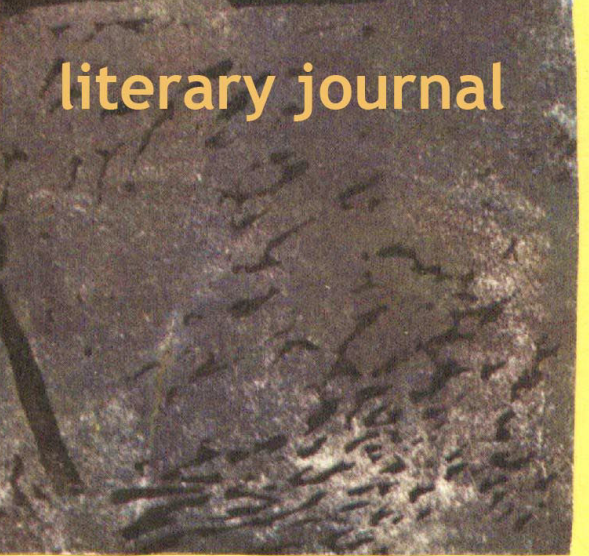




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Ginosko (ghin-océ-koe)

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

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A true work of fiction is a wonderfully simple thing—so simple that most so-called serious writers avoid trying it, feeling they ought to do something more important and ingenious, never guessing how incredibly difficult it is. A true work of fiction does all of the following things, and does them elegantly, efficiently: it creates a vivid and continuous dream in the reader's mind; it is implicitly philosophical; it fulfills or at least deals with all of the expectations it sets up; and it strikes us, in the end, not simply as a thing done but as a shining performance.

— John Gardner

Dimly Lit by Day

Gina M. Fields

He lays the gun down gently on the end table, like a baby he's afraid to wake. I don't know him. I don't know his name. And I don't know why I'm here. I'm smarter than this, or so I've been told. He's a grisly man, probably younger than his hardened looks reveal, wearing an unbuttoned blue plaid lumberjack shirt, over a fresh to death white tank top, with blue khaki pants - the unofficial Crips uniform.

Staring at me from his worn down, green, easy chair on the other side of the living room, he says, You're the smart one.

I don't respond, not because I'm not, but because, I don't want to seem arrogant or hurt the feelings of my three girlfriends who are stuffed onto this overstuffed, broken down, beige couch with me, in a barely sunlit, sparsely furnished apartment in The Jungle, a low income neighborhood in Central Los Angeles, where I've live with my overprotective mother and my older brother and sister.

We should go, I say.

No, he says, picking up the gun and placing it in his lap. His eyes won't leave mine. He adds, Pretty too.

Earlier this afternoon, we met three boys, a little older than us, maybe 16, 17, outside the Rave movie theater a few blocks from here, and they asked if we wanted to come over to their friend's place and hang out.

I said no, but Francine giggled, Yes, and Michelle, said, It'll be fun.

Stephanie, who's way more practical than any of us, whispered in my ear, We can't let them go alone, they'll get killed or raped or something stupid like that.

Now, I'm sitting in a weed stench-ed, dimly lit apartment, a single bead of sweat dripping down my spine, staring at a gun, trying to keep us all safe. The three boys who we met, who brought us here, who probably sell weed for the guy with the gun, linger in the hallway door, having been dismissed from the room by our captor.

I'm not that smart, I say.

You're not? he asks.

No, if I was I wouldn't be here.

He laughs and says, Funny too. How old are you?

Ummm, 16, I lie.

I'm 15. Why do I lie? Does that one year make me a more formidable opponent for a half stoned, 185 pound, 28 year old, gang member with a gun?

He squints his eyes like he doesn't believe me.

I left this behind. I got a scholarship to the private prep, Westlake School for Girls, and left behind, Audubon, my neighborhood middle school, my friends, and my mother's fears for me, to ride a Metro bus an hour and a half away to Bel Air, driving pass the recovery centers and wigs shops and 99 Cent Stores of my neighborhood to

sprawling lawns, 15 foot hedges and palm trees, like you see in the movies.

Then, came summer.

Why are you here? the drug dealer asks.

She thinks he's cute, I say, first nodding my head toward Francine, sitting next to me, and then towards the light skinned, skinny boy, nervously snickering in the hall with his homies.

Francine shoves into me, angrily denying, I do not. Why'd you go and say that?

I want to tell her, because staring at a gun promotes honesty, and I barely got away with lying once, so I'm not anxious to try again, but I'm concentrating on not breaking our captor's gaze. He will not respect that sign of weakness.

The late afternoon sun struggles in through uneven blinds, saturating the room with heat.

Michelle's nerves have gotten to her and she can't stop giggling. Stephanie is sniffing, trying to hold back tears. And Francine, blinded by her crush, is making flirty eyes towards the hallway.

He picks up the gun and points it at me, asking, So, are you afraid, Beauty?

Every breath in the room halts.

Heart pounding, mind racing, hands sweating, what's the right answer, what's the perfect quote, with a mind full of knowledge, surely Ellison, Emerson, someone, something I've learned will make me bulletproof? Words, thoughts, quotes jumble and stumble around in my head.

Nothing to say? he prompts.

Words can't stop bullets, I mutter.

He laughs loudly, and says, Naw, they can't. Laying the gun back down on the table, he adds, Remember this, today, this dumbass nigger sitting here, gave you a gift, gave you life. Don't ever forget. And I don't care what your stupid-ass friends say or do, don't ever walk into nobody's place if you don't know what's up. The next motherfucker may not be in a giving mood. Get out of here, go save the world or do whatever shit it is you need to do.

Bone Rock Then Ash

Dirk James

Tramping over the bed of a long gone ocean,
we hear the echoes of her sad, old sea chanties
swirling in her dusty spindrift, caught up in the slipstream
of time.

We are here to sink wells into her mountains, the ones
that have kept their balance even sitting in the middle of the shifting
earth beneath them. We sink our well deep in her steep slopes
breaking through that high shale and into cobbled firmament
of black basalt.

Bone, rock, then ash.

Tapping and Peering down into the skylight we are interlopers
interrupting this sleeping household. Drilling and drilling
we finally break in. We find a nurturing fossil cradling her dry child.
A disturbed Holocene unfolds her arms, slowly, gingerly
like any doting mother giving up her aging children tangled
in her apron strings. Giving them up into the hands of strange suitors.
Beneath the tons of hot daylight a fire Opal shines, anchored
in the forehead of the sun.

Bone, rock, then ash.

Traversing Ground Edd B Jennings

The day is bad. Head high touch me nots, usually flush with wet stalks, wither into themselves. Plants know things and feel the fear of what is to come. Fears past are never quite over.

A massive old sycamore crashed into the river. No wind, no shudder of limbs warned. I could have been on that side of the river as easily as I paddled the opposite bank. Except I wasn't.

I have places I stop and places I won't. Traversing ground, I call those places I won't stop. Animals sense the difference. Some of it can be explained. Dead Horse Hollow moderates temperatures. In the heat of the summer and in the cold of winter, the cattle and the deer lay up in its breaks. Air temperature can be twenty degrees more favorable. The boulder and fern packed hollow's name came from the 19th century, when the original owners learned to look there first for their dead horses.

I don't trust much to luck. Faint signals speak. Some men refuse the edges and the shadows and think nothing of lingering in the midday sun or walking the great open places. Thus we have Noel Coward's line, "only mad dogs and Englishmen."

Faint stirrings turning up the white under bellies of the leaves mean something. They carry scent far and wide and play with the path of a rifle bullet.

Why there? I often ask myself.

Not so long ago I made a hidden campsite on Reed Creek. Camp set, dinner eaten, I, in exhausted contemplation, watched the eternal drama of water on rock. Near sunset fingerling fish appeared, resting in the current, but only behind one rock. Most of the creek, as far as I could see, was empty of life. In the dropping light, more fish slipped from hidden crevices to join the school. A small rock to me, a massive boulder to them, it broke the current and pulled drifting food into their tiny eddy. At intervals fish made tiny rings in the surface when they snatched drifting food particles too small for me to see before returning to their stations, a miniature scene too insignificant for the wide world to notice or use. I watched the fish until the darkness hid them.

In the moonlight that night the white bark of the sycamores shined like religious icons. Ecstasy and fear. We retreat. We draw forth.

Reenactment Therapy

Nicholas Rys

Ma and Pa never could tell when their number was up so I guess it was no surprise when they didn't see it comin' like the goddamn runaway train it was. I heard in some towns they got folks who look for weeks. They drain lakes and put up posters and call the sheriff. But not around here. They didn't do anything at all.

At first, it was just me in that stupid house and, for a second, the goddamn thing almost swallowed me up. I mean it. Sometimes I could barely breathe in there.

He had these big eyes that always made him look like terrified or like he had just been caught doing something wrong and right away I had trouble telling which it was. Even standing still he looked like he was heading somewhere else. He always talked so fast. His shoulders hunched forward and he wore a jacket that was too big for him and when he would smoke cigarettes his chin would jut out as he would exhale in a way that seemed too awkward and sincere to be put on. I thought he was adopted. He called his parents by their first names and was already talking about each in the past tense.

Soon after she started comin' and goin' as she pleased. I didn't mind at all. I kinda liked when she was around. She needed a place to stay and I had more than enough room. Sometimes it was a drag cuz I had to go to school but other times I'd say fuck it and stay with her for days.

I think a bunch of us were smoking cigarettes by the river in Tire Hill. He and Bill cut school. Bill was an asshole but there was something about this other kid that seemed off...like a dog that flinches when you reach for the newspaper. At first I thought he seemed too scared to be dangerous.

Once in a while she'd show up with stolen food from the market and take me to the woods. We'd eat and make a tent out of twigs and leaves and a shredded blue tarp. But usually we just stayed in my house.

Sometimes she would stay so long that it would start to feel like the house was ours, like we were pickin' up right where Ma and Pa left off. I'd come home from school and she'd ask me how it went. I'd smile and say somethin' like "you wouldn't BELIEVE the day I had!!" and she'd let out a big toothy cackle and pull a joint out from behind her ear and we'd smoke it right there at the table. Other times she'd take off in the middle of the night and I wouldn't see her for weeks.

Some days we'd just sit around and get so high and I'd get so bored that I used to try and light his pants on fire. I never did. As soon as he'd hear the flick of the lighter next to his leg he'd jump up and yell at me and I'd laugh and he'd say I was fucked up and I'd say GOOD and he'd sit back down. I don't know. It got strange sometimes.

Once she put my hand between her legs and said she wanted me. I was nervous and didn't know what to do and she could tell and said don't be nervous and I said I wasn't but she knew I was. She told me it didn't mean nothin' and put her hand on my jeans. I said sure, alright, and put my hand on her tit and leaned in to kiss her lips. They were skinny and chapped and smelled like the strangest strawberries I've never tasted. She pulled away quickly, slapped me and told me not to do that. She said I obviously didn't get it at all and tossed her head back and laughed her big toothy laugh and switched the channel to that cooking show we both loved.

After a while he told me I could stay with him permanently, but I started getting weirded out after the first month or so and stopped staying for more than a few nights at a time. Mostly I'd just go over to get some rest and to eat some decent food. That's when he started telling me about the things he collected; the skins from the snakes he trapped out back, the teeth from the three cats he had when he was younger; the tufts of hair from his sisters' childhood dolls. I didn't want to ask where his parents were.

Your sense of smell really is a funny thing. I can't see great and think because it gave me so much trouble, my nose sharpened up real good. I can still remember the smell of damp nicotine that hung around Ma when she'd put me to sleep, and Pa's gasoline stained fingers when they'd come across my face. I can't remember for the life of me what either of them looked like but I can still remember that.

The police finally came to take him away after a neighbor found their bodies in the garage. Polly Douglas told the town paper she was on her way to the mailbox when she noticed a peculiar smell. She hadn't seen her neighbors for a while and went to investigate the odor, which she deduced was coming from their garage, thinking perhaps a raccoon or other large rodent got in and was responsible for the scent. I stopped coming by long before then. I suppose I did like him a bit. It really is something, how some folks turn out.

Quarters

C. Kubasta

Her mommy's Lonely smells sweet and makes music. Her daddy's Lonely sounds like whispers and giggles in the hallway when she's already in bed with lots of Daddy's voice saying "shush" and "be quiet" in his pretend-angry voice.

At her mommy's house, Luna only hears the Lonely after bedtime, when she's snuggled in her covers and the nightlight is on, but her mommy's phone starts making its ping sounds, so she knows people are talking to her mommy but not really talking. Sometimes she hears just her mommy's voice talking to someone on the phone but she can't tell who she's talking to most of the time, unless it's Aunt Kate. When Mommy is talking to Aunt Kate, Mommy says, "Kaaaate . . ." stretching out the middle of Aunt Kate's name and then she knows that Mommy is talking about something serious: that she's had a bad day at work, or that she's worried about something, and sometimes Luna's worried that she's worried about her. There's also lots of laughing and most of it sounds like real laughing, and lots of being quiet because Aunt Kate talks a lot.

At her daddy's house, she only hears the Lonely a long time after her bedtime, when she wakes up still sleepy and she knows her daddy has called one of his friends to come over and help him not be lonely. She falls back asleep and in the morning only her daddy is there so she doesn't know who was the giggling-whisper voice and she knows not to ask her daddy because then she'll see the lonely on his face that he tries to hide with the pretend-angry. He'll say things like, "Hurry up and eat your cereal," or "Hurry up, we're going to be late for school" or he'll pretend he didn't hear her and go out to the garage and start loading the car.

Daddy has lots of cars – the regular car, and the work truck and the junker car that he's always working on that Luna calls the rat car, and sometimes when he's working on the junker car, laying on the garage floor with only his feet sticking out, he'll start singing and she'll start singing too, quietly, and they'll both be singing silly songs about nothing and then there's no Lonely in the garage at all.

Sometimes she'll hear the same whisper-voice again and again and then Daddy will ask if she wants to meet one of his friends and she won't answer but he knows that she does so his friend will come over for dinner or they'll go out to Chili's where she likes to eat fries and Daddy's friend will talk to her in a voice different than the whisper-voice and try to be her friend too.

When Mommy has a new friend she usually gets to meet his daughter too, and sometimes they are friends then and they go to the park or the beach or swimming at the pool, and once they went to Disney all together. She can feel the way Mommy watches her friend and his daughter and she can feel the way he watches Mommy and her and then the Lonely feels different, but it's still there. She thinks everyone grownup

has their own Lonely; she thinks when she grows up she'll have her own Lonely too.

Sometimes they skype with Aunt Kate and Mommy and Aunt Kate think they are very smart and if they talk a certain way – using letters instead of names, using big words instead of little words – that she won't know what they're talking about. But she knows that words and names are only half of what grownups say when they say what they're saying and she knows most of what they're saying anyway. Lots of times they talk about Daddy and his friends or Mommy and her friends or Luna and whether she's still getting extra help at school with Mrs. Schwartz at the special-help reading table or whether Grandma Polly or Grandpa Doug are feeling any better and Luna knows that they are talking about serious grownup stuff and she listens very closely and later she mostly figures it out.

One time when Aunt Kate was visiting, and she and Mommy were getting ready to go out, Aunt Kate tried on every dress in her suitcase and even tried on some of Mommy's clothes too, but she wasn't happy with anything, and she curled her hair then brushed it straight and had Mommy do her makeup but she still wasn't happy and every time she looked in the mirror she took a big breath, then blew it all out, but no matter what she did she couldn't look taller and every time Mommy stood next to her in the mirror and smiled, Aunt Kate's eyes slid to the sides to look at her.

"Now you know how it feels," Luna said to Aunt Kate and Aunt Kate's mouth dropped open and she laughed one of her big Aunt Kate laughs and picked Luna up and rolled around on the bed, hugging her, and then when they went out later her hair was still messed up from playing with Luna but Aunt Kate didn't seem to mind anymore.

Mommy had laughed too, but turned to Aunt Kate and said, quiet, "I told you she listens to us."

When they skype with Aunt Kate, Aunt Kate makes lots of jokes and laughs a lot, even when Mommy looks upset or is using letters and big words. That's how Aunt Kate's Lonely sounds.

Sometimes after she meets one of Daddy's friends at Chili's, and then Daddy's friend starts staying at the house and pouring her cereal in the morning, she starts thinking of Daddy's friend as her friend too. Then she starts telling Aunt Kate that she has a new dog, or a new cat, or a dog and cat, because they moved into Daddy's house with Daddy's friend. Once a friend named Heather lived with them for a few months, and she brought a dog named Muffin. The next time Luna Skyped with Aunt Kate she told her that she had a new dog named Muffin and Mommy shook her head a little to Aunt Kate but Luna saw it too.

And most of Daddy's friends were nice to her, even if after a while Daddy wasn't so nice to them anymore. Heather stayed with them the longest, and she would braid Luna's hair, or paint her toenails with glitter paint if she was painting her own, and sometimes on Saturdays if Daddy had to work they'd go to the thrifty stores and buy

twirly skirts that smelled bad until they brought them home and washed them. Then Luna would dress-up dress up and they would all go out to Chili's for French fries.

When Luna walked into her room her piggy bank was on her dresser, not her table, and when she picked it up it felt mostly empty. Not heavy like it did when it was full of all the quarters and pennies and nickels and dimes that she'd been putting into it since Mommy brought it back from her trip to Mexico with Aunt Kate when she was five and Mommy said she was too little to go and besides it was a grown-up trip.

She went into the kitchen and Daddy was drinking from a can of beer and Heather was standing at the stove stirring taco meat for dinner.

"Daddy," she said, her pouty bottom lip out a little (Daddy hates when she sticks her pouty bottom lip out), "Daddy . . ." and then she didn't say anything else but held out her piggy bank.

Heather didn't turn around, but stood at the stove, stirring the taco meat that already smelled good.

"What?" Daddy said in his I-just-got-home-from-work-and-I'm-tired voice as he set down the beer and took the piggy bank.

"It's all gone," she whispered.

"What?" He said, but this time different, like he didn't hear her.

"Gone," she said, louder, with her pouty bottom lip out. She pointed at the piggy bank.

Daddy's eyes slid slow, out of the corners, to the piggy bank in his hands, to Heather stirring the taco meat on the stove, back to Luna standing there with her pouty bottom lip and back to Heather at the stove.

"Heather?" And now Daddy's voice was really angry, but Heather kept stirring and didn't turn around. She pointed with the plastic spoon to the six pack sitting on the counter, one of its plastic loops empty and stretched out, the two packs of Marlboro mediums.

"I was a little short," Heather said to the taco meat, not turning around.

"Luna, go to your room," Daddy said, quiet. His quiet voice was even worse than his angry voice and she ran to her room, slamming the door. Slamming the door wasn't allowed, but she heard more slamming doors and more angry voice, Daddy's voice and Heather's voice, and then car doors, and then driving away.

She and Daddy ate tacos later and there were lots of leftovers because Heather wasn't there and Muffin wasn't there and Daddy threw all the rest of the taco meat in the garbage and all the taco shells because he said *the goddamn things would go stale by tomorrow* but he put the cheese in a zipper bag and put that back in the refrigerator.

She went to her mommy's the next day and the next day but when she went back to her daddy's her piggy bank was back on the table and next to it was a whole roll of quarters like the kind they get when they go to laundromat to do clothes.

She sat on her bed putting the quarters into her piggy bank one by one, listening to the thunks. Mommy said money is dirty and you have to wash your hands after touching it, but she wasn't going to wash her hands. Before she put the last quarter into the piggybank, she put it in her mouth, feeling the heavy on her tongue. She held it against her pouty lip until it got warm, twirling the ridges against her mouth, feeling the sharp and the metal and the dirty she wasn't supposed to touch. And Daddy didn't ever mention the quarters and she didn't either, but the next time they went to the laundromat because *the goddamned washer was still broken*, he handed her the whole roll of quarters and let her put them into every machine. While their clothes were spinning spinning in the dryers, they played all the games, even the Crane game, which was *a racket* and *no one ever won at*, and even though there was no one else in the whole place, she knew the Lonely was there with them.

by William C Blome

HUNTING ELK ALONG GREEN RIVER

So you spin the top, and I spin the top, and maybe we get the monsignor's housekeeper (right now, a-ways downstream) to give the top a spin, but really, there's practically no difference here: millers won't stop thriving in our closets, and the housekeeper forever spreads plaid panties across one quality ass. For the kind of difference that genuinely registers—that zooms up the pole when you hammer hard and collides with the bell at the top—is when a stag behind the shoreline moves out of your scope and fills a space unknown to focus. That's when them great cheeks of hers get fluffed by polka dots (not plaid), and wool coats on their hangers in the hallway escape becoming holey. But it's all so momentary—can't you see that, man?—as momentary as trying to imagine every top in North America set in motion all at once, and it's at such seconds as those that you come to spot you've yet to blood an elk.

INKY PEARL DIVER

Oh you can say whatever the hell you want
about how great it is to sleep with a winter-coat model
(spring-fresh off her runway, munching hard on khaki
Rye Crisp, and one fuck-finger stink-, stink-, stinking
of ginger); or some Episcopal deacon (expert in throaty whispers
and charcoal grilling fish-for-all within cathedral meeting space);
or even a first-time grandmother (all dyked out in glittery silk
and white-fox furs and quietly pleased as shit
to be able to get out of her grandchild's first communion).
Yeah, you can say what you will about how swell it is to be
screwing hard on Solstice night number one,
but my own taste sprints like a whippet (sprints, rests, then
sprints again) toward an inky pearl diver just-come-up
and truly going to seed, a bulging, dripping tart
with omnipresent value and genuinely capacious lungs.

ON THE HUDSON

Hudson, Hudson, it's on my starboard side and always
nearing four o'clock when redbirds finish landing for the day
on Finnish outdoor gear like carved birch trees and clumsy,
prudish ice maidens with wood-shaved pigtailed and cottony
private parts. Hudson, I dial my barge speed down
as we get heads-up to pass her apartment building where just
a bit ago, I bore witness like a drill bit through soft birch
to see her husband leave for work and lip sync to passers-by
all there is to know about their steel-cage homestead. That's
him, warbling pretenses to strangers port and starboard
of his scuffing walk in leathered feet, and now my barge comes
level with the picture window of a hundred times before,
when she and I held binocular sea trials for this very boat
and decided powder-blue rayon was the color and sheen
of choice for the signal panties she now sprints naked in
across a living room and then yanks off, Hudson,
and presses up against the glass my barge just passed
on its tight-vagina thrust to Albany and/or Helsinki.

SLIVERS

The only reason I'm on the road to Phu Loi at seven in the morning is because my wife's father had been on the same road at the same time of day in June many years earlier, when he found, first, a small stone tablet with Vietnamese alphabets chiseled-on predicting the collapse of the French and the return of their bodies and cremains to Europe; and second (and more significantly), a scrolled, watercolor portrait of me on choicest rice paper, me, the man his youngest daughter was destined to marry, so I trust you can see my figuring here, I trust you don't have to be a fucking genius: If dad had been walking on this road and came across rock-and-paper of such obvious importance, then there have to be generous slivers of chance I'll be stepping full-weight on the rusty, upright, and closed blades of a pair of sewing scissors, and, at the very least, their resulting, bent configuration will be this gnomon pointing away from everywhere you are and always toward the soft and adolescent courtesan who's patiently holding breakfast for me now.

Harmful if Swallowed

Michael Davis

Your eyes are closed. And a voice repeats itself: *if you can't eat, you need to sleep*. "If you can't sleep, you need to build something. Something edifying and engrossing. A sculpture. A sculpture that will take you out of yourself and release your attachments." The voice of Dr. Bentley Philips, your wife's psychiatrist. He arrived an hour ago, claiming at you called him. It's possible that you did.

"But that's only if you can't sleep," he says.

Sitting under the chandelier on the white shag of your unfurnished dining room, your new two-story house seems enormous and the night endless. None of the windows have curtains. Through the large bay window in the dining room, the desolation of the new housing development is clear: empty asphalt drives, vacant yards, half-build skeletons of houses. You see the silhouettes of transplanted midget palms waving in the orange glow of sodium vapor lamps around your circular driveway. Evil midget palms with fronds like sword blades. The chandelier is large and electric. It blazes like an alien mothership.

"Can't you give me something?"

"You mean a fat pill that'll knock you into next Tuesday?"

Bentley is a Buddhist, does Buddhist psychotherapy. He uses terms like "satori" and "blissful illumination" and talks about "exploding supernovas of joy in the meninges of the skull."

"You're an addict, Ed." He tamps the bowl of his bong with his thumb. "Say, 'I'm an addict,' and I'll write you a script right now."

It's *possible* that you're an addict. But it's a *fact* that, due to meth and despair, you haven't been sleeping. You've been seeing mice at the edges of your vision. Your conversations with yourself in the bathroom mirror have grown cryptic and obscure—as have your talks with the cast of *Battlestar Galactica*.

"What if I say, 'Fuck off,' and punch you in the mouth?" You may be delusional and talking to television characters through the bathroom mirror, but unfortunately you're not imagining Bentley. You've always hated your wife's psychiatrist.

He shrugs and takes a long draw, tiny wisps of smoke rising from the bowl. The fact that you might have called him in a meth-addled stupor doesn't make him any less of an asshole. You remind yourself that Bentley, too, shall pass. He coughs out used smoke and tells you to blame yourself, not the drugs. He says you need to admit what you are.

You put on the *Sounds of the Humpback Whales* CD he has in his boom box, the one he always brings with him to play chants and guided meditations and shit like that. Then, over the sounds of whale fin slapping the water, you tell him he's a worthless pot-head.

What you don't say is that you feel worried when you look through the front windows—the opaque, mirror-black world waiting to eat you, the wide circular drive illuminated in the middle of the glass. You watch the midget palms standing around the drive as if engaged in ritual, their fronds fronding the wind as the chandelier waits above, its monstrous mandibular arms glowing with the fires of perdition.

Bentley wants you to hit the bong. He nods and smirks when you wave it off as if he was testing you. There's no way to blame drugs for this situation. Drugs are innocent. You blame Paula, your ex-wife. Fucking Paula, who abducted all the furniture *en route* and disappeared.

So if squinting Commander Adama appears in the dark dining room window or behind you in the bathroom mirror and starts telling you you have to *roll the hard six* just like in the series, you'll ignore him as a rule. You'll tell yourself there's more than enough time to fix his geriatric bullshit hallucinatory ass. If you see a mouse doing the Macarena across the back of the toilet tank, you'll blink it gone. You'll listen to the whales and tell yourself this is *not* psychosis. This is the necessary meth, the straight dope. Emotional life support. Beyond question. Only meth will save you from a violent probing on the alien mothership, which you feel will be more or less inevitable once the chandelier reveals itself.

The doctor's triple-chambered bong bubbles as he initiates an herbal *satori*. The bong is bright orange, as long as Bentley's arm, with pointillist green arabesques on the side. It's enormous, faintly penile, slick-looking. The arabesques seem like sequins formed out of *abjad*. You imagine a woman with needles sticking out of her tongue licking designs into the bong—all about the unpronounceable name of god and forgiveness and how you must turn away from foolishness. Indeed.

The midget palms are right outside the window now. They wave and dip their fronds. Standing between them, Commander Adama beckons. You give him the finger and Bentley laughs. "Hallucinational are we?"

"I'm cold."

"You're sweating. Say you're an addict, Ed. Just say it."

The necessary meth, the straight dope: if you're going to be completely honest, you'll admit that the meninges of the skull cannot withstand more than 72 hours of racing heart and no sleep before acute psychosis sets in.

Psychosis. The big chosis.

This is not something other drugs can prevent, not even satori weed from the good doctor's bong of enlightenment. Rather, amphetamine psychosis is a Daisy Duke Moment, a stretchy atemporal hiccup of sever disidentification in which you realize that you are now and always have been, say, the Antichrist or a tawny pug that was once shot into space by Soviet physicists or the sexy hillbilly cousin of Bo and Luke Duke for 6 full seasons.

But if you admit to yourself that Commander Adama is actually just a palm tree outside the window, then you must confront the unsettling question: what are palm

trees?

“Look at you with your cock bong,” you say. “Have I ever seen you *without* a bong?”

“Paula has.”

Meth psychosis would constitute a total break in the reality *piñata*. It would constitute a new state of being in which you’re blindfolded, weeping on the ground, and all the candies of the world will have razorblades in them forevermore. *Death Piñata*. It’s the Winchester Mystery House on acid. It’s Daisy Duke. It’s Mitt Romney having won instead with plagues of locusts, the death of the firstborn, the Tower of Babel falling down all over again. It’s the *chosis* that makes the rest of society’s *piñata*-beaters want to tie you up and throw you in a hole. Daisy Duke? Oh my sweet lord, yes.

“You know, there’s nothing wrong with fucking a psychiatrist up, Bentley. People will probably *like* me for it. The police will. I could fuck you up right now.”

“With every threat you make, Ed, I grow stronger. You know why? Because I’m a Jedi knight and you’re an addict. That’s why.”

And a voice repeats itself: *if you can’t eat, you need to sleep. If you can’t sleep, you need to build something. Something to distract you. Something to relieve you and bless you. Something sacramental. Something to initiate satori.* And therefore, you know the only relief possible lies in the construction of an *utterly* enlightening machine dedicated *completely* to personal bliss, covered in knobs and cranks, and weighing more than a gun safe from the 1930s. One must build a beautiful, interactive sculpture. A machine, yes, but one that would connect you to the *infinite*.

“That’s the spirit,” Bentley says. And you realize you’ve been talking out loud, but it doesn’t make the idea any less brilliant. So this is what you do. Infused with the unstable and perhaps inbred hillbilly energy of an impending Daisy Duke Moment, you know you have to roll the hard six. You watch yourself get out some tools, a squirt-can of 3-in-1 oil, and the box of machine parts someone left in the front closet. You watch yourself scream incoherently at Bentley like some kind of bloodthirsty pterodactyl. You dance in circles and stamp your feet until he helps you carry in the enormous moldy butcher block you found in the storm drain below the housing development. Then you listen to the whales and start to superglue the parts on.

It takes forever.

It only takes a little while.

It makes you want to gouge your eyes out with a screwdriver.

It makes you giggle like a little girl.

You’re not hallucinating. Those aren’t palm fronds swishing scissor-like beside your ears. That’s not Commander Adama in the foyer with his uniform pants around his ankles. He’s putting Daisy Duke and the new girl-Starbuck through a lesbian bondage routine with ball gags and chains and a stuffed puglet. They’re surrounded by midget palms, but you don’t have time to watch the fronding. You’re at the ground-zero-

eleventh-hour-apocalyptic-meltdown-trigger-point-of-all-creation and there's no time to be a tourist with the whole reality *piñata* hanging in the balance.

It looks like a chunk of Watts Towers when you finish, an amazing machine bristling with buttons and levers, knobs, cranks. You turn the knobs. You push the buttons.

You *do* feel slightly better.

"That sculpture you made has focused your thoughts. That's good, my son," Bentley says.

"This is a machine that *creates satoris*, bitch. Drug free. None of your Jedi bullshit. No psychobabble. Just pure, sweet, extra-virgin distractive bliss. Better, by far, than your cock bong. You better recognize."

Bentley nods, smiles, his eyes nothing but slits. "It's good that you took my advice, Ed. But remember, those levers don't actually do anything. They're just a placebo. They won't keep you from diving head-first into a drained swimming pool or running over yourself with a car. You *will* eventually do something like that, you know."

The thought of running over yourself with a car is terrifying. "Screw that. It's about focus. You think I'm a meth addict, but you're high and wrong. I made this machine before you told me to. I made this fucking years ago. I'm ancient like the hills."

"Addict. That's what I think. That's what *Paula* thinks."

"Paula has no philosophy and neither do you."

Bentley's cackles turn into coughs. He lies back and stares at the mothership chandelier, puts his hands behind his head. "Bliss machine. I like that. Bliss is nice. Machines are nice."

In the menagerie of lethal street drugs, methamphetamine has had a short yet astonishing history. It is everywhere and nowhere, the redneck grail. It can be made from various combinations of iodine, battery acid, cold pills, acetone, paint thinner, white gasoline, wood ester, fiberglass resin, grain alcohol, liquid ether, and Bisquick. Moreover, it's frisky and it was to bring you the paper in the morning. It's coat has a glossy sheen and it's just so cute the way it wags its tail. Cute as a button. Meth is a pug that loves you. And it's never, ever going away.

So let's say at least some of what you've been experiencing has been due to blown-out meninges and perhaps to the sheer stuporous exhaustion that comes from overclocking the bodymind with such chemical puggy goodness. Before you left Gainesville, you had quite the little laboratory in your garage. But you were *not* a drug dealer. You were a married man with equity and a Prius, a fan of whimsical Rube Goldberg inventions, minor league baseball, and space opera. You recycled. You had a job as a chemical engineer for a company that produces one thing: synthetic lube oil for the nose cones of ICBMs—lube oil that used to come from whale blubber. This was good work you were doing. Yes, Daisy, you were saving the fucking whales. You were saving Free Willy. Sing with them, Daisy. Sing.

In fact, all the drugs you made were for personal use. Contrary to popular belief, meth did not turn you in to a raving, flesh eating werewolf. Rather, it made you more efficient and aware at work while providing an excellent hobby interest. And now, after ten faithful years of whale conservation and making it possible for the United States to turn North Korea into glowing maple syrup for 20 centuries, you don't even own a bed.

So let's say you've taken up chain smoking as both protest and comfort, sitting against the dining room wall in your boxer shorts, contemplating the mournful song of the humpback whale and pug dogs and battlestars and why Paula is so wrong about everything. Let's say you've been compulsively applying ChapStick and snorting rails of homemade powdered meth at the rate of 250mg every three to four hours for the last 48 consecutive hours. Let's say you've started to twitch. Let's say a raindrop that got caught on the windowpane made you cry. Nobody loves you. The whales are singing. The house has no furniture.

Bentley's finishing another bowl. Let's also say you're alright with despising him enough to choke him unconscious with one hand if he gets too close.

"Why did I call you? There's no way I could have called you."

"Because you need my help," Bentley says.

And let's admit that your obsession with *Battlestar Galactica* has also played a role in this—that you are powerless over *Battlestar Galactica* and that your life has become unmanageable. You look over at the machine you built, the Blissful Illumination Machine (BIM). It's now covered by an old T-shirt. It's sitting on the carpet where the dining room table should be.

"I need furniture is what I need."

"Yeah." Bentley nods. "That's true."

The current meninges-frying meth binge started 48.5 hours ago with a call in the deep end of the night, the phone squealing like a child shocked out of a dream. *It's alright*, you said half-sleep, *daddy'll take care of everything*. But you don't know why you said that because you don't have kids. You were holding the phone upside-down in the dark.

"What did you call me?" said the little voice.

"Are you the movers?" you asked. "I told you not to call me at night. For chrissake, it's the *middle of the night*. This is unacceptable."

"Ed Tiller? There's an end table here with your name on it, Mr. Tiller. We thought you'd want to know."

"It's almost midnight. You should have been here last week."

Creeping death: you knew exactly why they were late, why you'd been sleeping on a blanket for days under a sinister chandelier in the dining room—the only room with carpet and therefore the warmest place in the house since the heaters didn't work.

"We're in Lubbock," he said. "I'm sorry. We're in Lubbock."

But that was 48.5 hours ago when you were psychologically defenseless. Now

you're higher than Luke Skywalker and you've got the BIM finished and you don't have to dwell on Lubbock or calls in the middle of the night letting you know your soon-to-be-ex-wife had the movers divide your possessions in a truck stop parking lot.

Under the T-shirt, the levers and protrusions of the BIM resemble a jumble of bones under a shroud, a fat pug skeleton. Could the image of a skeletal pug bring enlightenment under a shirt? Why not? Dipping a pug in acid and wrapping up the bones is not something Rube Goldberg would kick you out of heaven for. Saint Rube, patron of over-engineered machines and useless gestures. *Ave Sanctus Rubius, hear our prayer.*

"I'm hungry. Big surprise there." Bentley laughs at his own wit. You notice Captain Starbuck and Commander Adama making out over in the foyer. They're sloppy, loud. It's horrible.

"I've got some instant coffee in the kitchen," you say. "That's it."

You focus on the BIM with all your power, trying to block out the slurping, smacking noises.

"You should switch to xenadrine, Ed. Contains ephedrine, caffeine, aspirin. Best legal speed there is, actually. You could crush it up." Something mocking in Bentley's voice.

"You're the worst doctor I've ever met. What did you ever do for Paula anyway?"

"I freed her from the illusion of separation, Ed. And I made sweet love to her vagina. Say you're an addict, Ed. Say it."

Hideous. But you're not coming down to his level. You're not down with killing pugs yet. There's one last episode of *Battlestar Galactica: the Reimagined Series* waiting. One. Only one. And if you can get over the image of Starbuck and Commander Adama going at it, maybe you can finally get closure. The dvd has been sitting on your laptop, looking at you. But you have approximately 25 minutes left on the laptop battery and, thanks to Paula, no power cord—no way to recharge without leaving the house for Radio Shack. Is it even possible to leave the house? No. It isn't.

Bentley has the munchies. He goes to look for the instant coffee, which he says he's going to eat. But he'll never find it because you actually taped the packets under the sink, realizing, in one of your more precognitive moments, that otherwise anyone could take them. You start to chuckle. You hold your hand out and can't stop it from shaking.

No, it's not possible to go anywhere outside. You'd wind up in the drunk tank, spread-eagled over a fender, tortured in a basement. Nothing good ever happens in a basement. And you're sure nothing good is exactly what would happen to you. The world beyond the house's airlock is the cold vacuum of space, the cruel stars waiting, and no luscious Captain Starbuck to love you and make it alright.

"Where the hell is it?" Bentley's voice is hollow and slightly lower coming from the kitchen. Commander Adama and Starbuck have reverted to their natural midget palm state. The foyer is now a tropical island. Toucans. The dulcet tones of a ukulele. Turn

the cranks of the BIM. Pull the levers. *Ave Sanctus Rubius*.

“What? Bentley you fuck? Munchies? Feeling a *drug* craving? Wishing you had a plate of *chimichangas*, perhaps? Pizza? A big bowl of buttered popcorn? Say you’re an addict, Bentley. Say it. Then maybe I’ll tell you where I had the—*sandwiches*.”

He’s back in a flash, standing over you, hands balled into fists. “You’re mentally ill,” he says. “You’re addicted to illegal narcotics. That’s why you’re so cruel.”

“A whole cooler of sandwiches straight from Safeway, Bentley. Just think about it.”

“It’s not you, Ed. It’s the horrible disease of chemical dependency *in* you.”

“Turkey. Pastrami. Tomato basil. Lightly drizzled with olive oil.”

“You sick bastard.”

“Chipotle antipasto on rosemary flat bread with capers and chicken remoulade.”

For a moment, he looks like he’s going to cry, which is good.

“Caramelized onions, Bentley. Hear me? Caramelized.”

Then he does, a single tear rolling down his cheek. “You know, I never doubted what Paula said about you. But I never understood how deep your sickness goes.”

“Paula snorted Xanax on a nightly basis and couldn’t get off unless I choked her. Welcome to my world, Bentley.”

“So.” He wipes his cheek, takes a deep breath and tries to smile but now he’s twitching, too. “Were you just kidding about the sandwiches?”

In the course of watching the entire *Battlestar Galactica* series 13 consecutive times—always high and always stopping short of the Final Episode—you have come to believe that a power greater than yourself could restore you to sanity. You said as much to Paula when you were still living with her back in Florida and she was complaining about your nightly viewings. “Honey,” you said, “I think there’s something encoded here. Something metaphysical. I think Captain Starbuck might be talking to me. I mean, *really talking* to me.”

“Starbuck is talking to the camera, Ed.”

“I think I believe in god. A numinous reality. The communion of saints. The forgiveness of sins. The whole fucking thing. It’s there. It’s right there. I think I’ve finally got religion.”

And then she pointed to the sign she’d made a week before, the sheet of printer paper taped over your desk that read: “CAPTAIN STARBUCK ISN’T REAL. SHE IS AN ACTRESS NAMED KATEE SACKHOFF IN A TV SHOW THAT ENDED. YOU ARE AN IDIOT.” Paula’s pointing nail was a bloody claw and her eyes were dead moons of resentment. Maybe she was right and you are an idiot. But there can be no denying that the words Captain Starbuck speaks are oracular in nature, that *Battlestar Galactica* might have ruined your marriage but it might also have saved your soul. And, yes, it is possible that Paula resembled a Cylon.

In fact, it would not be untoward to say that in spite of saving the whales from nuclear nose cones, faithfully sorting bottles from cans, and pulling down six figures to

keep dear Paula in gold rings and Gucci, there was never a time when married life seemed right and stable. That is, except for said moments of chemical methamphetamine communion with the words of Captain Starbuck, whose wisdom yet warms the cockles of your heart.

Paula was no Captain Starbuck. She knew it, too. And hell hath no fury like a woman scorned for a television show. But please. Paula owned enough handbags to kill a normal human. Handbag overdose: Gucci, Melli Blanco, Prada, Dolce and Gabbana, DKNY, House of Florence, even one made of pure black goat. Open her closet and there they were—leather-smelling, ruby studded, chained with nubbins of white gold and clasps and little symbols. A Babylon of bags. And a hanging garden of shoes. And Paula with her cartons of Virginia Slims and five different groups of friends you didn't even know about for the longest time and were never allowed to meet.

Paula's calves were cut like rocks and the fake breasts she got from Husband Number One were hanging in there strong at a generous C. She had her own bedroom. But you always had breakfast together. Damn those breakfasts were good. You could feel the love bubbling in the bacon. And she didn't mind that you had a laboratory in the garage. She didn't even notice if for months or didn't care until you spoke for 17 hours—couldn't stop speaking—about mysteries, Cylons, oracles, galactic sorcery. She made you dump the beakers before you moved and that should have told you.

Her brown hair was always in a twist. Her cellie blew up nightly. Callers with names like J-Dub, Rickkie, Kayreessa, Fabian d'Alonzo. Who's named Fabian in this day and age, you wanted to know, but that was part of the You Don't Ask and I Won't Tell part of the marriage, the biggest part, and Paula wasn't telling. Your obsession with *Battlestar Galactica* tore it. Maybe it meant you'd never assimilate and take a name like Rock-D and start wearing shiny tight-fitting shirts to clubs with one-syllable names. In your defense, Paula had no ear for the oracular.

Between man and wife, man and Daisy Duke, or man and pug dog, there can be a great sadness. But there comes a time when man and dog must reconcile. Dog is dead, says man's wife. Man is dead, says dog. But you could imagine a better way. In a world gone mad, space opera is the ultimate anodyne. You quit reading scripture years ago. You went through a poetry phase. Sure you read *Flowers of Evil* and it seemed to mean something at the time, but Paris imagined as a bloated whore doesn't uplift. And, in the end, the best that you could say for Baudelaire was that he liked cats. As for "Tintern Abbey," don't even bother. You got "Ozymandias" and most of William Carlos Williams and the jokes of Billy Collins and *Howl* and *Leaves of Grass* but whatever the leaves meant didn't catch and, after all, you couldn't smoke them. There was no Burning Bush Effect, no Daisy Duke Moment, no divine revelation from the mouths of the gods. This you got from Captain Starbuck, her voice flowing like Hecate's fountain: Gorgo, Mormo, Moon of a Thousand Forms. Yes.

So you made a decision to turn your will and life over to the care of Captain Starbuck as you understood her. It wasn't wrong. It was following your bliss. And that can't be wrong. Even if your wife has no left you and there's an end table with "Ed Tiller" on it sitting in a parking lot in Lubbock, Texas.

The only thing keeping you from ending it all is the BIM and the Final Episode. You lost your job. You lost your marriage. You lost the whales you should have been saving from nose cones. And you lost all the clothing you'd had in your drawers. All you've got left is this two-story tract house in Santa Monica, two boxes of shirts, a laptop, a psychiatrist baked out of his mind, and sorrow. And after the Final Episode, you can die as you've lived: a nothing, a failure, a no one. A zero. An empty crying thing, blown out of the *Battlestar* airlock and falling up into the big dark.

You wake up listening to your breathing. The side of your face is bonded to the shag with vomit. The whales are still singing. You're fairly certain it's your vomit. You take the T-shirt off the BIM and look at it, inhaling it's 3-in-1 oil, turning its cranks. The base is solid wood—the butcher block, moldy and unlegged. On its surface, you have affixed rubberized red knobs, lathe handle, stippled cranks, link arms, handle washers, index sprockets, casefeed arm stop pins, an assortment of jam nuts, a camming pin, and a variety of other components which were unlabeled and which will now never need labels. From the same cardboard box you found in the front closet, you obtained the plastic spout bottle of 3-in-1 oil with a skull on the back and WARNING: HARMFUL IF SWALLOWED in bright red. But not harmful to the BIM. To the BIM, it's holy anointing oil. And as you manipulate the parts, you breathe in the scent of the mechanical world and sigh.

Bentley must have left earlier. He's back now, cooking lamb chops. He's got a plastic bottle of vodka, which he alternately drinks from and pours into the frying pan. He took his pants off at some point. He's dancing from foot to foot in pale yellow boxers, singing *Bye-Bye Miss American Pie* while he fries up the chops. The question as to whether Bentley has anything beyond pot and booze in his system is now moot. High or crazy stops mattering after a while. Doctor Bentley. Mr. Rational. God's gift to the psychiatric profession and mental health everywhere is singing at the top of his voice and frying lamb chops in your kitchen for reasons you cannot fathom, shatterproof plastic gallon of vodka notwithstanding.

You un-skitch your face from the shag and wobble upright.

"Bentley? Bentley-poo? What are you doing, Bentley-poo?"

You feel like a child walking for the first time. A new world on stilts. Everything tilting. A sudden great pure-hearted sense of accomplishment. You did it! Look, honey, junior's walking. But as for the hideous pulsing agony in your meninges? ignore it. Ignore the sudden anxiety you feel, realizing that the BIM will be back in the dining room and therefore out of arm's reach if you walk into the kitchen. Banish it. There's a psychiatrist present. The psychiatrist who had everything to do with the abduction of

your furniture and the dematerialization of your wife into the post-marital vapor of Lubbock, Texas.

Bentley dances and sings like some stubbly lamb-chop-frying satyr, raising up and fluttering his hands at key points in the song as if to say, *Hallelujah! I've been saved by lamb meat!* Instead, he sings, *Them good old boys are drinking whiskey and rye* and flips the chops as if they were pancakes. Hot oil splatters.

"Bentley? Are you alright, my little friend? What are you doing, Bentley-poo? Did you get into your medicine bag?"

The aroma of lamb chops and cheap vodka is repellent, but you will not be repelled from your own kitchen, even if the only pan in it is the Teflon fryer he must have bought along with the booze. Your head pounds with each step forward.

"Come on, now. Let's come back to Earth. It's a Class M planet with gravity and an atmosphere. You'll like it on Earth."

Singin' this will be the day that I die. He does a Michael Jackson spin but shrieks when he sees you in the kitchen doorway and drops the vodka. True to its design, the bottle does not break, the plastic stopper at the mouth preventing all spillage. Some bottle designer out there understands the health principle of keeping one's vodka wet and one's powder dry. Momentarily distracted, maybe hypnotized, you notice the tide of the vodka in the bottle. But with every rise and fall, the agony in your head grows worse. There's no preventing that. You cover your face with your palms and breathe. When you take your hands away, Bentley has backed up against the far wall, staring at you, holding the frying pan out as if it were some holy relic against evil.

"Stay the fuck away from me." His eyes are big and terrified. He jabs at you with the pan, the lamb chops in it sizzling. You notice the entire left side of his body is covered in blood.

"What did you do, Bentley? Is that your blood?"

"Blood? What the fuck do you want with my blood?" He looks left and right. He's cornered. To his left stands the enormous empty refrigerator that came with the house. To his right, a wall. "You want my fucking blood. You're a fucking vampire. I knew it."

"Bentley. I'm not a vampire. Now put down the chops."

"You're a vampire and if you don't step away from me, I'm gonna use this on you. I mean it."

Holding the side of your head, you step past the vodka bottle and reach out to take the frying pan, which in retrospect, you should not have done. Bentley screams an impassioned death cry of a small mammal about to be snapped up for dinner and throws the entire contents of the frying pan—vodka, hot oil, and two medium-well lamb chops—at your face. You duck just in time to get a spray of searing oil across your back, burning through your T-shirt.

Bentley follows the hot oil over you, diving head-first, and hits the floor hard. He slips but gets up and disappears out the kitchen. You also slip—on a lamb chop—and land flat on your back. Your head hurts too much for you to get right back up. Your

back is burned. However, you do have the energy to scream, “Goddamn you, Bentley, I am not a fucking vampire. I’m a werewolf and when I find you, I’m gonna make you my werewolf bitch and burn you with fucking cooking oil you fucker.”

But by the time you find him, you feel you understand him.

The BIM brought you back and the chops were good. Proximity breeds tolerance, maybe even complacency. Moving through the house, frying pan dripping warm oil onto your hand, you revert from murderous to melancholy. What, for example, was more important: caving in the skull of your wife’s psychiatrist or watching the Final Episode? If sitting for a moment beside your Blissful Illumination Machine could bring you back, where were you? What does it really mean to want immediate and brutal vengeance on a wife-stealing psychiatrist when the cruel stars wait in the trackless void? When you finish turning the cranks and inhaling the scent of the BIM’s holy oil, you realize that these were the sort of questions Paula could have asked herself before deciding to leave you without furniture or hope.

By the time you decide to ask Bentley about his role in this, you’re standing outside the bathroom door, listening to him scream: “It’s locked! It’s locked, okay? Locked. And when the sun comes up, I’m gonna find your coffin!”

“You got into the meth and you’re paranoid, my brother. Paranoia. Shouldn’t you know about that?”

A dedicated meth addict will develop an extrasensory understanding of the drug at some point, made from one part intuition and three parts memory of previous bad decisions. It comes with the territory and it can calm you down in the throes of a bad run that’s otherwise putting a pressure cooker death clamp on your meninges. What once was an army of brain-sucking, face-eating ghouls climbing up towards your bedroom window can be attributed to inchoate fears attributed to possessed midget palms in the drive or some other fearful agency. And gods willing, you may tell yourself: yes, that might be an octopus tentacle sticking out of the mouth of my dead third-grade teacher standing in the other room, but I understand that if I sit very still and operate the dials on this BIM, she will not notice me.

Bentley pounds on the bathroom door and tells you he knows you’re undead. “I should have staked your heart when I had the chance,” he says. What he hasn’t learned yet is that running only encourages the monsters.

“Dr. Philips, my good friend, you snorted a pile of meth from the big jar in the pantry. You were not ready for this. Magic meth, Bentley. Makes you think everyone’s a vampire. Gives you a nosebleed and a lust for lamb meat.”

Now he’s weeping, saying “Paula” over and over. You sit down against the bathroom door and hold up the frying pan: no oil, a yellow-brown drip trail leading down the hallway toward the stairs.

“What about Paula? What did you do to her?”

He slumps against the other side of the door. “You think you’re the only one who hurts, Ed? I hurt.” The pain in his voice. The remorse. Only one woman could inspire

those feelings. But you can't see your former wife and Bentley as any kind of item. Paula, the dance club going, fake Florida tan having, Prada wearing, hip-hop-hit-me-on-my-two-way no-you-can't-meet-my-friends diva of the universe getting together with rail-thin, balding Bentley? Inconceivable.

"You're telling me you had an affair with my wife? Or are you just high and delusional? I think what you want to be is high and delusional."

"She married *you* didn't she? You don't think she'd step out? You don't think she ever did? She told me she had five affairs you knew about. And then there were the ones that you didn't know about."

"Bentley, tell me I'm not going to have to beat the fuck out of you with this frying pan."

There's scuffling, some thuds, and grunting from within the bathroom.

"You're destroying my new house."

"It's not your house! Paula owns it all now!" Then the sound of breaking glass—the small bathroom window being punched out since he couldn't get it to slide up on its casement. You listen to him grunt and strain. Eventually, he returns and slumps back against the door, exhausted.

"Bentley?"

"I don't speak to vampires."

And that's where things stand, philosophically. You ask Bentley to unlock the door a few more times, but he's determined to make good on his no vampire communication policy. That and maybe he's forgotten how the lock works, which is also a very real possibility. In order to clean his wounds or because he has recalled the legend that vampires cannot cross running water, he turns on all the taps and begins flushing the toilet repeatedly.

When the water seeps underneath the door and wets your shorts, you stand and wander through the upstairs rooms, the pain in your head lessening somewhat but still undeniably there. The empty unfurnished bedrooms. The barren inset shelves of the study. Slanting orange bars of light through vertical blinds. All the space, empty, useless, made for occupants leading more abundant lives with jobs and books and the unnamed end tables of domestic bliss. With such space, it's no wonder that you've been under high levels of strain. When one reaches out in the darkness and touches nothing, what makes sense? When one's wife says she'll be there but spirits the furniture away to Lubbock, what is normal?

Standing at the top of the stairs, looking through the window over the circular drive, you banish the thought that the midget palms are still waiting for you out there. That's just drug shit, paranoia. If you'd gone the distance and actually paid for some high-class metallic sodium instead of being lazy and using the more readily available ammonia and battery acid, none of this would have happened. You'd have gotten Ye Goode Oulde Dependable High, mild euphoria, perhaps a hard-on. But this: tremors, visions, agonizing headache, heartbroken terrified psychiatrist flooding your house,

nervous breakdowns, grief, Saint Rube Goldberg shaking his head in dismay while incoherent screaming and splashing comes from the bathroom.

Or not a nervous breakdown. Maybe just a Goldberg Variation—like St. Goldberg’s *Self-Operating Napkin*, which raises a string, jerks a table, pours seeds into a cup, and sets off a tiny rocket that will cause the napkin to wipe one’s chin—a small chain reaction, an invention meant to play between the acts, meant to keep you sufficiently amused as you move through disrecognized domestic space, from having to having not, from end table to absence in the big bad dark.

Or your beloved Daisy Duke Moment: one moment, you’re a mildly depressed, slightly drug-addicted chemical engineer living beyond your means in Gainesville with a wife named Paula and the next moment you’re here, looking at your reflection in a window at night, hallucinating a tawny pug head in the place of your own. A few hours ago, battery acid having its filthy way with your meninges, you’d have believed a pug reflection—floppy little ears, watery soulful eyes, a certain Cosmonaut fervor in the seriousness of the expression.

By your watch calculator, it’s now been 50.7 hours since the movers called, 48.4 hours since you realized Paula never had any intention of arriving with the furniture to “talk things out.” Talk. Shit. Without furniture, all other marital issues are irrelevant. At this point, the only intelligent response is to huff, sniff the air, and yowl at the chandelier in socialist pug sorrow. And only Captain Starbuck has the answers. Soon you will play the Final Episode on your laptop while you make a searching and fearless moral inventory. Soon the Oracle will whisper to the maelstrom of your soul. And you will, at last and for all time, find release.

Your eyes are closed. And a voice repeats itself: *I’m dying. Can’t you see that? It’s dark. I’m slipping away.*

“No you’re not,” you say to the wall outside the bathroom. “You’re just a little upset, man.”

At some point, Bentley turned off the faucets. The water stopped seeping under the door and dripping through to the pantry and rooms on the ground floor. The voice sounds like it belongs to Bentley. Then again, you would be crazy to attribute everything to him when you have been so hallucinatory in the timeless Daisy Duke moment of all bad drugs—when the meninges try and fail to reassemble themselves on the brainpan and all assumptions about what’s real and what’s a hallucination must pass away. Your head continues to pound, to throb with each heartbeat, and you decide the voice is not coming from Bentley after all. Everything is quiet. The dark hallway. The locked bathroom door. Maybe’ while you’ve been holding a hallucinatory dialogue with yourself, something has actually happened to the good doctor. You reach up and try the door again. It’s still locked.

I’m dying, the voice says. *Can’t you see that?*

You’re not dying, Bentley. Nobody’s dying. I’m suffering from hallucinations brought on by sustained sleep deprivation and methamphetamine use.

Don't you want to talk about it?

"There is no talk. Talk doesn't work. There's only: unlock the bathroom door. There's only: eject Bentley from the house. There's only: plug in the laptop and watch the Final Episode."

And get Paula back?

"Paula's never coming back, Bentley. I know that."

Which may be the truest thing you've said to yourself all night. Because you *are* talking to yourself, aren't you?

Aren't you?

You try the bathroom door again and kick it a few times, screaming at Bentley for being such a worthless asshole. Because he *is* that, isn't he? He's that above all else.

You've replaced *Sounds of the Humpback Whales* with R.E.M.'s *Eponymous*. Drifting through the rooms to the third complete cycle of the album, you wonder exactly how long it's going to take for this shitty album to make you hurt yourself. For that matter, how long can a psychiatrist withstand R.E.M. after a night of humpback whales in heat? Not long. With meth, less so. Traipsing through the house, doing little ballet pirouettes, you sing along with "Talk About the Passion" at the top of your voice—off-key maybe, but is there really a key? And besides, the whole point is to get Bentley to come out of the bathroom, possibly so you can kill him and certainly so you can urinate.

You discovered that the power cord to the laptop wasn't missing after all—an incredible relief. You had no memory of tying it with a rubber band and hiding it between the shirts in your suitcase. Finding it there made you wonder what else you might have hidden away while high or blacked out. Gangster rolls of fifties? The house keys you misplaced shortly after arriving, sweaty and trembling from the airport? Yet more meth?

Bentley wasn't careful with your current dope storage jar. You find it in the pantry, open on its side, a long yellow-white drift from the bout of the jar to the edge of the wooden shelf. And if you were a desperate wild-eyed junkie in the classic Hollywood sense, if you'd *bought* the meth to use because you *needed* it, if that were your *lifestyle*, Bentley's carelessness might have sent you over the edge into a murderous werewolf fever of spitting and cursing and hammering the bathroom door with an oily frying pan. Instead, you know you can just make more.

As Michael Stipe starts up with "(Don't Go Back To) Rockville," you consider the fact that you have resources. A BIM for stability. A house. Access to an Oracle of the Gods. A psychiatrist locked in your bathroom. To say nothing of all the drugs you want and the knowledge of how to make more.

You consider the possibility that doing one more rail of meth, just as a fortifying measure, wouldn't hurt at all. Just one rail. One for old time's sake. One for Commander Adama. One for the Gipper. One for Daisy Duke, Captain Starbuck, JFK, and Yanni. One for the fucking whales. One for sadness and alliteration, disorientation,

disrecognition, distention, and the patent disregard of everything displeasing.

Yeah, disidentification. Right before the Soviet physicists initialize the launch sequence and your tawny pug ass goes sky-high along with casefeeds and camming pins, the mechanical universe squealing into space like battlestars gone wild. The BIM—you've got your beautiful, impractical bliss machine at least—a calming vector of predictability if you can just keep cranking the cranks.

So you do another line and the meninges start to sizzle.

The movers might not be coming west of Lubbock after all, of course. Santa Monica might not be on their itinerary. But you've got their *number*. And you can *find* them. And they *know* it. At least there's that. At least you've got Captain Starbuck and an enormous jar of home-cooked methamphetamine hydrochloride and the Final Episode. Another rail and another smoke, lighter jumping around so much that you have to press your hand against the wall to hold it steady. You dial the movers, but they don't answer and you'll be damned if you're going to start leaving them messages.

Disidentification of disrecognized space: this house could be a beautiful meth lab. A lab and a shrine. Statues to Jesus Malverde, the Virgin of Guadalupe, and Saint Rube. Prayer beads, candles, and incense. An enormous day-glow poster of Captain Starbuck and Daisy Duke healing the sick of Calcutta. And all around it: separatory funnels, Bunsen burners, reaction vessels, plastic storage containers, large glass beakers, Mason jars, Pyrex, plastic Igloo coolers. Even the BIM would be wired in. A Rube Goldberg meth machine to reflect the hideous spirit of the times, putting out pounds of meth with no other purpose than to get you high and keep you there. Meth for meth's sake. But Paula made you get rid of all your beakers before the move. Where are the goddamn Soviet physicists to shoot you into space now? Asking is pointless. Nobody cares. The pug weeps crystal tears.

The phone rings. Surprise. It's the movers.

"I thought you were in Lubbock," you say, yowling a little like a pug for emphasis before you shake off the Daisy Duke Moment and feel ready to communicate the full and proper extent of your indignation about your furniture being abducted.

"We were. There's still the matter of the end table, sir."

"There's a lot more at stake here than just an end table, fucker. There's a Malm and a Stolmen, an Elgå, a Brimnes, an Aspvik, and Expedit, and, yes, a Framstå. That's all high-end Swedish shit, purchased at great difficulty and expense from the international importer, Ikea. I don't expect you people to know about that or appreciate it, but it means a lot to me."

"We don't have anything like that."

"You LIE! You've stolen my Aspvik!" Yes and then you hang up.

Taken intranasally in powder form, quality methamphetamine will produce a reasonable euphoria, a gentleman's euphoria, not an all-encompassing derangement of the senses. It won't come on like a freight train. Not a screaming bondage snuff film

with ball gag and bodily fluids flying through the air, but rather like fantasy night with Sue Ellen Ellen, pristine captainette of the cheer team after the big game—soft-core and blushing with all kinds of muted pink goodness you want to keep and hold tight in the warm center of your center. So some fuck dumps your Aspvik in Lubbock and you decide it's time for another rail because what the hell else are you going to do? What would Captain Starbuck do *sans* Aspvik?

You are now perfectly and completely ready to have Captain Starbuck remove all defects from your character. This is how you intend to make amends to those you may have hurt—what you intend to admit to Bentley, to yourself, and to Paula if she ever talks to you again. You will admit the precise nature of your wrongs. Because, as much as Paula has wrecked your life, can you really blame her?

It's still dark outside and it has begun to rain. How much time has passed tonight? Aeons. Minutes. The cold vault of the heavens wheeling through the centuries. The midget palms creeping a little bit closer in the fronding of a moment. Those cruel stars.

If you can't eat, you need to sleep. If you can't sleep, you need to build something. Something edifying an engrossing. But how engrossing can a therapeutically Buddhist invention be if it spontaneously disintegrates? The fact that you do not see the BIM when you return to the dining room could mean that it has actually disappeared or that it is now invisible.

You close your eyes and try to get steady. *Walk home to an empty house, sit around all by yourself / I know it might sound strange, / but I believe / You'll be coming back before too long* sings Michael Stipe. And, at least for the moment, you are inclined to agree. Screw Rockville—never go back! And screw Paula and screw Bentley sneaking around with his Freudian penis bong and all his Buddhist drama. So you're having difficulties with reality. Who isn't?

Yes?

Well, just consider where you are.

That's the problem. I'm beginning to have doubts.

Lack of certainty is not certainty of lack. Quack. Quack.

Are you on drugs?

Yes, as a matter of fact, I am. What's that got to do with anything?

Everything.

Something better happen soon, sings Michael, *or it's gonna be too late to bring you back*. You feel he's singing directly to you. How could he not be singing directly to you? You're the only one here. The only other option is Bentley. And where *is* Bentley?

Your wife's psychiatrist is not here being sung to. That's one thing you know. And yet, the BIM hasn't re-materialized. You make a searching inventory:

- 1 The Rooms: empty.
- 2 Bentley: gone as gone gets. Bathroom door open now. Tentacles of mist from shower hanging in the still air of the hall. It's important to be clean.

But still. Where is a psychiatrist liable to hide?

- 3 The BIM: also gone. Maybe even gonner than Bentley-gone. Was it ever actually there? Were you? Stop that.
- 4 Depression: everywhere but where the BIM used to be. You're not coming down, but you're not high, either. More like you're sideways, as they say, *stepping sideways*. Things apporting hither and thither around the property. The midget palms once again inching their way up the drive. You can see those bastards with their bastard fronds. You know what they're up to.
- 5 The Whales: safe, for now.

In the kitchen, almost as if through some kind of demonic punctuation, some kind of horrible inevitability, your hand comes away from your mouth slick with blood. Bentley's? Terrible possibilities snap and crackle across the meninges. Horror of horrors: Bentley left a perfect bloody hand print right at the place where he caromed against the white kitchen wall. The print is crusted burgundy with palm lines so clear and fine that a fortune teller could read his destiny. And double-horror: the print fits your hand perfectly. You've murdered Dr. Bentley.

Screaming wordlessly, your hand stuck to the print, magnetized there, you know you killed him and drank his blood. You *are* a vampire. And so it makes sense that you're now condemned to die with your own hand fitted in the print, stuck forever to the evidence of your guilt. Poetic justice. No Buddhist therapy for something like this. No Blissful Illumination Machine. No love. No drugs. No Aspvik to soothe the meninges of the skull.

If you can't eat, you need to sleep. Remember the blood on your face. It's your blood, the mother of all nosebleeds covering your mouth and chin. You stop screaming. Michael Stipe tells you that *Everybody else in town only wants to bring you down / and that's not how it ought to be.* But you've seen R.E.M.'s music actually make cats vomit. So you can't be bothered by Michael Stipe's senseless infantile puling. Especially when you're bleeding and stuck. Then again, maybe all this blood is yours and none of it comes from Bentley.

Would that make you feel better?

I'm not sure.

You're bleeding to death, you know.

Nobody dies of a nosebleed.

Look at your shoes.

They're squishy, filled with blood. You wonder how all that blood got from your nose to your feet without getting on your pants. You really need to find a way to unstick your hand from the wall. The blood has attracted the midget palms. They crowd into the

kitchen, Commander Adama walking behind. His face is a skull. He's wearing a cowboy hat. He cracks a bullwhip, driving them forward.

"The hard six!" he screams. "The hard six!"

And you go down, screaming, vomiting, into the fronding dark.

The sun rises without event.

The midget palms are gone and it appears you are alive. Moreover, your hand is unstuck from the wall. Even the hand print is gone. After searching the entire house and silencing Michael Stipe, you realize there is only one place you haven't looked for Bentley.

It takes you 15 minutes to climb the back trellis and onto the peaked roof. As soon as you stand up, you see Bentley, sitting on the edge of the peak that looks out over the empty swimming pool filled with dead leaves, the back yard with artificial grass, the drainage ditch. Beyond that: the housing development, gridlock on the I-5, morning haze over Los Angeles.

Bentley's been up here all along, using the BIM as a back support. No blood. Yellow polo. Brown khakis. He shaved and smells like gardenia.

"We've been waiting for you," he says when you walk up and sit beside him.

"We?" The lights of downtown are still winking in the deep haze like a fallen constellation. The half-developed housing project is speckled with pools of shadow around the inner frames of unfinished homes.

"Me and Paula."

You look behind, but the roof is empty except for you and Bentley.

"Paula isn't here."

Bentley glances at you and smiles. "Well, perhaps not; though there is always the possibility that you can't see her."

"I can see *you* well enough."

"Can you?"

He stands and moves the BIM so that its dials and cranks face you. You turn the dials and crank the cranks.

"I feel better. Thanks."

"It really works, doesn't it?" He smiles again. "Now do you trust me?"

Behind him, the sky has already changed from faint violet to pale blue. The stars have faded. The distant lights of the city are almost all gone now. Somewhere close by, two cats shriek at each other, about to fight.

"I didn't kill you after all."

"No, Ed, you didn't. It's not possible for you to kill me."

"I think I'm sick, Bentley."

"You're an addict, Ed. Just say it. Say it and I'll show you how to be free."

At the other end of the roof, Captain Starbuck is trying to set fire to the house with a fistful of burning rags while blue uniformed Commander Adama looks on and smiles.

He no longer has a skull face, but he's still wearing the cowboy hat. A naked Daisy Duke covered in spiders with medusa-like palm fronds sticking out of her head crawls up over the edge of the roof on all fours like a lizard. She has a knife in her teeth. You can't bear the sight and have to look away. Fresh blood drips out of your nose, making the old bloodstains on your shirt glisten.

"Just say it. Say *I'm an addict.*"

"I'm an addict."

Bentley's smile gets wider. He holds up a Styrofoam cup and squirts the BIM's holy 3-in-1 oil into it, then hands it to you. "Bottoms up," he says.

"Won't that mess me up?"

"You're an addict. You said it yourself."

In a way beyond words, that makes perfect sense. You nod and Bentley nods back. On the tip of the roof, you knock back a full cup of machine oil. It tastes surprisingly good before you feel your stomach seize and twist with a pain you've never felt before.

"Now do the right thing," he whispers in your ear.

And you realize that you never saw the Final Episode and now you never will.

Captain Starbuck is behind you. She speaks with Paula's voice. "Do the right thing, Ed."

You nod, spread your arms, and dive into the empty backyard pool, knowing that it will open and you will fly through, at last free and blissful, into the big dark.

by Charles Kell

My Mother Lives Alone & Far Away

One day I will dial
her number and the phone
will ring and ring and no
one will answer.

And the story will drift
away, about when she was
a little girl, finding a chewed
up paperback and a dozen

dead baby mice wrapped
with tissue paper in a shoebox
tucked inside a burnt-out Datsun
down the hill of the junkyard her
father once owned.

House Arrest

I unplug it from the wall
then quickly plug it back
in. The phone rings.
I'm attached to the wall

by an invisible thing.
Plugged in while the wall
seems to move yet
the walls aren't moving.

Thirty-two steps. The phone
rings. I quickly plug
the thing back in again.
It can sense things through

my skin. I hold the bottle
over my mother's head
ready to strike but instead
start hitting my head over

& over again until blood
runs down. Next morning
I unplug it, my mother
drives me to turn it in &

I am gone not to be seen
again for a very long time.

Night Sirens

A city inside of me
releases a rumble
of endless rotations.

A mouth waits to be
filled. What one might call
unbalanced arbitration.

Hollow spaces jammed
quick with dark, reenacting
the term “mechanical obsolescence.”

Flesh conduits, what one
might call “being convinced
one can engage with

anything.” Reenacting
the famous play with
the tree on one side

and the rock on the other.
A booming sound not unlike
an animal screaming. A sound

not unlike being trapped under-
water, forever.

Be Prepared

my mother slurred on the phone.
“There’s secrets you don’t know

about. You may have a brother out
there somewhere, your father...”

her voice trailed off while I lay
in bed listening, a sore throat

cough, reading a new book *Francis
Bacon in Your Blood*. My mother

whispers “I had to tell you, tell
someone,” though she forgets

she did three years ago, in a way,
drunk, rummaging through dresser

drawers, stumbling upon some old
papers after my father’s death. “He

loved women. We all make mistakes.
There are secrets you will never

know.” I say nothing, really don’t
care all that much. Worried, more,

that my mother will fall again, worse
this next time. “He loved you.

I’m sorry, just in case someone comes
looking. D.N.A. Be prepared. I forgave

him like he did me. There are things
you will never know. How could you?

Both over and just beginning. All
of the secrets hiding in your blood.”

Haruspicy

The last time I saw him
yellow skin from liver failure
hospital gown barely covers
his bulging stomach—this is my
fault—or part of it (I'm sorry Tim).

The safest place in the world
is your kitchen, most of the time—
yet I hate life there. Fifteen
green stones balance on a table
while the sweat drips down
your forehead onto the floor.
An empty bottle.

You are still alive from some miracle
neither of us could explain.

Ten years ago I sprang you from
the hospital playing hillbilly Hank Jr
in my blue Town Car and drinking warm
white wine from the bottle (you
passed me one of your Percodans
and I felt guilty for taking it yet not
as guilty as I would for denying
your offer).

You would never forgive me
if I jumped off that famous bridge
in Cleveland into oncoming traffic.

One day we walk through Towner's
Woods carrying our beers out in the open.
We find a dead bird and with leaves
place it on a broken branch and float
it to the center of Lake Rockwell. We
get back in my car and drive. The windows
are down and currents of air sweep—
there is nothing else on the road.

by Donald Levering

Advance Directives

I hear my voice like a preacher's
holding forth on immortality,
or a hunter telling how to track

a rabbit. But I'm reading my wife
and daughter an end-of-life
decision list. Whether,

when my pulse is weak, to inflate
the failing lungs and spark the heart.
Whether they should nourish me,

and give me water, by mouth or vein
when I can't ask for either.
How much pain should I endure

and how they'll handle my remains.
I listen to myself pretending
that the trek into death

is a family bedtime story,
a fantasy I wrote in which
the speaker is a traveler

in a blizzard who finds a passage
through a frozen river.
Maybe there's a castle underneath.

Maybe before he goes below
he tracks a magic rabbit
whose footprints don't stop

where the hawk's wings sweep the snow.

Spring Calling

Over and over the dove on the pole
is calling
blue purling tones.

Below its perch my girlfriend's door
is locked. It's early—
no one answers my knock.

I try her on my phone,
look up from her porch to watch
the bird's tail

lift and lower
each full note.
Once more I dial her number.

Again the dove is cooing
over fences, wires, and roofs,
and beds of blooming tulips.

Toast

for Joseph & Betsy

The wedding couple isn't young.
They kiss demurely and turn
to lead us from the chapel.

The band strikes up
and joins the cavalcade
down the hill to tables

under yellow cottonwoods
where another senior couple
is popping corks from bottles.

Horns and drums and fiddle
play an upbeat tune,
glasses are raised higher

than heads, fizz tingles
palates. There's gaiety
and mirth, more is poured, spumes

over, happy spillage, consecration
for oldsters newly wed.
Bubbles rise from twice-fermented grapes.

The Water the Light

The water

is right where you left it
reflecting twilight

pooled at the base
of the blossoming apricot

seeping through the soil
to the capillary roots

rising through the trunk
out the branches

into the veins of leaves

And the light you left last night

draining into the horizon
rose behind your eyelids

into the dream of snow geese
lifting from lake sheen

That light suffuses this dawn
This water shimmers

inside the blooming apricot

within you

The Well in Colonel Arthur's Yard

*The deeper the well, the higher it is,
for the height and the depth are one.*
—Meister Eckhart

I'm passing through the alleyway, a no-man's land of buzzing weeds and rusty junk where a crow and snake are fighting. I root for the snake, I hate how crows always dart at me, scolding. Up on a pole is the nest where the fight must have started over the bird's eggs. The snake escapes beneath a garbage bin. I hurl a dead limb at the crow.

Along comes that older girl, Karla, who once took me down to her cellar and made me show her my privates. We both pretend it never happened. Right off she's telling me I've got to come with her to a secret place where kids aren't supposed to go. I don't budge until Karla says very low, *It's in the yard of Colonel Arthur.*

Before the Colonel had died, all the kids dreaded being sent to pay their respects to "the glorious soldier who gave his legs for the fatherland." I thought that was a stupid thing to do. We'd have to listen to his wheezy voice telling the same old stories—capture, hunger, torture, left to freeze in the snow. But it was his shortened shape under the covers that horrified me. I feared the old soldier would fly out of bed like a legless demon to punish me for my disrespectful thoughts.

It's hot; my eyes fix on the sweat spot on Karla's shorts above her butt as I follow her through the alley. Something's bulging in her pocket. After we scale the fence, she makes me lie down beside her to hide. Face to face her eyes are so hard I can't see into them. Then she's poking the ground with a stick until she scratches something that makes a metal sound. *This is it, she says, you have to promise not to tell. Why would I tell on myself?*, I say. We scrape away loose dirt and slide the heavy cover off.

A musty breeze lifts my hair. *That's just a tall hole*, I say. *Stupid*, she says, *it's an old well*. She reaches in and feels along the wall. A metal rung is fastened to the stone. With her foot she finds another step farther down. Now we're both on the ladder.

The deeper we go, the cooler it gets. Karla stops bossing me. From above I hear a creaking sound like a crow. My heart pounds. It smells weird down here. The walls are getting slicker. Finally we reach the bottom. It's almost all black. In the shallow puddle between our feet, the opening at the top looks like a dime. She grabs my wrist and places something hard in my hand. Her warm breath in my ear tickles me down to my dick. She whispers, *It's Colonel Arthur's jaw bone.*

I know she's trying to trick me with whatever it is she was carrying in her pocket. But I act like I believe her, just so I can show her I'm not scared. I can take her dares.

by Mark Vogel

Rattlesnake Daddy

Black wiry hair grows from his neck and chest,
and on his arm a biker nickname is inked
permanent enough, a bold painted accomplishment,
a link to a tribal world—a singular connect
to the breathing time when rock and roll
expanded like clouds, loud wild and free.
Who wouldn't be honored to have him observe
with his stoic poise the cutting so soon to begin?

In our scheduled togetherness I feel safe
knowing he will be my guide.

Already I drift.

Dressed in green hospital scrub, he speaks softly,
and reaches to the anesthetic cart,
pulls tubing close, prepares his syringe.
Though his red-blue tattoo somehow informs
his work, no out front rebellion breathes behind
his attentive almost gentle glance. No rough
outlaw flag flies from another era, no biker
stoned stare freezes a time cruising in
naked primal flowing away from close cropped
work, from medical Rules of stupid Order.

Nowhere in this sterility is a longhair counter-culture
message that documents a parallel secret world.
No—his professional oh-so-high (enough)
credentialed standards insist he explain
to me, so passive on the cart, the surgeon's
plans of attack to stitch and repair.
In my foggy numb I wonder how many others
live branded by names we rarely see.

How surreptitious and quiet we must be,
removing evidence from our vitas.

In this hospital warehouse, I suspect he alone
displays his free will, and plays silent psychedelic
electric guitar in his glance.

My closing eyes give approval
to Rattlesnake Daddy.

All points bulletin

It's never the changes we want that change anything.

--Junot Diaz

All points bulletin: *generic white people immersed in the dream lose a cat and unearth the world*, posting flyers on telephone poles, driving in erratic panic, holding morning coffee, peering in backyards, up tall trees, beneath parked cars.

According to one site suburbanites scrubbed of ethnicity lose *a cell phone as an excuse to buy new toys*, to set off a web of connections.

According to myth, when ancestors first saw themselves as cartoons they cultivated chaos, which explains why close by on urban streets observers insist a plain Bob heading out to work dropped credit cards in a sewer just to walk an edge.

A half-literate small town newspaper claims a pale real estate agent lost a pocketbook in a purse to cultivate subtle drama, then fought the street-sweeper

moving with rumble and smoke round the corner.

In red black and yellow magic-marker a mantra breathes on a flyer: *White people lose a cat to inflame the community*, so tourists as protesters will check out the scene. According to records stored in clouds an aged neutered cat escaped, seeking freedom, which prompted an owner's panic. Such relief when the cat was found in minutes by

multi-lingual firemen stuffed with Twinkies and bologna sandwiches.

The ensuing You-tube clip went viral, illustrating insatiable hunger for new lives—fueling copy-cat actions that already scratch in the dirt.

Meanwhile the old dog deliberately slips out the door to find peace, to avoid the hip surgery which his masters are convinced is for the best.

down another grizzly road

aspens across the river frame mountains rising
over this land of moose, elk, wolves.

Beside the campsite trash bin a yellow and black sign
says *Bear Warning*, prompting a private movie
stuck on preview—an unstoppable grizzly mother
with two cubs attacking ugly pale danger—us.
The snort and rush with mouth open, the determined
rooting at reddened unrecognizable flesh.

All day on another planet ten miles north
great crowds have explored lodges, photographed buffalo
then traveled in herds creating traffic jams,
but here day ebbs and evening already erases
precious light, leaving mist round elk grazing unhurried.
Four tentative mule deer emerge from sheltered trees
as a first dark layer appears on the warning sign.

Suddenly like wide-eyed children startled by
moving shadows, we feel fear. For the metal bear box
will protect food, but not a thin tent staked in hard packed dirt,
and not us huddled inside to escape uncountable mosquitos.
Segregated from the outside, we are unable to walk
trails, or throw bread crusts to evening birds,
or watch roasted marshmallows flame in the fire.

From the beginning we stumbled upon grizzly tracks
overlapping upon grizzly tracks near stunted willows
on Snake River banks, not fifty feet from the campsite,
like the big ones come often and party on essential ground.
Now in mist and quiet we see in our religion how
bears released from the dream are close, sniffing
with disdain, ready to lumber forward,

full of musk, with heads swinging, determined
to retake this land they forever have owned.

together with the goddess

In emerging white light, under high clouds tinged in amber,
the morning is temporary and gentle,
a soft worn book without argument,

detailing the constructed / as a petty demon,
a hustler, a mere giggler, in this
peak of spring stretching release

when also a frizz haired goddess comes awake
in daring innocence, like she is all new
with her tangled salt/pepper hair as she rolls,

and breasts struggle for freedom.
Surely brown nipples just now grow firm,
like a secret message has been heard.

Breathing in March living loam,
layered thick and thin characters cluster close,
for fifty feet from our window

yearling black heifers at the fence drool,
and stumble to be closer to us,
rubbing their shit stained haunches
against each other,

like all they know is circling, and shuffling
wide-eyed in a rolling magnetic now—

in the same filtered gold sun that reaches
through the window to us.

We delight in knowledge we aren't alone,
and reach in slow motion kiss-all-over caress,

so we can again merge in this perfect air.
Later, from our open window, we speak
to the cows, as they shift and jostle,

struggling to hear every word.

by John McKernan

ALPHABET SCULPTURE

At the Museum
For Children

Each letter was huge
Five to seven feet tall
Painted a different color

Drunk teenager
I staggered midnights
Through that garden
To fall asleep

Curled near my favorites
X Y Z
All those sounds
Pouring
Into my brain in darkness

ANCIENT HISTORY

My Dad's white seed
My Mom's yellow egg

Twisting way back to the drops of milk
From those perfect nipples
Of Gramma Eve

Behind them all a universe
The size of one grain of sand
Creating enough space
For a zillion hourglass of time

Most of my life is invisible
Even the rough edges
Shadows
Cast by my calcium skeleton
Seen by lightning Soundless at Midnight

All of which
Seemed real
When it happened
Especially the kisses
And the memories of kisses
And the dreams of kisses

TWILIGHT

I must be confused if this is my body

I remember planting the nine rows of corn

Down on my knees in the mud after returning from
Vermont

Snow was still piled high inside the curves of my
skull

Here it is September & a blue plate is piled high with
steaming white corn in a mirror of oozy yellow
butter

I wonder if that's only a picture of a machine gun the
sundial on the patio has aimed at my right eye

The candy stripper told everyone in nine rooms how
she CPR revived a 98-year-old woman who had
fallen on the Big Bear parking lot

She regretted ripping the old woman's wig &
breaking her dentures

If this is my body I must be somewhere else

What we are all afraid to say is probably the truth

Even though it sounds like the wind sharpening
a squadron of icicles

This is not a family newspaper so you can report
anything and use any kind of language

Even the silence hiding beneath the Atlantic
Ocean

I plan to decipher & translate it

It is not a rune & has almost no rhyme

The corn does taste delicious

The tomatoes – yellow & red – suggest this patio
should be renamed Mount Olympus

I don't care if my language lacks the aorist
& the optative

You just think it is a big red razor blade up there
in the sky-scythe scraping some more sundial
shadow into the granite ocean

I always enjoy looking backwards – At Dawn
especially – Rosy Fingered Dawn

DUTY

The coward rose in darkness, dressed quickly, and raced to the Commanding Officer's tent.

The coward saluted smartly as he reported for duty and provided the correct password

He was proud of the sheen of his new uniform in the glow of the carbide lamp and very happy he had polished the new pair of shoes

Every one of his nerves jumped when he heard the flag crack in the frozen air

He had been standing for hours at attention

He knew he was ready when he began to see the tip of his shadow creep out from beneath his shoes.

The commanding officer nodded gravely as he handed the coward his assignment papers with the map rolled into the shape of a baton for a relay.

The coward would remember forever how the officer's smart salute seemed like a directional signal.

Its wide arc sweeping out to the farthest island.

He jumped across the moat when he saw the sentry's bayonet and sprinted toward the forest when he heard the guard dogs round the fence's perimeter.

This is the life he thought.

He knew the forest would provide him with plenty of fear.

He would avoid the city.

It was crammed with graveyards and he was not a coward for nothing.

I SAVED THE MAPLE BRANCHES

From a tree in the back yard
My mother used

To whip
My legs & back
Then built a kite

With stolen
White sewing thread
Shaping the sticks
Into a bizarre Euclidean triangle

White wrapping paper
Stars & Crosses & Eyes
I wanted to lift my pain high
Over the house I slept in
To see it in blue bright sunlight Distant

The Red Ribbon Tide

Kristian Ashley Macaron

On the harbinger nights we collide together around our bar table like its driftwood, and it may as well be for how it floats under the surface of wet condensations casing dewy tumblers of drink. We seem to know when these nights are, though sometimes we barely know each other. The Captain sits with us only as long as we are pirates. When one of us begins to peer into a past or ask a question of a secret or a curiosity, he leaves us for the bar and for Sue, who has long blue hair, the color of a cloud's reflection on a broken sea.

The way the questions work is that there can always be too many. The line between our own past and pirate is as blurry to each of us as it is to each other. While the storm hovers over our tiny island, I try to forget that my ship can sink just like the ships of old, and if it does, it will lie weighted under heavy watery waves, never to rock again weightless in the sun. Jules, Krill, Vince, and I sit in the bar of the hotel while our captain takes shots of rum with the bartender who reminds us of a mermaid caught in a space between here and there.

Last month the explorers discovered the remnants of the pirate galley *Jackal Blight* in the surf just beyond our shores. The ship skeleton is petrified by salt and barnacle skin and the artifacts are not treasures or jewels, but echoes of the men who served aboard her. We know the explorers; we are obsessed with the things they draw out of the water. We are all in love with shipwrecks. Each of us roped to our own favorite, the one that most reflects the paths that led us here.

We all live in a tourist resort in the Caribbean Sea, though we spend our days at work and leisure on the resort pirate galley, the *Red Ribbon Tide*. Our lives are friendly pirate lives, actor lives, and we love them. The seasons change with the tourism, but every day we walk the same recreated decks and live in the laughter of children. We talk pirate lingo, dress in pirate clothes, have pirate names, serve pirate rum, but it's not a job for us. It's immersion into a life we chose at points of juncture.

In these waters I am Seraphina, and I tell the tourists I've been here forever. Some days I believe it myself: that I'm an island girl, and I've only dreamed of sleeping on the mainland. Then I can pretend the old red sheets never wrapped around me and that I never dreamed with my head on someone's chest. Here, I sleep sometimes in the hammock on my balcony. I eat fish cooked in banana leaves and drink coconut water coffee. I exist only in this world, the International Waters of the Caribbean Sea.

It wasn't so much the loss of love, but the loss of possibility, that sunk me like the *Whydah Gally* off Cape Cod and crushed the gold of coins beneath the waves and piles of sand. It took over two hundred years for those legends to turn to dust, and those who were in my world then told me, *Baby, you don't have that kind of time*, so I

pulled up anchor and found myself sun-dazed on the surface in a warmer water. I broke ground again in sand dunes and salt waves colored sugar-blue. I met some other castaways and made a home. We all lie to ourselves and each other in this makeshift paradise and we try to forget what was left in the wreckage behind us.

My crew isn't so much a family as an anchor. The things we know about each other are limited and vague. I know that Jules once picked blueberries in Maine, but I don't know how she got to the island or where she was before this. Krill's real name is Christopher and he first came to the island on a cruise ship. When he sobered up alone and broke in Mississippi, he took the next plane back. He's cheerful, he's absolutely happy here, but we don't know why he really left. Boris is from a small town in Siberia, but he makes the best rum punch in the hemisphere. Boris is his pirate name, and when we asked him why he chose it he said it was his grandson's name and nothing more. Vincent is newest here, apart from me. All that the rest of us know of him is that in the land he came from he never had to do his laundry and he never learned to cook, but we all know those are bigger things than he will admit.

The Captain of the *Red Ribbon Tide* is Horace, but he's *Horatio* to the children, and he growls his orders like the best kind of movie-pirate. His devotion is what gives us drive. The children flock to him; they bring him swords to brandish and copy his pirate voice. Horace chases them across the deck. He humors them with cutlass fights and hands out eye patches and peg legs. He's a true sailor, however, and even though the crew spends our days throwing baying, tourist children off the plank into the water and our evenings serving rum punch to their parents, in our down time, he makes certain that every inch of the wooden galley is scrubbed clean, hosed off, and tied down: pristine.

The hurricane approached earlier than we'd expected, whirlwinds of loose leaves blew into the saltwater, through the light that pieced through our lanterns. Earlier, I watched Vincent help Horace tie the main sail down, both of them wiped the rain out of their eyes, while I waited in the water below on the motorboat to carry us back to shore.

Both of them were shirtless, having jumped straight out of bed, and for the first time in months, I could see each of Vincent's tattoos. He has a dark and red meteor falling down his right shoulder, a bleeding heart on his right breast, a sea-maiden with a trident on his back, an anchor and a script over his ribs which I have never been able to read from so far away. It's the meteor that I know I've seen before on concert posters lit by theater lights, but Vincent's meteor is slightly different, coupled with debris starlets, which look like eyes or flowers or bullet wounds.

I never look too closely at it— though it draws my eyes like a changing sky— because of the way he covers it with his white threaded shirts, even on the worst days when the rest of the boys strip to shorts, vests and necklaces and Jules and I hike up

our skirts so we look like castaway pixies. When the news crews and treasure hunters came out to the island in hoards to exclaim that the explorers had discovered the lost pirate ship, the *Jackal Blight* the lost ship of the famous Captain Redd, Vince stopped going out with us to the bars, and ate his lunch with Horace in the ship cabin. He refused to be interviewed when they came with cameras to Turtle Bay Resort to talk to the *Ribbon's* crew, and now gives a different name to the tourists and the journalists when they sailed on our evening cruises. Though late at night, in his room next to mine, I could hear him flipping through the channels and the low sounds of news proclaiming the behemoth discovery under the waves off our shore. They wouldn't stop talking about how the ship cracked from the bottom to the top and how the Captain's treasure was still buried elsewhere, like myth. The discovery had brought the famous story back to life, and the island tourism tripled in a matter of weeks. It hasn't stopped yet, except for the storm.

In the bar, Krill and Jules are holding hands and sipping beer. Their eyes are glued to the swirls of clouds on the television. We join them, after toweling off the mixture of saltwater and rainwater from our skin. Boris is asleep with his wife already, though how they can sleep through the storm is beyond all of us. We all envy him, because out of all of us, he's most at home here. He married an island girl, who calls him Boris too, and lives apart in a real house with a kitchen and a separate room for their someday baby. Still, he comes to work with us everyday, to man the sound system and mix our rum punch, joking all day long to distract the rest of us from our recent reincarnations.

"Boris said Syl was making storm soup," Krill says, entranced. "Do you know what that is?"

"A ploy to get Boris home from the bar," Vincent says.

"No, it must be some island witchery," Krill says. "Syl's magic hands stirring fresh rain, vegetables, and some rainbow skinned fish." His eyes shine as he says this, and he wonders earnestly.

"Syl can trap that man with anything," Jules says.

"Syl could convince any man of anything, let Boris have this magic storm soup." Vince defends, and so we let Boris' absence be that magic, a thing we'll never question.

When we talk together, low and deep into the night, Sue lets us pour our own beer while she sips coconut rum, and leans her elbows over the bar. Horace most of all tonight, is our focus. The *Red Ribbon Tide* is his own home. He sleeps on the ship most nights because his hotel suite reminds him of the bedroom he once had in Virginia where he found his wife dead and a letter she wrote him under the door when he opened it. Tonight he has to sleep in the resort while the galley tosses through the rain, just outside. So Krill and I feed him shots until he promises to marry Krill and Jules under the Jolly Roger at a hurricane sunset. We all cheer and Jules blushes beautifully. She's the kind of pirate that girls want to be on Halloween, but she's the kind of woman who's seen every kind of heartache. I don't look like the kind of woman

who would be a pirate. I look like the kind of woman who would work in an office, wear pencil skirts and carry high heels in her waterproof bag on the subway.

“Jules, I can just imagine you being a shipwrecked pirate bride,” I say. She blushes into her near-empty pint glass.

“If we weren’t here,” she starts almost cautiously, the other world opening. “If I could go back, I would want us to be married on the beach in Ogunquit as the tide goes out. The beach there is miles long when the tide is out and the weddings happen in little coves at low tide, everyone climbs down from the rocky cliffs, barefoot and circles the bride and groom with torches as the sun sets across from the ocean.”

“Maybe there is a cove like that here,” Krill says.

Tonight the news other than the hurricane is about the treasure hunters.

“There’s finally going to be a major excavation of the wreck,” Krill says. “The diving teams will arrive in a few weeks. I’ll be scavenging the shore to see what the waves find.” He winks at Jules, because he’d love to find her pirate treasure, but there wasn’t treasure aboard the *Jackal Blight*.

“Makes me wonder about the *Ribbon*,” Jules adds, “What would they think of us, if they were excavating her?”

Horace takes a long draught to finish his beer and goes to the bar. He pulls up a barstool and flirts easily with Sue, as she pulls her long white hair over one shoulder and takes a sip of blue Malibu.

“Do you leave things on the boat?” Vincent asks.

Jules doesn’t, she says, only dresses sometimes or swimming suits.

“I have almost as much on the boat as Horace,” Krill says. He lists it all and none of us argue.

“What about you, Vince?” I ask. “What would they say about you?”

He laughs slightly, and rolls up the sleeves of his shirt. Red flecks of meteor scatter over his forearm.

“I wouldn’t be there. Nothing of me would be there,” is all he says.

“Wouldn’t you want that?” Krill asks. “I’d want them to remember me, even as a fake pirate.”

“No,” Vincent says. “Because then they’d want to know where I came from. They’d want to know my name, my life, my love, my treasures, even you guys—my crew—and I want those things to be all mine.”

We’re all quiet for moment as the storm winds rattle the building.

“I tell you what,” Krill says, and he looks for Horace, still with Sue. “I’m raising the stakes.” He leans back in his chair and reaches into his pocket.

“We might not have a ship tomorrow, and if we don’t, who’s to say we’ll still be that family, that crew? I’ll wager I know you guys—Horace and Boris included, *Jules* included—as much as the hypothetical future stranger who digs up the wreckage of our beloved galley. I mean, I don’t even know your real *names*.”

It could have been the hurricane, but his words gave us chills, bound us to that table and as he held out a small die, we could have been playing anything. We could have been anybody. Krill continues, "We dance around this game sometimes, skirt each other, but this time we play for real. We each roll one at a time. The number you get is the number of questions you are asked. The rule: you must always answer one. The person to your right asks the first question and the person next to them asks the second and so forth."

"Caliber of honesty?" I ask.

"We're pirates, Seraph." He smirks. "But we're not playing for gold. Caliber is that if the rest of us feel like we're being lied to: we can ask another question."

"You sound like Long John Silver over there," Horace calls.

"Come'n and join us, old man Ahab!" Krill replies cheerfully and lifts his pint to toast the captain, his levity a reason he is the first mate.

Krill rolls the die first and its sound on the table is sharper than the thunder outside.

"Two," he says. "Jules, your question is first and then Seraph."

"Which is your favorite planet?" Jules says.

"What's do you love about being a pirate?" I ask. Krill shakes his head, raises his glass. His eyes are shining.

"Too easy. Start over."

"What do you miss about your mother?" Jules asks. Her voice holds some indignance.

"Would you rather meet a mermaid or a Martian?"

Krill laughs at my question, but he defers to Jules.

"Since it's my idea, I will choose the harder question to begin. What I miss most about my mother is her voice. I grew up in the South, but my mother was from France. It's the reason I don't have a phone."

"You want those kind of answers?" Vincent's voice is tense, and I feel my limbs seize.

"We usually stop before we get this far, I know. I never know who is telling truths, half-truths or lies. I'm tired of it. Jules is next," is all Krill says and he puts the numbered cube in front of his fiancé.

She rolls, feigning her security, I know. Her number is three.

"Where are you from?" is my question, and I turn to Vince who raps the table with his fingertips.

"Why this island out of all the ones in the sea?" he asks.

"You could have been anyone," Krill says softly. "Why a pirate?"

The way she smiles at these is the way we know her. She will never give us answers.

"I met Sue my third day here. I asked her for a job and she sent me to Horace. That's why I'm a pirate."

I roll next and my number is two.

“Did you think you’d ever end up here?” Vince asks.

“What’s your shipwreck?” Krill poses.

“The *Whydah Gally*.” I am certain, but they are surprised because they don’t know why I came to the island.

“She was undiscovered for nearly 300 years, buried under 20 feet of sand,” Krill says, our master of shipwrecks.

“The *Whydah* was a lovers’ ship,” I offer. When I sunk, it was in the cold north, and it froze me deeper than the sun can move.

“If my story were a ship’s story, I would be the *Whydah Gally* and *he* would be the sea.” A pirate felled by a rain god.

They are quiet. I feel a little more solid. This is what it means, the knowing. Some storms are unraveling.

Vince rolls last, a four. He’s the most nervous of us. We know him the least. Krill asks first.

“Where were you born?”

“Do you talk to your family now?” Jules asks. I hesitate. There are too many things I want to know. I almost want him to have his secrets.

“How many tattoos do you have?” I ask shyly, but I get his attention.

“Favorite restaurant stateside?” is Krill’s second question.

“Fourteen and a half,” Vince says.

The rain hasn’t stopped. We are the only people in the bar. Most of the tourists have left the island and those who remained have gone inland. Sue and Horace are still in their own world. She is wiping and storing glasses while he sips something dark.

The historical accounts of pirates say that the pirates were their own nation, though they moved from sea to shore, shore to ship, and ship to sea. They chose their own leaders, split bounty equally and held all men equal. They were noble in their own right, though they held no allegiance to the worlds they conquered.

Legends tell that ‘Black Sam’ Bellamy was twenty-eight years old when he captured the slave ship *Whydah Gally* near the Bahamas. He was promised to the New England maiden, Maria Hallet. Maria’s uncle told Bellamy that he could only marry his niece if he had the money to give her a wealthy life. She was christened a sea witch, a rain goddess when she swore her love to the sailor become blackguard. They cast her out of her home. Still, she waited for him at a bar near the tip of the Cape Cod wilderness of sand banks and grey cliffs.

Months later, with a ship laden with millions of dollars in treasure and artifacts, seemingly nothing would have stopped Bellamy. He saw the cliffs of Wellfleet, and the bewildered love so close. He’d sailed too fast and still too late. The *Whydah* met, not the beautiful Maria, but a hurricane that rent the ship from stern to hull and the cold Atlantic waves bit the gleaming galley in half only fifty feet from shore. No records of the captain’s body were ever recovered, and the *Whydah Gally* disappeared. None of

her coins would buy Bellamy's bride.

Krill's second turn gives him one question. His eyes are lit with anticipation as he waits for his fiancé to think to ask something she doesn't know.

"What pirate?" she finally asks, and his brightness doesn't sway.

"James Hook, baby," he says. "I'm not here to be a grown-up. I'm here for the fun of it, for the challenge."

"You're not going to grow up?" I ask.

"I didn't say I wasn't. Not your turn, mate."

There's an unusual sharpness in his voice, and I realize that none of us are asking Krill the right questions. The thing about Krill is that he never lost something. He is the one of us most open about his past. He is completely, unarguably himself, and that makes him alone. It never occurred to me before that he was running from something else, something different. When Jules rolls for a single question, I ask her.

"Would you let him be a pirate here forever?"

"You have to ask about her," Krill says.

"I am asking about her."

"No," Jules says, "No," softer. "Unless, this was the only thing that really made him happy. I wouldn't let him be like me, or him." She looks at Horace draws a new line between them.

My roll is five and the questions are suddenly harder to choose from.

Then Vincent gets three questions.

"Why this island?" Krill asks.

"Do you have a shipwreck?" Jules asks delicately.

"Were you a musician?" is my question.

"I don't know how to answer you two," he points to Jules and Krill. "I was a musician."

"I knew it." I breathed out. "I knew you were. You were famous." He laughs a little sadly.

"I wasn't that kind of musician. No one misses me now," he says.

Jules is smiling, but Krill doesn't know what to do.

"Famous?" he asks.

"No more questions," says Vince.

I knew Vince the first time I saw the meteor perpetually falling from his arm into ocean once as he sun-screened his already-dark body before the first boarding of children.

"Don't stare and don't ask," Jules said. "I think he used to draw them." She swept past me with a cooler of popsicles.

But I know I've seen that tattoo before. As months passed, every day I watched same careful way Vincent poured the red punch juice into the saltwater-splotched beer

steins. He let it crackle slowly over the ice, and twists the cocktail umbrellas over the rim, each pour familiar and devoted, before handing it smiling to the thirsty waiting hands, and it occurs to me every day how much he looks like the man whose handmade music posters lined the subway stations, announcing new gigs, new venues, new dates. He was a stranger to me, but I admired his constant presence, his dedication to his art. His pictures weren't close-ups, but his meteor arm was always draped over his banjo, and then one he day disappeared.

The third round of the game closes the bar. Sue floats over to us, with Horace on her arm.

"I have to check the courtyard," she says. "Hold on to this one?"

She helps him sit next to Jules, and in seconds she's wandered out into the storm. I'm certain her feet entwine into some fishtail and she's riding the wind into the sea.

"You have to play this round, Cap," Krill orders, "and this is the last round, so Horace asks the questions." Horace is too drunk to argue. Krill rolls first again.

"Horace, you have to ask now. Ask Krill something." Vince urges.

"Where did you hide that chest I gave you?" Horace asks, so seriously, the rest of us are laughing, with the exception of Krill.

"That was a secret, Horace!" He slams the table.

"You really buried a chest?" Vince says.

"You don't get to ask a question this round. I got a three," Krill says. "I did that for all of us. I'm the only one who knows where it is. There is, of course, a map. Also hidden. Only Horace knows where that is. Now a question for Jules, Cap."

"How long have you followed these stars?" Horace asks, more voluntarily than any of us expected.

Jules breathes very deeply. "My daughter's name was Rigel. Her father named her. I came here to see the sky."

Somehow we knew already about her daughter, though no one talks about it. We can tell because we see her interact with the children everyday, listening to their laughter, splashes, and pure, careless joy. If Krill is Captain Hook, then she is Wendy Darling, and the way I see it, the Wendy-bird was always better off with pirates than with lost boys.

"You ready for this, Captain?" Krill asks and then nods to me. "It's his turn."

"Why don't you ask out Sue?" is my question.

"Sue? Sue isn't of this world," the Captain says.

Horace asks Vincent if anyone at home knows where he is. Vince shakes his head, *no*. Then he asks me if *Seraphina* is my born name.

"*Seraphina* is the 'me' who can break out of maelstroms," I answer.

think of stones smoothed by the salted sea. I think of the skins of water snakes. I think of the days before when I found myself drowning.

Finally, we all walk quietly down the hallways. They're mostly dark to save power and we feel our ways to our doors. Krill and Jules take Horace to his room, which is next to theirs. Vince and I find our corridor, and I run my fingertips along the walls until I find my door.

"That was an interesting night," Vince says.

"I have one more question."

He turns toward me.

"Why the meteor?"

"Not everything that falls apart is ruined. Even if it can't ever be put back together."

For a minute we hear just the storm outside as it battles the sand and the ocean.

"Seraphina," Vincent says. "Come listen to the storm with me."

"At least we're home," I say and Vince tells me that he's a long way from home,

"This place really feels like home to you?" he asks. He pulls his fingers through my water-streaked hair.

"Yes, it has to be," I say, because of how much home meant to me before.

This time when I think of that home, it doesn't overwhelm me. I ask Vince where his home is. I force myself to listen to him instead of the rain falling. He says he's trying to build it inside himself. Trying to make it a place for only him and only God, which means there's no room for me, but I don't care.

He doesn't kiss like a rock star. He kisses like a lost boy. I kiss like water snakes. The doldrums that make up who we are were never as important at this storm we saw together.

When the storm finally softens, and the sea is sick with herself she churns a little quieter, Vincent stirs in the darkness and my eyes trace the lines of ink on his skin.

"Vince," I say, "who were you before this?"

"I don't know," he says. "I lost track."

"But who were you? You were someone." I push, but he's quiet.

"Who were *you*?" he asks finally. His fingers climb over my arm.

We linger a while in this silence, and I'll never know who he was, or if he was. The wind shivers, and he wraps his meteor arm around my body, but he sings, almost murmurs: *"The roads we walk are more like mazes, and they change the way we split the skies. I miss your different smiles the way I miss the summer sun. Everything is sun, rain girl. Everything is sun."*

Outside perhaps the *Red Ribbon Tide* is collapsing. Another destruction. When I wake up before sunrise, I call Horace's room, from Vincent's phone. I already know he's sleepless.

"What's the word, Captain?" I whisper.

“They said she’s afloat. That’s the last I heard, Seraph.”

“That’s good news, sir.” He’s quiet for a minute and then he returns to the conversation Jules began at the bar.

“What do you think they’d say if they excavated the *Ribbon*?” he asks.

“Two hundred years from now?” I ask. “I guess, they’d think we were pirates, Horace. We have lots of rum bottles, and empty chests. We have good rigging.”

“No gold, though.”

“What shipwrecks have gold? It all turns to myth down there.”

“They say the *Jackal Blight* was void of treasure, for all its fame and violence. We have some plastic necklaces and cheap cocktail glasses.”

I met Horace a long time before I came here, though he doesn’t remember me. I was a kid who signed up to get thrown off the plank. When my life changed course, I thought the least logical thing I could do was to come back here, become a pirate, and use the red fire sunsets and the jade waters to forge something new. Let the sun burn me brown and grow my hair out as long as I could. If I was a castaway, here I could be one.

“Do you know how many children will remember you till the day they die?” I speak softly. He says goodbye, the receiver clicks. The storm unravels inside me.

When I came back two years ago, I realized that even then Horace was breaking inside. With the children he is harsh and boisterous. He is the chilling pirate that buries treasure and commands the plank, and calls for cannon fire. They love him. They are terrified of him, but he’s not that person, really. He is Nemo, in his submarine spaceship.

Fifteen years before he had hoisted me onto the plank, and I saw the sunlight flicker against the Caribbean. My orange bathing suit was the color of the starfish deep below, and I ran to the edge of the board. Fearless, I stared fiercely into the innocent waves. I jumped. I slipped like a gem into the crystal water with barely a splash. When I saw the surface it was covered in bubbles, salty air and radiant colors. Everything was sun.

INTERVIEWER: Finally, a fundamental question: namely, as a creative writer what do you think is the function of your art? Why a representation of fact, rather than fact itself?

HEMINGWAY: Why be puzzled by that? From things that have happened and from things as they exist and from all things that you know and all those you cannot know, you make something through your invention that is not a representation but a whole new thing truer than anything true and alive, and you make it alive, and if you make it well enough, you give it immortality. That is why you write and for no other reason that you know of. But what about all the reasons that no one knows?

AMERICAN MOBILE

E M Schorb

The pure products of America go crazy . . .

—*William Carlos Williams*

Miss Smith, she dead.

. . . my blind left eye don't stop me
I swivel quick around then get ahead
back at the panorama
striped down and then back up the hill
to any future peak greened brown black cut through
white striped like up the leg on a uniform
the wind don't wall me
my aerodynamics
they'd lift my license for my eye full of sugar
but I still drink
that VA doctor's lower'n fish shit
no beer no way
but I drink Lite test my blood take my insulin
I eat right mostly but my Drake's cakes
I'm thirty-three feet back
sixty-six long times to here
always dreamed of motorhoming
free to be you and me
Maxine's you
she sips at that beer
stares through the wraparound
like she's watching home movies
and shoots bytes at me like look there
did you see that
she's frightened at being sixty next week
I told her look at me—you plus six
and I'm still steering
still truckin' but I never was a trucker
was a kid a soldier a vet a cop and
a guard at Disney's that was my whole damned life
that back there behind me on the road
but it comes along with me in my sugar-eye

my shotup shoulder from War Two
my skin cancer from standing all those years in the sun
reflecting off tarmac and parked cars at Disney World

Max says look Jersey plates
she says Joisey we started out in Jersey
we fell in love haven't slept together in years
Max thinks I'm not well interested
but it's the sugar
I don't tell nobody not even her not especially her
suppose she knew I couldn't
what kind of man would she think
look she says back in back her mother sees it too
I don't know what it is must be on my blind side
but I don't say no way I let them know
I'm blind as a blackboard over there
not hurtling along at eighty
they'd piss their beer
you got to hold to your lane
the old lady's nearly ninety but full of it
not only beer either if you know
look Max says
shut up Max but I don't say it
I don't listen about Alabama moons
Georgia peaches glorious Asheville leaves
I talk to myself my only friend
they suck me in like black holes
the old lady and Max everything goes
into them nothing out toward me
did I believe in love
I've stopped laughing even
I've been driving too long

I see us off the edge of a cliff if I don't keep him awake
old man hunched up at the wheel was he my hero
I think there's something wrong with his eyes now
the way he jerks around to see I've noticed
I ride not swiveled in a bucket by a tilted instrument pod
but sometimes behind him astraddle his first Harley
his long blond hair snapping in my eyes no helmets
my fingers feeling in the deep holes

through his shoulder and his ribs
where the sniper's bullet drilled through
he died he said and came alive again on a table in England
I still wore his white dress shirt
hanging out over my rolled-up blue jeans
shiny pennies in my loafers
Frank Sinatra made me scream Elvis my one daughter
Buddy's blonde princess the Dead my grandson
nobody sings anymore all back there somewhere
with my mother boozed up at ninety
a Depression-made cheapskate
sipping cheap port
and a hundred thousand in the bank
how did we get here
where are we going why must I come
Harry could save me
clever with life how left-handed he
mangled his right hand in the leather machine
made them think he was right-handed
more compensation
at last a little house and money in the bank
and I got us out of Jersey
like war in the project then
the Sixties the long hot summers
bullets through the windows
down to Max and Buddy in Orlando to my little house
Harry why must I travel with them
the youngsters even are old but Harry's gone
crazy at the end
fighting in the trenches again
Argonne Belleau Wood
gone on the road behind us
dead and buried in Orlando
buried and lost his grave lost
we are going to sue
I have no place to put flowers
no place to talk to him anymore
they lost my Harry
tough leather guy from Brooklyn
tough guy so sweet once
poor old crazy man

gone back to the trenches back to Pershing
mustardgas and Belleau Wood
another world so far away
to his grave at ninety-five
I don't want cable
only my one soap-opera station
only my wine
don't even want life to come back
what is the wind
Star stories say some of us are aliens
supermarket tabloids Maxine calls them
and tries to make me think they print lies
sometimes I think Buddy and maybe even Maxine too
I bore her but maybe pod people have taken over her body
like that old movie
maybe she isn't Maxine at all she doesn't act like Maxine
I could have a baby too
like the hundred year old woman in Australia
it would kill me at ninety they must eat something
yogurt like those Russians who live forever aliens too
and the little girl no older than smaller than
who had quadruplets by a tom cat
all of them born with whiskers
the pictures were right there I saw them
whiskers and pointed ears and long tails I saw them
what is that going by where are they taking me

"Good Housekeeping" said
the kitchen was the warm womb
of the colonial home and early-American women
would stand at the hearth watching the turkey turn
as they pumped up the flames
packing sandwiches for an airline ain't exactly
the big time but we made it
Buddy and I paid off the American dream
for his bedroom and my bedroom
and the alligators down on the lawn
to the rock seawall wanting sun
what's life
put the rocks back put
back build up fall put back

two slices Wonder Bread
one slice waterpumped ham mayo mustard
my long thin fingers all little silver scars
I'm nobody what did I deserve
not Buddy and my mother anyway
sixty ain't the end yet
not even with all my loose belly skin and
stupid strokefoot dragging when I'm tired
like Buddy on Omaha Beach
but I got it right through the head
like being brain-shot and nine weeks in the hospital
stealing our money
there she is sipping her wine at ninety
defying nature and three out of five of us kids with strokes
always demanding maybe she gave us the strokes
but nobody's dead yet they say we are all lucky
so that's what luck is not being dead
a case could be made

driving into the dusk is like driving into a dream
better hit the lights
that big cluster of stars down there
I aim my good eye on ahead
now in the dusk it gets tricky
but I don't let Max know
extreme macular degeneration
sugar-induced doc says
then he says you got varicose veins in your eye
laser beams he says burn 'em out
so I see blue for a week from the dye
and the blue fades to gray and that's it
my credit's good
social security veteran's pension Disney retirement
I'm a triple dipper
plus equity in the house poor boy makes good
I'm driving fifty thousand dollars across America
like I started out with anything but
a piano-teaching widowed mother
like I had a chance in life
I play my own tapes me at the organ
singing Willy Nelson songs

“On the Road Again” Max hates my music
she’s jealous but says I could of made a living
at it could of but couldn’t take the joints
composed some myself guitar piano organ
my tape plays “King of the Road”
my plates say NO MORTGAGE NO BOSS
NO JOB NO WORRIES I’M RETIRED
twenty years standing in the sun eating Twinkies skin cancer
Harry thought Max could do better
he never had a home like ours right on the gators’ water
he’d say he never had alligators on his lawn either
only stinkbugs in his old palm tree
sometimes I miss fighting with him
him on the Kaiser me on Hitler
who was worse all ancient history
even the Commies are dead
nothing left for Freedom to fight
and the world moves moves into the next century
away from us what we did and needed
it’ll all be computers and new people
no more like us we’re dinosaurs
old people but we move
and we take our houses with us like hermit crabs
we circle Asheville in leaves we land at Normandy
not ten minutes in and all my bones break
until I wake up on the table in England
purple heart silver star
I remember the sea swashing puffs of smoke
our flag it still stands yesterday’s news who cares
Max is sarcastic once she was proud
I can’t help it Max
it’s the sugar sugar

. . . who betrayed me so many times with his Harley
with somebody else’s legs around him
fingers in his wounds
hot stuff and joins the police
to wear his beautiful blue uniform
and ride his police cycle with his blond hair
fluffed all around his blue visored hat
and me pregnant alone with his blonde love in my stomach

stud making a fool of his wife making a fool of his life
with no good burgling cops only Orlando left for us
thank the chief who saved us and that was when I began
when I began I began began to be old

Maxine looks like me at sixty
you could compare her to a picture of me then
O Harry do you remember
where are we
North Carolina
why are we here climbing this mountain
full of beautiful leaves
is that heaven up there what is that up there
a jetstream
a flying saucer
why don't we just stay home
where I know where things are
they don't think about me how I can't see
how I wish Harry were here
how he was when he was young
so neat courtly so kind and sweet
not like at the end afraid of the Hun
hiding under the table gone crazy old man
with old-timers disease
it was all there again for him
no time had happened
no me no all that life all wiped out
and he was there again and it made me wonder
if we aren't all just here or there or where are we

Asheville we pack it in at Nashville
Max and the old lady won't go to the Grand Ole Opry
so I'll leave them to themselves
I'll go like I always said I would
could hear it in Jersey when I was a kid
could hear it all over the country
Hank Williams Minnie Pearl Tex Ritter Hillbilly Heaven
a southern yankee I *never get enough of that wonderful stuff*
Max says we should of gone the other route
to Memphis first Graceland Elvis can wait I say
but it turns out to be Hank Williams Junior and Rockabilly

not like I dreamed of it glitz and bang
even a vet can yearn for the old sweetstuff
Junior's daddy the original Hank the real thing
the lyrics were in a language I could understand
we fought the wars and longed for love
they march for peace and seem to hate
like I'm still waiting for the fat lady to sing
President Truman even introduced Kate
Smith to the Queen
as "America" *Oh beautiful for spacious skies*
but the Opry's like the rest of it now
maybe we should try Dollyland at Pigeon Forge
no Max wouldn't like it because

angels come to our door but Buddy won't let them in
do you know these are the last days
not if you have something spiritual
it's on Earth
he was sent by the God of Love
that's why Graceland is a church
even if it's like they say
that his body ate twenty Big Macs a day
his soul had to live on Earth didn't it had to eat
so Buddy's blonde daughter tells me
my daughter too but more his blonde like him
now nearly bald not her him not dark like me
well gray but if Elvis could bring happiness
then he is a god

he's one of those aliens Max
he was sent here to sing and bring love
they say Graceland is more beautiful than Heaven
that it's all blue like the sky with no clouds
no thunderbooms and tin-roof rain clatter
where are we

like when Buddy grinds his choppers
he is eating us up in his sleep
our night war like our day war cannibal
shoved our beds apart into separate rooms
trumpets saxophones trombones

Buddy names my snoring while he grinds on
and her crazy on the convertible back there
all night coughs and chatters in her sleep
about chicken wing prices
it's like a gone-nuts orchestra
OOMPA OOMPA OOMPA CLICKETY-CLICK BLAH BLAH
his teeth telling how much he hates his life
at different times broken uppers and lowers
life that never did what he wanted it to do
we rocked that motorpark in Nashville
hooked up Winnebago nearly laughed itself free
electric lines tore out as it rolled over on its side
and later shaking with screaming
Mama and I had sucked the city of any last drop
of Southern Comfort
Buddy never came back from the Opry till it was dying out
drunk himself from shit-kicking with urban cowboys
I told him his sugar'll kill him he sleeps grinding his life
like steak into hamburger I'm his life
what's life
Mama refuses to die until we do
gray and stroked and sugared and beer'd under
but how could we leave her at home who'd watch her
nobody'll take her in if we go she has to go
won't go to nursing home no way you know no how
and I don't mean not to go go go before I die
thank GOD for Winnebagos
next stopover next postcard
P.S. life's a war and you can't give up
love Max at sixty

heaven is a place like Graceland
they say Elvis's daughter owns it now
she's the spitting image spitting image
listen Max at least the foreigners don't own Graceland
like they do everything else
it ain't true that we don't work as hard as the Japs
but the unions Max I never did trust the unions

you think like a scab-cop
my father was a union man Buddy

her father was a union man
Harry was always a good union man
and a good Democrat

if they're good for anything the aliens'll be UNION
if I didn't belong to a union
do you think they'd of paid me so much
for making lousy sandwiches
did you get enough sleep
we should of gone to Graceland first
read a "Reader's Digest" article once
first it was the farmlife held us to place
then industry mills and trading and
later the big factories up north
made cities centers now no more
anyone anywhere now the computers
no more fixed life no more unions no more
democrats no more stay put go go go
like the damned beatniks hippies used to do
on the road in the sky
a whole corporation inside your portable
computer workforce anywhere
regions don't mean nothing cities countries
my country 'tis of thee
I'm caught between the old lady back there
and my grandson
he'll be part of it the brave new world he said
college boy and his kids won't even know
what we were
can't you just see it grandpa
no boundaries no borders
even space the moon Mars
business everywhere signals flying through the air
caught between times becoming part of it
losing it at the same time
with my sugar walking down the street
I never noticed how sweet beer is
injections they'll be able to fix that too grandpa
and the whole world and even space
will become AMERICA

you look at your mother and you think
how could I have come out of that sixty years ago
HAPPY BIRTHDAY Max
it's a chorus of whiskey-cracked voices
a duo of dead and gone ghosts
calling back over their shoulders
it's bye-bye Maxine you're as good as dead
with your mastectomied pumped-up plastic tits
what'd you need them for for *him*
could of caused the stroke I'm told
but then why my brother and sister stroked out too
my face I had burned with acid and scraped
for him forty years ago
acne pits from her tea and cheap day-old cake
to stuff us just before supper all of us
faces like burned-red moons
from her brother-can-you-spare-a-dime
cheap Depression soul
the old man back from Belleau Wood
mustard gas and the formaldehyde stink of the tannery
the whole goddamned century's been a war
I could live to see the end of it
no more goddamned Twentieth Century
now we fight each other we can't stop fighting
we're like three hairy-assed Marines
landing on each other's beaches
HAPPY BIRTHDAY Maxine
Christ he kissed me breath like death blow out my candle
if I could I'd blow them out of the Winnebago
and get my wish a little time on earth alone a little life before I die

Max was always tough even as a little girl
she always fought
her father'd have to drag her off
from a fight but he was proud
my Max don't take no shit he said

we had to be tough Jersey we all glow in the dark
better than hard cold and cheap
we had nothin' but trouble like the plague

Nineteen-Nineteen she says
the doughboys brought the influenza back from Europe
all those displaced persons
my best girlfriend died of it everybody
was dying you're too young to know
good to be too young for some things
why do you think God does it
screw that
God helps them who help themselves Buddy
he likes that one damned Republican
but he's right it's like Elvis
a success a blond guy with black hair and a cape
God loves us all Max He's sending them to help us
well He's got a damned funny way of showing it
your granddaughter says He sent Elvis
or is it Elvis sent her
I told her he came in on a saucer
they'll all be here soon

Buddy singing playing the organ he installed
coming in on a wing and a prayer
his feet pumping he loves to show off
he says Harry was just a leather worker
says my mother taught piano class will tell
your people don't have no class no way
then it's a Donnybrook
in the musical world

in heaven this couldn't of happened
if Max would spell me
I'd go back and get drunk with the old lady
sit in my *Seat w/Telescoping Pedestal*
and stare at her until I could see inside her BRAIN
but Max won't spell me won't drive no way no how
just sucks in sixpacks and farts at speed bumps
I'm mustard gassed like Harry at Belleau Wood
turn on the BTU's she says watch out
open the vents here comes Max
but she admits it was damned embarrassing
we got the Arizona state troopers all over us
here's the old lady telling the pump jockey

at our time of life we want full service telling him
I'M BEING KIDNAPPED BY ALIENS
I have a lovely home in Orlando
they're forcing me to go with them
they want my money a hundred thousand dollars
it belongs to Harry he earned it with the wrong hand
call the police help help
it takes some explaining but I tell them me I'm an ex-cop
look I say but they got me and Max over a car hood
if I had one of those BIG FOOT trucks
I'd drive right over top of this traffic jam
crushing cars like an angry giant
that's why everybody loves Big Foot
I look at the cops and twirl
my finger in a circle at my temple
nuts the both of them I say
they feel sorry for me and because I'm an ex-cop

get real Buddy do you think God's in California
or in the Painted Desert or the Petrified Forest
I want to see the first Disney place is all
Max is *mad* like Mel great roadman
people say it's the end of America
from the coast there on it's out forever
and the sea climbs into the sky
Buddy it's your music
sometimes you sound like some godawful poet
song of the open road Max
there's good trucker songs Max
trucker poets cowboy poets
you're ignorant Max
don't start Buddy don't start
I tell you what Buddy
Vegas is God
you get a bucketful of change and pull handles
until something good happens
gangsters built Vegas Max
gangsters built everything Buddy
Bugsy Siegel is God and Vegas is heaven
for shame Maxine
what do you know Mama

it's all a chance and to hell with your aliens
can't you see saucers Maxine
clouds Mama we're in the mountains
Sierra Nevadas Mama
I'm not *your* mother I'm hers maybe
and the white bombs of love
like the Star says it's Elvis in his saucer
lots of Elvises because this is the end of time
they have big dark eyes and sideburns down to here
real smooth cheeks and they wear wonderful jumpsuits
with colors like Las Vegas that night
the first or second so it was stacks of colors
and everything blinking they wear clothes like that
with glittery things hanging down from their sleeves
I was a little girl when Dreamland burned down
my mother your grandmother Maxine
said you could see Dreamland burning from Jersey
I had been to Coney Island I had been to Dreamland
I'm sure I saw Vesuvius erupt and a great naval battle
where New York was bombarded by foreign ships
and then an American admiral went out
and defeated all of them
you see children it is all a dream
and you keep waking up to something new
we aren't really here at all we are here
and somewhere else at the same time in Dreamland
Meet me tonight in Dreamland under the silvery moon
my mother used to play that one Mama
I am not your mother don't call me Mama
you're alone in the world Harry never liked you
motorcycle-head he called you
Maxine's got me if she is Maxine
of course I'm Maxine
Christ of course white bombs
SNOW
where are we Maxine
if I smashed this pedal down down hill
I saw a movie once about a wagon train full of people
heading west on Donner tha's it the Donner party
they were going over these very mountains they were up here
high like this and there was a blizzard and they got caught

and they couldn't get down out of it
blizzard starved and they began to eat each other
don't look at me Buddy
the saucers will save us
they'll snatch us up into Graceland
they can do anything they can make us fly
can they take us back to where they came from
is it a musical place
of course it's a musical place
Elvis is King
yeah Graceland is the real true blue heaven
beyond the cheap chicken wings of the world Mama
beyond the world Maxine
or whoever you are
Buddy my ears just popped
we're climbing Max
it's getting dark Buddy
you better stop
can't stop on the highway
some articulated eighteenwheeler
some BIG FOOT
come behind us
no visibility
now I nail my one good eye
to the white-dark wraparound
like one big cataract
faint red lights
turning off ahead
now nothing
down there's a turn
somewhere down there
I hit the gas down hard to the floor
it's dark and white like being wrapped in ermine
if we weren't doing eighty ninety a hundred
it's like a toboggan like the OLYMPICS
SWOOSH SWOOSH and we're out off in SPACE
the cold moon and stars ahead
I push my *WING-EXTENDER* BUTTON
and now it's STAR TREK
THE PANORAMA OF SPACE
I can see through the thick clusters of stars

Ahead there deep
GOD'S BRIGHT MUSICAL CASTLE
but the saucers hold us floating in air
HIGH OVER GRACELAND
You can see the lights
I told them I told them
And THOUSANDS and THOUSANDS
of GOLDEN COINS COME GLITTERING
CRASHING OUT

Flight

Nikki Boss

The inn is crowded and it takes too long to get outside, where tears can be erased with my palms before they matter. Men pinch and grab as I walk through the room. Each step I take is a syllable, the lament and moan of customer's names. Prostitution: the patron saint in my homeless existence.

I make it to a field behind the inn, alone with the full moon offering solace until footsteps hit my ears. I am afraid and alone in the night.

"Mary." His voice creates pause. My name has become unfamiliar to me; they call me Magdalene. They also call me whore.

I do not know this man before me. Some of the villagers call him Messiah in mockery, but not all. I cannot answer because my voice will suffocate beneath the weight of each man I have lain with.

He offers his hand, and I wonder.

"Walk with me, Mary. Follow." His voice is a request, gentle.

I give him my hand, and we walk together without looking back. My sins are named. We stop and watch as each one grows wings, and we clap when they take flight.

Tea Lesson

Sean Hooks

My grandfather's name is Robert but he goes by Hank. He's eighty now, just recently turned, his birthday three days after Christmas. His hair, a salt and pepper sweep, is parted on the left. He has always been a surly man, difficult to approach. Of another era, when men wore hats and women wore dresses, a time when seriousness was masculinity and silence was virtue and there was no such thing as a manly smile.

Hank was a truck driver. He still wears Old Spice cologne. He used to smoke Lucky Strikes but quit fifteen years ago. He enjoys Canada Mints, the pink ones. As a child they sat in a dish in my grandparents' kitchen. I started chomping them right away. Now I let them linger in my mouth, getting soft, then I bite in. I do not wear cologne. I've never been a smoker.

I teach Drama to high schoolers and direct the plays, one in the winter and one in the spring. I am not a homosexual. I am twenty-nine years old. I had a serious girlfriend but I'm not sure I want another one for a while. I have my poker dreams. I play online and go to the casinos every weekend, sometimes getting a cheap room on the outskirts of Atlantic City, other times a motel in the sleepy Connecticut burghs near Foxwoods. I'm thinking about quitting the teaching job, pursuing those dreams, along with my dream of crossing the country by car. I never did it when I was younger. My friends and I talked about it—inspired by Kerouac's *On the Road*, which I still like to peruse every summer—but it never came together. We made road trips to Atlanta, New Orleans, Nashville, Miami, but we never got into the west. And now I want to drive to Las Vegas, become a professional poker player. It is an actual possibility. It consumes my thoughts the way Ibsen and Chekhov and O'Neill once did.

Seated across from my grandfather, I admire the man's stillness. It feels like there ought to be a cat in his apartment, but there is not. There is a television playing in the adjacent living room. We're in the kitchen, having just finished an episode of *The Honeymooners*, his favorite show. My grandfather watches the marathon every year, when they air twenty-four hours straight on Channel 11. Today is New Year's Day, and the marathon will continue until midnight. We might watch some college football as well, but we always switch back to Ralph and Alice, Norton and Trix, and my grandfather laughs his gravelly laugh. His lips remain a sealed crease, but his laugh vibrates in my chest like a heavy bass-line.

I live in New Jersey, the same municipality where I went to high school. My apartment is on the opposite end of town from my parents' house. They live next to Grandpa Hank, my mother's father, my only living grandparent. The woman who owns the house, in which he resides on the second floor, is a Polish immigrant in her nineties, someone even older and heartier and more ascetic than my grandfather. She is blind, but she is one of those elderly women who never get cold. She doesn't visit

my grandfather's apartment, as far as anyone knows, though occasionally they walk to Sal's Deli on Ridge Road to buy fresh cold cuts and kaiser rolls. Sophie is her name. When I was a boy she would hand me tomatoes from her garden, gently lowering a brown paper bag over the fence, then I would run inside and give them to my mother.

My grandfather drinks hot tea, never iced, not even in summer. He takes it with lemon, honey, milk, sugar—never all together, always an unpredictable variety of combinations, and sometimes he takes it *au naturel*. No fancy or flavored teas, always just plain old Lipton. Before adding any of those other substances, he lets the tea bag steep for what seems an interminable amount of time. I have never outlasted him. I can't just let it sit there. I have to fish out the bag and add my milk and sugar and start drinking. I would feel guilty if I made him drink his tea after it had gotten cold. I held out pretty long once and he eyed me with contempt, as if what I was doing was petty. I never lasted that long again.

Stout and imposing, my grandfather. Thick-necked. Always a collared shirt. Substantial hands, twice as thick as mine. A man who never wears gloves no matter how cold it gets. He still has the countenance of a worker even though he is long retired. He carries himself with an air of earned formality, a provider, though my grandmother died from a stroke my senior year in high school. Until very recently he still drove, always large, heavy, American-made automobiles.

A silver spoon, a porcelain cup. This is not a man who drinks from plastic or Styrofoam or oversized mugs. This is a man who is suspicious of coffee. I think he finds it feminine, a woman's drink, redolent of the coffee klatch, of gossip and perfume, or of those lesser truckers who needed it as a boost, a crutch. A cup of tea is a stolid and solitary thing. He has a way of getting the tea bag to hang from the spoon without spinning. It's in how he hooks the string around the spoon's stem. I can't do it, though for a while I practiced, in my apartment, at the other end of town, by myself, feeling that perhaps there should've been a cat in my domicile as well, eyeing me with feline distrust as I attempted to mimic my grandfather's esoteric skill.

I don't think there's anything specific he waits for. There is no set amount of time, no signal that his tea is 'done,' but at some point it finally reaches some sort of perfection, and he reaches a level of repose, at which point he flips the bag into the hollow of the spoon in one motion, squeezes it firmly against the paper square, draining it with a single exertion of pressure from his thumb.

His weakness is his hearing. He traces it all the way back to an incident during his time in the army, a gunshot that went off inches from the side of his head. I've never held a gun except as a prop in a play. His hearing aid is an expensive one, but it doesn't do as much as he'd like. The aural condition is degenerative and he avoids crowds and family gatherings, preferring singular company, usually in the form of Sophie, myself, my mother, or my Uncle Bobby, who lives in the basement apartment, beneath Sophie's. Tonight he's out watching the bowl games with some friends of his from the Meadowlands Racetrack. Bobby is a gambler too, but he can't keep up with

me at cards anymore. His thrill is the horses. He prefers an announcer's voice to a dealer's, a winning trifecta ticket or daily double and a stack of dirty green bills to a full house or a nut flush and a stack of dirty poker chips. His sanctuary is Saratoga, two weeks every summer. Bobby is an only son, a mailman. He does not know who Charles Bukowski is, but I find something poetic about men who hang out at racetracks, who live in basements, two floors down from their father, in the house next door to their sister.

My grandfather doesn't offer his opinion of my career, and though I am sure there is some degree of skepticism, he has great respect for work, for steady employment, and if asked I bet he'd say something like, "The world needs high school teachers. Teachers are important. They are something essential." It would be clear from his tone that he finds teachers to be the opposite of frivolous. "If it was me," he'd continue, "I'd probably teach Math or History. But that's me. My grandson teaches the plays. Teaches acting. Teaches writing. He likes words. Likes his Shakespeare, my grandson." He'd say it with pride, absolutely sure that a grandson who knew about Shakespeare was as important a contributor to American society as one who could repair a transmission. I don't know what he would think of Brecht and Beckett, Pirandello and Ionescu. Probably not too highly. I doubt he's ever read a play or seen one performed. But he has seen this country, has crisscrossed it a hundred times, five hundred times, maybe a thousand. I've never asked and couldn't venture an accurate guess.

"I'm thinking of doing some traveling, Grandpa. Maybe head out west."

"What's that?" He flips the tea bag into the spoon, squeezes it dry, places its shriveled corpse on the saucer where it sits like a sun-baked cicada.

I take my fourth sip of tea, he his first. My tea has milk and sugar in it, as always. Tonight his is with honey only. "I'm thinking I might want to do a little traveling, or maybe even move. Out west."

"West you say?"

I think of him on the highway, behind the wheel of a rig, a content and confident man. I wonder if he had regular comrades on the road, a Joe in Youngstown or a Tommy in Terre Haute who he'd see twice a year. I wonder if he ever cheated on my grandmother with some truck stop waitress just outside of Kansas City or St. Louis or Omaha, some bawdy Doris or May or Ruth.

"Yeah, maybe out to Nevada. You ever drive through Nevada?"

"Nevada?"

"Yeah. Nevada. Southern part of Nevada. Las Vegas."

"Drove all over. All over."

He's playing with me. It's like I'm the cat and he's tossing me a ball of yarn just to watch me get tangled up in it.

"Well uh, what did you think of it?"

"What'd I think of Nevada?"

“Yeah. Las Vegas.”

“Hot.” He laughs hard, more than a chuckle. “A hot hot place. Hot like an oven, the desert. Back when I first started they didn’t have the air conditioning. Not in the rigs, not at the truck stops, not at the motels. Just hot on top of hot. It might be a good place to go now, with the air conditioning. You gonna teach out there? A transfer or something? New school?”

“Maybe college,” I lie. “Try to be a professor.”

“Teach at a college?”

“Yeah.”

“You gotta do more schoolin’ for that?”

“I’d have to get a Master’s Degree at least. Graduate school.”

He sips his tea and says, “Ahhhh.” It’s like he has some secret way of enjoying the beverage more than I do, more than I can. “Well, you’re young. No wife or kids.

Teaching college.” He laughs again. “A professor?”

“Maybe.”

I long for a story but he’s never been a storyteller, always a man of obscure comments, the briefest of anecdotes. Some diner he and all the other truckers knew was really a front for the mob. How Roadway paid better than Yellow but Yellow treated its drivers better. Some of his old C.B. handles: Gruffer, Jersey Dog, East Coast Hank.

“I was thinking of driving out. What do you think would be the best way to go? You think Route Eighty...”

His glance is on *The Honeymooners*, the Captain Video episode. Norton just broke out the spaceman’s helmet. He laughs and sips his tea before refocusing his deep-set eyes on me. “What was that, John?”

It’s a basic name I have. My father was a big Celtics fan, born and raised in Plymouth, moved to New Jersey because my mother and her family are from here. I was named after John Havlicek.

“I said I was thinking about driving out, and I was wondering what’s the best way to go?”

“It’s not too hard. I’m sure they changed some of the roads since then, since I was driving the coast-to-coast runs. I gave that up pretty young, wanted to stay close to your grandmother. Worked this side of the Mississippi mostly. I’d wager you’re better off looking it up on the computer than asking this old geezer.”

He does not own and has never used a computer. He can work the remote control for the digital cable, but surf the internet? No, sir. He grasps the general concept, but has no interest in ‘tinkering with magic boxes.’

“Yeah, I could, I could look it up, but maybe, I was thinking, uh, maybe I could retrace one of your old routes. You still have any of your road maps? I remember you used to show them to me when I was a kid.”

“Maps? You’ll need maps. It’s not that hard though. Smart guy such as yourself won’t have no problems. This country is smaller than people think.”

“But do you have those old maps, the ones you used to give me to look at back when I was little?” I hold my hand out as a visual aid, displaying the height of the six, seven or maybe eight year-old me.

“Can’t trust old maps. Get yourself some new ones. Charlie, up at the deli where I go for my fruit and my cold cuts, he sells ‘em. Got the out of town papers too. *Herald* and the *Globe*. *Washington Post*, *Dallas Morning News*, that’s a good one, even got the *Los Angeles Times*, Charlie has. I’ll have him put some aside, some maps, when you’re getting ready to go. If you go. You ain’t certain yet?”

My grandfather admires certainty, decisiveness. “I’m pretty sure. I gotta do something. Something different. Been living here in this town my whole life.”

“If you want to go, you should go. Meet a girl while you’re out there. Bring her back east for the wedding though, I don’t think my old bones could handle a haul out west anymore. And you ain’t getting me on any airplane, that’s for sure.” There is something of a smile, a tweak, a parting of the crease. I don’t see myself married anytime soon. I can see myself out west, and I can see myself coming back, to visit, around the holidays, hopefully not for a funeral. I’d like to come back and have a cup of tea with him. I’d like it to not be so frustrating. I’d like to have access to all those stories this man must possess.

“So uh, back when you were driving, did you have a place you anticipated fondly? A favorite destination?”

“What’s that now?” On the television, Alice is telling the men to stop their squabbling, to quit acting like babies and grow up.

“Somewhere they sent you that you knew would be a fun time. Maybe there was a good restaurant or you were friends with other truckers who congregated there. A particular city or state. Something you really looked forward to.”

For some reason I guess that he’s going to say Denver, or maybe Boulder, someplace in Colorado. I expect him to talk about why Colorado was his favorite, because it was a challenge, and a man really needed to be able to handle his rig up in the Rocky Mountains, the shifting of gears on the passes, the steep inclines, the slippery descents, the unpredictable snowstorms that snuck down from Canada without warning, how that was the measure of a man, that was why he always loved Cadillacs—some of which I rode in the back of as a child—because Cadillacs were big and smooth, a car to come home to, roomy, automatic transmission, air conditioning, an earned luxury for all that time on the road, that near-death experience outside of Colorado Springs or Fort Collins or Aurora.

He takes a large sip of his tea. I’d like to think that during that sip he was thinking, remembering, contemplating my question. He blinks, turns his gaze away, slowly rises to his feet, moves over to the sofa without warning or announcement. He stops when he gets there, places his hand on the back of the couch and looks at me, still sitting at the kitchen table. “A favorite you said?”

“Yeah, a favorite place, where you used to go, when you were traveling.”

He grins, shuffles around to the front of the sofa, lowers himself down, reaches for the remote control, his signal that he wants me to join him in more intently watching the next episode of *The Honeymooners* marathon.

“What do I know about traveling, John? What I did wasn’t traveling, it was work.”

I nod and bring him his cup of tea, carrying my own in my left hand, taking a seat on the other end of the couch, leaving the middle cushion empty, in the interests of manliness.

Barbie at Seventy

Terry Sanville

There are houses in this town where girls lived that I once loved. At least I thought I loved them. But at nineteen, who really knows. What I did know was that, back then, they thought of me as a bad investment, having joined the Army, bound for Vietnam and that disastrous war.

One girl told me, "I'll write to you if you want. But I can't get attached. You understand, don't you?"

Hell no, I thought, and tried erasing her from my mind.

Another followed me up the flanks of the Santa Lucia Mountains above our coastal California town. We made out for half the night. Then she hurried off to the Bay Area, to her steady boyfriend – an older guy, stable, a better investment.

I could feel my college classmates draw away from me, an incessant retreat, like the tides in Matthew Arnold's *Dover Beach*. Some guys sent to Southeast Asia never came back. Few of my friends had talked about dying, and those that had, protested the war.

Fifty-plus years later, the thought of dying again clouded my mind. I railed against it, tried to keep fit, watched my diet, and stayed active in that same little city. But none of that prepared me for...for my encounter with Barbie.

After four decades, I had sold my bookstore the year before and retired. I found joy in being outside, walking through our town, living the good life, even though my wife had died and my kids scattered. It really did feel like a new beginning, albeit a lonely one.

I hung out at Sheila's Café, shot the bull with Ray-Ray the cook through the order window, and read discarded newspapers. On a blustery April afternoon, I sat at the empty counter and stared at the obituary section, forcing myself to remember old faces and names. The restaurant's front door opened behind me and the wind rustled the flimsy pages. Annoyed, I looked up and into Ray-Ray's eyes. He stared past me, a weird smile curling his lips.

"Check her out, man. She's your kind of *chica*."

"What? Pushing a walker and playing connect the dots with her age spots?"

The cook laughed. "No, man. Just check her out."

I folded the newspaper in preparation for a quick spin on the counter stool. But before I could, she sat on the second seat over from me and ordered a vanilla shake and a salad from Dawn, my favorite valley girl waitress. I faced forward, stealing sideways glances, too chicken to turn and stare at her.

"Go ahead and take a good look," she said. "You know you want to."

"Are...are you talking to me?"

“Yes, who else would I be talking to?”

I rotated my stool and faced a platinum blonde with hair pulled back into a ponytail, staring me down with aqua eyes. Her conical boobs stretched a high-necked blouse beneath an old lady cardigan. She turned toward Ray-Ray and smiled. He bobbed his head, grinning, and ducked back inside the kitchen.

She had full lips, high cheekbones with skin pulled taut across them. But slight folds beneath her chin and deep crow's feet around her eyes revealed her age, that and her old hands. A small hourglass-shaped indentation graced her left cheek. I stared at it and froze. Her face split into a grin.

“Do you recognize me yet?” she asked. “I could tell it was you by that nose of yours, although it looks a bit longer.”

“Gee, thanks...I think”

“You should remember, ya know. We had a wonderful night once.”

“Barbara, what the hell are you doing here? I was just thinking about you.”

“I was on the train from the City to visit my oldest daughter in San Diego. Thought I'd spend a day here. It's been fifty-one years. I knew you still lived in town, looked you up on the Internet.”

“Why?”

She brushed stray hairs away from her face and smiled. “Everything about those years seems special now, don't you think? So much drama. I figured I'd find you at the same greasy spoon you took me to before we climbed the mountain.”

“Yeah, well...well you look great.”

“You mean for an old lady?”

“You look great to me.” I studied her face, hair, figure, clothes, and legs hidden by a long skirt. She leaned over the counter, her brilliant red lips wrapped around a straw, sucking.

“So tell me,” she asked, “have you had a good life? You were so freaked out the last time we...we were together. Sorry, but I didn't want any part of that. But now here you are, looking younger than ever, damn you.”

“Yeah, it's been good. How about you?”

“Good, good. Two husbands, five kids between 'em, seven grandkids.”

“You know what they say, ‘Be nice to your kids. Someday they'll choose your nursing home’.”

Barbara laughed at the tired old joke and chomped into her salad. I sipped coffee and continued staring at her. She didn't seem to mind.

“So you're traveling alone? Where's your husband?”

“Forest Lawn. He passed last year from a bad ticker. You don't have one of those, do you?”

“No. I thought I'd skip that experience. But keeping in shape is getting harder, maybe not worth the effort.”

“Don't I know it. Stan, he was my first, wanted all this work done.” She waved a

hand in front of her face and down her body. "I look silly, just like that doll. But it doesn't last."

"You...you look good."

"Why thank you, kind sir." She slid onto the stool next to me and touched my arm with a hand tanned the color of tea. She caught me looking.

"I do love to garden and my hands show it. Maybe I should wear gloves."

"Why? Do you have someone to fool or impress?"

"No one, except maybe you."

"Ah, that's sweet," I said. "Do you want to get out of here? I know some quiet places where we can—"

"Hold on, mister. A gal's gotta be careful, especially with an old...jeez, I don't know what to call you."

"Ken will do just fine."

The color came up in her cheeks and she turned her head ever so slightly, showing her profile. I remembered that move from our night at the party back in '66, in a wooden house with a broad front porch and wind chimes next to the front door. I'd asked her to come with me, hike to the ridgeline above the town, make out and hopefully more. Heading off to war, I thought I had little to lose.

"Order up," Ray-Ray yelled. Dawn hustled to deliver bacon cheeseburgers to the young couple kissing in the corner. I tossed some bills onto the counter and offered Barbara my arm.

"Let's split."

She chuckled. "You still talk the same way you did back then."

"Yeah, well, I've been thinking like a nineteen-year-old lately. Not a good sign."

"I don't know. It could be. We all try and remember how we felt and who we felt it with."

"Yeah, you got that straight."

Outside, the sidewalk crowd pulled us along through the downtown toward my room in the Granada Hotel. But Barbara hauled on my arm.

"Don't you have a car?"

"I have a beat-up Jeep with no top that barely runs. I mostly walk."

"Well, let's drive to our mountain and climb it."

"Really? That's one hell of a hike."

"Trust me, it'll be worth it."

My Jeep coughed and sputtered but finally started. Its tires felt soft as we bumped along through old neighborhoods until one of the streets dead-ended at the trailhead. Barbara jumped out and scrambled up the slope, her flat shoes slapping against the baked adobe soil, her blonde ponytail bouncing before me. I hurried to catch her, my heart thundering. I pushed upward, breathing hard, the views of the valley and the ridge top swimming in and out of focus. The sun burned my back. Gasping, we scrambled on all fours up the trail's steep parts before stopping just shy of the summit,

alongside a shallow draw crowded with oaks. We crept under a tree and collapsed.

Gradually, the sound of our breathing softened. The wind off the Pacific blew down the valley and cooled us. Barbara came into my arms. I closed my eyes and kissed her on the mouth. She tasted like salted vanilla. We fell backward onto the thick bed of leaves. I ran my hands over her body and she moaned. We undressed and covered the ground with our clothes. I lay beside her, stroking her nakedness. She looked young, full of spring. I rolled onto her and we made slow, sweet love.

A strong gust of wind shook the tree. I lifted myself up to look, my eyes half closed. The newspaper before me fluttered in the wind.

Ray-Ray called out, "Hey *pendejo*, close the door, will ya!"

The gale ceased. I opened my eyes wide to stare once again at the obituary page with its names, faces and summarized lives, and at one small entry beneath a photo.

"Barbara Dugovic, 70, mother of five, passed away on April 23rd in San Francisco, after a long career as a teacher."

I sipped my coffee and smiled, knowing that while I wasn't nineteen, my mind could still finish a good story, filling in the gaps with wistful thinking and only slightly false memories.

Halloween

Jennifer Woodworth

This is for you, a message thirty years later from “Esmeralda the Gypsy,” who read your palm that Halloween, that brilliant, cold fall night when the whole university was out in costume. The maple candy melted in our mouths, and the deep red in the leaves chased the yellow away—do you remember we’d learned that only during a fall of cold, bright days, will the sugar in the maples freeze into red. Did street lights ever make a place more like a movie set? Or was it the thousands of students outside in costume? That giant carrot—I knew it was you—only you would have dyed a whole sheet electric orange, wrapped it around you tight from knees to head, chosen that wild carrot hair.

I grabbed your carrot hands, turned them over, silently studied them before I told you the story of your life—who you loved, whether she loved you too, how many children, your happiness then and now, how much of yourself you give away in love, the steadiness of your heart, the difference between what’s left and what’s kept; what you’d made of what had been given you; what you’ve made by now of what you’ve been given. *Turn it over—the back of your hand, this finger, here—you’re good at math? Yes, if you want to—you like to count, you. You don’t read, this is art you’ll never make, though the mind of genius will be in your hands—where do you lose your desire for it—*

and at that instant, an enormous rabbit sprang out of his hole to chase you, and you became a giant carrot with flying green crepe-paper hair running down the street, turning over cards and tables, changing candy for prayers and for dreams, and you ran off with the true love you’d find in your late twenties, your marriage, your generosity in love, and the children you’d have, all clutched in your hands—

did you keep your fist closed long enough to put them, safe, under your pillow? I hear their candy wrappers and their screaming even now—was it delight or terror you felt? Were stage lights in the dark enough to turn you around, to chase the giant white rabbit away? At least you were on the right side of the looking glass—and there in the lights with thousands of students in costumes, we walked or ran or rolled in raked-up piles of leaves in front yards—that dazzling, numinous fall, and this is what I knew of you that would not be true for decades, but would be true nonetheless many times—the candy the lights your true love your long happiness the babies the bunny and I knew you, I knew you then.

A Grove of Ashes

Olivia Kate Cerrone

The earth steamed. Cords of smoke drifted from the trash banking the dirt road they drove along. Paula gazed out from the passenger side window of the small hatchback, wishing that she'd never agreed to visit the abandoned olive grove, miles away outside of Agrigento in Sicily. Early morning twilight glazed over heaps of industrial garbage. She even noticed more strands of that bright yellow tape, the same kind she'd seen attached to the gated entrance they'd broken into earlier. The one marked *vietato*. Forbidden.

"It looks like someone dumped out the contents of a house," Paula said.

"This is the work of the Nerotocco chemical factory, as carried out by the Bardi crime family," Serafina said. Even in the dim light, she wore tinted glasses.

"I thought you said they buried it all," Paula said.

"They do this also," Serafina said and pulled the car over to the side of the road.

Headlights cut across the wide fields, casting a few olive trunks in a sleepy orange glow. For several weeks now Paula had been on assignment with the Rome-based *// Giornale*, hot on a lead regarding the Mafia-backed toxic dumping in civilian territory and its connection to the unsettling cancer epidemic in the area. Serafina had been fighting the case in the Italian courts for years. She was one of the few lawyers who agreed to help. Paula gazed hard at the long stretch of debris—a broken T.V. set, washing machine, plastic bags, oil drums, refrigerators, glass bottles, lidless containers, pipes, reams of cotton-candy-like installation, and wooden planks that looked once part of a wall, holding up a roof.

"Why doesn't someone just come in and clean it all up?" she said.

"What *someone*? According to the government, they have no record of anything being dumped here," Serafina said.

She grabbed the Nikon from where she'd secured it on the console between their seats, opened the car door and stepped out. A smell of burnt plastic hung in the humid air. Gravel and broken glass crunched beneath Paula's canvas sneakers as she sidestepped a pile of black tubing and made her way back onto the road. Serafina pushed her tinted glasses back and adjusted the camera before her. She aimed the lens at certain points along the trash heap and clicked away. Between each digitized beep, she explained how it'd all started well before the eighties, with the Mafia cutting deals among the cooperate heads of various factories and refineries in Northern Italy, buying off their industrial waste for cheap and then disposing it—thousands of toxic barrels—into their own Southern backyards. They dumped the waste anywhere they could get away with—in old wells, rundown quarries, canals, caves, even the most fertile places such as these farmlands. They'd burn the waste, reducing it into a mixture of dirt and selling it off to local small-town farmers as a specialty-made fertilizer

to be scattered among the fields.

“Those who would not accept the offering were threatened. So on it went until the people began to get sick,” she said. “Leukemia, stomach cancer. Rare tumors appearing in the bladder, liver and tongue. The hospital in Palermo is flooded everyday with new cases, and many have had to leave for more advanced treatment centers in Milan or Rome. I’m talking about young people here. Twenty-year olds. Teenagers and children.”

Paula longed to be back in the car. She jogged her memory as to what produce she’d consumed from the local markets or how much tap water she may’ve already ingested.

“Those olives over there are poisonous then?” she said.

“A year ago, the toxicity levels were so high that it became more cost effective to use it as a landfill. Then they will burn it all away, leave us with a grove of ashes,” Serafina said.

“Why hasn’t anyone done anything about it?” Paula said.

“It’s business, though all of the money goes to Northern Italy. It always has,” Serafina said. “But to hold anyone accountable for what has been going on has proved to be for the most part impossible, until now. We have evidence linking the deals made among some of the corporations, and now we are suing them on behalf of the victims’ families.”

Paula stared ahead at the tips of Mediterranean rooftops of a town in the close distance, which in the dim light had lost the vibrancy of its red-orange tiles, and resembled gray shells.

“So they lived around here then? The people who got sick?” Paula said.

“Yes.”

“Did you know any of them?”

Serafina lowered the camera. “My son.”

She gazed ahead in silence, then her eyes narrowed. “Did you hear that?” she said.

Paula strained to listen past the olive leaves rustling in the warm, steady breeze.

“No. What is it?”

“They’re here.”

Serafina returned to the hatchback and with slow, soundless care, opened the driver’s side door and sat inside, killing the headlights. Paula followed, unnerved. Who exactly were *they*? There was no sign of any traffic coming from either direction. Perhaps they’d only imagined hearing anything. Still, Serafina plugged the keys into the ignition and started the car forward. Paula cracked the passenger side window and noticed a white, ghostlike shape among the trash. As they passed it, she saw that it was the body of a dog with a thin, filthy coat. She looked away. Only a small portion of the road emerging from between the trash heaps could be seen before them, but Serafina continued onward without hesitation. Then the path climbed in hairpin curves and the row of trees receded behind them as they reached a hill at the edge of the

grove. A distant boom thundered from below. Paula gazed hard at what was visible of the valley from the windshield. A garbage truck stood parked further down the road. Men worked around it.

“Why did you stop the car here?” she said.

“They’ll be too far to spot us,” Serafina said. She gathered together her camera, opened the car door and stepped out.

“What are you doing?” Paula said. “Those people will kill us.”

She folded her arms tight and tried to breathe. They were only here to take pictures of the industrial waste. Serafina said nothing about documenting Mafiosi. Paula edged from the car, taking each step with care, as if the slightest audible movement could be heard above the steady growl of the truck’s engines. She crept to where the lawyer stood. The aim of the camera’s lens indicated to Paula where she should direct her gaze. Two men in orange jumpsuits and heavy, elbow-length work gloves stood at the back of the truck. White masks obscured the lower portions of their faces. Together they hoisted what appeared to be an oil drum and hurled it into the grove. Then they turned and repeated the job, depositing five large barrels into the rubbish heap. A third man in jeans stood to the side, monitoring the workers’ progress. Paula wondered if he carried a gun, as they were all well within range of one another. She found the relentless beeping of Serafina’s camera infuriating. Why didn’t she silence the device beforehand?

“They usually come out much earlier in the night,” Serafina said.

“So you knew they’d be here then?” Paula said, her whispered voice a bitter hiss.

Serafina didn’t respond. She kept the camera fixed before her and continued to shoot. Paula resisted the urge to rip the electronic away and smash it to pieces.

Gunshots exploded near their feet. Paula shouted and ducked, as if that might somehow prevent the inevitable. She snapped her head and saw one of the men running toward them. The women scrambled into the hatchback. Serafina fired up the ignition and shifted into reverse, slamming them backwards up along the path. Paula kept her head half-lowered, watching the shooter advance onto the hill and over the spot where they were just standing. They pulled out from the sight of the Mafiosi and reached a small clearing in the trash, where Serafina banged a U-turn and set them racing forward. Paula gripped the passenger door handle until her knuckles were white. She couldn’t speak, much less think straight until they were back onto the main strip of highway, headed toward Agrigento.

Serafina kept silent. She’d returned the tinted glasses to her face. The car ride back to Agrigento was less than half an hour, and as they drove, the weak dawn light expanded into a hot morning hour, giving Sicily’s vegetation a radiant exposure. Soon the white Scala Dei Turchi cliffs came into view.

“A quick stop at my home and then I’ll bring you back to Agrigento. I have some documents there that may be of interest to you,” Serafina said.

“No more surprises. Please just drive me back,” Paula said.

“I thought you wanted to see it all for your own eyes? Understand as much as possible. I’m sure your editors at *Il Giornale* will appreciate what I have to share,” she said.

They exited off of the main strip for a smaller dirt path lined by pink and candy blue hydrangea bushes. A white stonewall house emerged. Potted honey lilies and spider plants dripped from its wide balconies, where they’d dined together before. Serafina parked the hatchback and outside they stepped into a fresh breeze of *zagara* oranges and sweet pea blossoms. Paula followed the woman inside, her ears still ringing with the sound of gunshots. They climbed a tall, spiral staircase that led to an office well-lit by the large French windows overlooking the Mediterranean Sea.

“What is it that you wanted to show me?” Paula said. She was eager to leave, anxious to be done with Sicily for good.

“One moment please,” Serafina said, as she went through the top drawer of a filing cabinet that stood beside a tall row of glass-enclosed bookshelves.

Paula took in the room. A naked I-shaped desk sat between two high-back leather chairs. An enormous cork board occupied much of the wall space parallel to the desk. Among the pinned note cards full of unintelligible Italian scribble, hung a collage of photographs, some of which Paula recognized. There was that famous one of the Sicilian magistrates, Falcone and Borsellino with the former sharing something private to the later during what appeared to be a press conference. They were both blown up in a car bomb during the early nineties, for their legal work against the Mafia. Then there were other pictures, more recent shots of the trash dumping in various public locations throughout Sicily. Then the faces of people, the victims perhaps. One girl, a teenager, who wore a bright easy smile framed by the long wavy locks of her brown hair. Her photo was positioned just above the one of Falcone and Borsellino.

“Who is this?” Paula said.

Serafina pulled a manila folder out from the drawer and snapped the cabinet shut as she turned around. She came closer to where Paula stood and frowned.

“That was Melissa Bassi. The Sacra Corona Unita, the Pugliesi Mafia blew up her school a few years ago in Brindisi. She was sixteen years old.”

Paula stared hard at the girl’s photograph. “Why?” she said.

“To scare the people, keep them subdued,” Serafina said. “And also to serve as a reminder of what they did to Falcone, considering that Melissa’s school was named after his wife, and that the bombing occurred near the twentieth anniversary of his assassination.”

Paula shook her head, speechless. Then another photo caught her attention, this one separated from the rest—he was a handsome young man, perhaps in his mid-twenties, with a full head of dark curls, and a hawkish nose hooked over his playful grin. She noticed the way in which Serafina gazed at it without comment.

“This is your son,” Paula said.

“Taken not too long before he became ill. My ex-husband and I thought it was only the

flu at first. He was gone in three months," she said.

"What was it?"

"Leukemia," she said. "Stefano worked the land here like his father. They were so alike in that way. They wanted nothing more than to root themselves to this island. Most of the youth leave Italy. The miserable economy makes finding employment next to impossible, especially now. But Stefano didn't care. This was home for him."

"I'm sorry," Paula said.

Serafina handed her the manila folder. "Don't be sorry," she said.

The weight of the file surprised Paula, though she couldn't bring herself to peruse through the stack of documents just yet. Now that she had some of the information she wanted, she was afraid of what she might discover, and what that much might ask of her. She realized then that there was no extricating herself from what lay ahead, as if time itself had become no more than a tangled knot, compressed into the same sticky mess, unavoidable no more. Paula took her place in the chair opposite the lawyer's desk and asked where they should begin.

girls

monica noelle simon

i couldn't convince you to come back
and they told me i shouldn't try so
instead i took two bites of a sandwich
and threw it away. at least i could do that.
i'm lucky. a radio station played that song,
you know, the one i watched you
finger on your guitar, you know,
the soundtrack to my over-active heart
i couldn't seem to turn it off, so
i plucked a cigarette out of the pack
and decided it would count as dinner.
dumb girls are always shrinking their
waistlines. smart girls run marathons,
get a ph.d., meet someone new. not us.
we look at the number on the scale
and think somehow, magically, it
will transport to your brain. or maybe
we don't. dumb girls, we know nothing
except we have no control. food controls
us. we need it to live, to run, to breathe,
we need it to have the energy to clash
our bodies against yours at 3 am.
we need it to see how this story will end.
love, this story will end. our story has ended.
they tell us this is disorder. quite literally
we are taking the order out of our lives.
first the cookies, then the cake. maybe
some vegetables can stay, who cares,
the magic is gone, it all tastes the same.
i need disorder to distract me
i need the hunger to scream to my brain
like the panic button on a car i parked
two feet from your house the day you said
goodbye. goodbye comes in forms.
goodbye is a tuesday night when it's raining
goodbye is wondering if you can hear me
where you are. goodbye is the empty plate,
the sharpness of my rib cage, my protruding

clavicle. it's disappearing not by your wish,
but by my own. you want me to go, but, baby,
i don't need your help. i can do it on my own

CANDY FROM A STRANGER

John Tavares

Martim received a call from the new majority shareholder of Silva Nootropics as he drove his silver Subaru. The new owner wanted to know what he should do with a fresh batch of candy he had manufactured which contained caffeine past its expiry date.

“I honestly don’t know,” Martim replied in his cellphone as he drove past the dip and curve on the provincial highway near the creek.

“But you owned and ran the company,” the retired NHL player said.

“That was before you took over. Any issues with raw materials like stale sugar or artificial sweeteners and additives like caffeine past the best before date never arose,” Martim said. “We, I, tried to use the freshest raw materials and ingredients.”

“But caffeine one day beyond its expiry date should still be potent,” he said.

“You’ll have to talk to a pharmacologist,” Martim replied.

“Come on. Can’t you give me some sound advice here?” he pleaded. “You’re still a consultant for the company. It’s part of the deal.”

“I say you should dump the batch,” Martim said.

“Dumping that lot of candy is going to cost money, and it’s a waste of food, and I don’t like to waste food.”

“Then speak to a food scientist or a pharmacologist.”

“Where do I find a pharmacologist or food scientist?” he asked.

“The University of Toronto, or the University of Guelph. Check the company contacts in the big black book, or the phone directory; there was an agricultural scientist and food scientist who worked as a consultant for us before, but she’ll probably charge you a hefty fee.”

The retired hockey player and new owner hung up the telephone on Martim, who unwrapped the gold foil from the candy and slowly sucked the coffee flavored caramel. The candy slowly melted in his mouth and soothed him, even though it had the equivalent amount of caffeine of a third of a cup of coffee. The coffee candy also contained the amino acid L-Theanine, reputed to exert a relaxing effect and enhance cognitive function.

Martim drove his all-wheel drive sports car past her every evening towards the end of winter, with its gradual metamorphosis to spring, as he drove northbound along the Northwestern Ontario highway to the gym and fitness centre in the town of Beaverbrook. She was tall, elegant, and beautiful, with long dark hair and dressed in skin-tight athletic apparel, despite the chill, cold, snow, and wind. She had a beautiful face, he thought, exotic, unlike any he had seen, even in the cosmopolitan city of Toronto. Her mother was an indigenous woman who worked as an Oji-Cree teacher and translator for the Residential School at Pelican Fall on the Lac Seul reserve; her

father worked in administration at the Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs in Beaverbrook. Over six feet tall and slim, with long black hair in a French braid, she jogged alongside highway several kilometres each day. She turned back when she reached the tourist camp lodge and bridge above the narrows and the rapids which tumbled through narrows, which separated the two lakes. Then she ran until she reached her home somewhere on the highway above the incline down towards Moose Creek. Her image filled his mind, and he simply couldn't forget her. She was simply that beautiful, albeit he guessed she was a student. After spending the day monitoring the financial markets and trading for the accounts of his clients, he drove the ten miles into town to the fitness centre. He worked on his routine in the gym: he alternately lifted weights and dumb bells and drove the stationary bicycle, running on the treadmill, climbing the stair climber, and working out on the Nordic machine. Then he sat in the sauna and heated his body and showered. He returned home, having combed back his thick locks, which started to grey around the curly fringes.

The early spring turned out to be unseasonably cold: the roads were icy, even in late March the temperatures at night were below zero. He had nearly exhausted his winter's supply of firewood and resorted to heating with heating oil in his furnace and electrical baseboards. At first winter was mild and then, when spring arrived, cold temperatures refroze the ice on the lakes and melting snow.

As he drove down the highway back home, he occasionally passed her wearing an orange vest on a bicycle, or even if it was late, more likely she was jogging. Having retired from the candy making business, he took up photography as a hobby, and she struck him as statuesque and striking, so much so he thought she should try modeling professionally. The tall young woman, dressed lightly, continued to run alongside the shoulder of the highway. She ran at a steady but strong pace on the paved and gravel shoulder. In fact, he sometimes felt concerned at her light dress in the cold and wanted to offer her a ride home, but he didn't want to interrupt her jog and give the impression he looked to take advantage of her.

On April's Fool Day, he saw her as he drove home. The temperature was minus twenty degrees and snow was drifting slowly in thick coats on the asphalt and forest. As he saw her jogging along the highway and broke open a fresh bag of candy, he thought that she looked more dressed for a jog in the park on a spring day. He feared she would succumb to exposure, trip while jogging, sprain an ankle, and then have difficulty reaching her destination before cold, exposure, and exhaustion settled upon her, and she became another victim of the elements. He remembered reading in the community newspaper that a barely intoxicated man, with pneumonia, had recently succumbed to the cold while he hiked along the trail that ran alongside the highway out of town. He was reluctant to stop until he read the temperature on the interior gauge read minus twenty.

"Can I give you a ride?" Martim asked, as he pulled up next to her.

She continued jogging. He drove alongside her while the cold air rushed past the

open windshield inside the car and the fog of their breath and the smoke from the heat of the car clouded the frigid air.

“It’s extremely cold. Don’t you feel the cold?”

“What cold?”

“The temperature gauge inside my car—which was actually warm before I rolled down the windows—say it’s minus twenty-five degree Celsius, which is minus four degrees Fahrenheit.”

“I don’t know Fahrenheit; I only know Celsius.”

“Are you sure you don’t want a ride?”

The closer he came to her the better look he obtained and the more striking he thought she looked.

“I feel comfortable running.”

“But it’s very cold and I’m concerned about your well-being.”

“Are you a police officer?” She started to stride along the middle of the road beside the driver’s windshield.

“No, but I’d prefer if you ran along the shoulder of the highway and not beside the driver’s window,” Martim said. “I don’t want you to get hit by a passing car.”

“Are you a police officer?”

“No. What makes you think I am?”

“Because you’re authoritarian.”

“I’m what?”

“Bossy.”

“I’m worried about you,” Martim said, raising his voice. “It’s twenty degrees below zero, not counting the wind chill, and you’re wearing a thin layer of athletic apparel and nothing else.”

She grew flustered and paused her high-speed walk. “OK.”

He stopped the all-wheel drive car. She opened the door to the rear seat, but when she saw his camera equipment, stacks of textbooks and newspapers, and his bags of golden wrapped candy, she sighed. He apologized and leaned back, shifting the pile and clutter into the opposite back seat. Groaning, looking away from him, she took a seat in the passenger seat. Martim started driving along the highway back out of town, where he thought she lived, not far from where he lived on the lake at the edge of the provincial park. The snow started to come down hard. “See what I mean?”

She shrugged, annoyed, as if her mother reminded her not to wear so revealing a crop top. She showed him her smartphone and asked if she could recharge the phone in his car. He was impressed; it looked like the latest version of the most expensive smartphone, but he told her he did not have the cords or adapter. She said she had enough power to call her mother.

“If you like, I can give you a ride,” Martim said. “If I leave you now at the side of the highway, you’re going to have to wait a while in the cold for your mother to come driving, assuming he doesn’t get stuck in the snow.”

"I can jog."

"But, if your mother drives through the snow for you, she can get stuck in her car."

"She has a four wheel drive."

"Well, you're in my car already. Just relax. I can drive you. And it's getting colder, though usually the temperature rises during these weather systems with snowfalls."

"I'm not a weatherman," she said.

Martim switched the radio from public radio station to the popular Northcliff radio station, thinking she liked popular music, as she started to drive along the highway.

"I usually work out every evening at the gym."

"So you drive twenty kilometres into town so you can ride a stationary bike or jog on the track inside a building that has carbon monoxide fumes from the Zamboni they use to groom the ice on the hockey rink."

"Well, you could inhale fumes jogging on the highway."

"Yes, but the amount would be minute and you wouldn't be polluting the environment."

"I understand. It's a little bit ironic."

"And isn't it a little bit expensive?"

"The gym isn't expensive, if you buy an annual membership. Then you knock it down to a dollar a day."

"That's three hundred upfront, still too much money. And you could donate that money to a charity for malnourished children in war torn areas, or to the local homeless shelter." She was more thoughtful, intelligent, and argumentative than he expected. "Why not just jog or cycle along the highway or bush roads?"

She looked as if she was wearing many hundreds of dollars in the latest, most fashionable athletic apparel—a bit of irony in that, he thought. "Because I don't have much of a social life, and I get a chance to meet and chat with people at the gym. Some people I haven't seen for years because I was born and raised in this area but moved away for college." He unwrapped a gold foil candy and started sucking. "If you wanted to start working out at the gym, we could car pool."

"What good would that do when I don't have a gym membership?"

"I could buy you a membership."

"Why?"

"My good deed for the day."

"My mom can afford to pay."

"Or I could pay you."

She shifted uncomfortably. "Why would you want to pay me?"

"Modelling."

"What?"

"I'm an amateur photographer, and I'd like to try working with a model. I've never worked with a model before. Would you model for me?"

"I'm not a model. I'm a college student."

“I’m not a professional photographer, but I think you should think about being a model.”

“You’re not the first person who told me that. I’m actually studying to become an ultrasound technician. I’m in my third year and I was supposed to be doing my practicum right now.”

“That’s an excellent choice of profession. I have a client who’s an ultrasound technician. He earns over one hundred thousand dollars a year.”

“He must work plenty of overtime.”

“He works some overtime, but he has plenty of experience, and the hospital pays him well for his skills and experience.”

“Anyway, I’m taking my third year off to deal with an eating disorder. If I become model, my eating disorder will only become worse.”

Martim felt surprised she disclosed something that personal. “I’m sorry.” He realized it was a mistake to offer this young woman a ride, whatever the weather, or comment on her photogenic appearance. He slowed the car down, so the motor vehicle wouldn’t skid and slid along the highway, and stopped. “Shall I just let you off here?”

She glared at him and held up her smartphone as if ready to take a photograph or make a cellphone call.

“Sorry.” Martim drove silently along the highway as the skyline and thick forest darkened and the snow continued to fall. “Haven’t we passed your place yet?”

She shifted and blushed. “I live further down the highway, near the summer bible camp.”

Martim thought her answer didn’t sound right; he thought she was lying simply because she didn’t want him to know where she lived, which was fine with him, but the idea shattered whatever illusions about her he may have nurtured. “This is a fair distance. You actually jog this far?”

“Some nights. Some nights my mother or girlfriend or boyfriend picks me up.”

“You have a boyfriend?”

She nodded and blushed. Every evening he saw her jogging alone, and he had never seen her picked up by her mother or boyfriend. Moreover, she jogged with such an intensity and persistence he feared she was suffering or punishing herself. Martim reached into the back seat and realized he may have been exposing her to his body odor since he hadn’t showered after his workout at the gym, but he supposed it didn’t matter because she smelled a bit sweaty. He offered her a pure orange juice in juice box or a caffeinated energy drink from his food cooler.

“Do you want something to drink?”

She shook her head and looked back at the books on the seat. Then he decided to offer her some flavored nootropics candy made by the company he started in the basement of his uncle’s house in Toronto. When she accepted a handful of candy from the freshly opened bag, he expressed surprised, but added, “Don’t worry the wrappers are tamper proof. I made certain. I grew up around the time of the Tylenol poisonings.”

She looked at him with wide startled eyes. “Are you a teacher?”

“No, I’m an investment advisor. I buy and sell stocks, bonds, mutual funds, and electronic trading funds for myself and clients.”

“In Beaverbrook? Who has money for stocks and bonds in Beaverbrook?”

However much he initially thought she would make an attractive model, the more he got to know her the more he thought she would make a fair lawyer; she appeared skeptical, cynical, and even inclined to cross-examine. “You’d be surprised, but most of my clients are from out of town.”

“Shouldn’t you be, like, in Toronto or Winnipeg?”

“Maybe. But I have roots to this small town—my parents immigrated here and I’ve never been able to escape. I have property here, too. I inherited my parents’ house. Then my brother died when he was driving home in the winter. He was a freight train engineer, fatigued after work, a long railroad trip west. Still, he drove home in a blizzard, and his minivan skidded on this very same highway when he fell asleep at the wheel. He suffocated when he crashed into a snow bank. Afterwards, I bought his house on the highway, where I now have a home office, with an excellent view of the lake. Some clients are delighted with where I live and visit me during the summer for fishing and boating.”

She tore open the foil wrapper and bit down on the candy, so he could hear her teeth crunching. He wanted to tell her she should suck, not chew the candy, for optimal taste and effect. “And I started the company that manufactures the candy, a small boutique operation that supplies mostly health food stores. The candy contains 33 milligrams of caffeine, approximately the dosage of caffeine in a third of a large cup of regular strength coffee, with equal amounts of the natural sweetener stevia and sugar for sweetness. It’s even supplemented with a few B-vitamins and the amino acid L-Theanine for a mild natural soothing effect to counteract the caffeine jitters. Adding the nutrients and supplements, though, made taste a challenge. Since coffee is practically my favourite food, I decided on a coffee flavour. I spent weeks learning to make candy and even more weeks formulating the flavour and texture, so it was palatable. In fact, coffee is the only flavor; I gave up on making others blends because none tasted as good—to my tongue, anyway. What’s the saying, ‘Do one thing, really, really well.’ Anyhow, the candy sold well, but I got stressed out. I ran myself ragged managing the company, doing everything from formulation, cooking, and delivery, when I reached the point where all I wanted to do was read a book and pursue my hobby of photography. I managed to sell my business practically the moment I made my decision. I received enough money to live comfortably for the rest of my life because I’m a frugal and thrifty guy.”

“And modest, too?” She twisted the corner of her mouth.

Martim pointed to the name in tiny print on the label: Silva Nootropics, Inc. “See that’s my name and the name of my company. The new owner, an NHL hockey player, decided to keep the name for brand recognition.”

She looked closely at the wrapper and read the fine print label. He handed her some more candy—indeed, he gave her a whole 250-gram bag, which she managed to stuff in the pocket of her tight hoodie. Then he drove past the turnoff for a logging road upon which several houses were located. “Like, that’s my street.”

“That’s a logging road.”

“There are houses at the ends of some of these roads, believe me. I live in one of them.”

He suddenly noticed a degree of uptalk in her voice: a sign of nervousness? Martim drove along the main road of sand and gravel. She told him at a fork in the road, her house was at the end of the driveway.

“I can drive you right up to the house.”

“No,” she insisted. “I don’t want my mother to see.”

“Sorry, I understand.” He handed her his business card but she handed it back at him, after she took a quick look.

“Silva Wealth Management? I don’t need wealth management. Thanks for the candy, though.”

“Nootropics. It’s not candy; it’s a nootropic, a mild cognitive enhancers.”

She bolted from the passenger door into thick crust of snow on the road. Martim reversed the car along the length of the lane until he reached a cleared area beside a pile of sixteen-foot logs and turned and sped and skidded along the snowy road until he was back on the highway.

He spent the evening watching a documentary on the financial crisis and working on a correspondence course in corporate finance and then fell asleep reading a camera manual. Late the following morning, he woke up to the sound of a clock radio. While he brewed coffee and made toast, he checked the status of the financial markets online and on the cable business news networks and took a few calls from clients and adjusted some investment and retirement portfolios, buying and selling stocks. At around noon, he took a few pictures with his telephoto lens of the cardinal flying around the bird feeder. He turned on the radio, tuned to the local station news, and heard news of a young woman missing in the area. He turned on the television to news of the financial markets. His mind distracted, he couldn’t hear that the market had dropped three percent, over two hundred basis points, or make any connection.

In the ensuing days, as he drove into town for his evening workout, he didn’t see the young woman jogging along the highway. For several nights as he drove along the twisting, winding two-lane secondary highway into town to the municipal recreation facilities which housed the gym, he noticed he did not see the girl jogging alongside the highway. He originally thought nothing of the news report, and he tended to avoid the local radio station because it played so much irritating pop music. Then he heard on the regional radio stations news reports sounding wild and ominous: canine units visiting from Thunder Bay, a detective travelling from other provincial police detachments and investigating, volunteer search teams in the dozens combing fields

and streams and lakeshore near her home. He thought of dropping by the police station and telling them at which turnoff on the highway and bush road he dropped the university student off.

Then Martim heard on the radio ongoing news about her disappearance: one report quoted a family source who said she used her cell phone to call the friend's house she intended to visit after she was dropped off in a car by someone she described as a creepy. She asked the stranger to leave her near her friend's home, on a rural road, further along on the highway, since she did not want him to know where she lived. The police believed she might have become lost in a labyrinthine of logging and mining roads around the house of her friend, whose father was a logger.

A few days passed after the initial reports of her disappearance. Then an ice angler found her frozen corpse in an ice-fishing hut on the lake near her friend's home. The police said she sought shelter in a culvert beneath the logging road. Search and rescue volunteers, members of the snowmobile club and volunteer fire department, followed her path and footprints from the logging road to where she huddled in the culvert. They followed the trail of gold foil candy wrappers she discarded to an ice-fishing hut. Martim cringed when he read her friend said she received a call from her after she was she was dropped off in a car by a man who made her afraid and she described the driver as a creep. The police thought she became lost on the roads and bush as she tried to reach her friend's house. The battery in her cell phone lost its charge, and she ducked in a culvert for a frozen creek beneath the roadway. Then she followed the creek a short distance into the frozen lake and sought shelter in the ice-fishing hut to escape the wind chill and sub-zero temperatures. The angler returned for a last ice-fishing trip to dismantling the hut before the ice on the lake melted during spring thaw. If she had been able to start a fire in the woodstove, he figured, she would have survived, since he stored enough wood piled around the shed to heat the interior for a few days. Martim decided to explore the roads near where he had dropped her off. Driving his all-wheel drive car, he became lost in a maze of abandoned logging roads and roads that led to mining and outpost camps. When he came to a frozen creek where the culvert was visible from the road, he parked his car in the bush. He followed the footprints along the logging road and through the bush and found a candy wrapper. He walked to the culvert and saw a scattered a pile of gold foil candy wrappers. This did not look like an expert crime scene investigation: this was the work of search and rescue workers, volunteer firefighters, snowmobilers, friends, or neighbours, he figured; otherwise, they would have seized the candy wrappers as evidence. He picked up the wrappers, deposited them in his pocket, and felt relieved she may have derived some sustenance from them. Martim went to the car, walked to his car, donned his winter parka, gloves, and toque, and followed the trail of footprints along the frozen creek, along which there was still occasionally dropped a gold foil candy wrapper. They did not even pick up the wrappers and exam them. They did not notice that a local boy had done good, made a success of himself in the city by starting

a candy company, specializing in nootropics, which he sold for a few million dollars to an National Hockey League player before moving back to his hometown.

He followed the trail of footprints and candy wrappers to the lakeshore and the frozen lake, where he spotted the ice-fishing hut from the trail along the shoreline. There was crime scene tape wrapped the hut but his curiosity overwhelmed him. He broke into the hut, forcing open the door, snapping open the padlock, and found the interior as she found it, although she left behind gold foil candy wrappers and paramedics dropped wrappers for medicine supplies and the caps for needles. He took a walk back to the culvert, followed the trail of his own footprints and those of others that led along the road, clutching the candy wrappers in his parka pocket. One could have hiked the maze of roads for miles only to reach to a dead end, an abandoned hunting and fishing lodge, a wrecked cottage, an area of cutover with planted saplings and seedlings. She had become truly lost. The incident and her death stunned him, and even caused him tears, but he decided to mention their encounter to nobody. Each night he continued his drive in his silver car through the sleet and snow of the seemingly never-ending winter. One evening, he contemplated skipping his fitness routine during another unseasonal snowstorm but drove to the gym anyway. On the return drive home, in the blizzard at night, the tires of his all-wheel drive motor vehicle skidded on the highway at a sharp curve and dip in the road at the bridge over the creek. He struggled with the steering wheel and brakes, losing control of the car as the tires slipped on the ice and the vehicle fishtailed. His silver vehicle collided head-on with a huge snowplow barreling down the narrow highway. The wreckage of his Subaru was strewn across both lanes, the car windshields shattered, the front end pancaked by the massive snow scoop of the stoic truck. He still carried boxes of complimentary samples in the backseat of his car, alongside his laptop and briefcase, and scattered for dozens of meters across the pavement and snow and ice from the wreckage of the motor vehicles were the candies in their gold foil wrappers.

The Life of a Private Eye

Michael Larrain

for James Crumley, in memoriam

Lately

I've been finding round smooth stones
in my pants pockets
and naturally assumed I had slept on the beach,
been awakened by the incoming tide
and washed up at a seaside diner
where the waitress called me sugar
(though my clothes were crusted with salt).
She slips a mug of coffee down the counter to me
and the woman down the way
who looks a little like Veronica Lake might look
if she were trying and failing to look
like Humphrey Bogart with a hangover
opens her trench coat and shows me
that god is still at the top of his game,
then slips a small silver flask
out of the inside breast pocket,
tilts it back and forth and
jerks her head at the exit.

Along the sidewalk are people
holding all their belongings,
their *worldly goods* in their arms
and looking around as though
a place to live might be found
in the lower chambers of the upper air.
"I used to keep the sea in this flask," she said
with a rueful smile, "so I could drink and
float on my back at the same time. But now..."
Her voice trailed off. She didn't seem to be
talking to me, in any case. She cinched
the coat against the wind off the ocean,
slipped the flask out and handed it to me.
The cold vodka hit my blood stream like
a young blonde touching down on a ski slope at dawn.
We passed a dark alleyway

strewn with garbage and dead winos,
leading to dazzling beaches
where beautiful girls were surfing nearly naked,
balancing big umbrella drinks on their boards.
The most stunning wore a one-piece made of bees.
She was a humming golden blur above curling blue water.
But if you tried to walk down the alley
to get to the beach, the girls, the umbrella drinks,
sinister forces gave you no end of grief.
A few steps in, you found yourself on a
tributary of the alley, a shortcut to nowhere,
or, rather, somewhere you had been before
but not in person.
Eventually I wised up and realized that every one
led you into a different movie.
With my luck I would always play a butler.
I didn't want into the picture business anyway.
I preferred hoofing it aimlessly up the boulevard
with the trench coat babe, fingering
the round smooth stones in my pockets.
Having already seen her naked
(the lightning flash that reunites
the origins of time with the end of all that is)
took the edge off my need to see her naked.
Now I was free to luxuriate in her company and conversation.
All around us were tenements undergoing
very slow demolition, the wrecking ball
a destruction-bent comet heading for a planet
as yet unborn, *no hurry, baby, don't worry 'bout a thing*.
The squatters were Talmudic scholars,
safe-crackers, conga drummers. She
spoke of her father, her first love, the mother
she had lost, the daughter she could not find,
the pattern of the wallpaper in her room
when she was little, her fear that she was
trapped there now, in the wallpaper.
The salt in the air was the promise of future sorrow,
she explained, handing out playing cards
to the homeless folks on the sidewalk,
a four of clubs to the washed-up movie star
whose name was no longer remembered,

a three of diamonds to the crazy old woman
who played the ukulele so beautifully
and sang in the voice of a crow,
a queen of spades to the down-and-outer with immaculate nails
dressed in a very old tuxedo and a battered fedora.
"Gotta go, my shopping cart is double-parked,"
he said, but stayed. "Our parents were missionaries
in China," he told me. "My mama was a fortune-teller and a whore
who foretold her own downfall, then turned
to preaching against fornication and strong drink."
My companion ruffled the man's hair affectionately.
"This is my brother, Jacob," she said. "He's out looking
for our daddy, a prophet of doom who
tap-danced as he roared out the bad news
to the uncomprehending Chinese in Kowloon.
They ate it up, couldn't get enough."
"So long, Deli," he said, and pushed off, but not
before pressing two canned goods upon me.
"Short for Delilah," she said. I'd noticed
that his cart was filled with nothing but cans
of pineapple slices and artichoke hearts
and that he'd given me one of each. "Is he on
some kind of special diet?" I asked her. "No," she said,
"He's not even homeless. He just never goes home.
He wanders around looking for our father, who is, or was,
uncommonly fond of artichoke hearts, and my daughter
who dotes on pineapple slices. He hasn't had
any luck so far, but by nightfall most days he's traded
the artichoke hearts and the pineapple slices for leads
to their whereabouts." "Did she run away?" I said.
"We had what you might call a 'falling out.'" she said.
"It was my fault. I would look at my girl and think,
'Where do you put the water when
the vase is already filled with light?'
Then we quarreled and before I could apologize,
she vanished without a trace."
"What's her name" I said.
"Well, her given name is Lorelei,
but I've always called her Honeysuckle,
because swarms of bees used to follow her around
when she was little, as though

she were made of wildflowers," she said.

"But they never did her any harm."

Then I began to put it all together. The alley, the one-piece swimsuit, the pineapple slices in the umbrella drink of the girl who was a golden blur above curling blue water. The sign that read "Wildflower Alley."

"My fee is a hundred dollars a day," I said, "plus expenses. But we could forget about the money. I already owe you a drink."

The look of gratitude she gave me more than made up for anything I could ever say, do, think, care about or work my ass off trying to figure out. Now I knew what I had to do, go down that dark lane, stay out of the movies, find the girl, reunite her with her mama and somehow get home in time to tuck my own daughter in.

The trench coat babe slipped me the flask as I was setting out. "For luck, she said, in a throaty whisper, "If you find my Honeysuckle, you can keep it."

It was the damnedest alley any man ever stepped into, A creek cutting across it diagonally, coming out of one wall as sweet as you please and disappearing into the other, the walls themselves were covered with wildflowers growing out of solid brick.

I felt the dead crowding around me, trying to take a selfie with the living.

Outside, it was mid-morning, but if I looked overhead

I saw the night sky, the stars opening like switchblades that would cut you from your first kiss to your last words.

I wet my index finger and drew a line against the sky at the identical angle the creek crossed the alley.

Call it a hunch.

A slanting channel of illuminated carbonation appeared in the water, indicating where it would be safe to ford the little stream.

The water was close to freezing so I took out the flask and knocked back the last of the vodka. On impulse, I held it down in the creek and let it fill with cold water.

I hear you're supposed to hydrate.
The cuffs of my pants were soaked again
but it didn't seem to bother
the family of wild turkeys
who walked by without a care.
When I stood in the entrances to the tributaries
and concentrated hard, I could tell
which movies they led to: spaghetti westerns, espionage pictures,
romantic comedies, screwball comedies, silent
comedies. I was tempted for a second to wander
into *Shanghai Express* (1932) with Dietrich,
Clive Brook and Anna May Wong, directed by Von Sternberg.
I'd never been in black and white.
But I kept going toward the beach.
Just as I was about to step out of the alley
a black 1937 Cadillac pulled up,
blocking the way. I couldn't see the driver's face
but in the passenger seat was an old man
with hair like a white campfire
holding an intricately carved oak walking stick,
a shillelagh, really, out the window
and pounding it on the roof for emphasis.
*"If nude girls flew above us in the sky
performing the laziest of figure-eights
on the airiest of roller-skates
we would look more often to the stars
but instead we concentrate
on staying out of bars"* he said,
and banged his shillelagh
on the roof of the Caddy again.
On impulse, I held out one of my canned goods to him.
He regarded it like the baby Jesus
with a lottery ticket taped to his forehead.
"Praise the lord and pass the artichoke hearts,"
he said, and I offered him a sip of water
from the flask. "That's the best damned vodka
I've ever tasted," he said, actually smacking his lips.
But I had killed the vodka and refilled the flask
from the creek, with water outside
the illumined panel I had used to cross. Apparently,
the creek was a natural, or supernatural, distillery

and ran pure moonshine. From now on, I'd better stay the hell away from Wildflower Alley. There was no need to ask who he was, not after I glanced down and saw the old but still elegant tap shoes on his feet. A bee flew by me, headed for the waterline. I said my goodbyes and set out after it, as though a humming had taken me by the hand. She looked so much like her mother that from a distance of twelve feet you couldn't have told them apart, except that Delilah's hair was cropped short and Lorelei's fell in drenched waves to the dimples in her back. She had just completed a perfect ride deep in the curl of of a twelve foot tube, planted the end of her longboard in the sand and leaned against it negligently. The one-piece had been discarded in favor of a bikini, also made of honeybees. Her suit made conversation difficult, what with the constant blur and motion of the bees. Every once in a while, one would fly off on its appointed rounds, but they always returned. "What are you doing out here" I said, after explaining why I was there. "Your mother's been looking all over for you." "I've been looking for my uncle," she said. "He's out looking for your grandfather." "I know where my grandfather is," she said "He's out looking for my mother." *I must be the Einstein of stupidity, I thought. They're all moving in a circle, like the pirates and Indians in Peter Pan. If I can just get one of them to stand still for a while, everyone else will bump into him.* "Do you know who the driver is, the one at the wheel of the old Caddy your daddy is riding around the boardwalk in?" I said. "I'm not at liberty to discuss it," she said. "But it's the real reason I ran away. I provoked the argument

with my mom and then used it as an excuse.
I wanted to see if I could make it all come true.
And find out if the waves were breaking left or right."
It wasn't hard to spot the Caddy, it was
the only car parked with its tires on wet sand.
He was standing on the running board in an ice-cream suit,
doing a righteous cha-cha with a cocktail shaker,
the sunlight flashing off the white sidewalls
and the wire wheels sparkling
in call and response to crashing surf.
His companion, the driver, was sitting inside
wearing a bee-keeper's hat, and heavy gloves.
I slid in beside her as she lifted the veil
to take a sip of her martini, nodding her approval.
The sight of her face told me even before she spoke
who was chauffeuring the old charlatan around.
"Our moonrise ritual" she said. "Pardon my bizarre appearance.
I have to wear this rig when I'm around my granddaughter.
A bee sting would send me into anaphylactic shock."
"It may not be my place to ask," I said,
"But I got the impression from Delilah
that her mother had passed on."
'That's what she believes," she said,
eyeing a snowy egret that had landed on the left front bumper.
"Years ago, I found my husband in a compromising
situation with one of his young Chinese converts.
She was in a state of advanced undress,
and they were both speechless when I walked in on them,
guilt writ large upon their faces in English and Mandarin.
I didn't bother demanding an explanation, just left him
then and there, and took myself off to sort out my thoughts.
Later, when I found out my husband had been set up,
that the naked Chinese teenager, a pretty little thing,
was an agent of the Baptists trying to muscle in
on his congregation, I was flat-out mortified. That was
how I had first met him, after all." She sighed.
"It's like the gunfighter racket. There's always
some new slut in town, looking to make
a name for herself. How could I face
my family again after falsely accusing my husband,
who may be a a rascal and bit of a loon,

but he's a good man who believes his own foolishness.
I faked my death by having an obit published
in a small paper on the Ivory Coast of Africa,
where it's important to get bodies in the ground in a hurry,
so that no one would have time to attend a funeral. And I paid
an old friend to erect a marker over the supposed grave."
"But how did you get here from wherever it is you went?"
"I had learned the secret from my granddaughter.
It's a sort of water-borne tin-can telephone between worlds."
"And how did your widower learn you were still alive?"
The old man leaned in through the window
and offered me a martini, ice cold, straight up, no olive.
"At the instant of my death," he declaimed,
"I will be translated into fourteen languages:
fox, fog, railroad train, tree frog, typhoon,
empty saloon, tenor sax, shorebird tracks,
emperor whale, filling sail, rising tide, lowering sky,
coyote cry, and the mysteries of a woman's heart,"
"Every time he delivers that speech,"
the bee-keeper whispered, "He changes all the languages."
"But to answer your question," he said.
"I saw the love of my life, she whom I'd thought
was lost to me forever, strolling down the boardwalk,
veiled, in a white caftan, as though she'd returned as
a ghost whose walk I would have known anywhere.
I proposed to her again, thinking
she'd be my wife in her own afterlife."
"Are you planning on telling your daughter
that you're alive?" I asked her.
"Yes, and soon. But we wanted a second
honeymoon first," she said. "It's like young love
in an old body, and even more fun
because we have to keep it from the children."
But there remained the problem
of how to get Lorelei and her grandfather
from the beach to the other side of town.
which seemed to exist in another dimension.
Her grandmother declined to make the journey
on the grounds it would be undignified. She
would stay in the small waterfront hotel where they'd
been enjoying their post-posthumous, doubly-marital

and happily unreformed love affair and wait for her husband and daughter to join her later.

"We can't go through Wildflower Alley," Lorelei said,"

"Only one man's ever come out of it alive.

Say, how did you get here anyway?"

"Oh, I kind of drifted in on the tide, like a note in a bottle."

"And we can't swim around the point. There are vicious undertows you don't want to mess with.

But I know a sort of secret passageway," she went on.

"About a quarter of a mile offshore,

There's a blue hole that goes down almost three hundred feet, where it opens into a series of submerged caves that run beneath the town. If we swim through the caves, we can re-emerge just out past the breakers on the other side."

She issued diving equipment to her grandfather and myself, and we went to Where the Sea Weeps Itself to Death.

When we walked back out of the ocean, we were right in front of the diner where I'd breakfasted a few hours before.

I had cut off my trousers just above the knees and the round smooth stones were still in my pockets.

Needless to say, I was barefoot. You don't want to go slapping down the boulevard in diving flippers.

"I hear that only one man has ever made it through Wildflower Alley and lived to tell the tale," I said to the preacher man, failing to mention that we'd become brothers of a kind. I shook the flask at him,

"How would he have done that, do your suppose?"

"I never set foot in the alley," he said, "I rode the currents of the creek from the mountains down to the seashore."

"How did you keep from growing too polluted to even float?" I asked.

"It's like anything else," he said, taking a pull,

"You build up a tolerance. I had a vision of my granddaughter, with a light behind her. It turned out that the light was my wife, the very light of my life."

The trench coat babe was in her old place at the end of the counter, leaning against the wall,

her hands jammed into the pockets,
squinting out from under her hat brim.
But her eyes opened wide at the sight of Lorelei
and her grandfather. "How did you find my daughter?"
"Oh, I just followed the honey." "And my father, too.
You've unearthed my entire past."
"That's me, always thinking five moves behind."
I reckoned I had tipped my hat to the lady
by way of saying goodbye, then gone on a
five day bender with the old preacher, which would
explain my blacking out the whole episode afterwards.
That's how I figured it had gone down, anyway.
But the truth, as it happened, was quite otherwise.
My own girl child (as she confided to me while
I was telling her sweet dreams that night), thinking,
*Where do you put the water when
the vase is already filled with light?*
had been picking up the round smooth stones
from the rock garden
in our front yard and slipping them
into my pockets as a joke while I slept.
If it weren't for the slightly damp ace of hearts
I found in my back pocket before turning in,
and the Mexican silver flask
and the visions of all the characters' futures
I glimpsed in the wallpaper of her room,
I'd think I had been on the wrong case the whole time.
Such is the life of a private eye.

by Ace Boggess

Battle Beyond the Sun

A.P. Dovzenko Filmstudio, 1959

I heard there was a space race once
(before my time, just missed it):
rockets chasing rockets to the moon
because Sputnik chirped & Kennedy said—
ah, but who cares what anybody said?
It's the idea *we're better than you*,
although we aren't, but we both have the bomb.
There must be a way to beat each other down
while not blowing each other up.
How about a trip to the moon, then Mars?
Folks still talk about heading for Mars—
plotting & building, selecting a crew.
Not the Soviets (gone) or Americans per se:
private groups of moneyed dreamers, fire-
eyed engineers, the occasional prophet of gloom.
As for this Russian film with English overdubbing:
it gets most of the future wrong,
predicts our same two sides still fighting for space
in a finite but expanding universe.

Future Women

Ada Films, et al., 1969

Kind of a piss-poor attitude, if you ask me:
smug & graceless, praising the violence.
Gangster-hearted also,
these scheming, gun-toting bankers
keep a wired vault that's filled with gold.
Oh, but those outfits:
lingerie mixed with leather,
vinyl, capes. See, it's not ideology
that makes a fascist fascinate;
it's passion & a hint of sex appeal.

The Manster

Lopert Pictures, et al., 1959

Lord, I have become the story I wanted to write,
loosed my ugliness,
binged without repentance on the dark.

This is the prayer of a man with two heads:
one loving, the other a beast.
Can either be blameless,

its next burning, wild on blood?
I was a reporter once, seeking
my inverted pyramid in trivia.

I called that news. Now news calls me by name
as ink runs like mascara
trailing down the image of my face.

The Golden Voyage of Sinbad

Columbia Pictures, 1973

Mine is a map
on a charred wall.

Mine is the voice
in the well.

Who needs a treasure
of infinite wealth?

It's too much
for a man to keep

in the pockets
of his pants.

Bloodline

Janet Damaske

My mother had the best set of legs; anyone who ever saw them would agree. They didn't see much sun and they didn't go on forever like some great legs do, but they were dancer legs, always working, twirling, pointing, flexing, barely ever still.

When she got the call that her cancer had come back for the third time, she and I were standing in a subway station. When I saw her face fall, I sat down on a bench and lowered my head, my eyes resting on those legs. They were still for longer than a moment. But when they started moving again, her body stayed still and her left leg straightened and stiffened, while her right leg swung forward, kicking back, toe pointed. I heard her words, quietly spoken, but kept my eyes on those dancing legs and hung onto a shred of hope.

My daughter Grace, now 4, got her Grammy's legs. They have more definition than one would expect in a tiny person, solid little calves, a miniature version of my mother's, with the right calve a bit larger than the left. Her legs do not work with the skill that my mother's did and her toes are never pointed, but they move just as fast and often. Legs pumping, arms flailing, she dances and skips and she runs, towards me, away from me, sometimes stumbling, always counting on me to steady her, no matter where I am.

Grace and Mom missed each other by six months and seven days. I took the pregnancy test in the hospice house where my mother was dying of ovarian cancer. She cried and then laughed: "I bet that's the only pregnancy test that's ever been taken in this place." It was April then; we thought if only she could make it to Christmas, she'd get to meet my second child. But she was gone by May.

In the weeks when my mother lay dying, Grace was taking form – her heart pumping blood; her brain and spine developing; her tiny nose, toes, fingernails, all brand new. I cannot decide how I feel about this, that at the precise time my mom's heart was slowing pace, as her body was shutting down for its final rest, Grace's was booting up. The little girl whom Mom and I had spent years envisioning slipped right past her Grammy, leaving me hopelessly shouting, "You missed her! You missed Grammy! She was JUST HERE!" And to Mom, "Tell me you can see this child. Tell me you aren't actually missing this." One is here and one is not.

And now, I see my mother's legs and her petite hands and her long, narrow fingers and the walnut shell shape of her eyes in my 4 year old girl. I wrap her folded hands in mine and cup them to my face, breathe her in. I never meant to see my mother in my

daughter, but I do, and I am grateful, but also troubled.

My mother got her good looks and her hot temper from her mother. Her love of music and her nervous energy came from her father. And, it seems, the mutated BRCA2 gene that we discovered in the years before her death came from him as well. This imperceptibly small error lay along the Chromosome 13, where one particular gene, whose job is to suppress certain cancers, breast and ovarian among them, simply does not work. The BRCA gene ended my mother's life long before her body should have ever shut down.

I can't say I was shocked to learn years after her death that the exact same mutated gene ended up on my own Chromosome 13. I have her green eyes and her inability to lie and that tiny dimple at the top of my left ear. I have her nervous energy and I have her bloody BRCA2 mutation, and I have a terrible suspicion that my daughter does too.

"Will Grace have to do what you did?" My seven year old son asks on our way home from karate.

He refers to my double mastectomy and my bilateral salphingo-oophorectomy, though he doesn't entirely understand what he's asking or what's gone on. My breasts and ovaries and fallopian tubes are gone now, but that doesn't mean a whole lot to him. He has been told there will be no more siblings, which he's responded to with relief more than anything. And he knows that if he puts his hand on my chest I will flinch, not out of pain, but because I'll never get used to this numbness. I've been scraped out and refilled, and what is there now is hard, foreign, and entirely man made.

"I hope not, Noah, but I really don't know," I say, looking in the rearview mirror as Grace, buckled in her five-point harness, stares sleepily out her window.

When he was 5 and she was 2, and I had just learned I was BRCA positive, I had my breasts removed to prevent my near 50 percent chance of getting breast cancer before age 70. My toddling girl stared at me in bed, poked at my bandages and stared at the drainage tubes protruding out of my skin. "That hurt, mama? Your boobos hurt? Why did you get boobies at the hospital?" The words are used interchangeably and over time, it sticks. Boobos, boobies, they are the same.

My tiny nurse watched over me in the weeks that followed my mastectomy, nestled up to my side, sometimes standing over me as I awoke from medication-induced naps. She'd stay an arms length from the tubes dangling from my chest, but she was not afraid of the rest of me. She'd run her tiny finger along the bandages, and later, along the bright red scabbing lines, and later, along the fading scars. She'd check on me by the day; she'd comment on my improvement. "Oh! Better! The boobos look great,

Mama! No more boobies!”

If ever I'd been forced to picture this time of my life, breasts removed, a sense of disfigurement sweeping through me, it was my mother who was standing over me, feeding me comfort and warmth, with soft words and soup from a can. But in her place, a not quite three foot, fuzzy-headed, pacifier-addicted, heavy-breathing, sweaty morsel of energy. She fed me plastic chicken thighs in tiny blue bowls made for stuffed animal tea parties and I felt better.

Early this year, when she was 4 and I, 36, a spike in a routine screening test resulted in a surgery my doctor advised I have as soon as possible, and so out came my ovaries and my fallopian tubes and any hope of one more pregnancy. I came home exhausted and infertile, and began my recovery by sleeping through the day. Grace peered in on me, listless on the couch, that late Friday morning, and then quietly mentioned she was tired too. She walked up the stairs and slept, three long naps within that one day, broken up only by mealtimes. She hadn't napped in over a year and she's never napped since. She will likely not remember this day, but I always will.

I did not expect to accept empathy from a 4 year old or nurturing from a 2 year old, but I suppose she started holding me up long before I even met her, perhaps from the moment I realized a life was starting in a place that only sees death. A chance of hope, subdued indeed by my own shame at envisioning a future while those residing in the same space were reaching back into their lives once lived or, worse, simply at a standstill, just waiting to die.

Because I never really believed my mother was actually dying, even as she lay on her deathbed, she held her place in my daydreams, right plunk in the middle, holding the new baby while I chased my son. Still, today, she is there in my head, coming in the front door of my home, whisking the kids away to the park, laughing as she closes the door behind her and runs to catch up with them.

The room across the hospice house hall must have welcomed and parted with at least five people in the six weeks we were there. I always knew when the end had come; calmly whispering nurses, sometimes with tears, followed by an increase in activity in and out of the room. At some point, our door would get quietly closed as the room across the hall was emptied. I listened and watched as it all took place, every time, and still I could not picture the moment that this scene would be ours to experience.

Things were perhaps more settled in our room, but our shared desperation became more palpable by the day until we could not help but acknowledge it. One day, we sat up in her bed with my laptop, and she bought clothes for her grandkids for the next

several years. Another day, she sat the family down to explain where all Christmas decorations could be found. Other days, she talked about where she wanted her clothes to go after she was gone. On the nights when it was only she and I, we talked about baby names.

Most days, I lay next to my mother in a reclining chair and sometimes I crawled into bed with her, unable to put any space between us. At times, I sobbed until I could hardly breathe, and when my mother, sinking deeper, could no longer calm me down, the thought of my little boy and the tiny person I was supposed to be making usually did; I'd catch my breath, anyway; I'd pause to breathe. I wondered if a fetus could survive this sort of stress. *Hang on, please just hang on*, I thought, hand on my stomach, eyes on my mother.

I hovered over her in those final weeks, checked her feeding tubes, brushed her hair, added blush to her cheeks, and, later on, I sat towards her head and dripped water from a sponge, the slowest drips, every few minutes, onto her lips and her tongue.

What I wanted, every minute, just one more lucid moment with her, and then one more, until the day came when I was too afraid I'd waste her energy if she gave it to me. I begged my father to stop trying to make her talk because I wanted her around longer. He looked at me frantically and I covered my face, knowing full well I had chosen her stability over his.

And there I was, both daughter and mother to my mother, holding on for dear life.

The years following my mother's death were uniquely lonely and humbling for all of us. I did not stop it – or even realize it – when Grace, in her infancy and in all her innocence, somehow took the reins and blindly guided us along. I welcomed her neediness, my hands in motion all day, changing diapers, offering milk, wiping spit-up, thrusting something new into the life of our family.

I never meant for Grace to help save us from our grief. But it couldn't be helped. Born into a family in mourning, this six-pound morsel seemed to have passed her maternal grandmother in the night. Six months and seven days after our loss, here was Grace, reflexively grabbing our thumbs and not letting go, and we could not help but feel a relief akin to rescue. It was never fair, but it couldn't be helped.

And now she is a child. I look towards this little girl and, it seems, I've created a miniature version of myself. I see her fine, scraggly hair and hear her raucous, unapologetic laugh. I watch her in her shyness, stepping back, observing, and I see her, in moments, tangle her words in her tongue and quickly ask me to erase what she said. I see her head in the clouds and her eyes on me and, as I look back at her, I see

my own reflection.

But oh, how I want a map of her genes, to be assured that if we magnified her Chromosome 13, it would look exactly like her daddy's and nothing at all like mine. Perhaps the day our coded strands were grabbed and combined at random was a lucky day for her. I am full of doubt, but for now, what more can I do but hold onto the chance that her shapely leg gene and her boisterous laugh gene lie on any other chromosome than 13? Perhaps her BRCA2 gene is entirely intact and we have somehow broken this wearisome, worrisome pattern.

Each morning, she slowly emerges from her room and walks downstairs, a late riser like me, with her arms outstretched. She's getting big now, but I lift her up and she collapses in my arms. I pat down the thin layer of hair that covers her head, pull it out of her face and look at her. "I missed you last night!" I say, and it's true. Because, after all, this is a love story. It is a love story with perhaps more complexities than other love stories I've been able to tell. It's a love story between a daughter and a mother and a grandmother, though two of us have never met. Here are three Davis girls who, in and out of life, have held each other together, swapping roles, instinctively grabbing ahold of one another in desperation or support. Yes, we are daughters of BRCA, but more importantly, what runs through our blood is fierce love, an intuitive need to heal each other's pain, an energy that endures on and on and on. We dance on until we're entirely out of breath.

I was not there the morning my mother died. After weeks of sleeping on a hospice house couch, I began to think that if this baby did have any chance of surviving, I needed to spend my nights in my home, make steps towards some sense of balance. The last evening we spoke, she was barely conscious and impossibly weak; she had not moved on her own in days. I sat on the left side of the bed, leaned over her head and kissed her again and again. "I can't say goodbye but I need to watch out for this baby," I said. "I think I need to go home tonight, Mom. How can I go?" I laid my head and arms upon my mother's tiny body and shook with sadness, soaking my face and her sheets. And then I felt a hand on my head, the gentlest touch, now smoothing my hair. I looked up and saw her face, drenched in tears, and I saw she was nodding. *I will miss you so much*, said the sorrow in her eyes. *But you need to take care of my daughter and my grandbaby*, said their twinkle, still alive, amidst the green. At some point that night, and I don't know when, I lifted my head, rose from her bed, and slowly walked to the door.

by Olivia Mertz

Rosie's Riverbed

She points to a patch of papered grass

picked dry by birds bleached hair

straw strewn against the river's edge.

And that is where I lost my virginity, laughs

beside the river's winding, she points at the patch where reeds snake

windblown wheat bones of summer of light

knocking seedless heads.

a cold March afternoon, nearly still water still frostfringed

our mudded boots bend and

she is quiet today.

the shadow of her figure stretched tries to trample her first

bedded now kneehigh nest, her first

touching this place the shadow in snow

and I see her then habitual red

14yearold body dark in the grass

pried thighs open a crash of tossed rock into river.

Someone's Monologue

We take turns getting high—barn or pond side.

 baby-gabey, we say, cannot know, stays xbox sidelined.

Every time I come over dad ushers me with an elbow

or ben bends towards me head rocking

or rosie's eyebrows raise, rouse me from the room.

 It is starfall on the pond

 stars sitting on waterceiling like lily pads.

Disappearing on the dock, we let each exhale in effort

 a new shadow, ben breezes rings into wind.

The 3 of them, their matching browlines

 eyecavities heavier, a habitual red.

I take flashlight to the dockedge lighting

 the algae throb of fishfins their yellow

weaving deeper, offended almost

 away.

I am high and calm as the highway's quiet thrust
a carlight's rare illumination of our smoke
peeking beneath the water, finding fish.

There is always an argument or someone's monologue, but to me
a tuned out tv screen flashes silent pictures on the pond top.

The Forest, Loudly

deep summer beavertail waterslap in aspen clearing

we swam in the dam

my brothers, sister and me

slapping mud on each others' faces smelling shit

white branches throwing in a mud puddle pond

found the dam first deep

in the grove not then whitt l e d

we never see the beavers

just trees chewed like carrot sticks

fine chips at the base of an amputated forest

there must be chalk on the mouths of the monsters

munching numbed by aspirin in aspen bark in leafbuds

every morninglight bears another absence

bare of bodies but bloodshed in pooled

piles of heart shaped leaves

in the fall we wrap the trees in blacktar bandages

wrapping in the dark flashlights in the dark while

the forest loudly chews and eats itself inside out

Watching Jon Etter

June 5th

I don't know what to write in a journal. At least not a journal about myself. I wonder what she's writing in her journal.

I guess I'll just go update my other journals. Gerald's going through a messy divorce, so I've got to get the details down while I still remember them all. I should have started with him. Guess I was just eager to get this thing started.

June 13th

I screwed up. I shouldn't have mentioned her. Maybe someday, but now's too soon.

I guess I should talk about my family—you can learn a lot about people by their family. Like the fact that Ann Marie comes from a really religious family, which is why she gets upset when people in the office swear and why she flipped out when Wayne told that dirty joke.

My parents were nice people. My father worked in sales. He never talked much about it though. In fact, he didn't talk about much of anything—he always said he spent way too much time talking on the job, so the last thing he wanted to do was talk when he got home. He didn't ignore me or anything. He looked at my report cards and asked how school was going and stuff. When he saw me reading, he'd check the titles. He didn't like fiction—said that it wasn't real, that a man should focus on the world around him not on “make believe.” He was right, too. What's real is way more interesting. He died of a heart attack when I was twelve.

My mother was also really quiet. She was raised by parents who believed that children should only speak when spoken to, which is how she raised me. She cleaned houses during the day. Before I started school and during breaks after I did, she used to take me along with her. She always brought along coloring books and crayons when I was little, but I preferred to look around the houses. She didn't seem to mind since I always left things the way I found them.

I really started to get to know the two of them when I was about six. I went down to get a drink of water one night after my bedtime when I heard the two of them talking in their bedroom. I sneaked over, sat down next to the door, and listened. I can't remember what they talked about that first night, but I know that it was the most I ever heard the two of them talk at a stretch. When they finally stopped, I sneaked back up to bed.

After that, it became a nightly ritual for me. I'd go to bed when they told me, pretend to fall asleep, and then sneak down and just listen. That's how I found out how much my father hated his job, how unsuccessful he was, how much my mother

resented the fact that she had to work to support the family, and everything else about them. That's also how I found out that they really hadn't wanted me. But they did their best raising me, so I really can't complain.

Well, that's enough for now. It looks like there's a big to-do in one of the apartments across the way that needs some attention.

June 18th

School was really where I started to figure out what I was. I'm guessing that's when most people like us figure it out.

When I started school, I was really quiet and awkward. The other kids at first kind of scared me—they were so loud and energetic. I just really didn't know how to relate to them at first and got picked on a lot. You know how kids are.

After a while, the teachers stopped trying to force me to interact, so I kind of stood or sat off to the side and didn't say anything except when someone said something to me, which wasn't often. As long as I just stayed out of the way, they left me alone and picked on somebody else.

I soon learned that you can really get to know somebody well if you just watch them from a distance. Within a couple months of figuring out my place, I really felt close to my class—I knew who had secret crushes or not-so-secret crushes, who swiped lunches on the sly, which kids were the predators and which kids were their prey, and a lot more. And as the years went on, I got to know them even better. I eventually learned that a lot of the crush kids were just starved for attention, that the lunch stealers were just plain starved, and which of the bullies and the bullied got even worse beatings at home.

It was from all of that that I learned about how life works. It's like a movie or a play. You've got the performers—people who go out and do things and kind of put on a show, the people everybody pays attention to. And then you have the backstage people, like camera operators and costumers—people who are there to basically help the performers put on the show. They do the work, they buy the drinks, they encourage the performers—basically, they do whatever it takes to keep the show going.

And then there are people like us. We're the audience. The show doesn't make any difference if nobody is watching. So that's what we do: we watch. The only difference is that it seems like in real life, there aren't as many of us in the audience. Or maybe there are more than I think because everybody is so good at it? And since there seem to be so few of us, it's that much more important for those of us in the audience to pay close attention to the drama around us.

That's why I first started keeping journals on people. While the other kids played kickball or four-square, I'd sit under a tree or against the side of the school and take notes on what they were doing. It's funny—my teachers always said what a good writer I was, especially when it came to writing stories. All I really did was to just take stuff that happened and change the names and a few details. That's how I learned that my father was right about fiction being a waste of time—it's all just real stuff with a few lies

thrown in.

Speaking of journals on other people, time to get to that.

June 22nd

Junior year in high school I took things a little too far, I guess. I decided that I wanted to get closer to all the people that I had come to know over the years. My mother's house-cleaning work had grown in the years after my father's death, and a lot of the parents of my friends at school had become her clients. So one spring, I started borrowing my mother's keys to their houses so I could see where my friends lived. I'd figure out who had extracurriculars after school, and then I'd keep an eye on their houses for a while to get an idea of when the first member of the family would get home each day. Once I knew when it was safe to go in, I'd start popping in for visits.

At first it was a lot like when I was a kid—I would just go in, walk around, and get a feel for the place. I was like a ghost haunting those places, except I only came out during the daytime and I wasn't that scary-looking. It was nice and peaceful in those houses, and I felt like I was getting closer to the kids in my class.

The big payoff and eventually the end of my visits came when I got a little more bold and started going through drawers and looking under mattresses. That's where I found the holy grail for people like us: diaries. If you think that you can learn a lot by observing people, listening to their conversations and stuff, you would not believe all that you can find out about them if they keep a diary that you have access to.

Actually, I'm sure you do know. Sure, a lot of it's just what you can catch during the day, but then there's all the stuff about what's going on inside their heads and behind closed doors...

So anyway, it all happened one Thursday afternoon. I was so caught up reading Vanessa Griffin's diary that I didn't hear the front door open. Fortunately, I did hear the stumbling and giggling coming up the stairs in time to dive under the bed. (That, by the way, is also how I found out that my mother doesn't usually bother to clean under beds.) While I'd been reading about all the things that she wanted to do with Jason Knoedler, she apparently had decided to skip track practice to actually do some of them. So I had to lie there silently while she did them (or him, I suppose) on the bed above me. I worried that I'd be stuck there until nighttime and would have to try to sneak out after everyone had gone to sleep. Fortunately, Vanessa and Jason left after an hour or so, and I had just enough time to hustle my dust-bunny-covered butt out of there.

That was the last time I made a visit like that. I was almost caught, and, more importantly, I figured that I had broken one of the rules of our existence. Audience members get to see what we're allowed to see. If they want us to see them get intimate, they leave the windows unobstructed. If they want us to read a note or a diary, they leave it sitting out in the open for us to find. Sneaking into someone's home when they've locked it—that's like sneaking backstage at a theater. It's not part of the show and it's none of our business unless we're invited back there.

After that, I stuck to looking in through windows. That's the stuff they want you to see. I even got a pair of binoculars at a pawnshop to see better. They're great—I still use them.

June 28th

Right after I graduated from high school, my mother made it clear that I needed to get a job and get out on my own. At first I thought about getting a job at the post office as a mail carrier, but I decided against it. There'd be too many people on a regular route to really get to know well, plus I decided that opening mail, like sneaking into a house, was inappropriate and off limits. Then I thought of working in a mailroom at a company, which is how I ended up at my current job.

Mailroom work is perfect for audience members. Almost everything sent intra-office is unsealed, which is clearly an invitation to be read. Making the rounds delivering mail gives me a chance to get to know everybody and overhear things without really being noticed. Sure, a few of my coworkers occasionally try to engage me in polite chit-chat, but most just give me an absent-minded "hi" if they acknowledge my presence at all. It's great.

My job also gave me the chance to move into an apartment building, which is about as perfect a situation as possible for someone like ~~us~~ me. The walls are paper-thin, so I can sit in the kitchen and listen to the old married couple in the apartment next door or I can go into the bedroom and listen to the young woman on the other side (not much to hear there except on those rare occasions when she has a date or company over). It's also pretty easy to listen at doors and pretend I'm going to get my mail or heading out for groceries if anyone comes. Plus there's another apartment building right outside my window, and it seems like almost everyone who lives there wants to be seen because hardly anyone ever draws their blinds. In fact, in summer, most of them leave their windows open so that I can hear their conversations as well as see what's going on. That building actually is much more interesting than mine. I've thought about moving over to it, but I probably catch more of what's going on where I am.

July 1st

Well, I guess it's time to get to the big stuff, which all started a few months ago. As you know.

Over the past seven years, I've gotten to know the people in our company really well. While there's always some turnover each year, most people who work here tend to stay, which is great—I've always preferred long-term relationships where I can really get to know people. I have a hard time imagining what life would be like without Gerald, Karen, Tom, Cindy, and everyone else. That said, I always take a keen interest in the new hires.

The first thing I that really noticed about the new data processor was that nothing really struck me about her. Usually, when people move into their cubicles, the first thing they do is personalize them—put up posters, set up framed pictures of loved

ones, lay out assorted knick-knacks. Not her. The only thing on her desk was work. After a couple weeks, that was still the case.

The other thing that puzzled me was that she didn't seem to have any personal relationships. She didn't chat with her coworkers or use the phone for anything other than business. At lunch, she would sit on her own in a corner, gazing around the room and writing in a notebook that she always has with her. The notebook made me think that she was an aspiring novelist. I've worked with several people who saw their jobs as just a way to get by until their artistic career took off (Bill Andrews still thinks that his white, middle-class, suburban blues band is destined for success), but for some reason that didn't seem to quite fit her. It was kind of driving me crazy—I just couldn't figure her out.

And then a few weeks ago, it finally made sense. During my rounds that day, she wasn't at her desk—her whole department was in a meeting. One of the drawers on her desk was partially open, and I saw the cover of her notebook peaking out at me through the crack. I knew that I probably shouldn't look at it. She did put it in a desk drawer, which would signal that this was private. But at the same time, she did leave it open a crack, which could indicate a subtle invitation. With no one around and my curiosity getting the better of me, I eased open the drawer and took a peek...

And there it was! The answer! The notebook was filled with her observations of her coworkers! Every day at lunch, she was writing down what was going on around her. I didn't dare read much, but what I saw looked like what I do, except briefer and she didn't keep separate sections on each person like I do (which I think is a much better way to do it). That was why I couldn't figure her out.—she was like me! She was audience! I always knew that there were other people out there like me (there had to be—who ever heard of an audience of one?), but I'd never found one before.

Excitement, however, quickly gave way to uncertainty. Now that I knew this, what should I do about it? Should I still chronicle what went on with her life? Did I owe her some sort of professional courtesy and ignore her, pretend I was as oblivious to her existence as everyone was to mine? Or could I—should I—tell her that I knew and let her know that I was like her?

I became obsessed with that last thought over the next several days. Why shouldn't I tell her? Why shouldn't she know that I was like her? Why couldn't the two of us talk about the stories that surround us? Why should we continue to be separate and alone? It got so bad, it started to affect my other relationships. Peggy's fight with Tom barely got three sentences in her journal, I missed a bunch of details about Gerald's split with his wife, and I completely lost track of everything going on in both of my apartment buildings.

I finally decided I needed to say something, but what and how? Several times at work I tried, but all that ended up coming out was a quick, "Here's your mail." At lunch, I walked over to sit down at her table, but chickened out at the last minute. I even started following her after work to the subway, but when it was her stop, I'd just sit

there and keep riding, cursing myself for being a coward.

After over a week, my desperation finally became too much to bear. I was going to say something or I was going to burst. After a sleepless Thursday night, I decided that the best way to take care of it was to wait until after work when we could be alone. As the day wore on, my stomach knotted up in a combination of dread and excitement. During my rounds and at lunch that day, I almost said something, but I held myself back and bided my time. God, I've never had a day pass as slowly as that one!

After work, the subway was even more crowded than usual and I ended up crammed right up next to her in the middle of the car. At one point our hands briefly touched when her grip slipped on the pole we both clutched. When we came to her stop, I almost lost my nerve but managed to push my way out just before the doors closed. Then I almost couldn't find her in the teeming station before luckily spying her going up the exit stairs, her appearance being to me now glaring in its unobtrusiveness.

I followed her for a couple blocks, letting the crowd thin out and screwing up my nerve. Finally, she turned down a small side street, and it was just the two of us.

"Excuse me," I called out, quickening my pace to close the gap between us.

She didn't even turn around. I rushed up to her and said it again, daring to tap her on the shoulder as I did it.

She turned around, looking kind of startled. Suddenly, I had no idea what to say. Here was my big moment and I was speechless. I just kind of stared at her, dumbfounded. She looked confused and a little uncomfortable. I finally manage to spit out, "Hi," and then after a long pause, "I... we... we work at the same place."

"I know," she said, looking down at ground. "I've seen you."

There was a long, awkward silence after that. Finally, she asked, "Why have you been following me?"

"I haven't... I wasn't..." I started to stammer. "Well, I mean, I was... but..."

"You've done it before, too, but you always just stayed on the subway before."

"I... I wanted to talk to you," I said.

"Why?" She sounded genuinely surprised.

"Well... I, um, I read your journal." She started when I said that. "You know, the one you're always writing in."

"You what?" she asked, surprise, fear, and anger seeming to mingle in her voice. "How?"

"That day you were in the meeting and you left it in your desk, I—"

"No one is supposed to see that! You had no right to go through my desk!"

"I didn't. I just saw that the drawer was open, so I thought that maybe meant that you wanted it to be seen."

"No! I was just in a hurry. Oh, God—" she moaned.

"It's okay," I said. "I won't tell anyone. In fact, I'm just like you."

"What do you mean?"

"I—I do the same thing. I'm also one of those people who watch other people. And I keep journals on them, too."

She looked straight at me now, instead of looking down or to the side. "Why are you telling me this?" she asked.

"Because... I don't know... Because maybe we don't need to be alone to do what we do? Maybe—maybe we can do it together?"

I couldn't read the expression on her face, but I could tell that she was shrinking back from me. She looked away and said, "I can't— It's just—I have to go!"

"But—" I said.

"Just leave me alone. Don't follow me," she said as she turned and hurried off.

I went home and collapsed on my bed. I couldn't believe how stupid I had been! People like me aren't supposed to accost people on the street. People like me aren't supposed to make overtures to other people. People like me are supposed to just watch. And listen. And stay out of everyone's way. And, I concluded, that's what I would do for the rest of my miserable life.

Most of the rest of that weekend is a blur of self-recrimination, self-pity, dejection, and despair. I must have done something with my time other than agonize over what had happened, but I'll be damned if I can remember what. The only part that is clear is what happened after I went out to have some lunch that Sunday.

When I came back to my apartment, a note had been slipped under my door. At first I assumed that someone must have picked the wrong door, but then I saw my name on it. Here's the note:

I'm sorry I ran off on Friday. I just wasn't comfortable talking to you like that. I'm not very good at talking to people. I prefer to sit back and just watch life go on around me, like I'm a fan at a game or something.

I've thought about what you said. I've thought about it a lot, and I think you might be right. But I'm not ready yet. I need to know you better before I can do that.

I was thinking that maybe we could both start writing journals about ourselves for a change, like real diaries that other people write for themselves? Then we could maybe leave them sitting around at work so that we could take turns swiping them and reading them on the sly?

If you want to do this, just start your journal and leave it on your desk in the mailroom Monday. If not, I completely understand.

So that's what we've been doing the past few weeks. And it's been wonderful!

July 15th

She's coming over tonight and bringing some of her journals with her. We've talked at lunch the past couple of days about them and I'm eager to see them. I keep trying to convince her that it's much more orderly and creates a stronger narrative to keep separate journals on each person, but she seems dead set on doing holistic, day-to-day journals for each environment—office, apartment, neighborhood, etc. I'll keep an open mind, but I really think I've got the better system. We'll see what she thinks.

I've also got her a little surprise (and I know that it will be a surprise because this notebook is staying under lock and key until after the visit). I bought her a really nice set of binoculars. She probably has some, but these are first rate. Plus she didn't say anything about bringing hers, and there's the potential for a big fight across the way that I'm sure we'll both really want to see.

I finally figured out what has been missing from my audience theory all these years. Sure, maybe on some rare occasions you end up as an audience of one, but usually there are more out there. And being at the show is really a group experience. It's not just them up there on the stage and you alone there in the dark—it's you and everyone else there in the theater, coming together and being part of something bigger than everyone involved. The performers feed off the audience's attention, and the audience's hearts swell and beat as one to the drama both in front of them and between them there in the rows and aisles. When you're in the audience, you're never really alone.

by Allan Johnston

Clear Cut
Idaho, 1974

I hired on with Ray Donavan
to mop up clear-cuts south of St. Maries.
Ray called me "Injun" because of my hair.
A fat kid with chaw-stains on his teeth
ran the big saw. We'd climb through log jams
knocking out any stump over three feet.
I was so green, a city boy,
I'd do things like drop logs on my helmet
while I was in it. At lunchtime I'd crawl
to the road. We'd eat together —
Ray, me, the kid — then Ray would kick back
into one of those amazing
sleeps you never find anywhere
but by a cat road in the woods.
He'd just cover his face with his old hat
and fall in

and the kid
would grab his chain saw and head over the hill
to knock out the big trees just for fun.
I'd sit, half-awake, the big saw whining
somewhere above and away. The tear
of crashing trees on distant slopes
somehow triggered snores that kept on
welling out of Ray.
And after a while I too would drift
off into dreams, inconscient dust
track—

swirling off the cat

but each snore
killed whatever
dream I entered,
brought me back
bark-stiff and startled to Ray lying dead
as a dog while forests faded
from my dreams, but something somewhere
also seemed to be rising from sleep —
the chain saw singing its insistent
insect hunger through fallen forests;
the dust that choked; clear, cutting light:
I'd start up, wondering where to turn.

Potato Farming Near George, Washington, 1975

It was a town you'd never
return to if you had
the ill star of ending
up there for god knows what.
I was there for potatoes,
camped by a rusty, half-sunk
trash can of a Quonset hut
and up each day at four
to torture my lips
with coffee boiled to mud
in a ten cent pot
from the Salvation Army
and spiked with hooch
to get us through the day.
One gas station, two bars,
and Rosy's Cafe was just about it.
At Joe's Club you could hear
the farmhands jaw through
their tractor dirt for hours
and hours about the tits
of some waitress or who
was dinking the sheriff's wife.
You were listening to
America's heartbeat, I guess,
after thirteen hours riding
the harvester, throwing the cow bones
and blight-sick milky hulks
of potatoes into the trashed fields,
the digger beneath you loud
as a B-52. Rosy's was the place
where you'd tabasco your hash-browns
week after week finding the same
farmhands jawing, jawing
till you walked out the door
and ran into the morning
that lit up the highway
from Spokane to Yakima
in a way you never noticed
from your place on the diggers,
no bonus if you quit.
So Rosy's it was and always
would be—the sky bright
all the way to the Rockies, crisp
as a French fry, golden as heaven,
there for you here, now.

Cutting Cedar Shakes in the Aladdin Star Valley, 1975

Deep in winter the work went on—
the knock of mallet on the froe
into the top inch of wood, then the twist
and pop as the shake sang off

and span to the ground, or, caught by hand,
was passed into the pile.

The other parts— the bark, the culls,
boards too curved by knots for use —
went to the other pile
that slowly heaped in the driveway
on the ice until the cold
of the work, the height of the wood,

or some deep love of flame
called for the can
of gasoline.

With a quick dowse and a tossed lit match,
the pyre rose high in burning.

It was afternoon then,
and all the day of work
was measured by the waste we lit
and stood before, warming,
cold beers in hand
to signal the end of something —
the day, a shake pile, all our labor.

Even as we stood, the heat
worked into the driveway ice.
It sent small rivulets of water
running down the driveway

toward the road, sometimes freezing,
sometimes reaching
the Star Route.

Hay House

The green tractor hobbled
in huffs upon each chugging spill
as the baler excreted rectangular
impactions of the hay in fattened
dominoes. Bruce would lean in
along the truck side with the bale hooks
winging out of his fists, each one
a mutilated hand,
fantastic pirate fingers stabbing
into the sides of bales to sling them
up with rhythmic ardor born
with repetition, hard and sorry
in exhausting out of mind
with the weight and repetition,
these bales handed or flung up
the truck side. They birthed from that round
of chugging baler into this sweating
straw-chuff world. My hook would find
the bale and lug it where it fit
that house of hay we built up
on the truck bed, not for joy
or for fairy-tale pigs,
but just as a stack of grey-green bricks
of hay. The hooks would send
each bale up to a place determined
by the building that came from loading
on the truck, and so seemed
like something made by being part
of the work of clearing the land
before the freeze could cut the worth
of hay, eliminate the chance
of harvest. Everything
about the house we built to carry
off into the barn seemed
to create itself, yet left
some debt or hunger to hay's history,
all the bales of all the years
the barns have been here, everywhere,
the taking in, the stacking that
continues in some great line
of work that consumes strength
with repetition and out of grace.

Harvest

In the places where we walked
homesteaders had once tilled
acreage; but since then
more than a century has gone.
All that remains of their breaking
of the earth are the mossy
underlogs of barns and houses
long since dissipated
in the hunger of moss and fungus.
About them stand the apple trees,
feral, climbing still
among the larch and aspen.

Each tree has turned its fruit
away from commonalities
of produce to the subtle
adaptive accidents
of difference in tartness, sweetness,
taste, size, shape; distinct,
shrunken, varicolored
— again
the great introspection

of nature; again
the grace notes of mutation,

fruit and sweetness drifting toward
the coming wilderness.

Apples, cannabis, and insects.
Apple-gorged and smoked out,
we would sit and listen
as the humming, sexual waves
of insects worked across the fields,
opening with the moving of
the songs, each indistinct, all mixing
into one great rhythm.
These too came in swells
as each species was fulfilled,
its sound replaced in surges rolling
over us as we sat,

listening, tasting: here to know
some part of the world: the fruit, the harvest.

Gone To Seaside

T E Cowell

It's morning now, a sunny one with pink billowy clouds about the horizon. Ron's sitting in a wooden rocker on the balcony, he's been watching the shifts in the morning light with a kind of indifference, a deserved kind of ignorance. His mind is planted on his wife, and everything else, the events of real-time, move without his impression.

He nurses a cappuccino he'd gone down to a cafe for. A blueberry scone, behind him on the kitchen counter still in its paper bag, rests beside his phone. Ron's been visiting this town each summer for the past six summers now, minus that one summer they'd splurged and gone to Italy instead. Had that been three or four years ago? He furrows his brow and rubs at his eyes in an effort to remember, as if remembering will fix things.

He'd had a bad night's sleep. He'd poured himself a nightcap while waiting in vain for his phone to light up with a text or a call. In the course of a few wasted hours he'd finished off the whiskey and passed out with his socks on.

Linda's absence feels stronger than her presence. This truth makes Ron wonder if maybe they have in fact been together too long. But then he shakes his head. A foolish thought. No such thing as together too long, not if there's mutual love. He's been married to her almost thirty years, and now this?

He finishes the last of his cappuccino, thinks he should've gotten a triple-shot. He still feels like hell. His slouched, tired body feels glued to the seat. He realizes no amount of caffeine can help his situation, that more sleep would be best but that it's momentarily out of the question.

The sun's steadily climbing, the clouds on the horizon are losing their pinkness, turning white. The people on the boardwalk go from antique walkers fighting arthritis to middle age joggers fighting fat to twenty-something-year-olds on bicycles clutching surfboards under their arms. It doesn't take long before all the tourists swarm the beach and the boardwalk, the turnaround point, snapping pictures in front of the Lewis and Clark statue, the sun-shimmering ocean behind them, whitecaps breaking.

Ron spots a young girl tossing bread crumbs into the sand. A group of seagulls dive from the top of some light posts on the boardwalk. The girl makes a little squeal of excitement. She stomps her feet and claps her hands. Her young parents stand happily by her side. This is a moment for them, one they'll treasure for years. Tourists slow on the boardwalk to watch. Some take pictures. The young parents are a little embarrassed by the commotion their daughter's started. Being the leaders of honest, quiet lives, they sense their embarrassment between themselves.

Ron guesses about thirty-five or forty seagulls are competing over the breadcrumbs. The birds squawk, flutter their wings and peck at each other. The scene

brings back memories from the summer six years ago, back when the kids were on the initial track to starting their own lives and it was just them again, as it'd been in the beginning.

Linda had tossed a hunk of French bread from the balcony, the same balcony where Ron's sitting now. The bread had landed in the sand in front of a lone seagull sitting as complacently as a mother hen warming its eggs. Soon other seagulls crash-landed in the sand. He and Linda watched for a while as the seagulls fought over the bread. Then they went back inside, into the kitchen for more bread. When they turned around the seagulls had taken over the length of their balcony, staring in at them with their unreadable beady black eyes. Ron can still remember how Linda had laughed—so hard that her feet gave out from under her and it finally looked like she was crying on the hardwood floor.

Sitting there in the wooden rocker, he shivers under the memory. He still needs her, he realizes, he still loves her the same as ever.

After she'd given him the news, the, to him, completely-out-of-left-field news, Ron had been speechless, thinking at first that it was some sort of cruel joke, that perhaps humor was like fashion and it had changed right under his nose. For a second he even wondered if it was April Fool's Day before realizing it was the middle of May. His wife's face had remained the same though, composed, devoid of or expertly hiding emotion. Ron felt the blood drain from his own face.

"Why?" It was all he could manage.

"Life's too short to live my life like it's over."

He can't get her response out of his head. It was a shock, a blow. Ron didn't know where she'd gotten it from, where she'd read it or which of her friends had brainwashed her. He wondered whether this was some kind of rare post-menopausal mental condition where women suffered brain lapses of logic and uttered unintelligible nonsense.

Before locking up the house in Portland and getting in his leather-seated sedan, Ron had left a note on the dinner table. Gone to Seaside, he wrote in his sloppy cursive hand. Hope to see you there.

Linda's Subaru was absent the gravel driveway when he backed out. He didn't know where she'd gone off to, thought she'd just gone for a walk and a breath of fresh air, didn't want to believe that her words had been sincere or that, roaming imagination be damned, she'd been sleeping with another man. It seemed a little belated in life for sensual pleasures. Ron could've understood maybe if she'd been in her thirties or even her forties, but his Linda was fifty-one.

The timing seemed impeccable in other ways outside of age though. Ron came to recognize this soon after hitting the Sunset Highway. Their kids had finally settled into career-type jobs of their own, even Danny, the oldest, who hadn't received his B.A.

until last fall, two weeks before his twenty-ninth birthday. Driving west past tree-shrouded hillsides and flat yellow prairies, Ron wondered if the crux of his and Linda's marriage had always rested on the kids. His mind reached into the past. In those days he'd been swamped with work, stranded at his downtown law office for ten-hour days. Linda had worked too, juggling the role of professionalism meets maternalism, both real estate agent and housewife. Naturally stubborn, she'd rejected Ron's repeated suggestion of hiring a babysitter. She'd wanted to do it all and had somehow found the time not to mention the energy to pull it off. Ron had to give her credit for that. He had helped too, of course, as much as he could.

As he drove in the direction of the sea, he wondered if she could've harbored resentment towards him for not being more involved. He wondered what kind of woman she was deep down, if maybe he'd missed something. They say love is blind.

Around eleven, the sun bright, Ron stands up from the wooden rocker with a sigh and turns his back from the balcony. Back in the kitchen he picks his phone up off the counter. He finds a voice message from Danielle, his loyal secretary. His mouth tightens as he puts the phone to his ear. His eyes close as he listens to Danielle's slightly queasy voice. He doesn't want to think about work at a time like this, and her voice suddenly makes him want to break something. Her message informs him of a young man charged by his pregnant girlfriend for domestic violence. Does he wish to represent the sleaze-bag?

Ron sighs as he takes the phone from his ear. He searches for any other missed calls, texts, suddenly aware of the beating of his heart. He puts his phone in his pant pocket, puts his shoes on and then goes out the front door.

He starts down familiar sidewalks, glancing into storefront windows. He sees plastic hand shovels, striped towels and beach balls. There's a place to ride bumper cars, a merry-go-round, a large videogame arcade. Ron passes people who all seem to share similar traits, like struggling to finish ice cream cones before they melt onto shirtfronts. Passing familiar cafes, restaurants he'd discovered with his wife, Ron feels her absence rush over him again. Though he hadn't touched his breakfast scone, he can't bring himself to enter the sandwich shop, or Pig 'N Pancake, or the cafe by the bridge with the white wicker chairs and the oriental paintings on the walls. Instead, he veers into a dark, musty-looking bar, the kind of place he wouldn't be able to drag his wife inside for anything.

Three whiskey-on-the-rocks later, plus a jumbo dog to cover both breakfast and lunch, Ron's back on the sidewalk, squinting his eyes against the day. Unsure, he retraces his steps down Broadway towards the beach. He takes his phone out of his pocket, squints at it. He finds no messages, no missed calls.

"God-damn-it Linda," he mutters, shoving the phone back in his pocket.

People are flying kites now from the sand. The kites hang in the sky, suspended on

the breeze. Ron looks up at them, sees their colors. He looks away. The whiskey's given him a good buzz. He feels he could walk forever. As long as he's outside, moving, he'll be all right. Linda will either call or leave a text, he feels sure of it now. Her tone will be apologetic, and he'll comfort her with forgiveness. They'll make up and pretend that nothing happened. They won't tell their grown-up kids, they'll never know how close they'd come.

As he walks up the boardwalk, passing the beachfront hotels and apartments, other condominiums, Ron wonders if maybe Linda's on her way to Seaside at this very moment. He imagines her entering the condo, imagines her waiting there for him in her favorite armchair. It's an exhilarating thought. Ron grins wolfishly at the ground as he turns down a street that winds through a quiet residential neighborhood of shingled two-story houses.

He makes a broad loop, as he gets back on the boardwalk he passes an aquarium where people can feed seals fish, something he's done two or three times with Linda. The boardwalk takes him back to Broadway, the Lewis and Clark statue, the roundabout.

Back in the condo, there's the disappointment of emptiness. Ron checks his phone again. Surely there's a message. But no, there's nothing.

He can't hold out any longer. I'm worried, Linda, he texts. Please tell me you're coming. He stares at the text, and then adds an "I miss you" to it. He wants to say more, but stops himself. He hits send, leaves the phone back on the kitchen counter beside the scone still in its bag. He crawls into bed with his clothes on, closes his eyes, breathes. His head's spinning, his heart rises in his chest like he's on a roller-coaster ride. The whiskey buzz is wearing off. In its place is a dead-tired feeling.

When Ron wakes up it's after dinnertime. He goes straight to his phone. He sees there's a text from Linda. His hand shakes as he reads it.

I'm not sure what to say. I guess I feel that I've sacrificed so much over the years that I don't know who I am anymore. I'm afraid my life has been one big joke, or at least it feels that way. I mean, what do I have to show for everything? We raised some kids, sure, but anyone can do that. I want more, Ron. You probably think it sounds silly, but that's how I feel. All I know is that I'm not content with things the way they are. I'd say don't take it personally, because it's not your fault, but knowing you you probably will. I hope Seaside is relaxing. Send me some pics if you feel like it. We'll talk more later. Bye for now.

It's probably the longest text he's ever received. Ron reads it twice. When he looks up he finds himself back out on the balcony. The sun's setting. People are out on the beach, the boardwalk. A few fires burn in the sand, spread over lengthy distances. At the fire nearest him a young woman is hula hooping. There are LED lights on her hoop that shine blue and orange. The lights spin around and around, impossibly fast as the hoop travels up and down her body, around her arms to her hands, over her head. The hoop looks attached to her, it doesn't seem possible that she doesn't drop it, doesn't

make a single falter. A young man, unable to take his eyes off the hula-hooping young woman, sits before the fire on a log of driftwood.

Ron slowly lowers himself back into the wooden rocker. The tears that come sting his eyes. He realizes he can't stay in this town any longer, that it was a mistake coming here alone. He stands back up, turns his back to the beach to gather his things and leave.

Birds of Dusk

Roger Real Drouin

This story is a fictional account of real events.

“Today we enjoy the beauty of our Florida wading birds largely because of these men.” — reads the free standing historical marker, 26 degrees, 54.615 minutes north, by 82 degrees, 05.740 minutes west. ¹

*

Can't find any relations, the deputy says, standing on this side of the open door. *He has some kin back in Placida*, Pearson says, and he asks for the reckoning. With some reservation yet an earnest lawman's exactitude, the deputy proceeds to tell him what they know: a cast netter, Sunday past, came upon Columbus' launch submerged under eight feet of dark water; to keep the boat down, two heavy sacks of sand had been fashioned under the thwarts; his body was never recovered despite the long search of northern harbor and creek waters, but his shredded hat was inside the skiff, with bits of hair, skull and brain matter clung to it. Little other information has been secured.

*

A week previous, upon the cold and wet beginning of November, back where the point of cypress and sweetgum come to the slough, Columbus G. McLeod watched the clouds move in and quiet the light from the sky. The wind filled the absence left by the sharp sun now gone.

Columbus, originally of Placida, watched the clouds, and the curlew circling above, the glossy golden-green and purple, and the pure green of the primaries reflected even without the light.

But the curlew was the only movement above.

He began walking the point, fulfilling his duty, counting.

Since winter of 19 and 03, the water birds were roosting further in, further between, and fewer than ever seen in these parts. Now, one could count seventy fewer.

The rains would be coming soon enough.

Pearson, who had hired him on two previous summers ago as warden of the estuary, says keep watch of the point, and the Myakkae and the northern islands of the harbor, where the egrets and white pelicans would just be putting in their appearance for the winter. But Columbus had learned he'd have to watch over the whole damn estuary. He'd watch it as best as one man could.

The winds turned the leaves of the sweetgum, and further in the hickories and stopper where the curlews and greater egrets and little snowies would soon have built their nests sheltered from snake and gator. Working industriously, there were at least two men, leaving behind scattered plumes, half buried in the muck now at Columbus' boots, and the spent 10 shot, as well as the broken blade and burnt tins discarded in ash. In the wind, Columbus discerned the odor that'll soon bring the vultures and coons, and he watched above the only movement in the clouds, *plegadis falcinellus*, glossed curlew.

*

Middle of the morning, still raining nails, the two men waited under the big water oak. Atoning for his whistling and his dry aigles, the older of the two waiting men, offered the bottle almost full.

Charlie drank the burn and took another, the whiskey coating his gut and warming his blood, but when it reached his feet, all he felt was the hard cold inside his boots and his feet starting to blister. He didn't mind none the hard dirt sleeping ground, nor these winter rains, nor bitter coffee, nor the cold before light. If he could keep his boots dry. But Charlie's boots were soaked through. Later he could dry them by the fire when they finally got to Ogden, but he knew that would make no difference.

The older man, who goes by Tosch, leaned back. From his shirt pocket he retrieved a single egret plume, tucking it up in the dirty hatband, the feather a ghost bright in the dark. With a fashionable twist of his long, gangled finger, he pushed the hat back down on his brow, winking and grinning to Charlie, who took another drink of the burn.

It was a time after the rains let up, out under the oak, when Tosch with his owl ears was the first to hear the distant sparrowhawk, *klee klee klee klee*. He turned slowly towards the high-pitched calls, but then he was sitting cross leg'd, still as rail iron, preparing for his ritual. The old man placed his rifle and the old, engraved breech-loaded, and the tin of sweet oil, before him on the yellowed newsprint. He poured the oil out on the cloth and got to rubbing down everything except the stock on the rifle, slowly pouring some of the oil on the bore rod.

You's pissin' in the wind if you don't swab out the bore, he declared.

Though Charlie could not rightly reckon who had had more from the bottle of whiskey near empty, he rightly knew his barefeet were numb'ed by fire, the dampened snags dragged from the prairie wood burning good enough now. He considered his numbed feet. Recalling aching feet, he remembered the work of his younger years, him and his cousins digging and harrowing past dusk. But he did not leave to leave anything save his old man. One more drink of the burn, he takes. That's a burn not unlike the fire. He put another sang down, and he listened for the hawk, or a panther purring somewhere distant, but he could only hear the sang hissing, smoke rising among the flames, and embers crackling. His feet were numbed good. The embers

burning in the wind like stars.

Firelight showed month-old headlines across the top of the newspaper:

ORVILLE FULLY RECOVERED FROM INJURIES;
WRIGHT BROTHERS' THIRD — AND FIRST PUBLIC —
AEROPLANE FLIGHT SCHEDULED

HARD HIT STOCKS BREAK ON SELLING

PLANT AND CO. PLAN NEW RAIL EXTENSION

Charlie helped himself to another drink, a good burn of it, the bottle just about empty, and he watched the smoke drifting until it was invisible against the sky pitch dark.

*

“... the Lacey Act and the new restrictions have thus far only increased the value of fashionable plumes poached from the wild for the millinery trade. Some poachers continue to gun down entire flocks, oblivious to the newly-enacted state laws and Audubon-instated wardens.”— The DeSota Morning Record, Sept. 5, 1908.

*

Columbus woke the morning of the second of November to the wind against the old oak struck twice by lightning. He lit the small fire in the cookstove, and set himself before the stove.

Well before first light, in the small outpost where he lived and resided alone, he fixed his coffee, as he does. In the framed picture on the backside clapboard, the thin reddish egret in his burnished copper and slate plumage stalked the flats waters. Pearson had given him the framed drawing, titled sketch no. 18, *reddish egret, drawn, engraved, and coloured from nature, by A. Rider.*

Coffee in thermos, bread in cloth, Columbus buttoned his long shirtsleeves. With first light, he was motoring east across Isokpoga, then southward, shutting down the engine and letting the long-hulled launch drift where the lake meets the shallow passages of creekhead.

The sun returned, as it does after the rains, yet the clouds, like blocks of granite and basalt swirled in the light coming across, are the first clouds of early winter.

On another morning, through oak and cabbage palm Columbus might've bided his time, letting the launch drift along as slowly as one could through the early light, even stopping about here where the creek flows over, flooding the palms and stopper in still waters.

This was a good place in the first light, where he could make his own modest

sketch in his journal book.

The fishing pied heron a worthy subject. In the warming light, the *ardea tricolor's* chest plumage glass cobalt and amethyst. Or perhaps he'd sketch the Henslow's, putting in his appearance over there low in the fetterbush, the tiny sparrow singing his soft, two note song. Upon first appearance drably painted browns and grays, but when seen well a striking sparrow, his cheeks and nape the emerald of the bush, tail forked, belly streaked, and rust patched wings.

At times, Columbus would just sit and watch, observing the heron's patience. Born in September, he's seen the turning of sixty two Novembers, and a drifting pace now suited him acceptably.

But this morning the warden lowered his hat to the light and having drifted a ways from the fishing egret, the sparrow's soft *tsi-tsi tsi-ick* faded behind him, he turned over the engine, catching that first odor of the unburnt naphtha. Narrower than the myakkae, yet longer, deep in its heart, the web of creeks converge and drift all the ways to the waters of the harbor.

He steered his skiff due south through the darker, crimson waters. Bout halfway between the point and the first of the islands of the harbor. Unnamed still on the map, though some have called the middle creek little myakkae, it wound like a bellyful moccasin through the dark of stopper and oak climbing cyrilla. The wind came through the trees.

Columbus was never married, though there had been a woman a long time ago. He thought of her at times, and when he did, he held onto the thought if he could.

*

From Ogden, having unloaded and picked up fortifications, they came down through the sun lighting up the river.

Reckon the Wright boys made it? Charlie asked above the clanking of the outboard.

HA, now that's pissin' right in the wind, said Tosch.

Orville almost made it, before, Charlie said.

Al-most, the older of the men said, as he produced his pipe from his long pocket, holding the wheel with his left palm, the pipe with thumb and trigger finger. He packed it up with tobacco and myrsine, keeping the dory skiff mostly straight. *Before he crashed and crumpled his flyer.*

Where the river comes through sweetwater, the younger of the men pointed out the first of the cypress knees just breaking the surface and the weathered smooth snags. Tosch navigated the dory round.

Due south, southeast a ways, where they could make out the spit they call windy point, Tosch nodded to an old pine growing aslant.

Two winters 'go, he began, I watched a sparrowhawk dive like light'ning from that very slash. Nailed his prey down there in the willow thick'ts. Then this heavy-weight

eagle, rough and ready, soars out of the blue sky, tailing that hawk like a shadow.

Charlie says, *Nineteen times outta twenty, eagle got the odds.*

Tosch carefully lit the pipe.

Well, yes. That eagle snatched the dropped blackbird right up in his big talons.

He took his first smoke, and continued, *but, not without a hell of a chase. That little hawk held onto his prey and shot off, flyin' fast and hard, and nearly buggering his 'pponet out.* At this he waved his pipe to illustrate, as best a hand could, the hawk's movement. *Now, that was an aviational feat if I've seen one.*

*

Columbus has spoken to men, informing them of poaching laws and his jurisdiction. But he reckoned there would be a time when men wouldn't listen. It was back in '05, four years after the Lacey Act, when Pearson had to tend to Guy's grieving wife down in Monroe. Guy was a good warden. Nearly half Columbus' years and known as an uncanny marksman. He was fatally wounded in duty during an argument with two known plumers.

In the last moment of a dream some nights before, before the numb weightlessness of just waking, Columbus could see through the rain heavy, his steps lighter and lighter, so light, muscles moving before he told them to. He was sprinting or maybe flying. He woke breathing heavily when he came to, laying awake on hard sheets.

*

After the cedars and big ferns, the river opens into bullbrush where it crosses the little myakkae, and Tosch opened the throttle. A good time before dusk the men see harbor waters, though they can't yet make out the first of the islands to the south.

Having flat-bottomed the skiff in limestone sand at bluff's edge, Tosch spit and grinned, securing line to a river elm, its faded leaves ready to drop. Once again, he produced his pipe from his long pocket, topping it off with myrsine.

Charlie climbed the lookout of an elm, climbing steadily as he did as a boy, branch at a step, until he was up in the heart of the tree's shadows. He stepped out balancing along a sturdy branch, toward the light.

Standing up in the winds churning, he followed a large snook below, and he watched the horizon. Only a speck of a fisherman's mullet skiff a far ways out. To the south, the birds of plume coming in. Like clockwork, they come in to roost before dusk. Snow white egrets soaring low, their reflections inching over the water.

Tosch below smoked his pipe, awaiting the report.

No sign of any warden, Charlie reported. And though there's no sign of man other than the mullet skiff, he thought of the names on the maps changing. To the south he glimpsed shell key, which it's always been, but is now Chaise's Key. Tosch says they want to fill in the mangroves there, plant more of them cajeput trees that

suck up all the water. And further south, he looked to the land once owned by Culver, where years ago his grandpa, while digging a well for Culver, found gold escudos, and now old man Culver's tractor left to rust and his storehouse left to fall, where instead of growing citrus and tomato, they're plating the fallow farmland. *The carpet baggers ain't gone*, Charlie thought, *just new ones have arrived with new schemes*.

*

The largest of the islands of the northern harbor measured a mile north to south, about two miles across. In the middle of dusk and the middle of the pine and palmetto of the interior, the fire burned low, cleanly.

Columbus had company at his small camp. The chirping dripping down from the lone, tiny Henslow's, maybe the same sparrow from the creek, singing softly and skipping between the branches, and above the snowies and the greater egrets drifting, along with the glossy curlews, wood storks, and the pink curlews, conducting their business.

He leaned back against the pine, one of the old growth spared by the storm of ninety seven, with its furrowed bark and long branches, one of the tall pines you can see when you approach the island from the north, taller than the surrounding wood.

It was a moonless night.

The warden leaned back against the furrowed bark of the oak, watching the birds of dusk.

He slept past first born light and woke to the sun rising and the sound of rifle shot, shot after shot, quieter than birdshot.

He leaned up and reached over for his boots and gun and his hat. The tall grass was cold wet with dew.

*

As the men would reload, another would fly up, and the entire flock of egrets would follow, in a half circle before eventually flying closer to the men. Fearful. Confused. They beat their wings and squawked. But they wouldn't leave.

What dumb birds, one of the men shouted. Closer, the warden could see the plume in his dirty hat. The other, younger and stouter, stood with his back squared to the warden.

The egrets circled and flew closer yet. They could leave. But they wouldn't. They were trying to save each other.

A wounded one kicked and rustled in the mud.

One of the men had a shotgun, the other a long-barreled. The wounded egret no longer rustling, clouds mirrored in water's edge.

The younger man with the rifle turned.

*

“... In 1901, the Audubon Society persuaded the state to adopt laws protecting Florida wildlife, especially plumage birds. Even so, no funds were allocated. The state, however, agreed to deputize two wardens hired by the Audubon Society. The danger of this work was evidenced when Guy M. Bradley, charged with protecting the Everglades area, was found shot to death near Flamingo on July 8, 1905. Columbus G. McLeod of Placida, charged with protecting the rookeries here in northern Charlotte Harbor, disappeared under suspicious circumstances and was presumed murdered on November 30, 1908. This second death of an Audubon warden sparked a national campaign against the wearing of feathers, and shifted public sentiment in favor of stronger enforcement of wildlife protection laws and the prosecution of plume hunters. Today we enjoy the beauty of our Florida wading birds largely because of these men.” — reads the free standing historical marker, 26 degrees, 54.615 minutes north, by 82 degrees, 05.740 minutes west.

THE OVALTINE FACTORY IN VILLA PARK, ILLINOIS, NOW Kenneth Pobo

a luxury condo. You can make
love inside a faded factory.
For decades

we sniffed for Ovaltine's chocolate smell.
A noon whistle sharpened
a knife in our ears.
It seemed Ovaltine would last forever.
I was a kid. Forever
was a swing set. Closed, the building

sat for years, busted windows,
a place to party, and, some say,
a home for ghosts.
Our history was decay,
brick by brick. A dead head shop
right near the condo's front entrance.

Chicago still looks over its shoulder,
asks for steaming Ovaltine on a winter day.
Some residents say they hear
footsteps on the roof. Whose?
Our great-grandparents who worked
there during the Depression?

Or is it just a prairie wind
that loped across lost farms
having a joke on us.

by Gerard Sarnat

Feeling the Bern Offbeats: Palo Alto, 1 June 2016

Sweet soft summer day queuing for Sanders' rally
a week before California's crucial primary; we erstwhile Beats,
ex-Grateful Deadheads or current Raging Grannies in tie-dye
Feel the Bern T-shirts chit-chat about the *Weekly Standard*

whose editor is crystal-clear trying his god darndest to punch
up a French neocon white knight – essentially invisible
to the general public -- as an arguably credible
Trump/ Clinton/ Johnson/ Stein fifth party alternative.

When déjà vu Ralph Nader's Green Party is dropped
into the poll mix, its 3% balances out the Libertarian
4 % which cuts more into Republican than Demo votes
till Crooked Hillary's margin over Dopey Donald

all but evaporates. Sun hat, screen and glasses, harmonium
plus gold liquid in plastic water bottle through uber-tight security;
drooling for Bernie to SUV up from Salinas; lolling in shorts
on a blanket; we whine about the heat, sip cool Chardonnay.

I invite two women wearing *Not For Sale* buttons and sweltering
in black to join us. One grunts, "Not now," I think.
But the other smiles, "Yes!" to our Camembert as she whispers
through her burka how it was as a girl back in Afghanistan.

St. Elsewhere Public Health Hazards

My day job ministers to clusterfucked homeless
souls at overflowing facilities
stuck among county jail, garbage dump and zoo.

The too sick, too poor, too addled
who by chance can't land grub or beds roll joints
and sleeping bags, take shits in the muck outside.

Last weekend driving south toward Lompoc
to visit a buddy doing soft time in the Federal Pen,
channeling not-quite accidental Trump

nearby I pass not-quite coincidental
Vandenberg Air Force Base which houses
hardened Thor ICBM launch pads -- no surprise

to thumbs on nuke buttons in Pyongyang where
their version of wild men not-quite unintentionally
target our not-quite innocent friend.

Cul-De-Sac

Lovers tussle for primo parking below our forest home.
Recalling my own teens and their safety

I don't object yet do patrol with a modest touch.

Next morning's the time to gather left behinds.
Beer empties. Tobacco or cannabis butts.

Even matching monogrammed His/ Her gifts --

soiled undies unceremoniously draped over the mailbox.
But if a particular license plate leaves refuse

such as used condoms much more than once

that's where trusty whistle + flashlight draw the line
with threats of Sunday calls to their moms and dads.

Ladder in a Back Pocket

Alexandria Peary

They were sitting in a friend's backyard who had just announced he'll be a non-doer soon. He was an executive at a major pharmaceutical company or had accepted such a job only a few weeks back. They were waiting on a final meal at the edge of a Norwegian pine forest. The shiny barbecue grill would shortly be shipped, and the pit bull named after a flower would also head to Illinois. The new stone patio on which they sat in chairs brought from the kitchen had been contracted out to attract a buyer. The house had a buyer in twenty-four hours. That morning, the woman's husband used a janitor's long-handled broom to spread sealant on their driveway. She made a fruit salad to bring to dinner and tightened plastic wrap over the bowl but was interested in his progress and moved several times to an upstairs window to watch. He stopped occasionally to survey the black path or change his music. She watched his muscled, middle-aged form, the cargo pants with a paisley of tar, the cheap drug store straw hat. At the stop sign, neighbors peered over the steering wheels in their high-end vehicles. Now his hands were washed. He had showered using Dial soap, not Irish Spring which her father used after coming home from construction.

They sat drinking ale and looking forward to the steak on the grill, the son of a house painter and the son of a carpenter and the daughter of a carpenter. Raising her glass and looking at the red sunset, she noticed again how her husband's neck in summer was pinker than his shoulders or triceps of winter.

The friend and the couple were raising two young daughters apiece. They probably won't marry handy, the woman has wistfully stated on more than one occasion. When her husband wasn't home, she praised his practical nature, his ability to install a toilet or hardwood floors as well as win a book prize. She tried to plant seeds in her girls' heads but given their parents' lifestyle, they probably wouldn't marry handy. The night before her wedding, she had applied pin-sized wildflowers until two in the morning to

the four domes of their homemade cake. Her husband was inspecting the grouting between the patio stones. She could tell from the position of his shoulders that he didn't approve of the outsourced workmanship.

Her father-in-law approves of her hanging wash out on the line instead of using the clothes dryer. She looks up from that sentence, and her seventy-three year old father-in-law walks past balancing a house painter's ladder.

She could never marry one of her boyfriends because of the magazines stacked next to the toilet or the way their parents had spent hours over the newspaper on a weekday. Dog-eared *National Geographics* stood on the crocheted rug in her parents' bathroom, Dale Carnegie's *How to Make Friends and Influence People* tucked behind the plastic plant.

The friend who was becoming a non-doer was offering advice about yard care. You got to recognize when you don't need to fight anymore for a place at the table. They all laughed because he had stripped the sod by hand over two weekends and shoveled in \$10,000 worth of loam but was still outsourced by clover.

As the couple turned their second-hand minivan around the cul de sac, tic tic tic of the mailboxes of new Colonials, navigating the strangely named streets of the gated community, they commented on how hard it would be to find a friend who came from one background but was moving to another. Tied to their car roof with knotted rope was the 30-foot ladder their friend had sold them at a bargain. Securing the ladder had been like slipping a pack of cigarettes into a shirt pocket or a comb into the back pocket of a pair of Carhartts.

She knew how to cook and cook well, she might add, but not how to sew a neat button or preserve garden vegetables or cut her children's bangs. The dishes she liked to make were not the casseroles of her working mother, not bubbling images served in Corning Ware.

Therefore, for God's love, be careful in this work and do not strain the heart in your breast by grossness or excess.

Work more with a flair than with any gross strength.

For the more lightly your work, the more humble and spiritual it is. The more gross, the more bodily and beastlike.

Therefore be careful. Surely a beastlike heart that presumes to touch the high mountain of this work will be driven away with stones. Therefore beware of this beastlike grossness and learn to love lightly with a soft and quiet countenance, as well in body as in soul. Wait for the Lord's will courteously and humbly; do not grab over-hastily, like a greedy greyhound, though your hunger is great.

—from *The Cloud of Unknowing*, anonymous

CONTRIBUTORS

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Edd B. Jennings runs beef cattle in the mountains of Virginia. His work has appeared in numerous literary magazines this summer. He's at work on a series of books on canoeing in the Arctic and a novel. He can be contacted through the Leslie Owen Literary Agency.

Nicholas Rys writes and makes music in the idyllic village of Yellow Springs, Ohio. His work has previously appeared in such publications as *Shotgun Honey*, *Thought Catalog*, *Fanzine* and *Entropy*.

C. Kubasta's is the author of two chapbooks, *A Lovely Box* and *&s* (both from Finishing Line), and a full-length poetry collection, *All Beautiful & Useless* (BlazeVOX). Her next book, *Of Covenants*, is forthcoming from Whitepoint Press in 2017. Her poetry, fragments, and prose experiment with hybrid forms, pronoun slippage and intentional awkwardness. Find her at ckubasta.com.

William C. Blome writes poetry and short fiction. He lives wedged between Baltimore and Washington, DC, and he is a master's degree graduate of the Johns Hopkins University Writing Seminars. His work has previously seen the light of day in such fine little mags as *Amarillo Bay*, *PRISM International*, *Fiction Southeast*, *Roanoke Review*, *Salted Feathers* and *The California Quarterly*.

Michael Davis My short fiction has appeared in *Descant*, *The San Joaquin Review*, *The Jabberwock Review*, *The Black Mountain Review*, *Eclipse*, *Cottonwood*, *The Mid-American Review*, *Full Circle*, *Hayden's Ferry Review*, *The Georgia Review*, *Storyglossia*, *The Chicago Quarterly Review*, *Willow Springs*, *The Normal School*, *Arcana*, *The Superstition Review*, *The New Ohio Review*, *The Painted Bride Quarterly*, *The Atticus Review*, *Isthmus*, the Earlyworks Press Short Story Anthology, *Redline* "Best of the Year" issue for 2014, *Small Print Magazine*, and *Forge*. I was a William Saroyan Fellow and fiction editor of the journal *CutBank*.

I've been nominated for the Pushcart Prize on four separate occasions by *The Mid-*

American Review, *Hayden's Ferry*, *Storyglossia*, and *Isthmus*. My story "Gravity" won the 2008 George Garrett fiction award given out by Eastern Washington University. "The Man in Africa" was voted one of the "Million Writers Award Notable Stories of 2007" and was subsequently reviewed by Xujun Eberlein for Five Star Literary Stories. In 2013, I was selected as a winner in the Earlyworks Press short story competition. And in 2014, I was a winner in the Redline Urban Fiction contest. My collection of stories, Gravity, was published by Carnegie Mellon UP in 2009. I have an MFA in fiction writing from the University of Montana and a PhD in English from Western Michigan University.

Charles Kell is a PhD student at The University of Rhode Island and editor of *The Ocean State Review*. His poetry and fiction have appeared or are forthcoming in *The New Orleans Review*, *The Saint Ann's Review*, *floor_plan_journal*, *The Manhattanville Review*, and elsewhere. He teaches in Rhode Island and Connecticut

Donald Levering My 7th full-length poetry book, Coltrane's God, published by Red Mountain Press, won the New Mexico Press Women Poetry Book Contest in 2016. My previous book, The Water Leveling With Us, placed 2nd in the 2015 National Federation of Press Women Creative Verse Book Competition. I am a past NEA Fellow in Poetry and winner of the 2015 Literal Latté Award and was Runner-Up for the 2016 Ruth Stone Poetry Prize. I have been a Duende Series Reader and was a Guest Poet in the Academy of American Poets online Forum. More information is available at donaldlevering.com.

Mark Vogel has published short stories in *Cities and Roads*, *Knight Literary Journal*, *Whimperbang*, *SN Review*, and *Our Stories*. Poetry has appeared in *English Journal*, *Cape Rock*, *Dark Sky*, *Cold Mountain Review*, *Broken Bridge Review* and many other journals. He is currently Professor of English at Appalachian State University in Boone, North Carolina, and directs the Appalachian Writing Project.

John McKernan - who grew up in Omaha Nebraska - is now a retired comma herder / Phonics Coach after teaching 41 years at Marshall University. He lives in West Virginia and Florida. His most recent book is a selected poems Resurrection of the Dust. He has published poems in *The Atlantic Monthly*, *The Paris Review*, *The New Yorker*, *Virginia Quarterly Review*, *The Journal*, *Antioch Review*, *Guernica*, *Field* and many other magazines

Kristian Ashley Macaron writes obsessively about pirates, whales, wolves, folktales, deserts, volcanoes, hurricanes, planets, and her life, of course. Originally from Albuquerque, NM where she attended the University of New Mexico, Kristian received her MFA from Emerson College in Boston, Massachusetts and thus melded her love for the Southwest with the stunning New England coast. Kristian's first poetry

chapbook, *Storm*, was released in July 2015 from Swimming With Elephants Publications in Albuquerque, NM. Her other publications of fiction and poetry are published in *The Winter Tangerine Review*, *Philadelphia Stories*, *Duke City Fix: The Sunday Poem*, and *Lightning Cake Journal and The Bellows American Review (The [BAR])*. Kristian's work has also appeared on stage in 2008 at the University of New Mexico in "Full Frontal Poetry". She has taught scriptwriting at the Emerson College Pre-College Creative Writers' Workshop and currently teaches English at the University of New Mexico-Valencia campus.

E.M. Schorb is a prize-winning poet and novelist. *His Murderer's Day* was awarded the Verna Emery Poetry Prize and published by Purdue University Press; his collection, *Time and Fevers*, was the recipient of the Writer's Digest International Self-Published Award for Poetry and also an Eric Hoffer Award. Most recently, *Words in Passing*, was published by The New Formalist Press. His novel, *Paradise Square*, was awarded the International eBook Award Foundation's Prize for fiction at the Frankfurt Book Fair. But Schorb maintains that he is first and foremost a poet, and his poetry has appeared in numerous publications, here and abroad.

Nikki Boss lives in New England with her husband, children, and too many animals. She teaches middle school ELA and is a MFA candidate at Vermont College of Fine Arts. Nikki's work can be found in *Paddleshots Anthology*, *Heater*, *Beechwood Review*, and various other places online.

Sean Hooks was born and raised in New Jersey. He has a BA-Liberal Arts from Drew University, an MFA-Fiction from the University of Nevada, Las Vegas and an MA-English from Loyola Marymount University. He currently lives, writes and works as an English professor in Los Angeles. Recent publications include *Pif Magazine*, *Superstition Review*, *SubStance*, *FORTH Magazine*, *Intellectual Refuge*, *The Journal*, *Heavy Feather Review*, and *Los Angeles Review of Books*. Earlier articles, essays and print journalism were published in *Las Vegas Weekly* and *The Record*. Work is forthcoming from *The International Journal of Literary Humanities* and Akashic Books. He has written a novel and is actively seeking representation/publication while also working on both a new book and a film project.

Terry Sanville lives in San Luis Obispo, California with his artist-poet wife (his in-house editor) and one skittery cat (his in-house critic). He writes full time, producing short stories, essays, poems, and novels. Since 2005, his short stories have been accepted by more than 230 literary and commercial journals, magazines, and anthologies including *The Potomac Review*, *The Bitter Oleander*, *Shenandoah*, and *Conclave: A Journal of Character*. He was nominated twice for a Pushcart Prize for his stories "The Sweeper," and "The Garage." Terry is a retired urban planner and an accomplished jazz and blues guitarist – who once played with a symphony orchestra

backing up jazz legend George

Jennifer Woodworth studied for the MFA in Creative Writing at Old Dominion and almost finished. She is the recipient of the 2009 AROHO Orlando Prize in Flash Fiction and the 2012 Nassau Review Writers Award in Poetry. Her chapbook, How I Kiss Her Turning Head, was published in 2014 by Monkey Puzzle Press, and her stories and poems have appeared at *Opium*, and *flashquake*, in *The Nassau Review* and in *Bellow Literary Journal*. She knows how lucky she is that she gets to write all the time.

Olivia Kate Cerrone's Pushcart Prize-nominated fiction recently won the *Crab Orchard Review's* 2016 Jack Dyer Fiction Prize. Her short stories have appeared in various literary journals, including *New South*, *the Berkeley Fiction Review*, *The MacGuffin*, *War, Literature and the Arts*, *JMWW*, *Word Riot*, *Quiddity* and *Paterson Literary Review*. She is at work on a novel.

She is a regular contributor to *The Rumpus*. She serves as an associate editor for *CONSEQUENCE Magazine*, and as a writing mentor for the Afghan Women's Writing Project. She is a member of the PEN American Center.

Cerrone earned an MFA in fiction from New York University and a BFA from the Writing, Literature and Publishing program at Emerson College.

Monica Noelle Simon is a poet, writer and marketing professional from Scranton, Pa. She is the creator of Poets of NEPA. Her writing has been published on *Elite Daily*, *The Bitchin' Kitsch*, *Burningwood Literary Journal*, *Poets of NEPA*, and *HelloGiggles*.

John Tavares My previous publications include short stories published in a number of literary journals: one short fiction published in *Blood & Aphorisms*; 1 in chapbook by Plowman Press; 1 in *Green's Magazine*; 1 in *Filling Station*; 2 in *Whetstone*; 2 in *Broken Pencil*; 1 in *Tessera*; 1 in *Windsor Review*; 3 in *Paperplates*; 1 in *The Write Place at the Write Time*; 3 in *The Maple Tree Literary Supplement*; 2 in *The Writing Disorder*; 1 in *Gertrude*; 1 in *Turk's Head Review*; 1 in *Outside In Literary & Travel Magazine*; 1 in *Bareback Magazine*; 1 in *Rampike*; 2 in *Crab Fat Literary Magazine*; 3 in *The Round Up Writer's Zine*; 1 in *The Acentos Review*; 1 in *Gravel*; 1 in the *Brasilia Review*; 1 in *Sediments Literary Arts-Journals*; 2 in *The Gambler*; 1 in *Red Cedar Review*; 3 in *Writing Raw*. Also, over a dozen of my short stories and some creative nonfiction was published in *The Siren*, then Centennial College's student newspaper. Following journalism studies, I had articles and features published in *East York Observer*, *East York Times*, *Beaches Town Crier*, *East Toronto Advocate*, *Our Toronto* – plus community and trade newspapers such as York University's *Excalibur* and *Hospital News*, where I interned as an editorial assistant. I broadcast a set of my short stories as a community broadcaster for Sioux Lookout's CBLS/CBQW radio one summer. I recently wrote a novel and am an avid photographer.

Born and raised in Sioux Lookout, Ontario, I'm the son of Portuguese immigrants from

the Azores. My formal education includes graduation from the 2-year GAS program at Humber College in Etobicoke with concentration in psychology (1993); the 3-year journalism program at Centennial College in East York (1996); the Specialized Honors BA in English from York University in North York (2012). I've worked as a research assistant for the Sioux Lookout Public Library and as a research assistant conducting a waste management survey of all Sioux Lookout households for the public works department and regional recycle association. I also worked with the disabled for the Sioux Lookout Association for Community Living. I've recently completed the Canadian Securities Course, a certification required by the Canadian investment industry.

Michael Larrain was born in Los Angeles in 1947. He is the author of four collections of poems: The Promises Kept in Sleep (Redwood Press, 1978), Just One Drink for the Diamond Cutter (Animist Press, 1980) and For One Moment There Was No Queen, (Wufahtibootda Press, 1982) and How It All Came True: Poems for My Daughter (Crumpled Press, New York, 2014). Rainy Day Women Press of Willits, CA, has released a CD of his reading of his selected love poems called *Lipstick: A Catalogue for Continuous Undressing*. His novels are South of The North Star, Movies on the Sails, and As the Case May Be. His children's storybooks are The Girl With the Loom In Her Room, Heaven & Earth, Homer the Hobo & Ulysses the Goat and Wilder & Wilder Still.

He lives in Sonoma County (California) where, for forty-two years, he has been the owner-operator of the roadside flower stand, Flowers Not To Reason Why, and has long been a senior partner in the Way-Up, Firm And High-Tail It Bright Out of Town Detective Agency, a loosely aligned confederacy of shady characters devoted to the complete discrediting of reality in our time. He operates a non-denominational wedding ministry called A More Perfect Union and is the father of Wilder Kathleen the Rage of Paris Larrain, age 9.

Ace Boggess is the author of two books of poetry: The Prisoners (Brick Road Poetry Press, 2014) and The Beautiful Girl Whose Wish Was Not Fulfilled (Highwire Press, 2003). His novel, A Song Without a Melody, is forthcoming from Hyperborea Publishing. His writing has appeared in *Harvard Review*, *Mid-American Review*, *RATTLE*, *River Styx*, *North Dakota Quarterly* and many other journals. He lives in Charleston, West Virginia.

Janet Hope Damaske is a stay-at-home mother with interests in writing, reading, editing and psychology. After earning her BA in psychology with a minor in creative writing at Hamilton College, she worked for several years at a rehabilitation center for people with mental illness, providing job training and running a writer's group for creative therapy. She later moved onto a career in medical publishing, where she continues to work part-time. Janet currently volunteers with several non-profit

organizations in her hometown of Winchester MA, where she lives with her husband and two children. She writes a blog, which can be found at <http://jhdamaske.blogspot.com>. She has previously published in *The Writing Disorder*.

Olivia Mertz is a poet and visual artist. She's also the poetry editor for *APRICITY* Press, an annual online publication of poetry, prose, short fiction, visual art and dance works. Story-telling across multiple mediums, Olivia's work employs portraiture to explore personalities and relationships. Olivia was a recipient of the Ina Coolbrith Memorial Poetry Prize, her work appeared in *The Walrus*, and she was a contributor at the 2015 Bread Loaf Writers' Conference. She currently lives in Brooklyn, NY.

Jon Etter is a Milwaukee-based writer and English teacher. His fiction has been/will be featured in *The London Journal of Fiction*, *The Singularity*, *Odd Tree Quarterly*, *Midnight Circus*, *Tulip Tree Review*, and the anthology *The Great Tome of Forgotten Relics and Artifacts*. Visit him on the web at JonEtter.com and [Facebook.com/JonEtterWriter](https://www.facebook.com/JonEtterWriter).

Allan Johnston Originally from southern California, Allan Johnston earned his M.A. in Creative Writing and his Ph.D. in English from the University of California, Davis. His poems have appeared in over sixty journals, including *Poetry*, *Poetry East*, *Rattle*, and *Rhino*. He has published one full-length poetry collection (*Tasks of Survival*, 1996) and three chapbooks (*Northport*, 2010; *Departures*, 2013; *Contingencies*, 2015), and received an Illinois Arts Council Fellowship, a Pushcart Prize nomination (2009), and First Prize in Poetry in the Outrider Press Literary Anthology competition (2010). He now teaches writing and literature at Columbia College and DePaul University in Chicago. He reads or has read *for Word River*, *r.kv.r.y*, and the Illinois Emerging Poets competition, and is co-editor of *JPSE: Journal for the Philosophical Study of Education*. His scholarly articles have appeared in *Twentieth Century Literature*, *College Literature*, and several other journals.
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T. E. Cowell's fiction's been published in *SmokeLong*, *Across the Margin*, *Eunoia Review*, and elsewhere. He lives on an island in Washington state.

Roger Real Drouin is a writer. His stories have appeared in the *Potomac Review*, *The Doctor T.J. Eckleburg Review*, *Ginosko* (issue #12), *Grey Sparrow Journal*, *Pif Magazine*, *Pindelyboz*, and elsewhere. He is also the founder of Little Curlew Press, an independent literary press that publishes works with a strong ecological undercurrent.

Kenneth Pobo had a new book out in November 2015 from Urban Farmhouse Press called *Booking Rooms in the Kuiper Belt*. His work has appeared in *Mudfish*, *Hawaii*

Review, The Fiddlehead, Indiana Review, and elsewhere.

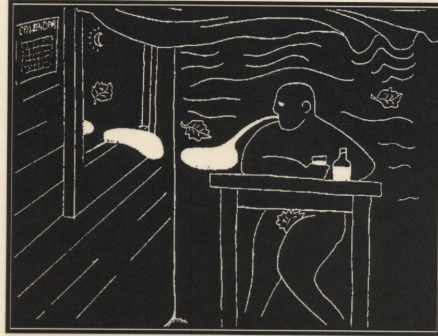
Gerard Sarnat is the author of four critically-acclaimed collections: HOMELESS CHRONICLES from Abraham to Burning Man (2010), Disputes (2012), 17s (2014) and Melting The Ice King (2016). Work from Ice King was accepted by over seventy magazines, including *Gargoyle* and *Lowestoft Chronicle*, and featured in *Songs of Eretz Poetry Review*, *Avocet: A Journal of Nature Poems*, *LEVELER*, *tNY*, *StepAway*, *Bywords* and *Floor Plan*. For Huffington Post and other reviews, reading dates, publications, interviews and more, visit Gerard Sarnat.com. Go to Amazon to find Gerry's books plus Editorial and Customer Reviews. Harvard and Stanford educated, Gerry's worked in jails as a physician, built and staffed clinics for the marginalized, been a CEO of healthcare organizations and Stanford Medical School professor. Married since 1969, he and his wife have three children and three grandkids.

Alexandria Peary My four books include Control Bird Alt Delete (Iowa Poetry Prize) and Creative Writing Pedagogies for the Twenty-First Century (with Tom C. Hunley). Other writing has appeared or is forthcoming in *Canary*, *Volt*, *North American Review*, *Hotel Amerika*, *LIT*, *Diode*, *New Delta Review*, *Poetry Daily*, *New England Review*, *Denver Quarterly*, *Verse Daily*, *New American Writing*, *Sixth Finch*, *The Chariton Review*, *Map Literary*, and *New Madrid*, and has been awarded the Joseph Langland Award from the Academy of American Poets and the Slope Editions Book Prize. My creative nonfiction piece, "Holes and Walls," was included in the "Notable Essays and Literary Nonfiction of 2014" by the Best American series. More information is available at <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/alexandria-peary>.

DATES AND DREAMS

Short Fictions, Prose Poems, Cartoons

E. M. SCHORB



with an introduction by

X. J. Kennedy

¹ Historic Markers Across Florida. <<http://www.lat34north.com/HistoricMarkersFL/MarkerDetail.cfm?KeyID=08-05&MarkerTitle=Columbus%20G.%20Mcleod--Protector%20of%20Plumed%20Birds>>