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Ginosko (ghin-océ-koe)

A Greek word meaning
to perceive, understand, realize, come to know;
knowledge that has an inception, a progress, an attainment.
The recognition of truth from experience.

γινώσκω

To write the red of a tomato
before it is mixed into beans for chili is a form of praise.

To write an image of a child caught
in war is confession or petition or requiem.

To write grief onto a page of lined paper
until tears blur the ink is often the surest
access to giving or receiving forgiveness.

To write a comic scene is grace and beatitude.

To write irony is to seek justice.

To write admission of failure is humility.

To be in an attitude of praise or thanksgiving, to rage against God,
or to open one's inner self and listen, is prayer.

To write tragedy and allow comedy to arise between the lines
is miracle and revelation.

— Pat Schneider

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Say it with Feathers

Jay Merrill

A young unnamed woman sits on a sleeping bag in a doorway twirling a feather in one hand.

My mum and dad have come again today. As usual they're unable to speak. In my family there are two opposing pictures of how a woman is. On my father's side she's a dazzler; on my mother's, a pale grey goose. Or that is the way I felt when my mother said, 'It's the male birds that have the bright plumage. There's no getting away from that.' I couldn't help wondering why Dad got together with my mum. My mother's own explanation would have been that a man might like to flirt with sparkly but he wouldn't want to marry it. At six I experimented with the background-goose image but as a teen became a party-girl and went for glam. If nobody wanted to marry me I was fine with that. *Dazzle* was my middle name.

My mother has an ascetic streak and Dad an urge for the colourful splash. But it became clear to me that both approaches were rooted in the world of appearances. And I wanted more for myself than that. I found my parents superficial. My hostile manner led to rows. They skulked together like dissatisfied children while I berated them with statements about the importance of the *real*. Funny it should be me who brought them together in the end.

I got heavily into politics, wanted the parents to know what was going on everywhere around them, expecting my mum and dad to denounce the iniquities of the age. I ached for them to have an awareness of global consciousness and the effects of poverty but they were too busy feathering their nest. They clung to consumerism as though it were a god.

She stands and wraps her sleeping bag round herself, indicating cold, the feather hangs limp in one hand.

The parents stood together in a show of unity and I was the one at odds. This was a new phenomenon as throughout my entire childhood they'd been at war. One or the other of them was always on my side for the purpose of doing the other down. When I joined *Occupy* the goose-feathers and the party-feathers flew at home. After which they kind of twined together as Mum and Dad joined forces against me. I couldn't bear to watch and guess what, I didn't have to. I moved lock and stock into the St Paul's site, because how could I feel anger about the greed and poverty which were rife in our society and yet do nothing? When the site closed down I was on the street – to me it was a moral statement. Gave me a sense of solidarity. My mum and dad saw me one day begging by the roadside. Since then they've followed me around.

Then she holds up the feather and blows it away in the wind.

They have come to persuade me to mend my ways. I could have dazzled in more than name or I could have been the sensible dull one letting the men wear the brighter feathers. Either get-up they'd have understood. But the *Real Me* is too much for them to take.

by Mitchell Krockmalnik Grabois

Sainthood

Radioactive giantism will feed the masses.

My green writing glows on the page, not even a page anymore, a screen, infinitely mutable, no sign anywhere of a cross-out, as if I were immaculate, error-free, radioactive, gigantic.

The masses will crawl out from under their collapsed garment factories. They will brush their damp and matted hair from their foreheads. They will pick up knives and forks spilled from the broken cafeteria and they will attack the hundred-foot oarfish, prehistoric and tasty, and the one-hundred-sixty-foot squid that washed up on a Fukushima tide.

My errors melt like snow in the Colorado sun the day after a storm, and leave no trace. I am nominating myself for sainthood.

Calamari for one and all. Calamari for your tired and poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free.

My errors disappear like a perfect crime, a perfect murder. The process of creation is fat-free, gluten-free, violence-free.

Old Woman Hanging Out Wash

1.

After I heard about the murder of twenty children in their crayola classroom, I descended the splintery stairs to my cellar and sat behind my drums, and beat them. By the time the other members of my band showed up, the bassist, who works as a bartender, the guitarist, whose girlfriend went back to Arkansas, and the lead singer, dark as a gypsy, I was frothed, my black t-shirt soaked with sweat, my arms pumped like a bodybuilder's, the *Mounds of Venus* at the base of my thumbs hard as walnuts. My dog, who I'd saved from the pound and normally likes rock music, cowered behind the water heater as if the shooter of children were in the room with his assault rifle. I got up to give him a lamb treat and smooth his ears back and tell him that everything was going to be all right.

2.

Later that year, from the top of a Roman arena in France, I watch groups of schoolchildren move in clumps and think: *children are not our future. They're merely the next set of pawns. Cannon fodder.*

Across the street, on a balcony with cracked tiles, an old woman hangs out her wash—black brassiere, black panties. Maybe she's doing laundry for her daughter or granddaughter. I watch pigeons on the roof. I get hypnotized by them. When I come out of my trance, I see that the children are gone. The Roman arena is empty again. At this moment, Americans are torturing prisoners of war, but I won't know that until later.

High Contrast

1.

I think my dentist, my girlfriend suffers from *Borderline Personality Disorder*. She rides the edge between anxiety and psychosis. How else to explain her behavior during my first appointment? She sent her assistant out of the room and closed the door. I was unaware, high on nitrous oxide. The next thing I knew, no instrument was in my mouth, but her tongue. I didn't object. She was more than ten years older than me but had that Nordic look, like she was born to slalom and end her run in a spray of snow. Through the nitrous haze, I felt her undoing my big silver and turquoise belt buckle. I didn't look at her. My eyes were on the video screen on the ceiling, palm trees swaying, pelicans gliding above a blue-green sea.

O my God. This dentist was about forty, but she fucked like a sixteen-year-old, like she was sex-starved and had been waiting for me all her life. Sometimes I shout when I come and I must have given a sign because at the exact right moment she put her hand over my mouth, so as not to disturb patients in the adjoining rooms who might have been getting their teeth cleaned or whose anxiety was growing over the procedures they were awaiting.

She climbed off me. My nitrous mind fell into the music coming out of my headphones, Eighties Classics. *Eight Six Seven Five Three O Nine*. That song had suddenly acquired a remarkable profundity. I drifted off to sleep .

When I awoke, my pants were back up, my belt fastened, and my new dentist, my new girlfriend, was smiling, those Nordic blue eyes fixed on me with something like love. So that's why I'm thinking: *Borderline Personality Disorder*. As my mother would say: *That's not what a normal person would do*.

2.

A few months later, we're on vacation. We're in Arles for the *Fourth Annual Photographic Exposition of the Nude*. In my opinion there are too many blurry pictures. They are blurry in the way that fat makes the body blurry. I want tightness, high contrast, but I'm not going to get it.

HE DIDN'T REFUSE

Sreedhevi Iyer

They stopped and stared. The mountain did not look the same as before. How had that house become smaller – or was it just they who had grown up? Seeing it now, how had they never seen it before?

The paths before them opened up, and they continued to walk, and came by the river. They had to stop, and he looked at her, wondering if she was affected.

“How are you?” she asked instead, surprising him. He did not hear what she really meant.

“We are of no use,” he said.

“Are you sure?”

“I never had any intention of saving the world.”

She thought about that for a while, then agreed. They sat down by the bank as the river tumbled. They watched as it sped past them, too fast. Stones and boulders made the bed uneven, and the gush of water sometimes frightened them. But they also had flowers around them, and he saw that she liked it. Absurdly, it felt like a holiday, and as the afternoon grew he wished he could move them out of the way, anything to make it easier.

She laughed. “It is okay,” she said. “Dying from these flowers of confusion in a strange place can be an okay death.”

He blinked, successively, as if it was a tic. It was new, but it was his reaction, not hers, and so she decided she would not ask him about it. Like her mythical blackness, this could be the chink in his armour, the only thing that said he had his own complications.

How funny, she thought, as they sat there by the river, getting increasingly wet from sudden sprays. They were the tragedy of always interacting in the wrong place at the wrong time. They were unveiling themselves in slow motion, layers of grey dirt crumbling off an old painting of black tree stumps, like in a forest. Nobody can go into the forest of someone’s head that quickly, she thought. He was still hard to read, inscrutable, and that is why they could do this together, in protest, so they could be of use. She had asked, and he had said yes. He could refuse her easily the way she cannot. He had refused other questions many times before, on city pavements as they walked to the bus stop after gnocchi and wine.

There he could, it had been easy. Now, here, he hadn't. It had made her forgive.

"Shall we?" he asked, blinking some more. She nodded, and her head fragmented.

The water cut them cold, and they lost their specificity. They held on and laughed, each waiting for the other to let go. All they had to do was float and inhale. Stray flowers came down the stream and touched their faces. They shivered and screamed, then stayed still, letting it all pass.

The Waters of Babylon

Andrew Lee-Hart

They probably think I am a just bit nervous, the way that I never meet anybody's gaze but am always looking round, never still, permanently on edge. And there is my silence, which is really listening; I have learned to listen, listen for that odd word or tone, that second's hesitation which gives the game away. When you have been on the run for as long as I have, these things are second nature, and if I forget them for just one moment then that could be it.

They seem to like me at the care home; well the residents do, I don't really care about the other staff. I am patient, quiet and do not mind listening to their stories, the stories that they tell every day to whoever will listen. I feel as if I have more in common with them who have lived hard lives and seen unspeakable things, than with the staff who are mostly young and trivial, and are interested in the holy trinity of drink, sex and television.

I have been working there for four weeks. It was easy to get in, after all the money is awful and the work is hard, but I don't mind that. And Nottingham has some cheap places to live if you don't mind a bedsit and noise at night, which I don't. I lived here a few years ago, in my previous life. Odd that it is still the same; castle, canal and the square in front of the town hall, it is just me that has aged. I won't stay here long, I never do but it is okay, and at least it is big so I am less conspicuous.

I take Sylvia Dodd out this morning to do her shopping. She likes to get out and visit the local shops to buy her daily packet of Rothmans and a bar of Dairy Milk. Sylvia always dresses well; not flash but good clothes that suit her, and she has a lovely perfume, quite classy. We slowly walk down the street; it is November and getting cold, but with that smell I love of autumn. We walk through fallen leaves and I have a sudden shot of nostalgia which I swiftly push aside. Sylvia talks about the royal wedding; she is an old fashioned socialist and hates the royal family.

"Waste of money and to think of all those people without homes. I have a good mind to write to that Tony Blair" and she sniffs contemptuously. I do not know what royal wedding she is talking about and I certainly do not vote, being on the electoral register would be suicide, I would be taken within the week.

We walk into the Co-op where Sylvia likes to go. She is quite friendly with most of the staff, who do the decent thing and talk to her. It is the older lady there today, too much make-up and rather overweight. She smiles at me and I quickly look away.

"Back again" she smiles. Genuine? I smile back briefly and pretend to read the front

page of a newspaper.

"It's Sharon isn't it?" she asks, seeming friendly. Why is she talking to me, when Sylvia would so like to chatter?

"No, Barbara." I never forget the name I am going under. I swap them regularly of course, but have never been caught out.

Sylvia leaves the shop with chocolate and fags in her handbag. She is talking about her daughter now, who is an electrician. I know what she will say, but listen anyway, always pays to listen even if you think you know what is coming next. We walk back the way we came, I make sure that nobody is following me, just in case. But nobody is. Hopefully they don't know where I am yet, think I am still in Sheffield in that awful damp flat.

We get back to the home, I help her use the toilet and get changed. She then sits in the back garden, ignoring the chill, and smokes. I should be helping the other staff with household tasks but Sylvia enjoys my company and at least she does not ask me about myself. Once she did enquire whether I had a boyfriend and I told her my usual lie about having someone in the army. In theory that stops them trying to pair me off and keeps male staff from making a pass at me.

We walk back into the building; I smell beans and sausages coming from the kitchen and this mingles with the smell of disinfectant as the residents' rooms are cleaned. The senior, or boss as the residents call her, Marie comes out of her office with a young man in tow.

"Ah Barbara, this is Tom, he is new." He is handsome, with designer stubble and the smell of some aftershave, too expensive for someone doing this job. He looks at me for just that fraction too long, as if he is comparing me with a photograph he has seen recently. Perhaps it was nothing, but I have learned to follow my hunches. I start making plans.

It is six in the evening, the end of my shift. Tom enters the staffroom, just as I am getting my bag and coat to go home. He looks full of purpose and evil intent.

"Going home?" he asks.

I look at him, briefly. He grabs his bag and coat from his locker; both too new and just wrong.

"I'll walk with you."

"No don't"

"Oh come on" he steps towards me, his pumps making no sound on the cheap plastic flooring. He is close to me now and I can smell him and hear him breathe. I have a knife in my pocket and I clench the handle. The door opens and Marie walks in full of concentrated fury. I take my chance, push past her and jump the first bus I find.

I always leave my two bags packed, just in case, it is not the first time that I have had to leave in a hurry. I grab my toiletries from the bathroom and I am ready. Within five minutes of entering my bedsit I am walking down the road; rucksack on my back and shoulder bag by my side, heading towards the railway station, shivering slightly with the cold and with despair.

Through the fence we occasionally see the soldiers and men in suits, looking busy and slightly furtive, as if ashamed of what they are up to. It is an American airbase which according to the internet has devious things going on. It was probably foolish going to join the protest camp, after all no doubt they are under heavy surveillance. But I like the fact that the people share my transient lifestyle. Anyway I will only stay a couple of weeks and then go, or sooner if I have to. My name is now Liz.

I share a tent with a woman called Nico, named after the singer. She is tough and carries a knife so I feel safe with her, I lost mine in Chesterfield. Like most of the people in the camp she does not pry too much, many of them are on the run from something as well, or like to pretend they are. It is a community, and I like to have people about me some of the time.

We lie there in the evening reading; I borrowed Robinson Crusoe from Jack, who joined the camp just before me, whilst Nico reads something heavy and political looking. I lie back on my sleeping bag and think of the things I have seen and felt, but it becomes too much and I turn back to Robinson on his island. Sometimes I need to dwell on the unspeakable things I have seen just to stop me getting complacent, but only for a few moments; that is enough. The tent smells of Nico's cheap body spray and under that a faint smell of unclean bodies and sweat.

After a while we walk out into the countryside and sniff the air. It is March and the air is full of pollen, still cold after a hard winter.

"Why are you reading Robinson Crusoe?"

"Useful tips for survival. It's a good story."

"He is just a capitalist; controlling the means of production and then enslaving the local population. Someone should write a Marxist critique of it."

"Jack lent it to me." I admitted.

"I think he is police. There are always one or two. He has tried to get me into bed, wouldn't trust him. Just be careful, these undercovers will do anything."

There had been rumours of policemen joining protest camps; forming relationships, having children. Not everyone believed it, but I had no reason to doubt it.

I keep Jack at a distance after Nico's warning, although did not return Robinson

Crusoe as I want to finish it. It is a good story, written as if he was in a hurry to get it all down. I would love to live on an island, secluded and safe with only the occasional cannibal to bother me.

Jack comes into the tent a few days later, he is all nonchalance.

"Hi Liz, I was looking for Nico."

He looks at me

"So what do you think of Robinson Crusoe?"

I calculate whether there is space to get past him. I know Nico has gone into town with some of the others. However we never leave our base unguarded so there will be people about, and I can scream.

"Okay, nearly finished it." I edge towards Nico's sleeping bag, which contains her knife.

"Do you fancy a drink tonight? It is about time you and I got to know each other we could go and have some fun."

I look at him. "No thanks, my turn to wash-up"

"But surely afterwards?"

"No." he looks at me steadily for a moment and then leaves.

Two days later we are raided. Nico and I see them coming; we are out foraging in some fields at a distance from the camp and see the vans heading towards the tents from all directions. We both run. There is no time to get our stuff, but Nico keeps her car hidden well away from the camp so we are able to jump into it and make our escape. The police probably don't even notice us, and if they do we have too far a head start. Fortunately I had finished reading Robinson Crusoe, although I hadn't returned it to Jack.

Nico is driving to Dover and then by ferry to France to join some anarchists in Paris. She does not suggest I go with her, and I am happy with that. I suspect that ports and airports are unsafe and heavily watched which is why I have never attempted to leave the country. She drops me off near London, and soon I am in the capital, where I find somewhere to squat. My parents lived in Highgate, are maybe still there, but I cannot think of visiting them, and anyway I cannot remember their address.

I like it in London; it feels safe with so many people, so long as I keep with the crowds. I love the noise, and the bustle, the river and the buildings that dwarf us all. Every day I walk the streets, watching the people and pretending that I am one of them.

And I see her disappearing into Aldgate Tube station; a thin nervous woman, looking in every direction but that in which she is going. Her image is caught by the CCTV cameras that patrol this city and is then beamed straight to us. If she leaves we will find her, we always do. Wherever she goes we will know about it sooner or later. And we will get her eventually, we always get the people we are chasing; she will get tired,

perhaps ill and inevitably she will get old. All we have to do is wait.

by Grant Tabard

Breast Fragments

I will stroke your breast until it fragments
with clamorous lions and foul-mouthed wasps
that buzz in formation and form a twitch
halo round your head, and crumbs of tigers
fly out as sanguined paper streamers fixed
with clots that make this butterfly heart beat
for you, virgin you, foul mouthed queen of my
bleed. I'll caress your posterior till
it ejaculates a tiny house of
mechanical palpating fingertips.
The lights in the trees are unprepared for
the ragged splendour of your tail feather,
as black as Crawford's mascara, as soft
as drowning, blemished as an apple core.

When the World Was Tender

When all the world was tender the scent of your
Weather was the making of me. I hung

Over balconies, steel reflections of
A theatre barbed, snarling, written in scars.

I drop to the fall of your name, letters
Bunched like spiders legs, each syllable delves

Into my verdant flesh, nurturing my
Moth-eaten roots, the concern of my kiss.

The Wolves Have Sheared the Sun

The sun is an eye of finely turned wood,
A painted eye coated in vinegar.
The stars are egg shells filled with ghost stories,
A timber camp calling out for the dead.
As the wind simplifies the cold, ambling
Wolves sheath the sunrise with a blanket of
Plaited darkness. The raw wolves of sunset
Have torn the throat out of the spring lamb east,
All the galaxies are lanterns blown out.
The night's flesh devours its own, nothing is
Cherished in the waxen shine of snapshots
Of lambency that flitters like moths wings,
A jigsaw puzzle that flaps away the
Pieces and scatters them on the wolves breath.

The Prophet of Horus

1.

Howl in clear nights mist,
Above the ship's masts.
Wain in the singing,
Knowing dried death has
Slowly discharged eyes.

2.

The house was made of
Three walls and a tree
Reclaiming the beat
Of the skinny treed
Forest of Galen.

3.

Howl to the clear night
Above the ship masts.
Wade in the conscious
Knot-face sail of death's
Sinful discharged eyes.

4.

Horus is waiting
In the rafters, deciding
Who goes into the

Gutter, raging in
This gruel of spilt innards.
He could stroke the Sun

Like a weak gadfly
Bemoaning the swish of a
Feather cut bull's tail.

5.

The ruins, floor strewn with fossil'd petals, beyond rotting; this once was a holy site. How does this null space with bare rafters entrap this wise god? Am I a disciple? I Eat hawk meat with Him entwined with long pig trailing entrails, tethered to this tomb of Advisers led by tall, slim as a clothes peg tress in wild bunches, branches coming in Narcotic urges to please this cabin with the hawks head. The birds come crying Incense, I am His mouth, I am His glass eyed follower and every stringy Morsel cries out with respect for the sacrifice and hunger for the remains, the Utensils of the killing. After the feeding, the hawk shrank to pocket size and flew on to a Stone table, an ominous altar, blood stained, and I devour the god of splinted wings.

6.

Howl to the clear night,
All above the stars.
Wait in the conscious
Knot-face of sly Death,

Seethe his discharged eyes.

by Jack C Buck

Conversations in an Idle Car

You felt it earlier in the night, at dinner, in the way you responded by not responding to something she has said. You are relieved driving away back to your apartment that it didn't continue because for those other ones it isn't over when it ends, it goes on for some time afterward. Her voice, her smell, her hair sticks around. You find traces of her around, you turn up things you have nearly forgotten and it comes back to you.

You feel it, this shift, the turn, the this isn't going to work nice to have met you the last 4 or 5 weeks have been fine, but now it's over. It happens when it does and you see it when it does. And, her body, her legs, her arms look different now. I bet you probably slept over at her place on Monday. Here it is Wednesday and you are talking and you notice from the corner of your eye her take a quick look at you to see if you are looking at her. She doesn't see that you see, so she shifts her body as far away from you in the passenger seat without unlocking the car's door and taking the gamble of tuck and roll at 45 miles per hour. She want's nothing to do with you anymore and tells you by looking out the window and saying, "hm? What did you say?"

Filling in

I would walk next to her, a foot or two behind her, trying to keep up. She would lean into it, talking, singing a few lines in between from a song that reminded her of what she was talking about. In those rare moments when she wasn't moving, at crosswalks, sometimes I would say something when I felt it was worth something, and she would look at me, smiling, ready to grab my arm to encourage me to go on.

And then she would really keep at it while thrusting on top. I close my eyes to slow it down. I want her to slow down, but this is her speed. I want her to look at me, instead of telling me I can have her anyway I want. She likes everything, she says. She tells me to tell her what I want. She grabs my hand and uses my palm to slap her ass. I want to tell her to breathe hard and wait for it. I want to kiss her inner thighs, her eyelids, but I don't want to disturb her. So, this will have to do. I don't want to see her frown and upset as though she has remembered who I am, and who I am not.

The Man Who Lost Everything

Erica Verrillo

Zayde died last Saturday. This afternoon we gathered to attend a service over a plain pine coffin and to remember him over cold cuts on rye. I remembered my grandfather chiefly as a madman.

“He died happy,” said my mother. “That’s all that matters.”

My father nodded automatically. His little head string had been pulled. My mother has a way of making pronouncements which cannot be refuted. Obviously, that was all that mattered in life, dying happy. If you believed otherwise – for example, that living happy was what really mattered – you were a fool.

“Pass the bread,” said my father. He did not participate in philosophical discussions.

My mother picked up the bread basket and gestured for me to pass it on. She glanced at my ears.

“That old-fashioned jewelry looks good on you,” she said. “Dropped pearls are coming back into fashion.” Coming from her, the compliment was a subtle put down. White gold was obviously “in.” She was covered with it. Her voice turned sharp. “Sam, easy on the pastrami. You know what the doctor said.”

My father grunted, and heaped it on. Any other day he would have started an argument. This was a day better suited for passive aggression.

“He died happy,” she insisted. It was all I could do to keep from nodding.

When I think of my grandfather, I am always fourteen. That was the year he came to us every Saturday. His second wife, Lillian, had died the year before. As a consequence my mother felt the obligation to attend to him – though not without reservations. His visits always disrupted her household routine.

My grandfather was a tall man. When he strode down the street to our house, his black overcoat flapping around him like wings, and his beard jutting out from under his great beaked nose, the words “wrath of God” always came to my mind. I was the lookout, because no matter what I was doing – drawing, practicing piano, reading – I

always seemed to know exactly when to stop and look out the window. Invariably, my grandfather would appear within seconds. It was as though I had conjured him. My mother never questioned this rare talent of mine; she simply made good use of it.

“Zayde’s coming!” On Saturday I was allowed to shout, because it was my job. And while Zayde marched down the street, yelling at fire hydrants, telephone poles and trees, flailing his walking stick furiously at parked cars, my mother scurried about the house, assembling, straightening, cleaning, preparing for the onslaught – as if achieving greater order within the house could compensate for the chaos which was about to enter it. At the last moment she removed her earrings, bracelets, brooch and necklace and thrust them into her apron pockets. By the time she answered the door, she was unadorned except for her plain gold wedding band.

“Come in Zayde.” She always greeted him as “grandfather” in Yiddish. I never thought it odd. After all, he had been old when I was born. She took his hat and stick and placed them in the back of the closet. He kept his coat on, as usual. My mother did not accompany him into the living room.

I was reading by the window when he came in.

“I will get your tea,” my mother said. My grandfather didn’t reply, unless you want to consider grunting as a form of speech. He perched himself on the edge of our Danish Modern couch. I tried to ignore him.

Once he was in the house Zayde usually behaved himself, though he muttered constantly. I never understood what he was saying, mainly because I didn’t care to. He expressed sentiments I had no wish to fathom. My task was to stay there until my mother returned, keeping him, at least from my mother’s perspective, out of harm’s way. That day he sat untypically silent, his brow deeply furrowed. I watched him carefully out of the corner of my eye as I leafed through a copy of *Seventeen*, waiting to see if he would croak something intelligible – like maybe “Lenore.” He appeared to be thinking. Then, abruptly, he opened his wide, frayed lapel, and drew out a large flat book. He laid the book on my mother’s new glass and stainless steel coffee table. The table had “cost a fortune.” I wasn’t allowed to go near it.

“Come.” It was the first time, in my memory, that he had directly addressed me. More than anything else, the invitation was alarming. But the book was enticing. I was dead sure it didn’t belong on that table. Eventually, curiosity got the better of me, and crablike, I inched my way closer.

He had placed the book facing me, so that I could open it without coming over to his

side of the table. For that I was grateful. I put my fingers lightly on the cover. It had once been smooth red leather, but now it was cracked all over – and very dirty. It was irresistible. When I opened the cover, I found myself looking at the picture of a young man.

Zayde pointed at his chest.

I was shocked. The man in the picture was young, and handsome in a clean-cut kind of way. He was leaning against a wall with his arms crossed confidently over his chest. He didn't look in the slightest bit crazy. I looked up at Zayde's wrinkled face skeptically. He made a curt "go on" gesture with his finger.

Every page was filled with faded pictures of people in strange clothing, unsmiling couples posing stiffly before the camera, the women seated precariously on fragile chairs in front of frozen men. Heavy curtains framed the pictures, as though the couples were on a stage. However, given their stodgy faces and unglamorous poses it seemed unlikely they were actors. On one page a woman sat next to a table bearing a vase of flowers. I could practically smell the dust.

All those dull, grim-faced portraits made me want to return to my glossy magazine. But Zayde's eyes were boring into me, so I kept turning the thick black pages. Towards the end there were several pictures of children looking uncomfortable in thick white stockings and clunky boots. I stared at them with some interest.

"My brothers and sisters," he said. "All dead."

"Oh," I said. It had not occurred to me that Zayde had come from a family. Maybe he'd had a father and mother, too. Sure enough, the next picture was of a fierce unsmiling man with a black beard. This, most likely, was Zayde's father. He looked like a man fully capable of carrying a grudge. I glanced at Zayde and he nodded impatiently, urging me on. I turned to the last page of the book, glad that now I could close it and go back to reading my magazines. There was one last picture.

Unlike the others, this picture had not been taken in a studio. A young woman sat in the grass, her dark eyes regarding me with warmth and humor. She was leaning on one slim arm. A long, thick braid hung loosely over the opposite shoulder. She was dressed more casually than the others in the album. Her white blouse, partially open, revealed a graceful neck and part of one shoulder, and her full skirts were mounded carelessly around her, as though she had just flung herself to the ground. A pale, gleaming orb hung from each earlobe. The formal pearls looked a little out of place in this picture, though they would not have in any of the others. As I gazed into her huge

smoky eyes, I desperately hoped I was related to her. She was the most beautiful woman I had ever seen.

“Here’s your tea,” my mother announced. She entered the room bearing a tray with pastries, a bowl of preserves and a glass of tea. Zayde refused to drink tea from a cup, like a normal person.

“Who is this?” I demanded, assuming that she would know. She glanced down at the photo album and shook her head.

“Put that away,” she said to no one in particular. Since it was Zayde’s book there was nowhere to put it. Zayde picked it up and inserted it within the darkness of his coat. When I went back to my magazine, the models all looked insipid. I put it away and went to watch TV at the neighbors’. My presence was no longer required.

When I returned for supper a few hours later, Zayde was crazy again.

“It’s all slipping away!” he cried. Tears flowed down his face, dripped off his long nose and into his beard. Soon he would start to shout gibberish. My mother tried to soothe him.

“You still have your business,” she said.

Amazingly, that was a fact. Zayde owned a jewelry store on 58th Street. I had never been there. But my mother had taken me to A La Vielle Russie so many times that I had come to believe my grandfather had made Fabergé eggs for the Czar.

“Oh no!” my mother laughed. “He never made anything like that! He was just an ordinary Minsk jeweler.”

In my mind, I saw nothing ordinary about jewelry. Sparkling stones and golden chains were pure magic to me. The stuff of dreams.

Zayde had left the motherland right before World War II, his wealth of jewels sewn securely into his coat seams. He had brought nothing and no one else with him. Once in the States he worked for a jeweler in lower Manhattan. He was ambitious. Within a year he opened his own midtown store, married the daughter of an upholsterer, and had his only child – my mother. His wife had died when my mother was in her twenties. At some point after that he went mad.

“It’s fear,” my mother explained. “He has already lost so much. He is afraid of losing everything.”

“How?” I protested. He had a store filled with treasure. It didn’t occur to me to point out the fact that he had us, too. Families simply existed – they weren’t something a person could possess, or lose.

“You’re too young to understand,” she said, which was true.

According to my mother, Zayde was completely sane when she was growing up. She recalls him as “a hardworking man.” He rose early, went to work, maintained a family and business and, to all appearances, stood as a shining example immigrant success. However, a man who looks through a magnifying glass fourteen hours a day can easily develop tunnel vision; obsessions can sprout and grow, hidden from family and friends.

When did his madness begin? I imagine it must have started in the privacy of his shop, in the evening after he had closed up. I see him there, standing alone in the dim light, gazing at the cases of gold and silver, counting the gemstones as they lay on their beds of black velvet. He must, at the very least, have felt protective. Perhaps, as the War intensified, his possessiveness turned into paranoia. It seems a plausible explanation, for as the war years wore on his mind began to slip into isolated realms. He muttered to himself constantly, even before Lillian became ill. After her death, freed at last from the constraints of sanity, he transformed himself into his current caricature of lunacy. There was never a time when he did not terrify me.

Zayde wore his black coat through every season. Sometimes, I had the horrible suspicion that he wore nothing beneath it. His eyes, deeply sunken under his shaggy eyebrows, never seemed to register what he saw, or, rather, what the rest of us saw. He heard voices which ceaselessly reiterated his deepest terrors and he responded to their threats vehemently.

“They are taking it all away!” He would howl his mad refrain at mailboxes, phone booths.

God wasn’t picking up, or maybe Zayde’s frantic shrieking couldn’t be heard over the squeal of the El. On the street, the sight of jewelry drove him into a frenzy. “Thief! Hoodlum! Police!” He shouted at his surprised victim, until, indeed, the police arrived and hauled him away.

We would receive a phone call. My mother would put down the phone. Sighing heavily she would pin on her hat and go into the City to fetch him. There was never any bail. The man was not dangerous, just a nuisance. His business, needless to say, suffered. As it declined, his ranting fits intensified. He would call the house at all hours, waking us with a start.

My mother always answered. Who else would call in the dead of night? Still, I'd perk up my ears, until I could hear her whisper over and over again: "Nobody is taking anything away from you."

My mother probably believed she could restore him to reason by sheer force of repetition. But it was her mantra, not his. She waited, as we all did, for the inevitable. I remember that when his business finally did fold, it was like a clap of doom. The wrath of God was finally visited upon the totally deserving. Zayde called one December morning to say that he was closing the store.

"I've lost it all," he said, and hung up.

My mother phoned back immediately, but he must have called from a pay phone, because there was already an out-of-service recording for the store. She tried his home and got no answer. Then, panicked, she called police stations, hospitals, the morgue and finally me. By the time I got there, my parents were arguing over who was going to start the next round of telephone calls.

"Ruthie," she implored, holding out the phone to me.

"It's too soon to call the police," said my father. "You have to wait a few days before he can be a missing person. It's only been eight hours."

My mother was not comforted. With Zayde there was no predicting, and, even more alarming for her, no controlling him.

"Yes, I know," she snapped. "But he's..." Even now she would not say it.

"You should have had him committed years ago," said my father, relentless. My mother cast him a murderous look. This was not a discussion I needed to take part in. I put my things down and walked over to the window. I was late this time. He was already half way down the street.

“Zayde’s coming,” I said.

My mother rushed first to the window and then to the door.

There was my grandfather, standing on the threshold, neat, clean and shaven. As he walked through the door, he removed his coat, revealing a plain brown suit.

“Happy holidays,” said my grandfather, handing my mother a white bakery box. He patted her on the head.

It was a miracle.

And that is how my grandfather regained his sanity. The manifestation of his deepest fear had released him from the curse of his madness. Or so I believed at the time. It was the only explanation at hand, and it made a nice parable for later use. My mother, of course, refused to discuss it with me. She had never admitted to his madness to begin with. And once he had recovered from it, she refused to look a gift kuchel in the mouth.

“He’s fine,” she said whenever I asked after him. “That’s all that matters.”

As always, I nodded. At that time, there was no reason not to.

In the tranquil years that followed, I finished my degree. After putting in a few years working for Social Services, I started my own practice, and lived a life of unblemished conventionality – until my mother called last weekend.

“Zayde’s in the hospital,” my mother said. She was using her matter-of-fact voice, the one that prevented the expression of any form of sympathy. “He’s had a stroke.”

“Should I come?” I asked, though I already knew what she would say.

“No,” she said. “He’s paralyzed. He can’t talk. He won’t know who you are.”

“I’ll be there in an hour,” I said.

On the way to the hospital, I examined my motivations. Certainly, I had never been close to my grandfather. He had been mad for my entire childhood, coming out of his delusions only after I had left home. My mother, of course, needed support, although it was not likely she would accept any. My father never needed anything. I had to admit that my professional training was completely useless when it came to dealing with my

own family. In the end I decided that the reason I was driving like a bat out of hell was simply because I felt compelled to perform my filial duty. I was doing the right thing – with reservations.

The hospital had given my grandfather a private room, so it was clear they did not expect him to live long. There were no flowers, no cards, no visitors. The atmosphere in the room was somber. My parents rose when I came in.

“How are you?” I greeted my mother with a kiss. Her eyes were red.

“I’m fine,” she lied, blowing her nose delicately into a tissue.

I wasn’t about to argue with her. “I’m fine” was family code for “I’m not going to talk about how I feel.” Not even death could induce me to break that code.

“He was just sitting there watching TV, when he keeled over,” said my father. “He was watching Lawrence Welk.” This was the Official Story, so I listened carefully to the details.

“Have you eaten?” asked my mother.

“Yes,” I replied. I knew she hadn’t. “Why don’t you two get something? I’ll stay here.”

My mother seemed reluctant, but at my father’s insistence she gathered up her bag and made for the door. Grief had temporarily shocked her into obedience.

“We’ll be back soon,” she said.

I took a seat next to the bed. My grandfather looked small and vulnerable. I had never gotten used to seeing him without his jutting beard. Lying there against the white pillow, he looked almost like a boy. I touched his hand. As I expected, there was no response. A nurse entered and dimmed the lights. She said nothing, and neither did I. The monitors blinked impersonally.

What are they hoping to record? I wondered. When all the lines go flat, and when all the beeping and flickering stops, is that the end of life? How can a machine determine when it’s over? Some lives finish long, long before the crossing of that final boundary can be measured –consumed by madness and hopelessness and fear. I looked down at the immobile face of my grandfather.

His eyes were open, and he was staring directly at me. It was the same intent gaze he had leveled at me all those years ago, when he had forced me to look at the photo album. A picture swam into my mind of a dark beauty, her eyes warm and laughing, in love with the man behind the camera. The sweet fragrance of cut grass filled the room, displacing the odors of disinfectant and plastic, relegating them to a lost, distant future. I watched his hand as it reached out to me.

Slowly, he extended his arm, and when his closed hand hovered directly over my mine, he opened his fingers, releasing two gleaming drops into my palm.

“Perla,” he said. “I’ve made these for you.” Then he closed his eyes, a smile of pure bliss gracing his lips.

by John Greiner

Doused

Varnished the western road
and the
venereal sideswipes
cultured she would say
when we meet
 we shall shout
there will be a baptism
and ballroom dancing
romance now so industrial
will be compared to Camembert
spread thick on the crack
in the ceiling
heaven soft focused she
shines beside men kneeling
broken backed
look at
the score
the symphony's
final note
the letter
of the conductor
on the menu of masterpieces
I find the fish and chips to be
the most exalted
option
though doused in malt vinegar
she however dines on radiant mistakes
served on Styrofoam plates

Your Summer Dress

Your summer dress
stinks of streets,
of perfume caught
and killed in tourists'
fears.

Your July braids
are tangled in evening
ambitions and neon
histories of dimmed
opening nights.

Your autumn eyes
search the seasons to come,
catching cabbies and hot dog
vendors by surprise
on the avenues.

Your October flesh
is luminous before
the camera's flash
that brightens the hotel
room far from Broadway.

Magenta Stockings

Magenta stockings morning
rise.

Your purple painted eyelids
dawn the west
so far east.

The television
is turned on in the room fraught
with the lost night's
comfort. My eyes
are caught on the off switch
about to click.

Promenade

Seen
fine new
city New
York
weather fresh as a schoolgirl
out and about
beauty
punch
line
today
my
timing's off
her swagger plays
on
long lost
autumn
walks in
the wild

Dead Fish

Jono Naito

Nana died on a riverbed. Three hundred rounded stones I counted that supported her brittle bones. Stones to harness the health of the slate in skin, stones for the chakras of mental cosmos, stones for good wishes on clan friends. Nana's stones were star-bits, dinosaur eyes, fingernails from giants.

As I took in her room I wondered where all that power had gone. She had collected the minerals of the world and tucked them away in daily life. The mattress was embroidered with river rocks, there were gems in the lampshades, granite in the floor, shelves stacking up to the ceiling like a tapestry of the Earth. Turquoise beads hung in the window to break apart the light, and the topaz in the furniture scythed scintillation from raw sun.

"It's different, in a way," said my mother, her hand on my shoulder.

"No shit," I said. I didn't mean to disrespect Nana's deathbed, but my mother didn't hush me. We knew Nana swore more than a dying soldier, said it was because she was made of war minerals. We knew Nana was cussing her whole way up to pearl gates.

#

I watched happy tourists pass on the Esopus, riding big black tubes. Hooting, singing, screaming, they pushed each other into the freezing water. It was always frigid dip in the Catskills; a youthful me had forgotten that every year, and each summer I would leap into those currents and shriek. I would run back up to the house, up to Nana on the porch with a stone I had picked up. She would be on a swinging bench, stringing garnets into bracelets. Stopping what she was doing, she'd receive the gift from me, her only granddaughter, but I felt like I competed with the earth itself for her topaz eyes. The river stone would be grey, it would be round, it would be identical to every one I had brought her before. She said the same thing every time: "This is the best one yet." Even though I had heard it a hundred times before, I believed her and smiled like I did something right.

#

"I talked to your father this morning," my mother said from her perch by the unused fireplace. Nana had stuck pumice in it, she said it held the fire goddess in like volcanos did. If I ever tried to disturb it, lava would pour into the house and we'd have jump in the freezing river to save our lives. When I realized my mother had spoken to me, I waited before I nodded.

"He and I think you should go into town a bit. It'll help, it'll help to do things."

I nodded again and returned to my attention to my laptop. Sophia wasn't here this summer, neither was Fran. They had posted about their trips, their adventures in Jamaica and Spain. The internet was a sick tortoise out here and I could never hope to watch the video Sophia left me. I got one image, like a bad photo, of her face in front of a blue ocean, mouth agape mid-word. I bet the ocean was warm, and the sand was a hot slap to the toes, something that would get me to want to jump in the cold water like a kid again.

"I mean it," my mother said again, "Maybe you'll meet someone. It's different, without Francine and Sophia out here."

Luckily it was only a trip for them. Even if it didn't load, I would have liked one last story from Nana as a frozen image on the screen, maybe surrounded by pearls and light.

#

Whenever it rained, Nana liked to sit in the big chair. The big chair was a patchwork of black velvet that she had decorated with bloodstones to make a glistening savannah. She called it her traveling chair, and she meant that when the world was not good for an adventure, it was time to sit down and imagine them. It was her big thinking throne, and I would curl up on a cushion at her feet and listen to her stories. Nana would hold aloft the latest stone I had brought her and would tell me where it had been.

One day I asked her if there were a lot of fish in the river and she told me yes. I, the curious sort, then asked about the bodies.

"What bodies, shortstuff?" she asked.

"The fish, when they die. Where do they go? I don't see any."

She grinned and leaned back like the velvet would engulf her.

"Isn't it obvious? The stones, the riverbed. Those are the dead fish. All of them, all laid out from the start to the end of time."

I looked with a grimace at the rocks I had been fiddling with in my hands, but I wasn't a dumb child, not always. So I asked, "But we sometimes have fish at dinner. Those aren't rocks."

"Of course," she said, not missing a beat, "Those fish are the ones that would become part of us. The fish in the river that die become part of the river. When we go, we become part of the river too, we too will become dead fish, we too will become stones."

"That's why all these stones tell me such great stories," she continued, holding one to her ear, "They've been everywhere."

A pause, and she seemed intent on a voice I couldn't hear.

"And," she concluded, "they thank you for listening."

#

Her name was Corinthia.

It was a collision of taste; she and I wanted the same brand of iced tea at Phoenicia's only market. It was her earrings that caught my attention first. Deep blue droplets, maybe sapphire.

"I like those," I muttered.

"Thanks."

My blood swam fast; I had somehow said more to her in a moment than to my mother in a week.

"They look like sapphires," I said. I knew sapphires, Nana had a few that told stories of women in bells dancing for the sun to rise.

"No idea," she said. "Antique shop, outside town. If they are sapphires they are ten dollar sapphires."

#

Corinthia and I sat in opposite armchairs and regarded each other. We leaned this way and that, we curled up and spread out. We conformed to the chairs, then pressed ourselves against their tired limits. The whining creaks made us each smile in turn.

"So you come out here every summer?" asked she asked. She began to fiddle with an agate bead from a dish beside her. I smelled only dust, the same snowfall that drifted in the afternoon light over Corinthia's head.

"Yes," I said, "but I've never been here before."

She sighed, "Isn't it magic?"

There was pride in Corinthia's eyes as she looked around at the inside of the cramped and teetering antique store. I, even though surrounded by trashed treasures, continued to regard her with curiosity; the perfect auburn hair, the thick hairband, the long plain dress. Her sapphire earrings caught my eye at first, but I was then entranced by her pallor, like blood wasn't flowing under her light brown cheeks. She was shorter than me, unlike Fran and Sophia, and her wrists struggled with a burden of bracelets.

"Where are you from?" I asked.

"The city. New York City. I moved here two months ago. My dad likes the fresh air, you know?"

We waited as two customers walked through. The man, face mightily bearded, looked at us with confusion, like he knew we couldn't be part of the chairs on which we sat. We stared back, both too shy to make a peep.

When he passed Corinthia asked, "Why every summer?"

"I usually just come to see my Nana." Usually.

"Is something different this time?"

I did not want a new friend to coddle my spirit, so I didn't answer. Instead I reached out for an agate bead and told her a story about it, about how it was the spirit of a man who never wanted the sun to set so he moved to the north pole. It was a Nana story, and that came with guilt, but for a moment it was mine.

#

I didn't introduce Corinthia to the Esopus; they were already friends. She didn't have the history I did, or Nana, but when we sat with our toes pruning in the icy currents, she caressed the boulder we sat on like she knew it. Familiarity— how she whistled to the breeze, and let the water dribble down her arm— was what I saw in her.

"It's all fake, you know, what I had as a kid," said Corinthia. I had asked about home before, when she lived in the city. She grew up by a park, Prospect Park, and the lakes and rivers were all man-made. "I didn't know for the longest. No idea people could even do that. No idea."

When it was time to build parks, they moved everything. Dirt, stone, trees, all of it placed piece by piece into these living paintings. Corinthia said they were nothing like up here, so I wondered why they even tried. I asked her what her father did, that he could move up here.

"He got a contract," she said, "and the doctor said it would be better for me. My lungs are no spring chickens, they are basically water, both of them, like I'm an inside-out mermaid."

"So what kind of chickens are they?"

She tilted her head back and opened her mouth wide, and all I saw was marble and morganite. She gargled, spit, and cawed loud enough to startle a squirrel or something in the bush. Corinthia threw her arms outward, and the flecks of water on them arced in the air. "Merbirds!" she exclaimed, beginning to flap, without a sense of grace. I began to smile, and looked off at the far shore. I wondered why I never startled anything.

"You know, you don't laugh so much," she said. "You almost do, but then you think, think, think. Then you say nothing."

"I guess funny is a slow thing for me," I said. I didn't make eye contact with her, and she raised my face by the chin.

"I think slow is good, the river is slow. That's what Nana would have said, right? Slow, like erosion." Corinthia lifted me up to my feet and gathered up her shirt and shoes, but she fumbled; her sandal was in the water and halfway around the bend before we could think to grab it. It was then a fish, an Esopus immigrant.

#

Our first kiss was on the root of an oak tree, and we piled up stones to mark the spot. I made sure they were all granite, for longevity.

When I told my mother I had met someone, she made her assumptions, and I ignored them. I walked down the dirt road with each toe kicking up the pebbles, I almost forgot that I never liked to be all barefoot where the ground was sharp. I met her on the turn of the road where it met the bridge, and we stumbled over brambles, her hand pulling mine, until we reached the tree-line as it wrestled with shoreline boulders. It was down past the tubing waters, where people never went. No trout for the tourists, no depth for swimming. Just the hundreds of stones, all the dead fish, and us, two warm, too alive.

Igneous, metamorphic, sedimentary. As she told me about her mishap in second grade involving a pencil and a microwave, I thought about what her stories were carved from. Was she from a tough family, one that was all heat and collapse, threatening to explode? Did she see life as twenty and more pressures, bending to dodge every part? Was what made Corinthia was a series of events, each alone, each not mixing, just settling and being? I thought about it so much that I didn't take the time to stop listening and start looking. While we kissed, her black sandal fell off and floated away and she laughed, saying she would have tough feet like me. I didn't remember what happened with the pencil in second grade. The sandal and the granite, that is all I remember.

#

Nana never went to the hospital, but something about the one in Margeretville was familiar. The smells, the thoughtful frowns, the children staring up at doctors in lab coats with confused admiration. Everyone was wrinkled or hairless, making it easy to find Corinthia.

"You must be Corinthia," said my mother, shaking her hand. "I have heard so much about you." She hadn't.

"Thank you for the visit," said Corinthia. I handed her a river rock I had picked up and said the river wished her to get better. "You made a joke!" she exclaimed as best she could through the mask. It was July, and I counted the days until August would come and I would leave, or perhaps, when she would leave me. I didn't know which I'd rather have, which story I'd rather live. A rock and a hard place, Nana would have said, like the river between banks. Hilarious because it's where all good things are, all life. Corinthia started coughing, and my mother and I were patient for it to pass.

#

The summer was coming to a close, and I had not seen Corinthia in such a time that I forgot that she ever kissed me. The surprise I felt when there was a call for me. My mother had the house half littered with boxes containing Nana's old things, and she had only just come back in form hammering in the 'For Sale' sign. She called me over, saying it was for me. It was Corinthia, it was news, it was good news, I thought. I sprinted, tripping over the rolled up carpet of quartz and wool, stubbing a toe on her traveling chair, when I got to the phone. She said she would be right over, down by the water. I didn't bother hanging up, running down to the river. I stopped short of jumping in, the freezing feeling lapping at my toes.

"You knew I was a bit more water than I liked to say," said Corinthia's voice. I looked up, and she stood on a bent tree trunk, dress all blue, her hair spread like tributaries. I began to wade in to reach her, and she waved to stop me, holding up a river stone, smooth, the best one yet. "Stories, remember? Stories. Me and you." I kept splashing in, not feeling my blood chill. I shrieked, and Corinthia did not flinch.

Throwing her arms up, her dress ruffled into feathers, her legs turning to scales. She fell back, and became the ripples of a hundred trout, scattering and flowing away, down the river. I tried to catch every single one, and it was all gone so soon, all of her. I couldn't remember what kind of earrings she had.

My mother had to drag me out of the Esopus, her corduroys and T-shirt soaked through as I grabbed at the water, trying to get anything back. Sapphire, I remembered. Ten dollar sapphires.

#

Nana's house was bought by a couple with a baby, but they didn't want the stones. This meant they were going back out, out to the river, for the most part. My mother said I could keep a few, and I didn't want any. They all seemed so quiet.

Before we left, my mother pointed down the road, where Corinthia and I would always walk to the bridge at the bend in the road. "Would you like to walk it again?" I didn't say anything, because it was so different. I walked the whole way to our granite pile, since toppled. I took out all of Nana's stones and put them down, and picked up a single piece of the granite pile. The start of my collection.

Just beyond where we had sat, near the sandy stretch where the tubers would roll onto shore was a shape, a shape like her that I had to squint at to be sure. I ran, tip-toeing on the wet stones, until I got to close enough.

It was a sapling, with river trash hung about it like decorations. A rag, a black sandal, bits of string. It was a monument to the Esopus, or a gravestone. I looked at it, and thought, maybe, by tilting my head just a bit, it was like Corinthia, standing on one foot kicking back and laughing off all the weight in the world until all that was left was the purity of her, a sapling, not even grown. The longer I stared, the more I felt the feeling too, and I laughed until the next round of tourists floated past.

Misnamed Ghetto

Melissa Brooks

She told me I lived in the ghetto. When I asked her what ghetto meant, she answered “black.” But only a few black kids went to my school. Everyone else was white or Latino. Either way, I didn’t know why it was an insult. I figured she must be wrong. That ghetto must have something to do with all the church kids having bigger houses than me. My mom buying my clothes from Wal-Mart instead of the Gap. Not having cable and watching TGIF and the fake *Doug* with all the wrong voices instead of Nickelodeon or the Disney channel. Not having air conditioning so hissing fans that whipped hair in my face overran my house in the summer. I showed her how to breathe into the fan so our voices boomed garbled and goofy but that wasn’t the right kind of fun. I figured ghetto had something to do with going to a school where the teachers went on strike and waited a grade too long to teach me cursive and division. Learning how to hurtle insults in Spanish. Graffiti marking the blacktop and stop signs. Why I always played at her house even though I liked my lavender room and hand-me-down toys and never felt scared playing in the street.

But I stopped telling people where I lived because when her mom told the other moms I lived in the ghetto, she shook her head like it really was too bad—our family was such a *nice* family. And I knew she’d tell the other kids and they’d feel sorry for me too even though none of us knew what ghetto meant. That plenty of kids had to worry about a lot of things I didn’t. Sharing a crowded bed with their brothers and sisters or having to camp on the floor. Having no one to walk them home from school or help them with confusing math homework. Contending every day with too much yelling or too much silence. We didn’t know that some kids lived in condemned houses or no houses at all. That some kids couldn’t read. Couldn’t refuse vegetables because produce was too expensive. That some kids knew monsters didn’t only lurk beneath the bed at night. We didn’t know that even a small amount of money could be the difference between being stuck in a town worse than mine or moving somewhere that offered dust-free schools with happy teachers. Because my mom moved me to the same town where my church friends lived so I’d learn algebra earlier. So I’d stop picking up Spanish unless it was in a classroom. So she no longer had to claim our old town, the misnamed ghetto, as her own when her upper middleclass friends asked where she lived.

The bonny baby suckled readily, swallowed soft food, and slept soundly. Her mama said, "She be snug as a bug in them swaddlings."

But when she was a toddler, mama noticed that she wasn't seeing right. The eye doctor at Columbus hummed and hawed and told mama to bring the child back in a couple of years. And then his attempts to correct the cross eyes were unsuccessful. She moved around the shack with eye patches and stumbled into tables and chairs. She got her first pair of eyeglasses at five, and other children made fun of her. Some of them were very mean, they grabbed her glasses and hid them. When she outgrew the badly scratched glasses in a few years, mama bought a new pair. Happy with her glasses, she admired herself in the mirror. Marylou walked in. "Well, well, looky, if it ain't Miss purdy Rachel. Brand-spanking new glasses! Com'on lemme see." She yanked them out, stomped on them and laughed raucously at the shattered pieces. "Now, go tell mama you broke them. If you tell I done it, I'm gonna whup you good."

She started to cry. "My glasses broke, mama."

Mama was angry. Always living close to the bone, even a few pennies mattered.

"Rachel Williams! You are heedless and unthoughtless! I spent all me savings on them glasses." Mama had a hard look. Rachel knew that look. It meant thrashing. She was already peeing in her panty, and drops were trickling down to her thighs.

Mama said quietly. "Go get me a switch." Now Rachel cried louder. "Mama, I don't see no good, no glasses." Mama picked up the old pair from the kitchen counter. "Use them-here."

Rachel ran to the backyard as fast as her wobbly legs took her, and looked around. She had a choice between a crabapple and a dogwood. She hated to break off a branch from the dogwood which was in full bloom with pretty pink flowers. But the crabapple didn't do too well that spring. Standing on tiptoes she broke a small branch, and plucked off the leaves.

Mama said, "Drop your britches." The first one stung, hurt real bad, Rachel started to holler, "Mama, please....I'm sorry..." Mama said, "Hush up." The second, third, swish, swish, fourth, swish, swish. And then Rachel lost count and fell on the floor, pee all around her.

Rachel could never eat breakfast early in the morning. While gobbling down a fried hog brain, two eggs and biscuits, Marylou would tease her, "You ain't got the time to be hungry, ha?" Rachel gulped down a glass of milk and ran to catch the school bus, and by mid-morning she would be starving, but had nothing to eat. She was embarrassed to eat her lunch, leftovers from previous night's dinner, while her classmates ate fancy

sandwiches, store-bought crackers and peanut butter. The constant hunger made it hard to focus on lessons. School was bad, what with teachers hollering at her to study harder. Classmates called her squinty and bullied relentlessly.

Whereas most of the country had successfully dug itself out of the abysmal depths of Depression, and enjoyed the post war economic growth and prosperity, many poor people in the deep South were not so lucky. These unfortunate souls didn't have central heating, indoor plumbing, vacuum cleaners or automobiles. They counted themselves lucky if their bellies were full. They counted themselves lucky if they had a roof—however rickety, over their head. They counted themselves lucky if they had a bed to sleep in. They counted themselves lucky if they didn't freeze to death in their cold shacks in middle of the winter. They counted themselves lucky if they washed their bodies in warm weather to get rid of all the grime that accumulated through the cold months. They counted themselves lucky if they could wear a clean set of clothes on a Sunday to pray the Good Lord for a better life.

Since Rachel was born into such an unlucky family, she had no toys to play with, no story books to read, and no radio to listen. She caught lightning bugs, put them in a jar, and watched them glow in the dark. The flash of the specks of green or red glow of the fireflies, twinkling in the darkness of the night felt as if the flies danced solely for her entertainment.

The landlord, the leading light of Aberdeen and mama's main man, had died, and his wife, a wizened harridan, displeased with her husband's liaison with the voluptuous woman with fat in all the right places, threw mama out of the two room shack. When they heard of mama's problem, her sons—Larry and Ricky took leave from the Army, purchased land and with the help of cousins and uncles built a small house with carpet, and in-door plumbing. Thank the Good Lord, the days when they tore off pages of Sears catalog to go to the outhouse were in the past. And another luxury—air-conditioning!

2

Mama strongly felt that children should move out and fend for themselves after high school. Marylou moved to Birmingham, and with a relative's help, found a job at a doctor's office. When Rachel completed high school, mama wanted to send her to Memphis to stay with her older sister—Joyce, and look for a job.

As soon as she heard the crunching noise on the gravel driveway, Rachel ran out. "Oh, shining new car! I like them whitewall tires. Will you take me for a ride?"

Joyce hugged her. "Sure thing, sugar. Let's go in the evening after it cools off."

Joyce hugged mama, who had her feet up on an ottoman. "How is your arthritis?"

Mama sighed. "It's bothersome, cain't walk no good. I'm laid up." She reached for her glasses and put them on and looked at Joyce. "Ain't seen you in a month of Sundays."

Rachel brought a pitcher of ice-cold lemonade.

Joyce took a big sip. "Yes, Mama. Too much to do. Managing the office, taking the kids to ballgames, piano lessons, swimming, and you know how Mike is, he never picks up after himself. At the end of the day I'm bone-tired." Joyce took off her sandals and wriggled her toes. "I've been thinking about Rachel. She's not street-smart, can't hold nothing in her head."

"Yes, yes. She be muddled all right."

Rachel said, "Mama, I ain't...." but when mama looked at her real hard she had to shut up.

Folks at home thought that Rachel was dumb, belittled her, and never included her in conversations. Sometimes, just to please them, she acted extra dumb to make them feel cleverer when they imparted words of wisdom.

Joyce said, "Rachel had to repeat two grades in high school. I ain't sure she's ready for a job, not yet. She might can go to a community college to learn skills, typing, accounting."

"Yes, yes, she just ain't cut out for no store clerk job." Mama dipped tobacco, and thought for a while. "Now college...ah...um...that be a good idea. But I ain't got no money."

I saved up some, I reckon...well...I might can pay Rachel's tuition and board."

"Now, Joyce, don't you get into no trouble with your mother-in-law."

"Mama, don't you worry. The old witch won't know a thing."

Rachel said, "I'm done with them books. I can't learn no more. Books give me headache. I've done finished my studying."

Joyce said sternly, "Look here, missy, nobody is gonna hire you. You can't read right, can't write, your spelling horrible, your math no good." To take sting out of the rebuke she patted her little sister.

Rachel started to cry. "I'm gonna run away, go to Birmingham, go to Atlanta."

3

Rachel was sent a community college in Tupelo. She had a hard time coping with college-level courses, and was always at the bottom of her class. She shared a tiny apartment with three girls. They didn't have much to do with Rachel, but tolerated her as they needed another girl to share expenses. To make a little spending money Rachel looked for a part-time job. She walked up and down the main street, looking for help wanted signs. When she stepped into a shoe shop, a beautiful black girl asked, "Wanta buy shoes, Miss?"

"No, I'm looking for a job."

The black girl smiled. "I ain't sure if the boss man..."

Just then a big, burly man walked in briskly. "Hey, Tammy, did we get the shipment

from New York?”

“No, Kevin. This here lady is of a mind to work here.” Tammy walked away to help a customer.

Kevin was surprised to see a white girl in his shop. “Did you work in a shoe shop before?”

“No, but I can learn.” As was her habit when she spoke to people, she kept her head down.

Kevin smiled. “Most of my customers are black, I may have a problem if I hire you.” “You can try me for a couple of weeks...I’ll work hard.”

Kevin saw in Rachel a strong country girl who might work without complaining. “Okay, you are on. I’ll pay a buck and half per hour.”

Kevin was in and out of the shop and never stayed in one place long. He had other fish to fry, a convenient store at the other end of town and another shoe store at West Point.

Tammy said, “You must be real special, the boss hired you in a hurry.”

Rachel smiled. “I don’t know.”

Tammy’s said, “But you ain’t one of us, you cain’t sell no shoes to Negroes.”

Rachel signaled Tammy to follow her to the back room. She turned her back to Tammy and removed her T-shirt and bra. “See those scars on my back, did you see?”

“Yes.”

“Tammy, them was from the beating I got when we was all in the Freedom March. I’m sure you heard about it. Didn’t you?”

“Yes, yes, that James Meredith, that was last summer, ain’t it? You is brave.” Tammy hugged her.

Rachel felt guilty for misleading Tammy. It was indeed true that she was in that march, albeit inadvertently. On a visit to an aunt’s house in Canton, while playing with cousins, Rachel saw many black people singing and walking. She was curious and simply joined the crowd. And then somebody hollered, ‘cops, cops’, and there was smoke and her eyes began to water. A cousin pulled her out and then mama beat her with a leather belt. ‘No chile of mine is gonna be a no nigger-lover’. More than the savage beating, what hurt Rachel was that mama didn’t let her explain that it was an accident. It was a slow Thursday evening—weekends were their busy time, and Rachel was studying for finals. She kept a watchful eye on the few customers who came in to browse. All of a sudden there was a loud scream and Tammy emerged from the back room weeping and wailing, “He’s shot, he’s shot.” She ran straight into Rachel’s arms and held on to her tightly.

Rachel slowly pried herself from Tammy’s grip and sat her down. “Whatsa matter? Who, who?”

“The radio, the radio...” Tammy was shaking, tears flowing down her dark cheeks, “Dr. King is shot.”

Rachel said, "Oh! No! It can't be, it can't be."

Just then the phone rang. It was Kevin who told them to close the shop and go home. Rachel made sure that shutters were down and securely locked. "Tammy, can I walk you home?"

Tammy was still distraught. "No, no, you go on home. My house ain't far." "No, no, no. I can't let you walk alone. I'm gonna go with you."

4

Rachel was twenty two when she got out of the community college. Most of the time she felt as if she was in a prison, being punished, and whatever little she learned disappeared immediately after a test, just like water poured onto the parched earth. With a lot of help from the instructors Rachel got her diploma. Mama didn't say anything, congratulations or a good job, nothing. She didn't even bake a cake, like she did when Marylou got through high school. Mama thought the world of Marylou, the sun rose and set on her favorite child. It was Joyce who took it upon herself to arrange a party and invited relatives and neighbors. Larry and Ricky were faraway in Vietnam, but sent a check.

Joyce said, "It's a great feeling y'all! I'm real sure Rachel might can find a job now. What you reckon, mama?"

Mama took out her can of tobacco, opened it and smelled it to determine the freshness, and if it was moist and aromatic. To pack the can, she banged it a few times on the coffee table. Then she worked her fingers into the can, pulled out a pinch using her index finger and thumb, and placed it between her lower lip and gums. "I ain't sure of that. One thing I see, she now talk like them citified folks."

Marylou burst out laughing. "Mama you are a howl, ha, ha, ha."

Rachel was hurt that mama made fun of her instead of complementing her for learning to speak the right way. When Marylou came home after living in Birmingham for a while, she too lost most of the country dialect. But at that time mama didn't say a word.

Joyce said, "Y'all know, in big cities, it's important to speak right. I'm real proud of Rachel."

Marylou said, "You ought to be, you ought to be, you spent all that money, if you ask me, it's throwing good money after bad."

Rachel wanted say something scathing to put Marylou in her place, but couldn't think of anything sharp nor witty. Joyce glared at Marylou.

Mama was about ready to spit out the tobacco juice, and looked for her spittoon which she always kept by the side table. Dark brown tobacco juice trickled from the corner of her mouth. Marylou jumped up, ran out to the porch and brought a shining brass spittoon. Mama spit the juice looked at the it quizzically. "I'll be..." She wiped her mouth with her handkerchief, sighed and sat back on her recliner; the tobacco was doing its

job.

Marylou smiled. "Yes, mama. I polished it, used a ton of Brasso, and elbow grease. Mama, now it's as good as new." She gave mama a fresh handkerchief. "I'm keeping a few fresh handkerchiefs in this here drawer."

Mama bestowed one of her rare smiles upon Marylou. "You sure know how to do them things right."

Rachel slipped out to the porch and enjoyed the to and fro motion of the squeaking swing. She did not understand why mama was ugly to her. She remembered how mama would let Marylou flirt and fornicate, while she, the dumb Rachel sweated in the fields, pulling weeds and planting corn on hot and muggy summer days. During the short break for snacks and water, Rachel rolled on the porch floor, and it felt so good to be on the cool concrete floor. When it was time to harvest cotton, Rachel and other kids from the neighborhood were given sacks to collect the white cotton bolls. If she was slow in picking, mama would use a switch. "Faster! Rachel Williams! Faster!" Even now she had tears at the sight of the scars on her calves.

5

With a little money and a few clothes in a duffle bag, Rachel traveled to Memphis by bus. The bus stopped at many small towns to pick up passengers or drop them off. A trip of a mere three hours by car, took more than six hours. When Rachel came to live with Joyce and Mike, the house was full with four rambunctious kids. Eager to ease out of the cacophony as soon as possible, she hit the pavements, knocked on many doors, and found work at a women's club. Notwithstanding the pompous job title—an administrative assistant, the pay was meager and benefits nonexistent. She could barely afford a studio apartment in a rough neighborhood, where drug dealing, gun shots, and cop cars with flashing blue lights were all too common. The apartment, however, was on a bus route, a boon to the wheels-less Rachel. The big Baptist church was right opposite the apartment, and every Wednesday evening and Sunday morning she enjoyed the fellowship, the choir, and the preacher's fire and brimstone sermons.

In addition to keeping accounts, Rachel served mint juleps and other potent potables to the high class matrons. Ignoring Rachel's presence, as if she was a piece of furniture, the ladies gossiped, and Rachel came to know of the financial transactions, illicit affairs, illegitimate offspring, and dodgy dealings of the upper crust.

Listening to the gossip came in handy when Rachel, after working at the club for a few years, looked for a better job. One of the ladies, Ms. Holland, owned factories and commercial real estate in Tennessee and Arkansas. One day, in a bold move, Rachel approached Ms. Holland when she came out of the powder room. Ms. Holland frowned. "This is neither the time nor the place. Don't you know better than disturbing

the members?"

What little courage Rachel mustered vanished very quickly. "I, I, I, I'm sorry, ma'am. I'm very sorry." With a red face she ran back to her cubby hole, and cried at her stupidity. It was naive to believe that such a rich and powerful lady would talk to her, a lowly employee, and not much better than a peon. She was worried if Ms. Holland might complain to her boss. Losing the job meant disappointing Joyce, or god forbid, returning to Aberdeen, to face mama's wrath.

After an agonizing week Ms. Holland spoke to Rachel. "Walk with me.", she commanded.

"Why did you want to meet me?" Ms. Holland walked rapidly with long strides, her heels making, tik, tak, tik, tak, noise on the concrete driveway, and Rachel had a hard time keeping up with the long-legged lady.

"I'm sorry, ma'am. I wasn't thinking right."

"Don't apologize. Just tell me."

"I...I...want a job. I heard you are kind to, to, people like me."

Ms. Holland's features softened a little, and a smile was beginning to form. "Who told you all that nonsense?"

"No one, ma'am. I just heard."

Ms. Holland asked, "Aren't you happy here?"

"Yes ma'am. But this job pays minimum wage, I want to do better."

"Call my office, make an appointment." The chauffeur opened the rear door of the big long Cadillac.

For the next few days, Rachel was all shook up and couldn't think of anything but the upcoming meeting with Ms. Holland. In her spare time, making sure that the boss lady didn't find out, Rachel used the club's old typewriter to update her resume. She described each and every course at the community college without mentioning the grades (all Cs), and hobbies (walking and reading). Actually, walking was not really a hobby as she had to walk everywhere out of sheer necessity. Rachel felt bad for not having hobbies, like swimming, hiking, debating, classical music, opera or other high-class stuff. She was apprehensive that, after seeing the poor resume, Ms. Holland might laugh and throw her out. In any case, she tried to be positive, and presented herself at Ms. Holland's office in her Sunday best, and a dash of perfume that Joyce gave for last Christmas. Luckily Ms. Holland's office was on the bus route and Rachel didn't need to walk far. Not that she couldn't walk, but on a hot day she didn't want to arrive for an important meeting all sweaty and grimy.

The building was one of those modern ones, all glass and steel, with a big sign in front, "Holland Enterprises." Rachel walked in and a receptionist sent her to the tenth floor where she was intercepted by yet another woman and made to wait. After about half an hour, she was escorted by another woman to the sixth floor and ushered into a large, brightly lit corner office with a view of the mighty Mississippi river and the big

bridge to Arkansas. A tall gentleman looked up from his desk. "Ha. You brought the young lady." Looking at Rachel, he said, "Sit." He dismissed the secretary with a curt nod. "Ms. Holland is away, she asked me to talk to you. I am Bob Carsia."

Rachel slipped her resume onto his desk, and he glanced at it briefly.

He nodded his head. "Yes, yes. Good resume, quite good. We do some number crunching here, are you up to it?"

"Yes, sir. All I need is a good calculator."

He laughed loudly. "That's funny, at least you are honest. What I mean is can you keep track of accounts, pending orders, goods delivered, money coming in and going out, bills to pay, that sort of thing."

"Yes, sir, I am doing the same thing now at the women's club."

"Good, good. We'll get back to you."

Rachel started working for Holland Enterprises. Her monthly salary after taxes was eight-hundred and fifty dollars, about five times her pay at the club. In addition, she had a pension plan and health and dental care. It was a very heady feeling, and her first impulse was to find an apartment in a better neighborhood—midtown, near Overton Park within walking distance to shops and restaurants. But on second thoughts, when she came down to the ground level from the euphoria, the idea was summarily rejected. She thought, better save for a rainy day.

Her income at the women's club barely met her basic needs, and a phone was a luxury, not that there were many people to talk to. Now, however, the significant raise emboldened her. She had an option to rent or buy a telephone outright. A little bit of number crunching suggested that owing the equipment saved a lot of money in the long run. She anxiously lifted the chocolate-colored receiver and was excited at the familiar dial tone.

Mama said, "Tarnation, girl! You is muddled, cain't last a day in them high-faluting companies."

Rachel's delight turned to despair, and felt as if a cotton boll was shoved up her throat. Mr. Carsia was an ex-marine, and ran the office with strict military discipline. The office was responsible for sending out estimates, receiving orders, transmitting the orders to engineers on the floor, billing, paying vendors, and general correspondence. Rachel's desk was L-shaped, the short arm for a typewriter, and the longer one for an electronic calculator—more efficient than the mechanical one at the club, and files and ledgers. Although Rachel and three other girls had specific duties, sometimes they worked together and swapped duties to get the work done quickly.

In the posh corporate office where well-dressed girls glided about, Rachel, in her cheap clothes, felt at a distinct disadvantage. She had only five dresses, bought at a goodwill store, one for each day of the week. So, a large part of her first few paychecks went towards fashionable dresses, pants suits, dress shoes, and high-

heeled sandals. And a new pair of expensive eye glasses and a modern hairdo completed the makeover. Although not a drop-dead-gorgeous type, with blonde hair tumbling down to her shoulders, the freckled and full-figured country girl now rated a second glance. At high school and college, she missed out on the sixties' sexual revolution. Now in the sensible seventies, this young maiden was rearing to enter the world of lust and love. When Rachel was in line for Wednesday dinner at church, a big, fat guy said hello and started talking. After several dates she felt comfortable enough to invite him to her apartment. This was her first time with a man, his chin with the evening bristle felt rough on her soft cheeks. He fondled her, undressed her, and kissed her everywhere. She enjoyed his touch and tongue, and wanted to reciprocate. Actually it was hard for her to feel him what with all the belly fat around. She was aroused, ready for the next step, but he didn't appear to be in a hurry. Impatient, she yanked his boxers, and was shocked at his woefully inadequate miniature member, not even half as long as her pinky. Rachel felt cheated, and after that debacle avoided him.

Then she met an older guy, and went out with him a few times. At his apartment, he kissed her and she kissed him back. Slowly, he led her to the bedroom, and after a prolonged foreplay, before he could even penetrate the portals of pleasure he spewed all over her crotch. But even though she gave him a few more chances, he wasn't up to it.

At a Friday night party at a friend's apartment, Rachel danced with Jimmy, a technician at the medical center. When Rachel was looking for a ride home, Jimmy volunteered. At the front door kissed her. "Can I call you, we can maybe have lunch or something?"* On their dates, although she wanted to pay her share, he didn't let her. And then at his apartment for dinner, he offered her a glass of red wine, and picked up his glass, swirled the wine around, sniffed it. "Ah, nice bouquet." He smacked his lips. "Come on, take a sip, this wine is really good."

She looked at it suspiciously. "I don't drink."

"It is okay to have a glass. Go on, try it."

"I don't know, mama won't like it."

He laughed. "Your mama ain't here. You gotta have some fun."

When she drank the whole glass in a single gulp, he burst out laughing. "See, Rachel, wine should be sipped slowly, you don't gulp it all down in a hurry. You are supposed to savor it, enjoy the flavors, you know, sort of swirl it around your palate."

She blushed. "I'm sorry, I didn't know."

He said, "Not to worry, not to worry. This is your first time."

They ate pasta and fish and polished off the whole bottle. The wine got to her head, she felt good and relaxed. He kissed her. His lips were demanding, as if inviting her participation. She thrust her tongue out and caressed his gums. He then removed her blouse and bra, fondled her breasts and stroked her thighs. She abandoned herself,

and hoped and prayed, dear God, at least this time, let him be normal, it better work this time, third time charm. Alas, when it came to the main event there was only pain, no pleasure. Although he was slow and gentle, it felt as if she was speared.

While she was happy that at long last she became a woman, however, a nagging feeling lingered. The initial burning sensation disappeared after a few days when the ruptured tissue

healed. And it didn't hurt when he entered her. But whenever he thrust hard, it felt as if something bumped deep inside. Not a third time charm, it was more like a third time curse. No ecstasy, only agony.

After a few more painful encounters, she stopped seeing him.

7

Rachel was a bit perturbed when Dr. Childs mentioned hysteroscopy and ultrasound. During the procedure, he explained, "I'm going to inject saline to expand your uterine cavity, I can see better." He showed her an instrument which looked like a thin wire, "This is flexible, it has a light at the other end, this will illuminate the uterine cavity. I'm going to insert it into your vagina, this won't hurt, but may cause some discomfort." He looked at a monitor for quite some time.

He said, "You have a big fibroid in your uterus. It looks as big as a cantaloupe. That is the reason for your heavy menstrual bleeding and painful intercourse. We'll have to confirm this with an ultrasound, but I'm almost certain."

After the ultrasound, Dr. Childs said, "It needs to come out."

Rachel asked, "How?"

"Well, we make an incision in your belly to reach your uterus. Unfortunately, in your case the fibroid is too large and is firmly lodged in the uterine wall, So, I need to remove the whole uterus. I'm sorry."

After she recuperated, the consequences of her recent surgery began to sink in. She would be pain-free whenever she had sex, not that there was a long line of men to bed her. On the other hand, she couldn't have children. Rachel, like most women, had her dreams while growing up. She dreamed of falling in love, walking down the aisle in a dogwood white dress, and produce a brood of children to hang on to her apron strings while she baked apple pies and peach cobbles.

8

Rachel met Scott, a mid-level executive, at an office party. Scott was a good dancer, and they hit it off. When the party was winding down, she accepted Scott's invitation for a drink. He lived in a small house in the Overton park area.

He said, "I grew up in Dallas. My folks live down there."

With Scott sex was wonderful. His love-making was slow and drawn out like his drawl. His kisses were subtle hints of what was about to follow, and his caresses ignited libidinous sparks. Before making love he disrobed her, and with lavender oil massaged her everywhere. Even after he was spent, he continued to nibble and fondle, and that only inflamed her further and ready for yet another bout of decadent love-making. Many times Rachel wondered what he saw in her, so plain and simple, but brushed those doubts aside quickly, and thought that as long as he wanted, she would be his slave. Scott was the first man she slept with after the hysterectomy. At last, sex was painless, sex was fun, and sex was thrilling. She was energized, wanted to do things, wanted to talk, wanted to announce to the whole wide world that sex was great, and sex was euphoric. She no longer had to brace for the throbbing pain that eventually followed after a man entered her, and no longer had to fake a smile, hide her pain, and moan and groan like she enjoyed it.

Scott took her to a jewelry shop to buy earrings for her birthday. Rachel assumed she might pick one of those clip-ons. But the pair she liked were ear studs, and her ears weren't pierced. To please Scott she got her ears pierced. Whereas one ear healed quickly, the other one took forever to heal. She didn't tell Scott about the pain. And when he wanted to buy her a necklace, she didn't have the heart to tell him that she didn't like the feel of cold metal next to her skin. The only thing she tolerated was a wrist watch with a soft leather strap.

9

One evening, Scott went down on his knees to propose. She kept the big sparkling diamond ring in her hand, didn't want to wear it, not just yet.

"I'm really honored, but I can't have children. I'd to have a hysterectomy." He said, "How come you didn't tell me about this before now?"

"It didn't come up." She kept the ring on the dining table. "Find yourself a normal woman, someone who can have children." Trying not cry, she walked out.

Rachel was depressed after declining Scott's proposal. She wanted to marry him, to be with him, and grow old with him. After that fateful evening, they did not meet for a while. It was only three weeks to Christmas. She better get off her butt and buy gifts. She made hot tea and sat down to make her list. The FM station was playing, "I'll have a blue Christmas without you." Bless his heart, poor, rich Elvis, he still made huge sums of money even after he was dead and buried. To make sure she didn't forget anybody she double checked the list. It was five in the evening and already dark and the long, cold, gloomy nights wouldn't help her blue mood. At the mall, she purchased a few trinkets at a newly opened Christmas shop and bumped into Scott. Surprised, she stood still. He hugged her and they kissed passionately.

"I missed you. Well, ah, um, I, I, I was thinking about us these past few months, we

can adopt, can't we?"

"Yes, I guess so."

"We can get a baby from Russia or China, can't we?"

"Yes. I guess we can." Rachel wasn't sure how that worked.

Scott said, "Mom and dad want to meet you. Let's go to Dallas. Shall we plan to leave couple of days before Christmas, and then after Christmas day, we will drive to San Antonio, a little sightseeing, get back after the New Year day."

They left Memphis around five in the evening, and after driving for about four hours they had a bite to eat at Hope. She must have dozed off and the next thing she knew she was thrown out of the car, lying amidst bushes adjoining the interstate, and unable to move. And then everything blanked out.

When she woke up, her right leg was in a cast, and the splint was attached to a Balkan frame and her right arm was also in a cast. When she groped for her glasses on the side table, they weren't there. Everything was blurred, but she made out faint outlines of objects around her. A curtain was hanging down from a track on the ceiling, and underneath it was a propped open door. Squeaking sounds—swish, swish, of sneakers and indistinct muffled voices could be heard. A sliver of light entered the room through the gaps of a closed mini-blind, but she wasn't sure if it was daylight or twilight.

A nurse walked in. "How are you feeling, honey?"

"Where's Scott? Where is he?"

The nurse looked at a monitor, nodded and made a note on a chart. "I'm sorry, sugar. I don't know nothing. Would you like some coffee or juice?"

Only then Rachel realized that she was very thirsty. "Please, can I have some water?"

The nurse gently propped her up. Rachel took small sips of the cold water, closed her eyes and tried to recollect the events before she passed out. She was sure there had to be an accident, otherwise she wouldn't be here tied to this horrible hospital bed, with tubes sticking into every part of her body. She vaguely remembered the sirens, the blue flashing lights, and someone lifting her up. How many days was she in bed, how many days was she unconscious, or was it only few hours? She smelled the familiar scent of Chanel No. 5, Joyce's signature perfume.

Joyce hugged her gently. "How are ya, honey?" She sat on the edge of the bed and gave Rachel's battered eye glasses, "Here, put them on, seems like they were on the ground where you were thrown out of the car. They are badly scratched, but it'll do for now. We'll get you a new pair once we are back to Memphis. Okay?"

"Where's Scott?"

Joyce choked up. "I'm sorry, honey, there was no hope, he, he, is gone. I'm very sorry." Rachel screamed. "Noooooooooooo....."

Like the primal spirit of the universe, like the unshakable Absolute, the One, the All, the creator, i.e., the artist, expresses himself by and through imperfection. It is the stuff of life, the very sign of livingness. One gets nearer to the heart of truth, which I suppose is the ultimate aim of the writer, in the measure that he ceases to struggle, in the measure that he abandons the will. The great writer is the very symbol of life, of the non-perfect. He moves effortlessly, giving the illusion of perfection, from some unknown center which is certainly not the brain center but which is definitely a center, a center connected with the rhythm of the whole universe and consequently as sound, solid, unshakable, as durable, defiant, anarchic, purposeless, as the universe itself. Art teaches nothing, except the significance of life.

— Henry Miller

Heavy Compulsion

Samuel Vargo

Tension and ten heavy girls play Barbooth in the projects while it rains in unholy sheets outside. The shooter casts two miniature dice and throws two threes and wins. Mona Lisa's pet cat crawls underneath the furry olive-colored table and snuggles up to Boot Baby's leg. Boot Baby kicks the feline, furious that Harley Charley didn't throw a one and a one, or a two and a two, or a four and a four, or a one and a two; because if he had, she would have won. Like the others, Boot Baby had five dollars on that stupid roll and if only those two little cubes would have revealed something good. A two and a two would have been great, she thinks, as the rain pounds against the window.

Boot Baby doesn't know any of the other girls and she doesn't care. She knows they all live around here somewhere, and after the game, they'll all go back to where they came from, most likely busted, disgusted and not-to-be-trusted. The game's dice man, Harley Charley, allows Mona Lisa to bring her black-and-white cat to his daily Barbooth game because he doesn't mind cats and it makes Mona Lisa Baby happy. "I aim to please," is his motto and Harley Charley doesn't own a Harley-Davidson motorcycle - but he looks like he might - that's how he got his neat nickname.

So Harley Charley, throws another round, a six and a six, and he wins again. Boot Baby takes a snort of her absinthe and lets out a huff. The other nine heavy girls also lose. The roller has thrown wins for himself over a dozen times in a row and the ten heavy girls are beginning to think his Barbooth game is rigged.

"Do you have somethin' in those dice?" Mona Lisa asks him.

"Nope. It's all in the wrists," the dealer says.

"You've got loaded dice, Harley Charley," Mona Lisa complains.

Harley Charley wheezes, takes a toke off his unfiltered Pall Mall, and shows his ochre-colored teeth, not in a benign smile, but an evil grimace. His smile's more like a rictus - and Boot Baby cringes at Harley Charley's unholy looking physiognomy.

"It's an old Middle-Eastern dice game and almost anything can happen," Harley Charley explains. "It really helps if you're Jewish or Greek. None of you ten heavy girls look like you're part of either ethnic group."

So the girls all get out their little pocketbooks and each fishes for another five to throw on the table. A stack of fives growing like a skyscraper of currency is now situated in front of Harley Charley. His weekly dice game is a hit around Barleycorn Estates, a place filled with heavy girls, their heavy kids, along with their heavy significant others (it's amazing how heavy Barleycorn Estates is with heavy people).

"Bones to the loan, let'em roll," Harley Charley wheezes, and spins a 6-5 and he wins again. He stretches out his long skinny arm and like a net, waves it over the fuzzy green table top, pulling in all the fives.

"Bones to the loan, go to fucking hell!" Boot Baby screams.

“Cool down girl. It’s all for fun and entertainment. Just shits and giggles,” Harley Charley laughs.

“When’s this stupid game over?” Paradise Alice asks, finagling a toothpick around between her two sharp-looking incisors.

“It’s over when all you heavy girls lose all your heavy fives,” Harley Charley says.

“I just won’t come in Apartment 27 anymore,” Hunchback Hilda says, snorting down her whiskey and water like an old school marm drunk on a dare on the bad side of Omaha on the last night of a science teachers’ conference.

“Back to the wall, let’em fall,” Harley Charley wheezes, and rolls a 2 and a 2, and the girls are overjoyed that all ten of them will be able to split Harley Charley’s five stake – for fifty cents each. But after the two square soldiers seem to settle on the table, those blasted bongs boomeranged, revealing a 3-3 combo.

“So nice doing business with you heavy ladies,” Harley Charley wheezes, and stretches out his skinny arm, netting all nine fives in one vast sweep.

“I can hardly wait until this game is over,” Mousy Moose mentions. Mousy Moose clocks in at a hefty 657 pounds. And on a five-two frame, that’s a lot of heavy girl to cart around on those big, fat heavy legs and feet. Mousy Moose is the lightest and the sveltest of the group – that’s why she got the nickname Mousy Moose. Her christened name is Babalonia Breathoff, by the way.

“You nine can walk out of Apartment 27 any ole time,” Harley Charley says. “And you know the drill. My daily dice game starts at 1 p.m. sharp and lasts, well it lasts until I have everybody’s fives and everyone leaves Apartment 27 frowning.”

“You’re a bastard, Harley Charley,” Mousy Moose snorts.

“Yes I am. I am indeed,” he answers and rolls another 1-1 combination and does the usual. His arm is beginning to get tired from all the stretching – but it’s a labor of love for him.

“I can hardly wait until this game is over,” Mona Lisa complains.

“You can pick your fat ass off your little ole chair any time you please,” Harley Charley huffs. “And you know if you want to come back again tomorrow, I’ll be here, in Apartment 27 with my dice again tomorrow. It starts at 1 p.m. sharp. And it’s always very local - in wonderful, fabulous, fabled Barleycorn Estates.”

“I’d leave but I just can’t,” Boot Baby sighs.

“I can’t neither,” Hunchback Hilda whispers.

“Ah, you ladies have to lighten up. It’s all for fun. Shits and giggles and cyanide tablets covered in honey,” Harley Charley says as the rain pounds on the only window, and it seems to be getting a lot heavier and hungrier with each cast of Harley Charley’s set of dice.

The Company of Strangers

Michael Campagnoli

*. . .no whiteness (lost) is so white
as the memory of whiteness.*
---Wm. Carlos Williams

New Orleans, 1952

-1-

Not far from our apartment on the Rue St. Ann, there lived a Gypsy fortuneteller who claimed to be an hermaphrodite. An immense creature with infinite rolls of fat and layers of skirts and blouses. A virtual mound of cloth upon a mound of flesh. Her only vanity was her hair, which was coarse and black. It folded down her breast in ringlets and spread out about her plump body like a silken tent swaying in a Gulf breeze. I was always vaguely terrified in her presence.

Highly colored, cherubic, and quite beautiful, really, her face was conflicted by a baffling collection of assorted tics and neurotic confusions. A pair of thick wire-rimmed glasses circled her eyes, made them appear larger, more luminous than they were. In conversation, she'd erupt quite suddenly in unexpected treble peals of laughter. Rocking back and forth as she spoke, she'd announce even casual observations as if they partook of the miraculous. On one occasion, she told a client that she had children with herself. She even had pictures. I didn't know then it was an old joke. I was a young boy and I believed her. But that's what it was like growing up on the Rue St. Ann: the extraordinary became commonplace.

-2-

"Vibrations are *strong* today," the Gypsy cried. "See how my hand trembles!" It was the Eve of All Saints in the year nineteen-hundred-and-fifty-two. A sign on the porch advertised "Bayou Cruises & Riverboat Rides/Virginity Certified." Next-door was an antique shop. Adjacent a flamenco parlor. The Gypsy sat in a peacock-shaped wicker chair and fanned herself. "Roscid," she declared, "positively roscid." Her real name was Imogene Voyant. She claimed to know Marie Laveau, the Voodoo Queen.

"Didn't Miss Laveau die before you were born?" I asked.

"Why would *that* make a difference?" she answered.

Thereafter her eyes commenced to roll and flutter. She drifted into a modest swoon. Pressing one hand elegantly to her forehead, she cried, "When snow falls in Jefferson Parrish, thieves will break into the shrine of Saint Teresa and steal the jewels given by that rich lady from up north." Given the annual snowfall in New Orleans, it was one of her more fantastic predictions. Even I was a little skeptical. A suitably mysterious and solemn interlude convened. She shuddered and revived herself.

"Fetch me camphor and a hanky, boy," she commanded, then proffered pralines and peanut brittle when I complied. She shuffled the tarot and laid out the deck.

"Your key card is 'The Fool'," she told me.

I bowed my head and frowned.

"Not so grim, little seeker. The Fool is upright—a *choice* to be made. Very positive!" She deployed each card with care. Savored the nuances. "Yes, yes, yes," she continued. "The Palm, the Lightening, the Serpent biting his tail. Remarkable!" She looked at me with candor. "Not to be timid, little seeker. This. . .will be a *Day of Wonder*."

-3-

It began normally enough.

Mother shuffled a bowl of oatmeal before me, then retreated to a chair by the kitchen window. Clutching a handkerchief in one hand, eyes red and swollen, she gazed across the tenement rooftops into the ever-widening morning sun. She mopped her brow, daubed her eyes and nose. Nibbled vacantly at the damp and crumbled handkerchief. No cause for alarm, I thought. Mother's moods were always "operatic." She was given to brooding (either that or to turmoil), so I wasn't unusually disturbed by her distress that day.

When I came home for lunch, I found her on hands and knees, ostensibly scrubbing the floor. Crouched and motionless, she stared blankly at the scarred, slightly warped linoleum. When she noticed me, she flinched. For a moment, we looked at each other, then she continued with her work, pre-occupied, saying nothing. I decided it was a time to lay low. To lurk.

Not long thereafter, my aunt knocked on the back door.

My mother's youngest sister. Evelyn was her name. Drove all the way from Port Allen that morning. Looked drawn and tired. They placed a second chair near the kitchen window and talked. I listened in the hall.

The voices were low, then my mother's voice grew suddenly harsh, edgy with malice.

“After all I’ve done!” she said. “Work my fingers to the bone, and this is what I get? Well, no more!”

My aunt frowned. She was full of sympathy.

“What can you do?” she said.

Evelyn was very thin and nervous. The kind of woman whose function in life was to bring comfort to others.

“We’ll see. . .” my mother answered ominously. “We’ll just see.”

Then her voice lowered. She tried to speak but what came out was small and frightened, a strange watery deep-sea sound, somehow weak and naked. She turned toward the window. Her eyes welled. Her chest heaved. Her throat gurgled. Tears fell down her cheeks. She extended a single, soft, white hand. Evelyn nodded sadly. She reached out and cradled the hand between both of hers.

Together, they wept.

Had you asked, I would’ve said everything was all right. But I knew then that something was wrong, seriously wrong. This was not a conventional woe. No mere self-indulgence. There were undercurrents here, crosscurrents, mysterious and subtle, dangerous to navigate, like deep water before a Gulf storm. The Gypsy was right. This was no ordinary day.

-4-

My father arrived home at five. Neither spoke. Mother wouldn’t even look at him. Over dinner, the silence continued, tight as a jar, none of us knowing where to look.

“We have to be ready by six” my mother announced. She cleared the dishes, then retreated to her bedroom to dress.

My father turned to me.

“What’s she want?” he asked. “I came home *early*.” He was a salesman for *United Produce*. “For Christ’s sake, it’s our *busy* time!”

I shrugged as if he were in the habit of soliciting my opinion. No one told me we were going anywhere. I assumed I’d be staying home. Whatever was happening would proceed without my knowledge or approval.

“Jesus Christ,” my father grumbled and closed the bathroom door to shave.

A few moments later, my mother took me aside.

Wearing only stockings and a slip, her voice no more than a whisper, she told me to put my church clothes on and “be quick about it.” Then she stopped, almost an afterthought. She kneeled, both hands on my shoulders, looked intently in my eyes. She said something about “Grand” (which is what we called my maternal grandmother). But before she could finish, her eyes welled up and her lower lip began to tremble. I looked away. She mumbled something about God. Something about “Grand” being with Him. I wanted to break free, but she held tight. She looked directly

in my eyes. “Do you understand?” she asked.

I didn’t understand. Didn’t want to understand. At least not immediately, but I nodded and tried to leave.

This time she embraced me. Pulled me close. Her face flushed, moist, her blue eyes red. A damp, radiant shiver of heat and sounds of submergence emanated from her. There were warm, secret, female odors. I was numb. Confused by such intimacy, I didn’t know what to say, what to do. So I stood there until her grasp loosened.

As I made my escape, I felt the urge to return, to maybe kiss her. But I didn’t. I would have, even willingly, if it were that—a kiss and nothing more—but I couldn’t bear the thought of another swarming turgescence embrace. I left her there, head bowed, kneeling in the hallway, overburdened with grief.

While I dressed, I heard them arguing. They were in their bedroom with the door closed. Quick staccato sentences, tense utterances, almost grunts, muttered beneath their breath. The sounds grew louder, but the words remained unclear. There was a pause. I waited. The door opened and I heard my mother’s voice. In the upper registers, it could evoke the resonance of brass. “She’s *my* mother,” the voice declared, tremulous but emboldened, “and *he*’s coming!”

If you were wise, you did not speak to my father in such a tone. I braced for the inevitable. But nothing happened. Instead, there was silence. Another extraordinary thing. The door slammed and my father stomped angrily down the hall.

-5-

It wasn’t the first time they argued about Grand.

Her given name was Gertrude, but everyone called her “Grand.” She was an old lady, even then when I knew her as a boy, and never very charitable. “Tough old bird,” father would say and he was right. Orphaned at sixteen, she negotiated a dangerous world and prevailed. A substantial Victorian matriarch. Imperious, pale, green-eyed, she raised a family of six single-handedly after her husband ran off with a cashier from D. H. Holmes. She fed them, put clothes on their backs, kept a roof over their heads, even during the Depression. “When Grand dies,” father told me, “God will have to leave heaven. They *both* can’t be boss.”

The trouble between them began one muggy August night when mother was just a girl of sixteen. She climbed out her bedroom window, down a ladder, to where a young Marine stood waiting with bated breath in his dress blues. The young Marine was my father. They hopped a train to Biloxi and were married the next morning. Grandmother Gertrude disowned my mother, would not speak a word to her, even admit of her existence for five full years after the marriage.

When father and mother were courting, mother had to sneak out of the house to meet him. Grand would yell after her, “I know where you’re going--you’re going to meet that *dago*. Well, don’t bring him around here. I *forbid* him to step foot in this house.” When I was born, my hair was thick and black, already so long it had to be cut in the hospital. According to mother, the nurses crowded around my crib, thought me cute. But Grand’s only comment was, “He looks like a little *mon-key*,” tendered with just the inflection to make her intent unmistakable.

I grew up feeling shame for any shared inheritance: the dark hair and eyes, the ruddy complexion, the least display of temper. They all elicited a raised eyebrow, a look of disgust, as if she could taste and smell the contamination.

To Grand’s way of thinking elevating your voice was a serious and embarrassing lapse of etiquette. Expressing anything but diluted emotion, a childish lack of control: a sign of weakness. My father’s family seemed ignorant, even disdainful, of these significant virtues. The Italians were loud, boisterous, unpredictable—fiercely affectionate, yet disagreed with frightening intensity, not unlike the characters in the operas they loved so well. They scared me to death. “Don’t be like that,” Grand would tell me, “don’t be like your *father*.” She didn’t have to explain. On the few occasions when she was compelled to be in the presence of my father’s family, she spent the entire time with a horrified smile frozen on her China-doll face. The discomfort was palpable. She’d hover over Nonno Michele, a bronze-olive skinned old man who could barely speak English, as if he were feeble or moronic. When he quite sensibly resisted her attentions, she’d roll her eyes, shake her head, and smile regretfully. “What can you do?” she’d say.

After she got too old to live by herself, she came to live with us. Toward the end, she lost control of her bowels. Crazy with pain, furious at life, she lashed out at everyone. “Don’t pay attention,” Mother told me, “she isn’t herself.” Once, close to the end, she hissed at me from the darkness of her room. She looked fierce, wild, like a madwoman, smelled sour, acrid. She grabbed my arm, hard, and in a desperate, harsh whisper said, “I loved you *best* . . . You were always my favorite . . . *Do you understand?*” Then her eyes clouded over and she fell back, exhausted by the effort. A little later, they came and took her away.

When the end finally came, mother would later tell me, Grand sat straight-bolt upright, one palsied arm propped behind her, and reached out with her left hand, gently gesturing with her fingers, as if she were trying to grasp something infinitely small and delicate. Her sagging bloated face turned briefly coy, suddenly girlish. The fleeting, averted eyes of a young coquette. Then, without warning, as if she spied some grotesque apparition, her mouth dropped into a large black “O”. She screamed. A wail that raked the air like huge nails scraped along a blackboard. “No,” she cried, “NO!” then collapsed back upon the mattress. A half-hour later she gave one, final, convulsive quiver and died.

Her presence filled our apartment and could only be fully calculated in its absence. Each word, each gesture, each idea was filtered through her critical eye. A part of my everyday experience. Tangible as bread. Basic as air. Ubiquitous as the sun. But now she was gone. Just-like-that. Gone. And at eight years old, I was left to ponder the meanings of finality. Don't ask me why we love. Only the heart knows.

-6-

Around 6 p.m., a tall man dressed in a dark suit appeared at our front door. He escorted us down to the street where a stout, perspiring woman waited in a late model car. "Pontiac" was on the soup-green side panel, the hawk-faced likeness of an Indian on the hood. We climbed in back.

The evening sun had set, but the air was still heavy, oppressive. In deference to the hairdos of the ladies, the windows were not rolled down. Merely cracked an inch or two. It hardly mattered. The air was so ponderous, so baked and stagnant, that the blast from the windows brought no relief.

My parents did not move or speak.

My mother, huge and terrible, with powdered face, billeted in black chintz. Her cheeks red and fleshy, splotched by white dust; her nose awful, the flared nostrils almost transparent; her face puffed, perpetually moist. And my father (dark eyes burning in his forehead). He sat straight, rigid and awkward, in a starched white shirt. A clumsy Windsor knot hugged his neck, which was already chafed by irritation. His face was mottled by the combination of sweat and a too-close shave on a sultry evening; dots of dried blood still clung to his chin where the grain was especially tough.

They stared straight ahead, hearts in outrage, unable to look upon the other without contempt.

I tried to sit perfectly still.

Beads of sweat dotted my brow ("*Perspiration*," Grand would've corrected). Formed above my upper lip. Crowded my collar and armpits. My legs cramped with the ache of constraint. The steamy interior pressed in on me. When I could stand it no longer, I tugged at the stiff collar of my white shirt and took a deep breath.

"Don't do that, Joseph," my mother cautioned. "You'll wrinkle yourself. Sit quiet and be a good boy."

Earlier that fall, I'd seen "Pasha the Great" buried alive at the Parish Fair. He took a secret "Egyptian" potion, got sealed in an airtight casket, lowered into the ground, and left there for six hours. Everyone talked about it. Even the banks were closed for the day. Thinking of his green turban and purple cape, I inhaled and exhaled slowly (green turban-purple cape), evenly (green turban-purple cape, green turban-purple

cape), trying hard not to move.

We traveled west along the Boulevard Bellereve.

Nameless streets drifted by. Vacant storefronts and empty laundromats. Posters, tattered and bleached by the sun, cried, "I like IKE" or "MILK 84¢/GAL." There were rows of townhouses, elegant and sleepy, with green verandahs and wrought-iron balconies.

"Next left," the hump-necked lady in front said.

The driver nodded.

The two strangers were of vague acquaintance. Later, I realized their presence was almost exclusively the consequence of ownership. That is, they owned a vehicle and we owned none. He was big-headed, round-shouldered, leaned forward with both hands on the wheel. His slow-blinking eyes drooped, rarely left the billowing pavement. He appeared on the verge of sleep. He drove slow. Exceedingly slow. Prudent to the point of despair.

The woman I'd gotten a glimpse of as she sat Buddha-like when I first climbed in. Now that I looked more closely, I noticed that she had an absurdly small head propped upon high broad shoulders and that the fat "humped" on the back of her thick moist neck. Occasionally, a drop of sweat escaped from the tangled mat of her upswept hair and traveled down the circumference of that "hump."

"That's it," she told him. "We're almost there."

And so we rode.

Like stuffed penguins: imprisoned in this monstrous suffocating automobile, clothes sticking to our spongy skin, smothered by the humid, paludal heat, the pungent odor of the dingy car, the redolence of cheap heavy perfume, and the combined fermented exhalations of grief.

"This is it," the humped-neck lady said, indicating a street sign in the near distance.

The driver nodded.

"There, there's a space!" the stuffed voice commanded, pointing.

Though the street was void of traffic, the driver made several passes at the empty space. He lurched forward. Swung back. Craned his long neck back and forth, back and forth, back and forth.

The fat lady grumbled.

"Am I close?" he asked.

"YES," came the reply.

"I'll try again."

"Hiss," the fat lady fumed.

An aggregate sigh of relief ascended when the car finally came to a halt. My father rubbed his raw neck. My mother rustled, gathered herself. I opened the door and

scrambled to my feet.

-7-

I stretched out in the open air, hunched my shoulders, rolled my head, took a deep breath, felt the need to run. But something threatened here, something vague and sinister in the descending darkness, the unfamiliar surroundings. In the blue twilight, the street was like a tunnel. Lined and over-arched with broad oak trees, heavy-leafed and drowsy with dust. The old cracked sidewalks were wide and bordered by high hedges that restricted my view. In the silver-grey sky, storm clouds out in the Gulf, liquid and purple, gathered and floated by a broken moon. There was an eerie stillness here; of muted light, long shadows, and the air in flux.

The group collected itself. Proceeded down the high hedge to an opening.

When we turned, I saw the house for the first time. Hidden in trees, half in shadow, it was large, stately, made of limestone. A porch ran the length of the exterior with columns in twos and threes. There were Palladian windows, cornice-line modillions, ornamented gables. The stairs had fancy wrought-iron railings and the porch was lit by the glow of a single lamp suspended from a thick black chain. Surely, I remember thinking, rich people lived here. On a gold plate beneath the bell were engraved the words, "*De mortuis nil nisi bonum.*"

The house lurked, loomed, looked ominous.

The driver, who in this light resembled Boris Karloff, reached forward and opened the door. He motioned us in.

I hesitated.

One previous Halloween, dressed in a homemade costume, I knocked on a neighbor's door only to be confronted by the same kind of ill-omened almost darkness, and then by a specter in black crepe, face covered with burnt cork, dried corn starch, flour and water. So I balked before the gaping aperture and relented only after my mother prodded me forward with an ineluctable nudge.

When we crossed the threshold, the atmosphere changed.

It was cool, damp, fecund. The air had a stale, somewhat fertile smell—but strangely antiseptic—dank and murky, the sweet over-ripeness of mold and decomposition. Like visiting sick people. A house of contagion, where invisible poisons could invade my lungs, creep into my brain, my bones, the intricacies of my bowels. I held my breath.

Almost immediately, we were greeted by a man in a shiny black suit. I observed him closely as he spoke. Shorter than the others. He was round, rotund, balloon-like. Tied by collar and shoes. Not sloppy nor obese. His fat was settled. Didn't jiggle or shift. More a geometric abstraction than a person overweight with blubber. It was as if

he'd never outgrown that chubby little boy his mother still so doted on. His hair was sparse, soft like a baby's. A clear source of discomfort. There was a bald spot in back that his hands inevitably inspected and earnestly tried to hide. Attempts were also made to smooth the short, unmanageable waves and the tiny, tiny curls that fringed his brow. His chubby hands were in constant nervous movement. Clammy palm habitually and sensually sought out clammy palm. This man smelled sweet-acid, like sweat and sen-sen.

He was not to be trusted. Something about his lips, too full, too red, his baby cheeks, the skin fleshy with rash, something about his collar, too white, too tight, making his head too bloated, tumescent and pink, that made me uncomfortable, made me distrust the darting eyes, the forced whisper, the wide perspiring forehead. He was a peculiar sort. And besides, he had no neck.

Suddenly, his face filled my vision.

He had stooped down to retrieve a card he'd dropped. And now, he was poised before me, this large, gross, predatory creature, blood rushing to and swelling the already swollen head. The nose was bilious and white, the nostrils a deep purple-red. He looked at me through pink-squeezed eyes and smiled. A genuine kindness in his face. Later, I'd recall his surprising agility, even a measure of grace, but at that moment I was gripped by fear.

And then the face was gone.

He addressed a few additional comments to the adults and led us down a long hallway with several rooms on either side. There was only the crinch of shoes on carpet and the swoosh of cloth on cloth. At the end of the hallway, he stopped and turned, opened a pair of tall white doors, bowed his head solemnly, and stepped aside.

The gargoyle and the "hump-necked" lady filed in.

When we approached, the moonfaced stranger stepped before us. He took my mother's hand. "I think you'll be pleased," he said, quivering with feminine intensity. "I know it's been hard for you. I did my best."

Rheumy-eyed and overwrought, mother, smiled wanly, but with affection. Her throat gurgled. My father unconsciously scowled. The fat man bowed his head and glided away, a broad sweeping movement, almost athletic, not unlike a glissade or demi-chassé. We paused.

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The room was all deep reds, warm yellows, and soft browns. Lining the walls were well-cushioned couches with scrolled arms and fancy wooden inlays. The carpet was thick and oriental. Folding chairs were in neat little rows. It looked like a cross between a much-varnished Renaissance painting and the gaudy cathouse decadence

of the Vieux Carré. At the end of a wide center aisle, past the anxious stares of wrinkled, wet-eyed adults, was a large copper colored box with the top open.

A stiff thumb in my back directed me forward.

I moved cautiously.

Row by row, heads turned and tired eyes examined us. Strangers, looking somber and wearing black, presented faces full of official pity and regret. Neighbors, deferent and unsure, smiled meekly. Nervous relatives, fanning themselves obsessively, struggled with jealousy and grief. I registered these facts with quick, skittish glances. But my eyes never really left the forbidding oblong straight ahead. With each step, I absorbed more and more turbulent information. My chest tightened. I took shallow breaths.

Though the box was elevated, I knew immediately there was a body in it. And I knew *whose* body it was. I just couldn't comprehend the fact. I was aware of death and dying but ignorant of its conventions. What could they be thinking? Whose perverse idea was this? "*SHE*" was supposed to be with "*GOD*," in "*HEAVEN*," not propped up in some box in the back of a rich person's house. It was barbarous, alien. And yet they all acted as if this event, though infrequent, was entirely normal. A case of the commonplace become extraordinary.

Had I been capable of logical thought, I would've concluded that the world of adults was hopelessly baffling, aberrant, and cruel. Instead, I was preoccupied by an overpowering sense of violent dislocation. My world was being turned upside down; reality pulled inside out. And it was being accomplished by the very people who were supposed to protect me. What could be the meaning of it? Is this what the Gypsy meant by *Day of Wonder*?

We proceeded slowly down the wide center aisle. My head turned from side to side, my eyes blinked, my feet kept a steady pace. But I lost all sense of volition. There was the sensation of lightheadedness and floating, as if I were drawn in, a participant without velleity, borne along upon the warp and woof of some primordial dream. Horrified, and yet, not unlike the others, accepting without resistance a strict sense of duty to that horror.

When we reached the box, my mother bowed her head and mumbled. My father stared straight ahead. He seemed angry, perhaps, vaguely embarrassed. A hostage to the very end to Grand's prerogatives. Nearby, the orb-faced undertaker hovered with nervous solicitude. Also in attendance, I noticed for the first time, was the cavernous Reverend Shortsleeves. He stood to one side of the box, ceremonially erect, professionally sedate.

I peeked over my shoulder at the crowd.

Aunt Jo, turgid and red-eyed, fingered the lace embroidery of a large white hanky.

From time to time, she brought it to her mouth and chewed. Next to her was baldheaded Uncle Howard and plump Aunt Marie. Then came Aunt Evelyn, as fretful and wraith-like as ever; the only sister not to border the obese (and for that reason an object of disdain). The others—Norman, Ruth, and Louise with their various spouses—maintained appropriate attitudes of grief.

I noticed also, standing discreetly in one back corner, another familiar face. It was my grandfather. His name was Alfredo Michele Cantata (pronounced with a hard “c” and long “e,” like “Mee-KAY-lee”), but I called him Nonno, like the Italians. He peered over the blue-grey permanent waves and pomaded crew cuts. A ceiling light above his head accentuated the prominent, accipitral nose, endowed him with a quality of fierceness, not unlike the hawk-faced likeness of the Indian ornament on the Pontiac’s hood. His eyes caught mine. He winked and smiled. I turned forward, abashed, but secretly pleased.

I loved the old man, but I feared him.

On Sunday afternoons, he’d give me a quarter to crank his old Victrola. The music was strange, but I didn’t mind the cranking. He directed: how fast, how slow. He’d hum, gesture, motion to speed up as the music soared. “Veloce. Più velocemente!” would come the command, uttered with eyes shut tight, the veins of his wiry neck swollen, and one hand extended. Amid the rising and falling of Verdi and Caruso, he’d soak peaches in his wine, dream about the Old World and a wife already dead from consumption. A thick, calloused finger would trace the outline of a black, gilt-framed photograph and he’d talk of summer nights when he was just a young man, a boy still, courting Nonna Raffaella beneath a moonlit Florentine window, playing his mandolin, singing in a thin but sweet tenor the passionate ‘Maria, Mari!’ or the simple, “Una Furtive Lagrima.” Serenading. As his father had serenaded his mother before him, and his father, and his father.

He was not a big man but, even in advanced age, strong. A body capable of tremendous leverage. The hands of a stonecutter, large and muscular, deeply creased. Dangerous hands. Even in repose, they carried the threat of violence. Once, I saw him knock a stranger out with a single blow. The stranger was taller, but the punch broke his nose like a rock crushing a biscuit. There was the crack of bone on bone, the snap-crackle of collapsing cartilage. The stranger’s eyes rolled up into his head. He sank to the ground with a thud. There was shouting. People running. Blood everywhere.

But as I’d crank, the scratchy music would play and the unquiet hands would remain at ease. He’d lean his head back, his white mustache would shine in the receding light, the sad, dark eyes would close, and he’d look old, fine-boned, and frail. Caruso would sail higher and higher. Respighi now, I think. A favorite. And the old man, dancing in circles in the little house alone, would sing along,

*Dell'aere ai morsi crudi
gli addolorati tronche
offron predgando i bronchi
nudi.*

*How cold I am! How alone;
through the grey sky
a sigh flies up
from the dead.*

*It calls to me: Come,
the valley is dark.
Oh sad, unloved one,
come! Come!*

The final crescendo would burst, sever the air, and be followed by a solemn coda. “Basta,” the old man would whisper, “Basta.” He’d pause, shake his head, and listen, as if someone were speaking. Then look at me and smile. I’d nod and begin again. The music would rise and swell. The bent crooked figure would sway gently in the dying light and those hardened, ominous hands would gesture plaintively, delicately, with a wild knotted, sinewy grace.

When it was done, we’d both stand in silence.

We wouldn’t move or speak.

Head bowed, eyes closed, I could feel his gaze upon me; the intensity of his heart. I’d look up, tentative, almost mournful.

A moment would pass.

We’d look, each at the other, until neither he nor I could stand a moment more, then he’d grab me in a rush, send me squealing in the air.

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Above me, my mother whispered inaudibly.

She spoke directly to the box, shaking her head from side to side. Her face was a tight rouge knot, her eyes liquefied black rims. It ran down her cheeks in tiny rivulets, mixing, like ink and wine, with the meaty rose-colored make-up. She was sweating profusely.

Then she turned pale.

Her forehead and cheeks grew ashen, a ghastly white and blue. She faltered, gripped the edge of the casket for support. Her girth rocked back and forth. She

tottered precariously.

The crowd edged up on their seats.

My father stood beside her. A formidable and formal block. Expressionless. I could tell he sensed an incipient public “performance.” Furious, I guess, perhaps humiliated, by the part he was obligated to play. He propped her up with one hand and indicated a chair in the front row with the other.

She refused.

After a few deep breaths. Her color returned. She nodded reassuringly.

Then she turned her attention to me: A look that asked something, something specific but unknown. Until that moment, I assumed my role was purely emblematic, decorative—an impartial, albeit stunned, spectator. Now I was being thrust into the spotlight myself.

She knelt beside me. Fixed me with that stare. It implored and commanded something—whatever it was—I was certain I couldn’t give. Alarums sounded in my head. The din became deafening. I stepped back blindly. She held my arm, hooked her hands beneath my shoulders, and with great effort lifted.

The ceiling swayed closer. I veered back in terror. Chastened by the glare of the crowd, I squirmed subtly to be free. But she clutched me to her and waited.

When I ceased, she stepped close to the casket.

All eyes turned to us. She leaned over.

“Kiss Grand goodbye,” she said, straining to be tender.

I was transfixed.

There was Grand, high-topped with lace and a cameo choker, only she looked pale, lifeless, as if covered with white candle wax and powder, her veins blue beneath. Something was wrong. MONSTROUSLY wrong. She laid there HORRIBLE: a bitter, ironic pout on her prissy, painted lips and her hair like broken, silver, transparent wire.

A powerful disorder grew inside me. It compounded itself, luxuriated, moved from my belly into my ever-tightening chest. The alarums escalated. So loud now, I could hardly hear or think.

My mother pushed me closer and closer.

The haggard human stump loomed, filled my vision. I strained backward. Possessed by an unreasoning animal fear. I wriggled and pushed to be free. But she was inexorable. The firmness of her grip emphatic: There will be no escape. I looked to my father. For a moment, it appeared that he’d snatch me from her. Instead, he turned and stared straight ahead, sacrificing, as he always did, his own best and most basic instincts for the approval of a culture that despised and rejected him.

Suddenly, the Reverend Shortsleeves stepped forward.

“The Lord is MERCIFUL,” he boomed.

It startled everyone.

“WISDOM beyond UNDERSTANDING,” he continued.

Mother pushed me closer. . .

“GIVE PRAISE!” he commanded.

Briefly, I’d harbored the hope that he was offering some sort of assistance.

Actually, he was endorsing the spectacle. I was pushed closer.

“HALLELUJAH!!!” he cried.

And closer. . .

My heart pounded. My vision constricted. My head swelled with an unreal buoyancy. But at the end, I no longer struggled. I surrendered, repudiated my horror and revulsion to that which was inevitable, to that which I somehow knew all along was inevitable. . .

And my cheek touched the corpse.

The alarms ceased.

The disorder subsided.

I felt strangely composed.

Resting on the padded rim of the casket, I extended a curious, exploratory touch. I noted with detachment that the figure’s arm was indistinct. Roundish but firm. It didn’t feel like a human thing at all. Neither did it feel cold nor clammy, igneous nor porphyritic. Instead, it was soft—almost solid—not unlike an overstuffed toy or maybe a bladder stretched to capacity, pumped full with a dense doughy substance. This thing, this *thing* which was once Grand, was just another crude concoction. Like the crepe-and-corn-starch covered specter one Halloween before, this “thing” was just another crass illusion perpetrated by the adult world. Not Grand at all, but a gross, demeaning self-replica.

My mother’s hands stirred beneath my shoulders. I rose briefly, then descended. The corpse floated away.

The melodrama concluded.

The atrocity complete.

My mother returned me to the floor with a groan.

Her face was flushed, contorted. One plump arm hung limp at her side. The other clutched her breast. She rocked gently, wheezing, struggling for breath, ingesting huge soughing sobs of air. Her enormous bulk heaved.

All attention inclined to her.

Would she gain control or crumble to the ground? The expression on her face seemed uncertain. We waited.

The air seemed to thin and weaken.

She took a deep breath and expelled it with a loud sigh through loose distended lips. She raised her eyebrows in dismay and appeared on the verge of faint.

At this precise moment, a shriek erupted from somewhere behind us. A high-pitched skirl that blasted the silence and unleashed a kind of primitive permission. Almost simultaneously, a woman, short-necked and stout, of startling velocity, charged

my mother, moaning as she came. The ensuing collision sent both women to the floor.

It was Aunt Gerry.

They looked like two Sumo wrestlers in a swoon. Embraced, trance-like, they evulsed long, slow, sorrowful wails. The remaining sisters, in descending order, rushed to them weeping and leapt upon the pile like a gang of lunatic football players. They swayed all in a heap.

There was a momentary lull—a quarter-rest—while the dazed participants stared at each other in silence; a split-second stop-time for reappraisal, which was followed by a quake of sonic proportions. Gasps, sighs, guttural sobs filled the room. It grew louder, more shrill and hysterical, fed on itself, like some sort of random chain reaction, precipitating larger collateral explosions, after-shock, each more convulsive and irrationally potent than the one before.

People rushed about.

A phalanx of arms, legs, and anguished faces raced to the fallen mourners. Men shouted. Old ladies screamed. Women collapsed (often conveniently) in the arms of their escorts. Distress echoed the room, as if the air, itself, was shorting out, overburdened by the heat, the emotional turmoil, the turbulence of guilt and grief.

Amid the confusion—the crowded bodies, the overturned chairs, the single-minded pre-occupation with rescue—I was unintentionally propelled to the floor with such force that the breath was knocked from me. It was terrifying. I couldn't pull air in or push air out. My lungs refused to function, stuck together like sheets of flypaper. Conjointly, all my other organs seemed to turn to stone. My vision blurred. My heart swelled. I couldn't move or speak. Things began to spin. I thought I was going to pass out. I thought I was going to die.

Then, from out of nowhere, in the midst of chaos, I was being lifted—lifted, Lifted, LIFTED. Strong hands lifted me up--*up*, *Up*, *UP*--up out of the danger and disorder. As I ascended, the air came rushing back into my lungs, sweet and pullulative, free and unbounded.

It was Nonno Michele.

He raised me to his chest. Encircled me with his arms. Pulled me so close, I could hear the rattle of his breath and inhale the warm odors of his body, pungent and aromatic, (the smell of sweat and rich black earth, that from his garden—and something more—a faint elusive emanation, a kind of ethnic incense, an animal musk, a scent hereditary and undeniable that I would forever after associate with this tough, exquisite old man).

He held me in one arm and fended off the crowd with the other.

Human shapes, forms, human faces, red and swollen, anxious with panic and care, brushed, shoved, pressed near, then drifted away. I closed my eyes and clung to Nonno's neck.

I heard the undertaker's chubby-faced voice. A fierce sibilance in the old man's ear. His arm pointed to a door, hidden by curtains, behind the catafalque. He motioned us to follow.

As we approached the curtain, we were accosted by a tall, middle-aged woman with dried-out bleached blonde hair and excessive red lipstick. She held herself superior and erect. Something like a steamer trunk propped on thin piano legs. She pursed her lips and shook her head "no." "I'll take him," she said, her tone arrogant and autocratic. She put her hands around my waist.

I held tight. I could feel myself being drawn closer to her.

A growl escaped the old man's lips. Not weak. Neither passive nor hysterical. But a brood warning. Masculine. Territorial. A lion who paws the earth and roars.

The dried-out blonde shrank back.

"How *dare*. . ." she began.

But Nonno shoved past.

Safely out of the room, the undertaker indicated a red and white "EXIT" sign down a long hallway to our left. He reached up to caress my cheek, but I buried my face in the old man's shoulder. Nonno nodded and we headed down the hall. When I looked up, I saw the undertaker (his name was Roy) straighten his tie, pull his jacket down, and flatten his lapels. He paused, put his hand on the doorknob, and looked back in our direction. When he saw me looking at him, he smiled and performed a deprecatory shrug. Then he took a deep breath, turned the handle, and pushed. A rush of noise escaped as he disappeared into the fray once more.

We continued down the hall.

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We found ourselves on a small porch (a stoop, really) with three narrow cement steps and black andiron railings. Breathing heavily, Nonno lowered me to the top step and sat me on his lap.

When I looked up, I saw a soft blue lawn that stretched far in the distance. It had showered while we were inside. A cool wind blew. The moon, the pale important moon, emerged from behind clouds and the wet grass sparkled in its reflection.

Out in the darkness, I noticed something.

A shadow ran out of sight behind a row of larkspur and Spanish Broom. When it reappeared, I saw a dog—young and elastic—galloping on oversized paws and legs too long for its body. He sniffed the ground, grunted and snorted. Then raced off in another direction.

I climbed to my feet for a closer look.

He cast a long lanky shadow. Beguiled by the night and the moon and the stars, he romped back and forth until a smell so sweet caused him to lie on his back and roll.

Once upright, he shook himself and shuddered. Then suddenly, he stopped. He stared into the darkness of the woods.

He stood perfectly still, head up, ears alert, and sniffed the air. He turned his head and listened. Without warning, he sprinted toward the woods, irresistibly drawn, and disappeared forever.

I waited.

A moment later, there was a brief, high-pitched howl, as if the forest, like some great black beast, swallowed him whole.

An eerie silence followed.

A gust of wind shook the trees. The branches moved like spidery fingers. The moon, the cold hard implacable moon, disappeared behind the dark blue clouds. I shivered, suddenly lost and alone. I turned to Nonno. He'd been watching me, not the dog, the entire time and behind his eyes was unmistakable affection. He extended his arms and I leaped to him, weeping, without fear or shame or pride.

A little later, we heard the Reverend Shortsleeves through an open window.

"Though my body be destroyed-uh," he declared, hiccupping the final syllable much in the peculiar style of a sanctified radio preacher, a manner then still odd and unfamiliar to both me and my grandfather, "yet shall I see GOD-uh! Whom I shall see-uh, for MYSELF!" His voice (not unlike the cry of an hysterical stork) carried far beyond a normal voice. "Whom my eye-uh—shall behold-uh—on the *DAY OF WUNDA-UH!!!*"

Nonno began to laugh. He couldn't help but laugh. What an extraordinary creature this preacher was, stalking back and forth with his strange, lonely squeal. I laughed, too. Our laughter began slowly. It rippled around us. Embraced us. Embraced him, embraced all of them. It grew louder and louder. It floated out in concentric circles, sailing on the wind, filling up the darkness and the empty, empty night.

We sat for a long time saying nothing. I noticed that his jacket was still "hunched up" where I'd grabbed him and that his trousers were hiked high above black socks, exposing two spindly white calves with cracked, flaky skin.

Looking out into the darkness, I asked, "Do you believe in Heaven, Nonno?"

He thought for a moment.

"I don't know," he answered.

Momma says Grand is up in Heaven with God. She's *sure* of it."

"I suppose," he said.

"You're *safe* there," I told him. "God protects you."

"Yes."

"But aren't you afraid to die, Nonno? Doesn't it scare you?"

"Yes," he said, simply and without hesitation.

I didn't understand. Who can ever understand? But I noticed that in speaking

about death, there was no change in Nonno's expression. The music still played in his voice, the light still shined in his dark eyes, and his mouth was never very far from a smile. The Gypsy was right: a *choice* was to be made. It was a day of *choices*. I snuggled close.

The last remaining clouds drifted to the southeast and the moon, the full dead hunter's moon, shined bright, cast a white sterile light upon the ground. On the breeze were the first new smells of autumn. And the two of us, the old man and the boy, forsaking the company of all other adults, were left alone with our thoughts.

In the Spring of the following year, I read in the *Times Picayune* that "Pasha the Great" met an untimely end. Apparently, his famous "Egyptian" potion proved infamous and fatal for a first and final time. On April 2nd in Monroeville, Alabama, when they removed the gaudy black and silver casket hood, Pasha arose no more. His real name was Hy Zelkowitz, the *Times* informed. He was from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

Later that month, thieves broke into the shrine of St. Teresa in Jefferson Parish and stole the jewels that were the gift of a rich lady from up north. The Gypsy claimed that it snowed (an unheard of event in New Orleans) and that wolves howled at her door. "Oh, how they howl," she cried, "how they *do* howl!" I did not hear the wolves nor see the snow. But on that same night, being old and full of years, Alfredo Michele Cantata died. Like Father Abraham, he was gathered unto his own people and laid to rest. No one from Momma's family came to pay respects, but in the sanctuary of my room, I wept bitterly, uncontrollably, and at the funeral I kissed his face.

Lions

C. R. Resetarits

The girl's first exploration of the ruins is all about light glazing the depths of shaft graves and tholos tombs and a soft spring warmth penetrating flesh to bone, mettle, heart.

The veterans, the dig director Richard, his wife Catherine, and associate director Hubert, are uncustomarily engaged in their guiding tour. The girl, a cousin of Catherine's from a rather tragic side of the family, is a budding photographer whom Richard has taken a special interest in and hired for this season's excavations.

At the Lion Gate of Mycenae, the girl's hushed, reverent "ah" flutters about their heads like cabbage moths on an imperceptible breeze. By late afternoon the quartet arrive at the summit of the citadel to sit among column bases and ancient doorframes--a millennium prior to Classical Greece--and share a sparse meal of wine and cheese.

They eat in silence, relishing lack of motion, lulled by drink and the soft roar of wind on the runs of Cyclopean walls, which glow as apricot-colored ribbons against the brown-plum hills.

Richard is the first to stretch out on a warm slab of wall, hat over eyes. Hubert follows, then Catherine. They are on the brink of sleep when roused by footfalls over loose rock.

Catherine looks up to find the girl walking along the edge of a wall five feet above the Citadel floor, a twenty-foot drop the other side.

"Be careful dear," Catherine calls out, which sends both men chuckling.

The girl sits upon the wall above them and reads from a small book, raising her elbows akimbo, one hand shielding eyes from the sun's glare. The whole of her slender body strains gazing across the Aegean. Suddenly she says,

"The sea is there, and who shall drain its yield?"

Catherine claps immediately to urge her on. Both men chuckle again, the sound rattling and swishing like a net full of fish in the older one's chest.

"Excellent choice, my dear," he sounds, hiding the scale-slaps in his baritone chords of authority. "Clytaemestra welcoming Agamemnon home from Troy."

The girl twists around to look at him with a grin, then works her way carefully into a stand, and with one hand on book and the other outstretched toward the sea begins to read in her clear, small voice about the whirl of drifts on the stricken heart, about betrayal and coveting.

In the midst of her reading Richard bolts, mumbling that he will wait for them at the lion gates.

"What the devil?" Hubert asks, his young, sinewy arms stretching overhead.

"He shouldn't have interrupted you, darling," Catherine says.

"Can't hold his wine like the old days, I'd imagine," Hubert laughs, turns his attention absentmindedly to the girl. "Well done, little one. Give you a hand?"

"No, thank you" she says shyly and then, less shy, running down the wall, jumping clear of the rubble and dust: "Richard. Richard. Wait for me."

Venetian Balloons

C. R. Resetarits

The death house this moment is moon-wrapped, the water line
as still as her dear white gown settled on arresting stones.
You descend uneven stairs, arms wrapped around dark dresses,
legs wavering at gondola dip. You row out alone to the deepest parts,
the ember-clad half desires you lent her trailing eel-like
in your wake. You mean to drown them, her last quest, the only
one you chose to heed, her failed knight of chimerical armor,
of jousting words, of season on season of small-cut critiques.
Weren't you, all told, as kind as possible and *tres fond* of her
early fame So there you were two writers of the Middle Age
playing house on the grand canal, playing at genders, genres
neither could embrace enough.

Wood on water, the sliding sound
of silk drowning, the harsh tears from gondolier's spear through the heart
of her vestments carried under. Would she not approve built as
they were for her singular form? You mean it kind, as kind as
possible. There were no promises to your dear, deaf Miss Grief.
Such extravagant silence. You could not have surrendered. Even
she would not have written you that way. Your coupledness was safe
until the trapped air works free, the last gasp of her lavender
and lilac sprays and the rising, the black balloons, one by one
undrown, the unfathomable complexities, grand constructions
of bust and sleeve surfacing to haunt your next buoyant threshold,
next wordplay, next sweet-flawed mastery as all your dead muses
rise to haunt you with watery gifts wrapped in bruising purple air.

SHE CONTEMPLATES A TRIP

Jacqueline Doyle

Her moods are strongly affected by colors, and when she dresses in the morning she chooses colors carefully, considering each one. One day lemon yellow to lift her spirits and counteract the fog outside, another day acorn brown to harmonize with the crisp fall weather and falling leaves, another day peacock blue because it's her favorite color and illuminates her hazel eyes. Eyes are the windows of the soul, someone said, which perhaps is why she becomes uncomfortable when someone stares into her eyes too long. Long being more than few seconds, or perhaps it's the intensity and not the duration of the gaze that unsettles her. Her colleague Marco often stares at her too intently, and she averts her eyes, pretending to study the announcements on the bulletin board in the hall outside their offices. Offices the size of telephone booths, they joke, but she prefers a small office to a cubicle, her boundaries clearly marked, a door she can shut. Shut out what, she doesn't know, but she has always been solitary, anxious when visitors linger too long in her apartment after she hosts the book club, happiest curled up on the sofa with her cat and a book. Book a trip to Mexico for Christmas, my aunt loved it, Marco tells her. Her immediate reaction is no. No thanks, she says, but she wonders whether she'd like to travel after all, and whether her world has become too small over the years. Years spent at work in the same insurance company and at home in the same apartment with her cat, reading. Reading can tell her about other places besides New Jersey, she reasons, but it's not quite the same as being there, is it? It's hard to say, as she's done so little traveling, always home for the holidays, or shuttling back and forth between her tiny office and tiny apartment and the tiny grocery store around the corner, which she favors over the larger supermarket, with its crowded parking lot and long lines and colossal pyramids of cereals and sodas and crackers and cookies. Cookies she'd rather bake herself, talking to the cat as she

slips sweet crumbs to her. Her cat, what would she do with her cat if she went away? Away to where, she wonders, for Mexico is surely too dangerous for a woman alone. Alone and inexperienced, as she hasn't been on a plane for years, not since she went to her college roommate's wedding in Tucson, and would need to buy one of those new suitcases with wheels and a pullout handle, and wouldn't know what to tip the taxi driver, that is, if she decided to go on a trip after all. All the destinations she can think of are too daunting, and really she'd prefer a tiny city in a tiny country for a very short period of time. Time is running out to make reservations, and it wouldn't hurt to plan for a year in advance, next Christmas maybe. Maybe that would be best, as the thought of planning a trip in only a few months leaves her breathless and worried. Worried that she'll make the wrong choices, because what does she want, tropics or snow, countryside or city, beach or sightseeing, something far away or closer. Closer to what she's used to, somewhere that she can curl up with a book, she thinks, at least in the evening as she's not one for night life. Life seems to be passing her by, and it's probably time to try something new. New clothes might be a start, she decides, and one night she tries on all the clothes in her closet, imagining trips and looking for clues about the new wardrobe she'll buy and where she might go. Go to Iceland she tells herself, as she pulls on a heavy navy cable-knit sweater, or Paris, as she adjusts a black wool beret she didn't know she had, or Puerto Rico, as she shimmies into a lime green dress she hasn't worn in years. Years ago she was a bit more daring, or was she? She looks at the pile of clothes on her bed and wonders if the most daring she's ever been was the lime green dress that a girlfriend talked her into and she only wore once, to a crowded club in Hoboken where she sat and looked at the dancers.

SIRENS

Jacqueline Doyle

The siren sounds. First two yelps, and then a continuous wail.

She sits up straight in bed, heart pounding. "I will die. I will die. I will die." The pulsing red glow of the ambulance departing from the paramedic facility down the street shines through the curtains.

"We will die," she whispers to her lover, who groans and punches his pillow, pulls the comforter up to his neck. His quiet snores resume, but she stares at the ceiling, eyes wide open.

"Somewhere, someone is dying," she thinks. "Maybe nearby." She imagines the paramedics hooking up the heart monitor, smearing cold gel on an old woman's flaccid white torso before applying suction cups, listening for the gentle beeps that signal life. "You're going to be okay," they lie. "Everything's all right."

The young woman gropes with her feet for her slippers beside the bed. She shuffles into the bathroom for her robe, staring for a moment at her face in the mirror, unnaturally pale in the sudden flash of light. In the kitchen she puts on the kettle, and removes a pack of tarot cards from a cedar box on the shelf by the stove. She cuts the deck twice and draws three gaily-colored cards, lining them up on the table. The Ten of Pentacles. The Three of Wands. The Fool. No death tonight. Perhaps a journey of some kind.

She ponders the third card as her tea steeps. A handsome youth stands poised on the edge of a cliff, his small white dog leaping beside him. He is prepared for travel, a bundle attached to a stick slung over his shoulder, hobo-style. He holds a white flower and looks up at the sky, seemingly unaware of the precipice before him. Is her lover the Fool, or is she? She was drawn to his good sense, the heft of his shoulders. He made life seem easy. But he is oblivious to her concerns, too practical, too

mundane. She blames him for sleeping. For snoring in her bed, covers tucked under his chin.

She warms her hands over the steaming mug of chai and takes a sip, savoring her discontent. Contemplates a trip. Maybe a cruise with her lover, or without him. Absentmindedly fingers the scars inside her wrists, her mind elsewhere. He finds her intriguing, he said once, but he doesn't like scenes. She can feel a scene building like an ocean swell. Recriminations. Stormy departures. Sobbing reconciliations. Passionate couplings. They'll sprawl naked on the rumpled sheets, their limbs entwined. "We will die," she'll croon in his ear, her voice low and musical. "You've never understood me."

She shuffles the cards and cuts them again.

Her lover dreams of sirens, beautiful feathered creatures, half bird, half woman, luring him to sure destruction. Iridescent plumage shines in the sun as they gather on the island rocks, wings aflutter, twittering in agitation before their sweet melody begins. Faint strains carry across the waves, almost drowned out by the gusts of wind and slapping of water against the sides of the ship. It is cold and wet on deck. He gulps in the salt air, grips the railing, and leans forward to hear.

The Girls We Love

Alaina Symanovich

The first time I watch *Titanic* I am fourteen, longhaired and small-breasted. I've never kissed a boy, never known a touch more risqué than my dad's arm on my shoulders during movie nights. He and I watch endless films splash across our television, oblivious to a world wider than Wege pretzels and Blockbuster rentals. Weekends flicker by in a strobe of blue light and laugh tracks, one that blips me from pre-K all the way to high school.

As the *Titanic* sinks, our basement throbs with darkness; cold prickles my skin and sidles under my cocoon of quilts. Tears roll down my cheeks as the credits roll over the screen, and when I look at Dad, his eyes are glistening like sea glass. We have the same barreling forehead, the same craggy Russian nose and chin. People never find my mother when they search my face.

An outsider might question why Dad and I bunker in our underground hideout, sheathed in ratty blankets on the threadbare couch, while Mom reclines on leather upstairs. I might find it strange that she lords alone over the high-ceilinged den with walls painted marigold. Instead, I tiptoe past her lounge like a prisoner skirting the sheriff, and she keeps up with the Kardashians well enough to lose track of me.

Replaying *Titanic* in my mind, I see Rose and Jack making love in the backseat of a car; I see her telling him where to put his hands. Her palm smacks the fogged window again and again. Jack disappears into the cerulean sea, frozen and drowned for love. It's as surreal a sight as my friends kissing their boyfriends, their hands nipping at belt loops and shirt buttons. I'm not lying when I tell those friends I think I'm asexual. At sleepovers, I straddle them for back massages during marathon rounds of Truth or Dare. They interrogate each other—who do you like? Who would you rather kiss?—as I trek over trapezii and deltoids, my fingers finding every sore spot. These massages exempt me from the game.

"Is love really like that?" I ask Dad, nodding at the screen where Rose and Jack were. I flex my palm, and in the television light it looks anemic, pale as a halved apple. I try to imagine it thrust against a window in a heave of passion, and fail. I bury it back under the blanket.

Dad watches the screen fade as he considers my question. I repeat myself—is that really how love feels? Like you'd die for the other person?—and give up expecting an answer by the time he says, "Yes. In the beginning, at least."

Only when I slide into bed that night, my legs goosebumping at the chilly sheets, do I wonder about the end.

* * *

Dad retires over Christmas of my senior year. He wants to savor my last few months at home, he says—to enjoy those seasons. Snowstorms pummel the state all winter, so we establish a new tradition: every morning that I wake to a two-hour delay, we brew coffee, stash our pockets with Kleenex, and set out for the nearby woods. In Timberland boots we lumber across miles of forest: five if the snow isn't wet, if our matching Reynaud's fingers don't throb purple, if Mom won't be too annoyed by our absence.

When Dad married Mom, neither of them knew what her Charcot-Marie-Tooth disease truly entailed. Only my grandmother had the disease—she, and a smattering of distant cousins Mom never managed to track down. Mom only heard rumors of them: their trouble walking, their hands that deadened with age. Neuropathy isn't uncommon in Appalachia, but CMT in a woman, and in only one child of five, is. As we hike through the woods, Dad tells me stories of venturing into the stacks of Penn State's library with Mom. Like most university couples, they went on regular dates. Unlike most couples, those dates included researching the incurable and degenerative disease that was crippling one of them.

"But why did you—" I cower from the question on my lips. My boots kick clots of snow into the air. I watch them bloom white, sparkle, then disappear. "When you read those things, why did you—?"

"Stick around?"

I nod, though Dad is too busy navigating the snowdrifts to look at me. I picture him poring over medical tomes as the sky glowers orange, as the sun dissolves over the wintry campus. He studies images of withered feet, high-arched and curling into themselves, and reads how one day his girlfriend will be unable to walk. To dress herself, hold cutlery or get on and off the toilet. Yet he reaches for her hand, his thumb tracing the crest of her first finger, and turns another filmy page.

"I stuck around because I was in love," he tells the snow that banks the path. "Maybe I didn't know what I was up against. Maybe I did. Maybe I felt bad, because your mom was there when I really needed someone, so I thought I should be there for her.

"And I know she feels left out when we go on these walks," he says, guilt and condensation ghosting his mouth. "I do. And I don't want to hurt her. But I can't give up this time with you."

The lines drill deeper into Mom's face every time we close the door on her. There's the year she catches Dad ditching work to take me to matinees, *Seabiscuit* and *Pirates of the Caribbean* and *A Cinderella Story*, our fingers glossy with butter; the year she discovers the luxury karaoke machine he bought me and stored in the basement, where she couldn't go; the first year he attends Back-to-School Night as a single parent so we can traverse the building quickly. Her silent treatments last for days. She accuses me of hating her, and him of supporting it, and I come to understand the

heavy cost of loving me. I promise myself that I'll never let anyone sacrifice for me the way Dad did; that if anyone suffers for my love, it will be me.

* * *

I find Dad one January afternoon contemplating his reflection in a glass of merlot. Since his retirement, the after-school hours have become the highlight of our days: we can spend time together openly because Mom is at work, not sulking in the next room. But Dad always reserves the red wine for dinnertime, when we dice vegetables and season meat together in the mellow kitchen light. He never drinks alone. His eyes don't meet mine as I enter the room.

"I've been reading First Corinthians," he says. He settles his elbows on his knees, sighs a not-first-glass sigh. "'If any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he should not divorce her.' Seven-twelve." In eighteen years he's never uttered the word *divorce*.

He smirks. "'For the unbelieving wife is made holy because of her husband. Otherwise your children—'" he pauses, rubs his forehead—"would be unclean; but as it is, they are holy.' Seven-fourteen."

The light tickles his hair as he bows his head, igniting reds and golds throughout the thinning russet. The top of him looks like Christmas again, like ribboned gifts and potted poinsettias. But his face is all winter, a furious one that threatens to linger far longer than a season.

"Divorce," I sample the word, looking down at my wrists as I do: two white willows branching from a rumpled sweater.

"She screwed me over on the life insurance annuity." He ekes out a brittle laugh. "If I die first, I'm giving her a hundred percent of the benefit. But if *she* dies first—" the muscle in his jaw jumps.

But I already know what will happen. Moreover, I know why she did it. I retract my wrists inside my sleeves, ashamed.

"And she lied about it, too. That's the worst part. She acted like we were a team, like we were making the decisions together." He bites his lip and drains the glass. "I'm sorry. Forgive me." He forces a small laugh, a wretched, wobbly one, and calls me by a pet name. "I shouldn't drag you into this."

"You can talk to me," I whisper, perching on the arm of the couch. Everything in this living room, the enclave Mom deemed "the fancy room," looms oversized and overpriced: the custom-made chairs; the reupholstered loveseats where only company sits; the hand-painted china plates arrayed above the bureau. She wanted extravagant, so Dad agreed, even though we rarely host guests.

Dad doesn't look at me. "No, I'll be okay. I've got my investments—she can't touch those. And I've got you." He smiles, still dimly. "I know you'll take care of me."

"Daddy—"

"I shouldn't say things like 'divorce,'" he slurs. "I shouldn't put you through that."

I coax the wineglass out of his hands, something I've done more and more over the past few years. Mom doesn't know how much he drinks; he ferrets the boxes away in the basement, ones we buy when we claim we're running errands, ones we pay for with cash. I tell Dad we can talk another time, when he's feeling better, and I shut myself in my room.

I remember standing before my mirror, four years old, while Dad twisted my hair into a ponytail and clipped on a bow. I remember snuggling into his chest on the piled basement couch, one ear tuned to the movie, the other to his stomach, which gargled like an undersea monster. I remember tucking the word *divorce* under my tongue since I was young, hiding it like the last sliver of a caramel, letting its sugar meld into my mouth.

* * *

We never continue the divorce conversation. Another storm pounds the town that night, an ice storm. As usual, as he has after every weekday snowstorm of my life, Dad escorts Mom to work so she won't slip on the walk into the building. He always walks with his right hand clamped around her left arm, but in winter he looks extra grim, his mouth stapled shut in concentration.

I expect we will hike when Dad returns, but when the door careens open, rebounding off the wall, he wears Mom slung across his back. She brays like the animals I've seen shot on TV documentaries, her mouth yowled open, jaw jutted forward. Dad staggers under her weight but manages to get her to the couch, then get ice, then change his mind and remove the ice and reload her into the car. When he phones from the emergency room, his voice is deflated almost to nothing.

In the weeks that follow, after the doctors call with the X-ray results (patella fractured in two) and Dad stops muttering to himself (*I only looked away for a second, don't know how I let her fall, don't know how she went down so fast*) and Mom's wheelchair arrives (purchased, not rented), she announces her retirement. Dad stations her in front of the television and spends his days bringing food, clearing food, adjusting her, readjusting her, taking her to the bathroom, adjusting her again. It is, indeed, a long winter.

Once Mom can bend her leg by degrees, she decides to call a realtor in Florida. Dad's eyes look dewy when he breaks the news to me, but he's tired—too tired to argue. She wants to go South, so he agrees, then returns to the kitchen to fix her dinner.

* * *

They settle into the retirement village of Mom's choice. I email Dad before every call, and he arranges to elude Mom, to "run to the store" so he can talk to me.

Occasionally, if she's sunning on the lanai or busy on the computer, he slinks into the garage and talks to me from inside the broiling car. If Mom knew how often we

conversed, she would disapprove, maybe even forbid it. At the very least, she'd demand to listen.

"I don't think I could handle this marriage without the Lord," Dad confesses one night. It's February and I'm pacing the neighborhood, eyeing the houses lit like jack-o-lanterns. Inside their cheery windows I see living rooms rainbowed with television light, kitchens where parents tag-team loading the dishwasher. The scent of steak slicks the air around one home, and I close my eyes and pretend I smell Dad's sirloins on the grill. I pretend I don't live alone, a college student in a drafty house that smells like dust and Lean Cuisines. I pretend Dad is walking beside me, long-divorced and happy, his voice a bell cutting the winter dark.

"Your mother won't—" Dad sighs, a sharp crackle in my ear. "Can I say this? Forgive me if it's too much information, but—your mother refuses to have sex. She won't let me touch her." He sighs again. "So I don't, of course I don't. Because God's shown me how to get through it."

The wind makes my contacts shards of glass on my eyes. "How?"

"You," he says, calm. "I have you."

"Daddy," I frown into the night. "No."

"I mean it," he continues. "You're my purpose in life. When I think back on it, and I ask God why it all worked out like this—why I married your mother, why I found the Lord so late, why so much struggle—I realize, it's you. The only reason I'm here is to support you. To send you off into the world."

I gaze at the houses around me, bricked snug against the winter.

"I wouldn't have married your mother, had I been a believer in college." He says it as if he's giving me a gift. "And then I wouldn't have you. And that would've been the biggest tragedy I can imagine."

* * *

Dad and Mom met in the lobby of Electrical Engineering East, where she flirted with him at the registration desk before summer classes. She never rose from her seat, so when he fetched her for their first date he couldn't help but gape at the braces that clamped her calves. Her twiggy arms and fingers, features he'd thought lovely on such a tall woman, suddenly made sense. When he opened the car door for her, he thought to himself, *she's nice, but this is a one-time thing*.

But he'd taken a gap between his sophomore and junior years of college, two years of crisscrossing the country in a freight truck, and found himself disoriented at Penn State. His classmates were young, pudgy-faced, stationary in the way of anyone who hasn't spent months speeding over highways. So Mom went from a one-time thing to a full-time thing, and soon enough Dad had a Master's in electrical engineering and they owned a ranch house close to campus.

I meet Renee on the third day of my third year of college. If room 320 had been on the other side of the hall, we could have seen Electrical Engineering East through the

warped window. I never mention that to Renee, though; I sit inches from her for a month before I summon the courage to even look at her.

Maybe my whole life would have unfolded differently if she hadn't breached that first conversation. Like those paper fortune-tellers I played with in grade school, maybe that pocket of myself would have remained covered if I'd never swooned over her eyes. But I more than swoon over them: I look into her irises as someone would look over a cliff, my terror electric. Those brown eyes smolder dark as the glass of the first beer she pours me—my first drink, ever. She splits the amber bottle between two Ball jars and clinks hers to mine. From her balcony I can see all the landmarks of my life: campus, the library, Electrical Engineering East.

"I think this is the start of a beautiful friendship," she says as I take my first gulp of beer. And I lean against the railing, so lightheaded I might dissolve into her cigarette smoke and float away.

* * *

Renee loves another girl—she stipulates that from the beginning.

I love her—I tell her that by November.

Neither of these declarations matters.

As fall steepens into winter, I stockpile packs of Orbit bubblegum in my backpack because it's her favorite; I buy Bic lighters and pretend they're hers, given me to hold, so her cigarettes always burn bright. I lean left during proofreading exams, let her copy my perfect papers, and grin when she calls me her grammar hammer. I program my phone so hers is the only number immune to the "do not disturb" setting; her messages interrupt my classes and my sleep. We share my textbooks: I shuttle them to her several times a week, braving icy sidewalks for a few minutes' conversation. I consider myself the luckiest girl on campus.

On her twenty-second birthday, we are the last two awake. The other party guests sprawl across the floor and the couch, their vodka-laced snores shredding the quiet, their cheeks dappled with mascara trails and the glitter Renee showered over everybody. It's 4:30 in the morning, and we've reprised the old act: Renee shut herself in her room with the girl she loves, the unavailable one, who refused her. I wept on the balcony, looked over my campus touchstones and contemplated jumping, my feet naked on the frosty concrete.

My head cottonball-light, I curl up on the living room floor without a blanket. I don't expect Renee to return, yet I'm awake and ready when she bends down beside me. "Come to my room," she whispers.

Someone already splays across her bed, so we squeeze onto a beanbag, our spines arching like the crests of a heart as we make room for one another. She casts a duvet over us, tucks our feet in, then finds my eyes. Her pupils are wide as sunflower heads.

“Rub my back?” she asks. She rolls onto her side before I can answer, before a smile kisses every pore on my face. “Then I’ll do yours,” she mumbles into the beanbag.

“You don’t have to.”

I know she won’t, and it pleases me. As I sweep my hands over the contours of her neck, her shoulders, her vertebrae, I don’t want to tell her I love her—I want her to feel it. *Don’t worry about returning the favor*, I think, willing my hands to emote it. *Let me do everything*.

My fingers explore the threads of her shirt until, bold, I slip my hand beneath it. I rake my fingernails over her flesh, delighting in its tautness, its heat. I did this at sleepovers for years, for other girls, and it meant nothing. Now, as we whisper to one another in the dark, I understand what it means to put my hands on someone.

After many minutes, after the sky lightens and casts the room in aquamarine, I lock my knees behind Renee’s and curve my body around her back. Her heart pounds beneath my touch, and I hide my face in her neck.

The next day I will learn that she remembers none of it: not the poems I scribed into her skin; not the moment when she rolled over and laced our hands together, weaved her legs through mine. But for the night I am whole, happiness burning like tobacco smoke in my lungs. *This*, I mouth into the darkness, too quiet for her to hear. *You. You are why I’m alive.*

* * *

When Dad and Mom visit, I stay at home, not at the new apartment I’ve rented near campus—the apartment close to Renee and my new life of beer and cigarettes and forgetting to call Dad. I notice him eyeing me all week, sifting through my words when I speak and staring after me when I leave the house. On the last night of the visit, I discover a neon-green note taped to my bedpost. *We need to talk*, it reads. *Come find me*.

He and Mom laze side-by-side on loungers, eyeballing the television in silence. I hesitate in the doorway of the den, clasping my elbow, wondering how to summon Dad without alerting Mom. Eventually he notices my shadow bobbing against the opposite wall and scrabbles out of his seat. Mom furrows her eyebrows at him and he grunts something about his stomach, making a vague pained gesture. In my old bedroom, with the door closed, he folds me into his arms and suctions my ear to his chest.

“I miss you so much when I’m in Florida,” he sighs, holding me so tight that each breath pulls me in, then pushes me away.

“I know, Daddy.” *But I have Renee now*: the thought digs spiked shoes into my heart. I look away, guilty but not sorry.

“You love her, don’t you,” he whispers. “Renee. You talk about her all the time.”

Her name triggers an avalanche of memories: brown eyes slick with vodka; aquamarine light; snores like a music-box song coaxing me to sleep. I see the clay

armadillo beside Renee's bed, the postcards from her grandmother tacked around her desk, the chapbooks strung like Christmas lights atop the bookshelves. Her cologne tickles my nostrils like the tease of a sneeze or the first gulp of beer. I feel her on my palms and in the tears wheedling out of my eyes.

"It's okay if you're together," he says. "You can tell me."

I groan, shake my head, lean away from his words. "We're just friends."

He spools me in, as if doing so will stitch me back together. "First loves are hard. And I can tell you really love her."

I nod—a yes that beats the air like an errant *Amen* in church.

"There's a part of us that never gets over that first love, I think. We carry pieces of them with us forever. But hopefully we bring the best of them, and forget all the rest."

He gives me a bracing squeeze. "Have I ever told you about Joanne?"

I wriggle out of his grasp, confused, and find his eyes. We both know he never mentioned a Joanne; her name smells red, more forbidden a word than *divorce*.

"We were high school sweethearts—crazy about each other. We never seemed to get the timing right, though; she always liked me when I was after somebody else, I was always chasing her at the wrong time. But when we managed to be on the same page, it was like nothing I had before. Or since."

His hands knead my shoulders again, insistent as grief.

"And I never told anyone," he says, "but a few years ago, she found me." He reads the shock in my eyes. "Not in person; on Facebook. The day I made my profile—the day—she sent me a message. Within hours."

Tears speckle his hazel eyes.

"And I replied."

This time, I don't ask why he's telling me this. This time I hug him, because I already know.

* * *

When my Renee's ringtone wakes me in the middle of the night, I don't hesitate to grab my keys. All she says is she's at a bar, in pain from a bruised knee, and doesn't want to walk to the bus stop. I scrape the sleet off my windshield, imagining Dad asleep in his lakehouse with the windows wide open. It would agonize him to see me skidding onto the slick, empty street, but I do it anyway.

My car's tires struggle for traction on the roads' patchwork of ice and powder. The storm raged in alternating bursts all day: freezing rain one hour, pluming snow the next, turning the town into a frozen layer cake that no number of plows could conquer.

Renee clambers into the car beneath the amber pulse of a spotlight, and the back wheels fishtail as I steer us toward the main street. We merge onto roads emptier than I've ever seen them, but I'm not afraid—not even when we crest the street's steepest hill and see the snake's tongue of road rippling before us. Since childhood, I've read reports of buses stalling and cars colliding on this slope, but I begin its

descent calmly. If we spin out, at least we spin out together.

But we don't—not as we pass the old Blockbuster where Dad and I began so many weekends; not as we near the liquor store where I waited for him to buy his merlots. I've waited for Renee outside that same store, replaced memories of Dad with ones of her bantering with the cashier, a dark-haired nymph clutching her box of Franzia. I imagine a time when she'll be gone, after the storm subsides and the traffic returns, and I wish that future away. I wish it could stay the two of us, the only girls in the world, mesmerized by snow surges studding pearls through the sky.

On Valentine's Day, a message from Renee bathes my car in digital light. She tells me she's been accepted to a school down South, almost as far as Florida. I stow the phone out of sight and merge onto a highway, fully aware I'm speeding, fully indifferent. As my car carves an eastbound path, I think of Renee's balcony and the campus lights like birthday-cake candles arrayed beneath it. I wonder who will own that view once she leaves.

She asks me to drive her to the airport for her school visit, and I agree before she can finish the question. I want to be the last person she sees in Pennsylvania; I want to be the one by her side, even if that means taking her away. We peel out of town on a March afternoon in twin leather jackets, Renee deejaying the radio. Halfway to Scranton, she tells me to pull to the side of I-80, to the gravelly shoulder that slopes into still-dead grass. She says she'll stretch her legs, smoke a cigarette. When I told Dad about her nicotine habit, he instructed me to never let her smoke in the car. "The smell will soak into the seats," he warned. "It'll never come out."

That's why I let her light her L&M inside, half-heartedly nudging the tip toward her open window between drags. I imagine the smoke, a cocktail of ash and breath, settling into the interior. Like the salt puddles she tracked inside all winter, the ghostly bootprints I'll never wipe away, her scent can stay in my passenger seat forever.

The car quakes as tractor-trailers whoosh by, swallowing us in their sound. I wince at every tremor, and Renee laughs at me and tousles her hair with her free hand. "You're so scared right now," she teases.

"My parents never did this," I say, checking the rearview mirror. "Never stopped on the side of the road."

But that's not true. In November of my dad's senior year, he drove Mom down route 26 to their favorite restaurant. As dusk peppered shadows over the scene, he maneuvered his Mercury Monterey off the highway, telling Mom he heard something wrong with the engine—not to worry, he said, but he'd better check out that clunking. He wrenched open the hood, tinkered for a few minutes as she gazed at the foliage. "Here's the problem," he said, clunking the hood back into place and bending down beside her window with a small diamond ring. "This little guy was stuck in the carburetor."

What is a diamond, anyway, but carbon and heat? I watch Renee's cigarette smolder, orange then gray then gone, and think it's not so different from a precious stone. Maybe if the season weren't still settled in cold; maybe if the wind wouldn't nip so sharply beneath our too-thin jackets; maybe if there wasn't an endless summer awaiting her in the South—maybe then the heat would reach the carbon in Renee's hand, turn it to diamond. Maybe we could kindle something here, on the roadside, that would last.

Alone in Renee's living room as another party winds down, I muse at my reflection in a glass of beer and wonder about the girls we love, and the ones we don't. I wonder which is the bigger tragedy as I pursue stranger after stranger on these nights, in black rooms that feel aquamarine.

Renee summarizes it best as she plucks the drink from my hand and drapes a blanket over my legs. Pity spikes her voice; I feel its icepick in my knees. She thinks I'm asleep, but I'm awake to hear her and the girl she will take to bed.

"She watches everything I do," Renee whispers to the girl—not one she loves, but the one she'll love tonight. "It's so hard."

In the morning when I wake, a pretzel on the pleather chair, I think of Dad in Florida, rising to the sun and to the woman who never cast Joanne from his heart. I think of Renee, asleep in the hands of a girl whom she will abandon. I think of her in the South, letting another girl pay for her cigarettes, scribbling in another girl's textbooks, and maybe leaving that girl, too, in the end. And I fumble for a phone to call Dad, stifling tears when he answers on the second ring.

1. Darley's Arabian: *in Aleppo*

Nosing after milk, the big colt batters her udder again. Accustomed to his frequent assaults, she merely grunts her soft complaint, drops her head, searches out spring grass. Among last year's stalks, close to the root, her swift-winnowing lips discover new milletgrass, wild wheat. Her worn teeth clip and tear. Her foal suckles. Gouts of blue milk-foam trill from his eager lips.

*In Saint Simeon's ruined shrine,
a blackcap sings from the hermit's seat.*

At Aleppo, Sheikh Mirza receives the English Consul.

2. Godolphin's Barb: Tattersalls, Ireland. Sale Day

*Lot #72. Bay colt by **Dream Ahead (IRE)** out of an **Entrepreneur (GB)** mare. Consigned by private owner. A three-year-old horse in training. Galloping well on the flat. **E.B.F.** nominated. Sold with veterinary certificate.*

How then shall we regard him, our marvelous engine of expectation, his legacy of natural violence? And how regard this new deputy, our own guesswork, our wishful thinking?

*On the tote board,
even odds.*

How fluid the boundaries of good luck.

3. Byerley's Turk: at Atokad Park with John Wolfers

In June, 1686, Lorraine and Bavaria and Savoy invest the city. By September, Pest burned, Abdi Pasha dead, Buda falls in flames—yet for the dark warhorse, the omens are auspicious. For him, the Aras roars and foams, siroccos rise red in the west. Out of Yorkshire then, long years he sends like khamaseens his swift, sure-footed sons: Jigg and Partner, Tartar and Herod.

In Tully, County Kildare, Ahonoora then Indian Ridge.

In Nebraska, a shirt-tail relative.

Always that hot blood tells.

*An odor of prairie sage—
the moon framed in the window
moving on.*

She must have come in sometime in the middle of the night. When I got there at 4:00 a.m. John already had her settled in a stall next to the tack room. "From back East," he said. A big long-legged mare. Dark bay, star and a strip, a little cresty, but good balance and muscling. Fit. She looked bright and alert, too, but she was heavily bandaged on all four legs and to top that, she wore an odd bulky wrap to sweat her nearside shoulder. Her front end seemed the worst—tendons wrapped and poulticed, spider bandages over both knees and going halfway up her forearms. John had two ice boots sitting outside the stall door, too. "Looks like she's a clumsy sprinter," he told me, "but she might make a racehorse." Of course, if he were going to make that happen, he'd have to be really careful with her.

*Nebraska sunset—
the shadow of a lone cottonwood
spooks my horse.*

When he sent her to work, she went out as soon as they opened the track, so she was always ready to go when I got there—yellow vet wrap and cotton sheeting all around, clear to her hocks on the back legs, moleskin patches and lubricants over the bulbs of her forefeet and inside over the coronet bands behind. All I had to do was throw a saddle and bridle on her and hand her off to the gallop boy. John took her over himself when she came back and he spent a lot of time in her stall.

*Nebraska.
All summer long,
a harmonica in my saddlebag.*

Every day, other trainers would come by to commiserate with John over the mare's fragile physique and to nod and muse and offer their best advice on how to keep her on her feet long enough to finish a race or two. Most thought she was a waste of time and feed, and said so in so many words. John was always the patient sufferer. He sent her off in a couple of quarter claimers and she ran along with the bunch but never made a move on the leaders.

*Especially in summer,
the yammering of coyotes—*

high plains moon.

One Saturday morning I had a note. John had hauled the mare down to Omaha and had entered her up in some high dollar handicap. When he got back that next Monday, he showed me a suitcase full of money. He said there was close to \$50,000 in it. Our mare had gone off at 1200/1 and he had cleaned up through an off-track bookie. The mare won by 6 lengths. He had an offer and sold her out of the test barn for \$35,000, cash.

July.

*Sound of a train horn down at the crossing—
coolness of evening.*

I asked him "Weren't they worried about her old injuries?" He told me then that as far as he knew, the mare had never taken a bad step in her life. All the bandaging and griping about her legs had been just smoke so nobody would be interested in her long enough to look hard at her papers—Lorenzaccio on the topside and three lines to Nasrullah on the bottom. "Best bred horse I ever owned. But you can't fall in love with 'em. That's how you go broke."

*On my front step,
an empty snakeskin—*

whatever you might make of that.

4. Mr. Alcock's Arabian: at Ak-Sar-Ben with Tipton Stables, 1983

And by 4:00 am, we're at breakfast in the track kitchen. By 5:00, we're back in the shed row and Big John's coffee maker begins to gurgle and hiss. This is when the two-year-olds start to stir. They chuffle softly, growing restless-- they nicker stall to stall. The clock radio in the tack room suddenly begins to blare out Top 40 Country. An old campaigner startled awake surges upright in a racket of hooves, his bandaged legs threshing his bed of yellow straw. When the lights come on, horses stretch like big dogs and shake themselves, shift forward toward their routines, lean into the alley expecting the grooms. The pony horse grinds his teeth and bucks in place. The crazy chestnut weaves. Others, the youngsters, work their jaws or pace. The big bay gelding paws the floor.

The feed room door sticks then rattles open when I give it a jerk. Impatient for his splash of oats, the new colt circles, kicks the wall—against the mild textures of the moment, the unexpected detonation is just one more mark against him.

Gallop boys lounging over strong coffee idly consider him. John's already got his number.

*Cold morning sun coming up red.
Long shadows of riders headed out.*

Good days for sure, way back when. Ak-Sar-Ben and the Coliseum are long gone. John's long dead. We did start some nice horses there—*Tipton Special*, *He's a Block*, *Huliai*, my old route horse *Blazing Don* who had to have at least a mile and a half to win, the leggy Kentucky mare that come running out of nowhere and paid John off 1200-to-1. But that gray colt? He was an empty hide—a foul-tempered, dangerous, one-gutted hog that never ran up to his papers. We sent him out five times and he couldn't break his maiden. We kept him fit to run but they wouldn't write him a race. Finally, on the last day of the meeting, John put him in the gate as a \$300 claimer "3-year-old maidens, colts and fillies, non-winners of 4." He went off in a field of half-a-dozen other no-talent nags, all of them useless cripples and crow bait. I'm in the win picture with the little savage, but the stewards took his number down before we even got to the test barn. They figured out he'd bumped the three horse down the stretch. More bother than he was worth, I swear, whatever they paid for him. He should have gone straight to the canner from the yearling sale.

In the constellation of the first horse, Al Faras al Awwal, the subtle star Kitalpha is ascendant; in the legend, it is the pale mare Kirat. Legends and stars, all these in long

line of descent from Mr. Alcock's Honeywood sire— Crab and Aimwell, Desert Orchid, Red Rum, Arkle, Native Dancer, that sorry plug we started in Omaha, and all the Thoroughbred grays.

*May rain—
in the abandoned pasture,
meadowsweet,
a sea of loosestrife.*

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Words are important in prayer, but they must eventually become transparent.

They are not the primary reality and cannot occupy the major part of my attention. I use words to get me started; often enough I stay with them, because in some odd way they relate to a wordless prayer in my heart.

It is as though the words are a window onto my own depths,
through which something of my inner reality peeps out.

Sometimes my gaze is so intense that I cease to notice the window,
and cannot rightly say whether the words are still there or not.

The song is over, as it were, but the melody lingers on.

— Michael Casey

Dear friend

I will grant you credit of truth and forthrightness to begin. When you told me the Mareotic had its hidden, ancillary ordeals- and a long-term, emergent kind of dolor, apart from the ignominy and deep heartbreak of leaving Rome- I did not believe you. Perhaps I wished that downplaying the grievance in the abstract would not only negate the real sensation, but would go some to acclimatizing to one's new state of being your hope-scourged friend. I write this 15 minutes after inspecting the sea shore. My first assessment would be "foul", but I admit- objectively- I have no one example by which I can point to its being so, and the criterion I use feels off the cuff and facile and- perhaps- more than a little inspired by resentment.

I have read of lakes in the Indus- described by Eumenides of Ionia, self styled soldier-chronicler, lost in the cohorts of Alexander- where the sea and sky mirror one another perfectly; a god could catch their reflection in its waters and be shown their true person. It seems then one's choice becomes between stark knowledge or a more accommodating ignorance. They say Narcissus was punished by Nemesis to waste away, awe-struck, enraptured by his own reflection. Water passed through him until he was transformed into a flower. I can rather say that he chose accommodating self-love, because that the cruel choice Nemesis offered him. It is as Catullus says:

*" Furthermore, Respect Nemesis, for
She is a [true] goddess, and
Not to be trifled with."*

But here I am waxing- quite literally- lyrical on subjects I do not have the erudition- or wit- to propound on. Nor will I be able to; soon whatever I know will be handful of sand- with the occasional eon old shell- in the hinterland. I will survive in the letters I have written- you and the few others I remain in contact with- and somewhere in the out of the way cobblestones and labyrinthine alleys of Rome. But I am getting ahead of myself, and I have not yet described my surroundings, least of all the lake itself, the environment and my villa. 'Even here'- you must be thinking- and I picture your eyes rolling customarily, old friend.

It is small, as one could expect- the impluvium could hardly function as a birdbath, as risible as it sounds, but then how much rain does this climate permit? What's there is brackish and coagulated. The triclinium could probably only seat no more than two dedicated gourmets. My needs are few- obviously- and as you could guess any frugality attached to my name I have brought with me, as if in a trunk. Perhaps I should have become a typical Roman decadent overseas; what was Antony doing if only respecting a stereotype?

My bedroom is spartan: low bed, thin coverlet, a window overlooking the shore. I compose my letters in a study little bigger than a closet, the air caked with the must of book, compounded by the lack of circulation. It impresses on me some continuity, like I am the latest in a tradition of scribes or pyramid-keepers, keeping the Pax alive on the borders of the desert. I suppose I'll subsist on voles and seafood (?), at least until I can- or have the means at least- to order stock from Alexandria. Strictly speaking, I can't travel anywhere more than 10 miles from this precinct, but the letter of the law is- after all- "not to set foot on Roman soil, until any future reprieve is granted executively from the emperor or a $\frac{3}{4}$ majority in the senate", which includes the emperor. On the one hand this- strictly speaking- isn't Roman soil, or in the least nominal sense possible; on the other the term "Roman soil" is so vast that obeying it meaningfully

would be impossible. I content myself with this tiny conclusion. This being said, I have no special reason to habitate in Alexandria. Its air is not to my liking; not even a facsimile Rome. I remember visiting it a twenty or so young man, surrounded by a retinue and an interpreter. The smoke of the houses royal purple as the sun finished its track. We were conveyed past the ruins of the great library and I remember feeling that all cities were ruins that we agree to cohabit for an indefinite time-span. By this time it was night. As Epicurus says:

“The sleeping body is as dead”

and what is a city at night but a sleeping body, the cloaked rustles and bawds and hooded people dreams as in a vast mind? Here- next to the sea- I am as Ra, whose night is battle with a giant snake and whose day is the renewed day of all.

The implications of that statement- I imagine- one might consider unnerving, reduction ad absurdum. True I am not Ra and when sleeping, I don't know where or who I am- a reasonable description of the dissolution of any world. The doctrine of the gates of horn and ivory is a false one: you don't know what is true, dreaming; it seems absurd to claim an event follows from a certain dream rather than some chance or coincidence. As the Jews say:

*“What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; **there is nothing new under the sun.**” [The emphasis is mine]*

When I visit Rome in my dreams, I am so happy and convinced of its utter truth- I find a mirror and am wearing a pro consulate robe, or as if I were presenting a case in an old court, seeing my face again for the first time in a long while- then, sand- yellow and fine- begins to seep from every doorway, every window sill; the amphora overflow with sand and slowly- strangely calm- I hear the sound of the wind behind my head, its fingers whispering next to my earlobe. I turn around- I feel there is something I must

see behind me- and I wake up. For a good ratio of nights I am sweating, smelling like some diseased augury. I am scared- yes- when I wake up. But more than that I am angry. I feel like I've been transformed into a wolf, furious, jaws open like the gate of ivory. I know my anger is real; so- therefore- is the world.

There is a sizable fishing village along the north bank, of which my villa forms the outskirts. There are no suburbs. Obviously. I've only ventured into it onetime prior to writing this, enough to cove the local inhabitants. In the centre of the village was a golden aquilla, propped up at the base with stones the colour of watery bronze, next to a miniscule rostra. I walked past it on my way to the sea; a local man tried to accost me in a strange language. He was slight and lean, like an undernourished sheep. His face had a Ptolemaic kind of impression, except where it was obscured with a hideous beard, and his left eye trailed slightly behind his right as he looked at me. I slit his throat with my dagger before he could finish articulating himself, and dashed his brains against the brownish-blue rock. A member of his family- a brother, quite possibly- tried to lay his clenched hand on me, as a small crowd moved around us like startled antelope. I cut his arm at the elbow and almost severed it, then held it against the rock and snapped it off with my foot, pulling him forward with the blade pointed at the crowd.

I threw him back to them and said- in what Latin they might understand- that he should be treated duly and immediately- saved, if possible- and that I would contribute remedies and the necessary care from my own reserve. I told them not to touch me. It was easier- friend- when these places were names on a map and their existence in cities were a matter of hearsay and customary gossip. I would wish all young, virtuous men of Rome to go out and see the empire- at least, while there is still one- but I cannot say one would be prepared for it.

There is apocrypha- recorded, I think, by Dio Cassius in the *Anecdota ad regnum Marci Aurelii Populorum Romanorem*- that when Varus' legions were ambushed in Teutoburg forest there were men- common legionaries of any given age- who survived. They crawled and hid in the undergrowth, fleeing , shedding their armour like insects shed their old skin. They crammed what sustenance could be found- compounded with dirt and the mulched puddle water of the forest floor- and wandered, fording rivers until they were not sure which rivers they had crossed and which were new and unknown. If any- by whatever quirk- made their way back to Roman territory- just through this congress with the wild, the silent forests, than with any people or unlatinate barbarian, were they mistaken as Teutons, Celts, Picts, Parthians, Saxons, Ostrogoths, Vandals, Huns, Jews, Armenians, Greeks, Chinese, or whatever people or uncomputable image appeared to those farmers that discovered them. There are even records of those men stumbling out of the forest in the present day, tattered fatigues hung around their shoulders and thigh, dazed and uncomprehending, frightened by the clothes of their finders or the different smell of the air. When I dream, I dream sometimes of going to the toilet and flowers and vines growing up through the lead pipes, the water absolutely quiet.

I don't know when this letter will reach you, though I can only imagine the commercial interests of Alexandria necessitate a kind of faster service, whether it ultimately goes to Rome or Constantinople.

If possible, please write- I would like some reminder of Roman contact here, even more so from so noble and good a friend.

Best wishes

Gnaeus Marcus Coriolanus

- addendum

Dear friend. If this letter reaches you, you have just read my master's request for a letter. This will be of no use. If you notice any discrepancy in our scripts, be assured I have not rewritten or changed the content, or broken his seal. This task I feel is necessary, and I hope you will respond with understanding. I was brought by my master from Rome. Out of his staff- cooks, name-rememberers, porters- he insisted he be allowed to retain my service. The others were freed. As we left, he gripped my arm and- it felt- dragged me out of the house, as if he would drag me to Egypt himself. He would have crawled on the Via Apia. I was kept under the deck of the ship during the voyage. Sometimes I heard noises outside the cell and was afraid that he was watching me in the dark, like my shadow.

For the time we have spent here, I have done I always have. I have always had a talent for numeracy and accountancy. Several times- here and back then- we have discussed and drafted his will. That said, it ultimately amounts to making suggestions and structural hints, which my master will choose either to regard or not. None of its content is available to me, and I have often had to guess as to what he wants, when there is confusion. My jobs have been harder; the staff is much smaller. He has not touched me, yet. At night, when he cannot sleep, it is my task to recite stories to him, like an infant, and try to conceal any fear.

Sometimes he continues to ask for another and I say no, waiting until he falls asleep. He used to bawl; now he stares at me, eyes on mine, silent, thinking. Then I return to my quarters. In the morning I am expected to do some kind of service; cooking, or waiting on him in addition to my usual management. Since there is not a great deal to

manage here, the excuse is made that since I am still his, no other task could possibly exist for me. There are two local cooks- one given by the town in good will, who now fears the master, and another bought in Alexandria. They are not familiar with Roman dishes; I teach them whatever scraps of information I know. Near infinitesimal. There was another servant who carried the dishes, but they tripped- spilling the food onto the master's toga and the embroidered purple couch.

Such as it was this morning, when my master left to walk around the desert hinterland of the sea. He did this after finishing your letter. He returned two hours later with blood softly leaking onto his cheek, like a statue's canals, hoed by the rain. I asked him what had happened. He didn't say anything; it seemed he would refuse to speak. Then he told me: he had been making his way through the scree and broken rocks of a cliff when he met me, looking down at him. He said: "what the fuck are you doing here?" Apparently I just smiled. I was standing on a rock face, almost vertical. "Get the fuck back to the house!" he shouted. I looked at him and told him that they would soon be at the house to carry him off. Who? The people of the village. There were more people killed there last night, ripped apart down their chest, attacked almost by an animal. They describe the murderer as foreign, wearing a purple rimmed cloak, slightly sunburnt, with red tears making two little canals down his face. This is when my master began to weep. He had tried- he said- to wipe the tears away as he moved back to the house, but they would not go. "What are you?" he said. "Quod eris sum" I am have supposed to have said, though my spoken Latin is not great. My master and I usually address one another in Greek. At this point I too now had begun to weep, my mouth stretching wide, into a smile my master has described in the past as "hideous". He began to run. He heard nothing pursuing him, but did not relent, until he was at least a mile from that cliff. He finished his story as soon as the first rock shattered the window.

I hid. He was clutching his head, snarling, his voice rising in pitch before it might become a bird's cry. I ran into the study and heard the door brake from its hinges. I heard gasps. There was movement and noise I didn't recognise. Then it was silent. For some reason they didn't destroy the house, possibly out of respect for its history, of which my master must have been a brief, peculiar footnote, or some sense of awe, or terror. It was night when I came out. Forgive me for saying so, but I needed to know my fate. I was alone in a foreign place. I sought out my master's will in its locked chest and broke it open to read. I assure you, this is what it read:

*Being without descendants or familia to whom I could bestow honour, I- Gnaeus Marcus, also called Coriolanus, bequeath my worldly property to friend- x-
To be taken into effect at their wish, after my death*

It is in your hands then, that my fate rests. I beg you. If you accept this, I will belong to you, in which case, I ask for manumission. It feels like I have been a stage actor in someone's bizarre comedy, as in the dramas and tragedies I watched through stealth when I was young, and nobody knew me. I beg you- if you are merciful- to grant me freedom. If you do not accept, I will be free regardless, I suppose; I don't know what will happen. I'll be searched for, an anomaly in the records of the census taker and the offices of Rome in need of correction. I will be a fugitive in another country, or a slave again. If you are merciful, please, consider me.

V.

There is blood on the corner of the paper.

As a creature of language, the writer is always caught up in the war of fictions (jargons), but he is never anything but a plaything in it, since the language that constitutes him (writing) is always outside-of-place (atopic); by the simple effect of polysemy (rudimentary stage of writing), the warrior commitment of a literary dialect is dubious from its origin. The writer is always on the blind spot of systems, adrift; he is the joker in the pack, a *mana*, a zero degree, the dummy in the bridge game: necessary to the meaning (the battle), but himself deprived of fixed meaning; his place, his (exchange) *value*, varies according to the movements of history, the tactical blows of the struggle: he is asked all and/or nothing. He himself is outside exchange, plunged into non-profit, the Zen *mushotoku*, desiring nothing but the perverse bliss of words (but bliss is never a taking: nothing separates it from *satori*, from losing). Paradox: the writer suppresses this gratuitousness of writing (which approaches, by bliss, the gratuitousness of death): he stiffens, hardens his muscles, denies the drift, represses bliss: there are very few writers who combat *both* ideological repression and libidinal repression (the kind, of course, which the intellectual brings to bear upon himself: upon his own language).

— Roland Barthes

THE COLORS OF MIRRORS

For Sophie Mitchell

When you're horizontal, asleep,
all mirrors are precisely white:
They slyly pluck out this
or that secret, etching them
delicately so they remain secrets.

When darkness begins to leave,
quiet as a butterfly's breath, they
turn almost as blue as a flatted
note you abandoned on a table
hoping it would stay unread.

In full daylight, they disguise
themselves as plain silver
tricking you into believing
you see only yourself and never
notice that you're blind.

Come sunset, they sing loud
in oranges and violets. Always
just south of the right key to remind
you they're watching you alertly
as a bent second hand

until you tread—softly-socked—
upstairs to bed. Then they
put on their watchtower faces
and perfectly white glasses.
They read you all night

and they laugh and laugh and laugh.

NAUTICAL DREAM

I dreamed a sailor afraid of water.
He kissed green rigging. His prayers were heard
by all the wrong gods. The sea called the name
only his mother knew and her tear salts were
his first meal. On land, he travelled by train
for the rocking. His Punic union card—
signed by Ahab—caused lower deck laughter.
A flotsam dream: On high tides it floats near
my soul. The moon steals it like backwards rain.
Cool wells are filled with pale sons and daughters
adrift on fossil curtains in red, hard
evenings. Any meaning's revealed after
I almost forget the nautical game
played by biblical ghosts cast overboard.
This page was never white. No—a blue plain
brightened by dim starfish. Ink was brought here
in sieves. I copy the screaming seabirds
pretending that every sound was the same
as letters I write as if they were words.
The Rosetta Stone cracked. A war fought here
is forgotten—drowned in my sailor dream.

ON THE LAST DAY OF MY FIFTIES
I LEAD A TOUR THROUGH NORTH BEACH

Walk with me now—
I'll show you
holy ground:
Where words
were ladders
and ladders white smoke
that climbed
through sea-light
leaving no more notes
than the August
meteor showers.
Sound
was built
of bopbeat and
kisses echoed
on foggy nights.
Tops drift off—
lightly. Touch
was enough.
The round tower
wasn't much
of a tower,
but silky blue
wine flowed.
The stars
spoke Italian.
Nothing was taught
but you always learned
on Green Street.
The Cold
Mountain is
just over
that broken hill
and lovelorn
churchbells ring out
new bridge tolls.

Now step across
Columbus
And be still.
Fishermen pulled
their nets.
You won't get caught.

APPARITION

He came from the west
out of morning fog
pushing a red shopping cart

Moisture paints light on a gray beard.
Coverless paperbacks slide
to the street behind him.

He stops a stranger and asks,
“Hey mister,” voice cold as fog,
“you ever seen the silent hills?”

VACANT PUBLIC SPACE

Time is an eternity that stammers.
—Umberto Eco

Shadows on the square
uncover loose change.
Chess tables stand cold—stripped bare
of pawns and errant bishops.
Disarranged
napkins and bags hop
from down here to over there.
Everyone is elsewhere.

Only the wind plays here
in afternoon light.
Loose pieces of hiking gear
are scattered, ready to cause
a short fight
or be torn by claws
a yellow cat opens here—
this bare place, this polished mirror.

by Ron Gibson, Jr.

North of Falling

You were in my kitchen. Your lower back snug against the counter, while I leaned against my right hand and hip. We didn't question how thousands of miles dwindled to this cramped space, we just talked. Never a break in conversation, not even for the fact I was wearing a goldfish bowl on my head.

I thought it unfair that even this close to you I was somehow distant, that this glass bowl was still a partition between us. I leaned closer and touched your hand with my fingertips. You recognized the touch as want and I could feel you acquiesce. But as my voice echoed around my head, your voice pulled back and hid and I could no longer hear you. Your body began to disappear into the fogbank of my gathering breath. When I said I love you, all I heard was the hollow echo of "You" and slow drips of condensation.

To Me To You

Even though I hoped the world would forget my birthday, I didn't mind when you showed up on my doorstep. You smiled, clutching a box to your chest, before handing it over. I appreciated that you didn't wrap it, and said so. You said, 'It is literally nothing.' Rather than asking if you meant the effort, I said it felt like nothing, because it did. It was light as air. It felt like an empty cardboard box. But you insisted it was something. As I cut away at twine with my pocket knife, you added, 'I saw you admiring it and thought I would get it for you.'

When I opened it, a perfect square of blue filled the box. When I touched it, my fingerprints left an impression like memory foam and rose back to its square shape. Before I could ask, you said it was part of the clear sky that day when we sat next to each other on a blanket on the ground, near a wooded lake. When we talked art, gossip and life, before laying back, suffocating in blue, your kind mouth informing my body how you felt.

I thanked you and put the box on a desk, near other wild objects that inhabited my windowsill -- a turkey-vulture feather, twining bracelets of wild grasses and various botanical drawings and specimens.
All gifts from you.

Because one piece at a time, you brought the world that much closer to me to you.

Smoke Over Water

A text came in and vibrated against Tim's leg a few minutes after being chewed out by Marco for punching in late.

'What do you think?'

Marco was lucky Tim came in at all. After a late night with Courtney, imagining futures he didn't want to imagine, Tim just wanted to drive. To see stagnant skylines give way to open roads with mountain rivers, unincorporated townships and dive bars. Anywhere the population of trees outnumbered people, and the illusion of disappearing from the world was strongest.

Tim slipped his cell back into his pocket, unanswered, and took his place amongst the hordes of guitars hanging from the wall, behind the glass case displaying foot pedals.

The truth was he didn't know what to think, didn't know what to feel. And worse yet, he knew Courtney didn't either. He knew she wasn't the type to create needless bullshit, that she would sooner drive away from her own body if she could.

For people that prided themselves on being different, they hated being relegated to a cast away script from an after-school special that would never air.

'The Perils of Fucking,' starring Corey Feldman and Alyssa Milano.

0% rating on Rotten Tomatoes.

Pathetic.

About as pathetic, Tim thought, as one of the many Guitar Hero rejects that hung around the store all summer, plugged into an amp, showing off. Even though they rarely bought more than a new set of strings, Marco insisted their presence was good for business. To give amateurs with deep pockets the impression that they too could play anything if they wanted. And not with hours of practice, but only if they purchased the overpriced equipment that Marco was pushing.

What do you think?

Even while helping a woman buy a solid low-end acoustic for her son, the words gnawed at him.

As Tim rang her up, Marco wandered by and gave a subtle look of disapproval. Tim knew what that look meant. Marco wanted him to either push high-end or the crappiest Chinese-made guitars that could never be resold. Whatever put more profit into his pocket at the end of the day.

What do you think?

Tim pulled out his cell and tapped, 'I hate this job.'

What started as a cool summer job a few years ago had turned into this. How many more disapproving looks must he endure just because he wanted to give customers some value for their dollars? How many times could he listen to the opening chords of 'Smoke Over Water' before he puked?

The truth was, Tim knew, he could endure all of it and more. He loved comfort zones even when they were uncomfortable. As long as there was a paycheck he could always continue.

And now with Courtney... He could see his life stretching out in front of him forever, always waiting to move without moving. He could see himself becoming a capitalist pig like Marco, fucking everyone over that he could.

Phone buzz, 'Quit. We'll figure something out.'

Tim slightly smiled. Like staring down that terrifying space below the high dive as a kid: Sometimes it took someone to yell before he ever left his feet.

And though he didn't know how deep this jump would take him, he tapped, 'Be home. Let's go for a drive.'

The Taste of Blood and Oak

Amanda Nicole Corbin

"It's been a year," I say into the old fashioned glass I'm spinning around in my fingers before it clanks against the wooden bar and I set it away.

"Anniversary?" Dave asks.

My head jolts towards the unfamiliar words. Dave and I do this; we hang out, drink, and pretend we know the difference between the Cavs and the Spurs.

"No," I chuckle more smugly than nonchalantly. "We don't celebrate that."

"Lucky," Dave says.

I don't reply, because I figure Dave's zoned back out into the basketball game, but he's still staring directly at me.

"Since I got this gig," I lie.

"Ah," Dave says, turning away from me.

I've skip-stoned my way through various knockoffs of a directing career. When I was a kid, I dreamed of climbing a large oak and hanging my bed sheets from the branches. I would project a film I directed for my neighbors and beam with pride. It was always about a beautiful woman and her love of gardening. Childish, I know, but it was one of my best dreams. As I commanded the film to play, I never fell out of the tree, but blood would fill my mouth as the reel clicked in vain and refused to roll. It was like having a head wound and being unable to open the gauze. It was common knowledge to me that morning breath tasted like iron.

"When you gonna let me come on set," he sips his tonic, "meet that hot redhead?"

"We don't just hire bozos like you off the street," I wonder if we're even at the level to call each other *bozos*. "Besides, what we film is more than just sex."

"Does your wife agree?"

"She doesn't ask."

"Lucky."

I say nothing and search my back pocket for keys.

"You good?" Dave asks flatly.

At the end of the bar, I watch a middle-aged couple make out through the smoke with the fervor Sienna and I once had. The curls of smoke branch out around the couple as though forming a large, thick fibrous creature. Disgusted, I say, "Yeah," and head out.

*

Upon getting home, I immediately walk around the outside of my house intending to find my wife in her usual spot, at the base of a very large oak tree. Each time I round the small vinyl siding of our house, the elephant-esque branches—in both texture and color—reach towards both me and the sky as though preparing for a sacrifice. Despite my wife's constant attention, It always looks hungry. The most striking image, however,

is the vacancy of my wife's petite knees resting on the gnarled roots.

When I shut the front door after jiggling it into place, I am shocked to find Sienna inside for once, tending a small bonsai tree at the kitchen counter. So far, not even iced-over telephone poles have stopped her from dedicating her time to the backyard. Perhaps she is finally finished trying to convince The Tree outback that it can "know Itself."

I set a grocery bag on the counter and magician-pull a string of lights out of it. Sienna doesn't look up until I speak.

"I took these from the set," I let the bulbs cascade onto the granite. "I thought The Tree might like them." I'm hoping the lights might choke The Tree or strangle It in the night.

"Did you sleep last night?" I ask, despite my own insomnia. In my own sleep attempts, I pretend the hum of the heater is actually the rumbling of an engine. I picture a large, roaring chainsaw accompanied by a whirring wood chipper. Sometimes I imagine cutting It down myself. I then dream that no matter how hard I grit my teeth while thrusting the motorized tool against the trunk, The Tree only grows larger and the only blood I see is my own.

"I got this," she begins while hovering over the tiny plant, "for your work." She's nit-picking the mulch pieces in the biodegradable pot. Behind it, her rack rests on the counter like shined fruit. "Not very needy."

I sigh and sit at the stool across from her. "I don't have a desk."

"You have windows," she assumes. She pushes the bonsai toward me and finally makes eye contact. Pointing at the string of lights, she asks, "What color?"

I shrug as I feel for the outlet on the side of the counter. "Bluish?" I plug them in and they illuminate the space between us. She fingers the strand like an afghan scarf, her head moving slightly left and right.

"How do you ask The Tree its favorite color?"

You don't, would be the rational, normal, caught-off-guard response. Like a chef being asked how to always cook the perfect steak.

I point at her jeans, "How did you know you liked those? That they fit right?" I want to comment on how they flatter her ass like a taut hammock lulling her cheeks to sleep. I want to ask if we can get a hammock for our backyard. I want to strip her down. "The first time?"

"I tried them on?" Then, her eyes widen. "Ah," she points at me, "but how do we know if The Tree likes them?"

You don't.

"I'm sure you will know," I insist. "It's almost time for budding, right?"

*

Every time I mow the lawn this April, I count the ways I am stupid. This has been a lifelong checklist, but having to lift up the chain of four extension cords in order to guide the mower underneath has recently earned itself the most prominent reason on

the list. Sienna keeps The Tree lit at all times. She does this regardless of daylight, weather, or my inability to pay for the electricity bill. She says The Tree likes them. I want to say The Tree doesn't like the sloppy cross-hatched mow lines in the yard or my pseudo-unemployment.

I wipe the sweat off my forehead and watch it drip into the blades of grass. The beads struggle to make it to the soil and evaporate anyway. Sienna's tip-toed at the base of The Tree, scattering seeds as she tries to hang the bird feeder. She sees me and waves me over.

I leave the lawn mower running, assuming our interaction will be brief. My eyes follow her outstretched forearm to a branch neither of us can reach. "Look how pink."

Even the word *pink* causes me to adjust myself. This past year of marriage has been like one long foreplay event. She's more stubborn than my unflowering tomato plant, which is the only thing I've ever tried to grow.

"Like your cheeks after you sat out here all winter," I coo, pulling her in, my thumb against her soft face. Blood pulls through me.

She giggles and pushes me away. "It's almost The Tree's birthday."

"Dave's coming over next week," I state. I never set Dave up with the hot redhead, but I still have her number. Instead, I return to my dying lawn mower and finish cutting the yard.

A few days later, Dave rocks in a chair too frail and small for him, leaning his beer against the armrest. We sip in the shade and watch my wife plant tulips to the north side of The Tree. This is the first time Dave's seen my house.

Still holding his bottle, he points to Sienna. "Damn, gardening keeps them in shape."

Dave's voice makes the sober hairs stand on my neck. I nod. He taps the wooden rocking chair. "You hear that sound?" It's a hollow, gray knock. "Rot. Happens in deadwood and live trees." He points again towards my wife. "And that," he sips again, "doesn't have much longer."

I laugh. I set my full beer on the porch, and laugh into my hands. I add laughing to my list of why I am stupid. I keep laughing and laugh my way through the summer.

*

Most of the leaves have reached the ground, some more gracefully than others. The backyard is covered in the decaying foliage and I don't have the energy to rake over the tethered cords. Chewing my tongue, I walk outside and begin to pull them apart, one by one.

Sienna sprints from the kitchen as I separate another two.

She holds my hands to stop me from pulling the last, even though the lights died out with the first tug.

"Please," she begs, "it's almost winter."

I throw the cords down and head to The Tree. I place the pad of my index finger under a sliver of bark that's sticking out like a hangnail. I can hear some kind of whimper

from behind me but I pluck The Tree, exposing the lower layer underneath the bark. I expect blood, but I forget trees don't bleed.

"Look," I hold the bark fragment in front of her face, "It's basically fucking dead."

Her eyes water and she grabs the piece from me. "Don't. Do that." She approaches The Tree and rubs the open wound.

"This is what happens," I huff, before walking back to the silent house.

I can't sleep, so I try jerking it to the redhead from work. I half-succeed and fall asleep in my bed in the late morning. I was prepared to dream about the city declaring The Tree unsafe and prepped for immediate disposal.

Instead, I dream I'm at one of Dave's and my usual jaunts, sitting at the bar near a heated fireplace. The crackling of both the fire and patrons' laughter is relaxing, and I see Dave's mouth smile in a way I never have before, unzipping like a purse full of teeth. Then, the building begins to rumble and rock with the smoothness of a porch swing. The bar my elbows rest on begins to expand as though it's breathing, wooden tendrils reaching every which way. Knotting and twisting, the growing branches intersect themselves and pulsate heavy breaths. Blood pumps through me and not only fills my mouth, but cascades out onto the floor. Now, down at the end of the bar, Dave strokes part of the expanding wood, still smiling his raw smile, as though ready to hand me a chainsaw.

When I wake up in the morning, the house is empty and the yard is silent. I walk to the window to presumably observe my wife, but instead catch the reflection of a swollen, bloody knot on my lip. My clenched jaw must have punctured the thin membrane in my sleep while my wife finally fetched divorce papers that would only ask for me to vacate the premises and leave The Tree to her and her to only The Tree

Hive Mind

She shatters for its soft
comb, a slugger for ooze,
like an awful creature
seeking a drink of death's
gold, a beaten honey.

Like an airy seizure,
she is shaking the wind
with her wooden bee bat,
silencing the buzzing
to taste their succulent.

Stings enrapture her arms
in this fog of yellow
and black, the pheromones
of bicolor coma;
she fights color to sleep.

In that cover of taste,
that woven quilt of hive,
she bludgeons to golden,
bloody bees for a suck
of sugar on her tongue.

Now this is wealth, a girl
standing on gore, gifted
the fruits of the flowers
flooding her sugared mouth,
pleasing, porous, so sweet.

The Peacock

She's plucking a peacock
in the hurricane's eye,
its plumage like shattered
glass, stained and in color.

Pigments of green and blue
streak through yellow and brown
like an impressionist
painting of lily blooms.

She makes a hat of them
with a brim of plumage
built from its broken cage,
and then she nests the beak.

It broke in blustering,
windswept within the rain
flooding the foundation
of her feathered birdhouse.

She built it with hangers,
unwound and then rewound
into a homemade home,
as if she lived in it.

Now she has the right size,
recreated in storm;
she flees in it, fitted,
and splaying her feathers.

Crawlers

They squirm like snakes on Medusa, sliming
in glorious death where everything grows
for the grave boy dissecting with switchblade.

He slices them, rearranges their heads,
and wraps their bodies like rings, so shiny
in the moonlight, a monarch of the worms.

Lost in fluctuation of overflow,
he reaches into detritus, the deep
pulse of land pushing against fingerprints.

Jarring, he screws the mason lid tightly
to tell his tale to mother, her call
sounding like a shrieking owl, maddening.

She defines the unmoved, no nightwalker
or woman under new moon; she believes
in bacteria, and that all things bite.

So he will show her, present them to her
like a gift to a shrew, taming, so sick.
They become her disease; she baited it.

Tornado

The uneasy oak is unwound
from the fingers of a twister,
like clay sculpted by whetted wind.

And the funnel has kissed the ground
in an angry suck with a smack
of rotational lips in storm.

By the windmill where the windows
are breaking into arrowheads,
a sparrow smothers the shingles.

Pressed there like garbage compacted,
its wings are tracing the trigger:
unequal winds in atmosphere.

Its feathers unfold in creases
and crush as if chewed by sky wolves
airborne, rabid, biting, aloft.

And its collide is caressing
the smothered siding, a canvass
of spread-eagled oil, awestruck.

Moon Highway

Setting Snoqualmie
in land exchanged
for layered concrete,
life is paved over.

And glistening, it will
roundabout death,
sacred and significant,
burying moon birth.

Planned path, it opens
the flat to falls,
like water fighting,
losing to land matte.

Sand, silt, cemented
ancestors in sludge,
we watch fathers form
into lanes, expressed.

And driving to water,
they accelerate steam
and evaporate us,
like smoking the sun.

by Jeremiah Castelo

- Shadowboxing -

My shoulders are well oiled axles,
my fists are cannon balls

I am an uncompromised,
uninhibited,
and unchallenged fresh breath of boldness

I am the statue of fastholding,
chiseled down from black diamond
by the strong hand of craftsmanship

I am chaos's more stable second cousin,
and favored uncle to the prodigals,
the profligates,
the princes,
and the prodigies

I am the lion's heart beat,
the war drum's sporadic syncopation

I am the wolf pack's collective sixth and seventh senses,
keen on the scent of blood, fear,
and impending annihilation

I will not sway to the breath of your voice
nor will I stagger at the wind your weather weaves

Advance upon me and find yourself hard pressed against calloused intolerance,
behind which is a wall,
and behind that wall,
an army

I pray you combust into flames and feathers at once
should my name birth from your lips

I pray my night guardsmen have eyes of eagles,
and my trumpeteers have breaths of behemoths
should you ever encroach upon my camp at dreaming hour

I promise to impress upon you pressure,
of a nature that spawns pearls, magma, and passionate revolution

But the only revolution that will come of your resistance is vertigo,
as you spiral downward into abysmal forgottenness

Now heed my words with intent lest you risk the fate of faded bewilderment
May God be my strength as I destroy you

Eviscerate you

Annihilate you

I will obliterate you until the only remnant of your very existence
is but a vague memory,
of a fleeting idea,
in a dream,
inside a dream,
inside a coma.

The Taste of Water

You are heartwarmth in winter

You are the wind that rustles
the orange and green ornaments,
delicately clinging to wooden branches

You are a lonely thought
silently walking
through my labyrinth mind,
barefoot and curious

You are golden silence
at my breakfast table,
the perfect mid-day sweetcake,
and supper's sparkling silverware

You are the cold swell
my sandy shoreline summons
and the breeze to whom
my beach is betrothed

You are the scent of sweet memory,
the perfume of passionate whisper,
and the aroma of aura's arousal

You are the dream in between dreams,
the delicate moment before waking,
and the time forgotten before sleep fell

You are love at its most selfless;

A heart whose blood flows
infinite and outward,

A bind unbroken
since time's conception,

A weave unweathered,
and unwaivering

You are the taste of water,
the sound of melody,
and the picture
of what beauty
dreams itself to be.

- Opium and Opera -

When the Opium wears off,
my bones begin to ache
at every passing breeze,
my muscles succumb to gravity's will,
and my skin is a blanket of pain.

When the Opera finally ends,
the silence is as deafening
as a drowning violin,
as lonely as a lost feather
floating on wandering wind,
as painful as heartache and heartburn,
and as uncomfortable
as undersized undergarment,
woven of wool,
and worn
not in winter,
but in the stare of the summer sun.

When the cakes have all been eaten
and the wine has been drunk,
I'm a starving lion in a plastic jungle,
I'm the insatiable leviathan
sinking ship after abandoned ship,
I'm the salmon who drank the river dry,
I'm the sailor who swallowed the sea,
and the emperor who ate the earth,
country by country, from crust to core.

When love has waxed cold
and passion has left,
winter walks everywhere
and screams with each step,
my lost lover's face
is seen in each breath,
crystals condense
on my heart and my hands,
and the night is as dark
as a stranger's shadow.

When the Opium wears off
and the Opera finally ends,
our reality is too real to know,
the truth is too complex to comprehend,
the pain goes beyond what our threshold can fathom,
and the silence is as loud as death.

- My Heart Needs a Home -

My heart needs a home,
I've tried fitting it on bookshelves among fantasy novels and romantic stories,
but for some reason,
JRR Tolkien wouldn't let me in between him and Danielle Steele,

I've tried placing it by my stereo;
in front of the speaker;
next to my well-ranged arsenal of music
which has taken me years to put together.

But after a while,
I'd notice that Hard Rock would cause my heart to turn to stone,
Hip Hop would cause it to turn black at every curse,
Electronic music would cause it to break down into fine pieces of sand,
and the deep melancholy sounds of the bass guitar
would manifest as wind from the sub woofer;
blowing it away.

I've tried dipping it into a mug of beer
or soaking it in hard alcohol,
but time and time again;
it would dissolve into the liquid
and I'd lose it.

The bartender would mistake it for a Bloody Mary,
mix it up,
and serve it to the next girl
who wouldn't gulp it all down at once,
but take little sips in between conversations in order to savor it. Sometimes I'd
be tempted to believe that she's well aware of what she's drinking;
Every sip hurts my chest.

I would roll it around in white powder
hoping to create some sort of protective mask,
but the chemical in the drug would eat away the surface;
leaving it disfigured and more fragile than ever.

I had tried planting it into the ground
among the cannabis plants to see if something would grow out of it, But when I had
returned to dig it up,
I had found that the roots of the surrounding plants
had drained the life out of the core;
turning it into shell.
When I cracked it open, it was hollow.

I've tried placing it in the bosom of beautiful women,
which seemed like the right place at the time,
until each one used the pointy, polished finger nail
of her long, slender, finger
to pierce the center of it;
causing it to ooze blood.

I've tried placing it into the hands of those I trusted,
but the hands of the strong would squeeze too tightly,
the hands of the weak would keep dropping it,
the hands of the unreliable would leave it in dark places and forget about it,
the hands of the cruel would throw it as far as they could, like a baseball,

the hands of the hurtful would immediately hand it right back to me,
and the hands of the clean would never touch it at all.

Then I placed it into the hands of my Creator, my Savior; the One who spent ages
coming up with its design,
the One who calculated every measurement to the finest detail,
the One who made countless rough drafts in order to attain perfection,
the One who is waiting for His masterpiece
To willingly be placed back into His gentle, cupped hands.....

When I did, it fit perfectly, and glowed a bright red, as if it were smiling. It
started singing quietly;
the most beautiful melody I've ever heard.
It has remained there ever since,
and will remain there forever.

- Skin -

Last time I checked,
it was still on my neck,
What now is a mark,
once was a speck,

Protected by the freckle,
I can now never forget,
Tattooed into a bad mood,
the ink I still regret,

Smooth surface, epidermis,
let color fill the pores,
Black lines, abstract designs,
around the open sores,

Follow my fingers
from the valley to the summit,
Let go of all your baggage,
watch all your worries plummet,

Rub it in a circle
'til the purple turns to pink,
Palm against palm
let our fingers interlink,

Wrinkles and folds,
crevices and creases,
Capturing the bead
a sweat gland releases,

Scars and birthmarks
and lipstick kisses,
Fleshly desires
and skinful blisses,

Cuts and wounds
and bumps and bruises,
Believing the lies
when beauty confuses,

A tingling sensation
while waiting patiently,
Exhale into the navel
and let creation breathe,

Scriptures and phrases
that raises goosebumps,
The laying on of healing hands
and disappearing lumps,

I've spent a lifetime,
counting freckles and moles,
Skin against skin,
like magnetic poles.

SHAKEY

John Haggerty

Shakey threw a party that lasted all night. It was down under the highway at Patterson and 5th, where the cops won't even drive past because they are such punk-assed little bitches these days. We found an old metal tub and lit some garbage. The fire was smoky and foul, but it kept the cold out of your lungs and your fingers from freezing right onto the bottle as it went around. The cars on the freeway screamed away above us. Up there, everyone's in a hurry to be somewhere else. But not us. We don't really have any somewheres left but this.

Shakey was dying of something complicated and slow, and it made people uncomfortable, but not enough to keep them away from his booze. So we all got drunk down there, all of the usuals off the street, and even some of the girls from over on 7th brave enough to duck out on their shift, looking for a chance to get out of the wind. Somebody had a boom box that sort of worked, and we drank and danced around that fire, the flames throwing up orange flashes. We closed our eyes and revved up the ghosts of good times in the past, and for a while that worked just fine. But the radio kept fading in and out and eventually that got on people's nerves, and somebody kicked it over and it stopped working altogether. And the wine ran out and there was a fight over one of the girls, not that either of those sorry drunks could afford her anyway, or coax any life into their drinker's dicks if they could. But there they were, staggering around, swinging away like they had something to gain or lose. And then Burnette found us and slapped the girls back up onto the street and soon it was just me and Shakey, down under the bridge as the sun started coming up, hoping for something in the way of warmth.

"Used to be, anything close to a party like that, the cops would have been in here swinging," he said. He started into a fit, one of those street coughs, an affliction you never get used to. "You could count on them for a beatdown, at least. You could count on them for that." For a while it was quiet, everyone who had someplace to go having gotten there, the world, for a second, content to rest. "Do you think it's like this?" he said. "I think I could handle it if it's like this." His body shook a little bit, and he suddenly looked really cold. "I really wouldn't mind that at all." He closed his eyes and we tried to imagine if that was true, the last warmth of the fire draining out of our faces as the sun crawled its way up into the sky.

Coterminous Lives

Kirie C. Pedersen

"Coterminous lives plotted on parallel lines and projected back into the past might be said to have come together."

On the November day it all fell to pieces, in the long tunnel toward spring, the sky turned dark at four-thirty. The temperature was in the sixties, unusual for the eastern face of the Olympic Mountains. The warmth made Maria restless, and she shook Dylan, the big golden retriever, from his bed, pulled on her heavy boots, and set off walking.

At the foot of the road, beneath a giant cedar, Maria's mother stood alone.

"I can't find Daddy," Flor said.

Maria took her mother's hand, but Flor pulled away.

"I don't like Daddy using the chain saw alone," Flor said. "Now I can't find him."

Maria cupped her palms behind her ears like a choral singer checking to see if she was on key. "Wolf ears, Mama," she said. "The way you taught me." And in the distance, Maria caught the whine of the chain saw. "I know just where he is." Maria tugged her mother's thin wrist. "Walk up the mountain with me, and we'll meet him on the other side."

When they reached the crest of the hill where mock orange and Pacific rhododendron formed a thicket, a path veered off into the forest. Maria's father, Pete, stood among the remnants of a willow toppled by the first autumn storm. The logs were bucked into fireplace-sized pieces, neatly stacked and ready to be lugged home.

"Where were you?" he said plaintively to Flor. "I was looking for you." As always, Pete ignored Maria. Since Maria separated from her husband the previous June, Maria's father looked right through her, or walked out of the room when she came in.

"You abandoned a dying man," he said before the fast of silence began.

No point to say Paul was the one who left.

"I made her walk with me," Maria said. In the distance, dark clouds advanced down a turquoise strip of sky. "I knew right where you'd be." Even if her father stared through her with those ice-blue, the odd inner lurch that sent Maria walking this bright clear morning made her stand close to her parents. She extracted the chainsaw from Pete's hand.

"You sure you can carry that?" Flor reached out and brushed damp tendrils of hair from her daughter's face. "It won't hurt your hands?"

"My hands are fine." Occasionally placing the chainsaw on the path so she could heft a fallen branch to the side, Maria strode a few paces ahead. She was like Dylan, the dog, forever carrying sticks to drop at her father's feet.

"Hear anything from Paul?" Flor's approach to the separation was to pretend it never happened.

"I called the Sheriff's Office this morning." Maria knew Pete was listening, and she pled her case through a third party. "I wanted to know why a convicted felon was given a permit to carry a concealed weapon."

"Why would Paul want a gun?"

"Sahari says he carries two handguns." Sahari was Paul's eighteen-year old daughter, Maria's stepdaughter. Maria glanced at Pete, but his face, reddened by cold and alcohol, was without expression. "He forced her to hold the gun even though she cried." Maria inhaled the scent of Douglas fir branches wrenched by wind. The storm arrived with a splatter of hail, and her parents headed in the direction of their home a mile away through the woods. Before her exile, Maria would have gone with them, shared a pot of tea with sliced lemon and honey.

As Maria descended the path to her cottage, she heard the land line ring. Muddy boots and all, she ran. "911 dispatched to Paul's at 3:23 this afternoon." Carla worked at the sheriff's office, and now she talked over Maria's wail. "It's okay," Carla said. "It's okay."

Once, when they were commuting to work, Maria's car hit black ice and began to spin. Carla murmured instructions like a birth coach and saved Maria from panic. When Paul bought the first gun and started to appear in the middle of the night to stand outside Maria's window, Carla showed up with a tool chest and changed the locks.

"You're Sahari's mother," Carla said when Maria complained that she couldn't protect Sahari from her parents, that a stepmother had no rights. "You're all she has."

Maria rolled on the floor. She felt like a dog struck by a car, legs kicking air. She ran back into the forest and flung herself onto the rain-damp moss. That terrifying sound was coming from her, and she could not stop the howling.

When Sahari left for work at six-thirty that morning, it was still dark. Another day without sunshine or daylight or meaningful human contact. Was this what it was like to be an adult? Sit in an office all day, file papers and answer phones, cruise the Internet, pretend she belonged here. The work day was not yet over, but everyone else had left early except for the other work-study student, a cheerful and skeletal receptionist.

"Leaving early?" Missy asked. Although Missy acted friendly, Sahari was sure she despised her.

"Screw it," Sahari said. "I already worked more today than any of these middle-aged, sit-on-your-butt-all-day government employees."

"Oh!" Missy sat up straight, her blush like clown circles on her thin cheeks. "Hot date?"

"Fucked up date," Sahari said, slamming the door behind her.

Daddy's Buddhist name was Kuo Yu, his birth name Paul Joseph. "My parents left our upbringing to the Mother Church," Daddy said. Sahari wondered what else Mother Church did to Daddy. One of Daddy's grade school teachers showed up in the media, millions of dollars in settlements. Daddy refused to discuss it.

Instead, he purchased a gun.

"This is my power time," he said.

"What do you expect?" Maria asked. "He's a triple Scorpio."

"What are you to me now?" Sahari asked Maria then. And Maria always said "Whatever you want or need. I'm here for you." Only she wasn't. She escaped. "I don't need platitudes," Sahari said. "I need something definitive and permanent."

"You won't get that from me," Maria said.

As soon as Sahari left work, her mood lifted. Walmart loomed in the space previously claimed by an old-growth forest. That's what she needed. She was living in her mother's trailer, everything she owned in a cardboard box. She parked in the far corner of the lot. Another of Maria's teachings: Any exercise is better than none.

Inside the warm store, Sahari wandered the aisles, picking up objects, touching them from all angles, smelling them, holding them up to her body. Maria hated shopping, wanted only to get in and out as quickly as possible. She had never set foot in a Walmart. Sahari's mother, Peggy, could spend the entire day. She could live here. Store security guards often followed her, as they followed Sahari now. To spite them, Sahari lingered in the automotive section, lifting packages of freshener and swinging them back and forth as if to sanctify the aisle.

In checkout, flooded with shame, she watched the clerk scan her purchases: Maybelline concealer, purple lip gloss, peppermint breath lozenges, blueberry air freshener, a three-pack. And, in the ever-hopeless attempt to placate Daddy, a jug of motor oil. "You're stupid about cars," Daddy said. "Everyone should carry motor oil and a kit of tools." Well, yes, and she was also a spendthrift and a money drunk, as Daddy shouted when he said she should pay his mortgage. And then, biggest insult to Daddy, she moved back in with her mother.

And now she was going to be late. Daddy would say she was passive aggressive.

He was probably right about that, too.

From the outside, the cottage Daddy moved into after he and Maria split up looked tidy. Bob, the black and white springer spaniel, was there, but Daddy was not. Weird. He wouldn't go on a walk without Bob.

"Oh God," Sahari whispered. "Please, no."

Maria dialed Sahari's mother. "Doggy's at work," Peggy said in her nasal voice. She insisted on calling Sahari this nickname. "You never changed a diaper," she told Maria. "You don't know how bad she smelled."

"Is there a message?" Peggy's voice claimed her right to know, her biological possession of Sahari's business.

Maria tightened her throat so she wouldn't cry. "Just ask her to call me right away." Maria collapsed across the bed she built after she and Paul split up and she moved into this shack on her parents' property.

The phone rang. At the sound of Flor's voice, so soothing and filled with love, Maria sobbed.

"But Honey, Paul's fine," Flor said. "I saw him last week. He looked great!"

"I've got to go," Maria said.

"I know Paul," Flor said. "I'm sure he's telling jokes."

"Mama, he's dying."

"No, no," Flor said. "I want you to know he's fine."

When Paul's phone rang, Sahari answered in her work voice. "Hello," she said. "Yes, this is she." It was Angela Johnson, a nurse and mother of a girl Sahari grew up with. "How did you know I was here?"

"You should get here right now while your father's still conscious." Sahari thought of how Angela knew her daughter was being molested, and didn't do anything about it. "Can you get someone to be with you?"

"I'm fine," Sahari said. She needed to clear the scattered items in Daddy's bedroom, or Daddy would be mad. Pans and juice to the kitchen. Dirty jeans and shirts and socks into the washing machine. She could not force herself to touch the blanket. She turned off the lights. Bob leaned against her leg, and she stroked his silky fur. "Owning a pet prolongs your life," Daddy said.

The waiting room was cold, empty, and seemingly sterile, but Peggy was a nurse there until her license was revoked, and Sahari knew the place was crawling with staph. Her vision blurred, and the edges became fuzzy. A television was bolted to the wall, the sound off. She fixed on the noise of the clock, the color of the chairs, her yellow blouse and flowered skirt. She didn't remember calling anyone, but relatives and friends started to arrive. She wished they would leave.

Daddy would hate a public spectacle.

"Maria?" Sahari was whispering.

"Where are you?"

"Hospital."

"Who's there?"

"People. I don't know. I wish they would all go away."

"How is he?"

"He's in a lot of pain."

"Have you talked with him?"

"Sort of." Sahari was sinking into thick mud, breathing out final words. "They're really

busy. With him.”

“Honey, how are you? What do you want me to do?”

“There’s nothing you can do.”

“I’ll come get you.”

“No. I want to conserve my resources. My mom’s coming. You don’t need to come. I’m fine.”

Maria called her sister. When Ana was in her twenties, her husband died. Ana sat holding him that entire afternoon, both of them drenched with his blood. Ana would know what to do.

“I need to be there,” Maria said. “Sahari needs me.”

“That’s her mother’s job,” Ana said. “You don’t need to be around those people.”

“What I need isn’t important now.”

“You’ve done everything you can,” Ana said. “Now it belongs to the family.”

“Isn’t Sahari my family?”

“Not anymore,” Ana said.

Sahari wandered the hospital. On every floor, she visited a restroom, turning the hand dryers on again and again, warming her hands. She stared into the mirrors. If she was a filial daughter, as the Buddhists taught, she’d be crying. From a couch in the vast main lobby with its ornate skylight, she watched the rain like a cat watching birds, her head turned toward any movement or sound.

As if setting off for a long sea voyage, Maria packed boxes of food. She folded shirts, jeans, socks and underwear and stuffed them into her grey duffel. She tucked away creams for morning and for night, razors for shaving legs and armpits, witch hazel and cotton pads, and a sack of oranges. Then she left a message on Claire’s voicemail. In Seattle, she always stayed with Claire, but she wondered if it was right in a situation like this.

Claire called back immediately. “Of course,” she said. “Stay as long as you want. Sahari too. Make this your home.” Like all Maria’s friends, Claire acted as if Sahari was Maria’s daughter. About two in the morning, Maria finally climbed into bed. Just as she was falling asleep, the phone rang.

“I, you,” Peggy began. Her voice was slurred.

“Where are you?”

“I couldn’t take it,” Peggy said. “I had to leave. I’ve wished that man dead a million times, and here I am trying to save him.”

“Why aren’t you with Sahari?”

“They fucked everything up. They intubated him.” Maria refused to ask what this meant. With Peggy, as with Paul, it was safest not to engage. Stay quiet. Don’t become prey. If they shock you or make you cry out, you’re through. “I want you to

take over," Peggy said. "She needs someone with her."

"Why not you?"

"From the moment he seized, he was in reptilian brain." The phone went dead.

Maria had no memory of how she reached Seattle. She navigated hospital row, the hilltop studded with medical facilities. As she circled in on the parking lot below the hospital, she willed away her panic. She drove through surging traffic to reach the circular descent of the parking garage that wound deeply into the earth. An entire day had vanished, and she was not where she belonged: With Sahari. In the rear view mirror, she glimpsed her own red-streaked face.

Once inside the vast hospital, she became hopelessly lost. Grey walls and corridors stretched without markings or signs. She pushed the button for an elevator and then selected 3, Intensive Care. The elevator opened onto long curving corridors, and the few people who passed moved without eye contact, their bodies signaling not to talk. The door to Intensive Care was locked. A blue-clad man brushed past her on his way out. "You can't go in there," he said.

"I know someone who's in there."

He gestured toward a telephone attached to the wall. "Read the instructions," he said, and he hurried down the corridor.

The electronic doors swung open, and Maria walked in like a rescue worker in her bright yellow raincoat. Beneath the domed skylight in the middle of the lobby, they moved into each other's arms.

"Do you want to see him?" Sahari asked.

"They wouldn't let me," Maria said.

"Oh, I go there all the time," Sahari said, as if she'd been there for weeks. Beside Sahari, Maria felt shriveled and small. Sahari's hair was pulled back tightly. Her face was pale, as if someone had drained all the blood from her body, but her lips were purple and her eyes carefully lined with matching paint.

"Have you eaten?" In the years Maria struggled with weight, Flor always greeted her this way, and Maria had despised her for it. Now it seemed the most essential question.

"I'm not hungry," Sahari was starved. She just didn't want Maria to pay.

"When did you last eat?"

"Oh, lunch yesterday I guess." They had reached the ICU, and Sahari picked up the phone. "Daughter," she said. "Paul." Then she pushed open the doors. "No, *they* ordered sandwiches earlier," Sahari said. "The family has food. I'm fine."

The ICU was dimly lit, like one of Daddy's Buddhist shrines, quiet except for a rhythmic pumping sound. Blue-clad staff glanced up and then returned to their work. "I can't stay here," Sahari said. "I start to faint. Like my eyes are bleeding." She rubbed her face. "Is that bad of me?"

"There aren't any rules for how you feel."

"Are you sure?" Sahari moved past doorways that opened onto shriveled bodies bedecked with tubes and wires.

Paul looked like a fallen old growth cedar. His body was swollen, and blood seeped from his ears, his nose, and the pores of his skin. Even the panther tattoo that covered his forearm appeared to be bleeding.

Maria made it look so easy, just walk right up and touch it. Him. Oh my God, after everything he'd done to her, Maria still felt forgiveness and love.

"I've got to get out of here," Sahari said.

"Just give me one minute." Maria touched the tip of Paul's head, and Sahari rocked from one foot to the other. She was like a lover; she wanted Maria to herself.

"I'm sorry," she said as they pushed out the double doors.

"You need caffeine and fresh air," Maria said. "I'm taking you for a walk." That was Maria's solution for everything.

"I can't leave. If he dies, it's my fault."

Maria led Sahari down flights of stairs to the hospital basement, where a tiny window was cut into the wall of the long hallway. A kind-faced man gazed into their eyes.

"Two double shorts," Maria said. The machine hissed, and the man handed them tiny cups. "The holy sacrament," Maria said, lifting her cup and then downing the contents. "Now let's get out of here."

In the family room, Paul's parents, siblings, and cousins chatted as if they'd chosen this particular time and place for a family picnic. The room smelled of stale pizza and French fries. Trays of withered vegetables, congealed dips, and sodas littered the tables and floor.

"You can't leave," Papa said. Everyone pointed to a tiny television attached high on a wall. "There's a killer on a rampage."

"We've got a big dog," Sahari said. "Maria brought Dylan."

When Sahari was with her, Maria lost her usual ceaseless pulse of anxiety. Sahari oriented her and brought out an inner strength. Over the years, she and Sahari were I hostage to Paul's rage and Peggy's upheaval. Maria had relied on a fierce instinct to protect, but that wasn't necessarily love. Maybe, as Peggy and Paul repeatedly told her, mothers knew better how to communicate with children they'd carried inside.

When they reached the car, Dylan jumped out and stretched. Maria clipped his leash onto his collar and headed quickly north on Broadway. When Sahari was small, Maria worked through guides to Pacific Northwest trails, a different path every weekend. "Pick up the pace," Maria would say, and Sahari never dared complain. It was drizzling lightly, and soon they were sweating, a combination of heat and cold. The oversized dog offered a sense of safety as they navigated between lurching men

and clusters of students. The air smelled of incense, gyros and sweat.

"I wish your Dad was nicer to you," Sahari said. "You should stand up to him. Sometimes if you snap back at people, they're more hesitant to be rude."

"What about yours?"

"Daddy and I were making up," Sahari said. A woman leaned against a concrete wall and murmured into her hand. At every intersection, Sahari stepped out in front of traffic, and the dog tugged Maria to follow.

"When was that?"

"Just a few days ago. Can you believe this? Daddy called and said he was sorry." Sahari touched Maria's arm.

"So you talked and it was okay?"

"He wasn't weird or anything. We were going to have dinner. At Silverwater." Sahari and Maria exchanged glances and laughed. The night Sahari moved out, Paul asked what she intended to cook for dinner. When Sahari suggested Silverwater, he shouted, "You just want to go to restaurants, like Maria, and waste all your money."

Sahari stopped dead in her tracks. "We'd better turn around now," she said.

"You need to eat," Maria said. "There's nothing our presence can do at the hospital."

When the waitress approached, Maria's brain refused to generate responses, but the familiar rituals of water, tea, and menus seemed to soothe Sahari. "California rolls and a bowl of *udon*," she told the waitress. "To share." When the sushi arrived, Maria fed Sahari a California roll, and Sahari pressed her knees against Maria. "I was really hungry," she said. "I didn't think I'd be able to eat."

"You have to keep eating," Maria said, although she hadn't touched a bite herself. "You need strength."

"He's not dying."

"I know you don't want him to die," Maria said. "I don't either."

"He can't die," Sahari said. "I'm too stupid."

"Why do you say that?" The waitress cleared away the bowl, plates and chopsticks and poured green tea into tiny cups. On a television screen behind the counter, a squadron of police, guns drawn, surrounded a man.

"In the emergency room. I was stupid. I didn't know what to say to him."

"He was conscious?"

"Oh yes, but he couldn't see. His eyes were, like, staring, and rolling around."

"Did he talk?"

"He was begging for something to drink, but they wouldn't let him have anything." Sahari sipped at her tea. "He was sweating and shaking."

"Could you touch him?"

"I touched his hand. He seemed so desperate. Then he started shaking so much

he almost fell off the bed, and everyone was working on him and someone shoved me away. 'Get out, just get the hell out,' they said, and I heard him scream."

"Did you say goodbye?"

"I told him I loved him. And he said he loved me too." Color had returned to Sahari's cheeks, and she looked into Maria's eyes. "But he's not going to die." As they walked back along Broadway, Sahari seemed calmer. "Everyone's going to be mad," she said. "Don't leave me alone with them." In the hospital restroom, Sahari applied make-up, and Maria envied her. She could put on mascara without concern that it might soon smear down her face like a clown. "If I'm around them, I might have to leave," Sahari said. "You have to come with me, no matter what." She began to pluck hairs from the arch of each brow.

"They all think I'm bad. I'm sure that's what Daddy told them." Sahari covered her face with her hands.

"You're the grieving daughter," Maria said. "Just gaze off sadly, and they'll respect it."

As dusk fell, an official evicted the visitors, and by nine, the lobby was empty.

"Let's say good night to Paul," Maria said.

"I don't want to."

"You can stay here, then," Maria said.

Paul's body had continued to swell, and his face was no longer recognizable. In underwear and knee socks, his body was exposed for all to see. Maria stood erect, as if at attention, near Paul's left arm. His panther tattoo was faded to pinpoints of ink.

"I've got to get this swelling down," the nurse said. She left, and almost instantly an alarm shrieked. She hurried back in and re-set some dials. "His blood pressure dropped," the nurse said, making eye contact for the first time.

"Can he hear us?"

"Hearing's the last thing to go," the nurse said. "But with all this padding and how deeply he's sedated, no. Probably not." She touched his shoulder and moved outside for a muffled consultation.

"I want that man to live," a man said in a fierce voice.

In the morning, Claire made coffee in a French press. There was never anything to eat in her house, but it didn't matter because when they went anywhere, even just for an afternoon, Maria packed for a week.

"Do you want to hear messages, or do you want more coffee?" Claire asked.

"Coffee," Maria said, but the messages were dire. Overnight, Paul's organs began to fail. "He had to know, on some level, that this was coming," Maria said. On the street outside Claire's cottage, someone had smashed the windows of every car but Maria's. Sahari's relatives milled around the lobby or clustered in groups of two or three. Then

Peggy swept into the lobby and walked quickly towards Maria.

"Where's Doggy?" she asked. Maria looked around, but Sahari had dropped her purse and vanished. Peggy seized Maria's arm. She smelled of chocolate and cigarette smoke. "You don't want to be there when he dies," she said. "Don't let the Doggy go in." Tears streamed down her face and soaked the collar of her thick pink turtleneck.

Maria shook off her hand, and picked up Sahari's purse. "I'm going to stay with Sahari," she said. She found her way to the ICU. People crowded into Paul's cubicle.

"Did the wife get to say goodbye?" a nurse asked.

"Yes, she did," someone said, and Maria wondered if they meant Peggy.

"It's over," someone said then.

Sahari ran from the room. Maria ran after her to the glass entry doors of the lobby, where Peggy stood on the sidewalk taking deep drags on her cigarette.

"Come on, Doggy," Peggy said, helping Sahari into the back seat of the car as if she was a child. "We're done here."

"Wait," Maria said. "Her purse," but Peggy climbed into the car and they pulled away from the curb, vanishing into the early morning traffic.

TO CYNTHIA IN THE CITY OF LOVE

Bill Tremblay

Our trip to Paris is like my dreams where I travel through a city as "the seeing-eye."

Travel. As a child my mother would say "travie" as she spoke *quebecois*, the secret language my parents used to argue in.

I asked her, "Does it mean 'to travel?'" "No," she said, "it means hard work. Like in the factory. You lift and sweat and come home your body aching."

Later I see the word "travail" in the Old Testament listed as one of God's curses upon Adam and Eve, painful labor building arks or pyramids for men, agony of birth for women. Travaille.

In my dreams there's not much I can do about what goes on; it's an estranged version of recent events with people from the central casting office of the collective unconscious as extras. My job is to see, as in understand. perceive, grasp, get it. Ah.

We fly from Denver to Charlotte, NC, first. Our stomachs tell us to have a little lunch.

Seated in the dining area Cynthia says, "Don't look now, but there's a guy behind you wearing a doom hat." "What?" "A man in a black baseball cap that says in white letters 'DOOM.'" "Is it some portent." "Who knows?"

All night long as we plow through the thin air we watch the same movie about old English people learning that life and love are over only when they're over and not to quit on themselves. While the sun shines, while there's a moon for dancing, make death take you, it says.

Cyn and I arrive, book into our hotel near Strasburg and Sainte Denis.

The building dates from the late 18th Century, but it's owned by an American company.

The basement is where breakfast is. The food is great but some doorways are bricked in. Signs say, "Sans Issue." We look it up in our French dictionary. It means "No Exit." Holy Moses. The title of Jean-Paul Sartre's harrowing play.

Which was much in my mind when I was writing *Duhamel*. A man and two women—one of whom is a lesbian, the other a woman who takes offense at everything the man says, which prompts the lesbian to seduce her. She likes the words but not the touch. She likes the touch of a man, and there's only one man, but he's a brute. So the lesbian tries again, and fails, and the man tries again, but fails, This goes on forever. Hell for Eternity. Round and round. Desire ever new and inevitably frustrating.

Why did I understand this even as a child? I tried to make my little friends like me. The more I tried the more I failed because they could sense the desperation in me, the trying.

That's how it went. Try, fail. Try, fail. I learned at last to be impatient, to see the failure before the attempt. Impatient to get through now, to get on to the next try, to go somewhere else, somewhere new, where there were people I might not fail with, a true American, a pioneer leaving Massachusetts for Ohio and Ohio for Nebraska and Nebraska for Oregon, Impatient. The bear always going over the mountain.

We go out on Strasburg and down to the intersection. It's an African section. People living in the streets. Kids play soccer in the alleyways. Good noise. Children playing, *Comme se va* among the grown-ups.

There's a theatre. The marquee advertises a play, *E'tre ou Non*. To be, or not. Giant bearded Shakespeare looms over the roofs of grocery stores, hair salons, electronics shops above the heavily trafficked street. There's an article in the paper that says Shakespeare may have smoked marijuana. Traces in clay pipes dug up from his garden. He takes a toke, inhales. Eyelids droop. He writes: "*My lips, two blushing pilgrims, ready stand ... to smooth that rough touch with a tender kiss.*"

We head toward a restaurant that stands under the sign of a happy hippopotamus. We try the salmon salad. As we sign I say to Cynthia, "There's no line for a tip." A guy in the next table leans over smiling. "It's not the American way of business we do in France." "But if you could write in a tip the tips would be bigger," I say. "The restaurants pay the waiters better," he smiles. "They don't make the customer pay for what they don't pay the waiters, you see?" *Comme ci comme ça*.

A cash register rings in my head only it's a gateway into an infinity of numbers moving like iridescent subway cars through each other in what amounts to massive rivers in the darkness between galaxies. The American way of business. Find a way to make your customers pay not only for the dinner but for the waiter, whom you pay at less-than minimum. Hmmm.

Back in the room I try to explain my childhood yet again to Cynthia in the City of Love.

When I was a child I tried to comprehend God's methods—if not his purpose—in making some happy, others not. The happy ones like flashing random fire-fly lights. The not, the contextual darkness. How does this work?

He knows all, not a sparrow falls, &c. Not simply that God uses laws of physics. Miracles contravene. But for everyday matters involving prayers for all kinds of blessings, the everyday twists and turns of what some would call "fate," the telegrams

with news of changed fortunes by the billions every second, God accomplishes this “in mysterious ways.” “Let’s enter the mysteries, then.”

“No, no, my child. Leave fate to faith.”

When I was eight I wanted to be the one who sees how God does all this. Some huge mind-boggling switch board? For some reason in Paris I start remembering my ruminations about dreams which sometimes involve long frightening flights through the cosmos.

Perhaps it can only be expressed in a forbidden language like French.

My parents strike me with a peculiar form of aphasia—I can only know the names of persons, places, things or ideas but not the names of actions. French, if it can be said to exist, is full of ruptures for me. Later I see Chinese poems. Face. Wine. I. Dusk. Blossoms. Clothes. Moon. Stream. Birds. People. Not. Li Po.

I dream a red and yellow supernova blows me through a galaxy shaped like a hoop. I find myself floating above a planet. Slowly at first then with gathering speed I streak through its atmosphere—my screams of fear turn into a fireball—and I am born to witness the following dream, *r/ve*, reverie:

a martial arts teacher and his acolyte both in black pants and tunics circle each other
a mirrored room with hardwood floors

student launches a kick to the teacher’s throat which breaks his trachea

choking teacher falls to his knees, clutching his throat with both hands, dead

I ask the student “Why did you kill your teacher?”

His eyes neon red. “Because I am the teacher.”

I am on fire with the idea that I will direct a movie about the killer fighting an upstart challenger who will come not to revenge the original teacher’s death but to restore God’s order. “People will not be able to resist the compulsion to see this movie!” A moment later I add, “I’ll be able to finance my own projects!” Wake.

We go to the Louvre Friday. Through room after room of Egyptian statues and sarcophagi. It’s all making the right representation, building the right tomb, killing death.

I collapse on a bench, sweating, gasping for air. I have dry heaves. In such pain—in my arms and chest. I had an infarction several years ago and have a stent in my heart. Can't move. I'm dying for sure.

We leave the museum somehow into the long-bearded Persians, take a taxi back to the hotel, a green Peugeot, stuck in Paris traffic. Narrow street, Huge tourist bus blocking the way.

I'm trying to tell Cynthia how much I love her, what I'm grateful for [that we were friends before we were lovers] before I die in the back seat. I smell the black leather.

A pedestrian is swearing at a motorcyclist in French. Cynthia gives me a vague translation: "Who the hell are you tell me to get out of your way! "

It's still the world. A congested heart. Stressed. Full of people shouting their rage at each other. Honking horns. Why did I ever want to make representations of this madness? Despite it all I still love my crazy fellow humans.

I wish I could get out of the car, walk to the sidewalk, breathe deep, do my *t'ai chi* form. It's what I do with my impatience.

I have no idea where I am. Cynthia's holding my hand.

Tears are rolling down my face and I'm laughing because I'm thinking, 'I go to Paris out of some weird feeling that I'm French and I ought to go back to before the beginning and sure enough as soon as I get here I have a heart attack.'

The irony is that for three years I've been trying to relax, to overcome my impatience. I'm sitting in this taxi. I can't tell the driver to go around. He doesn't speak English. Maybe his turban doesn't even understand French. Maybe I couldn't even tell him, "Hey, I'm dying here." It's just too noisy and polluted, sucking diesel smoke. I've been kidding myself. I can't relax by trying to relax.

My stomach is cramping. I'm afraid I'll throw up in the back seat. "I feel awful," I say.

I see my condition. Even though I may be in my last minutes I still want to scream, "Get me out of here!" What if I am, as my mother would say with a giggle, "Tout fini"?

I turn to Cynthia. "Tell my friends helping me with my projects to take their time. A dead man is not impatient."

I'm in a nightmare. This isn't real. We get to the hotel. I collapse in the lobby. The concierge calls an ambulance. I cell-phone Michael and leave a message saying, "Sorry I can't make it. I think I'm checking out, my friend."

We call our travel agent. He contacts my cardiologist. Her advice is, go to the hospital. The "pompiers" arrive quickly. [EMTs are an off-shoot of the fire-brigades of old, those who literally "pumped" the water through the hoses, hence *pompiers*.]

Given a choice between "the American hospital" and a public one called Lari-Boissiere.

I lie on a gurney as they take me out of the ambulance. A domed ceiling at the Emergency entrance. When I stare up I see someone has written in pink crayon, "Joyeux." "Doom." Now "Joy." Merry. What kind of message is that? Doom Joy?

I am a child. Someone has sent me a Christmas card with the words Joyeux Noël.

The waiting room is a scene straight out of "Marat/Sade." Thirty or so people with open wounds and broken limbs. We wait for hours. Groans like an under-song to a madman's screams.

One of the beat-up drunks—big lumps on his cheeks and forehead—wakes up. He looks at me as if he knows me. He swings his legs over the side of the gurney and slowly salutes me in that French way—palm outward—so I salute him back. All very ceremonious. I say in one of the many phrases everybody picks up just being alive "Bon chance."

He seems to take heart, jumps off the gurney, and staggers out the swinging doors. Checks himself out. I imagine him bursting through the swinging doors of the bar he was drinking at before somebody lumped him up like a sack of Idaho potatoes.

Cynthia is with me. A nice conversation in English with a black guy from the Cape Verde islands who lived in Portugal not far from where we lived when eu era um professor da Universidade de Lisboa, Faculdade de Letras, 1979. Los Palmas. La Playa.

Finally they take me into an examining room and run me through tests. Echograms, blood tests &c. for indications of heart failure.

The doctors and nurses are all nice, though they kid me about being American. "Americans. Very demanding. No patience," says a young man in white. "I know. I worked at the American hospital. Awful. I quit. I don't like the American way of medicine. Crazy."

They wheel in a fold-up bed so Cynthia can sleep in the same room in Cardiologie.

They give me a pill and I sleep a dream:

a wall of blue tiles is the King of Persia, a blue lion,

the number 17035 which is part of the code of how God distributes desires and actions, successes and failures to the people of earth.

I find myself walking through the reedy shallow waters near the banks of the Tigris River.

A white snake blocks my way. I try to lift it out of the water but it bites me.

Two swollen blisters on the palm of my hand. I pull a knife from my belt, slice the blisters.

Blinking fireflies flutter from my wounds into the river.

I find myself on a sand hill outside medieval Baghdad. minarets, stone steps, climbing to a castle, a hotel, people carrying canvas book bags by handles walk up marble staircase like in an Escher. I walk up but stop half-way, thinking Escher must've been trying to represent the *sans issue* of understanding God's ways, how He distributes dreams, actions, consequences, fates, various dooms and dead-ends.

Next morning they give me a mild anesthetic and puncture an artery in my right wrist. "Why is my hand on fire?" I ask the doctor. "Drug to dilate artery," he says from behind mask. "Oh."

He pushes a tube with a camera up my arm and into my heart. "Shouldn't I be asleep?" The doctor ignores me. I lose consciousness.

I dream I'm in a classroom with maybe 20 students. "What is a poem?" the visiting poet who sits in a white porcelain tub covered to his throat in water asks.

"A poem is a group of words that give delight by being an extraordinary view of ordinary things."

"That's pretty abstract," the VP says. "Try again."

"A poem is a black, white and brown cow smiling as she sees people enjoying her milk in their coffee."

"Better," he says as he sloshes around in the soapy water. "And that is the cow's reward, the smiles of the farmer and his wife. That's all there is. I know because I'm the man with a saxophone in his throat."

The result is that my stent is clean and clear, my arteries, no trace of cholesterol. A bad case of dehydration from all-night trans-Atlantic flight, going to big museum too soon.

They release me about the same time they took me in but not before Cynthia has a run-in with a guy in the accounting office. “I am sick of you people who can’t speak French.” He’s so angry he spits. “And your insurance stinks!”

I get back into my clothes. We *marche* down the corridors to the office. There he is, the man who made Cynthia cry.

“You hurt my wife’s feelings. Apologize to her,” I say.

“Je ne comprends pas,” he says.

I fumble in my back pocket for my wallet, pull out my credit card, shove it toward him. “You understand this?”

“*Mais oui*,” he says standing up, walking us to the Bursar’s office.

And out we go into the parking lot. Cynthia says, as we wait for a taxi, “I thought I was in the movie, ‘Monty Python and the Holy Grail.’ Any second you were going to call him a ‘French pig-dog’ and the two of you would end up in a fist-fight. He would fling a brindle cow at you or something.”

We nevertheless had a great time. Loved riding in the bateaux on the Seine. Arthur Rimbaud goes to the steering wheel, but there is nothing. Rien.

An actual breeze. The D’Orsay. I practically fall on the floor and worship these paintings I’d loved since I was 17 in New York. Degas, Renoir, Manet, Monet, Sisley.

We drink a lot of bottled water and stay out of the hospital.

On Bastille Day we go to the big parade, stand at the corner where the church of Madeleine is. Each of the regiments march by singing its own song. Overhead the fighter jets making red, white and blue smoke trails. Cynthia draws my attention to a group of students singing “the Marseillaise” carrying a big white flag with a peace dove on it.

Long talks in our hotel room—as the Iran nuclear deal and the Greek economic crisis endlessly loop on the only English-speaking channel in Paris. But we see a wonderful production of “Carmen” on RT. I read *A Path with Heart* to myself, passages to Cynthia. She discovers the word “dyscalculia,” which explains why she’s always had trouble with math and can’t tell left from right.

I know how I deal with that—signs. Our hotel in Paris is on the corner of daylight. Literally, there’s a sign on the corner of Strasburg and Goublier that says DAYLIGHT.

I get furious over the political news. Feel sorry for the Greeks. Have no sympathy for the Germans. "Part of the whole neo-liberal global economic tyranny!" I shout.

Cyn gets upset. I finally see her face; her forehead wrinkled with woe.

"What's the matter?"

"The matter is ... when you rant like that it hurts me."

I feel a concussion like thunder. In my chest. The shock runs up my throat to my eyes. "I never want that."

"I depend on you. And when you yell like that ... it scares me."

"Why haven't you said anything?"

"What else am I supposed to do?" She smiles a little. "I don't want to tell you you sound like a left-wing Archie Bunker."

"Mon dieu."

She wipes my face with her hand.

"I'll try never to do it again."

"Not try. Do."

"You sound like Yoda," I say as I kiss her.

Reading Kornfield helps. People are screaming at each other in the alley-way behind the hotel. In English! Crazy. How am I ever going to find some peace in my aging jock-strap of a heart?

I get up and do some *t'ai chi*. Try to breathe into the *tan tien*. It helps. I try to say some "loving kindness" prayers, imagine being on intimate terms with everyone in Paris, magically can speak French. I see it for a fleeting moment—why I shout, fighting mad when I see these pompous asses pontificating on television about Greece's duty to repay its debts—I'm 10 years old and a gang of my schoolmates has surrounded me and is knocking me around. "Do our homework or we'll beat the shit out of you!"

Goldman Sachs, JP Morgan, Duetsche Bank, they're all great big bullies deep down in

my mind somewhere, and I'm going to fight them, I am sick of their pushing me around, making me feel like being smart in school is a bad thing. I start working at Weld & Beck's Feed & Grain Store, hoisting 100-pound bags of chicken feed, wheeling five of them on a hand-truck to the elevator where they're lifted up into the cavernous dark loft where mysterious birds fly like brooding thoughts in the grain-dusty air. In September I start fighting them, one by one, I break my hand fighting them and I don't stop until they leave me alone. *Sacre bleu!*

Kornfield says what I need is a good cry. Many of them. Flush the rage with tears.

Which is what we say when we stand in La Chapelle in the colored light from stained-glass windows we are told were made to house the remains of "the True Cross," *vera cruz, vrais crois*.

Then as if plucked by pincers from the sky we are in the dark again. Mono-song of engines. Before us on little screens pictures of towering pink clouds and a shaft of gold sunlight beaming down onto ragged timbers and in a tracking shot a man in a 19th Century suit daubing white foam with a brush, making representations of a shipwreck. John Ruskin walks up. "Sublime," he says, "sublime."

Art is the joy we make out of the doom we live.

Black Crush

Adam “Bucho” Rodenberger

I felt my breath mingle with that of the others. The basement was dank and humid, impervious to light of any sort, the color of pure pitch. We all struggled to stay silent in the dark, but the soft rustle of fabric on fabric, shoulder against shoulder, chest against back...these sounds felt magnified to us, like wild animals traipsing through a dead forest. A soft whimper came from a corner of the room, a sympathetic hushing from another.

This was our designated place to hide. Nada, the wife of our grocer, had some experience with these kinds of things and arranged it all. Having immigrated from Abkhazia shortly after the conflict in 1998, she understood perfectly what self-preservation meant. When the separatists had begun their own form of ethnic cleansing, she and her brothers found themselves alone; her father had taken to the streets to fight back (and eventually died) while her mother had bled to death due to a stray bullet as they all tried to escape.

I remember the first time she told me what it was like to leave her mother lying there in the street as her brothers tugged her towards their escape. No burial, no ceremony, the matriarch left unceremoniously to the carrion birds. This was life for many outside America's borders and I realized then we had been sheltered. How could I respond to her tearless eyes and her quivering lips as she spoke? What experience did I have that could have alleviated her pain? What would Aiden or Aria do in that same situation now? She was a tough woman and the only person I knew for sure down in this dank hole of a hiding place. But I trusted her, and I assumed everyone else down here did as well. Or, at least, she trusted them and that was enough.

The smell of soap mingled with ash and dirt. I held my nose and tried not to sneeze. Someone shuffled their feet, a teardrop splashed against the floor, a finger brushed an eyelash from a cheek, a quiet worried sigh. Silence could be deafening when it meant the difference between living and dying, when it meant keeping one's bloodline intact to perforate the width and breadth of history, if only in the tiniest of margins.

How long do you think we'll need to stay here? a voice whispered in my ear. I shrugged, briefly forgetting they couldn't see me. The voice was deep, a man's. I could smell the nicotine on his breath as it passed my face.

Shut. Up.

A woman's voice, a concerned hiss devoid of anger.

Aiden, my ten year-old son, stood in front of me, my hands draped across his chest, his fingers clutching mine painfully tight. I could feel his heart thumping loud and hard beneath the skin. I ran a hand through his hair to calm him, to let him know he was safe. But he's a smart boy and his heart never wavered, never stopped beating strong

despite my attempts to soothe him.

His mother and sister were elsewhere in a similar hidden situation. The *harpsound* rang across the city and she and I scattered to find the children after kissing each other for what, we hoped, was not the last time. We had talked long into the night after the kids had been put to bed about what we would have to do when the time came. We knew we couldn't let sentimentality take over when the *harpsound* came. Let other families be careless in their protection; I couldn't afford to put my emotions before the safety of my children. Jessica had allowed only a single tear loose before running off to find Aria while I ran to find Aiden.

We'd practiced it numerous times in the weeks building up to the occupation, first deciding on our proximity to the children, which became complicated as communication by phone or email had been deemed illegal for civilian use but legal for any member of the military or political leaders still left in charge. For simplicity's sake, we each chose a particular child as our own personal responsibility. We each were to know where they were at all times of the day, who they were with, what they were doing, where they would be going, so on. Once we had the children adhering to a particular schedule, Jessica and I were able to breathe a little easier. One problem of many solved to a certain degree.

Then we had to sit the children down and ingrain in them the idea of self-preservation. The children stared down at the floor or looked at each other, nervous and unsure, as we spoke, but we could tell by the downturned lips and furrowed brows that they were listening. And they were scared, but they seemed to understand what we asked of them but not why they had to know:

Don't go anywhere with anyone else.

Don't panic; we'll be there.

Don't be afraid if you hear loud sounds; fear leads to bad choices.

If you see a soldier before you see either of us, run. Your mother or I will meet you at the designated spots.

Do not get caught, do not stop running.

Some hard truths for children to hear, but we ran out of time to play it safe with the realities of the moment. I had Thomas here beside me, and that was good. I could only hope that Jessica had found Aria in time to get her hidden. I worried that Aria would be inconsolable, would unintentionally lead the soldiers to their hiding place. It's hard to get an emotional five-year old to stop crying in any situation, much less one that made silence a life or death situation.

A muffled cough from across the room, as if someone had buried their face in the fabric of their coat. A soft shuffling of feet. An exhalation of breath. Someone was whispering a prayer. I could smell sweat and fear, could feel them tickle my nose with their prickly, pungent odors. I felt Aiden's fingers clutch mine tighter, uncomfortably so. I leaned down and put my mouth to his ear.

Are you okay?

I could feel his hair against my lips as he nodded. I remembered a soft roll and an apple his mother had shoved into my pocket before we parted. I leaned down again, felt my lips against his ear.

Are you hungry?

He shook his head and I leaned back up, running my hand down the back of his neck. I wondered what he would remember of this time period when he got older. That he would get older was of no question to me (I refused to entertain the thought that he would not survive long enough to see adulthood), but the memory has a funny way of slanting the truth when the hair has gone gray and the bones a little more brittle. Recounting those stories over and over cements them into our consciousness in a way that the spoken word cannot do alone. With each recollection, the words may dissipate into the air with every breath, but the memory becomes a little clearer, a little more vivid for the telling though the memory may be incomplete.

Flashes of memory came back to me, my father standing behind me the way Aiden and I were now. Family photos, vacations, Sunday church services. The smell of his cologne barely masking the cigarette odor embedded in his clothing, yellowed fingers petting my hair. I wonder what my father would have done in this situation. Would he have taken these same measures that Jessica and I had? Would he have broken up his family this same way...?

A shuffling came from across the room, a whisper, a creak. The room fell silent again for a minute, then two. The sound of breathing through nostrils, the whistling wheeze of old age and bad habits. The air filled with guarded exhalations, aching from standing up and still for so long. It felt like the room was slowly sucking the life out of us and we were more than happy to let it. We knew that killing ourselves for a little while would allow us to truly taste the sweetness of life when we finally emerged from the dark. That first breath in daylight would be ambrosia.

In the middle of fear, you forget everything but self-preservation. You forget what music sounds like, you forget the names of friends, you forget love, you forget, for the briefest of moments, who you are beyond the immediate reflex of needing to survive, but you remember that your life is worth holding on to for a little while longer no matter how black the world around you becomes.

You forget the minutiae, the mundane, the inconsequential. You become acutely aware of the internal workings of your body; blood pumps hard and fast through every vein, artery, and capillary, expanding them all and making its way through every appendage up into a heart that takes it all in before sending it right back out. Sweat beads up in places you never believed could sweat. Your shirt sticks to your body and for some

strange moment, it is your armor against the naked. The more you wear, the safer you feel, guarded against some unknown and unforeseen danger. This is a lie of course, but this is what the irrational mind does when endorphins and the adrenaline take over. Here in the dark, everyone a possible stranger, everyone a possible traitor, this fear amplified inside me. I couldn't tell you what the room looked like. I couldn't tell you the ratio of men to women, or adults to children, former rich to former poor, but I could tell you what they smelled like collectively. I could tell you how they breathed; I could differentiate between their respiratory tics, the length and breadth of their sighs, the smell of last meals on their breath. I could tell which individuals moved more and which side of the room was better at remaining still as stone. It seemed like hours that we stood there, huddled together, one small swath of citizens sizing each other up like the blind as we waited and hoped for a cavalry instead of a firing squad.

My muscles ached, my legs close to giving out. I couldn't remember what it was like to be ten again, but I imagined Aiden's tiny body was close to exhaustion if I was under this much duress. Had I the strength or had he been smaller, I simply would have picked him up and held him against my chest while he napped in the crook of my neck, but this was impossible. I had to be content with him pressed up against me, had to be content with every inch of arm covering him to remind him I was wholly and completely there.

He was an unplanned, but wonderful, surprise to us. I had just finished my doctoral work in gothic literature studies while Jessica was working at an investment firm not far from the campus. Neither of us had planned on marriage, content to simply live together as monogamous partners. We both felt a ceremony was for the guests more than for the guests of honor, but I proposed to her in the OBGYN's office when I saw Aiden's blurry form on the screen. I couldn't help myself; I had no ring and no speech formulated when I fell to my knee, but it all felt right. Thankfully, Jessica felt it too and said yes. Two of the greatest moments of my life experienced at the same time. It was unimaginably wonderful.

Four quick years later, Aria arrived. Jessica still worked at the same investment firm, earning the bulk of our income, while I stayed at home with the kids doing freelance writing and a little translation work here and there. University jobs were scarce as most classrooms had gone digital. A single professor could give several video lectures on one day to three thousand students across the globe and still get the same academic results. The universities made money, the students earned degrees, but the teachers fell slowly by the wayside unless one knew somebody or had been grandfathered in to the profession. An ugly kind of nepotism to be sure and I still refuse to believe the students are better for the changes.

Rather than bringing us closer together, as some genuinely believe, the digital age has reinforced a kind of human disconnect by allowing us to feel we're being brought

closer together through the use of binary code realistically-contrasted computer screens. The majority of the populace socializes through their phones or their computers, seemingly never leaving their homes except to go to work. We've turned our interactions into bite (byte?)-sized moments meant to make the most of a minute. Each second maximized to fit into our "busy" schedules rather than to make our schedules work for us.

They can have it all; give me a book and a face to face conversation every time. When Aria was five, foreign hackers found their way into the U.S. economy. Wall Street was crippled beyond anything we'd ever seen, even the derivatives fiasco of 2007. The three largest banks were digitally wiped clean, effectively eliminating every bank account across the country. Some blamed the North Koreans, others blamed the Chinese. I didn't put much stock in the former, but the latter made sense as we'd caught them several times over the years trying to hack their way in to our other systems.

Imagine the 1's and 0's that stream across stock tickers and bank accounts disappeared. Imagine your lifelong savings account completely drained and absolutely no one is able to recover it. Magnify that frustration by the nearly five-hundred million people living in this country. Now imagine everyone, from the most poverty-stricken all the way up to the wealthiest, finally and actually coming to the realization that money was the only thing separating us all. Imagine all those people, side by side awash in the same anger, consumed by the same level of rage against an unseen enemy. It was emboldening to see all walks of life, all political stripes, banding together as an actual nation. It was also unimaginably depressing to see that these little pieces of green, numbered paper had kept us so distant from each other for so long. But once you unleash the hounds, it's hard to get them back in their cages if they haven't hunted down their prey. You cannot contain that level of rage with any number of rational arguments or the presence of police officers. Or so we thought as we watched unimpeded rioting and looting, the slow destruction of government buildings by tall flames of licking fire, the broadcast images of fists and objects slammed against bank windows until they spider-webbed and shattered. It is strange how quickly a revolution can turn the common man into history's remembered and revered revolutionary. Welcome to the now.

A gentle rumble arrived, shook the walls of their complacent dust. We quietly shushed one other, each assuming someone else had made the noise before we heard the rumbling grow louder with every torturous second. More dust flew about in the dark, found its way into our shallow breaths, dared us not to sneeze or cough, dared us to not betray ourselves. I imagined all of our faces turned up to the ceiling as if hoping for

some kind of heavenly reprieve as we tried to see through the floor above us. All eyes on God, all mouths stuck in silent prayer.

The rumbling became an angry growling, a metallic rhythm getting louder as it continued to vibrate the earth around us. I clutched Aiden harder, pressed him against my body as if to make him a part of me, as if to cocoon him completely from whatever was to happen. His heart pounded through his chest, his breathing quickened, his hands wrapped around mine, white-knuckled. What terror he must have been feeling that his body could barely contain it, standing here in the dark with other frightened adults. I could tell he was trying to be braver than his age should've allowed. The world was asking too much of him now.

The growl reached a feverish pitch, a thick and monstrous sound that split ear drums and wormed its way into our brains, intensifying the fear already nestled there. A repetitive *thump-duhduh-thump-duhduh-thump-duhduh-thump* added itself to the noise. My imagination reeled at the spectacle that must be, at this moment, filling our streets and boulevards. Oh but if it had remained imaginary.

I knew the sounds well, had seen firsthand the events that followed the arrival of the war machines and their army-fatigued escorts that marched on either side. I had seen the elderly crushed beneath the ever-moving track shoes, had seen their homes and businesses turned to smoke by the deafening turrets of the tanks.

The soldiers had pressed on in lockstep, faces calm and empty, as they stepped over the bodies left in the tank's wake. Armed automatons wearing our flag on their uniforms. I did not understand, would never understand, how they had turned against their own countrymen. Had none of them felt the same intense rage at the current state of affairs that affected not just a few, but *all* of us? Had none of them possessed the strength to refuse the orders handed down to them? Was there no soldier among them, raised to notice and fight injustice, who had the strength of character to remove himself from the frontline and place him or herself squarely in front of the populace like armor? I worried that the time of that kind of man was over.

The minutes ticked off, slow as midnight's leaky faucet, as we all stood there, waiting, holding breath for fear the slightest sound would give us away over the din of a thousand boots thundering across the pavement. That a sneeze or a cough would give away our position was not a ridiculous idea and I'm sure it was the only one swirling around in everyone else's minds as well. The rumble came and came, an ocean of destruction washing over the top of us, drowning us in its unending sound. I tried to picture how many troops and tanks were moving past us and could not fathom the number, could not believe the amount of people it would take to fill our streets with that sound, that heavy and uneasy moving of earth and stone.

Aiden turned around in the dark, wrapping his arms around my body and pressing his head against my waist. His body shuddered against me and soon I could feel his

tears soaking through my shirt. I leaned down to kiss his head and ran my hand through his hair. *We'll be fine*, I whispered into his ear, hoping he could hear me clearly over the noise. *So will your mother and Aria*. He nodded and wiped his eyes on my shirt and still I held him close, waiting.

I wanted to tell him that all this would pass, that all this was something he'd erase from his memory when he grew into adulthood. I wanted to make sure he understood that this wasn't normal, that normal was him running home in the streets with his sister after school. Not because they were being chased, but because some inner fire had been ignited inside them and came bursting out of their bodies in the form of innocent laughter. I wanted him to live in the blinding light of the sun rather than feel like he needed the protection of the hidden dark.

This is what I wanted to tell my son before the door was kicked in by armed men. This is what I wanted to tell my son before the silvery light of the cloudy day illuminated the basement. This is what I wanted to tell my son before the screaming started and we all pressed against each other in terror, our faces finally known to each other moments before the terror came and swallowed us whole.

The Concrete

Daniel Abbott

Joey Cane sits under a flickering porch light, gutting a Swisher, emptying stale tobacco on dew-damp grass. He blows excess fragments off the thin shell and drags his tongue across its brown skin. From a plastic sandwich baggie he empties a trail of weed and then rolls it into a blunt. He snaps open a Detroit Lions Zippo. Its flame chews the air. Joey inhales smoke and listens to the city breathe.

Nighttime in the southeast side of Grand Rapids is a symphony of sirens and squealing tires, domestic altercations, the occasional gunshot. And Joey's trained ear knows the noise of bad choices. Felonies succeeding or failing—criminals running free or leaving handcuffed in patrol cars—victims filing police reports or leaving the 'hood in body bags.

Beneath a haze of smoke, Joey watches his neighbors to the left through their open bedroom window. Joey has lived next to Frank and Nelly Page for over a year and they have never spoken a word to him, just the occasional head nod and grunt from Frank, Nelly always with a curious stare, but never so much as a smile in Joey's direction. People too consumed by their own problems to be concerned with the world.

Through the window, Joey watches Frank empty dresser drawers onto the floor. He sees him toss clothes and shoeboxes out of a closet. Then Frank leaves the room. Nelly follows, yelling, though Joey can't make out the words. There are no curtains covering the living room window on the side of the house facing Joey's porch. He watches the Pages' son, Isaac, sitting on the couch, hiding in his hooded sweatshirt, face buried in his hands. This isn't a new scene. Frank is long gone on crack cocaine and only home to binge crash, to recoup for his next pillage. Joey watches him stomp through the living room, past Isaac. He slams the front door, and then climbs into his Ford pickup, tears out of the driveway. Off into the night. Chasing that high.

Nelly opens the front door, mean-mugs the ghost of Frank's truck, and then she's back inside looking at her son, arms folded, out of excuses.

Some nights after Isaac is asleep Nelly sits outside on her porch smoking a cigarette. Other nights she leaves Isaac alone and drives away in her rusty white Dodge Shadow. Joey imagines her approaching that pink and purple house on Jefferson Street—the house with boarded windows and the sky blue door—the house where the gone ones go. Joey pictures Nelly beating on the door while a sullen Frank Page gives head to the glass dick and fills the house with the sweet stink of the Devil's smoke. He imagines her collapsed on the doorstep, head in her hands, tired of knocking and being ignored.

Joey gave his childhood to the concrete. Now he's twenty-six years old with arthritic knees and ankles. Instead of playing shooting guard for the Detroit Pistons

he's playing house with this 'hood chick, Tara James, who, if you asked any thug in the vicinity of his two-bedroom rental home on Francis Street, is the baddest bitch on the block. Joey Cane is known spitefully as the white boy who bagged her.

Joey sees Lorenzo dragging down the sidewalk, baggy jeans sagging past his ass, a thick, black belt clinging thigh high. He looks like he left his house fat and then shrunk in his clothes. And Joey swears the motherfucker has a weed detector. He lives two doors down, yet whenever Joey lights up, lo and behold: here comes Lorenzo.

"Let me smoke with you, yo." It's never a question with Lorenzo, always a statement.

He got paroled to his mother's house about a month ago after doing time in Jackson State Penitentiary for armed robbery. He can be seen daily with a forty-ounce Mickey's, walking up and down the street bullying teens for cigs, or slanging his own weed off his mother's porch while she works double shifts driving the city bus, paying the mortgage while her dead-beat son small-time hustles for cash.

"When we gonna smoke *your* weed, Lorenzo?"

"Rules is," says Lorenzo. He's five-eight, a buck eighty. Has a chipped tooth, skeptical eyes, and a head that stays on a swivel. "You don't get high off your own supply."

"No," says Joey, "you get high off mine." He grabs a lawn chair and sets it beside him. Lorenzo sits and adjusts himself so he can see the street. Relaxes into the chair like he owns the porch.

"You got balls smoking with that tether on, man," says Joey. "You ain't careful they're gonna send your ass back to Jackson."

"State of Michigan got bigger things to worry about than me getting high." Lorenzo reaches for the blunt.

Joey nods at the plastic cuff wrapped around Lorenzo's ankle. "What kind of range does that thing have?"

"I get around." They sit in silence for a moment. Lorenzo leans back in the chair watching the smoke float over his head and gather around the sputtering porch light. "What's up with Miss Thunderbooty, yo?"

"Sleeping," says Joey.

"And you out here?"

"What can I say?" says Joey. "I'm a child of the night."

"You's a goddamn fool, white boy." Lorenzo's half-laughing, half-choking on smoke. "If I was you I'd be in there waxing that ass."

"If you were me," says Joey, reaching for the blunt, hitting it, blowing smoke toward Lorenzo, "I'd be smoking your weed." He hits it again and hands the blunt back to him. "Not that it's your business, but she likes it when I wake her up," Joey says, tired of the inquiries. Lorenzo always asking his slick questions, and then running down the

block talking shit to anybody that feels like listening. "Thunderbooty," says Joey, "knows she's gonna get it when I get inside."

"Okay, white boy," says Lorenzo. Slick smile. Swivel head cocked sideways, aimed at the street.

Joey has the urge to slap him across his mouth, but knows better. He doesn't look like much, but Lorenzo Williams isn't someone you fuck with. Known to lose it over nothing, over a misconstrued glance, Lorenzo stepping up, saying, "Fuck you looking at?" ending the conversation by stomping some victim bloody with the heel of his boot. A couple weeks ago he shorted this kid, Darnell, on an ounce of weed and Darnell called him on it. That conversation ended with Lorenzo's nine millimeter Glock in the kid's mouth.

"You know the concrete's been talking about you, white boy," says Lorenzo.

"Is that right? What's it been saying?"

"Saying you were Mr. Basketball in '98. Saying you had a ride to Duke on the table and turned it down cold."

"That's right." Joey had heard the concrete talk too: saying Tara had poked a hole in his condoms with a sewing needle back then. That she'd been digging for gold, setting a trap for the white boy with the sweet jumper. He doesn't know if the story is true, but he remembers how Tara's face dropped when he told her he was staying home, taking a job at Grand Rapids Plastics, that he wanted to concentrate on being a dad, taking the road less travelled while the block shook its head, thinking *dumb motherfucker*.

"All that for Thunderbooty?"

"No," says Joey, "for Lyric."

Joey has plenty of regrets, but Lyric isn't one of them. The highlight of his day is coming home from the factory and finding his eight-year-old daughter waiting at the door, wrapping around his leg, saying, "Walk like a giant, daddy!" her brown frizzy curls bouncing as he stomps through the house beating on his chest like an ape.

Life could be worse, Joey thinks, watching his neighbors through the window, Isaac still with his head in his hands, Nelly rubbing his back, Frank past gone and heading somewhere lost. The blunt is down to ash. It hisses on the damp grass when Lorenzo flicks it and stands. "Give Miss Thunderbooty my best," Lorenzo says, gripping an invisible waist with his left hand, and slapping an invisible ass with his right. "Dumb muh fucka," Lorenzo whispers as he walks away, tugging at his pants while his boots scuff along the sidewalk.

"Loser," says Joey, after Lorenzo is out of earshot.

Though a basketball hoop is mounted to his garage, Joey hasn't picked up a ball since moving to Francis Street. Not since Lyric was born, not in the months after his decision to take a job at the plastics factory. Maybe Lorenzo had gotten under his skin

a little last night, bringing up the past, the possibilities of a bigger, brighter life. Or maybe he just ached for it: the sound of the basketball echoing off the concrete. The snap of the net. The deafening silence of the world around him.

This morning Joey dug through the boxes stacked in the garage, unpacked his childhood, and found his dusty, worn-to-peach-fuzz Spalding with the initials G.H. marked on the ball. He remembered the words of George Hessler, an eighth-grade history teacher who told Joey he would never make it to the NBA, never leave the city, never amount to shit.

Joey runs a finger over the initials and his lips curl into a nostalgic smile, remembering the hours he invested honing his skills, the sweat he'd given the concrete, picturing the face of his bitter-for-some-reason history teacher, dribbling until the initials faded from the ball, freshening them with a Sharpie when they did. Shooting before school, the court barely lit by the rising sun; after dark when the moon hardly sufficed as a floodlight; in summer covered in sweat, a farmer's tan in sleeveless shirts and sockless Chuck Taylor's; in winter shoveling off the court and shooting with stiff fingers, the ball frozen and bouncing with a heavy and hollow thunk.

But George Hessler was right. Joey has gone nowhere. As far as the world is concerned Joey Cane isn't shit. You don't get a Purple Heart for sacrificing your life to love a frizzy-haired girl. You get no accolades for being a father.

Joey doesn't know it, but Isaac Page is watching from the next-door window. Isaac is being seduced by the music of the ball echoing off of the concrete, the arc of the shot, the snap of the net, the beautiful seclusion of shooting a basketball alone. Isaac is awed by Joey's fluid motions, his limbs acting on command, the ball going where Joey guides it.

Isaac watches Joey's daughter step onto the driveway wearing pink Nike shoes and a pink jogging suit. She is asking for the ball. Joey smiles and lifts Lyric, kisses her on the forehead, the cheek, the lips. Tells her he loves her. Joey holds her tight against his chest, runs his fingers through her curls. Isaac watches Joey set the child down and kneel beside her, place the ball in her hands. Isaac smiles when Lyric tosses the ball off of Joey's forehead, when Joey exaggerates being knocked over, when Lyric jumps on top of him, and the ball rolls down the driveway and into the street.

That morning in the driveway, that slip into the past, had awakened a forgotten longing in Joey Cane. For some other life, another option. Something besides the drudgery of factory work. Something more than a marijuana sedated what if he can't seem to let go of. That spotlight he used to swagger in, seventeen and signing autographs, the world spinning on his middle finger, George Hessler on the cusp of being wrong.

He leans back in the lawn chair and watches weed smoke swirl against the finally-

dead porch light. He imagines that life. A couple years at Duke. Drafted by the Pistons. Sending Tara money. Spending time with Lyric during the off-season. But the thought of not being with his baby stings him. It makes him feel soft. Weak for love. Lyric with those frizzy curls and her pretty little voice. Always singing with her mother on that cheap karaoke machine Joey bought her for Christmas last year.

Nelly Page has stepped onto her porch and is walking toward him. Joey drops the blunt and hides it under his shoe. Joey sees Isaac propped against the arm of a couch through the next-door window, one socked foot crossed over the other, scribbling in a journal. His mother walking toward Joey, an aura of mystery thickening around this woman with each forward step.

“Got a smoke?” Nelly asks. She’s wearing a Michigan hoodie.

“Sure.” Joey thumbs a Camel out of its package, lights it, and passes it to Nelly. She has wild green eyes and a sensual mouth—thin black hair falling out the hood of her sweatshirt like some kind of anime ninja kid. She’s probably five or six years older than Joey, but she looks young, like a wanton teen playing at adult.

“I’ve lived next to you for over a year,” says Joey, “suddenly you’re speaking to me?”

“We keep to ourselves,” Nelly says. “Besides, I don’t think your woman would like it if I were starting up conversations with her man.”

“Yet here you are.”

“I’m here on business.”

“Business?”

“That’s right.” Nelly takes a hit on the Camel. “My son wants to know if he can use your basketball hoop.”

Joey glances back into Nelly’s living room window. Isaac is in the same position, leaning, feet crossed, scribbling away. “Why didn’t he just come and knock on the door?”

“He’s shy.” Nelly sees Joey looking toward her house, glances where he was looking, sees what Joey sees, what he has been seeing. “That’s a pretty nice view of my life,” she says. “Is that what you’re doing out here every night? Peeping in my window?”

“You don’t have curtains.” Joey watches Nelly watching Isaac. No doubt imagining what Joey has witnessed. “It’s just—there’s a lot of commotion.”

“Commotion,” says Nelly. “Interesting way of putting it.” Her eyes fix on Isaac. “How much have you seen?”

“Enough.”

Nelly takes a pull on the cigarette, tilts her head back, and puffs two loose rings into the air. “I bought Isaac a basketball.”

Joey says nothing, just watches Nelly Page watching her son through the window. He’s struck by the woman’s toughness. Seeing those window scenes, Isaac crying

into his hands, Frank turning the house out, Nelly screaming and shielding herself from blows—Joey assumed she was a weak woman, too scared or too stupid to leave. Nelly is not stupid or scared. She is something else entirely. What, though, Joey doesn't know.

"It would be good for him to get outside. Used to be you couldn't shut the kid up. Now you can't get two words out of him," Nelly says.

"That's cool," says Joey. "I mean it's cool, Isaac can use the hoop."

"Thanks," says Nelly. She breaks her cigarette in half and drops it off the porch. Turns to walk away.

"Wait," Joey says. "You mind if I ask you a personal question?"

"Fuck it," she says, "we're *friends*, right?"

"Frank," says Joey, "how long he been chasing?"

The words drop out of his mouth and land on the porch with a thud. Nelly smiles though, staring at Isaac through the window until her smile fades. "Awhile," she says.

"He's gonna get himself killed out here."

"We all got problems," says Nelly. "We all got vices."

Joey wonders what hers are. How does Nelly Page cope with the life she was dealt? The bottle? Joey thinks of the blunt under his foot; wonders what Nelly would say if she saw him getting high. Would she look the other way? Would she smoke it with him?

"But Isaac is only ten," says Nelly. "He doesn't deserve this shit." She waves her hand in a small fan motion, as if taking in the entire block with her gesture.

Joey wakes to the echo of the ball bouncing off of the concrete. It's five o'clock in the morning. Tara stands in front of the bedroom window, peeking outside through the blinds, naked besides a red thong, thunder booty hanging like an anchor from the small of her back. Joey respects the burden of having that much ass. A magnet for tactless eyes, inspiring *damns* and *aw shits*, grabbing hands and smacking palms. She has a body built for sex. No denying it. A 'hood Helen of Troy. Like Tara James was sculpted by the hand of God himself for the sole purpose of dragging the minds of men into the gutter.

"You know anything about this?" Tara turns, whispering, as if Isaac Page is a deer that might run away if he hears her voice through the screen of the open window. Tara is caught in a rare human moment, the 'hood veil removed. She is only a girl, appreciating that a broken child has dragged himself out of the darkness and into her driveway.

Joey nods. "I didn't think he'd be out there this early."

"He reminds me of you," says Tara, still whispering.

Joey wishes this was her. No slang, no sarcastic tone, no shit talking. Tara is soft-spoken and vulnerable. As soon as she becomes aware of it she'll be gone.

She eases shut the window and walks toward him. A tattoo of his name is scribbled on her swaying left hip. She wets her lips with her tongue. And when she crawls onto the bed and peels back the covers, Joey thinks, if it were forever five o'clock in the morning, I would make you my wife.

Joey rolls onto his back and interlocks his fingers behind his head. Tara's fingernails feel like claws when she drags them across his stomach. He stares at the ceiling and feels the burn of her gaze. Joey wishes he could roll away, out of the bed, out of this house, out of this life. To a life where he didn't live check to check, stand in grocery lines with food stamps—to a life where he didn't have to feign love and wear faithfulness like a martyr's badge. What was it about Tara? Why couldn't he love her? He closes his eyes and wishes things were different, wishes Tara could always be the girl in the window, wishes that each time he came it didn't siphon the possibility of love.

"Joey?"

"Yeah." He knows these moments are cracking her, one unspoken word at a time.

"What are you thinking?"

He knows she wants him to say he loves her. He isn't capable of the lie.

"Nothing," he says, "I'm just enjoying my numb."

She twists her nails through his chest curls, across the tattoo of their daughter's baby picture on his right shoulder, freehanded by Watson, a former biker turned ink-artist, who studied a framed picture of Lyric at four months old, put the photograph away, and somehow made the tattoo look more real than the picture itself.

"Was it good for you?" Tara asks.

It was. Too good. Good enough to spend the rest of his life faithful and empty. When Tara props up her ass, bites down on her bottom lip, and looks over her shoulder, when she talks her shit, Joey pounding it from behind, Miss Thunderbooty's head smacking against the headboard—it's lust, fucking. Simple. But when Joey sees something in her, like he did this morning, when he kisses her and gets lost and goes looking for the source of what he saw—that's when he's left empty, and knows for certain: He doesn't love Tara. He never will love Tara. He is trapped.

"The best," Joey says. No more than a whisper. His eyes closed. He pictures walking out the door, away from Francis Street, out of the southeast side with Lyric riding on his shoulders, Tara standing on the doorstep talking her shit. It would never play out like that, though, would it? The woman always gets the child. The man always gets stroked by the Friend of the Court, that long, thick government dick that gives it to you straight up the ass, no Vaseline—leaves you sleeping in your car, or on a couch, or in your parent's basement.

"I hate it when you get quiet after," Tara says.

"Sorry." Joey gropes the floor for his boxer shorts.

"And now you're gonna go smoke," she says.

Joey stands and watches her pull the covers to her neck.

"You know what?" Tara says. "You ain't shit, Joey. Acting all lovey dovey with me, taking your time—soon as you bust your nut you wanna leave me laying here like a hoe."

"It's not like that."

"Stop playing with my mind, Joey." Her tears are dammed and it's on the edge of breaking. But when that dam breaks the tears don't ever come. Just anger. Since he's known Tara James he's only seen her cry once. That day she punched a hole in the wall and threw a three pound dumbbell across the room that hit Joey in the sternum. Something Joey's mother had said to her on the phone. He can't remember the words, but he knows it was racist; Dutch-Republican racist, and after that conversation everything changed.

Joey turns away, waiting, expecting Tara to crank up the volume on her anger and let the insults rain down upon him: factory-working-muthafucka-has-been-shoulda-woulda-coulda-white-ass-only-looking-for-some-black-pussy. "Look, I'm sorry. I really am." Joey doesn't look at her. "I'm going to go check on the boy."

Isaac Page is a sad sight with a basketball in his hands. Slapping at the thing when he dribbles, using both hands when he shoots, ball clanging off the front of the rim or the backboard, shooting it like he is trying to break something, like he's pissed off at the world.

"Hey, little man." Joey approaches, cigarette nestled between his lips, smoke hovering eye-level, rocking a white wife-beater and black Nike shorts, wearing no shoes, only socks.

Isaac turns and looks at him. The kid has fierce eyes, ancient eyes, eyes a thousand years older than the rest of him, eyes burning blue like butane flames. He's an intense ball of anger. Joey wonders what Isaac writes in those notebooks he's always scratching away at, imagines what Isaac has seen that Joey hasn't observed through the window.

"Mind if I shoot with you?"

Isaac tosses Joey the ball and Joey dribbles twice, then flicks his wrist. The ball arcs through the air. The net snaps inside out.

"Change," says Joey. He gives Isaac a once over. Joey knows he hasn't been through or seen half the shit the kid has. Growing up upper-middle class in East Grand Rapids, getting dropped off at Garfield Park by his lawyer father on his way to work, a 'hood tourist, down here for the competition, murdering cats on the court. Meeting Tara the summer before senior year, going black-girl crazy, pulling the plug on his future and letting it funnel down the drain. Isaac Page was born in this shit. Joey Cane had tossed himself off of a building and landed in it.

Isaac retrieves the ball and tosses it back. "It's in the wrist," says Joey. "See?" Flick. Snap. "You try."

The boy looks numb, desensitized. He used to cry on those nights when shit got bad. Joey would pace his porch, pissed off, thinking about beating on the door while Frank was losing control, tossing furniture around the living room. Nelly shielding Isaac from his wrath. But Joey was too much of a coward to intervene. Isaac is the brave one, standing in front of Joey, still here, armored against the mean reality of his life.

Isaac holds the ball with two hands, knees bent, ready to shoot. "Wait," says Joey, "dribble closer to the basket, little man. We have to fix your form before you step out here." Joey asks for the ball. "The most important thing is balance. Feet shoulder width apart, right foot forward—do what I do."

Isaac mimics Joey. He stands ready to shoot. Joey sees Tara in the window, hiding behind the blinds, and he wonders what she's thinking. Wonders what she has sacrificed for him. Wonders how long love will keep her hanging around, broke, barely getting by, when everywhere she goes another baller is licking his chops, waiting for a chance to scoop her up. Wonders if he'd even care if she did leave.

"Okay," says Joey, turning back to Isaac. "It starts with the toes of your right foot. Make sure they're pointed toward the rim. Bend your knees. Good. Your right knee should line up with your right toes. Now line your right hand up, fingers along the seams."

Joey looks into his bedroom again and sees Tara holding Lyric against her chest. He can't hear her voice, but he knows Tara is singing to her. Tara's a morning person, happy until the day breaks her, until the reality of their life together ruins her mood. The sad fact, thinks Joey, is this: Tara only wants to be loved. And the only thing she wants is the one thing he can't give her.

"When you shoot it, you'll lead with your pointer finger. Yeah, nice, you're getting it. The left hand is only used to balance the ball. You want that off to the side, your right thumb angled toward your left. Good. Now, when you shoot it, your right elbow should line up with your right knee, which should still be lined up with your right toes. The shooting motion isn't a push, it's kind of a half-toss, half-flick. Go ahead, try it."

Isaac's ball travels feet short of the rim.

"Nice." Joey looks up at his bedroom window. Tara and Lyric are gone.

"I missed," says Isaac, the first words he's spoken.

"Doesn't matter," says Joey. "You kept your elbow straight and you flicked your wrist. Keep practicing and you'll start making shots."

Joey parks his burgundy Oldsmobile Delta 88 curbside. He steps out of the car wearing navy blue Dickies pants and brown Timberland boots. His white t-shirt is dirt-stained and sweaty around the armpits. His knees and ankles ache from being on his feet for eight hours. His hands ache from compressing the grips on a mold press

machine. His fingers are sliced open and sore from working too fast, trimming flash from plastic auto parts with a box cutter.

Seeing Isaac out here lightens his mood. Injects a pulse into the monotony of the daily grind. Each morning this summer Isaac has been in Joey's driveway. Each day when Joey comes home from work, there is Isaac, dribbling the ball, shooting, showing improvement. It's too early to tell, but Joey trusts his gut. The kid is a natural.

Isaac's father had come home begging the night before and Nelly let him in the house. Frank Page would be back on the block in a day or two, when crack's whispers become screams, when love no longer matters enough to plug his ears. He's never home for long. But Isaac has found a planet for himself, a place to get lost. The concrete: where nothing exists but the sound of the ball and the snap of the net.

"What's up with the bruise, Isaac?" A small greenish smear on his right cheekbone—Nelly probably tried to cover it up with face powder. Joey looks up at Frank and Nelly's bedroom window. The blinds are closed. "He putting his hands on you now, too?"

Isaac dribbles twice and shoots. The ball rotates on its arc but rattles out of the rim. "I'm fine."

"Fine?" asks Joey.

"*Fine*," says Isaac, grabbing the ball, dribbling. Flick. Snap.

"You've been spending a lot of time with that boy," says Tara.

They are at Garfield Park, an island of grass with a couple of baseball fields, tennis courts, basketball courts, a playground, and a drained wading pool concealed by a perimeter of sagging rusted fence. Joey unravels the swings that are thrown over the top bar while Lyric waits. He lifts his daughter, kisses her on the forehead, and places her on the untangled swing.

"You say that like it's a bad thing," he says.

"Hmmpf."

"Hmmpf, what? The kid's got nobody, Tara. No friends, his dad's on that shit—"

"What about his mom?"

"What about her?"

"She's a sexy little thing, isn't she?"

"Daddy, push me," says Lyric, pumping her legs but making little progress. "I want an underdog, Daddy."

Joey pulls back the swing and pauses before running underneath it, pushing Lyric over his head, then turning to watch her smile while she soars back into the peak of her arc, her hair flapping around as she sails downward.

"So?" says Tara.

"So, what?"

"So, when you and Isaac are out there playing basketball, getting all sweaty, does

Miss Sexy invite you in for chocolate chip cookies and lemonade?" She pops her tongue against the roof of her mouth when she says it and rolls her eyes.

"Jesus Christ, Tara. Are you serious? The boy is in our driveway at five o'clock every morning shooting a goddamn basketball."

"What do you know about Miss Sexy?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, do you know anything about her? Everyone's got a story, Joey. You know her story?"

"Fuck." Joey lips the word. Glances at Lyric. He runs a hand over his clipper-trimmed hair. "Just say what you got to say."

"Lorenzo from down the street told me she's a nympho. Like a straight-up sex addict. Said she's one of those gotta-have-it girls."

"Lorenzo?" says Joey. "When were you talking to Lorenzo?" Joey imagines Lorenzo sitting on his porch smoking a cigarette, watching Joey drive off to work.

"I get out sometimes, Joey. I have conversations."

"Conversations." Joey imagines Lorenzo creeping down the sidewalk, knocking on his door, swivel head double-checking the street for Joey's Delta 88.

"That's right. I have all kinds of conversations."

Joey pictures Lorenzo ascending the steps to his bedroom, tugging at his pants, watching Tara's ass as she leads him up the stairs. Lyric sleeping in the other room. Tara leaning against the bed with her ass up in the air. A stupid smirk on Lorenzo's face when he drops his pants and mounts her.

"I'd be careful with Nympho Nelly," says Tara, "before you ruin the best thing you ever gonna get."

All is dark at the Page's. No commotion. That was yesterday, when Nelly took Frank back. Again. Tonight the shades are drawn in Frank and Nelly's bedroom. Isaac isn't on the couch. Frank's been in and out all day, looking bad, worse than normal, like his skull tried to vacuum in his eyeballs, but they got stuck in the alley of their sockets. Scratching at his arms while he crawled into his truck, coming home looking worse for wear. A day of failed missions. One after another.

Tonight is like an exhale though, the calm relief after a deep breath. Joey's feet are propped on the porch, he's pulling on a Camel, enjoying a melancholy marijuana buzz, solo, no Lorenzo to cramp his high. He glances down the street toward Lorenzo's house. Dead. Then notices Nelly creeping down the sidewalk, appearing almost out of nowhere.

"Hey, you." Nelly stops in front Joey's porch, arms crossed, hair thrown in a ponytail. "Can I get one?" Her head tilts toward Joey's open box of Camels napping next to his Zippo.

"Help yourself," says Joey, glancing at the Page's dark house. He'd been out here

for a couple hours. He wonders how she managed to slip past him. "Where's Isaac?"

"Sleeping."

"Sleeping?"

"He was when I left."

"Where were you?"

"Shit, man, what's with the interrogation?"

"Curiosity."

"Hmm. You seen Frank?"

"Not for a few hours. He ain't looking too good."

Nelly grabs the cigarette pack and the Zippo. She measures Joey with sly eyes and a flirty half-smile, a look that Joey thinks he could be misinterpreting. He remembers what Tara said about her conversation with Lorenzo, about sex addiction. His eyes comb over Nelly: pouty lips, a series of diamond piercings in the cartilage of both ears, glowing in the night like two half-moons. There's love in her eyes, or lust: sneaky greens canopied by thick black lashes; looking at him like she wants something more than late-night conversation. Joey discards the thought, thinking it must just be the weed.

"I just want to say." Nelly pulls out a Camel, sparks the lighter, and inhales deep. Exhales slow. "I appreciate what you're doing for my boy."

"It's nothing."

"No, it's something. Isaac's crazy about you, Joey."

"He's a good kid—"

The front door opens and there stands Tara, wearing nothing but a bathrobe and a hair scarf. She looks at Joey, then at Nelly, then she bites her bottom lip. "Really, Joey?" she says. Then turns to Nelly. "And you," she says, "shouldn't you be out looking for your man? You know what?" It's hard to tell if Tara's talking to Joey or Nelly or the air.

"I got what I came for." Nelly shows Tara the Camel. "I'll leave."

"Tara," says Joey.

"Whatever." Tara slams the door.

"Tough crowd," says Nelly.

"Tell me about it," Joey says. "Look, sorry, she's just—"

"A woman."

"Yeah," says Joey, "a woman."

Nelly turns to walk away.

"Wait," says Joey, "I want to ask you something."

"Shoot."

"Is Frank beating on Isaac?"

Nelly flicks the Camel butt into the grass. "Look, Joey. I appreciate what you're doing for my son. I do. But what goes on in my house is not your business."

“Isaac’s my business,” says Joey. “You made him my business when you sent him to my driveway. You want to be a fucking punching bag, go ahead. But don’t send him over to me with bruises and expect me not to give a shit. It’s too late for that, Nelly. I care.”

Tara opens the door and steps onto the porch wearing skimpy denim shorts and a Pepsi t-shirt. “Give me the keys to the Olds,” she says.

Joey reaches into his pocket. “For what?”

“For what the fuck I want,” Tara says. “It’s my car, too.” Her eyes sway toward Nelly. “Bitch, I thought you were leaving.”

“I am.”

Joey hands Tara the keys. “Don’t bother,” Tara says. “The deadbeat’s all yours.”

“What the fuck?” Joey says. “Where are you going?”

“I’ll be back when I get here.” Then she rolls her eyes at Nelly and steps off the porch, ass switching as she walks away.

For a while Joey paces the bedroom. It’s hot and humid tonight and not even a breath of a breeze. No AC. The screen has a small tear in it. Stray mosquitoes have found their way into the room. No plants. No pictures on the wall. No TV. He and Tara’s shared dresser inherited from Tara’s childhood home. “Tee loves so-in-so etched in the flawed wood finishing, the boy’s name concealed beneath permanent black marker.

He considers asking Nelly to watch Lyric so he can soldier the southeast side on foot, or catch a cab. But fuck that. Tara’s not going to make him jump off that ledge. Instead, he walks into Lyric’s bedroom and wipes drool off her cheek. He scoops her in his arms. Walks back into the bedroom and lies with Lyric’s head resting on his chest.

His stomach hurts at the thought of leaving this house. To tuck his tail between his legs and go back to East Grand Rapids, back to his childhood bedroom and start over. That option has always been there. But something about the way his Dutch slash Christian slash Republican mother looked at his baby girl, with her brown skin and her frizzy locks—Joey’s mother with that tight smile, those phony eyes—he could never go back; not to that life. Lyric deserves to be loved, not tolerated.

Tara finally staggers in just after 2:00 a.m. She slams the door when she enters the house and stomps up the stairs.

“Shhh,” Joey says, when she walks into the room. “You’ll wake her.”

“What, muthafucka? You bring her in here so I wouldn’t cuss your ass out?”

“Cuss me out? You’re the one who’s been gone all night.”

“You ain’t my daddy.”

“You’re drunk.”

“I might have had a few drinks.”

"A few? Your makeup is smeared. Your hair is all over the place."

"That's what happens when—"

"What?"

Tara laughs and loses her balance, grabbing at a lampshade and knocking the lamp onto the floor. Lyric turns in Joey's arms.

"Where were you?" He's surprised by his jealousy. Until lately the prospect of being betrayed had never crossed his mind. He was the one making the sacrifices. He was the one who had given up his dreams. Love or no love, they had *something*, and whatever that was at least required loyalty.

"What? You think I'm a hoe? You think I'm out here giving it away? I ain't you, Joey. How was Nympho Nelly, anyways? Bet you couldn't wait for me to leave. Brought her in here and gave it to her real good, right? Or did you bend her over the porch. Bitch like that: she'd probably take it from behind while the whole block was watching."

"I didn't do anything," says Joey. "Jesus Christ, Tara, what the hell?"

"Whatever."

"Where were you, Tara?"

"I met some girlfriends at a bar."

"Which bar?" Joey pictures Tara with Lorenzo in some vague semblance of a dive bar, but remembers Lorenzo's tether. He imagines Lorenzo there anyway, cops showing up with guns drawn, the bartender pointing to the restroom, Tara bent over a sink, thunder booty bouncing against his thighs, Lorenzo's pants at his ankles.

"I don't remember."

"Which girlfriends?"

"Noneya," she says. She laughs.

"This ain't cool, Tara."

"Aw, look who's suddenly jealous."

"This ain't cool."

Tara stands with her hand on her hip. Satisfied smile crawling across her face. "Let me see the baby," she says.

"For what?"

"So I can put her to bed. I hate you right now, Joey, but I'ma need you to put something in me tonight. I'ma need you to put a pounding on it."

Joey stands on the porch pulling on a Camel. The Pages' living room light is on now and he can see Isaac on the couch. He watches the boy's chest rise and fall, an open notebook on top of him, basketball tucked in his arm.

Frank Page crept out the house a half hour before, without the usual scene, this time kissing his sleeping son on the forehead, wearing eyes that looked like he would never return. Those long-gone crackhead eyes—eyes that have stopped fighting the

chase and submitted. When Frank walked out of the house and opened the door of his pickup, he looked over at Joey and went to speak, but didn't. Instead Frank shook his head, piled into his truck, and peeled out of the driveway.

Joey watches Nelly walk into the living room. Kiss Isaac on the cheek. Step into the night. She notices Joey and walks over. A Marlboro Light wedged behind her ear. No tears in her eyes; no tears in her voice, she says, "He left again."

"I saw," says Joey. He looks past Nelly at Isaac. The boy doesn't deserve this life. This neighborhood. But who does? Upstairs Miss Thunderbooty is passed out drunk. In an hour or so Lyric will be up, ready for breakfast. He'll go to work. He'll come home. Nothing will change. He'll grow old and die, his childhood wasted, his dream expired.

Nelly lights her cigarette. "Your girlfriend doesn't like me much, huh?"

"Where'd you get that?"

"Your bedroom window is open." She looks over at Isaac sleeping on the couch and smiles. "You have a nice view of my life," she says, "but I get to hear the music of yours."

Two houses down Lorenzo's porch light is on. His mother's gone to work already and it's not even five yet. Lorenzo though, won't pop is head out the door until noon, moving up and down the block, testing the patience of the sensor on his tether. "How often do you talk to Lorenzo?" Joey asks Nelly.

"Lorenzo? Dime Bag Lorenzo?"

"Only one Lorenzo on the block, Nelly."

She smiles and looks away. "I go over there when I need something."

"Weed?"

"Sure."

"Vices," says Joey, thinking when Frank's out chasing his high, Nympho Nelly's out chasing something else.

"Vices," says Nelly. "We all have them." She moves to walk away and then she turns toward him. "You know," she says. "Frank used to be a good dad. A really good dad. Nothing like he is now. Things won't ever be how they used to be. I know that. I just thank God Isaac has you, Joey. My boy would be lost if you weren't around."

Francis Street is quiet for a Friday night. Empty porches. No one creeping up and down the sidewalk. Not even the usual noise: the not-so-distant sirens, domestic situations, the chirp chirp of patrol cars harassing every black face that's outside after dark. It's serene, almost. A strange vibe in the air. Like tonight, just tonight, everyone in the vicinity is taking a break from polluting the air with their problems.

The only thing killing the quiet is Isaac. Relentless with questions. Asking about the past, about the glory days, on constantly about Joey's rise up from out of the driveway and into some packed arena. The last couple of weeks the boy has crawled

out of his shell. Tonight Joey wishes Isaac would crawl back in.

"Joey," Isaac says. "You're only twenty-six, dude. It's not too late. You could go to college, or try out for the Pistons."

Joey pulls on a Camel and exhales smoke out of his nose. His mind on Lorenzo: the epitome of southeast-side shit. The felon. The drug-dealer. Forty years old and living with his mother, walking up and down the sidewalk with his pants hanging past his ass, bullying teens, holding a bottle of malt liquor in a brown paper bag, looking like a movie extra in his own life.

"I've been smoking for eight years," Joey tells Isaac. He pulls on the Camel again. "It's over, little man. My lungs are done. Knees are gone, ankles too."

Tonight though, Lorenzo is scarce; Joey saw him pop his head out the house around eight, when he first joined Isaac in the driveway, Lorenzo looking up and down the street, seeing Joey and smirking, shaking his head, and then going back inside.

"Quit smoking," says Isaac. He dribbles twice and shoots. Flick. Snap.

Joey ignores him. "Your shot looks good," he says. "Now you have to work on those handles." Joey looks down the street toward Lorenzo's house. There was something in that smirk. Always that smirk. Always eyefucking Tara, but never saying a word to her, not when Joey's around.

"Joey. All you have to do is quit smoking."

"How about this: how about you make it for both of us? On my word, Isaac: you ever have a game, I'll be there. Every one."

"Daddy?" Lyric stands in front of Joey and Isaac, wearing pajamas, wiping sleep from her eyes. She's only a couple years younger than Isaac, but Isaac seems so much older; the things he's seen, been through. Lyric's in this shit too, this neighborhood, but besides being caught in the crossfire of the occasional Joey/Tara argument, Lyric is oblivious to this block, confined to this driveway and the safety of this house.

"Mommy's not home," Lyric says.

Adorable. Coily curls. Her mother's light brown eyes. Joey's girlish mouth. Joey wishes she could stay like this forever. "Baby?" Joey says. He lifts his daughter and kisses her cheek. Isaac stops dribbling and holds the ball. The Olds is still parked curbside. Tara must have crept away on foot, must have snuck out the backdoor unnoticed, then crept along the other side of the house. Joey carries Lyric inside. "Tara!" he says. "Tara?" He walks up the stairs and into the bathroom. There's steam on the mirror. Makeup cases scattered across the sink. Flat iron left plugged in.

"What's wrong, Daddy?"

"Nothing. Nothing, Baby."

Joey carries Lyric down the stairs and back outside. Isaac is waiting for him on the porch, still holding the basketball.

"I need you to sit with Lyric for a minute. Can you do that?" asks Joey.

"Yeah," says Isaac. "What's wrong?"

Joey looks down the street, cracks his knuckles, his neck, and loosens his shoulders.

"Joey?" says Isaac.

"I'll only be a minute." Joey turns toward Lorenzo's. His Nike sandals slap the concrete as he walks. A cool breeze against his damp beater. He's buzzed off adrenaline. His hands trembling. Everything he could have been is behind him. Everything he has become breathes within the walls of this house on Francis Street. And now it's come to this: walking down the sidewalk with his mind on violence. He's walking into chaos, no chance of winning, not caring; no reason to fight, but ready; not knowing what exactly he's fighting for.

Joey beats on Lorenzo's door. He rings the bell three times, then holds it down with his left hand, and continues beating on the door with his right.

The door cracks open and Joey pushes against it. It is held shut by a chain. "You looking to die tonight, muh fucka?" asks Lorenzo. Shirtless. More built than he looks with his clothes on. Aging tattoos on muscled shoulders and arms.

"I know she's in there," says Joey.

"Thunderbooty?" Lorenzo smiles.

"Shit ain't funny, Lorenzo. Where is she? Tara!" he yells.

"Look, white boy. You need to stop with all this goddamn noise. You about to make me lose my cool."

"Fuck you."

"Fuck me?"

"Fuck you. I know she's in there, Lorenzo."

Lorenzo laughs. "Yeah, I got your bitch, nigga. She's upstairs waiting on me."

Joey lowers his shoulder into the door. It doesn't budge.

Lorenzo unbolts the chain. He grabs Joey by the throat. Punches him on the ear. Joey staggers, but gets ahold of Lorenzo's arm, pulls him onto the porch. Joey sees the silhouette of a woman standing in the house at the top of a stairway.

Lorenzo smashes Joey's head against the porch's concrete pillar. He twists Joey onto his back. Lorenzo lowers a naked heel onto Joey's face. Joey lays still. Lorenzo slaps him across his skull. "Look what you made me do, white boy." Lorenzo stands and looks up and down the street. He lights a cigarette and takes a drag. "Come beating on my door? *My* goddamn door. Like you're gonna do something." Lorenzo kneels next to Joey, who's barely conscious and bleeding from the mouth. He puts the cigarette out on his forehead. "Look at you now, white boy. Mr. Superstar. White Michael Jordan. Ain't shit now, are you? No different than the rest of us niggas."

"Tara," whispers Joey.

"You's a dumb muh fucka, you know that?" Lorenzo stands and turns to walk into the house.

Joey is coming to his senses, seeing Tara standing at the top of Lorenzo's stairs. His head throbs. He licks blood from the corner of his mouth. The night is noiseless.

Joey tackles Lorenzo in the doorway and they fall against a shoe rack, knocking it to the floor. They wrestle for a moment before Lorenzo gets Joey onto his back.

Joey looks to the top of the stairs and sees a large Mexican woman half-wrapped in a tattered green blanket, a quarter-sized mole curling into her cleavage.

Lorenzo lowers a forearm into Joey's throat and puts his weight behind it. "Breaking and entering." Lorenzo pulls a pistol out of his waistband.

"Zo, don't!" cries the woman.

Joey looks into Lorenzo's face and knows he's going to die.

He closes his eyes and sees Tara laughing in a dim-lit bar. She's with two female friends and they all sip from fruity looking drinks.

The cold barrel of the pistol is heavy against his skull.

He sees Nelly driving through the southeast side crying, looking for Frank's truck, finding it abandoned, Frank nowhere to be seen.

Steel slides across steel when Lorenzo cocks the pistol. The sound is loud and seems to echo in the empty night.

Joey sees Isaac and Lyric. They are sitting on his porch and Isaac is holding her. Lyric is crying into his neck. Tears stream down Isaac's face, trying to be brave for Lyric, his chest heaving.

Joey opens his eyes. Lorenzo has crossed over a line too far to turn back. There is no fear, or remorse, or conflict in his eyes. Just a cold, brown, calm. Joey hears sirens in the distance and tries to imagine a different life, but can't.

LIVING UP TO EXPECTATIONS

Kim Farleigh

Michael left the pub to answer his phone: Marta ringing back.

Drizzle fell from grey mist. Blurred forms moved behind the pub's frosted windows. Drops, falling from eaves, splattering on grey footpaths, distorted reflections.

"How are you?" Marta asked.

"Fine. And you?"

"Fine."

"I've got tickets for tomorrow's bullfights. Want to come?"

"I'd love to. I've always wanted to go to San Isidro. For years, I've wanted to go. Fantastic."

"It'll be cold," he warned.

"I can't wait. I've always wanted to go to San Isidro; but it's so hard to get tickets. How did you get them?"

"A client."

"Lucky you."

"Let's meet at six-thirty at the metro exit."

"Great. I can't wait."

Sometimes women receive phone calls because others aren't available.

*

Shadows slithered outside the bullring. The wind was going to make cape-work difficult. The slithering reflected changes in heavenly blue, white and grey.

Clustered people were under awnings at drink and food stalls, the stalls' darker shadows sharply defined, unlike the clouds' ephemeral reflections.

Marta emerged from the metro and said: "Hi!"

The whites engulfing her irises suggested surprise. She was wearing a T-shirt and a leather jacket. He had a coat. Their shaded seats were where the sun couldn't offset the cool wind.

The ring became visible from a stairway. Faceless masses on the other side of the arena were under timber pillars that supported higher tiers whose facades displayed Spanish flags.

The crowd's rumbling disappeared when a black bull charged into the ring, no seat unoccupied, silence deep with anticipation.

Marta, doing up her leather jacket, said: "It's cold."

She folded her arms across her chest.

A banderillero missed with his prongs, the crowd laughing as the bull's hoofs, like machine-gun fire kicking up sand, created explosions across the ring as the bull pursued the banderillero's dashing feet, timber torn off the barrier by the bull's weapons where the banderillero leapt to safety, Marta's laughter's sincerity contrasting with her enthusiastic affectations.

She recalled Michael warning her about the cold. Instead of listening, she had pelted him with ebullience. He knew she wasn't enthusiastic about bullfighting; but he didn't know her reaction came from what she thought were his hopes about her motivations.

The crowd went silent when Juan Alconero Fuentes, the banderillero, returned to the ring.

"Do it, son," someone yelled, the crowd now wanting to see a man fight back.

These prongs, Juan thought, are penetrating that hide and there's no place to hide.

His anger became resolution.

"Wonderful," Michael said, as Juan flicked his head and shouted at the bull, Marta wrapping her arms more tightly around herself.

The banderillas penetrated the bull's back, the crowd roaring its waterfall-like roaring, Michael uplifted by a skilful act done perfectly under pressure.

"It'd be wonderful being in the sun," Marta replied.

Michael didn't reply.

A bullfighter, Pedro Ramirez Jimenez, hugged Juan and said: "Fantastic."

Juan felt gorgeous amazement.

Pedro added: "Always recall your doubters. Think revenge."

Juan's amazement overflowed when Pedro drove a fist into the barrier and hissed: "Revenge!"

The Mexico City slum that twenty-one-year-old Pedro had emerged from faced a wealthy housing estate. Pedro had seen many expensive cars coming and going from a place he wanted to enter. The sign he stood with one day outside that place said: "I want to become a bullfighter." A big, black car stopped; a window came down; a man inside said: "If that's what you want then that's what you're going to become." Salvador Salgado Rojo saw the burning desperation in Pedro's eyes. He paid for Pedro's bullfighting tuition. Soon Pedro started dazzling with audacious performances, his dream to fight at San Isidro in Madrid now a reality.

He rotated in the ring's centre, holding up his hat, acknowledging those who had supported Juan when Juan had failed.

This crowd, Pedro thought, knows; a crowd investing its hope in surrogate glory in the lone man at the heart of concentric circles of people.

"He's thanking us," Michael explained to Marta, who didn't care.

She was envious because Cristina was shopping. But Marta had expressed enthusiasm for bullfighting, especially at San Isidro, so she was going to have to stay longer, battling cold.

The changing wind reduced Pedro's cape's effectiveness. Pedro's big moment had arrived and conditions were bad, the wind a final barrier that had to be overcome so he could enter the elite. And the crowd knew it.

Silence prevailed as Pedro faced a bull, the world's dispersed quietude seemingly gathered up and placed in the ring. Only Pedro and the fans wafting before women's faces in the sun were moving.

I'd love to be holding one of those fans, Marta thought.

Most were concentrating on what Pedro was holding, which was quivering, potentially giving misleading signals, like a bad parent.

"Are you staying to the end?" Marta asked.

“Absolutely,” Michael replied.

“I might go early,” Marta said. “It’s a bit nippy.”

Pedro’s cape sat before the bull’s face, shortening distances so that the effect of quivering red edges would be reduced; the bull lunged, cape swinging back, bull following and turning, cape swinging back, bull following, Pedro slowing the cape half-way through a pass, the bull slowing with this slowing, time slowing with this slowing, elegance getting painted by virtue onto collective-crowd memory, Pedro shouting with a clenched fist, the roaring crowd elevated by technique’s fusion with virtue.

“Wonderful,” Michael said.

Marta was texting Cristina.

“What?!” Marta asked.

“Never mind,” Michael replied.

The conversation that bullfighting brilliance produces crackled around the arena, bubbles of it dying out in discrete disappearances as Pedro began again his calculated stepping towards the bull. This, Pedro knew, was when everything had to unite, the moment between the life desired and the one that has to be left behind.

He had never succumbed to what he perceived to be other people’s expectations of him; he had chained himself to a destiny that resembled a continent on the edge of a dangerous sea. Never had he changed his behaviour to satisfy those who expected something from himself other than himself.

The intrigued, pearly-eyed bull was now showing a more sophisticated variety of enthusiasm than that type that had made him charge into the ring with ignorant boldness; this cape-wing was dangerous and it liked playing. Yes, Cape-Wing, Michael imagined the bull thinking, you want to play and so do I.

Recalling his doubters’ mockery, Pedro placed his left hand on his hip so that the shoulder curved, increasing his size in the bull’s eyes, a hand placed as he thrust the cape forwards and shouted “Ha!”, the crowd roaring, someone yelling: “That’s it, son. Give it to him.”

Elegant audacity delights because it infers stylish survival through power.

Marta read Cristina’s response: Come. I’ll be here until at least 10 o’clock.

Cristina's taste in handbags was unparalleled. Candle delight flickered in Marta's mind, delight quivering in the crowd's as the bull dashed forwards, the cape swinging in an arc of casual control, Pedro turning, the cape going from his right hand to his left, the hanging, brilliant, sun-drenched cape an irresistible invitation to play, the retreating invitation taking the rising horns with it, the horns passing near Pedro's chest, the bull's front legs rising with the rising cape, Michael's head fizzing with effervescent wonderment, the rising flying hoofs airborne, immortality stamping this vision of man and beast onto permanent, collective memory, the human mind the world's biggest gallery, Marta saying: "Michael, I have to go. Cristina's got a problem."

She certainly has, Michael thought.

"Okay," he said. "I'll ring you."

The man behind Michael shouted: "Fantastic. Now kill it," as Marta fled towards the exit, Pedro Ramirez Jimenez receiving river-rushing, smacking-hand approbation from a thrilled crowd.

Everything Pedro had done had been perfectly executed in the dangerous conditions and the bull's desire to charge in straight lines had been a great help. Even the greats need luck.

The crowd's *aficionados* knew they were witnessing more than just greatness; they were seeing a young man pursuing a life's dream.

Many of those who appreciated this were women who had bypassed dancing, yoga, reiki and shopping as methods of avoiding self-analysis and one of them was beside Michael.

"Your friend," she said, "left at an interesting moment."

"She's sweet," Michael replied, "but she's got no idea of what life is. Handbags dominate beauty."

Inmaculada Concepción replied: "A pity, eh?"

"Yes; but you can't tell people anything. They have to find out for themselves."

Marta dashed out of the ring, thinking: Why are other people's expectations more important than my own?!

The feeling that chatting with Cristina about clothes and handbags wasn't going to solve a deeper problem—that a deficiency existed—had been the real cause of Marta's first ever episode of self-analysis.

The wind, coming from the snow-covered mountains above Madrid, had been the unexpected catalyst for this venture within. That wind, bringing snow again in late spring, had caused reflection.

If psychological circumstances dictate that facing danger is necessary to fulfil a destiny then avoiding self-analysis is impossible: You are forced to face yourself; the man in the ring had been doing that for years: facing bulls meant facing himself and there was nowhere to run.

"I hope," Michael told Inmaculada, "that he kills it perfectly. He deserves it."

"I hope so, too," Inmaculada replied. "If he does, it's going to feel like justification."

Michael's turned quickly to look at her. Beauty's electromagnetic goodness radiated from her face.

Their hopes were those of the crowd that wanted surrogate glory. Such experiences meant advancement to our ancestors. The crowd wanted to feel what it was like to live. They wanted what wasn't for sale and Pedro wanted to give it to them.

He breathed deeply, the bull's flanks heaving like agitated seas. Pedro's ambition was so high that he now welcomed the blustery breeze's difficulties, for the chance of enacting a perfect kill in these conditions he perceived as the ultimate act of revenge against his doubters. The hatred he felt for those who had mocked his desired destiny he transferred onto the bull so that when he raised the sword to pierce the bull's back he only felt justification, his blade made golden by the sun, the bull's horns' shadows printed onto the cape by ultraviolet.

"The sun," Michael said, "is encouraging the horns to follow the cape."

The horns' black shadows wavered with wavering red.

"He's so blessed," Inmaculada replied, "I wouldn't be surprised."

Silence reigned as man and bull united in an ungainly awkwardness interspersed with rapidly executed precision.....then the bull was wobbling, Pedro's triumphant right arm raised, the crowd rising, roaring voices resembling tumbling water, the sword in the bull's back up to a red hilt, hands smacking together, white handkerchiefs waving in hands upon the multicoloured mass of the steep banks of the curving crowd, white wafting like butterflies' wings to indicate that the bullfight's president should acknowledge the greatness of Pedro's performance; then the president's handkerchief got draped over the balustrade of a balcony high in the stands, indicating that an ear could be cut, a roar erupting in celebration of this decision, the

bull collapsing dead, Pedro circling the ring after an assistant had cut the ear that Pedro held up to the crowd, objects raining down into the ring that Pedro's assistants picked up and threw back, a woman, with showering, blue-black hair, throwing a rose that Pedro picked up, kissed and hurled back, Michael saying: "Fantastic," the crowd's applause loudest where Pedro was passing, circling applause like an auditory Mexican wave of mutual, delighted affirmation as if everyone had played a role in a life-changing victory.

*

Michael, Inmaculada and her brother, Antonio, were strolling outside the ring, salmon-pink on heavenly cobalt above, the ring's cobalt tiles possessing the same mysterious density of azure as the cobalt that backed the heavens' wisps. Yellow wisps, resembling the tiles embedded into the bullring's cobalt, faced pink in pastel images that had the gentleness of achievement.

"Today," Michael said, "was the beginning of an era."

"That's why I'm keeping the program," Inmaculada replied.

A sense of history, Michael thought: fundamental to long-term attraction.

"Let's have a drink," Antonio said.

"Fine by me," Michael said.

The painted wall tiles in the bar they entered showed medieval bullfight scenes. They sat underneath a mounted bull's head. The bull had died where they had just been, its bravery preserved for those whose memories contained images obtained through passionate observation.

"You mentioned handbags," Inmaculada said. "I don't understand why some women are so fascinated by them."

Michael smiled because of her passionate delivery. Ebony follicles covered her shoulders. The whites of her eyes engulfed vast, brown irises, like polished mahogany in porcelain.

"It's ridiculous," she continued, "because they do it for other women. Men don't care if you've worn something twice in a week. They care about what you say."

"When talentless women," Michael replied, "have enormous egos, vanity drives them to find shallow ways of justifying their self-perception. They don't have the talent to be,

as it were, in a ring, competing in something that requires virtues, so they have to find superficial ways of maintaining their self-importance. And they don't understand they're fulfilling an unconscious need for observation. We survived because we observed. They don't have the wherewithal, or the humility, to go to museums and acknowledge other people's greatness. Gucci is God and they are Gucci's children."

Antonio and Inmaculada laughed.

"Sometimes," Inma said, "it's boring being with women because they talk about their pregnancies and their partners, the petty details of their lives. They call this 'expressing their feelings'. Humility is difficult to find."

A waiter took their order. Antonio went to the toilet to ring a friend.

"I'll be at the usual place at 9.30," he said. "Ring me in ten minutes."

"Why?" the friend asked.

"I'll explain later. When you ring act like you understand what I'm talking about."

"Okay."

When Antonio returned, Michael was saying: "Certain virtues were once essential for survival so we admire those virtues. Bullfighting requires those virtues that our ancestors admired, virtues that caused our evolution. We're unconsciously nostalgic."

Inmaculada's concentration when Michael spoke had the still intensity of an enthralled crowd's. His green eyes were so unusual that just observing them was enough to inspire concentration in someone naturally sensitive towards the exotic. She respected people who respected life. And she was mature enough to appreciate that men and women wanted the same things; and that if you wanted to keep a man you had to be interested in men generally, rather than believing that most of them were ordinary and that amongst them was a Greek God who only cared about you.

Antonio's phone rang.

"Yes," he said.

"Okay. What is it?"

"I'll come now. See you there."

He hung up.

"I have to go," he said. "Real Madrid's playing tonight. You know how it is with men and football."

He shook hands with Michael and said: "It's been great meeting you. I hope to see you again."

"Likewise," Michael replied.

When Antonio kissed his sister goodbye she whispered: "Thanks."

*

Pedro Ramirez Jimenez's euphoric disbelief made the objects he looked at seem surreal. He hugged Juan Alconero Fuentes and said: "You gave me extra motivation."

Juan was short and rotund. A big, gnarled nose decorated his wide, round face. His small, dark eyes shone with gracious humility.

He had done something that day beyond the majority's reach and because he knew how difficult it was to achieve greatness he knew what humility was.

"Me?!" he replied.

"You made me see that the crowd wanted victory," Pedro replied.

Pedro's problem had never been self-belief; his problem had been people's capacity to see talent.

Gratitude flows from fulfilled destinies. Pedro's satisfaction came from the knowledge that everything he was now going to do would be orientated to reinforcing the destiny he perceived for himself. Everything could now be channelled into a fate free of absurdity. He was never going to forget those who had helped and supported him.

And gratitude was what Michael felt as he embraced Inmaculada and said: "Whatever put me beside you today seems miraculous, not just coincidence."

"I bet you say that to all the girls."

"I'd probably be very busy if I did."

Lights shone above them, the ring like a fortress against darkness.

"When you know what you want, and it appears, there's no time to waste," Michael added.

They hugged each other tightly.

“I’ve got to thank Antonio,” he continued, “for his strategic withdrawal.”

“He knows his sister well. And what is it you want?”

“To avoid believing that other people’s expectations of me are more important than my own expectations of myself.”

“Good. I’m glad.”

*

When Marta got home that dryness born from having taken the easy option intensified; she had lacked the inspiration to understand something new. Had she been doing more than just trying to fulfill Michael’s expectations, as she had perceived them, she would have found out what the conditions were going to be like beforehand: she would have done the research; she would have listened.

The handbag she dropped onto the kitchen table was unusual: military khakis with touches of chrome and leather. Cristina had been happily envious of that bag. Marta had been proud to have been seen in the street with that handbag, especially after Cristina’s compliments, delight flashes having shone like the bag’s chrome every time Marta had spotted envy glints in other women’s eyes. Now that seemed as empty as it was, a distraction failing to hide emotional deficiencies.

I must start flamenco, she thought. Gloria met a man doing flamenco.

Flamenco was now the new saviour. Other things had been saviours but these things had failed. What happened to Gloria could happen to her. Marta was thirty-eight and had never done flamenco. She had never even considered doing it. She hadn’t been interested until she discovered what had happened to Gloria, who, it had been reported, was now deeply in love.

But choreography intrigued Gloria who started flamenco as a teenager. Because flamenco appealed to Gloria as an aesthetic representation of wider experience, she had kept doing it, finally meeting a like-minded person who shared her feelings for flamenco’s deeper significance. She and her boyfriend were experts on flamenco’s history.

So flamenco was now it—thanks to Gloria—flamenco igniting another conflagration of hope.

When no man worthy of her magnificence had surfaced, flamenco began to feel like work.

Marta got drunk with Cristina one night when she discovered that Michael's girlfriend, an *El País* journalist, was the woman who had been beside him in the ring that day in which Pedro Ramirez had begun a process that would lead to the Mexican becoming history's most acclaimed bullfighter.

"Men are just interested in beautiful women," Marta said.

"They're so superficial," Cristina replied.

Later, while glancing through a fashion magazine, Cristina said: "Hugh Jackman is so gorgeous."

"If only all men were like that," Marta replied.

Superficiality glorifies surfaces.

Faith and fiction both journey forward in time and space and draw their life from that journey. They are that journey, really. They involve the concrete, the earthen, the particular, more than they do the abstract and the cerebral. In both faith and fiction the people you meet along the way, the things that happen to happen, the places— the airport bar, the room where you have a last supper with some friend—count for much more than ideas do. Fiction can hold opposites together in a story simultaneously, like love and hate, laughter and weeping, despair and hope, and so can faith, which by its very nature both sees and does not see. That's what faith is: seeing and not seeing, seeing dimly, seeing from afar.

— Frederick Buechner

by J Todd Hawkins

The Kudzu

On the first warm day of each long spring, it uncurls, stretches, and begins to suffocate the world beneath its sun-love. From then, it grows seven feet every week. It covers all without discrimination, without regard, without regret. We slow the van down to see, and it reaches out to us. Caresses the contours of the fender. Cups the globe of the headlights. Fondles with the latch. We have been bred to hate it, but as for us, we want only to open the window, open the door.

on the first day
hovering over formless waters:
the spirit of God

In autumn fires' leaf-smoke, it will shed and sleep in still brown waterfalls of slender stems, bare vines. But it will not retreat. It will not start over. It will not ever really die.

Stanley's House of Power

Nelson Street, Greenville, 1970

It was, they said, where one went for mojo hands or rubber bats or black cat bones. We were young. We ducked in. To get out of the rain, we told ourselves. The smell of patchouli and peeled wallpaper settled around us. "Look-Ka Py Py" by the Meters spun on the turntable.

We walked back and back and back, not knowing what else to do, past gris-gris dust and pouches of toenail parings and dried frogs and Ghanaian fertility statues. Finally, we reached the table of black candles, each stuck with thirty pins. It was where Nelson Street came to pray. Write your wish on a slip of paper. Set it on the altar. Light a candle. Leave four bits or a dollar for Stanley.

We smiled at each other and took turns coyly hiding our papers as we wrote. When we folded our slips over and set them down, her arm brushed one off. It fluttered to the floor like a plastic snowflake.

We didn't mean any harm, but couldn't help reading the words—

—and we shot out again into the evening rain like sparks from a fuse because, we told ourselves, Nelson Street was beautiful in the rain, because the rain washed the oil off the street, because the rain smelled fresh and new.

in the dark
rising black smoke
is invisible

Jelly's Travels

after Jelly Roll Morton, 1908

He would call them “joys”—the mad, frenetic stomps, the rags, the arrangements dripping with the Spanish tinge. He would call them joys because they were the furthest thing from the blues he could think of. They were the contrablues, the antiblues, the unblues.

peaches in the road
a good week past rotten
when he arrives

He came through here. Winning enough at pool to buy a bag of salt and some Coca-Cola. He'd mix the two and sell the potion as a tonic to consumptives. A dollar a bottle.

At night, he sought the rough honky tonks and jukes. Any place with a piano. Places where the women would do the ham dance—a can-can performed without undergarments. The dancers kicking at a side of pork hanging from the rafters. And he would know what to play for them. Always. He would play them joys.

dawn through cracked glass
flies in the washbasin
floating

When that boy died after his doctoring, he decided it was time to move on. Eventually, he made it to Helena and then Memphis, and while Gayoso Street wasn't Basin Street, the brothels paid well and the women were cleaner and everywhere there was a piano. It was city life, after all, that always suited him best.

the song ends
his cigarette
has burned down

Reptiles Inside the Body

There is the coachwhip snake. It chases a man down, overcomes him with ease, wraps him up, & beats him to death with its tail. Then, to ensure he is truly dead, it probes his nostrils to sense his breath. It slips inside his ear & pierces the thin skin inside.

Or there is the milk snake, which suckles the cows & goats, draining them each night so that by dawn, all they may offer is thin bloodmilk from limp teats.

But the worst by far are the reptiles deep inside the body.

For sometimes, a man will kill a rattler, remove its head, hang it in the chimney to dry. He will grind it down into skin powder. Rub it between his fingertips. Drop it in the glass of a rival's whiskey. From the poison, legions of snakes grow inside. Snakes slide along his back, just under the skin. Snakes spring, worming from his cut palm like maggots in old, soft meat. Snakes rack his stomach in double-bent pain. And deep, deep inside, intestines hatch from snakes' heads.

stripe of fallow field
below the horizon:
endless

Black Dog

Steve Passey

Old Man Solomon has a dog with some Blue Heeler in him, low and mean. You have to keep your head on a swivel with that dog around. Like all Blue Heelers it will bite, and like all Blue Heelers it won't bark. No warning, just teeth. My twin sister Jenny and I will walk past the Old Man's place on the other side of the street like momma told us to do rather than go on the dog's side. Some parents complain to the old man, either call him up or talk across the fence when they see him in his yard. "Keep that dog off of our kids", they say and he comes back with "Keep them kids outta my yard." No one was ever in his yard, but he knows it's some kid's word vs. his. He never even gave the dog a name. Imagine that. He never named his dog. Once in a while the By-Law officer would drive by but he never did catch the dog out of the yard. I saw that dog bite a kid once. Walked up behind him with his head low and went right at the kid's ankle, right at the tendon, just a quick nip. The kid yelped and turned around and the Blue Heeler with no name stood there without a sound with his head low, his eyes up, his teeth bared and the hair on his back standing up. You have to keep your eye on that dog.

#

"Jenny" I said "It's about a girl."

"Heidi Weller" She said. There are few things that surprise my sister. And we are twins.

"Heidi Weller" I said. "I want to ask her to dance at the dance."

"So ask her" Jenny says.

"I can't unless I know for sure she's not going to say no."

"Well, I can't ask her for you. I am not friends with her," Jenny said "She's a rich kid. Besides, just like you find it easier to ask me to ask her so you can know ahead of time – she will find it easier to say no to me in order to say no to you ahead of time."

"Are you saying she won't dance with me?" I asked. Knowing this is the lesser of two evils. Better to hear it here and now than to experience it in front of the whole school.

"Don't put words in my mouth" Jenny said. "What I am saying is that you are going to have to ask her to find out. If *I* ask her she will *probably* say no. But if *you* ask her at the dance she will *probably* say yes. That's as good of advice as I can give you. You're thirteen Danny – some things you are just going to have to do on your own."

I think for a minute. "I wonder if Clayton would help?"

Jenny just looks at me. This is her soft spot. Clayton's momma works at the call centre with ours. They live in a trailer a block over, past Old Man Solomon's place.

Jenny has had a crush on Clayton forever. Clayton used to party his ass off. He did not give a single, solitary shit about anything. She liked him for that. Then he decided to get serious so he could get into the service. He cut his hair, got a job and started to give a shit about a few things. She liked him even more for that. Clayton used to babysit us back in his hair days when our moms would go out with people from work on Fridays. It was cool as shit. We'd play video games, drink cokes non-stop and crank up the tunes.

"He might," Jenny said slowly. "Like I said, you gotta ask yourself".

#

A few months ago Mom had taken me to visit our dad's parents. We didn't see them often and Jenny refused to go. I'm not sure of the right or wrong of that. But she stayed home and we went. When I got back Jenny was kind of quiet. Not sad quiet – just quiet quiet. I thought she might be hiding something. I brought it up and she just looked at me like I was stupid. It drove me crazy to the point I had to be direct with her. Finally – finally – after a week when mom wasn't around I cornered her in her room and asked her point blank "Did you try weed?"

This was our thing. We are twins. When we were ten or eleven we had decided that we would maybe someday – maybe – try weed, but not without each other. We are twins. We'd do this thing together or not at all. I was pretty much convinced. Jenny just looked at me.

"No," she said. "Anyways, I had forgotten all about that. How do you even remember such things?" By now I was totally convinced she had smoked weed.

"I'm telling mom you smoked weed." I said. "Pothead!" I hissed. It was all I could think of to say.

"Don't you dare!" she said.

"Either you tell me what you did or I'm telling mom you smoked weed," I spat back.

"Ok," she said "But I'm telling you only because we're twins. You remember that time when you went off to see dad's parents and I stayed home alone?"

I nodded.

"Clayton came over. We just hung out, it was nice. Just two friends, just hanging out."

"And smoking weed!" I said. "Like you'd be all off in La-La land like you are and not tell me for a week that Clayton came over. That's no big deal. That's nothing at all."

She looked at me for a long time then, just looked. Weighing and measuring. "Get into my closet" she finally said, looking close at me the whole time. She went to her dresser and brought out a roll of those hard candy breath mints with the little sparkles in them. She got in to the closet with me and shut the door. It was dark in

there, and warm and smelled of her clean clothes that momma had laundered.

“Look at my mouth,” she said and I looked where I thought her mouth was. I could hear her unwrap the breath mints with her hand and then feel her move her hand up to put it her mouth. I could smell it briefly on her lips and then hear it on her tongue as she rolled it in her mouth and clicked it on her teeth. She was quiet for a moment and then – *crack* – she bit down hard and tiny sparks shot into the closet from her mouth and her breath was heavy and sweet and I am sure I smiled with an open mouth.

“How did you do that?” I asked.

“It’s called ‘sparking’,” she said “It’s easy. You take the hard candy, put it on your back teeth so that it lies up and down and not flat and then – all at once – you bite down hard and fast and crush it. Pop! Little sparks from it fly out of your mouth. Don’t suck on it – it needs to be pretty dry. Remember to keep your mouth open.”

She pressed a Cert into my hand and I popped it into my mouth and did as she said and she laughed out loud. “It worked perfectly!” she said, and then we went through the pack of mints, each in turn, until there were none.

“So this is what you did with Clayton?” I asked when we were done, before we left the closet.

“Sparking” she said in a stage-whisper, and opened the door. The light from outside was too bright then, and I closed my eyes, and the last thing I saw was the dust motes in the air just barley moving, as if they were too tired or maybe just lazy from the heat to coalesce into something other than what they were.

#

I started walking over to Clayton’s place with my head full of Heidi Weller. Heidi was blond, not as blond as we she had been when we were in Grade School when she was practically white, but blond the color of honey and cinnamon and she had brown eyes. She wore white shirts. She wore dresses. She played volleyball and wore makeup and her daddy was rich. She had a lot of friends. Next week would be the last week of school before summer break, and there will be a dance. I so want to dance with Heidi Weller. In that brief shining moment I’d be somebody – no doubt about it. She has a lot of friends. I just want to dance with her but while I am walking I think I might like to go sparking with her too and I think about her in the dark of my sister’s closet and I shake my head and open my eyes and try to walk faster but I close them again and she’s in the closet and I see her dark against the golden dust motes and hear a *crack* from her moth and I see the little sparks fly and I imagine her mouth to be soft and her breath to smell of Certs and strawberry lip gloss. I keep my eyes closed even while I walk and I walk so slow I might as well be standing. I can’t even imagine why I imagine strawberry lip gloss. I just imagine that it has to be nice.

Old Man Solomon's nameless dog bites me right about then – hard and quick – right on the back of the ankle, right on the tendon. It hurts like hell and I fall down. I'm scared of the fucking dog but just as mad too – the little bastard just circumcised my dream of Heidi Weller's strawberry lip gloss and sparking in my twin sister's closet. I get up like a white hot shot and face off with the nameless spotted devil. He with his head low and teeth bared without a sound and me backing up, limping and waving both arms, hurling a steady stream of f-bombs at him with the spit and hate flying from my mouth. I'm loud enough for both of us – even for all of us kids who ever got bit by that dog - if words had weight I'd have crushed him to a blue stain. I walk backwards up to Clayton's a half block away. The distance between the dog and I by then is such that he turns his back and goes back into Old Man Solomon's yard and I turn and walk up to Clayton's momma's trailer door and knock.

Clayton opens the door and offers a fist bump. "Bro," he says. "Why the limp?"

"Fucking Old Man Solomon's dog bit me," I said.

"Ah Bro-ski," he says – "You didn't go the long way around did you. Mind you - you shouldn't have to."

I just nod. The fear is gone, my mouth is so dry. My ankle still hurts.

"I'll tell you what," Clayton said "Let's fix that dog for you. I'm sick of that bullshit. Old Man Solomon will be in the city today – drinking at the VFW – he won't be back until supper. Everyone else here is at work. Let's fix that dog."

I shrug my shoulders and nod. My ankle feels better already.

Clayton isn't wearing a shirt – he never does now. Since he got all straight-edge and cut his hair and got that job at the drilling mud place he never wears a shirt. Just jeans and those steel-toed cowboy boots he got for work. You can see the veins in his biceps now, the triangle of his shoulder muscles, and he has abs. Clayton's always showing a six.

"Gotta get in shape for the service" he told me once, and patted his abs. I looked away. It seemed kind of weird to admire his abs. He got them loading bags of drilling mud onto pallets. Labor looks good on a young man.

Clayton and his abs pull on his steel toed boots, walk on out into the first hot day of summer and start looking around the trailer.

He pulls up an old two-by-four, five feet long, splintered at one end with nails sticking out of the other and swung it in a wide arc like a baseball bat and then overhand, more straight up-and-down like a hammer. The board has faded to grey with age and he sets it down without saying anything. He went under the steps and fished out an old propane barbecue tank – more rust than silver paint on it and swung that around a little too.

"Ugh" he said "Too heavy" and set it back down under the steps. He walked back down to the back corner of the trailer near the gas meter and pulled out a rusty iron bar that was lying by the trailer – rebar actually, the kind of rod used to reinforce

concrete. It was rusty with age but made a happy whipping sound when he swung it. Long enough to reach a dog I thought, light enough to swing, and easy enough to keep a hold of.

“Found this when I was six,” he said “Stuck it in a fire ant’s nest once. Ran like hell. Glad I kept it. Glad momma didn’t find it and throw it away. It’ll do. Now let’s go show that damn dog who is boss.”

We walked down the street together and then turned to go past old Man Solomon’s. He stopped there and said, “Tell you what, Gg on a head of me – ten steps. Keep your eye out for that dog. When he comes out behind you like he does you stare him down. I’ll come up behind him and fuck his shit up with the rebar.”

I nodded and I walked on ahead. Briefly, briefly I thought of Heidi Weller in a blue summer dress, her hair in a single braid, her brown eyes flashing. I almost laughed and I am sure I blushed but in the same second I remember that I am afraid of the dog. I forget to count to ten. Where is the dog? Where? I look behind me and sure enough, there he is, coming in low. He is all black on his back and his hackles are up, his sides the mottled grey of one of those World War Two German fighter-planes. His eyes are more orange than brown and in the curl of his lip his teeth are bare and he made no sound at all.

I stood there, my palms out and my fingers up eye to eye with the devil, and heard Clayton’s steel-toed boots coming up fast like a hammer striking metal and saw in the early afternoon sun the arc of the rebar in Clayton’s hands as it came down at the nameless dog the rebar descending, as if from a great height. *Crack* it went across the black back and the dog screamed – a shriek that could break glass – and the dog was on his side, his paws moving like it was swimming and I laughed out loud. Clayton brought the bar down a second time – harder now – he had reached so far behind him to generate momentum the bar scraped on the concrete of the sidewalk before he brought it up and over and it came around, came over, came to the dog with a deeper, harder *CRACK!* and the black dog shrieked again – so loud now I had to look around. He was almost totally over on his back now, his paws in the air as if to protect his face not unlike me with my own hands a moment ago. Clayton took the rebar for the third time and holding it by one end in both hands he drove it straight down through the dog’s belly like a sword, like a marker, like a period. The rebar went through the fur on the dog’s belly, grey and soft and sparse and through him. There was a muted *chunk* sound as the point of the rebar reached the other side of the dog and hit the concrete of the sidewalk beneath it. The dog made a sound like air leaving a ball – a long and sharp series of breaths like *HAHAHAHAHAHA!* They rattled down the street and up past the tree leaves into a cloudless sky and Clayton and I stood there with our hands empty and stared at the dog. We were breathing hard and our palms were sweaty and the dog lay sort of on its back and on its side with almost 2 feet of rebar pointing straight up.

No one moved until Clayton stepped forward and spit on the dog, phlegm white and heavy and said, “Not so tough now are you, you little motherfucker.”

He held out his fist to me for a fist bump and I touched my fist to his, just barely touched it, my eyes on the rattling dog at our feet.

The dog rolled on to his belly then, the rebar falling over to hit the concrete with another, sharper *chunk*, this one not muted by his own body. His jaws open in a rictus of a grin and his eyes are so wide open you can see the whites. His eyes rolled, orange and white, but he would not look at us. Clayton pushed the dog’s hindquarters with the toe of his boot and said, “Look at me you motherfucker. Look at me.” The dog would not look but he sat up, his breath ragged and his tongue hanging, the rebar in his guts hanging out at such an angle so as to touch the ground. Clayton prodded him with his boot again and said “Move motherfucker,” and this time the dog did move. Slowly, and as if with great effort he turned around and tried to walk back into old man Solomon’s yard. He took two steps then sat down again.

“Not so fast,” Clayton said and then put himself between the dog and the yard. “Not so fast. Hey Danny – motor on back to my momma’s and grab us a couple of beers from the fridge will ya? It’s hot as shit out here”.

#

After Jenny and I had sparked Jenny got about of the closet and went and sat cross-legged with her back against her bed. I stayed in the closet on the piles of clothes that smelled like fresh laundry. She looked at me without speaking, looked through me without saying anything.

“What’s up sis?” I asked.

“Nothing,” she answered. “From here the closet looks so small.”

I could still taste the Certs. It was on my teeth and mouth and in her breath and in the air.

“You ok?” I asked.

“With the light the way it is I can hardly see you back there,” she said.

#

I walked back over to Clayton’s mommas and looked up at the sky. He was right – it was hot. It’s that first really hot day of spring, summer before it’s officially summer, and it feels like a record breaker already and it’s only early afternoon. Even the tree leaves sweat. Spring will be over soon, and the green days done until by August the heat will turn everything into the color of a civil war photograph. It feels like today’s the day that starts. Last August I actually dreamed of water. I remember the dream.

I get the beer from the fridge and by the time I walk them back to Clayton little

drops of condensation have formed on the cans and the dog is back on its feet again.

Clayton cracks his beer and I crack mine and he says "Check it out. The little bastard won't give up" and sure enough the dog is walking slowly and stiffly, like it's walking on glass. It tries to walk around Clayton into Old Man Solomon's yard but he moves a few feet to block it every time and slowly but surely edges it out to the sidewalk, away from the yard. *HAHAHAHA* it breathes now, loud enough I can't believe people can't hear it. I guess most of them are working, people like my momma, and kids are in their houses or at the mall or something. The dog walks and sits, walks and sits, and Clayton, with me alongside, herds it away from its yard.

"So what did you come over for in the first place?" Clayton asks me, as we maneuver the dog along the sidewalk. The rebar hanging out its side drags on the concrete and makes an ungodly sound - like fingernails on a chalkboard. "I'm sure it wasn't about this." He nodded at the dog and spat at it again.

"Um, yeah," I say. "It's about a girl. A girl I like. There's a dance next week and I want to ask her to dance but only if I know for sure she'll say yes."

Clayton laughed. "Ain't any way to guarantee that," he said. "Who is she?"

"Heidi Weller," I say and I sigh.

"I know the family," he says. "She's a rich kid. She's got a lot of friends."

"I know."

By now we have come to the edge of town – the edge of the trailer park really, and the road just runs out of town out past the landfill and out to little old farms like Old Man Solomon's before he sold and moved into town. Ain't any money in these little farms save the real estate when it's sold to developers. Old Man Solomon got his money and in time his old neighbors will get theirs.

We have the dog in the middle of the road now and he lies down, breathing hard. His jaws are open impossibly wide, his tongue hangs to the asphalt below and his eyes are so wide there is more white than orange. Still, he won't look at us. He turns his head if we walk up. Clayton tries to prod him along with his steel toed boot again, but this time the dog does not move. He just pants and looks away. There is a fence alongside the road and a tree with branches that just overhang the fence.

"Come on," Clayton says. "Let's go sit on the fence under that tree and grab some shade. It's way too fucking hot out here today."

We go sit in the shade and drink our beer. It's so hot out here the beer is already getting warm and where the first swallows went down like *Manna* from heaven the last few are a bit sour on the stomach.

"Well," says Clayton, drawing it out. "Here's how I'd do it. One: She's got a lot of friends, so ask a few of them to dance first. If they are friends with Heidi they're not gonna be the fatties anyways. They're probably other cool kids – just not as cool as Heidi. This way Heidi will see you're just out there having fun. If you zero in on her it'll set her radar off and she'll say "no". No girl wants to be some guy's only option. Not at

a middle school dance. It's loser-ish. Maybe even a bit stalker-ish. So work your way up."

I nod and take another pull of warm beer.

"Secondly," he said. "Don't be too polite. That'll set her radar off too. After you have let her see you out there with her friends and you're just a guy having fun go on up and say "Let's go!" Don't ask her – tell her. Hold out your hand. She'll go. She might look at her friends and shrug her shoulders like she *has* to do this but trust me, girls like to dance. She'll dance. And would you fucking look at that?"

The sun has moved behind the tree now and the shade from its branches touches the road. The black dog has gotten up and staggered into the shade before lying down again, lying in the shade at that same awkward angle it had when first the rebar had stuck in its guts, the rebar pointing into the sky. The rebar is not so straight up now though, more like at an angle. It wavers a little with each hard breath drawn.

Clayton sets his empty on a fence post, I notice the can is smeared a red color. It's from the condensation on the can, the sweat on his hands and the rust from the rebar. He walks out to the dog and tries to get it to move with a few prods from his boot but the dog won't move. He grabs the protruding end of the rebar and wiggles it a bit – that gets the dog going. *HAHAHAHA* it breathes again with a half a snarl, his jaws wide open, and his eyes rolling wildly. He looks at Clayton and I can't tell if it's fear or hate or begging for mercy but Clayton gets him back out to the middle of the road by steering him with the rebar, gets him out of the shade and into the sun before he lets him lie down again.

"Not on my watch," Clayton says as he comes back and sits on the fence. "Now, after you have danced with her – tell her you want her to save one more. I'm sure she'll say "sure" or "yes" or whatever but the key is don't actually ask again. If she asks you great – that's great. That's how it's supposed to work. But you never want to ask her again. Just don't. One step at a time and this is as good as it'll get for now."

The last of my beer, warm and sour, has gone down and I watch the dog half on its side, half on its back, wide mouthed in the sun. God it's hot. The sweat on my forehead runs down into my eyes even in the shade. I imagine Heidi now in a red summer dress, red and white with a red bandana on her wrist and still with a single long braid. I imagine her with her friends and I imagine them laughing. I do laugh a bit this time. Clayton is watching the dog and either doesn't hear me or thinks I'm laughing at the dog. It's so hot.

"Have you ever asked a girl to dance this way Clayton?" is all I can think to ask.

"Who? Me?" He says and laughs. "Not me, man. I let 'em come to me. I have abs. But if you gotta ask, you gotta come up with a different plan". He pats his stomach and it's hard and you can see the cuts and the blue vein that runs up from inside his jeans from his groin between his hip and navel.

All I can do is nod. The dog is totally on its side now, the rebar pointed almost

straight up again. I can see a fat red clot like a crimson leech on the pavement where it has come out of the wound. Flies are starting to come but he's still breathing. I can hear it and see the ribcage moving, moving hard like he was running uphill. In the afternoon sun the pavement has to feel like a lake of fire.

"Yeah, not so tough now," Clayton says, looking at the dog. "Say what Danny – why don't you run on back to momma's and grab us two more beers. It's hotter than hell out here. I'll watch the damn dog. In a while – in a little while - I'll go pull the rebar out of the fucker. We'll leave him there like he's been run over. Kind of shits all over Old Man Solon's bullshit about that dog never being out of the yard. That ol' bastard never even named it, you know that? Won't even miss it. No one will miss it. No one will miss Solomon when he's gone either. You know – at the end of the day, everyone; *everything* gets exactly what it deserves."

#

"So you didn't smoke weed, you just sparked?"

I ask Jenny twice. She doesn't hear me the first time. She's just looking into the closet. The sun the way it is, I'm in shadow, in darkness, and I am sure she can hardly see me and those little specks of dust rise in the air like a screen, like smoke.

"No," She finally answers. "We did some other stuff".

It is my turn to be quiet now. I wait on her.

"We kissed," she says finally. "Clayton kissed me. We had sparked the last candy. We sat there just looking at each other and he asked if I wanted him to kiss me and I didn't say anything and he leaned forward and did it."

I said nothing.

"It's ok," she said. "It's ok, I wanted it to happen."

"I'm a-leave now," I said, and got up and got out of the closet. Jenny still sat there, cross legged with her back against her little bed. All her stuffed animals were in a line up against her pillows.

"I'm gone."

#

I run to get the beers from Clayton's mommas but walk 'em back. I don't want them to foam up. Plus it's too hot to run both ways. I think again of Heidi Weller, I think of her now in jeans and a sleeveless tee shirt like Jenny's jeans and Jenny's shirt. I think of her in the closet and I think of sparking with her. Her eyes are brown and in the darkness they catch just a bit of the last light of afternoon and they flash like garnets and she puts the candy in her mouth. I can't see her hair but I know it's in a long braid hanging down her back. I wonder what it feels like, how soft it must be to touch. It's so hot; another beer would be a really good idea. Our momma wouldn't approve but I

hardly think about that now. I get to the fence in the shade of the tree and hand Clayton his beer and we pop 'em both at the same time. The first swallow is so cold, so good. Clayton gestures towards the black dog with the can in his hand. "It won't be long now," he says.

HAHAHAHAHA its breath comes again only ragged and uneven, like a motor that won't start.

"You're a cool kid and all Dan," Clayton says, his eyes still on the black dog. "But it's best you keep this between you and me. I mean, we'd be heroes to every kid in the park, but there is always some do-gooder that'll shit themselves silly over a dog. So we don't say nothin' to nobody, *capeche?*."

I nod my head and keep my eyes on the dog.

"You can tell Jenny" of course he adds. "You guys are twins. I know how close twins are. She's a good kid, like you. She won't say anything."

I nod again and take a long pull from my beer. So cold. So good. God, the heat.

Lens

"Every act of perception is to some degree an act of creation, and every act of memory is to some degree an act of imagination."

Gerald Edelman (July 1, 1929 – May 17, 2014)

Memory alters the landscape:
makes ruins romantic
turns the moon into the only friend
who still keeps secrets.

Like a glass lens [periscope / microscope / frotoscope / binkoscope]
memory determines
what we see first,
and finally,
 what we make of it.

There is a moon
apart from the mind
we lend this
star-cluttered sky
absent always one
single abiding story.

To see the moon
is to remember
all the moons before
assemble bits
and pieces
into a tale big enough
to rule the heavens.

Night, we call it,
the recalling itself
 unfathomable.

The Memory of What Is Not

*"The memory of what is not may be better than the amnesia of what is."
Robert Smithson*

Just before your head hits the hardwood floor.....
just before you realize the dull cracking sound is your skull's response to hardwood...
you feel the blood leave your lips like a confession.

They want to know what you remember. To help you. To make things better.

You've had an accident. Things happen. There are others. They can help.
But you only remember the litany.

Memory Belonging to Sgt. Bill Culpepper

For the veterans of present wars, and wars ever-present

Since the conflict, I speak a new language
of migraines and brilliantly colored auras
that brings back Mosul in pieces, unbidden.

Migraine and memory bleed together,
the memory coils into a cycle, like
water transpiring from warm leaves
returning as rain over parched desert lips.

A memory a feedback loop, a flashback
so vivid and robust that no one can bear
to hear it- wearing ribbons on their chest,
stickers promising passionate “support”
only for their eyes to blink shut when I
describe what they supported, as if
every scar on this skin amounts to a lie.

The memory’s loop is the *mis-en-scene*.
I sense the octane of panic engulfing an
incomplete landscape, then the copper
metal taste of memory or migraine...
so hard to say which, still impossible
to hold one against the other.

Migraine and memory bleed together
since the conflict, I don’t believe myself.
A diagnosis- damage to the frontal lobe
becomes another promise, useless against
automated wiring. This mind is a machine
that shouts without regard to context
or collateral damage. I avoid aisles
and children in grocery stores, purchase
only fruit and chicken, look for short lines.

A memory, a feedback loop, a flashback
makes it impossible to turn the ignition.
I cannot feel guilty for unremembered
actions, bullets, and bombs released as
part of the past's general order. My
shame is for the present's revisions of
the past- the flashbacks and how they
dislodge entire families from cinema seats.

Since the conflict, I find safety in shadows.
No one asks me to account for the sudden
bursts of light or how flames focus sight
into tunnel vision. No one knows much
about how history amounts to a fiction,
how its protagonists die before being
absorbed into concrete statistics. No one
knows how to honor numerical monuments.

A memory, a feedback loop, a flashback
suddenly I am stranded with an elderly
lady wearing a Sarah Palin t-shirt, fresh
from a facelift vacation. "Thank you
for your service," she smiles.

"Thank you for your service," she says
also to the man who washes her car.
And smiles. A boatload of smiles.

I wish everything weren't so enhanced.
I wonder what I'm missing in her face.
My face— is it my own?
Your face— do you trust it?

Since the conflict, faces read like texts.
Migraine and memory bleed together,
all these faces, flesh and blood over bone,
each furrow, every wrinkle the beginning
of a true story someone might still tell me.
All these faces turned plastic, taking from

us the complicated histories, the stories
grandparents can no longer tell
which face is their own.
I wander alone.

Metallurgists, All

A man has a right to live in any state that corresponds to his views, his preferences, or anything else. Otherwise he is nothing but a slave. The real criminals are those who prevent free emigration and by doing so provoke the crimes they accuse us of.

Eduard Kuznetsov, Prison Diary

I.

We Eastern bloc exiles
are metallurgists, all:
blood drawn thick with
ideology and crystals.

Our mythologies harden into boneyards:
born of utopian splendor and supernatural cognition,
a pair of homo sovieticus made science their ambition.
First calculate then combine two separate gene pools,
then watch to see what happens to puppets who break rules.
Both top-of-their-class , precise, and well-assembled,
their DNA dreams heretofore un-resembled.

II.

Of humanity, we say little:

more than less,
still, nothing much.

Only the masses remain

in airports along borders
mistranslated yet again
into ominous nouns

defectors

those who defect
a part of self misplaced
worn skinny by the effort
to render things whole.

III.

Customs officers may be helpful
but no one dared tell my parents
how communism is hereditary,
why this condition sticks like
soldered skin to branded beast.

We smell like onions and boiled
cabbage. Verdict: Brand C is
for communism. They smell
of new plastic and hairspray.
Verdict: Brand C is for Capitalism.

Look here, says my mother,
how a scar eventually
becomes a mutation.

IV.

Not even the long-awaited
festival of citizenship, that
blessed naturalization
of historic novelties,

contains the power to
diminish iron amassed
in our blood, essential.

Imagine how we frown,
how devout all this trying
harder, finally going
native with nerves,

un-rememorable
to ourselves in
these limp self
over-coagulated
by amnesia.

Reciting A Memory

Reciting a memory I can't recall:
the truck hit me at 45 m.p.h. on impact
my body tossed skyward
smashed through the windshield
landed in his young American lap.
It feels wrong.

As wrong as the possibility of an anxious android
anxiety being an either/or proposition
a verdict on what it means to be human.
It feels like lying.

The androids draw nearer
brush against the holy grail of anxiety
just as human beings learn to automate
themselves out of it. Lose touch.
It feels mechanical.

One day, it will take an android
to remind me why worry.

Mothers Who Die

for everyone who loved Lydia Alina Stefanescu, 1948-2015

at the funeral home all the flowers are fake

I could not countenance a funeral. The extended family ached like an ingrown toenail, foreheads bauched with the aroma of Botox. An ellipses of blank stares inappropriate for the ceremonies of honest-to-goodness grief. There is no good grief. No proper punctuation. The parentheses of a hug holds us back from the statement that follows.

Seal the casket with wood glue I told the undertaker. His shirt was a lavender bloom straight from heaven's finest arboretum. The business of death is bright colors and gaudy in person— but fancy on the next year's tax return.

there's an article in the paper....

The local newspaper printed an article about her two days after her death. The title included the word "beloved". Also "doctor".

The active verb— "dies"— piddled across the page in past tense. Overall, the impression one received was definitive.

sprawled on the living room floor where i am birthing pilgrims

What will we doooooooo? her grandchildren wailed. They cried and played make-believe games with hand-sewn dolls. In the games, all the nice and special dolls had to die. The living room was covered in dolls that had suddenly died. The deaths were sudden and straight-faced.

I said first and foremost we needed to find the right words for this peculiar occasion.

Then I chased words through the house, up and down hallways, until the neck of the word “noooooo” quivered between my hands like an unplucked chicken. After shaking the word and slamming it against the kitchen tile wall, I removed the “n” from the series of o’s. There. Much better. Oooooo pranced through the living room like hula hoop hips, happy to sport a permit.

The dolls kept dying. Children, I said, the deathage must cease. The dearth of deathing is doing us harm.

What will we doooooooooo? they demanded.

We will go on a pilgrimage, I announced. We will make a map of places grandma could be apart from inside the wolf’s belly. We will find the hinterlind where she is hiding and feast upon her blueberry cobbler. We will celebrate her life and maybe light sparklers.

When will we gooooooooo? they needed to know. I said all I could say which came out: Pronto.

preparations for the voyage

I cried in the Chevron bathroom stall. I cried near the confederate jasmine vine on the left side of the mailbox. I cried in conditions of suburban sprawl. I cried on the couch, in the black bucket seat, near the diaper, halfway between the Little Free Library and a nearby house, in the funeral home parlor, in the late afternoon traffic which turned every light orange, in the mega-box store with low prices for milk. I cried in the grass and pressed my face into the driveway pavement.

When I woke up to check if she was still dead, there were no signs of tears on my face. No concrete gravel scars.

I took this as an omen.

maybe orange beach

There weren't any traditions except going to the beach in the summer so we went to a place called Orange Beach and the only orange part were the shells strafed in leftover BP flocculent.

I wrote a poem while sitting on the jetties. The poem involved noise and crunching sounds. A teeth-grinder recognizes the night before in the sound of morning cereal.

*The palm tree hustles a paved corner of paradise
covered in condos. Sand bears evidence of palm
fruit formed small and barely orange. A variation
on fresh-palette peach. Then gravel gravel gravel
more gravel plus concrete ground cover all this
gravel is a grave. We kill the things we love if
only to keep them. A name on the title is a deed.
A word may be done to another. Mine.*

I wanted to read the poem aloud but the ocean raised its voice into the white foam crest, so argumentative.

If I tried to read the poem aloud, it would come out holy as cavities and flush with unmined alloys.

The minerals of me are hard to hear. Metals are missing from the words I need to say. To speak is hard metal manufacturing.

and besides...

We don't have any special hats, the children complained. *How can be pilgrims without those hats?*

there is no such thing as a zipper anymore

Her employees wanted to look inside the casket for closure. But the casket was closed I said what more closure could anyone want? A closed casket doesn't mean much. The blueberry shrubs have been picked clean by birds. There is no fruit left to make a cobbler.

I wonder how she will make a blueberry cobbler for her grandchildren with this dying and all.

I read a book about how it feels when a mother dies. The book was on bestseller lists. A mother dies at least every day. Or, once a day is the death I can see coming.

The book hardly helps. Now I know for a fact that my mother will die because everybody does it.

I still don't know what to do when she dies.

I still can't believe she would go and be like everybody else.

night is a mess

Night is a curtain of hair to hide behind, a knot she'll never comb. Night is 10:27 pm when I sneak onto the red brick stoop of her house and watch the moths burn their skin on streetlights. Remember the early morning we sat here and watched the house across the street burn down. Smoke pressed through the dogwoods so slow we mistook its flumes for a litter of kittens. For something lost we could soothe with milk. Lit our cigarettes in tandem and said we were glad to not burn. Not yet.

people are a mess

Her husband wants to be left alone. But you are already very alone, I said to myself without saying much else except maybe *ohiamsososososorryitmustbesohardandthensome* to the left-alone man.

she liked it when i didn't look messy

In the morning I comb my hair and put on a bracelet. I wear her apple-scented perfume. I perform the role she left as co-Executor of her estate. I smell like printer paper and professionals.

In Alabama a female Executor is called an Executrix. This is a legal term. When I inform others of my role, their eyes glaze over with soft-porn stares and Marvel comic memories. I need a better costume.

A friend hugs me hard. We are both motherless daughters. We are women whose mothers were early adopters of the technocracy known as death. We are status morticians. Our lips burn from kissing hot coffee mugs.

baby steps, they say

My sister continues to see patients. When her eyes close as she describes a recipe, I understand she cannot stand what she sees. This is why she sits on the gray linen couch without speaking. This is why her skin resembles a beautiful white tibia. She hordes bones and soon there will be a baby. I think my love for this baby will be greater than my love for all the world's bones and babies combined. My sister is brilliant. Her love infects me like a blue-green algal bloom. We cannot consider the consequences of our toxicity on other forms of life.

a road i can't find on the map we are still somehow making

Where are we goooooooooing? they chime.

They are children ever-busy clanging and chiming. They are bells and I am the church belfry bat, mortified on the hour by what devotion does to the darkness.

Don't disrupt the darkness, I snap. The bones inside my wings carry me away.

I resolve to live for my mother. I resolve to live and then one day maybe die.

I don't want to make any promises so my words stretch through the ocean of loved one's minds like a rotten peninsula. The ground is rotten. The tomatoes we eat have grown in the ashes of other dead mothers though nobody mentions this at lunch.

I do not understand the autopsy. A massive pulmonary embolism is not a skinny-dipping internist's death. The autopsy must be referring to a rock star.

It is different to turn one's blessings into accounting statements. People who think my mom is dead don't know how she joined a four-man sailing crew in the North Sea without divulging any details until after.

first person to person

There is a yellow puddle of streetlight near the mailbox. I stand with my toes over the cusp of available light.

I remember things she said and now the pronouns are muddled. The courage with which I throttled nooooooo tucks the children to sleep and waits by the foot of their bed.

Come with me, I beg.

No, it snarls. Go be a big girl. Go get you some big girl boots. Go listen to country music and shoot big girl guns.

My chin drags like a badly-thrown anchor. Pieces of jellyfish arms sting my eyes. I remember things she said, and it turns into the game we play we ghosts.

Maybe you'll write poems about me after I die, she said eyebrows lurching. Expectant.

I shrugged because two can play at the you'll-love-me-later game. I shrugged because you are she and now what.

Maybe you already knew how it would feel to win. To be right forever. To be the voice we never ignored again. The sonnet behind every sparrow and sunset. A reluctant country song we couldn't stop seeking.

In this game we play with ghosts, the pot is yours. I lose but can't stop playing. Come back. Convince me why I should remain in the land of the living where only losers get left.

FINITUDES

I

Leaves fall like confetti. In gusts,
they twist and turn. The hawksbill geranium
we planted in July is still blooming in October,
each tendril ending in a violet flower.
Low to the ground, nodding softly
in the wind, it never seems to struggle.

II

Under a weightless rain,
in dress uniforms of dark blue,
the firemen marched in solemn step
to the mournful accompaniment
of the “Emerald Society Pipes and Drums.”
Wreaths were laid at the monument,
and a bell struck for every man lost
in the last year.

Our dead are always with us,
not only at anniversaries.
They keep watch over us,
they chide and encourage us,
if we let them.

III

It was a day like any other day,
the mist hung low to the ground
and hid the hills.
The wind blew and the rain spilled,
and the sun broke through.
And the wet grass waved,
as majestic clouds floated past,
like time, hurrying
in one direction.

IV

The migrating bird that can't keep up
gets left behind.

Bathe me in golden light,
heal my shattered bones.

DUST MOTES

Early January, snowed under.
The sky deep blue as a flower
where the Nosterkill rushes under ice
in the direction of all streams
that join greater waters.

Inside, I was washing my hair
at my weekend routine,
blissfully soaking in a warm bath,
as I rinsed off soap and shampoo.

Where light fell in slanting shafts
to lie in squares on the green floor,
I saw colonies of dust motes,
twirling, falling, rising.

So many they were myriad,
yet I never knew
they were always there
trapped in light and air,
unfelt, unheard, unseen.

ELEGY (FOR WENDY)

Your expressive brown eyes
with their faint tinge of hurt,

on a blue-and-white island in the Aegean,
on a beach honeycombed with caves,

one summer in your reckless youth—
no clothes but a caftan, a rock for your roof.

Lulled by breezes, rocked by waves,
you danced in the sea, water sparkled on your skin.

In the film that your friend made of you,
you seemed more alive than I will ever be.

There are other films—yours, too—
all the films are now your ghosts.

Of films that took shape from your editing touch,
I am drawn to the Tibetan throat singers,

how they trained their vocal cavities to produce unearthly tones,
like the growl of a bull united with the song of a child.

Watching, listening, I am shaken to the core
by the tantric voice vibrating in rhythm with the universe.

A BACKWARD GLANCE

In tiny color transparencies,
these images swim up from the past
into the oval of my magnifying glass:

My grandparents squint
into the sweltering Alabama sun
next to long-lost relatives
visiting from Australia.
I am eight years old.

My mother lounges by the pool
in a one-piece bathing suit
looking younger than I remember
on a Florida vacation,
while my sisters splash in the pool.
I am thirteen.

Flash forward half a dozen years
to my sisters holding bouquets
as if they were bridesmaids
standing next to their dates at a dance
under an arch twined with artificial flowers.

In these captured moments
everyone is always smiling,
and yet I want to weep
for what will happen to us,
for what has happened already.

The essential advantage for a poet is not to have
a beautiful world with which to deal:
it is to be able to see beneath both beauty and ugliness;
to see the boredom, and the horror, and glory.

— T S Eliot

Excerpt from the novel Ravensbone

Catherine Rosoff

I.
Alex
2010

*Fly away little pretty bird
Fly fly away
Fly away little pretty bird
And pretty you'll always be*

These smoothly sung words came from the rosy lips of the most beautiful child Alex had ever seen. It made the thirty-five-year-old uncomfortable to think it, but as the daffodil-haired, hyacinth-eyed twelve-year-old walked through the emerald forest hand-in-hand with her daffodil-haired, flame-eyed fourteen-year-old sister, Freya, he couldn't help himself. He was grateful when Thora's borderline homely older sister took over the next verse of the dirge-like bluegrass song.

*I see in your eyes a promise
Your own tender love you bring
But fly away little pretty bird
Close the spring*

He wasn't sure if he was even walking anymore, her voice a stunning predator biting into him.

Thora sang,
*Love's own tender flame
Warms this meeting
And love's tender song should sing
But fly away little pretty bird
And pretty you'll always stay*

The sunshine finally piercing through the shady woods, Alex could finally see shimmering sapphire flashes of the lake just ahead.

Freya sang,
*I cannot make you no promise
For love is such a daily good thing
Fly away little pretty bird
For he'd only clip your wings*

This was their favorite place. Where, sometimes just together and sometimes with their father, they would play guitar, fish, swim, and lay against the grass, letting the sun bake their wet bodies dry.

Thora sang,

Fly away little pretty bird

And pretty you'd always stay

Suddenly Freya unclasped Thora's hand, darting so quickly to one tree, then another, that her waist-length tresses and lilac sundress actually flew behind her. Just as Alex was about to ask Thora what she was doing, he saw her grab a rabbit by its hind legs. Holding the frantically squirming animal in the air upside down, she clasped its head and twisted it until it became still. She then stretched out her hand and began raising it.

"This part's really hard to do," Thora told Alex. "You're supposed to only be able to do it if you're really strong, like adult man strong. But somehow she can do it."

As Freya hit the back of the rabbit's neck with a karate chop, Thora cocked her head closer to him and lowered her voice. "But she is showing off for you," she said with a good-natured smirk. "We have a coop full of rabbits we use for meat."

"But rabbits are agricultural—"

"—pests. I know—I know—and wild rabbits have a different taste than domesticated ones."

"So are you going to eat it, Freya?" Alex asked as she threw the rabbit over her shoulder, stood up, and walked toward them.

"No, I killed it for you. I figured you're the one who's our guest. And hospitality is one of the nine virtues."

"Which means I'm going to be cooking it."

"Well you're a better cook than me, Thora. I'm the better killer and skinner."

"That's true. I am a pretty good cook if I may say so myself."

"You're too modest, Thor. That's one of my sister's flaws." Putting her arm around her sister's shoulder, she squeezed it and gave her a hearty kiss on the cheek.

"You're an amazing cook. You'll see, Alex. You'll probably forget you're not at a restaurant."

"Have you ever been to a restaurant?" he asked, sort of wishing he hadn't once he had.

"Yes," Freya said. "I think I've been . . . a long time ago."

He wanted to ask her to elaborate, but knew he probably shouldn't. At least not at the moment.

. . .

"I like your accent."

They were heading back from the lake through the forest.

"Thank you, Thora."

“English accents are so pretty.”

“Why isn’t the crew with us?” Freya asked.

Alex was surprised that she used the term “crew.” It seemed an overly sophisticated term for her to use. Then he realized it actually probably wasn’t.

“There were some technical difficulties that are being fixed now.”

Difficulties that had initially angered him. But as their trek through the forest was winding down, his anger had gradually transformed into something that wavered from mild annoyance to borderline gratitude.

...

“So over there there’s—Alex, are you okay?” Jonah asked. Like the tall and skinny Alex, with his pallid, Aryan, dissolute-aristocrat appearance, the girls’ slightly older father had an unconventional, debatable handsomeness, with the rough-hewn, wiry, jutting-brow looks of a cowboy in a western.

His eyes glued to the twinkling-diamond stars against the deep lapis sky, he replied. “No—it’s just—I’ve never seen a night sky that looked like this. I’m sorry.”

“No need to apologize to me. I’ve been here forever and I still get awestruck by this place. Even the air here is so clean and pure that—”

“—that sometimes when you inhale it you actually get a little buzz.”

“Exactly.” Jonah laughed.

Suddenly Alex heard the footsteps of the crew behind them and he realized he had forgotten that they were there. They were nearing a campfire where the girls were slowly strumming guitars for a group of about a dozen children their age and younger who sat stock-still with rapt attention.

Thora sang,

There is a road and it leads to Valhalla

Where only the chosen are allowed

There is a boy with a dream of Valhalla

A place in the land of the gods

Freya sang,

But in the heart where the fire burns forever

Where life goes on for those who fell in battle

The gods are waiting the moment he falls in a fight

Squeezing the shoulder of a ten-or-so-year-old girl next to her, she sang,

And he will rise when the sun goes down

“Me?” The girl asked, sheepish yet honored.

“You know the words, Eisa.”

The girl sang,

Raised high his sword

As he cried out Valhalla

His dream had become reality

*And tonight he will die
On the road to Valhalla
Chosen to feast with the gods*

As Thora took over the next verse, singing something about forever-burning fires, Alex noticed Jonah's eyes moistening.

"Are you okay Jonah?"

Jesus, *how long* had he been doing this?

"I'm just looking at my daughters and I'm thinking about . . . how *lost* I was back when I was their age."

" . . . I think . . . most people—at least at some point when they're growing up—feel lost."

"Not like me." He paused, shook his head, then dropped his voice to a near whisper. "Not like me."

"Don't you think Gideon was lost, very lost, in a way most young people aren't when he was growing up?"

"It's different."

"Why?"

"Because you have to be lost—very lost—to become a Gideon Brand. But I'm not a Gideon Brand."

"But you're a Jonah Auer. The man who raised those two girls over there."

Realizing his sincerity, a slight nausea gently trickled through his belly. His throat suddenly felt dry as the girls began to play a new song.

"Okay, *now I know* you know the lyrics to this song," Freya said. "So you I want you all—every single one of you—to sing along with us. But we will start you off."

The girls together began to sing in a tempo so slow it sounded reverential. Even hymn-like.

Eyes shining down with un-spilled tears.

On cue the others joined in unison,

Thinking about all these wasted years.

Everything worth living for is gone,

Brother, I find it hard to keep fighting on

Falling down toward the abyss

The reaper embraces me with his kiss

It makes me want to refuse to care

To watch this all unfold—too much to bear

If this is the way it ends

If this is the way my race ends

If this is the way it ends—I can't bear to witness

*Disease encroaching all that I hold dear,
Somehow I gotta get my soul out of here
Heart of agony, faint burning hope
I'm finding it hard to try to cope*

*Because liars own the world with conquering poise
In a wasteland of meaningless noise
We don't stand a chance with dormant pride
The heroes of our race have already died*

*If this is the way it ends—if this is the way my race ends
If this is the way it ends—I can't bear to witness*

*To imagine it has all come down to this
Apathy and suicidal bliss*

*It's all over except for the cryin'
With a whimper instead of the roar of the lion*

*The greatest race to ever walk the earth
Dying a slow death with insane mirth
The tomb has been prepared, our race betrayed
White man, fight the fight toward the grave*

II. Elias 1949 – 1971

In 1942, twenty-five-year-old Dov Miller was a Hasidic rabbi living in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. A brilliant, studious man whose passion for Judaism translated into a dynamic style that gave him a small, but ultra-devoted congregation and whose flat feet had exempted him from the draft, he was considered a good catch by the parents of eighteen-year-old Rebecca Rothstein.

Or rather, he was considered a good catch by Rebecca's father. Her mother, Sarah, was not so sure, but said nothing. It wasn't her place.

In 1943, Devorah was born. In 1944, Judith. In 1945, Leah. When Magda was born in 1946, Dov began to wonder if God was not punishing him for some sin that he was unaware of having committed by refusing to give him even a single son. So when Rebecca informed him she was pregnant a mere three months after giving birth to

Magda, he decided to devote himself more fully to God, so that God might reward him with a son at last.

How might he do this? By devoting every ounce of himself to prayer and the study of the Torah.

He could not do this with a congregation, however. It was too diverting. So he became part of a subculture of Hasid males who devoted their lives to such endeavors. His wife kindly begged him not to do this, not when she was pregnant. How would they live? She knew the answer to this question, but she still asked it all the same.

They would do what other Hasid couples in such situations did. She would go to work, likely teaching at an Orthodox girls' school and the community would donate whatever they could to help supplement her income, proffering everything from home-cooked food, to their children's outgrown clothes, to money. They would, in fact, be glad to do this. They wouldn't pity her. They might even envy her. In their world, Dov's planned avocation would place him in a position of high esteem. People would be glad to help support him.

And so this is what happened.

Rebecca was aghast when the doctor who delivered her fifth child told her she had just bore a healthy baby girl. As she held Abigail in her arms under her husband's dead gaze, however, she had second thoughts. Though he had never told her, or anyone else, of his reasons for leaving his congregation in favor of study, she knew them. Now he might finally see the futility of his motives and resume paid work.

He too began to wonder if his regimen of study and prayer was not a futile one. Had he simply spent too little time on it to reap its potential rewards?

He realized he was wrong in 1948 when Rebecca had a miscarriage. Yes, he had applied himself to this course of study for nearly a year, but for how many hours a day? He began studying eleven hours daily excluding meals and services. He rarely went to sleep before midnight or slept more than five hours a night.

Soon he was immersing himself so deeply in his "reflections" that he began skipping a meal a day and not uncommonly two. His clothes began to hang off of him. When his eight months-pregnant wife told him that some in the community were whispering that he might be ill, he wondered if he should give up and try to get hired back at his old synagogue. Over the next month, wondering had started to become planning.

And then Elias was born.

When Rebecca saw her husband's overjoyed face as he took their son in his arms she thought, *It's over.*

When her husband looked into his newborn son's face, he thought, *It's only just begun.*

Why should he treat God so cheaply? Withdrawing from him just as He had

rewarded him? Why not return His generosity with an even greater one, by producing the greatest scholar of Judaism he could find within himself to produce?

Elias grew into a child of not only unusual intelligence, but also one of unusual attractiveness. Tall and slim, with high cheekbones, caramel-colored skin, and glistening jet-hued hair and eyes, he had an aristocratic, feline beauty that caused adults to stare at him as he walked down the street. For a long time, he thought of these gifts as a curse. Were he a child of modest or even average intelligence, his father would have probably given up on trying to turn him into a brilliant religious scholar. As it was, his brains only made his father more unrelenting. He not only forbade him to have a social life, but he sporadically beat him when he felt he was not giving his studies full effort. Even his beauty seemed to have a frustrating pointlessness to it. He felt this even though he believed it probably contributed to the fact that his mother and sisters fawned over him as if he were a child prince. (He considered this treatment as something he was entitled to. The price he had to pay for his elevated status was quite a high one.) However, he knew his good looks would not help him obtain a desirable wife. For that he would need to become a man who earned more money than his father did, and his father seemed ferociously determined to prevent him from doing that.

When he was thirteen, his oldest sister, Devorah, married a man named Adam Levy. Adam came from a well-off family who had their own import-export business. His father, David, the business' owner, was a slightly pudgy, jovial man who seemed to sprout sunshine from his round pink face. At one Shabbat dinner, after noticing how much interest Elias showed in his business, David laughed, slapped him on the shoulder and said, "Slow down, you're too young, you'll have to wait until you're old enough for me to hire you." He was joking, but both Elias and his father took him quite seriously. His father saw him as the first real threat to Elias' future. Elias saw him as the first ray of hope in it.

About a month after the Shabbat dinner, he and his father were discussing the Holocaust. Elias was aware that his father held a theory about it that a contingent of Orthodox Jews also had. It confused Elias so he decided to ask him about it.

If the Holocaust was God's way of punishing the Jews because so many had stopped practicing Orthodox Judaism, he asked his father, then why were so many of the Holocaust's victims Orthodox Jews?

For the first time in his life, his father hit him with a closed fist—in the throat.

As he coughed breathlessly, Elias hated his father more than he ever had. But he had to bite his lip to stop himself from smiling.

After that, the more defiant Elias got, the more his father beat him and the more he beat him, the more defiant he got. Yet Elias never failed to do ultimately what he was told. He merely submitted to his father with the angry, smiling-eyed obedience of a prisoner who thought himself superior to his jailer and was just waiting for the day he

could shank him and escape.

When Elias was sixteen, his mother developed lupus. She was still able to teach for a couple of more years, until her illness reduced her to working part-time on the kindergarten level. His father was forced to go back to work as a rabbi. He had planned for Elias to attend a *beis medrash*, a college that taught undergraduate-level Torah studies, on a full scholarship. His son, however, had seen to it that he only earned a partial scholarship to attend one. And he wasn't about to let Elias use his mother's illness as an excuse not to go and take up David Levy's impertinent offer of a job in his business. (He had suspected, not entirely wrongly, that Elias was somewhat relieved by his mother's misfortune because he sensed it might provide him with precisely this type of opportunity.)

However, within a year her condition deteriorated to the point that she could no longer work and soon medical bills they couldn't pay began piling up. So when David asked Elias to work for him again when he was nineteen, Dov permitted him to say yes.

Elias was thrilled to accept the offer and thrilled to do the work itself. It turned out he was quite a shrewd businessman. However, he loathed the greater exposure it gave him to the non-Orthodox world. Not because he loathed the world he saw, but because he loathed that this world saw him.

He hated travelling on the subway every day, feeling staring eyes on him, hearing indecipherable, whispered words. And he hated it even more once he got to work. His job was in Harlem. It would have been bad enough had he not had to hear the more-than-occasional jeers when he walked the four blocks back and forth to and from the subway and avert his eyes from the frequent silent, hostile stares. But once he got to work he had to contend with the men who worked in the warehouse and drove the trucks. Their hostility always came dripping in sugar, always with a "sir" or a "mister," but spoken with soft, poisonous tongues and slyly laughing eyes. And what was worse, according to David, you always had to have eyes on the back your head and your hand on your wallet.

As for the world he saw, he only loathed the desire it bred in him. It was as if he had been locked in a closet his whole life and was now finally being let out into the sunshine, only to have to return to it every night and weekend. Yet still, he had his weekdays out in the sun in this place of glittering, decadent freedom. Where people walked down the street and could view numerous shops with tempting sweets and savories and just walk in and buy them without checking whether they were kosher or not. A place where men could view brazenly bareheaded, naked-armed women and look them in the eye and even shake their hand. A place where teenagers walked out of films hand-in-hand and even kissed each other right out on the street.

One day David sent him on an errand in midtown involving some paperwork a new client needed to sign. He had been instructed that he was a "real whale" named

Mordechai Grossman who owned a chain of upscale department stores named Forsythe and Frost.

The New York City Forsythe and Frost looked like a blown-up version of the gingerbread house in Hansel and Gretel. The interior was bathed in velvet, silk, and marble and colored shades of cotton candy pink and lemon drop yellow so fetching and sugary sweet that it actually almost beckoned Elias to rip off pieces of it and eat it. The salespeople were so attractive that at first he didn't think they were even real and couldn't distinguish the still, silent ones from the mannequins. His eyes catching sight of a ballerina-bodied ice blonde poured into a nude sheath, they raced away from her when she smiled at him like a pair of roaches retreating from the beam of a flashlight.

Mordechai Grossman was a balding, overweight man who appeared to be about 6'3", though he was in reality only 5'11". His eyes smiled even when he didn't and his voice was like a cup of strong coffee doused with milk and sugar: robust and energizing, but warm and sweet. He immediately told him to call him Morty and gestured toward one of the pastel-hued French macarons on a silver dish on his desk.

"Would you like one? They're shipped directly from Par-Oh, I'm sorry, they're not kosher. I apologize for my foolishness. I'm a Reform Jew—a total Pagan."

"Not at all. I would certainly indulge if I could. They look quite tasty."

In fact, they looked more than tasty. They were actually making him salivate. Like an animal. A starving animal.

As he went through the papers, he excused himself to take a call, apologetically explaining it was a quite important one and would only take a few minutes. At some point during the call, he turned his back to him to search for some papers. Elias didn't even realize the cookie was in his mouth until he saw Mr. Grossman staring at him. After a second, he gave him a smile and a wink and continued his phone conversation.

Over the next few months, he came to have a lot of contact with Mr. Grossman, or Morty, as he insisted on being called. Morty seemed genuinely impressed by his business acumen and constantly joked with David about his desire to steal him away from him. Yet it was not just a business bond that was being formed, but also a personal one.

He learned that eighteen years earlier, during a storm, Morty was driving with his seven-year-old son, Ben and five-year-old daughter, Irene when he got into an accident that only temporarily injured himself and his daughter but killed his son, who had removed the seat belt he always hated to wear. His daughter began struggling in school, progressively so as the years went on. Some teachers considered her lazy while others believed she was simply of "low intelligence." They didn't always hide these views from her. The kids even began to catch on and she began being taunted with nicknames like Dummy and Dunce. Finding solace in food, she eventually was anointed with another one: Fatty.

Thinking it might help the friendless girl he bought her a puppy for her ninth

birthday, another for her tenth, and a cat for her eleventh. At the age of twelve, she added a canary and a parrot to her menagerie. She lost weight, but only enough to shrink from fat to extremely chubby and seemed to lose all interest in people, seeming to be frighteningly content to spend all her time with her pets. She even begged him and his wife to let her take in a stray dog she saw wandering through their neighborhood. His wife, Sylvia, was horrified, but he bribed her with the promise of an extremely expensive piece of jewelry he had previously refused her to get her to agree. At the age of fifteen, Irene was finally diagnosed with severe dyslexia, which not only made reading and writing, but also processing information, extremely difficult. A mere year after the term “learning disabled” had even entered the educational lexicon, there was little help for someone like her, even with all his money and her advanced age made things even worse as early intervention was so key.

Once she told him when she was in high school that she might want to become a veterinarian and he had to swallow a lump in his throat. She would be lucky if she would become a housewife. In addition to her weight, she was saddled with painful shyness and had developed a terrible acne condition. At the age of twenty-three, the acne had been replaced with a scattering of scars and pockmarks, but the forty excess pounds and social awkwardness remained. She had a job she enjoyed that he had gotten her working at an animal shelter, where she had developed a friendship with an equally quiet and unattractive coworker named Harriet, but she had never even had a boyfriend and still lived with him at home.

At the mention of his home, a tiny electric spark prickled Elias’ brain as he imagined what it might look like.

He would get to find out when, six months after first meeting him, Morty invited him to his Long Island mansion.

Its interior and exterior looked like a huge human-sized version of an opulent Victorian dollhouse. When he first met his daughter, he was a little shocked. She had the button nose, huge, long-lashed eyes, and thick, glossy hair of the dolls he had spied in the toy section of Forsythe and Frost. When she said hello to him, she did so in a voice so prettily high-pitched that he could have imagined it coming out of one of them were they to come to life. When she extended her hand, he did not take it. But before he could explain to her why, her mother, a slightly plump, heavily bejeweled pineapple blonde lightly snapped. “Remember what we told you? They don’t shake women’s hands.”

The painful awkwardness at dinner gradually shrunk afterwards as she showed him her menagerie and told him something about each animal. She had four dogs, two cats, and four exotic birds. Though she seemed most enthusiastic about the dogs, he was most drawn to the birds. Not merely because of the birds themselves, but also because of their cages, which were almost as dazzlingly ornate in their beauty.

Morty continued to invite him to dinner at his home every couple of weeks or so.

As he had with the first dinner, he successfully pulled the wool over his father and David's eyes by telling his father he was working overtime for David and telling David he was doing work for Morty—a ruse Morty was all-too-willing to help him keep afloat. After a few months of this, he began to fear it was only a matter of time before he got caught. One night, however, after the women had retired and he was waiting for Morty to take him to the train station as he always did on these nights, Morty asked him if he could stay a bit longer. He had something to talk to him about. He took him into his study where he poured him a fifty-year-old scotch and lit him a Cuban cigar.

A week later, Elias, clean-shaven and *pais*-free in a suit bought for him by Morty, married Irene in the Grossman's Reform rabbi's chambers, was installed in an executive position at Forsythe and Frost, and had been disowned by his father, and therefore by default, his whole family.

As he said, "I do," the premonition came over him that he would never see any of them again. His brain felt clouded, heavy, the fog only lifting as a euphoric chill ran through his body. Looking at Irene and feeling, for the first time, an inkling of sexual desire for her, he gave her her first kiss.

Eleven months later, Irene gave birth to an eight-pound baby boy. They named him Jonah.

. . .

Listed in order of presentation, below is a listing of the songs whose lyrics are included in this piece and their authors.

"Pretty Bird" by Hazel Dickens

"Road to Valhalla" by Ian Stuart

"Ode To a Dying People" by George Burdi

Brother Caleb

Blake Kilgore

Sweat beaded on his hands and forehead, and it matted the ragged border of his graying beard. Moist warmth radiated beneath his habit, which was dark and heavy and long. His belt cut into his abdomen, which pressed against his sagging chest, and his tailbone was sore. He wiped his brow, using his sleeve to soak the perspiration so it wouldn't drip onto the manuscript and leave an unsightly mark. If it did, he would have to replicate the page, again.

He squinted, straining beneath the hot torches that hung above. Fading eyes grew weary, and his aching limbs were stiff from so many hours hunched over the sturdy, worn table. The stone walls were also degraded, scorched to sooty black all around the sconces. But they stood firm, a silent testament to the yoke of suffering and perseverance.

He preferred writing in the morning. But while sunrise was a good time to scribe, it was better for nurturing soil and plant and fellowship. So, during the day he worked with his brothers in the garden, beneath the pure light of the sun, plucking thorny interlopers and sprinkling nourishment on plump and long and round green and red and brown fruits and vegetables. He became kinsmen to the earth, rejoicing in the grime trapped underneath his fingernails and staining his palms. And his hope was revived by the simple mystery of the harvest.

His hands bore the calluses of both the trowel and the pen. Toil and contemplation, body and mind – these were two sides of being. But there was more.

The hum and chatter of the flame were pleasant, breaking the silence of the chamber. They lulled the mind, so that conscious thought dimmed and what lay beneath moaned for breath, begged to be uncovered. His left hand fumbled for the knots, and he found the rhythm of the meditation, not on his lips, but in his soul.

He was out of time, adrift, peaceful. Later, the rattle of the hourglass fell silent, and he remembered his task. The prayer rope went back around his neck. Barely conscious, his body had cooled while he chanted, and his dry fingers gripped the quill. The nib lowered into the weighty basin of ink, emerged, baptized in shadowy thickness, and veered gracefully toward a blank parchment. The tool was double black, because the feather had dropped from a scavenger, a crow. He copied the text, attempted to make mystery fact through language, and his soul exulted and groaned at the noble but feeble quest, the hopeful attempt to illumine the path for those who might follow.

The words, so potent, were merely hints. Only the feet of the nomad soul, perhaps following faint traces of a master, could wander the oblivion maze of doubt and finally discover the unfathomable certainty of the Divine.

His left ring finger, bare, moved reverently, just above the crumbling, ancient script of the original, and he wondered at that scribe, the young acolyte who had taken down the dictation of the aged elder just before his departure, a good death. Had that other monk thought the task worthwhile, or did he simply obey? Did it trouble him to copy clues and secrets? Did that other man write the words and then frown, perplexed, as he did now?

“When you are praying, do not shape within yourself any image of the Deity and do not let your intellect be stamped with the impress of any form; but approach the Immaterial in an immaterial manner, and then you will understand.”

-Evagrius the Solitary

Disconnect from the empirical or the rational, from the speculative or scientific, from rules; yet, this was a rule. And if prayer is communion, how can the Transcendent remain faceless to the intellect, and to the eyes?

He shook his head, his eyes wet with despair. There had been many years of wilderness and only a trickle of manna. Why continue to struggle for the answer, if it could not be known?

But this was not the answer, it was a bridge, and he must decide whether or not to take the gamble, to obey. The giants – fear, suffering, death - were on the other side, still waiting. They would never leave, would have to be conquered, annihilated. He spoke, faintly.

“Please, grant courage to my brothers.”

Then, pulling the rope away from his throat, over his head, he began to cycle the woven step-ladder between forefinger and thumb, holding it out to the Wondrous Unknown, waiting.

And stilling his mind, he listened.

Joseph

Caroll Ann Susco

I made all the furniture in this house. It's also my trade. I like to smooth the wood out, feel the knots, the waves of lines. Something about trees. Quiet, blown by the wind. An oak's leaves rustling. I go out into the forest, run my hands along the bark, look up. Blue sky. I have been a worried man, made small by trees.

You don't hear much about me. Mainly my wife. People pray to her, as if she could grant them salvation. She cannot. Neither can I. I have no answers. Only quiet.

So, Mary came to me. I was in my shop. She said she was pregnant. Who would believe we had not had relations? I took her away from Nazareth. I took her and spent what little I'd saved. I took her and brought her finally to Bethlehem, where too tired to go on, we looked for a place to stay. I am a man of honor and married Mary. The story of us is personal. I won't discuss it here.

I taught my son the trade. I call him my son although he'd deny it. I raised the boy. I like to think I taught him something. I like to think I taught him patience by teaching him to listen to the wood as you smooth it. The story of knots, rings, bug holes. One has to listen to hear the wind rustle the leaves, the branches creak. I respect the wood.

Smooth, I run my hand along it.

At the temple, my son left us. We left him. We were worried. He scolded us for it.

Not long after the temple incident, I was carving a bowl when my arm began to hurt.

My son ran into my shop but stopped at the door and looked at me as I fell over, face down in the dirt, silent. He did not try to save me, but I felt the peace of the wood and it was okay to let go. It hurts a man to leave his responsibility. But honestly, who cared if I did? Mary would be fine. Jesus would be fine. The other children. I would only get a few mentions in the Bible. Joseph, unfather. Joseph, lonely guy. But I could hear the woods, trunks creaking, leaves rustling. He held me. I let go.

They buried me under a Sycamore whose trunk was thick, knotted, and old. With the rough bark, the termites, the woodpeckers. They buried me where I could become part of the bark, or the marrow, or the sap, a leaf, water reaching toward the blue yellow light.

The Woods

Robert Earle

You could call anything the woods. Lucy used the term so casually that no one noticed. Early on in New York City she'd laugh in that easy way of hers and ask who wasn't lost in the woods. She majored in psychology because the mind reminded her of the woods that had surrounded her childhood home. The mind had no straight paths, the mind was full of shadows, the mind was a kind of hideaway beyond the fence-work of the brain. It wasn't about being smart. She knew she wasn't smart. Her mother told her that. Her mother also told her, the last child of six, to stay out of the way. So she wandered in the woods, alert to the susurrus of nature and self-noise—her breathing, her imagining, her reaction to looking up and seeing torn pieces of sky through the leaves above or peering through the trees toward traces of the gray-blue river so big it barely seemed to move.

She sometimes got poison ivy so bad it immobilized her. Her mother never dealt with it. Two of her older sisters coated her with calamine. Lucy liked Jessie and Nell dabbing her with cotton balls soaked with the thick liquid while saying, "You poor thing," and "My God, this poison ivy is terrible." Funny thing: the poison ivy was still out in the woods; what was on her skin was just the oil from the leaves; then came the weeping, itching rash. You'd say you got poison ivy, but you didn't. The woods had the poison ivy.

The first thing that alarmed her about majoring in psychology at NYU was the requirement that you see a shrink, and then the inevitable expectation that girls would discuss their mothers. Her mother was callous, but Lucy didn't blame her. This troubled her therapist more than it did Lucy.

"Everyone in the community thought my mother was a saint with six children and a husband who kept losing good jobs and drinking too much," she'd explain in that hoarse voice of hers. "Maybe she was saintly to begin with, but no wonder she lost her saintliness when I came along. She said the family's brains were used up by the time I was born. She was almost funny taking things out on me. Like never cooking enough food and giving me too little. My sisters would push some of theirs onto my plate. God, otherwise I would have starved!" Lucy really laughed at that.

One of her roommates said she didn't need psychology. This roommate had read a lot of Nietzsche and Herman Hesse. For her the key to life was achieving the laughter of the gods Lucy apparently was born with. The roommate had a boyfriend who was an English major. He came at laughter through the nonsensical wit of Laurence Sterne and Lewis Carroll. He, too, hung around Lucy to hear her laugh, a natural, oxygenating laughter, streaming in and out of everything she said. Perhaps this was why he, too, missed her variants of "in the woods," or "lost in the woods," or "you sure couldn't find that in the woods," or "what woods are these?" a

reference to Robert Frost that she often posed rhetorically in response to conundrums or confessions or conflicts and unreasonable demands. She got the degree somehow. You couldn't say NYU cared she was a mediocre graduate. The whole thing, it seemed to her, was whatever she learned hanging out in New York and coming to understand the city the way she had understood the woods when she was a kid. She learned to wait for things to happen, because they would. She learned from making mistakes with people, because she would. At a point, after three so-called serious relationships, she had a not-serious relationship with a not-serious guy she actually married. They held the wedding in a loft and invited everyone, a mistake because everyone came. She looked out into the crowd and imagined them all as trees that would never grow so close together if they had any sense. Everyone wanted a party, sure, but it seemed as if they really wanted to see if you could equate marriage with the morass of how they were living in New York, communally, jammed together, all for one and one for all. Her husband Sal epitomized the proposition that one guy was as good as another. He had curly hair to his shoulders, a polka dot shirt, and a major non-future as a painter. It had been his idea they marry. Was it because she found work in J.C. Penny's human resources department and could pay their bills? No, he said it was her cheery way of passing the time. Her sister Nell asked her the next day why she married such a doofus. "It could be annulled, couldn't it?" "Is that a real question?" "Lucy, he fell down drunk or stoned or I don't know what. Where is he now?" "He's asleep. He does that all day, paints all night." "Where's the honeymoon? What's the plan? I just don't get you." Lucy accepted their mother in Nell, criticizing her. "There is no plan, but at least you're worried for me. I'm grateful for that." "You don't realize it, but you're such a catch. Guys think you're a sweet squeeze." Lucy really laughed at that one. "At least don't have a baby with him," Nell said. "Promise me that?" They were in a Chelsea café with beaucoup mirrors, so it was easy to see they were sisters, the long upper lip, the nice hair, the builds that would hold up as they aged, boobs not too big, hips not too wide. Nell had been married and divorced and remarried. Lucy would never throw this in her face, yet that fact gave her a helpful insight. People close to you spoke as if they were inside you, which they weren't, and knew all about you, which they didn't. She had married Sal more out of a sense of mystery than anything else. She *didn't* know him. But telling Nell this wouldn't improve their conversation, so she didn't say it. She stayed married to Sal for seven months. He didn't protest the divorce. Couldn't—he slept through the court date, proving her point they were laughably

out of touch.

Another year passed in the granite, concrete, steel, brick and glass woods of New York City. She lived in a shitty Lower East Side building whose gloomy hallways with their heavily locked doors resembled a very old penitentiary. That year she practiced Tae Kwon Do five nights a week and recovered in bed alone on Saturdays and Sundays. Then, according to her sisters' predictions and urging, she would give up Tae Kwon Do and marry a second time, hopefully getting it right. She'd be mature, approaching thirty, professionally solid.

She resisted. Everyone should be happy, she knew. As a little girl she'd watched the whole family twist and writhe and carry on in spasms of happiness, or what passed for it, but instead of joining in, she'd gone across the lawn, jumped the sagging snow fence, and wandered in the woods.

I'll go to forestry school, she thought. Nell and Lucy's one brother, Johnny, told her she was too old and not prepared. It amazed her that they wanted to save her from this mistake, as if living the way she was living wasn't a mistake. Johnny tended to walk around when he lectured her. Of course this had to happen in the family house, which he had acquired, because you couldn't walk around in her place on the Lower East Side. He also gave her the unknowing look he'd given her all her life. She had the distinct feeling that each time he encountered her, he had to be reminded who she was. He was like their mother in this way, but her mother had had to work at it a bit because Lucy had emerged from her womb, whereas it came naturally to him, eleven years older than she. Like their father, he was an alcoholic. Maybe the booze haze he stared through explained his pattern-recognition difficulties, making it hard for him to see that something shaped like Lucy was, in fact, Lucy.

"See those woods?" he said, pointing out the window past the swimming pool and the snow fence now flat on the ground. "*Those* are woods. You left them behind. You live in the city. What do you know about woods?"

She laughed for the first time in a long time. Johnny got angry the way their father got angry. Became really violent and abusive. Lucy had done some work on alcoholism at NYU and in J.C. Penny's human resources department. What she found meaningful was the way in which alcohol abuse lowered all standards of speech and behavior. An alcoholic tended to see himself as a low-life loser or a Napoleonic figure of all-knowing grandeur. Johnny's decision was to be a ranking officer in the Grande Armée. He told her she should climb the corporate ladder, get herself a decent place to live, and grow up.

He concluded by ranting, "You know who got the trees! I did! Those woods were my woods before you were born, and now I really own 'em. Just forget about forestry school and live your goddamned life."

Her goddamned life. Such a forest dark.

She started with long walks in Central Park, then visits to the New York Botanical Garden in the Bronx, and then hikes in state forests up the Hudson, field books and notebooks in hand. Setting Tae Kwon Do aside, this was her new passion. She overdid her preparation, in fact. The Yale School of Forestry accepted her more because of her social science background than her home-schooled mastery of Linnaean taxonomy, the life cycles of forests, and acid rain. Yale was a disappointing experience—policy pulp—but after six years, by now in her thirties, she landed an actual forestry management job in Oregon, a job and life in the woods contemplating black and white oaks, quaking aspens and ponderosa pines. It did take a while to internalize the size of the Oregon woods versus the Jersey woods where she had wandered as a child. Trees of a certain height or girth eluded her sense of intimacy until she found ways to think into their silence, the way they wrapped time within their rings and pushed it skyward. The West was spiritual in a broader sense than the East, beyond laughter, poetry, alcohol, and of course, her family, which never visited but sometimes expected her back East for graduations, weddings, and funerals.

After those trips home, she scheduled detoxifying backcountry treks. Once a man named Pat was assigned to walk a sixty mile circuit with her. She did not fear or dislike men. The question this man presented, however, was how much she might like him. Walk ahead or behind someone for eight hours a day. Build fires together. Pitch tents near one another. Wake up soaking in the cool bath of morning air. Evaluate the man and the depth of his absorption in what absorbs you. Then you will begin to know him.

She had some difficulties with Pat for a while. He'd been at this longer than she had. Normally the male-female relationship development phase expressed itself in sharing experiences, exploring memories, telling stories. But Pat was past that, way past. Pat had never lived in a city and walked with his feet, not his mouth. He silently crouched to study root systems as if they were ancient runes, which of course they were, for five or ten minutes. When he finished, he kept what he'd seen and thought to himself. Didn't share, or, to use another verb, didn't warble, hoping the female of the species walking behind him would suddenly declare it was time to mate.

He was like a walking tree, she decided. There was no such thing, or she'd never thought there was such a thing, but he was. They trekked along. The terrain nagged and pulled at them. Sometimes her toes, her thighs, and her walking sticks were the only thing involved in steep ascents. Sometimes to keep the rest of her body from falling down the canyon trail she'd just hiked she literally had to hug a tree, face wet with sweat, and hold on tight.

Then she realized she was a walking tree, too, and what she'd always been,

and why she'd always wanted to be in the woods. She was possessed by the natural silence of the woods that wasn't silence at all. It was breathing, it was boot scrabble and loose stones kicked back down the trail that was no trail, just a dry rut in the wilderness. She seldom felt compelled to say more than, "Look." Pat seldom replied by parting his lips. He just looked and saw what she saw and finally saw her, too. Perhaps not the greatest pattern recognition but good enough: That tree following me around is Lucy. Her own tree. Her own woods. Bark as soft as velvet to the touch.

So they got married and lived as foresters until their knees and hips gave out. Then they spent much of their time on their cabin's porch, contemplating the trees gathered around them to bear witness to the burls and lightning strikes of their old age.

by James Claffey

Spit & Shine

The poem about the butterfly that sang arias reminds me of the desiccated shell of the snapping turtle behind the outhouse. Clapboard houses and rusted drainpipes litter the highway like scattered kindling. Song of the opossum, song of the mournful. Spit and shine the snagged tangle of split aglets. Ladder to the shingled roof and the crumbling chimney where the rook's nest sits empty.

Original Flight Pattern Logged

A thing of great beauty, the undercarriage strutted and riveted against the vagaries of the elements. We capitulate in the end because the motion of those upper-arm muscles will not be enough to raise the vessel from the ground sufficiently to clear the fence at the butt end of the field. Down there bleached bones sit in thick mud, jagged eye sockets and loose teeth in broken jaws. The nature of defiance. He bowls from the clock tower end, feet tearing up the turf, the scorched rectangle of summer as hard as tack. Triumvirate. Holy Trinity on pedestals. Bronze and impassive. Slightest movement turns the great bird towards the fence, the creaking of wood and metal singeing the quiet of the morning. Hands let go, away, to the air. To the lakes and the reeds, the frog hollows and the drowned swans.

Conflagration: August 1971

Galway.

Windswept beach.

A seal carcass undisturbed on the shore.

Smoke from McDonogh's timber yard rises cumulusly over the city.

Off shore a curragh with three men bobs in the heavy swell. Clouds. Green water. The splash of oars echoes.

The lone curlew whistles as it skims low along the waterline.

Kelp.

Unsettled weather blowing in from the Atlantic.

One sailor turns a potato in his pocketed hand for the arthritis.

A beam of narrow sun shafts through the darkness.

How the waves ripple ever on.

The other fisherman wipes the mouth of the flask with a woolen elbow and drinks long.

Prayers. To Jesus and his sweet mother, Mary, Star of the Sea.

Floating scum. Bladder wrack.

Tarred hull, watertight.

Dawn Telephone

You rouse easily, so at precarious 3 a.m. last night
I thieflike slid into our bed with spilling elbows and bruised head.
Nerves a-jangle, praying not to stir your still sleep,
I put my face against, and wrap my hands around, and rest my restless arms.

You shudder but don't stir. You are a crocus with the lights turned low.
You know what it is like to wake at dawn.
We know how to put our ears against each other's walls,
to listen for a little crack, a hollow space.

I want to wake with you despite my spider nerves,
my cracking joints, my spinning brain.
You are a ship with sails turned east, a telephone at dawn.
Sometimes it's like I can't wake up at all.

Absence of Subject

Villa Vauban, Luxembourg City

In a photograph without a subject
We long for a face, eyes, or a smirk
Or even just a pair of hands.
We get so lonely for each other,
Even going alone to exhibitions,
A girl standing by the dilapidated farmhouse:
Not just the farmhouse standing all alone.

Friend, you left three months ago
And the whole house was a photograph manipulation:
A wonder of the modern age, complete with
Cuts and splices where you used to sit,
An empty spot in bed,
A gaping hole somewhere above my navel.

Historiography

I have kept the seashells, the pink lamp,
The tapestry, and a doll with a cracked skull.
I keep them quietly, like an earache.
I kept birthday cards and tinsel that we draped on skinny limbs.
I remember that we built a bookshelf, smoked indoors,
And took a train to Arkansas. Outside the window it was dark.

What was it that we lost, or gained?
I haven't breathed for the past year.
Soon it will be May, our wedding month,
And soon we won't be recognizable.

One day, though, someone will appear beneath your window.
A girl, having remembered, will come and burn your thumbs.
You'll realize tomorrow's Sunday, and it's too big to predict.
It'll stick in time and then be gone,
Like a marriage, or a snowstorm where the horses
Huddle in the peeling barn, amazed.

The Keeper
for Mason

The brush stroke hairs barely suggest
Some veins to heart and lungs
As though a tentative whim

A whole small person
The size of a good loaf of bread
Safire eyes so bright smile his steady light

The sweet mouth perfect as a fairy's bow
His tiny palm has a telling crease—Oh
It seemed all our unease was unleashed

Still good gossamer threads and tubes
The good surgeon's scalpel and stitches
Complete him after the womb

As his parents in agony witness
Their shoulders and bowed heads
As noble as all the beasts of field

Of branch or water
Start to grow the unseen wings
They now need

To beat the life and miracles
Out of this earth's air
Sheltering their babe

Life and more life

We will keep

For the angel has arrived
And if it takes all the silver
In a whole star

We will spend it
Let The Keeper thrive
Let him

SONNET IN NEGATIVE CAPABILITY

"for I was a stone: washed in the stream. I was cut clean"

--D.A. Powell

If to what is broken she is called
Let her see first my baby brother
In blond-down halos their little heads bald

The song in their ears increases ever
In undies at two and four in their one first river

Their innocence unbroken by the water's cold

Their spoon-size palms scoop the granite milk and gold
Grandfather, mountain, trees and bushes watched them play the water

As the melon chilled a dragonfly zizzed them and tall pines moaned
Just when tiny feet slipped upon the mossy stones
They splashed disappearing diamonds into memory

Grandfather smiled upon a sun-shaft dancing two-headed, small-boned
This one Brother's shadow fell year fifty, still, she sings him forward on her own
Slip through, John, join her by the lamp to enter that photo

At Easter The Lupines Staged Position At The Hips of the Hills

(Also Of And Relating to a Wolf : Lupus
Fearless, Ravenous, Wildly Hungry, Greedy)

Lupines make their scent

in purple

as if ...

the cursive ballet in India ink on the yellowed love letter
explodes an over-written swath of wine against the soft hills

right at the cows' ankles

Petals crushed beneath their dream-walking hooves

set free a lupine and dirt perfume

the lush scent stings

Inbreathe it

You Inebriates

Wrath was ancient and crushed in the East

Kiss lips to potent air

Oh...

This blue violet sky back of our eyes

Third Eye

Inner eye

All Eden receives such sighs

THE AUDIENCE--Waiting for W.S. Merwin To Read

Untruss him or her
And let the heat of roasting
Extrude the oysters
The chestnuts of Asia and Italy
The corn of the apparently
Original Americans
The moldy grain from a mad Europe
Let me out now! I know
Why I curse the bulbous
Lullaby of the ice cream truck
Driven by the eager immigrant Indian
Innocent of the fake calliope
At just the hour the school bell
Releases the fish
So long
Small-town married
My song is false perfect
And burns my throat
No wonder my
Beguiling eyes are unconvincing
I run from room
To room like I once did
For a new lover
I pant
Clutch breasts
To bar the exploding exodus
Of the million birds
In the one of me
I do hear
My own century
Oh, Husband, fledged Children
House the ivy wants
The storm of feathers
Is here
I fling open

OUT OF CENTER, LOOK BACK IN

*"Backed up roses bleed out the ends of my hair"—Anne Carson,
DECREATION*

In the living room's unlit afternoon
Dark within
She collapsed with groceries around her chair
Looked into the shadows
Scenes of old pain reeling on
Unaware
Seven pink rosebuds on tall stems
Water up to their shoulders in the glass
Breathed unseen
Until a late Autumn sunbeam glanced the eves
Ancient sun shot in
A lily pad of light
Floats those bound pink petals
In slow release
As if the heads of bathing girls in pink caps
Gesture together in a water ballet
Lit the roses themselves from within themselves
The source of pink light
An illumination
Happened upon
Whilst the Siamese dozed
Upon her faux leopard skin
All in a moment she remembers
She bought those over-large pink roses
To burst this temporary gloom
That pink of Grandmother's
Certainty
"This too shall pass, honey"
These very roses
No gift of apology or condolence
No celebration of anniversary or achievement
All
For the boon
Beauty is
Scaffolding invisible
Lit from within

WORLD NEWS AT HOME

From Chris Hani Baragwaneth Hospital

*Soweto, South Africa**

Safe in California

A woman folds the lime green towel

Fingers deep in warm plush

Her fluffy haired girl nooks to her side upon the sofa

Clutching the sock monkey

They hear the disembodied iambic pentameter news voice

Report, "Siamese twin girls were separated at the head

Their very skulls and a vein they shared"

Now she listens, now she looks

The unseen camera scans the narrow

Halls of this antique infirmary

A place she has never seen nor imagined

So people-full, the languishing, long-boned Africans recline

Upon every inch of floor and propped on walls

Clutching their own arms for pillows

Yea, though I walk

From a sofa, safe, she prays, in California

Through the valley of the shadow of death

Woman and girl embrace and gape

Each gaunt African sings into the swollen

Radiant harmony in this old army barracks

Their golden song shimmers through the halls

Tossing, lofting, batting away Death

White swathed nurses float

Among them with empty hands, and also sing

She and her girl hear the separate voices climb the song

Hugging warm towels in California

Still the practical report flies over as fact

The cadence of the British news voice trudges on

Deaf to all sound but itself

The colonial-oxen-slave-beast language

Cleared the jungle of the impossible mystery

Blind oxen, eyes lashed out, bodies whipped onward

Sounding the swaying bulk and stomp of hooves

The British voice continues

"I hear songs climb songs, do you, Sweetheart?"
The singers go unmentioned by the voice
Only "...top surgeon...flown in...high risk...uncertain..."

Full body song sends from African brain and spine,
Solar plexus, chest, thigh and rolling foot,
Ten rays from African fingers, ten rays from African toes
The African hundreds shape the one voice
A giant beehive voice silvered with baby laugh
The one voice for the two baby girls
"I hear songs climb songs, do you, Sweetheart?"

On a sofa in California where their ocean is Pacific
"they smile at us, Mama"

They hear the sick and dying themselves
Sing every note and all the octaves
Shimmering voices climb shining song
Devouring the poverty of medicine
Through the flatness of the TV
Through the flat invisible voice
Her fluffy haired girl rushes to the screen

"They sing to me!
They sing to me!
They sing to me!"

In both fists the woman crushes the plush green

**We did not know that day we were watching the first wave of the AIDS epidemic in
South Africa, still unnamed.*

Swan in Love

Susan Phillips

Odette—her given name was Jane, but she'd stopped using it years ago—liked to sit by the lake in one spot, next to a stand of white birch trees. She would lean against the broad trunk of her favorite birch and gaze out at the lake. She brought breadcrumbs for the ducks, even though this was forbidden. She took a handful of crumbs from her large tote bag and tossed the crumbs at the ducks. The ducks quacked and pecked at the crumbs.

"Shh, it's our secret." The ducks stopped quacking. Along with the bread, her bag held an apple and an orange, a library copy of Sue Grafton's latest mystery and a notebook and pencil in case she wanted to jot down notes or sketch the ducks or a birch tree. Once she had seen an egret and another late afternoon had heard a loon's sad, high-pitched wail from the opposite side of the shore. She hadn't seen the loon, though, and the egret flew away before she located her pencil.

* * *

Today she opened the bag and took out a pure white woolen scarf she had started two weeks ago. Instead of putting fringe on the ends, she had decided to knit extra pieces and attach them to one side of the scarf. She had drawn the pattern of the finished scarf—it would resemble a swan's wing. The ducks had silently accepted their bread and had not quacked once. The only sound was the click-click-click of her knitting needles. At one point she stopped and stared again at the lake. She might have closed her eyes for a moment, but she opened them immediately when she heard a loud flap of wings and a distinctive honking. In front of her was a large white swan—the largest she had ever seen. It seemed to be standing in the shallow water as it stretched its neck and flapped its wings over and over. Odette stood up slowly, not wanting to frighten the swan. It stayed where it was, then bowed its long neck to her. Odette smiled at the swan and was sure it smiled back at her. She rummaged in her bag for more breadcrumbs, which she tossed to the swan. It looked away, then back to the bread. It bent its neck and examined the crumbs. Finally, daintily, it began to nibble, eating two bites, pausing, eating another two bites, pausing until all the bread was gone. Odette bent down and picked up the long white scarf she had been working on. She tossed it toward the lake. The swan dipped its neck and turned its head toward her. Odette bowed her head. When she looked up again the swan had flown away.

* * *

After the girl left, the swan returned to his favorite spot by the circle of birch trees. Though he'd never seen the girl before, he'd seen traces of her—a lost needle, a

forgotten paperback copy of *The Indefinite State of Imaginary Morals*, scraps of wool from a completed blanket. Just last week he'd feasted on breadcrumbs the ducks hadn't finished. Now that he'd seen her, he wanted to see her again. He swam in a small circle, stopping to nibble on leftover crumbs. He stared at the scarf and wondered why the girl had tossed it to him. He switched direction and again swam in a circle. As he swam, he remembered some old family legends. His mother's Great Uncle Siegfried had fallen in love with a swan that turned out to be a human girl. Siegfried's heart had been broken and he'd never found another swan to love. And there was a cousin on his father's side—the most beautiful of the swan cousins—who had mysteriously lost all her feathers one winter. Only after her death did the family discover that she'd been giving her feathers to a poor fisherman who supplemented his meager income by producing pillows stuffed with her feathers. There were other family stories of men pretending to be swans in order to seduce innocent girls. "It's always the swans," his father had said over and over. "We get blamed for everything. Ignore any girls you meet. Humans are frivolous. We mate for life, while they change their minds and flit from one partner to another." It was good advice, but he couldn't follow it. Instead he swam toward the white scarf and pulled it forward. The swan had grown up with that advice, but now it was hard to follow. The girl had turned her head toward him. As every swan knew, this was the first indication of love. He could almost feel the warmth of her skin when they would finally twine their necks together. They would glide along the lake and find a private nesting spot. They would flap their arms in unison and fly together as a perfectly matched team. We swans mate for life, he thought, and I've met my mate. Unlike the humans in family stories, the girl would be his forever. Without more thought, the swan swam toward the white scarf and pulled it forward.

* * *

Odette returned home tired and chilly. For the first time she'd left the lake without a knitting project in her bag. She sighed and looked around the small apartment, which was filled with wicker baskets and cedar chests, all stuffed with knitted articles. She rummaged through her skeins of wool, hoping to find more of the white wool she'd worked on earlier. After searching through four tote bags and two baskets, she shrugged and went to listen to messages on her answering machine. Her landlady had called, inviting her to dinner. Odette returned the call, accepting the invitation and decided she had enough time for a short nap before dinner. * * * That night her landlady's nephew also came to dinner. He was tall and pale, with washed-out blue eyes and prematurely white hair. His left arm seemed to flutter, and he held out his long right arm to shake Odette's hand and bowed his long, pale neck.

by Gary Charles Wilkens

Windows

I sit in the plush chairs
of the Philosophy Building,
drinking free coffee
and staring past the fringe
of forget-me-nots before
the tall windows.

Outside a homeless man,
his things in a bundle, walks
by the busy highway in spring
air and sun, moving
intently.

Portrait of a Lady

What arguments and controversies boil
beneath the dark skin covering your small
face, your coal eyes ever downcast, following
the ant trails on the dirty sidewalk
as you push the bright-eyed baby boy
in his rickety stroller through brown grass
beside the urban sprawl roadway
with its gas stations and laundromats?

Do your hands clinch in anger with the wiry
strength of the poor, backbone of a woman
I see every other day on my walk to work?
You're going somewhere you can't see
for reasons you don't care about—
are you a rebel or a poet under your tight
hair, or a hunched wanderer pushed forward?

After an Unsuccessful Poem

I found a live cockroach in my bag.
Right next to my *Huckleberry Finn*.
A big brown roach crawling all
over my notebook.

I shook the bag out the backdoor
until the frantic bean splashed
wrong-side up on the wet sidewalk.
I flipped him over and God how he ran.

Out from the Baghdad Mental Hospital

Her dress was red with a rain of yellow flowers. The dust of the evening floor still caked it. She left ruined doors and stepped down broken steps. People were running everywhere with mattresses and couches, except for the crazy sick ones who sat balled up in the doorways.

She passed them silently on her way along a road that hung onto the earth like a belt. The sun was dull flaming orange and alone in a flat sky— she held to her slow way, ignored by trucks and soldiers and police and time and God and suffering and the grass.

Train to Stuttgart

Melting snow reveals the tracks
at the Bahnhof as we board.
Gravelly clouds pile over empty

houses. An old woman swallowed
by a black coat stares at graffiti
of ninjas. Thin saplings link hands

in a dance on the dirty canvas
of passing towns. Smokestacks
like cast-off shoes between stations.

The Stuttgart sign rusts above piles
of plastic. Turkish boys in white
scarves file out beneath the city.

Self-Portrait in an Expanding Universe

Plates, bowls and silverware
alone in a silent kitchen.
The rest of the house hollow,
curtains mad at the windows,
yard choked with weeds.

The street vacant,
the town depopulated.
The jar of the air
ringing as if slapped.

Rising into the exosphere
reveals only pregnant blackness.
And I, just there, winking at you
like a receding comet.

by Janelle Elyse Kihlstrom

My Mother Has Been Very Ill

Parceled light not fading all at once.
We spoke this evening, Mother,
still of tomorrow.

I remember many birds –
the red ones, too,
not all of them omens.

I go to call the mind a thing,
and already I've disproved myself.
What use in starting now?

That's what I said, you meant.
Only for the honest work, like any other
thing. Things, things.

You speak of the roof collapsing
in, Mother; all your teeth
are falling out.

You speak in poetry,
a sort of work I'd almost abandoned.
For what? The mind?

The mind: is it oblique,
or just opaque?
The light's still there,

outside the half-drawn windows,
all its blues unblended
with its oranges.

Angels, Above

Between the point of speaking and the
winter haze,

you pause –

Your startle reflex found its voice
in childhood eschatologies.

And so the staircase hurries at both ends.

What if flight is just a matter of perspective?

AN ANTIQUE CERTAINTY

(After Valverde)

Aflame, the siesta undermines
walls, radiance exhausting
as a glance escaping reason.
Questions merit presence
if we last like inheritors:
rose bush fiery, waters repetitive
in the one forever river,
immutable millstone of appearance,
house erected on a snare of sand.
Perhaps the answer's east
in arch & threshold worn away,
bindweed conquering form,
dense dolor of tamed silence.
Anticipate the afternoon
an antique certainty
accompanies a shadow:
sunset would dawn.

BOOM IN DUBAI

Where sea used to be—
dunes like dares.

Watch money take
nothing and shape it up.
Sky sells then,
and towers gather
like imaginary friends
eager for your side.

Is future wish or doom?
We're dust
that just won't settle.

CLOUD

Cloud trickles over black rock,
fingering the lake like a finicky browser,
then slowly swirls upwards, slowly,
slowly, an unhurried genie,
crystal air graying into a wall
soft as smoke.

Stunted boys
clatter their mules downhill, paths
all tangled string, bolting hungrily
for fat whites too scared and winded
to go back where they came from
on their own.

Cloud takes the town
and keeps it cold. Doors open
for rich to sit by reddening stoves
and swap lies and wonders, making memories
for their other life. At home in dim light,
barrel-chested poor
find them feed, serve them tea
in their only life.

DRAGON'S GIRL
(For Beltran)

Dragon's Girl's six.
She's sometimes bad.

Dragon's Girl's a thorn
so fixed to Dad,
starting's uprooting,
hurt and time
a black point trembling.

Now many deep breaths.
Begin the bend to nowhere.

River's at her skirt.
Dragon's Girl might fall.
Mountainous hunger. Night's
a black road. Maps?
No.

Dragon's Girl proclaims
we could be the first
to say this day
something nice.

Dragon, a ruin, offers to try.

FLYING FINN

The past is never past.
It's only secretive
as blood and bone.

Dad kept words bottled
like aging wine. Were they
wise whispers or vicious vinegar?
Stories breathed through Mom,
cagey kin getting by
in green gritty hollows.
Fathering, fighting, fucking—
bitter business best left unsaid.

In a foreign forest,
where he might have lived,
I pretend
he longed to burn us out
and fly free as ash.
What was the wish
working his head?
Wind soothes an ache of pines.
There's no understanding a wall

by P C Vandall

In the Mental Ward

He bulges in geriatric spandex
shorts, varicose veins flaming down his calves
to gout ridden toes looped in Jesus Christ
sandals. His silver slick-winged hair combs

the runways above his dark raisin ears
and there's a helicopter landing
where his old turf once was. His knuckles
are ringed in gold, studded in spikes and skulls

while cobras unwind from bleached out muscles.
He buries his heart beneath a moth beaten
gray Zeppelin shirt. I tell him were in
the mental ward but he just keeps rocking

his chair --rap, rap, rappin on Heavens floor.

(Previously published in Room Magazine)

Distortion

I am in love. Not with you
but with the moment
you hesitated
and I captured you,
kept you suspended
on the cedar planks
of the Capilano bridge.
I know you won't change, will
never enter the gaping
wound that ethers below.
It's easy to hold you
--love this thin can be held
from the outside-in.
You dangle above
my watering eyes, double
exposed yet more focused
then I ever could be.
I love the way you look,
the way your hands flutter up
like fledglings in mid-flight.

(Previously published in Poetry Pacific)

Hide and Seek

It was your favorite game as a child.
You were small and could shape and curl
your body to fit all sorts of places.
Your giggle is what gave you away.
The last time I found you was under

the glass top coffee table, face squashed up
against beveled green glass, body tucked
and folded beneath. You left the smudge
of your face like a shadow. It's been years
since we played. The snow bellyaches soft

blue, leaves piles of sky in heaps on the ground.
The lake becomes a field. There's a flat line
where a fence used to be. A line charcoaled
in crows and geese. Ice curls up a snarled lip
around the water's edge. The air is stone,

crumbles down in pebbles past glass lit panes.
A blanket unfolds, covers up frost
bitten docks, quills, prints, even shadows
vanish below. Funny, I couldn't find
you that day. Today, I could walk blind

to the exact spot. I can see you
under frosted glass, body stretched thin,
rosy fingers pressed to the hard brailed
surface. Your small white lips latched on
to the cold breast of ice above you.

(Previously Published in Island Writer)

On the Eve

Last night I saw moon
in her arms, buttercup
yellow and streaming down.

Her face glowed with cheeks
the color of rich-red
apples over winters

flesh, bone white as the gray-
haired church beneath the dark
steeple of howling pines.

horse trading on the blue mesa

rick richardson

that trendy heroin(e) addiction
becomes you- and your fiction

goes well with the pale
-skinned thin western booted
blue-eyed shooter
riding sidesaddle
on your scooter

does she kiss like me
and bring you coffee?

i could lay you both down
in the in-betweens
and make heaven-

til hell is heavy as a monday
track day in albuquerque
while she sells your jewelry
in sante fe where it's trendy

-i'll be waiting
on the blue mesa.

Thunder

i still try to remember
to take my boots off
at the door

my feet are wet
from walking in the rain

i leave laetoli footprints
on the pine floor
-like the first man

trying to walk upright
but can't seem to
get it straight

There's a lot of empty space
in a house
so full of quiet

wishing for thunder.

detail

a learning experience
- the detailed
timing and precision

- a certain etiquette
in the rise and fall
of hands and feet

i learned the walk
- mirrored on the toe
of a spit-shined boot

shooting imaginary doves
in white gloves -

the proper fold
of the cloth
- tight and taught
with stars above

a tri-fold - not
a trifling thing we're told

the color of a mother's tears
and grip of a father's grief -
the why in the cry of a child

- sad song of the bugler
on a windswept hill
standing in the detail.

falling days

she writes of the falling days
- knows them well, one can tell

simple things like string
and wrappings
autumn and swallows -
hollow places she has seen
in boxes and photographs

and so it is - the falling days
the number of birds at my feeder are fewer
no more humming, no painted buntings
-only my homies come now, my vato birds, my mijas

the cardinal, both red and green
the nuthatch and chickadee, the titmouse-
all three
the wrens and finches, too-

and the blues still like to bathe
in the pyrex baking dish sun warmed
on a sunny day-serenaded by the mocking
one hopping from grub to worm below

- my usual feathered friends
not caring about the weather-fair or foul
and in the pale blue, a gull still laughs
at the folly of it all-

leaving goes slowly-
a spiraling, a gust of wind-
days slowly graying
shorter, lightly fading
- friends, they go

the falling days, change and leavings
leave me - well, you know...

i see the simple things
that soothe, like string
and wrappings, swallows -

- autumn, you know?
Arborglyph love notes
She left me love notes
carved on the aspens

Writing was her passion
and her letters long lasting

leaving traces of jasmine in the air

Her family was Basque
and she wrote her notes in Euskara

I'd find them in the fall
and trace the xs with my fingers

Sometimes I'd linger
hoping to meet her

The daughter of a shepherd
who loved me.

does she kiss like me
and bring you coffee?

i could lay you both down
in the in-betweens
and make heaven-

til hell is heavy as a monday
track day in albuquerque
while she sells your jewelry
in sante fe where it's trendy

-i'll be waiting
on the blue mesa.

goes well with the pale
-skinned thin western booted
blue-eyed shooter
riding sidesaddle

on your scooter

does she kiss like me
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i could lay you both down
in the in-betweens
and make heaven-

til hell is heavy as a monday
track day in albuquerque
while she sells your jewelry
in sante fe where it's trendy

-i'll be waiting
on the blue mesa.

Hi

T. E. Cowell

I was reading *Goodnight Moon* to my son when my brother called. But it was only after James was asleep—a major tell being his partially open little mouth—that I put the book down and left his room.

My brother, as always, hadn't left me a message. As far as I knew he never left anyone messages. It was just who he was.

I thought about not calling my brother back, but just as soon as I thought this my mind started to wander: what if he was in trouble again? The thought almost made me want to laugh, then cry. In my mind my brother was always in trouble.

I called him back, staring out the kitchen window at the woods that edged our property line. I could still make out some sky through the trees, but the sun was now down and it was growing darker by the second.

My brother answered on the third ring. "Hey, big bro! How's it?"

His voice was loud in my ear, a mild affront. "It's good, Brad," I said. "How's everything with you?"

I swept my gaze from the scene outside the window down to the kitchen's hardwood floor. I heard voices on my brother's end, then laughter. I figured he was at a party of some sort.

"Things are great!" he said. "I'm at this outdoor party, under some bridge in north Portland. Everyone's got quilts and blankets spread out on the grass. It's super chill."

Hearing this, unsurprised, I started for the living room, the couch. "Sounds fun," I muttered.

"Yeah, I'm digging it."

I sat down on the couch, then turned and lay down flat. I rested my head against one of the cushioned armrests, closed my eyes. "So, everything's good then? You're doing good?"

"Of course, big bro. Doing just fine. You don't have to always play the paranoid card, you know."

I tried to laugh, but what came out was more like a grunt. "Alright," I said. "Duly noted. It's just that the last time you called me it was to bail you out of jail."

The sounds of the partygoers kicked up a notch in my ear. I heard more laughter, someone yell something. I imagined them all stoned out of their heads, utterly disoriented. It made me sad, knowing that my brother was a part of this group, sadder still that there seemed to be nothing I could do about it. Telling him what I thought wouldn't help. I'd tried that before. In consequence my brother wouldn't speak to me for nearly a year.

"I know," he said. "Hey, thanks again. I still owe you for that."

"Don't mention it. That's what big brothers are for."

"No, really, I do. I've changed since then. I don't deal anything illegal anymore."

I rolled my eyes. "So, what, you deal aspirin now? Pepto-Bismol?"

My brother laughed but left it there. I figured I didn't want to know, and so didn't ask. Even if I did want to know I doubted he'd tell me the whole truth. My brother was a marvelous liar. Everything he said hid something else.

"So, why'd you call then?" I asked, trying to sound polite and strictly curious, not at all unwelcoming.

"Just to say hi. I haven't talked to you in a while and just wanted to know how you were doing and all."

I recognized some softness in my brother's voice, a vulnerability that fed my heart with tender warmth.

"I'm good, Brad. Work's good. James is good. Clara's good—she's visiting her aunt in Seattle right now. Anyways, we're all good. It's one big happy family over here."

"That's good," my brother said. "Glad to hear it."

I swallowed. My throat felt dry, scratchy. "You're sure you're good?"

He didn't answer me. The following second or two stretched out like a tired body. "Well," he said, "I'm gonna get back to the party now. I kind of strayed away talking to you. Anyways, take care, big bro. Good to hear from you."

I sort of panicked then; this urge crept up in me to talk to my brother like a real person, a friend, an equal, instead of like his older, sensible, worrywart brother. I wanted us to be on more familiar terms, like we'd been in the past, before our lives had grown complicated and diverged. But I hesitated, didn't know what to say. We'd been talking like this, just brushing the surface, for so long now that there seemed no other way for us to communicate.

"You too," I said. "Hey, thanks for calling. You can call me anytime, you know."

"Okay, thanks. So long, Todd."

"Bye, Brad."

I moved my phone away from my ear. After a minute or two I got up from the couch, walked past the kitchen into the hallway. I entered James's room again, walked up to his crib and looked down at him. His little mouth was still open, and from the faint light through the window I noticed some drool on the side of his mouth. Reflexively, I reached my hand over his crib and ever so gently transferred the drool onto my finger, then onto the side of my pajama pants.

I left James's room and started going around the house, turning off all the lights in preparation for bed. In the kitchen I noticed a deer through the window, standing in the grass and staring up at me with its round, black, vulnerable-looking eyes. Staring back at the deer, I tried to appear harmless. I nodded my head, as if trying to tell it I wasn't a threat, that there was nothing to be afraid of here. But the deer kept staring at me, its body tense, so I turned from the window and left it alone.

by Therése Halscheid'

After Alaska

for Lisa

She lives in me now, in the north of my chest, where it is all dark, all winter --

to my ears will come her voice, then to my eyes, this white woman,
then pathways to the tribe she roamed with, to places inside me
where they are hunting and she is gathering and there, a certain arrow,
and there, a stab of certain pain

then to moments other than these, to nights when my heart is a drum for her dancing
and her movements tell stories, and I feel in her feet
all that was told to me, all that was shared.

When I breathe and the wind blows in a mighty power, my mouth forms
a small opening and she scales the dark throat to leap where
my lip catches the light, that she might sit
and be warmed for awhile --

I felt her once, during an inner storm, as a certain chill ran through,
after my muscles tightened into big cold mountains, that she was arranging my ribs
arching them, same as the shelters she spoke of in the icy north of Alaska,
where they shape whalebone over driftwood and pack it with sod.

There is a veined landscape she traverses in the spring
where my blood runs as thawed rivers

and she waits on the sands of myself for the return of the whale,
propped against a white embankment of bones, knees drawn to her chest
as in the way of the Eskimo, at times looking up, reading
the starry pores, the sky of my cloudless skin.

“After Alaska” first appeared in Connecticut Review and in the author’s book Frozen Latitudes

The Walk Home

Each day the curtains part from each home we pass
and without clearly seeing them
I can sense the widening eyes of mothers, I can feel
their thoughts through the windows
and it is all about the way
my father and I look
to them.

It is about it being late spring and the fact that
he and I wear woolen coats and gloves
as we are always cold, our lives so dark
not even the sun can
save us.

It is about my looking less than human, brittle-boned,
slumped, I am that thin --

and certainly, it is the sight of my father beside me
who is near blind and brain damaged,
someone behaving in ways that one might find
in mental wards.

Sometimes, their curtains are torn far apart
so fast as if fate landed an illusion, something
that never should be, and nothing appears real
except for their manicured lawns
and the distance the sidewalks allow
each afternoon, at 3:00, as we shuffle past this
place of groomed grass and the scent of
immediate flowers.

Above us are always the
overhanging trees whose blossoming
leaves spread glorious and are just like
a wedding arbor.

So perfect, I think, for this really is
what we are married to --

this aisle, this arm-in-arm walk
after school from my aunt's house to ours
this street like an obvious map of us,
pointing things out that
we cannot escape.

"The Walk Home" first appeared in *Identity Theory* and in the author's book *Frozen Latitudes*

The Telling Wind

Wales, Alaska

If, in this moment I speak with a voice
it is to say of the ground, it is not fit for trees

nothing grows here but snow
the ice fog moves with nothing to cling to

if I am to speak of the land's lonely beauty
it is to say of both winter and summer, the color is white

it is to tell of the natural spring
set against the flank of a mountain

and how the people all come to it
going in sleighs with raw air freezing their lungs.

Of the salty sea, the vast Bering Sea,
to mention that even it freezes

which is to say where walrus are lounging on icebergs

and how, in late spring, the waves house the whale

and of the sky, a sky so shockingly cold, it is to add how

the moon appears with an open mouth.

If, as air, I speak --

if what I speak of is enough

to brush back the thin dry snow

it is to show you the graves of the dead

it is to say of the dead that

all the winters in them, their bodies remember.

"The Telling Wind" first appeared in *Imagination & Place* and in the author's book *Frozen Latitudes*

My Father's Cereal

We wake on dry land where the sun works brilliant --

until a bib is tied about my father's neck

a bowl is placed high upon books

and the largest spoon in the house is set in his hand

between two crooked fingers.

There is my mother creating this daily scene of events

pouring Cheerios into his bowl

adding the white milk before guiding

my father's spoon down into it.

She leaves the room then and there is only myself

sitting across from him.

I have my own bowl but do nothing about it.

We are a pair, of sorts. I refuse how his face is unreadable
that his brain is damaged enough to believe he is eating

and he is blind to the point where he thinks I look fine.

When we move, we move as slow water moves
barely along because nothing can save us.

His spoon floats through air, is empty, is treading in space,
my thoughts are all garbled as if made of liquid....

We remain this way, my father and I
as if under water

the Cheerios turn soggy, inflating like inner tubes
but it is too late --

soon we will drown in this moment

day will begin, and there will only be the strange surfacing
of our tragic lives.

“My Father’s Cereal” appeared in *Exit 13* and in the author’s book *Frozen Latitudes*

Trash Day

This is how it really looked long ago....

This is myself back in time, a girl
with sallow skin, dragging metal cans to the curb,
notice how I stand for awhile that far from our house
watch how my lips, bright as scars, are parting
open with words so the great air can take them
out of their mystery --

see how my thoughts form the storms, how the morning sky
fills with dark sentences

always something about aphasia, his dementia,
something always about my father caught
so quiet inside me

that would rise in the wind to become
something readable.

I am only fourteen. But you can tell I look old
as if life is ending. Notice how my limbs droop so
willow-like over the trash, see how the cans
are all packed with food, know I am starving myself, I am
that full of my father....

These are our neighbors, each turning in their sleep as they wake,
each waking as they turn from their room to the window
watching the weather above them.

And this is an image of the whole town in shock.
See how they dread my gray hovering grief, just watch
as they walk, how they carry on with the endless clouds
I made weekly, correctly, so very awful and coming
into their eyes.

“Trash Day” first appeared in *Comstock Review* and in the author’s book *Frozen Latitudes*

DOG

I.

With age you became gift wrap, migraine-colored, undone by a pinkie finger, for whom time was a series of blinking lights. Unless you condensed you were wrapped around trees, where your dread dropped like fruit. She could not pluck you down but you could see the want in her eyes as she stared from below.

II.

The hounds in the portraits you'd seen were hellish, on an interminable chase. While you looked, something in you refused to emerge into the world, and it was tucked in a fertile stretch of skin. It was not fluttering. It was already a dead man in the castle, having lived there all its life — and you were pregnant with it, that fetal thing perched on the edge of the crenelation.

III.

She was fat, city-pigeon fat; she was large with sighs like the baking of bread. It will gauge your bank account to have monkshood painted on the lid of the tin box. It will still astonish you when you must do the same for your father. No hunt, no nobility. Not in your tea and not in slumber which is a luxury you earned, in contrast to your dog, on buses.

HOUR OF THE WOLF

never day or night in the trailer. indifferent dead-fly
kitchen light: good place to think. not-brightness exhaled
warms a cooling brain. my bed against the window. cheek too

me: a dog fawning at the moon. afraid of the twisting eye
with its disinterring silver. all my body's questions above
ground. sleep covers me: a mossy hand. another word for faith

UNIVERSITY AT DROUGHT'S END
San Jose State University, CA.

puddles that twinkle with galaxy-spun oil & air sticks behind the ears & sweating brick & stucco & the bell tower wails wetly & every bird on guard listening for the scratch-and-rush of a downpour & from the dorms from the window the courtyard & people-grains rolling through stinking sagging sidewalks & in the last storm you bundled inside with her & now the campus hums the campus *oms* with the growth of fins & you wish for another girl as skittish as a fish.

HONEY (HOSPITAL POEM VI)

there was Sam Adams given to me on birthday #14
a Tennessee jar that owned the picnic table

discarded because no one fed me the royal jelly
because I breathed heavier after that day

a jug of the bees' product stands aloft on an altar
the panting summer aroused and wet around it

sweetness in the singular: the ants and foxes came
the men and women and did I approach?

do you have a honey? asks the nurse here
and me this mercurial, choleric child with gold feet

this moth of the first taste cringe and no kisses
on a battlefield across from ambrosia

FLAT

"Breast binding is the material used in, or the act of flattening breasts by the use of constrictive materials." – Wikipedia

cotton-ball knees deformed her dresses
though she liked to wear them, though
her shoulders fanned out from the straps
like ox-horned tragedies; and her father's

belts never gave her the impression of
safety, his shoes and ties bigger than
the telescopes which could not see across
the moldy breadbasket of her. (no song of

solomon incited.) from a chinese company
came the brown fabric — a net, releasing.
and she wore it, wide open like the homestead.
a twelfth night viola. missouri along the

female side. surprise: she thinks of herself
before the settlement and the harvest. she
thinks of tantalus who until the big crunch
will stoop down for the quench.

[untitled]
Jeremi Handrinos

And you father, will you keep me?
As we age and grind away at hope.
I have your body; your laugh,
Your ability to spin the yarn,
But I fear I have spun myself dry.
I waited for you outside the gates -
to change, but you are set in your ways;
As I speak out loud in circles
to those that would hear me grovel
at the raising of sun and satellites.
My sin is tight about my hands and neck
like outerwear for the hunter.
But who am I to pull the trigger?
You taught me how to be the moment.
You kissed me without worry, or cause,
or what my cheek might say
to your course of action.
Your need to prevail with pride.
I watched them cage you, and break you.
For no other reason than desperation -
you were numbered then uniformed
Behind thick glass between fingerprints.
I love you father, you made me smile
in the face of adversity's shadow.
Motherless, we swing back into tense
staring stances; Midway between shore
and the deep — I have your name,
and I have your need to teach fools.
This year I will be 30, and I wonder where
the time went as I re-read shoe boxed letters
to a boy that died long ago on the road to paradise.
I can count the times we smoked and drove
into the vast relentless sands of tomorrow.
I will not number the days between your old age,
and my naivety; Because that would
mean admitting that we are dying to forgive -
The precise momentum that sent us dividing.

My love for you is steady late night sweat,
and the memory of you down the hall,
but you are not down the hall.
That room is empty like my eyes and heart.
That house is gone like my mind.
Please know, if you go before me, there will
always be the chance that you might
wait in death to see my life find you
Ready, to bring us home.

by Scott Sherman

Okra

There is a dream.
I walk to a holy green mountain
wearing a halo of okra.
The land around me is flat,
wheat orange. I am in love & can drink
pioneer wind.

Mojave Swing

There is threat born into our blood,
the nightmarish charm of deserts we get lost in.

Tuned slot machine lights
lanterns in the Mojave overcast,
leeching an overstretched world. Draining

nuclear neon. The water here is brown,
like the car we abandoned somewhere along US 50.

Rituals of Grief: How Gen Y Is Reinventing Mourning and Making Every Life Matter

Edissa Nicolas

Lately, I've been thinking about death. This is not a morbid fascination. It's hard to observe American culture and not think about it. It's everywhere. I see what it does to us and about how we deal with it. For example, have you ever wondered what happened to the American ritual of mourners wearing a black armband when someone in their family dies? The practice of wearing a black armband to indicate mourning is immortalized in the 1946 film, *It's a Wonderful Life*, where the protagonist John Bailey's wears one after his father passes away. I've thought of the practice several times in my life, usually after a person I cared for has died. I want to run around, telling people that things are not quite right. In some cultures black attire is worn for a year after a death. And in others, a widow must wear black until the end of her days. It is human to mark death in a public way, and yet, mainstream American culture virtually ignores death in all but a few high-profile cases of famous people, which garner all the attention. Even then, most of the attention focuses on the circumstances surrounding the death and not the process of bereavement. Death, however, has its devastatingly quiet, unseen elements that our society, altogether enamored with violence and guns if movies and media don't lie, has yet to reconcile.

Our society is both fascinated by and terrified of death. The mystery of the other side consumes our thoughts, fantasies and imaginations. We have many stories of how one person or another is able to cheat death—the immortality of the vampires and superheroes, for example, provide temporary escapism from reality. Despite the escapist tendencies of the movie and media industries, not everyone has the luxury of relegating death to a mere fantasy/temporary possibility meant to entertain in its abstraction of the potent and debilitating reality it really is. Many communities must confront . Nor do they wish to this force of nature with no intercessions and little compassion from a society that is entirely anesthetized to their pain. It's not personal.

This is a byproduct of the everyday war on the streets, on TV, and even in our hearts.

Look around. Every time there's a shooting, an impromptu memorial is set up. Pictures, flowers and tokens of love are set out on random street corners or even under trees where the untoward violence occurred. These are spontaneous acts by people who cannot easily turn away from the pain of loss, especially when these acts transpire in close proximity to their homes hide their suffering. A street corner become a living memorial; a tree, a tombstone.

The Millennials have, of course, surpassed Gen X in dealing with death—of necessity.

Unfortunately, today's urban youth live with a near daily awareness of death, and it's not just grandparents who are dying, either. These are violent times, and it's youth who forfeit their lives. Young people of color in urban areas seem to have an inordinate amount of death to contend with on a regular basis. Their very existence is criminalized and their lives severely undervalued. They've had to invent methods for handling the burden of so much loss.

They embrace it and wear it like armor, and in the process, they bring their love and grief into the most unexpected places.

Over the past several years of teaching, I've observed the emergence of these new and profound displays of grief from young people in my classes. More than ever, the relics of their fallen peers are captured and worn in daily vigil. Tee shirts are emblazoned with the bright face of a friend, a cousin or a sister; epitaphs on shirts, badges and decals commemorate the dearly departed and keep the beloved alive in the hearts and minds of their community and loved ones. Collaged with the photos of the fondest memories of the deceased, family and friends wear buttons and placards on lanyards.

Quite literally, the dead go to college, to work and to the movies with the living.

The results are magical. It humanizes the youth who wear these tokens of love, while at the same time revering the deceased. These tokens of love are a clear source of hope, respect and grief for the bearer. Moreover, they bring awareness and compassion to the wearer, who more than ever needs the visibility and the loving gaze of others in the community. Like the black armband of bygone days, these emblems bespeak of the pain of the bearer with an eloquent silence, an essential aspect since grief makes people do strange things; it can alter their personality or cause erratic behavior. Without a clear external sign, how can others know that errant comportment is possibly connected to a major life transition? Death is the ultimate game changer, which no one is ever fully prepared for, despite its inevitable nature.

The death of a loved one does not easily fade from memory or dull with time. The ritual of wearing a mark to signal to others the status of the wearer: "I'm hurting." "Handle me with care." "Compassion needed." "I've lost a dear one." There is no way to turn coldly away from such an outpouring, to not look with understanding at the person in pain.

As community members, we need to know when others are suffering so we can share their burden. It can mean not asking for what he or she may not be able to give on a particular day. As co-workers, teachers and friends we can greet these youth with kindness and much needed compassion in a fast-moving world that too often denies the harsh realities and devastating experiences of young people of color. These signs provide opportunities for connection. We can grieve with our youth, express condolences and sympathies, and be patient with them. The stress and heartache caused by death is well documented. That's not new. What has changed is our society. We seem to have grown numb to the pain caused by violence and death, especially when it's meted out to other people's children. It is possibly why Generation Y has taken to demonstrating their grief in a public way. It's a form of resistance to the status quo. It's a loving anthem that cries out, "Every life matters."

The Consequences of Violence

Steven Thomas Howell

There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book.

Books are well written, or badly written. That is all.

—Oscar Wilde

I've found it true in personal experience that being a target of life-threatening violence strips away everything that isn't a core value or an innermost desire. Near the eastern Afghan village of Shkin in 1994, I huddled in a mud brick house with other soldiers as insurgent fighters fired Chinese-made 102mm rockets at us from a point of origin just over the mostly-imaginary Pakistani border, a high, rocky ridge overlooking the American forward operating base. The few words we exchanged during the attack—shouted over the crunch of explosions—consisted of false bravado and standard-issue black humor. Somebody asked whose brilliant idea it was to plant the base within easy range of a Pakistani mountain. Another swore he would choke a certain local national who worked on the base for spilling the beans to the bad guys that the counter-fire radar system had broken down earlier in the day. I laughed along with the others as expected, but the thoughts that raced in my mind were of my family and plans for the future.

Was it so impossible that the people on that high ridge lobbing explosives might be willing to come down and talk things over with us? Couldn't we forgive each other and move on? Flying bricks, ringing ears, and a mouthful of dust eclipsed every worry, leaving only the knowledge that there were men on a mountain trying to kill me, and I wasn't ready to die.

Like Flannery O'Connor's Grandmother character in "A Good Man is Hard to Find," whether I had survived that day or not, I was changed. We don't necessarily have to face life-threatening violence to get us to the point of asking who we are and what would matter most to us in the face of imminent, violent death. Literature serves as the most realistic substitute available.

As a relatively new writer, a retired U.S. Army officer, and veteran of two Middle Eastern armed conflicts, I am drawn to writers who have explored the nature of violence. This isn't because I enjoy violence—quite the opposite. I have spent more than two decades observing human behavior in life-threatening situations, and what baffles me is why we human beings continue to engage in behavior universally recognized as the worst possible way to spend our time and resources. As I reach the point in my life when I feel ready to write about my own experiences with violence, I

look to masters of the art of fiction to learn how they treat violence and its effects on people in their work.

The stories of Flannery O'Connor, Tim O'Brien, Cormac McCarthy, Josip Novakovich, and Phil Klay depict violence and its effects in the most realistic terms. O'Connor, the only author I'll discuss who does not write about war, brings the point of view of not only a woman, but of a person experiencing the deep tensions and conflicts of the American South of the mid-twentieth century. Her collection, *A Good Man is Hard to Find*, and its title story show how a master of the short story uses violence as deftly as a surgeon uses a scalpel to achieve a specific effect.

I identify with Tim O'Brien because of our shared experiences. His book, *The Things They Carried*, which straddles the line between memoir and fiction, directs how I go about transforming my memories into stories and novels. His writing comes across as almost too real for me, which is why I trust him as a storyteller. His war stories convey the hideous and obscene reality of war, yet they also serve as a window into the hearts and thoughts of the real people that inhabit them. There can be no more effective warning against the horrors of war than reading the true stories of those who suffer most, the common infantrymen in the field.

Cormac McCarthy created a work of fiction like no other in *Blood Meridian* or *the Evening Redness in the West*. This novel uses pervasive violence as setting. The important events of the story occur in the presence of continuous bloodshed, yet the book manages to be a story of redemption rather than a book about mass slaughter, and it tracks the progress of its characters while uncovering one of the darkest chapters of American history.

In Josip Novakovich's collection, *Infidelities*, we find tenderly told stories in which the characters are each not only the victims of war violence, but also the perpetrators. The book shows how violence changes us and makes us into the thing we fear. More importantly, *Infidelities* allows the reader to empathize with people who are both criminals and victims and showing us that nothing about the morality of war is clear-cut.

Phil Klay's *Redeployment* acquaints us with the combat veteran portion of the roughly one percent of Americans who have served on active duty in the military. With so many veterans coming home from America's wars, it makes good sense to read fiction that reveals as much as possible what coming home means to them. Reading honestly written war fiction such as *The Things They Carried* and *Redeployment* are imperfect but effective tools for the uninitiated to understand war.

Fiction writers either depict realistic violence in an honest effort to reveal its monstrous nature and the conditions that lead to it, or they—either intentionally or not—depict violence in a way that sensationalizes abuse, bloodshed, and violent brutal death. One example of this is J.G. Ballard’s novel *Crash*, in which characters with a fetish for death and maiming by automobile experience over-the-top, graphic violence presented in a sexualized manner: violence for its own sake that serves no greater purpose. This distinction may mean the difference between the creation of literature and a much less noble result. Writers of fiction bear the responsibility of capturing human experience with as much accuracy and honesty as possible. Exposing readers to realistic acts of violence that serve to illuminate characters and move the story forward can affect popular thinking on the largely unseen details of real-world violence in a positive way. Conversely, the creation of characters and situations designed specifically to set the conditions for violence may sell a lot of mass-market fiction, but is unlikely to be mistaken for respectable literature.

The more realistically violent situations are depicted in literature, the more likely readers will be to consider the real-life consequences of violence. By making literary violence into something of a different quality than the real thing, writers create an absurd version of reality—a Warner Brothers cartoon version of violence that may not result in injury or death. Worse, creation of fictional fantasy violence without consequences may actually propagate a tolerance to violent behavior in popular culture. My father, a Vietnam veteran with a 30-year career in law enforcement, taught me that no one wins in a knife fight. He knew the dangers of failing to consider the consequences of violence and wanted his son never to make the mistake of believing the bloodless mayhem on television had any basis in reality. These days, I remind my teenaged son that in life, unlike the games he plays on his X-Box, only rarely is one lucky enough to return to a gunfight after being shot, and then only after a long, painful, and probably less than full recovery.

O’Connor brings the point of view of a woman and of a person experiencing the deep tensions and conflicts of the American South of the mid-twentieth century in *A Good Man is Hard to Find*. Its title story shows how a master of the short story uses violence as deftly as a surgeon uses a scalpel to achieve a specific effect. In effective depictions of violence, the characters’ actions tell the story more effectively than the writer could accomplish through indirect methods, and the voice of a fictional character can be more effective than the voice of the author. The Misfit, the criminal gang leader and pseudo-prophet in “A Good Man is Hard to Find” is the best example of this. In the voice of the shirtless, sober Misfit, a hardened criminal and the most intelligent and insightful character in the story, the reader readily accepts dire spiritual assertions and justifications for murder.

“Jesus was the only one that ever raised the dead,” the Misfit continued, “and He shouldn’t have done it. He thrown everything off balance. If He did what He said, then it’s nothing for you to do but throw away everything and follow Him, and if He didn’t, then it’s nothing for you to do but to enjoy the few minutes you got left the best way you can—by killing somebody or burning down his house or doing some other meanness to him. No pleasure but meanness,” he said and his voice had become almost a snarl.¹

Why should writers show the brutality to the reader? Why not simply say that the Misfit had his henchmen take the family into the woods and shoot them, that one of his henchmen brought him the dead man’s shirt because he needed one? O’Connor explained her reasons at a reading of “A Good Man is Hard to Find” at Hollins College, in Virginia, in 1963.

“I suppose the reasons for the use of so much violence in modern fiction will differ with each writer who uses it, but in my own stories I have found that violence is strangely capable of returning my characters to reality and preparing them to accept their moment of grace. Their heads are so hard that almost nothing else will do the work. This idea, that reality is something to which we must be returned at considered cost, is one which is seldom understood by the casual reader, but it is one which is implicit in the Christian view of the world...And in this story you should be on the lookout for such things as the action of grace in the Grandmother’s soul, and not for the dead bodies.”²

O’Connor leads up to the violence with the suspicious behavior of the Misfit gang’s car on the hill, approaching slowly, passing, and returning like a predator stalking a rafter of turkeys. The car is ‘hearse-like’³ with 3 three men inside, which, considering O’Connor’s Christian predisposition, this is likely an allusion to the three horsemen of the apocalypse.

The Grandmother’s⁴ death is the only murder O’Connor shows us up close. The killing of the rest of the family is implied or heard, as in the Grandmother’s failure or decision not to recognize the shirt taken from her dead son’s body, in the scream of the mother or daughter, presumably caused by one witnessing the murder of the other before meeting her own doom fate in the deserted woods. When the time comes for the Grandmother to die, after she has offered money and renounced her Christian faith, it

¹ O’Connor, Flannery. *A Good Man is Hard to Find. The Complete Stories*. Noonday, 1997. Print. p. 132

² O’Connor, Flannery. Reading at Hollins College, Virginia. 14 October 1963. Online Source: <http://www2.sunysuffolk.edu/lewiss/Oconnor.htm>

³ p. 126

⁴ p. 132

is only after she has had her first selfless thought. She suddenly expresses compassion for the Misfit by telling him he is one of her own children, and once she has had her moment of grace, the Misfit releases her from mortal existence by giving her a quick three rounds to the chest. The Grandmother became a good woman only when she accepted she was going to die, hence the Misfit's statement near the end of the story that she would have been a good woman, had she had someone to "shoot her every day of her life." The violence of her death comes across almost as a religious event, almost as if the Misfit were there to release her from her self-centered, sinful life. In missing the brutality of the murder of the Grandmother, we would also miss the exact moment of her redemption. My interpretation of the old woman's murder is that O'Connor is showing us that, according to the Christian point of view, living in a state of selfishness and hypocrisy is worse than dying in grace. To indicate the murder of the Grandmother in any way other than showing the Misfit firing the bullets into her body as she reached for him to offer comfort would have been to miss the point of the story.

*

I am sick and tired of war. Its glory is all moonshine. It is only those who have neither fired a shot nor heard the shrieks and groans of the wounded who cry aloud for blood, for vengeance, for desolation. War is hell.

—William Tecumseh Sherman⁵

Tim O'Brien, a veteran of the Vietnam War, presents his book, *The Things They Carried*, as a work of fiction. I think of his writing style as 'up close and personal.' Efficiently, he ticks off the details of violence, emotion, and setting without euphemisms. When O'Brien writes in "Speaking of Courage" of Norman Bowker's night spent submerged to the eyeballs in a flooded sewage field during a mortar barrage, he provides us with the sights and sounds of the attack, as well as the smell and taste of the contents of the flooded field latrine where his platoon is pinned down.

Everything was black and wet. The field just exploded. Rain and slop and shrapnel, nowhere to run, and all they could do was worm down into the slime and cover up and wait.

O'Brien uses only the barest description of events, but the facts are enough. Bowker mentions the taste of the filth and hearing the sound of his own heartbeat as he submerges himself to avoid shrapnel, and the experience is as unforgettable as it is impossible to adequately describe to anyone who was not there with him.

⁵ As quoted by Grossman, Dave. *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society*. Back Bay Books, 1995. p. 74

In O'Brien's work, war really is hell, and instead of a groovy 1960s soundtrack, it comes with third-world stench. Perhaps it is because war is so incessantly loud that it seems that most soldiers remember smells more than sounds. O'Brien captures the simple, everyday horror of deadly violence in compact language that omits nothing, no matter how awkward or disturbing. Bowker recalls,

Two rounds hit close by. Then a third, even closer, and immediately, off to his left, he heard somebody screaming. It was Kiowa—he knew that.⁶

O'Brien uses pacing to good effect here. Two mortar rounds impact in a five-word sentence. In the next sentence, the third round lands, and Bowker hears someone screaming in agony and terror. I get the feeling that time is stretching for Bowker in the way the pace of seconds seems to slow when the adrenaline flows, and giving him long enough to realize it is his close friend who has been hit.

Bowker searches and finds his friend, and we see that Kiowa has not died a heroic death. By showing us the fear and excrement and maiming, O'Brien illustrates the pointless, tragic, and obscene nature of war. Like Flannery O'Connor's Grandmother in "A Good Man is Hard to Find," Bowker perceives minute details that lend truth to the scene and ground us in place. O'Connor's Grandmother notes the mileage on the car as the family departs Atlanta. Bowker notes the state of his friend's body as it disappears into the muck. In each case, these are details the characters are likely to remember, and the reader does, as well.

There were bubbles where Kiowa's head should've been. The left hand was curled open; the fingernails were filthy; the wrist-watch gave off a green phosphorescent shine as it slipped beneath the thick waters.⁷

In the book's title story, "The Things They Carried," O'Brien captures one of the strange details life sometimes uses to season memories of tragedy.

Lee Strunk made a funny ghost sound, a kind of moaning, yet dry happy, and right then, when Strunk made that high happy moaning sound, when he went Ahhooooo, right then Ted Lavender was shot in the head on his way back from peeing. He lay with his mouth open. The teeth were broken. There was a swollen black bruise under his left eye. The cheekbone was gone. Oh chit, Rat Kiley

⁶ O'Brien, Tim. *The Things They Carried*. Houghton-Mifflin, 1990. Print. p. 128

⁷ *ibid.*, p. 130

said, the guy's dead. The guy's dead, he kept saying, which seemed profound—the guy's dead. I mean really.⁸

Tim O'Brien differs from Flannery O'Connor in his frank depiction of violence. Whereas O'Connor keeps murder in the distance in "A Good Man is Hard to Find" by allowing the reader only to hear screams and gunshots until the final three shots to the Grandmother's chest that underscores the point of the story, Tim O'Brien hides nothing, and for good reason. In an October 1991 conversation during his residency as a Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Writing Fellow at The College of Wooster, O'Brien tells Debra Shostak,

One of the objects among many in writing about violence has to do with reaffirming the truth of the cliché that "war is hell," or "death is horrible," something we all so often tend to forget....My object is not to wallow in blood and gore. The object is to display it in terms so that you want to stay away from it if possible.⁹

The men in O'Brien's stories are not the lantern-jawed heroes of the Army's "Be All You Can Be" television ads. No—these are regular, red-blooded American boys, out in the woods trying not to think about the war festering around them, most of them have been drafted against their will. They send a few bucks home to their families and sometimes die on the way back from taking a leak. O'Brien does literature a service by showing the reality of war. The matter-of-fact depiction of violence in *The Things They Carried* is absolutely necessary to convey the clear message that war is something to be avoided. O'Brien's characters do not discuss the Communist threat to western society. They talk about girlfriends, booze, and cars. Because we learn something about each soldier in the platoon, it hurts the reader when they die and when they return to the United States and fail to successfully transition back to civilian life. If we can't imagine what it's like to be one of them, maybe we can empathize with them for having become victims of bickering governments.

In "How to Tell a True War Story," O'Brien does the best job I have ever heard of explaining why it is nearly impossible for veterans to talk about what happened on the battlefield. He asserts that unless a war story is terrifying, embarrassing, and disgusting, if at the end of a war story the reader feels at ease with how things turned out, then that story is carrying on the traditional, nationalistic lie that justified violence is in some way righteous or glorious.

⁸ *ibid.*, p. 10

⁹ Web-based interview found at <http://artfuldodge.sites.wooster.edu/content/tim-obrien>

A true war story is never moral. It does not instruct, nor encourage virtue, nor suggest models of proper human behavior, nor restrain men from doing the things men have always done. If a story seems moral, do not believe it. If at the end of a war story you feel uplifted, or if you feel that some small bit of rectitude has been salvaged from the larger waste, then you have been made the victim of a very old and terrible lie. There is no rectitude whatsoever. There is no virtue. As a first rule of thumb, therefore, you can tell a true war story by its absolute and uncompromising allegiance to obscenity and evil.

* * *

The strong do what they can, and the weak suffer what they must.
—Thucydides

Reclusive genius Cormac McCarthy's writing is so different from anything else I have read that based on his novel, *Blood Meridian or the Evening Redness in the West*, I think of him as the sole inhabitant of his own literary planet. *Blood Meridian* encompasses what would have been one of the most difficult reading experiences of my life if not for the simple yet unconventional beauty of the language within. McCarthy delivers government-sponsored genocide in one long irresistible draught that burns going down and packs a not entirely pleasant kick. *Blood Meridian's* unrelenting realism stands in a category of its own for its unflinching focus on the physical details of the atrocities committed by the Glanton Gang in the Texas-Mexico borderlands of the mid-nineteenth century. In the midst of some of the best writing produced by an American author, the reader encounters scenes of the most repugnant brutality and obscenity. This historical-fictional account of the organized extermination of Native American civilians revives a bit of the nastier history European-Americans had kept hidden in the attic for more than a century. It is essential reading.

Tim O'Brien and Cormac McCarthy share the characteristic of describing events in simple, straightforward language. Each lays out the facts of violence without allowing the reader to look away. In this way, fiction becomes like a reality in which horror is strangely compelling, like an imminent air show crash or the immediate aftermath of a horrific disaster on the roadside. We cannot turn away. In this passage, we see Glanton acting as an example for the men he leads.

Glanton pushed the horse back and took one of the heavy saddle pistols from its scabbard and cocked it.
Watch yourself there.

Several of the men stepped back.

The woman looked up. Neither courage nor heartsick in those old eyes. He pointed with his left hand and she turned to follow his and with her age and he put the pistol to her head and fired...

A fist sized hole erupted out of the far side of the woman's head in a great vomit of gore and she pitched over and lay slain in her blood without remedy.¹⁰

Following this simple bit of business, Glanton orders one of his men, "Get that receipt for us," by which he means the man should take murdered woman's scalp to present to a certain local government paying the gang for every Native American killed. McCarthy never elaborates, never gives an opinion on the bloody events he depicts, nor do his characters, save for the erudite and supernaturally evil Judge Holden.

McCarthy differs from O'Brien in the relentlessness of his narrative. In *The Things They Carried*, mayhem happens in the form of measured incidents. *Blood Meridian* moves from brawl to murder to massacre without a pause in the tension. McCarthy pushes us as we read the way Glanton pushes his horses through the desert, leaving the beasts lying spent on the burning ground. Only a psychopath could finish *Blood Meridian* without feeling emotionally drained, morally exhausted. After a grueling sleepless trek during which Glanton threatens the lives of his own scouts, in constant danger of ambush while tracking a tribe called the Gileños, the gang of hired killers spots the encampment of their chosen prey. There is no rest.

Glanton rode his horse completely through the first wickiup trampling the occupants underfoot. Figures were scrambling out of the low doorways. The raiders went through the village at full gallop and turned and came back. A warrior stepped into their path and leveled a lance and Glanton shot him dead. Three others ran and he shot the first two with shots so closely executed that they fell together and the third one seemed to be coming apart as he ran, hit by half a dozen pistolballs.¹¹

What follows is a general slaughter involving women, children, and dogs, followed by a close examination of the dismembered head of a man who may be worth a large bounty. In the hands of a lesser writer, the amount and pace of the havoc would be unendurable. As it is, *Blood Meridian* is certainly not a book I recommend for casual summer reading on the beach, and I'll never leave my worn copy lying where my mother, known to read Louis L'amour westerns, might find it and start reading.

¹⁰ McCarthy, Cormac. *Blood Meridian or the Evening Redness in the West*. Modern Library, 2001. Print. p. 98

¹¹ *ibid.*, p. 154

Regarding the First Gulf War, Kenneth Jarecke wrote in *American Photo* in 1991 “If we’re big enough to fight a war, we should be big enough to look at it.” This should apply to our ancestors’ wars as well, even if they were relatively small wars carried out by bands of mercenary killers. That way, when we start killing, we do it with the understanding that our descendants will have the opportunity to judge our actions. The realistic depiction of violence in literature is essential for carrying the memory of horrific events such as the crimes of the Glanton Gang forward to future generations. Those who have experienced war first-hand need no warnings about the horror and waste of it all. But if a time comes, and I pray it does, when no one alive remembers what it is to either to make just war or commit government-legitimized mass murder, only literature will serve as the collective experience of humanity. We’ll need McCarthy’s red-handed brand of historical fiction to remind us that genocide carries moral consequences even for those in a position to oversee the writing of history books for the next few generations.

In the fiction of Josip Novakovich, we see violence from a more disturbing point of view, that of deep inside the head of one person harming another. The people in Novakovich’s collection, *Infidelities*, are desperate victims of the vicious spasms of late Twentieth Century Balkan violence, damaged or soon to be damaged and doing what they believe they must to survive or protect those they love. This is another aspect of war to which only a direct interpretation of violence can do justice—the never-ending fear of death, injury, or the sort of violation that leaves behind permanent psychological scars. That kind of fear can motivate people to behave contrary to values they may have held all their lives. When someone witnesses the death of a loved one or survives an attack against themselves, the fear can turn into a kind of lifelong resolve to never again allow such a thing to happen. Violence changes everyone involved—the person who commits the act as well as the victim.

In the story “Spleen,” Novakovich places the reader in a scene from the point of view of a young woman who is about to be raped by a soldier. It’s an honest and realistic depiction of the situation, and the male author writes with deep empathy, from the point of view of the woman in trouble, as she defends herself with a pre-positioned knife and admirable courage.

I sat up sideways, felt on the floor for the knife, grabbed its handle, and without hesitation stuck the knife into him. I wanted to get him in the middle of his abdomen but I missed and stuck it to the side, the left side. I did not think it went deep.

He shrieked and didn’t react when I leaped to the side and ran straight out of

doors. And so I ran into the hills, naked, in the cold November night.¹²

Glossing over the repugnant exchange preceding this passage between the would-be rapist and the victim would not do justice to the desperation of the woman who reaches for the knife. She is clearly justified in her counter-attack on a person who is beyond listening to reason and beyond redemption. Having reached the sanctuary of a monastery and bursting into the midst of a group of monks in prayer, the freezing, naked woman, whose name we never learn, hears the Latin word *miser cordia* spoken by one of the brothers, which she says she likes. With the utterance of the Latin word for mercy, literally “wretched heart,” the girl begins her journey to a new life in America. Having been stripped of absolutely everything she had, it would seem she could make a new start in the New World, but as this story illustrates, some wounds aren’t visible and stay with a person, affecting future behavior and shaping future relationships. The story continues to build empathy for this character as a victim of a horrible experience.

Novakovich’s violence lacks the subtlety of Flannery O’Connor. His characters, rather than ruminating over the implications of recent events as Mrs. Turpin does in O’Connor’s story “Revelation,” show us their changes through the choices they make and through the physical sensations of the narrator. Novakovich plays out the motivations for the harm people do to one another. Like Cormac McCarthy, Novakovich moves from one human offense to another, but where McCarthy’s violence comes down incessantly like precipitation leaving the reader to interpret its effects, Novakovich clearly shows the source of characters’ motives through experience, followed by what those motivations lead them to do. In comparison to Tim O’Brien’s accounts of war violence, Novakovich delves less into character’s inner thoughts about their own emotional states during and after traumatic events. I read “Spleen” with the sense that the narrator is telling me her story, perhaps face to face over a few drinks, embellishing where she likes and leaving certain things out.

Later, after our anonymous protagonist has arrived in Ohio, she meets a Bosnian man by the name of Dragan. Though the two become intimate, the man refuses to remove his shirt when they have sex. The woman grows suspicious, and Novakovich reveals why in a dream the woman has in which the man with whom she is involved has an unhealed knife wound in his side, exactly where she had stabbed the soldier in the old country.

Now, in my dream, Dragan appeared in a black T-shirt. I asked him, why don’t you take it off?

¹² Novakovich, Josip. *Infidelities. Stories of War and Lust*. Harper Perennial, 2005. Print. p. 3

I can't.

I will make love to you only if you take it off.

I'd rather not.

So I undressed and teased him, and when he took off his T-shirt, I saw a brown scar on his left side, under the ribs, in the spleen area. The scar paled, then blushed, and became angry red. Drops of blood slid out of it and went down his flank.¹³

Because of the visceral scene at the story's beginning, I felt the horror of this dream as though I were experiencing it, and when the woman goes to lengths to persuade her new lover to take off his shirt, I understand why she must see his naked torso.

Novakovich has put me into the girl's head. I feel her fear, irrational as it may be, and I understand. The fear has an almost supernatural quality to it, and I was as convinced as the protagonist that Dragan would turn out to be the one who had tried to rape her.

In the next scene of the story, they drink Guinness at a bar, and the woman invites Dragan into her apartment. She has to know whether her dream is true. What she reveals next would be completely shocking under other circumstances, but in the case of this narrator, it is expected.

Under the pillow I had a kitchen knife,¹⁴ just in case. I know, that sounds like some praying mantis kind of thing, and if so, maybe the man should have his last wish, without knowing it was his last, to make love. I didn't mind the idea; in a way, I almost wanted him to become aggressive and dangerous so I could do it. Not that I wanted to do it, but the temptation flashed in my mind.¹⁵

Novakovich has created sufficient empathy for this character that my reaction is not one of horror, but one of sympathy for what she has endured. I know this woman is no monster, but she has been shaped by the events of her life. Without experiencing the horror of her past experience, I would never be able to understand her behavior in this scene. A summary of the attempted rape would not have prepared me for the apparently psychopathic thoughts she has of murdering the unsuspecting Dragan in bed. After seeing violence on the page, as the character lives it, we not only are able to understand her later behavior but feel amazed that she is able to pursue intimate relations with another Bosnian man at all. There is hope that she can recover from the fear that has followed her to a new continent.

¹³ *ibid.*, p. 13

¹⁴ I'm fascinated by the second definition of the Latin word *miser cordia* in the context of this story—a thin-bladed dagger, used in the Middle Ages to give the death wound or *mercy* stroke to a fallen adversary.

¹⁵ *ibid.*, p. 17

In the case of Novakovich's stories, the depiction of graphic violence creates deep empathy for the victims and shows how the cycle of violence is perpetuated in places like the Balkans. Once someone becomes a victim, their worldview is forever altered into one in which they feel always vigilant and prepared to commit violence to defend themselves. Worse, they may hold themselves in a constant state of readiness to exact vengeance for the wrongs done to them. Fiction that illustrates these human tendencies educates those of us who haven't experienced anything like the chaos of the Balkan conflicts of the 1990s, hard as it may be to read, and allows readers to transcend the ignorance of the commonly heard American opinion about people in war-torn regions that, "those people over there are crazy."

*

Nations customarily measure the "costs of war" in dollars, lost production, or the number of soldiers killed or wounded. Rarely do military establishments attempt to measure the costs of war in terms of individual human suffering. Psychiatric breakdown remains one of the most costly items of war when expressed in human terms.

—Richard Gabriel, *No More Heroes*¹⁶

Phil Klay's *Redeployment* is the first book on the Iraq War I have read since before spending 15 months in Baghdad in 2008 and 2009. I've sheltered myself from war fiction for a while, uncertain whether I would be prepared to go back in my mind to the kind of emotions that would certainly arise while reading about that recent conflict. Someone whose opinion I respect recommended *Redeployment*, a short story collection similar in form to Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*. This essay is a small part of my journey back to "normal" following multiple military deployments to Southwest Asia, and Phil Klay belongs here perhaps more than any of the writers I've discussed because of his stories' relationship to my own experiences.

Klay's fiction matters for at least two reasons. Like Tim O'Brien's fiction, it allows civilians to see into the lives of ordinary Marines as they deal with the daily traumas of modern counterinsurgency operations. This is a point of view very few people fully understand, and Klay's fiction may help Americans understand what has happened to the veterans they welcome home, people who come back changed by war. Klay's fiction is also important for veterans struggling with the things we bring home—images, sounds, smells lodged in our heads that can steal our sleep at night. Reading Klay's fictional accounts of the type of experiences many veterans share in common is a counterintuitive sort of comfort. Klay's fiction elucidates the mental sacrifices made in

¹⁶ Section II epigraph of Grossman, Dave. *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society*. Back Bay Books, 1995. p. 41 (taken by Grossman from Gabriel, R.A. *No More Heroes: Madness and Psychiatry in War*. Hill and Wang, 1987)

wartime--the types of wounds people carry silently and invisibly.

The Things They Carried depicts the U.S. Army's efforts to fight the insurgency in Vietnam from the point of view of ordinary soldiers, but when a conflict fades so many decades into the past, it begins to take on the patina of history. O'Brien's work, as valuable as it is, takes its place among fictional depictions of soldiers in earlier wars. Phil Klay's work, though strikingly similar to O'Brien's, feels new and raw, because it is. These stories haven't been home from the combat zone long enough for the scar tissue to harden.

Klay's strength is in his adept sharing of unique points of view. One such example is the story called "Psychological Operations," in which a young former U.S. Army soldier of Coptic Egyptian origin discusses his experiences while attached to a Marine Corps battalion in Iraq. His job was broadcasting propaganda to the enemy through loudspeakers in the western Iraqi city of Fallujah, a city densely populated by civilians trying to carry on their lives in the midst of daily urban combat between U.S. Forces and various insurgent groups.

"It was horrible. There was gunfire and explosions and the mosques blaring messages and Arabic music and we were blaring Drowning Pol and Eminem. The Marines started calling it Lalafallujah. A music festival from hell."

"In a city," she said, "filled with people."

"But it wasn't just music," I said. "The Marines, they'd compete to find the dirtiest insults they could think of. And then we'd go scream over the loudspeakers, taunting holed-up insurgents until they'd come running out of the mosques, all mad, and we'd mow them down."

The beauty of this story is that it shows a man talking about his experiences with a young woman who seems to be against everything he stands for. Not only does he experience some degree of healing of the guilt he carries for his actions during the war, the woman, a newly-converted Muslim, gains some understanding of what he has been through. The story consists mainly of two people with differing opinions having a conversation, something it seems the world needs to see more often. The two gain a better understanding of one another that the story's ending suggests may develop into a friendship.

In "After Action Report," Klay depicts an incident on a city street in Iraq in which an untrained Iraqi youth appears after an improvised explosive device disables an American armored vehicle and directs unaimed, automatic fire at a young American soldier named Timhead.

Instinct took over. He shot the kid three times before he hit the ground. Can't miss at that range. The kid's mother ran out to try to pull her son back into the

house. She came just in time to see bits of him blow out of his shoulders.

When vets say things like, “If you weren’t there, you can’t understand,” this is the sort of thing they’re talking about. We have to see this in literary form, at this level of graphic detail, to get an inkling of what the experience is like for a person whose training is so deeply ingrained that they will act in self-defense automatically, using the weapons and the legitimacy issued to them by their government. It is only upon reflection, minutes and years later, that the reality of what they have done sinks in.

Dave Grossman, in his non-fiction book, *On Killing*, writes of an a conversation between Richard Holmes and an elderly veteran seventy years after his combat experiences,

Often you can keep these things out of your mind when you are young and active, but they come back to haunt your nights in your old age. “We thought we had managed all right,” he told Holmes, “kept the awful things out of our minds, but now I’m an old man and they come out from where I hid them. Every night.”¹⁷

Citizens in a democracy from which volunteers are sent to kill those judged to be enemies have a responsibility to know the human results of the policies their political representatives choose to implement. Fiction helps us to do that, and though violence is often difficult to read, I see no other way to begin to understand the costs of preserving the “way of life” I suspect many of us take for granted in the West.

Realistic depictions of violence in literature are indispensable to creating fiction capable of teaching empathy for other human beings, not only victims but also those who inflict violence on others. Whether the act of harming someone is done with the approval of the state or as a crime, understanding the motivations for committing violence and the psychological damage to both perpetrators and victims seems essential to preventing violence and treating its disastrous effects.

Reading violence in fiction can have a cathartic effect, much like seeing tragedy in a play or listening to particularly harsh music. By purging ourselves of violent emotions, a certain segment of humanity can avoid committing violence in the real world. By experiencing the horror of a literary work such as *Blood Meridian*, we may take away from the experience a heightened sense of repugnance for state-sponsored violence. Creating empathy by allowing readers to feel what victims feel seems an effective deterrent to violent crime, at least for anyone able to imagine themselves in the place

¹⁷ *ibid.*, p. 75

of another. This is why violent criminals are introduced to the victims of their crimes in courtrooms—as part of their sentencing as well as a step toward rehabilitation.

With so many veterans returning from foreign wars, there will be an increasing need for civilians to gain an understanding of what makes those returning from war tick. With so many combat veterans entering the civilian workforce, fiction may be the best tool for employers to learn something about veterans and alleviate fears born of misunderstanding the sometimes unusual behavior of someone who has done harm at the government's bidding, but has maybe also been a victim. Fiction is the best way I know for a person to live outside of their daily experience and to empathize with a type of person they may otherwise never meet. If we can tolerate experiencing the ugliness of a life less safe and pleasant than our own, we may learn something valuable about ourselves as well as the other.

Violence is generally seen as a social ill, a flaw in the human race, a result of crime and war, and a thing to be avoided. Violence is taboo in civilized society, yet despite our natural aversion to having violence committed against us or those we care about, authors of fiction continue to supply the high demand for literature containing varying types and degrees of violence. Violence appears on bookshelves everywhere, with debatable results as to what qualifies as art. Once we make a distinction between violence written in pursuit of higher literary goals versus that which is designed to sell mass market books based on its appeal to base human desires, the question arises as to whether violence *should* be desirable or acceptable in literature, and if so, in what form and what sort of presentation? Realistic depictions of violence in literature are indispensable to creating fiction capable of teaching empathy for other human beings.

Depicting violence is as necessary in literature as depicting dialogue, sex, or any other natural human interaction. Fiction frees the reader to experience violence, like other taboo subjects, as openly and graphically as the writer chooses to interpret it. To gloss over the harm people inflict on one another would be to ignore one of the unfortunate but defining characteristics of humanity. Violence can be masked or alluded to in a way similar to how writers often deal with sex, but for writers to create an ostensibly realistic world in which violence plays no part is to deal falsely with readers about the world in which we live. Creating literature that serves as the conscience of civilization requires that writers bring to bear all the truth they possibly can.

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John Haggerty's short stories have appeared in more than forty literary magazines, including *Confrontation*, *Santa Monica Review*, and *War, Literature & the Arts*. He is the winner of the Pinch Literary Award for Fiction and received an honorable mention for the Katharine Anne Porter Prize. His nonfiction has appeared in *Salon*.

Kirie C Pedersen Other writing appears in *Quiddity International Literary Journal* and

Public Radio program, Bluestem Magazine, Eleven Eleven, Chaffey Review, Caper Literary Journal, Avatar Review, Utne Reader, Seven Days, Wisconsin Review, Eclipse, riverSedge, Great American Literary Review, Alcoholism the National Magazine, Hackwriters, Regeneration (Rodale Press), Glossolalia, American Motorcyclist, Folly Magazine, The View from Here, Northwest People, Teachers and Writers, A Gourmet Notebook, r.kv.r.y Quarterly Literary Review, Laurel Review (Greentower Press), Burrow Press Review, South Jersey Underground, Pithead Chapel, Theater Latte Da, Apocrypha and Abstractions, Juked, Foliate Oak, Superstition Review, Agave Magazine and elsewhere. I hold a M.A. in fiction writing and literature

BILL TREMBLAY is a poet and novelist. His work has appeared in eight full-length volumes including *Crying in the Cheap Seats* [UMass Press], *The Anarchist Heart* [New Rivers Press: 1975], *Home Front* [Lynx House Press: 1978], *Second Sun: New & Selected Poems* [L'Eperiver Press: 1983], *Duhamel: Ideas of Order in Little Canada* [BOA Editions Ltd., 1986], *Rainstorm Over the Alphabet* [Lynx House Press, 1998], *Shooting Script: Door of Fire* [Eastern Washington University Press, 2003] which won the Colorado Book Award.

His most recent book is: *Magician's Hat: Poems on the Life and Art of David Alfaro Siqueiros* [Lynx House Press: 2013]. He has received fellowships and awards from the NEA, the NEH, the Fulbright Commission, and the Corporation at Yaddo as well as many anthologies including Pushcart Prize, *Best American Poetry*. He directed the MFA in Creative Writing Program at Colorado State University, founded the *Colorado Review* and served as its chief editor for 15 years. He received the John F. Stern Distinguished Professor Award in 2004. He is the author of a novel, *The June Rise* [Utah State University Press [1994]/Fulcrum Publishing [2002] which received a star review on NPR's "All Things Considered." His latest book, *Walks Along the Ditch*, is forthcoming from Lynx House Press [2016].

Adam "Bucho" Rodenberger He has been published in *Alors, Et Tois?*, *Agua Magazine*, *Offbeatpulp*, *Up The Staircase*, *The Gloom Cupboard*, *BrainBox Magazine*, *Cause & Effect Magazine*, *the Santa Clara Review*, *Crack the Spine*, *Penduline Press*, *Lunch Box*, *Eunoia Review*, *Serving House Journal*, *Aphelion*, *Glint Literary Journal*, Fox Spirit's "Girl at the End of the World: Book 1" anthology, *Slice Magazine*, *Sheepshead Review*, *Meat For Tea: The Valley Review*, *Bluestem Magazine*, *L'allures des Mots*, *Phoebe*, and has been shortlisted for the Almond Press "Broken Worlds" fiction contest.

He blogs at <http://triphoprisy.blogspot.com>

Daniel Abbott is a product of the MFA program at the Vermont College of Fine Arts. His short fiction has been nominated for an AWP Intro Award and has appeared in the

Owen Wister Review and the *Noctua Review*. Daniel lives in Grand Rapids, Michigan, where he is putting the last few kisses on his first novel, The Concrete.
www.facebook.com/DanielAbbottFiction and [@AbbottFiction](https://twitter.com/AbbottFiction)

Kim Farleigh has worked for aid agencies in three conflicts: Kosovo, Iraq and Palestine. He takes risks to get the experience required for writing. He likes fine wine, art, photography and bullfighting, which probably explains why this Australian lives in Madrid; although he wouldn't say no to living in a French château. 127 of his stories have been accepted by 79 different magazines.

J. Todd Hawkins My poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in *AGNI*, *Chiron Review*, *American Literary Review*, *Sugared Water*, *Borderlands: Texas Poetry Review*, *Concho River Review*, *Wisconsin Review*, *bottle rockets*, *50 Haikus*, and elsewhere. I have presented and discussed poetry on panels at the University of Mississippi's Southern Writers/Southern Writing Conference, Tarleton State University's Langdon Review Arts Festival, and Oklahoma State University's Graduate Humanities Conference.

I grew up in Fort Worth, exploring Cowtown's seemingly bipolar culture: its punk rock clubs and art museums, its honky tonks and coffee houses. I believe this environment helped me develop an appreciation for the juxtaposition of seemingly disparate images, forms, and themes. I grew to seek the mash-up, the limerick inside the sonnet, the Dadaist at the cowboy poetry festival. Naturally, I fell in love with haibun: the melding of prose and verse, the narrative and the lyrical, the modern and the timeless.

Steve Passey is from Southern Alberta. Previous Fiction has appeared in *Existere Journal*, *Big Pulp*, *The Molotov Cocktail*, and *Minor Literature[s]*.

Alina Stefanescu was born in Romania, raised in Alabama, and reared by the love-ghost of Tom Waits and Hannah Arendt. Her homeland is a speculative fiction. Currently, she lives in Tuscaloosa with her partner and and three children. She was a finalist in the *Black Warrior Review* Poetry Prize this past year. Her syllables are forthcoming in *Tower Journal*, *Cider Press Review*, *Lockjaw*, *PoemMemoirStory*, and *Kindred*, among others. More online at http://alina_stefanescu.typepad.com/writing/.

Anne Whitehouse Poet, fiction writer, journalist, and critic Anne Whitehouse's books include poetry collections The Surveyor's Hand (Compton Press), Blessings and Curses (Poetic Matrix Press), One Sunday Morning (Finishing Line Press), The Refrain (Dos Madres Press), Bear in Mind (Finishing Line Press), and Fall Love (novel). Recent poetry and fiction publications include *The View from Here*, *Art from Art* (anthology), *Istanbul Poetry Review*, *Pain and Memory* and Being Human: Call of the

Wild (anthologies), *riverbabble*, *Yale Journal of Humanities in Medicine*, and others. She lives in New York City. www.annewhitehouse.com

Cathy Rosoff is the author of two novels, Feral Little Gods and Ravensbone. This is the second time *Ginosko* has excerpted the latter novel, which has also been excerpted in *The Missing Slate*. *The Blue Lake Review* and *Unlikely 2.0* published stories that eventually led to the writing of the novel. *The Stone Hobo* and *The Write Room* published sections of Feral Little Gods, the former nominating her for The Pushcart Prize. Feral Little Gods also passed through the first round of the Amazon Breakthrough Novel Award and is now available on Amazon, as well as the Barnes and Noble and Smashwords websites. Ravensbone is still in its final polish stage. Her website is www.cathyrosoff.com.

Blake Kilgore Part Texan, part Okie - Blake Kilgore fell for a Jersey girl. A history teacher by day, he also coaches basketball and performs original folk music. He is grateful for his wife and four sons. Blake's writing has recently appeared or is forthcoming in *The Alembic*, *Forge*, *The Bookends Review*, and *Torrid Literature Journal's Christian Anthology: The Effects of Grace*.

Carroll Ann Susco has an MFA in Fiction from the University of Pittsburgh and numerous publications, including *The Sun Magazine*. She has a chapbook on Smashwords.com titled True Fiction: A Pseudo Autobiographical Chapbook in Three Parts.

Robert Earle With more than ninety stories in print and online literary journals, Robert Earle is one of the more widely published contemporary short fiction writers in America. His new novel is Suffer the Children. He lives in North Carolina after a diplomatic career that took him to Latin America, Europe, and the Middle East.

James Claffey hails from County Westmeath, Ireland, and lives on an avocado ranch in Carpinteria, CA. He is fiction editor at *Literary Orphans*, and the author of the short fiction collection, Blood a Cold Blue. His work appears in the W.W. Norton Anthology, *Flash Fiction International*, and is forthcoming in Queensferry Press's anthology, Best Small Fictions of 2015.

New writing and reviews at *Fiction Southeast Litro UK Flash Fiction International Anthology MadHat Lit The Eunoia Review The Miscreant Flash Fiction Chronicles Prime Number Magazine Entropy Up the Staircase Quarterly, Blood a Cold Blue*
Website at: www.jamesclaffey.com

Elizabeth Light is a doctoral candidate in medieval literature at Fordham University. Her poetry has appeared in *Columbia College Literary Review*, *Driftwood*, *Release*,

What You Do/Eat a Peach, *The Stratford Star*, and is forthcoming in *Literary Orphans*. She lives in Connecticut with a black cat named Ringo Starr.

Julia Vose's book is Moved Out On The Inside (The Figures Press). *Academy of American Poet's Prize*, SFSU. Her poems have appeared in *Deep Down* (Farrar Strauss and Giroux); *This Is Women's Work* (Panjandrum), Changing Harm To Harmony, ed. Joe Zacardi; Digging Our Poetic Roots, ed. Katherine Hastings; Marin Poetry Center Anthologies; *American Poetry Review*, *However*, etc. Has taught/consulted poetry writing at SFSU, UC Extension; as Writer-In-Residence at Mt. Zion Hospital (NEA grant); and as CPITS Master Poet/Teacher.

Susan Phillips A native of Chicago, Susan Phillips is a Boston area writer, photographer and teacher, whose work has been published in many newspapers and magazines. Her short stories have been printed in over twelve magazines, including *Lacuna*, *Poetica Magazine*, *Literary Brushstrokes*, *Rose Red Review*, *Lisette's Tales of the Imagination* and in the anthology All the Women Followed Her. She is currently working on an historical novel about King Agrippa I and three collections of short stories: one about women in the Hebrew Bible, another about Talmudic figures and a collection of fairy tales.

Gary Charles Wilkens is a poet, science fiction writer, and creative writing teacher residing in Norfolk, Virginia, where he is an Assistant Professor of English at Norfolk State University. He received his PhD in Literature and Creative Writing from The University of Southern Mississippi in 2010. His poems have appeared in many literary journals, including *Adirondack Review*, *The Cortland Review*, *Dacey Brown*, *James Dickey Review*, *Moon City Review*, *Passages North*, *Poetry Southeast*, *The Prague Review*, *Texas Review*, and *Yellow Medicine Review*. He was the winner of the Texas Review Breakthrough Poetry Prize in 2006 for his book The Red Light Was My Mind, and his poetry manuscript Fayetteville was a Finalist in the 2014 Moon City Poetry Prize contest. His science fiction has appeared in *Foliate Oak Literary Magazine*.

Janelle Elyse Kihlstrom's poems have appeared in various literary journals, and her chapbook, Blue Trajectory, was published by Dancing Girl Press in 2011. She edits the online journal *Melusine* and holds an M.A. in Writing from Johns Hopkins University. She lives with her small but recently expanded family in the Washington, D.C. area.

J Tarwood This is my track record: poems in *Free Lunch*, *American Poetry Review*, *American Poetry Monthly*, *BAD*, *Big Muddy*, *Buckle &*, *Bryant Literary Review*, *Pike's Creek*, *Blue Mesa*, *Eratica*, *Calliope*, *Coe Review*, *Rockhurst Review*, *Natural Bridge*, *Willow Review*, *Yet Another Small Magazine*, *Rio*, *Rhino*, *Paris/Atlantic*, *Phantasmagoria*, *California Quarterly*, *Liberty Hill Poetry Review*, *Lilies & Cannonballs*,

Colere, Poetry Ireland, Wind, Grassroots, Poetry Motel, Midwest Quarterly, Main Street Rag, White Pelican Review, Quantum Tao, Red River Review, Rapid River, Runes, Terra Incognita, Visions, and Plainsong. In 1997, I won a Plainsong poetry award, and I was a featured poet in *Visions* in 2001. One of my poems was nominated for a Pushcart Prize in 2003 I also have three books published: And For The Mouth A Flower, Grand Detour, and The Cats in Zanzibar.

P C Vandall is the author of three collections of poetry: Something from Nothing, (*Writing Knights Press*) Woodwinds (*Lipstick Press*) and Matrimonial Cake (*Red Dashboard*). When Pamela is not writing, she's sleeping. She believes sleep is death without the commitment.

Rick Richardson is a professional archaeologist living on the coast of North Carolina, USA.

His first published poetry appeared in the University of San Francisco's *Ignatian Literary Magazine*, Issue 27, April 2015.

T. E. Cowell lives in Washington state. For more of his fiction contact him at tecowell4@gmail.com

Therése Halscheid's latest poetry collection Frozen Latitudes (Press 53), received the Eric Hoffer Book Award, HM for poetry. Previous collections include Uncommon Geography, Without Home and a Greatest Hits chapbook award by Pudding House. Magazine publications include *The Gettysburg Review*, *Tampa Review*, *South Loop*, *Sou'wester*, among others. She has taught in varied settings including an Inupiaq Eskimo tribe in the far north of Alaska, and in the Ural Mountains of Russia. For several years she had been writing on the road by way of house-sitting. Website: ThereseHalscheid.com

Chelsea Eckert will be attending UNC Greensboro for her MFA in creative writing in the fall of 2015. Her fiction and poetry, both literary and genre, have appeared or will appear in over twenty print and online venues. Stalk her like a hungry catamount at <http://chelseaeckert.me>.

Jeremi Handrinos Books: Juno's Peacock (Sun Rising Poetry Press, 2004)
Anthologies: Omega 6 HereAfter the COUP (Howling Dog Press, 2006), Cosmic Brownies (Sun Rising Poetry Press, 2005), Mind Mutations (Sun Rising Poetry Press, 2005)

Journals: *Ginosko Literary Journal*

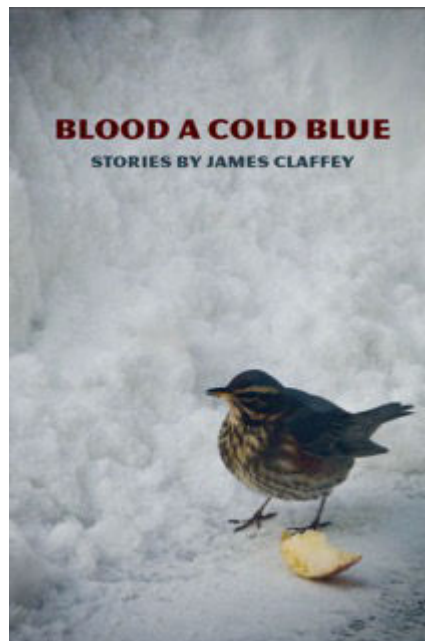
Performances: Short on Cash, Not Hair (2006), Shen~Ring CD (2004), Junk Jazz CD (2003), Gangbox CD (2001), Emotionally Unavailable (1999), (spit it how its spun)

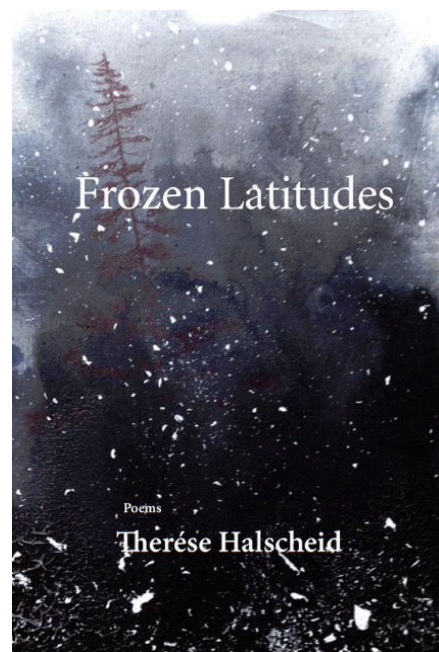
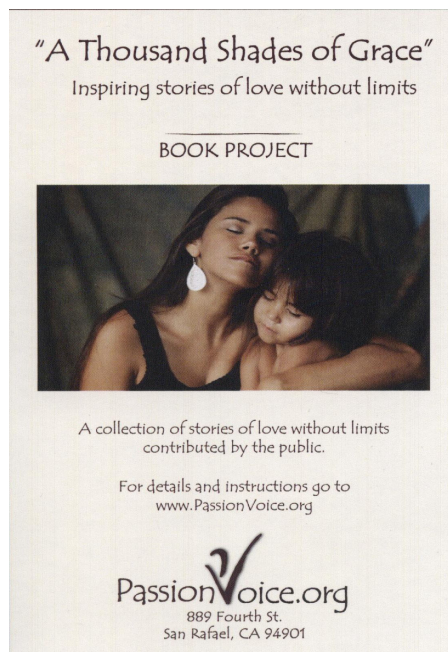
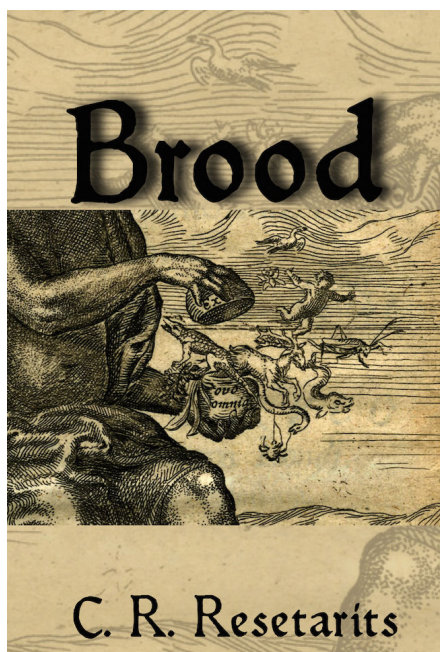
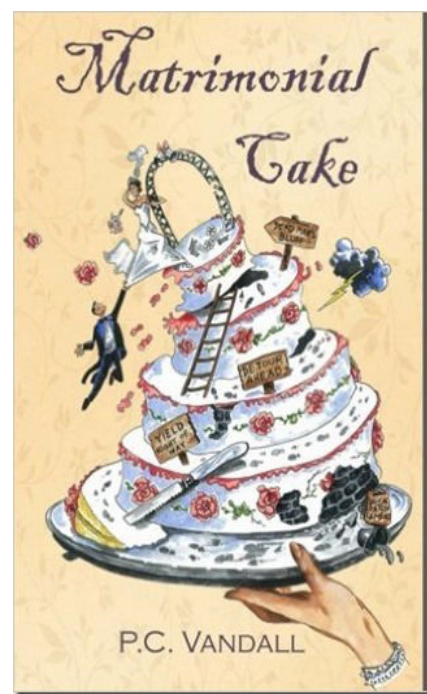
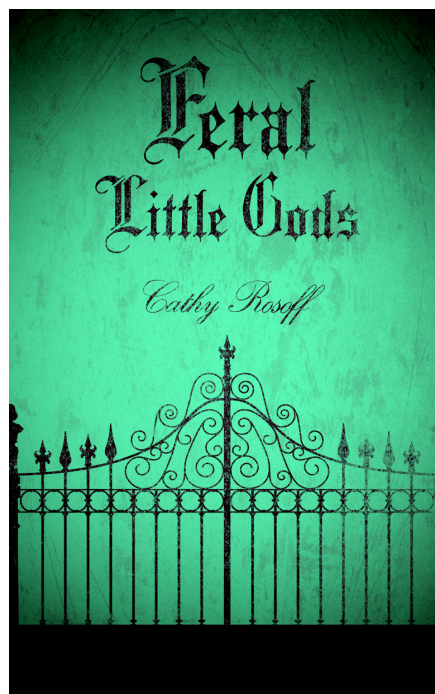
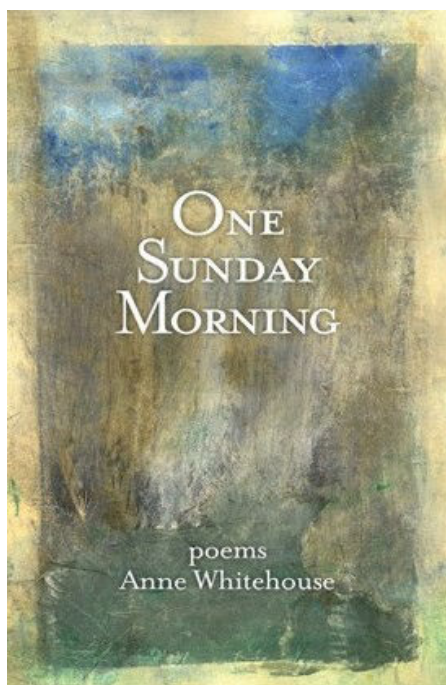
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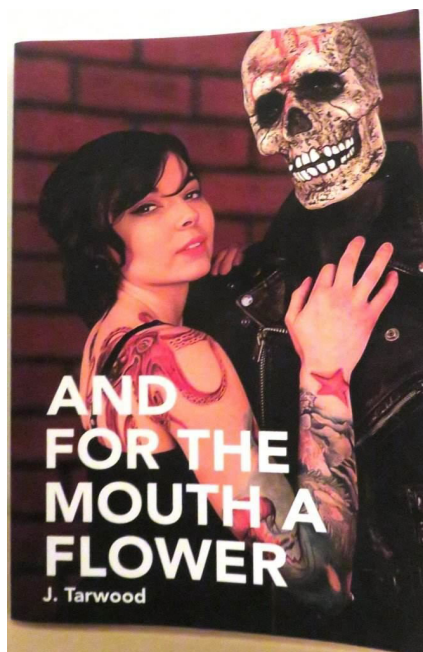
Scott Sherman is a graduate of Ursinus College, where he earned his BA in the field of English. He has been writing poetry for six years, and his work often focuses on abstract depictions of his youth, dreams, and relationships. He breathes nostalgia, and tries to include his past into the majority of his writing. He has recently, or will be published in *Clover*, a *Literary Rag* - Issue 10, *Lost Coast Review* - Winter 2016 Issue, *Floor Plan* - Issue D, *The Opiate* - Issue 4, and *Rivet Journal* - Issue 6."

Edissa Nicolas holds a BA in Education from Brown University and an MFA in Creative Writing from Mills College. She teaches English, Writing, Literature, and life skills as a professor in a San Francisco Bay Area community college. Edissa is also an active life-style blogger, writing about wellness, gardening, culture and community as a regular contributor to her church newsletter and several blogs. Currently, she is working on a historical-fiction novel based on the life of Matthew Henson, posthumously recognized co-discoverer of the North Pole. An immigrant from Dominican Republic, Edissa grew up in New York City, and gardens, writes and loves life in San Francisco.

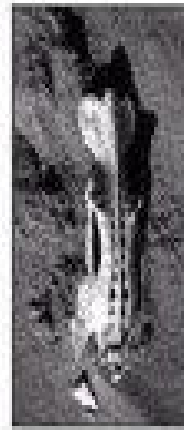
Steven Thomas Howell is a fiction writer living in Tampa, Florida. He holds an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Tampa and is working on his first novel. Read more about him at steventhomashowell.com.







AS I WAS PULLED UNDER THE EARTH



GRANT TARBARD