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Broad River Review

Volume 53
2021

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

ASSOCIATE EDITORS

Claire Allen
Anna Grace Jones

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EDITORS' NOTE

Each year, the *Broad River Review* publishes a number of contest winners and select finalists. The Rash Awards in 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 David Joy and Catherine Carter, who served as judges for the 2021 Rash Awards in Fiction and Poetry, respectively. Joy selected "The Sinkhole" by Alan Sincic for the fiction award, while Carter chose "Eclogue 4: The Woodpecker" by John Blair as winner of the poetry award. Congratulations to both winners, who received $500 each and publication in this issue.

Joy said of Alan Sincic's story: "What separated this story from the others was that the writing felt like something I hadn't encountered before. From the opening line, there was a very distinct voice with a tight grip on the wheel. Driven by that voice and a distinctive turn of phrase, 'The Sinkhole' accomplishes much of what the short story form excels at when done well—a narrative swept toward one final turn, a question half raised but left unanswered, and a reader's mind left to wonder. This is short fiction that lingers and echoes of something bigger."

Carter said of John Blair's poem: "I was drawn back to it by the way it braids together not only Jesus and the woodpecker, but the insects the woodpecker seeks, 'the wood's softened / and sacred heart,' and the woodpecker's 'shameless insistence that / this moment is the only possible moment.' The poem has a definite arc from first to last, an attention to the world which rivals that of the grinding insects, and some appealing interior music."

We would also like to thank every writer who submitted to us or entered our contests. A full list of honorable mentions and finalists can be found on our website, broadriverreview.org. Our next contest submission period will coincide with our regular submission period, which will be February 1–April 1, 2022. Full submission information and guidelines, including profiles of the judges, will appear on our web site in January 2022.

Gardner-Webb University has published a literary magazine continuously since 1968. Early issues appeared under the titles *The Green Scribe* and *One Little Candle*, then a long run as *Reflections*, beginning in 1973. Finally, in 2002, we became the *Broad River Review*, when the

magazine was also upgraded from side-staple to a perfect bound publication and increased its scope from local to regional and national.

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

ALAN SINCIC

The Sinkhole

Winner, 2021 Rash Award in Fiction

Not that a patch here, a pocket there was ever enough for him. No. Not for Barnett. First the ruins of the turpentine mill. Then the swamp. And then, bit by bit, decade by decade, the dump and the cesspool, the floodplain and the gravel pit and the derelict orchard, the deserted rail bed and the abandoned bombing range—half the damn territory while we were still frisking the Davenport for nickels. Hence the hilltop and hence the Mormons and hence, not but a week later, the sinkhole.

Off of Pine Hills Road, remember? That crack in the egg, puncture in the crust of the pie big enough to swallow cars and trucks and steam shovels, tree-forts and houses and churches, the backstops and dugouts and crusty clay diamonds of Little league fields dusted with sunlight and speckled with boys in white flannel. We laughed when he bought it. *Pennies to the acre* he bought it, sure, but not even the city, not the county, not even the idiots up Tallahassee way wanted this burst of a blister, this thumb-hole in the heart of the map.

And that's exactly what we told him. Again and again, and for the sheer pleasure of telling him, the bastard—half-asleep there, sheeted up onto the chair like a burial at sea, frosted with Burma Shave and stinking of Aqua Velva. Slowly he rocked, side to side, in time to the tinny beat of some yodeler on the radio wailing:

There was three kings into the east,
Three kings both great and high,
And they hae sworn a solemn oath
John Barleycorn should die.

Drummed his fingers on the fat of the leather seat. Waggled the silver tip of that Tony Llama like a conductor's baton.

It's not for the roof above your head, said we, that you buy a house, no, but for the ground beneath your feet. That's what you count on—the bedrock, the rebar, the brick of the earth itself. Last thing you want to hear, in the middle of the night, is the crackle of the floorboards as the *terra firma* swallows you whole, as you and the house that holds you, all of it—bathroom, bedroom, living room, kitchen—banjo with the calf-skin fret, bust of Caesar, little yippy dog – slithers down that creamy funnel and into the belly of the Kracken.

They took a plough and plough'd him down,
Put clods upon his head,
And they hae sworn a solemn oath
John Barleycorn was dead.

When Joe asked him what the hell he thought a sinkhole could possibly be worth, Barnett rose up out the chair, draped in white, the Barber's smock still pinned to his collar. He stepped up to the picture window. "You tell me," he said as he cocked his hands up into a little frame, you know, like a movie director. *What am I bid for this?* he said as he held it there, the frame, tipped it, and with it, the blue sky, the barrel staves of the water tower, the cloud a boutonniere the size of a city, even the window itself—the flow of the red letters, Shave and a Shine brushed up onto the glass and trimmed in white like the piping on a cake—*what am I bid?*

"Two bits," said Parish, voice like a rusty muffler, "if you throw in a shave."

"A shave and a blow-job," said Maxie. This got a laugh, but not from Barnett, no. Course not. His Majesty too busy sliding that viewfinder out over the cosmos front of Joe's, past the barber pole dinged with BBs and mothy bits and the clumpy chalk of pigeons, out over the javelin fin of the Chevy parked at the curb and onward, panning leftward, out over the far square, the patch of green, the gazebo no bigger than a teapot in the distance and then near again, across the street and breaking into view, the shaggy oaks that fringe the diner and brush the awning raw and then onward, leftward, out over the clearing, out over the broken barn—canted windward and crispy with termites—onward, slowly, slowly, down the piney slope to the blip of silver where the pond (a catch-basin, really) simmered in the heat.

"That's the treasure," he said. "Right there."

"Oil?"

"Uranium?"

"Water," Barnett said.

"The water?"

"Water," he said.

"Okay," said Joe. "A watering hole. But what with the slope—"

"Hogs maybe," said Maxie. "But cattle? On an incline like that you'd have to—"

"Run a pump," said Joe. "Pipe it up to a trough."

"Gotta have a spring up under there," said Lynch. "Not much better than a cistern without you got a source of water up under there."

Joe shook his head. "Yeah, but a good rain..."

"You'd get the run-off," said Maxie, suddenly animated. "Hell, half the lakes around here—"

"Lakes, okay, lakes," said Lynch. "But that's not a lake. What you got there – "

"What you got there is a puddle," said Bidwell, hot towel over his head, blind to it all but speaking out some secret vision of his own.

"Puddle with a purpose," said Barnett.

"The hell you say," said Lynch.

"With a purpose," he said.

"Now if that were a puddle of bourbon," said Joe.

"Oh ye of little faith," said Barnett.

"Here it comes," said Lynch.

"Having eyes, do you not see?" said Barnett. "Having ears, do you not hear?"

"God Junior."

"There is your treasure," he said. *There*, and stretched out his arm like Moses in the movie swinging round the flock to face the land of milk and honey. There—framed up in the caliper gap where the pink of the finger hovers just, just so, above the curl of the stubby thumb: a glint of silver no bigger than a dime, a distillation of the invisible air vivid as a shot of gin.

"Water-view," he said. "That's what we call it. Water-view."

"So what are you selling, Barnett? Swimming holes?"

"Not the water, no. Something better than the water."

"Instant water, right?" said Lynch. "Just add water."

"I'm in the window business, boys." Barnett rapped on the plate glass with that knuckle ring of his, *Loyal Order of the Moose, All for One and One for All*. "What I sell is the view."

"Glory be to Jesus," said Lynch with that grouty voice of his, that slow percolation up out the gravely deep. "Cut me off a slice of that air."

"Me too," said Joe.

"Can you break a twenty?" said Maxwell.

"An order to go," said Cochrane, we all of us now keen to sing along, to broaden out the mockery into something masterful and grand. Not the yip of the dog. No. The cry of the wolf. The bay of the hound.

"You take a trade-in? Got a picture of my old lady here got a couple thousand miles on it."

"GB! GB! I get my money back if the sun goes down?"

"That come in, like, a version for the radio?"

"Big discount for the blind."

"I bid a thousand dollars!"

"Ten thousand!"

"A million!"

Still baking there up under the white linen, Bidwell lifted his hand. "You take a check, GB"—the palm up, like boozer taking the pledge—"or you want I should cut you a picture of a check?"

A solid blow. A joy to behold. Even the tips of the smokes they glowed a little brighter.

Like any of that mattered to GB. Like he could give a damn. From under the smock he pulled the—you'd have thought it was the goddamned Gettysburg Address—deed to the parcel he'd skimmed off the Mormon deal. As if. All week he'd been gloating about this little slice of waterfront the width of a kiddie canoe, object of ridicule even, it seemed, to Barnett himself, who'd joked about the size of the claim *(get yourself a post-hole digger you could bury a man upright)* even as he'd invited us to *(face down if he's a sinner, said Lynch)* join in the mockery.

After all, we were the big shots. We were the ones bought up the primo land ahead of time, acres of lakefront off the market, out from under his nose. Lake Lawn. Not but a half mile across—hospital, prison farm, muck land on the far side, nothing but cat-tails on the near but golden, see, golden opportunity now that we'd pooled our resources and pitched in, the each of us, commensurate with his place in the pecking order to finally, and after all these years, make a killing. The only way to get rich is to think rich, right? Think *Winter Park dandy in the white summer suit and the Panama Hat and the skinny cigar.* What does he hanker for? Waterfront property. Mansion with a dock. His very own private personal lake.

Which is what made the deed such a joke, Barnett up there pitching that toothpick of a territory like it was a goddam caber toss. By now we'd heard such a confabulation of bone fides out of him, such a jambalaya of truthy lies and lie-speckled truths, sawdust plastered up into the shape of a tree, we were ready for anything.

"So." He shook the deed. Shivered the air with needles of light. "What am I bid for this?"

Talk about laughter. Maxie let out a whoop. Bidwell and the boys howled. Even Lynch geigered up a little.

"You got yourself a flume ride," said Joe.

"A ski ramp," said Bo.

"Bowl-a-Rama with a single lane," said somebody out the back room.

Even the cracker sheriff and that greasy deputy of his—up from Orlo Vista for a trim and shine, shot of whiskey back of the package store,

shot at that aero-dynamical waitress in orbit around the elliptical bar at the heart of the Checkerboard Grill – joined in, told him a phone booth'd be just the thing to build on it, or a shithouse maybe, *shithouse with a pay phone*.

Not that it touched him in the least. Barnett thrived on abuse, rag-picker that he was, and the more you mocked him, the more he smiled. That was the angle he played. Always an angle. And not but a day later we saw what the angle was, saw, in the distance, through a gap in the brush where the oaks that wall the road give way to pasture, Barnett, Barnett and then, pinned up onto the skyline like a set of paper dolls, Barnett and Starr together. Not out front of Maxie's or stirred into the shade trees back of Murph's Auto or swiveled up into the steam, the strop of the razor, the bite of the lime and the clove and the ash in the air where the barber rambles and the boys argue and the door jangles with life but here, in the middle of nowhere, looking down from a gunpowder gray hump of shovel-blasted sand at a squad of convicts, road crew from the Prison Farm in the denim overalls and the wife-beater tees and the floppy denim caps all cut to a size.

Word was he'd paid the Sheriff to muster the crew to dig (out of the goodness of their heart) a ditch from the G. Gordon Barnett snippet of waterfront to the G. Gordon Barnett sinkhole a quarter mile away. A *watercourse* he called it. *A fact on the groun*d. To those who complained about the gash in the landscape, he laid a survey map out over the hood of his jeep and—careful not to trespass, not even with the tip of his finger, so much as a crumb of private property—traced the route the ditch followed. It followed the trail of a telegraph never built, a right-of-way chalked out ages ago to link a derelict foundry to a municipal aerodrome as invisible now as the day it was first envisioned. *Eminent Domain* is what he called it. *Community Property*. An invitation, an opening, a vacancy into which, as a member in good standing, and having risen to the occasion, Barnet inserted his (what would be the word for it?) member.

Bastard. The Bastard. Turned the sinkhole into a lake. Diced the land up into itty-bitty lots, speckled the banks with a couple dozen little cracker-jack houses, *European Villas* he called them—fiberglass and gypsum and cinderblock, plaster of Paris birdbaths and aluminum lintels and a colonnade of particle board dipped in a marbley paint and topped with a head of Caesar the size of a tetherball. The whole she-bang *(the Glory that was Greece, the Grandeur that was Rome)* he pitched as a kind of Holiday in Pompeii, bacchanal in the center of Vesuvius, *Water-View Estate*s, then sold it all of a piece to a Cincinnati dentist-cum-real estate mogul. Top dollar. Cash only. "Here lies one whose name was writ in water," he said as he signed off on the map that rode with the deed, as he circled the words that sailed out over the blue at the heart of it all: *Lake Barnett*.

When we complained that he was stealing our water, the *original* water, Barnett argued we should be the one's to pay him. *Answer me this*, he said as he decapitated the tip of his Cubano with a snip of them foldable little scissors, *Which is more valuable—land or water?*

"Depends on whose water you—"

"You don't walk on the water, do you?"

"No, but—"

"Don't sleep on the water, build on the water—hell." He stopped. Glanced out the window. It was the winter now. The ground no longer glowed like an oven. The stray dogs ambled out into the sunlight and sniffed the wind. "What the hell's the good of the water when—think about it, you ever think about it—you can't even own the water?"

"But you don't have the right to—"

"To what? To give you the land?"

"No. To—"

"Extra land? For free?"

"But – "

"Every time I drink another foot of water off of that lake of yours, that's another acre tacked on to your land."

The thing was...he was right, the bastard. How could you argue with that? Not that it did us any good. Not after the slaughter-house opened across the lake, downslope of the prison farm, and the smell of offal filled the air, and the shit clung to the water lilies, and even the frogs began to curdle and die. Took a loss on the sale but it could've been worse. If we'd sold it to Barnett, who out-bid the gun club and the tannery, we'd have never heard the end of it. So we lied. *Prior claim*, we said, and a Pyrrhic victory, sure, whatever, but never, never did the crackle of small arms fire out over Lake Lawn in the evening sound so sweet.

Not that it mattered, what with the onward march of the Boy Wonder out over the land, but a vision, see? A promise of glory. And who knows? God is good. God got a scale. God give him, maybe, like a limp or a cough. That'll serve. Come the spring, when the grove sweetens with the fat of the orange and the lime, the tangelo and the peach, the plum and the pear and the melon, and the blue sky sings, and the bass bites, and into the lung of that Wonder the tubercular soil sifters and blooms, we'll shake our heads, and whisper up a word of pity, and gather at the side of the grave with a sheaf of lilies and a fist of gravel at the ready to sing, sing the praises of a grifter gone to meet his maker, to meet the king of all the grifters, the God who fed us into the fire of life and left us there to burn. Mercy.

JOHN BLAIR

Eclogue 4: The Woodpecker

Winner, 2021 Rash Award in Poetry

Jesus shake the air someone shouts
from down the hill   the neighbor
perhaps who holds the weekly prayer
meetings in his kitchen as he wishes

his flock goodbye   engines
starting one by one in answer   call
and response   the day like a plastic flower
endlessly serene and too beautiful to love

because there are no promises greater
than *something more than this* and *you*
have no reason to be afraid   and all
the while a woodpecker hammers away

at the tree of life which is only the dead
oak at the edge of your yard
opening peepholes to the next world
in his methodical way   mechanical

as a nailgun and too fast to count
though he stops for a while to consider you
and your persistence on your porch
your watchfulness

head tilted as though listening
for the tiniest of insects grinding
the length of their tunnels   which is
the length of their lives spent

in adoration of the wood's softened
and sacred heart   and you realize then
that his attention is devotion to everything
inside this moment and to all the things

the moment makes to give itself
the shine of reality   inherent
to its shameless insistence that
this moment is the only possible moment

        the woodpecker turning back
to shake the air again with his own answer
        which is nothing less than every answer
this world might deign to give.

ESTELLE BAJOU

I Never Learned to Pray

A stubbornness appears
In the pit of my stomach,
Spreads out like cold, blue dye
Through still water under light,
Fills up my limbs and head
And comforts me
As it must indicate a certainty,
Lurking in the liquid
Of my being.

In the unearthly quiet
My body begins to listen,

To taste the high Denver air.

I see tiny insects twirling
Like points of white light
In a shaft of afternoon sun.

I feel tiny blades of grass
Under my fingers,
In the curve of my palm.

I hear the low hum of an air conditioner,
A few neighboring voices,
Sweet clucks of chickens
In a coop behind me.

I sense my good friend,
Her penetrating eyes,
Purple streaks in her brown hair,
Her little black sneakers
Hooking the plastic chair legs.

I remember:
My mother as a young, kinetic woman,
My sister as a serious child at the family piano,
My nephews, now in the flush of childhood,
My sweet friends,
All the people I love.

I dream:
Of places I wish to see,
Things I wish to notice,
And say and do and make.

I do all this without leaving
The concrete step on which I sit.
I do it without remembering or dreaming.
I am not even really doing it.

It's no different than watching an ant search this flagstone,
Or feeling my lips with my tongue,
Or hearing the pencil in my friend's hand
Scratch thin lines into a page.

Then, after the stubbornness,
The certainty and quiet and listening,
Remembering and dreaming:

I let go of something,
Like a breath joining the delicious air.

GEORGE BANDY

The Ever-Changing City & Life, 1938

I'd grown faster than expectations
or hand-me-downs could keep covered.
I was dressed in threadbare
jeans, sock-less canvass shoes
and a T-shirt too small for me.

A scruffy, freckled kid
with a hungry look
as if I'd devour anything eatable
and left unattended.

I knew there was a White Law[1]
Hotel,
a White House
and a Congress of powerful white men
who lived in Georgetown manses,
and that the founding fathers'
white daughters,
Daughters of the American Revolution,
stayed somewhere in town.

We were below the Mason-Dixon Line.
We were in the South.

But if you'd seen no more of this city
than I,
you'd think it all black.

It was Chinamen living in Chinatown,
all their lives, never needing to speak
anything but Chinese,
though an ocean of humanity
surrounded them.

[1] The Whitelaw Hotel opened in 1919 at 13th &T Streets in Washington, DC, and was the first luxury apartment-hotel for African Americans. It was financed by John Whitelaw Lewis a one-time black laborer who founded the Industrial Savings Bank.

This was exactly the same.

An island or a prison colony
where everything is what you find or make.
A world so anemic
that a few voices that read aloud
or a few energetic home-bodies
who
displayed painted pictures on the street
constituted a renaissance.

A world where,
as long as you left the white people out of it,
you could do anything.

***

I left the ancient tenements
with their tottering alley additions,
exhausted
secondhand cars
left to rust on the curb,
and storefronts the wrong shade
of yellow
for respectable;

And moved into the picaresque
Perfection of tree-lined streets
and brownstones with manicured
squares of green
behind wrought iron.

I caught the gaze of well-dressed, animated
mannequins
and nodded gravely,
though none nodded back.

Trellised roses, ivy and snap dragons abound;
in the street gleaming newness:
From dusty Streetcars to polished Cadillacs
to rubbished work-wagons
in egress.

A world of perfection marred
only by me and the occasional billboard
reminder of order:
The White Family—
father, mother, brother, daughter
and Sparky—
in the new Ford coupe
and labeled "The American Way,"
as if enough could ever be enough.

Or the cartooned spectacle
& insistence of public order
With jammed up
smiling coal-black faces:
Stylized darkies, plump and jovial,
with lips enough to sink a ship,
pressed into service:
Aunt Jemimas, Brer Rabbits, Uncle Toms
Or assorted Black Sambos.
These weren't real Negroes—
not any I'd ever met.

These were Negroes
made out
of a fond remembrance of The Slave Days
by advertising men, who still counted
the losses of their families'
plantations, property and wealth
to the intervention of meddlesome,
railroading
abolitionists
and their northern helpers.

I didn't go far, I was afraid to go far.

***

Back in my neighborhood,
I looked around
marveling
how much it'd changed
in those few hours.

I looked at the women on the sidewalk,
cooling from the evening heat:

Some big; some brown;
some so light they looked yellow;
some skinny rails with shifts
that hung flat to knobby breasts
and fell straight
from shoulder to hip to ground;
some with ponderous breasts
and bottoms that stuck out
As if made to be stood or ridden upon,
and reminded me of elegant
white women
pictured in stereographs of the 1890s:
prim and prissy,
in long dresses with bustles
which poof their behinds.

Women and girls always moving,
swimming
up and down
the patchwork artery of concrete
and asphalt.

And the men in colorful suits,
smoking on stoops,
or idling in barbecue shacks
over beer and short whiskies,
or as the evening turned purple
searching for the right light,
just outside
the range of the street lamp's sodium glare,
ready for business or is-ness
and eyes always watching.

Not a white face out there.

A rainbow of hues.

Colored
from the orange of their upraised hands
clear down
to the white soles of their feet.

I saw how much mom owed to the people—
heritage embossed in her flesh,
no matter
how light her skin.

Never see it in me, but it was there.

MICHAEL BEADLE

My Mother's Rock Collection

For eons it sat, hidden quarry
boxed among books until
I lifted the gray stained cover,

held its smell of stale earth,
dug thumbs through chucks of ore,
chasm gravel, traveled talus,

cold tongues of volcanic rage.
Some I'd tilt to catch a glinty luster,
weigh their worth, mine their memory.

One by one, the labels
penned in faded blue
woke the spell of stone lore:

marble, gypsum, feldspar,
olivine, obsidian,
bituminous shale.

How I clung to those nuggets,
craved their weighted shapes,
pieces of a floating world

we can't let go:
the pull of a mountain
in the palm of our hand.

CHRIS BELDEN

The Bones of Chester Slocum

By the fifteenth month of the drought, the lake no longer held her secrets.

There, for example, fifty feet out from Crescent Beach, ran the low stone wall built by some farmer two hundred years before Lake Tawaba even existed. And in Drescher's Cove, half-buried in silt, lay three massive truck tires (where was the fourth? we wondered) tossed into the lake by some thoughtless long-ago resident. Near the old dam the Fletcher kids came upon a girl's bicycle, a Hula Hoop, and an Easy-Bake Oven. Mysteriously, a once-fancy men's dresser was found several yards out from Dick Canavan's formerly waterfront property, its six drawers intact, the hand-carved detailing worn away as if half-transitioned from Jacobean to Shaker. Curious to peek inside, those of us with sturdy boots slopped our way through the muck to retrieve the dresser to find only more muck and one partial fish skeleton in its drawers. Elsewhere we uncovered clumps of old clothing, at least three car batteries, and countless bottles and cans. In front of the Astins' place lay an intact aquarium, which prompted many jokes about fish keeping fish as pets. These items were discovered over the course of several weeks, by children and adults alike, and as the silt dried out in the unrelenting sun, more of us ventured "off shore," where only a few puddles remained and the old stream that once fed Lake Tawaba had dried to a trickle.

One hundred years earlier, developers had bulldozed a roughly circular hole of forty acres and constructed a dam at its southern end. Slowly but surely, the area filled with rainwater and water from the stream that entered the lake from its northern end after winding down from Pine Mountain. The developers dubbed their creation Lake Tawaba, a misspelling of Wataba, which supposedly means "tree bark," but the name sounded Native American enough, and thus "authentic." Then they erected small homes around the shore, belted by a narrow road and another ring of homes. For a century children swam in Lake Tawaba, men fished for bass, and lovers canoed out to tiny Swan Island to make out beneath a bowl of stars. Thickly forested hills surrounded the lake so that to come upon it by road or trail was like finding Shangri-La. The rustic homes and simple life here attracted artists and craftspeople, teachers and nurses, with the occasional city lawyer or financial adviser looking for a relaxing weekend residence. No one anticipated the drought, which, combined with the inevitable buildup

of silt over the years, slowly transformed Lake Tawaba from a recreational paradise to, at first, a smelly, algae-choked swamp, and, eventually, this mucky bog pocked with rocks, weeds, and detritus.

Repelled by the constant smell of rotting lake weeds and algae, residents started to move away, leaving their now unsellable homes to the banks. Then, as wells began to dry up, more families departed. Those who remained drilled deeper wells and diligently conserved water. Lawns turned brown and our bodies gave off a rank odor that, surprisingly, we got used to. Still, every day we prayed for rain, staring up at the bleached sky and recalling the ping of raindrops on our roofs and the music of thunderstorms.

One day, sixteen months in, Adam Rose was walking across the now mostly dried silt toward my house—one of the few silver linings of the situation being the option of taking a shortcut "across the lake"—when he came upon a bone sticking out of the lake bed. At first he thought it must be a deer bone, or the bone of some other animal, but it so resembled the thick thigh bone of a human—almost cartoonishly perfect—that he quickly changed his mind. Digging around the immediate vicinity, he uncovered a tibia, a rib, and a partial hip.

He ran to my house and showed me the thigh bone.

"Chester's?" he said.

"Must be."

We returned to the spot and dug around some more. We found ribs, vertebrae, and, eventually, the skull. It was remarkably well-preserved, like a prop from a horror movie.

Adam held it out at arm's length and said, "Alas, poor Chester! I knew him, Tim: a man of infinite..."

"Ignorance?" I said.

"That works."

"Cruelty?"

"That too." He set the skull down on the pile of bones. "Should we report these to the proper authorities?"

"What's the point?" I said. "It'll just bring up a lot of bad memories."

"Yeah, you're probably right."

"In fact," I said, "we probably shouldn't tell anybody." I looked him in his slightly crossed eyes. "You with me on this?"

"Of course," he said.

But Adam couldn't help himself. He blabbed to his wife, Denise, who blabbed to my wife, Flo, and from those two the news spread like an airborne virus around the lake. But no one called the police. No one wanted to open that door, least of all Chester's wife, Noreen, who, when told of

Chester's bones, screeched as if seeing the man's ghost rise up in front of her, seeking revenge.

"Burn them!" she shouted. "Light them on fire and bury the ashes in a septic tank!"

***

Chester Slocum had been the one neighbor you avoided, or at least hoped to avoid, since it could be difficult to take a walk around Lake Tawaba without encountering the man. Dressed in what looked like a safari outfit—boots, tan slacks and top, sunglasses, Tilley hat—he always seemed to be lurking on the roads here, as if on patrol to keep out what he called "the undesirable element." And once you came across Chester—or once he found you, because he always seemed to be lying in wait—there was no escaping his attention. "Timothy!" he'd bellow as he strutted toward me, and I knew I was trapped and would have to endure a good half hour or so of hate, bigotry, and paranoia.

The country, he'd announce, was lost, either to the blacks, the Mexicans, the Jews, or the "homos," depending on his mood. If you were new to the neighborhood, Chester would ask for your full name and, based on your assumed heritage, he would school you on all the sins of whatever non-Anglo Saxon group your ancestors belonged to. If you happened to be a WASP, he'd drill you for info about your political inclinations, and Lord help you if you identified as a Democrat. If you were a Republican WASP, he'd put a tattooed arm ("Semper Fi!") around your shoulder and say, "What're we going to do about all those blacks/Mexicans/Jews/homos?" It got so bad that Flo refused to take walks with me. Instead, she would drive five miles to the town recreation center and stroll along what Chester declared the "socialist trails" because they'd been designed and built using local tax dollars.

Still, for years Chester was mostly tolerated as, at worst, an irritating local character, the daffy uncle type who perhaps lost too many brain cells to concussion bombs in some long-ago war. Seeing him approach, cigarette in one hand, cup of coffee in the other, could ruin your afternoon, but surely he wasn't dangerous. Then word leaked that he had been treating Noreen to, at first, intense emotional abuse. Neighbors could hear his distinctive, nicotine-charred voice as he hurled insults at her, calling her all sorts of awful names and accusing her of various personal and civic failings. When asked, Noreen would shrug it off and say she was used to it. But then one day she showed up at a gin rummy gathering of wives with a black eye and admitted, after some strong encouragement and a margarita or two, that Chester had struck her.

Noreen made everyone swear not to call the police. She said she would handle this herself. In the meantime, running into Chester on walks became an even more complicated affair. That conspiratorial grin, the slightly crazed look in his eyes, the gleeful complaints about how the country was going down the toilet—it was hard not to punch him in the nose and say, "How do you like it?" And he started to become more hostile with all of us. He and Adam got into a shouting match about Muslims. He accused Sean McCarthy's "people" of being useless drunks. He called Marquis Huntley the N word—it was under his breath, but Marquis insisted the man said it. Everyone started to avoid Chester, and I joined Flo on the socialist trails down at the rec center.

Then, a month or so later, he disappeared—went for one of his walks and never came home. That was the official story anyway. The police questioned several neighbors and we all said more or less the same thing: Chester was always taking walks and lately had seemed a little more tappy than usual. For all we knew he had wandered into the woods, got disoriented, and was attacked by one of the bears that occasionally turn up around here. Searches were organized and posters printed ("Missing!"). Noreen remained stoic throughout it all and offered no theories of her own. But whatever had befallen Chester Slocum, we figured, he'd had it coming, and the prospect of walks around the lake uninterrupted by his toxic blather was well worth keeping our conspiracy theories behind buttoned lips.

That was ten years ago. In the meantime, everyone got older, if not necessarily wiser, and for the most part we forgot about Chester's disappearance. Things went back to normal, more or less. Until the drought.

***

Contra Noreen's wishes, we did not burn Chester's bones. Adam and I collected them into a garbage bag and buried them in the woods directly behind my house. After stuffing the bag in the ground and replacing the soil, we stood for a moment beside the grave.

"Should we say anything?" Adam asked.

"How about 'Good riddance.'"

"Hell, Tim, Chester was a human being too."

I looked over at him. Tim was the mischievous guy at parties who told off-color jokes, but today his typically impish eyes looked different somehow, less lively.

"Go ahead," I said.

He mumbled something about ashes to ashes and finding peace. On the way out of the woods he said, "What do you think really happened to ol' Chester anyway?"

"No clue," I said.

The old conspiracy theories had been revived since we'd uncovered the bones. For as long as we knew him, Chester had never gone swimming, nor fishing, so how did his body end up in the lake? Well, obviously, some said, he'd been murdered and then dumped in the water. The details of this homicide varied: Noreen hired a hit man to kill Chester and dispose of the corpse; or, after yet another racial slur, Marquis Huntley exploded and murdered him; or a posse of fed-up neighbors-turned-vigilantes ambushed Chester, convened a mock trial, and executed him.

None of these scenarios struck me as impossible, I told Adam, but they were highly implausible, especially given our neighbors' inability to keep a secret—"For example," I said, "you and our secret about finding the bones." He flushed. "It's just as probable," I continued, "that Chester went out for a stroll, tripped on one of Tawaba Lane's many potholes, rolled down an embankment, hit his head on a rock, and splashed into the lake, where the current pulled him out to the middle."

"I guess that could've happened," Adam said.

But, people being people, most favored blood-drenched stories, and soon rumors circulated and neighbors began to eye each other more warily than usual. Separated from Chester's ugliness by a decade, they forgot the relief they'd felt at his absence and now turned their attention toward ideas of justice. Noreen, always popular, received fewer invitations to play gin rummy or go out to dinner. Marquis, who tended to keep to himself anyway, began to notice people stare and whisper as he jogged along Tawaba Lane in the evenings. Soon anyone who voiced previously accepted criticisms of Chester's character received the hairy eyeball and an abrupt termination of conversation.

Eventually this marginalizing spread beyond those who spoke ill of Chester the man to those who disagreed with the extreme beliefs he had held dear. You say corporate welfare is more destructive to democracy than welfare to the poor? G'bye. You think a wall separating the U.S. and Mexico is a stupid idea? Adios. You believe torture makes us no better than the enemy? Pardon me while I get out my waterboard. And God forbid you blame greenhouse gases for the drought!

Once those bones appeared, it was as though Chester Slocum himself had returned to annoy us all over again.

Even Adam, who back in the day would send regrets to anyone who had the nerve to invite him and Chester to the same party, started to ape the dead man's views. One day, during a casual chat about the latest mass shooting, he opined that "Guns don't kill people, people kill people." I stared at him—at those now mirthless eyes—and he just said, "What?"

When Marquis Huntley drove by a few days later (without a friendly wave) and I noticed a bumper sticker on his Buick that read White lives matter too, it became clear to me that the neighborhood must have been taken over by aliens—real aliens, not the kind Chester was so afraid of—and Flo and I started discussing a move. The problem, of course, was that no one would buy a house with its own well on a dried-up lake, at least not for anywhere near the price we'd paid for it. We could cut and run, like so many others, but we didn't want to be saddled with a ruined credit rating, not to mention all the lost equity.

One night, while I lay in bed fretting about all this, among other things, I heard a noise outside. It sounded like human footsteps on the dead leaves at the edge of the woods. I threw on a robe and went downstairs. In the silver light of a half-moon I could make out two figures among the trees. I switched on the porch light and opened the door. Startled, the two men turned, and there stood Adam and Marquis, dressed in dark clothes, each holding a spade.

"What're you guys doing out there?" I asked, though I was pretty sure I knew the answer.

Adam leaned on his spade and said, "We want Chester's bones, Tim."

"Why the hell do you want Chester's bones?" I started moving slowly toward them, but I didn't want to get too close—they looked dangerous in their dark clothes, their eyes black and dead-looking.

"Where are they, Tim?" Adam asked.

"You were with me when we buried them," I said, knowing he'd never find the grave in the dark.

"The man needs a proper burial," he said.

"Yeah," Marquis said. "A proper burial."

"What does Noreen have to say about that?" I asked.

"Who cares?" Adam said.

I took a step closer. "I care."

Adam took up his spade and walked toward me. "Just show me where the bones are, Tim, and there won't be any trouble."

Marquis, looking nervous, moved up to stand beside him.

"Adam," I said. "Marquis. What the hell has gotten into you? You guys hated Chester. You were happy when he disappeared. We laughed when the bones turned up. And now—now you're starting to sound like the guy. What happened?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Adam said. "Chester was a decent guy. He should get a decent sendoff."

"A decent guy? Adam, he said he'd never trust you because Jews worship the almighty dollar. Marquis, he could never accept that you're an accountant—he insisted you were on food stamps. Never mind what he did to Noreen."

"We don't have to agree with everything Chester said," Marquis said. "But he was right about a lot of things."

"Like what?" I said. "Name one thing he was right about."

Adam leaned on his spade and said in a conciliatory tone, "Tim, even you have to admit that this country has been taken over."

"Yeah," I said, "by crazy people. By the Chester Slocums of the world."

"No, no, no," they both said, and Marquis added, "By the illegals."

I didn't want to get into it with these two any more than I had wanted to get into it with Chester ten years ago.

"This conversation is over," I said. "Please go home." Then I turned and walked back inside.

Adam never did find the bones—because I'd moved them.

***

Ten years ago, on the day Chester Slocum was to disappear, Noreen called me in a panic.

"Please come over," she said. "Something's happened."

When I got there, Chester was lying on the kitchen floor, a pool of blood spreading out beneath him. He was alive, but his skin was gray, the light in his eyes half lit.

"You bitch," he muttered over and over.

"What happened?" I asked Noreen, who didn't look much better than he did.

"I shot the bastard," she said. She was still holding the gun, one of Chester's.

I took the gun and set it down on a table, careful to point it toward the wall.

"You bitch," Chester said.

It looked like she had shot him in the hip.

"Okay," I said, trying to think. "We should call the police."

"No," Noreen said.

"Chester was abusing you," I said. "Everyone knows it."

She started to cry. "I can't, I can't."

"You bitch..."

"Well, what do you want to do?" I asked.

"I want it to end," Noreen said.

She looked down at her husband, who stared up at her with loathing in his eyes. He resembled a mad dog, frothing at the mouth. The blood was now pumping out of him, like from a hose, as his heart beat faster, spurred on by hate.

"You bitch, bitch, bitch..."

Noreen stood up. "Die, you miserable old fool!"

A moment later, he lost consciousness. The blood stopped coming. His chest went still.

We sat down and said nothing for a long time. What do you say in a situation like that? Noreen cried, but it was hard to tell what for—for Chester? For herself? Eventually I found some words.

"We need to do something," I said.

She wiped her nose and said, "Yes."

We wrapped Chester up in a tarp from his garage, then I went home for dinner. Flo asked me what was the matter, and I told her I didn't feel well. I went to bed early, and in the middle of the night snuck out to Noreen's. We put Chester in a wheelbarrow and I rolled him down to the shore. I "borrowed" Dick Canavan's rowboat and quietly paddled out to the middle of the lake. It was full and deep that year after a spring of hard rains. I unwrapped the tarp and attached two cinderblocks to the body with rope. Then, with some difficulty, I managed to roll Chester over the side and into the water.

Noreen and I never spoke of the incident again.

***

In the two months or so since Adam and Marquis showed up with their spades, the neighborhood has calmed down some. Things are not the same, and probably never will be, but folks are talking about things that have nothing to do with Chester or his beliefs, and Adam and I are friendly again. I'd like to say that this is because people came to their senses on their own, that they realized Chester's ideas were outdated and based on ignorance. But the real reason is that it finally started raining.

About one month ago the sky went suddenly dark in the middle of the day. Thick gray clouds rolled overhead, the wind picked up, and there was that smell in the air of coming rain. Those of us who were home stepped outside and looked up as if hearing angels blowing trumpets. The first scattered drops—huge ones, the size of nickels—made craters in the dirt and rattled windows. Flo and I stood holding hands out on our brown lawn, our mouths open, tongues out, and nothing ever tasted so good. After

a moment the rain stopped. We looked at each other and were about to cry when it started up again, this time heavier. Soon the rain fell in sheets, as if not made of separate drops but one vast curtain of water. We stayed outside, getting soaked, for an hour, laughing. We watched puddles form in the lake. We watched our yard lapping up the rain like a sponge. Then we went inside, dried off, and sat by the window for the rest of the day, listening to the sound of the rain on the roof.

It's rained several times since then, and the lake is about half full—deep enough to hide any remaining secrets. Lawns are turning green, and trees are starting to sprout leaves. One day I turned on the tap and water gushed out. On our walks around the lake Flo and I nod and say hello to our neighbors, who nod and say hello back. We're sometimes invited onto decks for a drink, and there is pleasant talk about the change in weather. No one mentions Chester Slocum.

You may be wondering what I did with Chester's bones. I dug them up because I had a feeling that word would get out about their location—Adam couldn't help himself—and I wanted to avoid any move toward memorializing the man. I don't necessarily approve of the way he met his end, but Chester was a bad person, and he doesn't deserve anyone's admiration. For that reason I'm not going to tell anyone where his bones are—not even you. It's my secret now, mine alone, and I'm going to keep it.

PETER BERGQUIST

Journey

I remember a night when I was a boy
and supposed to be asleep.
In bed beneath my knee-propped covers,
my flashlight burning red holes in the sheet,
I listened to a little radio at my ear
and, prowling round the dial,
happened on a program
from a place which sounded oddly
like an interlocking tangled wood.
The disembodied voice announced a piece,
The Mysterious Mountain,
by a man with a strange name, Hovhaness.

Eyes closed in the darkness,
before I knew it
I was going to that mountain,
flying fast and low above the flatlands
as if I were a silent helicopter,
lifting when I reached the foothills,
floating over wet firs
half-enshrouded in a hovering fog,
rising lightly up to meet the peak which,
even when the music climaxed,
never showed itself.

A Salt Rifle

Sung down the counter,
a dawn chorus. Remember
when we had the condiment
dispensers on every table,
bears full of honey,
cows full of cream?
Even hot pepper seeds
in a little slot-top chubby
jar? We pause,
a moment of silence, finger
the place where
the soy sauce used to be.

VIVIAN I. BIKULEGE

Read the Water

Fallen leaves float brown-red on the French Broad
like sailboats on Central Park Conservatory Water;
a northern pond, less wild than Carolina rivers.
Flowing northwest against a southbound Greenville Highway,
she glistens gin clear in winter, gurgling and licking rocks,
wears feathered icicles like a boa on the banks of her shoulders.

From static photographs on another Zoom call,
a Pisgah flyfisher woman tries to teach me to *read the water*.
I will have to sit beside the run to regard the river's body—
riffles and plunge pools, pocket water and back eddies.
Relocating in a pandemic to the foothills, I was never alone—
butterweed resurrects along a greening shoreline,
a watershed welcome spills into spring, giddy with rain.

GEORGE BANDY

Not the Destination

At the back of the doublewide I went down the ramp which Mom had had built for Dad. By the time it was finished hospice had been called and he no longer walked. The mesothelioma cancer had spread from lungs to bone, and his left thigh just snapped from under him.

He didn't feel any pain.

He got his wheelchair right away and would've gotten the motorized Hover Round or Jazzy, but like the ramp it was just too late. So I used his ramp to wind down to the patio and pass the pole beans Mom had planted right into the foot of the trellis.

It was late, Mom long asleep or, at least, retreated. I'd gone out the kitchen door to look at Dad's workshop, a ten by fifteen metal shed. Mom had given me the keys and said to take whatever I wanted. The Younger Brother had already found Dad's guns, though he was careful not to mention it around Mom.

I turned on the screw-fluorescents.

Dad's workshop held fifty, almost sixty years, of tools collected and carried from the mountains of Virginia to Langley Field, and then onward to Hampton Roads, and from there to Newport News all the way to Dade City, Florida, through a dozen houses and several trailers. Tools from trades he'd practiced a season or two, on and off, until his enthusiasm waned. Some he only briefly sampled finding mastery too easy, but all he collected.

His first fulltime job had been as a coal miner in southwest Virginia, and then the year after he'd married Mom, and my birth, he apprenticed as a pipe-fitter and stayed on for twenty years at the Newport News Shipyard & Dry Dock while raising his family. Throughout all of his years he'd continued to absorb the trades: welder, carpenter, bicycle mechanic, and barber.

He'd taught himself, in the late sixties, barbering with an old set of mechanical clippers; after being satisfied with his journeyman efforts on his sons, he then decided to spend our summer vacation, in Appalachia, cutting hair for all of his brothers and nephews.

The project quickly lost its appeal.

With a fancy flourish he kept flashing the silvery clippers from hand to hand, and then rapidly squeezing close and open the handle's wide 'Y' until his fingers began to cramp. I saw him wince only once.

When we got home, the mechanical clippers were retired. He resolved in the future to go electric for the ease of his wrists, while acknowledging that go-anywhere barbering was better as high concept than as a prudent professional choice, since haircuts and civilization tended to run in the same circles.

He'd been a knife maker, bricklayer, auto mechanic, truck driver, bee-keeper (like his father) and more, until he became too sick to fiddle at making things work. His last fulltime job, after he'd "retired" to Dade City, Florida, was master diesel mechanic, working on the big earthmoving machines at Crawler Rail & Roller out on 301.

I toed boxes under his work bench to get a sense of how heavy they were and left them unopened. Next to his drill press I found a cigar box.

I shook it and it rattled.

Inside, I found a quarter-sized brass disc stamped with Dad's ID number from when he worked at the shipyard. He'd always worn the disc pinned to his bill cap. In the same box was a pamphlet in a yellowed cellophane envelope entitled: *You Led a Good Life*. I skimmed the short essay put out by the shipyard outlining his and the company's efforts to make the world safe and to usher in the nuclear age—all "while being paid an outstanding wage and living in an unprecedented economy of ascendancy: A noble legacy."

I pocketed the disc and tossed the pamphlet into a pile of boxes in the corner. I chased after the pamphlet—it'd been important to Dad.

***

There are more things I didn't list that he'd done and some he wouldn't admit, such as homebrew master, moonshiner, and poacher.

When a boy in Berwind, West Virginia, he'd barely made it out of ninth grade, but he'd picked up the trades almost without trying. Except the one that he wanted most, which he could never get the hang of, heating and air conditioning mechanic.

In his late twenties, in Newport News, he'd taken vocational classes at a local high school at night but never mastered the algebra, so he never figured out the coefficients necessary for successful heating and cooling.

I remember, at about eight or nine, when I was already teacher's pet in Mrs. Richardson's third grade class, how she tried to motivate us with the beauty of learning. She squeaked chalk at the blackboard demonstrating the maths we'd learned already: addition, subtraction and multiplication, and then she started up with those pesky fractions.

She saw our look of dread.

She promised if we kept working we'd soon master common denominators, and then, by middle school, we'd be ready for algebra. She

put on the board the algebraic equation which I'd seen in Dad's exercise book.

She asked, "Who knows the answer?"

My arm shot up and scraped the ceiling.

All of me wanted to shine for the beautiful Mrs. Richardson. Even then, she was expecting her first child and had not told the class that she'd be leaving us soon for his birthing.

She called on Eliot Shotgood my archrival.

He Got It Wrong.

Even now I am pleased. She told him not to worry he would know the answers in sixth grade. Then, knowing I'd win her back, I blurted my answer.

Mrs. Richardson demanded, "How did you know?"

I hesitated. "I guessed."

"You're a good guesser." She leaned close and whispered, "Don't be afraid to show who you are." She roughed my widow's peak. "It's okay."

I loved her then, I still do.

***

I padlocked the shed door and leaned against the rail, holding the earth still like I did when I first started walking after my heart attack, years before. The motion detector light timed out. I was bathed in darkness and heard the humming of a mosquito close to my ear.

Nothing but the latest buzz, a variation played throughout the millennium—sweet creature—letter perfect. A blood song, a birth song, a history of all who'd come before and all to be, the Creator willing: Not a prayer, but an acknowledgement.

I am my father's son.

ADAM BURGESS

Phantom

The cold rolls in
on a northwest wind and returns to me
my happiness.

These lines drip ecstatic,
cool and numb as the drops
that once hit the back of our two throats.

Memories tilt forward thunderous—
drunken lemmings at the edge of the world.

In my mind, your lips are the sway of midnight's neon rave.
Aglow.
Your voice falls yellow.

What does it mean?
That I feel the absence of you.
As a limb stolen from me in unnatural sleep.

I rise un-whole.
Unsure where to place my solitary soul. Or how.

Learning to walk without you is pain more severe
than the kind I knew when you were here.

CAMILLE CARTER

Georgia O'Keeffe, From the Faraway, Nearby*, 1937*

Make no bones about it—
or better yet, make *bones*:
sandborne sun-bleached bald-faced bones
naked but for a Southwest sky

I began picking up bones
because there were no flowers.
More than enough to fill your pockets, a treasure
trove—in plain-sight—atop sage-covered plains.

In the picture taken by your lover, you pose with them—
Nestling them, caressing them, pressing them:
Brush of bone against your cheekbone. Your eyes rolled back
in ecstasy—momentarily, you were someplace else.

Place was a metaphysics; the word "skeleton" meant "home."
He will not follow you there. You return alone
to New Mexico, to your catacomb, curio cabinet stuffed
with canvases, with corpses.

It's the summer of 1936 when you receive his letter:
I worry… the landscape makes you lonely…
But it is his logic that makes him lonely. You will not
bother to reply. Outside at dusk,

you paint the desert, the broken fence, a single
chicken bone. Suddenly you are struck
to think how elemental they turned out to be,
your life's preoccupations.

Where in the prism of the painting antlers bloom,
as ascendent and gnarled as branches,
sits the alien skull of the once-majestic stag,
his eye-sockets hollow but for your projections.

One night you dreamt you saw yourself as if from far away,
          asleep and slumped on sand dunes the color of cream.
Walking backwards you watch with fascination as your body
fades into a hillock's hump, is stifled by a sun-drenched sheet.

BENJAMIN CHAPPELOW

Blackdamp

Seemed like once Henry died, the house started to go. Like a hinge holding the world broke, the floor tilted, and everything would go sliding to the right. You could really see it looking from the front yard—the sprung clapboards, the lean of it all. With him gone, I thought it'd fall one board and nail at a time and then all at once. I kept getting dreams about it all falling on me.

"I know you're hurting," Mrs. Lawrence hadn't bothered combing her hair and I could see a knot tangled near her ear. Her eyes were watery. "But it's so soon. Too soon."

She was one of those women who cried all the time, at weddings, at Henry's funeral. Her own husband had died, and it was like she'd anointed me, the way she had squeezed my hand across the pew and said you'll be alright there. Yesterday, she'd been inconsolable. Came home to an empty birdcage and open window. Had the neighbors running over but nothing else was missing but the birdseed. She was fanning herself with one of my travel magazines from the doctor's office.

"When Junior's off at college," I said. "There ain't much sense in staying."

"I stayed." She held onto the porch railing. She could feel the lean too. "And where'll you go?"

"With whatever Mr. Adams gets from the case, I reckon, anywhere."

"You best be letting Dan and his men handle that. No man from Lexington knows you like we do. Best let them handle it. They'll take care of it—care of you. Both of y'all."

Them, we knew, meant Dan. With all the strikes going around Kentucky, he wasn't letting his men form any union. Always talking about how the Soviets were trying to sneak into his mine.

"We can take care just fine. Mr. Adams is fine."

"You seen his car? Those shoes?" Low whistle. "He didn't get that helping folks like us." She sounded like Junior then. When Mr. Adams had explained it to us—cause of death would match our claim…ran out of air… good for our case—Junior told him we knew how to read. Shook his head when Mr. Adams never stayed, rolled his eyes when he tip-toed his shiny black loafers around the mud in our yard.

“It’s his job to help us,” I said.

“I’m just saying is all, Judith.” She sat down in Henry’s chair. Whenever he got off work, it had been Henry’s ritual to hop out the truck bed, smack the tailgate with his hardhat, and fall into that chair as the truck went on so he could catch the last of the sun dipping below the mountains. When that evening all the miners had gotten out of the truck and explained to me how blackdamp snuck up on you, how it cut off your air, all of them covered head-to-toe in ash like crows in the yard, I kept waiting for Henry to come out of that empty truck.

“When Leonard died,” she said. “That’s when I needed a community most. Wherever you’re thinking of going, you won’t find what you got right here.”

We had more polite talk—last Sunday’s sermon, Junior’s college plans. Crickets in the quiet, the flutter of moth wings hitting the porch light. Afterwards, I watched her mosey back to her house across the road. Her “Carter/Mondale” sign was lying face-down in her yard. In their hurry, a neighbor must have knocked it over and no one put it upright. When she passed it to reach her front door, she didn’t bother with it either.

The crawlspace under the porch was big enough now for Junior to bellycrawl under the floorboards. The ground under the house was loose, he said. That was causing the dip. Houses, Henry always told Junior, were like men. They needed a firm foundation and no openings. Junior’s flashlight shone through the kitchen floorboards, no doubt catching the termite trails and droppings of long-gone rodents. All those years ago, Junior had thought it was monsters scratching under his bed, sending him running to our room. Henry had had it with the rats, with me threatening to call an exterminator when his traps caught nothing, with Junior sleeping between us. You got to deal with it yourself. Henry said it at all of us. How Junior got the guts to go down there with his t-ball bat and a flashlight, I hadn’t the slightest clue. They must have been scarier than he’d expected. His screaming woke us. Henry pried away the kitchen floorboard with his claw hammer and there was Junior’s scared little face, arms reaching up for me. Henry kept telling Junior he had to be brave. Got to be braver. I could only imagine how Junior felt when the exterminator pulled out what ended up being mice, dead, fitting in the palm of his glove.

“Yeah,” Junior said from under the floor. “Not looking good.”

He pushed up against one of the loose floorboards and it wiggled and whined. The termites had eaten trails through it. The lines on the top of the boards came on so slowly that I’d hardly noticed them until the night

Henry died. I'd been staring at the floor, waiting for the lines to turn into words.

"You're probably the only one light enough not to break it." Junior said.

I leaned against the counter. The depot in town had stopped selling DDT after the ban. I'd have to see if they had something else for termites. We sure couldn't afford new floors, none of those tile floors I'd seen in the Southern Living magazines. I told him I'd be heading to the store and hated the flutter in my chest that followed me out the door. Like someone opening your cage and you hadn't figured out the house was still locked.

Junior was crawling out when I crossed the porch. Didn't bother with a goodbye, just, "Milk too. We're out of milk." Far enough from the house, it looked like I was leaving Henry there brushing the dirt off himself, big body and dark hair.

Back when mining took more men to do, the town went and built a bowling alley, a florist, a diner—now all gutted and boarded up by the time Nixon took office. They built houses too, their walls now felled and floors growing weeds until words like "inside" and "outside" didn't mean much. Walking past them, I wondered, once Junior was gone too, if someone would find me in our house, a good widow at her post. One day I just wouldn't step out, and no one would find me until the house grew open.

The yellow flashes in the briars along the road stopped me. Birds singing. I pulled out the seeds from my dress pocket and held them out, palm up and arm straight. I waited, keeping still, like I was a part of everything permanent. In a flash, a yellow canary landed on my wrist, pecked a seed, and flew away.

When I saw Dan coming to the house with a bottle, I thought like hell I was someone who needed it. He had worked up a good deal of sweat. The pits of his company shirt were dark. Henry claimed Dan never wore anything else. I didn't think that was true until the funeral, when Dan had thrown a dinner jacket over the white button up, over the Friedman Company logo. When he got out of his truck, I was taking a sheet off the line, the fabric yellow in the afternoon. His shadow grew bigger in the sheet and he peeked around it, said hello. I kept the sheet up between us.

"Junior around?" He asked.

"At the churchyard, most like. Seeing his daddy," I said. "And he ain't twenty-one, if that bottle's for him."

"I ain't twenty-one neither." He laughed. "It's for you." When I didn't say anything, he added, "Reckoned you could use a drink."

“That right?” I turned away, started folding clothes into the wicker basket.

He stepped around the sheet, mustache twisted down.

“I got something you ought to know, Judith. About the case.” He pointed to his truck. “If you got the time.”

“And why can’t you tell me here?”

“Because,” he said. “You could use a drink.”

My fingers found the soft fabric of Henry’s nightshirt in the basket. Junior would be mad I’d washed it. He’d walk around his room with it, muttering to himself, library books on mining law spread over his desk. Made me think of the nuns I’d seen in Covington as a little girl, rosaries in folded hands.

“That wife of yours drink?” I asked him. “Mary don’t seem like the drinking kind. Not while pregnant, at least.”

“It’s just about the case,” he said. “I’ll have you back before supper.”

I thought about heading inside, crossing that mark in the living room floor where Junior had let his corner of the casket slip. The other men had laughed it off, saying his daddy had been an eater, and the rest of the wake Junior had his mouth wedged tight. I had to cross that mark to get to the kitchen.

As Dan drove us down the road, I picked at the cracks in the leather seat. Tiny black dots in the yellow stuffing. That was the thing with coal ash. No matter how much Henry tried washing it off, there’d always be a little left, under a fingernail or in his hair. After he died, I’d still find a little in our bed, finer than sugar, and scrub the sheets until my hands were red.

We didn’t talk about Henry until we were halfway down the bottle. Mostly polite talk at first. How was Mary. When was the baby due. Then politics—he liked Ford. I didn’t tell him I liked Carter. Then we found ourselves on Junior.

“And I opened that book of his—that one from school about the mockingbird. He’s got all these lines circled. That lawyer in court talking at the jury. Like he’s taking notes!”

I was the only one who laughed but I didn’t care. Dan had parked at the bank of Kitts Creek, the water humming low. If I was still enough, I was in a warm bath with the faucet running.

“You know what he called me?” I held the bottle out but he waved it away. “In front of that lawyer, he called me his mother. Not mom. Not mama. ‘My mother.’ Like I’m some stranger.”

“He call his daddy ‘my father?’”

"Just Dad."

Dan paused. "A good man, him."

That was the funeral in a nutshell. Such a good man.

"I had all kinds of men in that mine. But your husband? As good as they got."

Dan had joked with other miners at the funeral. Said Henry would've dug his own grave on account of how hard he'd worked.

"Ain't I lucky."

"Nose to the grindstone." He sighed. "Always worked hard. During breaks, even. You know about that? Him working during breaks?"

"That what you brought me here for? Telling me you worked him to death?"

"I'm telling you he broke code. That's when we found him. During lunchbreak."

The gin turned all hot in my stomach, making my lungs tight. "So?"

He grunted and twisted his big body around, dug into his pocket, and tossed onto the dashboard Paw's lighter. An old metal zippo, scratched and dull. Paw had claimed it kept him warm in a trench in northwestern France, but he had to quit smoking after the black lung. Gave the lighter to Henry as a show of his blessing, looking at us both with dry lips around the plastic tube, the parts of him ending where the machine began.

"Found that on him," Dan said. "Another violation. Can't take nothing flammable down there."

I needed fresh air and pushed open the door, the rush of cold and everything else as I stumbled out. He called out after me.

"You get what I'm saying? They got lawyers that'll take little things like this and ruin your case. Hell, they don't got to. They can just drown you in court fees. Whatever way they want, they'll get you."

I turned my back to him and the headlights and walked to the creekbank. I'd let Henry steal me away from Paw and he'd take me here. It had some deep parts you'd go stepping in and feel the world fall through you. Henry would grab me and hold me against him in that water. Told myself that was what freedom was. Out of Paw, into Henry. I'd sip the last dregs in the bottles we shared because an empty bottle meant it'd be over and I'd have to go back home, sneak in through my window knowing Maw wouldn't be sleeping with Paw wheezing in their bed like some kind of animal.

"I'm trying to help, Judith," Dan called behind me. "Henry wouldn't want y'all going after them like this."

"No, he would," I called back. "He'd want it."

The clunk of his door opening then closing. His big shadow blocked the headlights as he got close.

"And what do you want?"

When I cupped the water, cool on my hands and face, it smelled like blood. All the tailings from the mine would run off into the creek after it rained, and I tried to remember how it smelled when Henry took me there, trying to pull out the nothing-smell from what it had been.

"You want peace," Dan said. "Right? You don't want to be spending years in and out of courtrooms. Fighting those men. You want peace. You want to move on."

"I'm his wife. Ain't no moving on."

Dan stepped beside me and scooped up the gin bottle I'd left resting in the roots. He had bags under his eyes.

"Heard you're thinking of leaving. Where to?"

"Anywhere I want," I said. "Don't got to stop and keep in one place. I'll get to move when I want."

"You got the money for all that traveling?" He held out the bottle to me. When I took it, he shoved his hands in his pockets.

"That lawyer of yours is getting a letter from Friedman tomorrow. They're going to settle with you. Out-of-court. A lot of money, I bet."

That flutter in my chest came. I took a breath, shook my head.

"Don't mean Junior will," I said. "No justice in that."

"Don't mean you won't."

He stepped away, back into his car, and I took that as the cue to leave. I drained the last of the gin, the burn hitting all the way down.

Mrs. Lawrence's lights were off when we pulled up. Ours were on. She'd get more birds, I knew. Sell the male ones to the mine since they sang better, keep the females to make more, live off her dead husband's pension.

"The canaries. Weren't they dead, when you found him?"

He turned to me. "What do you mean?"

"Wouldn't they have died, with the blackdamp?" I didn't want to look up at him. He took a while to answer.

"Yeah. The ones where he was." When he reached his arm across me, I didn't think he was opening my door until the cold rush hit me. "He probably didn't notice when they quit singing. Probably too busy."

There was a burnt smell when I came in. Junior was at the table eating out of a can of kidney beans. Behind him, a pot filled with soupy brown sludge in the sink. I couldn't help from laughing at it, at him. He was standing up, asking me where I'd been, what I was doing with Blankenship, and I almost called him Henry then. The lean of the house was pulling me to bed, but Junior had me by the shoulders.

"You been drinking? With him?"

"Your mother," I said. "Can have fun when she wants to."

I felt along my dress until I found Paw's lighter in my pocket. I must have slipped it in like Henry had done with cards when he was drunk—that habit—a thing of his that he put in me, something we didn't bury. I pushed it into Junior's chest.

"Gave me this," I told him. "Thought I'd pass it on. Man of the house and all that."

He let go and I went to bed, just realizing I'd left the sheets on the line, and fell into the mattress anyway.

Junior must have seen Mr. Adam's sedan and Mr. Blankenship's truck in the driveway, his mouth drawn tight when he opened the screen door. Mr. Adams, who wouldn't take off his suit jacket, had all the papers spread out on the table. He stood and motioned for Junior to take his own seat even though we had four chairs. "We were just discussing the good news we received."

Junior pointed at Dan sitting beside me. "Why's he here, then?"

"Junior." I'd been nursing a headache all day. Couldn't keep nothing down but coffee. "Take a seat."

He kept where he was, fiddling with his bag straps. There must have been more books in that schoolbag. While Mr. Adams went on explaining the letter Mr. Blankenship brought on behalf of the Friedman Company, how they'd be willing to settle out-of-court, saying over and over how lucky, how fortunate we were, Junior was looking at me. Fire in his eyes.

"It's good money," I told him. "Enough for any school you'd like."

Before stomping to his room, he looked at me and said, "It's all this easy for you, huh?"

I excused myself. He was going through the papers and books on his desk, shoving them to the floor, muttering to himself.

"Acting like it's all about the money."

A look over his shoulder at me. The only time he'd ever been neat, ever put things in order, was how he managed his books. All closed, papers filed away in book covers. Inside the cover of one of the books on the floor, the COAL KEEPS THE LIGHTS ON! sticker was scratched out.

"Any operator who willfully violates a mandatory health or safety act…" he trailed his finger down one of the loose papers. The light shone through it and I could see the blue ink underlining the words. "…shall, upon conviction, be punished by a fine of not more than twenty-five thousand dollars, or by imprisonment for not more than one year. Or by both." He held the paper out to me. "Bet you they're not even paying that much, are they?"

“This what you’re doing?” I said. “Instead of schoolwork?”

“I’m doing something,” he said. “He’s trying to wiggle out of it. Blankenship knows he’ll go down if we go to court. And he’s got you tricked.”

“So, which is it? Whose fault? Blankenship or Friedman?”

“It’s both! That damn lawyer explain it to you? We make our case, Blankenship goes to jail, Friedman gives us the money. But they think we’re some dumb hicks who don’t know.” He shook the paper at me. “But I know. I read it. I done read it all.”

I sat at the corner of his bed. I’d probably made it a thousand times. Our bed, then his. Could never say what all that preening was for. Those two could have slept fine on just the mattress, wouldn’t never complained. I smoothed out the spot beside me. Patted it. He stayed where he was. It never had two people in it, I realized. Some other girl would learn to tuck the corners under the mattress. Ain’t no such thing as a thankless job, Maw would tell me. In the kitchen, the men were quiet.

“What’re you trying to prove with all this?” I asked.

“Prove?” He said. “That they can’t get away with it.”

“It ain’t about them. It’s about us.”

‘It’s about Dad!” He was Henry, then. How Henry used to fight. All low hums until it was one loud holler you couldn’t see coming until it hit you.

“If it was me,” Junior said, softer. “If I’d died down there—he wouldn’t let them get away with it.”

“And I thank the Lord it was him and not you.”

It must have been the wrong thing to say. He turned away from me. “You don’t get it.”

“What don’t I get?” I was loud too. “What’s in them books saying you know more than me?”

“You don’t get Dad.”

With his back to me, Henry was there. No, I still got him. Would still keep having him in that courtroom, each time stepping up to the alter of his death as his wife.

“I done worked myself to the bone for him. And you. I made more sacrifices than you could ever think.”

“And now it’s over? When I’m gone too, you’ll finally be free?”

When I slapped him, all I could think about was how his cheek felt, that stubble that I’d never noticed. When had he started shaving? His eyes started welling up, the same way he’d held it in on the porch when we got the news. He’d gotten Henry’s name, his dark hair, big body, strong nose

and chin. But that look he was giving me, that was Henry's too. Nights after work when he'd take hold of my arm, keeping me in the bed, close to him. Please, he'd say. I need this a little while longer.

I grabbed him by the arms. "You are not the only one hurting."

"No." He pulled away again, his voice cracking. "I am."

In the kitchen, neither of them looked at me when I took my seat. Mr. Adams had his nose wrinkled at his teacup, picking grounds out with his fingers and wiping it on his napkin. Dan had his feet resting on the empty chair and a better woman than me would have told him not to dirty it up.

Henry came back that night, in his jumpsuit, the one Junior wouldn't let me wash. Must have thought there were still bits of him left, like the soot caught in the threads, and I'd made Junior keep it in his room. Henry came into the hallway, leaning against the wall, coughing. Burnt smell. He doubled over, his back to me, all that powdery death coming out onto the floor that I'd have to sweep away until it passed through the cracks in the floorboards. I thought about calling him to bed, but he went into Junior's room instead. I fell back asleep.

Dan was on the porch when I opened the door. The knocking had jolted me out of sleep, wouldn't stop as I was throwing on a robe. He was holding a lit Davy lamp, and when he lowered it, the shadows on his face stuck. Soot, I realized. He had it smeared all over his shirt, the side of his face, his hands. Like Henry was dead all over again, only Dan was here this time, the only one here to give the news. He stepped close enough to make the light hurt my eyes, his voice low.

"Where's he at?"

The cemetery. Buried. Not here. Dan pushed past me, flicking on the lights, smelling of smoke. He went around the house, starting at Junior's room and finding it empty, the covers on the bed spilling onto the floor. Dan started pulling open every door to every room, the light flashing around as I followed him. It felt like some place inside me was getting violated, some deep part that I couldn't keep safe pulling my robe around me tight. My mind went to the cleaning I'd have to do, him leaving ash on everything he touched. After checking every nook and closet, he turned to me, jaw clenched, and started walking at me, backing me into the kitchen.

"Where's Junior?"

The sink basin pressed into the small of my back. Wet seeped through my robe and made me shiver. The familiarity of the kitchen went away with the Davy lamp putting shadows on everything, until this place didn't feel like mine.

"You can't hide him, Judith."

I didn't know where to breathe in. Something was burning. The oven was off but the smell was thick and I was breathing it in.

"He's not in his room? I thought—" I couldn't think of anything else.

"Playing dumb." Dan kicked a chair and I felt a jolt, like a bone snapping. A broken chair leg rolled across the floor and settled at my feet. Something shifted under it, beneath the floorboards, a shadow changing in the gaps. I looked away, at Dan's dirty boots. He took a step closer. "He went and burned up our lives, and you're playing dumb!"

"I ain't playing." The tilt of the house was pulling everything towards me, making me feel small and heavy, him looming over me.

"I saw him, Judith," he said. "I saw him running out, so don't think you can lie and say he didn't do nothing."

"Where's the sheriff?" I asked.

"Now my men and I can go looking through them woods all night," he went on. "Or you can tell me where he went."

"How come you ain't called the sheriff?"

Dan stopped, took a step towards me, the floor groaning. The termites, I remembered then. All this weight. I prayed that they had gone still, that the house would hold.

"Judith." His voice was softer, his face still stone. "If Friedman hears what your boy did, they're not giving you no settlement."

I tried to listen for the little ticking from the wood, like tiny clocks, but I couldn't hear over my heart pumping in my ears. His voice seemed far away then.

"Judith," he said again. "I'm trying to help you. You know that. Always have been."

I thought about Maw. In one of the houses down the road to the depot where I couldn't bring myself to look for my childhood inside, finding her facedown on the kitchen floor, waiting for her to move. I wondered if I would be like her with Junior in prison. She'd stayed when she didn't have to, no one needing her, keeping herself around me in my cage.

"Henry," I told them. "You saw Henry."

He frowned.

"I get them mixed up too. But that was Henry. Junior's up in Louisville looking at colleges."

When Dan took another step towards me, towards the termite-lined part of the floor, I picked up the table leg. He stopped, was one more step to the termite-lined part of the kitchen floor.

"You know how long it'll burn?" He told me. "Long after you or me or anyone in town is alive."

I'll be gone long before then. We'll both be.

"He needs to answer for the lives he's destroyed."

"You know what I think?" My tongue felt sharp, nicking the insides of my mouth, making my mouth taste like metal. "You and I both know you didn't keep that mine safe. And now, it caught fire, and you're trying to pin it on my boy. My son."

I thought he'd lunge at me, the way the lines in his face curled, his brow hooding over his eyes. The table leg was a flimsy thing, a wooden spoon you'd tap a naughty child upside the head with. He'd come for me and the floor would fall and take us. Instead, with a yell, he hurled the Davy lamp across the living room. I heard the shelf split and Maw's china shatter. The light in it was still on, a blue glow in the corner of my eye. He was breathing heavy, his voice shaky.

"I got a kid coming, Judith."

"And I got mine," I told him. "You can't take my husband and my son. Not him too."

I didn't move until I heard his truck peeling down the road, breathed in the smoke smell he left. Through the open door, across the road, Mrs. Lawrence's houselights were on. I waited for her to open her own door and walk over, but Junior appeared in the doorway instead, wearing Henry's jumpsuit and wringing his hands.

"Mama," he said.

No matter how much I'd sweep away the ash, wipe and scrub every surface, repair the chair, I knew the house wouldn't look the same.

"Mama," he said again, coming towards me. "You alright?"

I wacked him with the table leg. Once, twice on the shoulder. It was like hitting a brick wall, solid, but he still yelped and put his arms out. I thought he'd argue with me, some quick holler of Henry's, but he only turned and shuffled off. When I was alone with the mess—the pieces of shelf and china, the broken chair, all that ash, I figured there wasn't much sense in cleaning.

When I opened his door, he was lying in bed with his back to me. I grabbed his school bag off his chair and emptied the books out before I started packing clothes into it—shirts, pants, underwear, socks, and finally Henry's nightshirt folded on top of it all, until I could barely zip it up. He had his head turned, watching me, but turned away when I crawled in next to him. Ash smell, sturdy body shaking as he cried.

“There weren’t no birds down there,” he kept saying. “Had them working down there…no birds. Not a single one.”

I shushed him, told him to breathe, smoothed his hair. I figured it’d be nice to stay a while, the two of us still and breathing, like parts of the house one last time before we’d have to move.

KENNETH CHAMLEE

Vision

View from the Wind River Mountains, Wyoming, 1860
Albert Bierstadt, Boston Museum of Fine Arts

Before each whipped Olympus with meringue of clouds,
before commerce glossed his memory, Bierstadt painted
a year of unscaffolded skies and rivers ribboning plains
absent any honorific peak, scenes of casual imprecision

and delight, like this one with its heraldic morning,
thick trees tracking a watercourse through rock towers
down to a topaz verdure, two riders
and a packhorse descending a trail-less slope

carrying a freedom I cannot imagine, carrying
everything they know is enough, a surety
found in those few Wind River paintings
sketched on site but refigured

two thousand miles away, like this one in the museum
built on land once foraged by the Massachusett.
I want to believe this painting affirms ease and choice,
moving light on the land, accepting seasonal gifts,

but by 1860 the removals were thirty years on
and my wish is blind though the painting is bold,
not frosted or sagging like me, and the hill where it was
brushed to beginning today likely faces a green-striped

snake of interstate. Then I see it, what I didn’t
see so many times—a thread of faint white dots
mid-valley, right of the river, an unmistakable
string of wagons and teams, tiny as cells.

SHARON CHARDE

Almost

What adhered us shouted louder
than the beeps and hisses of those machines
around you. You'd been dead two hours,
now you'd come alive again, rib-halves
wired back, tubes and tape all over you,
fixed heart beating in regular rhythm.
Our son and I hung somewhere in the noise,
inconsequential cogs in the cathedral
of human repair. It was sunny, that May
day, we'd sat in the shine of it while they
mended you. The brightness belied
what was happening inside, it sheltered us
when we wondered if we'd heard your last
words. But no. I wouldn't have to organize
my life around another death, though I'd
been ready to become a widow. I owe
someone something for this, tenderness
of reclamation. Your name wouldn't
have to be crossed out, the world will
still have us in it.

STEPHANY L.N. DAVIS

Prayer for My Niece

When the day ends
And all goes black
And the quiet is around—

I can't help but see
Your tiny frame on the road.
Your neck twisted and turned
Like a deer hit mid rut.

And I wonder
What you thought of last.
The chlorine on your skin:
The ice cream on your fingertips.
The clouds—
    the way they fracture and break:
The sun—
    the way it splinters and wanes.

Or was it the swerve,
    The flip,
        The crash,
            The final snap.
The sudden thrust into light.

I thought I saw you tucked behind
The trunk of a poplar tree,
Its leaves a golden shroud—
A sheepish grin on your face.
Looking at the trinkets and treats
Left on the lap of the Saint
That guards your grave.
Offerings of flowers:
Treasures of coins
And stones.

And I wonder if you gained an angel's wings.
Or if the dust of your ashes became stars.
I imagine you as a plant,
An insect,
An animal.
You—
My child's shadow.
Her shield.
You—
Her second skin.

SUSAN BERARDI

Let Slip the Dogs of Hope

I swore I'd never get a dog. Then I did. Twenty-six years after my marriage vows stipulated "I do" so long as "We won't."

I didn't get him for fun or security. My kids didn't wear me down. Any desire to be the best mommy in the world collapsed in the wake of cynophobia. They might as well have asked me for a Goliath bird-eating tarantula.

This pup's a ten-week-old, six-pound Cavachon, part Cavalier King Charles Spaniel, part Bichon Frisé. In a top ten ranking of the cutest things in the world, he'd trounce dessert tarts, baby's feet, and—yeah—puppies. But that's not why I bought him.

I'm the one who posed like Vanna White next to a sign in lower Manhattan that read, "Dog Free Zone," and then texted the snapshot to my dog-lover friends. I'm the one whose heart straitjackets her tonsils when I ring a doorbell and hear the scamper, the slide, the demonic barking of Cerberus, who waits for me on the other side. I'm the one who never simpers when a coworker swipes through her cell phone photo montage of her seven-years-since-he-was-rescued Boxer Bulldog like he's an 80-pound newborn baby swaddled in Linus's blanket and adorned with silk ribbons made from the tail of a unicorn.

I'm also the perfect height for an American Staffordshire Terrier to snuffle up my crotch farther than my husband has ever gone. The "Me Too" moment makes for awkward meet-and-greets when the owner assures me, "It's okay. He likes to lick."

"Every other kid has one," my three sons lamented.

But I never once saw a kid with a dog. I saw the mothers. Long before the sun rubbed its eyes and hit the snooze button, when Boston temperatures plummeted to ten below after a Nor'easter had dumped four feet of snow overnight, I saw the moms, wrapped in Gore-Tex and waddling like Nanook of the North as they "walked" the dogs. I promised I'd sell the boys at cost before I crossed over to that Dark Side.

> *Three rescues, male, mixed breeds of Italian and German descent, happy and loveable but could benefit from training to come when called, sleep when expected, and refrain from barking, begging, and badgering their owners. Fully potty trained, though aim is poor. $300 or best offer.*

When I first met this baby Cavachon, my heart didn't flutter. My voice didn't rise to an octave only bats could detect. Sure, the little guy was adorable, tan and white, little splash of brown on the tail. And I have experienced serenity at times: when I've seen a rainbow, smelled a Balsam fir, heard the blessed sound of silence after a colicky baby finally gives up the fight. I had potential.

I bought the dog because that's what a mother does when her 21-year-old son comes to the edge of all the light that he knows. My middle son Peyton has autism. In contrast to the parent-teacher conferences for the exceptional, Peyton's evaluations always started with "deficits." On the playground, in class, in life, he's ranked not by what he can do, but what he can't.

Lack of eye contact. Peyton's response: "Isn't it rude to stare at someone else's eyeballs?"

Lack of common interests. Persistent, intense preoccupation with one subject that other people find mind-numbing: "And here's another reason why Celeste Holm should have won Best Supporting Actress for *All About Eve*."

Lack of give and take in conversation: "How can I possibly condense my list of every movie the Oscar committee snubbed since 1929 down to fifteen seconds or less? Also, I'm not interested in what he has to say."

Lack of sensory balance—hyper sensitive to noise, button waistbands, and any day over 72 degrees. I agree. Who's the idiot that brought back those '80s high-waisted jeans, anyway?

Lack of ability to put himself in someone else's shoes: "Do you know how many types of toe fungi coagulate inside a shoe?" And now that Peyton's in his 20s: "Why doesn't anyone ever put himself in my shoes?"

On Christmas Day, when Peyton was a sophomore in college, we waited in the Denver airport for our flight back home to St. Louis. We'd gone skiing over the boys' winter break. Peyton received a call. His two roommates from college, lovely girls he'd met in the dorm last year, want to complete their roommate contracts for junior year. They didn't want to continue sharing an apartment with him.

I understood the sentiment, but on Christmas Day? The girls had nothing against Peyton, but they never got to the level of "friends." They were peers, fellow students, acquaintances. They'd tried the *Three's Company* arrangement, and now they wanted to room with other girls.

Peyton retreated deep inside himself, devastated and ashamed. Three days later, he swallowed a bottle of pills.

His older brother Ben was the only one home. My husband Al and I were dancing the night away at a wedding reception. The guilt still harasses

me, haunts me with "If only the parents had been home...." All I could do for my son was everything, and do it perfectly. I hadn't come close.

Peyton lay in Mercy Hospital's I.C.U., clinging to a life where he'd never have a friend, or a wife, or a family of his own. The doctor said his despair was common among people with autism. Eighty percent remain unemployed and 100 percent experience depression at multiple points in their lives. Common. Eighty to 100 percent. Misery needs company.

Peyton survived. We all carried the scars.

He moved back home for the second semester while he went through in-patient and then out-patient counseling. I drove him back and forth to his classes. Most days, we traveled the two-hour roundtrip in silence.

Sometime in March, Peyton's voice came out low and croaky, like he hadn't used it in years. "Why am I like this?" He pressed his fists to his eyes. "Why am I—defective?"

"Oh, honey, you're not," I said, though we both knew the experience had broken him. We'd both yearned for the breakthrough that would enable him to walk into school an entirely healed person.

"Why can't I be normal?"

I cringed. "What is normal, anyway?"

"Playing sports. Having friends. Being invited."

My heart sank. "That's not true."

"You don't get it!" He slammed his palms on his thighs. Sobs lurked behind his voice. "I try and try and try, and nothing ever works. I wear the same style of clothes. I say all the greetings: 'Hello.' 'Have a nice day.' 'How are you?' 'How do you like the class?'"

"Honey—"

"I talk about other people's interests. I don't talk about mine. None of it matters."

"You just haven't found the right kids yet."

"These are the kids, Mom," he shouted. "Thirteen thousand kids and not one of them can stand me." He stared out the window. "Who else is out there? Who will I find?"

"Oh, Peyton." I took hold of his hand. "You're the bravest person I've ever known."

"There's a fine line between being brave and being stupid," he said.

"No," I said. "You keep going to school. You keep trying." I touched his shoulder. He jerked it away. "You're brave because you're worthy," I said. "You are worthy of friendship."

He leaned his head on my shoulder. "Thanks, Mom," he said. "But if you don't step on it, I'm going to be late."

People can see right away if a young man is an athlete, not only by the clothes he wears, but by the way he strolls into every room like he owns the place. Peyton's talents remained invisible to his peers. No one knew he'd won state championships in piano and violin. No one cheered for his varsity play in the university orchestra. Yet he was the poster child of good manners and respect for all. Consider the evidence.

Due to his hypersensitivity to smells, a tsunami of Axe body spray would never follow in his wake when he enters a room, unlike the athlete mentioned above. Second, he follows all the rules, all the time. If, by chance, a teacher forgets to hand out the quiz she promised yesterday, he'll be sure to remind her. He won't hesitate to remind a boss that the meeting should have ended three minutes ago.

Third, he always tells the truth. If a woman asks, "Does this dress make me look fat?" Peyton wouldn't hesitate to say, "Absolutely." If the police asked him for my whereabouts between ten and twelve, he'd have to tell them: "Fifth grade."

He has an incredible memory; he can recall every mistake I ever made in raising him. He's dependable, harbors no ulterior motives, and epitomizes polite, saying please and thank you and holding the door open for everyone who follows, even if the next pedestrian is a football field away. Funny how Peyton doesn't interrupt, or talk negatively about others, or try to exploit another person's weakness, yet hardly anyone else does the same to him.

In our home, testosterone oozes from the walls like blood from the Overlook Hotel. I've stepped in it many times. So early on, I became inured to the perils of young masculinity: that my basement TV room would smell like a middle school P.E. locker room; that lowland gorilla was the primary language spoken in the home; that the simplest way to get a pubescent boy out of the shower was to turn on the dishwasher. But I never got inured to autism.

Peyton transferred to Saint Louis University before his junior year of college. His cousin Alessandra would be a sophomore there and wanted him to live with her. She and Peyton made grand plans to live and graduate together as the best of friends.

It happened in early October. Alessandra quit school, packed up, and moved home without a word. She had her own issues—some serious health concerns and a case of Stage 10 narcissism. Peyton might have dodged a bullet with her departure, but she and Benji, her little Havanese dog, were his only sources of companionship. He loved them more than anything. Once they left, he was alone, again.

Doctors say intense social rejection activates the exact same areas of the brain as physical pain. Though my sister reassured me "it's not him, it's her," Peyton assumed he was to blame.

How many times do kids with disabilities hear the platitudes? "It's not your fault." "You have so many good qualities." "I'd be your friend if I was your age."

But would I?

I tried to brush away the ugly whispers of my own childhood. From 1979 to 1986, my parents and I lived in southwest Kansas, in a town called Mullinville, population 350. We moved there when I entered fourth grade. My brother and sisters were long gone, off to college or with families of their own. My dad had secured a new job in the oil field, and we fulfilled the role of a poor, white-trash family living in a double-wide trailer.

Including me, we had eight kids in the entire fourth grade. By the time I turned thirteen, the three other girls in my class had grown to 5'11, 5'10, and 5'8. I was 4'6. Also, my mom's idea of fashion for her scrawny, boobless daughter included a bowl haircut and hand-me-down Tuffskins.

At school, I skittered around like a cockroach under a muster of peacocks. In my eyes, all the other kids looked the same: golden, confident, unsullied by adversity. I believed in the hierarchy, and I believed in all that I lacked.

Jan lived a few blocks away from me. Aside from her face, Jan was "normal" in every way. She played sports and did well in school. But she'd been born without a roof in her mouth. She'd undergone multiple surgeries to save her life. The cleft palette the doctors left behind told the story of her miracle survival.

Her nose was flattened, her mouth scarred and contorted. She only had a few teeth and when she spoke, she sometimes snorted. The kids all laughed when she did. I laughed too.

Jan invited me over a few times, but after so many "No, thanks, maybe next time," she stopped asking. The cool kids didn't wanted me in their circle, but Jan… Well, Jan was different. What if they saw me with her? For eight years, I chose loneliness over friendship. My hunger to belong mattered more than being friends with the one girl who offered me belonging.

I winced at the remembering. I'd acted exactly like all the kids I'd been criticizing at Peyton's schools. How we hate the traits in others that mirror ourselves.

I bought the dog because when human relationships fail, nothing beats the enthusiastic tail wag from a friend that never judges, never scorns. Research shows that a pet can help people on the spectrum improve their

confidence, reduce anxiety, and develop a lasting bond built on unconditional love. After a K-12 and college experience fraught with isolation and disappointment, Peyton needed a friend.

After his cousin hightailed it back to Chicago, we agonized over what we could do to save him from himself. I prayed day and night for something good to happen to him, anything, two Twizzlers packs dropped from a vending machine, a shiny quarter face-up on the sidewalk, just one kid in his biochemistry class saying, "This seat's open."

For once in his life, God, please. Give Peyton a break.

Granted, we were lapsed Catholics, so God probably put me in the stand-by line. He might've held my recent Lenten sacrifice against me: I gave up giving up something for Lent. When my prayers didn't work, I did a Robert Johnson and offered to sell my soul to the devil. I'm still waiting for him to call me back.

The *deus ex machina* never came, so I decided to take charge, as if that was something new. Be proactive. Solve the problem. A dog was the answer, because bringing a puppy into an overstressed house is exactly what a mother should do to regain balance and find Karmic peace.

He named the little pup Bran, after the character Bran Stark in *Game of Thrones*, who became disabled as a child and grew up to be king. Such a regal name. When I take him on walks, the old people always ask, "Bran? Like bran flakes? Raisin Bran?" I lose them at White Walkers.

I never saw autism coming. I just assumed we had another J.D. Salinger in the making.

Doctors diagnosed Peyton with autism at age six, soon after his Kindergarten teacher considered his encyclopedic knowledge of Academy Award-winning movies "abnormal" for a six-year-old boy. All I knew was the school frowned upon a mother squeezing off another student's windpipe when she discovered he was the little ferret on the playground calling her son a retard.

I never saw this dog coming either. Now he's one of us, my fourth boy. I've started a new chapter, one where a dog is redeemable, and the answer to my prayer for Peyton came with molasses-brown eyes and an unrelenting desire to eat poop.

The first time I saw Bran, his brother Dandy was climbing all over him to attract my attention. Each time Bran edged forward, Dandy cockblocked him.

Dandy was the epitome of cool: charismatic, charming, naturally good at finding other dogs' weaknesses, the kind who'd step on his own brother's back if it meant the popular bitches would notice him. Even his

name was foreshadowing. Bran was smaller and calmer, a dreamer more suited to living in Iowa City and writing literary novels than pursuing a career in baseball or getting a Wall Street gig.

Bran CPR'd Peyton back to life. Perhaps a Darwinian survival of the fittest still plays out with the junkyard dogs, but Bran seems to be above the great game of popularity. In fact, who knew the entire pet industry celebrates the underdog? The Cavachon breeder from whom I'd bought Bran showed me a runt he said wouldn't weigh more than eight pounds as an adult. He priced her 50 percent higher than all his other pups. She sold in six hours. You go, girl.

All my dog-owning friends derided me for not adopting a rescue dog. I assured them Bran was a hybrid country boy from the Ozarks, though his Cavalier King Charles father had won three championships, and his Bichon Frisé mother traveled in a pink Prada crate. Maybe Bran came from money, but he was old money, the kind that serves on charity boards and makes their teenagers wake up at 5:00 a.m. on Saturdays to caddy at the golf club.

Whatever my friends believed, Bran was a rescue dog. He saved Peyton…and maybe he saved me, too.

After 24 years of motherhood, I thought I'd be on the home stretch by now, gliding down that last trail of a soul-defining mountain climb worthy of a Jack London novel. Any parent who coos and counsels, "It's the journey, not the destination," hasn't raised a kid with a disability. The climb might offer some amazing views, but they're hard to see when you're on your knees in a blizzard.

Bran scampered into our lives with open paws. I never have to worry if he'll choose Peyton for his team. No chance Bran will reject him or embarrass him or not be completely captivated when Peyton offers a detailed explanation on why *All About Eve* deserves more acclaim for its fourteen Oscar nominations than either *Titanic* or *La La Land*.

Today I picked up a dog's poop for the first time in my life. It wasn't a horrible experience, and I continue to find solace in detesting everyone else's dogs. At least Bran will never be tall enough to snuffle my crotch.

I've learned hard lessons. Most important, the world doesn't care how many times my son falls, as long as it's one less time than the number of times he gets back up. I wish Peyton's falls weren't so devastating, or frequent. He keeps searching for the script in a place that expects him to do improv.

"What do we say when life gets us down?" his counselor once asked.

"Called it," Peyton replied.

I'll always worry about my son, hence the voodoo dolls, shiv, and flask I carry when I go to yet another meeting in the college disability

services office. But I know with ineptitude and exhaustion comes grace. I may be only an average mother, but on a bell curve, I'm at the top.

So Bran comes to us as a promise. He doesn't define Peyton by his deficits. He doesn't see autism. To him, Peyton is the best friend he'll ever have.

That's why I bought the dog, for hope.

MARY CHRISTINE DELEA

I'm Faster Than My Brothers

with a Winchester repeater and a better shot, plus I play the violin.
I can recite nineteen Bible passages, learned how to bake shoo-fly pie

when an Amish family moved nearby—I helped out the Mrs.
with one of the troubles I know how to fix, and she paid me

in recipes. Everyone knows me for my cures. Brandy and opium
for colicky babies, arsenic-infused buffalo jerky for the diseases

of sinful copulation, chicken thyroids for constipation,
water cures for headaches. And the trickier troubles, the ones

even my brothers don't know I can cure. The women arrive at night,
counting on the darkness to keep their visits secret. For girls

who have been wronged but aren't with child, I mix a Maiden's Blush
for restoration—gin, absinthe, sugar, sweet syrup, and lemon.

Some come to rid themselves of unwanted mistakes—
they get enemas of brandy or tea with a drop or two of mercury.

Their reasons are varied, whispered to me as my brothers snore upstairs.
Poverty. Beatings. Unmarried. Too young to care for a child.

Too old to want more. Or the father is a ranch hand, a snake oil salesman
who passed through last summer, the married minister even my brothers

think is vainglorious and not to be trusted. Getting rid of something
is easier than creating life from empty air, which is what the skinny,

tearful girl sitting at my table right now wants from me. Her husband
won't stop until she is filled with his seed. She blushes as

she speaks to me, her voice cracking, embarrassed to be voicing
out loud such intimacies about her fraught life. I've seen her husband

in town, older than God and as fat as a mountain, stumbling out of the
saloon, vomit on his shirt and his pants stained with shit and mud.

She tells me he forces his useless member into her regularly,
doing nothing that will make a child he requires of her.

I give her a sweet tonic of herbs and berries. She drinks and we talk
quietly. About the weather, the new school being built,

my handsome brother Albert. I make another concoction for her
to mix into a gooseberry jam for that husband. After he eats

his heart will slow to a stop, as if naturally, as if God has called him
from her tiny, bruised arms to his great and loving ones.

DAVID DIXON

The Practice

You bring water from the well
and draw yourself in buckets
until empty
Then return nomadic to the source

Paths emerge from your footsteps
Words ripen into blessing

Steadfast
as dust longing to be formed into flesh
Breath that becomes bone

You remove your shoes with daily reverence
and sweep beneath the holy branches
of the tree in the Garden

So that the dust becomes dirt
dirt becomes ground
ground
becomes earth

And the earth becomes
whole again

Down to our roots

MARY ALICE DIXON

Hungry Love Seeks Dressy Dimestore Woman

In Mama's wooden box,
below the plastic lilies,
her pink petunia earrings
smile glitter on their petals.

Here lies the gilded circle pin
I gave her, Christmas I was nine,
pin with face of Hungry Delbert,
gold sequins glow his eyes

my prize with pecan bacon pancakes
at Delbert's All-Night Diner, where
Delbert Joe, the cook, gave me all
the maple chocolate milk

a thirsty kid could drink, smitten
with my Mama, who worked
the Woolworth's jewelry counter,
he wooed her from afar.

Now pink petunias on her ears,
Hungry Delbert on her breast,
we dressed her in her dimestore best,
to sleep beneath a quilt of clay

while Delbert Joe plants plastic lilies
above her wooden box and tends his
pecan pancake kitchen, working
dimestore dressy hungry every night.

Sarah DeLena

Swan Song

I wish I could hear her now.

The way she snorted when a joke was too much for her to handle. When she sang along to a song on the radio, badly out of pitch and tempo, drowning out the perfect melody that was crafted beneath. How she said my name.

I find myself searching out any hint of her now, chasing shadows. The smell of lemon-scented shampoo in the bathroom. Muddy sneaker tracks on my bedroom carpet. The absent feeling of her breath on my neck as she slept, unwelcome, in my bed another night after a nightmare.

June would get on the train during the day at Wonderland and off at Government Center, then on again and then off at Boylston, then take the reverse back home at night. Blue to green to green to blue, like clockwork, the corners of her mouth curved up at eight and four.

I can see her getting off the green line and emerging into the Common, the pigeon pile murmuring around her in search of food, but she makes them scattered with a laugh, something funny she's reading on her phone. She crosses the street to grab a drink from the coffee shop, then drifts into her university building, her headphones playing some distressed-sounding violin quartet.

She sits in class, trying to focus, but ends up scrolling online and buying books she doesn't have the time to read. She looks out the window at the sun setting behind the city, imagines the shadows eclipsing the sail boats on the Charles, and smiles, grateful for the view, for another sunset.

She steps back out onto the sidewalk, wading into the night, and then slips back on the green, then the blue, and then settles in her seat for the thirty minute journey back home. She puts on her headphones and plays a delicate sonata, but still doesn't know this is her last time on the train, her last ride home, and that she isn't going to get off at the end like she should, like she god damn has a right to. She's still gliding down the melody, seeing only quarter notes and sixteenths ahead.

Someone is examining her in the train car, a man maybe five seats down sitting on the opposite side who's pulling down his baseball cap to cover his face. He is sizing her up. Could she fight back? How fast could she run? Is she beautiful enough, worthy enough?

He clenches and unclenches his sweating hands, nails digging into his skin making half-crescent moons, palms like the night sky. He feels she is worthy. He decides he is going to take her life.

June is smart, she's capable, she's aware. She told me she turns her headphones off when she leaves the train so she can hear if anyone is following her. She doesn't share the elevator when she travels to the floor in the parking garage with her car on it. She holds her finger over the panic button on her keys and looks behind her and when she gets in? She checks the back seat first, then locks the doors as fast as she can. On another night she gets to live.

But maybe when the man asks her for directions, pointing at the MBTA map strung on the car wall as the train slows into the last stop, *her stop*, she answers. Maybe she pulls off her headphones and points at the red line, *that one there is the one you want*, but he insists the directions are wrong, standing up and nearing the door, gesturing to the map. The car is empty except for them, a tense silence flooding the air. He is in front of the door.

Maybe she knows what he's doing and she's going to make a break for it. Or maybe she rises to get a better look at the map, to try to help him. Either way, that's when he grabs her because finally she's close enough, close enough to breathe in the lemon-scent of her hair, and we know from the recording of the platform that he does pull her out the door, and the train goes on without them both.

We know she bites him, digs her heels into the floor, and tries to throw him back with her on the now-empty train tracks, but he's strong. He's ready for her to fight for her life. We saw him tighten his grip around her neck.

I wonder if he knew when he saw her that she was just weak enough, just tired enough from the school day, just small enough to strangle with his bare hands after he dragged her into the elevator, into his car parked in the garage, and had his way with her?

I don't want to know what she felt, how she fought, or what she thought in her last moments. The decrescendo between how he chose to take my sister's life like it was his to take and how long her torture lasted is something I never want to know. How he dumped her at the bottom of the stairs outside the back of the train station, arms tucked neatly at her sides, palms up to the night sky, eyes full of stars.

But sometimes I try anyway, just so she doesn't have to be alone with it all.

Sometimes I have nightmares like these imagining her last ride. Sometimes I go and wait at the platform for her. Sometimes I take the blue to the green and back again just so I might see her ghost.

I asked my mother if she thought June still takes the train to school every day, but she didn't like that. I imagine her sitting there, listening to her favorite composer, and I wonder if she knows what's coming. I wonder if she ever thinks about her sister who wasn't one anymore.

When I close my eyes and hear the horn of the train at night, her ghost is tied to the sound. Sometimes it almost sounds like a single piano key and someone is pressing down hard on the ivory, making the note last as long as it can, like a gasp of breath while treading water. I try to keep my head above the waves, but it always drags me under, into memories of when she was younger.

June used to wake me up in the middle of the night, bouncing by the side of my bed, her eyes wide as she whispered vaguely in the dark through the gap of two missing front teeth.

He's back.

Who's back? I'd mumble, rubbing my eyes, and she'd look to my bedroom window, fear rolling down her little body in waves. She'd dig her nails into my forearm.

The piano man, she'd reply.

She swore when she was older that this simply never occurred, that I'd made up the memory to torment and embarrass her in front of friends. But I remember the piano man, I mean, how could I forget? June would hear someone playing the piano in the woods, only at night, and they were usually the same lullabies mom played on our piano to put her to sleep in the first place.

I think the notes got jumbled in her memory and were lingering in her dreams, so when she'd wake up suddenly in the night, she thought she could still hear someone playing. So she crafted the idea of this man, hiding in the woods behind our little white one-story house, who did nothing but wait until little girls went to sleep so he could play the piano and wake them up.

Despite her fear, she wanted me to be able to spot him if he ever emerged from the woods, so she made sure to give me his mugshot. She drew sketches of a man as tall as a tree, faceless, completely filled in with black crayon. He had long spindly arms and even longer, thinner fingers dancing over the ivory keys of a piano growing inside of a huge old oak tree. He was her nightmare from ages five to nine, and then, nothing.

The piano man stopped playing and June stopped recounting his concertos. And who was I to remind her of her terror? I was finally getting a full night's rest. I was going to keep quiet about him, just a small secret shared between the three of us. It wasn't until we were older that I realized she'd forgotten about him completely. It seemed that I alone was left to bear the wicked memory of the man hiding in the woods.

But I like to think now that he was a gentle spirit, despite his menacing height and faceless form. That he only wanted to soothe little girls to sleep, not wake them.

I imagine them now when I can't sleep, sitting side by side on the mossy bench made of oak roots and knotted wood, playing chopsticks until dawn when the sun could finally chase away the dark, the nightmares, the ghosts, and any runaway trains rumbling by my bedroom window.

I wish I could hear them now.

TIMOTHY DODD

Advent

Pops is crossing the bridge
in grey suit, his thick Bible
tucked to breast like a football.

The little chapel sits across
the creek in bottomland:
quiet and picturesque, idyllic.

Below us, before the sounds
of sanctity, sermon, testimony,
water sings me a soluble hymn.

I follow father's path slowly,
lingering and looking, not
to pastor, but my own passage.

E.R. DONNELLY

Phantom

As ice slipping free to let
its body be the sway of waves

we turn from the main road
to wonder who will wake

at the hum of our lights coming.
On the right, a low house

hunts the earth, blue
black except the copper bead

of porch light, steady.

The road is still half glass
in late winter, the trees lightened

of life race away engorged, flooded
toward a stale blushing sky,

outwitting our eyes hoping
to come to know their ends.

WILLIAM DORESKI

Benjamin's Grave

Digging a cat grave in winter
opens wounds larger than planets.
The soil is too tough for us
but we hack through it anyway.
With a maul we drive an axe blade
into the impossible texture
and chip it up in angled shards.

Only last night I dreamt I walked
the streets of Cambridge with an axe.
The rough old campus of MIT
looked me over with a shrug.
If police had asked me, I'd say
what if I need to behead myself
and lack the proper instrument?

Frozen earth-smell rebukes us
as we rip a hole to receive
the boxed carcass of Benjamin,
a tux cat of mild demeanor
and clean and regular habits,
beloved by many cat friends
whom he outlived with a flourish.

The day sags toward pastel shades,
tinting roils and rumples of snow.
Shoveling down to the surface
and gnawing it open tires us
almost enough to muddle the pain
we'll be toting in our pockets
until the next shade of dark appalls.

We dump two bags of garden soil
to replace the brittle dirt-shards.
We grab our tools and trot back
to the house with bodies feeling
archaeological enough
to excavate when numb enough
to recognize our own remains.

BAILEY FLYNN

The Trip

Nonna's breathing next to me is shallow, rattling like hard candy in a tin. I wonder if I should reach across the long backseat we are both sitting on, but I don't want to feel the cold, powdery skin of her hands. To make up for the thought I raise my voice and ask Brian, sitting on the passenger side, to turn up the A/C. I smile at Nonna across the seat.

"I don't want this," she says, her voice cracking at the edges. My father doesn't look at her in the rearview mirror. His shoulders rise and fall in miniature with a sigh before he asks her if she'd like to hear anything on the radio.

Nonna sits silent for a long second, so I think she's going to ignore him like he did her. But then she opens her mouth. "Bowie," she bites back. Brian starts fiddling with the radio until he finds a grainy version of "Heroes" probably coming in from some far-off Atlanta station. We listen in silence.

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It is late afternoon, sticky with heat. Dad doesn't want to take breaks on the drive, and I've been holding my bladder taut like a full balloon for the past two hours. I'm frozen, trying not to move the muscles of my abdomen, when Brian says his blood sugar is low. Dad asks me to grab the snack bag from the back, but when I swivel to look over the backseat there's nothing there. He asks Brian if he put it in the trunk that morning like he told him to. Brian shrugs, noncommittal.

We pull off at a gas station. Dad doesn't want Brian walking into the store alone when he's having an episode, so he tells him to stay in the car with Nonna. I ask the attendant behind the counter for the bathroom key, and he hands it to me on a ring attached to a pine-tree-shaped air freshener. I wonder if it's supposed to make the bathroom smell better while you're in there. If it is, it doesn't work. I breathe through my mouth while I pee and the pressure in my abdomen loosens. I don't smell the air freshener at all until I've returned it to the attendant and the scent is left on my fingers, a mix of aftershave and Pine Sol.

"Where you all headed?" the attendant asks.

He is lanky with a neck beard and longish hair that flips out at the edges behind his ears. I wonder if he might be hitting on me. I tell him the name of the town that Dad had me look up on Google maps last night so

I could print him out directions, even though he could have just used his phone. Neckbeard gives a long, knowing hum. I'm pretty sure he has no idea what I'm talking about, but then he proves me wrong.

"You heard of that house up there? Gets people from all over the state."

"That's where we're going," I tell him.

He goes quiet for a second while he scratches the bristles on his neck. "Not for you, I hope?" he asks in lower voice, though he sounds more curious than concerned.

"Not for me," I confirm, shaking my head. He nods and I hear Dad coming up from the back of the store with the rustle of plastic snack wrappings. Before he gets there, the attendant raises his fingers at me in a weak wave.

"Godspeed," he says.

I tell Brian this in the car and he doesn't believe me. He says, *bullshit*, says, *people don't really say that*. Dad gets back in the car while I'm still trying to convince Brian. After a minute of pointedly trying to ignore us he asks what I'm talking about. I tell him and he shakes his head before turning the key in the ignition.

"Just a bunch of hicks and Christ-nuts out here," he says. I don't understand what he means by this and, from the look on his face, he doesn't either. We're merging back onto the freeway before any of us can ask him.

***

We don't realize at first that we've arrived. We're still a mile away and sitting in bumper-to-bumper traffic, a license plate from Florida staring at us from the back of the Honda ahead. I can tell Dad didn't picture it like this. He keeps checking his mirrors like he's going to slide onto the left side of the road and pull ahead of all these other people with their own dying relatives in their cars. I wonder if he would do it if Brian and I weren't there.

"Maybe there's another route," I say.

"Where the hell are all these people coming from?" Dad asks instead of answering.

Brian, bored and slumped against the window, says, "I guess they saw the news too."

Nonna's been quiet for a long time. I follow my father's eyes on her in the rearview mirror and see her chest rising and falling—gentle, like clothes billowing on a line in a weak breeze. "She's breathing," I tell him, not bothering to lower my voice.

We first saw the house on the news three weeks ago. I'd heard of it before then, at school, but everyone there thought it was one of those

local legends that you half-believe until you reach high school and know better. On the news they interviewed people going in and out of the house in between showing shots of it from across the lawn, small and dowdy looking. A lot of the people seemed kind of nuts. They probably were. But there were also some people who seemed normal, even a little embarrassed, like they knew how it sounded. No one was bringing their family members to the house to die, at least no one they showed on camera during that first report. They just talked to visitors. There was one guy who stuck in my head because he looked like Mr. Herbert from school—tall and grey-haired with glasses. He said that he was there visiting his son. I guess it was just the way he said it, and the way he looked like the person who taught me biology. I believed him.

Dad inches the car forward for a while, getting more and more fidgety. Finally he makes a huffing sound and pulls hard to the right so that two wheels hop off the asphalt onto the grass. We drive like this past the other cars. Some people start honking. We pass one car with the window rolled down and the woman inside gives us the finger. I'm embarrassed and try to concentrate on Nonna while Dad tells Brian to stop flipping the bird back.

***

I'm half-expecting someone to stop us, but no one does, and after a few minutes of driving like this we see the house. It looks bigger in person, which is good. Things being crowded is one of the reasons Nonna said no when Dad first brought up the news report. By then there had been more coverage because some local chaplains and ministers had started telling their congregations about the house and actually bringing families there upon request to do last rites. I don't know how they made the house seem like an okay combination with the whole eternal heaven thing, but they must have done it somehow, because suddenly more people were talking about it. A couple really religious students at school got pulled out of class to go with their families to the house, or at least that was what the rest of us assumed.

Dad seems calmer now that we can see the house. We still have to make it up the driveway, but we manage to bumpily merge our way into the line of cars—more honking—and the wait seems faster with the house so close. Eventually we get up the hill to the gravel semicircle that marks the end of the driveway. It's already filled with parked cars, so Dad pulls straight onto the lawn and parks.

Suddenly Nonna is reaching for me, her powdery fingers tapping at my wrist. She doesn't say anything, just looks at me and parts her lips a little.

She doesn't want to go in. I tell Dad as much when he comes around and opens the passenger door to unbuckle her, but he just sighs and tells Nonna in a gentle voice, "We talked about this."

This isn't totally true. Or they did talk, but it's not like Nonna agreed. There was the crowd thing, and then the fact that Baba wouldn't be there, or Mom. We haven't gone to any church since I was little, but I know Nonna used to take Dad every weekend when he was a kid. She doesn't seem to buy the stuff about the chaplains and ministers approving the house. She wanted to die at home, I know, probably near the purple orchid she keeps in a pot on her nightstand and stares at for minutes at a time when waking up from a nap or waiting to fall asleep.

Dad gets the collapsible wheelchair out of the trunk and scoops Nonna up and into it. The big wheels keep getting stuck in the grass, but he keeps going until we reach the front door. All of us stop for a second, unsure.

"Are we supposed to knock?" Brian asks finally. But Dad shakes his head and reaches for the handle. It's unlocked, and after he pushes the door open, I hold it for him to roll Nonna through.

Inside it's cooler and a little dark after the afternoon sun. My eyes take a second to adjust. It's not all that different from our house. There's a staircase up against one wall in front of us and a hallway that keeps going past it into the middle of the house. To the left and right there's doorways that lead into other rooms, spaces that at home would be the living and dining rooms. Here their furniture doesn't identify them as any particular kind of room at all. Everything has been moved out to make room for chairs and cushions and couches, and it's clear that people move them around from where they're supposed to be—there's a whole flock of dining chairs clustered awkwardly together in one corner, and a couch right in the middle of a room so that you have to squeeze by it just to reach the door. And then there's people. A lot of people. Most of the seats are filled. The sound is like a fancy restaurant, voices lowered, but a dozen different conversations happening at once.

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We wander around for a few minutes, Dad wheeling Nonna and Brian jogging up ahead to scout out the next room. I try to keep my eyes averted from the people we go by, because it seems rude to look. I know Nonna won't want to be looked at. Finally Brian comes back from up ahead and says there's a room that's a little quieter off the kitchen. We go, Dad rolling Nonna too quickly so that I'm scared she'll get jostled and hurt herself.

Brian's right about the room. There's just one other group and an empty armchair in the corner with a couple chairs drawn up around it. I can see immediately why there's less people here; the room isn't as nice a place to die as the others in the house. It's narrow and long with a low ceiling and no windows. It was probably a big walk-in pantry at some point. I hope the others don't notice and try to smile at Nonna once Dad has lowered her into the armchair. He and Brian take the seats, so I stay standing.

"You comfortable?" Dad asks her. "Do you need anything?"

Nonna cuts him a look like if he asks her that again she'll hit him, even though we all know she can barely lift her arms. I watch her eyes go around the room, taking it in.

"It's stuffy in here," she announces in her hoarse voice. "Smells like cigarettes."

I take a deep inhale through my nose and think she's making it up—I don't smell anything. Dad, now that we're here, seems more patient. He just reaches out for Nonna's hand and rubs his thumb over the back of her knuckles. She lets him, maybe out of mercy but probably because it would be too much effort to move. In the silence that follows we all seem to realize we don't know what to do now. We were so focused on making it here that none of us thought much about the after.

Dad eventually starts telling stories, asking Nonna if she remembers this time or that time. I've heard a lot of them before, and Nonna's fading in and out of lucidity anyways, so I look around. Before I can stop myself I'm sneaking looks at the other group in the room, studying at each of them carefully. I realize I'm trying to find out which one of them they're here for, which one is supposed to die here. But they all look healthy. Happy, even. They're not being jerks about it—their voices are lowered like everyone else's—but I see one of them say something and the other two put their hands over their mouths trying not to laugh out loud.

I reach over to tap Brian's shoulder and ask him what he thinks. He watches the group for a minute or two and then shrugs, saying, "Maybe they're visiting someone." It takes me a minute to know what he means.

It's not like they've shown any on the news. People at school don't even really trade rumors about what they look like, or if they do it's in a half-embarrassed way, trying to be ridiculous so no one really thinks they believe it: Patrick Swayze in that one movie, the green booger-like things from *Ghostbusters*. I've assumed they probably, in actuality, just look real. Like they did when they were alive, except you can't touch them.

I keep watching the group while trying not to be obvious about it. There's two women and a man, probably all in their thirties or so. The guy

seems to be the funny one, making the others laugh. Could it be him? Or maybe I'm wrong and they're invisible to the naked eye unless you knew them when they were alive. I try to tell whether the trio seem to be talking to someone else who I can't see, but they're all talking together in a way that makes it hard to tell.

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When I tune back in Dad is asking Nonna whether she remembers the story about the Statue of Liberty. Brian rolls his eyes and I shoot him a look to remind him to be good. Dad starts launching into the story, how when he was four Nonna and Baba took him and Aunt Caroline and Uncle Erik to New York City for a vacation, and it was fall so they ate caramel apples Baba bought them from a stand in Central Park and Aunt Caroline tried using it to get her loose tooth to come out but it wouldn't budge. And they went to Ellis Island on the ferry, to see the Statue of Liberty. And Nonna was tired and didn't want to climb all the stairs, so Baba was gonna take all the kids up, but Dad said he didn't want to go. So he stayed with Nonna, and then after ten minutes he started crying because he wanted to go to the top, too. And Nonna had to climb all those stairs up to the big green head with him on her hip.

"Remember?" Dad asks. "You were so mad at me the rest of the day."

I feel a weird urge to look away, like I'm seeing something I'm not supposed to. It's something about his voice, like he's pleading with her to remember how mad she was, like he needs her to say it really happened. I avert my eyes to Nonna and see that she's lucid, see the same feeling I'm having cross her face.

"I was," she says, or I think she does. Her voice is so quiet it's hard to be sure. I see her fingers twitch under Dad's hand like she wants to squeeze it.

HOLLIE DUGAS

Picasso's Last Poem to Dora Maar

If there is a bird inside me,
then it is a raven, mischievous

and almost blue, doing strange things
with ants, mashing their entrails

against my feathers, becoming drunk
on the acid of their small black bodies.

You see, smaller things are made
for suffering. I've made you

an unwearable ring, a tiny pointed spike
in the center. This will be the last time

I notice you driving your little penknife
into your skin.

If there is a bird inside you,
then it is not the bare breasted owl,

it is the ortolan,
a dainty and exquisite creature,

a thing to be devoured whole
behind shrouds of white,

your sweet songs of sorrow sliding
into my mouth. I cannot picture you

smiling. You do not ache
as quietly as I do. I want to hide you

from God, drown you in Armagnac;
then, chew, crunch my teeth into

the brittle bone, where your unhappiness
lives. I want your bare flesh

dissolving onto my tongue, tender
as the wing of an angel.

JULIA NUNNALLY DUNCAN

Colitis

The diarrhea was virulent,
and his cotton diaper stayed soiled
with a pale stool that seeped through the cloth

and onto the floorboards when he crawled.

Not much anyone could do—
not even the company doctor
who knew the baby wouldn't last long.
They all loved him—
he was such a fair child,
his blond hair and blue eyes
rare amongst his darker siblings.
He was their pet
who would soon become a regret
in all their hearts.
To lose this baby brother and son
at fourteen months old
was a tragedy for the cotton mill family—

hard for anyone to understand
even then in the 1920s
when such misfortune came often
to so many.

JIM GISH

A Slave to the Monkey Man

He always wore that yellow shirt with a flowered tie every Friday. And he always looked like such a geek with those horn-rimmed glasses and chalk dust on his pants. I never talked about him being my father unless someone heard about it somewhere and asked me, and then I tried to act like I knew he was a first-rate spasmo like Jenny Lickle, the sophomore girl with the red hair who wandered around the halls like she just landed in a spaceship and was trying to learn a new language.

"Poe was a genius," my father said as he moved about at the front of the room.

"Some devotees of literature have called him The Divine Edgar," he intoned, his eyes rolled up toward the ceiling like he was thinking lofty thoughts and dwelling in other realms beyond this mortal world.

Bunny Yates, one of the football players, snickered at the back of the room. He has cheated on every test since the first of the year by switching papers with Bobby Crone, the brain trust in front of him.

My father talked like that even when we were sitting at the kitchen table, eating frozen pizza he buys at some discount grocery store where you bring your own paper bags. In the living room Brutus is beating the shit out of Popeye, and down the hall in my room, an old Pearl Jam tape reverberates through the halls. But in the kitchen where we are sitting, my father asks me questions, giving me his benign smile. It is like he is trying to figure me out like a poem he has explicated. He wants to know my rhythm and my meter and decide what makes me tick.

"Coach Donatelli said you've decided not to go out for basketball next year."

I sit, looking down at my pizza, wondering what he thinks I will say. I work at the Super Saver over on Main, sacking groceries and mopping the aisles where crazy old ladies knock over the displays. On the weekends, I hang out with Tony and Marcus, and we goof off, maybe shoplift a little at Kmart and listen to head banging music. We smoke a little weed and get in fights with punks from Cruppville. It doesn't have anything to do with Coach Donatelli who thinks he is General Patton. It doesn't have anything to do with my father who worships Poe and Longfellow but can't fix the leak in the kitchen ceiling.

"Yeah, my knee has been bothering me since the tournament last year. Doc Swaze said that there's some cartilege damage."

My father sips his tea and stares off, like he is waiting for a signal from some guy in a control booth about what to do next. He does the same thing in class sometimes, standing there, staring off toward the ceiling as though he expected Walt Whitman to show up and tell a few jokes or explain why Leaves of Grass was the beginning of really democratic poetry.

Now I chew the cardboard pizza crust and count to a hundred and all that time, my father says nothing. Finally, just when I am ready to bolt and run, he stands up and puts his hand on my shoulder.

"I'd like to see you play some basketball, but you do what you need to do," he tells me.

Then he leaves me there, like I will know what's best. This is the man who drove my mother off to the funny farm where she makes us belts and sends us water color drawings. This is the man who let my brother leave at midnight and join the Navy where he is learning radar equipment, because living with my dad is like living with a warm, fuzzy fog which drifts and settles, spreads out and then engulfs you, all in the name of something short of love.

"You don't know who you are," my mother would shout at him as they sat at this same table, while I huddled at the top of the steps and listened.

"You could have been a principal ten years ago and a superintendent five years later, but you won't assert yourself. You won't tell people what you need because you don't know yourself. You just shuffle and smile, and nothing ever happens. You are never mad and you are never glad, and you have never turned a cartwheel in your whole sad, little life. You're just there talking in circles and apologizing."

Even on those nights when I was supposed to be asleep, I kept waiting for my father to come out swinging from the floor. I wanted him to grab my mother and shake her and tell her just how things were and what he was going to do to make it up to her. But when I bent to peek between the slats in the banister, he was cleaning his glasses with his shirt tail, moving his mouth as though to find the words which would help her understand.

"I'm sorry you feel that way, Ellen."

Even now, after he had said what he said, I sat there, hearing him rattling the dishes in the sink, and I am thinking that he wants me out there running the court because it makes him feel good. It was something he could never do, and now he wants to live through me doing it, like one of those sea creatures that attaches itself to you and goes along for a free ride while it sucks your blood.

Maybe it was his hand on my shoulder that was the trigger. Maybe it was breaking up with Wendy Harkness who said that I was never going to grow up. Maybe it was just every damn thing.

Whatever caused it doesn't matter now because that was the night I met the Monkey Man. It was a Friday night, and Tony and me went to the carnival at Cider Bay and got into a fight with the crack head who ran the basketball hoop on the midway. I hit six shots in a row and cleaned him out of panda bears. Then he said that he didn't want my next dollar and tried to close down the concession. He pushed me once like he thought he was dismissing some silly kid, and that was when I hit him. The next thing I know he is staggering, trying to find the light, holding on. When he went down, a man who was not more than four feet tall came out of a trailer, leading six monkeys. He walked right up to me where I stood, rubbing my knuckles and looking a little scared, while Tony kept smacking my shoulder saying, "Good shot, dude."

The monkey man stepped over the crack head like he was so much discarded rubbish and looked up at me.

"Don't worry. I ain't calling the cops. He's done had his chances. I need a shill for this basketball concession, though. Somebody clean cut and sure of himself like you. A kid who can swish three in a row just so show the rubes how easy it is."

Tony looked at me and laughed. But what I was doing was watching my hand come up slowly, hearing my voice like it came out of somebody else's dream.

"I can do that," I said, and I shook his moist little hand.

Tony told me that I was crazy, but I could tell he was excited about somebody who was a junior in high school just chunking it all and walking away, just like in a movie.

I went home and let myself in the house and packed. My Dad was asleep in front of the TV with a copy of *The House of the Seven Gables* lying open on his lap. I left him a note saying that I had to get away and think about things. I didn't tell him that I was running away because I was afraid if I stayed around, I would turn out like him.

Tony gave me a ride back to Cider Bay and shook my hand. I threw my duffel into a trailer and helped disassemble the rides and strike the tents. We pulled out after midnight in a light rain, a long caravan of trucks and trailers and cars. When I thought about it, it was sort of an American thing to do, run off and join the circus.

I sat next to an Hispanic guy named Luis who kept telling me how much he missed his wife and kids in Vera Cruz. All the while I was thinking, here I am, sixteen and on my own, a slave to the Monkey Man.

Back at my house, my father was waking up. He would find the note, and maybe he would walk in those aimless circles around the kitchen table, running his hands through his hair, making little tufts stand up there. He would want to call the police, but they were all people he had taught. It would make him seem weak and scared, and he tried to avoid that if he could. Likely, he would just go up there and lie on top of his bed spread with his old pair of cheap gray slacks he'd bought at Sears. He would take off his glasses and watch the ceiling and wonder what went wrong, like I said, clueless and helpless all in the same package. Just a kind of crazy, old man.

Maybe you think you know carnies because you saw a movie somewhere or because you have gone to the county fair and invented a story for yourself about the tattooed lady sitting out beside her trailer, breast feeding her baby and talking to the Borneo Man who eats live chickens. but you don't know anything, really.

The carnies took me in like natural born blood, and I learned to fit in. I learned to be happy when my booth cleared $200 on a night or to be happy for Rosie, the belly dancer queen, when she rolled a small-town deacon for five hundred dollars and then turned him out into the dark, empty night. I drove a flat bed truck and drank coffee and took down tents and put some lip into my voice and dared the Methodist boys to put up or shut up. I swished the net with merciless regularity to show them how easy it was and then I took their money like I thought the very next time or the next, they were going to figure out the secret.

I might have done that for a year or two or forever because it was bittersweet and kind of romantic in a goofy way. The carnival was a family, and you forgot the old rules and just remembered the family and what was good for one was good for all of us.

The Monkey Man ran the carnival like a benign patriarch, and you might find yourself with a fifty-dollar bonus at the end of a good week or a little note telling you to take the night off and swing with the locals.

I had long forgotten about Wendy Harkness, and I thought sometimes if I saw her, I would ask her who was grown up now. But I saw that was foolish and childish, something a silly teenager would do who still had to prove something. I sometimes wondered about Tony and wondered if he was at the Go Kart tracks or the miniature golf course, picking up girls and pouring whisky in their Cokes out in the car, driving fast, listening to Counting Crows and Beck. I might have gone on like that, just lost in that blur of what came next and then what came next, but then I had that dream. And after that, none of it was any good anymore, like it all turned sour overnight.

It was a Sunday night after a dead day in Hagerstown. The sky looked like dirty dish water, and there'd been a fine mist falling so that as they say in bad comedies, "People stayed away in droves." A few fat farmers and their puffy wives and kids wandered the midway, clutching their dollars and looking at everyone suspiciously like the carnies like myself were going to steal their kids and sell them into slavery. We shut down early, and I spent most of the evening playing penny-ante poker with Garland Deems who ran the horse race concession and listening to him grumble about his wife, Marlene, whom he thought was sleeping with the Monkey Man.

I went to my trailer around ten thirty and sat around with the three other guys who slept in that trailer, watching a movie about Vietnam. I went into the back and turned on my headphones with some bird calls and nature sounds on it to drown out the TV and the way the other guys kept screaming at the TV every time the Americans shot another "slope," as Garland Deems called them. I slept for about two hours, and for no reason that I could think of, I woke up. I tossed and turned, listening to the other guys snoring but I couldn't get back to sleep. So I slipped out of the trailer and walked around the grounds in the darkness. I watched some clouds rumbling in from the north, and I saw a fork of lightning maybe ten miles away. The air smelled like bruised fruit, and I noticed one of my hands kept shaking when I'd smoke a cigarette, the kind of shaking you think about with old men who are going batty in the head and talk to their cats all day.

I went back to the trailer and fell into a troubled sleep. I dreamed about walking down the streets of Barlow on a summer evening. Kids were out playing frisbee and Dads were drinking beer and turning the steaks on the grill. As I got closer to my house, I saw that it was dark, not even the kitchen light left on, something my father did in a pathetic attempt to persuade burglars that there was someone at home.

I walked up that sidewalk with those big cracks running across it which my dad was going to fix the next summer or the next. Inside, I could hear a slow classical piano piece, the kind of thing my dad listened to when he was by himself, spooky stuff like Mahler or Beethoven. I went up and knocked on the door, which was odd because I have never knocked on the door of my own house before. No one answered, so I pushed open the door and walked into the hall which smelled like wet wood and furniture polish. There was one small lamp on in that small room off the kitchen which my dad called his den, and that's when I saw the line of people. My father was in his own green leather chair, and while I watched, one at a time, a person would walk up to him and speak.

I saw Mrs. Donatelli, coach Donatelli's mom, who had been my own father's English teacher when he went to school.

"Norman, you have got all the talent in the world. You could have been a good writer, but you threw it all away to marry that tramp."

My father reached out and shook her hand and nodded earnestly.

Mrs. Donatelli walked off toward the door and came right past me, giving me one of those prune-like smiles that some old ladies give you when they have had their say and are feeling pretty pleased with themselves.

Then I saw my grandfather with his steel blue eyes, dressed up in a business suit, a man who owned two coal mines and whose hero was Andrew Carnagie. He had a diamond stick pin in his tie.

"Norman, you should have come into the company. You owed it to your wife and kids. They needed a stronger effort from you."

My father nodded again, and my grandfather walked out past me, smelling like Old Spice and cigar smoke.

The grievances built as each in turn, my grandmother, my aunt, and my own mother recited the litany of his failures. Then, suddenly, I was no longer in the shadows of the hall, I was in the line. The person in front of me moved away, and I was standing there, looking down at him. I fixed my mouth to speak, but no words came to my lips.

I looked into his eyes, and I saw a deep well of sadness and regret. I knew that whatever I said, he would accept it as his due and believe that he had deserved it. And that fact itself was like a crushing weight on my chest. And looking into his eyes, I saw that despite all his poses and all of his lofty talk about beauty and truth, he was a lonely man who believed that he had failed. I knew in that moment that when he died, his former students would read about it and laugh, remembering the chalk dust on his khakis and the way he colored red when a pretty girl leaned over his desk to look at her grade.

I woke up in that close little trailer and heard the rain drops drumming on the metal roof. I felt something dense and tight next to my heart.

I worked another three weeks, but somehow I was not one of them any more. They could smell the leaving on me, the way my eyes drifted off center like I was already on the road going home.

It was a Thursday night that I closed down my stand and put the puffy stuffed animals back into their plastic containers and stored them away under a tarp. I told everyone goodbye, and a couple of the women hugged me.

I packed my things into the duffel and stopped at the Monkey Man's tent. Marlene answered the door, wearing a slip.

"You done okay," the Monkey Man told me, writing out the check. "You stayed longer than most. I guess it's just natural that after you had your fling with the real world that you are running back to a sugar tit."

I started to tell him about to dream to explain things, but he didn't care. He was back to pawing at Marlene. I slammed the door and walked off down the dark, empty fairway, away from the Blue Grass Shows and my days with the Monkey Man.

I caught a ride with one of the truck drivers to a truck stop where I hitched a ride south. At the next truck stop I got a ride with a man named Vic and his girlfriend Chloe in an old VW bus. For a hundred miles they smoked grass and talked about how Jerry Garcia died to set us free. They let me out on the interstate a mile from my house, and I walked up the sidewalk at eight o'clock that night, stumbling over a large chunk of cement that had been kicked loose from a flower urn.

I didn't knock on the door like in the dream because it was my home. The shutters still needed painting and my father's cat, Melville, crouched under a wicker chair on the porch and watched me. When I called his name, he rushed out and purred as he rubbed against my leg and I scratched his ear.

When I walked into the house, I found my father asleep in his lounge chair, a bunch of research papers spilling out of his lap and onto the floor. In the yellow light from the reading lamp. I could see the worry lines around his eyes and mouth. Sitting on the mantel was a large picture of me as a child which I had never seen before. I was sitting astride a pony, and my mother and father stood on each side, holding me on, smiling at each other over my head.

I went into the kitchen and warmed up some chicken noodle soup and read the local Sunday paper. Then I went in and sat on the couch across from my dad and I was watching a baseball game when he woke up and saw me there.

"Danny," he said my name softly, hesitantly, almost as if he feared I was the merest leftover shadow of a dream.

"Hi, Dad. You taking naps in the evening now like an old man?"

He smiled and shook his head.

"I feel like an old man sometimes. These damn papers put me to sleep. These kids can't write a simple sentence."

"Wow, what's new?" I said and walked out toward the kitchen.

As I passed his chair, I touched his shoulder. I got a Pepsi out of the refrigerator and then I asked him about my friends. He said that Tony had got picked up shop lifting at K-Mart and he had been kicked off the baseball and basketball team. He said Wendy Harkness was the president of the National Honor Society and was going to get scholarships galore because of her ACT scores.

Then we watched the games, and he told me about Miss Falwell, the librarian, who fell and broke her hip. I drank the Pepsi and nodded and

thought of me getting nailed for shop lifting. I wondered if I should call up Wendy Harkness and ask her how things were going now that she was going to be a Rhoades Scholar and rule the world.

I could tell by that yearning just behind my Dad's eyes that he wanted to ask me about where I had been. But he didn't ask, and I didn't feel like talking about it. When he finally unhinged himself, he seemed to move more slowly than I remembered, a little stoop shouldered like a man who had started to decay a little every month.

"I've got to get to bed, son. You're welcome to whatever..."

Then he stopped midway through that sentence and shook his head.

"Well, of course you are. It's your house, too," he said. "I think I am getting addled."

My Dad mounted the stairs, and I could see that he was dragging all that regret and fear behind him like giant rocks. I wanted to call after him and tell him that he was okay, that he had done the best he knew how. But I knew he wouldn't hear me, and that he would go up and spend half the night wrestling with that wild jumble of dreams he had conjured up when he was my age. He had been very certain about a lot of things, had known them all by heart, but now he was just a high school teacher with chalk on his clothes and five years to go before retirement.

"I'm glad you're home, Danny," he called to me from the top of the steps.

"Me, too," I said.

The game kept on going, and Nebraska was beating somebody. But I was back among the wagons and the heady freedom of that other life, where we slicked the rubes, where you sat together and told giant lies about the girls you had known. Somewhere north of Wilkes Barre the Monkey Man was making love to Marlene, but it was okay. I had been there and now I had come home.

I think it's some kind of Zen thing that says, "When you are in the water, be completely in the water." I was completely in the water, right where I needed to be. That was going to be enough.

T.K. EDMOND

Litany of St. Loser

Whisper grace,
wisdom,
peace
on the sly.

Light a candle.
Drop a coin.
Touch yourself
in four places.

Hear your body
pop, wood
squeal under
foot and carry

your cringing
vespers
out the door
in echo.

TERRI KIRBY ERICKSON

The Letter

Nothing is ordinary—not condensation on a pane
of glass—that streak of sunlight, yellow
as lemons, in the neighbor's backyard. Trees

are rustling tender new leaves, and our lawn
is as thick as a wool rug. Even the scent of coffee

wafting from the kitchen is a miracle,
a woman walking her little dog down the sidewalk,
its leash as taut as rigging. Yet, every house

hides something that hurts, even as we call to one
another, *good morning, good morning*—

our faces open as a letter lying on a table, the kind
that makes our hands shake when we find it
in the mailbox, that we read only once.

JOEL FERDON

After Burying My Hummingbird

I worry about the tiny pink stuffed pig more
than the green-chested dead hummingbird
        I found, perfect, outside my library.
        The little bird, with tongue draped

over beak like a rope in kerosene, was
still whole. *Surely someone will move*
        him I pleaded in my mind,
        too busy to stop and place him

with the zinnias he loved. The next
morning, I found both the hummingbird,
        fluid halo around his head,
        and that pink pig.

The little girl owner of the stuffed swine
and her dad, pizza delivery dad, sat
        in the back of the library all
        night while the momma took

night classes. You would have never
known they were there except for
        the wet, deep rasp hurting
        out of the girl, maybe three

years old. Sunken, swollen eyes--
blue lips. I wished in that moment
        I had $100 dollars so I could
        shove it at the guy so much

younger than me in ratty Dockers and
pizza delivery shirt & say *If you lose*
        her, you might not die but
        you will want to. Instead,

I preached the Health Department and his
eyes went wide and white-- nothing going
    in. So when I found Ms. Priscilla Pig,
    or so I named her, in the sharpest

corner of the library after burying
my hummingbird, I worried,
    not only for the little life lost
    and the potential for

more, but about the little boy who rides
in my truck every morning who still
    asks, *Daddy found Ms. Priscilla's*
    little girl yet?

ROBERT FILLMAN

Melting Point

My uncle on the local news
            summing up his life
            in a thirty-second spot,
his words broken up
            and clumsily put back
            together
between noisy, sporadic shots of him
            in an apron and helmet,
            a pair of leather welding gloves,
the TV reporter cutting him off
to ask what he plans to do now
that the plant has closed, his job
            lost,
not grasping how those words sear
            like an acetylene torch
and there I am watching
            as a small boy,
seeing the irrevocable destruction
            of my kin
from the comfort of my living room,
not knowing the pain
he carried in his head,
            his liver,
            his fists,
            his rifle,
how it's all there
flashing on the screen
and for a moment transformed
into something useful
            and brilliant,
a natural kind of alchemy,
the tears in a middle-aged man's eyes
            about to spark
when the channel suddenly cuts
            to commercial—

DANIEL GINSBURG

The Missing Boy

Everywhere, you stare at me
from your little league photo
in posters stapled to phone poles,
pinned to cork boards in stores,
taped to walls in malls.
You, a slight-framed boy,
bat raised over your shoulder,
sandy blond hair sprouting
from under your red cap,
gaps in your smile where
adult teeth have not grown in.

Middle schoolers don't mention you;
mean as ever, they collude in four square,
set up each other for spikes in my box.
The big rubber ball soars
out of reach. Kids in Levi's laugh
at my Toughskins, sheathe combs in back
pockets. My stomach aches with loneliness.
I knock an ice cream from a boy's hand;
he raises his fists 'til a teacher steps in.

Mom grips my wrist
and hurries through Sears, checking off errands.
For a moment, your mom left you
by the Space Invaders game
while she shopped for a lamp. For weeks,
the reward grows like panic—
five, fifty, one-hundred thousand.
You keep looking at me.
One day, men fish in a canal
beside a Florida highway, and they find you.
Long after the posters come down,
I see your hazel eyes pleading with me
to run.

SUMMER HAMMOND

At the Top

Let's just say that, for Marguerite and I, being at the fair was quite a big deal.

A highly abnormal circumstance.

Meaning that I was fourteen, and Marguerite was eighteen, and this was our first time at a fair.

Our church was suspect of fairs. Also music concerts and water parks, where flesh danced in sinful liberation, glorified over Yahweh. For amusement, families at our church attended craft festivals, went on hikes, and took lengthy horseback rides to quell the fires of fleshly desires. A week before, our Elders and their wives hosted a square dance, where flesh was subdued beneath button up plaid shirts, and we modified the moves so opposite sexes did not have to touch, using hay hooks instead of hands. Pastor Jerry had arranged a whole wall of hay hooks in our church barn for weddings and other shindigs. We took the dances quite slow to avoid injury.

Our church's health food co-op was also a source of fun. Along with the other kids, I liked unloading the massive semi-truck that backed slowly down the long gravel lane to our church, a converted silo on abandoned farmland. The truck was stacked to the gills with boxes and boxes of healthful goodies such as honeyed sesame sticks, carob balls, and crates of Yahweh-approved papaya nectar, shining like treasure gold.

My secret wrong-headed dream was to go to the Barn Swing in Ozark, Missouri, with my Baptist friends, Carrie and Rachael, who were part of Home-school Herd. The Baptists got to go, but not us Shiloh Silo youth. I imagined a wooden swing, like the one hanging from the branch of our big old Oak, only ten times bigger, sailing out over a sea of golden hay bales. Carrie and Rachael laughed at me, they said no, you doof, the Barn Swing is nothing like a real swing, it's fast and high and terrifying and awesome, and Christian music plays loud, thrumming in your eardrums, and you can't scream cuss words, but you can scream your heart out for Jesus, and as you fly, it feels like God, whooshing through you.

"Whooshing through you?" I'd said. "Like gas?"

They'd laughed even harder, pounding their knees. "Holy farts, Batman!"

My Baptist friends, for all their sweet innocence, and knowing every word to every Michael W. Smith song, which they sang together teary-eyed

and choked up, possessed a shockingly crude sense of humor. Pastor Jerry would not approve of Carrie and Rachel's high-pitched use of the word *fart* in conjunction with Yahweh.

I feared Pastor Jerry would not approve of our family, now strolling along what Dad called the midway, a place decadent with sin. The clatter, spin, and shriek of rides, like demons. The blip and beep, the mad seductive swirl of Satanic games. The conglomeration of Worldly aromas. Oh! fried temptation of corndogs and pungent mustard, the buttered popcorn and rich powder sugar siren song of funnel cakes, all competing for my olfactory, and spiritual, attention.

Pastor Jerry forbade his Sheep from consuming junk food, or, what he called, Satan's Tidbits, which made Marguerite giggle. She said Satan's Tidbits sounded spicy, and crunchy. Something she'd like to try. For this and many other reasons, I feared for my sister's earthly and eternal well-being. Ingesting junk food, Pastor Jerry warned, was the first step in a long slide to the pool of Fire that Burns Without End. When I was in Kindergarten, before I joined Home-school Herd, Mom checked me over after school, twisting my face this way and that, inspecting my sweater threads, searching for crumbs and stains, dire evidence that I'd imbibed chocolate milk and animal crackers at Snack-Time. She'd warn me, again and again, not to partake of Kool-Aid on the field trip. Kool-Aid, I'll admit, tested my resolve the most, even more than Oreos. The pretty red Solo cups and my classmate's matching red moustaches, almost too much to bear. That's why my whole church had joined The Lord's Pantry, a health food co-op. Carob balls satiated the lust for Oreos. Carob balls were a protective shield against Satan's tidbits.

Along the midway, I kept a close eye on the "Carneys," as Dad called them. Wiry, tattooed men with wispy facial hair, brazen and shouting, leaping out, golden-tongued, part convict and part Hollywood, exuding aggression and charm in equal measure. They lounged like skinny wild cats, smoking up a storm, calling out to the scantily clad girls streaming by in a sugar rush of loud laughter and profanity. We were continuously jostled by these groups. Mom, Dad, Marguerite and I, the trundling old RV on a freeway full of zooming Corvettes. Our slowness was due, in part, to my great injury, the thick bandage round my knee, my limping walk.

Mom hooked her arm through mine, squeezed. "Are you having fun, Claudette?" Her platinum hair, caught up in two high ponytails, held by green satin ribbons. "Are you, baby?"

Each time she asked, my anxiety climbed another rung. "Yes, oh yes," I assured her, each time. After all, Mom had gotten us here, our first time at the fair. Dad would never have brought us of his own volition. Dad

was allegiant to Shiloh Silo rules. *To a fault*, Mom whispered sometimes, behind his back. Don't misunderstand. Mom, like a true woman of Yahweh, submitted. She didn't work outside the home. She didn't have a driver's license. She cleaned house, cooked every meal from scratch, faithfully incorporating Yahweh-approved herbs and vegetables from our church cookbook *Shiloh Silo's Sacred Kitchen*. Every Monday, grocery day, Mom opened her palm, and Dad peeled bills into her hand, brow furrowed, painstaking, as though it were a great burden to him, and he must make her feel the weight of every dollar.

Yet she'd stood up to Dad when he'd protested that the fair was rife with base and vile pleasures of the flesh. "Oh come on, Paul," she'd said, "loosen up." Dad's name was Herbert, not Paul. But she called him Paul, as in Apostle Paul, on those occasions she chastised him for being too rigid.

Sullen, heaving a great many sighs, he'd stuck his best cowboy hat on his head, the brown suede Stetson I'd bought him three Christmases back. He'd driven us over an hour, from our small town of Jasper, Missouri, to Springfield, where the Assemblies of God churches rose up, splendid mountains of holiness.

Mom watched me with such worried, solicitous hope, I couldn't bear to tell her the truth.

I wasn't having fun.

I was trying not to die.

Six months ago, menstrual bleeding had crept into my life, thief-like. Ever since, I'd devoted a great deal of time to trying to stop "IT." Mom had attempted to help me, plying me with daily shots of straight lemon juice. She swore by it, said it had worked for her, postponing "IT" until she was married at eighteen, and ready for babies. She also had me run daily laps, more and more of them, pushing myself to the brink of unconsciousness. When my period kept showing up, despite these efforts, I'd poured feverish energy into hiding "IT" from Dad.

And trying not to die.

I had no idea that along with cramps, mood swings, breast pain, and indigestion, one would also, in the throes of the menstrual cycle, have to do battle with Death. Why didn't the booklets tell you? I hadn't been at all prepared.

Now, Death snuck up on me in the middle of the night, so that I woke, thrashing and flailing and gasping, throwing my blankets helter skelter, pummeling the pillow, crying out, saliva dropping from my mouth in big wet globs. Mom, running down the hallway, kneeling bedside, praying in tongues, beseeching Yahweh.

Mom had no idea the true nature of my peril. She feared I'd developed asthma. She wanted to take me to Pastor Jerry for consultation, and spiritual healing. I'd begged her no, no, please no. The same way I'd begged her, when I woke to those terrible rusty stains on my underwear, not to tell Dad. I dreaded Pastor Jerry discovering Death in me, the way I dreaded Dad discovering IT.

Death and Menstruation.

They both snuck up on you, ruining an otherwise good day.

I'd been happy the first few hours at the fair. During the agricultural show, I'd admired the husky calves and nimble prize-winning goats. In the art tent, I'd smiled, watching a judge hang a blue ribbon on a gigantic oil painting of an apple pie slice. The painting deserved that ribbon. The apples falling out of that pie just glistened.

But out here on the Midway, the rush, the noise, the shrieks, the smells, thick with ghastly light, too much, too bright, too fast. Death crept into my arms, turning them leaden. I shook them. And again, Mom eyed me. The harder she looked, the shallower my breaths. I wished she'd stop looking and yet, was also afraid that she'd stop. She said, "What is it, baby? Does your boo-boo hurt? Do you need to rest? Herbert, Claudette's knee!"

Dad looked over his shoulder, and slowed.

Marguerite looked over hers, and scowled.

How could she justify being so hateful? After all, my limp, my mangled knee now mummified in thick bandages, was her fault.

Two days before, my sister had nearly killed me, showing off for some boy.

Mom took me by the hand, leading me toward a bench. Marguerite rolled her eyes, and I could hear her. *Mommy's little girl*. The words she spat at me, in our worst brawls.

One of the Carnies leapt out. Sweeping his arms toward Marguerite, he swiveled to Dad. "Sir, you wanna win a prize for your beautiful daughter?" He held aloft a garish pink-furred teddy bear with shiny red hearts for eyes.

"No," Dad said. And again. "No." He waved the man away.

Marguerite glanced at Dad. She bit her lip, and her eyes fell.

We walked away, and the Carnie yelled after us. "Aww, don't be sad, doll! You're gorgeous! Come back. I'll win the bear for ya!" Mom shook her head, screwed up her face. Mom said, male attention fed Marguerite's sinful, prideful nature. That's why the accident had occurred. It was wrong, Mom said, wrong and unjust, that *I'd* been the one hurt.

Marguerite halted, and I nearly walked into her. She lifted her face. "Oh." The way she said it, with hushed wonder. I thought of last Christmas, she and I, decorating the tree together. The moment our hands overlapped as

we placed the star at the top. The way Marguerite had stepped back, lifting her eyes to take in the fullness of our creation. Now, I looked up alongside her, to the evening sky, deep dark blue, full of cloud puffs. Against that sky, the Ferris wheel turned. Lit up, full of people, a whole spinning city.

"Claudette!" Mom bounced up and down. She grabbed my elbow, shook. "Aw, baby, you want to ride? You want to ride the Ferris wheel?"

Truth be told, I didn't. Not one bit.

Mom swiveled to Marguerite. "Your sister wants to ride the Ferris wheel. Go ride the Ferris wheel with your sister!"

Marguerite turned and walked away, taking her place in line.

Mom's lip curled. "Why that little snot. Who does she think she is?"

"I'll go," I said, quickly. "Don't worry, Mom. I'll go."

"Oh, hooray! Have fun, dolly." Mom took my face between her hands, kissed both my cheeks, loud smacks. "Love you!" As I limped off, she waved and waved. She stood on tiptoe, waving. Like I was boarding a steamship across the Atlantic, who knew when she'd see me again.

I got behind Marguerite in line. She kept her back to me. The Ferris wheel slowed and slowed. But when I closed my eyes, it spun and spun, lights blurring into a terrible broken rainbow.

Opening my eyes, I tried to breathe evenly. I studied Marguerite's hair, flowing down, a cascade of honeyed curls, kissing her hips. Pastor Jerry didn't force the women in our church to grow their hair long, like the Apostolic Pentecostal churches. But he did preach that Yahweh reveled in a woman's hair. "It is a fine thing," he'd said more than once to Marguerite, "yes, surely a fine thing, to see a woman so young, growing her hair long, for the Glory of Yahweh." I could see that it took everything in him, not to reach out and touch her luxury of curls, his hands white-knuckling the Bible.

The line moved, and we moved. My throat tightened. I turned, and there she was, still there. Mom blew me luxurious kisses, her blonde pigtails swinging, one suspender strap of her pink denim romper, falling off her shoulder. Dad kept his head down, fussed with the video camera. He'd grown quiet around me lately, avoided my eyes. Sometimes I wondered if Mom had broken her promise. If she'd told Dad about what had happened to me. About IT.

"Ouch!" Marguerite shrieked. "Watch it, Claudette!"

I'd stepped on my sister's heel, pulling her shoe half off.

"Ow, ow, ow." Marguerite hopped about, her face wrenched, contorted, like I'd shot her. She made a whole award-winning production out of it, and I knew why.

The boy who took our tickets was tan and lithe, yet well-muscled, with loads of curly black hair. He grimaced in sympathy. "Shoot," he said.

"Ouch. You okay, girl?" He looked my sister up and down, then skewered me with a glance. I'd committed the unforgivable sin, stepping on the heel of a Goddess.

Face burning with shame, I pointed to my knee, the big bandage wrapped round and round. "See that?" I said. "*She* did that!"

Marguerite's back stiffened. She marched off, boarding the ride without me.

I climbed after her into a pink cart. She scooted far from me as she could, scrunching herself into the corner. Mom said that Marguerite had the Spirits of Vanity and Drama. At Shiloh Silo, we believed sins were more than bad thoughts, or bad deeds. Sins were evil spirits that latched on, clung to your weakest places, like ticks. I side-eyed my sister. All I could see clinging to her was her dress. Marguerite and I wore nearly matching sun dresses. Mom had made them for us at her sewing machine. Mine white, with little blue flowers, Marguerite's pink, with little yellow flowers. On Marguerite, the dress transformed into an entirely different creature. She snapped, "Quit staring, you perv!" Crossing her arms over her chest. "Grow your own boobs."

"I don't want them," I snapped back. "You can have them *all*." I stuck out my tongue.

Our cart lifted, then stopped. An elderly couple boarded the cart below us, the neon lights of the ride flickering, shifting atop their sheen of silver hair. Marguerite and I dangled, not too far from the ground. Not too far yet, to change one's mind. I wanted off. I blinked back tears, could hear Carrie and Rachael laughing at me, howling, their fists pounding knees. *Wimpy*, they'd cry, *you could never brave the Baptist Barn Swing*. I danced my feet up and down. "I want off!"

Marguerite leaned in, sneering. "BABYYYYYY!" She yelled in my face.

I tried to stomp her foot, but she moved away fast, laughing.

"Stop being so mean!"

"Mean, mean, mean." Marguerite mocked, wagging her head. We lifted again, and stopped, letting more passengers on. We swung now, suspended in the middle, between the bottom and the top. My chest squeezed. My breathing labored. Instead of a heartbeat, static, a buzzing blur. Then, the numbness. Creeping stealthy, heavy, into my toes, my ankles, my calves. Death, trying to take me, inch by inch. I squeezed my eyes shut, focused on my wounded knee, tried to contact my pulse, a tiny drumbeat within the pain. If I felt it, I would know, I was still alive.

Our car rose up and up, gaining momentum. Marguerite laughed and clapped.

Then we stopped. This time with a jerk, and a loud mechanical clunk. Silence fell.

"Oh my gosh!" Marguerite leaned and twisted. I refused to open my eyes, but I heard it, the rusty grind of metal. "We're at the top, Claudette. The tippy top. Like the star on the Christmas tree…" Her voice trailed off, and then, "Claudette. What's wrong with your hands?"

I fluttered my eyes open, long enough to see my hands. They hung in the air, suspended like us. But my fingers. My fingers! They'd folded inward, fingertips frozen together, forming a steeple of sorts. I tried to wiggle them. I couldn't. They wouldn't budge. "They're paralyzed!" I cried.

"Your fingers? Your fingers are paralyzed?" Marguerite giggled, a little snort attached.

"It's not funny!" I flapped my hands at her, wild.

"You know what they look like? Crawdad hands." She made pinching motions in front of my face, still laughing.

"Stop it. Stop, Marguerite. I'm scared."

"Or that doll we had. Remember that doll? The plastic one with the movable fingers. But then she got old, and her fingers locked. Remember that?"

I moaned, sank down in the cart. "Help me, please. Don't let me die, Marguerite."

She grew silent. I felt her studying me.

Then, in one quick motion, she grabbed one of my hands. She worked to pry my fingers apart. They moved right back into place. "I've never seen anything like it." Her voice, hushed, as she let my hand go.

"It's Death," I confessed. "It's rigor mortis in my hands."

"What, Claudette? What did you say?"

"It started when I got my period."

"What started?"

"*Death*." I sobbed. "I got my period and now, I'm *dying*, Marguerite."

After a moment, my sister said, "Wow. Freud would have a heyday with you."

My gut boiled. Leave it to my sister to make fun of me while I died, finger by finger, at the top of the Ferris Wheel. Who was Freud? One of those Worldly authors she read now that she'd graduated from Home-school Herd. She didn't have me fooled. I knew exactly what she was reading, under the covers, late at night. Not the Bible. Not Yahweh-approved literature. No, my sister was indulging in what Pastor Jerry called *spiritual pornography*. Books penned by Devil-inflamed female writers. Sorceresses, Pastor Jerry called them, writing books with titles like *Madwoman in the Attic*, on the cover a

drawing of a woman's eye, an evil red eye, peering through a keyhole. I'd found that very book, stuffed deep inside Marguerite's pillowcase!

Picturing that terrible eye, a dream, a recurring dream from childhood, surfaced in my mind. I hadn't thought of the dream in years. In the dream, I wore a Pharaoh's elaborate striped head dress over my curls. In the dream, I stood over Marguerite while she played in our sand box, packing the spaces of a dented old aluminum cupcake tin. I yelled, and she looked up at me. I brandished a stick. A common stick, fallen from one of our backyard trees. Yet, my sister's face wrenched with shock, then terror. She dropped the cupcake tin, sand spilling all over her lap.

What harm could I cause with a little stick? Oh, I wanted to be done with this ride. I called out, stomping my feet, "Why aren't we moving? What's wrong? What's happening?"

The riders below shouted up to us. I couldn't make out what they said. Marguerite translated. "The ride broke. We're stuck up here."

"No! No!" I waved my frozen hands in the air.

"Open your eyes," Marguerite said.

I shook my head, hard. "No."

"Claudette, *we're* the ones. We're the ones at the top."

"I don't want to!"

Marguerite said, "I'll tell you what I see. I see the whole fairground, Claudette, shimmering, glistening, moving. *Alive*."

"Stop," I begged. "Please stop telling me."

"The lights, they look like stars. Not pinned to the sky, no. Stars, spilled loose, scattered and moving, blazing bright, all over the ground."

"Oh stop. I beg you."

"Oh, I see them! There they are. Mom and Dad." Her voice grew quiet, solemn. "Mom's hair is luminous, shining almost white. Dad's cowboy hat, his video camera. But look at them. so far away, they don't even look real."

I couldn't breathe. I gasped for air. Any moment, I'd be extinguished.

Marguerite said: "Did you know Pastor Jerry performed an exorcism on me?"

My heart lurched into life. My mouth went dry.

"Mom made me, after the fight. The one in the kitchen. You were there."

Was I? I was sitting at the kitchen table, after dinner, working on the Yahweh-approved evolution-free Biology course utilized by my Home-school Herd. Marguerite loaded the dishwasher while Mom wiped down the stove. The radio was on, oldie's playing, some fun fifties song that sometimes

inspired Mom to break out dancing, doing The Twist. Sometimes we'd dance with her, Marguerite and I, and even Dad would watch from the entryway, with a smile. But they weren't dancing, suddenly they were at each other, Mom and Marguerite, hissing and spitting, screaming like two feral cats. Mom's arms flew out, shoving Marguerite's breasts. Marguerite, flailing, falling backward. The crash and clatter of the open dishwasher. Marguerite, sprawling on the floor, midst the clack and clatter of dirty forks and spoons tap-dancing on the tile. Was it real? I couldn't tell.

Marguerite said: "Pastor Jerry detected three spirits on me. Vanity, Rebellion, and Lust. He said the Spirit of Lust is the vilest, and is attached to my hair. He grabbed my curls, each side of my head, and pulled me right into his crotch, there in the church. He cried, said the Spirit of Lust in my hair had tempted him, tried to tear him from Yahweh. He shook me and shook me..." Her voice broke. "Mom and Dad just watched. Afterward, Dad wouldn't look at me. And on the ride home, Mom hissed, *I knew it. I knew you were bad*."

My heart beat so hard now, there was no denying I was alive.

Marguerite said: "Mom's turned you against me."

A breeze kicked up. Our cart creak creaked, and my skin crawled. Mom once had a nickname for my sister. I remembered all of us sitting together on the porch, Mom calling out, *Stinky Feet Marguerite!* Marguerite, little then, had crossed her arms. *I don't like that, stop*. Mom had elbowed me, and I'd joined in. *Stinky Feet Marguerite!* both of us singing it, a relentless chorus. Marguerite blinking, blinking, then sobbing, shaking.

Marguerite said: "Mom named us after her dolls. I heard her tell Sister Morris over coffee. She said, *My childhood dolls were named Marguerite and Claudette. My Dad got them for me. They were his make up gift, after he'd gone on a drunk and beaten me bloody. My mother told me the dolls were expensive, from France. Maybe she was lying, she often did, and I believed her. I bathed them and brushed their hair. I made their dresses by hand at the sewing machine. No one took care of me like that. No one. Claudette was the good one, obedient and pure. I gave her candy and wagon rides. Marguerite was the bad one, dirty and vain. I stripped off her nice clothes, made her sit naked, face pressed to the wall*."

We were forbidden to eavesdrop on Mom's coffee dates. She'd warned Marguerite and I, time and again. Stay in your rooms, lock the doors, don't come out.

Marguerite said: "Are we real, Claudette? Do you know if we're real?"

I had a strange memory. Mom bringing us to the fair in an old-time buggy. Mom in pigtails, standing in line for the Ferris wheel, Marguerite

clutched under her arm, me, pressed close to her chest. Mom insisting, to the boy with dark, curly hair, that her dolls be allowed to ride together. Her foot stomping, her pigtails swinging. I broke into a sweat. But it wasn't a memory! I knew I was real. When Marguerite swerved, and knocked me off my bike, I'd slid down the asphalt, and there'd been blood, hadn't there? Blood, so much of it. Like with IT. I wanted off this ride. I shook and shook my hands, fingertips still locked together.

Marguerite said: "Claudette, we have to find out if we're real. We have to try. But we'll always be alone. That's the thing, Claudette. That's what I know, and what you have to know. We'll never feel real, and the world will never understand us. We'll only have each other. Maybe."

Maybe.

And then: "Claudette. The accident was *your* fault."

I sat straight up. Our cart rocked.

Marguerite said: "We were at the park, riding bikes. We were having fun, laughing together. Then we started downhill, going fast, then faster. Our hair blew back. We shrieked. You saw Mom. You waved. She ignored you, wouldn't look. You called out, loud, then louder. You stood up, waving and calling for her. Finally, she looked. That's when the race started. You hunched over your handlebars. You wanted to beat me, and you wanted Mom to watch. When I got ahead, you swerved, Claudette."

I shook my head, back and forth, back and forth.

"Yes, you did, Claudette. You swerved into me, and our gears caught. You wanted to hurt me. The accident was *your* fault."

Her voice, hard and sure as a bead.

A *thunk!* our cart jerked back. We both gasped.

Marguerite said: "You're a damn chicken!"

Another deep mechanical growl, a shudder from the engine.

Marguerite said: "You're not dying, Claudette. You're growing up. It's your turn now. You'll become the bad doll. She'll throw you naked in the corner. And he won't want to win you a prize at the fair."

The moon froze.

The wheel moved.

Our petite pink cart pushed backward and fell. Rose and fell. Again and again, a dizzying spin. Our hair blew around our faces, into our mouths, and we laughed. Marguerite and I, we laughed, and I listened to it, like a song I'd forgotten. I did not open my eyes. I only felt. The air and the motion, the up, the down, the hot tears crawling, fierce as warriors into battle, down my neck.

Marguerite said: "Your hands! Claudette, your hands!"

I wiggled my fingers. They were free. I danced them around as we dipped and rose.

Marguerite said: "Open your eyes, Claudette. Look, look!"

I didn't want to look. I only wanted to *feel* the wheel, and God, whooshing through me.

Little by little we slowed, then stopped, and Marguerite said, "One last time, at the top. Open them, Claudette. Just once."

And I did.

Just seconds to see, to take in.

I twisted this way and that, filling my eyes, my sight. The world below, all its strange and terrible cities, people, and dreams, spelled out in little lights. *Spilled stars*. Marguerite took one of my hands in her own. She twined her fingers with mine. "You're alive," she said. "See?"

We shook our hands, our two clasped hands, high in the air.

Then down, falling to earth, where everything was large again. The stars so near, so bright, they burned.

We climbed off our petite pink cart. Our fingers parted ways.

"Oh, what happened, baby?" Mom gathered me up. She kissed my cheeks, one, then the other, again and again. "Were you stuck, Claudette? Oh, my little girl, I was so scared. Were you stuck up there, my darling?"

Dad was proud, he'd caught it all on tape, the whole crisis.

Later, at home, we'd gather in the living room to watch. Marguerite and I, studying intently, the top. Had they found us up there? Had they heard? Mom's voice, demanding in the background, "Where are they, Herbert? Do you see them? Find them! Zoom in!"

But before that, we'd walk the fairgrounds, one last time.

Dad wanted to see the tractor pull, and when Mom told him go, he'd splinter away.

A group of Marguerite's friends would wander by. I wouldn't recognize them from church. She'd run after them, curls flying behind.

Mom would say, "Why, look at her. Just look at her go."

I would look. And I would see my sister's yearning. The way she lagged behind the others, yet tried to keep up, tossing her curls, laughing loud. Her loneliness, and desire, carving a hole in my chest.

For a moment, I would forget. "Mom, can we go back? I want to win that bear."

Mom would draw away, look at me hard. "That bear? What bear?" And then, "That ugly pink thing, you mean?" Her eyes would narrow. "For your *sister*? The one who made you crash? Who almost killed you? Who abandoned you, running off with her friends? Who left you here in the dust? Who could care less? Who will *always* leave you?"

The way her hands curled into fists. The way her nostrils flared. Her pigtails swinging.

I would say: “No, Mom. Not for her. For *you*.”

Her angry sneer would give way to a smile. And I would see that dream. The rest of it, unfold. I was only a child in a Pharaoh’s head dress, standing over Marguerite with a stick.

What harm could I do with a little old tree stick?

I sawed off Marguerite’s leg. Slowly, painstakingly, with the tree stick, while she writhed in the dirt. Her leg was not a plastic leg. A circle of blood appeared.

In horror, I turned to look, over my shoulder, at the Ferris wheel, rising up. I saw a small man, with a tidy white beard, flourishing a cigar, sitting cross-legged in our petite pink cart, there at the top. He waved, leaving a swirl of smoke from his cigar. I waved back. And from him I heard for the first time, something merciful, something kind.

Freud said: Down there, you are, all of you, spilled stars.

BEN GRONER III

When a Country Is a Metaphor

One could make the case that more than
anything else, this country is a road.

Not a verdigris statue in a harbor, nor
a rusty canyon plummeting a mile into

the earth, not as much as a black ribbon
of asphalt baking in June's hazy heat.

This road unrolls across flung plains,
winds through cedar forests, plunges

into chalky deserts, ascends obsidian
mountains. It proceeds from gritty

victories, past colossal failures, toward
the questions in a five-year-old's eyes.

It passes cheery small towns, ramshackle
steel mills, tangles of light-studded

metropolises, going around so many decent
people trying their best to make a living

and make love and take kind steps toward
their neighbors. The texture of this road

shifts with every town and turn and mile;
it isn't tied to the past, but it hasn't

forgotten where it came from; it doesn't
fear the future, but it hasn't yet arrived.

Flying down such a highway, I am
unfettered from everything stationary,

even my own past, am as malleable as
a ridgeline curve, able to divert course,

or press the pedal of longing down so far
I rocket toward the seam of the horizon,

beyond even its infinite edge. Yet as
I sense this seeming endlessness can't

be truly endless, I glance over at her—and
one deep breath later we're belting out a

Waylon Jennings tune in unison, swaying
and smiling, the windows rolled down

letting steel guitar jangle out past brown
towers of Iowa corn soaked in the blue

and sun and clouds that are here now and
won't be here again, pavement rumbling

beneath the tires, the world outside
rushing by, the sky and stalks and song

drenched in gladness, going on forever.

RICH GLINNEN

Ticking and Turning

Lately the baby has been turning
Like a clock's minute hand

I will lay her neatly in the crib,
But return to feet
Tangled in the slats
And a hairier head
Angled towards a corner

I suppose next week
She will tick with the ferocity
Of a second hand
And rotate before my eyes

And just when I think
Time can't go any faster,
She will break barriers
And rise like a sundial.

CORDELIA HANEMANN

Medusa by Matchlight

Come to the house by the circuitous path,
round the frozen pond, not knowing
if it will hold beneath sheer sky spare moon.
Nothing moves save the click of iced branches
asway under their own weight.

Return to face Mother, gone a long time,
and survive. Soundless shadows deep in snow
wait in scratched light. Its momentary flash
barely illuminates the black sheet glass
and the face etched there, formed not of air
or thought, the hissing hair at the vacant window.

Through the door, some dead scene alive again
or never dead, in dust that does not rise
even as breath blows the matchlight's
little burst of fire that thus expires
leaving in charred remains, cold of bone
flesh, mind and heart, the turn to stone.

Always this place waits   now brighter
now dark   framed and shrouded in mist

KENDALL KLYM

Reading Lint

The summer I turned fifteen, my mother and father packed me away to go live with my Aunt Lis. This was well before cell phones and computer games—a time when kids roamed freely on their bikes, and TV was something you watched when the weather was bad. I had just grown my first whisker, right through the middle of a pimple, and was bored with being an underweight only child picked on at school and cast aside by parents. I was to stay with my aunt until the week before school started—no reason given. Both Mom and Dad said I'd be happier living on a farm with animals, and I believed them. I'd always loved dogs and cats, even though I didn't have any. I also loved my parents but accepted that they were never the nurturing kind. Yet they always provided for me. They gave me my own room and bathroom and took time to teach me at an early age how to do laundry and cook food. They also let me stay overnight with my friend Max, whose mother made us grilled cheese sandwiches we used to eat while playing Hot Wheels on the back patio. Max was also an only child. But unlike me, he weighed too much. Both of us were rejects at our suburban school.

We had big summer plans to build a fort, which was going to be made of scrap wood from Max's father's workshop and junk that other people threw away. "Always carry a rope": that was our motto, which worked to our advantage, when dumpsters were greasy and slick. We were both disappointed when I announced my unexpected departure. But as much as I liked being with Max—he had bunk beds—I felt awkward around his parents. They loved to ask questions that made me feel uncomfortable. It's not that the questions were inappropriate; I just didn't know how to answer, and, by the end of my visits, I felt like my family was abnormal. Also, Max's parents' laundry room had a strange smell that made *me* feel strange. Needless to say, I was always glad to return to my own space.

In the upstairs hallway leading to my bedroom hung a line of portraits, including that of Lisette Morreaux, my mother's half-sister. My grandmother divorced Aunt Lis's father, Henri from Québec, before marrying Grandpap Elmer. My aunt never married. Often, when I walked past her portrait, I paused to look into her gray-green eyes. Unlike the other photos, which featured drawn faces with deadpan expressions, Aunt Lis's portrait portrayed a solid countenance, and her expression was one of prominence.

She had short obsidian hair with sideburns that came to a perfect point. Her lips were full and eyebrows arching. My father said she was strange. My mother said little about her, unless asked, and even then, she was reticent. For the longest time, all I knew about Aunt Lis was that she was single, traveled a lot, and cut her own hair. Every now and then, when I felt irritated or lonely, I'd stop and look at Aunt Lis's portrait and wonder if she and I, despite our lack of physical resemblance, might have something in common.

According to my mother, Aunt Lis lived alone in an old brick farmhouse in the middle of nowhere. For a living, she baked bread for high-end bakeries in the cities—dense and dark: European style. She also rented land to tenant farmers, who raised corn and soy. According to my father, Aunt Lis was "more than comfortable, considering her extensive and extravagant trips." That's how I knew her—by the postcards she sent from places I'd never heard of, like Dubrovnik, Machu Picchu, and the Magdalene Islands. When my parents were finished looking at the cards, I put them in the secret drawer of an old desk in the attic—a place I used to hide out during fights.

The older I became the more my parents argued—usually about money, particularly as it related to me. My mother said I was smart enough to earn a college scholarship, but my father wasn't so sure. Both had decided—probably at my birth—that I would go away to a public university, in-state. But tuitions were on the rise, while their salaries remained stable. Neither believed in college loans. Mom and Dad also argued about little things, such as how to park the cars in the driveway and what to eat for dinner. Considering they both worked for the same accounting firm, I was convinced they spent too much time together. Yet they had few friends and no real hobbies. On one hand, they belonged together, and on another, they didn't.

Little was said about the decision to ship me off to my aunt's, and I was looking forward to a change of pace, as long as I could bring my bike. "By all means," barked my father, who said he could use the garage space taken up by my ten-speed. I liked the idea of spending the summer in the country, which, I figured, had a lot more places to explore than the same old neighborhood, with its unimaginative ranch houses and tacky strip mall. I pictured Aunt Lis's farm a vast and sweeping space, where I could ride around without worrying about cars or pedestrians. The place would be full of cats and dogs and cows and pigs I could love and take care of. Because of my father's allergies, no animals were allowed in my parents' house. The closest thing to a pet that I owned was a miniature barrel cactus I wrapped in tin foil to take with me because I knew no one would water it while I was gone. Once, when water from the tray below the cactus dripped onto the

floor, my mother yelled at me. It's interesting—the little things we remember decades later.

While it may seem like my parents were nothing but petty misanthropes who wanted to get rid of me as soon as possible, that wasn't true. There were times we did things together and enjoyed each other's company. The memories of polishing the cars with my father and repapering the kitchen shelves with my mother will never leave me. There were also times my parents did things for me, like helping with a science project and giving me a birthday picnic in the park. Unfortunately, such experiences dwindled to nothing, as my mother and father's struggling marriage took precedence.

It was a rainy afternoon, when Mom drove me two hours and fifteen minutes to Aunt Lis's farm. Neither of us said much. From the strained expression on my mother's face, I could tell she didn't want to talk, especially when she knew what was on my mind. Max had just stayed with us for a week, while his parents were going through a divorce. His mother and father split up in the early spring, after someone broke into their house through the laundry-room door and stole the TV and stereo. When Max left, I asked Mom several times about her relationship with Dad. She always changed the subject. The one time I asked my father, he ended up coughing, and a terrible smell came out of his mouth. Halfway to Aunt Lis's, I realized how much I'd miss Max. During a late-winter sleepover at his place, we rode our bikes to a park with woods and hiked until it started snowing. On our way home, there was a whiteout. In order to keep from losing each other in the storm, Max tied a piece of rope around my waist and connected it to his. We walked our bikes on the side of the road in single file to avoid getting run over. The plows had yet to show up, and traffic was almost nonexistent. To keep on track, we dug through the snow every few seconds to find the curb. That was my idea. The experience was exciting but scary. When I fell, Max helped me up and said: "Don't worry; I'll take care of you," and he did. We arrived at his house just before dark. His parents had been so worried that they stopped letting us see each other for a month. Once settled at Aunt Lis's, I would figure a way for Max to come and stay.

The roads grew smaller as Mom and I drove deeper into the country. When I looked out the window, all I could see was flat farmland, with rounded clusters of trees flanking the low, gray horizon. At some point, I started to doze. When I heard the swish of grass caressing chassis, I opened my eyes and asked my mother if she had made a wrong turn. "Not much further," she said. At this point, we couldn't have been going more than five miles an hour. The station wagon wallowed along two parallel ruts in the

mud, separated by a crown of spring vegetation. A few minutes later, Mom stopped the car and pointed to a house. She told me to be nice to my aunt and said she'd pick me up at the end of August. The moment my bike, knapsack, and I were out of the way, she backed up, turned around, and went home.

* * *

Despite the weather, Aunt Lis was waiting for me on the porch swing—a gray longhaired cat on her lap and a tabby lounging on one of the steps. Both ran away when I approached, and my aunt stood up and offered her hand. "You look like a man on a long and solitary journey," she said, as we shook formally. "May I offer you shelter, as you rest from your trip?" When I failed to answer, she winked and motioned for me to follow. On our way into the house, she told me I must learn to tread lightly. "Later on, I might be in the mood for layer cake, and we need to be careful how we move around, while it's in the oven." When I promised to walk softly, she offered me a chair at the kitchen table. "What about you? Are you interested in cake?" Not sure what to say, I shrugged my shoulders. At the table, she talked for at least an hour about living in the country—how much she liked it, especially the people. "I enjoy people everywhere, which is why I love to travel." Her voice was soft yet full of flavor, kind of like the cake we made later that afternoon—layered with fluffy white frosting, fresh coconut she let me crack with a hammer, and pineapple we both peeled and chopped. When she spoke, I forgot she was two years older than my mother. Depending on the circumstances and conversation, my aunt morphed from middle-aged to young. Her face had few wrinkles, and sometimes, when she stood up from a chair, she'd bounce. Other times, she'd take her time, as if she were about to look both ways before crossing a street.

My summer started out with exploring the bottomlands around the farm and catching crayfish in the creek—there were no kids to be found, and the one time I called Max, his mother said he went away to camp. In the absence of my only friend, I grew close to my aunt. She was different from any adult I had ever met, never asking, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" or "What's your favorite sport?" Most importantly, she never bothered me about girls or made jokes about my getting married "before you know it." Instead, she wanted to know my opinion about things that nobody talks about, even to this day. At the end of my first week, she sat me down at her round mahogany dining-room table and said, "What would you do, if you met and ended up liking someone who didn't speak a word of English?" When I said I didn't know, we spent the next hour playing a game, in which she spoke only French and gesticulated wildly. Aunt Lis's father had moved

back to Québec, after my grandmother divorced him. When my aunt visited, he taught her French. Thanks to the game, I learned to speak a few words of a foreign language. I also learned how to make gestures to indicate that I'm hungry, thirsty, and have to go to the bathroom. My aunt and I both laughed a great deal. Then she invited me to see her back room, kept under lock and key and out of bounds up until then. "This is where I see clients," she said, "and this afternoon, I'm having one, so I want you to be on your best behavior."

That's when I learned about my aunt's secret job—the one she had never mentioned to my parents. Aunt Lis told people's fortunes by reading their laundry lint. Clients came from all over the state and beyond to experience her one-of-a-kind services. No one, including city people, seemed to mind the trek over rutted mud to have their lives revealed from the laundered remnants of their clothes, sweat, and skin. In her heyday, both women and men would show up with a handful of the fluffy stuff, straight from the dryer, and she'd warn them of an infestation of grasshoppers, suggest they postpone a trip to Florida and go to the doctor, tell them to get a new tractor before the next harvest. When they followed her advice, they were thankful, and when they didn't, they were sorry.

Her backroom, where the hour-long readings occurred, was decorated with ribbons and trophies from the county fair, where she'd won prizes for her cakes, breads, preserves, and honey. On the east wall was a framed antique poster featuring the 1972 MayPool Washer-Dryer Combo, green-gold in color and celebrated for its reliability and oversized lint catcher. More than a passing tribute, the poster signified my aunt's most prized possession: the eponymous contraption, in working order and located on the opposite end of the house. As much as the backroom was homey, it also exuded a sense of propriety. Facing a large picture window was a Louis XV blood-red sofa, where clients were asked to sit. Aunt Lis settled on an Amish ladder chair atop a plush red cushion that matched the sofa. Between the chair and sofa was an oak coffee table, also antique, with ball-and-claw feet. Unless the sun was out, lighting remained dim, giving the room a sepia tone.

When Aunt Lis performed readings, her techniques were slow and methodic. Once the client was comfortable, she tossed the lint high in the air. A champion horseshoe thrower, she would never miss the target, which was a commemorative bowl from the county fair, featuring a picture of cattle feeding from a trough. Why she chose that bowl, I was never sure, but not too long ago, I came across an old article, claiming a local champion steer had been injected with corn oil to beef up its muscles and ended up disqualified

from a competition at the fair. The commemorative bowl was dated the same year as the article. When the lint landed, Aunt Lis closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and dipped her nose into the bowl. For about thirty seconds, she sniffed the lint. The first time I watched, I had to leave the room because her sniffing reminded me of a pig, and I started to laugh. That's the only time Aunt Lis ever yelled at me. I didn't get to view the rest of the reading and was banned from the room.

After I presented her with a written apology, she allowed me to come back—on probation, of course. The first full reading I experienced was with a woman of about twenty, who arrived unexpectedly at the front door and said she had driven 200 miles. She had long dyed blond hair and a little too much makeup. For a moment, I pictured her an actress, but not the sort you'd see in the movies or on TV because she had a big nose and crooked teeth. "My sister came to you once, a long time ago," said the woman. "You may not remember, but you helped her find a lost bracelet, and now I need your help." Aunt Lis, standing inside the screen door, said her readings have led to the retrieval of many lost bracelets, and she only saw clients by appointment. The woman proceeded to remove a fist-sized pile of lint from her pocket, which flew out of her hands and landed on the rain-soaked porch. Then she burst into tears, and my aunt invited her in. As soon as the woman stepped into the house, I smelled, very faintly, the scent of a dog—something with lots of fur, I imagined, and whispered so to my aunt.

Seated at the kitchen table sipping a cup of homegrown herbal tea, the woman stopped crying, and Aunt Lis introduced me as her "assistant-in-training." "I'd be happy to perform a reading, as long as this young man is allowed to observe." The woman agreed, and we moved to the back room. Barely seated on the blood-red couch, the woman said: "Me and Skip had a fight, and he left. I just need to know if he's coming back." When my aunt asked for a description, the woman said Skip was short with long hair. "Some of it's dark, and other parts are lighter." After tossing and smelling the lint, Aunt Lis picked it up and separated the fibers. This was my favorite part of that and every subsequent reading I had the privilege to experience. In the midst of scrutinizing each strand, she developed the most euphoric expression I've ever seen on a living human face, no matter who the client or what the circumstances. Often it took quite a while for her to come out of her trance, or whatever you wish to call it, and speak. When she did, her tone was sonorous yet compassionate. Not so this time. She broke the silence with a forceful announcement. "Skip is a dog; isn't he?" The woman reacted with a jolt. She admitted that Skip was a Shetland sheepdog, and he had not gone missing. Then she bowed her head and apologized. "A friend

of mine whose mother came to you a while back, dared me to try and slip you up." When the woman stood up to leave, Aunt Lis told her to sit down. "You asked for a reading, and you're going to get one, whether you like it or not." At that point, my aunt pulled out a magnifying glass and examined the lint. Then she turned to the woman and said: "Skip gets around. He's been spending time with a lady beagle, who's going to have puppies." She told the woman that the friend who dared her wasn't much of a friend and would end up betraying her, if the two continued to spend time together. After that, my aunt said the reading was over.

Tears streaming down the woman's face, she said she was sorry she had doubted my aunt and her profession. "How do you do it—tell so much about a person's life from junk that lands in the dryer?" Aunt Lis told the woman that lint was not junk. Then she nodded my way and asked me to speak. Taken aback yet pleased that I had sensed the presence of dog fur in the woman's lint, I cleared my throat. Then I said, "Miss Morreaux never reveals her secrets, not even to her assistants." When the woman took out some cash, Aunt Lis pushed her hand away. "Instead of money, I want the pick of the litter. If you ask Skip, he'll show you where his wife lives." The woman agreed. Near the end of the summer, she showed up with a Sheltie-beagle mix I named Crispy because he snatched up a piece of toast—Aunt Lis's famous dark bread—that fell out of my hand onto the kitchen floor.

Of course not all of my aunt's readings were strange or had a happy ending, but no matter what the outcome, she always appeared transformed. Her expression was one of reverie—a sense of muted elation, in which her eyes grew bigger with wonderment, as if she had discovered a beautiful secret she couldn't wait to share. During all the times I observed a reading, and there were many, no one walked away upset. Most of her regular customers offered tips or gifts to express their appreciation. A farmer she had told to check his milking machines ended up returning the same day with a giant chunk of cheddar. He said Aunt Lis saved his cows and his dairy. "This is the least I can give you."

Needless to say, Aunt Lis was well liked in her community. Even some of the local church ladies, who made her swear to secrecy about their visiting a fortuneteller, warmed up to her. She was always easygoing, except when someone or something interrupted her work. I remember a time when a summer storm came up, and she insisted a client remain seated through screaming tornado sirens. "Funnel won't touch down anywhere near," she had said. "Old red barn ready to fall apart will be the only casualty." The next day, when the local news confirmed her prediction with footage of the demolished structure, Aunt Lis ended up with three new clients. Her only method of advertisement was word of mouth.

* * *

At the end of the summer, my parents announced that they were not getting a divorce. However, my father had been diagnosed with stomach cancer—completely unexpected, considering there was minimal pain—and would undergo a serious regimen of chemo, beginning in September. "How would you like to live with Aunt Lis for a while longer?" asked my mother. Without hesitation, I said yes. My father told me not to think that he and my mother didn't love me. "I just believe that things'll be better for us all, if you stay with your aunt a while longer." I agreed wholeheartedly. The last thing I wanted to do was return to a school, where I was persona non grata, even if Max were there to take the sting out of life. That fall, I started a new school in a country town, and on weekends, I helped organize Aunt Lis's schedule of clients. I joined Future Farmers of America (FFA) and met a few friends. Though I was hardly popular, I no longer qualified as an outcast. Aunt Lis bought me a milk cow, and I named her Maxine. Despite my slow learning curve, when it came to milking, Maxine and I bonded quickly. With Crispy by my side, offering more affection than I'd ever experienced from a living creature, life felt easier. Everything was going well, except my father had taken a leave of absence from work because the chemo made him nauseated and weak. When we came for Thanksgiving, he barely ate. Afterward, he was sick. Mom said little during the visit, and when she gave me a hug goodbye, she had tears in her eyes. We all knew my father had limited time.

After the weekend at my parents', my aunt decided to give me my first formal lint reading. It lasted two hours and ended up with me crying. Aunt Lis started out by saying: "You've been blessed or cursed—it depends on how you look at it—with a similar gift to mine. It's time you learned to use it." Then she explained that ability to smell Skip was the first solid indication of my potential. "I knew you were special, but it took a while to discover how much. I'm sorry about that." I said there was no need to be sorry. At this point, she stood up from her ladder chair, and told me: "You, my dear, are a smeller. If you hone your skill, you'll learn to smell danger, death, excitement, prosperity, and a host of other things that deep down, everybody wants to know about. Life won't be easy, but I'll do my best to help make it work out."

And she did. By the end of the year, my father was dead, and my mother went into a deep depression. When we came for a visit, she wouldn't get out of bed. Even Crispy, with his funny way of banging his tail on the floor when he was excited, couldn't cheer her up. Aunt Lis extended our stay, and I missed a week of school. To help Mom, we made fresh bread and a bunch of homemade meals we wrapped up and put in the freezer. We talked

to her boss, who said he'd grant her a temporary leave of absence and would send someone to check in with her once a week. Both Aunt Lis and I were reluctant to leave her alone. Mom died soon after. According to the death certificate, her organs stopped functioning because of lack of nutrition. In other words, she starved herself to death.

While my grief for my father had felt minimal, once Mom died, I plummeted to a state I still have trouble understanding. Part of me was ecstatic that the two people I called Mom and Dad could be together in a different world—unimpeded by work, money, or offspring. For some reason—I've never been religious—I believed and continue to believe in such a world, in which people who leave this earth are freed from their former responsibilities, allowed to pursue, without interruption, the activities that make them whole. Another part of me felt guilty for my elation, and that caused me to lose most of my newfound confidence. If it weren't for Aunt Lis, Crispy, Maxine, and a few friends, I don't know what would've happened.

In addition to giving me weekly lint readings and comforting me with words of reassurance, Aunt Lis taught me a great deal about how to live. Thanks to her, I can handle my unusual ability—I never liked the word gift, which makes me think of something tangible placed in a box and wrapped in ribbons and pretty paper. My ability wasn't, isn't, and never will be anything like that. Instead, my capacity to discern what most people can't is both ineffable and layered—fibrous and fluffy like lint. My ability is useless, if I don't share it with others. That's what Aunt Lis did, and I follow suit. Thanks to my aunt, I learned that lint isn't the only substance that lends itself to readings. I also found out that gifts or abilities come with a hefty price tag. Intimacy with another human being is almost impossible, when your senses are so acute. I remember a time just before I left for college, when I asked Aunt Lis if she had ever been in love. This was the only time she responded by changing the subject.

* * *

In my third year studying animal husbandry, I received word that Aunt Lis was dying. Weeks before the call, I had sensed something was not right—no lint reading, just a feeling. But, as one would expect, I was wrapped up in my own life. At least I saw my aunt one last time, and we got a chance to say goodbye. My grief for Aunt Lis was a lot more traditional than what I experienced from the loss of my parents—lots of crying, a tremendous feeling of heaviness, and painful wishes that I had spent more time with her: attitudes and sentiments that enabled me to define myself as human.

Aunt Lis left me the farm, which I've turned into an organic dairy with a small staff of colleagues. Though the place is not large, I'm very successful, thanks to a secret practice I learned from my aunt: after washing each of my cows, I dry her with bath towels I place in my 1972 MayPool Washer-Dryer Combo. Yep, it's still working, including the supersize lint catcher. When the towels are ready, I read my cows' lint. My bovines and I have a special bond. I sell milk, butter, and cheese to high-end restaurants and supermarkets. The only human lint I read belongs to my friends and colleagues, and I don't travel—not with a farm to take care of.

A few weeks ago, I went into my aunt's attic—I still call it that, even though the house has been mine for decades—and came across a drawer full of love letters written in French and addressed to Lisette Morreaux, all with a Québec postmark. Having taken two years of French, I was able to read them. Unbeknownst to me, Aunt Lis had met a young woman when visiting her father. She was barely fifteen, when she started her relationship, which lasted several years and was quite intimate and steamy, according to the letters. When I put them away, I thought about looking up Max. We lost touch after my mother's funeral.

RYAN HARPER

Eleutherian Mills

Descents steep the power
clustered on the Brandywine
grey stone and willow fold
south the old capital,
a scheme turned sentiment:
picnic at the millrace, dreaming
the splendid contentions
of the adverse wheel
once white in revolution

high to low the bonds mapped
from the Stargazers' Stone—
Wauwaset Valley, the antique land:
deep north, siege of cranes
lurch over fleet phantoms, the felled
elm of Shackamaxon,
the port no one can shut;
below, Christina draped half-prone
before the big house on the hill,
correctional, marooned;
east to the towers on the banks,
the new capital bulldozed
into the place of the bear;
across the widening water,
the furnaces of Salem
charging the mid-Atlantic
Mason-Dixon mainline—
the national city compiled,
peace and friendship, manufacture
of powder and light.

Today the millrace in retreat,
pocked and serried with wind

and soft sun: edge runner
ground motionless, sepia,
the rustic colonnade
of the gardens, Hagley burning
gold, Eleutherian
pastoral, factory of fire,
generation of ruin
still at the fall line.

JOSEPH HARDY

On 4th of July

our town's so small, people marching
in the Main Street parade run around
the block to keep it from ending.

We sit close enough to the fireworks
the crump and detonation of each rocket stuns
and rolls back from the hills.

We take something from erupting light
tracing the downturned bowl of night,
its long branches bending down around us.

Light spawning light spawning light
inscribing lines of afterimage, of wonder passing
to wherever wonder goes.

Here, until the last barrage and echoes fade,
without the filigree of Louie Armstrong's
Wonderful World, or claims

of America the Beautiful,
or John Philip Souza's vaulting
piccolos, we stand,

brush fallen ash from our clothes,
check each other for the holes
from embers.

MARK HENDERSON

Hercules in Fugue

It's not me, this life,
this heritage—

half victim,
half raping god;

I watch it like a show, a play.

The fit began long before
I killed the ones who I
loved the most,

and continues still;
the labors—killing monsters,
back and forth through Hell—

further separate

me from myself:
a consciousness outside

thinking more, not less.

Is that me daring

to love again—in preview

of the centaur's poisonous blood?

BRODIE LOWE

The Upper Room

He rolled off the mattress, careful to not wake Susan lying next to him in a fetal position with a body pillow between her knees. Walking sock-footed into the living room, he paused beneath the ceiling fan and stared at his lot in life.

A blue-and-white ringed rug was pinned beneath his dining room table. The same one that he once paced back and forth on in his church office while he recited sermon notes. When he was stuck on a certain passage and he didn't know it by heart, he palmed wall paneling and pressed on its smooth surface as if to even out his own mind. And when he couldn't force any remembrance out of his mouth, knowing that he would have to walk back over to the desk to look at his notes, he removed his hand and watched the condensation fade away as if witnessing traces of the paranormal evaporate. After the fifth or sixth time of going through the highlights and the illustrations, he knew it all. By then, he would remove his hand from the wall and there was no stamp of sweat there because he was no longer nervous. He knew it backwards and forwards. Those were days of purpose. Days of anticipation. Days before this morning, he thought. Before the money came into his life. Before his son stood on the front porch and told him to hold onto the money until he returned. He'd seen track marks on his arms, the same arms Matt had placed fake tattoos on, peculiar-looking elephants. And he knew that his son was in deep this time.

But Matt went and hid the money from Susan when his son ran off and hit the road in the beat-up Camaro. An unspoken truce that said, "Trust me on this one. Trust me just one more time not to screw up. And I'll be back when things cool down."

In the living room, he stared, eye level, at a nail-mounted horse collar with mirror inlay. He studied his reflection in the streaked glass and had a hard time recognizing the eyes staring back because he discerned that those eyes could never unsee the money that his son had entrusted to him.

He couldn't go back in time and change things. There was no use in thinking he could if he tried. But he ruminated on what he would do differently. He'd put up a hand earlier that morning when his son had stormed up his front porch steps and told him that if they found him with the money, he'd be graveyard dead. Matt would've told his son to stop right there and

go back where he came from with that bag of god-knows-how-much and ask somebody else to go hide it and take on that burden.

There were plenty of reasons for him to get upset about it. Because he had fought temptation longer than his son. Because he'd lived long enough to see how thoughts wormed their way into a man's brain and heart and turned into strange desires. He was about used up from turning away from things that could bring pleasure or fortune. A man's heart could only take so much, he mused. It was only so strong. Strength came from either a built-in engine reservoir from the day of birth or years of saying, "No" to opportunities of self-indulgence masked in luxury. Whichever one it was, he didn't want to wait around and find out. There was no telling how much longer it would be for him to cave on the inside and accept things for the way they were and put that money to use.

Susan still had medical bills from when she had her cervix removed so that the cancer would stop. Even with the house re-financed, the mortgage was hard to come by each month. In their earlier years of marriage, they had made promises of travelling the world together and visiting tropical islands with the same clear water and white-bleached sands they had seen in the magazines. So many promises made to one another. To eventually move away from Lincolnton. To find a pink-painted house on the shores of some Florida beach, and move in and prop their feet up on recliners while they rubbed aloe on their sunburns, laughing and blaming one another for not spreading the sun lotion evenly on their backs and shoulders.

But the money's origin was like a mixing bucket of an eccentric painter who mixed every color. It would only produce a brown-green color of confusion where blues and reds and purples could no longer be deciphered.

A four-tier shelf, crammed with books, stood next to the mirror, and he walked over to the stacked volumes and ran fingers over their spines. Hardcovers on theology and philosophy. Paperbacks on types of fowl to hunt during the right seasons. Spiral-bound cookbook collections written in pencil, handed down over the years by his mother and her mother before her. And books of poetry written by a man who once worked at a post office and left it all behind to write.

Squatting, he slid a shoe box from the bottom shelf. A dried granddaddy long leg lay shriveled on top, and he brushed it away. Removing the lid, he stuck his hand inside, grabbing hold of twenty-plus years' worth of church directories. The ball of muscle at the base of his thumb cramped a little as he tried keeping them together in one grip, but their slick covers were too much, and they fell from his grasp just as he freed them from the box. They skittered across the hardwood floor, fanned out.

He flipped through the directories from the eighties and recognized faces he had long forgotten. Faces who pulled him aside after services and told him they needed help kicking bad habits. Faces who told him they knew exactly who it was that stole from them and they were about to go get what was theirs if he didn't tell them another way around it. Faces who asked him what to do about their cheating spouses. Faces who looked to him for all the answers in all the gray areas of their lives. He wondered if those couples had worked through it and were still together. Or if they had filed for divorce and married someone else who wouldn't cause them the same heartache he'd heard in their quivering whispers in his office.

Matt looked at the faux leather watchband around his wrist. Nearly three in the morning. Susan never got up before sunrise. Tomorrow was Friday and neither of them had anything to do. She planned on going over to her sister's house and watching her niece for the night. He'd have time to drive out to that place he once played in as a child. Could be back before the sky turned orange red.

He stood from the pile of hoarded directories and moved to the walk-in pantry where they kept full trash bags on the floor until it was time to haul them off to the dump. He dragged the bags out onto the kitchen linoleum and returned to the pantry, falling to his knees, considering the sawed-through three-by-three square in the sheetrock beneath shelves of canned food. A little makeshift that could have doubled as entry big enough for a Rottweiler to get through. He reached up to the bottom shelf, moving aside a box of oatmeal cream pies and a clear bag of peppermint bark shards from December that Susan had forgotten to throw out, and he found the green handle of a flat-head.

He jammed the screwdriver into all three grooves, prying open the sides, little by little, until he could fit his fingers through. Then he detached it from the wall and slid it to the corner of the pantry.

A deluxe tube amp was wedged in between two wooden studs in the darkness behind the wrested sheetrock. With both arms, he reached in and grabbed it by the bolted frame, dragging it from its crude tomb. He stood, lifting it by a split strap screwed into the top of its wooden cabinet, and carried it into the living room, spraddle-legged, careful to not bump into a counter or trip over his own two feet.

Hoisting it to the loveseat, he let go and it tumbled backwards, leaning into the cushion. A rustling of plastic settled on the inside.

He took the driver to the screws burrowed in the corners and sides of the amp. The tip slipped out of one screw's rusted groove, chipping away at the head. He slowly re-inserted it into the single rut, careful to not strip it,

and loosened it some more. Then he stuck the driver into his back pocket and unscrewed the rest with his fingers.

Removing the frame, he peered inside, past the circuitry, past the wires, and saw the heavy-duty black trash bag nestled in between the parts that once amplified voice.

He half-expected to open the bag with thousands of IOU's printed on heretic dollar bills one might find in a board game. And he wished that it were true. But when he unknotted the flap-tie, it was still there. Dozens of rubber-banded bricks of cash.

He walked across the living room, over to the kitchen table. He grabbed a wooden napkin holder with carved duck motifs wearing blue dresses and blue bonnets and used its corner to move aside piles of junk mail. Then he dropped the bag on the table. This was the place he and Susan drank coffee late into the mornings and worked through the harder crossword puzzles together on Sunday afternoons. Tallied up their savings. Talked about selling the place and moving. "Let's just get up and go," Susan had said. "Go somewhere that stays warm all year long." She would wring her hands. Twist her wedding band around her finger. Stare out the window at the cardinals and their little black masks. Sometimes, Matt wondered if she wished she were like them. Free to fly. Free to move.

He scooped out a handful of rubber-banded stacks and held them in his hands, away from his face as if preparing for some venomous strike should he hold them too close. He steered away from the magnetic force of relinquishing control.

He didn't know how his son had amassed such a fortune.

Part of him felt like he was the only one bold enough to rid himself of the money because he lacked the knowledge of its origins. And that had its advantages.

A floorboard creak came from the hallway leading to the bedroom, and he froze in place, the cash in his hand. It was an old piece of laminate that had cracked when he was coming back from the bathroom where he rinsed out a cement urn planter. He had never bothered to fix it because it was in the middle of the hallway and he would have to take up the whole floor just to replace it.

But soon after, all he could hear was Susan snoring. Nothing more.

He let the money drop in the trash bag, and he tied it off one last time. Pressing his hands on the plastic, he used his body weight to compress all the air out, and it hissed from tiny openings forged by the corners of stacked cash. He slung it over his shoulder like some doomed Saint Nicholas heading out to the wrong house with the wrong gift. He walked over to the

front door, careful to not step on boards known for chafing nails in joists. After grabbing his keys off the rack, he slid his feet into construction boots that he wore when he mowed the grass and climbed his ladder to clean out the gutters when a storm swept through.

Where he was going, he needed shoes he didn't mind getting dirty.

***

Matt made the drive from Lincolnton to Shelby with a can of Cheerwine between his legs. He was quick to drink it when he first popped the top because he knew how short the drink's fizz lasted. It always went flat faster than other sodas. But he liked to feel the carbonation burn against the back of his throat, a self-soothing habit he'd picked up in the first few months of his sobriety. It was a way to mock the burn of alcohol and hoax his brain into believing that he hadn't given up the spirits. Sometimes, he thought he could feel a little buzz after he drank it. Felt lighter in the feet. Calmer in his thinking. He knew it wasn't real. Probably nothing more than a sugar rush. But he found it to do the trick, and so he kept with it. That's why he kept a couple of them stuffed in a cooler in the front floorboard. For when the days were full of running errands of hauling off trash to the dump or swinging by the produce stand to pick up a bag of peaches for Susan or when he passed a neon-lit tavern in the night on the way home from picking up last-minute coffee grounds for the next morning.

He hit the edge of town and slowed, crossing through the last four-way intersection of blinking yellow lights. Then he picked it back up to fifty miles an hour and turned on the cruise control when he hit a good stretch of highway. There was a patched pothole here and there, but they'd been filled and refilled, and they weren't as deep-set as he remembered.

He leaned back a little so that his knees touched the steering wheel at five and seven and he held it there. Then he tore off the can's pull-tab. Embedded its aluminum edge between the flesh and nail of his middle finger. Pressed down until it got a good hold on his meat and wouldn't fall off. Rolled down the passenger window. And as he sped past a deer crossing sign full of buckshot, he flicked the tab through the window. He thought he heard a little ping out there in the night. Felt satisfied.

Houses grew more dispersed the further away he got from gas stations. An industrial building advertised coffins and mattresses for sale. A bankrupt and condemned convenience store with boarded-up windows. A giant O circled the letter A, spray-painted red on pieces of plywood nailed to the frames. A rusted burn barrel lay on its side in front of the store. A dog sniffed at its side. Matt watched it stare at him in the sideview mirror and then lower its head and trot through the dirt.

He knew of an old wagon trail that ran through the woods and back-ended up against the abandoned house. He turned right on a grassless patch of earth. Pulled up to a closed cattle gate. Turned off the headlights and engine before another rambler of the night caught glimpse of the red glow of his brake lights.

When he got out of the truck, he didn't waste any time. He threw the trash bag over the gate and stepped sideways through the middle part, lowering his torso almost parallel with the ground as a professional wrestler might enter a ring, hesitant. He felt a pinch grip his lower back and he bumped the back of his head on one of the metal rails.

Before long, he found himself moving through the darkened wood, a simian shape taking measured steps through bracken black as coal. Shouldering the loot of money and looking from side to side. Expecting some beast to leap from its perch on a tree or from a bunkered hole in the ground. Envisioning a night raider running full sprint toward him, knowing the promise of what the bag held, a blurred motoring of legs through the night, its hands outstretched and its eyes looking only at the trash bag slung over his shoulder.

He turned around when he heard a stick break, and he placed the bag against his stomach as if to soften the blow of whatever had found him. But the creature stepped away with hesitation and scampered off. He turned back around. Faced the silhouette of the house. Another eighty yards or so and he'd be there.

By and by, he found himself standing on the crumbled steps of a two-story house, its back end halved by tree line. A tall oak punched through the roof where a chimney ought to have been, reaching into the night's tide of moonlit clouds skittering eastward, acre by acre. The tree's branches antlered the air and hunks of lichen-patched limbs that had snapped off over the years lay on the roof.

He stepped through the front door and crossed the creaking living room floor. Wallpaper had wilted and strips of it fell from once pasted seams. Patterns of daisy and perennial bouquets bubbled on parts of the sheetrock and there were tiny confessions of teenage love markered on pink petals.

Capsized ribs of a canine lay in the corner. A bed of sodden quilts in the center of the room. Brass candlesticks next to it, wax drooled and caked cold on the sides.

A place where lovers met in the dark.

A place where the necromantic convened and forged the night with occult practices in hopes of reviving the dead, perhaps.

A place that had been used-up.

No one had been here for years. If these walls could talk, he mused.

Something rattled across the room, then stopped.

To his left, a flight of stairs had been reduced to a pile of rubble and it looked as if it had been taken down with an assortment of tools, whatever could be found. He imagined drifters taking hatchets and sledgehammers to the stairs and stepping back to admire their handiwork.

The partitioned wall beneath the second-floor balcony looked as if it had been chewed away by a backhoe loader, but there were no tire tracks on the ground, no remnant of metal plow that might've been Frankensteined from a larger machine.

Directly below the balcony was a porcelain hot tub filled to the brim with rainwater. Spiky balls had fallen from sweetgum trees and found their way through the roof's opening. They floated on top of the murky water like fish bobbers used for bait. Someone had dragged it inside and created their own hotel of love, free of rent.

An extension ladder leaned against the wall where the stairs had been, and he climbed one-armed up the rungs. When he reached the top, he swung the trash bag overhead and it landed in a great rustling.

He worked his way to his feet, never letting go of the bag should some undiscovered troll shoot out from wall paneling and take it from him. He hadn't moved this much in a long time and he was already beginning to notice his hamstring cramping on him and the arches of his feet tightening and quivering in little balls of muscle, nervous and unsure of how much more he had to move.

His foot shot through a board in the hardwood flooring, and he noticed gnawed away innards termites feasted on in the break. He heard tiny splashes of the broken board in the hot tub below. A creature moved in the shadowy water as if disturbed. He pulled his foot out and walked around the new hole. His forehead knocked into a pull cord and he looked up to see an attic door plum and horizontal with the ceiling. He pulled down on the cord and unfolded the wooden ladder until it was fully extended.

Climbing, he poked his head through the attic's access and, leaning his body against the incline of the steps for balance, he pushed the bag through the opening both-handed. Its plastic body caught on the splintered sides and tore, but he kept pushing until it collapsed on the other side.

In a moment of quiet despair, he thought it lost forever in the confines of the house's upper room.

He dug in his back pocket and took out his keys. There was a mini flashlight on the key ring, and he clicked its push button. Then he placed it in his mouth. Held it in the middle of his teeth. Swept its weak beam through the attic.

Once inside, he crawled on his hands and knees over nailed plywood until it ended, and before him was a crawlspace of patched cotton-candy cobbled insulation. Joist lumber ran headlong in front of him across the floor.

He gripped the bag and stood, bent-backed, before walking through the pink fiberglass, one foot on either side of a joist. The further he walked in the little a-framed attic, the more he lowered his head as if entering some smaller gated eye.

By the time he reached the opposite end of the attic, he squatted and leaned his back against the plywood wall. He adjusted the flashlight between his teeth. Pillowed the bag between his diaphragm and the tops of his thighs to hold it in place. Reached forward and peeled up a strip of insulation. Clamping the foam down with his knees, he let the bag fall from him, and it settled on the OSB sub-flooring as if it knew and accepted its resting place.

Smoothing his hands over the bulked plastic, he massaged the cash inside until it was flat and wedged tight between two joists. His mind wandered to the same soothing position he had once been in as a pastor when he pacified and rubbed spread fingers over trembling backs of men and women who knelt and wept at the altar of his church. Mourners who folded their hands and buried thumb knuckles into the centers of their foreheads as if coaxing their lidded third eye to open and thrust them through a wormhole of prophecy and divination that would tell them how to make things right, how to make ends meet.

But this mass did not quiver.

This thing had no emotion.

It could be burned.

It could be forgotten, not hurt. But if it was not forgotten, there would be more pain in the world. And its fingers would grip the necks of those who wished for better lives. The money would dunk them into waters of promise, baptizing them in the name of itching palms and burning pockets that would then bury them in a greater misery. A mob of midnight thieves would purge hope with more leniency.

Matt knew that he was no different than the rest. He would succumb to the same whisperings of gluttony and could foresee himself using most of the money to zero out Susan's medical bills. To renovate the rest of his house. To upgrade Susan's car to something more dependable that didn't burn up oil, that got better mileage, that she could be proud to drive. Before he knew it, there would be nothing more to buy and fix, and he would find himself standing in line at a liquor store, holding a bottle of whiskey, looking at the front entrance, hoping he checked out and got back inside his truck before anyone he knew would see him. Because he had been down that road before.

More times than he liked to remember. And every time he did remember, he wondered how hardheaded he must have been to know that the same actions produced the same results. He knew that once he found himself standing in line, there was little chance of turning around and putting the bottle back on the shelf and walking out. There was little chance of the bottle lasting more than a couple days if he did buy it. And there was another chance that he would buy another to blockade the guilt of breaking the promise he had made to Susan and the men who sat with him and told their stories of how they fought to rebuild the human wreckage alcohol had made of their lives.

Inches became miles.

He lifted his hands from the bag and did not touch it again.

When he plopped the insulation back into place, something crawled crossways over angled wall studs. He tried to see what it was, but it sounded like it lost its footing and fell down below.

After descending the ladder and refolding it shut, he held the pull cord taut and brought out a multi-tool from his pants pocket. Took a tiny, serrated knife blade to the string and cut through the whole thing in one swipe. The attic door released from his grasp and it slapped shut against the plaster-peeled ceiling.

He put the severed cord in his back pocket.

Running thumbs around the insides of his belt, he moved his waistline up higher on his hip bones. Slid his hands around to his lower waist. Pulled on the back of his sweat-slicked shirt. Felt the extra weight there. And he pressed on his flesh as if to mash it back down and form it into muscle in the same way coals turn to diamonds.

Too many years had gone by, he thought to himself. It would take a lot out of him to ever get back into the swing of things. And he stood stupefied at the way his body had failed him. At how his neck was already tight. He needed to crack it.

He put a fist on the right side of his jaw and pushed, his neck giving way to the release of tension. It cracked three times like bubble packing, and he did the same thing to the other side. Then he made his way over to the extension ladder and grabbed it by the capped ends. Wiggled it to make sure the rails were still locked in place. Shifted it to the left and the right so that the safety shoes were not sitting on twigs or rocks and would not roll out from under him. Then he turned around and backpedaled down its rusted frame.

Before long, he found himself back in the woods, making his way to his truck. He nearly rolled his ankle when he stepped on a leaf-pasted glass jar. He squatted and grabbed the fruit jar from the bottom. Rolled it around in his hand in admiration, searching for something of value inside.

A mass of leaf mold from autumn clotted the jar's walls. Inside was another season. The past tucked away. The dead not knowing how to fall apart and rid itself of the world. Brown-white sticks came up through the leaves and stabbed the inside of the teal-tinted glass. Tiny branches, maybe. But they looked more like bone limbs. He turned the jar upside down and beat its side with the heel of his hand until the moist leaves fell out in clumps. Then he squatted and poked a finger through these dull legends of fall and found a mouse's skull.

He'd heard of old pest control tricks with fruit jars this size. How a hole was cut through the center of the lid and how a mouse that wandered in and took the bait was stopped on the way out by a one-way trapdoor. He often wondered about animals that were caught through deception and thought himself not much different. Couldn't be more trapped than he already was. And the further he went with hiding the money, the further he buried himself in secrets he wasn't sure he could answer for.

But he knew one thing. He'd sit on his porch the next day and then the day after that, waiting for his son to come back home.

JOAN HOFMANN

Brown Trout

Now the rod in his own hands
on the metal bridge
over the Farmington River
he, all of seven

climbs up on the stoop
stares between the railings
wings the just-hooked worm
into the rushing river below.

The line slants taut
against the foamy run,
his face turns wild, electrified,
as he reels in clumsy and eager
Wham! the shiny fish lands
on the sidewalk, flipping
until slapped bloody to still.

Limbed through the gill,
on the walk home
the trout's raised high to eye level
to be checked with pride though
he worries aloud about the kill
while I wonder
What about the bloodworm?
No photo on the fridge for him?

ELIZABETH W. JACKSON

Three Gardenias

It's another tale of centuries, of beauty: my mother
            extolling the handsomeness of the Italian guide
who escorts her tour group through the vineyards. *He*

can press my grapes anytime. At 80,
            she has only the obvious to lose.
She perks up and widens her smile for any man

who's good-looking and trim. Her hip surgeon
            is one, and she swoons
over his mistake of her age, the word, *Beautiful!*

She swears she doesn't want another— her marriages
            wasted by digs covered over with smiles.
Yet, every past joy, she culls, treasures

like an Easter egg discovered days after the hunt,
            its swirls of lavender and rose,
a prize to protect, to save forever.

Last night, she called to recap her day and the film
            "Sunset Boulevard," which drove her back
to a forgotten time, her father beside her on the couch

reading *The Wizard of Oz. Daddy always told me*
            I was such a smart, pretty little girl.
On the merry-go-round of memories, she rides. A circle

has no end. The rust-red hair of her osteopath
            reincarnates the college boyfriend she nearly married,
but my father won her with boyish surprises, *Did I ever tell you*

we flew kites on our second date? And she gushes
            about past parties, her favorite cocktail dress—
royal blue with long diaphanous sleeves, a hemline short as youth.

Descartes spoke too soon. *I think, therefore I am*
isn't always enough.
Once upon a time is forever, and for my mother,

Heaven means living on in the stories
of those who love her.
The sign of infinity: two linked circles.

*

Fifty is weeks away for me. We've chosen my dress— black
with lace dyed green, deep-hued as oak leaves
and the emerald my mother will pass down

as hers did too. The surround of diamonds reaches across time
like stars. How easily it must have slipped over
her tapered finger, elegant before arthritis,

and now, I cup the worn velvet box, an elongated octagon,
Many have held this before me. I'm the last—
no daughter to ring us into the future.

*

As a young girl, I played for hours
with Russian nesting dolls,
painted wooden Babushkas identical

but for size. At my whim,
each birthed a small replica
or slipped back into the belly-box of one larger.

My mother bagged them for the attic,
later drove them to good will,
so the children of strangers

could hold close the dolls,
trace their curves, replay
opening and closing.

In another box,
glossy, rectangular and lined,
my mother's body will disappear, buried

under the metaphor of grass
    like my father thirty years ago,
his suit and flesh decaying. The gravestone—

a partition—
    engraved with three gardenias,
his favorite flower.

Here, I search for one clear image
    of his face, of his hands.
I search for wisdom

too slow to come. How can I help but turn
    towards anything that blooms—
day lilies, azaleas, even the bouquet

that wilts on the next stone? And then,
    there's what my body knows, that welcome breeze,
the brush of arrival and departure.

MICHAEL BRANTLEY

No More to the Lake

The billboard that read "Langston's" was sun-bleached, paint-chipped and showing its age, but it was beautiful to me. It meant the long ride, painfully extended by youthful anticipation and the fact that most of it was on N.C. Highway 701, a tedious two-lane, was finally over.

As soon as the car could be unpacked, I'd be set free to splash and swim in the cool refreshing waters of White Lake, just a few strides of my long preteen legs from the front door of the cottage.

August was a rough month in eastern North Carolina, as it was all over the South. Temperatures didn't mean anything; every day was a miserable, humid test of endurance until the sun went down. The garden was just past its peak, the tobacco harvest—at least for my family—was nearly done, and the beginning of a new school year was close at hand. All of that would be forgotten just as soon as I got a running start and jumped off the end of the pier.

As miserable as the dog days could be, this one last marker of the summer was what made those days bearable. I know I drove my parents and everyone else in the old grey-and-faux-wood paneled Mercury station wagon crazy.

"The ditches are getting sandy!" I'd shout as we started passing the roadside vegetable stands that served as landmarks.

"It won't be long," Mama would say.

At that point, I'd put my copy of *The Sporting News* or whatever James Bond novel I'd brought along on the seat, as if my vigilance would get us to our destination any quicker. Once we made that last turn, it was almost time.

Mama, who tried not to dampen my enthusiasm, endured it. "Start looking for water," she'd say. "We are almost there."

Once my folks checked in at the office, I'd hustle to do my share to lug those clunky blue vintage 1960s suitcases and the big red Coleman cooler inside. It took a lot of stuff to sustain a family on vacation, more so than I'd ever realize until I became a parent. As soon as it was all in, I was immediately in a bathroom stripping down, and before that spring-triggered screen door could finish banging against its jamb, I heard, "Stay where I can see you! Don't get in over your head! Stay out from under the pier! Get out of there if you get cramps, you can drown that way! I will be right behind you!"

"I will do my best not to drown," I'd yell back, laughing, dodging hidden tree stumps, kicking up sand, on my way to making sweet memories I never thought I'd need to store.

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There were signs that read "The Nation's Safest Beach" at White Lake, a reassurance to Mama, who feared a great number of things that might happen to her children, from abductions to all sorts of freak accidents with garden implements—"Don't play around with that hoe, the next thing you know, you're going to rupture yourself!" White Lake is so named for its white sandy bottom and that gently slopes toward the center. There are no undercurrents and no sudden drop offs, and no harsh breakers, just gentle slapping waves sent shoreward from boats and jet skis operating in the deepest areas. The water so clear that you could stand at any depth and see the bottom, just like a swimming pool. That was at least true to just over six feet, the height I stood the last year we went, just after my freshman year at Barton College. The lake was no death trap like the dangerous, crowded beaches.

Mama never learned to swim and feared the undertow of the ocean. She stood a slender 5'2", with a dry sense of humor and a cautious eye for any number of life's pitfalls. We lived in a house where three girls had lived who drowned in the Tar River on a hot afternoon 50 years earlier after getting caught in a mysterious whirlpool known as the Indian Hole, and this heightened her anxiety. In practice, she was terrified of most all bodies of water, so much so that despite living only a couple of hours from the Outer Banks, we never went to the beach until my late teens. It was the way she and most of her peers were raised in rural eastern North Carolina—the world outside the community was full of danger. But Mama was okay with White Lake—there was no riptide or sharks, and she could keep an eye on us. There was lots of sandy beach, and it was cheap enough to stay on the waterfront in a cottage with a kitchen and enough room to sleep all seven of us and then some. Looking back, it is funny how much she enjoyed those trips, even though she worked just as hard on vacation as she did at home—preparing three meals a day for the family, making sure we were stocked with supplies, and that the cottage stayed clean.

My family started going to White Lake in the 1960s before I was born, learning of the place because of the Future Farmers of America camp there (my brother was a member) and from people at church who gave it high marks as family-friendly. My earliest memories are of us only staying for a weekend, but when my parents got out of farming and Daddy took an

office job in Rocky Mount at a welding supply company, trips got extended to a week. We always stayed “on the water” because ironically, what was the point of going to the lake if you couldn’t see it, mama always said.

My four brothers and sisters went—all adults by the time I was eight—sometimes for the whole week, sometimes for just a couple of days. They’d all married while I was still in elementary school, and so wives and husbands, and later, babies, added to the mix, although to me, it never seemed crowded. Sometimes a cousin my age would tag along, and we’d spend the days digging in the sand and seeking relief from the sun under the piers.

***

There were rules, but I never recall hearing them being spoken. There was little TV to be watched, except to get the weather in the morning, and maybe the news at night. The rabbit ears only pulled in about four channels anyway, so it wasn’t much of a distraction. There was no alcohol involved. I don’t know if anyone in my family drank then, but we were Baptists, so it would have been a secret anyway. There was no smoking, although sometimes an invited “outsider”—a friend of my parents or siblings who might stay a day or two—might pull out a pack of cigarettes back when people didn’t ask permission to light up. Another interesting fact that underlined the importance of this annual sojourn was that we usually left on a Sunday morning, significant because we never, ever skipped church. Except when we went to White Lake.

***

White Lake is a geological anomaly known as a Carolina Bay. Geologists aren’t positive, but believe Carolina Bays were formed by meteorite crashes. The lake is said to be clear because it is fed by underground springs. Although these bodies can be found from Georgia to Maryland, 800 of the 900 remaining are in North Carolina. There used to be thousands. White Lake is in Bladen County, near Bladen Lakes State Forest, between Elizabethtown and the port city of Wilmington. It seemed like such a paradise to me, but now I realize that area was more poverty stricken than my own county. Even the resort areas seem humble compared to the pristine condition of vacation condos and hotels people expect at coastal resorts today.

Carolina Bays are oval or round, mostly grouped on either side of the North Carolina-South Carolina border and many are now bogs or no longer hold water. At its deepest point, White Lake is 10 to 15 feet, depending on whom you ask. Its first appearance on a map was in 1770 when it was called

Granston Lake. It became Bartram after that, and then got the name that stuck in 1886. The first public area opened as Melvin's Beach on the south side in 1901 and 20 years later Crystal and Goldston beaches—names that still carry water in the area—began operation. The next year, 1922, saw new roads into the area which immediately created a tourist attraction. A series of glass-bottom boats patrolled the lake every year, and the tour guide's voice over the PA system could be heard all the way to shore.

There were some pretty cool legends that always seem to come up on our trips. Supposedly, the inventor of 7up—or was it Sun Drop or maybe Dr. Pepper—lived right on the lake, just across from wherever we were staying, no matter what side of the lake we were on. There was also supposed to be a famous novelist who lived there, but I never was able to nail down who it was, elusive as Robin Masters. And of course, there were any number of legends about disfiguring boat accidents that usually involved a lightning strike, a teenager and an explosion, but I always felt like my mischievous brother Bill made those up for Mama's benefit.

***

Cypress trees ringed the lake, partially in the water, hanging full with Spanish moss. Lapping, rhythmic waves, muffled the screams and squeals of children and admonitions from parents to stop running on the pier or to stop splashing a little brother or sister in the face. Entire days were spent in the water. It was a relief, a respite from life's demands. After a summer of heat and labor, it wasn't just about cutting loose, everyone just exhaled. I swam and pretended my floats were battleships, like the USS North Carolina, which was harbored just down the road in Wilmington. There were constant water gun fights, but before the week was the weaponry would be ruined, jammed by the fine white sand. "Chicken fights" got out of hand and usually ended up with my sunning sisters and sisters-in-law getting splashed, and exaggerating anger and seeking revenge.

Nights meant playing WAR or Monopoly or Hearts or Rook, as I soaked in family stories about long-passed relatives handed down on the screened-in porch that was standard for every cottage. Jokes were corny and sometimes racy, and always in plentiful supply, as was gossip. It always rained at least one day and one night, but never more. Nothing set the senses alive more than the tangy scent of rain filtering through the Spanish moss covered trees in the yard, tapping a melody on the sheet metal roof, background music to the laughter and teasing and love that blew out into the late nights. Other vacationers often swam late into the night, with just enough illumination from the pier lights – you could hear the laughing and

flirting and roughhousing drift across the still waters, as boats and jet skis were now docked at nightfall. I never went on those night dips, that was time for my siblings and their spouses.

It was thrilling to stay up with the adults and be un-policed on bedtimes. When the last of the card players or revelers called it quits, I'd put my book aside and sleep came easy to the drone of the cooling window unit air conditioner.

Things we didn't do at home, or have the time to do, we did. It was like we became another family, one without so much responsibility, without so much hard work, without livings to be made. This was a different life, a week, a vacation in the truest sense. It was an escape, but not from the people we loved and spent so much time with. I never sat on the porch at home and watched a thunderstorm pass or listened or carried on with others for hours —I always had something else to do. Not White Lake, though. Such a state of bliss seems elusive now.

***

Food was a big deal, and all of our meals were cooked at the cottage. In nearly 20 years of those trips, I remember us eating out once. A trip to the IGA, the only local grocery store around, brought back a week's smorgasbord. Breakfast meant bacon or sausage and eggs and toast. Lunch was usually a quick sandwich, just something fast so we could get back in the water but not until we let our food settle for an hour (those dreaded cramps and/or drowning would descend, otherwise). I never realized until I was an adult that the settle time neatly coincided with how long it took my mother and sisters Jane and Carol, who were like second and third mamas, to cook and clean up the mess we all made. Daddy, who rarely cooked at home except on the weekends, fired up the charcoal grill almost every night, standing watch in a ribbed, sleeveless t-shirt, dress pants, and bare feet. His specialty was barbecued chicken and he was known for his sauce or "hot ton (rhymes with John), a mixture of vinegar, ketchup and spices that was legendary among neighbors and friends back home. My favorite was hamburgers cooked on the grill with a big slab of hoop cheese or the plasticy yellow slices, topped with a mound of "husky mix"—hopped lettuce, sweet pickles, and onions, bound together with Catalina dressing.

One night, usually Friday or Saturday, we walked to the pavilion on the trail that encircled the entire lake. The pavilion was a madhouse of people, so many, so loud, playing games to win prizes and the approval of newfound beach romances. Bells clanged, pinball machines rattled and blinked, and the air was hazy and heavy with popcorn and tobacco smoke.

There was the constant traffic of stuffed animals and warped, elongated soft drink bottles, string art, and Budweiser beach towels paraded about. Just before we got there, we passed through the "black part" of the Lake. While government imposed, legal segregation was long gone in the 1970s and 80s, there was still a separation of the races, each seemingly too busy enjoying the water or the pinball machines to take note—but I know now that they did. As a child, I was puzzled how this worked.

Putt-Putt was important and took on a competitive edge, but win or lose, it ended with a stop at the walk-up Dairy Queen for hot fudge sundaes. This was the only DQ I knew of, exotic beyond the Tastee Freezes back home. And, there was always a pass through the gift shops filled with water guns, rafts, and knickknacks and plaques, all emblazoned with White Lake, N.C. in script and some corny joke. I did not imagine there was another place in the world to vacation or that these trips would ever end.

***

Eventually, jobs got more demanding, the family moved away from farming, and my siblings' families grew, and vacation times were determined by bosses. It was nearly impossible to find a house big enough to accommodate a mushrooming family, and that was the whole point of the trip, being together. I couldn't imagine what those who didn't go could possibly be doing that they would miss the highlight of the year. What could be better?

White Lake starting having troubles of its own about the same time. The last year we went, water levels were low and the previously crystal clear water was dark green and murky. Many of the cottages were in disrepair, showing their age, holes in the roof, evidence of mice and insects.

We skipped a year, that year turned into a decade, and before we knew it, our family vacations were over and we never took another one, an unceremonious end to a tradition we all thought would last forever.

"We'll go back next year," became "We need to go again one year" to "I miss going to White Lake" to "Remember when we used to all go to White Lake?"

Little did we know that it was foreshadowing for the day when holidays would send us into rotating years of family gatherings, and those gatherings would mostly fall by the wayside as well. Change never seems to give fair warning.

***

Mama always wanted a big family, but that growth was the undoing of White Lake, and honestly other family gatherings as well. Our streak of

get-togethers was so impressive, that when it abruptly ended, I explained it to Mama this way:

"Mama, we have to look at this thing like we got away with it for a long time. We dodged bullets for years that other families didn't."

The closeness of gatherings can't be sustained when a family reaches a certain population. That's no criticism of the people and I only now have come to understand and appreciate how well everyone got along in those close quarters, especially when this was the same group of people we spent the rest of the year with. Eventually, some were too far flung, too different, babies grown up with families of their own, too many different obligations and interests and jobs and finances.

That last year we went is a good example. My two brothers-in-law, both of whom I loved like brothers, and I drove from White Lake to nearby Whiteville to play golf. We had so much fun, we said we should make it an annual thing. We never went again. Eventually, one would leave the family in divorce and the other would pass away, years before he should have.

***

Like most people fortunate enough to grow up in a large family, I took those trips and big meals for granted. Now they've all but disappeared. At times they seemed overwhelming, as if there was no no chance at a new adventure during certain times or holidays in the year.

There was my Aunt Vannette's Christmas Eve dinner and Granny's Christmas Day, the former ending with a premature passing, the latter due age finally taking its toll. Then there was the weekly meal at my parents' house. Every Sunday after church, my brothers and sisters and nephews and nieces gathered for a massive lunch. Saturday nights before I was born was usually dinner and pro wrestling, I was always told, and later was burgers or steaks on the grill. As a teenager, I wanted to escape this, and go get fast food with my friends, true evidence of an empty brain in those days. Even on Friday nights, some family would come over for supper, and then stick around for "The Dukes of Hazzard" and "Dallas."

We still have Thanksgiving and Christmas get-togethers, but because the family is so large, someone is always in a rotation with other family. Even the more recent tradition on my wife's side of meeting at the beach for Thanksgiving supper and weekend has ended. There have been deaths and divorces and soon, even the great-grandkids of my parents will start marrying off.

When I was younger, I figured I'd take my future wife and our family on those White Lake trips. But the trips ended before we got together. She would have loved it.

Oddly, we've never talked about going. Of course, we wouldn't have the same experience. I'm sure everything would seem smaller or less exciting. I don't know what the water is like, but it could never be as clear as my memory says it was. Our kids would miss the sea shells and waves they love so much at the beach.

There wouldn't be the buzzing, crowded kitchen or the hotly contested card games.

I imagine the water is too shallow for a grown man to get a running start and jump off the end of the pier, probably not for my teenage children, either. And even if it was, it wouldn't be the same lake I remembered, my old friend. My family doesn't have a White Lake. We don't go to the same place two years in a row, much less 25.

The place I so naively thought would always be there is a distant memory and gets brought up less and less. What was a constant, precious thing is gone. It never was about the lake though. While it was beautiful and fun, we had all we needed before we left home.

We could drive back to the lake, but we can't go back. My brothers and sisters and I just have those perfectly formed memories that still make us stop and smile and remember for a moment before gently fading like the late August Carolina sun.

LOWELL JAEGER

At the Office Window

Solitary runner crossing a far expanse
of dried timothy and wild rye, wending her way
uphill, climbing November's frigid early morning air,
huffing white puffs of steam.

Now, she nears the summit—soon to crest the rise—
and I will lose sight of whatever attracted my gaze
as I attended her progress, the pitch the stride
of each footfall, her strain and determination.

She's gone. A lonely wind follows, fanning the grass
in flattened zigzags, while a parade of ragged
clouds trudges overhead, onward, looking down
on the big-wide world, lifting my thoughts

to sail skyward after that solitary runner, wherever
she's arrived, one step chasing the next, each
moment linked, each heartbeat, each of us joined
invisibly, a certain rhythm and flow, so intricate

and vast, so easily passed over, so difficult to name.

JONATHAN LATIMER

Night Walk

Moonlight confuses the trail I usually walk
    and know so well in daytime. Surprising.

Broad stretches of low grass shine an even
    silver even across empty ground,

Blending depressions and rises into false
    smoothness, deceiving the eye just as

The night quiet deceives the ear. Nothing
    To hear broken when a loud whinny cuts

Through the air: Screech owl claiming its space.
    We all want that luxury, reaching out,

Stretching all our boundaries whenever we can

Driftless

Fifty is the age
I become invisible.

Having lost
that intimate space, warm
hands plunged
deep,
love is a day
still dark,
injured as it rushes
forward.

Outside, a lone
dog's
bark,
a trill of winter
wrens,
a locust tree, dying
beneath its frosty
coat.

I am an axe
that has lost
its direction,
searching
for something other
than a woodland.

I carry two
photographs
of my son,
faded
as a clouded moon,
snug in my breast
pocket.

To this day,
I wonder
why the road curves
when a mother
wanders.

Regret,
the gentle measure
of a heart
in the shadow
of an executioner.

AMY S. LERMAN

Mimeograph

It's weird how my fingertips purple
when I'm healthiest, thawing blueberries
meant for oatmeal, more years without
medication, and how I've always been drawn
to staining, particularly purpled fingertips,
all those carboned pads my sister and I used
when playing store or restaurant, setting up
a great aunt's hat boxes like Oleson's general store
on Little House on the Prairie, always delivering
my parents' receipts for invisible tuna melts.
After hours, we'd need to use the scrub brush
until purple turned fingers red, the cleaning
delayed by the ink's figure eights swirling
the basin and our need to trace them.

At a summer camp years later, I re-inked every
time I flattened master stencils—canteen or KP
schedules—against the Gestener's cylinder,
the purple's smell lavender yet medicinal
like alcohol-dipped cotton balls, lingering—
intoxicating, night after night, as I held his hand
on the cabin porch, until he needed to return
to his side of the lake and a letter from his girl.

Now, I wonder if that ink ever left, if I didn't
scrub hard enough, year after year spilling
deeper into dermal layers, a continuous threading,
paper to paper, index finger to thumb.
All I know is I am not alone, this purple
resurging in every restaurant serving squid
ink risotto, where prep cooks and sous chefs
forego gloves, polka-dot crisp, white aprons,
which memorialize the gutting, ink sac
and tentacle trimming, behind-the-eye stabbing,
making us allies, our purpling palpable, all labors
and years now obsidian, transferable, irregular, blobs.

MARGARET MARCUM

Steam

on the windows. Transparent squares turning
to white walls. We are floating

            beside the phantom of our
love splattered on the sides
            of this ephemeral starship—
of this you still choose to say

The most dangerous word
hanging on your lips like a spider
defeated by its own silk

Two suspended masterpieces
of hollow consummation,
you and me, hot and heavy, your
two glass hand prints pressing
hard on the throat, shattering but not
breaking
what remained of my blank hope

Two faces shining with shame
in the rear view mirror. With you
I am still alone

GAYLORD BREWER

Suicide

Rumor later had it he shot himself in the head in his car in a supermarket parking lot, perhaps Wal-Mart. Details were sketchy, cyber whispers. Suicide makes people uncomfortable. At the time, all I had for deciphering was a terse e-mail that he'd killed himself, a memorial service to be held in Tennessee that weekend. As I was spending the summer in a cabin near the non-existent town of Dyea, Alaska, once a bustling port for Gold Rush stampeders now just trees and paths and an occasional overgrown cellar or foundation stone, pilings like rotted teeth in the slough, I would not be in attendance.

The news surprised and irritated me. Two years earlier, I had been badgered into directing his Master's thesis—original poems and an accompanying essay on aesthetics—by a colleague. He was an older student, fortyish, perennially disheveled and rambling—which I hardly remarked at the time—always enthusiastic about poetic process. I didn't pry, but he gave the impression of someone energized by a fresh start. After the thesis defense, I'd gotten him into a fledging MFA program two hours away that a friend had begun. It seemed a good and happy and fortuitous fit. (Only after the fact, having coffee with said friend, who hadn't heard of the death until then, did I learn that my former student had routinely arrived to class—when he attended at all—reeking of booze, had increasingly missed his own classes, and had departed after a single semester. All news to me. Had I been so blind?)

My immediate anger at the suicide caught me off-guard, and I was further annoyed that the announcement, stoked by my response, had interrupted my own writing. A selfish distraction from beyond the grave. I gave up on the morning and followed golden retriever Mya—one of three dogs on the property, and the goofiest, always ready for action—down to the West Creek (an Alaskan-sized misnomer, as the "creek" was often a frothing river). Mya never tired of loping into the frigid water to chase sticks she didn't recover, then clambering back to shore a tangled and dripping mess. It occurred to me that my departed student would frolic with no more dogs, study no more rivers, never fear the sudden emergence of bear from the shadows of spruce and cottonwood. Served him right.

The next day, I wrote an impressively crude, derisive, and unpublishable poem addressing his pompous stupidity, agreeably pompous

myself. Regarding this poem, I remain neither apologetic nor mollified. The following month, an increasingly isolated time from human company, unfolded slowly for me. Highs and lows. I never tired of the brutal and magnificent landscape—a continually humbling lesson of scale—splitting logs for the wood stove, stealing eggs from the chickens, of the whole cornball frontiersman narrative.

A sidebar: My colleague who'd convinced me to undertake the thesis had died suddenly late the previous summer, in his mid-sixties. He went unexpectedly into the hospital on a Saturday evening and was dead on Tuesday, just before the start of fall classes. "Madame, all stories, if continued far enough, end in death, and no true story-teller would keep that from you." Nearly three years have passed since that moment in the car in the Wal-Mart parking lot. An act signifying what? In pursuit of what last conceit? A presumed courage? A story I will not attempt to its conclusion. Not today.

NICOLE MATIS

The Cutting Room

I.
White only scares when it's bare—the milk of fresh paint on walls, aspirin tablets, paper without ink.

Bare is a misconception. Hospitals more blue than stripped, or maybe I'm used to spaces being empty
as the mattress of my top bunk bed—

thin, creased sheets,
carbon steel rails.
Patient submerged in sterile sea.

II.
A square patch of skin, iodine dig.
The same sort of sharpie I'd spend hours outlining a diagram of glycolysis, now marks the cut.

Flesh caves on contact with rubber gloves, familiar, the way we all lean into touch, yet stiff, calculating fear
of the syringe stab that must come,

as with hesitation in all beginnings. I hold my breath at the first incision.

III.
The overheads aren't the kind you squint at, yet something in their focus of light makes them powerful. With saucer spin
they center on the end of the tunnel,

only the tunnel's a slit in someone's sedated chest where forceps brace train track ribs.

IV.
Laparoscopic means the human holes are small. Less exposure to infection that way,
only opening where the probe camera pokes.
A mound punctures surface, and they're in. Inside the body. Inside glycolysis itself.

Inside, I always feel trapped. As if something beyond my insulation beckons to be met.
An atmospheric fur that requires stroking.

Maybe that's how hernias feel. Abdomen envious
of lungs—the only organ inside that gets to tickle air.

V.
They project the surgical field
on a screen, perfectly pin-pointing
the abnormality. All I can see is red—how one's fingers glow
when a flashlight is pressed
tight against the palm,
muted chromatic
the way fireflies like it.

But the picture glistens with oil, oscillates on every breath—
the only indication of a face behind IV and drapes.

VI.
Blood at the start is darkest.
Oxygen leaping from hemoglobin to wed air.

It's thicker in its natural place than it is rushing out, how I remember it
when I stubbed my toe playing nerf and laughed on the couch

with soaked paper towel and ice

at the gushing of the inflammatory response, platelets finally clotting.

VII.
Retractors bind the epithelia wide. Suction, clamps, lap pads
fill crater of human space.

Some say all procedures are the same when a surgeon's done it a hundred
times.

I'd like to think 0.9% sodium chloride irrigation dumped and pumped,
means more to follicles than a rinse and repeat.

VIII.
I've always had a high pain tolerance
but never stopped to examine the wounds
that warranted stitches—
five on my forehead, two on my eye.
As if it's possible to compare waterfall to well.

Can't help the letdown as I peer
at my own stagnant veins on my wrists,
but blood is never blue. It's a tissue trick of light.

S.B. MERROW

Heaven Gives Its Glimpses

And now they are gone:
the knives and butterflies, friends
and flutes, farmers, fathers—

the door slides open to windy green
and a rabbit jumps, alert, afraid.
She goes to ground—we follow down

on raucous bones the clicking track
of memory—a passing glimpse of Robert Frost[1]—
faded flags and queues of toilets in Odenton's

backyards—then Bowie Seabrook Carollton
and Union, named places that twine in time
like columbines seeding the path

with hybrid color,
like family recipes consumed,
that fortify and are forgotten,

like the broken spines of beloved books
we can't discard, totems that shape
our destination. We've filled and hefted

the pots of summer, the tools of chef,
poet and bodhisattva plumber,
cleaving the sky in starts and stops

on a clicking track—less a commute
than a yoga pose held breath after breath
—fingers reaching for the terminus.

[1] Frost's poem "A Passing Glimpse" references a train ride, and concludes with this line: *Heaven gives its glimpses only to those /Not in position to look too close*.

KAYLA JESSOP

Better Homes & Gardens Advises to Create Depth with Houseplants

Somewhere between bringing home the slow-growing spider and pink, polka dot plant, you ask me why I've been buying so many house plants—I say *I'm buying one each time someone leaves*. The small, red-tailed cactus came home the week before the shutdown. This one was the exception: no one had left yet or maybe, everyone had left, succumbing to preparations of what could be. The peace lily, soaking in the warmth of the sliding glass door by the balcony, traveled across three states after my mother's funeral. The leaves are brown most of the time, from under watering or overwatering, I'm never sure. *Stubborn like your mother*, her friend told me once. Eight months later, a green and purple succulent lies on the bay windowsill in the living room; it's watched the river flow since the week my father died. That one, I'll admit, was an accidental house plant. I went into Home Depot searching for paint for the bathroom, and I found it sitting near a dying peace lily in the clearance section. *It felt like a sign*, I told you when I brought it home. You said *we're running out of space*. And as I took it out of the small pot it was in, packing its roots into fresh soil, I whispered: *I'm running out of hurt*. Three weeks after my best friend separated her own aloe vera plant, I take home its seedling in a nursery pot. It's four days after I have a weeping falling out with my sister, and in the chaos of repeating our spiteful words over and over again in my head, I don't replant the aloe in time. It dies slowly, resting in its over-dried, crisp soil. I toss it in the trash: *I failed you, too*. I promise you then that I'll take a break from soil-dusted balconies, fingernails with the lingering scent of nutrients, and planting the ghosts of my losses. In return, you promise me that *it'll be a long time before the need for another plant*. But still, the empty, ocean blue planter, held company by an unopened bag of soil, anxiously sits in the corner of the balcony porch—waiting for you to leave, too.

CAROL LUTHER

Unquiet Spirits

A snapped twig, a rolling pebble, the jingle of keys, the rustle of fabric in her backpack, a slap at a gnat—Kate wiped the clammy sweat from her forehead. She and her friend Julie were making good time walking up the trail from the Tennessee side of the mountain to get to the Hinderlight cabin.

Kate stopped so suddenly that Julie nearly piled into her. Kate pointed just ahead of her foot. “Bear scat.”

“Oh, no! Where’s the bear?” Julie scanned the sides of the trail.

Kate smiled at her jitters. Julie was a novice hiker. “Gone looking for berries probably. Bears run away when they hear us tramping through the woods.”

“Looks pretty fresh to me! Remember that attack two years ago?”

“That was north of here in the national park, and the only attack in sixty years. I’d say the odds are in our favor.”

“Still—” Julie sighed. “And remember that wanted poster we saw back at the store? They think that guy’s been spotted around here.”

“Do you want to go on? Your decision.” Kate took a quick swig of water.

“Yes.” Julie readjusted the straps of her backpack on her shoulders and peered up the trail. “Yes. We’re nearly there aren’t we?”

“Pretty close to the turnoff.” Kate stowed her canteen. They walked on, Julie giving the scat a careful berth and muttering, “Bear, bear, go away—use the trail another day!”

Kate was taking Julie to the old Hinderlight cabin so that Julie could photograph it. Kate had told her that it was a hybrid structure, part log cabin, part frame, maybe as much as a hundred and fifty years old. Julie planned to do a photography exhibit of the decaying structures of the common folk who had lived in the mountains but whose property was not in the national park. Maybe someone would be interested in saving some of the cabins, Kate thought.

The trees provided plenty of shade, but there was no breeze underneath the canopy. While it was not unbearably hot, it was warm enough with their steady climb to raise a sweat that did not evaporate.

“At least it’s not raining,” Julie said, wiping her neck with a bandanna.

"Might as well be," Kate responded.

After passing a couple of trails splitting off, they came to a third path that led to the left off the well-trodden main trail. "Here's the turnoff," Kate said.

They paused for water.

"No birds," Julie commented. "It's really quiet up here."

"Too hot, everything's resting until it cools off. We're the only noise," Kate said.

"Are you sure this is the place?" Julie said. "The other little trails looked pretty much like this one."

"It looks a little different from the last time I was here with the hiking club, but then that was spring three years ago, and now it's mid-summer with everything grown up." Kate checked the pedometer on her phone. "The mileage is right."

"I don't want to get stuck out here in the dark on a trail we can hardly see. Good way to
get lost." Julie looked at her phone. "No reception up here."

"Let me check one more landmark. You wait here. I'm going to walk up a ways and look for the creek."

Kate left Julie sipping water and walked ahead. The sound of her footsteps was muffled by the dense foliage around the path. Julie was going to have to work on her nerves, Kate thought. There was the creek she remembered. Good, they had not gone too far, and she announced that to Julie when she returned.

"So, OK, ready to move on?" Kate asked.

"How good is this trail? I mean, seriously. We've both heard plenty of stories about hikers who took a shortcut and ended up lost."

"And were never seen again," Kate said in her best mysterious voice. "Look, we'll be fine. People still use this side trail; you can tell. I have my compass. It's daylight. No storm clouds in sight. But if it worries you too much, we can turn back. It's your project, you decide."

Julie hesitated and then said, "No, you're right. I'm just not used to being in the woods like you are, but if I'm going to do this project, I have to get over that. Lead on, Dan'l Boone."

They both laughed and started up the little trail.

True to Kate's prediction, the path, though not well worn, remained clear but narrow.

"You know," Kate said, pushing back a redbud limb, "the cabin's supposed to be haunted."

"Oh, pray, tell on. I'd much rather deal with ghosts than bears," Julie said.

Kate grinned. "I don't know the whole story. Maybe we can ask the folks down at the store when we get back to the car. They probably know the tale. It was the flu epidemic in 1919 that took the Hinderlights. No one's really lived there since. Supposedly one of their kinfolk tried to farm it later but soon gave it up. Some people said it was just too hard to farm, but some say," she put on a ghost-story tone, "that it was the ghosts of the Hinderlights that drove him out."

"Uh-huh, ghosts, no doubt," Julie agreed. "I've noticed that old, deserted houses fascinate ghosts."

"Well, old houses should be haunted, don't you think? Think of all the lives that have passed through them. Something should be left behind."

"Sad story." Julie shook her head. "Imagine, the whole family."

Their talk tapered off as they saved their breath for the climb. Within an hour, their destination was before them.

The Hinderlight cabin sat on the side of a gentle slope. Small trees and bushes had marched up to it on the sides and back, but in the front a little clearing welcomed tall weeds and the slips of tulip poplars fighting to establish themselves. A leggy rose bush clung to the side of the front porch. An old farm road, now not much wider than a walking trail, started at the side of the dilapidated barn and led down the other side of the mountain to North Carolina.

"The light's pretty good in the clearing," Julie said, pulling out her fancy camera. She started taking pictures as Kate found a seat on a rock to the side of the cabin and began to eat an apple.

Part of the house was a newer one-story frame construction with a porch. It had been attached to the end of the old cabin. The logs were visible where some of the board covering had fallen away.

Julie took several shots from a distance and then moved in for close-ups of various features. She hummed happily as she started around to the back. "I'm going inside. Be ready for a rescue if you hear a crash."

"Walk softly," Kate warned. She soon felt herself getting sleepy now that she had sat down. Yawning, she put the apple on her backpack. The leaves at the tops of the trees slightly rustled in a faint breeze. A gnat whined by her ear. Her eyelids drooped.

But something alerted her—a noise. Julie's bear?

Just coming into view on the old farm road was a tall, thin woman, dressed in a brimmed hat, sturdy hiking boots, long pants, and, in spite of the heat, a long sleeved shirt. She walked at a steady pace. She held a hiking staff and carried a well-worn, full backpack.

The woman was scrutinizing the woods to her right. Then she abruptly stopped and walked up the slope a few feet. She set down her pack and rummaged in it for a minute, pulling out a small plastic bag. She dug up something and placed it in the bag. Kate was curious, but the woman wasn't yet close enough to speak to.

The woman shouldered her pack again and walked purposefully towards the cabin, but instead of coming into the clearing she angled towards the back. She didn't look at Kate.

"Hello! Hot day for a hike!" Kate called and waved her hand.

The woman glanced at Kate, smiled slightly, and waved back. The she headed straight up the ridge off the trail.

"Not a good idea," Kate thought and started to ask where she was going, but the woman had dissolved into the colors of the underbrush. Kate walked to the side of the cabin and looked up the slope. "Hello! Excuse me!" she called, but she could neither see nor hear the hiker. How could she have disappeared so quickly?

Kate sat down again on the rock and took a deep breath of the clammy air. The gnat returned. She swatted at it irritably and looked down the rocky, rutted road in puzzlement.

Julie stepped out onto the front porch. "So far, no ghosts. But there's a great chimney in the front room with a big fireplace." She trained her camera on the green leaves beside the porch step. "Daffodils! You can tell where old cabins were by the daffodils."

"That woman who was just here—," Kate began.

"What woman?" Julie adjusted her camera. "The light's still good." She walked to the barn and began carefully documenting the exterior.

"Didn't you hear me say hello?"

"No, I was poking around in all the corners inside. I guess I was pretty absorbed. Who was she?"

"I don't know. She looked like she was collecting plants. She waved but didn't speak, and then she just walked right up the ridge into the woods. Not on the trail. That's not a good idea if you're alone."

"If she's up here botanizing or something, she must know every rock and tree." Julie pulled out her sketchbook.

"Umm, probably." Kate picked up her apple and finished it.

"Are you sure you didn't just doze off and dream her up?" Julie asked, drawing diagrams and making notes.

"Maybe." Kate remembered her drowsiness. "But she seemed pretty real to me."

Kate wandered around the structures, but finally, after another half hour, she called to Julie, who was precariously balancing on the ladder to

the barn loft, and recommended that they start back because the sun was definitely angling down in the sky and would soon be dropping behind the ridge.

Julie tossed around architectural terms and ideas for her photography exhibit as they hiked back. They encountered no problems on the narrow trail that connected with the main one, but they did find themselves in deepening shadows on the lower part of the main trail and had to step carefully.

Soon they were back at the convenience store parking lot where they'd left the car.

As they walked into the store to use the restrooms and get a snack, Kate said, "That hiker—I hope she's OK. Maybe we should mention her at the store."

"Good idea."

The store served as a camper's supply, convenience store for locals, center for hunting/fishing licenses, and a repository for a flotsam of other handy items and souvenirs. T-shirts had scenes of the mountains. One local T-shirt featured a slogan "Fly Hawk fly!" with a fuzzy photograph of a good-looking man on it.

Kate and Julie stood behind a man who was paying for gas and some bottled water at the counter. He studied the T-shirts while he waited for his change. He was dressed in expensive outdoor gear. Fisherman? Kate wondered idly. Or an executive playing fisherman?

"So you haven't been missing anything, Orrin? Nobody going through your trash?" the man asked the clerk.

Orrin, the large, moon-faced man behind the counter, was shaking his head. "Nossir. Not a thing. All quiet."

"Well, you contact us if you do notice anything." The man straightened the "Fly Hawk fly" T-shirt so that the photograph was clearer.

"Sure will. So, they thinking he's on this side of the mountain?"

"It's as credible as any other rumor." The man took the water bottles and went out to an SUV where another man waited. He pulled out a cell phone and made a call before driving on.

Julie placed her Diet Coke and package of trail mix on the counter. As she paid, she said, "Excuse me, but I'd like to ask about something."

"Sure," Orrin said, entering her purchases in the register.

"We've heard that the Hinderlight cabin is haunted. Do you know the story?"

"Oh, yeah, nice hike up there, isn't it?" he said.

A thin woman had joined him behind the counter. Looked like she lived on cigarettes and black coffee, Kate thought.

The woman balanced on a step stool, stocking cartons of cigarettes in the overhead bins. She glanced down at Julie.

Orrin continued. "It was in the flu epidemic back after WWI. They all five took sick about the same time, so they couldn't much help each other. The oldest, a boy, he was the least sick, and he set off to get help, but by the time he got down the road to the next farm, about three miles, he was in a bad way. As luck would have it, their neighbors there had gone into town for the day. The neighbors didn't get back till late that night, but they found the boy curled up in their barn. They set out by lantern light to find the others. The little girl, just starting to walk, had wandered out on the porch and laid down there. They found her dead. The mother and father were dead in their bed. The middle girl was barely alive, and she was the only survivor. Oldest boy died. The ghost part is they say you'll hear the boy walking down the road going for help, and in the window, you'll see the littlest girl looking out. I never seen them myself, but that's what they say."

"That's what they say all right," the thin woman chimed in, with a sharp look at Orrin.

While Julie thought about the story, Kate told him about the hiker she'd seen. "And then," she finished, "she walked up into the woods behind the cabin. We were a little concerned. I just thought somebody ought to know about her."

"Well now, we don't run no rescue service here," Orrin said. "Did she go up from this side? Because nobody but you all parked in the lot. And most people taking that trail park here."

"No, she came up from the North Carolina side," Kate said.

"What did she look like?" the woman asked.

Kate described her and finished, "—and a big green backpack. In her thirties probably. Seemed to be collecting plants."

Orrin drew in his breath suddenly and looked at the woman. "SuDee, do you think—"

"Orrin." SuDee became absorbed in stacking the cigarette cartons.

"What? Who is she?" Julie asked.

There was a pause. Orrin spoke. "I think you may have seen The Ridge Walker. Was anything written on her backpack?"

Kate thought carefully. "Yes, there were initials stenciled on her pack. G? Maybe a B? No, a G and an S. That's all."

Orrin reached to the stand of local interest books next to the counter. He picked up a slim
paperback titled Unquiet Spirits and, opening it to page 20, handed it to Kate.

She read out loud: "One of the stranger stories of local lore concerns Geneva Smithers, a botanist from Western Carolina University who was researching native plants. She was last seen parking her car at the North Carolina side pullout to the Hinderlight cabin around 9 in the morning on June 20, 2006. She had planned to spend the night in the cabin, so no one was looking for her until late on June 21, but she did not return home to her husband that evening. As it got to be midnight and still no word—" Kate looked up. "Now wait, are you suggesting that the woman I saw was Geneva Smithers?"

"Some kind of ghost? In broad daylight?" Julie asked.

"Look, I'm just saying what they say. Other people have seen her too. If you read the whole story there, you'll see that they never found a trace of her, or her things, anywhere on that mountain. It was like she'd 'vanished into thin air.' There was a TV program about it. A couple of years ago people start seeing a woman like her on the trail."

"An unquiet spirit," SuDee muttered.

Kate looked at SuDee and Orrin with a skeptical eye. "But she seemed as real as you two are standing right there. If she was some sort of ghost, shouldn't she be more—ghostly?"

Orrin held his hands up. "Well, it's in the book. It's got all kinds of stories about folks that got lost in the mountains and was never found. Most of them didn't end up as ghosts, but she did. You know what that means."

"Foul play," SuDee supplied.

"Now she never hurt nobody," Orrin reassured them.

"Husband did her in's what I think," SuDee said.

"Uh-huh," Julie said. "We better be getting along, Kate, before somebody reports us missing."

"OK. I'll take the book." Kate paid for Unquiet Spirits and read it with absorption as she trailed Julie to the car.

Orrin and SuDee watched them drive away.

"You shameless peddler." SuDee slapped her hand on the counter.

"Sold a book, didn't I?" Orrin said. "And you was helping."

"And that FBI man that was here—" SuDee walked to the bulletin board that was crammed with notices and smacked her hand on the wanted poster that hung there. It had two photographs of the handsome man on the T-shirt, one without a beard and one altered to show him with a beard. "Hawk Knott," it read. "Wanted for murder, possession of illegal explosives, destruction of federal property, conspiracy. Should be considered armed and dangerous. Believed to be hiding in the mountains near the North Carolina-Tennessee border. If seen, do not approach; report his whereabouts to local,

state, or federal law enforcement officials. REWARD for information leading to his arrest and conviction." Someone had written at the bottom "The Smoky Ghost."

"If Mr. Hawk Knott goes rummaging in our garbage, you can bet I'll turn him in for the reward money, and that's more than selling a book every now and then to tourists," SuDee said emphatically. "And these T-shirts, making out like he's some kind of hero. He blew up an IRS office, and it killed a man. Now there's an unquiet spirit."

"Some people agree with him. Now, maybe not the blowing up something or killing somebody, but, you know. The big guys do OK, but us little guys have to run as hard as we can to stay in the same place. When do we ever get a break?" Orrin protested.

"What good did his little stunt do? To him or anybody? Nobody in the history of the world has ever liked taxes, but they're always going to be there. Let me remind you, 'render unto Caesar,' that's what it says in the Bible, and that ends it as far as I'm concerned. It's just something you have to do." SuDee returned to the counter and began stocking the remaining cigarette cartons. "And another thing—that 'ghostly' hiker? I have my own notion about who she might be. Yeah, an unquiet spirit all right." She whacked a carton to make it fit in.

Julie drove as Kate skimmed through Geneva's story. Kate looked up from the book. "They speculate that Geneva's husband did something with her, sneaked up the trail behind her; they'd been having some troubles. Or that she just walked on through to this side and met somebody and went off with him."

"So it's either a murder mystery or a romance," Julie said. "Or maybe a bear got her."

"People claim to see her in the woods. She walks to the cabin, then goes up the mountain." Kate shut the book. "If she is walking there, it must have been foul play. Runaway romances don't end with ghosts."

"It makes a good story," Julie said. "But then, there're many kinds of hauntings. To me, those cabins are the ghosts, the remains of the folks who lived there."

"Yeah, a good story." Kate caught Julie's glance, and they both started laughing. "Those two have their act down pretty well. They probably sell a lot of books!"

But, Kate wondered, as the blue sky tinged to gray, if the hiker weren't a ghost, who was she?

'Geneva' walked quickly up the mountain with sure steps. She skirted the edge of a laurel hell. At the top of that, the ground steepened. There was no trail, but she walked as if she followed one. Presently she arrived at a small bald at the top of the ridge and stopped to catch her breath. She put a piece of grass between her thumbs and, carefully holding her fists together, blew on the grass to make it shriek. She repeated that several times and waited, drinking some water, as she leaned back against a tree.

She heard a series of taps and replied quietly, "It's me, Hawk."

In a moment, the man whose face was on the T-shirts stepped out from a thicket. He was thinner than his picture, his hair uncombed, his beard scraggly.

"Trill," he said. "Hi, sis."

"Long time," she replied. "Here's your things." She patted the heavy pack.

Hawk began transferring salt, coffee, soap, socks, and other supplies to his faded backpack.

Trill pulled a piece of paper from her pocket. "Here's your latest wanted poster. The locals have gotten up some T-shirts too. In your favor, I mean. Things like 'Fly, Hawk, fly.'" She handed him the paper. "You have a name meant for a wanted poster, you know. Hawk Knott. Very evocative."

He studied the poster. "Born to be hanged, huh?" He handed it back to her.

"Not funny, big brother, not funny." She watched him carefully distribute the load in his pack. "How long?"

"Long as it takes. They're still searching pretty thoroughly, aren't they? They haven't got the better of me yet, but I can't leave until the heat dies down." He stashed a few packages of dried fruit in a side pocket.

"But then where? Move to Montana? You're too famous. Not just locally either. Soon you're going to be a hero for every disaffected group out there. I can see it coming. More T-shirts, then a country-rock song about rebels, a website, a fan club. You and the white supremacists and the happy apocalyptists and the survivalists and whatever--it'll all just get mixed up into one big mishmash of anti-government sound and fury."

"Hey, give it a rest." He opened a package of beef jerky and started gnawing on a piece. Its spicy smell swirled in her direction.

"You think Mason and Jane would be proud of you? They were hippies, part of the counter-culture, but—"

"The government—"

"—our parents did not raise us to use violence. They may have smoked some pot, but they never hurt anybody."

"I said stop!" He smacked at the pack to flatten out a bulge. "You just don't know what all is going on—"

"Oh, now we'll have a clear explanation."

"OK, Trillium. You can keep your head in the sand if you want to, but if you'd bother to look past all the lies—all that 'official' stuff, it's just all lies meaning to keep us ignorant—"

"Hawk, you're the one who's been listening to lies!"

"Easy, now, keep your voice down."

She hushed as he lifted the pack to feel its weight. She took a long drink of water.

He didn't look at her as he zipped shut the big compartment. "I didn't mean to kill anybody. You know that."

"But you did. His family was on the news again—on the anniversary."

"Let's leave it alone." He ran his fingers along the Velcro to shut the smaller pocket. "Thanks for helping out. I know it's dangerous for you. If you want to stop coming, I understand. I'll make it."

Trill changed the subject. "I saw two hikers at the Hinderlight cabin. Not FBI or marshals. But I had to go in another direction for a while and then cut back so they couldn't tell where I was really going."

He looked at her pack with "G. S." stenciled on it. "Still posing as the ghost?"

"I let them use their imagination." She sighed. "I'll keep helping you, Hawk. Mason and Jane would want me to, despite what you did. You're my only brother. But I wish you'd turn yourself in. I worry that—"

"I know. I wish you wouldn't."

"It's my choice to come up here. I'll live with it." With a quick good-bye, Trill started down the ridge.

Hawk watched her melt into the colors of the leaves, and then he hoisted his pack and turned for the long trek back to his camp. The light was fading, but his feet knew the way.

The last rays of sun pierce through a gap in the trees and strike some of the cracked panes of a window at the Hinderlight cabin. A shimmery blotch appears on the old glass, a pale figure that seems to have arms, legs, a face. A feverish child? A light? The final sliver of sun fades. The white shape lingers at the window as though looking out for help, restless, swaying. A light. A child. A child. A light.

A child—

CINDY MILWE

Anniversary

My body is not the same body
it was on my wedding day,

bikini-bottomed on Santorini's
steep cliffs and red sand. Tank-topped

and flip-flopped, I sprinted
through Delphi like a goddess

on cocaine, re-enacting
the first Olympic games

with a makeshift pastel crown
of ouzo-doused wildflowers.

Today, I limp out of bed,
the ruins of Greece

thousands of miles
from the old sink

where I rinse my old face,
scrub the dent on the bridge

of my nose where bad cells
were twice scraped out,

sunburn the result
of my mother's begging

to "get some color,"
use baby oil and a reflector

on a Connecticut patio
in February, the frozen slats

of red and white lounge chairs
digging pink grooves into the backs

of my young thighs, not yet
fat labyrinths of swollen

cellulitic varicosity.
This body has housed a girl

on her way to that glorious,
terrifying new-breasted beauty,

two boys more in love
with my “floppy” flesh

than any boyfriend, fiancé
or husband in this life so far.

I have buried both prom dates,
said goodbye to my cheekbones;

sharp eyesight dulled, pelvic floor gone.
When my daughter looked through

an old album and saw a picture
of me and my high school

boyfriend on the Fourth of July
sharing a chocolate éclair

on my grandparents’ jetty,
she stared hard at the unrecognizable

girl of her mother, the cute boy
in the glare, both strangers in cut-offs.

“Andrew was so hot,” she decided.
“Why did he pick you?”

SALLY STEWART MOHNEY

Wearing My Pale Life

as a loose linen robe—waiting, wonting
while broken in bed, steps away
from the threatening staircase.

Soon able to sit, spine-still,
and peer out
the bay window
at the aftermath: one
bereft gray hydrangea, once
robust with blue.

Finally, first steps:
one sudden afternoon
you lead me gingerly
to the old bridge

over flat ground
under copper
turning trees
past abundant
overgrown laurel vine

reaching for us—

I cling to your
waxed coat elbow.

Then we tread
over splintered planks
hold
the wrought rail
in our cold palms

as hazel water
courses beneath.

Then home
to a fall fire—
lantern to light
our feet into another
Season.

You knew I needed to witness
my river again

CATHERINE MALCYNSKY

Have You Seen This Dog?

A while back I had a dog named Yesterday, after the Beatles song. He ran away, and time got funny after that. I couldn't remember how long I'd had him: I was just past young when I got him, soon to be old when I lost him. I missed him immediately, like a furry phantom limb: the weight of his head on my lap, the pressure of his paws against my thighs whenever I came home. He used to shed like a sonofabitch, little black-and-white hairs everywhere. With him gone, I didn't even bother to sweep or lint-roll anymore. That fur was the softest proof of him, blowing around the tiles when I shut and opened doors.

The first few mornings after he left, it was like this: I'd be safe and snug, watching the ballet of dust in the slats of sun through my shades—then I'd come to about a dozen blinks later, remembering that I wasn't late for school, that my mother was a senior citizen, that my dog had run away—and my life would be suddenly brittle and porous, like a dried-up sponge that couldn't absorb anything. I worried about him out there, half-deaf and arthritic, limping around in the thick shade of the woods. There wasn't even a forest nearby, we lived in the city—but that's where I imagined him, rolling around in pine needles, belly to the sky. It was the end of summer and then the end of fall, everything dead before you stepped on it. The world was cooling down, dew crystalizing by the time the sun rose, but I still slept with the window open, in case Yesterday came panting at my door.

Once I knew he was missing and not just temporarily misplaced, I did the whole flier thing: printed out a hundred with Yesterday's face and my phone number. It wasn't my favorite photo of him, but it was the most recent: frosted-white muzzle, the milky gaze of his cataracts. By the end of it my old printer was hot and sputtering, spitting him out in streaky, ghost-like clones. I left inky thumb-prints on the last of the bunch.

I'd never paid much attention to fliers before, and I doubt many people paid attention to mine. Still, I posted them along the neighboring streets. I'd never realized how riddled those wooden telephone poles are—how many dogs, cats, people, had been reduced to rusty staples over the years. On my way home, I passed my dog a hundred times, the edges of him crinkling in the breeze. It was like walking around with a splinter in my sole.

At the time, I worked at a used car dealership. The kind you drive by and it makes you sort of sad and nauseous: an ever-growing fleet of traded-

in steeds with prices plastered on the windows. Each price sticker was the obnoxious shape and color of an action bubble in a comic book, as if to make the place more fun and less real. The building itself was a massive, concrete block with a couple of those big inflatable tube-men stationed on the roof. On a bad day, they drooped over the side of the building, as if contemplating a leap; on a good day, they spasmed in the breeze.

I'd worked there long enough to have earned two raises and a promotion, even though my responsibilities never seemed to change. I wore cheap suits and a knock-off smile, attempted to schmooze the uncertain customers who bit their nails and chewed their cheeks while aimlessly orbiting a 2011 Nissan. There were better salesmen on the lot, none whom I could name now; their Crest Whitestrip-smiles beamed down from that cheesy Employee of the Month corkboard. I'd made it up there only once, after I sold a newly-used 2016 Hyundai to a former English teacher who'd given me hard time for never reading Hamlet. That had been my peak at the dealership. By the time my dog ran off, I was sort of haunting the parking lot. People had a tendency of reciting the days of the week when they looked at me, saying things like, *Mondays, eh?* or, T*hank god it's Friday!*, which I took to mean that I never looked all that jazzed to be where I was.

After so many cordial years together, Mr. What's-His-Face and I had more or less given up on small talk. He had three teenage daughters and a middle-aged ex-wife, and sometimes I asked about them if we were stuck in the break room together while the Keurig trickled. I didn't have any of those things, but one day I did tell him about my runaway dog. I guess it had been about a week since he vanished; there was still a bowl of water left for Yesterday on my stoop, collecting gnats.

Maybe I hoped What's-His-Face would take pity and let me off early. Maybe I just didn't know how to talk about anything else. He was a cat person, I just knew it, but when I told him about Yesterday, old What's-His-Face still looked sorry for me. He pushed his glasses up his nose and frowned, leaning against the fake leather couch.

"What kind of dog?" he asked.

"Not sure," I admitted, shaking up a little cup of Half & Half.

"Did you leave your gate open, or something? And he bolted from the yard?"

"I don't know." I tore a sugar packet, watched the little crystals melt into the black.

There was something milky about the old boss's eyes as he watched me now. He looked like that, sometimes, when he talked about the ex-wife.

"And how long's he been gone?"

I swallowed too quickly, scalding my throat. "He's not *gone*," I said, "just missing."

"Right." What's-His-Face put a hand on my shoulder, like he was trying to sell me something. "Too bad it's a dog, and not something smaller—I don't have much advice for ya, I'm sorry to say. Normally when I lose something I just retrace my steps."

Then he wished me luck and headed back out to the lot, and I stood there drinking my coffee and thinking about what he'd said. I knew it was stupid advice, hardly applicable to my scenario, but I took it anyway, because I was desperate not to be desperate anymore.

I clocked out and walked to the café where I'd picked up my coffee that morning. I'd taped a flier to the front door, but someone had taken it down, which might've pissed me off if I'd had much *umph* left in me. So I went back to my apartment and ate another banana, brushed my teeth again and climbed back into bed. I got up the next day and ate dinner, watched TV, ate lunch, walked around the city, pausing to stare at the milky eyes on every telephone pole. I ate breakfast, showered, called my friend Frankie about last night's game, went back to bed. I continued this cycle all weekend, flinching every time a dog barked in the distance, but I didn't recover anything in the process. In fact, I felt worse for Yesterday than ever, since the poor bastard had watched some version of this for God knows how many years: me living my life in small circles.

On Monday—not sure which one—I was back on the lot, thinking maybe Yesterday really was gone, and not just missing. The sun was fickle, peeking out from behind the clouds at sporadic intervals, and I wasn't expecting much from the day when this washed-up looking dude brought in a 2002 Honda Accord. The thing was beat to shit, dented all over, like crumpled tinfoil. Someone had pulled the insignia off the front bumper and torn a bunch of stickers off the back, leaving these shapeless white splotches all over the car's ass.

As soon as the owner gets out, What's-His-Face hits him with the old, "I'm sorry, sir," shaking his head apologetically. I knew this meant we couldn't take it, it being in such rough shape—but before he could finish turning the guy away, I spoke up.

"Actually, hey—can I take it for a drive, real quick?"

I'd said it half by accident, and both men looked surprised; I was a little shaken up myself, when I heard the words come out of my mouth.

"I just want to see something," I shrugged. That was as all I was feeling up to, in terms of explaining. I don't think old What's-His-Face was thrilled about it, his being sure that we wouldn't take the beater, but I could

see a look of mercy taking hold of his face. There were fliers for Yesterday up on the dealership corkboards, now, underneath all those show-pony employees.

"Alright," the Honda's owner said. I recognized the warm air he had about him: hope, but tossed around too much, like a blanket washed too many times. "Just around the block?"

"Round the block," I confirmed. The men looked at each other and nodded, What's-His-Face still looking stern, lest the poor Honda-owner think things were about to turn around for him.

I was allotted fifteen minutes, which were harder for me to track from the driver's seat than you'd think. The Honda reeked of cigs, another reason it'd never sell on our lot, but I didn't mind; my mother had smoked all her life, lipstick stains around the filters of her Marlboro Lights. I slid the seat back a little and tweaked the mirrors, nudged the radio to something I could hum along to. By the time I pulled onto the main road, I felt like I was going somewhere.

As a kid, used to get heart palpitations. My doctor said it wasn't anything serious (much to my mother's relief), and it was really just a manifestation of my boyhood anxiety (much to my father's dismay). Whenever it happened, my heart felt like a pill I couldn't swallow all the way—just for a second or two, but each one was the longest second of my life. This skipping, this half-beating—sometimes time did it, too. It happened again as I settled into that shitty Honda, thumbs resting on either side of the well-worn wheel. I'd driven the same model in high school, crashed it on my way home from after-prom. I don't remember the accident, so much, but I remember the fumbling youth of the night: chiffon and pulsating lights, the smell of pollen and perfume. Hands trembling to secure a corsage, hands trembling to undo a bra clasp. Slow songs that felt glacial and excruciating, beer suds resurfacing in vomit. All of these memories, or embers of memory, glowed again while I drove the Accord.

One minute I was stinking of aftershave, tiptoeing around a life crisis and wandering around my asphalt pasture—and the next I was a few years shy of twenty again, driving eighty on the freeway, banging my head to songs about adult things I didn't know of in the past-tense yet. Wishing I was old enough not to have homework or a curfew, old enough to get an apartment and a girlfriend all to myself, old enough to have a big old dog that missed me every second I was gone. Too young to know that all of it flies by, runs off somewhere.

I didn't have an itinerary in mind when I drove that Honda off the lot. I wound up driving that guy's car all over town, taking turns and honoring

stop signs mostly out of muscle memory. My phone rang a few times in my pocket, but I didn't hear it over the music. I scanned sidewalks and shrubbery for the tail end of Yesterday, worried I'd find him nosing around someone's trash like a raccoon, or whizzing on some lady's tulips. By then, the papers I'd put up were rain-soaked and wind-blown, ink bleeding until the dog was blurry enough to be anyone's, no matter how slowly I drove by.

When I got back to the dealership, I was told it had been forty-five minutes. What's-His-Face was beet red, sweat glistening on his brow, and the guy who owned the Honda looked familiar to me somehow, like we'd played Little League together or something—but he didn't have any interest in getting to the bottom of it. I didn't try to explain or defend myself, but I did lobby on behalf of the Honda—which ran pretty good, all things considered. I couldn't argue away all those miles on the dash, though; you'd think they'd be a testament to its grit, proof that the sorry-looking wagon could make it this far—but somehow those numbers doom us all.

Needless to say, we didn't take the car, and the owner was pretty crushed about it. Soon someone would give her a slap on the rear bumper, condemning the loyal vehicle with a solemn take her away, boys. I was glad I wouldn't be there to see it. In the meantime, What's-His-Face told me I was suspended, which was a punishment I hadn't thought existed at car dealerships.

Condemned to my apartment, I finally gave in and vacuumed. The layer of dust and dirt on my floor had become uncomfortable even with socks on. I found myself slipping on the residue of days I hoped hadn't passed, especially when going up on the staircase. With one of those long, plastic hoses, I chased dust bunnies around when they hopped away. The last of Yesterday got sucked up, too, every follicle now part of some grey-brown mixture I had to bang out into the trash.

Since the dog disappeared, I'd picked up my phone every time it rang. It was usually only a telemarketer or my therapist's office, always soliciting something. I avoided pet stores and groomers, even re-routed my way to work so I wouldn't have to pass the dog park. The wind, some other scoundrel, had taken most of my fliers down. I rarely saw them anymore, except for one night, when I was on my way home from a bar where I'd been drinking with Frankie. Alone by then, I found myself frozen in front of a flier, and I read over it as if it were someone else's loss. It had been so long that it almost felt that way. I ended up calling myself, punching in the numbers just as they were printed, and got my own voicemail. Before the tone, my voice sounded younger, happier. It's over, I told that phony, chipper version of myself. Give it up. Then I threw up on the sidewalk, and must have blacked out after that.

Spring again, and I couldn't piece together when Yesterday had gone. Had he chased something around the bend, ran into the street, wandered out of the apartment while I was unloading groceries? I pulled a piece of his fur from a sweater I'd forgotten about, and the hair was longer than I remembered his being.

Around then I started to wonder if Yesterday wasn't a dog at all, but a girlfriend. I remembered a woman with long black hair, and how she'd shrieked in my bathroom mirror when she found a strand of silver sprouting from her scalp. She'd always been happy to see me, rested her head in my lap when we watched TV. There had been panting, whining, scolding—we'd played fetch, in a way: I'd throw something and she'd run off, come back begging for more. I couldn't grasp how or when she'd left, how many times I'd walked around the city, aimlessly calling her name. Had she chased someone around the bend, ran into the street, wandered out of the apartment while I was unloading groceries?

I found her photo buried in my computer. Made fliers of her, too. Unlike with the dog, I saw people stop to look at them, scrunch their faces up to be sure they didn't know her. They shook their heads before they walked away, tsk'ed their tongues as they went about their day.

About a week after I posted them she called me up, threatening to call the cops if I didn't take them down. She told me I needed to move on, that I was crazy, we'd been over for years now.

Not knowing what else to say, I told her my dog ran away. After a weary breath—which jogged my memory a bit—she said, Good for him, and hung up.

After that, I quit my job at the dealership and spent some more time retracing my steps. When I thought I saw a tail disappearing down an alley, or a pawprint in the soil of someone's garden, I pulled over no matter where I was. I drove by my old high school, found myself trying out combinations on my old locker. I couldn't get it open, and some kid in an NFL jersey told me to beat it, and that same English teacher who bought the Hyundai had to break it up. At the house where I grew up, asked the young, fancy couple who lived there if they'd seen a dog recently, or not so recently, or ever. They let me pet their Irish Setter on their front stoop for awhile, but then even he got bored of me.

At some point I went by the cemetery where my father stays put. He didn't say much less than he did in life, when I asked his tombstone if he saw any mutts up there. I even went to see my mother in that retirement home with all the mums out front, and asked to see one of her scrapbooks. She had all kinds of pictures of me in it, snapshots I'd forgotten or had never

seen before, all the way from duck-patterned onesies to cheap grey suits. The Girlfriend was in there, too, toward the end: all smiles on my shoulder.

My mother let me look at myself, at us, even though she didn't remember me. She had always been kind to strangers. Sometimes I watched her watch me; it was like I was a song she couldn't name but knew the tune of, and if I laughed or smiled it struck a chord with her, and for a blink or two we were familiar to each other. Still, she wouldn't know Yesterday if he were curled up next to her on that bed, breathing hot breath onto her wrinkled knees.

Eventually I made it through the bulk of my life, and had more or less let the whole thing go. It was then that my friend Frankie confessed that he'd found Yesterday all those years back, not too long after he first bolted. The old dog was pushed off to the side of a road not far from my apartment, a pile of black and white fur atop one of those storm drains. I'd been back at the dealership, newly un-suspended, and he hadn't wanted to call me up on the job with the news. So Frankie dragged my dog into the woods, buried him respectfully under the pine needles and leaves. When I asked why he hadn't told me, he said he didn't want me to "lose it"—whatever "it" was supposed to be.

He handed me the collar, when the confession was over: I'd convinced myself that it had been blue, but it was green from every angle. It was a Wednesday around 5pm and I was holding the nylon in my hands, the dog's name glinting in the dim light of the café. It's funny, in an oh, well kind of way: it's not always the parts you liked best that come back to you, in the end.

RUBY HANSEN MURRAY

Davis Peak Road

You stand in your yard beside the road,
smoothly paved, phone pedestals installed,
the city knitting itself around you.

You've lived these many years alone,
fir forests wreathed in mist,
the shed snug with cordwood,
ridden your motorcycle on gravel roads
among thickets of salmonberry,
spires of foxglove.

You harvested elderberries
where clearcut patches yield home sites
newly gated, American flags.

You long for the years it rained too much
to live, moss gathering like hair,
when only bears came to visit, a cougar
the only promise.

ANDREW NAJBERG

Year of the Rat

A woman thrown free wobbles upright among the derailed train cars,
her shoulder attached only by a band of skin and sinew.

She attempts to sling her purse like she is about to walk into Macy's.
But she misses her own body altogether and the handbag crashes to
smoking dirt.

A tube of red lipstick, a compact, a notepad with a pastel toned lily on the cover
tumble to the ground, and her lungs simply deflate.

She let out a gentle 'oh', and her brain orders her nearly severed hand to lift.
It doesn't.

She drops to one knee and then thumps on her ass.
She is visibly draining from herself.

Among the drive shafts and busted furnace pokes the head of a rat
from a burrow under some rocks.

Its whiskers vibrate as it sniffs oil spray on grass and pulverized stone.

The secret to immortality is to try to get to the end of life and fail to arrive,
but the rat doesn't know the magnitude of the failure around it

as passengers thrust mangled limbs out broken berth windows.

Doesn't know that carrion birds alight on branches,
mongrels skirt the scene's edge and suss which scents appetize.

Eventually, sirens will come, but for now, computerized watches
do their best to make sense of the cessation of hearts.

A man in a blue suit receives a text message in his pocket.
It's from his daughter driving home from college.

Apparently, she has hit traffic and will be more than a little late
So she's going to pick up dinner on the road.

RYAN NELSON

Trolling the Dam at Night

All the walleye in the lake
bunch up in the rhythm of waves
crashing against the manmade
dam with a slow but relentless
erosion of concrete, rebar,
fortitude, and faith.
God help us if we forget
how to keep our boat
in line with the steep ledge
just outside the shallows.
Keep a firm grip while slowly
letting out a little more line.
Most the time it's a territorial strike;
not a random midnight snack.
Over and over we troll this wall
pulling our deep divers behind.
Questions we cast into the dark
remain unanswered despite
sharp hooks and loud rattles.
Throngs of ancient fish stare
us down as we slowly
veer toward their nests.
White iridescent eyes glow like
xenon drawing us to the edge;
yet with a jolt they zig and
zag away beyond our reach.

THOMAS MAYA

The Biggest Splash

It was hands down the weirdest thing I've ever seen: three grown men dressed to the nines, wearing black suits with black ties, in a pool. And I mean *really in that pool*—not just with their socks and Oxfords pulled off, their slacks cuffed, sitting along the edge with six bare feet dangling in the water. Not standing shoeless, trousers hiked up to their knees, on the wide underwater steps of the shallow end. No—these men, all three of them, were in the deep end of that gleaming blue rectangle, treading water as if their lives depended on it. And, to top it all off, not one of them had bothered to take off their suit jackets.

I spotted the men on our way out to the pool, and seeing them, I told the kids to stay in the shallow end until I could get in the water. They either didn't hear me or ignored what I'd said as they barreled across the stone patio and, screaming with joy, dashed into the pool midway between both ends. This was Tucson, a place alien to our family, and they'd been complaining about the desert scorch nonstop since we'd first climbed off an airplane just a few days prior. Two boys and one girl, all three under the age of eight, not one excited about the prospect of moving to such a godforsaken part of the country. Their mother, my wife Diana, was a top candidate for a tenure track position in the Rhetoric Department at U of A. The job was such a sure thing, we'd brought the children along to get used to the idea of living in Arizona, and the pool at the hotel had been the only thing to save their mother and I from a full-on mutiny of ankle-biters.

After dropping our towels and a beach-cum-pool bag onto a chaise longue, I peeled off an already sweat-drenched t-shirt—we'd only just walked out of the hotel's constant-wall of air-conditioning—and kicked flip-flops underneath the chair before turning back toward the water. Audrey, the oldest, was doing short laps along the shorter length of the pool, her lithe body cutting into a crisp blue that looked to be right out of a David Hockney painting. The boys, Catholic twins, had stopped splashing and were whispering in their standard conspiratorial fashion, planning something they knew I wouldn't want them to be planning.

Down at the deep end, the three men continued treading, nothing more, nothing less. Except for the churn of the water and their labored breathing, they were silent. One of them, the eldest by a couple of decades, even had his eyes closed. The whiskers of his grayish-white beard were matted down from the weight of the water, and his face looked serene, even

peaceful. But for some reason, that look of his seemed forced, fake. The kind of mask worn by someone with a fiery temper counting to ten before responding to an accident, an insult, perhaps even the antics of an idiot.

I eyed this peculiar scene with interest and suspicion as sunshine fell over us in tyrannical abundance. The heat was absolutely unbearable, and I walked to the tiled edge to dip one set of toes into the water, testing the temperature before making any hasty commitments. Not surprisingly, it was refreshingly cool—and somewhat choppy, from the three men's constant treading and the three children's constant capering, especially the boys, who had shifted from collusion to conflict as they began splashing each other in an all-too-familiar smash-mouth frenzy. I sat down at the edge of the pool, dangled my legs into the water, and took a moment to allow for more reconnaissance. I am often intrigued by such peculiarities, and this particular scene made my head ooze full of curiosity.

There was—surprisingly—no one else out on the patioscape, just empty chaises longues and a neatly arranged company of large turquoise patio umbrellas, placed evenly between even rows of minaret-like palm trees, the ones with unimaginably tall and skinny trunks. The three men didn't speak to each other, not a word, not since we'd come out of the hotel, and it felt as if we'd interrupted an important conversation, something crucial for why they were doing what they were doing, one that they'd decided to hold off on finishing until the children and I left the pool. Perhaps that was why the oldest of the three had closed his eyes. That unfinished-ness felt like a charge to the air, what I imagine it feels like being in a place hit by a bolt of lightning just seconds after the strike; situations scarred by Lichtenberg figures, by a potential for some just-passed hazard.

Thinking of these loose and playful connections while eyeing the men—furtively of course—I recalled a story Diana had, a few months back, read one night, a story that she'd so loved she felt the need to tell me all about it, about some old lady recounting for her elderly friends the way in which a whole section of her extended family had decades before been killed all at once by a single bolt of lightning, leaving only an infant alive. We had been on the couch after the kids had gone to bed. She'd pulled my attention away from whatever I was reading at the time. I'd nodded, listened to her description of the dead, how they were arranged around a small cabin as if nothing were wrong, as if they were all still alive, just sitting there enjoying the evening as they had been when the lightning came for them, and hearing Diana describe all of this that night, I'd had the odd feeling that this description sounded vaguely familiar to the account she had, only once, shared with me of her first husband's death. I didn't mention that comparison to her, not then, not after, though I'd thought about the similarity a number of times since.

The men in the pool kept treading, still not saying a thing, and again I figured they were waiting for us to leave. I chuckled to myself thinking that these men were in for a surprise if choosing to wait for our departure—it was like extracting crocodiles from a swamp trying to get my wife's kids out of the pool.

The man with the grizzled beard was around my father's age, in his late sixties, but he seemed to be trim and adequately maintained in the fitness department. So much so, in fact, that he was clearly having the easiest time treading water in full regalia; he was doing just fine with his eyes closed, his face still that bastion of feigned passivity. The other two were both younger men, perhaps in their late thirties, maybe early forties. One of them, who also wore a beard but in reddish-browns, was struggling to keep his head above water, his breathing labored, the sounds he was making as heavy as a poorly tuned lawnmower engine, his arm and leg movements inconsistent, fitful, and his mouth open from time to time, to spit out mouthfuls of water he was intent on not swallowing. The third man treaded along easily enough, his clean-shaven face, neck, and shoulders kept above the surface with minimal effort. He was smiling when looking over at the other young man, who more and more appeared to be just a few minutes from drowning. I recognized in that poisoned smile the kind of schadenfreude each of the boys relishes in when seeing their own brother suffering. And catching that look on his face had me wondering if this odd assembly of well-dressed and taciturn swimmers was comprised of a father and his sons. It was difficult to see any resemblance given that, slick-wet and emblazoned with sunshine as they were, they all had the look of glimmering seals to them. Still, I could tell that the sun was having its way with them. Their faces were all three gleaming with a purplish-blue complexion; I noticed this as I maneuvered a seated dive into the cool bath.

Swimming underwater, I glanced in their direction as I moved across the short length of the pool. The water was so clear, so absolutely limpid, in fact, that I could see them with striking clarity. Black suits like oily pelts gathered about them as their arms and legs jabbed and kicked at the water, black ties slinking and stillborn by the surface, tethered to their necks like dead eels, with four or five or maybe even six feet of pool depth waiting quietly beneath them. That was when I first noticed the shoes—not Oxfords but wingtips—that they were all still wearing. Identical pairs to match identical suits, down to their pocket squares. To the nines indeed, yet multiplied by three.

As I surfaced at the opposite wall, I wondered if this was some kind of odd wager playing itself out before us; a bunch of gamblers who'd gone from Hold 'Em, to horses, to this prop bet unfolding before our eyes, all to see who could hold out the longest treading water while dressed for a funeral

or a wedding, as they were. In the same first breath, I wondered if they might be Mafioso types and thought to check on the kids, curious to know if they'd taken notice of this oddity we were witness to. When I spun around, I saw the girl first—she was seated on the set of wide cascading steps that marked the grand entrance to the shallow end of the pool—but the boys were nowhere to be found. I was about to ask Audrey about her brothers' whereabouts when I heard both numbskulls announcing themselves with the same belted-out notice: "Cannonbaaaaaaall!"

I looked up over my shoulder to see each of their flying bodies curled into tight fists just before they plunged into the blue. Ethan, the baby of the family, disappeared beneath the surface with little surf or swell. Charlie, the middle child, made the bigger splash, coming down against the water right between the three men in their suits and where I was, holding fast to a tiled wall. The wave Charlie created rolled over one of the bearded men's heads, the younger one who'd been struggling the most, and, after a cough and a water-muffled yelp, he disappeared long enough for me to think he might actually be drowning. Charlie and Ethan, both strong swimmers who'd long ago made it through all the shark-level classes at our local YMCA, were already down at the other end of the pool, harassing their sister with little karate chops of water when the older man, eyes now open, finally broke the group's vow of silence.

"Get your brother," he said.

Hearing this edict, the other man shook his head, treading with that same awful smile.

"Before he drowns," the older man added, speaking the way I would when rebuking the kids, the boys especially.

The younger man shook his head again and said, "He's your son."

I looked over at our kids—my wife's kids, really; their father, along with five other soldiers from his squad, was killed by sniper fire in Kabul when the children were all under the age of four. Seeing all three of them gawking toward the deep end, I had the distinct feeling that this was probably not something their mother would want them watching. Diana has—not surprisingly—become something of an overprotective mother. When she told me the story of her first husband's death, she'd mentioned three very particular pieces of information before diving into the details: she told me that she'd learned everything from the horse's mouth, the staff sergeant who'd discovered the dead; she said that she hadn't yet told the kids because they weren't old enough for the particulars; and she concluded her preamble by letting me know that she would only ever repeat this story once more, once they were finally old enough to hear of their father's death. She would, I think, take umbrage with me knowing that I wasn't stopping them

from watching the situation that was unfolding before us. Not that I was at all certain as to what we were watching, besides an apparent drowning, that is.

"Now!" the old man yelled, his head and upper body bobbing beneath the surface slightly, from the effort it took to expel a scream while treading water in a suit. It was the first hint I'd seen of him struggling in the pool.

There was no response, just the continued churn of pool-water and that snide look etched into the younger face. Gazing down into the clear-blue ripples beneath my arms and chest, I could see the submerged man, his body a blurred and refracted mass of black that kicked at the water the way a suicide might when first dropping against a rope's hold. I looked up from that unfolding calamity and saw that neither man—not the brother, not the man's father—was planning on saving him. Just before I dove under the surface, I heard Audrey call out "Daddy, is everything—" The rest of her words shifted to dolphin sounds, then disappeared altogether, as I swam down toward the drowning man.

He was still conscious, still using his arms to plead with the water, but he was sluggish and his face looked like the color of a battered tomato. I cut around him in a wide arc, so that I could come up behind him without giving up the allowance of space he needed to grab onto me in desperation. Years ago, for much of my twenties, to support myself through art school, I'd worked as an ocean lifeguard at Jones Beach and the Rockaways, and I knew the dangers of a drowning man's desperation, knew that these children might be fatherless a second time if I made even the slightest mistake. After I'd heard the story, I told Diana that I didn't think it was as gruesome as she'd imagined it to be. In fact, I told her she should think about telling the kids sooner than she'd planned. I had already come upon the boys speaking about their father's death in curious whispers, imagining the most gruesome of killings because of the way in which their mother had held back on sharing with them the particulars. Still, she held firm to her plan and I did my best to abide by her wishes; I did make it a point to talk to the boys about their father's death, obliquely anyway, letting them know that he hadn't been tortured in the gruesome ways they kept imagining. They, like their mother, didn't care to hear my perspective. Their response, to that, to so many of my other early intrusions, was to say that I wasn't their father and that they didn't have to listen to me, not one little bit. With time, I should say, we've accepted my role as a surrogate father, as a kind of dad. Or we—all of us, that is—will soon come to accept it; that's my hope, anyway.

To judge my next move, I took stock of the world above us: I could see the two other men, their black suits even darker, as they eclipsed the noon-hour sun. It was pinned to its zenith behind them, with a shifting corona of light visible like a phantom edge around their menacing bodies. I

knew to avoid their kicking feet as I threaded my arms through the drowning man's armpits and up around his shoulders. His hands fluttered weakly as I put him in a kind of full nelson, holding firm as I kicked up from the bottom of the pool.

When we broke the surface, I saw the children's faces; they were standing at the water's edge, small orbiting moons looking down into our eyes with concern and full of awe. Audrey smiled with relieved fright. One of the boys—I wasn't certain which one—said, "Shit balls!" making me wonder when I'd been overheard saying that twenty-something catchphrase of mine. But it was the briefest flash of inconsequential concern, and, shelving it for later, I turned onto my back, hefting the bulky man to my chest as I used a modified backstroke to bring him safely to the shallow end. The children followed, stepping along the edge of the pool almost gingerly, as if they'd suddenly become frightened of the water's power to kill. Neither of the two other men, I noticed as I swam with that bulky cargo of theirs, even bothered to look over at us, both still intent on treading water, and not in the least bit concerned about checking on the state of the man I'd just saved. The older man had, in fact, closed his eyes again, donning that mask of equanimity as if nothing had happened. It was astonishing—them caring less, as if it didn't matter that the other man, son or brother to either one, had nearly drowned. As if his death weren't of any concern.

I got him to the stairs where Audrey had been sitting before the commotion, and he leaned back against the edge of the pool and the underwater steps as if he were sitting in one of the many chaises longues laagered about us. Ethan, at the pool's lip, knelt down beside my head and asked, "Is he okay?"

The man coughed out a coffee-mug's worth of water as if to answer the boy's question, and I said, "He's going to be fine." The man coughed again, more water, another half mug, followed by deep, agitated breaths, a misfiring of the lungs correcting itself. "He'll live," I said, quickly looking over at Charlie—who I heard giggling above me—to give him my stop-laughing-this-isn't-a-laughing-matter scowl. He stopped and said, "Sorry." Hearing his sulky voice again, I knew it had been him to let out that curse; knew also that I would have to speak to him about that kind of language later, the way his bio-dad would have, perhaps during the second part of his mother's interview, a two-parter teaching demonstration and scholarly presentation, which was taking place at the university later that afternoon. She would be gone long enough for me to sit them all down, Charlie and Ethan, along with Audrey, to tell them that somehow, the Taliban sniper, undetected, had made his way close enough to their outpost to have an angle to shoot downwards into the foxhole-like sitting space the troop had dug for themselves out there on the far edges of that desert moonscape, how the staff

sergeant had come out of the CHU into the sun so soon after the shots were fired, he could see clouds of pink mist rising from off the men's skulls, all of them already dead, almost peacefully so, just sitting there with a single bullet wound each to the forehead or at their temples, their heads lurched forward or backward as if they were all napping, simply napping, nothing else.

"I'm okay…I'm…I have to keep up," the man said as he tried to heave his body upwards into a fully seated position.

I put my hand on his shoulder and said, "You need to rest." He was so tired from the near-drowning, and plus, from all the work he'd done to stay afloat before going under, that he fell back against the wall easily; it was as if I'd put my hand against the burnt-out husk of a man. As if he went to dust and ash right there in front of my eyes. In front of the kids' eyes too.

Audrey, who's been the quickest to accept me as more than just some temporary understudy, knelt down beside her baby brother Ethan and pointed at the two other men to ask, "What's going on, Daddy?"

"I'm not sure, baby, I don't know."

"Get your sorry sack of soup bones," the old man hollered across the pool as if to answer and to shut down all questions at once, "back here. We aren't finished."

The other man, the beardless one, answered the way I might have when he said, "He's done for," speaking his words loud enough and with the kind of pestering tone meant to spur his brother into agitation and action.

"You are done," I told him. "You have to rest." The man's eyelids fluttered closed but his breath was audible, starting to slow as his heart very likely eased back to a normal rate—and he sighed out in a way that suggested he'd accept my recommendation. "Yeah," I said to the man again, "you are definitely done."

Hearing my words, his eyes blinked open and he looked up into my face with what was unmistakably rage, a kind of instant spleen that had come out of nowhere. Shooting his upper body forward, he said, "We're not done till we're dead. Just like Mom says we—" but his words (and his rage) were then thankfully cut off when we all heard one of the remaining swimmers gurgling out another watery scream. This, I should mention, was also irregular given that most drownings are near noiseless, silent.

Ethan and Audrey both jumped to their feet, and their brother Charlie pointed to the deep end and said, "And another bites the dust," surprising me with those old Queen lyrics turned meme material as I turned to see what we were all turning toward: down at the other end of the pool, only one of the remaining two men was still visible, treading water without any difficulty. That single silvery head, elevated almost comically high over the water's surface, started letting loose wild screams that were peppered with laughter

and callous: "See! Ha ha! See ha what I ha ha ha told you two! Ha! You boys ha ha will never ha learn. Never!"

I stood up on the bottom step, intent on diving in yet again, to save a second drowning fool. But this time there was no need. The man who'd gone under resurfaced by the edge of the pool, close to one of many stepladders. Clearly plagued by exhaustion, he dragged himself along the wall to the closest ladder, and the children and I watched as he struggled to hoist himself out of the water's clutches. His jacket and slacks pressed against his skin in a way that made it look as if he were wearing a wetsuit, but one that seemed to be sloughing off his body in an unsettling way, so that it felt as if the fabric had a life of its own and wanted nothing more than to remain in the water, with or without the man to which it was draped over.

Once again, overwhelmed by the near-perfect qualities of that crisp blue rectangle, I thought of David Hockney's work, of his California years. For reading material on our flight to Tucson, I'd brought along a biography of Hockney's titled *A Rake's Progress*, from which I'd learned of the painter's obsession with pools and sun, an obsession he'd developed when flying into Los Angeles for the first time, seeing, as I'd recently seen, as we were coming in for a landing, all the many bright blue shapes dotting backyards across the urban sprawl, as if the desert city had been lined with giant sapphires to entice newcomers such as ourselves. Though we are all from various New England stock, my wife and I, her kids, Los Angeles seems like a dream come true when compared to the grim chance we're facing of having to live here, in this wasteland of sun-drenched swimming pools and air-conditioned hell. At least in that other desert city, the Californian one, there's the Pacific Ocean with its beaches and salt-water spray to escape to, to enjoy. Here, with my wife's quite-certain tenure track position at the university, there is only the promise of frigid classrooms, frigid homes, frigid cars, and that constant need for chlorinated oppression that the kids have been so hopped-up on. I must admit, I've been dreading the confines of this anemic existence something awful, and that, I know, made the oddity of these drowning fools all the more welcome.

I was thinking of the quiet peculiarity of some of Hockney's pool paintings when the older man started a vigorous front crawl, able as he was—somehow—to swim unbridled by the suit or the suit's trimmings. Thinking of one of the most famous of those works, it was as if the artist in the pink sports jacket and white slacks had jumped in, fully clothed, to swim alongside the man wearing tight-whites. At first, I thought the old man was intent on swimming some kind of perverse victory lap, but he merely came the length of the pool to join us in the shallow end. When he was able to stand, he did just that, and he came toward us looking like some kind of sea monster arisen, the leader of some ocean-bound race of creatures ready

to rule over a new epoch on earth. Which is to say: he looked fierce. But he smiled the warmest smile I've seen anywhere across the country. And he looked into the children's faces with an equally warm curiosity, and then said to me, "Cute kids. Make sure to raise them right." Then he took a first step up the stairs past me, stopping to lean over into his own son's face to say, "Come on, Henry, time to go." He put a water-logged hand onto his son's shoulder and squeezed gently, as lovingly as one ever could, and said, "Come on son, we can't be late."

Lazarus-like at hearing his father's request, he opened his eyes and asked "Time for the wake?" The father, with his eyes blinking shut ever so briefly, nodded, and the son staggered to his feet, and together, they stepped out of the pool.

Charlie took their place within seconds, plopping back into the water with a splash, and then asked, "Hey Dad, what's a wake?"

I shook my head and watched them start to walk off. In that moment, I was surprised by two things: first off, Charlie calling me 'Dad'; and second, Charlie not knowing what a wake was, given his own father's death. Though Diana hadn't told them the gruesome particulars, they had been there to witness all the various aspects of the funeral, from the wake, to the mass, to the burial itself, replete with all the distinct features of a military service, after their father's body had been returned to them. The flag that had been draped over their father's coffin was framed and lived on a wall in our living room, soon to be packed up, along with everything else, bound for a new wall in a new home. But, thinking about it in that moment, I realized the obvious: that they'd been young then, too young to remember particular words, to glean the meaning of things, let alone the weight of such ceremonies. Still, to add to the peculiarity of what we'd just witnessed, I'd also never heard of a midday wake, so I honestly couldn't give the boy a good answer, and I was left mealy-mouthed, troubling all of this out for myself as the clean-shaven brother waddled around the pool. He left behind a long trail of water, the way a small iceberg would if pushed around in this abominable heat, and joined his brother and father, so that all three dripped of grief in that same odd fashion. They took a hard left just before the large doors into the hotel, choosing to walk the length of the patio around the side of the building. They'd gotten close enough for the automatic door to register their presence, and it slid open to reveal my wife's beaming smile as she appeared in the entrance, walking out of the hotel at her customary clip—very likely in more of a rush than usual because of a busy afternoon schedule. She was wearing a white coverup over her favorite floral two-piece, looking radiant, and clearly ready to sneak in a quick midday dip. But her smile melted away as she saw them turn, this drenched triad of men dressed all in black, and she stopped

briefly, with a curiosity to easily match my own, and watched as they walked off.

They moved slow and unsteady as they made their way past the trim line of slender palms, heading out to a parking lot. They moved like pallbearers hauling an invisible casket, carrying the weight of the world on their shoulders. A massive box they would carry with them forever, or so I thought.

I heard Charlie scream, “Cannonball!” behind me, and it made me happy to think that the kids could brush off the oddity of this experience so easily. Which translated, of course, into them being able to brush off far worse things. Thinking this made me feel as if they might in fact someday soon be able to accept me fully into their family, and similarly, that I might accept them as a part of my own. I was lost in this thought as my wife walked over, making her way through a field of neatly littered lounge chairs to where I sat, half in and half out of the pool.

“What was that all about?” she said as she flicked her sandals off and stepped into the water beside me, not bothering to remove her coverup.

Before I could answer, Audrey came up and gave her a big hug from behind, saying “Mommie!”

“Hey darling,” she said in response to Audrey’s hug. And to me she said, “Bobbie?” as if I hadn’t been listening.

“Sorry, honey,” I said. “I don’t know—I have no clue what that was all about. I really don’t. None whatsoever.”

Audrey was quick to respond: “I do.”

She let go of her mother and we both turned to look at her, awaiting some kind of answer or explanation. She was tawny and beautiful, flowery even, not unlike a stargazer lily just before the petals are ready to open with a great blossoming of potential. Behind us, splashing in the pool, we could hear the boys at war with each other once more, two figures playfully at odds, their own potential equally evident.

“Daddy saved one of their lives,” Audrey said, beaming. She looked over into her mother’s face and said, “He’s a hero, just like Papa was.”

“Really, well isn’t that perfect,” Diana said. “We need all the heroes we can get, don’t we darling?” Then she turned to me and asked if it was the one missing a shoe. “Is that the man you saved?” she said to clarify.

“What?” I asked, realizing that I hadn’t noticed that detail when they’d walked out of the pool. “Really?” I said, shocked to hear it. In fact, I was so shocked by this, by what I’d missed, that it felt like I’d been sucker-punched in the face.

“You didn’t think that was weird?” my wife asked, not really hearing me.

There was so much to say just then. I wanted to tell her that so

much of what had just happened felt weird, that all of it felt weirder than anything I'd ever lived through. Just as much as I wanted to tell her to be honest with the kids, to tell them all the details she had for them about their father's death, and not just once, but as many times as they asked to hear it, so that they would have what they needed to get over it, to move on. So that she could move on, too. And if I'm being brutally honest, I'd have to admit that I also felt like telling her not accept this job offer, which I knew was inevitable, given how perfect she was for the position. No matter how many blue jewels and endless stretches of sun there were out here in the desert, it felt as if there was only dust and darkness waiting for us. All of these thoughts were brewing within me, wanting to be spoken out loud. But when I went to speak, there was Ethan's voice yelling for our attention: "There it is! There it is!"

We all turned to look to where he was pointing, down into the deep end of the pool. There, under that warbled mass of sunshine and water, was a blip of something blue-black held in the lowest depths, and in that moment when we first caught sight of it, both Ethan and his brother dove in. Neat dives the both of them, followed by the swift movement of well-trained young bodies. Beneath the heat of that unbearable sun, it felt so natural to watch the swift progress of those young boys, bathed as they were by the crystal-clear blue and the shimmering waves, looking like painted figures embedded in that blue canvas as they raced each other, quick as could be, all to be the first to fish out that bit of detritus one of the men had left behind.

There was so much held for me in that moment—imagining with all the power of my curiosity one of those men so distraught, so grief-stricken that he'd walked off to his own mother's wake without noticing one of his shoes gone missing. Or better yet—without caring. Hands down, that's the truest, most devoted example of love I've yet seen in this world. And it touched me the way an honest-to-god miracle would. Like surviving a bolt of lightning or a plane crash. Seeing close-up the hurling shrapnel of a car bomb carving so easily into concrete and metal, as if everything manmade was as soft as flesh. I could almost feel the sound of the man's uneven gait and the squelch of his sock-covered foot like some kind of faint pressure mounting inside my ribcage. So much so that this was quite certainly the day I started feeling comfortable with the idea of us being a family, me, my wife, her kids, all of us in it together for the long haul.

CASSADY O'REILLY-HAHN

Ergodic Apocalypse

a bowl of lemons
melts like a berg
in my palm
a grain of sand
begs for seeding
while the ocean
swallows its home
I wander the streets
in Laguna Beach
past sawdust festivals
halibut grills
over the shoreline
the sun sets
behind the hills
we don't know
what is happening
to the city
the sea it eating it
one chunk of asphalt
will be left of the 133
before the toll roads
claim that too
it doesn't matter
Wall Street won
high tide
is inevitable.

ROBERT L. PENICK

Thrift Store

Knick-knack aisle.
Something to justify
this blank march
across so many
seasons.

Salt shakers
a little man and woman
in Amish dress.
Holes in their heads
just like the rest
of us.

Ninety-nine cents.
Something pretty
to set on your
seven dollar
Goodwill kitchen
table.

MICHELE PARKER RANDALL

Hermeneutics

I study my son as he sleeps, torso,
arms, & thighs less boy, more
man. I have watched over him,

since his appearing—look—how
his hand splays now like a palm frond.
His feet flew through sixes, sevens, & eights

in one year & his chin need not lift
to cast his whispers into my ear.
Hermes, you never kept my interest long.

Your winged Birkenstocks and tortoise
made no sense to me. Once, I knew
you as the patron saint of floral deliveries,

a nameless, gold smudge silhouetted
on small, white trucks. I didn't know what
I didn't know. Eight years from now,

you'll fly in, your message landing
in my ear: *He is dying. I'm taking him.*
Understand:

                    I will send you packing,
your feet clean-plucked,
feathers in his pillow, fresh.

LANE OSBORNE

Gallop

Dawn on the second day of November, Sheriff Hill and his deputy, Joshua Barlow, rode in on a wagon from the livery stable to the corner of Third and Main where a southern live oak stood across from the county courthouse. The town was quiet but for the rattle of trace chains as the two horses shook off the autumn air. Conwayborough's old lamplighter shuffled past storefronts, snuffing the wicks of wall lanterns and street lamps, and townsfolk peeked from behind drawn shades as Hill pulled on the reins, slowing the horses to a stop. He stepped down, tethered the two mares to the hitching post, then shouldered the coil of rope, nodding to Barlow who hefted the orchard ladder from the buckboard wagon.

The two men, dungarees tucked in their boots, walked in silence across the wagon-rutted street, puddled by rain, then Barlow squinted skyward at the drizzle that fell and said, "It's a bleaksome day."

Hill followed Barlow's gaze, looking for a moment at the clouds thickening in the distance. "Would be without the weather," he said, settling his eyes back on the tree.

The three hundred-year-old oak, corkscrewed up from the ground, was feathered in resurrection fern and swathed in Spanish moss that hung from its limbs like haints. Hill eyed the latticework of branches and considered the previous people he'd strung up, twelve total in as many years. His first had been Nathan Wheeler, a farmer who'd murdered a tobacco buyer for devaluing his yield on account of flea beetle holes. Then there'd been Neil Williams, guilty of the rape of Widow Haskins. The last one Hill had hanged was a freedman who'd sunk an axe blade into Clement Pemberton's skull one day, burying the hatchet, as he said, with his former master. Each one still weighed heavy on Hill, and he knew today would even more.

A breeze slipped beneath his sack coat, between the buttons, and a chill settled in his bones as he slid the rope from his shoulder.

Barlow rested the ladder against the trunk. "This all we need?"

Hill didn't answer as he slung the rope across a branch midway up the bough and pulled down hard. Once, when he was hanging a Lumbee for arson, the rope had snapped, and the Indian had been pardoned due to God's providence, the law of divine intervention. Hill pulled again and, before tying the rope off at the trunk, measured it to length, taking into account the distance of the drop, the height of the boy.

As the rain slacked and morning brightened, the first folks gathered, dressed as though it were Sunday. Men wore frock coats and neckties, ushering women who gathered the hems of their crinoline-domed dresses, tiptoeing around puddles as they neared the courthouse steps. The wind whistled through the thoroughfare, stronger now, riffling the red, white, and blue bunting that draped from the courthouse's wrought-iron railings. Tomorrow was election day, and while Grant's win over Seymour for the presidency seemed certain, Hill's local re-election bid against Tweed Weaver seemed less so. Lately, he'd been accused of abusing his badge, arresting folks for personal reasons rather than violations of the law. He'd jailed R.J. Randall, the civil engineer from The Southern Railroad Company one weekend. Caught him thieving sundries from Goldfinch's Dry Goods—several tins of shag tobacco, rolling papers, a box of Lucifers. Guilty as hell. The same was true with Randall's bootlicker, Marshall Stevens, Southern Railroad's surveyor, who was arrested for public indecency weeks later. Neither case made it to court due to insufficient evidence, but Hill's own alleged misconduct had been called into question—allegations ginned up by Mayor Mackey who'd already hitched his wagon to Tweed Weaver, the two of them campaigning together ever since.

The Waccamaw River, winding its way at the end of Main, though less than a furlong away from where people waited, remained out of view due to the land's slope, but the stacks of a riverboat drawing into port towered as high as the leafless tupelos. As the boat docked, the steam whistle rolled over the river, bristling the hair on the back of Hill's neck who, along with Barlow, busied himself with unhitching the younger mare from the wagon.

The story of a fifteen-year-old boy, convicted of murder, who was to be executed by a sheriff up for re-election, had made its way to the surrounding counties. Men, women, and children disembarked at the dock, walking toward the center of town. Among them, a newspaper reporter who positioned his daguerreotype in the middle of the street, extending the camera's bellows toward the tree and the empty noose that hung from it.

Townsfolk and those from the surrounding farms arrived too—Tweed Weaver, the Larabees, the Padgetts, the Joneses, Pastor Tillman. When Judge Cottingham came out onto the courthouse's front portico, he pulled his pocket watch from his waistcoat and snapped it open. Just as Hill wondered if the Abernathys would show, an old mule wobbled onto Main Street, hitched to a flatbed wagon where Big Abe and his wife, Sarah, sat on either side of their son—a rough-hewn pine casket knocking about in the wagon's bed behind them.

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Seven months earlier, the knock at Hill's door had come well before daybreak, too early for a social visit or good news. He'd sat up in bed, placed his feet on the hardwood floor, and rubbed the weariness from his eyes. He struck a match on the bedside table, and lit the oil lamp, spilling light across where his wife still lay sleeping. Hill looked at Ruth for a moment, at the silver strands in her hazelnut hair, the gentle rise and fall of her chest and regret stirred somewhere deep inside him. The knock sounded again, louder this time, as Hill shuffled down the hall, past his son's room, to the door, opening it to find Barlow standing there, thin as a thread.

When Hill first advertised for a new deputy, Barlow wasn't the sort he'd had in mind. After Bug Abbott retired, Hill had hoped to find someone just as seasoned, but Barlow, without a whisker on his face and boots too big for his feet, showed up at the jailhouse instead. After introducing himself, Barlow told Hill how he'd hoped to fight in the war, but was too young, so he enlisted as a Confederate fifer. And how after Appomattox, he returned home to North Carolina, to log timber, but travelled to Conwayborough as soon as he heard there was need for a deputy. Barlow wasn't but nineteen, but he was eager, strong despite his size, and, well, the only person who'd applied for the position. So Hill pinned Bug's badge on him right then and there.

"Jep Padgett's missing," Barlow said. His eyes were bloodshot from the night watch and his voice trembled as he spoke. "Word is that Rooster and Hollis have been searching for him, even promised a bounty on the head of anyone who may've harmed him."

Hill could see that Barlow, deputized little more than two months earlier, didn't want to make the ride alone to Carsens Ferry to look into it, and he couldn't find fault with that. The Padgetts had never shown much regard for a sheriff's badge, and he knew Barlow's would garner even less. Hill considered waiting until sunrise, but it would take half a day's ride just to get there and back, and if there was something to Jep's disappearance, the trail would already be growing cold. So while Barlow saddled his horse, Hill dressed and left a note for Ruth, writing more words than he'd spoken to her in recent months.

Hill and Barlow set out on horseback, following the road that led south out of town. After they passed by Conwayborough Baptist, and the old muster field where cannons still stood on rotten wagon wheels, their brass barrels now a green patina, there was nothing but forest—dry branches rattling in the wind, the thrum of insects. The gravelly hoots of an owl sounded in the distance, as Hill looked up at the sliver of moon that hung above them.

Pink skimmed the horizon by the time they reached Rooster Padgett's place—a weathered shotgun shack, slouching among a stand of

scrub pines, with a stovepipe on the roof, belching plumes of smoke and cinder into the air. Nearby was a cord of wood stacked between two trees next to a whisky still, and caged gamecocks with dubbed wattles and combs beating their wings, crowing as sunlight spilled through the trees. Split-rail fencing wrapped around a hog barn where a passel of spotted hogs grunted by an empty trough.

Hill heard the click of a hammer before he saw Hollis Padgett walk from the front porch's shadows to the railing with a rifle leveled at his chest. Barlow reached for his pistol, but Hill waved him off.

"You lost?" Hollis said, squinting down his gun's barrel.

"I've come about Jep," Hill said. "Heard he's gone missing."

Rooster, sitting in a porch rocker, struck a match to light his cob pipe, his face visible for a moment in the flicker, before slipping back into the dark. He stood and hobbled to the railing with the aid of a crutch. He wore a butternut forage cap with a secession cockade stitched to its crown, and his left pant leg was pinned up at the knee, the lower half lost to battle.

"Jep's been missing for two days now," Rooster said. He placed a hand on Hollis's rifle, lowering the barrel.

"That like him?" Hill said. "To wander off?"

"Wouldn't be searching for him if it was," Hollis snarled.

Hill looked at Hollis then back at Rooster. "When'd you last see him?"

"Thursday evening," Rooster said. "Said he was leaving for town before sunup for more hog feed."

"His horse gone?" Barlow said.

"Found it yesterday evening," Rooster said, "just outside of town, grazing by the roadside."

Although he was already certain of the answer, Hill asked, "You know anyone around Carsens Ferry who might wish him harm?"

"Naw, Sheriff," Rooster said. He took a draw from his pipe and blew smoke daggers from his nose. "We Padgetts are a likable bunch."

"Mind if we look around?" Hill said.

Rooster fixed his yellow eyes on him. "We'll find what's come of Jep soon enough ourselves."

After Hill and Barlow left, they rode over to Martin Larabee's, a tobacco farm bordering the Padgetts' to the south. Larabee told them he hadn't seen Jep, said he'd told Rooster and Hollis the same when they came questioning, but that they were welcome to search his fields and farm, which they did, trotting their horses past furrowed rows to search the tree line and in Larabee's house and barn. They did the same across the road at Tad Jones's place, finding nothing there either.

"Could be he's out cattin' around," Barlow said, as they left Jones's farm, heading back north toward the Abernathys'. "Padgetts don't much seem like church-goers."

Hill shrugged. "Maybe, but it'd be best if we figure it out before the Padgetts do."

When they reached Cane Creek, the border between the Padgetts' and the Abernathys' land, they followed the water, avoiding the corn seedlings that were already shin-high in the field to their right. Midway back they came upon several rows, four acres or more, that had been uprooted and eaten. Barlow got down from his horse, knelt to the dirt, and ran two fingers in a cloven hoof print.

"Don't figure they're feral, do you?" he asked.

Hill stepped down from his horse, led her to the creek near a hog wallow where she drank, and Barlow took his horse to do the same. "No," Hill said, looking across the water at the Padgetts' woody land. "I think it's their hogs that did this."

"What brings you on my property?" Hill heard someone say, turning to see Big Abe Abernathy, all six-foot-five and three hundred pounds of him, standing there with three rusty coil-spring traps slung over his shoulder. It was the first time Hill had seen Big Abe in nearly a year and he couldn't help but notice how he'd aged, grayed temples and weathered face.

"We're looking for Jep Padgett," Hill said. "Haven't happened to see him have you?"

"I hadn't and already told the Padgetts as much."

"Barlow here thinks Jep might've wound up in some whorehouse," Hill said. "Mind if we look around, make sure he didn't stumble home drunk, end up face down in your creek, maybe somewhere else on your property?"

"Only if you got court papers permitting you to."

"That your son?" Barlow said. He pointed to a boy off in the distance walking their way. "Maybe he's seen him."

Big Abe looked over his shoulder and hollered to the boy to wait for him at home. Hill watched him turn around. Dear Lord, how quickly heartache can rise up like headwaters. Before the Abernathys moved out of town, Big Abe's son, Isaac, and Hill's boy, Benjamin, had once been friends. More like brothers. Even favored one another—chestnut eyes, round chins, hair thick as a horse's mane.

"You ever had trouble with the Padgetts?" Hill said, still watching Isaac walk away.

"Who hadn't?"

Hill nodded, then looked at the traps still resting on Big Abe's shoulder. "I see you're busy," he said, as he and Barlow climbed atop their horses. "We'll search elsewhere for now."

When Hill and Barlow headed back to Conwayborough, the same stretch of road that had been dark and strange hours earlier was now bright beneath the afternoon sun.

"Think that's enough motive?" Barlow asked. "Padgett hogs fattening themselves on Big Abe's corn? "

Hill watched a wren settle on a redbud branch in bloom. "I've seen folks die for less."

That evening, Hill found Ruth asleep in their son's bed, the drapes parted, and the full light of the setting sun cast across the room. He stood there a while, before walking in, not sure if he should. Ruth didn't wake when he entered, nor did she when he picked up the tintype that was propped on the side table, a picture of Benjamin taken two years earlier. Their son had looked much younger then, freckles dappling his nose and cheeks, hands clasped around the zoetrope he'd been given that Christmas. That toy, Benjamin's favorite, still sat on the dresser, and Hill walked to it, setting the tintype down and taking it with him to the armchair where he sat. He remembered how Ruth had told him that zoetrope meant "life turning," as he looked inside the cylinder at the images of a silhouetted horse in various poses of gait, frozen and unmoving—the way memories were for him now.

Ruth had been sitting there eleven months earlier, in that same chair, darning a pair of Benjamin's socks when Hill brought their boy's body to her, still wet from the river. Their son had been told to stay away from the trestle that The Southern Railroad Company had begun to build, but a friend's dare had proven stronger than a father's caution. That day came back in bits and pieces. Buzz of cicadas along the Waccamaw. Creosoted bridge pilings souring the air. Chill of his child's body against his. Ruth's mouth, gaped open in anguish, and the wooden reel of cotton thread, unspooling like lost time across the hardwood floor.

Hill shut his eyes to pray, wondering where to begin, but the cloud of words in his mind couldn't come together. He knew there was hurt in the world that couldn't be healed, voids that couldn't be filled, questions that couldn't be answered. When he opened his eyes he looked again at the zoetrope still in his hands and spun the slatted cylinder, sending the horse galloping, and he wept.

The next day, Hill interrupted the Abernathys' dinner, delivering court papers. Big Abe answered the door, but his wife, Sarah, stood from the table where Isaac remained seated, and sidled up next to her husband, worry wrinkling across her brow. When Sarah and Ruth had still been friends,

they'd often bake pies, cakes, or cobblers together after church on Sundays, and knit together most Wednesdays, but the relationship ended soon after Benjamin died—when Hill blamed Isaac for their son's drowning. What had Big Abe said back then? Boys'll be boys? That it wasn't like Benjamin was pushed? That it could've just as soon been Isaac who drowned that day? But it wasn't, was it? No, Big Abe's son was living. Breathing. Enjoying a second helping of ham.

Big Abe took the court papers from Hill reluctantly, and he and Sarah were still standing on their front porch reading them when Hill followed Massey Johnson's hounds as they nosed a scent trail along the Abernathys' cornfield, tugging hard at the end of their leads. They sniffed along Cane Creek all the way to the edge of the property line, losing the trail from time to time, threading their way through a stretch of piney flatwoods. The searchers—Hill, Massey, and Barlow—slowed as the hounds led them into forested swampland, and bog mud sucked at their boots. The hounds sloshed back along the creek, coming upon a game trail they followed until they reached the banks of the Waccamaw and began their baying.

Massey tightened his grip on the leads and shrugged. "Could be they've led us astray. These dogs are good for treeing coons and not much else."

"He may be right, Sheriff," Barlow said. "No footprints in all that mud? Not a stitch of clothing caught on any brambles?"

Hill nodded as he stared at the black water, watching white petals swirl in a small eddy. Dogwoods had been in bloom when Benjamin was baptized in the Waccamaw, and the melody of the choir's hymn suddenly flooded his mind, but the song's title didn't. *Bright Forever*, maybe? Hill hummed the tune to himself now, searching for the words, then remembered this: *Shall we meet beyond the river, where the surges cease to roll? Where in all the bright forever, sorrow ne'er shall press the soul?*

Days later, Jep's body was found further down river, tangled up in a trotline. His flesh had begun to slough from the bone, the blue rinsed from his eyes, but the bullet hole in his forehead was still clear, as were the bite marks around his ankle from a coil-spring trap.

Later that same week, when Hill and Barlow returned to the Abernathys', they found Big Abe in his barn, hammering a red-hot plowshare he'd just pulled from his forge. Sparks flew as he struck steel, peening the blade's edge.

"We found Jep's body," Hill hollered over the shrill sound of metal hitting metal.

Big Abe continued hammering the plowshare, harder now, without looking up or saying a word, and Hill thought back to Pastor Tillman

preaching from Joel days after the Confederacy first fired on Fort Sumter. The old preacher had said then that the time had come for folks in the community to beat their plowshares into swords, their pruning hooks into spears, and take up arms against their aggressors. Neither men, Hill nor Big Abe, had fought—one a young sheriff who felt an obligation to his community over the Confederacy, the other well past the age of conscription. Most folks in and around town had accused Big Abe of being a Lincoln loyalist, including his younger brother who later died in The Battle of Rivers' Bridge. But Hill had stood by him, Lincolnite or not, called him his friend.

"He had wounds around his right ankle," Hill continued. "The kind someone might get from the jaws of a trap like those you were setting the other day."

"I didn't kill him if that's your meaning," Big Abe said. He looked at Hill then to Barlow.

Hill shook his head. "Don't believe you did."

"Then why're you here?"

"For your boy."

Big Abe stepped toward Hill with his hammer still in hand. "This is about Benjamin, isn't it?"

Hill lunged at Big Abe, landing a blow to his chin. Big Abe righted himself, drove his shoulder into Hill's gut, slamming him into the barn wall. Barlow tried to get between them, but they didn't let loose of one another until a small voice said, "I did it."

Hill turned to see Isaac standing in the barn mouth, his body silhouetted by light.

"Go back to the house!" Big Abe hollered, but his son didn't move.

"I'd gone to check the corn for cutworms before sunup, like I'm supposed to," Isaac said.

"Enough!" Big Abe said, but his son kept talking.

"I had a lantern in one hand, my rifle in the other. I saw the hogs first, eating our corn again, then Jep, caught in one of our traps. He was bleeding and couldn't pry it open. He growled, said he was gonna kill me and my family. He tugged hard at the chain, looked to be loosening it from the hickory root it was anchored to. I got scared, so I shot him. I worried someone might've heard, so I made quick work of it, dragging his body to the creek and floating it down stream until it spilled out into the river."

Hill looked at Big Abe, now slouched against the wall. If he wasn't already bartering with God, he would be soon enough, wouldn't he? A father, a good one anyway, would ransom his farm, his home, even himself to keep his child out of harm's way. When Hill looked back at Isaac, the boy hung his head and held his arms straight out in front of him, waiting to be cuffed.

It took the jury less than an hour to find Isaac guilty of murder. An appeal was later denied, but Judge Cottingham agreed, at the request of Big Abe, to postpone the execution until autumn, so Isaac could help reap the family's yield. Now, five months later, the sky was clear but for the few clouds that daubed indigo in white billows and a skein of geese, honking as they flew over oaks, maples, elms, and birches, blotting the banks of the Waccamaw in gold and red, orange and plum. The sweet smell of leaf rot on the forest floor swept over the river and into town where Hill stood from his porch rocker after Ruth called him in for supper.

Ruth had butterbeans, fried chicken, and squares of cornbread waiting on the table. Hill took off his hat, hanging it on the back of his chair before taking a seat, and held her hand in his to say grace. They ate in silence, the flicker of wall sconces and the table's oil lamp illuminating the room. After they'd eaten, Hill looked out the window at the harvest moon waxed up full on the horizon.

He pushed away his plate. "Fields are nothing but stubble."

"That doesn't trouble you?" she asked. "Knowing the last of the Abernathys' corn has been broken, that their boy's due to be hanged?"

"Should it?"

Ruth looked at him like she was searching for someone she once knew, but was no longer there. She stood and cleared the table, taking the dishes to the washtub, then filled a cast-iron kettle with water, hung it from the mantel to warm, and added more logs to the fire. When she used the bellows to reignite the flame, dust rose in the air like altar ash and she began to cry.

Hill walked up behind Ruth, hesitated, then turned her around and pulled her into his arms. As her body softened into his, and her sobs quieted against his chest, he couldn't remember the last time he'd held her, but knew it'd been too long. He slid a thumb across her cheeks, drying tears as she gazed up at him. He looked at her for a moment—the fallen tress of hair, the soft creases around her eyes that settled on his.

"Hanging Isaac isn't going to bring Benjamin back," Ruth said.

The trill of tree crickets pressed against the window panes as Hill pulled her in closer and kissed the top of her head. He inhaled as though he might speak, but said nothing.

***

The crowd quieted as Big Abe pulled his mule to a stop near the courthouse. He stepped down and helped Sarah from the wagon, the two of them hugging Isaac before he walked over to Hill in the center of the

street. The court reporter, seated under the courthouse portico, dipped his nib in an ink well, readying himself to write as Judge Cottingham stepped to the railing and cleared his throat. “Let the record show we’ve convened on this second day of November in the year of our Lord, eighteen hundred and sixty-eight, for justice to be served in the case of South Carolina versus John Isaac Abernathy.”

“Young man,” Cottingham said, looking down at Isaac. “Have you any final words?”

Isaac looked to his parents, then up to Cottingham and shook his head.

“Have you a request for a final prayer?”

Isaac nodded.

Pastor Tillman hobbled over to him and smiled apologetically at the boy. Tillman had baptized Isaac, his mother, his father, and half the county. The old preacher looked to Hill like he was losing one of his own. “Bow your head and close your eyes, son,” Tillman said. He took the boy’s hands in his, pausing for a moment as though to gather his thoughts. “May the Lord in his love and mercy look upon you with the grace of the Holy Spirit. And may the Lord who freed you from sin, and saved you, also raise you up.”

Tillman patted Isaac’s head and squinted against the sun that now blazed between clouds as he limped back to the crowd line.

“Does anyone among us have cause for this execution not to be carried out?” Cottingham said.

Hill looked at Big Abe for a response, but he offered none, and Hill wondered what he would feel in the months and years to come—if grief would sneak up on Big Abe at unexpected moments as it had for him, if life would lose much of its meaning. Sure would. Big Abe, Christian as he was, would curse God almighty himself before long. A man can endure just about any hardship—blighted crops, rustled livestock, a war that splits a nation in two, pitting brother against brother. But the death of a child?

“You may proceed, Sheriff,” Cottingham said, and Hill led Isaac over to the tree, where the young horse stood, still as bronze. Hill bound Isaac’s hands behind his back, and hoisted him onto the mare with the help of Barlow. When Porter Johnson, the old sheriff who’d retired ahead of Hill, first showed him how to hang a man, he’d explained the importance of the knot’s position. Placed ahead of the left ear, beneath the jawline, the rope would snap the neck clean, making death certain and immediate. But placed behind the ear, the neck wouldn’t break at all. Instead, one of two things would happen: either the noose would cut off blood to the brain, making death slow and painful, or it wouldn’t constrict against the arteries and the hanged would survive without much more than a bad rope burn.

The wind moaned through the fern-laden branches as Hill climbed the ladder, still propped against the oak, and looked out across the crowd. Men shifted from foot to foot, and women dabbed at their eyes with handkerchiefs. Rooster leaned on his crutch, next to Hollis who slouched against the courthouse brick with his arms crossed. Big Abe and Sarah were still in the thoroughfare, and beyond them, Hill was surprised to see Ruth standing near a streetlamp. He looked at his wife, saw even from here how her body shook, as he looped the noose over Isaac's head, and drew it snug against the boy's neck. He lowered his gaze to the knot, hesitated a moment, then made an adjustment no one else watching would've understood, positioning it behind Isaac's ear, giving fate the final say.

"I love you, son," Big Abe said, his voice breaking.

Isaac fixed his eyes on his father as Cottingham pulled his pocket watch from his waistcoat, and raised his arm, holding it there for what felt like all eternity. Then he dropped it just as church bells tolled the ten o'clock hour, and Hill swatted the mare on her rump.

Sheriff Hill wouldn't remember exactly how life turned in the moments that followed—the way the rope snapped taut, nor how Isaac's body swung from the end of it; the gasps in the crowd, nor the look in the boy's eyes as he realized he'd survived the hanging; how Hollis's rifle fire, aimed at Isaac, missed its mark and pocked the tree, nor how Hollis was taken to the ground by bystanders and cuffed by Barlow. But Hill would remember that horse. He'd remember the way she stood still, dark against the sun, then the flare of her nostrils as she set in motion, the flow of her mane and tail, how mud splattered against her underbelly, and the drum of her hoofbeats as she broke into a full gallop headed east, unfurling like ribbon into the bright forever.

ISAAC RANKIN

Anthem

Baby boy is going through this phase
where every item is worthy of a Mic
Drop. Sippy cup: Mic Drop. That
annoying stuffed rabbit that repeats the
same damn song: Mic Drop— but still
kicking. Bottle pumped at 5AM. iPhone.
Daddy's just-within-reach beer: Mic.
Drop. Oh, how he cackles! Some
mornings I half expect him to break free
from the high chair, climb down, stand
up, and walk off the stage of our little
kitchen. He moves through the living
room like one of those evolution charts
coming to life, out the back door and
onto the porch, brushing off his leather-
covered shoulders and smoking his first
cigarette in indie-rocker solitude. But I
can't quite picture his grown face. Some
afternoons during nap time I crack his
door, afraid to find an empty crib
because the irreversibly adult him now
stands on the porch, back turned, face
covered by long hair. He's staring
beyond the tree line, beyond our
seedling home, beyond protection from
things I pretend to control. He's slowly
killing himself with another inhale that I
can still taste after seven years, six
months, and two days. Some nights in
deep sleep I find him on the porch. I
want to talk to my grown son. He turns
to say something but I can never make
out the words. I'm too distracted by his
face, which is always my own.

ALYSSA D. ROSS

The Dream of Growing Old

Five black vultures circle
the splayed armadillo carcass
just outside the turning point
            to the old folk's home.

One day later, they're still
picking at the grey shell,
gorging on soft insides
            the body now pushed

past the curb, backside upward
neatly tucked on a perfect square
of new turf. I notice driving home,
            waiving at the small, silver woman

who walks her dog. Her tiny dog
my brindle dog likes to bark at,
because we are neighbors,
            me and the elderly.

Am I the Silver Woman? Am I
            the Armadillo or the Vulture?

MICHAEL SALCMAN

Forensic Book Report

Somewhat short in size and undernourished,
this cadaver bears a partial set
of fingerprints from his right hand
and fragments of DNA from his left.
The spine’s slightly bent and torn
from age and over-reading.
On the end-papers
occasional blood stains make an appearance
and a few pages stick together
where the author drew the ichor out.
Some edges were never properly cut,
the rest mildly bumped.
Library stamps and dates indicate
a low level of interest as do
rare pencil-marked exclamations in the margins.
There’s a single corner fold on page 105,
when she drew a breath of self-recognition
and placed a dry flower before coming to its end.

MICHELE PARKER RANDALL

The Waiters

"You're lucky, really," the doctor says. He flips pages back and forth.

"Well, I feel lucky."

My husband pinches my shoulder.

"What?" The doctor looks up.

"Nothing. You were saying?"

"Now, we can refer you out to a specialist. There's obviously a problem going on, but without the history of recurrent losses, we couldn't refer you. You really need to go to a fertility clinic. Okay?"

"Okay."

"Most insurance companies will pay for a specialist with your history. Who's your insurance?" He flips faster through pages like he's really looking, but knows we'll respond before he finds the page stapled to the inside cover. I say nothing and wait to see how long it will take him to find the information.

"Silver State," my husband responds.

"Oh." The doctor looks at me then down at his shoes, "well, most insurance companies will cover it. You'll need to call yours."

"Perfect." The postered ceiling offers scenes of brilliant blue sky with luxuriant clouds poised above green, mossy boulders. Clear water rush-splashes, caught mid-tumble in a freeze-frame of lushness. I haven't bothered to sit up after the exam. The doctor had said everything looks great for my age, and I begin to wonder, who he measure that against. I sit up and remember: before every exam I promise to call *peek-a-boo!* when the doctor attempts eye contact or conversation during the vaginal examination. Damn. Next time.

"Money is no object," says my husband.

I side-eye him. It's the object that's going to re-shingle the roof, fix the radiator, and pay off our ever-lasting gobstopper of a school loan.

"Good, because it can get expensive." The doctor nods to make sure we know he's serious.

"Perfect," I say. My husband looks at me funny. How many times have I said that word? Maybe three.

"Okay. Good luck, and keep me posted." The doctor pumps my hand like a well handle—exactly four times—and nods (once) to my husband.

"How do you feel about all this?"

"Perfect."

***

Outside the clinic for a long, long, long time we wait. We arrived forty-five minutes early.

"If they think I'm crazy, will they not treat me?" The ten-page intake sheet in my lap devotes four pages to mental health.

"You'll pass."

"I mean, they should do that with everyone getting pregnant, not just people like me. Right?"

"Sure." My husband leans his head back and sighs.

"What?"

"Nothing. Are you ready for this?"

"Yep. See?" I flip papers. "Page 4, section B, question 2 implies that I am ready to continue." I hold up the paper stippled with blue ink. Yesterday I hand printed the answers over a piece of notebook paper to keep the lines even. I straighten the papers, make sure the check is signed and paper-clipped.

Breaking the wait, he opens the door. After signing in at the front desk, we find a place to sit in the weirdly long, over-decorated room full of nervous people and furniture. Four three-person couches and eight chairs glow various shades of plums and roses. Silk trees. Side tables display three foot high vases, with equally high and wide silk arrangements. Like a funereal art gallery. Two enormous brown coffee tables sit in the middle of the room, overflowing with magazines. I pick up a *Modern Parent* and glance at the others waiting. We are all just waiting. For miracles, maybe. Or answers. In one of the floral plum chairs sits an obviously pregnant woman.

"Look. Look at her," I whisper. "I guess they worked for her."

"See? They know what they're doing."

"Maybe she's a ringer."

"What? Are you--" He stifles his response, but raises one eyebrow. I know this gesture, but continue.

"Maybe she's paid to sit here and give women hope, so we willingly hand over cash." I give him a knowing look, nod my head, and cross my legs. "I bet they do that." He knows this gesture.

My husband picks up a Sports Illustrated and tries his best to look sporty, or illustrated, or not bored.

"Like how they leave out the *in* and just stick with *fertility clinic*—smart marketing that."

"Why are you here?"

"I'm sorry?" I surprised a young woman on the next couch over. She makes an obvious gesture of marking her place in a book.

"I'm sorry. We're new here, and I was just curious if you've been here before or if this is your first time, too." Why am I doing this? My husband remains focused on the article. He's eyes are not moving.

"This is our first. Excuse me." She opens her book, turns slightly away, and begins moving her mouth as she reads. Eyes flit left to right and her lips move with no sound escaping, just a rush movement of rosy flesh and a hush of air, like whispering a litany, the pages of the book her rosary.

A bang and struggle at the front door turns every head. A gray-haired woman wrestles a double stroller through the narrow doorframe. The door has a tendency to shut too quickly, smacking people, and apparently strollers, each time they step through. Everyone eyes the stroller as the woman checks in. *Babies*. The men watch in wonder. The women do their best to look unruffled. *Show off*.

***

A nurse asks for clarification of our medical history. My husband checked out just fine. Excellent count and motility—A+ swimmers, which leaves it all at my feet. I debate what to include and what to leave out.

This room is a smallish, not-quite-conference room with achingly hard chairs and tv/dvr in the corner.

"I smoked while I was on the pill. You think that did it?"

"The doctor will go over this with you. Just need to make sure the information is complete."

"You know, once I saw a show that said prescriptions can make you infertile, even if not listed as a side-effect." I fidget in the torture-seat, twist a tissue until pieces fluff-fissure off. The nurse doesn't look up. "I didn't believe it. I mean, it's on the bottle, right?"

My husband intervenes, "I'm sure it wasn't something you did."

"Easy for you to say," I whisper. Then louder, "Hypothetically. If I had smoked pot in high school, would that—?"

The specialist, smiling eagerly, enters, taking the file from the nurse. He introduces himself and sits, placing my folder on the table between us.

"Good morning!" He smiles again. His braces spark and flash in the florescent light.

"Good grief," I whisper, but it gets lost in the too loud *'Morning!* next to me.

"I looked over your records and I'm interested in your case." The specialist looks pleased, then looks up, clearly expecting us to be pleased. We nod quickly.

"One in four pregnancies end in miscarriage. You guys are the reverse of the normal statistics, which makes it very interesting."

"Interesting." I nod again. "Like, to you." I shoot a *help!* look at my husband. Nothing. "Just curious…um…how old are you…exactly? Because, for sure, I have things in my closet older than you." I take the kick from my husband without flinching.

"I know, I know. I look young," the specialist laughs, shimmering metal. Sparking. "But, I think we can help."

My husband smiles a *See?* which translates to *lots of people do good things when they're young*, his look continues. Continues. *Surely*. My look asks him to think about what he was doing at that age.

"Insured?" the specialist asks.

"No. Yes. I mean, we have insurance, but they aren't covering this, so we're paying cash."

"Let's start conservatively then. Medication about $200.00 a month the first eight. After that, ten a month, just over $200.00 a shot. I want to map your chromosomes to have a look-see. Plus, blood work to check on your hormones—"

"In case they left?"

"Heh. Funny. We need to make sure they're normal." The specialist looks at me. I smile back, wishing I could blind him with braces. "Call us when you start your cycle, exam and ultrasound on days two and fourteen, and use an ovulation kit. Questions?"

"No." We both reply.

The specialist lists more. My husband listens intently. I smile until my cheeks hurt and it's time for us to check out. Remembering the door, he hops through, grabbing the handle so it won't hit me; the door closes behind us with a solid whack.

***

Today in the rosy room full of waiters, I lean my head back until it touches the wall. I keep my eyes closed, sick of pall-bearer-worthy flowers and mauve.

"Head?" The medicine, though not helping me get pregnant, manages to cook up brilliant headaches. Piercing, blind-bright that reminds me of the old cartoons, spinning stars and tweeting birds halo.

"Mmm."

"Slide your foot over, and I'll stomp on it." For this I lift my head. "I read something about using pain as a distraction. I stomp on your toe, and you don't notice the headache for a while."

"Ha." I rub my elbow, still a blue-purple from the clinic's over-eager door.

I recognize some of the others, but today, I don't care to exchange nods. All of us lost in our own trial, each different enough we all feel: *no one understands*. And we're all correct. At first, I tried to make friends, thinking we'd carry each other. But, waiters who become pregnant disappear and feel guilty about those who haven't. Or they feel guilty about not feeling guilty. Or don't want to be reminded of this hell. Easier to go it alone.

Those who had children and now aim for a second family are different from those who waited to have children and now can't. Second-timers have nothing to lose and love to show pictures of their children *(why?)* or grandchildren *(leave now)*. Some waiters pack in a punisher-god, convinced they deserve this, and confess anything that might explain why they are failing. Some of us feel like a failure, like by nature, I should be able to do this *one* thing—even accidentally. But, no. Further, the women who cannot get pregnant at all. No successes, but no gut-punch disappointments, either. Just a long, long ocean voyage to nowhere. At the very top are the waiters with no children and no answers, but loss after loss after loss. Do not explain—just nod, or say hello. Cry with them if you mean it.

My husband jumps to his feet next to me.

"Coming?" he asks. A nurse stands in the open doorway.

"Go on without me."

His half-smile drags me off the couch to the same smaller waiting room with steel chairs. We wait in silence until the door opens.

"Oh, Peek-a-boo!" the specialist says. "Hilarious." He keeps chuckling as he sits down. "Of all the things to say."

"So now what," I ask. He takes five minutes to get to any point.

"Okay. Let me look... Okay. Okay." Each page marked with a verbal *Okay*. "I think we can say that the first batch did not work."

"No?" My eye twitches.

"Yes. And that's great," the specialist says.

"Great!" I move my leg away from the kick I know is coming.

"There's a new drug I've been wanting to try. He'll give you shots, once a day, days one through nine."

"He?" In unison.

The specialist looks up, "Is that a problem?" My husband's chin drops to his chest. He sighs a low moan.

"You get to shoot me."

"Oh. Wow. Wow. Wow. Is there any other way—I—I. Don't know if I can—" Memories of a childhood spent in too many hospitals blitz him. He pales.

"We'll teach you how before you leave today. This is hardly the most invasive therapy for people like you. Have you thought about how far you're willing to go?"

Eight months ago, we made it a point to meet other couples going through treatments. In the span of one week, we met two couples, one had a successful IVF after one try. They stated at least seventeen times that they were overwhelmed and maybe weren't ready to be parents. They were their best evidence. The other couple had five unsuccessful IVF sessions paid for by a second mortgage, and when that money was gone, they gave up and told their families they had a gambling problem. We agreed on a fuzzy gray between the two couples. So, we shoot.

After the specialist flashes Christmas-themed bands and leaves, the nurse enters with a bag of syringes, a red bio-hazard box/odd-piggy bank, and a vial of saline. She explains each step: fill the syringe with saline, squirt the saline into the powder vial, shake vigorously (*vigorously!*), and refill the syringe.

"It's very important that you remember to change the needle after you do all this, or it will be dull and hurt her. Got it?"

"Got it—fresh needles, dull wife." The nurse glares at my husband. I attempt a serious-face.

I know it hurts more if my muscles are tense, but there are no posters on this ceiling. Streamless. Silent, but for his breathing and air-conditioner hum.

"Wow! And, thank you."

My husband pulls the needle out, mutters *sorry*, and I rub my hip where a small wheal turns red, grows. What they don't tell us is that the actual medicine hurts ten times worse than saline and golf-ball wheals will be sore for days. Best not to know everything, or no one would ever do this. That's not true. Waiters would anyway.

Before we leave, we are handed a copy of our chromosome charts—all that biology lined up like a platoon. Like they're about to do something. Go somewhere. They seem prepared.

***

"Hello!" I offer a grand wave and slump onto the pinkish couch. "You know, I was thinking we ought to take our Christmas card photo here. Anyone else? Am I right?"

My husband and I lean back and put our feet up on the sturdy glass and iron table in front of us.

"Vacation-dream. Mountains or beaches?" My husband flips through a travel magazine.

“Depends. If the mountains are in Tahiti, then mountains. If the beaches are in Italy, then beaches. Either would be acceptable.” I pat his knee twice and leave my hand there.

“Me thinks you have lost your grasp on reality…keep it to the continental U.S.”

“Oh, fine…beaches. But Florida beaches, not Jersey beaches. Absolutely not Michigan beaches. Any chance we can go back to Cedar Key?”

“Workable.”

Individually, we both think about Cedar Key throughout the exam and meeting. I’m distracted by the specialist’s freshly freed teeth as he goes over our entire history, again, and the new therapies available, again, and we pick one, but not because it’s the best choice. We agreed beforehand that throwing a dart at a wall chart of choices would have the same results. We were taking option three, no matter what it was, and going all in. The third choice today a new injectible—for the low-low price of $850.00. Cash.

My husband pays while I schedule our next two appointments. I let him walk ahead of me on the way out and today hold back a few seconds before I follow. He lets the door go. I stick out my elbow.

CLAIRE SCOTT

We Are Not Given More Than We Can Handle

I want to live in that sentence, to pull it over me
like a warm blanket, sleep through the night for the first
time in years and wake to see my son swinging
his racquet, serving aces, hitting drop shots
and top spin forehands. Or memorizing Lee's lines
in *True West*, waiting for opening night at Steppenwolf.

Who in a meddling god's name gets to choose
what we can handle? Is there some dispirited divinity
floating in cumulus clouds, tossing burnt coffee, cancer,
crashed computers and car accidents like the slap slap
of rain on the earth, not especially caring
whether they land on a blind woman begging
on the street corner or a dot com CEO in an Armani suit
as long as He completes His quota for the day.

It seems we should be the ones who get to decide.
Not a broken leg, not now, no band width, even burnt peas
are too much, I pass. Not tomorrow either, my heart
narrowed with sorrow, clenched with foreboding
for my son who walks with a twisted limp since
the car in the crosswalk, since his dreams were put
in the back of a drawer under a stack of tennis clothes,
next to the clippings from plays in Chicago,
next to rave reviews.
Alive yes, but not allowed to live.

EMILY SCUDDER

Tidying

Crumbs on the tablecloth. Laundry on the chair. Dirty plates,
scattered silverware, burnt baking sheets. Counters to wipe.

I wander around, pick up. Some nights I resent this tidying
but tonight, I welcome this day lived.

I keep loose order. Give the floor a quick sweep.
Fold a damp dishcloth, hang it to dry overnight.

Muscle memories linger.

My grandmother unties her apron ties, hangs it on a hook.
My mother folds clothes, stacks them neatly on the bed.
My father wipes the stainless-steel percolator.

Releasing the day that is ours.

DUNCAN SMITH

Paper Is

a white-faced, silent, eight and a half by eleven god,
polar bear-free sea ice,
Tulum's beaches saying nothing of Mayan mysteries,
New Mexico's gypsum desert thirsting for ink,
where crane, fox, mouse await folding,
a pre-Pollack canvas, a transitioned tree,
the salt flat where words are cured.

KEVIN LICHTY

Cowboy Up, or Apache Junction Makes Men of the Saguaros

On weekends, I deliver packages to make the ends meet. In the mornings, we gather together, find our trucks, get them started and warmed up. We move as one, in pods, from the staging area into the warehouse. We leave as one or we don't leave at all, they tell us. It is this moment I love, how all the trucks move as one away from the warehouse as though we are water moving through a sluice and out into the city, the moment I turn onto the 202 become a single molecule on the road, alone, separate, semi-autonomous, the weight of the truck in my hands, the vibration of the door the separates the cabin from the cargo, moving away and away and away from the warehouse to where the city and the desert meet.

This is not my regular job. During the week I am an academic, more specifically I am a low-level instructor teaching 100 level writing courses. When I first got out to Arizona, one of the instructors in my practicum said "no one goes into education to get rich," and this is true, this is not what drew me to academia. And what I love most about my job will not feed my family or pay my bills. My job as a professor (we will ignore the semantics of titles and honorifics) makes me an elite. My job as a delivery driver makes me a front-line worker. I feel like neither, the categories blurry and meaningless.

I am wrangling three large packages and walking up a driveway on a Sunday afternoon. "Cowboy up or just lay there and bleed," a truck says to me as I approach from behind. These are the only two states of being I am allowed, according to the truck. There are a pair of cowboy boots cast in bronze on the doorstep that I am to wear, to wear and be made to bleed. You will bleed for these packages, these boots tell me, out here at the edge of the desert, "if you want to survive as an academic out here, cowboy up." I consider putting them on, what it would be like to slide my foot into what was once their leather skins, to walk around inside these relics, to toughen up. Will I bend to the will of the boots or will the boots bend to my will?

I am juggling seven packages in an RV park, the streets too narrow to bring the truck. Two girls play in the dust of the asphalt in the shade of a palo verde, their voices affect the girls they are pretending to be—rich, privileged, loved by each other. A mother yells at her son, "Stop playing with that. That's a baby toy. You aren't a baby anymore." She is so certain that things and humans have rigid categories, that those categories can't mix—you are either child or baby, you cannot be both, the toy cannot be meant for both baby and child. I wonder what I am out here? In this uniform I

am simply delivery boy, the bringer of packages, the bringer of joy. What category are those two girls playing in the dust and shade supposed to belong to?

I am not meant to interact with the customers "in this time," no matter what the instructions say. I am to wear my mask, leave the package at the door, and walk away. But they are anxious, come out of the door as I walk up, take the packages from my arms as though I am bringing a favorite casserole for dinner, surround me when I am outside of an RV too long wrangling a package. The RV parks are a collective. The individual and individual space blurs here—front porches become living rooms, roads become front porches—extensions of the small, cramp living spaces of the mobile homes they occupy. And so it is with the people, the boundaries of their relationships blur and become as one, and so the group of them says "we can sign for it if it needs to be signed for," because a package for one is a package for all. But signatures are not allowed, so I decline and say I am all right, and leave the package on a stair by the door and walk away.

Our dogs will destroy you, the instructions in the app tells me. Do not throw the packages over the gate, because the dogs will destroy them too. This is the opposite of the mobile home collective, their castle shall not be breached, even when it means leaving a package on the side of the road. The dogs bare their teeth from behind the fence. I ask them how they are doing and the dog's teeth tell me they want to eat my forearm, maybe tear into your throat a little, and this is how they are doing.

When I was five or six my best friend invited me to sled in his backyard. His aunt was staying there at the time. She had two dogs who did not like anyone besides his aunt. I asked him if they were inside. "Yeah," he said. "Come on," he said. We jumped the fence into his yard and walked along the side toward the hill in his backyard when the two dogs came charging down the hill, teeth bared, their deep barks freezing me in place. One put its paws on my chest and knocked me to the ground, the other lunged at me. Me, five or six, rolled and rolled and rolled, the dogs on top of me biting and snarling and biting, but still I am lucky it is winter, lucky to be in the snow, lucky to put my arms and cheap winter coat sleeves in front of my face, but still the dogs lunge and bit past my sleeves and my arms and their canines slide into my cheeks over and over. My friends dog, a little black puppy, dances around the two big dogs, licks my face as they bite and draw blood. Eventually his aunt comes and tosses a bottle at them, so close to my face I have to roll out of the way, and the dogs run away. I love dogs. I can be afraid of dogs too. The instructions tell me not to show fear, to turn to the side and hold the customer's packages like a shield in front of me, to coybow up and leave no packages behind. I wonder if I put on those cowboy

boots if I would still be afraid and indecisive about what to do with these packages when the dogs come running from behind the house? Am I allowed to both love and fear something at the same time? How do those emotions bleed together?

Fuck your feelings, a car tells me as I approach; its neighbor insists Black Lives Matter; across the street another warns me against listening to the fake news; a fourth waves a rainbow flag from its radio antenna. And I wonder what happened to our rigid categories of people, how they insist we are separated—by education, by lived experience, by geography. The electoral map shows us such stark and easy boundaries, tells a simple story of urban versus suburban versus rural America, that you are either red or blue, that our communities are either conservative or liberal. I wonder what the relationship between these neighbors must be like, in such close proximity to each other? Do they love each other or hate each other or ignore the very visible differences in how they see the world, themselves, and each other's place in it? The electoral map bleeds our here. I wonder if it will cowboy up or lie there.

My neighbor proclaims he carries a gun everywhere he goes on the neighborhood Facebook page whenever he gets the chance. When someone complained of their car being egged after Halloween, he reminded us all of this fact. His wife brings us banana cream pie in a bowl, asks us to watch their cat when they are away. I'm not sure what my neighbor would do if he caught a child toilet papering the tree in his front yard, if he would cowboy up and pull the trigger. Would he do it if it were my daughters were the ones who were holding the toilet paper rolls in their hands? I think about this at night, when I see this bravado. I wonder how much of it is postering, how much of it is the internet giving space for the category of being people who conceal carry think they have to be. If someone with grandchildren actually pulled the trigger, what does the rest of that life look like, how that decision would bleed into their bravado?

I don't have much time for thinking when I am out here delivering packages. That was the plan, though, to listen to my podcasts, to ponder, to write in my journal during my lunch break. But I prefer silence in the truck—the hum of the engine, the metallic voice of the GPS telling me where to go next, the door opening and closing, opening and closing. I prefer to lean into the ache of my shoulder, the soreness of my legs, the up and down, up and down from the truck 200 times a day. I told my interviewer that I use my head all day at my other job and wanted to use my body in my second. I am not meant to be thinking out here, I am meant to punish my body.

But I also can't help it, can't help to observe, to see, to catalogue the symbols of the lives I glimpse, to savor those moments when words are

exchanged, to examine the preconceptions of what I am, or was, or who I should be—what did you do before working for UPS? A woman asks me (I am far too old for this to be my first choice as a career, according to her words. I also do not work for UPS, it is obvious from my uniform). I am a teacher, I reply. This is a startlingly wonderful answer for her. What are you doing delivering packages on a Sunday when there's football on? A man asks me. I've got to make that money, right? I reply. These brief moments of connection are magic to me. I hold them in my hands and let them sink into my palms and disappear inside my body.

I am out way beyond the borders of the city. I traverse dirt roads to deliver packages, encounter colonies of RVs arranged in what someone calls apartments, what others might view as post-Apocalyptic style enclaves enclaves of humanity in the dust and dirt and rock and cactus of the desert. These are the lives I wonder the most about. A woman tells me her brother sent her a package to cheer her up because she is going through a sloppy divorce, another tells me to shove the package through a hole in the wall, let it slide it down two metal beams they set up as a kind of ramp. I drive up a long dirt driveway and into a forest of inflatable Christmas decorations too far from the main road to be meant for anyone but those who live there. I want to ask to linger, to wait until dark and see the lights come on and wander through the scenes they created.

In the midst of this, I also see gentrification—3,000 square foot homes walled and fenced and filled with equipment in their yards, compounds with pools and spas and gardens and paved driveways and satellite dishes poking from their roofs. I wonder how these houses came to be here, how these two ways of life intersect or not. I wonder who they displaced to buy this property, how long it will be until enough of these houses are built to push the rest of those who still live out here so far out that they have no access to water, electricity, plumbing. But I am not here to linger, or ponder, or wonder, or judge and so I must drop my packages and move on.

The last stop is a release, one you can feel coming as the truck empties and you can count on your hands how many stops you have left. I have been out here nine hours. The heat of the day is giving way. I sense a breeze through my vest, on my face. I breathe in the autumn desert through my mask. All the clear boundaries blur—I am both working and not working; I am in my body and not in my body; I am both thinking and feeling; it is neither day nor night. I lean into a stretch, the tightness of my back. East, the moon suspends over the lower peaks of the Superstitions. West, in the desert, the sun makes men of the saguaros.

JOHN THOMSON

My Father One Night

Our home was in an old neighborhood in Grass Valley, California, where the streets are still named after gold rush prostitutes: Vera, Doris, Elaine, Belle. We lived on Vera, in a duplex next to a Tulip tree. There was a green Rambler that didn't run and didn't belong to us in the driveway. We had a stocky orange cat named Moses.

We'd been in the duplex about three years before my mother told me and my little brother, Raleigh, that our father had something called Schizophrenia. Though the big, Russian-sounding word gave a name to my father's illness—and I already knew something was wrong with him—it remained difficult to understand and accept. The same father who'd taught me Bob Dylan songs on the guitar and untangled my fishing line and who made beautiful furniture—suddenly started believing there were FBI agents hiding in the green Rambler in our driveway and began wearing an oversized safari hat and carrying a sleeping bag under his arm into town at night, sleeping anywhere concealed and out of the rain, like a feral cat.

Whenever my father did these things, my mother often told me and Raleigh that his behavior was harmless. In her voice was the promising lift of confidence that Dad would never hurt us, even though he seemed frightening at times. He was, she said, like a garter snake or a Daddy-long-legged spider.

But when my father began to do scary things, I became aware that my mother's promise of our safety could no longer be kept. Once, for reasons still unknown to me, Dad came at me with a running lawn mower tilted on its back wheels, chasing me around the Tulip tree until I fled up the street. Another time he threatened to cut Raleigh's hair with the electric knife we used for carving the turkey at Thanksgiving, waving the knife in front of Raleigh's face and saying, "We don't allow communists in this house." And finally came the night he threw a jar of peanut butter at Mom in the kitchen, and then stomped out into the dark with his safari hat and sleeping bag after screaming he was going to come back and take care of us. To which my mother said, "We won't be here."

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She didn't tell us where we were going, but I could smell the cedars bordering the highway on the way to my Aunt Lilian's farm. My aunt's place was notched into a meadow the shape of a kidney bean. She and her one-

armed boyfriend, Boyd, raised donkeys on about 20 acres. They rented the donkeys to wilderness backpackers, mostly those hiking the Pacific Crest Trail, which was nearby.

My father said my aunt and Boyd were "hippies gone to seed," but I never thought of them as anything more than two people who were living the lives they wanted to live.

They were outside waiting for us in the broad circle of a flood light shining in front of their little house. My aunt stood stiff and straight and held a shovel and looked like one of Spartacus' warriors. Boyd stood next to her. He had no left arm from the elbow down and would not wear a prosthetic. The absence of weight on his left side made it seem as if his body was listing, though I've come to realize this was an optical illusion.

By now Mom had removed our suitcases from the car and stood next to me and Raleigh. She was much shorter than her sister, and they looked nothing alike. My father had once said the sisters had gone to the same salad bar of genes but came back with different food on their plate.

"You go and get settled in," said Aunt Lilian. "Me and Boyd will keep an eye out for him," she said, as if Dad were an enemy in a gorilla war.

Mom said nothing. Then we each picked up a suitcase and traveled down a dimly lit path to the old miner's cabin next to the main house. I'd been inside the cabin before. I'd helped Boyd lay new shingles on a roof that leaned much in the same way as he. Boyd had refurbished the cabin's interior. He'd wired it with electrical power from the main house and installed a small stove and refrigerator and cabinets and an overhead light. All with one arm.

There were no rooms in the cabin, just one common space. I imagined what'd be like living there for a length of time unknown to me. The windows were small, the ceiling low, and it had a unique, musty odor to it, as if the primitive smells of the gold rush still lingered.

We unpacked and chose which cot we wanted. Mom would sleep between me and Raleigh, close enough so she could spread her arms and touch both of us. Just as we were getting ready for bed, Boyd knocked on the door.

"We've got hot chocolate and brownies," he said.

"It's late, Boyd," said Mom.

"We know that. But it might help you get your minds off things."

Mom draped her arms over Raleigh's and my shoulders and looked at us as if going with Boyd was entirely our decision. We followed the beam of his flashlight to the house.

We gathered in the small kitchen. A scarred pine table consumed the space and we all pressed ourselves around a pyramid of brownies and a porcelain pitcher of hot cocoa. At our little home on Vera Street, there's

a picture of The Last Supper on the wall. At the center of a long table sits Jesus with his hands out as if he's catching the rain. The disciples are looking at him, some seeming on the verge of starvation. The picture was full of bright colors and Mom had put it right under the light in our kitchen. It often drew my gaze before we said grace. The radiant colors and the look on the apostles' faces somehow assured me our family's needs and struggles would be met and overcome, no matter how dire.

But there was no such painting in my Aunt Lilian's kitchen, so I imagined it there. For a time we all ate in silence. I expected talk about my father, but there was none. In the past my aunt had not spared me and Raleigh from hearing her advice to my mother, telling Mom straight out in our presence that Dad should be in a mental institution permanently and Mom should divorce him.

But my aunt said nothing, and finally Boyd talked about the two donkeys they'd be renting the next day to a couple celebrating their 40th wedding anniversary. The couple would be hiking the Northern California and Oregon portion of the Pacific Crest Trail, but turning around once they hit the Washington border. Boyd described the couple's adventure as if it were the cure to all the depravity and corruption in the world, a hopeful story about people actually getting along and celebrating with a hardy and challenging commune with nature. Then we heard my father yelling outside, and it was like a tree had fallen next to the house.

We all got up and huddled around the kitchen's small window and looked into the night. Boyd turned on the flood light and there was Dad, standing in the middle of it.

"I'm not here to do the hula!" he shouted. He was in baggy slacks and a sport coat. He wore the safari hat and had his sleeping bag tucked into the pit of his arm. He held a hammer in his left hand.

"So here we go," said Boyd.

"I'll call the sheriff," said Aunt Lilian.

"I'd rather you didn't do that, Lilian," Mom said. "It'll be all right."

"This is my home," said my aunt. "And I'm not taking any chances."

"How the heck did he get here?" said Boyd.

"He must have hitch-hiked," I said.

"But who would pick him up?" said Boyd.

"Is he going to throw that hammer through my window?" Aunt Lilian said.

"Better not," said Boyd.

Just as my aunt spoke these words, my father spread his legs and shifted the hammer in his hand and let the sleeping bag fall from his armpit to the ground.

Aunt Lilian was on the phone.

"Yes. We're just off Hwy 174, past the general store in Cedar Ridge. Yes. His name is Everett Pacey."

Aunt Lilian looked right at my mother and her eyebrows jerked into the shape of boomerangs. I suspected the dispatcher on the other end of the phone had said something like, "Oh yes. We know Everett."

The four of us stayed at the window. The flood light shown on my father, this man whose mind had been taken over by a power the religious once considered demonic. I remember wondering just then if either I or Raleigh would inherit Dad's illness, or if it might manifest itself in some lesser form. It came to me then that my father's threat to us was both in the present and the unforeseen future.

Dad used the handle of his hammer to lift the brim of his safari hat.

"What's for dinner?" he said. "Corned beef hash with a fried egg on top?"

This was Dad's favorite meal. Mom always made it for him on his birthday.

"Well?" Dad said. "I'm starving out here."

Mom had Boyd open the window so she could talk to Dad.

"All right, Everett," Mom said. "But can you drop the hammer?"

"What?" he asked.

"The hammer!" Boyd shouted. "Drop it."

My father looked at the tool as if he didn't know how it'd gotten in his hand, which may have been true.

"What about your cabinets?" Dad said.

So there, perhaps, was the benign reason for the hammer. Dad had come not only for a meal, but to do a job. Up until his sickness overcame him, he'd been a cabinet and furniture maker. The quality of his craftsmanship had been the antithesis of his disjointed mind. The cabinets and dressers he built were perfect; corners so flush the joints were invisible. The drawers and cupboards opened and closed with soundless precision.

He dropped the hammer. It made a thud. Two of Aunt Lilian's donkeys brayed loudly. Dad jerked his head to the sound.

"And they're off!" he shouted, as if announcing the start of the Kentucky Derby.

The donkeys continued to bray. Dad seemed entertained by the noise.

"Do you have any corned beef?" Mom said to her sister.

"What?" said Aunt Lilian.

"Corned beef. Do you have any?"

"Just the canned stuff," Aunt Lilian said.

"That'll do," Mom said.

"You mean he'll actually eat that stuff?" said Boyd.

Mom didn't answer. She pushed herself away from the window and stomped toward the front door. In a few moments we all saw her enter the pool of light and approach my father, who remained enamored by the donkey chorus.

"That's one brave woman," said Boyd.

I watched Mom go outside and take Dad's hand. This image has become a tall monument in my mind. She let his fingers hang in her palm and stared into his face and said things none of us could hear. Then she led him to the house.

"Let's clear off some space on this table," Aunt Lilian said, turning back into the kitchen. Raleigh and I helped.

Aunt Lilian searched the cupboard for the corned beef, sliding the cans around like hockey pucks until she found a rectangular one with a tiny turnkey attached for twisting it open.

Mom no longer held Dad's hand when they entered the kitchen. He walked behind her. He'd taken off his safari hat and held it meekly with both hands at his waist. Dad looked at me and Raleigh, shifting his eyes back and forth as if he were trying to remember who was who.

The donkeys kept braying. Then the sound waned into a strange and eerie murmur. Dad sat at the table and stared blankly into a napkin. Mom went to work making the hash. Aunt Lilian helped. Raleigh and I sat on opposite sides of our father. I sensed Raleigh wanted to say something to him, but couldn't think of the right words. Then a mound of corned beef hash with a fried egg on top appeared under my father's nose. He stared at it for a moment, as if the yolk of the egg was an eye looking back at him. Then he tilted his head back and stayed like this for a while, until he said: "Ketchup please."

"Coming up," Mom said.

She put a new bottle of ketchup next to the Dad's plate. He picked up the bottle and knocked the bottom with the heel of his hand. He opened the bottle and poured the ketchup in perfect spirals onto the hash and then stared at it again.

"Is this the canned stuff?" he said.

"Sorry, but it's all we had," Mom said.

"So you were trying to trick me, eh?" Dad said.

"Not at all," said Mom. "Just trying to make due."

"I see," he said.

He put on more ketchup, this time creating thin patterns on the fried egg.

"So why'd you bring that hammer, Dad?" Raleigh said.

"Because it's a tool of my trade," he said. Then he plunged his fork into the hash and began to eat. He seemed not to mind the canned stuff.

We all watched him. What he'd said to Raleigh about the hammer brought on a memory of the first thing I'd seen my father build: a chest made of native oak. He had, I remember, displayed it at the county fair, inside a barn where the works of local artisans were showcased. It was a jewel made of wood. It had compartments inside, useful but invisible. So beautiful was the piece, a man from San Francisco tracked my father down and gave him three thousand dollars for it. Dad had made the piece to keep, to pass on as a family heirloom, but the offer was so spectacular Dad took it, and then made another four of the chests, varying them only slightly and selling all of them to customers from the city.

Raleigh's instincts instructed him not to ask my father to elaborate on his answer. What seemed like a long time passed as we watched and listened to Dad eat his favorite meal. At one point Mom wiped ketchup from his chin. Dad didn't notice her hand as it sailed like a crop duster under his nose.

I liked watching him eat. He seemed happy, perhaps the happiest I'd ever seen him. Aunt Lilian slammed a plate of toast onto the table and Dad reached for it. Then all of use took some.

And then the light changed in the kitchen. I left the table and went to the window and looked out and saw a sherriff's patrol car approaching the house. I turned back to the table and saw my mother looking at me as if she knew what I'd seen and what it meant. She got up and hurried outside. Her sudden departure paused my father's eating. A smear of ketchup returned to his chin. First he looked at Aunt Lilian, and then at me.

"So where is your mother off to?" he said.

"Just outside," I said.

"I see," he said.

Dad stared at his hash. It was about half gone. I looked out the window again and saw Mom trotting out to the sheriff's deputy. The deputy parked just next to Dad's hammer and sleeping bag. He got out of his car and glanced down at the items and then waited for my mother.

He was a big man, and younger than Mom. He had a pleasantly round and passive face. He smiled and nodded. He seemed like someone who was in the wrong job, who didn't have the toughness cops needed.

My mother had her back to me when she talked to the deputy. She waved her hands and spoke words I couldn't hear. Then I heard the legs of Dad's chair scape against the floor and the clang of his fork onto his plate.

"We just can't have this!" he shouted. "This rebellion has gone far enough."

He stormed out of the kitchen and I tried to stop him. I yelled at his back and reached for his shirt, but he chopped at my wrist and struck it with a closed fist. This, then, was my father's first actual act of physical violence towards me.

Dad ran toward the deputy. Mom spun around and put out her arms to stop him. "Please, stop!" she said. But Dad swept her hands away and stuck his nose an inch from the deputy's chin.

"I thought this was the United States of America," Dad shouted.

"Just settle down, Everett," the deputy said.

So it was true. Dad was known on a first name basis among local law enforcement. Those mysterious times when he'd wandered the streets or took his sleeping bag to the city park to spend the night, were times when the cops had to intervene at some point. I wondered if Dad recognized the deputy, if there was some sort of history between them.

"We're all fine here," the deputy said.

"Oh is that right?" Dad said. "Well, I am not about to be sent to Alcatraz like Burt Lancaster."

The deputy tried to hold back a smile. Perhaps he'd seen the movie, "The Bird Man of Alcatraz," with Burt Lancaster. For a moment I hoped the deputy's reaction might convince my father he had nothing to fear from the officer. But it didn't.

"And I'm not about to swing from the end of a rope!" Dad said.

By now, Aunt Lilian, Raleigh, and Boyd stood in a half circle only a few feet away. Dad turned to them. "Well, I see the church choir is here," Dad said.

Then Dad picked up the hammer.

And everything changed.

"No one is going to hang you, Everett," my mother said. "Please put that hammer down. Let's just go home now."

"Home?" Dad said. "Home is nowhere."

Dad used his hammerless hand to stab at his head with a finger, as if he were using his skull to send an emergency telegram. Then he took off running.

He ran up my aunt's narrow driveway. All of us chased after him. But Dad was too fast. Mom once told me he'd been a sprinter on the high school track team, and now it seemed his legs went back to those days. He disappeared into the cedars. After only a few seconds we heard the screech of tires, the persistent honk of a horn, and an awful sounding thump. The

deputy ran ahead of us. When he reached the edge of the highway he stopped and told us we shouldn't go any farther. All of us, except my mother, did what he said.

I first heard her wail just before she reached the stand of trees. I could see her peering through a gap in the woods until she put her hands to her face and cried out. Boyd took hold of my arm but I tore free from him and ran to my mother. Then out of nowhere came my Aunt Lilian, seeming to run as fast as my father had run until she reached her sister and they went together to the highway, where my father lay in the middle of it.

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I remember only certain things. Many have told me it's a natural way for the mind and body to protect itself, the work of a kind of psychological immune system. I remember the crying, hysterical voice of the young male driver who'd hit Dad: He just charged out in front of me…oh my God, I'm so sorry…oh my God…And I can still hear the siren of the ambulance and see its red twirling light cutting through the dark forest air.

Dad suffered two broken legs and internal injuries. It was believed he'd recover, but he didn't. After only a few days in the hospital he contracted a severe infection. A barrage of antibiotics couldn't save him. He died three weeks after the accident.

During those weeks my mother practically lived at the hospital. She stayed at Dad's side and became sick herself, from sheer exhaustion. Mom recovered and had the strength and resilience to put together a wonderful memorial service for my father. She displayed some of his beautiful carpentry work in the foyer of the church. People stood and said good things about my father. But they only talked about the man he was before the illness overcame him.

He's been gone for thirty-five years now. I remain in Grass Valley, with a wife and two daughters. I teach geometry at the high school. I've always had a gift for deciphering numbers and harmonizing complicated angles. It's a talent I perhaps inherited from my father. All those splendid dressers and cabinets he made required an aptitude for knowing what fits.

Teaching math has helped reassure me there is some measure of order in the universe, patterns that can endure uncertainties in the passage of time. Still, there is no escaping having to look beyond formulas and into the complicated mess of life, and what happened to my father one night, and what has happened since:

Aunt Lilian and Boyd got married and moved to Idaho. They own and manage a hardware store in a little town outside Boise. They still have

their donkeys and continue to rent them out to backpackers. Aunt Lilian's place in Cedar Ridge is an illegal pot farm now. I drive past it every once in a while. It has all those tawdry signs of the industry: flimsily constructed green houses, pit bulls roaming the fence lines, the skunky smell of curing weed, cars without hubcaps, and a parade of young wayward souls in dreadlocks coming and going during harvest season. And the old miners' cabin is no longer there.

I don't see or talk to Raleigh all that much these days. Some tension has formed between us since I learned he'd joined a group called American Heritage. I went onto their website and read the odious language about America being preordained as a white Christian nation. I saw all the images of hard-faced men in goatees and camo with ARs slung over their shoulders, standing on top of pickups. I have come to realize Raleigh might not believe in all that hateful trash, but instead his involvement is a mild form of my dad's illness manifesting itself in paranoia, as I feared it someday might. Nevertheless I continue to reach out to my little brother.

Mom re-married. Her husband's name is Michael. He's a pastor at a large non-denominational church in town. He is a good and compassionate man. He treats my mother with respect, and he loves her. I don't attend Michael's church, but once in a while he and I fly fish together on the North Fork of the Yuba River. During those outings we respectfully share our perspectives about spiritual matters, and quietly celebrate when our views intersect, but let our thoughts stray to the technical aspects of fly fishing when we disagree, which is often. The last time we were on the river together I talked to Michael about how Dad's illness made judging his actions so difficult, and why God would allow my father to be afflicted with such a cruel and destructive malady. Michael didn't give me a theological answer. He didn't instruct me about the fall of humanity, the price of sin, and all of that. He simply warned me to always consider such questions in the absence of fear and anger. And so I do that. When I see my father running towards the highway, holding that hammer in his hand, I realize he didn't know if he was building something or fighting in a battle.

SHANNON SPIES

Otero Mesa

On a fine, wet day, on a fresh morning,
when the nose filters dew damp as a sieve,
the wetness and the rising heat together
rush to the brain, rich and thick as ink.

Odorous, much wider than a flower,
that mobius loosed down the nose and throat,
a breathing which makes the body down below
a kind of pretty baggage. The mesa,

as studded with green-violet grasses as Otero,
each acre as a million others stamped
with a blue and blameless ikon overhead—
a cheekbone, clasped hands, front facing eyes—

blurs along its edges, underfoot
becomes an arc that knows nothing of derision.
For such few moments before the mind begins,
the entire world is free from elevation.

MATTHEW J. SPIRENG

What They Do

It's what spiders in woodpiles
do as cold sets in. They slow
so you'd almost think them dead,

exposed amid white silken threads, but,
not below freezing yet, they move
slowly as if toys wound down that, jarred,

move sluggishly a little more. What
you don't know because we all have gaps
in knowledge is whether these survive,

winter over and come spring it is these same
spiders that stalk the wood for meals
so small you might not notice. But, old

or new, they do. And if you have wintered over
as well, you might find them there waking
as you get one last load for the stove.

JO BARBARA TAYLOR

Chenille

behind cirrus clouds
the moon leaks just enough white
to watch the lover trees
bend round each other

in the bedroom, new bedspread
and down pillows, a sheer nightgown,
his shoulders, her knees
bending

Spread's soft, like rows of corn silk
he says.
            Chenille she whispers,
her hand on his belly. A gentle word
to bend moonlight

moon lovers
his arm drapes her stomach
each stalking separate thoughts
bending into sleep

DIANE THIEL

Interplanetary Spelling Bee

What if you make it all the way to interplanetary?
—Dylan to his sister Christabel

For decades, we thought it was just static.
We could not discern any pattern, but over time,
we have learned that language is more
than sound waves. It could be intensities or colors,
distinctions far beyond the color/colour variation.

Now the static is standard in the spelling bee.
My daughter has advanced to interplanetary.
The participants are sponsored, but tickets for the family
cost an arm and a leg, or two tentacles. Depending.
She ends up near the front, in row 993,
but it is still hard for our limited eyes to see.
In the first round, 3,443.5 are eliminated.
A small percentage of the spellers.

The rules are similar—planet of origin, alternate pronunciation.
If a definition doesn't clarify, one might request
a representative object or interpretive dance,
like the green liquid moving in and out of an orb
that I still don't understand.

A few more rounds and the words heat up,
like the interpretive dances for *heartthrob*, and *combustible*.
We cross our fingers, and my daughter gets an easy one:
sesquipedalian. But she still asks for it in a sentence:
"It is hard to spell some sesquipedalian surnames."
In her school, she always has the most sesquipedalian last name, with
nineteen letters,
but here, her name is fairly short and simple, in comparison,
easy to spell. The next word is on a frequency
my untrained ear can't even hear. The speller waves
an appendage and passes through with ease.

The beings with more than one head or collective minds
seem to do quite well. But in the end, they tend not
to win overall, possibly because they become overconfident,
or because there is always some infighting.
Or maybe because spelling is more than just collecting.
Sometimes it is feeling the form and tone of a word,
a language, and making it your own, even for a moment.
My daughter can make many words her own, and her mind travels
great distances. She even makes it to the final fifty,
but is eliminated on a word with so alien a concept,
it is not sound, not color, not intensity.
There is no object or interpretive dance for this one.

The winner, still in the equivalent of middle school,
had studied on ninety-seven planets and had even visited
other dimensions. In fact, the bee organizers are considering
the idea of an interdimensional bee, but are discussing
the obvious problems, such as infinite homonyms,
infinite participants, which would mean infinite rounds,
even infinite versions of the same speller.
Infinity divided by any number is still infinity.

There is so much we still don't understand, so much
we haven't yet discovered, but we are fairly certain
that no matter how we try to bend time and dimension,
an interdimensional bee would simply have
no end

RANDOLPH THOMAS

Cypress Cones

We hear the first cypress cones
landing on the roof, on the sidewalk,
thudding on the hard, dry ground,
a summer passing before we catch it:
July stepping out, then August, birthdays
celebrated, a weeklong trip
to Edisto Beach, and one Saturday
driving home from an estate sale,
we stop to buy a watermelon
off the back of a truck, the best
in Mississippi, according to the handmade sign.
For a while, we taste sweet desserts,
but now half of it lies wrapped in plastic
taking up a shelf in the refrigerator
as we promise each other weekly it will go
when Sunday night rolls around, and debate
how long it's been in there.
Standing in the driveway, in the bright
morning light, you point to the branches
of the cypress, full of cones, high above
the garage roof; it's like putting on my glasses
after staring at the ocean without them,
seeing all the individual waves at once
and knowing suddenly their number
only exists in the abstract.

LUCINDA TREW

Standing at the Fence Staring into Cow Eyes Waiting for a Sign

the steers and cows pay no mind to me
standing by the chain-post fence, staring
into their crabgrass field, into their sorghum
eyes, into the sullen sun that sets beyond
a bank of rusted trucks and tractor parts

this is where I come after my mother dies
I come to stand and stare and steel
myself against this broken fence
corralling broken beasts
who I pray will comfort broken me

I scan the horizon and rucked field
for signs—a ring around the pinking sun
a hymn of wind and crow
too much to ask, but perhaps if I stand
still as rye, gaze into the heifer's eyes
wait for a sign, I might just catch a heavenly
herald of crossed long horns

yet the herd just stares back
offering nothing more
than the cadenced chaw of pigweed
switching flies from doleful tails
calves who grow to yearlings
in the time it takes to mourn

VIRGINIA RYAN

Unforgettable

My mother is visiting, trying to log onto our WIFI.

I give her the password again, spelling it out this time. "F-R-I-S-K-I-E. You know, like our dog."

She is confused. "Friskie? We never had a dog named Friskie," she replies.

"Of course we did," I say, instantly wondering if this is a sign of dementia. What will forget next: How to drive? Where she lives? Me?

"Dad had Chloe when we married," she says, "but we got rid of her before you were born. And then we got Sadie."

I had heard stories of Chloe, the elegant but nippy Dalmatian my father gave to the local fire department. Sadie was the mild-manner mutt we adopted when I was 16. Once she dragged home a ladies' wig that we thought, for a moment, was a head from the nearby cemetery.

Memory lapses happen to everyone and I think I should tell my mother not to worry, that she is 88, after all. But I don't. I am determined to prove to us both that she isn't succumbing to old age.

"I distinctly remember sitting with Elizabeth on the back steps of Madison Street. We must have been 5 and 4. We wore matching pastel jackets and round, cotton hats? Friskie sat between us?" My sentences turn into questions as I try to jog her memory with descriptions of me and my older sister and the house we had just moved into. Elizabeth's dark hair, cut blunt to the chin, straight and shiny. My tangled locks, dirty face. We were eating something messy. A chocolate-covered ice cream bar or maybe a Nutty Butty with its disappointing soggy cone right out of the box. It strikes me that this was early spring, not that we ever had much growing in our gray-dirt back yard.

She repeats that we didn't have a dog when I was a little girl.

I plow forward. "You took him to a farm one day when we were at school because our street had gotten too busy. You said it was too dangerous."

Only when I became an adult did I wonder about that farm and suspect that Friskie had been hit by a car. Otherwise, why didn't they at least let us say goodbye?

My mother looks at me like I'm crazy.

"I don't know what you're talking about. If you were in school, I would have had four of you by then. Do you really think we would have had a dog, too?"

My mother is as confident in her memory as I am in mine.

And yet, Friskie is as vivid to me as my own siblings. He was brown-and-white and small; his personality matched his name. After Elizabeth, he was my first and best friend.

I harvest my earliest childhood memories for another anecdote to convince her. But Friskie isn't there when I picture me and my siblings piling onto the creaky porch swing with Dad when he comes home from work. Or that Christmas Eve when Santa Claus surprised us at dinnertime with lollipops and encouragement to get to bed early. He's not on our laps as Elizabeth and I sit in Mom's tan pleather recliner pouring through the S&H Green Stamp book, picking one item from each page for our dream homes. Nor a few years later, in one of my last memories of Elizabeth, when she and I would sit and listen to 45s on her bedroom floor.

My mother's lack of memory for Friskie makes me miss Elizabeth, even now a half century later. If she were around today, she could have helped. If she had made it to adulthood, we wouldn't be having this conversation. Everything would have been different.

"But he's my Internet password. The answer to all my security questions. *What's the name of your first pet? Friskie*."

My attempt to show the vibrancy of my mother's mental acuity is not going as planned. She seems offended. "I think I would know if we had a dog," she says.

This gap in our memory unsettles me and I search for corroboration. My options are limited. Elizabeth gone, my father also. It isn't surprising that my next younger brother, who would have been only two, doesn't remember. I ask a slightly older cousin, my still surviving aunts. No one can help.

There aren't many photographs remaining from the 1960s. There's an album dedicated to Elizabeth, and a shoebox for the rest. Us kids crowded around a table, a white bandage X marking the stitches on my brother's head from the time he put a stool on top of a chair on top of that table. A tinseled covered Christmas tree, we young Ryans floating in an ocean of wrapping paper, ribbon, and boxes. A birthday party, for whom I am not sure, though my father is wearing a conical paper hat. I search the pictures in vain for a dog bowl, a chew toy, the tip of a tail caught in the edge of a frame.

There is a black-and-white photograph of Elizabeth and me. Only Elizabeth and me. We are wearing light jackets and cotton hats with floral patterns. We are sitting on the back concrete steps of our house on Madison Street eating ice cream cones. Flowers yet to bloom are pushing up through the ground beside us. My tongue is trying to stop chocolate streaming over my fingers. Elizabeth is leaning toward me, intense and serious. I'd like to think she is telling me a secret or giving me advice, but I don't remember.

CHARLES WHEELER

Heir Apparent

Mother handed
down to me
the disorder
in every
dim square foot
of my basement
—after she dug
her way free
of an East Tennessee
farm crisscrossed
by wormy
fence posts—
only to divine
them stacked
in every dark
basement
my father owned.

BOB WICKLESS

Monarchs in September

They have been counted,
From boats offshore,
Streaming down the coast
At eight hundred an hour,
Gliding south by southwest
From as far north
As the Arctic Circle,
Swinging down through New England
Into the Mid-Atlantic, more
Joining daily as they come.
Heading for Texas,
And then, from Texas,
To the volcanic mountains
Of central Mexico, they arrive
By November First,
The Day-of-the-Dead,
When the *campesinos* welcome them
As returning spirits of the departed,
Calling them *palomas* and *seperito*,
The butterfly that passes in November,
Before they fry them
In their own stored lipids
And eat them for lunch.

Metaphor means nothing to a Monarch,
But endurance counts. Weighing in
At sixty to an ounce,
They fly a thousand miles a month
And coast two hundred miles a day
When riding fifty knot tailwinds
As high as three thousand feet.
Home to an ancient practicality,
They know, too, how to stay low
In heavy air, headwinds, or rain.

And, while thousands are blown away,
Buffeted by the Atlantic's hard winds,
Millions make it to Sierra Chincua
Where they turn the oyamel firs
Living orange.

Some lepidopterists claim
This astonishing migration
May only be an insect's adjustment
To light—actually the length of day
And a clockwise motion of flight.
Yet they are strange:
What school child hasn't traced
The jewel shape of the chrysalis,
Its striking gold and green
Fit for any king, or marveled
At the caterpillar stripe
And utter magnificence
Of those orange and black wings—

Once, in September,
When I'd entered the second grade,
I had been playing in an open field
And saw them rise, feather light,
In a great streaming of wind—
Fifty million of them, I'd guessed—
And, as they passed,
One, exhausted,
Fell near my outstretched hand.
I had tried to save it, but couldn't,
Having no idea to make it well,
I carried it home nonetheless,
And took it the next week to Show-and-Tell.

Showing, it turned out, was for once
The easier part. I had spread
The beautiful, bright wings, making it
Simple to see, but the telling was hard,
And all I could think to say
Was that when I died

I would become a Monarch butterfly,
Whereupon my teacher, Miss Duty, said
Maybe I'd better learn more about butterflies
Before I said such a thing.
So I did. And now have realized,
Fifty years later, that Miss Duty,
In death, has become a campesino,
One destined to fry and eat beauty,
While I will indeed become a Monarch,
One tiny orange and black spot rising,
Joining the great, bright stream aloft,
In the migratory urging called God.

NANCY H. WOMACK

The Brothers Wyeth

Andrew created sepia-toned paintings,
bucolic scenes of farmland and frozen streams,
houses with peeling paint, lace curtains at the windows,
weathered wood on barns and sheds,
weathered faces on winter-worn neighbors and friends,
Christina's world and Helga's.

His brother, Nathanial, a scientist intrigued
with polymers, created the first plastic bottle
that didn't balloon out or explode from carbonation—
Easy Goers, the name Coca Cola gave its new six-packs.
No more danger of shattered bottles, scattered glass.

Andrew's paintings hang in museums and galleries,
adorn the homes of wealthy collectors, live between
the pages of coffee-table books and magazines,
sell in gift shops as small reproductions on greeting cards,
or even smaller on a special collection of postage stamps.

Nathaniel's bottles line up behind brightly lighted
glass doors in refrigerated splendor, colorful collages
decorating every convenience store in the world,
fill rows of shelves in grocery stores, glut our landfills,
require hundreds of years to decompose, pollute our seas
and fill the bellies of whales.

CONTRIBUTORS

ESTELLE BAJOU is a first generation French-American raised in a small furniture factory town in the North Carolina mountains. She has work published and forthcoming in *This Broken Shore* and *About Place Journal* and is currently working on her first collection of poetry and visual art with editor, Daniel Weeks. She is also a critically praised, award-winning actor and composer. She lives in Harlem.

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HOLLIE DUGAS lives in New Mexico. Her work has been selected to be included in *Barrow Street, Reed Magazine, Crab Creek Review, Redivider, Pembroke,*

Salamander, Poet Lore, Watershed Review, Mud Season Review, Whiskey Island, Chiron Review, Louisiana Literature, and *CALYX*. Dugas has been a finalist twice for the Peseroff Prize at *Breakwater Review*, Greg Grummer Poetry Prize at *Phoebe*, *Fugue's* Annual Contest, and has received Honorable Mention in *Broad River Review*. Additionally, "A Woman's Confession #5,162" was selected as the winner of *Western Humanities Review* Mountain West Writers' Contest (2017). Recently, Dugas has been nominated for a 2020 Pushcart Prize. She is currently a member on the editorial board for *Off the Coast*.

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JIM GISH was born and raised in Western Kentucky among the rogue Baptist tribes. His writing heroes include Joyce Carol Oates, Reynolds Price and Mark Twain,

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Best of the Net nominee, RICH GLINNEN, enjoys bowling, and eating his daughter's cheeks at his home in Bayside, New York. His work can be read in various print and online journals, as well as on his Tumblr and Instagram pages. His wife calls him Ho-ho.

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JOSEPH HARDY is one of a handful of writers in Nashville, Tennessee, who does not play a musical instrument, although a friend once asked him to bring his harmonica on a camping trip so they could throw it in the fire. His wife says he cannot leave a room without finding out something about everyone in it, and then telling her their stories later. His work has been published in *Appalachian Review, Cold Mountain Review, Inlandia, Poet Lore*, and *Poetry City* among others. He is the author of a book of poetry, *The Only Light Coming In*.

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LOWELL JAEGER (Montana Poet Laureate 2017-2019) is founding editor of Many Voices Press and recently edited *New Poets of the American West*, an anthology of poets from eleven western states. Jaeger is a graduate of the Iowa Writer's Workshop, winner of the Grolier Poetry Peace Prize, and recipient of fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Montana Arts Council. He was awarded the Montana Governor's Humanities Award for his work in promoting civil civic discourse.

KAYLA JESSOP is a recent graduate of the MA in Writing program at Coastal Carolina University. Her creative nonfiction has been published in *Tempo, Harpur Palate*, and is forthcoming in other literary magazines. She does her best writing while sitting in coffee shops and daydreaming about possibilities. In her free time, she enjoys cross-stitching and watching *New Girl*.

Winner of the Tartt First Fiction Award for *Step Lightly* (Livingston Press, 2019), **KENDALL KLYM** has won numerous awards for his short stories. He is a three-time honorable mention winner of the Great American Fiction Contest and has published short fiction in numerous journals, including *Hunger Mountain, Puerto del Sol*, and *Fiction International*. He has won writing fellowships at the Fairhope Center for the Writing Arts, the Martha's Vineyard Institute of Creative Writing, and Monson Arts. Two of his stories have been nominated for Pushcart Prizes, and he completed an eight-city book tour in 2019. Interviewed recently by editors of the Nebraska-based *Good Life Review*, Klym spent more than a decade living in the Midwest, which he discusses in a January 2021 podcast put out by the magazine. Klym has a PhD in English, with a concentration in Fiction Writing, from the University of Wales, Aberystwyth, and has taught creative writing, composition, and literature full time at Kennesaw State University outside Atlanta.

SHEREE LA PUMA is an award-winning writer whose personal essays, fiction, and poetry have appeared in or are forthcoming in *The Penn Review, American Journal of Poetry, WSQ, Chiron Review, SRPR, The Rumpus, Plainsongs*, and *I-70 Review*, among others. Her poetry was recently nominated for Best of The Net and two Pushcarts. Her micro-chapbook, *The Politics of Love*, was published in

August by Ghost City Press. She has a new chapbook, *Broken: Do Not Use*, recently released with Main Street Rag Publishing. She received an MFA in Writing from the California Institute of the Arts and taught poetry to former gang members. She can be found online at shereelapuma.com

JONATHAN LATIMER has worked in publishing as a publisher, editor, writer, and developer, specializing in creating and organizing large bodies of information in both print and electronic media. He now works as a freelance author and editor and as a consultant for multimedia educational projects for K-12 and college students, and information tools for students and adults.

AMY S. LERMAN has had poems published or forthcoming in *The Gila River Review, ABZ: A New Magazine of Poetry, Generations: A Journal of Ideas and Images, Garbanzo Literary Journal, Prime Number Magazine, Euphony, Stories That Need to Be Told, Solstice Literary Magazine, Smartish Pace, Rattle, Common Ground Review, Ember Chasm, Slippery Elm, Clementine Unbound, Vallum, Snapdragon, High Shelf, Ghost City Review*, and *Passengers*. Lerman also took second place in the 2014 *Prime Number Magazine* Award for Poetry, won the 2015 Art Young Memorial Award for Poetry, received an honorable mention in *Glimmer Train's* February 2015 Short Story Award for New Writers, *Stories That Need to Be Told* in 2018, and was a Finalist in poetry for the 2019 and 2017 Princemere Poetry Prizes, The Tucson Festival of Books Literary Awards, 2018, and the 2019 Erskine J. Poetry Prize.

KEVIN LICHTY was born and raised in the Virginia suburbs of Washington, D.C. He now lives in Arizona with his wife and two daughters where he is a writing instructor at Arizona State University. His work has appeared in *Yemasee, Hawaii Pacific Review, Ponder Review, Green Briar Review, Palooka*, and elsewhere.

BRODIE LOWE has a short story included in *Trouble No More*, an Allman Brothers Band Anthology, published by Down & Out Books and comprised of other stories by Michael Farris Smith, S.A. Cosby, and Brian Panowich (forthcoming in late 2021).

CAROL LUTHER has published short stories in *The Notebook: A Progressive Journal about Women & Girls with Rural & Small Town Roots*, *Still: The Journal*, *Persimmon Tree*, and in the anthology *A Tennessee Landscape, People, and Places*. She is professor emerita at Pellissippi State Community College in Knoxville, Tennessee, where she taught literature, writing, and film studies.

CATHERINE MALCYNSKY'S short stories have appeared in *The Susquehanna Apprentice* and *Carve Magazine* (among others), and a story was shortlisted for the *Masters Review* Winter Story Award in 2020. Malcynsky is currently an MFA candidate at Oregon State University, where she is working on a thesis of related short stories.

MARGARET MARCUM is a third-year graduate student in the MFA Program in Creative Writing at Florida Atlantic University in Boca Raton. Her poems have appeared in *Amethyst Review, Scapegoat Review, October Hill Magazine, Writing in a Woman's Voice*, and *Children, Churches, and Daddies*. She lives with her two cats, Angel and Alice.

NICOLE MATIS has a BS in biochemistry and cellular and molecular biology from the University of Tennessee, and is currently a student physician at the University of

South Alabama College of Medicine. Her work has appeared in *Cheat River Review*, Phi Kappa Phi Honor Society's *Forum*, *Phoenix, Rogue Agent*, and *Stirring*.

THOMAS MAYA is a Colombian-American writer from New York. His fiction was selected as a finalist for *Passages North's* 2020 Waasnode Prize and can be found in *PANK Magazine, The Acentos Review*, and forthcoming in *Wisconsin Review*, and his poetry is available in *Harpur Palate*. Maya is at work on a first novel and a first collection of stories.

S.B. MERROW lives in Baltimore. She is the author of a full-length poetry collection, *Everyone A Bell*, published by Kelsay Books. Her chapbook *Unpacking the China* won the QuillsEdge Press chapbook competition in 2016. Her poems have appeared in a number of literary journals, and she has published essays in *The Flutist Quarterly*, a trade magazine. In addition to writing poetry, she restores and repairs concert flutes for professional flutists.

CINDY MILWE'S work has been published in many journals and magazines, including *5 AM, Alaska Quarterly Review, Poetry East, Poet Lore, The William & Mary Review, Flyway, Talking River Review*, and *The Georgetown Review*, among others. Milwe also has poems in two anthologies: *Another City: Writing from Los Angeles* (City Lights, 2001) and *Changing Harm to Harmony: The Bullies and Bystanders Project* (Marin Poetry Center Press, 2015). Last year, her poem "Hunger" was selected as first prize winner for the Myra Shapiro Poetry Contest, sponsored by The International Women's Writing Guild. She earned a BA from New York University, a Masters in English Education at Columbia University's Teacher's College, and an MFA in poetry from Bennington College. Milwe lives with her husband and three children in in Venice, California.

SALLY STEWART MOHNEY'S poetry collection, *Low Country, High Water* (Texas Review Press, 2016) won the *Southern Poetry Anthology Prize: North Carolina*. Other publications include *Eventide* (Kelsay Books, 2020), *A Piece of Calm* (Finishing Line Press, 2014), and *Pale Blue Mercy* (Main Street Rag, 2013). Her work has appeared in *Broad River Review, The Charlotte Observer, Cortland Review, James Dickey Review, North Carolina Literary Review, San Pedro River Review, Town Creek Poetry, Verse Daily, Waccamaw Journal, The Reach of Song, Stone, River, Sky: An Anthology, The Southern Poetry Anthology: North Carolina*, *Winning Writers*, and elsewhere. Mohney has taken graduate courses at the University of Florida and the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop. She is the recipient of the Jesse Rehder Writing Prize from the University of North Carolina, and has been a nominee for the Georgia Author of the Year in Poetry. A North Carolina native, Mohney currently lives a thousand feet from the Chattahoochee River.

RUBY HANSEN MURRAY received the Montana Nonfiction Prize. See her work in the *Massachusetts Review, Colorlines, High Desert Journal, Seventh Wave, Moss, Exquisite Vessel: Shapes of Native Nonfiction, Native: Voices, Indigenous American Poetry, World Literature Today, CutBank*, and *The Rumpus*. She is citizen of the Osage Nation with West Indian roots. She can be found online at rubyhansenmurray.com

ANDREW NAJBERG is the author of *The Goats Have Taken Over the Barracks* (forthcoming, Finishing Line Press) and *Easy to Lose* (Finishing Line Press 2008). His poems have appeared in *North American Review, Louisville Review, Mockingheart*

Review, Faultline Journal, Bangalore Review, Another Chicago Magazine, and many other journals and anthologies. Currently, he teaches creative writing for the University of Tennessee Chattanooga where he assists with the Meacham Writers Workshop, and he graduated with his MFA from Spalding University. Find him on Twitter @AndrewNajberg.

RYAN NELSON lives in Lincoln, Nebraska and enjoys fishing, hiking, camping, and relaxing around the campfire. His poems have appeared in *Whole Notes, The Scrivner, Lilliput Review, Hummingbird*, and in *Plainsongs*, where "Slow Bite" was published as an award poem.

CASSADY O'REILLY-HAHN is a poet with an MA from Claremont Graduate University. He is a managing editor for *Foothill: A Poetry Journal* that highlights graduate student voices. He also works for AudioEyes, a company that describes TV and film for blind viewers. In his free time, Cassady writes haiku for his personal blog, *orhawrites*. This work can also be found on Instagram @cassady_orha. Cassady currently resides in Claremont, California, where he can be found flipping through fantasy novels in a cozy recliner on the weekends.

LANE OSBORNE completed his MFA at Warren Wilson College and teaches at Coastal Carolina University, where he serves as the faculty nonfiction editor for the literary journal, *Waccamaw*. His work, which has previously been nominated for a Pushcart Prize, has appeared in various journals, including *storySouth, Oxford Magazine*, and *The Citron Review*, and is forthcoming in *Chautauqua* and *SmokeLong Quarterly*.

ROBERT L. PENICK'S work has appeared in over 100 different literary journals, including *The Hudson Review, North American Review*, and the *California Quarterly*. Penick lives in Louisville, Kentucky, and previously edited *Ristau: A Journal of Being*. In 2018, he won the Slipstream Press chapbook competition. More of Penick's writing can be found at theartofmercy.net.

MICHELE PARKER RANDALL is the author of *Museum of Everyday Life* (Kelsay Books 2015) and the chapbook *A Future Unmappable* (Finishing Line Press 2021). Her work can be found in *Nimrod International Journal, Atlanta Review, Bellevue Literary Review, Tar River Poetry*, and elsewhere.

ISAAC RANKIN lives in Asheville, North Carolina. He works at an all-boys boarding school, Christ School, where he serves as Associate Director of Advancement. Working in schools is Isaac's calling, but he also enjoys traveling near and far, following sports obsessively, and chasing his son in the backyard. His poems have appeared or will soon appear in the *Chaffin Journal, Lily Poetry Review, Potomac Review, TAB Journal*, and other places.

ALYSSA D. ROSS was born in Guntersville, Alabama, but spent over a decade in Northern Virginia. She holds an MFA from George Mason University and a PhD from Auburn University. She currently Lectures in poetry, creative writing, composition, and literature at Auburn University.

VIRGINIA RYAN holds an MFA in Creative Writing from Lesley University and did her undergraduate work at George Washington University. She served with the Peace Corps in rural Thailand and worked as a journalist and in marketing before

venturing out on her own as a writer last year. Ryan's stories have appeared recently in such journals as *Embark, Anak Sastra, Adelaide*, and *Sky Magazine*.

MICHAEL SALCMAN is a retired physician and teacher of art history. He was chairman of neurosurgery at the University of Maryland and president of the Contemporary Museum in Baltimore. Salcman is a child of the Holocaust and a survivor of polio. His poems have appeared in *Arts & Letters, The Café Review, Hopkins Review, The Hudson Review, New Letters, Raritan*, and *Solstice*. His books include *The Clock Made of Confetti* (Orchises), which was nominated for The Poets Prize, *The Enemy of Good Is Better* (Orchises), *Poetry in Medicine*, a widely used anthology of classic and contemporary poems on doctors, patients, illness and healing (Persea Books, 2015), *A Prague Spring, Before & After* (2016), winner of the 2015 Sinclair Poetry Prize from Evening Street Press, and *Shades & Graces*, the inaugural winner of the Daniel Hoffman Legacy Book Prize (Spuyten Duyvil, 2020).

CLAIRE SCOTT is an award-winning poet who has received multiple Pushcart Prize nominations. Her work has appeared in the *Atlanta Review, Bellevue Literary Review, New Ohio Review, Enizagam,* and *Healing Muse*, among others. She is the author of *Waiting to be Called and Until I Couldn't* and is the co-author of *Unfolding in Light: A Sisters' Journey in Photography and Poetry*.

EMILY SCUDDER is the author of *Feeding Time* (Pecan Grove Press) and the chapbooks *Natural Instincts* and *A Change of Pace* (Finishing Line Press). Her poems have appeared in *Harvard Review, Agni Online, Margie, New Letters, Harpur Palate, Salamander, North Dakota Quarterly, Ethel Zine*, and other places. Visit her online at emilyscudder.com.

A teacher at Valencia College, **ALAN SINCIC** is the winner of the 2020 Rash Award in Fiction for his story, "The Sinkhole." Other fiction has appeared in *New Ohio Review, The Greensboro Review, The Saturday Evening Post, Hunger Mountain, Prime Number, Big Fiction Magazine, Cobalt, Burningword, A-3 Press,* and elsewhere. Recent short stories won contests sponsored by *The Texas Observer, Driftwood Press, The Prism Review, Westchester Review, American Writer's Review, The Vincent Brothers Review,* and *Pulp Literature*. Sincic earned an MFA at Western New England University and Columbia and—back in the day—published a children's chapter book, *Edward Is Only A Fish* (Henry Holt) that was reviewed in the *New York Times*, translated into German, and recently issued in a Kindle edition.

DUNCAN SMITH is a librarian-entrepreneur who lives and writes in Durham, North Carolina. Duncan's story "Reunion" was a finalist in the 2019 Rash Award for Fiction. His essays, poetry and prose have appeared in *Booklist, Broad River Review, Crucible*, and on *Red Eft Review*. A North Carolina native, he is a graduate of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

SHANNON SPIES received an MFA from the University of Idaho in 2014, and where she studied poetry writing with Bob Wrigley. Since then, Spies has worked for the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh and Duquesne University. Her work has previously appeared in *Poet Lore* and *Kestrel*.

MATTHEW J. SPIRENG'S full-length poetry book *Good Work* won the 2019 Sinclair Poetry Prize and was published in 2020 by Evening Street Press. Other

books include *What Focus Is* (WordTech Communications, 2011) and *Out of Body* (Bluestem Press, 2006). His chapbooks include *Clear Cut*, *Young Farmer, Encounters, Inspiration Point* (winner of the 2000 Bright Hill Press Poetry Chapbook Competition), and *Just This*. Since 1990, in addition to *Broad River Review*, Spireng's poems have also appeared in N*orth American Review, Tar River Poetry, Rattle, Louisiana Literature, Southern Poetry Review, Prairie Schooner,* and *Poet Lore*. He is an 11-time Pushcart Prize nominee and winner of The MacGuffin's 23rd Annual Poet Hunt Contest (2018) and the Common Ground Review Poetry Contest (2015). Spireng can be found online at matthewjspireng.com.

JO BARBARA TAYLOR lives in North Carolina, where she writes poetry and fiction, and leads poetry writing workshops. Her poetry and fiction have appeared in journals, magazines, anthologies, and online. She has published four poetry books with small presses.

DIANE THIEL is the author of ten books of poetry and nonfiction, including *Echolocations* and *Resistance Fantasies*. Her new book of poetry, *Questions from Outer Space*, is forthcoming from Red Hen Press in spring 2022. Thiel's work has appeared in many journals and is re-printed widely. Her awards include a PEN award, an NEA Award, and a Fulbright. Thiel received her undergraduate and graduate degrees from Brown University and is Professor of English and Associate Chair at the University of New Mexico. Thiel has traveled and lived in Europe, South America, Asia, and Australia, working on literary and environmental projects. Her website is dianethiel.net.

RANDOLPH THOMAS is the author of the poetry collection *The Deepest Rooms*, winner of the George Cable book award. His poems have recently appeared in *Southern Poetry Review, The Common, Poetry South*, *Pleiades, Poetry Daily*, *Verse Daily*, and many others. He is the author of the short story collection *Dispensations,* and his nonfiction has recently appeared in *Appalachian Review*. He teaches at Louisiana State University.

JOHN THOMSON'S stories have appeared in several literary journals, two of which were finalists in the 2019 and 2020 Rash Award Contests and were published in *Broad River Review*. His novel for young readers *A Small Boat at the Bottom of the Sea* was published by Milkweed Editions. Thomson is a retired land and wildlife conservationist living in Northern California.

LUCINDA TREW studied journalism and English at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Her work has appeared in *The Fredricksburg Literary and Art Review, The Poet, Cathexis Northwest Press, The Bangor Literary Journal, San Pedro River Review, Kakalak, Mockingheart Review, Flying South,* and other journals. She is a recipient of a 2021 Randall Jarrell Poetry Competition honorable mention, a 2020 Kakalak Poetry Award, a 2019 North Carolina Poetry Society Award, and was named a 2020 North Carolina Poetry Society poet laureate award finalist. Trew lives, writes and rambles in Union County, North Carolina.

A retired journalist, **CHARLES WHEELER** worked for five newspapers, which included stints as a copy editor, reporter, columnist and book critic. In addition to a journalism degree from the University of North Carolina, he holds a masters degree in liberal studies and an MFA in creative writing, both from UNC Greensboro. He lives in Winston-Salem, North Carolina.

BOB WICKLESS has published poems in many magazines and journals, including *American Scholar, Antioch Review, Broad River Review, Florida Review, Poetry, Shenandoah, Southern Indiana Review*, and *Southern Poetry Review*. His chapbook *Almost Happy* appeared in 2020 and a second chapbook, *(Riding) Shotgun in Imaginary Cars,* is forthcoming later this year, both from Orchard Street Press. Now retired, Wickless lives in Reidsville, North Carolina.

NANCY H. WOMACK lives on a farm in the foothills of Western North Carolina, where she enjoys gardening, reading, writing, and entertaining family and friends. Her poetry has appeared in various journals and anthologies, including *Broad River Review* and *Kakalak*. Her chapbook *Red Jacket Requiem* is forthcoming from Hermit Feathers Press.