2023

Volume 55 (2023)

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C V. Davis

BROAD RIVER REVIEW

Volume 55
2023

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

GARDNER-WEBB
UNIVERSITY

BROAD RIVER REVIEW

ASSOCIATE EDITOR
Ella Knowles

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

Acknowledgements
Cover Photography
"St. Marks Foggy Palms"
Scott Holstein, © 2022

Broad River Review, v. 55, © 2023
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CREATIVE NONFICTION

EDITORS' NOTE

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

Each year, the *Broad River Review* publishes a number of contest winners and select finalists. The Rash Awards in Fiction and Poetry 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 Glenis Redmond and Jen Fawkes, who served as judges for the 2023 Rash Awards in Poetry and Fiction, respectively. Redmond selected "Origin" by Marina Hope Wilson for the poetry award, while Fawkes chose "Egg Timer" by Rebecca Godwin as winner of the fiction award. Congratulations to both winners, who received $500 each and publication in this issue.

Redmond said of Wilson's poem: "Origin" leaves an indelible impression with its brevity and evocative imagery. Through twelve lines arranged in three quatrains, the poem unfurls into a haunting narrative, with each line seamlessly building upon the last. With a masterful economy of words, the poem weaves a palpable origin story that culminates with its striking last line. This poem resonates with a raw and undeniable truth.

Fawkes said of Godwin's story: What impresses me most about "Egg Timer" is the way it illuminates the moment we first sense the fault lines running beneath everything we've been taught to believe in—homeplace, family, love, marriage, duty. Even more devastating, perhaps, is the story's dramatization of the moment we sense the frailty of those we've seen as indestructible—and by extension, our own frailty. Ginnie Lackland—a smart, headstrong girl on the cusp of womanhood—is the perfect narrator for this rich, symphonic meditation on the cruelty, the beauty, the utter indifference of time.

Additional prize winners published in this edition include LaNora Paige McIntyre, winner of the J. Calvin Koonts Poetry Award, which is given to a senior English major or minor at Gardner-Webb University, and Varleine Coq, who won first prize in the Foothills Writing Contest for regional high

school students in Cleveland, Rutherford, Lincoln, and Gaston counties of North Carolina.

We would like to thank all writers who submitted to us or entered our contests. A full list of honorable mentions and finalists for the Rash Awards can be found on our website, broadriverreview.org. Our next contest submission period for the Rash Awards will be February 1–April 15, 2024. Full submission information and guidelines, including profiles of the judges, will appear on our web site in late January 2024. Our next general submission period will be February 1–April 1, 2024.

The staff would also like to thank our cover artist, Scott Holstein, who first appeared on our cover in 2004 as an undergraduate photojournalism student at Gardner-Webb University. Holstein has beeen a professional photographer based in Tallahassee, Floridsa, for 20 years. Samples of his work and business page can be found at scottholsteinphoto.com.

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.

REBECCA GODWIN

Egg Timer

Winner, 2023 Rash Award in Fiction

Nothing ever happens here, Ginnie wrote in her diary, the first morning she woke in the guest room of Aunt Cat's big house on Academy Street. Ever since she'd gotten this blue book with its small silver key from her mother last year, she'd tried to start her mornings teasing sense from whatever had happened the day before. But nothing in Red Hill, as far as she could see, did happen. Or maybe ever would. Since Ginnie's mother had dumped her here day before yesterday, she had an entire week to find out. It stretched before her like an endless desert: Red Hill in August was about the hottest place you could find in the entire state of South Carolina.

Even if it meant putting up with her parents and little sister, she'd rather be in Myrtle Beach, where the family was stationed now. They lived on base, but every chance she got, Ginnie figured out ways to get to the downtown Pavilion—the beach, the rides, and, especially during Easter breaks and summertime, the college boys, the kind who leaned out of balconies and along the backs of convertibles, hollering at girls as they strolled by. Thinking of it now made Ginnie feel zingy, alive.

Maybe she could *make* something happen, even in Red Hill. Today she would go to the Moose Club pool with her cousin Barbara Jane. She would wear the red bikini she'd gotten before they left the base in Germany. Judging by the dazed looks on the McKenzie twins' faces, the suit had been a hit the year before. Red Hill girls wore pastel polka-dot one-pieces that looked just like the ones their mothers wore. Ginnie's bikini was a little small this year, especially up top. Ted Montgomery, last year's lifeguard, had whistled the "Itsy Bitsy Teeny Weeny" song every time she and her sister Hannah—whose pathetic little bumps weren't worth whistling at—showed up at the pool. She hoped Ted would be there this year.

She wanted, suddenly, a cigarette. She thought of asking Aunt Cat could she bum one—that would surprise her! She sighed and wrote in her diary: *Something <u>will</u> happen today*.

But not yet. The ceiling fan spun lazily; outside the window, birds sang in the branches of old oaks. It would be another scorcher, sticky and still. She picked up *Exodus* from her bedside table and began to read.

The Jews were looking for a home. Well, she could relate to that—pillar to post, she'd heard Grandmother Sparks say about the way they never

lived anywhere longer than three years. She didn't agree with much that grandmother had ever said, but that part at least was true.

Ever since she'd read the Leon Uris book, *Mila 18*, Ginnie had felt herself immersed in the Jews' struggle. She was in the ghetto with heroic resisters. She reeled with their pain, their search for the place they belonged. Life was unfair; oh, she knew all about that. She wanted to fight alongside them, yearned to belong utterly to something that mattered. She often imagined changing her name to Leah or Delilah—something Biblical and ancient. Anything but Virginia Lucile.

Who was Ginnie Lackland anyway? Was she the wild girl her father fumed over in his early morning hours, the one busting out all over? The stealthy eavesdropper, her mother's night owl, hoarding the family's secrets like treasures? Or was she the girl her friends knew, who'd take almost any dare, climbing onto the back of a motorcycle behind a boy she'd met on the beach or slugging back Southern Comfort and then sneaking dazed-faced into her bedroom through the window. That's what had landed her at Aunt Cat's. She was, they said, a great disappointment and a bad role model for her younger sister.

Despairing for the world and her place in it, Ginnie wept.

When Aunt Cat knocked and then opened the door without waiting for an answer, she found her niece awash. "Ah, sweetie," she said. "It's not so bad. We gone have us a fine time, you and me." She held her arms out to Ginnie, who couldn't figure out anything to do but fall into them. Her cheek lay against the rose-colored silk of her aunt's peignoir; she had seven identical sets in different colors. For the last two days, she'd worn them till noon.

She stroked Ginnie's hair. "Sometimes life is just *hard*, idn't?"

Aunt Cat was a divorcée. Ginnie liked the sound of that, its whiff of decadence, especially in Red Hill, where it was more often whispered than spoken. She'd heard her mother say Aunt Cat had had to give up committee work at First Presbyterian after she and Uncle Vern split up, even though he still got to be an elder. Aunt Cat had stopped going, which was a relief—church had made Ginnie itchy ever since she'd discovered that she was an atheist, last year, in the middle of reading *Atlas Shrugged*. She never actually spoke the words to the Lord's Prayer now, just mouthed them, preferring instead to study people's faces when they weren't looking.

Looking now at her aunt's face, Ginnie saw shadows under the eyes and in the hollow of cheekbones. Everybody in Red Hill knew what Ginnie'd known practically forever—that Uncle Vern had been stepping out on Aunt Cat for years and had three children by a white trash woman he'd

set up house with. The youngest had been the final straw—a girl they'd named Vernelle. That was just throwing it in her face, Aunt Cat had wailed to Ginnie's mother, the week she'd stayed with them when the breakup happened, almost a year ago. Uncle Vern still paid for Aunt Cat's house and clothes and food. But Uncle Vern couldn't be their friend anymore.

The smell of cigarettes and perfume filled Ginnie's head. Aunt Cat wore only Lanvin—*Laah-vaah*, she called it, squeezing out the syllables through her nose—*from Paris, France*, she would murmur.

"We're gone have us a *time*, sweetie," her aunt repeated. "In fact," she put one finger on her niece's chin and tilted her head up; her eyes, Ginnie saw, shone almost to overflowing. "I have a surprise for you."

Two hours later, Ginnie found herself in a car with Phillip Nettles Brockington, of the Lake City Brockingtons, according to Aunt Cat. Leaning against the car door, she admired his profile. Here's how she might describe him in her diary: sand-colored hair, chiseled cheekbones, full lips. Even better: he was nineteen, a student at Carolina, and taking her to Mingo River for a picnic and swim and, as Aunt Cat had put it, voice rising as she looked from one to the other of them—a chance to get to know each other. This was Cat's surprise.

"Don't you worry about Barbara Jane," she'd said. "I'll speak to her mama. You can see your cousin any time. Phil's only got a few days before he heads back to school." She looked at Ginnie: "I want you to have the chance to meet all kinds of boys, you know? Boys from good families, boys who are stable."

My boyfriend, Phil, is a junior in college, Ginnie imagined writing to Suz Beaufain, her best friend from Germany. The Beaufains had been transferred to Langley that spring, and the two girls kept in touch through sporadic letters. Suz was always going to sophisticated-sounding parties with older kids in Virginia and D.C. Now Ginnie had news of her own. Well, not yet—but she could feel in the pit of her stomach that something might happen today after all.

Aunt Cat waved like a madwoman as they left. Phil looked over at Ginnie. She gave him her best side eye. "How old are you?"

Ginnie hadn't said. "Sixteen." And when his eyebrows rose in surprise, she added, "Almost seventeen," even though it wasn't remotely true. "You got a cigarette I can have?"

"I don't smoke."

"Oh."

He kept his eyes on the road. She moved her gaze along the curve of his jawbone. "What are you studying at Carolina?"

He shrugged. "I guess accounting. My daddy wants me to be a CPA."

"Oh." Ginnie tried to keep the disappointment from her voice. Accounting: Ugh. *Dear Suz*, she would write, *my boyfriend Phil wants to be an astronaut, so he's studying a lot of math. He's a genius*. Ginnie studied the muscles of his arms and let herself imagine golden chest hairs. *Plus, he's soooo built, like a first-class athlete. They're teaching him to chop through a block of steel with one hand*. This she had seen in a James Bond movie. *He looks kind of like Sean Connery, she might add. Every time I say something funny, his lip curls in just that sexy way*.

"You always want the same thing your *daddy* wants?"

Phil looked at her. She gazed back, wide-eyed, letting a little smile show she was teasing.

The car left the road. Righting it, he said, "I reckon, so far." His voice was calm.

"But what do you want to be?"

He turned onto the road leading to Mingo beach. Ginnie knew this place in her bones; her family had spent more Sundays out here than she could count. They passed the artesian well; her mouth remembered its icy stink, disgusting and pleasurable.

Phil parked and swiveled to face her. Oh, he was handsome, she saw, his face serious and intent.

"What I *want* is to be spending my last few days at home with my girlfriend, Mary Louise," he said, voice level. "But my daddy doesn't think her family's fine enough for ours and my mama owes your Aunt Cat a favor, so I'm here with you instead." He smiled tightly: "Okay, little girl?"

Ginnie felt heat rise from neck to face.

"So, no. In answer to your question: I don't always want what my daddy wants."

"Oh," she said.

"Now, ready for a swim?" His voice was business-like, as if he were asking did she need help with her math homework.

The beach wasn't in the least crowded. Only people who weren't Moose Club members, Barbara Jane had told her, swam there anymore. All the town kids went to the pool instead. Ginnie wished she were there with her cousin right now, letting Ted Montgomery admire her growth spurt.

When she peeled off the pique cover-up Aunt Cat had given her, though, she did see a flicker in Phil's eyes. She knew she could pass for eighteen, and had more than once, after changing the birth date on her military ID card from a nine to a seven. She was the designated beer buyer

for her friends, who thought her daring; kids could be arrested for messing with their IDs, they said, and their fathers could be demoted. *Do you have any idea the consequences of your actions, young lady?* was a familiar question in her house. She relished contemplating that particular consequence.

Phil spread the blanket on the bank. Looking out at the river, Ginnie adjusted the bottom of her bikini and sauntered down the bank. When the water reached thigh-high, she arced herself into its browny-green depths.

Surfacing, Ginnie saw with satisfaction that Phil had stayed motionless beside the blanket, observing, she imagined, her every move. The teenaged boys on the far bank were staring too; one gave a wolf-whistle. Ginnie turned to watch Phil slip into the water and swim out to her with easy, confident strokes.

"That's the first time I've seen one of those outside of a magazine," he said. "Your mama know you wear that?" His smile seemed almost reluctant; she liked that.

Her mother hadn't thought twice about it; in Germany, everyone had worn bikinis. "You'd be amazed what my mama doesn't know about me," she said.

"I just bet that's so, little girl." He swam around her lazily.

"I'm not really a little girl, in case you didn't notice."

He said nothing, just back-stroked away, so she could tell he had noticed. He swam to the opposite bank and back, strokes skillful and even. They stood in the water and talked for a while, slipping into an easy banter, amusing each other. Ginnie felt successful, as if she'd maneuvered an awkward social situation in a grownup way.

When they were packing up, Ginnie asked, "So, did we stay long enough to satisfy your daddy?"

His eyes darkened. "You do have a smart mouth, don't you?"

She did, and couldn't help but show it. "I reckon," she fell into the Red Hill pattern of speaking, slow and drawly, "but you won't get the chance to find out, will you."

In the car she left the window down and let the wind dry her hair. When they pulled up in front of Aunt Cat's house, she felt—suddenly—shy and young. "I had a nice time," she said, gathering her things. "Thank you."

He walked her to the door. Aunt Cat came onto the porch and smiled her large smile down at them, as if they were all in on something together. "Y'all done already? How was the pimiento cheese?"

"Very fine, Miss Cat," Phil said.

Ginnie put a foot on the step and turned toward him. "I had a nice time," she repeated. "Really." She grinned hard, daring him not to smile back.

He looked up at her aunt. "Actually, Miss Cat, we thought we might catch a movie at the drive-in tonight. If it's okay with you, of course."

"*Darling* boy!" Aunt Cat crooned. "Course it is." She beamed at Ginnie, who kept her face neutral. "Course it is."

"Didn't I say he was nice, honey?" Aunt Cat's eyes had been unnaturally bright ever since Phil's car had disappeared down the drive. Back at eight, Miss Cat, he'd said, never once speaking to Ginnie after announcing their date.

"Yessum," she said, yawning. "I'm tired."

"Well, we got a little errand to tend to right this minute and then you can nap."

Now they were driving the four blocks to Gramma's house in Aunt Cat's powder-blue Cadillac, all sparkling chrome and butter-cream leather, air-conditioner full throttle. As they went, Ginnie counted off every street sign, porch front, tree trunk, mailbox; she'd walked the narrow roads between Academy and Oak so many times in her life she knew them backwards and forwards. Aunt Cat steered with one hand, the long, lacquered nails of the other drummed the seat in a rat-a-tat. Her bracelets jangled.

Ginnie didn't want to visit her grandmother. She wanted time alone to consider what Phillip Nettles Brockington might be up to, to remember how the sun-spangled river had reflected in his eyes, how his mouth went tight when she teased. She wanted to write in her diary, but what would she say? Her mind was too big a muddle to make stuff up.

Ginnie hadn't seen her grandmother since Christmas, and she dreaded it. The holidays had been hard, the first Christmas since her family had been back in the States, and Uncle Clarence dead just eight months before—her father had flown Space A from Germany for the funeral. *Pickled himself*, she'd heard him tell her mother, when he returned, hitting the wall with his fist: *Goddamn it! Never got over that goddamn war.*

Last Christmas Gramma hadn't poached eggs for Ginnie or sung her to sleep or played Monopoly after supper. Uncle Clarence's little apartment beside the house had stayed silent and empty, and it seemed to Ginnie as if she could feel him in there still, clomping around and sipping whiskey. The empty apartment made her think of those phantom limbs she'd read about—the pain a person could feel in a place that was gone forever. She'd wondered if her uncle had felt that in his missing leg, if her grandmother felt it now, with her oldest boy gone.

After the holidays, she'd heard her parents talking about Gramma's troubles—locking herself out of the house, not recognizing their voices on the phone—and she felt scared about seeing her.

As if she'd read her mind, Aunt Cat said, pulling into the driveway: "If she calls you by some other name, honey, don't contradict her, hear?"

The yard looked the same, full of moss-draped oaks cooling the air, even in this swelter. Ginnie gazed at the side porch, that place she'd dreamed the smell and feel of all her life when her family was stationed far away, the first place she always headed when they returned for holidays and summers. She wanted to make sure that the Chinese checkers game still sat under the Parcheesi board, that the faded ladies' faces on the double-deck of cards hadn't changed, that the daybed pillows still sent up a flurry of dust particles when you plumped your head on them, so you could squint your eyes and watch them sift, silver in the sun and shadow. She wanted everything familiar to stay that way.

"Fixing to have a hard talk with your gramma." Aunt Cat put her arm around Ginnie's shoulder as they sat in the cool, humming car. "I'm the one's got to—her baby girl; she'll hear it best from me, your daddy said." She turned Ginnie's face towards hers. "All you have to do is be sweet, no matter what." Her voice cracked and her eyes grew shiny again, brim-full. "Can you do that for me? For Gramma?"

Ginnie nodded, feeling a knot in her belly.

Inside, the house was dark and cool, as always. But her grandmother wasn't at the door to greet them. That was the first strange thing. The smell in the house was the next: unfresh, it seemed to Ginnie.

"Mama?" Aunt Cat was moving towards the hall. "Mama?" She turned the corner into the bedroom. Ginnie, at her heels, stopped short when she saw her grandmother lying stone-still in the bed. Was she dead?

"Mama?" Cat sat on the bed, stroked her mother's shoulder. "Having a catnap?"

Her grandmother stirred—only asleep, of course! Ginnie went weak-kneed with relief. Short-lived: Her gramma's eyes shot open and a scream pierced the room, thin and high. She began scrabbling to pull the covers over her head, writhing away from Aunt Cat. "Nooooo!" she howled, keening, "Nononononono!"

Aunt Cat gathered up Ginnie's grandmother in a hug, whispering, "Hush, now, Mama, just hush." Ginnie couldn't move or speak. What she wanted to do was run, far and fast as she could. Instead she froze, looking at the old woman in her Gramma's bed—frail and wild-headed, veins stark-blue on hands that clutched at Aunt Cat's arms. One thin breast swung long and low, exposed.

"Oh, Catherine," she cried, her voice plaintive as a child's. "I thought—I was just—dreaming?" She shuddered, then saw Ginnie for the

first time. She smoothed the hair back from her face and gave a small smile. "Why, we have company, dear," she said, gathering her gown around her. "People are arriving for the wedding, aren't they?" She looked harder at Ginnie. "Are you one of those Sparks girls, honey?" She turned to Aunt Cat. "Do offer this child some tea, dear. Look at that face! Traveling's worn her down."

She held out her hand to Ginnie, studying her with vague, kind eyes. "Have you come from far off, honey?"

Ginnie felt Aunt Cat's eyes on her. "Yessum," she mumbled.

"Mama!" fluttered Aunt Cat, pushing Ginnie forward. Her voice was high and crackly. "You know who this is—your granddaughter, Virginia Lucile, named your same name. Jake and Grace's middle girl?" She pressed on Ginnie's shoulders to make her sit instead of hovering like an open-mouthed idiot.

"Your granddaughter, Mama. It's Ginnie."

Ginnie's grandmother looked intently at her, then at up Cat, raising her eyebrows. "What in this world are you talking about, Catherine? Your brother just has the one girl—what's her name?"

"Kari?" offered Ginnie, and her grandmother squeezed her hand, saying gratefully, "Dear child, yes. You know her then?"

Ginnie had tried to banish her older sister from her mind altogether since Kari had deserted them for her new German husband. One evening, a week before they'd been scheduled to leave Wiesbaden for the States, she'd come waltzing in with him by her side. "This is Dieter," she'd announced to the whole family, gathered at the dinner table. "We're married." He had cast a sheepish smile around the room. He had gray flecks in his hair; he looked about forty. It was maybe the first time Ginnie had ever seen her father speechless. Her mother had wept for weeks. Ginnie had told Hannah not to waste her time crying—let Kari have her old German guy; they could have their own rooms now, at their new base housing in Myrtle Beach.

But it was a funny thing how, just now, speaking her sister's name and hearing it repeated by her grandmother made Ginnie's breath come short; she felt pain like a knife in her side.

Her grandmother squeezed her hand again, determinedly not looking at Cat. She surveyed Ginnie's shorts and sleeveless shirt. Her brow wrinkled. "Do you need a place to change before the ceremony, dear?"

"Mama," said Cat. "There is no ceremony. And we need to talk about something."

"Well, I suppose we do, in that case!" Her grandmother rolled her eyes at Ginnie, as if to suggest, Isn't my daughter silly? "If you're not

getting married today, Catherine, then I'd like to know who is marrying that handsome fiancé of yours!" She laughed faintly, winked at Ginnie. "Some other lucky girl?"

At that, Aunt Cat flung herself on the bed beside her mother, wailing, "You wouldn't come live with me, Mama, and I couldn't move back in here, could I? You wouldn't let anybody *help*, Mama." She had covered her face with the pillow so that her next words came out muffled, as if from a great distance. "And now it's come to this. You're too far gone, Doc Mac says. Somebody's got to take care of you, don't you get that?"

Passing through the kitchen as they left, Ginnie saw how dilapidated it was: unused, like the rest of the house. But on the little painted shelf above the stove she saw the wooden egg timer Gramma had used when she made poached eggs in the mornings, just for Ginnie. My early riser, she called her. The hourglass had transfixed Ginnie; she remembered holding her breath as the sand flowed slowly, then all in a rush: disappearing faster and faster. Time was almost up! Her chest would ache, her eyes tear. And then it was *done*! Ginnie could eat her eggs, dipping strips of toast into golden yolks. For years she'd dreamt hourglass dreams. Now she turned away and followed Aunt Cat out the back door.

Later, getting ready for her date, Ginnie remembered her aunt's face in the car on the way back to Academy Street—still splotchy, hands shaky, voice hoarse. "The Presbyterian Home's nice, honey, she'll be happier. It's the right thing, best for her."

She remembered, too, the way her grandmother had reached for Aunt Cat there on the bed, smoothing her hair back from her temples and rocking back and forth. "Shhh, baby," she crooned, "It'll be all right. Tell your mama. Let it all out." And how, instead of telling what she had come for, Aunt Cat had poured forth the story of Uncle Vern and that trashy woman, how Cat still loved him in spite of it—Gramma stroking her hair the whole time, whispering, "Shhh, shhh," till she'd shushed her own self to sleep. They'd left her there, Aunt Cat saying the details could wait till tomorrow, didn't Ginnie reckon?

Ginnie couldn't reckon much of anything—as she layered on mascara, lacquered up her hair, glossed her pouty lips—least of all her grandmother gone, the house a phantom limb for them all to feel the loss of, the rest of their days.

"You're awful quiet," Phil remarked, five silent minutes after leaving Aunt Cat's driveway. In the darkening light, Ginnie could only make out the contours and shadows of his face. "Are you surprised I showed up?"

A spurt of anger heated her, for no good reason. "Why did you?" she said, her voice harsh. "Miss Mary Louise have other plans?"

He pulled to the side of the road and turned to her. "What is with you, Ginnie Lackland?" In the dimness, he looked older, unfamiliar. She had no idea, she realized, who he was. "Is rudeness your idea of a good time?"

"No," she said, in a small voice. "Sorry."

They drove the rest of the way in silence. Ginnie couldn't rouse herself from the afternoon at Gramma's, from Aunt Cat's gin-and-tonics downed in quick succession as soon as they'd gotten back, from her bitter breath as she'd leaned in to murmur, with a sloppy smile, "Y'all have fun, hear? Don't be too late."

Since it was a weeknight, the drive-in wasn't crowded. Phil eased them into the center of the back row. They got popcorn and Cokes from the concession stand. They'd watched the previews before Ginnie even noticed what the movie was: *Dr. Strangelove*, the title said, and then something about the atom bomb.

"Never heard of this," she said. "What is it?"

"Ah! She speaks!"

She grimaced. "Sorry. Again."

"I don't know much about it," he said. "Came out a couple years ago, just like everything else we get here. It's a satire, Peter Sellers. Supposed to be pretty funny."

"I could use a laugh," Ginnie leaned against the seat, trying to relax. Mosquitoes whined. Phil lit the citronella candle and the smell of burnt lemon filled the car. There was hardly a breeze to stir it. Under her thin sundress, sweat slicked her thighs.

She liked the silly opening scene but lost interest after the credits, when it was all cockpits and bombers and men in uniform: the U.S. Air Force, in action. That was her life—who wanted to see it on the big screen?

"War-wah," she said, in her best Red Hill drawl. She shifted towards Phil, smiling for the first time all night. "Who gives a good goddamn about that?"

He stared at her, the light from the screen flickering against his face. "I don't, at the moment," he answered, leaning across the seat to kiss her swiftly, with authority. *He kisses like a man*—she pictured the words on the lined page of her diary, in a letter to Suz—but then words went away and there was only the slow, insistent savor of his mouth.

They watched the end of the movie from the back seat, the citronella candle smoking up the screen, the scratchy sound of the movie coming to Ginnie as from a great distance. She had no idea what had happened

between those Air Force men at the beginning and this crazy cowboy astride a bomb; she could make no sense of it. Was it funny? Should she laugh or say something smart to Phil, silent and spent beside her? Before she could, the mushroom clouds arose, one after another filling the windshield before them, terrifying and beautiful.

For a good, long while after the screen went dark, neither of them spoke. Then Phil said, "You are a surprising girl," and Ginnie said, "Thank you," even though she didn't know if it was a compliment. She wanted to thank him anyway, for how he had made her feel: open and lazy, humming with languor and a strange, new kind of longing. He offered her a tissue and cleaned himself off briskly, efficiently.

Phil was a surprising man, too. He would have made a good accountant, she would think later, remembering that night in the sticky dark, his breath against her skin—"oh, little girl, oh"—his hands sure on her, rhythms expertly calibrated. He would have made a good husband for Miss Mary Louise Harrelson, a fine father to their children, a pillar, maybe, of his community and his church, but always with this other, hidden side: the secret knowing of how to make a girl hum—a knowing that would die with him in a flash of light and fury two years later, on a hot Da Nang night.

Aunt Cat's house glimmered in the streetlamp's glow. Ginnie stood in front of it after Phil had driven away. The lights were out; her aunt was likely sleeping off a gin-and-tonic haze, swaddled in hot pink or lemon-yellow silk, smelling of Lanvin. Was she dreaming of herself as another, full-of-promise girl—a girl with a flair for design, with a handsome husband and a mama down the street who could take care of things that went wrong?

All of Red Hill, it seemed to Ginnie, slept, and along with it the whole history of her family: Grandmother Sparks with her columned house and red plush carpet, her simmering self-righteousness; abandoned Aunt Cat and philandering Uncle Vern; the shadows of her mother and father, young and in desperate love, running away and not looking back; her dead Uncle Clarence before the war, handsome and whole; the grandfathers, gone before she ever knew them.

Her Gramma.

Ginnie began to walk—down Academy, across Second and Third, to Oak. She had nothing in her mind, only familiar ground falling away beneath her feet.

That night she did not wake her grandmother, as she had perhaps intended: Remember me! she might have cried, shaking sense back into her. Instead, Ginnie stole into the silent house by the back door, slid her hand

across the shelf above the stove, and slipped the worn wooden hourglass into her pocket. She couldn't really make things happen, she saw, any more than she could stop them from happening; they would keep their own time, shifting faster than she could imagine.

MARINA HOPE WILSON

Origin

Winner, 2023 Rash Award in Poetry

I am the three-inch gap
between the floorboard and the wall,
sag-mouthed wound
near the claw foot tub, port of entry and night's

fissure, crack
through which rats and slugs scurry and slip,
making children's toes curl.
Dark space and cold air,

I am the hole
you pretend is only shadow, the sliver
that tells you, again and again,
what being poor means.

LaNORA PAIGE McINTYRE

Winter Shopping

Winner, 2023 J. Calvin Koonts Poetry Award

We have entered another retail store searching for winter clothes,
nothing passing my mother's approval so far
as she inspects every item.

She grabs my hand, pulling me along,
as she kicks under the racks to find my brother
who is hiding beneath colorful jackets.

The chore is made fun, watching him peep at my mother
from between the sleeves. I try not to laugh
as she measures a sweater against me.

I can tell the search is important to her,
an essential mission to clothe her wild children
in preparation for upcoming winter storms.

How beautiful it is to see my mother at work,
pulling hangers off the racks, examining the clothing
that will protect us in the ways she cannot.

How beautiful it is to feel my mother's love
through the death-grip she has on my tricep
as we move to yet another rack.

VARLEINE COQ

Woes of a Lost Jersey Girl

Winner, 2023 Foothills Writing Contest

Belle was wrong—
home isn't where the heart is.
It's far, far away from there,

far, far away from here.
Home is the bass of the merengue playing in the streets
from the never ending festival of life at Auntie Magdalia's house.

Down the street from Magdalia's,
home is the rusting gold bell in Auntie Mala's kitchen
which doubles as our feeding bell, cannons on a ship, a bomb inside a well.
Or just a bell.

A doorbell rings.
Hey hun I'm—
Home is the scent of cigarettes outside on the Volpe's porch
after Aunt Cat kept telling Phil to quit.
He didn't.

I didn't realize that
home is the smell of jollof in the giant gray pot at Auntie Sylvie's house
that roamed around the house
taunting and teasing us to the table.

It sticks its tongue out and stares.
Home is the blunt looks and Snookie-filled phrases
heard outside
get out of town, you guys are hysterical, what are ya starin' at.

Random nights filled with strangers
whose morals are a mystery.
But it's not with me—

not anymore.
Home was lost in the textbooks, typing, and teaching,
buried in the grave with the truth—
my truth—
and I can't find my way home.

IDA MARIE BECK

Matins

I wake to hear a robin draw
the curtain on the night.

Sunlight slants a window
on our sheet, but you

are still asleep, your arm
flung wide toward me.

Anything goes! it says,
inviting me into your dreams.

How smooth that hand,
sweet as pines

at dusk, a hint of musk
in the finish.

You, my love, are not
privy to this moment

—so where do I
direct my thanks?

LAWRENCE ERNEST BRIDGES

Watching TV

A little unbelievable that the roommates
would show up in Geneva for the shootout.
Altogether impossible to wake up
and find we're not there, or here,
wherever we are on this day, free of troubles.
I creep through my ailments and memories
waiting for dawn and honesty to thunder in
the plan for the day, cashing wincing values
or the opposite, paying up. Green bananas.
It's hard to lose fruit, automatically, to sunlight.
Grow old, time, would you? Speak
your wisdom before we run out
to exercise against our demons.
I've aged to a point that all I think about
is starting over again with you
under blankets after dinner, watching TV.

ANNE BUCEY

Canebrake

Jane Brown, Woodlawn, 1850

No moon for seeing, all shadow,
dim moving. Wade the creek to the other side. Night birds call
a whirl-a-gig song, sing the name
given them—whip por will, whip por will—not stopping, like her breath,
push, push, pushing to carry herself, big with Jonas
dropping inside. William stole her out for birthing—
You'll be nobody's gal but mine.

They make a cave of cane break, roof with sky, trees eating
at its sides. Seems the world
is theirs. But the hurt keeps coming. And after one there's
two. He cuts the ropes, lays those babies slippery on her chest—
hunk of cheese, warm in her arms, two mouths
at her breasts. Still the crying. But that peace
won't last long with what comes up above them. Long, black,
hunkered down, the haint-like shine
of yellow eyes on a log. Her man quick
and catlike too—moves smooth and quiet, puts a bowie knife
to panther throat.

They keep coming in twos—three pairs out of ten—and born
in the quarters now, where the old man counts them
with his own two eyes, puts names
in a book. And he says

she won't go to the fields.

ALEXANDRA BURACK

The Eighth Child

Do you know how many babies
we're standing on?
asked auntie-by-marriage who never

invited us to her house. Distanter
relatives tramped the sod
basement, picking past

implements of farmers' lives:
oak-handled scythes with rusted
smiles, bowed legs of ice

tongs, stacked against the wall
like dormant spiders. And lone
behind a horse-hair mattress hollowed

through by rats, the hand-
carved churn, its warped
pestle angled toward the floor

like the nanas who reeled
cream to gold in a race
with the ascendant sun,

the plop of wooden paddle against
butter, the crack of the axe
on the woodpile, the seventh slam

of the outhouse door in a dark
that is neither twilight nor dawn.
Then, a new quiet from the cradle

where the eighth child used to sleep,
swaddled, near the woodstove.
Just enough to go around this morning

we were told great-grandmother yelled,
climbing up from the cellar, dusting
off her hands on her apron.

GILBERT ALLEN

God's Second Chance

Folks usually get handed *God's Second Chance* at 30,000 feet. Our 4D business card comes with every complimentary mini-bottle on charter flights to the Caribbean. The lovebirds see our name and toll-free number on one side and our logo on the other—a silver-haired Mr. Universe extending his index finger to a dingy Cinderella. And when they tilt the card to get a better look, she cleans up real good, as we like to say in South Carolina. After a few giggles, they slip it into their carry-on bag as a souvenir. They get to Grand Cayman or St. Maarten or Antigua, frown at themselves in their bathing suits, and check out our website.

An Artist's Colony Where the Canvas Is You.

They study the Before and After photos, and they start thinking *Why not?* Then they talk mommy makeovers or Botox or breast augmentations during a week full of hot tubs and Happy Hours, and they give us a call when they get back to the States. Maybe two percent actually make the pilgrimage to our clinic on Hilton Head Island. They're pleasantly surprised. It's not a hospital or a medical park. From the main drag, it looks just like the other boutique resorts—pastel stucco with big one-way tinted windows, surrounded by palmettos and oleander and St. Augustine grass. And a privacy fence to keep out any curious alligators.

Back in the day, only women came looking for what they called *work*, and what we call *re-creation*. The guys tagged along for emotional support, and maybe a few rounds of golf while their ladies were out of commission. In the new millennium it's nearly a 50-50 split. So when Ted and Leah Dickey walked into my office and took off their big sunglasses, the first thing I wondered was Who wanted What.

Both of them looked about the same age—too old to dream about singing on American Savior, and a bit too young for a major midlife crisis. I figured their goals would involve something I could do in my sleep.

Despite her corrugated forehead and his graying temples, they had *Just Married* written all over them. Holding hands, eyes locked on each other like tractor beams. Matching windbreakers. So I was able to aim my first question at both of them in the same breath. "What exactly do you folks have in mind?"

Now the husband focused on me. "She'd like to look like Jessica Arrington."

I don't keep up with pop culture, but my whole staff had been watching the final season of *Sidekicks* and talking about the principal actors over tummy tucks for what seemed like forever. "I see." At God's Second Chance, we don't judge. If we did, we'd be out of business.

"And I want to look like Chad Smith."

My expression must have said something that didn't get lost in translation.

"Relax, Dr. Toomey. I'm joking. About me."

Well, that was a relief. The woman dropped her husband's hand so she could pull her long blond hair to the sides of her face, baring it for my inspection. "Am I crazy?"

I walked her over to my examination chair and turned on the high intensity light. While she was sitting down, her husband slipped me a portfolio of glossy JAs from various angles, at various times throughout the ten-year run of her TV series. The two of them didn't dream this up while they were driving over the Karl Bowers Bridge—they'd done a lot of research. I could see that, surgically speaking, the *Sidekicks* "nice girl" wasn't a virgin. Far from it. I'd never looked at her closely before.

Now I directed my attention to Mrs. Dickey. "Well, it's doable," I said. "The basic contours of your faces are similar. But for about half as much re-creation, you could pass for the new judge on *American Savior*." That country singer's face wasn't my doing, but she'd flown here from Nashville for a Brazilian Butt Lift before she'd auditioned for Peter Simon.

"I could live with that," the husband deadpanned.

"I'm not doing this for you, Ted." She was staring down at the hardwood floor. "I'm doing this for me."

"I know," he said.

She sniffled. "He loves me the way I am."

Something was going on here beyond my area of expertise. "Let's take it from the top," I said. I tilted her face upward toward the exam light. "You'd need some electrolysis to make your forehead a little higher. A full facelift, with an incision from your new hairline to your lower scalp, behind your ear. To take care of those worry lines. Small implants for your cheeks and chin. Some laser freckle removal." I was saving the worst news for last. "And a radical rhinoplasty."

"What would that involve?" she said.

"Breaking your nose, then putting it back together. To provide more definition for your nasal tip."

"Can you do it?"

Her expression was one I see pretty often—fear and self-loathing, leavened with hope. "Yes. You could pass for her sister. But don't rush into

this. Think about what you'd be putting yourself through." Then I explained how she'd look just as good, for a lot less pain and effort and recovery time, if she simply readjusted her goal. "Why Jessica Arrington? Why not your own best self?"

She smiled, tears streaming down her cheeks, past the corners of her mouth. "When I look in the mirror, I want to see a good person."

Her husband held his hand to his eyebrows, like he had the world's worst headache. "It's complicated."

At this point I figured I should be talking to him. "She'd need several procedures, and they shouldn't be done all at once. We'd have to book her into a recovery suite for at least a couple weeks. Maybe a month. We're talking $200,000 dollars here. That's the ballpark estimate."

"Okay." Clearly the husband had given up on fighting this a long time ago. "Who books the suites?"

"Nurse Fuller. The woman you met on your way in."

He pecked his wife on the lips. "I'll see you outside, honey. After Dr. Toomey and I discuss the numbers."

When just the two of us were in the room, he said, "Whatever it costs, I'll pay it."

I never lowball. I always guesstimate a bit high—to discourage the dubious and account for the collateral expenses of the truly committed. "$200,000 should fully cover her care. Along with your companion suite. Off site. We work with several different resorts."

"Let's make it 250. Just to make sure."

When he handed me the check, I knew Ted Dickey was accustomed to paying for whatever he wanted, and getting whatever he paid for. Then he told me he was perfectly willing to spend ten times that amount on lawyers, if anything went wrong. "With instructions to make your life as miserable as possible."

I have an airtight consent form all my surgical patients sign before I ever pick up a scalpel. So litigation doesn't scare me. Not in the least. But I got into cosmetic surgery to do right by people—not to fat shame or railroad them or rip them off. I discourage almost as many procedures as I perform, and this one was borderline at best. "Extreme makeovers always carry a certain risk. Your wife is already a very attractive woman, Mr. Dickey. She doesn't need anything more than a little Botox and some collagen injections. Why in the world does she want to do this?"

He stared at me strangely. "You don't get out much, do you?"

I told him God's Second Chance kept me pretty busy. "My practice is built around personal care. Patients expect to see me every day. And to be available for emergencies. I like my work, and I'm very good at it."

He pointed to my computer. "Do you have an Internet connection?

"Of course."

"Put *Leah Medisian* into your search engine."

He spelled the name for me, and I wrote it down. I told him sure, just as soon as I had the chance, but I had patients to attend to. He said he could understand that. Then he stood up to join his wife at the scheduling desk in the lobby.

* * *

I didn't get to my computer until that evening. I spent the rest of the afternoon visiting the Recovery Suites—in our main building, across from the koi pond. The scalp reduction from two days ago needed his pressure dressings removed, and I had to make sure he'd stopped bleeding. And that his sleeping recliner was still locked in the right position. Different procedures demand different settings. Moving hair is maybe one step beyond meatball surgery, but post-op is another matter. Patients can't lie down horizontally for the first week, or their eye sockets swell up like stewed tomatoes. And they'll pull out the new grafts in their sleep unless they're wearing the special Hands Off robe we give them—the one with the side pockets and Velcro straps.

This guy was a color commentator for college basketball, and he'd scheduled his procedure for right after March Madness. He wanted to say goodbye to his hairpiece next season. Like most on-camera guys, he did exactly what he was told—he was taking his prophylactic Cipro and Medrol, as prescribed—and he seemed perfectly happy watching ESPN all day. He probably paid more attention to the announcers than to the games, picking up some new catch phrases. No cabin fever, at least not yet, but he wouldn't be restaurant-ready for quite a while. For the time being, he looked like an Iroquois who'd tried to scalp himself. Those Hair Club franchises grossly underestimate the down time—I tell guys that going in—but most of them don't hear me. The women are usually much better at listening.

But not my 360 body lift—a twenty-something down the hall. She was a week out from her procedure, and she swore to me and Nurse Fuller she'd been wearing her compression garment 24-7. I'd been suspicious for the last three days of my post-op visits, but I hadn't been certain. Now I was. She was a damn good liar, and it was definitely time for some tough love.

I told her she was heading straight for a seroma, and I'd have to put four drains in her back if she didn't get her act together.

"But it's so uncomfortable, Dr. Toomey." She was fanning herself with a fashion magazine, even though it was only April, and the AC was cranked down to 68 degrees.

"I know it's hard." Nurse Fuller held her free hand in a motherly fashion, while I gave the top of her head a fatherly pat. "If you promise to wear it, I'll put you on Percocet." Never underestimate the power of good drugs. "Here's enough to get you through tonight."

By the time I'd checked the OR schedule for tomorrow and returned to my office, Nurse Fuller and the rest of the girls had gone home for the day. After I ordered some takeout from Barnacle Grills, I finally sat down with my laptop and Googled *Leah Medisian*.

More stories popped up than I'd ever want to read, but evidently most of America didn't think so. Inquiring minds wanted to know. Three years ago, Leah Medisian had decided to put her own daughter out of her misery. From the pictures, the little girl looked maybe eighteen months old. Jackie's leukemia had spread to her bones, so she'd been in constant pain—but the father had refused to authorize any further medical intervention. He'd convinced himself he could cure her through prayer. One Sunday morning, while he was speaking in tongues with his fellow believers, Leah had slipped some opiates into her daughter's applesauce. When the whimpering stopped, she turned herself in to the police.

She pled guilty, and the judge gave her a symbolic sentence—he felt sorry for her, but he didn't want to make euthanasia the new normal in Charleston, South Carolina. The husband divorced her while she was in prison, serving her six months, and then he went on the talk show circuit.

The mainstream press stuck pretty much to the facts, in Local News sidebars. But the tabloids splashed her picture all over their front pages every couple of weeks, with all-caps headlines like MORPHINE MOMMY and BABY KILLER and SLAMMER! But the one that really stuck was LEAH THE MEDEA. You could see from the old photos she'd been growing her hair out and staining it ever since her release two years ago. And, judging from the dates on the stories, the paparazzi were still looking for her, with limited success. MEDEA MYSTERY! LEAH SPEED DATING?? BABY JACKIE CRIES IN HEAVEN!

When I look in the mirror, I want to see a good person. So she didn't want to be recognized, even by herself. Fair enough. Although I couldn't be certain, I'd always suspected that one of my first Extreme Makeovers had been a gangbanger looking for a fresh start. But as I've always said, at God's Second Chance we don't judge.

* * *

I did her rhinoplasty first, because it was the most involved, and because it would require the most healing time. The face lift and the implants

came next. They took longer, but they were less delicate than the nose job. "You might bleed a little bit through the gauze pads," I said. "Entirely normal."

"Bleed is good," she muttered. The bandages around her new nose made her sound like she had a bad cold. "That's something my husband would say. He's very clever. His pen name is Peter H. Dees."

She didn't want to talk about herself, and my techs and I didn't push it. Leah knew she was the elephant in the room, and all of us had figured out exactly who she was. Nurse Fuller—Chatty Kathy, we call her—for once didn't know what to say. With the moms, she usually trades stories about how Kids Do The Darndest Things. She has a son and three daughters, all in college now, despite their misdemeanor joyrides and binge drinking.

So, to fill the silence, I started rambling on about stuff I hadn't thought about in years. I told Leah I'd been the center on my college football team, but I'd never had any delusions about playing pro ball. I made Academic All American, but I wasn't as big or strong or fast as most of the other guys at my position. I was smarter, but smarter didn't get you to the NFL. Pro scouts look mainly for the stuff you can't teach. I could've tried my luck in Canada, but I figured I was better off in med school. At the time I thought I wanted to become a thoracic surgeon. But when I was a first-year resident, my supervising physician—a little weasel who must have been whirlied by a linebacker in his previous life—did everything he could to embarrass me. *Who gave you that white coat? Shouldn't you be selling ice cream? Are you sure you aren't a patient?* When I misdiagnosed an aortic aneurysm during rounds, he snorted and said, "With a name like Tucker Toomey, you'd be better off in plastics. At least you won't kill anybody."

Everybody laughed. Except me.

But it turned out the plastics guy in the hospital had been a quarterback in high school. Still a big football fan. When I sought him out, he said, "I can mentor a center. Snappers always have good hands." He was tough as hell, but he'd always say we were on the same team, and he meant it. I told Leah he made me see that helping people like their own bodies was just as important as fixing their hearts or their hernias. "Being healthy is important, sure, but it's just a means to an end. What's the point of being healthy if you're miserable?"

She nodded until I had to ask her to hold still for the next implant.

I saved her freckles and her hairline adjustment for the following week. After the third procedure, her husband asked me if he could move into her Recovery Suite. He'd been staying at a top-end B&B, at his own expense, and stopping by every morning to visit her, while I was busy with

new surgeries. I told Ted—we were on a first-name basis now—that his overnight presence would be counterproductive for a while.

"Why?"

You wouldn't believe some of the things I've seen happen in post-op. I've had a wife break her husband's new nose between her legs. I've had a guy get down on a labiaplasty and tear it to shreds. Saline implants squeezed out through their armpit incisions. "Well, some activities could compromise the results of her surgery. We don't want any accidents, Ted. Do you play golf?"

He told me he didn't.

"Too bad. I could get you some tee times at Harbour Town." When he said he wouldn't mind working on his tennis, I suggested the Vandaway Academy. It was only a couple of blocks away. "A lot of pros train there, but Rick and Molly Vandaway are terrific with social players, too. And Heather could help you with something more advanced, if you're interested. The first lesson's free, as part of your Recovery Package. Just tell her you were referred by Dr. Toomey."

* * *

I used to know Heather pretty well. She was, as they say, a piece of work. After she'd retired from the WTA Tour—she'd been a marginal player, never quite cracking the top hundred—she discovered that teaching pros needed a different skill set to maximize their earning potential. "I want to look more *fuckable*," she told me during her initial consultation.

No one ever accused Heather of not being candid.

I did some chemical peels to reverse two decades of sun damage, on an outpatient basis. She seemed pleased with the results. We had a few tennis dates—I'm not a bad player, advanced intermediate with a big forehand—but I couldn't keep up with her. She didn't give me any points, either, but I was okay with that. I have no illusions about my athletic abilities. It was good exercise. One evening, she invited me to her oceanfront condo for dinner with benefits. My wife had just left me, for one of my female patients. I'm not a monk. I said sure.

If Heather wasn't fuckable, it wasn't for lack of trying.

The next morning, she ordered in a Full American Breakfast for both of us, and we made a deal. She'd already seen the wicker basket of silicone bags at God's Second Chance, and she'd decided on the 200 cc. "Good choice," I said. "Substantial. But not flamboyant." To pay for her procedure, she agreed to provide Pro Challenges for any surgical companions I'd send to the Vandaway Academy. "The tennis is free," she'd added. "Everything else is negotiable."

"Fine," I told her. "What you do is your own business."

After her boob job she looked like a million bucks, and I made a point of not seeing her again, except on a professional basis. It was the best thing for both of us. Getting involved with your subcontractors is never a good idea.

* * *

Leah had cable TV in her Recovery Suite, but she asked for a VCR/DVD player so she could watch her home movies. After her daughter's diagnosis, she'd made a recording every day, to document Jackie's condition. Her husband, Mike, did most of the filming, but he hardly said a word, and he never appeared on camera. He seemed willing and able to construct what would become an electronic scourge for his wife's future use.

I do surgeries in the mornings, and follow-up care in the afternoons. Whenever I'd come to check on Leah, she'd be in her recliner, face swaddled in bandages, watching her former self change, feed, fondle, and sing lullabies to a child who couldn't stop screaming. She'd just sit there, fingering the JACKIE bracelet on her wrist like a rosary.

"You're doing great," I told her. "Ted won't recognize you."

"I'm not worried about Ted."

I was. His morning visits to Leah had become shorter and less frequent. He'd become very serious about his tennis, and he'd been spending a lot of time at the Vandaway Academy.

But maybe he was just giving her some space. This morning, Leah had brought her breakfast down to the lobby, to chat with the other female patients. In her bandages, she could go incognito. It's funny how men and women respond differently during recovery. The guys all want to cocoon. They don't want anyone seeing them until they're entirely healed, and their surgery blends into their New Year's workout resolution and their vacation tan and their fabulous haircut. Most of the women, though, like to get together while they're still in bandages, telling each other how natural they're going to look in the near future.

Natural is a strange word in cosmetic surgery. It means everything and nothing, at the same time. During the initial consultation almost every patient tells me, "I want to look natural, Dr. Toomey. Completely natural." And I'm thinking, *Then why are you in my office?* For that matter, if they wanted to look natural, they wouldn't be cutting their hair, or painting their fingernails, or wearing their clothes, designer or otherwise. Nobody wants to look completely natural, but they don't want to look like they've been seeing somebody like me, either. No. They want everybody to stare at them and think *God really got it right on this one. Why haven't I noticed before?* Like

the theme song from *Sidekicks* says: *Where nobody knows what you've done*. Unless a board-certified expert is studying you under a high-intensity lamp.

* * *

I don't put mirrors in the Recovery Suites unless a patient asks for them. Leah didn't. Generally I keep the Extreme Makeovers bandaged for longer than medically necessary—just to be on the safe side, and to keep them from getting discouraged. I change their dressings every day and monitor their progress. And when I decide they're ready to see themselves, I do the unveiling with their significant other in the room. I call it The Butterfly Effect.

When Leah was ready, I came to her Recovery Suite after lunch with Ted. I'd already told him to be supportive, regardless of what he saw. "We can discuss any reservations you have in private." But when I removed her bandages, his own face told the story. "Honey! You look great. *Better* than great."

"I agree with your husband's assessment," I said. "Congratulations, Leah."

The three of us walked into the lobby, which features a full length mirror. When Leah stood in front of it, her face turned into a twisted mask of pain.

"How could you?" She was shouting at herself, not at me. "*How could you!*" And she ran back to her Recovery Suite in her slippers. We could both hear her sobbing through the door. She finally let Ted inside, so he could begin to calm her down.

* * *

In my office a couple of hours later, I told Ted that Leah's reaction was a bit extreme, but not uncommon. Patients often got depressed after their procedures, no matter how well they turned out. Because, going in, they hadn't really known what they'd wanted. Because whatever problem they had didn't go away with their bandages.

Ted nodded. "The operation was a success, but the patient cried."

I told him he had a way with words, and I asked for permission to use the phrase on my website.

"Be my guest," he said. "Just don't tell my lawyers."

Then I asked if he was planning to sue me.

"You're a terrific surgeon." He seemed strangely calm, as if he were watching both of us from outside his own body. "In fact, you deserve a bonus, Tucker." He took out his checkbook, which he evidently carried with him wherever he went. "She looks wonderful."

I removed the pen from my desk. "That won't be necessary. And for the record, Ted, your wife is a wonderful person." It was true. She was the nicest neurotic I'd ever met, and in twenty years at God's Second Chance, I'd met quite a few. After Ted stood, I reached up to shake his hand.

"*And, with immense benignity inclined, he raised his plastic arm*." Ted grinned, rather ruefully I thought. "Mark Akenside. Eighteenth-century poet. Public domain. No problems with the copyright."

I told him I'd look it up.

He mentioned he was thinking about moving farther west in the state, to a gated community up in the mountains. "At least the paparazzi couldn't get in there."

"Maybe nobody will recognize your wife. With her married name. And her new face."

"I hope you're right," he said. "But I'm not sure how much that's going to help."

I told him I knew a therapist he might want to give a try. I'd referred several patients to him before, ones who'd had self-esteem issues. There's a big psychological element in cosmetic surgery. I wrote the contact information for Dr. Bradley Young on one of my own cards, then handed it to Ted. "He's a bit of a flake. New Age. But he can really help women feel better about themselves."

"Greenville." He laughed. "Maybe that's a harmonic convergence."

"Could be."

"Then why do I feel like a piece of crap?"

I didn't tell him, but at the moment, I felt pretty much like a piece of crap myself. Then he mentioned they'd try staying in Columbia, at least for the time being, to see how things went. So I gave him the name of a guy in Columbia, too.

After he'd left, I stared out my window at the oleander lining our parking lot. It was blooming and lovely and virtually unkillable—but deadly poison. Dogs and cats get sick on it all the time. Once in a while, even a little kid.

I took out my yTunes player and cranked "My Heart Will Go On" into my earbuds. It's cheesy, but ever since Toni Rose left me I always play it when I feel like the ship's hit an iceberg and the captain should have known better—but all you can do now is point to the lifeboats, and hope for the best. *Near, far, wherever you are*...It was a brilliant afternoon, with only a few scattered cirrus clouds to make the sky seem even bluer. The springs around here make you think you're in heaven. Or back in Eden, before the fall.

Now I saw Ted on the sidewalk. He couldn't see me, of course, through the one-way glass, so I walked right up to the window for a closer

look. He was carrying a couple of embossed leather suitcases to his Maserati Spyder. It was brand new—I'd seen the dealer plates when I'd passed it in the parking lot. After he put down the overstuffed brown bags, he got into the driver's seat, popped open the trunk, and powered down the convertible top. It occurred to me they probably hadn't been able to drive around together that way before, out in the open air—what with the paparazzi on the lookout for Leah's familiar face.

She was already in the car. She'd been waiting for him.

She was wearing those big sunglasses, with a Jessica Arrington hat to protect her hair and my best efforts. He turned on the engine, then got outside again to deal with the luggage. While he was hoisting their suitcases into the trunk, I could see Leah trying her best to look deliriously happy. It must have been painful, with all that re-creation I'd done around her mouth.

Her husband stood no more than ten feet away from me, staring at my one-way window, looking like he'd just seen a ghost.

But he fixed his face before he got back into the car. It was amazing. Like he'd just given himself an Extreme Makeover. Like he'd been my patient, not Leah. Like he was auditioning for my website. Before had become After.

And the song ended. For a moment, they looked like the perfect couple, and I felt happy for what I hoped they could become. And what they could remain. I waved to them both, although I knew they couldn't see me. Then he pulled out of the parking lot and started driving toward the bridge that would take them back to the mainland.

CHARLES BYRNE

Photosensitivity

Photinini seeking each other
in the dark are a shimmering
undulation of moonlit ocean swell.

To center your vision at night
upon any single one of them
is impossible: at the instant
of luciferin phosphorescence,
your eyes alight upon the light's
once-locus, but it has vanished.

So too, to reveal a night star
less luminescent than the Morning Star,
Lucifer, it is useful to fix your gaze
a degree obliquely from the speck
so that the photons fall directly
upon your rods.

Just as to look into the eyes
of your foe is a task
far less formidable than to fix
your gaze unwaveringly
upon the inscrutable
eyes of your beloved.

JEREMY CALDWELL

Looking Past the Future

Waiting for the marble-eye stoplight,
her head briefly rest against the dirty glass
of van window, much like a broken bobblehead,
staring past the five o'clock traffic,
past the dog walking the man,
past the shape-shifting potholes,
past the series of lefts and rights
and into the little house on the corner,
where she sees past the unmowed lawn,
past the late bill notices and credit card scams,
past the outdated pity in the mirror
and the soggy stare of love unfulfilled,
past the remnants of broken promises,
past forgotten dreams and secret joys,
and pretty soon, if it can be managed,
past tomorrow
and the next
and the next.

SHARON CHARDE

Love Me Do

for John

Because it's a good thing someone loves
me, even when I'm half-mast, morning
moody, don't like opera, buy more scarves
and sweaters than I need. Fiona's daughter
says there's not enough love in the world
so I need yours more, maybe to loan her
some? Close to the bone, raw, they tell me
of my poems, can I make this one sum
of so much, we quaver with its resonance?
You gave me three wishes for my birthday,
I've only used one. What should the others
be? That greedy me can have another three?
That I could have our second son back?
No, you can't give me that, but maybe
this, that we'll have the mercy of tomorrow,
stay alive long enough so when the god
of catastrophe calls it will be on the wrong
phone, that he'll only arrive when we're
not home.

NANCY BROCK

Porch Rocker

Life started slipping backward instead of moving forward the year I turned nineteen. I married Ben while we were still in college, I got pregnant, and a little girl disappeared. I had always expected my life to move in a linear pattern from one landmark event to the next. Instead I found myself with a queasy stomach, stuck in the rocking chair on a porch. No matter how fast I rocked, I only moved back and forth. The two major events last year were the Moon Walk and Woodstock. Neither one had the slightest effect on this town.

When I looked up from the reoccurring waves of nausea that racked my entire body, I surveyed the vista offered from my porch. I had a limited view, no farther than the end of the block either way I looked. The buds of the large magnolia tree still were as tight as fists. I had to wait another month before I'd see the buds relax into open white flowers. The houses across the street shimmered in the sunshine, their beckoning porches open arms of hospitality. I watched from my miserable isolation as my neighbors came and went about their daily routines with monotonous predictability. You could set your clock by their comings and goings.

One day, a day like any other day, I watched as a little girl walked down the opposite side of the street. She was a pretty little girl, with her blonde hair pulled back in two ponytails. She must be Sallie Forrester; she looked about the right age.

She stopped in front of the house directly across from me, a complete stop rather than a momentary pause. She turned toward the welcoming porch, waiting for something or some one.

My stomach gave a violent lurch as I imagined the open arms of the porch turning into the jaws of a grinning trap. Move! The word stuck in my throat, my stomach heaved again, and I hung my head over the nearby garbage can.

When I lifted my head, the little girl had disappeared. She simply continued her way down the street, I decided.

I remembered that moment later, after Sallie Forrester disappeared. After her disappearance, life never really got back to ordinary for me or anyone else.

* * *

I sat in the rocking chair on my porch watching the black and silver patrol car roll down the street. 'Folger County Sheriff Department' was emblazoned on the side. The car looked like a hearse and I shivered in spite of the June heat. The patrol car turned left onto the side street by the house next door, carefully backed out again, and parked in front of Gina Kendrick's house. I watched the officer get out of the car and walk toward the front door.

"Why, it's Paul Bryson," I said to myself. My heart began to thump erratically.

Paul Bryson and I dated during high school. We had an acrimonious breakup when Paul realized he wasn't an academic and entered the law enforcement academy. I had no plans to stay in the small town where we grew up. Ironic, since I married Ben Connors, a small town lawyer who wanted to stay right here in Malta.

I watched the door of Gina's house. After perhaps half an hour Paul reemerged. Rather than returning to the patrol car, he turned and walked toward my house. I folded my hands protectively over my pregnant belly. I wished I'd had time to brush my hair and change out of my faded house dress.

Paul stood before me, wide-brimmed hat and a notebook in hand. I indicated an empty rocker.

"Please sit down."

Paul sat. "Mandy, you're looking well. Congratulations. I've heard your good news." He pulled out a photograph from the notebook.

"I'm afraid I'm here on unpleasant business. We've had a little girl reported missing. She was last seen in this area."

I examined a school picture of a nine- or ten-year-old girl staring straight into the camera, a big smile on her face. Her blonde hair hung straight instead of in the familiar twin ponytails.

"Sallie." I recognized her.

"Do you know her?"

"Not really. During the school year I frequently saw her walking down the street with two of her friends. Since school has let out I see her once a week. She takes piano lessons from Gina Kendrick. I guess you know that."

Paul nodded. "Do you remember when you last saw her?"

"I should have seen her this past Tuesday. She always has her piano lesson once a week on Tuesday afternoon. I always see her walking to and from her piano lessons. She always walks down this side of the street on her way to Gina's house, and she crosses over to the other side of the street

when she walks back home. I remember now. I had a doctor's appointment that afternoon. I didn't see Sallie because I wasn't home."

"So your visit to the doctor can be verified." Paul jotted something in his notebook. "Your husband took you?"

"I can still drive. Ben was at the office. He's easing into his law practice."

If this rankled Paul, he didn't let on. "So he didn't take you to your doctor's appointment." It was a statement, not a question. Why did it unsettle me?

"Now, if you'll excuse me, my next stop is a visit to Sarah Carroll. I don't want her to feel left out. I'm sure she's seen the patrol car by now."

We both grinned. Paul knew Sarah Carroll as well as I did.

"Paul, when did Sallie disappear?"

I could tell Paul mentally weighed professional discretion against our long friendship. Friendship came out ahead. "Sallie Forrester was last seen by her mother this past Tuesday, when she left her house to walk to her piano lesson. Miss Kendrick told me that Sallie arrived for the lesson at her usual time and left at her usual time. Sallie never returned home. I still have other people to talk to, but so far Miss Kendrick seems to be the last person who saw Sallie Forrester on the day she disappeared. Anything else you remember?"

Before the pleasant weather turned into scorching summer, I watched the foot traffic along the street. The school year for Malta Elementary School would end in two weeks. The older children who lived in the neighborhood walked to and from school, weather permitting. I soon recognized the groups of children who always walked together. They were all white. The high school had fully integrated this past school year, but the junior high and the elementary schools weren't scheduled for full integration until fall. The group dynamics changed from one day to another. A child who walked with a group one day might walk alone the next day. I wondered what had happened on the playground or at recess during the day.

One little group of girls, aged nine or ten, always remained constant. I dubbed them the Three Musketeers. The group included the pretty little blonde girl. She was accompanied by a taller brunette, and a girl with light brown hair whose laughter rippled across the street as they approached.

The three girls never walked straight down the street. They always crossed over to the other side of the street when they reached the corner where Gina Kendrick lived. Were they afraid of Gina?

I soon had an answer to my question. One afternoon Richard Hugley stood on the sidewalk in front of his house. The three girls greeted him like a good friend, clustering around him eagerly.

"Sallie! Kate! Emily! How are my three little friends today?" I heard him across the street. "Want to take a little detour by the Piggly Wiggly on your way home? Yes? I thought so." He reached into his suit pants pocket, pulled out his hand, and put something into the outstretched hand of each child. "Now, each of you has enough for a Coca-Cola and a candy bar."

The little girls squealed delightedly, "Oh, thank you, thank you Mr. Hugley."

Mr. Hugley laughed as well. "Now let's not tell your mothers. This will be our secret, OK?"

The Hugley house stood directly across the street from our house. I always thought of Mr. Hugley as the Railroad Man. He served as the stationmaster for the Seaboard Coastline Freight and Passenger Depot. His wife Clara had made exquisite clothes for dolls before she passed away. I'd glimpsed Mr. Hugley only a few times in the past few months.

After the school year ended for the summer, only the little blonde girl walked past my house. She clutched her red music book against her chest as she approached Gina's house, her head bent in dejection and her footsteps dragging.

She followed the same route home that she and her friends had taken during the school year. She always walked on the side of the street opposite her destination, slowing her pace as she walked past the Hugley house.

Mr. Hugley's duties apparently didn't require that he remain at the station all day. One afternoon he returned just as the little girl crossed the street. He got out of his car and waited in front of his house. "Sallie," I heard him call. "I thought school was out for the summer."

Her head lifted and her pace quickened as she recognized her friend. "Momma thought I should take piano lessons, Mr. Hugley. I go to Miss Kendrick's for lessons once a week." Her face crumpled. "I wish Momma didn't make me. Miss Kendrick told me today I was wasting her time because I don't practice."

"You should have a treat for being subjected to such an ordeal." Mr. Hugley reached into his suit pants pocket and dropped something into Sallie's outstretched hand. "Now, let this be our secret, OK?"

Sallie might not be motivated to practice any harder, but at least the prospect of a treat might make her more enthusiastic about her weekly piano lessons. She paused in front of the Wilcox house. Mrs. Wilcox sat in her porch rocker, the flimsy material of her long skirt waving gently as she rocked. She must have spoken, for Sallie placed her music book on one of the porch steps and climbed to speak briefly to Mrs. Wilcox.

That's the last time I remember seeing Sallie Forrester.

What I didn't share with Paul was the conversation I'd had with Gina earlier that day. She'd stopped for a brief chat as she passed by on a return trip from the grocery store. "I better walk to the store while I can. The Piggly Wiggly won't stay in business much longer. Most people prefer shopping at the new grocery store on the bypass, even if they do have to drive to the edge of town. I have to run. Sallie comes for her piano lesson this afternoon. Lord, give me the patience to get through the hour."

"You sound the way Sallie looks when she arrives for her lesson," I said.

Gina laughed. "Some days I wish that child would disappear."

* * *

The tight-fisted magnolia blossoms relented and released their white petals into large open hands that drooped lazily in the shimmering heat. Mrs. Carroll and I rocked together. At least one afternoon a week, just for a change, I joined Mrs. Carroll on her porch. She invited me to call her by her first name, but I was brought up to refer to women of my mother's generation by their married names.

"The glories of Southern summers, when life moves at a rocking chair pace." She dared give voice to suspicions I would never think to mention. "Yes, this is a bad business. Sallie Forrester took piano lessons from Gina. She lived near enough so that she could walk to her afternoon lessons. Not so good for Miss Gina. That nice Paul Bryson certainly had some questions for me about that. If Gina wasn't one of the mill Kendricks, with all her money, I suspect a lot more questions might be asked."

The afternoon sun made me sleepy. I roused myself from my drowsiness. "Why, Mrs. Carroll, certainly no one suspects Gina."

Mrs. Carroll snorted. "Gina Kendrick does seem nice enough. She shows up in church every Sunday that she's in town and writes big checks to local charities. Still, you never know with women like that."

"Women like what?"

"You should know at your age. All I can say is that I would never let a granddaughter of mine take piano lessons from her."

"Why?" I straightened up so quickly I overturned my iced tea.

"She never married, but that wasn't entirely her fault. Her parents had hopes when they sent her off to that fancy music school in New York. Seems she got an exposure to more than high culture and developed a taste for things not fit for a young lady. I heard she had some kind of breakdown."

Rock, rock, rock.

"All that's common knowledge," Mrs. Carroll said. "I didn't tell Paul Bryson anything he didn't already know." We rocked for a few minutes

without speaking. Mrs. Carroll sighed. "I certainly hope I'm not a suspect. Jim played golf that day, and I stayed home alone. Now, how is your husband adjusting to living in your home town?"

Every one in town who mattered knew Ben and I lived in my parents' former house. No need for people to know Ben and I had begun sleeping in separate beds soon after we arrived. I'd gone to bed early one evening. One of the bedroom windows opened onto the porch. Through the open window I heard the creak of a rocking chair, saw the glow of a cigarette. When did he start smoking? When he finished his cigarette, he hadn't come to bed with me. He'd collapsed onto the bed in the guest room. I'd said nothing the next morning. After the first night, sleeping in the guest room became a habit for him.

I usually waited on the porch for him to come home. This night he seemed in a hurry to go inside. "Let's go inside," he told me, even though anything we said wouldn't be overheard. I followed him into the living room.

He asked me to sit on the sofa and took my hands in a firm grip. "Paul Bryson came to the office and asked me some questions. I wasn't at the office on the afternoon Sallie Forrester disappeared. I didn't want you to know."

He must have seen the fear in my face. "I do have an alibi. I drove over to the military base to talk to a mental health person. Some things happened during my service time. Lately I can't stop thinking about those things." He squeezed my hands before he released them. "This past spring I was walking back from the Law School the night those protesters set fire to the old ROTC building. I heard them call all soldiers murderers. They were talking about me, and all of us who thought we were serving our country during our time in service."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"I haven't told anyone. I don't want people thinking I'm crazy. I especially don't want you thinking I'm crazy."

I clasped his hands. "I think you're crazy for not trusting me."

"I killed a child while I was in Nam. A little girl." He watched my face as I processed this information. "It was an accident. I thought I was firing at a Viet Cong." When I said nothing, he added, "I don't have anything to do with Sallie Forrester's disappearance."

We slept together for the first time in many months. Somehow I sensed the best way for me to demonstrate my love and trust was through a silent shared intimacy. I'd missed the way Ben nestled next to me. Now his body pressed against my back and his arm draped around my full belly. He settled into sleep while I lay awake, praying we'd soon get back to a normal life, whatever normal was these days.

Now everyone became a suspect. People who had known each other for years suddenly began looking at each other through different eyes, assessing how well they really knew this person. I realized, with a sudden sick feeling, that Ben also was a suspect. A child's disappearance while walking down a public street in broad daylight was unnerving enough. For a child to disappear a few blocks from her own house was an outrage.

Paul checked the alibi of mill workers whose shift ended in the afternoon. The mill manager wisely allowed the workers to stay on the clock during their interviews.

Paul was thorough. He went to the railroad depot and talked to the stationmaster, Richard Hugley. Mr. Hugley correctly pointed out that he could provide some information on who got on the train, but had no information on who got off the train. Paul talked to Gina again. Paul drove out to the Malta Country Club to check the tee schedule and verify Jim Carroll spent the afternoon on the golf course. He paid a visit to the mental health department at the military base. Thankfully the administration verified Ben's appointment, while reminding Paul it was against policy to discuss patients. He even drove to the nursing home and tried to question the befuddled Mrs. Wilcox.

By mid-July the heat forced most people to take refuge indoors. The last blossoms on the magnolia trees wilted into shriveled brown petals. An early morning rain left the day cool enough for me to sit on the porch, indulging in my latest craving for ripe tomato sandwiches. I watched Mrs. Carroll emerge from her house and march across the street, a woman on a mission. She climbed the steps of Mr. Hugley's house and rang his bell. She waited a few minutes before she turned and climbed back down the steps. She headed around the side of the house. Mr. Hugley's failure to answer his bell probably meant he was working in the back yard. She soon reappeared. The way she stomped across the street told me she wasn't happy.

She saw me sitting on the porch and headed in my direction. I wiped the tomato juice from my chin and mouth. "Mandy, Mandy." She kept shaking her head as she approached. "I can't believe Richard Hugley is so stingy. I thought that Richard would be glad and proud to donate some of his roses for Agnes Wilcox. Do you know what he told me? 'Sarah Carroll, mind your own business and your own roses.' Do you know what he was doing when he told me that? Digging another rose bed! The man seems determined to turn his entire back yard into a rose bed! You'd think he would spare a few roses. He's a neighbor."

As far as Mrs. Carroll was concerned, Mr. Hugley had violated the Neighborhood Code of the South—give unto others as you would have given unto you.

She eased herself into an empty rocker. I inquired about Mrs. Wilcox. Mrs. Carroll shook her head. "She's a sad state. I visited her at the nursing home last Monday. She doesn't remember her own name, let alone anyone else's name. It's nice of you to think of her. I hope her son sells the house soon, or at least moves the furniture. It bothers me to see that fine house empty and rotting. At least he put a lock on the door. The week after Agnes left, the front door stood wide open, where any passing vagrant might make himself at home."

I tried to recall if I'd ever seen a vagrant on the streets of Malta. "We don't get many strangers coming through town."

"Or new folks moving into town. I wonder if I should tell Paul Bryson about Richard digging up the back yard. Yes, I think I will."

When Ben got home the men were already at work on Richard Hugley's yard. Ben walked over to offer assistance. I made no move to start supper, or to turn on the porch light. Mrs. Carroll rocked on her porch, and I knew she wasn't waiting for her husband to return from the golf course. She rose from her rocker as Ben crossed the street.

"Let's go inside." Whatever news Ben had, he didn't seem willing to share with Mrs. Carroll.

"Did they find anything?"

"Yes. They found dolls. Richard buried Clara's dolls."

* * *

No law denies a man the right to bury his dead wife's dolls on his own property. Most people, myself included, probably thought Richard Hugley had given the collection away. Immediately after Clara's death a procession of neighbors and well-wishers brought casseroles and condolences. The flood of sympathy eventually dried up, leaving the man alone with the collection of exquisitely dressed dolls.

Ben described the intersecting trenches the searchers had dug through the rose beds. The entire yard had the appearance of one big archaeological excavation. "Here's another one," a man called out and pulled a waxen form from the soft dirt by its arm. Even though he knew the figure was too small to be a child, Ben told me he still felt unnerved. The unclothed porcelain and rubber dolls lay in a row on undisturbed ground, dirt smudging their cheeks and rigid limbs, open eyes staring blindly. I tried to reassure him. These dolls served as models for Clara's dressmaking. No little girl had ever cuddled these silent forms, or pretended these were children or friends.

* * *

"If I'd only known," Mrs. Carroll said. "You think he knows I called the sheriff?" She'd brought me a chicken pot pie. I reluctantly took the dish and didn't invite her inside.

"I saw Alan Wilcox the other day."

I paused in the doorway. "And?"

"He's sold the house. Not to a nice family, but to a developer. Plans are to tear down the house and squeeze some apartments on the lot."

The day the movers arrived, Mrs. Carroll and I watched from her porch. It took most of the day for the men to move the accumulation of Mrs. Wilcox's life from the house to the van.

"Is that everything?" Mrs. Carroll called out.

Alan Wilcox crossed the street to speak to us. "I think so." He looked cheerful. "I don't remember her keeping anything in the attic, but I told one of the men to go check. Just in case."

We all heard the yell. "Hey, you better come over here!"

* * *

The movers found her in the attic. The coroner recorded heat and dehydration as the cause of death. One of the movers told a friend, the friend told another person, and by the end of the day most of the town knew. Sallie sat crumpled on the floor, moisture sucked from the tissues of her body. The sheriff's report concluded an unlocked and open door proved too great a temptation for the little girl who walked past the house every day. Once inside, had she explored all the rooms before she pulled the cord to lower the ladder to the attic? The ladder must have folded behind her and swung shut, trapping her. No one knew where she was, no one heard her screams

"At least it's over," I told Ben. I carefully turned over and pressed my face into his chest, inhaling the freshly laundered smell of his pajamas. We slept together now, in my childhood bedroom.

He shifted his body to lie on his side. "I don't think so. I don't think Paul Bryson thinks it's over, either."

Inside my body, the baby kicked. "What do you mean? Sheriff Lewis issued a statement."

"Do you really believe that child was capable of opening the attic door by herself?" The sick feeling returned.

A demolition crew tore the old Wilcox place apart. Alan Wilcox must have figured the strange death had put a curse on the house. Ben and I watched open-mouthed as the house came down board by board. "Alan Wilcox will do anything to make a buck," Mrs. Carroll fumed as workers loaded the debris in a truck. "What do you think he plans to do with the vacant

lot? He's hired a developer to construct a four-unit apartment building! We're going to have complete strangers living in our neighborhood." To our relief, the workers found no evidence of other little girls, either living or nonliving.

"Guess Alan Wilcox won't need that key any more." Ben said this so calmly.

"What key?" I asked.

"Agnes gave your father a spare key to keep years ago. I'd forgotten I even had it until now. For all I know, it's in a desk drawer with some other spare keys. I never used it."

* * *

Ben and I decided not to attend the funeral, using my pregnancy as an excuse. The Forresters weren't members of our church, or next-door neighbors. I don't know who went. This is the kind of information Sarah Carroll usually shared with me, but lately a coldness had crept between us and I kept a distance from her. Richard Hugley chose to sit out the funeral on his front porch, no doubt mourning his little friend, or maybe his dead wife. Since we didn't speak, I had no way of knowing.

Summer was almost over, and with fall we'd put up the rocking chairs and go inside.

LEONARDO CHUNG

The Last Time I Set Foot in a Café

the last time i set foot in a café,
i could have waited for a minor chord
to slip itself into

the hour-long playlist that dripped into
my eardrum, or perhaps i was hoping
for someone to

hurl their mug to van-gogh my ear instead. i could
have been mixing the straw in my plastic cup around,
praying for

a cacao chip to pierce through the sweetness
of vanilla cream that lassoes my taste buds,
choking them.

or maybe i could have swung from the top of the tree
that is so long overdue to be packed—
it's the twenty-ninth!—

and send all those sequined glass spheres flying
and shattering into coffee cups and onto
plates of crepe cakes.

i wouldn't call it havoc, but rather have a
different [delirium], because what does peace mean
without the occasional spilled drink?

J. MARK COONEY

Body-Shop Icon

Duffy, [an] amateur photographer, made over
500 snapshots of Detroit taken in the early 1970s.
—Detroit Institute of Arts

In matte gray: a street, ’70s dead.
A lone teen searches from within,
piercing our faceless stare.

The rood hulks behind him
like a sternum and clavicle
against a white brick veneer,
flouting proportion.

Its thick nave trunk
splits twin garage doors;
transept arms wing over each.

He stands flat, deaf to its vain demur,
absorbed, undiminished,
lost in the ungodly din of leaves
collecting against parking meters.

BRENT HOUSE

The Heartwood Triptych

1. Broken Hymns on a Mahogany Piano

Through the limbs of timber company pines, I drove along Lott McCarty Road, crossed the bridge over Mill Creek, and believed translations of the truth I received from every sanctuary I passed, as I condemned my blood for pulsing, condemned my body for coming to the preacher's daughter.

I heard from pulpits, "There is none righteous, no, not one," and I read from onionskin pages, knowing I would pass in no proximity to righteousness, so I gave in to the heat of a clapboard house, near abandoned for the mission of gospel, with the Kimball shell of mahogany and rosewood veneers, lost scales of ivory, thin felt bushing cloth, wet and damp, and hammers mostly still.

Was it for sins that I had done / He groaned upon the tree? / Here Lord, I give myself away: / 'Tis all that I can do.

She played a semblance of hymns, the songs she was taught. A hymn, usually, of invitation—"Just As I Am," or "At The Cross"—*Alas, and did my Savior bleed?*

Her fingers held upon the keys as faithfully as the submission of the church to Christ.

2. Cuts of Book-Matched Grain

As years of wood gave shade to a house, pained circles of her slough pressed under falling leaves of live oak in a late summer yard until I couldn't contain, so I fled, like a son of Israel from the wife of Potiphar; she, afraid or lonely, reached for me, in Hebrew, *taphas*, "to lay hold," with a second meaning, "to grasp in order to wield."

The hand-me-down dresses from her older cousin I desired; they sheathed her as a hand to a sword, and blood washed from vowelish crescents to lunate bone.

For my Lord says, "Come," and I seek my home, / Where He waits at the open door.

Cone-bearing trees of soft wood, for trusses, studs, and doors, with open-seeded hardwoods, for chifforobes, figures of angels holding nails, pianos, and a hidden paddle of bruised, broken and unbearable center, as skin around a splinter.

In houses of four generations back, soft heartwoods made hard by resin and years, no longer carry food and water, and lay on floors not so cold; after all–Mississippi–but still, too cold for naked feet, when a last match has been laid before a heater radiant.

3. Floors of Virgin Heartwood

Hunger finds oatmeal in the pantry closet, and perhaps emptiness ignores absence, spoons from a poor man's pie with a knowledge of past wars and depressions, with memory of a shell of pecans from native groves over the molasses, or perhaps the absence of hunger liberates appetite to want more flesh than the living soul can contain.

Jesu, my manna be; / ye living waters, burst / out of the rock for me. / my life-long wants supply; / as living souls are fed, / O feed me, or I die.

When preachers read from the beatitudes, we should hunger and thirst for righteousness, for we would be filled; I doubted, sated hunger with grains from a pantry of ancestors, quenched thirst with blood from the word, and walked on buckled floors of heartwood in a humid house. After sin, I pulled boots over my calves, and walked down the porch steps, carefully to avoid rotten boards.

If those floors were stripped back to the grains, revarnished, they would have been as beautiful as virgin forests to sharp-bladed sawyers.

CALEB COY

Blind Woman

What the blind woman
Across from me on the train
Said, rolling up her sleeves:

On rainy mornings when the pattering
Outside made the house seem still
My step-father woke me early

Place in my hand all manner of fabrics
Furs and rocks and mosses for me
To distinguish by texture alone.

He was endearing in the way a wolf is
Endearing, a wolf not raised by men
One that you can not pet.

Appearing in the semblance of a provider
It was not providing he found delight in—
I've travelled the world with these scars.

The Vibrating Pines
Gichin Funakoshi, 1947

Fleeing war in Okinawa,
your wife has died a refugee in Oisha,
due east of Nagasaki's holocaust.
Even now she can't return home—
you cradle the ashes on the packed train
heading north, bereft of all the youths
who would have called you *sensei*—
soldiers, sailors, airmen—their ears
refuse the syllables of the emperor's surrender.
Nobody offers you their seat as you stand
with natural posture, recalling when
you were young and held your horse stance
amidst a hurricane. Outside, the train passes
hills lined by pines trembling with the engine.
That is what they call karate now:
shoto-kan—the hall of vibrating pines—
your long-disused pen name
when once you were an aspiring poet.

JILL JEPSON

Subjunctive Mood

I was thirteen years old when I took my first foreign language class, Introduction to French. For years, I had longed to learn another language. I had listened enviously to the Mexican kids in my Central California high school, to my Swedish grandparents, to the old Portuguese women who lived on farms around our town, and the Chinese family who owned the grocery store. I had marveled at their ability to make meaning with sounds that meant nothing to me. They seemed to possess keys to another world, one of music and vibrant color, far away from the monotony of my hot farm town and the chaos of my troubled family. I imagined that learning another language would give me an escape.

I chose French for the glamour. I'd never heard it spoken, except for a phrase or two in the movies. I'd never met a French person, and knew nothing about French history or culture. But in my imagination, France was all about cigarettes, stilettos, and sin, all things I longed for.

Unfortunately, our French teacher, Mrs. Deacon, didn't actually know French. She must have had a couple years in college, but she didn't remember much. Every time she pronounced a word, she said it a little differently, so we were never certain what was correct, and her grammar explanations were so confusing we knew she wasn't sure of the rules.

We began our term by memorizing a dialogue about a boy who borrowed his friend's skis and fell on the slope. It was full of complicated sentences that we were supposed to learn by rote, even though we wouldn't study the grammar for months.

"Oh my gosh, my leg," the boy cried after he fell.

"I don't think that you are hurt," said his friend.

I took the sentences apart in my head.

Je ne pense pas che. I don't think that.

Tu sois blessé. You are hurt.

We all repeated the words in our dreadful accents, and went home to memorize them. I was determined to learn them well, so amid the noise and chaos of my home, I repeated the dialogue over and over.

My bedroom was the only route to the bathroom in our tiny house. People came in and out, and I hardly had a moment alone. That afternoon, my brother had brought his friends in to fondle my underwear and bras, so

I took time out to fold and organize them, shuddering at the violation of my privacy. My sisters barged into my room to open my closet and take two of my favorite blouses, and I interrupted my study long enough to plead with them to stop. Family arguments and the blaring TV carried through the thin walls. But I closed my eyes, created a quiet space within the noise, and repeated the French phrases again and again.

By the next day, I knew the dialogue perfectly, and when Mrs. Deacon asked me to recite it, I earned an approving nod. Then she gave us phrases to translate. I realized with dismay that I'd focused so much on the dialogue, I'd neglected the verb conjugations we were supposed to memorize. But when she gave me the phrase "you are hurt," I relaxed. I knew this. It was in the dialogue.

Tu sois blessé, I said confidently. And that is the exact moment I discovered that French was not what I expected.

"Incorrect," Mrs. Deacon said sharply.

Another girl, Janey, who was a friend of mine, but a bit of a snoot, giggled at my mistake. *Tu es*, she said primly, accepting the praise I'd been denied.

A knot of frustrated jealousy formed in my stomach. I didn't get it. Right in the dialogue it said *tu sois* meant *you are*.

That night, I studied the conjugations I was supposed to have learned the night before. Just as Janey had said, *you are* was *tu es*. But then, what about tu sois? According to the dialogue, it also meant you are. Why were there two ways to say the same thing? What was the difference between them? Was one wrong? I looked up *sois* in the glossary of my book, but it wasn't there. It wasn't in my French dictionary, either. I didn't even consider asking Mrs. Deacon. I doubted she knew, and suspected she would just make something up. I was stymied. If it wasn't correct, why was *sois* in our book? Why did *sois* even exist?

Something was wrong with French sounds, too. They were impossible to pronounce. *Celle, salle, cil*. They didn't sound like sell, Saul, or sill, but fell in mysterious places in between. Who knew there was an in between? Words like *vue* seemed like monstrous mixtures of *vee* with *you*. The *r* was a feat of oral gymnastics, a cross between gargling and coughing. And how did you say the strange vowel *œ*? I had idea.

French spelling, I soon discovered, was like something from a fourth dimension. There was a sound similar to the English vowel in "coat" but it was spelled in twelve different ways, and some of them were long chains of letters like *auds* and *eaux*.

Then there were the silences. The d at the end of *froid* and *grand*. The p in *beaucoup* and *drap*. Many s's and many t's and nearly every x. H

was silent at the beginning of the word, except when it wasn't, and there was no way to tell.

The tangled knot that was French confounded and frustrated me, but then so did everything else in my life. I wrestled with the world, trying to make sense of the nonsensical, struggling to put the contradictions into some kind of order.

I didn't understand my mother, who greeted me after school with homemade cream puffs, and told me I was pretty, but who would turn on a dime and bark that I was mean, unpleasant girl, sending me into a spiral of shame.

I didn't understand my father, who was gentle and sweet, but who repeated over and over every trivial slight and imagined insult he'd ever endured.

I didn't understand my Aunt Alma, who ridiculed me in front of my older cousins, and I didn't understand why my mother wouldn't tell her to stop.

I didn't understand my body at all. My periods were nothing like the minor inconveniences they described in health class, but left me sweating in pain and bleeding so badly I was constantly staining my clothes. And what was it they told us about 28-day cycles? Mine came every 20 or 36 or whenever, and they didn't last five days, but seven or ten or twelve.

I didn't understand boys, who ogled my breasts and tried to touch them at parties, but I didn't understand girls, either. I never knew what to do or say, and social situations left me so anxious that I chewed the side of my cheek raw and obsessively picked my zits.

The only thing I knew for certain was that the world had rules I was supposed to know, but somehow had never learned. Everyone else seemed to have life all figured out, but I was fumbling and stumbling in the dark. I castigated myself for my stupidity, shivering with shame in my bed at night.

So, I studied French. Because even if the path to French was strewn with rocks, those rocks were small enough to climb over or squeeze around, unlike the immovable boulders obstructing the rest of my life. French pronunciation was difficult, but you could get better if you tried. French conjugations were complicated, but you'd figure them out if you kept at it. Unlike the rules of proper behavior, which were mysterious, fluid, and impenetrable, French could be learned.

In my sophomore year, twelve months after I collided with French on my second day, I learned the answer to the question that had never stopped tormenting me: why *sois*?

In French, when you talk about something that happened, is happening, will happen, or happens all the time, you use the regular forms of

the verb, the indicative mood. If you're talking about reality, *you are* is *tu es*. But if you're talking about something that might happen, that you hope will happen, that you think, assume, or suppose has happened, you use different forms. *You are* becomes *tu sois*. Preferences and inclinations. Opinions and judgments. Advice and orders. Needs and desires. They are all expressed by these unique verb forms, called the subjunctive mood. At long last, that mysterious *sois* clicked into place.

I realized at once that there were languages in the world that made this important distinction. Things that are do not equal things that may be. Things I have are not the same as things that I want. Assumptions are not realities. Evaluations are not facts. Health class is not truth, and neither are my mother's judgments or my aunt's cruel comments. The freedom and confidence I longed for lay in the realm of promise and probability. My life was all about uncertainty and doubt, possibility and potential, and with this new way of viewing the world, I could sort through it, separate it out. My life, I realized, took place in the subjunctive.

DANIEL GINSBURG

The Carpet

for Mom

I.

For a pittance, you bought patches of rug: smooth lemon, lush green grass, plush turquoise nap of a lapping sea.

You glued them against jute, formed your rainbow checkerboard, and sewed the edges with a carpet needle.

When you pricked your fingers, you sent me for bandages.

I marveled at the spectral tapestry you fashioned from discarded shag, you, so resourceful in your birthing.

II.

The amniotic sac jiggled, gelatinous, like a soap bubble blown through Spring wind, so I pricked the membrane with my sterilized scissors.

Hurry, there is but a minute of oxygen!

When the sharp point pierced through, you cradled the puppy, soaked and blind, and aspirated hismouth until we heard the soft rush of air.

You dried him with a towel, tied the umbilical cord with thread, your voice quickening: *Abi's not sure what to do, so you must cut her cord*.

Only two inches from the puppy's body, I snipped with small hands, surprised by how hard I needed to squeeze, and you applied iodine.

Abi, her chest milk-laden, looked at me plaintively, lying wearily on the motley-colored carpet beside the whelping pen.

Be ready, there are more to come!

III.

I led Gimel, granddaughter of Abi, to her chain-link kennel, ten feet of fencing open to the sky.

You had reminded me of Gimel's craftiness—how she could kick open the U-shaped door latch—so I snapped on the padlock.

As I turned my head, metal clanged—resonance of her ascent, paws finding holds in octagonal links.

Gimel soared between the outstretched forearms of mature oaks, cloudless sky her backdrop, my head tilted upward,

eyes gazing in wonder.

TIMOTHY DODD

Prism

It was darker than inside a dead man's pockets when we walked out the backdoor of the Newton's house Saturday night and headed down for the creek. Knowing it best to avoid the road, Gil said to preserve our batteries and let our eyes adjust, but ten minutes later the blackness had only thickened and I couldn't even see the mountains surrounding the hollow. "Yep, gonna have to head back up," Gil said. "Let the feel of the blacktop guide us."

Darkness blinds, but still gives out its own funny sort of light, filling the mind with images. I wanted to spit it out, tell my friend all that I saw, but Gil had set the restrictions as well as the pace: no talking until we got to our station. In any case, the dead of night wouldn't allow those long, complicated musings that sometimes fill my mind even today. Darkness grants us the mystery of space and time, but then takes them away.

However it was going to turn out, I kept telling myself as we walked, it would be a story to retell. And even though I knew Gil and I would be far apart by autumn, someday we'd retell it to each other too, each of us filling in small details that the other would forget. What I didn't know was that our separation would be more than a calculable distance, more than me to university and Gil not. Funny how he was the one who loved taking cars apart and putting them back together while I was dead set on leaving West Virginia for good but couldn't even drive.

Gil lugged the bulk of the weight as we walked. I only had the lower legs and feet braced on my shoulders. Maybe less of a burden meant I could concentrate on my thoughts more, feel how darkness lets the air lick your skin. The temperature of that April night had dropped down and worked its way under my flannel. Cricket buzz made it chillier somehow—like the little breeze that we'd hear around us in the stirring of the trees.

I tried to concentrate on the carrying and keep pace as we headed further up the hollow. I couldn't tell Gil that Melanie had ignored me at school again that day, and that this weighed on me more than the mannequin we carried. The disappointment had been enough, in a roundabout way, to prompt a second trip to the guidance counselor—which then only left me feeling more nervous.

"Well not everyone has to go to college, Todd. Every individual has a different path in life," Ms. Rezzano said, plenty of G.I. pamphlets propped

up on the desk in her office. "Now tell me three things you really like. Then we can see what careers you might connect with. It could be cars, computers, airplanes. Anything at all."

"Pen pals. Pen pals. Pen pals," I answered, never saying I was really there to talk about Gil, not myself. Ms. Rezzano had to pause, which was the little crack that let Oslo flash through my mind again. Oslo and Christine. I wondered if everyone in Norway would really greet a stranger with a smile like Christine said they do, wondered if I might actually make it there some day.

Gil and I didn't stop for even a moment to rest or readjust, but no cars came down the road as we hauled that thing—exactly what we'd asked for when playing prayer warriors before setting out: "Lord, you know all things and see all needs. You know there's no place to hide along that road. Please give us the vision to walk the creek. And if not, just keep all the cars away—keep us from having to jump down over the embankment." Gil had prayed as we smirked and lifted two hands over our heads toward heaven.

But that made me think—and I'm sure Gil did the same—with no cars on the road, how long would we have to wait once we got things set up? Hours? What were the chances no car would come the entire night?

We were rounding the last curve before the straight stretch with Samson's store when Gil turned his head back toward me, breathing heavy. "Almost there," he said. Five minutes later we were setting the monstrosity down. "You first, man. Get its legs onto the road. And do it easy."

With little strain I started sliding the two large legs down my shoulders until the mannequin's feet rested on the road. Gil let out a big sigh of relief after leaning the figure up and letting it stand on its own. I could see my friend's cream-colored teeth in the darkness as he huffed and caught his breath, and I could see the pale but shining plaster face of the creature we'd brought with us.

Gil raised his arm to wipe sweat from his brow. "Let's get it over there. Into position," he said. So we started to drag the thing—fairly frail despite its mass and bulk. "We better lift it again." After carrying the dummy a few more yards, we stopped to let it down once more, standing it to face away from the direction of Gil's house.

"Let me get out the Converse now," Gil said, smacking his hands together as if dusting off limestone from spelunking palms. He unzipped his backpack and took out the old sneakers. "Lift it up a little and I'll slide these on its feet."

"Sure," I said. "Want the flashlight?"

"No, no. Not until we're moving to our waiting spot." Gil slipped one shoe over its right foot, then the other, then took the Reds' cap from his

bag and fit it atop its head. "This is going to scare the hell out of someone," he said.

"You know six feet tall looks like eight in the darkness?"

Gil laughed for the first time that night. "Yeah, right, so let's get to our spot and watch." I handed him the flashlight and he flipped on its supernatural surge of light blasting back down the hollow. Then I followed as Gil tramped off the shoulder of the road, jumped over the ditch, and climbed a short ways up the wooded hill where we found a spot to crouch down between the trees.

"You good here?"

"Yep."

"See down there okay?"

"Perfect."

Gil clicked the flashlight off, the dying illumination bringing a new round, new feeling, of darkness. We waited a few minutes to let our eyes readjust and then Gil repeated the directives. "No matter what, don't make any sound. Got it? They'll be looking into the darkness and won't see us even if looking straight our way. If you move or make a sound though, all bets are off, so make sure you play possum until death."

"Yeah I know," I said.

"And that means no beeps, lights, belches, farts. No watches or pocket alarm clocks."

"I told you I brought nothing, man."

"Okay, good. And it starts now because we can't be for sure someone won't pass by on foot. You ready?"

"Ready."

So the long silence between Gil and I began. In the darkness you can keep a hold for ten minutes or so, a count—but then things start to lose shape, disintegrate. Even time itself. The mind can keep wandering, but any sense of time and place is mostly gone, hard to grasp. After thirty minutes it gets difficult to locate the mannequin, the road itself, or even any sense of direction. After thirty minutes it wasn't a foot or two between Gil and me, but an endless void. I thought again how it might take five minutes or the whole night for our charade to sizzle or fade, for someone in that mountain hollow to either drive up on the mannequin we'd horked from our school's drama club or else for us to give up. Never crossed my mind that our silence would drag on for decades.

I started thinking about how I'd explain it all in my next letters. Do other countries even have hollows? But I knew the story would be too long to relate to Dewi. And Patience hadn't written back yet. Chae-Yeong would probably be bored, but Louise and Aud would like it. So would Christine who

seemed upbeat about anything from carrion beetles to Appalachian slang. Sometimes I'd find myself doing odd things at school just so I could write her about it. I had six pen pals in all that year before heading off to Morehead State: one in Korea, one in Ghana, one in England, one in Indonesia, and two in Norway. I always requested female pen pals. Well, there was Abdul from Qatar, but he dropped after a single correspondence.

Christine was my first. And best. We'd exchanged letters since eighth grade. She was a year older than me and lived in Skytta, a little place about ten miles north of Oslo. About once every three letters, Christine told me she hoped one day she could visit America. "Maybe New York and California," she'd write. I figured she'd get to those places sooner than I would.

Christine always sent me something extra with her correspondences: a postcard of a polar bear or Munch painting, a decal of the Norwegian flag, a button of Oslo—things like that. I tried to reciprocate. When I could find them, I'd send her pictures of New River Gorge, our gold-domed state capitol, or Harpers Ferry. Sometimes I'd send her newspaper clippings from the Charleston Gazette—whatever I could get my hands on for free. Christine was my only pen pal, however, who never sent me a photo of herself. Well, she did send one picture of a group of six girls all in school uniform and wrote, "Guess which one is me. If any of them." I picked the cutest one, but she said that wasn't her, nothing more. What Christine actually looked like became all the more a mystery.

I lifted my head when Gil tapped three times on the tree trunk next to us, our agreed upon method to communicate someone was coming. Through the woods, a glow angled in the distance. I adjusted my haunches as the vehicle's lights and engine noise grew steadily stronger, a cryptid slowly approaching from another world. When the car came around the curve, its headlights hit us like something interplanetary, jolting—from darkness to light, one as blinding as the other.

We watched, time suspended as the vehicle moved closer, slowing down once its headlights reached our towering man standing motionless in the road. "It's my brother," Gil muttered. "He'll beat the living wally out of me."

I didn't reply, only thought about how much I hated Nate Newton. Still do. A typical, self-absorbed big-shot-for-nothing who always tried to rub my nose in dog crap every time we ever met. The most recent had been outside Myers Market: "Married a pen pal yet, Todd? Hope she's female."

"I thought you said he'd gone to Huntington yesterday," I whispered.

"Just shut up, man. He'll have a gun."

Nate Newton's little Ford came to a stop with two silhouettes sitting comfortably in the front seat. Then his arm danced as he laid into the horn,

its deep bellow reverberating in the hollow. My muscles tensed waiting for the car door to click and Nate to pop out. I jerked when it wasn't Nate who moved, but Gil. The flashlight flipped on for a brief moment, and I saw a blur as my friend rose and took off up the mountain in almost complete darkness. Branches crackled up the hillside as Nate's door whipped open and he stepped out in jeans and a Busch t-shirt. "Who the hell are you?" he said to the mannequin.

The words shot fear through me, and in the shadows of his car lights I stood up and bailed, too. Head down, floundering up the hill in whatever general direction I thought Gil might have lumbered, my arms reached to push away as many unseen tree limbs as possible not knowing where any of my steps would land. Within seconds, however, I knew Gil was gone, swallowed up by the dark woods, and that I should abandon any hope of finding him until all this was over and we'd made it back to his parents' house. Below me, behind me, Nate yelled on the road in fuzzy light, propelling me up the mountain. How long would it take to get to the top?

Further up the mountain, Nate, his car, and the road all disappeared, leaving me on a blind island of wooden slope, feeling my way through a climb that must have taken an hour. When I reached the ridge's slice of level land, I thought to call out for Gil—maybe he'd be within earshot—but nighttime sounds and sensations kept me quiet. Exhausted, I lay down and contemplated my next move. At some point my mind turned off and I fell asleep.

The next morning arrived like every other day—sun shining, birds chirping, and the tops of beach, elm, and oak swaying. I looked around still thinking Gil might appear, but the place felt like it had been empty of humans since creation. I stretched, stood up to piss, then took off back down the mountain.

When I reached the road, funnily enough, it popped into my mind not to ever write Christine about the whole adventure after all: the scene looked like a murder—limbs of the mannequin were torn off and thrown near the creek, its head lay in the ditch, and the torso rested in weeds, busted into pieces. Gil and I surely wouldn't claim it. Or clean it up. Whatever Nate Newton had done, that's how it would remain. But even if I didn't relay things to my pen pals, surely I'd give an account to someone in school next week. And Gil and I would definitely go over all of it with a good laugh. Probably more than once.

But by that Monday it seemed almost stupid to tell the story to any classmates. And the next year at Morehead State, the whole matter would constitute nothing but embarrassment, even outright irresponsibility when

I got an internship with the Lexington Fire Department the subsequent summer. Life moved on one step at a time: to another graduation four years later, then new employment, then my marriage to Lillian, three kids, a Presbyterian church, and my career with the PA Department of Human Services—and until now, hard to believe, I've still never told the story about Gil and I placing a mannequin in the road to anyone.

It's even harder to believe that Gil and I never retold the story to each other either. When I made it back to his house the next morning there was no sign of him, and in fact, after that night I barely even saw him again. I mean, yeah, we said "see ya" to each other in the hallways at school probably half a dozen times over the next month or two. And at graduation we sat in the same pit of chairs on stage, wasting away our final three hours of high school in pointless boredom. I phoned him on a couple of occasions as well, maybe more, but he was never around to take my call. If he phoned me back, he never got through or I never received any message. I didn't think about it too much at the time, but looking back, I can't imagine that we never really spoke again on account of what happened with our mannequin fiasco. Or because of anything that may have transpired between Gil and his brother. Maybe I'm wrong, but I figured it was just momentum and the forces that be: tests and girls and the warm weather of springtime, then graduation before we knew it. And whatever comes after that. Especially for the few kids like me who moved away.

At some point I kind of forgot the whole mannequin story myself actually. At college, I even lost interest in my pen pals, forgot about any desire to visit Norway. To be honest, I hardly ever thought of Gil either—much less his brother Nate who'd evolved into a successful life insurance salesman—until a few years ago when my mother called me and said he'd passed away in a car accident not a mile from his home, just right near where we'd set up that dummy. Sadly, with family and job and all, I didn't even have the time to travel back home for his funeral. By then there were plenty of old, distant friendships without much more than an attic to store them, and after Gil's death, I forgot him all over again—our mannequin story, too. "On with life," as Lillian always says.

But these things have a way of creeping back up on you in their own sort of darkness and light, and yesterday during my yearly trip back home to see Mom and Dad—both of whom are now approaching eighty years of age—I recalled Gil and the mannequin caper while taking a drive up that same hollow near the Newton's old home, some other family now living there, of course. I still might not have remembered it, but down the straight stretch near where Samson's store once stood, a crow took off from

an oak limb, flew out in front of me carrying something in its beak. Nothing extraordinary about a flying crow, but this was a finger dangling from its mouth and somehow I got a clear look at it despite driving, despite how quickly it all happens.

In that split second I remembered Gil for some reason—actually saw him, right before my eyes, saw him as we crouched together in those woods off the road in the moments before he switched off the flashlight and later took off up the mountain. Then I wondered, perhaps strangely, if somehow all the pieces and parts of that mannequin, crushed by Nate Newton and left to bits at roadside, might have somehow survived for decades. And if so, what is it that would call a crow to pick something of it up now, even if only a finger, just as I passed by for the first time in thirty years or so?

I thought more about it all evening, wishing it an easy question to ask of Lillian or a colleague. Or even a pen pal if I still had one. But the likely answer that any logical person would give me is that my eyes deceived me—that it was no finger, only a large grub or stripped twig. As with darkness, motion has a way of blurring time and space—like the flight of that crow or an accelerating car, and exponentially so when the two meet. In a way I guess it means you see less or you see wrong. Then again, I thought, is that always true? What I had seen appeared entirely clear. Maybe in some other strange way—in this case on account of motion rather than darkness—the obscuring of time and space lets you see something more, something that ordinarily would evade vision.

In bed last night, hearing Pops snore in the other room, I thought how if two boys stood a mannequin up on that road during the wee hours of the night and I'd have been the twenty-five-year-old man to drive up on it, I'd have cursed them and taken an axe to the dummy, too, and swore that this is why I wanted out of this place called West Virginia forever. On that last point, Gil would have surely disagreed. He'd disagree now, too, I suppose, if he was still around. Come to think of it, it might be nice if I could speak to him today after all these years, ask him how time has changed his perspectives and what he thinks now of the old mannequin we carried up the hollow together. And I'd ask him if he thinks it could have really been a finger in that crow's mouth.

On second thought, maybe I wouldn't bring it up at all. Not because it would be awkward necessarily, but maybe because now it just seems like there wouldn't be much fun to it anymore. And anyway, someone would have to break the ice: you know—explain why we were silent all those years.

DANIEL GLEASON

Tagged

Writing your kid's name with a marker
on all his junk before loading him
onto the bus for camp or for the first day
of school is an act of sorcery.
It's what we hope will become a one word
magic spell that keeps him safe from the hardness
of the world, because he's so far away,
at least measured in heart beats, and maybe
that first symbolic gift you gave him,
that thing the nurse put on his birth certificate
will have just enough power to keep
all the bad out and all the good in.

CAROL HAMILTON

Legends

To some it matters
what wood was pierced with the nails
used to pinion the Christ's hands
and feet, and some say dogwood.
Tiffany fractured light to pass
through glass, forming luminous blossoms,
each white petal fabled to hold a drop
of reddest blood. Here, though, held still
and silent, no breezes giving the flowers
spring whispers as they sift and search
day's new light, the blossoms are formed
from mottled and opalescent shades of gray
held splayed by the branches of this condemned-
by-legend tree. I see no red teardrops
on this twice-recreated flowering,
once by glass and once here on paper,
and new leaves and dogwood and crucifixion,
still come each spring, stirring us
again to find new life and hope.

KAREN LUKE JACKSON

Plumbed

Imagine me twirling—
arms outstretched, palms raised
toward heaven—a girl dizzying

in her yard on Alder Street, collapsing
onto a bed of St. Augustine grass.
She knows nothing of whirling dervishes.

Nothing of marriage or divorce,
or the surgery

when her sternum will be sawed open.
It's nothing more
than a plumber changing a gasket
a friend assures before I enter the OR

wake two days later so ballooned
with fluid that eyelids refuse to open.
I'd bought a burial plot

and white cotton shroud.
Wouldn't you, too, have prepared?

Last night, body tangled in wires and sheets,
my childhood home burned.
The pine floors my father sawmilled,
the kitchen where my mother canned.

Who fiddled my heart
while my chest lay splayed?
Who spun me back
to that young girl's world?

MINDY FRIDDLE

Weather Girl

Gunner was a decent plumber, but slow as hell. It took him two days to install the Jenkins' farmhouse sink, and that put me behind. Toy Jenkins had started to complain about how long their kitchen renovation was taking—so, yeah, I was irritated and distracted that morning when Brynn called me. Maybe that's why I missed the first sign of trouble ahead.

"Hey," she said. "You busy?"

I cradled the phone, wiping away the grit on my hands. "I'm starting on a splashboard and it's—"

"Meet me for dinner?"

"Tonight? I was hoping to finish up here."

"It's been a rough day, Jake. We need to talk." Did I hear the distress punching through her trained broadcast voice? I hear it now.

She took my silence as a yes. "See you then."

I shoved the phone in my pocket and ran my finger around the sink, checking the seal. I was proud of the marble counters I'd installed—but I hoped the tile splashboard would be my tour de force. That was my favorite part—gutting places—even more than the results. The possibilities. No matter how well the renovations turned out, the ideal still beckoned, out of reach. All my refurbished kitchens were Platonic cave shadows.

* * *

That night, I waited at our favorite restaurant near the station at eight, Brynn's dinner hour. I sat in a booth by a window. The traffic had slowed to a crawl. It was raining buckets. The spring had been unusually dreary and wet, the kind of weather people complained about. But I was secretly pleased. I felt a kinship with the rising doom of water. The anniversary of my son's death fell in April, amid the splendor of azaleas, dogwoods, and daffodils. The cruelest month? No kidding. The world screamed rebirth when there was only death on my mind. For once, this spring seemed to grieve along with me. When I confessed this to Brynn over breakfast, she'd hugged me and said that made sense. "You'll be pleased to know another low-pressure front is on the way. We're going to have periods of heavy rain all week."

I didn't want flash floods or suffering. I just wanted the fog and rain to cloak the terrible, bright beauty of spring a little longer.

"You have to admit," Brynn had pointed out, "all this rain is good for your business."

Yes, there was that, too. Leaky roofs and flooded basements had become a regular epidemic in Euphoria. My voicemail overflowed like the gutters—which is what you get when you add "no job too small" to your business cards.

Still, it was selfish of me to enjoy such freaky weather patterns because Brynn bore the brunt of it. She couldn't walk the dogs without a passerby accosting her, demanding to know when the rain would stop. She was chief meteorologist for the local news—many a Euphorian believed her job description included not only predicting the weather but controlling it.

"You're the weather girl, ain't you?" someone would ask her in the hardware store or dry cleaners. "I'm the meteorologist," Brynn insisted. Being referred to as a "weather girl," usually from old men who still used words like stewardess and housewife and gal, no longer amused her. "When's this mess going to stop?" someone would demand with the kind of entitled irritation you might see at a customer service desk.

Brynn suggested rain barrels. Or she talked about climate change, because she did not often bypass an opportunity to educate our populace on the issue, which did not go over well. Global warming? Caused by humans?

I spotted Brynn's silver Prius now, turning into the parking lot just as the rain let up. The sight of her determined stride across the pavement in her sleeveless, dandelion-yellow dress, gracefully dodging puddles in her heels, filled me with pleasure. She slid across from me in the booth, her neat ponytail gleaming like a shiny penny, her hazel eyes wide and thoughtful, easily hurt. My love was verklempt. I signaled to Tru we were ready for our usual.

"So," she said, "Phil called me in for a little talk today."

"Huh. This about the climate change stuff?"

She nodded. "He admonished me for—let me see if I get this right—expressing my own views about air quality standards and not those of the station."

"Seems pretty objective. Either the air is polluted or it's not, right?"

"He told me, 'You're not expressing the opinions of Brynn Dupree. You're representing the station.' I asked him how I know what the views of the station are. He says,'simple.' And he hands me this Chamber of Commerce brochure, all about attracting business to South Carolina. No more talk about the EPA, he says."

I pictured blustering Phil, trying to ruffle Brynn's silky expertise. I smiled.

"I'm glad you find this amusing," she said with a sigh.

"Well, it's ludicrous, right? You're the best meteorologist that place has ever had. They're lucky to have you."

"Phil said there's a consultant coming to work with us on 'optics and appearance.' God, I miss Newton."

Newton, the former station manager who'd hired Brynn, had retired six months before, replaced by Phil—a middle-aged, ex-college football player who brought his combative tendencies and voracious ambition from the locker room to the newsroom.

"And the whole time Phil is talking to me, he has his arms crossed. Bad body language. You'd think they teach that in Management 101."

"I'm sure he flunked out of that one."

"Or maybe he was just trying to show off his cufflinks. He wears a different pair every day. He's making Ted do traffic reports in a suit and tie now."

Our order arrived. Steam curls rose from the rice. The aroma of lemon grass and cilantro drifted up.

"Jake, this isn't good."

"Your dinner?"

"My career." Her eyes filled. She pushed away her plate. "I can't eat. I'm too...angry."

I reached over, put my hand on hers.

"My contract is up for renewal in August, you know."

"Whoa. That's maybe overreacting, don't you think?"

"We don't have enough equity in our house to sell yet. If I lose my job—"

"Hold up. You're panicking. You had one bad day—"

"Being at Phil's mercy is so...frustrating. And scary." A zigzag of worry crossed her face. "I just...I don't want to be caught unprepared."

Brynn saw trouble on the horizon, a storm named Phil. She was a forecaster, after all, schooled in anticipating. She was a planner, a strategist, while I remained blinkered as a plough horse, taking one day at a time. Myopia kept me sober and sane, shielded from the poisonous past—my sixteen-year-old boy dying alone in the twisted wreckage of my Cherokee five years before—and the perilous future. Without Brynn's income, yes, we were sunk. We'd taken a second mortgage to finance my business, which had yet to turn a profit. I refused to acknowledge the brewing storm. I assumed it would blow over. I was wrong.

* * *

A month later, the rains stopped, a brutal heat wave set in. June mornings, Brynn and I began rising before dawn—Brynn for her daily runs, me for my slow morning jogs. I was nowhere near Brynn's level of fitness, nor nearly as dedicated, but I'd grown fond of a pedestrian's attentive view. Brynn's three-mile runs were meticulously planned, along the spine of Main Street. I meandered through our neighborhood, then strolled around town, basking in the luminous patina of history. Downtown Euphoria straddled the grade of a railroad track, a humped seam, a scar bisecting its heart. Storefronts and houses built more than a century ago hugged the train track, where a handful of inhabitants were lonely enough to welcome the sound of civilization—a chugging locomotive that shook rafters. It was a different story today, of course. The closer the tracks, the cheaper the rent. Now you paid for the privilege of distance.

In rosy sunrises, I'd pass Euphoria mill, its spindles and looms clapped into silence since its closure in 1989. It was a dystopian landscape, all broken glass, collapsed roof, graffiti; a palimpsest of the boom and bust in my hometown.

My paths were sneakily efficient, like a gerrymandered voting district, avoiding two sites that triggered painful memories: the Euphoria College campus and Stagecoach Road. The campus was a knife at my throat on bad days, reminding me this had to work, this business of mine, that no one left a tenured academic job these days, especially a promising young history scholar who, fifteen years later, was none of those things anymore. I always stopped short of Stagecoach Road and doubled back toward home, clobbered by such loss, it took effort not to howl. My son had died on Stagecoach Road. I never took it.

* * *

The next distress call from Brynn came one afternoon in July. The meeting with the consultant had been a disaster, she said. I met her for dinner.

"So, tell me about this consultant," I said. "This minion from the fiery depths of hell."

She laughed, but in a wet, shaky way, close to a sob. "She said I need to be 'softened.' Oh, and I'm an outsider. I scare people."

"That's nuts. She wasn't serious, right?"

"She told me, 'I believe the problem can be corrected with a few changes. The viewers' perceptions can always be adjusted.' I must have looked as freaked out as you are now because she told me, 'Oh dear. Phil hasn›t had a chat with you?' I mean, Jake. *Had a chat?* God help me."

"Soften? I don't get it. How?"

"Voice and wardrobe. She said my Midwestern accent is 'rather clipped.'"

"You don't have an accent."

"She told me to veil my hard Rs."

"Veil?"

"She gave me a list of words to 'soften.' Like Doppler. She said my Rs are too sharp and it's 'unsettling.' Dopplerrrr. North. Thunder. Oh, and lightning. 'Around here, dear, it's pronounced LITEning.' "

"Did she happen to mention the accuracy of your forecasts?"

"Yes! My forecasts are 'wonderfully' accurate. But no one likes a Chicken Little in this business, she tells me. They want a *cheerful* forecaster. So, I got pissed off. She says, 'Oh, dear. I can see you're upset. I haven't done my job properly.' And I said, 'yeah, what *is* your job?' That got her powdered nose out of joint. 'My job is to improve yours,' she says. And then she hits me with wardrobe changes. She pulls out fabric swatches, peaches, and pinks. Unlike the red dress I'm wearing now, which is apparently off-putting and overbearing."

"Man, I love that red dress."

"I need to take it down to rose. Especially with my 'lovely coppery tresses.' Three quarter sleeves with a pale pink shell blouse. So that means a whole new wardrobe for me. Thrills, huh? Strings of pearls, here I come. Nice classic lines, she said, but take the edge off with a ruffle, a hint of lace."

"So, what, she wants to turn you into a big phony Scarlett O'Hara announcing dew point temperatures in a hoop skirt?"

"Yeah, right? And three deep smiles every forecast. That's what she suggested."

"I'll count them for you."

"And there's something else. Even worse."

Our food arrived. I dipped a spring roll in mustard. Brynn pushed aside her plate.

"Today, Phil demanded I redo the tease. I said something like, 'heat and humidity brings poor air quality to the Upstate. Can we expect clearer skies ahead? Stay tuned to Weather Team 7 to find out.' Then Johnny—the camera guy—calls me. Says Phil wants a do over. And the poor guy says the boss wants me to take out the part about air quality. Keep it light. I said, 'Keep poor air quality light? Like I'm supposed to gloss over the fact we have particles in the air from Atlanta's cars and our smokestacks that we are all just sucking in our lungs?' Anyway." She heaved a big sigh. "I did it over. Through gritted teeth."

"Jesus, what an asshole. I'm sorry you have to put up with Phil."

"Then he drops this bomb. He wants to see my forecast *before* I go on the air. To *approve* it. Like I'm an intern! So, he comes to my desk—and looks over my shoulder and scrutinizes my five-day forecast. The air quality reports are tipping over one hundred and fifty—red. Phil is scowling and shaking his head. 'No need to harp on that,' he says. 'Do it over. People want to know about the heat. When it's going to let up. No thermometers with code red—hell, they'll think we're under a terrorist alert. Our viewers don't want to see a bunch of doom and gloom. I thought I'd made that clear.' "

"You're *kidding*."

"I kid you not. It took every shred of my patience to tell him that sure, I'll redo my forecast. I showed him these goofy, buck-toothed sunshines—I couldn't resist a little sarcasm—and you know what he said? 'I like those.' "

"So you did revise the forecast?"

"Of course. It's not like I have a choice. But first I had some fun with my original forecast. Amped it up big time, added a smokestack, put in some gas masks, some skull and cross bones, had a ball making it real. You know, like writing a letter to your enemy and then never sending it? It's supposed to be therapeutic."

* * *

Weeknights, I'd watch the eleven o'clock news and Brynn's forecast, then I'd tackle the crossword puzzle, until she arrived. Our dogs would leap to their feet whimpering with excitement, and we'd greet her at the door. But that night, after gutting the Connors' bathroom, I was so tired, I nearly fell asleep to a reporter giving a live remote about a trailer fire. I roused myself when Brynn's forecast came on. Which was a good thing. Something was wrong.

She started out a little shaky—mumbling about the heat wave and three-digit temps. Not her usual smooth intro. I detected a wisp of nervousness, her lips parting, closing, it was all in her mouth. Nothing anyone would notice, maybe, but me.

The temperatures on the map came up, along with graphics of agonized, sweating sunshines. And gas masks.

"This static high-pressure system is holding down the heat and humidity like a...a foot grinding a cigarette." She pointed to a garish, weeping thermometer bleeding red behind her, festooned with skulls and crossbones. "The air quality reports are tipping over one hundred and fifty."

Was this my Brynn, giving Phil the finger? She wasn't toning anything down, that was for sure.

"The air quality index is based on sulfur dioxide, nitrogen dioxide, carbon monoxide, ozone, and lead particles." She clicked through

photographs of smokestacks and traffic jams. "Tomorrow, no jogging or exercising outside if you value your lungs. Because the air quality will—"

"So, wow. The heat wave continues?" Bob McCobb, the anchor, boomed in his big baritone. Interrupted her, for God's sake.

"What?" This caught her by surprise. It was apparently time to banter pleasantly with the anchors.

"Yes. More heat," she said. "Smog and oppressive heat."

"Sounds like we should all stay inside tomorrow," Cathy the co-anchor said, making a pouty face.

"That's not a bad idea," Brynn said. "Stay inside."

* * *

When she came home that night, I met her at the door with open arms. She began to tear up.

"Hey, hey. Come here." I embraced her.

"I screwed up." My neck grew warm and wet from her tears.

"Brynn, sweetie, it's okay."

"No, it's not. It's not."

She pulled away. Her eyes were smudged with mascara. "I loaded the wrong graphics. I mean, the intern did, but I didn't check behind her before I went live."

She threw her purse and blazer in a chair, stepped out of her heels.

"Mistakes like that happen sometimes. You told me—"

"No, *this? This* was a disaster. The station was flooded with calls about people scared to death about the air quality. Like it's Armageddon. Can you imagine?"

Unfortunately, yes.

"It wasn't until we were on the air that I realized what happened, but there was nothing to do but proceed. I looked into the camera, and I...I carried on."

"That should count for something. Carrying on."

"The toss. Oh, the toss was a nightmare."

"The...toss?"

"When you're supposed to cut back to the anchors with some pithy, clever comment? You should have seen their faces." She chuckled bitterly. "Cathy and Bob looked at me like I was holding a gun."

"Did you meet with Phil and explain—"

"After we went to break—Phil—his face was code-red. I got the hell out of there."

"Meet with him tomorrow. Explain it was a screw-up, the intern loading the wrong stuff—tell him about that."

"I'm not going to throw some poor college kid under the bus."

"I didn't say blame her. I said explain. Surely it adds context."

She sighed. "I need to get out of these clothes."

I followed her into our bedroom. "I've got projects lined up for weeks," I said. "And more coming in. I'll have my contractor's license soon. So, there's that." She gave me a look full of tenderness. My naïveté withered under the spotlight of her pragmatism.

"Next week my tapes will be circulated and viewed by station managers from Portland, Maine to Flagstaff, Arizona. I already set that in motion, Jake. Plan B."

My stomach clenched. "Maybe you can find something near—like Charlotte? You could commute...maybe?"

"I'll do my best," she said with a sad smile, "but it doesn't look good." She shed her clothes, left them in a heap on the floor, then wiped off her make up. Her bare face emerged, tired and vulnerable. "I've got a shot to make it in a top twenty market, but in another three years? Who knows? I'm not getting any younger."

"You're thirty-seven!"

"Exactly."

She ran a bath. "I'm going to call in sick. I'm taking tomorrow off."

"Good plan."

She stepped into our clawfoot tub, lowered herself into the steaming water. "Oh my God, I just want to wash away this day." She lay back, submerged under water, her coiffed hair liberated, floating like burgundy kelp. Then she sat up, glistening and flushed, and looked at me. "Jake. You will come with me, right?"

I felt as if something was tearing apart in my chest.

* * *

Not long after Phil fired her, Brynn landed a job. She moved to Seattle. I stayed behind, to sell the house. My business had picked up—a kitchen and two bathrooms to renovate. Word of mouth—the best advertising in Euphoria. After our house sold, I leased a garage apartment before I joined her. I had to finish my projects, didn't I?

That was not part of the plan.

A year passed, then another. Every day, I allow myself a luxury. I pull up Brynn's weather report on her new station's website. I watch her forecast. Just five minutes. Anymore and it would undo me.

She's enjoying herself at her new job. She wears brazen yellow, funky purple, electric blue. She no longer shirks from air quality reports.

Her morning forecasts are merry affairs—she banters with the morning news crew. Flirts with the sports guy.

As for me, I have my work. I have this day, another morning walk through the streets shot with memories. I didn't see it, how I couldn't leave, how tethered I am, how this place has its hooks in me. I didn't plan it, I didn't decide to stay, but here I am. In Euphoria.

CAROL PARRIS KRAUSS

Those Just Beyond the Backyard

Aunt Frances summoned my daughter to the cusp of the yard. Rattled the feed bag and yodeled. The blue birds, cardinals, and robin red breast emerged. Clattered the willow tree fronds and mountain laurel limbs. Two deer perched behind a mess of honeysuckle and the albino squirrel nibbled oiled seeds from her outstretched hand.

She chatted with them for a spell. In her muddy brogans and worn overalls, counseled my daughter. Gifted her secrets of tending those beyond the backyard. How mountain people could converse with anyone, about anything.
That we had *the sight*, too.

The youngest of four, raised poor, Frances married in 11th grade. Reared three boys and a girl. Watched Uncle Bill go to the paper mill for third shift his whole adult life. Toting a sausage biscuit and orange Nehi in a grease-soaked paper bag.

Now her husband, two brothers, and sister have all passed. Even Cob the cat has gone. No longer weaves through the rows of Silver Queen. Frances still tends those just beyond the backyard. Summons hers who have gone—Bill, Bobby, Richard, and Ann holding Cob—to step to the cusp of the lawn. To take her hand.

Stay and chat with her for a spell.

GARY LARK

Gifts

We can hear the tink-tonk
of the bellwether bringing in her flock
with a storm arriving and us pulling whiskey
from the gift bottle left by old Jabberwock Sally
along with a round of cheese we traded for,
it being Christmas and us good customers
and her full of the spirit.

Shep and Ginger, wagtail sheepdogs
yip and yap at us to do our job
now that they've done theirs.
So out we go in the sideways rain
to pen the girls and give them some grain.
It's a small flock with a fine, dark wool
that brings a good price.

Glad of our antifreeze, we check
for the odd limp or lump, they're a pampered lot,
not like the neighbor's gang of range beasts.
I wonder if they know how good they have it.
Probably not, you belly up to the trough,
sleep in straw and think that's normal.
The fire feels good and the roof is sound.

AL MAGINNES

Inevitable

When we were salt, when we were watery cells
drifting toward sand, toward one another,
when we were flesh on our uncounted path
to dust, it was written that we would walk,
our feet marring the earth we were busy becoming.

MICHAEL SCHOEFFEL

Coffee Shop

I catch the wave of what could be in the mornings. Usually at a coffee shop, while I'm writing. I write at coffee shops as often as possible because they make me feel like I'm somewhere special in time. Surrounded by people doing their own special things. Working on spreadsheets for small businesses I'll never know. Sketching. Pulling out notebooks and staring at the wall for long periods of time, then scribbling something. Having philosophical conversations. The scent of slightly burnt coffee beans hangs in the air and all of us feel at home. In our own worlds, yet part of a grander community. A community of *coffee shop people*.

I'm not trying to over-romanticize it. A lot of it has to do with the coffee itself. The caffeine, I mean. You sit there at a table with one wobbly leg while a woman with a three-legged black lab walks through the line, orders, leaves. Cold air rushes in when she opens the door. A bell dings. You take a couple sips of the hot, earthy liquid, and off goes your mind. Now you're floating. Near the ceiling, mingling with the smoky coffee bean scent. You're settling into your body again. No longer do you feel like a stranger. Suddenly, your life is full of possibilities. You could live in France, in Costa Rica, in Siberia, right now, if you were truly determined to make it work. It's a matter of logistics…making a small change here, a bigger one here, quitting your job, yes, but that's no problem, no problem at all, and viola, you're living the life you've dreamed in some desirable foreign country. It's achievable now. Hopefully this caffeine high will last all day. You've got a lot of planning to do.

A woman with dreadlocks strolls in with her daughter of maybe three or four. The daughter sprints straight down the middle of the coffee shop, stopping only when she catches a glimpse of you, sitting there with your headphones, listening to pretentious piano music and making vague plans about moving to Europe. These are the strange moments. She looks timid, so you wave and smile, trying to put her at ease. It works. She laughs and is off again, sprinting to the back of the room and leaping onto a black couch. Your good deed is done for the day. You've made a child feel like the world is a decent place to be, even if you're not sure you believe that yourself.

Then there are the baristas. Everyone has their favorites, even if they've only ever spoken about the weather to them. It's this limited interaction

that allows you to concoct grand backstories for these people. They work in a coffee shop, so they *must* be interesting. Artists. Stoners. College students. Drunks. If you were ever to have a full conversation with one of them, all of these fantasies would schlep away like dead skin. Overexposure is the murderer of romance. So keep the baristas where they are: at a distance, behind the counter, moving to the command of the order sheet, concentrating on everything but you. Even as you consider their every motion, wondering what kind of beautiful works of art they must create when they're at home. It's all silly fantasy stuff—child-like, really—but you allow yourself to be taken by it, because life isn't always about being rational. Escapism can be a salve. At least temporarily.

Sometimes you're away from the coffee shop for a long period of time. When you return, the entire staff has changed, save maybe one of two people. Your favorites are always gone. And you can't help but wonder where they went, which universities they've enrolled in, what countries they're trekking across, what other coffee shop they now work at. Maybe on the other side of town, closer to home. Perhaps even (gasp) at a Starbucks. That green behemoth. Oh well. I'm sure they did whatever was best for them, and in the end, that's all that really matters. For you, and for everyone else. We should always be doing what's best for ourselves, at all times. But it doesn't work like that. This world's too full of ambiguity. And we, ourselves, are too many people, all with different motives, different goals. Different urges.

The group of five gray haired 60-something year old men is at it again. They're somehow here every day you're here, talking about philosophy and politics, roundtabling how they'd run the world differently if they were in charge. Some days, it's endearing to know people still have time to do stuff like this – and not just in Europe, where we'd all like to be. Other days, these men get too loud, and your caffeine is wearing off, and through your headphones you hear them say words like "Heidegger" and "socialism" and "Trump," and you think "Jesus Christ, if you really want to change the world, stop talking about it and *do it*." Gabbing is for the birds. The other day one of the guys, the loud one with a German accent who always wears a thin gray t-shirt even in the dead of winter, arrived before the rest. He was sitting there, upright and stoic, sipping his coffee, while "Like a Rolling Stone" played quietly. When the chorus came around, the gray t-shirt man belted out "how does it feeeeeeeeel" in a baritone befitting of an opera. One time, just like that, then silence. A couple people looked at him. Some smiling, others grimacing. Then the guy went back to sipping coffee as Bob moved on to the next verse.

It's time to leave. The wave has crested and broken. The guy sketching in a notebook across from you is gone. The little girl and her dreadlocked

mother, gone. Your dreams of international living are abating. The glow still remains but it's subdued now, smooth and steady, flat as a pond. Pack your laptop into your bookbag and make your way out the door, into the cold. It'd be nice if one of the baristas glanced up as you were leaving, gave you a friendly goodbye. It wouldn't even have to be one of your favorites. Just any old one. But it doesn't happen. The line has gotten too long. They're too busy. You're too busy, too. Outside the door, all of life's harsh realities await. You can't float forever. But it's good to do it every once and awhile. If only to remind yourself that there's a ground to return to.

TERRI McCORD

Sun Surround

The sun slams
the windshield

or is a shroud
Polaroid print light

that evaporates
our being

After reading the government's
warnings on how
to respond
to a nuclear blast specifically,
not a tornado, or avalanche,
or a gunman, my friend said
there are no coincidences,

the sun ahead spreads otherworldly
or othermore
wraps the car front, flames
in the eye, it all goes bright
with invisibility.

The traffic disappears
except for the muted
blinks of brakes

It is 4:08. In a few minutes,
the sun has dropped,
enough to see, to make

the turn into the parking lot.

S.G. FROMM

Mondi's Malocchio

Mrs. Mondi didn't like the odds.

I didn't intuit this through her facial expression or intonation. After answering her question about the chance of her husband not waking up from the anesthesia, she looked at me in silence for all of five seconds and then said:

"I don't like the odds."

Her husband, propped up in bed amidst the folds of his paper hospital gown, smiled at me and shrugged. He did it smoothly and quickly, a pantomime of benign futility. My guess is he did it a lot.

I tried a different tack.

"If we filled Bryant-Denny Stadium to its capacity of 100,077 and anesthetized *everyone*, maybe one person would not wake up."

This anecdote usually calms jittery patients and spouses. Not Mrs. Mondi.

"One person?" she asked. "*Who* exactly would that be?"

I gave Mrs. Mondi a reassuring smile. It was every bit as reflexive as Mr. Mondi's shrug. It was Mrs. Mondi's turn to switch strategies. She asked me how many procedures I did in one day. It wasn't a question most patients or spouses asked, even though it should be. I told her I averaged about nine or 10 between 8 a.m. and noon.

"That's good," she said. "I read on the Web that you should steer clear of doctors who do something like 40 colonoscopies in the morning."

That was the problem with the Internet: it was a complication when it spread faulty data, and even worse when it was accurate.

"Ok," Mrs. Mondi said. "Let's move on. What about the Malocchio?"

"The what?"

"The Malocchio," she said, nodding toward her husband.

Mr. Mondi reached to his neck and showed me a gold amulet on a chain. It was a tiny hand with the forefinger and little finger pointing downward.

"The nurse said it had to come off," Mrs. Mondi said.

"It does," I said.

"Why?"

I could have given her all the reasons, ranging from the prevention of burns from electrocautery units to reducing the possibility of infections, but realized detailed answers were a waste of energy with Mrs. Mondi.

"It's established protocol."

"So is a Malocchio," she said.

"I'm sorry?"

"The Malocchio. It's an established protocol."

She went over to her husband and took the amulet from his fingers, raising it to the full extent of the gold chain.

"It wards off evil spirits," she said.

"Well, that's—"

"—no. It's not."

"Not what?"

"A superstition. It's been around since 3500 B.C., the Neo—"

"—yes. The Neolithic period. But that was then. This is now. And pre-surgical protocols have to be followed."

Mrs. Mondi shot me another look. Mr. Mondi matched it with another reassuring shrug. He reached around his neck, unclasped the Malocchio and handed it to Mrs. Mondi. She put it on.

"One more question," she said. "How long will it take?"

"Anywhere from 30 to 60 minutes, depending on a range of factors."

"Such as?"

There were a dozen. I gave her one.

"If I locate any polyps, I'll need to remove them."

"I see."

Mrs. Mondi didn't ask about polyps. She didn't seem concerned. Perhaps the Malocchio was doing its job.

I briefly visited with a few more pre-op patients. None had questions. They wanted to get it over with. Nurse Havermeyer assisted me. Dr. Gardenaur was the anesthesiologist. He was necessary. We were using propofol. It's trickier, but cleaner. It puts the patient under fast, lets up just as quickly and keeps the traffic moving.

If we're fortunate, we have an art, a craft. Mine is with the colonoscope. Tip deflection. Torque. Air insufflation and suction. My hands and fingers moved on their own. The first eight procedures went well. We'd be able to wrap up the morning load well before lunch. Mr. Mondi was last. His procedure went as fluidly as the others. I found two polyps and removed them.

Post-op is as choreographed as the procedure. The patients are wheeled into recovery, where they wake up groggy and relieved. Some have post-op gastric discomfort. Some are hungry, some are nauseous. Gardenaur rides herd during this phase, making sure the nurses check breathing, circulation, consciousness and levels of oxygen. Everyone cycled out without a problem.

Except for Mr. Mondi.

"What?" I asked.

"Mr. Mondi," Nurse Havermeyer repeated. "He's not waking up."

I went to the little curtained cubicle that contained the unconscious Mr. Mondi, Gardenaur, another nurse named Adkins and, of course, Mrs. Mondi. She glared at me when I walked in. I tried not to look at her. We reviewed Mr. Mondi's vitals. All seemed normal. We then reviewed his medical history. There was nothing there but a history of high blood pressure, well under control with Lisinopril.

"We'll do a VBG," Gardenaur said.

"A what?" Mrs. Mondi asked.

"Venous blood gas," I said. "We want to make sure his electrolyte and hematocrit levels are normal."

Mrs. Mondi had no idea what electrolytes and hematocrit levels were, but she seemed comforted that we were doing something. She kept looking at Mr. Mondi's face, waiting. We all did. The VBG came back normal. Mr. Mondi remained unresponsive to verbal and painful stimuli. Blood pressure, body temperature, pulse and breathing rates were normal. We waited another hour. Nothing. It was time for a tomography exam.

"Speak English," Mrs. Mondi said.

"It allows us to see inside his body with a combination of X-rays and a computer that generates pictures," I said.

"Ok," she said. "Ok."

Gardenaur and I were looking at the scan within an hour.

"Anything?" I asked.

"Nothing," he said. "Nada."

"Well. I guess that means we wait."

"Wait?" Mrs. Mondi asked when I told her. "Is *that* all you have? Wait?"

"It's the best—"

"—no. It's *not* the best. Do another test. Draw some more blood. Do *something*."

I calmed her down as best I could. Gardenaur did the same, repeatedly telling her it was just a matter of time. That was a mistake.

"Define it," Mrs. Mondi said.

"What?" Gardenaur asked.

"A matter of time. How long?"

Gardenaur didn't answer. Neither did I.

"In the meantime, we'll transfer him to the ICU," Gardenaur said.

Somehow he thought this would sound reassuring. Mrs. Mondi looked from us to the silent Mr. Mondi.

"Good God," she said. "Good Christ."

We waited. I kept checking every 15 minutes. Mrs. Mondi sat at his bedside, glaring at me amid the soft whoosh of the ventilator and the steady beep of the oscilloscope. Seven hours went by. Mr. Mondi remained unresponsive to sternal rubs and nail bed pressure.

"What do we do now?" Mrs. Mondi asked.

"We wait," I said.

"You keep *saying* that. We wait. How long is enough. And then what?"

I didn't answer.

"You people," she finally said after Gardenaur conveniently excused himself. "You *lure* us in. You tell us how *routine* this all is. You reassure us with all your confidence. Then this happens. *This*. And then you go on with your lives. You go to the gym. And then home to your families and a cocktail and dinner and some television. Tell me. Is that what you're going to do?"

She looked away from me and back to her husband. I excused myself and said I would return in a while. I went to the lounge, had a cup of coffee and tried to distract myself by watching the news. The hills ringing Los Angeles were on fire. It seemed they were always brittle, always burning. There was another school shooting in a small town near Wichita, Kansas. Three dead, including the shooter. I looked at my watch and returned to the ICU. Mrs. Mondi still sat where she'd been. She looked up at me, but not with a glare. It was something else, open and moist and urgent. I looked over at Mr. Mondi. Nothing.

Mrs. Mondi reached behind her head, unclasped the Malocchio and held it out to me.

"Please," she said.

"Mrs. Mondi,—"

"—please."

She put the Malocchio in my palm. I looked at its long, extended fingers and noticed how detailed it was, including the lines etched into the palm. They're called palmar flexion creases. I kept this information to myself. Mrs. Mondi had no use for it.

"Please," Mrs. Mondi repeated.

I put it around my neck. Mrs. Mondi rose and fastened the clasp. She stood beside me, eyes closed, hands clasped. She started mumbling. It was some kind of prayer. I couldn't make out he words. I stepped closer and leaned over Mr. Mondi, fingering the Malocchio.

"Yes," Mrs. Mondi said. "Yes."

I bent further, my nose nearly touching Mr. Mondi's, looking for a sign, the flutter of an eyelid, the twitch of a finger. I knew it was there, just under the surface, waiting to rise.

MEGAN MARY MOORE

For Evelyn McHale

Art happens.
—Margaret Atwood

So, on May 1, 1947,
when Robert Wiles walked by the
Empire State Building and saw a body

atop a car, fallen from sky,
collapsed on her stage
under a singular sun-spotlight,

the hot, black car-metal
molded to fit her form,
did art happen?

Is that why Wiles took the photo?
Life Magazine called it
"The Most Beautiful Suicide."

Printed alongside the photo, was
Evelyn McHale's suicide note:

I don't want anyone,
in or out of my family,
to see any part of me.

I am afraid that art is bodies,
born to be looked at
in adoration and disgust.

Because artists and God
fall asleep the same way,
wondering what the eyes will say
about what they made.

Evelyn, I am sorry and,
Evelyn, I am afraid
that art happens, and I am afraid that art
belongs not just to the hands that made it
but to the eyes that watch it die.

RYAN NELSON

Aged Spirit

On the nose, a light
citrusy zest for life
and faint floral notes
of promise and hope.
On the palate, a bite
of bitter tannic regret
with a dry finish
of phenolic loneliness.
A spirit forgotten
and left in the barrel
a few too many years.

SCOTT THOMAS OUTLAR

The Good Old Days

We always rode
the late night trains

or walked
by moonlight
to the next hit
in the distance

Star dust fever
was an addiction

Salivating tongues
licked the universal flux
and synchronicity
was as common
as the sun
rising each morning

We huddled close
to the junkies

or kissed the streets
and the golden feet
of homeless gurus
singing silent stories
long forgotten
by civilization

Central heating
was our savior

and we slept like babies
medicated with a pacifier of gin

BILLY GEE

Peanut Butter Balls and the Unanswered Letter

I can't offer anything, not talent, not beauty. I'm just a moderately alive mass. Most people call me a humbug if that gives any sense.

One thing is always a constant. I have a mouthful of peanut butter pretzel balls.

* * *

It's the middle of the night. I can't sleep. I'm on the pot when I hear the phone ring. I pull up my underwear and hobble to the phone. Still chewing away.

"Hello?" I say.

"I'm sorry to call you, but…" Girl. Young-ish. Raspy voice. Just a scam.

"Who is this?"

Silence.

"Who is this? We've had these calls before. You can't just play this with me."

"It's Nancy. It's about John."

It's my son's wife. We don't talk. Not in a while, anyhow. I don't say anything.

"Listen. John's been hurt. Bad. He was hit by a car while riding his bike. He was changing lanes. You need to fly to L.A. right now...Are you there?"

* * *

Molly never wakes easy. When she hears what I'm telling her, the wailing begins. Thankfully we live in the middle of nowhere.

"We've got to go. You can cry in the car. But we have to go right now."

"What happened? How did this happen?"

She sits up in bed, starts praying.

"You can pray in the car. Let's go."

She dresses slowly, fumbling her buttons. Her mind in a shambles. She pushes her clothes into a bag. I swipe for flights on my phone. She's finally ready. She goes to the dresser and pauses, staring down into a drawer of jewelry.

"Molly!"

She ignores me and fishes around in the box. She pulls out a bracelet John gave her for Christmas years ago.

* * *

A few hours later, Molly and I sit on a runway waiting. I slip my hand into the bag at my feet and take another handful of peanut butter pretzels. The taste spills all through me. My brain floods with peanut butter. I'm happy, I really am when I eat these stupid things. Okay, I am probably not that happy with my life, but I do like peanut butter pretzel balls a whole lot.

I keep them with me at all times. I reach down and take a handful. That's the worst I do. I don't drink. I don't smoke. I eat, though. Boy, do I eat. That is how I get to sleep.

Crunch. Crunch. Crunch.

* * *

I look out the little window at the night above the clouds. All the stars lay right there with nothing between me and them. It makes me feel a little bit like a kid again.

Back then, I would lie awake in my room staring at the glow in the dark planets glued to the ceiling. They made me afraid because I was so small compared to them. Same thing with the idea of God. Or the way people talk about America sweeping three-thousand miles east to west. I never understood why a person like me was allowed to keep on living. What does it matter if I live or die? So insignificant compared to everything out there.

And why should I be allowed to keep on living when my son could die?

* * *

I love my kids. My daughter—she's fine. Lives off in another state with her husband. They're what most people call perfect. Have half a dozen kids, go to church, work hard but always seem happy to see us when we visit.

Then there's my oldest, John.

He's always been a burr in my side.

Last time he stayed with us, he told me his son was scared of me. His wife was scared of me. Scared of me? All I did was tell the kid no. Throwing the train around the Christmas tree. Doing whatever he pleased. No discipline, no rules. That's not how I raised my kid to raise his kid. No rules, no discipline.

Maybe I was a little loud, but a man can't change his ways. I am what I am. That's what I told him. And he brought up some incident with his wife,

I don't even remember. Yelling at her for not answering the phone? I didn't yell. She's just oversensitive. Women blow everything out of proportion. If you are in the house and the phone rings, you answer it. That's just common sense. And if I raise my voice, it's not yelling. I'm just trying to be heard all the way upstairs where God knows what that woman is doing all day. I work all day. What does she do?

"I don't change," I said to him. He blinked as if I slapped him in the face. He stared at me like he was waiting for me to change right there in front of him.

"I—don't—change," I repeated.

We don't see them much anymore.

* * *

We land with a thump. The whole plane bounces. That wakes up Molly real fast. We trolley long enough for me to finish the tub of pretzels. I feel fat, real fat. And happy. Fat and happy, as they say.

Everything is a rush in the city. Molly doesn't see any of it. I feel like a country mouse. On a train. In a cab. Costs a fortune. Then there is the hospital, like a maze leading us to a piece of cheese.

* * *

There he is. Tubes going in and out of his face, which looks like a purple muffin. Nancy sits beside him in tears. My wife walks over and touches her back. Nancy looks up at Molly the way you look when a stranger touches your shoulder in a store. Complete alarm. Then her face softens, like gravity caving in on her. She reaches up and hugs Molly. Tears drip down her face.

My grandson lies on the recliner with his head in his arms. His long girlish hair hanging down. What is that? Pink? When he sees his mother hugging his grandmother, he jumps up as if from a dream and stumbles over to join in on the hug. He always did love Nana.

I stand watching from behind. My attention drifts back to my son. I can't believe I'm seeing him like this. He's usually such a prick. Now look at him, laid out, eyes closed, so fragile and wrong.

I must be having déjà vu. When he was born, he came out purple. Couldn't breathe. They put the tubes in him then too. They kept him in an incubator for three days. They said he might not make it.

The doctors are saying the same thing now. They always say the same thing.

* * *

We wait three days. Three nights. We get some sleep in a hotel in shifts. Cold silence lingers between Nancy and me. Molly and Nancy seem to be getting along, and the kid too. The three of them whisper and sit around a puzzle, waiting. Chit-chat about nothing. At least I have my pretzels. What would I do without pretzels and peanut butter?

Crunch. Crunch. Crunch.

* * *

He's coughing somehow, body lurching up, but I can barely make out his face. The tubes go in and out, pumping him full of fluid. His eyes open. He stares at me, silent and blinking.

I reach out my hand and take his hand. He looks up like a little boy. Purple muffin boy. His eyes open like a deer about to be hit by a car, his eyes red as if he had any moisture he might cry. I begin to cry. I haven't touched his hand like this, actually held his hand like a father holds a son's, in over ten years.

* * *

He doesn't say anything for a long time, a few hours. He sleeps a little, then wakes again, and seems to be trying to say something. I lean down and listen. I wait a while. Finally, he makes it to the point where he can create words. They come out one at a time.

"Do—you—remember…

letter—I—wrote?"

I freeze. There was only ever one letter. A class assignment in fifth grade. He had to write a letter to someone and mail it through the post office, so he wrote me a letter. It was supposed to go to a stranger. Someone you can't talk to every day. He sent it to me, his own father. He addressed, stamped, and mailed it to his own house. It said I never played with him. It said I never talked to him. It said I was always working, and he knew it was for him and his sister and my mom, but all they wanted was time with me. It asked me why.

I nod. "Yes, I remember."

"Answer—it."

He coughs. He keeps on looking at me.

* * *

The doctor comes in and asks what happened. I tell her. What do I care? She just shakes her head and says that was too much for him. She points at the vitals. She quietly picks up the chart and starts flipping, looking something up on her phone, then disappears into the hall. She returns with a nurse who slips by me and attends to my son.

John pushes his head forward and whispers. The nurse looks at me and away. The nurse reports to the doctor. The doctor turns to me, says it will be a long recovery. She recommends now that we know he will live and that nothing critical was damaged that we can come back to visit in a month when talking wouldn't take so much out of him.

She's asking me to leave, I get it. John's asking me to leave.

Nancy smiles and turns this into the goodbye moment. Relief slides over me. Molly tries to convince the doctor we can stay, but she is absolute. Our grandson grabs Molly and starts to cry. Nancy slides her arms around Molly and the kid. They remain frozen beside the bed. I touch John's face. My fingers feel like wooden clubs rubbing against his soft grey cheeks.

Before we go, I reach out to Nancy. I put my arms around her. I mean it with all I can muster. I give her an awkward tug toward me. I feel like I'm hugging one of those bronze bears at the park.

* * *

We sit down on the plane.

I take another handful of pretzels and turn to face Molly. Chewing, I offer her some. She looks out the window.

* * *

Too many years made me like I am. I told my son I don't change. But I've changed. Last time I went back to my childhood home, to Connecticut, it was for my high school reunion. Everyone was rich except me. My school was one of the preppiest schools in the county. Only the best went in, only the best came out. The rest of them went on and graduated from prestigious universities, then married the right girls from the right families. Me? I didn't want any part of that. I moved to Maine, married a farm girl, got my plumber's license. When we met, Molly had long blond hair that went all the way down her back. It drove me crazy. Her hair isn't like it was. Now it looks like a mushroom top.

When we had the kids, I thought what all Dads think. This is the beginning. Then the babies come home, and you find yourself on a big turning wheel that never ends, playing the hamster in the middle. Run, run, run. I ended up fat with an empty house, more bills, and a wife so nervous all the time she can't think straight. The worst part is the way my son turned out. I did my best, but he's like those kids I went to high school with. I tried to raise him better than that, but he still went off to college, got a fancy girl, got a big job in the city. The problem is: I changed, but the kid who came out of me looks just like what I came from.

Hamsters end up in the same spot they start when the wheel stops.
Another mouthful of pretzels.
Crunch, crunch, crunch.

* * *

In the truck again, off the plane, back in Maine, Molly and I drive eighty miles per hour on the highway. I can't stop thinking about the letter. How do you answer that question? No one can. Life gets busy. You make plans. The plans fall down. You end up with regret, a big hole inside you. You try to fill the hole with pretzels and peanut butter.

The winter snow swirls up around the truck. Molly looks at me. I push back her hair, take her hand and kiss it. Just me and her quietly looking at everything around us. It makes me feel small.

Molly pulls her hand away and picks up the little tub of peanut butter pretzel balls where I always keep it wedged between the seats. She pops open the container, releasing the smell. She holds the tub out for me to take some. My stomach burns for them. My mouth fills with saliva. I speed up to switch lanes. I roll down my window and take the entire tub out of Molly's hands and cast it out into the air.

LAURO PALOMBA

Second Nature

like a forgiving lover
the streets come back to me
how they curve
where they lead
and we shuck our reserve
in a coy fever
the caressing familiarity
the communing rediscovered

I am not native sown
return to this locus each winter
for its warming touches
that loosen my coil
unlayer my clothes

dawn church bells spirit in
glimmer through shutter slats
tiger-striping me awakened
jealous that to its saga
I add but a misplaced comma
not gestating its secrets
nor it mine though we
confide the here and now

adopted places –
all their life and lives totaled
nature's favours alongside those devised
chance and cultivation –
round us

should you initially
arrive plausibly formed
but your receptors not sealed
there is always at hand
the blessing of being fine-tuned

I buoy myself
that with each visit
we pollinate one another
however infinitesimally
we fructify and wear on

LAILA HARTMAN-SIGALL

Together We Hated Ourselves and Waited to Be Helped

naked

I spent the summer in a sweatshirt. With sweat pressed into my back and Dove dripping down the creases of my ribcage. With kids who wore scars that streaked their arms. All of us, we were scared. There was a girl who liked giraffes, and the color pink. We sat together with our backs against the chartreuse paint by the locked door. After 9 p.m. we read about people falling in love. When I looked at her, I thought I'd be there forever.

Days we spent in fuzzy socks and shirts that stopped above our knees. Like us, the nurse was unfed and impatient. She asked me if I was okay and began to walk away. Her body was drawn in tattoos, and her jeans sat below her hip bones. One night she lined her eyes with blue wings and wore her fried hair down.

I thought of how my father loved nature, and I drew pictures of blue skies and wood. I breathed the air of vomit-stained floors and vanilla Boost and crayons. I never knew if I was lonely. Kids sat in circles and played games, told stories.

I woke with a shake in my hands. Behind blinking eyes, I saw my roommate standing in a pool of pee. I watched wet footprints escape the puddle and her hand cover the middle of her butt. She said she'd gotten worse. Everything was teal. Everywhere was pale and cold.

They became my family, the kids with frail fingers and dulled eyes. We were all tired. Together, we hated ourselves and waited to be helped. We wanted to leave—to our bedrooms or Spain or Union Station. The girl who liked pink sat with me while I watched the door. We laughed because she told me she wasn't that okay.

the parts of my body

We held each other while I stood on my toes and reached my chin to the corner of her neck. The stoop felt grainy beneath my converse. "I'm so happy you're home."

But I remembered the day I sat on my hands and watched the stillness of the doorknob. The woman with pink hair left a computer on the

table and told me to sign the forms when I was ready. I said, "I'm scared," and cold sweat slipped down my sides. They told me I would be okay, my parents. And I watched my mom swallow her fear.

She told me it would leave a scar. My mom, she wrapped her hand around my cheek and pulled me into her chest. "Baby," she said, "my baby." And she held me like I'd just been born and all I knew to do was cry.

Megan wore toothpaste-green scrubs and penciled-on eyebrows. "This will be goodbye, hon," and she watched my cry while I pulled the collar of my dad's Vince t-shirt.

All day after I sat at the desk, watching them. Kids in pajama pants, with anger in their eyes and weakness in their chests. Prisoners, they looked cold.

MARIA PALUMBO

Frames

My old friend lived adjacent to an army base
In a squarish house, snug, made of brick.
Each day she woke to Reveille,
each evening closed with Taps,
loud, regimented sounds that framed her days.

After she grew ill, I visited.
We sat inside her living room
before the window, calmly looking out,
and saw a neighbor walk his hobbling dog,
an ancient boy, retriever once, his coat no longer gold.

We watched them leave our vision field, and then return.
This time the neighbor held the dog
a massive crippled, crippling weight
within his arms
but didn't seem to mind.

A sunbeam touched the animal and spread a
golden glow across the flank, a swath of flaming radiance.
It vanished quickly underneath a shadow
even while his owner clutched his bulk
and we sat gazing, wishing it could last.

DAYE PHILLIPPO

Flock

The fuzz atop the Barred Rock chicks' heads where
red combs will sprout but haven't yet, remind me

of the days when women wore fancy hats to town,
to church. And the way the birds stand skirt to skirt

at the open door of the coop, clucking softly
and stepping on each other's toes, craning

to peek out, tipping their heads this way and that,
but not yet venturing down the ramp, reminds me

of the way females, young and old, used to gather,
Saturday mornings once a month, on the sidewalk

in front of the heavy wood and beveled glass doors
of Neuwelt's Fabric Store to wait for the manager

to key the lock, so we could all flock down
the creaking wooden steps to the basement sale.

MARIANNE LEEK

Resurrecting Harleigh

It's the second week of March, the stripped-down Blue Ridge Mountains a dark silhouette against a slate-gray sky promising a chance of unanticipated flurries on the tail end of a long, cold winter. I've heard older folks talk of the blizzard of '93, but I've never seen it snow more than six inches here, and never as late as that blizzard came, burying the Tusquittee valley under two feet of snow and knocking out electricity for nearly two weeks in some of the harder to reach coves in our county.

I shiver as the wind blows, my hair sticking to my Bonnie Bell bubble gum-slicked lips, coated by a used tube of lip gloss left in the girls' locker room last week. My feet are numb as I put two backpacks in the back seat of the car. The backpacks are new and look like interlopers among the fast-food wrappers, ripped upholstery, and dog hair littering the interior. They were handed out by well-meaning parent volunteers at the beginning of the school year to kids who couldn't afford school supplies. I found an extra one abandoned in the hallway at the end of the first school day, brought it home, and gave it to my Mama. Funny thing is, no one wants to carry those damn things because they come from the Dollar General. You can spot them from a mile away, cheap, brightly colored imitations of their upper-class cousins, carried by kids whose parents can't afford a backpack with a label.

I have to lean against the driver's side door to get it to shut properly. Standing barefoot, ignorant of the arctic blast that has invaded Southern Appalachia, I begin heading back toward the trailer. I stop at the ramshackle barn, pour feed into the trough and toss hay into the stalls with a pitchfork leaning precariously against the milking stand. Goats nibble my hand-me-down sweater and my feet are colder and dirtier from walking in the damp barn. The barn and goats belong to the man who owns the place we're staying in for now.

Tiptoeing around patches of leftover snow, I notice sunshine-yellow daffodils poking through, offering a hint of beauty on an otherwise gray and moody day. Inside, the kerosene heater is the only light in a darkening living room, ghostly shadows dancing eerily along the interior paneling. I've warned Mama and Hank about leaving the heater on when they're asleep, but that don't seem to concern them none. The windows are covered with thick plastic to keep out the cold, but tonight they look like a blurry, shivering, mirage of a sunset, for a brief moment coloring the room in soft gold while blocking out the rest of the world.

The electricity has been cut off for three days now. Pouring some water from a milk jug sitting on the counter, I wash a dirty bowl I find in the sink. I use just my hands and some liquid soap to clean it because the sponge sitting in the sink is wet and putrid. The whole damn place smells like rotting food, smoke, and filth.

Taking a packet of ramen from the bottom cabinet, I add some water from the jug and notice the mousetrap is empty, black droppings littering the floor like confetti. I walk over to the heater and place the bowl of ramen on top, patiently waiting for it to soften the noodles.

I eat dinner alone and set the dirty bowl back in the sink, balancing it precariously amid a pyramid of used plates and cups.

My Mama walks into the kitchen looking worn, sad, and visibly high. She is smoking a cigarette and hasn't showered. "Have you slept all day?" I ask.

Locked and loaded, she is ready with her reply, "I guess you think I should be working. There ain't no damned jobs to be had, Harleigh, and with this virus junk going on, who knows if anyone'll be hiring anytime soon."

"You didn't answer the question. What have y'all done all day?" I quietly ask, more a declaration than a question.

Not quietly enough. She steps forward and smacks me solidly in the mouth, mumbling something about disrespect and not talking to her Mama that way. She reminds me that we are leaving for Florida in the morning to go see my grandfather, a stranger to me. Walking unsteadily, she goes back into the bedroom and shuts the door, but not before I spot Hank sprawled across the naked mattress, a glass pipe and handgun lying haphazardly on the floor amid dirty clothing.

I reply to no one in particular, "I'm already packed."

Feeling a sting, I catch myself in the spotty mirror above the dilapidated brown sofa and see the red imprint of a hand left on my jaw. More hurt than angry, bitter tears slide down my face as I stand alone in the dark.

* * *

I am the first one awake and take a couple of mismatched mugs from a peeling yellow dish drainer and after boiling some water on the heater, I stir in some instant coffee. It tastes like crap, but then again to me all coffee tastes like crap, but I figure Hank and Mama gotta have something to get them awake enough for the ten-hour drive to south Florida.

Last week our school shut down for the Coronavirus—Corona like the beer. Seems like a weird-ass name for a virus if you ask me. I heard talk in the grocery store about a pandemic, but no one really knows what's going

on. Most kids are glad to get an extra week of spring break, but I like school and I miss getting to see my teachers. School has always been my sanctuary. There's been rumors of learning going online, but we ain't got no Internet and no way to get any, so it won't be affecting me none.

Mama wakes up next. "You been up long?" she sweetly asks. She clearly has no recollection of the night before, and graciously accepts the cup of coffee.

"I packed you some things and put them in the car already," I say. She kisses me on the top of the head. "Thank you, baby."

Hank gets up and looks worse for the wear. I haven't actually put eyes on him for two days. He's been holed up in that back room on and off for the past week. Comes out occasionally and grabs a Natty Light, some Saltines, and Vienna sausages. Goes back to the bedroom, and when the power bill is paid, turns that TV on loud as hell. Don't even think he watches it. Reckon' he just turns it up to drown out his thoughts.

"Plant closed indefinitely," he tells me.

"So what does that mean?" I ask.

"Hell if I know; who knows what's gonna happen." He throws a few items in an Ingles bag, grabs the mug I hand him, and says, "Gaw' damn, kid. You're an angel."

Hank is one of the good guys. He has his problems, but he seems to care about my Mama and doesn't pay much attention to me. The ones before have taken more of an interest, making comments that leave me uncomfortable and ashamed. Their hands brushing against my ass, their greedy eyes drawn to the changing places on my body.

Before we leave, I grab a worn notebook, some colored pens, and a few books I took from the library. I keep them stacked beside my bed like bricks in a foundation. I tell Mama there's a table of free books in the library and she believes me. On most days fiction is the only thing I allow to take up space in my head. It beats the nonfiction of my life. Hank looks at me and my notebook before commenting, "That kid's weird. Always writing stuff down and reading." Walking out the door, I can't help but grin at that one.

6:00 am. We head down the gravel driveway that snakes the length of the creek hidden by burgeoning Mountain Laurel and creeping Kudzu consuming everything in its path. The car in neutral, Hank jump-starts it as we hit the main road. The journey itself is a fortuitous endeavor considering the shape his car is in. I wonder if it's even possible for us to make it all the way to Florida. I've never been, but I've seen pictures, beautiful white sand beaches, and ocean water the color of a summer sky.

I can't sleep and there's something soothing about looking out the window while the world is soundless and still. The night stars are

disappearing as the rising sun turns the firmament a cotton candy pink, the mountains etching the horizon eventually fading into the distance behind us as we ride through north Georgia.

We pass by a small church with a fenced-in graveyard on the side of the road. The couple inches of snow we got last week that had begun to thaw has now re-frozen, casting an illusion and making them tombstones look like they're floating in a lake, smooth as glass under the last light of an overly full moon. I've heard some folks calling it a Super Moon.

"Let's get us a biscuit and some coffee," Hank suggests. He stops at a gas station that doubles as a McDonald's.

"Pick any biscuit you want," he says. I ask if I can get pancakes. "Hell yeah, kid." He goes to pay and comes up short. Mama tells me to run to the car and look in the glove box. "I think I got some cash in there."

Suddenly embarrassed, I realize I'm still in my pajamas, a t-shirt, and Crocs, but it doesn't seem to matter. There's a skeleton crew of employees, anticipating a possible shutdown any day now. I open the compartment and a prescription pill bottle drops onto the floor mat. Putting it back, I see Oxycodone on the label and realize I don't recognize the name on the bottle. I run five dollars back into the gas station.

Them pancakes are probably the best thing I've ever eaten. I eat sausage dripping in syrup and soak up the last of what's left with the pancakes. But sitting in the backseat of the car with my feet curled up underneath me, I read my favorite books while wishing I was anywhere but here. I've read *To Kill a Mockingbird* at least three times, cover to cover. I reread the part where Jem is forced to read to Mrs. Dubose. That part's always been my favorite. I think it's because I realize a lot of people don't like the circumstances they're in and sometimes you gotta be good to a person even when they ain't in no shape to be kind back to you. If I could pick my parents, it'd be Calpurnia and Atticus. I know they weren't married or nothing, but they seem like good parents to me.

Somewhere around Macon, I read "A Good Man is Hard to Find." I don't understand the point of that one. I know I sure as hell wouldn't want them selfish parents, nor that cranky, fake-ass, racist, grandma telling me what to do.

While I'm thinking about the grandma and trying to figure out what that guy meant when he said she would have been a good woman if someone would have been there to shoot her every minute of her life, I see the Welcome to Florida sign. It looks so pretty and I'm excited to be seeing it for the first time.

By now, the sun has burned off most of the oppressive fog that blankets the outlying swamp land, making the air warm and humid. Hank

pulls into a welcome center, which turns out ain't much different from a regular rest area.

While he and Mama are using the restroom, I wander around looking at the brochures in this place, little pamphlets advertising heaven on earth, with beautiful, perfect people, all smiles like they ain't got a care in the world. I ask the lady at the desk if they're free. She nods, her face hard and expressionless, not bothering to look up from her crossword. I have a bundle of bucket list Florida hot spots by the time Hank walks out. "Harleigh, you're a gen-u-ine pack rat if I've ever seen one. What the hell you need all that worthless junk for? We ain't never gonna be able to go to none of them places." He just shakes his head, mutters something, and motions me back into the car.

I spend much of the afternoon daydreaming about each of the places in the brochures. I think about Maggie, a girl in one of my classes, talking to me about her family's trip to Disney World last summer. She's the kindest person I've ever met. She shows me pictures on her phone, so flawless I can't even imagine a family looking like that. Her mama is beautiful; looks just like her. She's really too big, but her daddy is carrying her on his back outside some castle and she's laughing. I wonder with every inch of my being what that must feel like - to have that much love inside your body and to have someone who wants to carry you when the world makes you feel too tired to keep walking.

Maggie is always nice to me, but not in the fake way. She doesn't mind when I am put with her for class group work. She looks me in the eye when I ask her about her life. Sometimes she even asks me things about mine. But I never see her outside of school. Our worlds will never collide because it's hard to talk to someone when you don't have a cell phone or Internet.

One day back in the fall during P.E. she noticed me sitting on the bleachers, my face red, blotchy, and stained with tears. I don't even remember why I was crying. She just comes over and sits beside me - never said a word. Our water was shut off again, and I was wearing the same jacket I'd worn every day that month. It was filthy and I could smell myself, but she didn't seem to notice and sat with me until it was time to go back to the gym and change clothes for class. I had never changed in the first place, so I just lined up at the door like Pavlov's dog waiting for the bell to signal our dismissal to the cafeteria for lunch. As I remember this, I think about Boo Radley and how all he really wanted was to be seen. Maggie is proof that there is good in this world.

As we are passing through Jacksonville, my Mama squeals—"Turn it up, turn it up—I love this song." Windows rolled down, music blaring, she

sings along to Fleetwood Mac's "Landslide." She sings off-key, but it don't matter none to me or Hank. She is happy. I am happy.

Smiling, her dark hair blowing out the window, lines prematurely mark her brown skin, especially her forehead and around her eyes, a road map of poor choices and pain. But at that moment I notice how beautiful she once was. I want so badly for her to hug me, but I don't know how to make that happen. I hesitate and the moment is gone.

Not long after, I am abruptly jarred out of a sound sleep when suddenly Hank slams on the brakes and slaps my mama in the head. I don't know what started the argument. We are stopped on the side of a four-lane highway, cars passing dangerously close to our vehicle. Without provocation or warning, Hank takes the keys out of the ignition, rolls down the window, and throws them into the middle of the interstate. "What the hell'd you do that for, Hank?" I never hear him answer her. Mama just gets out of the car looking tired and ashamed and walks into the road to fetch them damn keys.

* * *

By midafternoon, we arrive at the house of a grandfather I've never met. It's a modest double wide and I see a man peek out into the driveway anticipating visitors. After brief introductions, I look around his trailer. My grandfather has displayed no evidence of any sort of past life. His decor is that of an unintentional minimalist. There are no framed family pictures, no children's art on the fridge, very little to suggest anyone really lives here at all. I think to myself: he is a very lonely man.

He's dying. "Cancer," Mama tells me, as if that one word can convey what she's already lost.

They make small talk. He asks her what she's doing now. "I'm between jobs right now, Daddy."

"Well," he says, "I'm sure something will open up. Always does."

"You like school?" he asks me.

"She's a real bookworm, Daddy."

"Reads all the damn time," Hank adds.

"Stay in school - only way you'll ever amount to anything," my grandfather says.

I think about the weight of his warning. We leave after an hour or so. My Mama hugs him and I see an envelope pass between the two. Before we leave, he awkwardly mumbles something about if he had more room, but before he can finish Mama interrupts and tells him "It's fine; we've got a place to stay."

We check into a mom-and-pop motel not far down the road. It's practically abandoned due to growing concerns over a possible pandemic. Hank says to me, "Hey Harleigh, disappear for a while, will ya?"

The air is becoming chilly as the sun slides lower in the sky, but I head down to the pool area, lay on a lawn chair, and press play on the Walkman I picked up at a thrift store. While listening to the REO Speedwagon cassette that was left in it, I watch a dad trying to teach his kid to dive in the pool. They seem to be the only other family at the motel. The family reminds me of the people in the brochures. I pull the hood of my tie-dye sweatshirt up over my head, turn the music up, and see the mom smiling and silently clapping.

At the dimming of the day, I get up and make my way back to the motel room. The black-out curtains are pulled, covering the room in premature darkness. The TV is turned on with the sound off, playing national news on a loop, the latest headlines scrolling across the bottom of the screen. I stand next to the bed where my mom is passed out, getting ready to crawl into the other bed for the night when I hear Hank start to stir.

"Watcha doing, Harleigh? You eat anything?"

"I got some snacks outta the vending machine," I lie.

"Harleigh, you ever read that poem about that bird?" He's slurring his words and I can see by the light emanating from the small muted television that his eyes are glassy. "You know the one that sailor shot," he continues. "That's the only damn thing I remember reading in high school," he says.

"Yeah," I reply, "I've read it."

He laughs, "That's you; that's you, Harleigh. You're that damn bird—what's it called?"

"An Albatross," I tell him.

"Yeah, hell yeah, that's it. You're the Albatross." He drifts back to sleep, unconscious.

I think about what he's said. I slip some money out of the envelope beside my Mama. Not much, just enough to get me where I need to go.

I quietly close the door behind me and walk down to the nearby 7-Eleven, the convenience store practically empty on a Friday evening. The cracked concrete parking lot and the light emanating from the store serve as an urban beacon for walkers, the only people out tonight, dead-eyed, searching for a fix. I see a payphone, but before I can discover whether or not it works, I realize that there ain't no one I can call. I sit down on the curb and silently begin to cry. The backpack sits beside me, damp, dirty, and forlorn. Realizing it's been sitting in a puddle of stagnant water, I put it on the sidewalk so as not to ruin what little is inside.

A lady with a baby walks out and notices me. She has a pack of cigarettes, a diet Mountain Dew, and a candy bar. "Baby, what's wrong? You all right?"

"I'm fine," I respond not making eye contact.

"Do you need a ride? You got a Mama?" she asks.

I shake my head. Her baby coos and smiles and I can't help but smile back through my tears. I reach up and touch its hand. The mother asks me again if she can take me somewhere. "I ain't got nowhere to go," I stammer.

"Well, everyone's gotta have somewhere to go, else you ain't never gonna get nowhere," she says matter of factly.

"Well, I don't," I say again.

"I ain't got much," she says. "And I sure as hell don't need no trouble," she adds. "But if you was needing a place for a day or two, I reckon I got a couch you can sleep on."

I can't believe what I'm hearing, and I'm confused by her kindness.

"You know kid, I don't know where you're coming from, but I know when I see someone who just needs someone to be kind to them. You just need a chance."

She starts to buckle the baby into the car seat, hands it a bottle, and turns back toward me. "I ain't gonna hurt you, but I understand if you don't wanna come. Ain't no one hardly to be trusted in this world."

I pick up my backpack and get in her car. I have nothing to lose and nowhere to go. And then I remember a vocabulary word I learned at school. I'm at an impasse, I think to myself. The baby looks over at me and keeps sucking from the bottle.

"So where you think you're headed anyways," the mother asks me. I take the map out of my backpack and unfold it. My eyes scan the entirety of the map and I randomly point to a place. The mother chuckles, "The most magical place on earth," she says. "Everybody be wantin' to go there."

She smiles. "How bout' right now we just start by going home."

"Home," I whisper, too quiet for anyone to hear. This unfamiliar word trips off my tongue and lands on my heart.

Looking out the window, I catch my reflection in the glass staring back at me, and I realize for the first time what I am feeling is hope. I turn and my eyes follow the headlights searching aimlessly down the long, abandoned road stretching out before me.

MARTHA GRAHAM WISEMAN

Feed Me

Food, after opera and perhaps for a time my father, was my mother's great love. She was a brilliant cook. In bed at night, she read Waverley Root's *The Food of Italy*. It was from her that I heard names like M.F.K. Fisher and Alice Waters. In the mid-sixties, she watched, avidly scribbling down recipes and instructions, *The French Chef* on public television; she did not watch TV otherwise. She joined The Book of the Month Club so that she could receive, at a discount, both volumes of *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*. She had little money but was deeply resourceful about food; she called herself the Queen of Make-Do. She could conjure a very good dinner out of scant ingredients. She was also savvy about allowing friends to pay for restaurant meals and for trips to, say, San Francisco or France, where she ate extremely well.

Strange: I remember few of the dishes she prepared.

Late in her life, chicken with tangerines (no, it was not sweet).

Earlier, a hearty bolognese.

Later again, she and I made a *boeuf en daube* together. I had just read *To the Lighthouse*, and she'd read it recently, too. We were both entranced by Mrs. Ramsay's dinner party and the stew she served, which "'is a triumph,' said Mr. Bankes, laying his knife down for a moment. He had eaten attentively. It was rich; it was tender. It was perfectly cooked." The *boeuf en daube* briefly holds the people at the table together, signaling Mrs. Ramsay's momentary triumph over isolation and dissolution.

In a reconciliation visit after some years of little communication between us, I spent a Thanksgiving with my mother, just the two of us, and for ourselves we cooked a turkey with apple, ham, and cornbread stuffing and Madeira pan gravy and a steamed cranberry pudding. The cooking and the food and the eating held us together, briefly, tentatively.

My mother wasn't much of a dessert cook, but for guests, at least in my childhood, she made either chocolate mousse or Charlotte russe, which I assumed were related because they rhymed. For both, she arranged lady fingers around the creamy mound of mousse or russe in a squared-off green glass bowl. She and a friend were, after seeing Julia Child create it, eager to try floating island, *île flottante*. I remember her saying the name in French,

as if it were a place in the world she yearned for, a place where there were only Baudelaire's *ordre et beauté, luxe, calme, et volupté*. Yes: that's what she sought.

To say that my mother disapproved of junk food would be an understatement. She was appalled that my cousin liked Hardee's hamburgers (Hardee's was the only fast-food joint in town then, the mid-sixties). She refused to have Oreos or candy in the house; the only cookies she bought were chocolate-covered graham crackers, plain graham crackers, and Fig Newtons. But there was one anomaly: for my dessert, she sometimes offered me a Hostess chocolate cupcake with its signature white squiggle on top. To me, this was a major treat. How Hostess cupcakes fitted with my mother's food aesthetic I never figured out. She never ate one, though they were packaged in pairs.

When I was a teenager, during three years away at school—two at high school and my first year at college—I developed, as one tends to do living in a dormitory and eating in a dining hall, a taste for what she would consider unnourishing junk. At my high school, you could sneak into the cafeteria at night and purchase a package of donuts from a machine (also candy and cigarettes) and dash back to the dorm and share the donuts with your roommates, giggling in your sugar high or, as I did even then, feeling uncomfortably bloated and cursing yourself for getting fat. One of my roommates received care packages from her mother, filled with squat cans of Vienna sausages, packages of Saltines, pots of CheezWhiz or aerosol spray cans of Easy Cheese, and jars of Tang. I couldn't imagine my mother sending such strange gifts. But even though I found the contents of the package unappetizing, I'm sure I partook. At college, I learned that Pop-tarts with their "fruit filling" and swirls of sugar made a handy breakfast or snack, and I ate them the summer after my first college year when I was with my mother. "Why are you eating those hunk-buns?" she asked me, scrunching up her nose. "They're terrible for you. Much too sweet." She'd say, "You're toasting those hunk-buns again?" How she came up with the name I don't know. Now I appreciate her inventiveness and would not tolerate hunk-buns.

During my short-lived dance career in the mid to late seventies, I grew dangerously thin: a common professional hazard for dancers. I became scrupulously solicitous about what I consumed, allowing myself only so much bread a day, dessert maybe once a week if at all. But even after I'd stopped dancing, given a few months of relenting, I could not interrupt the pattern, and soon I was growing thinner and thinner again. I felt ill all the

time, knotted or bloated or in pain, never knowing when or even if I might be hungry. I visited doctors and nutritionists who advised various diets that caused me to lose more weight. That awful lightness which edges toward disappearance, that sense of defying gravity, of being scraped to the core, appealed to me, as it does to so many young women.

A good friend, a physician, listened for many months to my constant complaints. She finally said, "You know, you'd feel better if you ate more."

Ah, simplicity.

What followed in good time, and with little money: many dinners of spaghetti with garlic and oil, which Marcella Hazan calls midnight spaghetti.

I have always loved eating late at night, the result of growing up with an actor-father and spending time with theater people. The rhythm of performance demands that you eat *afterward*, and it was especially satisfying after seeing my father onstage to sit down to dinner with him in a restaurant. Celebrating any performance, whether his or my own or a friend's, with a meal marked both actual and metaphorical release and fostered, à la Mrs. Ramsay's dinner table, a comforting sense of togetherness. I can hear in my mind now a line of Sonya's in *Uncle Vanya*: she says almost conspiratorially to Dr. Astrov—a part my father played and felt close to—"I love eating at night," and she brings out food to share with him. She is in love with the doctor, unrequitedly.

Somehow *Uncle Vanya* shows up no matter what I happen to be thinking about. Especially if I'm thinking about my father, tall and lean, who ate extremely well when married to my mother and extremely poorly during his long-lasting second marriage. My stepmother tried to act as if she understood and loved good food—"Oh, my," she'd say at a meal she hadn't prepared, "oh, my, I've never...So rich...."—but her cooking was utterly dismal. A dancer, she was allergic to large portions—sometimes to any portions. She could inflict her own commitment to thinness on others, not just my father. A sad example: During winter break my first year of college, she generously agreed to my bringing two of my new friends over for dinner. But when she served dessert—it was probably ice cream—she pointedly did not give any to the friend on the plump side. I was furious and humiliated, as were both my guests. She always insisted on margarine, low-fat milk, and low-fat cheeses (tasteless; Jarlsberg the best of the lot, big in those years) and expected my skinny father to eat her low-fat diet, which he did. This expectation did not change as they both grew older. He grew weaker and even thinner—bone-thin. He needed some fat.

I know he'd been partial at one time to chicken schmaltz and white radish sandwiches. He liked apple sauce with sour cream, schav with sour

cream, Uneeda biscuits with sour cream. My stepmother did keep a small container of sour cream on hand for him. Such munificence. To be fair, my father never learned to cook. I don't think he cared all that much about what he ate.

Neither my father nor my stepmother drank wine or liquor, though they accepted and gave as gifts bottles of Asti Spumante. My father was convinced that I knew a great deal about wine, which at that time was not exactly true. "What about that Cabernong Sauvigné you had last time?" he'd ask me. I never knew whether he bungled the name as an intentional joke or was simply misremembering it, uninterested in wine as he was. If I brought wine to a dinner at their apartment, my stepmother would ask to taste it. I'd begin to pour her a glass. "No, no, stop, that's too much—a taste is all I need." She'd take a sip, or rather drink the sip that was in her glass, and exclaim, fanning herself with her hand, "Oh, I feel drunk already! So strong!"

I do have a fond childhood memory of a sometime closeness with my father, enacted at a restaurant soda fountain. Until I was in my early teens, he used to take me to a Schrafft's—one of several locations throughout Manhattan—and we'd sit at the counter, and one of us would order a coffee ice cream soda, and the other would order a chocolate ice cream soda, and we'd trade the tall fluted-glass dishes back and forth. My father took obvious pleasure, not just in the treat itself but in sharing the treat with me, as if it were something known only to the two of us, a secret delight.

There was a sharp difference in my childhood between eating out with my mother and eating out with my father. My mother lived on little money, so she said, and she certainly felt poor, particularly in comparison to my father, who in her mind had so much more money. (At that young age, I had no understanding of or information about their actual financial states; later, I would learn that my mother tended to exaggerate on both sides of the issue.) When she and I lived in Chapel Hill, we met my cousins every Sunday for supper at the Carolina Inn, which had a cafeteria and a dining room. With my mother, the dining room was off limits—much too expensive. My father, in the grand tradition of divorced fathers who don't live regularly with their children, took me to the Inn's dining room when he visited. I was not to look at the prices on the right side of the menu, and I could start my meal with that lavish mid-century appetizer, a shrimp cocktail, which became a marker for luxurious food. When my mother asked what I'd eaten and I said shrimp cocktail and steak and chocolate cake—not the 75-cent fried chicken we almost always ordered in the cafeteria—she rolled her eyes and said, "Well, *he* can afford it."

When I lived in New York with my first husband and needed part-time jobs because of dancing—I took ballet class daily and had to leave time for rehearsals—I worked at two food stores: first, the famous Zabar's emporium on the Upper West Side and, later, in the Village, a small charcuterie, Les Trois Petits Cochons, run by two Frenchmen who resembled Mutt and Jeff, one very tall and thin, one short and stocky. At Zabar's, I first worked in the coffee department, filling bags with beans and grinding them if so desired (some asked for their coffee to be "grounded"). In a supposed move up, I worked n the cheese department, which was just a refrigerated wall of cheeses with a narrow butcher-block below waist level for cutting—and cutting again, if the customer wasn't happy with the piece you'd begun wrapping: "You expect me to put *that* on a cheese platter?" The cheese wall was just past the fish counter whose elder statesmen, often from the Old Country, believed theirs was the Kingdom, the land of smoked salmon of all sorts, whitefish salad, sable. No one else was allowed behind their high bank of cases. They were masters of the knife and the perfect paper-thin slices of lox.

The charcuterie, a more amiable workplace, was squeezed into a narrow two-story building, with its tiny crowded kitchen on the second floor. I stood behind the refrigerated case and served customers slices of various pâtés, squares of quiche made in sheet pans, and vegetable salads. By the time my shift was over, I smelled strongly of pâté, which I was not particularly fond of. Mutt and Jeff (actually Alain and Jean-Paul) let me take home whatever quiche—sometimes a whole tray—and salads were left over when we closed for the day. The quiche could be frozen, and it provided many a free meal to my then-husband and me, a blessing in those times of necessary thrift. I've rarely eaten quiche since. That was at least forty-five years ago.

My mother told me numerous times that I would never learn to cook.

But I did. I must have not only observed but absorbed some of her skill, some of her ease in the kitchen, her attentiveness to what she prepared and what she ate. By my twenties, I knew good food. I too can now improvise in the kitchen, ring changes on recipes, feel comfortable moving from counter to stove to table.

In my thirties, I subscribed to *Gourmet*, as did my mother. Every month, I gazed with wanton, hopeful desire at the enticing spreads—spreads, in both senses of the word. The recipes and the travel pieces gave my mother and me some common ground when we spoke on the phone. When the monthly issue arrived in the mail, every other activity stopped

until I could gaze lustfully at the gorgeous photographs and read through recipes and wonder if I'd ever go to Florence or the Isle of Skye or Mexico City. I wanted to make the most complicated dishes, and despite our money worries, I often managed to gather the necessary ingredients. I threw myself into the preparations.

When I left New York, I realized I couldn't take ten years' worth of *Gourmets* with me. I chose eight issues to keep—most of them November and December issues, thick with Thanksgiving and Christmas recipes. The rest of my sauce-stained *Gourmets* I carried to the apartment building's laundry room. I hope someone scooped up the magazines and looked longingly at the food and cooked and cooked.

My current husband spent the twenty-four years of his first marriage embraced by and enmeshed in his wife's large Italian family. Food generated and maintained the pulse of their lives: they talked about what they would cook, about the cooking process itself, and, while they ate, about what they were eating, how it had been prepared, and what they'd make the next day. Add to their (from my husband's point of view) food obsession the fact that his then-wife was a chef; I understand why our frequent discussions of "What shall we have for dinner?" can be wearing. He was never that interested in food in the first place; he has numerous food sensitivities and allergies. Being embedded so thoroughly with those whose days and nights were ruled by food sealed his general indifference to what he eats. Ironically, he also spent several years as a prep cook at an Italian cafe, which only validated that indifference.

I know, however, he deeply appreciates what I set before him. Right now, he's washing up all the pots I managed to use to cook a simple meal of gnocchi with sage and butter sauce, along with a side of sufficiently garlicked broccoli rabe.

These days, I yearn for someone else to cook me a delicious meal. I am very happy to offer such meals to my husband (we eat dinner together most every night) and to friends. But sometimes I can tend toward an irritating and impractical impatience, unwilling to wash lettuce or chop vegetables or even heat up leftovers. Sometimes, like a nestling who simply opens her mouth and expects nourishment, I want an excellent meal set before me as if by magic. Where, I wonder, are the nearby friends who are good cooks and would invite me to dinner? Why, I think ungratefully, selfishly, don't the friends I cook for cook for me? My husband and I regularly resort to takeout; that's the closest we come to having others feed us, and it can suffice—

but not always. Takeout is not the same as a loving and generous friend's cooking. I know I am being petty, perhaps greedy, or simply hungry for a delicate rush of delight on my palate and in my heart.

Luckily, I have felt that rush; I have been fed well in my life, sometimes gloriously. I will continue to cook food that can tantalize me and those I love. I will continue to devour recipes, whether or not I will ever make the food they tempt me with. My relation to food, like everyone else's, will continue to be complicated, My mother's passions and comforts, my father's treats and indifferences, my stepmother's hapless cooking, *Gourmet* and M.F.K. Fisher and Laurie Colwin and Marcella Hazan and Julia Child and all the cooks whose recipes I've read, made, and made again, all the cooks I know and those I don't know whose food has nourished me and those whose food has not, Zabar's and Les Trois Petits Cochons and dreams of restaurants I'll never dine in: all, and more, have seasoned my palate, tuned and tempered my taste.

I'm ready to eat.

CHRISTY PRAHL

An Insect Gives a Lesson on Darwinism

Green June beetle, half glean,
caught between the window
and the screen of the kitchen

hurling her body against glass.
Loud as buckshot,
loud as a man trapped in a trunk.

The thing about this beetle
is she's going to die here,
never again to know raspberries,
compost or figs,

I know, sure as I know
the cucumber peels in the sink
will curl like the thumb of the girl from school

with nothing but a bare-knuckled stepfather
and sweaters that smelled of mothballs,

who could pull her entire wrist backward
until the thumbnail touched the inside of her forearm

—Look, I'm double-jointed!—

which passed in her mind for friendship,

not long before a grain truck would iron her body
flat into the road
while walking to school in the pitch.

I see it clear as the line of alabaster on the horizon
after a drenching June rain,

clear as the malachite green of these wings,
the morgue of fly carcasses that may have seduced her,

clear as my capacity to do
not one practical thing to save her.

DAVID B. PRATHER

Death of the Drive-In

I think it had something to do
with the name of the place, the word
Sundowner pushed right up
against the word *Drive-In*,

and the fact that some of the people in town
were drawn to thoughts of Hades,
the voices of the damned crackling
through speakers. Everyone waited for the last

hazy gauze of dusk to simmer down,
so the Saturday double-feature could begin.
I remember most
the distractions, two acres of families

spread out on blankets, and young lovers
sleek on car hoods knowing
there would be no one to come around with flashlights
to break up their weekend kisses.

Even the men's room reeked of total darkness
because someone thought it would be funny
to steal all the light bulbs, then listen
as everyone fumbled for the switch before giving up.

Whatever it was, it locked the gates
two years before the afternoon a woman was raped
and murdered in the old concession stand,
a place where all of us had stood in line

entranced by the aromas of hot dog
and popcorn delicacies, and the candy sweet
syrup of soft drinks. I couldn't help
but think of every step I had ever taken

into that neon insouciance, and if I had walked
where she had died. Whatever it was, it was taken
from all of us, as though we had all been
raped and murdered, the unnecessary victims

face up in the floor, eyes wide, and the ceiling
water-damaged like the giant billboard screen.
And we drove past the place craning to see
what we could beyond the flea market vendor stalls,

the last few tin panels of fence gaping
their mouths of rust. I dreamed and dreamed
that place into an intrigue, until I became the predator,
the man with so much rage he had to tear the place down

bit by bit, telling the woman he loved
about summer and childhood and the god-sized faces
of all those people flickering in the dark
before she knew what was going to happen.

RAY MORRISON

Empty Sky

The Boy

The boy is bored, so he walks into the house leaving his sister in the backyard with her friends. It is the first weekend of summer. Not what the calendar would define as summer, but real summer, when school has officially ended for the year. His parents have thrown a party to celebrate his sister's graduation from middle school and his approaching start. The boy has few friends and none who were invited came, so the party consists entirely of his sister's friends, who cluster into conspiratorial huddles and ignore him. Their mother is a nurse who works in the emergency room at the local hospital and has been called in to work after an explosion at a warehouse injured more than a dozen people. Their father has driven to Chick-fil-A to pick up a platter of chicken nuggets they'd ordered for the party and has charged the girl with keeping an eye on her brother for the twenty or so minutes he's gone.

The boy decides to play *Call of Duty*, but when he walks into the den, he spies the camera drone his father recently bought. The boy is not supposed to use it unless his father is with him—it's expensive and easily damaged and not a toy—but he is already much better at maneuvering the drone than his father ever will be. Fortunately for the boy, his father's iPad, containing the app for controlling the device, is still lying on the table next to the drone. He decides he has just enough time before his father returns to fly the drone over the house and record a video of his sister and her friends. He carries the drone and iPad outside to the front yard and places the drone in the middle of the wide stretch of lawn that separates their house from the road. When the boy slides the switch to power it up, a small green light glows, indicating a fully charged battery. He unlocks the iPad (his father's password had been ridiculously easy to figure out) and opens the app that controls the drone. A sudden burst of laughter erupts from the backyard. He recognizes his sister's high-pitched squeal above the sound of the other girls.

The boy taps a button on the tablet and the drone wobbles upward, hovering a foot into the air, and the iPad's screen fills with a magnified image of the grass. He slides his finger along an arrow icon and the drone surges higher, straight above him. The video on the iPad's screen displays a miniature version of himself, a bird's-eye view in which he looks like a

character from one of his video games. He glides his fingertip left to drive the drone over the rooftop toward the backyard, but he doesn't realize the drone is facing away from the house and not toward it. The drone shoots in the direction of the street. He is momentarily confused by the unexpected image on the screen and glances up to look at the drone now sailing away from him. In his confusion, he forgets to take his finger off the screen, which would have made the drone hover in place, so it instead continues flying across the road. In his panic, the boy runs after it, looking only down at the iPad, frantically tapping the controller in an attempt to spin the drone around so that it will fly back toward him. But he is too late and the drone snags on power lines stretching along the street. It spirals downward into the road, hitting it with a loud cracking sound as three of its four propellers splinter and scatter along the blacktop. The screen on his father's iPad goes black.

He races into the street to retrieve the drone, terrified what will happen when his father finds out what he's done. In his rush, however, the boy does not see or hear the minivan coming down the street. If he had, he would have jumped back to the sidewalk, where he would have waited for the startled driver to pass by. The van's driver would have put her car in reverse, rolled down the passenger window, and scolded him for frightening her. Maybe she would have even told the boy's parents what he had done. But the boy does not see or hear the car. Instead, he darts in front of it, giving the driver no time to react. The boy is hit at thirty miles per hour, causing his head to snap against the van's hood, cracking his skull. His dead body is dragged underneath the vehicle for twenty or more feet before the van's driver manages to stop.

The girl and her friends hear screaming coming from the front of the house and run to see what happened. The van's driver is a woman, a neighbor from one street over and the mother of one of the girls at the party. She is keening and crying as she kneels next to the car's open door. The driver's daughter runs to her mother, who stops wailing long enough to mutter over and over that she didn't see the boy, that one moment he wasn't there and the next he was right in front of her. The girl and her mother grip each other tight, both crying, barely aware of the sudden activity around them as neighbors race out of their houses to see what the commotion is.

The boy's sister is the first to notice the small legs jutting out from underneath the rear of the van. It takes her a few seconds to recognize the jeans and sneakers and when she does, she is unable to move, her head and body suddenly filled with air. Her vision swirls and swirls so that the last thing the girl recognizes before fainting is the brilliant blue sky and the thin black stripes of the power lines slashing across it.

The Girl

Late the following morning, after the tumult and confusion and shock began to subside, the girl lies on her bed clutching a pillow over her face. For hours she has listened to the sounds of her parents downstairs, alternating between sobs and screams. At one point her father knocked on her bedroom door, a knock so light and tentative she had to wonder if she'd really heard it. She didn't answer or open the door. In the dark silence beneath the pillow, she fights to keep at bay the image of her brother's lifeless legs sticking out behind the van, as though he'd crawled there to take a nap.

Shortly past noon, the girl gets out of bed and dresses. She tiptoes downstairs and peeks into the family room. She sees her parents sitting on the sofa. They are facing away from her, but she can hear them discussing plans for her brother's funeral. Her mother suddenly breaks down and throws the pen she is holding across the room before collapsing against her husband's chest. The girl backs away and decides to go outside to get away from the gloom of the house, which feels so palpable she feels she could simply clutch a handful of it out of the air.

The sun is high and bright and as the girl steps out the front door, and she is temporarily blinded. After her eyes adjust, she finds herself staring toward the street, at the place where the destiny of her entire family had forever changed. She's angry at how ordinary it looks.

The girl walks across the lawn, her gaze never straying from the spot in the road where the accident occurred. She thinks about how quiet their street is, with hardly any traffic, and the cruel irony of that thought feels like a quick punch to her heart. As she steps off the curb she notices a spot—nothing more than a slightly darker patch against the dark surface of the blacktop—and she walks to it. Staring down, she realizes it is a trace of her brother's blood that wasn't completely cleaned off by the emergency workers. She squats and reaches down. She wants to feel, even caress, this last remnant of her brother, but as her hand hovers over it, she realizes she is incapable of touching it. She starts to walk back to the house, fighting an urge to keep glancing back at the blood spot. That's when she notices something lying against the curb.

The girl bends and picks up the object. It's plastic and thin and elongated. One end is rounded, and the other end is sharp, with a narrow point extending from it. The fierce heat of the sun burns the back of the girl's neck. She's about to drop the object when recognizes it's a piece of one of the drone's propellers. The girl closes her fingers around the blade, gripping it tight.

Inside the house, her parents are still collapsed against each other on the sofa, but silent now, so the girl goes upstairs to her bedroom. She

unclutches the piece of the propeller and looks at it for a long time before hiding it in the back corner of her closet's shelf.

Except a few intermittent hours from exhaustion, the girl has not slept since the accident. Whenever she has managed to doze, her sleep is filled with dreams of her brother. In most, he comes walking toward her from a great distance, out of a dark void, and the only parts of him that are in focus are his legs—his jeans and sneakers. One leg of the boy's pants has a small spot of blood the exact size and shape of the drone. The girl wakes sweaty and gasping.

Days pass. The house fills with the buzz of family and friends coming to offer their condolences. Four days following the accident, they bury her brother. It's another hot and sunny day, the sky devoid of clouds. The girl sits between her parents and stares at the casket as a priest she doesn't know (her family attends Mass rarely, typically only at Easter or Christmas) explains how her brother has ascended to heaven and is at that very moment in the warm embrace of Jesus. The girl tilts her head to the sky and peers upward. Her face looks desperate, searching for some sign that what the priest says is true, but all she sees is empty sky.

For the remainder of the summer, unless her parents force her, the girl does not leave the house. When the long, painful summer ends and autumn arrives, it brings with it a new school and a new routine. Most of the friends who were at the party the day her brother died say hi to the girl in the hallways at their new high school, but they no longer hang out with her, and they never invite her to join them after school. Instead, the girl heads home immediately after the final bell has rung and immerses herself in homework and reading. But each night, after getting ready for bed, she retrieves the broken piece of propeller hidden in her closet and lies holding it in the dark, sometimes for hours. Her biggest fear is, at some point, she'll forget that awful day. And she never wants to, even though the adults around her assure her that her life will be better the sooner she does. But forgetting would be a sin.

So, before she can fall asleep, the girl draws the sharp, pointed shard of the propeller deep against the soft flesh of her thigh, biting her lip against the pain she knows she deserves, marking the days without her brother. And later, when the scars are discovered, others will assume her self-mutilation was her attempt to carve away the guilt she feels over her negligence the day of the party. But she knows that the scars she'll always carry constitute a permanent reckoning of just how far she has come from that fateful day. And, just as likely, how far she has yet to go.

BARRY PETERS

JohnnyMac!

He'd had his driver's license for two weeks. Long enough, he believed, that he could convince his mother to let him take the truck to the new Hardee's by himself. His first solo trip to town. She had to cook the big meal for everyone the next day, so he'd bring home dinner. He'd even pay. It was Christmas Eve. And it was only five miles.

What he didn't tell his mother was that he was planning to stop at Simpson's Pharmacy and talk to Liz Perkins. The pharmacy would close early, so he had it all timed out: First Liz, then Hardee's, then back home. His mother didn't have to know; at least that's how he pictured it happening. Liz usually worked Thursdays, he'd seen her at the checkout twice when he and his mother stopped for detergent and dog food and other stuff, and the sign taped to the door last week said they'd be open until six on Christmas Eve. He hoped it was true. In Minerton, you never knew. Maybe Liz had asked for the day off because of a family thing. Maybe there wouldn't be any customers and they would close even earlier.

His name was Johnny MacFelton, though everyone at school called him JohnnyMac, said or shouted as quickly as possible: "JohnnyMac!" In the hallways between classes, he always heard a few "JohnnyMacs!" and he'd look for whoever shouted it and give him a fist-bump. That fall, after the accident, their history teacher, Mr. Levis, who was from someplace else, talked to Johnny about his name. They were going over Johnny's make-up work, and out of nowhere Mr. Levis said that he might try being called "John" since he was a sophomore now, he was growing up fast, his name should reflect his strength and maturity. Johnny remembered those exact words, "strength" and "maturity," but he still preferred "Johnny," and if he was honest, he liked "JohnnyMac" even better. Everyone seemed happy when they sang it out. It reminded him of playing the flutophone on Parent's Night in third grade.

Once his mother agreed that he could pick up Hardee's for dinner, Johnny considered his next problem: He couldn't leave for town before his sister arrived from Pittsburgh. Ashley and Mark and the baby were supposed to be in Minerton before dark. It was a three-hour drive, and his mother said they were going to leave right after lunch, but the baby might have other plans. Now it was four-thirty. Johnny did the calculations while looking out the picture window between the trees trying to get a glimpse of their silver

SUV coming up the road. Nothing moved but smoke from the chimney of their nearest neighbors, the Welches, at the bottom of the hill. The rail fence, the field, the blacktop, the telephone poles and wires, were cold and still in the late-afternoon gray.

Johnny tried to be patient. He pictured Liz Perkins in her navy-blue Simpson's smock, her dark hair ponytailed, sliding bags of chips and rolls of paper towel over the scanner and asking customers if they found everything they needed. "Merry Christmas," she'd tell them, handing them their change. But it was just a daydream to kill time so he snapped out of it. He considered going outside and checking on the dogs, but he'd done that twice already and they were fine. His phone was quiet. He thought about going online and playing 8-Ball, but it had started feeling like a waste of time. There was football on TV, a bowl game between teams he'd never heard of playing in a city two thousand miles away that would remind him of his own lousy football season. He only got into three games because he missed so many practices, plus he hadn't filled out yet and it seemed like all his teammates had.

He refocused on the road at the bottom of the hill and saw nothing. Come on, Ashley.

A couple weeks ago at the IGA, while his mother was talking to one of her friends in the parking lot, Johnny went back inside to the card section. His family had always given each other birthday and holiday cards. It was old-fashioned, but he thought Liz Perkins might like a Christmas card. He didn't know for sure. He had never talked to her. She was a junior, and it seemed like a long shot, but this was her first year at Minerton, so she probably didn't know that many people. Or guys. His friend Bud Vance, who knew everybody, told him that Liz's parents were divorced, that she moved here with her mother last summer, then Bud asked, "You got the hots for her, JohnnyMac?" Johnny skimmed through the Christmas cards, skipping the sappy red flowers and glittery gold cursive, until he found one with eight cartoon deer falling from clouds on the front and "Happy Holidays from the Rain Deer" printed on the inside. He bought it and slid it into the inside pocket of his football jacket so that it wouldn't crease on the way home. After they unloaded the groceries, he went to his room and signed it and PS'd that maybe she'd like to see the new Batman movie with him over the break. Then he wrote "Liz" on the envelope and licked the glue on the flap and hid the card in a drawer beneath his socks. He would give it to her in an hour, if his sister made it home by then, and if Simpson's was still open, and if Liz was working. And if he found the courage.

It was almost dark. Where were Ashley and Mark?

"Johnny," his mother called from the family room. "Come in here and help me with something."

He left the front window and found his mother sitting on the couch in the family room holding the silver star for the top of the Christmas tree. Her hands shook, her legs bounced up and down. Johnny worried about times like this, when his mother sort of lost it. He knew the feeling. It would sneak up on him out of nowhere. He'd suddenly want to cry and he could hardly move. The counselor, who told Johnny to call her Sarah, said feelings like these were normal. Sarah asked him how his mother was doing, and Johnny found himself saying that she was strong and that he admired her. Sarah smiled. They didn't talk about it though, the sadness, he and his mother. Sometimes she would look him in the eye and ask, "How are you doing, Johnny?" She never asked him that before the accident, not so directly and in such a serious voice.

In recent weeks Johnny hadn't felt the crying paralyzed feeling as much. He thought that when his mother went back to work after New Year's, maybe it wouldn't happen to her as much either. She worked in the payroll department at the county office. His father had worked for the county too. Permits and inspections.

Now she looked up at Johnny. "Would you?"

"Sure, Mom," he said. He took the silver star, pulled over a foldout chair from the table, made sure the legs were locked, then stood on the seat so he could reach the top of the tree over the outer branches. The day they bought the tree was difficult, when she and Johnny took the truck to the Minerton Soda Shop parking lot and walked through the fragrant cut pines, the tradition down to the two of them. She decorated it one day while he was at school. When he got home, she said she hoped he didn't mind, and he didn't. He in fact was glad. But the star was another tradition, his father topping the tree on Christmas Eve. Now, as Johnny reached the star up near the ceiling, the needles brushed his forearm where he had pulled up the sleeve of his hoodie. He remembered that itchy feeling from hanging ornaments when he was little.

He fumbled with the star for a minute, trying to figure out how the spring on the bottom fit over the vertical branch at the top.

"How does it work?" he asked his mother.

"I'm not sure. Do you need the scissors?"

They heard the sound of the front door opening down the hall.

"They're here." His mother rose from the couch, then turned to Johnny and reached out her arm. "Be careful," she said, and left the room.

Time was running out, the star was impossible, so Johnny balanced it in a nest of branches and stepped off the chair. He nearly jogged into the front room.

"Hardee's?" Ashley was saying. "Really, Mom? Not Hardee's."

Now he would have to say hello to his sister and Mark and the baby, and he would have to convince them about Hardee's, all in a matter of minutes. He glanced at the mantle. The wooden clock shaped like a tractor had been there as long as he could remember. His mother had thumb-tacked a red bow beneath it as usual. It was five-thirty.

Ashley was holding the baby like a football. Women held them that way, cradled in the crook of their arms so they couldn't be fumbled. Ben had been born in August. Their father had met him and held him, too. At the service and after, they told each other that was a good thing many times. Johnny remembered that Ben was his nephew and he was an uncle.

Ashley began giving Mark instructions about what to do with their suitcases and the shopping bags full of wrapped presents, then she stopped.

"Hold Ben, will you? I've got to hug my brother," she said. "Johnny, how are you?"

"Good." He added quickly, "Hungry."

"Let's make spaghetti," Ashley said. "We always made spaghetti on Christmas Eve. Do you have any, Mom?"

His memories of Christmas Eve began with the four of them sitting at the dining room table. He and Ashley and even their father would pull the rolls apart and put the steaming halves over their noses while their mother acted disgusted. It was just an act.

"Mom has to cook tomorrow," Johnny countered. "I'm going to pick up dinner." He left out the word "Hardee's" on purpose.

"Oh, you are?" Ashley said. "Mr. Driver now. How's that going?"

"Fine," he said. He noticed Ashley's hair was in a new style, flat and shiny, cut at a strange angle that reminded him of geometry class. He didn't see women in Minerton with hair like that. Ashley had married Mark four years ago and moved to Pittsburgh where he worked in a bank tower and she designed websites at home, or she used to before the baby. Maybe she still did.

"Well, I need something healthy," Ashley said.

"Hardee's has salads," he said. "I think."

Mark slung the baby over his shoulder and patted its bottom through the blankets.

"That's fine with me," he said. Mark was about six-five and had played for a small college in Pennsylvania. He was wearing many shirts, layers of them, the collars all turned up. Johnny was distracted by them for a minute, then realized he'd found an ally.

"Good, Mark," he said, using Mark's name for the first time probably ever. It made Johnny feel in control.

"Hardee's," Ashley said, giving in. "Johnny, you have to get out of this town."

He took salad orders for her and his mother, saying he didn't need to write it down, he could remember. Mark wanted a burger with everything and extra-large fries, chili sauce if they had it. "When in Rome," he said, making a face at Ashley.

His mom handed Johnny two twenties, refusing his offer to pay.

"Want some company?" Mark asked.

Johnny pictured him standing by the front door of the Simpson's while he talked to Liz Perkins. He shook his head, then went to the hall closet, picked up a ball cap, put it back down, and grabbed his football jacket.

"You'll freeze in that," his mother said.

"Running errands by yourself." Ashley folded her arms. "All grown up."

"You sure you don't want me to ride along?" Mark asked.

As Johnny was shutting the door, he heard his mother say, "Take Seventeen. Turn your lights on. And for God's sake, watch for the deer."

Johnny was starting the truck when he realized he had forgotten the card. It was too late to go back inside.

There were two ways into Minerton. Route Seventeen was four lanes part of the way, but it was longer and there were traffic lights at that end of town. If he missed all three, or even two, no way could he get to Simpson's before it closed. Pickle Pike, a twisting two-lane with no shoulders, was the back way to town and shorter. No traffic lights. It was also the road where his father died on September 10. Johnny had not been on Pickle Pike since. His mother refused to take Pickle. She always thought it was dangerous anyway. Now Johnny told himself that he had no choice. He backed the truck out of the driveway, hoping nobody was watching from the front window when he turned left.

He drove without music. He needed to focus. At the stop sign he looked right. Nobody was coming, though he couldn't see very far because of the curve and the darkness. He switched his lights off and on for the third time to make sure they were on. Then he turned onto Pickle Pike and accelerated. Everything was dark except for the double-yellow and the white line at the edge, the paint so faded he couldn't see it sometimes. He put on the brights and scanned the side of the road for deer. He checked the clock on the dashboard and saw it turn from 5:48 to 5:49.

When Johnny was little, he thought of a rollercoaster whenever they took Pickle Pike, which they usually did when his father was driving. It may have been a deer, or somebody who crossed the double-yellow and was too scared to stop, or loose gravel, that tipped his father's Buick off the

road that night and landed it upside down in Pickle Creek. His father had not been drinking, that's what the paper said. He'd been watching football at Fassbinder's, the way he did every Monday night in the fall, with his old friends from high school. His father called them Minerton lifers. They were two generations beyond actual working mines in town, his father explained, and most of them didn't know what to do with themselves. The county couldn't hire everyone.

The only thing Johnny knew about the mines was that once in a while a house would sink and his father would be busy at work. Permits and inspections, he would say. Johnny didn't know exactly what that meant, but he liked the sound of it, especially when he was a child. Hot dogs and beans, mac and cheese, permits and inspections.

Johnny was almost done with Pickle Pike when headlights came up from behind and illuminated the entire cab. They were like moons or suns in his mirror. It was probably a jacked-up truck, maybe an off-roader. Johnny had been driving the speed limit, or a little under, careful but fast enough, the way his father had taught him last summer, first in the empty high school parking lot and then on the back roads, including Pickle Pike one time. "Just don't tell your mother," his father had told him.

Now the headlights were right on Johnny's tail. He could hear the driver racing the engine. He didn't know whether to speed up or slow down. There was nowhere for him to pull over. In about two minutes he'd be in town. A few seconds later, the vehicle roared past him heading into a blind curve. It was a hi-riser like he thought. The red lights disappeared and he never saw it again.

Simpson's Pharmacy was still open. The lot was full and Johnny had to park on Fourth under a streetlight. He looked in the mirror and ran his hand through his hair and lightly touched a pimple on his chin. It was five before six.

Johnny had never seen Simpson's that crowded. He was carried along with the stream of customers away from the front registers. Was Liz Perkins working? He couldn't tell, the place was so packed. And something else was different; the customers were mostly men. Some were younger than his father, some his father's age, some older. They wore ball caps and knit hats. A couple had their hoods up. Their puffy winter coats and camo jackets and oversized flannel shirts brushed against each other as they walked the aisles. Many carried the red plastic shopping baskets hooked over their elbows, the way his mother did on Thursday nights. He realized the men were shopping for presents. They picked up small vases of artificial flowers and glass globes with nature scenes inside, looked at them closely, carefully put them in their baskets or back on the shelves. They examined

ceramic poodles and basset hounds, porcelain doll figurines, planters with fake greenery, salt and pepper shakers in the shape of fish. They eyeballed a display of multi-colored coffee mugs. They hunched over the counter in back scanning the watches and rings, old Mr. Simpson reaching inside and pulling out whatever they pointed to.

Johnny remembered that he still had to wrap the present for his mother, silver earrings that he bought not here but at Mueller's, the jewelry store down the street. One day when she wasn't home, Johnny had gone into her room and dug through the jewelry box on her dresser. He noticed that she had more silver than gold, much more, and he wanted her to have something new when she went back to work.

Suddenly Johnny felt hot standing in the crowd at the back of Simpson's. He couldn't move if he wanted to among the men. There was a lot of commotion. He tried to remember the kind of salads that his mother and Ashley wanted, but he couldn't. He still didn't know if Liz Perkins was working or not. He worried that he might start shaking. He wondered if he might cry.

A hand touched his shoulder. He turned and saw a man he recognized from somewhere, a tall bald guy with thick glasses and a goatee. The man said, "Merry Christmas, Bill MacFelton's boy," and pushed gently by.

He took a slow breath. He felt his legs again. He made his way to the front of the store. Three checkout lanes were open, long lines of men waiting their turns. He picked out Liz Perkins between the bodies, but he could only see her face, briefly. She was busy and he didn't have anything to buy. He had forgotten the card anyway.

Johnny gave himself permission to forget about her, for tonight anyway. It was time to go to Hardee's. He would turn on the radio while he waited at the drive-thru. He would inspect the bags to make sure they got his order right. Then he would drive home, one way or the other, safely and carefully, with food for his family.

ELISABETH PRESTON-HSU

He Who Wanted to Taste Gibraltar

A mechanic rowed across the Strait
still in his work clothes, looking for Spain.
Martín Zamora brought parts of him home.
I searched the newspaper's story to gather
a grief I did not know I had, to make
this man whole in Zamora's hands.

Did a white shark disarticulate
his [ ] first?
Did he know he'd taste only the salt
[of ocean and sweat, and never *mojama*]?
Wind pulled him off course,
then currents pulled him apart.
His lungs must have shivered
in the sudden cold, epiglottis closing,
holding breath to protect the hope
for air on the other side
of the channel, the other side
of his lips.
Statue of a lion missing a paw,
a figure without [ ].
We are still reaching for the shore,
the without say, this consumed
in cold waters where his tongue tasted
that before the morgue.

I will drive through the pines and sunflowers
his hearse once passed, his body collected
in green shroud and dried flowers.
He gasped for the air of many countries.
He drowned in waters everywhere.
It is not enough to say he is a garden:
Achraf Ameer, he who wanted to taste north.

In response to the *New York Times* article
"The Body Collector of Spain," published October 12, 2021.

ANNIE PRZYPYSZNY

Opening Up

Everyone's father was once
a child. Mine had four siblings
and straight black hair

and a long Polish last name
with no vowels.
In suburban Chicago,

he lived in a house
with a pinball machine
in the basement and oil portraits

of historic-looking people
on the walls—who knows
who they were, just that their eyes

watched. He liked the radio,
Casey Kasem counting his way down
through John Denver, The Carpenters—

soft, reassuring vocals, mellow
percussion, often lost in the noise
of the Metra rail thrumming

just a throw from the backyard.
He had a stuffed Snoopy doll
he found abandoned

in a parking lot—washed it,
stitched it, made it good
as almost new. He dressed it

in a hospital gown because
his father was a doctor
and he was a patient,

chronically ill all his life,
though I wouldn't know this
till I was eighteen, and it was

my brother who had to tell me;
though I recall a moment
when I was a little girl, showing Dad

the scar on the abdomen
of my Madeline doll—
that all-too-neat product

of her storybook surgery. In response,
Dad tugged up the hem of his shirt,
showed me his own old wound,

and it was then I learned he'd once
been opened up, though he reassured me
it wouldn't come to that again.

DAVID E. POSTON

A Valediction

"One more sound out of you," my father said, "and I'll make your little ears ring for a week! I've had it! I don't care if I hear another word from your mouth as long as I live." Then he got sick, and soon his wish was granted.

My mother's wishes were not, and after a few years her pleas gradually stopped.

Ms. Xylophone evaluated me in third grade, Ms. Eyeliner in sixth grade, and Ms. Hypermania all through high school. I tested well and always gave them clear results. I met all five criteria to be labelled an elective mute.

Of course I tested well. Testing saved me. Either I got pulled out of the classroom for an hour or two, or a beautiful silence was imposed all around me. I loved everything about standardized testing: the way my classmates and teachers dreaded and loathed it, the rhythmic drone of the directions, the scrape of perfectly sharpened #2 pencils forming circles on bubble sheets. I loved the moments of utter peace when I finished before everyone else and watched them drop their heads onto their desks one by one or struggle until the last second.

And I loved pop quizzes. Here's one for you.

Q1. My diagnosis was:

A. Schizophrenia
B. Social anxiety disorder
C. Undeterminable, because I (of course) never shared my father's wish with anyone
D. An over-excited amygdala

One of my heart's desires was to hold the *Guinness Book* world record for most silent years. Why not? People have had the hiccups for decades at a time. According to Amanda, the *Lord of the Rings* junkie, there once was a man in Spain who spontaneously burst into flame. Probably someone's wish being granted, I thought, or at best the beginning of a slant-rhymed limerick. But she was the only person who had read Tolkien through as many times as I had, so I did not disregard her. Even though I never disputed anyone, I disregarded almost everyone, except for her and Ms. Randolph and one Other.

Ms. Randolph used to talk about finding your voice, and she was so intense about it that my classmates forgot whether they should look at me or

look away. She was like a bird, black eyes and a beak of a nose, but gentle for all its sharpness, and curved, sharp-looking fingers. She held everything carelessly and waved it around a lot. She was more bright than loud, and she insisted you had it in you. So I wrote for her.

Of course I pissed her off, too. Take Holden Caulfield, for example. I hated the guy, the lazy lame-brained slacker. Maybe the world's not empty and meaningless. Maybe you're not trying hard enough to figure it out, dumbass. Stupidest book I had ever read. Sorry Ms. Randolph. I know you thought I would relate. Maybe if I had a lobotomy. But because of you, you sweet well-meaning lady, I read *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. And *The Stranger*. And Hesse and Steinbeck and even Ayn Rand. I read them in math class and in U.S. history class while Mr. Sterling was explaining our leaders' failures from Vietnam to when that Georgia peanut farmer gave away our nation's greatest engineering triumph. I thought a lot about failures and what would save us, about the voices I heard all day long and all the views they shared. I considered all the views, and even the ones I thought I was disregarding seeped into my thoughts.

Here's a thought, what I called the God's eye view of the world. God's hanging in the hallway, looks down just as the bell rings, and sees a cricket at the bottom of the stairwell. Its little antennae are quivering at the sound of the class-change bell. Little Mr. Cricket doesn't understand what the sounds and signs of the world mean. He doesn't know what's going to hit him when the stampede begins. It won't matter at all what he does.

The first draft of my speech began like this:

Before you were born, God sat you down on Her knee and said, "Pookie, thou hast a choice. Seriously, you do. You can either be a freak in high school or a freak for the rest of your life." She looked down at each one of us with the eternal serene expression of one who knows every screw-up from the Big Bang to Armageddon and who knows how each of us will answer before we open our cherubic little lips to reply.

We all had that moment on God's knee, and we all have had to live with our choices. And now, my fellow pookies, our lives are about to change, to converge, to crisscross…

The afternoon the One died, she kissed me on the cheek. It was fall, middle of football season, freshman year. She'd had enough of the jocks crowding up behind her when she bent over at her locker, and squatting down was even worse. She asked me to switch with her, so the last thing she did at school before she drove off in her little yellow Beetle convertible and smacked it head-on into the log truck was to hang her makeup mirror in my locker.

She didn't act surprised that my locker was empty, because by then it had dawned on her why I came and stood in front of it during every class change, every day, without ever opening it and why the jocks always had to shove me out of their way. When she asked me if I would switch and I nodded yes, she leaned over to whisper thank you in my ear. Then she kissed me ever so gently on the cheek. She was gone around the corner when I opened my eyes.

So Red Hinson didn't know he was slipping her note into my locker. It wasn't very eloquent, but he had clearly found his voice. *You can't do this to me, not now…I don't care what you do with it. Just don't screw up my life*. At her funeral, he sat with the family.

Q2. Why did her family never know?

A. because death by log truck does not require much examination
B. because Red Hinson didn't tell anyone
C. All of these answers are correct
D. because the clinic in Waynesboro doesn't ask for names

Q3. What happened to Red Hinson's note?

A. I left it on her grave
B. I put it back in her locker when I moved everything back
C. I burned it
D. I keep it under my pillow

Yes, I do, but not for you. That's what I want on a t-shirt. Or maybe *Sorry girls, he only speaks to virgins*, which the jocks in my P. E. class stuck on my back sophomore year, the wittiest thing any of them ever did, at least until I pulled the pistol at Writing Rock. *Had your hearing checked lately? I have the right to remain silent, and I'm not afraid to use it*, lame stuff like that. *Why don't you exercise your right to remain silent?*

Yes, I can speak. But I don't. I'm exceptional. People adjust, and most of them like it. Old man Basnight at the furniture and appliance store in Waynesboro hired me to ride shotgun for Donnie Earl DeLoatch and use the hand trucks. Donnie Earl didn't need any help carrying on a conversation, unless you count the need for somebody to shut him up before he told everything.

"…her husband's playing poker down at the Moose Lodge, see, and she calls him up to make sure he's still there. She's giving him a hard time because he's telling her he'll be home when he's damn ready, and I'm just

lickin' away on them things while she's talking, so it's all she can do to keep her voice steady. It just got her more excited. We laid up in that bed 'til 2:00 in the morning, and I just missed him catchin' me, 'cause I took a left just before he come around the curve to his driveway…"

Yes, he's told me more than I ever wanted to know. He told me about the $1,500 he found in a sack, too. That story matches up neatly with Sam's story about the time the $1,500 disappeared out of the register one day while everyone else was gone to lunch and he was out front with a customer. "Somebody came in the back door slicker than owl shit," Sam said, "and cleaned the drawer out."

Donnie Earl said that when he found the $1,500 in the paper sack, just lying by the side of the road, he put it way back in the top of his closet and took a long, sweet time spending it, so as not to call attention to himself. Sam's been eyeing everyone who comes into the store regularly, wondering who had the nerve to pull the daring daylight lunch caper. Beats me, I think, but of course I said nothing.

I said nothing about the gun in Mr. Barret's desk, either. He told me to wait right there when he got called out, so I waited. The rumor about confiscated porno magazines in his bottom desk drawer was evidently not true, but nobody had ever claimed I would find a loaded .38 in there. Black, old-fashioned-looking thing, but satisfyingly large and heavy when you hefted it in your hand while the principal was just outside the door in a shouting match with somebody's angry mother about the bedroom slippers her daughter had worn to school. Since his keys were hanging in the desk, I just locked it back in case he did have some magazines to safeguard in another drawer. I worried the rest of the day about shooting myself in an embarrassing place when I sat down.

I said nothing through all the sweeps and searches and the mysterious reward for missing school property announcements over the next few weeks. Some things are their own reward.

Such as seeing her at her locker every day, and never ever saying the wrong thing. Such as remembering that I was the last person she ever kissed. Who could explain what bittersweet means if he never felt her lips on his cheek? I don't mean how they felt at our lockers that afternoon after school; I mean later, when I heard the news and felt those cool lips on my cheek again. When I opened the locker and imagined that I could still smell her perfume.

I didn't need to tell the carload of jocks they were not going to push me around. They piled out, they circled, they saw the big black .38, and they piled back in, jumping over each other like crickets. They used the same old tired language coming and going. *We're gonna make you talk, you damn*

faggot! I got somethin' right here, you can talk to, freak-boy! You better have more than that when I get back here, bad-ass!

You just breathe steadily, exhale, and squeeze. Or not. It's all the same, I thought, as I enjoyed the way the world looked down the barrel of a gun.

The witty thing was the note on my locker on Monday. *Ceasefire*. Red Hinson convinced them to leave me alone. The story went everywhere, of course, but because it was true, nobody believed it. Except Mr. Barrett. The best thing about it all was how he left me alone, too.

Q4. Where's the pistol?

A. The janitor let me in Mr. Barrett's office, and I put it back in his desk
B. I keep it under my pillow, with the note
C. I threw it into the lake at Writing Rock
D. I carry it everywhere

Essay Question: Using complete sentences, explain either

(A) why Red Hinson left me alone
or
(B) why Mr. Barrett left me alone

If my junior and senior year were a film sequence, it would be a montage of smoldering tension, lots of averted eyes and whispers, and "Riders on the Storm" looping as the soundtrack. Somewhere in there I even began to relate to Holden Caulfield.

Not doing the senior oral presentation should have made me Sal, not Val, except that Hypermania and Ms. Randolph took up for me. Alicia Barnwell's mom raised a ruckus all the way to the school board, but everyone wanted to see what would happen at graduation.

The rest of the story goes like this: Ms. Randolph is supposed to help me with my speech, and she nixes the whole God and Pookie idea. Donnie Earl wants to know if it's true that I've got a pistol and offers to help me if I have another run-in with Red Hinson. Mr. Barrett hears about the gun incident at Writing Rock, calls me in a second time to ask me about it, and beats his fists on the desk as I stare back at him. Red Hinson realizes that she and I had changed lockers, so he is wondering what I know about his note, which of course, he cannot find. Old Man Basnight calls my mother and tells her he'd like to help with my college expenses because I've been such a good worker. With all this in mind, I prepare a new speech. I practice it with Ms. Randolph, but nobody else hears it. A rumor starts to go around

that I'm going to tell all at graduation. That I'll have a pistol under my robe. That I'm going to tell a secret about how she died. That I'm going to tell all manner of other dark secrets.

Q5. Why does nobody speak up about such an imminent threat to public safety?
A. Everyone knows I'm harmless
B. Nobody wants to get involved
C. No one wants their secrets to come to light
D. Everybody wants to see what will happen

Q6. What will happen?
A. Red Hinson's worst fears will be realized
B. Mr. Barret's worst fears will be realized
C. A phenomenal incident will occur that forms the basis of several doctoral dissertations, including my own
D. Everyone's worst fears will be realized

In our little corner of the world, high school graduation is considered a relatively lofty achievement, celebrated by all who can fit in the school auditorium and many who can only stand around the parking lot.

(Now, reader, don't be afraid for anyone's safety. This was a long time ago, when all manner of unimaginable things were things only a few of us imagined. A classroom, especially for someone like me, was still the safest place in the world. I knew the rules, the routines, the stereotypes, and I loved being able to hate them all. Everyone knew our places, whether insider or outsider, and everyone knew the strategies to get us through.

And you need to know this. That day at Writing Rock, when I looked down the barrel of that pistol, I had what Ms. Randolph would have called an epiphany. It sounds like something Holden Caulfield would sneer at as corny, but it's true and it comes from me. I was never going to fire a bullet because there would never be enough of them. But I had all the words in the world.

Still worried? Just this once, I hope you followed the worst test-taking advice we ever heard in school.)

ANSWER KEY
Q1. C
Q2. C

Q3. C
Q4. C
Q5. C
Q6. C
Essay Question: Answers will vary

We file in to "Pomp and Circumstance," and I take my seat on the stage. Looking out into the frozen-faced assemblage is like looking into hundreds of mirrors.

I step up to the lectern and begin to speak.

XIAOQUI QUI

Woman on a High Stool, Matisse, Las Vegas

only where the shadow is
on a vaulted bank, water is black
and thin, before streams down
to the spare spaces of trash
the riverbed, it shines blue, skirted
sky against strokes of teal, half-pleated
bushes, edges hollow out, the wooden
cityscape: I don't know who she is—
but I have known them. That look. They wrap
their entire, chromatic life behind
a sweat-saturated black, and waits with
clasped hands, tinted by
some sclera-eating sun
on the strip, a tourist guy confesses
he's scared of homeless artists
singing aggressively, to TV news
cut to exterior, day, wide shot of
a group of them
unsure if should get up
on their always grey carpets, grey
that rams through their scarves, ropes,
paint-peeled banisters and the front ceramic
tiles of Cesar's Palace, and if the grey has toned
them, or they it, and
to the audience behind the frame, if
there's something they're supposed to say.

KELLY SARGENT

Seed Fruit

During a muted morning hour,
a hazel-eyed nurse named Grace
offers me a selection of seed fruit
from a ceramic bowl painted with delicate strawberries.

I recall a hazy, humid day decades earlier
when a honeysuckle breeze
brushed our identical sea-sprayed faces,

sweetening the moments
like a ripened peach
at a summer morning sunrise.

Now, I watch you sleeping
under a hospital building roof
that is steep and unforgiving,

and wait for you to open your eyes
that are your ears, to hear me
holding our language in my hands.

I wrap your limp hand around signed letters
that I form with my fingers
over and over and over again: *P-l-e-a-s-e-d-o-n-t-l-e-a-v-e-m-e*

I cover you with your favorite plum purple cardigan
you had been wearing when it happened,
and reach for the chilled ceramic bowl.

My teeth scrape a peach pit,
and I swallow a winding,
wayward river at sunset.

I see a lone praying mantis
on an ash tree branch outside the window.
And I wonder

…if it is.

L.B. SEDLACEK

Soda Shoppe Blues

He roars up
in his blue pick-up truck
bearded man
in a work uniform
blue too
probably a mechanic
maybe auto parts
he sits and counts his
change
finally emerging from the
low slung truck
to feed his coins
from greasy hands
into the vending machine
needing that sweet soda
taste to get through
the rest of his day
he flips off the cap
takes a swig or two
then roars back out of
the parking lot the
way he came.

DANIELLE SELLERS

Letter to Myself, Age Six

After Amy Gerstler

Did you know that three founding fathers:
Adams, Jefferson, and Monroe
died on July 4th? Like your dad,

Adams and Monroe died of heart failure,
though they were given much more time
than yours will have, dead at 64.

Jefferson got all messed up with boils and infections
and diarrhea and what was likely prostate cancer,
so poor at the end he had to sell his books

for kindling. Your father will die
thirteen years from now also in financial ruin,
gambling to make his mortgage.

But right now, you're only six. It's been a year since
he was driving the Bronco pulling a trailer
that was hit by a drug-dulled semi driver.

He has moments, will always have moments,
where he seems to be asleep, cradling
his forehead in his catcher's mitt hand, prostrate

in his chenille Laz-y-boy. You will want
to climb up in his lap but you're afraid.
He is praying for forgiveness. He will die believing

it was his fault, for insisting on driving, insisting
we picnic at that spot on the neck of that road
on that bend of the Brazos. There will be a moment,

just one moment, when you are a freshman in college,
where he will break down. He will confess,
and you won't say, It wasn't your fault.

Because he did insist on driving, he did choose.
It will be years, nearly forty in fact, before you can
forgive him. At nineteen, there had been too many

fights, too many harsh punishments
for minor infractions, too many midnight leavings
without saying goodbye. Too much silence.

You will forgive him only when he's dead
longer than you were alive, when so much has happened
that you needed him for,
a dead little sister is the least of your worries.

ERIC RASMUSSEN

Ms. Breyer's Last Four Days

Christina should have gone to the funeral, but she barely knew the kid; school had been in session less than three weeks. She had learned his name—Tanner—but only because he had declined to participate in her first-day get-to-know-you games, then refused to take any materials home with him. The day following the service, five days after he had been discovered non-responsive in his bedroom with no suicide note or discernible cause of death, Christina found his stack of papers crammed in the bookshelf adjacent to his desk.

She sat in his seat. He had started each assignment with a firm, boxy scrawl, the sort of penmanship employed by students who struggle through English and generally hate school.

Last year, at about this same time, another of Christina's students had died, a 4.0 varsity tennis player named Emma Klinkhammer. Christina had only known her for a few weeks too, but they had formed an easy bond: Emma kept stopping in after school for help on her Youth Leadership Academy application essay, even though her writing was already pristine. No one supplied an official explanation of Emma's death, but everybody's guess was an undiagnosed eating disorder. Christina had attended that funeral, and it was awful. The grief she expected had been compounded by the sense that the family blamed *her*. School is supposed to keep kids safe. Teachers are trained to notice the issues that might end in tragedy. If Christina was a little better at her job, Emma might still be alive.

Christina's girlfriend at the time, Soledad, had insisted that she had imagined the accusatory looks. No one could possibly hold anyone's English teacher responsible for anything besides comma errors. Regardless, the guilt Christina still carried from Emma's funeral prevented her from paying her respects to Tanner, and that guilt only grew as she flipped through his troubled attempts at participating in English 10.

Under the half-dozen pieces of paper, Christina discovered the yellowed copy of *The Mayor of Casterbridge* she had handed out at the start of the semester. Her students hated the book. So did Christina, but it was the only title that remained in the department storage closet when Christina took her turn choosing a first-quarter text. She leaned back in the chair and fanned the paperback's pages. Most new teachers don't last

two years in the profession. Last year, her first year, she had scoffed at that statistic. Teaching had been her dream ever since she was five and spent most afternoons delivering alphabet lessons to her collection of stuffed animals. That afternoon, as the smell of old paper wafted around her, she wondered how it would feel to quit.

One of the pages crackled as she flipped past it, like it had dried after getting wet. She closed the book and the culprit revealed itself, the one wavy line nestled between the straight ones. With her fingernail Christina isolated the spot, then opened the book to assess the damage. Instead of water spots, though, she discovered something more annoying: an impressive case of doodle vandalism. Someone had drawn black boxes around most of the individual letters, leaving a small handful unmarked. The teenagers' creativity in finding new ways to destroy school property was impressive. Christina got to work on the code. *R, e, a, D, t, h, i, S, P, a, g…*

She sat up straighter as the answer became clear. *Read this page, then four days 'til you die.*

At first, the proximity of this message to an actual student's death didn't occur to her. She was too busy focusing on the fact that, unlike most illicit student annotations, at least this missive didn't concern penises.

Christina flipped to the inside of the front cover, where the list of previous borrowers would reveal who had defaced Thomas Hardy's immortal prose. Here, preceding Tanner's name, she found two words that made her shiver as adrenaline pinpricked her body.

Emma Klinkhammer.

Christina closed the book, stood, and crossed to the front of her classroom. She deposited the copy of The Mayor of Casterbridge in the recycle bin, then carried the bin to the hallway. Such acts normally required the completion of a Missing/Damaged Text form, but instead of heading to the office to retrieve a copy, Christina returned to her desk, sat, and burst into tears.

* * *

That night, shortly after 1:30 AM, the sound of a chair being scraped across the kitchen tile summoned Christina downstairs. Her first guess was Soledad, drunk and ready to make amends, or, more likely, drunk and looking to retrieve something she had forgotten when she moved out. Christina turned on every light switch and repeated "Hello?" as she inched through the living room and down the kitchen hallway. No one responded, and the scraping didn't stop. Then she heard the clinking of a spoon in a coffee mug. The kitchen wall felt cold as she slid her hand across its textured surface toward the light switch.

The illumination revealed a man with gray hair in a brown suit, sitting with his back to her. He turned slowly, almost as if he was as terrified by this scene as she was. His profile came into view and she could see his wrinkled face, with an enormous waxed mustache and sunken eyes. He held her mug with the watercolor flowers on it, which he raised and said, "Four days, dear." Then the cup fell from his hand.

The moment it hit the floor, Christina shot up from where she had been sleeping on the living room couch. It took a few seconds to figure out where she was, but no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't recall laying there the night before. All the lights were on. In the kitchen, the shattered remains of her flower mug were scattered across the floor.

* * *

The next day's lesson called for small group discussions, but there was no way Christina could muster the necessary energy or focus. On the drive to school, she decided to switch to a reading day, and when she shared the news with her first hour students, they groaned.

"This book is stupid," said Macy from the front row. "How much longer do we have to pretend to read it?"

Even though Christina was looking directly at Macy, she couldn't decipher the student's words. She was too distracted by the looping memory of the old man in her kitchen. Each time the moment replayed he turned slower and slower until she was trapped for what felt like hours in the handful of seconds before she could see his flat, frozen eyes.

Macy waved the book in the air. "Hello? I asked, how long?"

"Four days," Christina said. "Closer to three now." And then, even though she didn't decide to and she definitely didn't want to, she left the podium, crossed to her desk, opened her copy of Mayor of Casterbridge, and started tearing pages out, two at a time, three at a time, until Macy shouted, "Ms. Breyer! What's wrong with you?" Christina took a step back, brittle paper still in her hand, pieces wafting to the ground.

"I'm sorry," said Christina. "I have no idea."

* * *

Christina returned from lunch in the teacher's lounge to find Tanner's copy of *The Mayor of Casterbridge* sitting on her desk with a note stuck to the cover.

Found this in the recycle bin. Please see me.

The Post-It was signed by the assistant principal, a thick former gym teacher who also ran the baseball team. Before Christina had a chance to

gather her thoughts and head towards the administrative offices, she heard a knock, followed by his red face and dirty tennis shoes sliding into her classroom.

"You saw that book I left on your desk?" he asked.

Christina couldn't bring herself to touch it. "It's right here."

"That's school property."

"I know."

"Respecting school property is a basic expectation around here. I've coached our custodians to check."

All day Christina had been having problems with her vision. The edges wavered while the center glossed over like a migraine. But the book on her desk was crystal clear, clearer than anything she had ever seen.

"It's a terrible book," she said. "The students hate it."

"That sounds like a teacher problem, not a text problem."

"We could be so much more successful with almost anything else."

The assistant principal crossed his arms. "Getting rid of curricular materials requires school board approval," he said. "There's a form in my office. You're welcome to try filling it out."

* * *

It took until the final bell for Christina to find the courage to touch the book. It didn't burn her fingers. It didn't make her headache any worse. It was just a book. And maybe there was a simple explanation for everything that had happened in the last twenty-four hours. A virus. An overreaction to the death of one her students. A few ridiculous coincidences.

There was one way to find out.

She palmed Tanner's book and carried it at her side to the library. She found Tony the librarian sitting cross-legged on the floor in front of the manga section.

"Chrissy," Tony exclaimed. "Need help with another solid gold lesson idea?"

"Not today." Christina took a step back as if she might be contagious. "Do we have old yearbooks?"

Tony rocked backward in an effort to stand. "You bet."

"Don't get up," Christina snapped. "Just tell me where they are."

"Reference, across from the encyclopedias." Tony adjusted his glasses and stared at her. "Everything okay?"

"I don't know," she said. "I don't think so."

Christina deposited the suspect *Mayor of Casterbridge* on a table across from the reference section. She opened the front cover to find the

list of previous borrowers, along with years and the names of their English teachers. Six students had checked out this particular copy in the mid-90's. Then it sat ignored for over two decades until Emma last year. Christina retrieved the yearbooks from 1992 through 1997 and returned to her table.

The back of each yearbook featured an "In Memoriam" section, which most years consisted of a collage of elderly alumni who had passed on. But any student who died during the school year got their own page.

In 1992, Benjamin Gerhardt checked out the cursed copy of *Mayor of Casterbridge*. He was killed that spring. The yearbook write-up made it sound like a car accident.

In 1993, Stephanie Xiong happened to grab the book, and she died at a party. Her "In Memoriam" page included a news story that referenced potential alcohol poisoning.

In 1994, Daniel Mundt was assigned the book, but he apparently survived. In his class photo he wore a dark mullet and a scowl. He stood towards the back of the Auto Club group picture, and Christina located him in an action shot from a Metals & Welding class period. The reason for his survival seemed clear: he likely never opened the novel, never saw the damning page.

She found pictures of the three remaining victims amongst messages from their classmates. "We love you and miss you, Marguerite." "I'll always remember Bill's smile." "You're in a better place now, Lindsay." Christina closed the last yearbook with a trembling hand and turned her attention back to the novel, this time noticing another odd detail. All of the 90's students listed in the *Mayor of Casterbridge* had the same English teacher, a woman named Mrs. Gibb. Christina opened the '96-'97 yearbook again and found the woman's picture on the English department page, then jumped when a voice sounded close to her ear.

"Mrs. Gibb. I forgot about her." Tony the librarian leaned over, his stringy hair framing his face.

"Who was she?"

"Legendary English teacher. Students loved her."

"Is she still around? Can I find her?"

"No way. Have you not heard the story?"

Christina shook her head.

"At the end she went crazy. Tried to start the building on fire and burned herself alive in the process."

"That's awful."

Tony straightened up and tucked his hair behind his ears. "Tragic. She was only a couple years from retirement."

Christina closed the yearbook. Part of her was about to melt, her sanity flowing out of her as tears and desperate, hiccupping sobs. The other part was frozen in inevitably, a deer in headlights locked in a final moment of peace.

She turned to Tony. "What would you do if you knew your days around here were numbered?"

"On no!" He held up both hands. "You're not quitting too, are you?"

"I don't know what's going to happen."

"I wouldn't blame you." Tony crossed his arms. "My advice? Make a few memories. But mostly, relax. Whatever comes next can't possibly be as challenging as this place."

* * *

The next morning, Christina hit the snooze button three extra times. She hadn't slept well. The scraping noise from the kitchen had started shortly after midnight, and she ignored it for most of an hour before it stopped. Just as she was about to fall back to sleep, she felt a rustling at the end of her bed. She didn't want to open her eyes, but once again she wasn't in control of her body. The old man was sitting near her feet, unblinking, gasping like the oxygen was slowly being sucked from the room.

"Three days," he said.

"Tell me what to do and I'll do it."

"Three days."

It took her forever to get back to sleep after that.

She arrived at her classroom twelve minutes after the first bell, and the assistant principal had already let her students in and taken attendance. Before Christina could take off her jacket, the administrator gestured her into the hallway.

"You're late," he said.

"I'm sorry," replied Christina. "I had a terrible night."

"Regardless, first hour starts at 7:45."

Instead of a headache or the feverishness of the day before, a deep buzzing emanated from the base of Christina's skull. She stretched her neck from side to side. It didn't help.

"I'm here now," said Christina.

"With that attitude, you won't be around very long."

"Funny you should say that." Christina pushed past the assistant principal and addressed her class. "Get out your books. I'll come around with the garbage can. Today, we're starting something new."

* * *

That summer, right before school started, Christina had spent a whole week preparing a semester's worth of healthy freezer meals, and her schedule that night called for Mediterranean chickpeas with rice and green beans. Instead, she stopped at the liquor store for a $45 tequila, then found her favorite food truck and ordered a burrito. She finished it and most of the bottle on the couch, then fell asleep watching her favorite movie of all time, *13 Going on 30*. When she was young, imagining life as an adult fascinated her, but all of a sudden she couldn't recall any of the futures she had planned for herself.

When the old man started his racket around 2:00 AM, she marched into the kitchen, turned on the light, and sat in the chair across from him. This time he held the hand-made mug a student had gifted her the year before.

"Don't break that," she said.

"Two days."

"You don't have to keep dropping by. I know the schedule."

The old man's eyes glazed over and the corners of his mouth drooped, giving Christina the impression that he too was trapped in some terminal sentence he didn't understand.

"Are you Thomas Hardy?"

The old man set the mug on the table.

"Please tell me who you are."

After a few minutes of silence, Christina returned to the couch.

* * *

It was still dark when Christina awoke a few hours later. She rose, found her school bag, and retrieved her laptop. These actions again didn't feel like her own, but this time it was different. This time she approved of everything her body was doing. Her fingers clicked through to the school's absence management system, then signed up for a substitute teacher. She made coffee and an English muffin. She showered.

Then, four months after Soledad left, Christina got to work cleansing the house of their time together. Pictures of the two of them at Zion, holding parrots in Mexico, and enjoying a bottle of wine at an outdoor café went in a cardboard box. Christina moved the living room furniture back to the set-up Soledad preferred and relieved the walls of the paintings of sunflowers and daffodils and all the other flora that Soledad had always found "a little cheesy." Soledad's name was still on the mortgage, and in two days the house would be hers. Christina could only speculate how her ex would feel when

she walked through the front door after the funeral. Maybe fewer reminders of their relationship would make the process easier.

Next, Christina cleaned. Under everything, behind everything. It might have been smarter to spend her second-to-last full day alive doing something fun, skydiving or taking a hike or playing with puppies at some pet store. But when school was in session, she had a habit of ignoring everything else that brought her joy, like a clean house. And the movies she loved rewatching. And an amazing girlfriend she had once hoped to marry.

By sunset, the house was spotless. When the old man visited that night, Christina made a cup of tea and sat with him until sunrise.

* * *

On Christina's final morning, she showered and ate half an English muffin. She arrived at school early to prepare a writing exercise for the sophomores: What is the biggest mistake you've made, and where do you see its effects in your life? Many of them struggled to come up with anything to write about, but after talking them through broken friendships, family conflicts, and the times they wasted energy on things they later realized were unimportant, Christina helped most of them come up with workable ideas.

In between writing conferences she returned to Tanner's book. On a random page after the one with the death sentence, she started blacking out letters before realizing that constructing her own message would be much harder than she assumed. It took until sixth hour to find a page with the right letters in the right order. *Read this page, then a long and happy life*. She would have preferred the word "live" in the latter clause, but her time had run out.

The final bell rang, Christina's students departed. Did four days mean exactly ninety-six hours? Or was it more of a ballpark? She had first read the page at about 3:20, and she watched the clock tick towards that moment from her desk. The minute arrived. Then it passed without anything more noteworthy than the custodian in the hallway humming along with the country music blaring from her radio.

Christina retrieved her purse from the bottom desk drawer and found her cellphone in the outer pocket. She scrolled through her old text messages until she found the name that used to sit perpetually at the top of the list.

Soledad, Christina typed, *I have a box of stuff for you. I should be home this evening. I'd love to talk, if you want.*

After clicking "Send," she sent one more message, just in case. *If I'm not there, I'm really sorry. The box is in the entryway.*

Christina gathered her things, turned off the lights, and closed her classroom door just as the assistant principal came around the corner.

"Calling it early today?" the administrator asked.

"I don't feel well."

"You'll notice all your colleagues are still here. That's the dedication we prefer."

Christina chuckled. The way the assistant principal crossed his arms and raised his eyebrows looked exactly the same as her mom when she would interrupt five-year-old Christina's stuffed animal lessons for lunch or naps. "Isn't it about time for recess?" her mom would ask. "Not until they're done with the test," Miss Christina would respond.

"Is something funny?" the principal asked.

"I'm sorry." Despite her best effort to maintain a serious face, the giggles came anyway. She wanted to end with, "See you tomorrow," but that was more of a promise than she was able to make.

CASSIDY SHAO

Seventh Grade Science

Punnett squares. The big kick-off to our next unit
on genetics. Which traits are dominant or recessive.
Why it's really rare for two parents with blue eyes

to have a kid with brown eyes.
We get to talking about when
we were born.
At what hospital.
At what time.

I've seen those cute, framed pictures. A watercolor
teddy-bear wearing a checkered bowtie holding
a bundle of pastel balloons detailing the name
and the day my friends were born, down to the

very. damn. minute.

I've spoken to other adopted girls, and I learned
it wasn't uncommon. We used to dream—
That we were the long-lost daughters
of emperors and magistrates. That we belonged
to the last remaining bloodlines of the great
dynasties. That we would one day be whisked away
from everything we've come to know,
everyone we've come to love, and go live
the life of a Chinese Royal. But lately,

I've been thinking it was the Black Societies.
That they had to protect me during a nasty turf war
with blazing guns and shining swords
and mutilated bodies strewn about the concrete
floor of a restaurant. Maybe, as they hosed
off blood and watched it circle down
the drain, they surely thought
this is no place for a child to grow up.

MATTHEW J. SPIRENG

For a Friend After a Fall From His Roof

for Dan

Death is still
a stranger, but
he carries lilacs.
– Susan Ludvigson

Is that how it was, lying
broken on your deck, pain
overwhelming, no help
near at hand? It may be
winter, snow and ice reason for
your fall, but did the promise
of spring beckon, those blooms
sweet-smelling, soft on the eyes?
All you needed do was reach out
and accept the gift, but
one arm was twisted in the ladder,
broken and immovable, the other
still holding tight to this life.

Better that the stranger
go, walk off alone,
offer his pretty bouquet
to one who will welcome it.
Better the next lilacs you hold
be cut with your own
two hands, mobile again
after months on the mend.

DAVID STARKEY

Final Car Ride to the Vet

Ahead, the inescapable:
a cold examination table,
the first injection

to relax her,
then the second one.
For now, though,

our old yellow lab
lies in the backseat
covered by a blanket,

barely breathing.
It's winter:
I turn up the heat.

On the radio,
a soprano singing
an aria in Italian—

this lovely, otherworldly
voice neither of us
can understand.

ALEX ROST

Uncle Bill's Mule

Dad died with his pants around his ankles in a Dollar General bathroom off Highway 52 outside Orlando, Florida. I waited in the car while his heart heaved and popped. Sirens came and I slid onto the floor in the backseat under a blanket of fast-food wrappers and empty packs of Marlboros. A sweaty rosy cheeked cop dug me out and scolded me like I ruined his day. I called him a pig and tore my nails into the sides of his face. He slapped me hard, told me my dad was dead.

He tossed me into the back seat of his cruiser, trapped me in to watch dad's bulging body bag wheeled towards an ambulance. I pounded at the windows as they loaded him in. Kicked at the doors as they drove him off. Screamed the whole time. Nobody took notice.

I found my gaze fixed on that bright yellow light above the store, the bold black letters branded into it. D-O-L-L-A-R G-E-N-E-R-A-L. My fist clenched the door release, pointlessly and repeatedly pulling at the lever. The car seemed to compress. Air crushed me while my lungs struggled to grasp it. Swirls of brightly lit blackness invaded the edges of my vision, solidified as it encroached on my view of the sign, a spotlight on the letters.

I woke up drenched in piss. The rosy cheeked cop dragged me out of his car, cursing like I ruined his day all over again.

"I don't know about you, Carl, but something about those burritos don't agree with me." Those were the last words Dad said to me. He belched and groaned and the next time I saw his face it was propped up on a little pillow in a casket. I was sweating. He was cold.

When that was done, I settled in to live with my Uncle Bill. They couldn't find mom. Uncle Bill said she wasn't much worth finding anyways. He was a lot like Dad, except where Daddy ate, Uncle Bill drank.

We lived in a little house at the foot of a big wooded hill on the outskirts of a one stoplight town halfway between Charleston and Morgantown. That's West Virginia. Wasn't much there. A bar, gas station that doubled as a pizzeria, a little hunting and fishing shop, a diner open whenever its owner pleased. A Walmart—people called it the mall—twenty or so miles away out by the highway. McDonalds, Subway out there. People didn't head that way much though, didn't need to. We had our very own Dollar General.

A hollow chill clawed at me the first time we pulled into the parking lot and I saw those black letters tied together on their bright yellow background. A cold blade that sliced up and down my veins, cut through every organ, sickened every nerve. I threw open the rusted door of Uncle Bill's truck. My legs gave out. Biscuits and gravy spewed from my guts onto the cracked asphalt.

"What's wrong, boy?" Uncle Bill was always calling me boy. Sweat poured from my trembling brows, bile and sausage gravy dangled from my bottom lip. I wondered if it was how Dad felt before he died. Uncle Bill dropped down to a knee and gripped my shoulders.

"What's happening here, Carl?" I looked up at my uncle, his eyes glossed with beer and worry, mine stricken with tear strewn fear. He followed my gaze as it slid to glass fronted building. He understood.

"This ain't no good." His voice came low and slow, crackling with fresh contempt. "Nope. This ain't gonna work at all."

Uncle Bill's primary cleaning method was to take a butcher knife and scrape it across counters and sinks and tables, used it to lop away dried food or soap scum or toothpaste. It left behind a welcoming wornness, made the wood feel alive.

He sat me down at the heavy kitchen table with its scratched off veneer while he fixed a salami sandwich and poured a dixie cup full of milk. He took the chair across the table, beer in hand, and watched me eat.

"That ever happen to you before?" Uncle Bill asked in his drawling cadence. It felt like you could fit the whole of Moby Dick between his words. I shook my head. He leaned back, drained his beer, said "No, I didn't think so," and got another from the fridge.

"You know when I was your age, maybe a bit older, I had a similar kinda thing happen to me." I watched as my Uncle put the fresh can to his mouth. "Yep, we had us a mule one time. Charlie. Old mule, didn't do much really. Your grandpa's farm wasn't much by then neither, mostly sold off by the time me and your daddy were born.

"One day, your old man and me, we was just foolin around the shack we kept Charlie in. I musta gotten behind him, spooked him or something. I don't remember too much on the details. Old Charlie, he kicked me. I remember that much. Busted me up good. Broke ribs, mashed me right up." Uncle Bill's hand dropped to his chest, his fingertips traced the unseen scars beneath his shirt.

"Most of that summer I was down, laid in bed. Sweatin' and stinkin'. Hard for a kid to be laid up like that. Nothin worth doin'. When I finally

got to be alright enough, I come down, see old Charlie and get all shaky. Vision all blurry like. I fell over, blacked out. Happens three, four times. Your daddy, he sees what's goin' on, sees that it's Charlie giving me these fits. Says we gotta get rid of him, that the mule ain't good for nothin anyway. Your grandpa, he don't see it like that. Says there's something wrong with me, not the mule, that I better buck up and figure out my own problems. Says way he sees it, an old mule is good for a lot more than I'd been." Uncle Bill went and got himself another beer, guzzled and burped.

"Get all that sandwich in ya, fill on up." He sat, gently. Watched me eat. I was just figuring he was through when he cleared his throat.

"Few days later we wake up and find Charlie with his leg broke. He was real nasty about it, your grandpa. Says your daddy went and broke it. Says no way a mule's leg is gonna end up broke where it did. How it did. He lays into your daddy pretty good, but your old man don't say a word. Never told me neither, but I knew. I knew what your daddy did for me."

I studied the side of my uncle's face as he watched the old pines flutter in the breeze through the open window. Uncle Bill had a nasty scar that ran jagged from just above the corner of his lip down around his chin. Car wreck, I'd heard. Drunk, I'd heard. Not too long before he died, me and Dad were in a diner somewhere along the Gulf. Dad had his appetite that day. He'd already polished off a double cheeseburger and a fried steak dinner when he called the waitress over. She was a tired woman in her fifties, cigarette burns branded into her chest. Dad asked for a double order of chicken fingers, some fries. The waitress looked him up and down, showered him with disgust. Dad smiled, let that judgement soak in, then nodded at her scars and said, "Looks like I'm not the only one here wearing my mistakes."

Uncle Bill sighed, rubbed his eyes.

"What happened to Charlie?" I asked.

"Had to be put down. No use in a mule with it's leg broke. our grandpa thought it best that I do it, put the bullet in him. No way I could have done it back then, young as I was. Your daddy, he knew that. He was only a few years older than me but he grabbed our old .22 and ran on out there. I remember hearing the shots. Two came quick, then a third." He finished his beer, burped. "Yep."

Uncle Bill woke me up early a couple days later, said we were getting us a proper breakfast. On the ride into town Uncle Bill went on about how we were gonna eat the place empty. He kept on asking what I was gonna get and every time I answered pancakes or bacon or over easy eggs, he'd smile and say, "what else?"

Aunt Shirley's Diner was a narrow, low-roofed room with a large dirty window up front that let sunlight trickle in on its pale yellow walls. The kind of place where you can sit down for a ten-minute cup of coffee and end up drenched in its grilled grease stench the rest of the day. As far as I could tell, there wasn't any Aunt Shirley. The place was run by a thick bearded fella named Chuck, and when we walked in he was at his normal spot behind the counter, leaned in close to an old guy in a sweat salt stained *Support Your Troops* baseball cap. Uncle Bill nodded to the men and we took the booth closest to the door. We ordered damn near everything on the menu. Ate most of it too.

"That Dollar General over on Wilks?" I heard the old man say to Chuck. "Burnt to the ground. All the way. Ain't much left."

"No, how'd that happen?" Chuck asked, pouring himself a cup of coffee.

"Don't know, hearing it might be arson."

"Damn."

"Yep. Some punk kids, I'm thinking."

"Hell, they couldn't a been doing too good out here," Chuck said. "Guy who owned it probably burned it down himself. Get some insurance check."

"Yeah, maybe. Good riddance I say. Ain't much good came outta there anyways. Better off going on out to the mall."

I stared at Uncle Bill, watched as he lifted a piece of bacon to his mouth, took his time grinding it between his teeth. He never said another word about that Dollar General or any other Dollar General the whole time I knew him. Not a damn word.

MAX STEPHAN

A Requiem for Sylvia Plath's 'Mushrooms'

This time you were not writing about
Daddy, about
death,
the superficial words of *Mademoiselle*,
the colors of cadavers.

There were no hints of
cutting yourself

carefully,

delicately,

all the while watching,

waiting alone

in your hollow, hidden crawl space.

Instead you dealt with the loneliness
of being overlooked,
snubbed
like the soft white mystery of the masses;
you praised the brave,
told the world how you, too, knew
the pain of being
stopped, obstructed, betrayed.

There is no voice to testify
that you had hoped to be found by strangers
willing to shove the meek out of you;
but we can fancy
that before you turned that gas stove on,
before you locked the kitchen door,
cried your final tear of despair,

you had found pure deliverance,

reminding the meek, the feeble,
of who – someday – shall bear
accountability.

JO BARBARA TAYLOR

Wednesday Concert

The piano has sat, sorry, for so long. A curiosity. Passersby
may stroke the strings, lift the dampers, finger the keys.
Flats play flatter, sharps rend sharper under the bridge.
But on Wednesday, —that's old Sarry's day—music,
untuned and tinny, floats through the streets. Folks
huddle for a moment of miracle under the bridge.

On Wednesday, Sarry hauls her scarred wooden stool
from her cart, sets it on the cracked asphalt, rocks it
to check stability, then sits at the old piano under the bridge.
She fingers the cracked keys, spoiled by wind, rain, and abandon,
pushes up her ragged sleeves, bows her head, lifts her hands,
and plays the tattered sounds of echo under the bridge.
Pin block warped, strings slack and hammers off, pedals
softened in moss. She weaves in and out of Verdi, Gershwin,
and boogie woogie. Sarry, in concert under the bridge.

LUCINDA TREW

Premainderman

how did I come to be here
on this spread of low land—
remainderman to stretch of pine
and sassafras, water oak and cypress
knees wading in black river?

this unexpected bequest
that is neither birthright
nor deserved—a place I never
cared for, in either sense

a place whose green to gray
ghosts haunt untilled fields
stubborn fists of cotton
and dry clay dust, the relic
bones of tractors, barns
and highway trash

I am here, the rest long gone—
I am the last remaining one
yoked by sorrel grass
and fallen fence

ALLEN TULLOS

Silver Queen

More than steamed Florida shoals
and biting sand fleas drives sandled Cousin Andy,
once-removed, hours our way in his Olds 88.

Barely kept afloat selling Scott-Atwater boats
before they went under. Town of Weeki Wahee dissolving.
Algae blooming, seagrass choking, manatees in free fall.

Andy snores himself awake on our hillside acre
to boiled corn, sliced tomatoes, meatloaf, squash,
a bite or two of something sweet, toddy or two.

"Help yourself, Andy" and "Please pass the butter."
"Recognize Aunt Leo's gravy boat?"
"Hey there, Andy!" neighbors start saying.

Recovers his incurable laugh, habit of reading
newspapers, catalogs, in the bath we share
with clumped damp towels, shirts, underwear.

Whisker-peppered suds encrusting the sink, Andy
at the Kiwanis pancake brunch, we call.
"Ruth, when'd he say he'd be home? Ruth?"

MAUREEN SHERBONDY

The Mystery Shopper

It was hard for Elaine to take it all in: the blue sky, the dock, the long gangway to the ship, the crowd of people dragging luggage, and most of all, the enormity of the vessel. An entire city floated before her. One she couldn't wait to observe and document for cleanliness, activities, food quality, and service. She'd never secured a cruise assignment before, and hoped she could blend in with the other five thousand passengers to avoid being discovered on The Southern Gem, where all the decks were named for jewels.

The temperature was 95-degrees with nearly 100% humidity to boot, typical Florida weather. Even Elaine's floral shirt was soaked through. Her dark hair curled up and frizzed. Always careful to stay below the radar on these mystery gigs, she selected her wardrobe with the care of a stylist. Elaine scanned the crowd to check what the other forty-eight-year-old women were wearing. Most had donned sleeveless cotton dresses or bright-colored capris, much like her pink ones. Sandals or sneakers—the footwear of choice. Though younger families with children walked by, the average age seemed to be sixty. Groups of older women chatted excitedly. Elaine wondered if there would be singles events on the trip, then shook the thought away.

It had taken three years to get here. Her hard work had finally paid off, only after accepting every nickel-and-dime mystery assignment that I-SPY offered. Stanley would have loved the cruise ship, its layout and design, the different room options, the evening entertainment and poker tables. Her chest tightened at the thought of her beloved. When planning a silver wedding anniversary cruise of a lifetime, Stanley had carefully constructed and painted a cruise ship model and placed it at the top of the living room bookshelf.

That anniversary had come and gone without him. For four years, Elaine tried not to cry whenever she noticed the well-worn dent in Stanley's red chair. Empty. No one had sat there since the night of his stroke. There had been no anniversary cruise to Europe. Ah, best-laid plans. She now knew better.

If anyone should have dropped dead at forty-five, it should have been Elaine with her unfortunate genetics—high blood pressure, a slow metabolism, and the extra forty pounds she carried on her 5'6" frame.

In the evenings, Stanley's miniature train whistle blew as the set chugged its way around the living room perimeter. Stanley had programmed the cabooses to make the trip every night at seven p.m., the hour that usually coincided with their after-dinner routine. The train continued to move forward after her husband's death. Every time the whistle blew, she was both comforted by it and saddened. Maybe the next time the batteries died, she wouldn't replace them.

The ship's horn startled Elaine. For a moment she thought she was back home in her Raleigh living room. Now in her cabin, smaller than expected, she sighed. I-SPY had, thank goodness, given Elaine a cabin with a Juliet balcony and view. Not a large one—just big enough to fit a single chair. She inhaled a long breath of salty air and tried to take in the beauty—the ocean, the gray blue dusk sky, and the port diminishing in the distance. The rush of water lulled her into a peaceful state.

* * *

After Stanley's death, Elaine wondered what she could fill evenings with after her full day working in the office of the elementary school. Should she get a cat? Join a book club? Start to date? No other man would ever stand up to her Stanley. His kindness, his crooked smile, his concern for others. Why bother? Her older sister Joan had been filling her ears with her own horrific dating stories for the last twenty years. Joan had also been the one to suggest becoming a mystery shopper to occupy Elaine's lonely evenings.

"I do this mystery shopper gig sometimes," Joan had dropped in conversation after rehashing her latest failed meetup attempt. The one where the pharmacist was sixty pounds heavier than his profile photo and picked his teeth at the dinner table, pieces of corn and steak hitting Joan on the cheek.

"Send me the link. Sounds intriguing." Elaine opened the blinds a bit more to see what was happening at the neighbors, something she'd been doing of late when the house turned too quiet after dinner. She missed the discussion of Stanley's insurance company antics. They'd retire to the living room with a dry Malbec and Yahtzee tournament. Sometimes Stanley would switch it up and pour an aged bourbon and they'd play backgammon.

Joan added, "I-SPY pays you with free dinners and merchandise. Sometimes they send fifty dollars. It's kind of fun. You'd be great at it with your special powers of observation. Remember when you wanted to work for the CIA?"

"For about a week. Really, I wanted to be a teacher. Be around kids on account of not being able to...well, you know. Stanley's low-sperm count."

"I know. It would have been nice to have one offspring between us. Sorry you never finished school. I still feel guilty that you were the one to take care of Mom. Maybe you should go back to college. They have several good schools right near you."

The seven p.m. whistle blew. Elaine watched the trains move over the bookshelves, the doorway to the kitchen, then around the bend near the front door.

"Nah. My credits probably vanished. Went the way of my eggs. No guilt, Sis. I wanted to help Mom. And look at you now! CPA. So proud of you." Elaine focused on a scantily-clad young woman dropped off at the neighbor's house. At night, bright-colored sports cars pulled into that driveway, revving up motors and music, but never leaving the car. Drug deals? Prostitutes? Elaine added notes to the log she kept beside the window. Her plan was to type up the notes in memorandum format to send to the Bent Pine HOA.

"You listening? Elaine?"

"Oh, sorry. It's my strange neighbor, the drug dealer. Another short-skirted, skanky visitor."

"Anyway, you'd be perfect for this job. Sending the link now."

On a Friday before the end of the school year, the email arrived. Subject line: Cruise Assignment, July. The final attendance sheet flew out of Elaine's hand, and she ran to the ladies' room to text Joan.

Got it! The cruise gig! OMG!

* * *

An hour after unpacking and setting up her laptop, Tiffany Tingle, the overzealous activity assistant, knocked on Elaine's cabin door. Clipboard in hand and gold tag with her name and a cruise ship symbol beside it, Tiffany's high-pitched voice welcomed Elaine. She resembled half the cheerleaders from Elaine's days at Edison High, with her blonde-hair that swished back and forth whenever she opened her glossy, pouty mouth. Every statement ended in an elevated pitch, as if forever asking questions. Elaine had been the photographer for the school newspaper and forced to take pictures of the cheerleading squad. A pain flared in her neck when thinking about those days. How they mocked her appearance—mousy-looking and flat-chested.

"Mrs. Webb?" Tiffany searched Elaine's left hand. "Or is it Miss Webb?"

"Call me Elaine." She kept the door cracked open a bit, making sure to block the laptop, afraid enthusiastic Tiffany would find out her true mission. This had happened on Elaine's second assignment. At a restaurant after ordering, she'd made the mistake of leaving her notebook open as she commented on the slow service and lack of staff. In the midst of writing, a soft-shoed waiter laughed, then pointed at her notes.

"Oh, you're one of those investigators corporate sends. I thought so."

Humiliated, she'd paid for the soda and appetizer, grabbed her pad, then tripped on her way out. Elaine had never again made the mistake of record keeping during the mystery shop.

Tiffany nodded. "Honey, no worries. We have an excellent singles event this evening following the big welcome dinner in the main dining room.

Elaine backed up a step. "Singles event? Nah. No, I don't think so."

"Honey, it's fun! Lots of other women will be there. You could make some new friends. Ruby Deck at eight. No pressure." She leaned in and whispered, "Several engagements began at that bar. I think it's Bartender Alain. He's known to mix up magic love potions." Tiffany winked, then handed Elaine a magazine-thick handout of every event for the next six days.

The Southern Gem activity guide included something for everyone: hula hoop lessons, water aerobics, chair yoga and hot yoga, beginning and advanced wall climbing, guitar and harmonica lessons, meditation, tango and line dancing. There were also wine tasting, chocolate tasting, and even hot sauce tasting sessions. Though Elaine skimmed past the children's activities, she realized she would have to check these out as well. Sadness overwhelmed her. Though she worked at the school with children, the cruise would reveal happy families on vacation.

Elaine suddenly felt lonely. Her sister was her best female friend and lived three states away. Stanley had been her partner in life. Maybe she could combine work and socializing. Sitting on the small balcony, she typed up details about the experience thus far: the number of cruise employees who had greeted her, the photographer who had made her smile for the entry photo souvenir, and the man in uniform who had helped her to her cabin. Even Tiffany. Typing on the fifteen-page document, then proofreading her work, Elaine saved the file in a Word document, then shut off the laptop.

So maybe Tiffany was right. Perhaps she should check out the social life for singles on the cruise. And wasn't this part of her I-SPY responsibility? Joan had told her stories of singles events that she often attended at local museums, pubs, and dance venues in Maryland. "I end up hanging out

with the other women my age and rehashing our dating disasters and bad breakups. We give each other shopping and travel advice, too. I don't have that much in common with them, but it sure beats staying home alone on the weekends. And once in a while, a new bachelor shows up. Unfortunately, the women resort to their natural state of cats stalking prey. Claws come out."

At dinner, Elaine was seated with other single men and women of various ages who all seemed better put together than her. She tugged at her pale-yellow dress that kept bunching up around the middle. No one seemed to notice. They smiled and asked Elaine basic questions: where are you from; what do you do; have you ever cruised before. It reminded Elaine of the first semester at Rutgers when the questions included your major, your hometown, and the bands you liked. But these single men were old, sixty or more. She wondered if they thought she looked old. What did that matter? She wasn't looking. If Stanley were here, together they'd be analyzing the hairstyles, clothing, and facelifts, chuckling between whispers. He'd have his hand draped casually over her cold shoulders. If.

The white tableclothed dining room did not disappoint, with its fancy red china that matched the employees' uniforms. She selected chicken cordon-blue, a spinach salad, and molten chocolate lava cake for dessert—a mistake, she realized, when her stomach began rumbling. When dinner ended and she rose to say goodnight to the table, the leader of the pack, Pammy from Palm Beach, insisted that she join the group at the bar for a drink and conversation.

"This is my sixth cruise, Elaine. Trust me. Hang with us and you will have stories to tell for months. Best part of the cruise."

Pammy's jewels reflected in the fancy chandelier's light. A diamond necklace and several rings—rubies and emeralds. Elaine wondered if they were real. She stared at the gold band on her own right hand. Yes, she'd remembered to put on her simple gold studs, but it was like high school all over again, not fitting in with conversation or fashion choices. The five women, with names ending in I or Y, all wore designer outfits from pricey boutiques, the kind of clothes that were made of the right material with the right cut to accentuate their figures in the best possible way. She tugged again at her own dress that was even tighter now around her middle.

It wasn't so much that Elaine decided to go with the group, more that she was swept away by a wave of them, carried forward up to the Ruby deck where the circular, ocean-themed blue glass bar waited. Imprints of starfish, crabs, and shells were etched into the concrete bar. Glass jellyfish lights hung from the ceiling. The bar was backlit, highlighting colorful bottles of vodka, gin, and rum. Elaine thought the rainbow of hues echoed

the single women's jewels. She was about to turn around and break free from the group, but then she saw him.

Alain, the bartender, wore the same crooked grin as Stanley. She felt something tug at her chest when she took him in—his wavy dark-gray hair, gentle green eyes, and long arms that seemed to be in constant motion shaking tumblers, mixing various concoctions from the bar. He then neatly poured drinks into pretty martini, daiquiri, and other glasses. With a quick flick of his fingers and wrist, he added garnishes that resembled works of art.

Pammy, who must have noticed Elaine's flushing cheeks, sat beside her on a barstool and whispered, "He's a hottie, isn't he?"

Elaine choked on her water. "Oh, no. I wasn't..."

"No worries, Hon. We all have crushes on him. I tried three times in a row, but he doesn't mix work with pleasure. He's also got a little side business to help you relax."

Swallowing water more carefully, Elaine said, "I was admiring the pretty bar. I'm not here to meet guys. Side business?"

"If you need something to relax. Not to insult you, but you seem a bit tightly wound. Ask him for the extra side garnish when you order. Nothing crazy, just a little pill to take the edge off. Like doing two shots." She winked, then waved Alain over. "She'll have a vodka tonic, or two or three. Use the Absolute. A twist of lime and throw in an extra garnish." Pammy left a hundred-dollar bill, then joined the other women.

Alain set the vodka tonic down, then said, "Your hand." Her palm opened like a flower on command. Selling drugs on a cruise? She would have to mention this. Certainly, the cruise would fire him. Was this a thing on all cruise ships? Her head hurt thinking about reporting Alain. He looked like such a kind man. Commenting on service and food quality was one thing, but getting someone fired or arrested was another. Drug dealer? He didn't fit the profile. Maybe she should find out who else was involved. On the other hand, I-SPY would likely reward her for this shocking information. Perhaps if she showed an interest in him, he'd even reveal more. From her dating days in college, the few dates she'd gone on, she remembered to ask questions, anything to get a guy to talk about himself. Joan had remarked once that they were self-centered beings, spoiled by mothers who made the male species expect to be the center of the universe.

"Alain? I've never heard that before. It sounds like my name. Where are you from?"

"Here, there, and everywhere. Mostly France, then I moved around. You?"

"Me too. Moved around, I mean. North Carolina now, but I started in Connecticut."

"Yes. I've been there. Do you know the Mark Twain House?"

"Of course! It looks like a ship. Obviously, you would be familiar with that. My mother once worked there as a volunteer, taking people on tours."

"My mother volunteered at the Rodin Gardens; she took school kids on tours. Such similarities. Yes?"

Elaine nodded and gulped down the drink without realizing it. Alain poured another and said, "This one's on the house." He leaned in as if wanting to get closer to her.

After two more drinks, she discovered a plethora of other similarities: both had lost spouses, neither had kids, neither finished college due to sick mothers. Somewhere between drinks two and three she forgot the purpose of the conversation. The I-SPY assignment faded from her mind.

Alain said, "In fact, I'm paying bills for relatives. This is the reason for my side business. I send most of my money to my aunt and uncle in France. Both dying. Strokes a week apart. Can you believe this? Not very old. I pay for everything."

Elaine sighed at the sweetness of what he'd said. Sending money to relatives. Was anyone this kind anymore? But selling pills to make that needed money—this felt wrong.

Elaine slipped the pills into her purse, not knowing what else to do with them. Pills? She'd never even smoked marijuana. Recalling poor Stanley's stroke, she tugged on her dress sleeve. At least God had been merciful and ended things quickly. He would not have wanted to exist in an altered state of paralysis or brain damage like Alain's poor relatives.

"I'm so sorry, Alain," she touched his hand. His eyes glistened, then he turned to help one of the Candi, Patti, and Vicki single ladies.

Eventually, the DJ started playing 70s and 80s tunes and the women paired off with the men on the dance floor.

"You don't dance?" Alain asked, when the drink orders slowed.

"Well, Stanley didn't dance, so I never did."

"With the right partner, you would dance," he wiped the bar, then stopped to touch her right hand. "I took my ring off a year ago. You'll do it when ready. I know it's hard."

Elaine had never cried in public before, but with Alain's soft eyes on her and empathy pouring out of him, to the tune of Air Supply's "All Out of Love," she burst into tears.

* * *

Everything happened quickly. Elaine woke up dry-mouthed and slightly hungover. It took a moment to remember the four or five drinks, and

the white pill which she took at some point in the evening. She touched her lips, recalling kissing. Had she slept with Alain? She checked the bathroom for him or for proof that he'd stayed—dark, short hair in the sink, a wet toothbrush, the toilet seat up. She breathed a sigh of relief when no evidence revealed itself. Next, she searched her purse for the pills; maybe she wasn't remembering correctly. Her eyes were still attempting to focus. Things seemed teary and blurry.

One pill of two remained. New anxiety raced through her body—would the drug interact with her blood pressure and cholesterol medications? Maybe she'd been so tipsy, she had taken the pill along with her other medications.

She sat in front of her laptop, at the ready to finish day one's events—the dinner service and food quality, the song the waiters danced to in unison. The singles night event on the Ruby Deck. But when she got to the questions about the bartending service, she stopped. An email flashed before the screen. Alain.

Don't worry, nothing happened beyond kissing. You're a great kisser, by the way. Just wanted to get you to your cabin safely. Are you free tonight for a date? I have two hours from 4-6.

Elaine's face hurt from smiling. She read the note over and over again. Hadn't Pammy said that he didn't date the customers? Sitting on the balcony, Elaine touched her lips, the fog of last night dissipating. What would Stanley think of her? Kissing another man. Was he turning in his grave? Once, a few years into their marriage, she'd posed the question: Would you date again if I died early like my mom? Stanley shook his head, kissed her, and said, "I would stay home and work on my trains." At the time, Elaine thought it was sweet, but now she realized they'd been naïve. No one knew what would happen.

More of a struggle than the pangs of guilt moving through her was the drug selling dilemma. Should she add this item to her I-SPY report? How could she? She was now an accomplice. A seagull landed on her balcony, not moving. As if he expected something—a worm, a chunk of bred, a French fry. The white feathers brought to mind Stanley's hair—it had turned gray, then white by forty. She recalled the thick texture of Alain's hair, how it felt as she ran her fingers through it as he kissed her neck.

The bird gave up his quest, then flew into the morning sky. There was not a cloud or other vessel in sight. Exhausted, Elaine closed her laptop and fell into a deep slumber.

A knock woke her. After taking two Tylenol, Elaine opened the door, her head throbbing, to a perky Tiffany.

"Good morning, Miss Webb. Did you have fun at the singles night?"

"Word travels fast here." She pulled her floral robe closed.

"Indeed. Faster than the speed of this ship. It's my job to stay informed about the guests and make sure you enjoy the cruise experience. Did Alain shake up some potions for you?" She winked.

Did Tiffany know about the drug-selling? Or was she simply referring to instigating connections through his magical cocktails? "I had a good time, if that's what you're asking."

Tiffany clapped her hands. Would she spring into a cheer in the hallway? Elaine expected nothing less of the activity assistant.

"There's a great undereye cream at the spa in the Diamond Promenade. It might help reduce those dark circles, in case you're interested." After handing her a two-page update of the day's activities, she skipped off to knock on the next cabin door.

Elaine checked her eyes in the mirror. Indeed, Tiffany spoke truth. Dark half-moons looked back at her. Red lines contrasted with her green eyes in a bad way. Desperately needing to speak to her sister, she realized her phone didn't work, so she composed a quick email instead. Experienced Joan would know what to do, but Elaine kept the email about the evening's date, not about the drugs. On this topic she was stuck. Frustration set in when an email error message stated failure to send. It appeared she couldn't send messages to Joan.

Now she wished she had a girlfriend to confide in. Who could she turn to? The single women? Even before she'd become a mystery shopper, she'd always tried to blend in with the background, not stand out in a room of people. Alain had been the first person in a long time to get to know her. At work, the staff didn't know about Stanley; no one asked and she didn't tell. The truth was that without him, Elaine no longer really knew who she was. Her sister once said, "You wear a shield, that stop sign expression that shouts, 'Do not approach.' That's why people don't talk to you much."

* * *

Early afternoon by the pool, Elaine read a memoir about a man who spied on workers at an automotive plant because there was an ongoing theft issue. She was totally engrossed in a chapter about catching an employee he'd befriended, when the entire clique of single ladies whose names ended in I or Y arrived like a tidal wave. All wore white or sky-blue bikinis, showing off artificially flattened middles—the work of starvation diets, exercise, and the skill of great surgeons. Elaine was most surprised that they showed up at the pool with so much jewelry—clunky gold necklaces, gold bangles, fancy

earrings. The leader of the pack even wore a toe ring and ankle bracelet. Then there were the oversized hats. Did they think they were attending the Kentucky Derby?

Elaine, on the other hand, wore a bathing suit that her sister referred to as old lady swimwear—the kind with a built-in skirt to cover problem areas from buttocks to thigh. She tugged at the built-in padded bra.

"So, Hon," Pammy began, extending one perfectly manicured red nail to Elaine's hand. "I saw you sneaking away with Alain last night. You hound! While we were dancing with the senior citizen contingent, you somehow charmed the hottie bartender. I clearly underestimated you."

Elaine recognized the jealous look in Pammy's eyes. It was the same way an ex-high school friend acted when Elaine was accepted to Rutgers and her friend had been rejected and ended up at a community college. The same look her own sister had when Elaine held up her engagement ring at the family Thanksgiving dinner many years ago.

Best to play it cool. "Huh. He's just a nice man. I was upset about something and he took me to a quiet area until I felt better." She wanted to confide in Pammy, to ask for her advice, but couldn't find the words.

Pammy stared at the water where a handsome man was kissing his girlfriend or wife. "Sure. That's what happened. Makes more sense. After all, he turned me down. And, nothing cruel meant by this, but come on, look at me."

"Yes, you're very pretty. Men must ask you out all the time."

This seemed to satisfy Pammy, who ordered a Pina colada, then untied her bikini top. She rolled on her stomach and whispered something to one of the other ladies.

Then she turned back to Elaine. "I'm sorry, Hon. That wasn't very nice. I do that, you know, put other women down. Actually, I have low self-esteem, believe it or not. I caught my husband of twenty years cheating. It nearly killed me."

"I get it," Elaine smiled, shocked at the confession. Maybe she assumed things about people too early. Had she turned away other potential friends because of this?

While the others left the ship for the first port visit at Coco Cay, Elaine met with Alain for a rendezvous in a private room in the back of a smaller bar on the Amethyst Deck. Alain had arranged tea and cocktails, pastries, and a cheese platter. He pulled out her chair and draped a fancy white cloth napkin in her lap.

He spent a few minutes talking about his own life, then made it clear that he wanted to know all about Stanley and his trains, what it was

like working at the elementary school office, and when she planned to cruise again. Across the candlelight, Elaine felt a constant flutter in her chest. When it was time for Alain to begin his shift, he leaned in, kissed her, and asked if he could come by later. Without thinking, she nodded, then floated back to reality.

She had to work. Wandering to various activity rooms, she took mental notes about Bingo, wine tasting, and beginning guitar classes. With every step from room to room, she felt as though her body was floating; Alain put her in a state of being adrift at sea. Touching her lips, she could still feel the sweet taste of him. Trying to distract herself, Elaine participated in a chocolate tasting class, which was taught by a knowledgeable, funny teacher. With an hour to go, she returned to her cabin and typed up notes about her day's activities. Staring at the balcony, she struggled to focus. Time seemed to have slowed down.

Finally, at midnight, the knock on the door arrived. Elaine reapplied her lipstick, straightened the hem of her black dress, then opened the door.

* * *

"What the hell is this?" Alain raged the next morning.

She wasn't hungover this time, rather caught in that warm, dreamy state of saturation after an entire night of pleasure. How many times had it been? Two, three? She'd lost count. Why was he yelling?

"I opened your laptop to request a night off so I could see you again. Who are you?"

Alain's soft, kind eyes darkened and his entire face reddened. Her own body shivered beneath the covers. She pulled the blanket to her chin, as if seeking shelter from his anger.

"I didn't give you permission to use my computer. Turn it off. Now!" Attack, she decided. Throw him off track.

"Are you kidding me! You're a spy! Oh, my God. You're going to get me fired, aren't you?" He stepped closer, pulled the comforter away. "Look at me!"

Elaine stared at the carpet. She could not meet his eyes.

"Let me explain. I—"

The door slammed. Alain was gone.

* * *

The train whistled at its usual time. Her hands shook. The noise reminded her of the ship's loud horn. Never again would she step foot on a cruise. She thought she'd felt empty before, but now the loneliness gnawed

at her insides. It was too quiet in this house. Not even the sound of swooshing water to soothe her.

How she had managed to survive the last few days, she still wasn't sure. After Alain left, she felt a floating, then drowning sensation. It was hard to breathe at times. Pammy actually came to check on her after she disappeared from the Nassau and Haiti adventures, and from the main dining room for days. At the end of the cruise, they'd exchanged numbers and emails. When Elaine finally left her cabin, she wore dark sunglasses and a scarf over her hair in an attempt to hide from everyone, but mostly Alain.

I-SPY had written the day before with a reminder that the report was due. Elaine sat at her computer, typing mostly positive comments. When it came to the part about the bartending service, she gave the highest marks possible. After hitting send, she grabbed the model train's pre-set remote control and emptied its batteries.

PAMELA WAX

England Has a Ministry of Loneliness Now

When I feel the chill of true sorrow
bowed in D minor on a violin,
I hear the woman next door, fall
of 1981, how she haunted
our London boarding house,
the middle of night after night.
How she did not play, but keened
her violin like a banshee
from the Otherworld, wiling
subterranean tears and regret
from the ether. I imagined
how she cradled her instrument,
nuzzling it with her chin—
a child she'd lost,
a lover she'd never known,
the world she might nudge
into taking notice. I'd pass her,
wordless, on the way to the shared bath,
her gray hair greasy, a mouse quick
to return to her own four walls.

How I lay rigid, icy on the other side
of the double doors between her
parlor room and mine, privy
to her rites of exorcism
or flagellation. Was she Rachel,
refusing to be comforted for her children?
One of the Heliades, lamenting
her brother on the banks
of the Eridanus for eternity?
La Llorona, abandoned
and vengeful—or worse, Ophelia,
mad, on the brink of self-murder?

I was 20, on a semester abroad,
clueless to the savage
scheming of despair or the sin
of standing idly by a neighbor's grief
as she drew her bow each night
across a body, wooden and hollow.

BOB WICKLESS

Reading Poetry on a Stage Where Chet Baker Once Played

The King of France Tavern
Annapolis, Maryland

It's too quiet in here.

I've been around long enough
To realize
That usually means
Someone's expecting something—
So I gaze out,
Past a poorly placed spot,
Looking for a few friends
Gathered somewhere here in the dark

Thinking he used to look *good*,
James Dean movie star good
If you know what I mean

It pleases me to be asked to read

How, near the end, the S.O.B.
Looked like he might croak
Standing here

The first poem I'd like to read

What the obituary said—
He fell out a window, for Christ's sake,
That's sure as hell
Not one of the seven steps
To any heaven I've dreamed—

So I tell a few jokes,
Get the audience warmed up.
Working my way
Toward some final, inevitable poem

(A story sometimes helps.)

They smashed his face,
He lost his teeth, for Christ's sake,
His chops were so far gone
They thought he'd never play

By the time I reach
The next-to-the-last poem
The drums have been set up,
The bass player walks on

I don't think I can do this—

Then he nods, whispers
Well, you'd better. Don't you know
It's all you've got?

So I take the last page
And roll it up
Into a shape like his horn,
Raising it to my lips

But, Sweet Jesus,
All that comes out,
What everyone hears
Is not that astonishing sweetness,
Irrepressible melody,
The lilt of his last song,
But these tiny
Repetitive gestures—

Words, words, words.

LARRY D. THACKER

A Good View

My first real job out of college was running down disadvantaged people who might qualify for government benefits but needed help through the application process, anything from food stamps, to supplemental security income, to social security disability, or local assistance. Anything, really. You'd be surprised how many people who could have really used such help didn't know they qualified, and if they did want the help, the complication was often too intimidating to tackle on their own. I was out in the field finding people and walking them through the sea of red tape. Bless their hearts, some of the people I met along the way were in awful bad shape.

Dennis Sizemore lived in a station wagon behind the old Gulf station at the Crosstown Roads intersection. He'd lived there for years, I was told.

"That fella that lives behind the Crosstown Gulf," someone mentioned, "might could use some help. I don't think he's got much of anything to his name."

I showed up ignorant to the situation, figuring they meant the old guy lived in some rundown place out back of the station.

"Denny's out back," an employee told me. I guess they figured I knew who I was looking for and was aware of the poor guy's plight. There was no building out back. No little shack. No tent. No RV. The only thing back there were the restrooms, and some junked out cars and piles of chopped wood.

I didn't see anyone, until I did. I saw a big head of curly salt and pepper hair and a face covered with full a gray beard, the sort that grows all the way up the cheeks and acts like it wants to grow into the eyes. Denny was asleep behind the wheel of a rusted-out Buick station wagon. It had one flat tire, and the rest of the axels were on blocks. The hood was missing, exposing black rubber lines reaching everywhere. Much of the long back windows in the back of the wagon were blacked out with plastic. The front windows were rolled up and fogged at the corners. He was covered up with a sleeping bag to the neck. He looked dead. Even with the windows up, he smelled dead. His head was slumped forward, his chin cushioned by the bushiness of all that beard against his chest.

I admit, I almost turned around and headed back to the car. I dreaded the conversation I was probably about to have. But I stayed. I stayed.

I gave the glass a light tap. Nothing. Another tap. His head bobbed and he looked up from his sleep, then saw me with a start and his eyes popped open wide. The sun was to my back and in his eyes. His was a pair of the bluest eyes I'd ever seen. I stared for a beat longer than I should have and he furled his brow like I'd bothered him.

"What?" he yelled through the window.

"You Dennis Sizemore?" I asked.

"Say what?"

"Sizemore! You him?" I yelled, maybe a little aggravated myself.

He yanked an arm out from under his covers and began cranking the window down. I dreaded what was about to waft from inside there.

Imagine the layered years of small space existence this fella had amassed, added to the obvious severe infrequent bathing, rotten food, the accidents. None of the floorboards were visible. They were stacked thick as if an archeologist could pick through determining what someone's life was like over the years, topped off with piles of emptied sardine, smoked oyster, and spam cans. That hit me in the face. I stepped back for air. Piss and sardines was mostly what I could make out.

"What d'ya want, huh?" he asked, his blue eyes flaring more wildly.

I told him what I was doing, going around finding people that needed assistance. I handed him my card. He reached up to the passenger side visor and pulled down a pair of reading glasses. They looked surprisingly new. He pulled them on and stared at my card trying to focus. His one hand had a slight tremor.

He didn't look at me. "You with the government?"

"Not exactly. I'm with an agency that helps get people government help, though."

He pulled off his glasses and slid them back up in the visor. He glanced my card again, then tossed it on the can pile.

"Hell, buddy, what can you do for someone like me?" he mumbled, shaking his head with a little laugh.

This was a man near given up on living. I caught a glimpse of that in his eyes when I'd startled him, when his eyelids opened up wide, like I could see deeper into just a plain old homeless guy who needed a good meal and cleaning up. He was almost gone. That's what I saw. The soul was anxious, though the body was dead slow. The soul wanted gone, freed from that sorry anchor. I wondered why he wasn't already gone.

I tried telling him what all he could get help with. He got a little social security already, just over $300. Supplemental Security Income was just for such a situation. My figures told me he might could get more. He

was in that money range where he got just enough to eat off of an nothing else. No one could live off the little bit he got, but with a little more he might could get a simple place to live. Anything better than this.

"What I got to do to get that?"

I told him what I needed, pointing over my paperwork, how I needed his name, address, social security number, what forms of income he had. He looked up at me again. The sun was moving, hitting his face in a different way. His skin was shifting from a grayish to a yellowish. He turned enough for me to see how his nose looked enlarged and smashed.

"I don't know if I need to be telling you all that stuff," he told me, a little paranoia working into his face.

"This is what they need. It's what I do with everyone, Mr. Sizemore."

"I don't need no help," he said, probably believing what he said.

I told him to think on it. That I'd be back.

Maybe I would.

"Yeah, he's a stubborn old fart, ain't he?" the owner of the place said, pointing to the shoulder of the road out front. "About there's where they broke down, almost seven years now, I guess. The transmission went out on the Buick and they rolled to that spot and we towed it to back there and that's where him and the vehicle's been since."

"They," I said.

"Had a wife and daughter. The wife took off walking, cussing up a storm, dragging the little girl by the arm. I guess she never did come back. She had family over the mountain."

I wondered why he'd just stayed.

"He was crippled up. Worse now. Was on crutches back then, back when he had both feet."

"Both?"

"Bad diabetic. I don't see how he ain't lost every finger and toe by now. Lucky he's only lost the one foot up the shin."

I asked how he got around.

"There's an electric wheelchair back there. One of those scooters. He keeps it covered up from the thieves."

"He uses it?"

"When it works, yeah. We've kept it running best we could."

"Where's he go to?"

"Oh, down the road to the Dollar Plus, the grocery, the BBQ drive-thru."

I imagined that was funny.

"Bless his heart, he's just barely hanging on."

I'd interviewed a lot of people over these first few months of the job, but Denny was by far the worse off I'd met, and that was saying a lot. Actually, he was the worse off person I'd ever met in my life. Some of these folks were so far off the radar the government probably didn't even know they existed. They were fully self-sufficient, and not in ways you'd want to be. They grew little subsistence gardens, but barely. They had a few head of livestock and some chickens, but just enough. The well water would be full of clay and coal runoff and God knows what else. A lot of houses were little more than drafty shacks.

Some trusted me. Some didn't. I can't say how I would have reacted to some college punk stranger like me come knocking on my door saying they had free money from the government.

Plenty of folks were drawing disability or unemployment, but plenty wouldn't have it, sort of like Denny who needed it more than most but couldn't bring himself to ask for the help. He'd accept a little occasionally, like from the station owner who'd bring him a hot meal from his wife most Sundays, but Denny said he traded that for watching out for the place during off hours. As if he could do much more than yell at someone nosing around.

"You'd be surprised who you can run off just by making a little noise," he told me. "If they don't turn around and beat the piss outta ya." He pointed to his smashed nose. "Some kids did this to me last year. Guess they called my bluff," he laughed painfully. If his nose wasn't broken, it was close to it. He'd never gone to the doctor.

He'd gotten the most help when he'd had to have his right foot taken off due to his bad diabetes. There appeared to be a pile of mannequin parts in the back seat of the wagon that were actually several prosthetics he'd been fitted for before leaving the hospital. They looked mostly unused. Faded from the sun.

He said he tried to use them.

"They'd itch me," he claimed.

This second trip out to see Dennis was the first time I really noticed his amputated foot. This was a little warmer day and he turned out sideways from his driver's seat, one foot on the ground, the stumped leg hanging over the gravel. It was wrapped in dirty and loose gauze.

"So, they just kept giving you these to try?" I asked, pointing to the foot collection in the back.

"Yep. I guess someone was making a lot of money off it," he laughed.

He was right. Someone probably was. Not him, for sure.

I asked about his scooter, nodding over at his motorized wheelchair covered with a blue moldy tarp.

"That's Margaret, my scooter. Don't know what I'd do without her."

I could see stripes on it from under the tarp.

"It work okay? Looks like it'll move on."

"As long as the battery's good, yeah. I get around with it. When I have to. Not everyday. I gotta hide it a little. Kids mess with it—they stole it once and left it way up the road in a cemetery."

I asked if I could look at it. I asked where he'd gotten if from.

"Some church bought it for me."

It was scratched and banged up.

"You been wrecking this thing?" I joked.

He laughed and blushed. "A few times. I tend to speed when I get out on the roadside."

"You mean on the highway?" I asked, amazed he'd take the thing along the shoulder of the road.

"No other way of getting where I'm going. But I've wrecked it a few times in the ditch. I crossed into traffic once and almost got hit. The sheriff was mad at me. Said I'd almost caused a big accident. I told him, no kidding, I was there."

I laughed at that. He laughed, too, and took to a coughing fit.

We were talking just a little more openly by my third visit. He hadn't started any paperwork, but we were making progress in the way of conversational trust. I'd established rapport, at least. That was one of the first things our training had emphasized, establish genuine rapport with your client and you'll built real trust.

I outright asked him, "If you don't want the SSI help, what do you want? What can someone help you with in your situation, Denny?"

"My situation?" he mumbled. He gave that question some thought. I wondered if anyone had ever really asked him such a thing.

"What do I want?" he repeated. "Maybe not to be so cold all the time. Warm up a little?"

I tell you, that about broke my heart right there. Of all the things he could have said. A house to live in. A car. A job. A new scooter. Health. All he was thinking about was warming up a little. What a miserable state for a human being, I thought.

"With the diabetes I lose the blood in my hands and my foot. My fingers get numb. Even the tip of my nose," he said. "Can't really never get warm when you're like that. Winter's bad but it's about the same when it warms up. Always cold."

I said if he was ready to fill out my SSI forms, we might just be able to do something about that. I guess he'd softened enough by now. "What do you need to know?" he asked. What a breakthrough. We might actually get this fella some help after all.

I asked his age. He didn't say anything but dug around and handed me his license, expired for five years. He was sixty-two. Looked every bit of eighty. His old address was in Oak Ridge, Tennessee.

Current address? I said we'd used the station for mail, but say homeless.

Current income? He laughed at that. I couldn't help but smile myself. "I get three-hundred a month early social security."

"Barely enough to live on," I mumbled.

"When you live off fast food it is. Three hundred dollars is gone real fast when you eat out a lot. And there's only a few places that'll even let me eat in doors, ya know?"

I nodded, understanding.

Savings and checking? Another laugh. "I ain't saved any. I might have a few dollar's worth of dirty change in here. Is that what they mean?"

I said, "I don't think so."

I asked if he might could stay somewhere else while we processed his paperwork. Like where, he wondered. After this long, I was sure others had tried to get him into some other kind of shelter.

"Like the Salvation Army? Some other homeless shelter?"

This is when I came to realize there comes a time when a man grows used to just about anything if he deals with it long enough. Any pain, any sorrow, loss. Not that a thing doesn't hurt anymore. But it's a different sort of hurt? Maybe that's it. I supposed Denny hated his situation for a while, felt sorry for himself. How long? A year into this sorry situation? But it would have to have changed, that pain. For anything else to just still be breathing, even if it was bad air in a broke down station wagon.

I tried paying attention to what else was in the wagon when I could get a glance. Trash. Clothes. Books. Lots of books. I managed a few titles – *Nuclear Reactor Theory* and *What Really Happened at Chernobyl?* Denny was a smart man, that was obvious. I figured he'd had a good job back in Oak Ridge. I'm sure he'd been resourceful at some point in his life. No longer.

"I'd be afraid out here in the elements, especially in the middle of winter," I confessed. I meant that. The thought of it scared me for him. "You already said those kids roughed you up the one time and took your scooter the other time."

He shook his head, reached into his pile of junk and produced a rusty tire iron. It was really amazing how much he kept at arm's length right where he sat. "I got this now. I ain't too worried." I'm surprised he didn't have a knife or a pistol.

"I don't like the cold, like I said. And I don't like things moving around in here."

I suppose he meant bugs and mice finding refuge in the vehicle.

"Things move around in here at night and spook me. And the coyotes around here scare me something awful. Packs of em running around at night. Did you know there were so many around here?"

I didn't. I had no idea.

"They'll chew your arm off if it's hanging out the window of a night."

That was an awful image. Funny though. I asked, and the owner of the shop hadn't seen a coyote in these parts in ten years.

"And I like the view from here. It was a good place to stop as any, I guess."

He was right. I hadn't bothered looking around enough. Right out his windshield, over his big dashboard layered in old mail and magazines and newspapers, dipped the valley for a few miles until it met the Tennessee side of the Cumberland Mountains. The view stretched out to the left until the gas station got in the way, then out long to the right until the mountains shrunk too tiny to see. It was a beautiful thing.

"I'm glad we never made it to Kentucky," he laughed to himself, staring way off into the distance, over the valley toward the mountains, maybe toward Kentucky. "Or, at least me."

"That right?" I asked, thinking he might say something about his family.

"We were headed to her mother's for Christmas. Her mother hated me something fierce. Really something. I dreaded being in the same house as her for a week. Sheila new it. We'd argued the whole trip from home." He patted the crowded dashboard. "When the old family station wagon gave up the ghost out on the road, I guess that was the last straw for her. She grabbed some luggage and the kid and started walking toward the mountain, to Kentucky."

"And you stayed right here," I added.

"Yep. Right here ever since, by God," he said in a stubborn tone I knew had a lot to do with his overall situation.

I admit once I had his paperwork mailed off, I was relieved. I felt good about what was to come. If anyone qualified for more help it was Dennis Sizemore. I'd been going out and checking on him every two weeks, but I let a visit slide, feeling like I could move on to other needy folks I hadn't met yet. Folks maybe worse off than even old Denny. I'd gotten a little used to visiting with him, standing in the cold, the stench. How it'd take a day for me to shake off the mood I'd be in after a visit.

When I did run back by, I was in for a surprise. A kid was digging in the station wagon, literally, with a hoe and shovel. His face was covered with a black bandana up to the eyes. I watched. He'd rake debris from the backseat with the hoe, out on to the ground, then scrap it up into a metal trashcan with the shovel. He'd stomp on a bug as they'd go scurrying out of the refuse. He'd cleaned the back hatch out mostly already. The vehicle's original interior was a light blue carpet and vinyl. No longer. Where the sun hadn't faded it to crusty and brittle white, the layers of muck had stained the carpet a milky black. It was all rot and rust.

The kid noticed me watching.

"Hey."

"Where's the old man?" I asked, by now fearing the worst.

"He moved off somewhere, I guess," he said. "Left some money for me to clean this thing out." He huffed through his bandana. "Wish I'd known what I was in for, man."

"Know where he's gone?" I blurted out catching a face full of new stink from the station wagon. I was aggravated by now.

"Dude, go ask my uncle. He owns the station. I guess Denny moved off. Found himself an apartment over in town. Denny's even paying me to clean this wreck out, like he plans on getting it runnin again."

"He's got him a little place, I guess," the station owner told me. "Got one check in the mail. Got his food stamps figured out. Got an increase in his usual social security."

I was surprised it'd happened so fast. That he'd up and left out so quickly. I guess he was more resourceful than I'd given him credit.

"He cleaned up a little in the bathrooms back there and called a taxi. Gave me a hundred-dollar bill before he left to get the car cleaned out. Said he'd have it towed in a week."

I laughed a little at the thought of whether a hundred bucks was enough.

Maybe I looked a little confused. Either confused or a little disappointed. He picked up on it.

"He ever thank you for working with him?" he asked.

That wasn't important, was it? I don't reckon he had, but I sure as hell wasn't going to say anything.

"It's nice to get a thank you every once in a while."

I was glad something was working out for the old guy, though I was in the dark as to what exactly that looked like, but it sounded like things were suddenly better for Denny.

Why push it, I thought. If the old man had wanted me—some kid just out doing his new job for the government, who'd only met with him, what, five or six times?—to know where he'd landed on his feet, he'd have told me.

But I did wonder where he'd found a place. How his life was improving. If he was eating better. Cleaned up. What his plans were for the station wagon. If he planned on going back to the doctor for a better foot prosthesis. If he missed his view at all.

Whether he'd warmed up a little.

CHRISTY WISE

Goodwill

The Ohlone Way
one Stones t-shirt
a pair of skinny jeans
three pens with metallic ink
shampoo soap bar, rose-scented
book about snowshoeing in the Sierra.

That's what wasn't dropped off at Goodwill.

Goodwill.
I think of good will as kindness of strangers.

Kindness of people who held elevator doors
when I walked with a cane.
Kindness of drivers who flash headlights
to warn of highway patrol.

Kindness of oncology nurses who provide
comfort during desolation,
with a slight nonchalance
because who needs drama in a cancer ward?

Kindness of a family who rescued
my scarf from airport floor. With much
in my arms, I didn't notice absence of light cloth
meant to protect from frozen airplane air.

What about strangers who didn't run
after me with scarf fluttering?

L. VOCEM

Deportation Papers

Perhaps it was a strange twist of fate I was let go early from the restaurant that night. It wasn't that busy and while I was taking out the garbage, a piece of broken glass ripped through the bag and sliced my leg. No big deal, but I bleed easily, and blood trailed all over the floors. My shoe was gushy. So, I went home to my parent's basement. I had moved back there to save money and graduate from college.

I parked, rushed through the family room towards the basement door when I noticed Alicia, my sister, crying in the kitchen. I walked slowly towards her. This didn't seem like an ordinary cry, but the cry you have when you lose your boyfriend, or someone dear dies.

"What happened?" I asked.

She mumbled a few words. Her nose was red, eyes watery, mucus pouring. Spit came out of her mouth when she talked.

"I was accepted to Emory," she said, mumbling more.

"Well, congratulations. What's so bad about that?"

"We're being deported."

"What? That doesn't make sense."

She went on to explain that if the family did not leave the country in a month, they would be slapped with an illegal status and be subject to forceful removal.

"That shouldn't stop you from going to school. You have a student visa."

"Carlos, Dad is not going to let me stay here at all by myself, he wants all of us to go back to Venezuela."

"You can stay with me."

"Really, Dad thinks you're a degenerate druggie and he is going to let me stay with you?"

Alicia cried again. I hugged her and asked where Mom and Dad were. She didn't know, so I went around the house calling their names. I found Mom in the living room talking on the phone. I tried to say something, but she lifted her finger to be quiet. She held some papers in one hand and the handset of the phone in the other. She nodded and every now and then interjected, "but we already did that, everything was in order. I still don't understand...why didn't the Reagan amnesty apply to us?"

She listened, her eyes moving left and right.

"We entered legally."

I went upstairs to see if I could find Dad. Even though he didn't speak to me, maybe, just maybe he would tell me what was going on. I knocked on their bedroom door, only to hear in my father's god-like deep voice "not now."

I went down the hall to Jose Jesus' room, who now liked to be called Joe. He was on his bed looking angry.

"Carlos, do you believe this? We're going back. I was looking forward to high school, wanted to play football, hang out with my friends. I don't even speak Spanish anymore."

I went downstairs. Mom was off the phone, still holding the same papers in her hand, staring into the distance. I sat across from her. She glanced at me.

"I thought Dad got a promotion, and now this?"

"I told him not to play politics. He's not a citizen and they never give these contracts to foreign researchers. But you know your Dad, he loves to play God."

* * *

I had to study for my finals, but at home there was so much tension, so many fights going back and forth between my Mom and Dad. I went over my girlfriend's apartment to study.

Jennifer was worried and asked. "Will you go back? Will you stay? If you do, we'd never see each other again."

If I went back I would have to live with my parents, and quite frankly my dad and I didn't see eye to eye. In the last year, we had not spoken to each other. We would be at the table having dinner, and he'd say to my mother, "Teresa, can you ask your son to please pass me the mashed potatoes." It was childish and ridiculous. The same thing had happened to my older sister, Ana Maria, when the family first came to the States, so she went back to Venezuela and married her old sweetheart.

I couldn't believe Dad would not let Alicia stay with me. A degenerate druggie was the image he had of me since I dropped out of university and switched to an art school. What kind of education was that, he would criticize. I should be a professional, and that meant a lawyer, a doctor, an architect, or the military. Period. Or as he would say in Spanish. *Punto y se acabo*.

I couldn't stay over with Jennifer for long periods of time. She didn't want to give the impression we were living together and felt uncomfortable

having sex with only a thin wall separating the sound from her roommate. I had two more finals, one in philosophy of the twentieth century, and history, plus one last design project. I had no choice but to go back to the basement, where I had my drafting board, my T-square, special rapidograph pens and equipment.

* * *

"I have an announcement to make," my dad said in his thick accent, while we all sat at the dinner table. He went on to tell us that he was looking into some possible jobs, one with the World Health Organization and a large research university up north.

"How could immigration find out so quickly?" my mom interjected. "They had to be tipped off. I bet it was Dr. Kenning, your paper-pushing boss. I bet he found out you were going to be promoted to his job. He figured out how to get rid of you."

"Teresa, it's more complicated than that."

"What do you mean, more complicated?"

"Teresa, not now. One step at the time."

* * *

Jennifer and I went to a party over the weekend. A lot of our friends were foreign students or Americans who liked to hang out with the internationals. At the party, a joint was passed around. When it got to me, I looked at it and passed it to Jennifer. She looked at it as well and passed it around without taking a toke. It was something we had, that if one didn't do something, the other one would not either so we would be on the same wavelength. Someone came to me and said "sorry about your parents, I heard that they are being…"

How did they find out? I didn't want anyone to know. I felt shame, anger, apprehension. So, I lied through my teeth. I told them that he was just leaving because he was going to open an institute working on contagious diseases in South America and the third world. My friends bought it. At one point outside, while everyone was away, Jennifer came close and asked, "What are you going to do?"

"I have a student visa, so whatever my parents do, does not affect me."

"What happens after you graduate? That's only a month away."

"I'll get a job in an ad agency, something like that."

"You have a social security number?"

"I'll get one."

"We could get married."

"If I married you, it wouldn't be for a green card, but because I love you. Period."

"And do you love me?"

I locked eyes with Jennifer, pulled her in my arms and gave her a kiss.

"I do, but I would never want papers to get in the way."

* * *

Dad went up to New York, then Minneapolis and back to Atlanta. In our dinner talks, he told us he was doing what he could, but all these places were saying they could not decide right away, these things took months. He looked discouraged.

The next day, a real estate agent came to the house with a Polaroid camera snapping pictures.

"The house has a lovely swimming pool." She pointed out. "Houses with swimming pools take longer to sell."

"How's that?" my mom asked.

"They take a lot of maintenance, kind of like boats. So, you have to attract boat people or people that really understand and want the pool."

Mom came to the basement and we had a talk. She started in English as we usually did when we were all together. A decision that was made when we first came to the States and wanted everyone to properly learn the language. Yet half way through our conversation, she switched to Spanish. She didn't want to sell the house yet, but my dad said they would need the money to relocate the whole family to Venezuela and buy something. The banks down there were not like here, where you can get a loan and pay a monthly mortgage. Down there, you have to pay cash.

She couldn't believe their American dream was about to die. After all these years and all they had gone through, after spending over 20 grand in lawyers and filing every imaginable form and doing everything Immigration wanted. If they could just buy more time. She didn't understand why they didn't renew my dad's contract. He was the first person to photograph through the electron-microscope the gastroenteritis virus Echo-19. His research with encephalitis was legendary. How one little migratory bird started in the jungles of South American and ended in Canada was the culprit. At the Center, all the research on the Clostridium Difficile was his work. And his team was working on Legionnaires Disease when this happened. My mom recited these things by heart. But my dad was a horrible politician, my mom continued. He was too blunt, never sugarcoating anything.

"Kind of how he treats us," I said. "Whenever he is going to give you some advice, he tells you how horrible you were in the first place, so by the time he tells you the advice, you're angry or completely demoralized."

* * *

My dad was gone for a week. My brother finished school. My sister Alicia, had a big high school graduation at a stadium. As she walked around in her black garb, she cried, wishing that Dad was there. My dad doted on Alicia. She was probably the smartest of all of us, perhaps the one that would make it to medical school, instead of a loser in art school, or like my older sister, getting knocked up by her boyfriend and having to go back to Venezuela and marrying the guy. Maybe Jose Jesus would be the one. But like me, he didn't get along with Dad, and back when we used to share a room, would joke that Dad was related to Mengele, and in his spare time flew Stuka airplanes over the Balkans. It was a joke. But Dad expected only the best out of you. I remember in high school being punished because I made B pluses instead of As, being less than the best was unacceptable in his understanding of the world, and unless you delivered, you were mentally tortured and emotionally annihilated.

I used to have a little apartment with three roommates. It was close to school. It was cheap, close to Piedmont Park. I worked at a restaurant to make money, and managed to get grants from Venezuela to pay for school. I busted my ass in school and my grades were tops. I had even done an internship with an ad agency.

Then my mother convinced me to move back home to save money. Wha'ta hell, it was my last year of school. So, I did. Then the incident happened. One of my friends promised me a couple of joints. It was very late one night and since he didn't know my parents or how they were about things, he left them in an envelope in the passenger seat of my Honda Civic. My Mom must have heard him, or saw something from her window. I don't know. And my friend, later on told me that he got home and forgot to call me. My Mom found the envelope with the two joints and called a meeting the next day and confronted me about this with my dad sitting next to us. She gave me this lecture about how this is a gateway drug, that from here on is heavier things, cocaine, heroin, who knows what. She repeated the slogan that the first lady Nancy Reagan made popular "Just say no." As she said that, I played in my head the commercial that was shown in our advertising class, where they say, "this is your brain," and shows a frying pan, then they toss a couple of eggs and say, "this is your brain on drugs." Then I remembered seeing on TV the other version where they say "This is your brain, this is your brain on drugs, this is your brain with a side of bacon."

I wanted to laugh, but I guess they noticed that I was not taking them that seriously, so my dad leaned forward, and said, "You're punished."

He loved to do that to me as a kid. He would tell me, go to his room. Sometimes, he would forget and hours later, I stood facing his bed with his belt in my hand when he would show up. He would look surprised and tell me that I had three weeks without TV. Or a month without a bike. Or I was not allowed outside.

"You can't punish me," I said.

"Why not," he responded in his ominous tone. While my Mom, all of a sudden looked terrified.

"Look, I pay for my university, with grants, scholarships and what I make from the restaurant. If you have a problem, I'll be happy to move out."

"You don't talk to me like that! No son of mine is going to use that tone with me."

A few days later, my mom came to the basement to tell me that she had talked to my dad and that I didn't have to move out. But from then on, he didn't speak to me.

* * *

When my dad arrived home from his trip, Mom said we were going to have a special dinner. My sister set the table the way we always did, placemats, forks, knives, salad forks, butter knives, cloth napkins. As she did that, I reflected on how my American friends ate when I went to their parent's houses. People arrived on their own time, picked something from the stove, ate in front of a TV and moved on. I liked our formal dinner tradition.

This dinner was special. She was making the most traditional of Venezuela dishes, *pavellon criollo*. Mom had spent two days cooking *carne mechada*, shredded beef. In a cast-iron pot, black beans simmered, to which she had applied her secret ingredient. Years later I would find out it was a couple of bay leaves to give it that extra zing. And of course, white rice made her own special way. But what blew my mind was the sudden smell of frying plantains. I couldn't believe you could find those suckers here in the States.

My dad sat at the head of the table. My mom called for my dad to say the prayer. We all held hands forming an almost perfect ring around the table. Dad spoke. My sister closed her eyes and listened intently. My brother opened his eyes and glanced at me and rolling his eyes. I looked at my mom, on the opposite side of the table, eyes closed, nodding as my dad spoke. Then Amen was said and they all opened their eyes.

There was a new smell in the air.

"Am I smelling *arepas*?" I asked.

My mom smiled.

"Yes. You could not find *harina* PAN anywhere for years, and then only in the Cuban markets. And guess what, I bought this at Publics, our supermarket."

"Wow, this is so cool."

"I prefer bread," my brother said. "*Arepas* are like grits turned into a patty."

"But Mom, I love your *Pabellon*," my sister said.

The food was passed around and we all helped ourselves.

"The plantains also came from our supermarket," my mom said.

"Things are changing. What's next, mangos in a supermarket?" I said.

"Thank you for granting my request and making this lovely meal," my dad said.

My mom asked about my father's trip, but he remained rather quiet. She went along asking questions. Everyone said their usual, good, fine. When she asked me how I was, I said that I had finished my exams and was graduating in a month. I took a bite of my moms' dish, mixing the juicy beef with capers with some rice and black beans, savored in my mouth. I looked at my mom and asked "Are you guys going to my graduation?"

My mom and dad looked at each other.

"If we are still here, of course, we will," Dad said. Those were the first words that he had uttered to me directly in more than a year and a half.

"Your school is in Midtown," my mother said.

"Yes."

"I'm so happy that you moved back home. Where you lived was… so horrible."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, there were all those gay bars around there."

"But I lived close to Piedmont Park, it was really cool."

"But there's so much depravity."

"Mom, the area used to be overrun by drugs and hippies back in the day. The gays came over, and you know what, wherever they go, they fix things, real estate values go up and neighborhoods turn around."

"And how do you know such things?" my dad asked. He had spoken to me not once, but twice in one evening.

"One of my professors bought a house in the area and he told us."

"And he is gay?" my mother asked.

"As a matter of fact, he is not, but he doesn't have anything against them."

"They are bringing this country down with their promiscuous lifestyle. But God has punished them. What they do is not natural or right," Mom said.

My little brother had a smirk on his face, moving his eyes between mom and me.

"They are bringing this gay plague."

My dad grumbled but kept chewing his food, now looking at my mom and I.

"But mom, they are turning around these neighborhoods," I said.

"They have sex like wild bunnies," said my Mom.

"Mom, I don't think this is a conversation to have in front of Alicia. She may not know about these things," my brother said, with a chuckle.

How old was he?

"They are destroying the fabric of this nation. That is what brought Rome down. What do you think, Federico?" Mom asked Dad.

My dad cleared his throat and looked intently at all of us.

"I don't look at this from a religious point of view but a scientific point of view. And while I completely disapprove of their lifestyle, I don't see this as a mandate from God. Was the Black Death a mandate from God?"

"But it's wrong. Scriptures say it's wrong," my mom said.

"Where? Tell me, Teresa."

"God has punished them."

"We found a great number of gay people dying of Pneumocystis Pneumonia," Dad said emphatically. "That shouldn't happen unless your immune system is down. Then we saw the same pattern with Kaposi's Sarcoma. We started that research, we put the dots together. It was us that named it acquired immunodeficiency syndrome, AIDS. And then the White House cut our funding." My dad inhaled deeply, took a bite of my mom's food, closed his eyes, and chewed. He looked pissed, really pissed off. This also felt like a continuation of one of their fights, now throwing something in front of everyone.

"I miss our food," Dad said. "A good *sancocho*, a *Reina Pepiada Arepa*. Some *techeños*. Remember eating *cachitos*?"

"Ymmm. I remember those," my sister responded.

"I'd rather have a hamburger," my brother interjected. "With melting cheese. I want the cheese to drip all over my hand."

We all laughed and finished eating. Since Alicia had set the table, Joe and I cleared it and washed the dishes.

"He's trying to sell us on going back," my brother said, placing glasses on the drying rack.

* * *

People began to flow through the house with the real estate agent. They would pop their head in my room, go through the hallway to the swimming pool area. It annoyed the hell out of me, but it was, what it was. Unlike my brother and sister who considered this their home, to me, this was my parent's house.

My mom came down to the basement several times to tell me Dad was settling for offers that were too low, the house was worth a lot more. My mom was sad and angry. This was her dream home, everything she had wanted in life was here. And now, it was going to be gone in a blink of an eye.

I realized I needed to decide what to do in my life as well. Soon, I may not have a place to live and quite frankly, as much as I loved Venezuela, I did not want to go down there and live with them.

* * *

In one of our family dinners, it was my sister who opened the conversation.

"Why. Why do we have to go? There are millions of people who are here without papers, illegals."

"Not anymore, since the amnesty," Mom interjected.

"So, can't we apply to that?"

"No, because we came legally," Mom responded.

"But now we may become illegal.We should be able to apply. Right?"

"No, we can't," Mom said.

"That doesn't make sense. Anyway. We stay. Dad waits four, six months for one of those big jobs. And we go back to normal. It's not like they are going to break our doors down and arrest us. This is America, they would never, ever do something like that in this country."

"No. We go back," My dad said.

"Why? Why?"

"In my line of work, I may be hired by big healthcare systems, a national center, government agencies, university research institutes, my papers have to be spotless. So, the answer is no. We go back."

* * *

My mom went around putting little stickers on furniture, lamps and trinkets in the house. Then one Friday night she asked everyone to help move it to the driveway. It was going to be a garage sale. The next day, people walked through clothes, lamps, bikes, lawnmower, and all kinds of

personal things, now on sale. She also began to pack in boxes the things that she would take down to Venezuela. My mom looked tired and defeated.

"I'm going to miss you a lot," my brother said. "You've never complained. Whenever I yanked your chain you responded. During rainy cold days, hot nasty days you purred and went to work. You've made me a ton of money."

I gave him an odd look. He caressed the lawnmower as if it was a girlfriend, then looked at me.

The movers came twice. The first time they filled the truck with things that they would take down to Venezuela. They professionally wrapped crystal, lamps that my mom considered irreplaceable, part of my dad's library. The second truck arrived later. This one took beds, and whatever was going to be given away to one of the charities.

There was no furniture in the house except my room. I'd told them that I would either give it away to my friends or if I stayed, move it to my next place the moment the house was sold.

* * *

One night, while I was working on my portfolio, Dad stood by my door. The doctor, the researcher, the god now looked more like a diminished, sullen man.

"I know that you and I have not seen eye-to-eye for many years," he said in Spanish. "Probably since the incident."

He told me how much he wished that I had gone towards medicine, not art. But he understood now, that one must follow what feels right, what we are good at and I always had the gift even when I was small.

"But Dad, there's nothing wrong with art," I interjected. This is where in the past we would escalate into a full out argument and fight.

"I failed, not you," he said. "Your mom was right also. I let it get political at work. But I had to, I had to take a stand."

I kept quiet, realizing that perhaps we were not going the usual path into a war of wills.

"Take a stand?" I asked.

"You've heard me talk about Kaposi's Sarcoma or Pneumocystis pneumonia?"

"I may have," I responded, not quite sure where he was going with this and why he was talking about it.

"A lot of people started dying from a sarcoma that can be treated and managed. Others from a normally harmless fungus. It shouldn't be killing people. This type of pneumonia is treatable unless you have a compromised immune system."

"Oh, so you're talking about AIDS?"

"We were the first ones to call it that way. We were the ones who pointed out this could be a world epidemic. Yet our funding got cut. We had the resources and talent to be the first ones to isolate it. The French isolated SIVcpz, now we call it HIV."

"But why are you telling me all this, Dad?"

"People at the Center are not happy with what the Reagan people are doing, how they labeled the disease. We took a stand. Dr. Frank wrote a letter to the Director of Infectious Diseases. I backed him. We need blood and plasma collection systems. We predict a massive need for both epidemiologic and laboratory staff and a need for rapidly mobilizable funds to undertake field investigations. There's so much that needs to be done. There's so much we do not understand."

My dad took a pause.

"Are you going down with us?"

"I don't think I am," I responded.

"I'm not going to force you. You're a man now. But… here you will always be treated like a second-class citizen."

"I don't know Papá, I don't see it that way."

"In time, you will. I hope it changes. I hope I'm wrong. Anyway, the media got hold of the letter and it was published."

* * *

We all kissed like Latinos kiss: rubbing one cheek and then the other. Men give each other big bear hugs that crunch bones.

I pulled back and there was my dad. There was my brother, my sister, and then my mom. A tear rolled down her face. She was a strong woman, but you could tell she was holding her tears. You could see it in her lips holding tight. The shuttle to the airport was in the driveway. My brother and the driver moved most of their luggage into the back.

"They say the house will close in three weeks. We hope to be back for your graduation," my mom said.

"Take care," my dad said.

"So, Dad, what are you going to do?"

He looked up at the sky and then at me.

"I don't know. Maybe open a clinic, a center, people are dying. There's a lot that needs to be done."

DIANA WOODCOCK

The Peace of Detachment

Teach us to care and not to care.
—T.S. Eliot

How to practice the peace
of detachment? How to care
and not care? The bully cat

comes every day and night to
harass the patio strays. I ask
how to be detached, how to

let them fend for themselves,
how to care and not care
about these times of violence,

nihilism and crime, how to
withdraw and yet stay alert—
alive and sensitive,

how to be detached from
species going extinct,
how not to think

too much and yet approach
with each one the brink—
the droughts and fires,

the poachers and encroachers,
how to care and not care
the world's going up in smoke,

how to still hope
though we be heathen,
we might be holy.

JANICE ZERFAS

Albino Deer

There is the panic attack you have
and the panic attack you deserve,
yet they are as close as the medic
who sits next to you in the ambulance,
pushing his knees against the stretcher.
Later, you will pull the pressure point
stickers off yourself all day, without
expecting the mini-postages still there.
Soon, you will be wondering what the havoc
was all about, and how to contain it,
and if it can be contained.
But the medic will inform you he admires,
likes, all the pumpkins sprawled all over
the porch, the easement, one rotting
on the pine stump. A white pumpkin,
especially, he had never seen an albino—
like the albino deer someone shot
and they shouldn't have. Allegan
county, the heart of I-131 blizzards.
is he talking to distract you from a racing
pulse, wanting to see how you respond
to more trauma? Well, you can see the gut
entrails of that frostbit buck or doe, see its
body where it is tied to the ligature
of the clothesline's goal posts, left there
for days when the blood pressure dropped,
the eyes turning to deer flies the color of dark
huckleberries, surely gone. How
the hide shown in the cold blizzard moon.
How the dead deer made you feel your hand's cold.
While you picture the venison not yet processed,
he will be offering you advice: you can calm
yourself down naturally if you put your hand
on your heart, like a coffee cup on a saucer.

Don't contract your muscles more.
Let your hand rest there. Let it rest there,
though the mind tricks you, and yes, you are
placing your hand on the dead albino deer's heart,
thinking it is your own, and how calm.

CONTRIBUTORS

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CAROL HAMILTON has retired from teaching 2nd grade through graduate school in Connecticut, Indiana and Oklahoma, from storytelling and volunteer medical translating. She is a former Poet Laureate of Oklahoma and has published 19 books and chapbooks: children's novels, legends and poetry. She has been nominated ten times for a Pushcart Prize. She has won a Southwest Book Award, Oklahoma Book Award, David Ray Poetry Prize, *Byline Magazine* literary awards in both short story and poetry, Warren Keith Poetry Award, Pegasus Award and a Chiron Review Chapbook Award.

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SCOTT HOLSTEIN'S photography first appeared on the cover of the *Broad River Review* in 2006, when he was an undergraduate photojournalism student at Gardner-Webb University. Holstein has been a professional photographer based in Tallahassee, Florida, for 20 years, in a wide variety of genres, spanning advertising, marketing, and editorial photography. Holstein has photographed over 120 magazine covers. Samples of his work and business page can be found at scottholsteinphoto.com.

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KAREN LUKE JACKSON draws upon oral history, contemplative practices, and nature for inspiration. Her poems have appeared in *Atlanta Review, Ruminate, Susurrus, Salvation South,* and *Redheaded Stepchild*, among others. Her chapbook *Grit* (Finishing Line Press, 2020) chronicles her sister's adventures as an award-winning clown, and her full collection *The View Ever Changing* (Kelsay Books, 2021), explores the power of place and family ties. A lover of trees, Karen resides in a cottage on a goat pasture in Flat Rock, North Carolina. When she's not writing, she companions people on their spiritual journeys. She can be found online at karenlukejackson.com.

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GARY LARK grew up in the Umpqua Valley of Southern Oregon near the Umpqua River. Among other things, Lark has been a carpenter, janitor, hospital aide, salesman, storyteller, and fisherman. The last thirty years of his working life were spent as a librarian. Lark has published seven books of poetry, including *Easter Creek* (Main Street Rag), *Daybreak on the Water* (Flowstone Press), *Ordinary Gravity* (Airlie Press), *In the House of Memory* (BatCat Press) and *Without a Map* (Wellstone Press). His work has appeared in *Beloit Poetry Journal, Catamaran, Poet Lore, The Sun*, and *ZYZZYVA*.

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RAY MORRISON spent most of his childhood in Brooklyn, New York, and Washington, DC, but headed south after college to earn his degree in veterinary

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ALLEN TULLOS, professor of history and digital humanities at Emory University, is co-founder of the online journal *Southern Spaces* and co-director of the Emory Center for Digital Scholarship. His poetry has appeared in numerous publications including the British anthology *Entanglements, Common Ground Review, Southern Quarterly, Appalachian Journal*, and *The Fish Poetry Anthology 2020* (selected by Billy Collins). Tullos is the author of two books of American Studies: *Habits of Industry* (winner of the Sydnor Award) and *Alabama Getaway: The Political Imaginary and the Heart of Dixie*.

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PAMELA WAX is the author of *Walking the Labyrinth* (Main Street Rag, 2022) and the forthcoming chapbook *Starter Mothers* (Finishing Line Press). Her poems have received a Best of the Net nomination and awards from *Crosswinds, Paterson Literary Review, Poets' Billow, Oberon*, and the Robinson Jeffers Tor House. She has been published in literary journals, including *Barrow Street, Tupelo Quarterly, About Place Journal, Rust & Moth, Mudfish, Connecticut River Review, Naugatuck River Review, Pedestal, Split Rock Review, Sixfold*, and *Passengers Journal*. An ordained rabbi, Pam offers spirituality and poetry workshops online from her home in the Northern Berkshires of Massachusetts.

BOB WICKLESS has published poems in many magazines and journals, including *American Scholar, Antioch Review, Poetry, Shenandoah, Southern Indiana Review, Southern Poetry Review*, and the last three editions of *Broad River Review*. His chapbooks, *Almost Happy* (2020) and *(Riding) Shotgun in Imaginary Cars* (2021) are available from Orchard Street Press. A full-length collection, *The Secret Care the World Takes*, will appear from Orchard Street later this year.

MARINA HOPE WILSON'S poem "Origin" was the winner of the 2023 Rash Award in Poetry. Her poems have appeared or are forthcoming in journals such as *The Massachusetts Review, Horse Less Review, Mulberry Literary, Kissing Dynamite*, and *The Racket*. Her chapbook, *Nighttime*, was a finalist in the Black Lawrence Press Spring 2022 Black River Chapbook Competition. Marina lives in San Francisco with her partner, stepdaughter, and two cats, and makes her living as a speech-language therapist.

CHRISTY WISE is a poet, essayist and author. Her poems have appeared in *Panoplyzine, High Shelf Press*, and *Anthem*, among others. Her poem "Tony's Cocoon" was a finalist in the 2002 Julia Darling Memorial Poetry Prize. Christy's chapbook, *Tangible Terrain*, is forthcoming from Finishing Line Press in March 2024. Christy is most at home walking along the Pacific Ocean and hiking in Desolation Wilderness in the Eldorado National Forest.

MARTHA GRAHAM WISEMAN grew up in both New York and North Carolina. She has been an acting student, a dancer, and an editor. Wiseman taught English at Skidmore College until retiring in 2020. Her essays have been published in *The Georgia Review, Fish Anthology 2021, Ponder Review, Dorothy Parker's Ashes, Under the Sun, The Santa Ana River Review, The Bookends Review, oranges journal* (UK), *Kestrel*, and *Map Literary*. Work is forthcoming from *Queens Quarterly* (Canada).

DIANA WOODCOCK is the author of seven chapbooks and four poetry collections, most recently *Facing Aridity*, published in 2021 as a finalist for the 2020 Prism Prize for Climate Literature. Forthcoming in 2023 is *Holy Sparks* (a finalist for the 2020 Paraclete Press Poetry Award). She is the recipient of the 2011 Vernice Quebodeaux Pathways Poetry Prize for Women (for her debut collection *Swaying on the Elephant's Shoulders*), a three-time Pushcart Prize nominee, and a Best of the Net nominee. Currently teaching at VCUarts Qatar, she holds a PhD in Creative Writing from Lancaster University, where she researched poetry's role in the search for an environmental ethic.

JANICE ZERFAS' poems have appeared or forthcoming in the *South Dakota Review, Michigan's Dune Review, the MacGuffin*, and more. She is a recently-retired community college writing instructor, who still volunteers.