry Award, and five chapbooks.

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CYNTHIA YANCEY was an English major before she became a mother and then a medical doctor. Now, after working 30 years in the trenches of public health, from the Himalayas to the Andes to her downtown clinic in Asheville, North Carolina, she is writing the stories of her life. She has received the Suzanne S. Turner Unsung Heroine Award in 2011, an award for public service. She has written a children's picture book entitled *Zak and Niki: A First Look at Rising above Racism*, published by Grateful Steps in 2015.

MATT YEAGER writes sometimes. Most of the time he does other things, but sometimes he writes things down on paper. Usually other people are not involved. He teaches at Epic Charter School and also English and Humanities at Oklahoma City Community College, which he enjoys with all of his heart beats, not just the spaces between the influx and the outflux. He shares a house with a family, Shino and Ellis and Jude (and Pepper and Mugi and Stella), all of whom do not write. But regardless, Matt Yeager loves you and desires to see you succeed in whatever avenue you have chosen for your living time, before the time where you are no longer living.

JIANQING ZHENG is author of *Enforced Rustication in the Chinese Cultural Revolution* (Texas Review Press) and editor of *Conversations with Dana Gioia*, forthcoming from the University Press of Mississippi in January 2021. His manuscript *A Way of Looking* is winner of the 2019 Gerald Cable Poetry Competition.