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C. V. Davis

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THE
BROAD RIVER
REVIEW

Volume 48
2016

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

THE BROAD RIVER REVIEW

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EDITORS' NOTE

Each year, the *Broad River Review* publishes a number of contest winners and select finalists. The Rash Awards in Poetry and Fiction are named in honor of Ron Rash, a 1976 graduate of Gardner-Webb University. Rash's first published poem, "Last Night Ride," appeared in the pages of this literary review the year of his graduation. Since then, Rash has worked prodigiously to become a prize-winning writer and *New York Times* bestseller. His latest novel, *Above the Waterfall*, was published in the fall of 2015, while a new collection of poetry, *Poems: New and Selected*, appeared in the spring of 2016.

Additionally, the J. Calvin Koontz Poetry Award is awarded to a senior English major or minor at Gardner-Webb University whose poetry is judged most outstanding by a committee of department members. Congratulations to MaryKate Powell for receiving this recognition. Ilari Pass received the *Broad River Review* Editors's Prize in Poetry for "Kaleidoscope in Place of Conversation," which was selected from among all submissions by Gardner-Webb University students.

The editors would like to thank David Kirby and Aaron Gwyn for serving as judges for the Rash Awards in Poetry and Fiction, respectively. Kirby selected "Trespass" by Patricia L. Hamilton, of Jackson, Tennessee, for the poetry award, while Gwyn picked "We Are All Nobody" by Sam Grieve, of Darien, Connecticut, as winner of the fiction award. Congratulations to both winners, who received \$500 each and publication in the 2016 issue. Kirby said of Hamilton's poem: "This engaging poem begins like a mystery ('Now I see it was a set-up') but gradually becomes something more enduring, namely, a young person's search for her place in the world. The measure of its strength on both counts is that this poem stayed with me for days—I couldn't stop thinking about it." Gwyn commented on Grieve's story, "A great short story draws the reader into its unfamiliar world from the very first phrase, creating an atmosphere out of language. In 'We Are All Nobody,' that atmosphere is rich and haunting. This tale toys with our idea of what it means to be asleep or awake, imagining or experiencing, reading or participating, rational or deranged. Stunning."

We would also like to thank every writer who submitted to us or entered our contests. A full list of honorable mentions and finalists can be found on our website, www.broadriverreview.org. Our next contest submission period will coincide with our regular submission period, which

will be September 1–November 15, 2016. Full submission information and guidelines, including profiles of the judges, will appear on our web site in July. We also appreciate our subscribers and those who have donated to us.

Finally, the editors offer sincere appreciation to the Department of English Language and Literature at Gardner-Webb University for its continued support. In addition, the editors would like to thank university administration for its sustained financial backing of a literary review.

PATRICIA L. HAMILTON

Trespass

Now I see it was a set-up, that mild December day
we parked my boyfriend's battered Civic in the hard-packed
dirt lot and followed the runnel-gouged road
on foot until it petered into a narrow, rutted trail
that wound through chaparral-covered flanks and folds
shaded by scrub oak and Manzanita,
then climbed and dipped and rose, cresting
on a grassy ridge open to the scudding clouds.
It seemed natural that JD came with us
since the two of them had crossed the Karakoram
into China, their version of a buddy movie storyline.
I was resigned to my role as the girl—winded too soon,
needing to pause sometimes for a swig of water, lagging
on the steepest slopes—but trying hard to be plucky,
never realizing a threesome always meant
two would outvote one. Once we reached
the blustery summit, newly green after a soaking rain,
I stood slightly apart, drinking in the sage-scented air,
surveying the cottonwood-clotted valley far below
where we'd arranged for my best friend to retrieve us.

When he lifted the barbed-wire, I didn't sense my doom,
didn't realize whatever I chose would mean failing his test.
Baffled at the Sunday School moralist turned maverick,
the rule-follower ignoring the posted warning, perhaps
I should have recognized there had been other tests,
some quite cunning. But cruelty was a foreign tongue
I could never decipher. When JD thrust his leg
through the spread wires as if capitulation
were a long habit, I was too dumbstruck to do anything
but bend to the blithe force of my boyfriend's will.
Soon the security guard of the munitions plant
on whose land we were trespassing
blazed uphill in his pickup to bawl us out,

tumbleweed-cloud of dust rolling behind.
On the bronco-ride down to the guard shack
JD joked about *The Dukes of Hazzard*.
The boyfriend kept his own counsel. I held on tight
to the truck bed's side, quivering like a rabbit
in a sprung trap. The hacked-off guard jolted to a stop,
hollered again about idiot hikers, then let us go.

That night at the church party, I wanted to savor
the Christmas carols, the candles, the hot cocoa,
grateful for the guard's grace despite our foolishness.
We were safe, I thought, chastened but unscathed.
I was ready to forgive, move on. But the boyfriend
wouldn't look at me, wouldn't speak, wouldn't tell me
what was wrong. Some unspoken boundary breached?
For months I tormented myself with his silence,
unable to grasp the one sin he couldn't forgive:
my not hating him as much as he hated himself.

SAM GRIEVE

We Are All Nobody

Her mother is reading, as usual. She always loved to read, but now that she has all the time in the world, it is almost all she does. She sits in the wicker chair at the window, her feet up on the sill. Her hair has come loose from its bun. Connie examines her through sleepy eyes. Her mom is wearing a white linen dress from Eileen Fisher, the one they bought together last summer, and a necklace of African trading beads. The book, Connie sees, is called *The Magus*. Her mother's fingers are caked with clay.

The island is not somewhere she ever considered visiting. Not before, at any rate, when her life had been so resolute. Of course, she might have said at some point or another *I would love to go to Greece to see where my mother's family came from*, but it had been a dim sort of wish, like the desire to jump out of a plane, or perhaps adopt a child from Somalia. A wish that had been superseded by more pressing desires...snagging a table at Momofuku, or installing a new tub in her bathroom.

But then, in her weakest moment, her mother had said to her, "Take me, Connie. Take me to Hydra." And when it was all over later that night, Connie had gone home, opened her Mac, and in a fug of numbness and exhaustion, bought the tickets.

There are no tides here, as far as she can make out. The sea is so clear she can see fish twenty feet down, tiny shadows among the weeds. Her New York wardrobe is of no use. She does not bother to unpack most of it—merely a pair of flip-flops, her makeup bag, her bathing suit, and two sundresses that she bought in a panic from J. Crew the day she departed. The wardrobe smells of mothballs, and for this reason she leaves her other belongings in her suitcase, zipped up in the corner of her room.

The town is full of boutiques. Shops selling clothes and towels and jewelry, and touristy shops peddling T-shirts emblazoned with *I Love Greece* or the first fifty digits of pi wound into a spiral. In the back streets there are grocery stalls not much bigger than her bathroom in Manhattan that somehow contain every household item she might ever desire—each one an Aladdin's

cave if the forty thieves had been intent on pilfering bleach and soap and peanut butter and feta cheese and cigarettes and small packets of lavatory paper. And there are tavernas and ice cream parlors and coffee shops, some sprawling under awnings along the port, and others only a couple of round tables precarious on the pebbles.

Geographically, nothing makes sense—it is as though the town grew organically out of bits of people’s dreams and generations of aspirations and from the island itself. Fig and olive trees thrust their way into tiny squares. She follows the curve of white walls, trailing her fingers along the paint. She sits and drinks an iced coffee and counts the skinny cats, which slip down the meandering alleys, or butt their ears against her bare white legs. The light shifts, reimagines itself. Glaring, or exultant, or softly hazy over the fading islands, over the pewter sea.

She anticipates she will be gone for a week. JFK to Athens, a night in a small hotel in Plaka, then a hydrofoil to Hydra, five days on the island, then home. On paper it looks simple, but she has never taken so much time off work before.

Am I going mad? she wonders, as she emerges bleary-eyed from the terminal into the heat of an Athenian day. A nightmare taxi, the only battered Skoda in a row of lemon yellow Mercedes-Benzes, drives her into town, changing lanes precariously close to other cars. In Manhattan she would have complained. But now, both flayed raw by the past few weeks and a stranger in this fraying landscape of skinny dogs and car showrooms and endless dusty oleander, she is rendered incapable.

She planned to sleep for a few hours at the hotel; however, rest eludes her. So she showers and catches another cab to the entrance of the Acropolis. The sun is almost at its zenith. She stands in the sweltering line, purchases a ticket, and follows the stream of tourists up the worn steps. Cicadas shriek in the olive trees. The tourists move like cattle, plodding, Connie among them. They are mostly Chinese. The path narrows, they round a bend, she is aware of rooftops, feathery pines, sky, hills. Sweat pools in her bra. She barely has the energy to lift one foot before the other. Her mind has been reduced to an empty, fluttering thing. And then, when she is least expecting her, she spots her mom.

Her mother lifts a hand. She is wearing a cheesecloth skirt she had made for herself in the 1970s, handmade leather sandals, and a silver locket Connie had believed lost years ago. She sits in the shade in a no-go zone, beyond a rope.

“Yoo-hoo,” calls her mother.

Beneath Connie’s feet, the ground sways.

“You should have worn a hat,” says her mom. “And you also need to look around you. Stop galumphing. Lift up your eyes. Didn’t I teach you anything?”

Connie stretches out a hand, seeks something to hold on to. It must be heatstroke. The light is dazzling, and she is overcome with nausea. An Asian woman bearing an unfurled umbrella shoves past. Connie is momentarily caught in its blissful shade.

Her mother peers down at an open guidebook on her lap. “It says here that Athena and Poseidon had a contest to see who would become the patron deity of the city.” She has adopted her entertaining voice, the one she used on Connie when she was five and despised trips to museums. “I guess we know who won.”

She flashes Connie a collusive smile, flaps a hand toward the summit. “You’ll find it up there.”

“What?”

“Athena’s tree, of course,” says her mother. “Or at least another tree where the tree should be. Good place to start, don’t you think?”

Connie continues up the steps, or rather is pushed up by the relentless tide of people behind her. The day has taken on the quality of a dream. She emerges through the Propylaea; ahead lies the Parthenon, partly covered by scaffold, its pillars and all the stones around as white as ash. The sun presses down. In the distance Connie can just make out the silvery incandescence of the sea. She is dizzy from heat and lack of sleep. There are fewer people to the left, so she moves in that direction. And then, around a corner, in a parallelogram of shade, she spies a small olive tree. An image springs to her mind: a gigantic, bright-eyed goddess slamming her spear into the earth. Connie picks her way over the rough ground, slipping a hand meanwhile into her handbag. The heavy Ziploc bag, which had magically travelled through airport security without rousing suspicions, is still there. She opens it up, extracts a handful of its gravelly contents, and lets it spill.

The hydrofoil departs for Hydra the next morning. It is brutal getting up. The harbor is a chaos of ships and noise. Old men with faces courtesy of *National Geographic* sit and stare. She has never felt the weight of time so heavily. In New York time is ephemeral, swift, each birthday rolling in on the back of the one before, but here it is prolonged. How long have these men been sitting here? How long have they been old?

She boards the boat. Through the thick glass the sea is as gray as potassium. She can discern islands, rising dark like sea monsters' humps.

When she next opens her eyes, they are docking in Hydra town. Connie's cheek is damp with drool. She cannot recall when she last slept so heavily. Out of the window a picturesque white-walled town spills like sloshed paint up the mountainside. It is far more beautiful than she had imagined, for it had not crossed her mind to look at pictures. Her great-grandmother had come to the US for a better life, which meant, ergo, that Hydra must have been a dump. But now she sees it might be otherwise. She follows the other disembarking passengers. Marine air, with a hint of jasmine, assails her. The sky is a triumphant blue. And her mother is there, perched on a bollard, a copy of *My Family and Other Animals* on her lap.

"You look good," says her mom. "Did you get some sleep?"

Connie nods. Her breath catches in her throat, but she feels oddly calm. The way you are in dreams when faced with the impossible.

"Isn't it fabulous?" says her mom, gesturing with a jangling arm. "I found the guesthouse, by the way. Checked out all the rooms and yours is by far the nicest. It has a view of the sea."

They head up a walled street together, Connie dragging her bag on its noisy plastic wheels. The alley kinks and curls up the hillside. Through open doorways, Connie glimpses courtyards with fig trees and pots of thin-leaved basil and washing lines. An ancient black-clothed woman, bent almost in two over a blue pail of potato skins, lifts a damp hand and wishes them both *Kalimera*. A striped cat curls around her mother's legs. Her mother stops beneath a bougainvillea, tugs off one of the papery flowers, and sticks it behind her ear. Connie fumbles once more in her purse for the polythene bag.

They had never really got along. In fact—and it tortures Connie now—she had spent most of her life complaining about her mother. To friends, to strangers, to boyfriends. "It's my mom," she would wail, pulling a face whenever her cell rang at work.

Connie took after her father. She was precise. Inartistic. She liked order, numbers. Her mother was the opposite. She prided herself on being imaginative—an adjective that both Connie and her father used in the pejorative. She's got a wooly brain, Connie's father would mutter. Sees castles in the sky.

But now Connie wishes she had looked past these flaws. Regrets never getting to know her.

For the first two days on the island she escapes into sleep, curled up on her side in the low double bed. She has never been so tired in her life. Her mother moves through her dreams, sometimes young, a wooden tennis racquet over her shoulder, at other times elderly. She never shows her face. Connie wakes to light sprawling on the floor, the clamor of boat engines. She pulls the sheet over her head. The numbness and disbelief of the past few weeks has subsided; instead, she is filled with anguish. She thinks back to friends who have lost loved ones. The baskets of muffins she sent, the stupid, stupid cards. What a fool she had been to think she knew what grief was. How could she have known that you are stripped to the bone? And yet your traitorous heart beats on, nourished now by a black river of sorrow.

On the third morning, hunger forces her up. She dresses and heads down to the port. The striped cat trails her. Despite her own injunction against touching strays, she strokes his fur, sun-warm and real beneath her fingertips. It gives her hope. But down on the quayside the cafés are thronged with everyone but her mother.

For those next few days she is nobody. People do not seem to notice her, not after she has paid the bill at any rate. The food upsets her stomach. She finds a grocer on the harbor that sells chips and crackers and peanut butter, and she eats in her room. The town throngs with people. It is like she is watching a foreign film. She understands the actions but it makes no sense to her. The Ziploc bag comes everywhere, until her whole being aches beneath its weight, but she does not open it.

On the day of the phone call she kept working right up until 7:00 pm. When she finally left the office, dusk was falling. It was September and the air was dusty, as though all the vitality of summer had been sucked out of it. She stood on a corner of Bryant Park and Forty-second and Ubered a car, then watched the tiny vehicle on her phone screen edge its way toward her. Besides the initial call from the hospital, her mother's neighbor, Cynthia, had telephoned three times. A slight sense of unease coiled within her, but Connie banished it. Her mother was as healthy as a horse.

It was only after she had reached the hospital and found her mom, not much bigger than a ten-year-old child, asleep on a bed with a drip in her arm and an oxygen pipe in her nose, that the reality of what was happening struck her.

Sometimes she thinks she is drowning in grief. It is the only way she can describe it, how it has filled her up from within. And yet, in her aimless wandering, she begins to feel rage too. Anger at her mother for not being more truthful about her condition. Fury at herself for not noticing. What the fuck am I doing here? she asks herself, but really she is asking her truant mother who sent her on this fool's errand.

And then, when she is ready to throw in the towel, something happens. The man in her usual grocery shop smiles at her, revealing a row of teak-colored teeth. He hands her a peach after she has paid, and she walks outside, the warm fruit furred and heavy in her hand.

“You know what will happen if you eat that?” says a familiar voice. “You will have to stay here forever. Or for six months of the year at least.” Her mom is the faintest smudge of light. Connie eats the peach, and then, when nobody is looking, deposits the pit, along with a handful from the bag, behind a crate of figs. Then she phones the airline and delays her departure for a week.

Now she sees her mother everywhere. It is the vacation they never took together. Connie no longer purchases crackers; instead, at her mother's behest, she chooses a different restaurant each night. Her mother tells her what to order—taramasalata, and Greek salad and saganaki cheese and small carafes of wine the color of bougainvillea blossoms. Her mother dips a finger in the tarama, licks her fingers. She dresses for dinner; adopts head scarves, platform shoes, and clanking, wooden bangles. A geriatric man playing a bouzouki winks at her. Her mother laughs, tosses her crow-black hair. Connie's fingers rifle in her bag.

The grief is still there (How could it not be? It is burned into her, she will never be free of it.), but it has altered. She wakes up now intent on the day. She walks and walks. To the edge of the town. Along goat paths that cut through the wild rosemary above it. Her mother toys with her. An entire morning may drift by with no visit; on other days she is sitting in the wicker chair reading when Connie wakes up. Where does she go in between? The question hangs between them, but Connie dares not ask it.

Instead, she holds on to what she has. Drinks her in. Her mother seems to have every age at her disposal, and her entire wardrobe too. It is bewildering, enchanting. She is still her mother but she has become something else too—ineffable. It reminds Connie of when she was a tiny girl, holding on to her knee. Her mother's voice above, speaking a language that was both familiar but also incomprehensible to her ears.

But the best moments are when she incarnates as Annoying Mom.

“I have been meaning to tell you that you should have more sex,” her mother announces, when Connie is taking a bath. “It is not healthy, this single career woman life. You’re only forty-two, for goodness’ sake.”

“Mom!” Connie covers herself with a facecloth. Her mother picks up a nail file, examines her thumb.

“I am just saying, Connie. I think your life is actually quite empty. You didn’t even have that many lovers during college. And then you had that long boring relationship with, with... What the hell was his name again?”

“Oh, for goodness’ sake.” Connie rolls over, water sloshing over the side of the tub.

“Well?”

“I didn’t grow up in the sixties, like you,” Connie says finally. “When I went to college all we heard about was AIDS. I was terrified. And I was a math major. Math major don’t get laid a lot. It’s proven. And Brian, if that is whom you are referring to, just isn’t that sexually driven. He is an intellectual.”

“Pshwah.” Her mother stands up. “He is a pussy. I should have told you years ago. What you need my girl, is a nice Greek man. Someone with hair on his chest.”

She sat with her mother in that room all through that long night, holding her hand. Her mother’s hair was thin now, as though a kindergartner had made her out of clay, and pressed wool onto her scalp willy-nilly. Her eyelids, which throughout Connie’s life had been powdered bronze or teal or amethyst, were now a decomposing violet. Connie laid her head on the bed. How had this happened? She had spent a couple of hours with her mother just a week ago—they had gone shopping. Bought Ritz crackers, and Jell-O and tinned green beans and tuna. Safe preserved food in familiar packaging that suggested a static life. But her mother had not felt that, had she? She begged Connie to stay longer, and Connie, reluctant, had done so, flicking through family albums quickly to appease her, all those deceased sisters, the forgotten aunts.

“Stop, Connie,” her mother had said at one point, laying a clawed hand on a certain page. “It is my grandmother. From Hydra. You resemble her.” And Connie had squinted at the sepia photograph, at the sooty-haired, measly-mouthed woman, with regret.

She scatters the ashes everywhere she sees her. A smattering under a restaurant table, a handful cast into the sea. Her bag grows lighter. Without thinking, she becomes more sparing. Palmfuls reduce to pinches. Her days drift into each other. For the first time she just lives, breathing and moving. But Connie knows it cannot last. All that lies between her and her orphaned future is the contents of the bag. The despair that she had felt when first coming to the island begins to weigh on her. And then she is down to nothing, a few dry crumbs caught in a worn corner. Her mother grows quiet, as though she too is considering what lies ahead.

She was not there when her mother died. She had gone out to phone work. She was gone for fewer than ten minutes, but in that time her mother departed. Was that the worst part of it all? That she had not been holding her hand? Or that her mother had chosen to go on without her?

Her mother wakes her. The light is dim, lugubrious. She gets up without a word, pulls on a dress, her sneakers. The town sleeps, boats rock on silver water. Her mother leads her toward Mandraki, to the east. They walked here before, but never at this hour, in this silent, thyme-scented world. The road rises beneath her feet. She watches the glowing line of the horizon, the sea filling with pearlescent light. At the end of the road they come to a church, blue roofed. Her mother leads the way to the water, over rocks. Out in the bay, a young man of godly beauty emerges from the cockpit of a yacht. He stands for a moment, and then dives into the water. Her mother turns and winks at her. She tucks her book under her arm; *The Odyssey*, Connie notices, with amusement.

The sun gropes higher.

“At the end,” says her mother at last, breaking the silence, “we are all nobody.” Her eyes follow the swimming boy. “But for the briefest of time we can be somebody. Remember to lift up your eyes, Connie, and be.”

And Connie understands. Without needing to be told, she leans forward over the rocks, and pours the last flecks of the ash into the dawn-bright sea.

MARYKATE POWELL

Night Drives

Condensation gathers
at the bottom of my windshield.
The defrost is warm
and my breath is heavy.

That fog
that blinds my road vision
is my indwelling sin
personified.

The stereo is low,
just to deafen the silence,
just for the sake of white noise,
just to limit my thoughts.

The thoughts that keep me
driving in circles.
They say all roads lead to home,
and true, most roads have yellow lines,

But if home is where the heart is,
my body never follows.
It prefers blinding, golden sunrises at dawn,
visors down, legs open.

My car has my heart
or at least my time.
And the royal blue, digital speedometer
knows me better than most.

MARYKATE POWELL

First Date

There's a candle between us,
Even though lights hang above.
I can see his face clearly,
And he can see the makeup on mine.

The salad comes and I hate tomatoes
But I swallow, attempting to stay in control.
He asks me about pets.
I hate cats, he has one.

The waitress flirts as she pours *my* water,
Not once have her eyes been on mine.
She must be wondering,
Why order chicken when you can have steak?

I flash him my smile in between bites,
My lipstick must be faded by now.
"Excuse me, one moment?"
And I consider if he'll watch me walk away.

But the garlic mashed potatoes are better than my backside,
And the mirror in the ladies' room doesn't lie.
So I powder my nose and reapply *raspberry glaze*.
And there he is, empty plate, paycheck ready.

There's a candle between us,
And now I look closer.
Candles are a fire hazard in a small place like this.
The flame is battery operated, perception is reality.

ILARI PASS

Kaleidoscope in Place of Conversation

Several mirrors, angled
to one another, light rotating
and tumbling beautifully,
while colored objects—deep
ocean blue, orange, red
and yellow—match
an autumn day.

With one look in the cylinder, I am
witnessing the brevity
of form. At one end
of the cylinder, an eye. Beyond
the cylinder, a room,
and in that room one man
and one woman, floating.

SARAH WOOD ANDERSON

Knitter's Remorse

Winter here is cold,
so in late June
I knitted a hat for you, my first,
on thin needles slick and clumsy.
I knitted in the round,
sat it on my bedside table
until my mother could teach me
to reduce the stitches
and close the crown.

It sat there, purple and waiting,
during the grainy ultrasound that showed
I had not grown a skull for you.
Your big black eye that could not see
rested above a perfect hand that moved,
and feet that kicked
while I could feel you.

After you were removed,
I came back to my bed,
lifted the purple hat—
a maker of unfinished things.

CARL BOON

1947

Six months before I was born,
my father died on a Bakersfield highway.
Passersby in the shadows

of Shasta firs put their hands
in their jeans. The trail
of fertilizer and seed stretched
seventy yards from the Saco junction.

A boy on a bicycle brought the news
to my mother, who was in the kitchen
listening to *Ellery Queen* and chopping

broccoli for dinner. My sister
played Raggedy Ann on the stairs,
too little to know
the sound of steel on concrete.

Night fell without him
at the table as the condors flew
their usual patterns at the ridgeline.

The *Californian* told the news
in a thirty-word blurb that misspelled
his name, *my* name. At the funeral,
my mother wore a charcoal gown

and a raspberry scarf, the June sun
incessant, she said, through the Scotch
pine and black walnut.

BILL BROWN

First Snow

My sister and I rush to the open space
beneath the back porch, hunch together

with our brother's sleeping bag to watch
the flurries turn into a steady fall, as grass

begins to whiten and Josephus, our spaniel,
nestles with us, his breath warm against

our cheeks...I wake to this dream with
a glorious shiver, mid-August, my sister's

69th birthday...in the dream, our brother
hadn't gone to war, my father hadn't died

and no school tomorrow...a fleeting oasis
without future's shadows...my ghost follows

me downstairs to turn on coffee and feed cats.
He'll visit until Suzanne wakes, then return

to memory's closet where I still smell
GrandSally's coconut cake and fresh hay

and horse dung in Grandmilt's barn. The boy
never says why he comes, and I don't ask.

HEATHER BELL ADAMS

A Pop of Color

The Saturday night before she got hurt, Laurel sat by the hotel pool spying on another mother from Hillsborough Christian School. It was an indoor pool and, at almost nine o'clock in the evening, strobe lights swept across the vaulted ceiling and dance music—did they call it club music now?—pulsated faintly from the hidden speakers.

“Oliver, just a few more minutes. Almost bedtime.” Laurel tapped her watch for emphasis. Her ten-year-old son flicked one shoulder up, a sign that he'd heard her. He tossed the football high in the air and leaned back in the water to catch it, his pale belly surfacing briefly before he stood up again.

She snuck another glance at the woman in the shallow end. It was Tana Brightwell, wasn't it? But who was the man with her? Tana's husband had shaved his head. He looked nothing like the beefy, dark-haired man staring at Tana's turquoise bikini. Tana pursed her lips and tilted her head back, laughing. The man took a step closer and brushed Tana's nipple with the back of his hand.

Laurel looked down at her lap, fiddling with the plastic cover of her library book—another one of those novels about Anne Boleyn she was always reading. She took a deep breath and let the chlorine sting her nose. Didn't Oliver used to call out to her when he was playing? “Mom, watch this! Check this out!” But now he just kept launching the hotel's football high in the air and waiting, hands outstretched, for it to come back down.

Laurel tried not to look in Tana's direction, tried to ignore the sound of her laughing and the man's low voice. Wasn't Tana the least bit worried about being caught? Then again, it wasn't exactly a place you'd expect Hillsborough Christian families to hang around. Even though they'd only been at the school a little over a month, Laurel already knew most of the families flocked to the country club pool.

“Two minute warning, okay?” She called out to Oliver, jumpy at the thought of Tana looking over and noticing them. Maybe Tana wouldn't recognize her. This was Oliver's first year at the school. They'd switched him from the public system after he won a scholarship from the church.

Of course, if Tana did recognize her, then the whole thing would be awkward. But if the man simply left—up and disappeared—then Laurel could string together enough words for a good couple minutes of

conversation. Tana owned a store, Laurel remembered. Maybe she could ask Tana what it was like to be a working mother. Laurel used to work three days a week in the church office, but she quit when she was pregnant with Oliver. Still, she remembered how it felt to answer the phone all day, the way people complimented her cheerful voice, the idea that the stack of spiral-bound church directories held the pictures of close to three hundred potential friends, people Laurel would take a covered dish to if they had a loved one in the hospital, if someone ever called and let her know.

Laurel pulled her cardigan tighter. It was still warm outside, but she'd been right about the hotel air-conditioning. Everywhere they'd been—the lobby, the restaurant with its sticky tables, their deluxe room, the air was on full blast. The weather probably wouldn't cool down until after Halloween.

Her husband, Jay, was supposed to be working upstairs, catching up on invoices, but Laurel knew he must be distracted, worrying about their own air-conditioning back home. It hadn't been working for four days and the estimate for the new compressor—well, it was going to take most of their savings. But it wasn't like they had a choice. At night they'd been lying in bed sweating, cold washcloths draped over their foreheads. Finally, Laurel had remembered the radio contest she'd won.

“We could go stay at that new hotel out by the mall,” she'd suggested to Jay Saturday morning. “Remember I won a free night's stay? Including a steak dinner for two.”

He'd nodded, squeezing her arm on his way out to a new client consult. “It would be nice to cool down.”

Jay was a business owner too, just like Tana Brightwell with her store and the other Hillsborough Christian families with their wine bars and orthopedic clinics and accounting practices. After he'd taken an online course on home security, Jay took out a loan and started Home Tight. Laurel didn't really understand the company's name, even after Jay explained it was to remind people of their childhoods, the safe feeling from their parents tucking them in at bedtime. When they got the canceled check from his first install, Laurel had it framed at Rite Aid and hung it by his desk.

Over time Jay worked his way up to some commercial clients too, and they paid even more than residential. Not enough for private school tuition, but weren't they lucky when Oliver got that scholarship?

“If a commercial client's system is tripped, I'll show up on-site. Right there with the police.” Jay had told her. “No matter the time of day.”

“But what would that accomplish?” she'd wanted to ask. Instead, she'd found herself saying it was a good idea. “I think that's something they'll really value.”

Jay had nodded, and Laurel knew she'd happened upon the right thing to say. It reminded her of the way people who didn't speak English very well lit up when they were actually understood.

She called for Oliver again and he groaned, but he climbed out of the pool, dripping, and she got up to hand him one of the flimsy towels from the hamper.

"Be careful, it's slippery." Laurel pointed to the concrete dotted with puddles and stepped carefully in her sturdy, rubber-soled sandals. These days, she needed shoes with arch support or her feet would ache. She was only nine, maybe ten years older than most of the other moms, but sometimes it felt like they were a completely different generation. It wasn't her fault she and Jay took so long to get pregnant. Or maybe it was. They'd never gotten things checked out, especially after they finally had Oliver.

Laurel looked over at Tana one last time—just as she climbed out of the pool, the man close behind her. She pulled on a white cover-up from the floor and he wrapped a towel around his waist. It made him look like he was naked, like he'd just stepped out of the shower. Laurel touched Oliver's arm so he would wait. The football bobbed in the water, bumping up against the edge again and again. As the man held the swinging frosted glass door open for Tana, Laurel saw that she'd left something behind. When she went to check, she discovered a long necklace of blonde wooden beads with a neon green tassel pendant. She poked at it with her sandal, remembering how the other women at Mothers' Tea had been wearing them.

"Nothing fancy," she'd heard one of them say as she held up her pink tassel, "just a pop of color, you know?"

It was too late to call out. Tana and the man had disappeared. Laurel was pretty sure Tana sold the necklaces at her store. After the last Morning Meeting, when the parents had gathered to pray about violence in schools, Tana handed out sale flyers. Laurel remembered studying the collage of pictures showing what was for sale. Besides the necklaces—she was sure about them now—there were crosses made from oyster shells and a table lamp with a gold turtle shell for its base. The shop's name was At Your Service, another name Laurel didn't really understand. Anyway, she'd never shopped there, sure that the prices were higher than what she could afford.

Back in the hotel room, while Oliver brushed his teeth, Laurel whispered to Jay about what she'd seen.

"Maybe it wasn't really her," Jay said. He drew little circles on the notepad resting on his lap.

"Oh, I'm sure it was. Isn't her store one of your accounts?"

"Yeah, it's over near Five Points."

“It’s a very awkward situation, don’t you think? Socially, I mean.”

“Not really our business, I guess.” Jay frowned and ripped the top page off the notepad.

The back of Laurel’s throat burned. She didn’t know why she was so upset, why she felt like crying. “Right. There’s nothing really to be done. Not a thing.”

Her husband nodded and Laurel reached to turn off the T.V. “Oliver, let’s finish up in there, okay?”

Monday afternoon as Laurel drove Oliver home from school, he asked if Dillon could come over the next day. “We hung out at study hall today,” he explained.

“Dillon Brightwell?”

“I don’t know. Yeah, I guess.”

“Well, sure. I can call his mom and arrange to pick him up after school when I get you. If she sends a note to Dillon’s advisory teacher, they’ll allow that. At least according to the handbook.”

But when Laurel called, nobody answered and she had to leave a message with her cell phone number. Later that evening when she was washing the supper dishes, she got a text from Tana saying she would drop Dillon off at their house after his orthodontist appointment.

Later that night, as they got ready for bed, Laurel finally had a chance to talk to Jay about Dillon coming over. “It’s quite a coincidence, don’t you think?”

Jay pulled off his t-shirt, sighing. “You mean because of the hotel thing? But you said she didn’t even see you.”

“No, I mean, I don’t think she did. But since school started we’ve heard nothing about Dillon and now this. It’s odd, right?”

“I guess I don’t really see—” Jay frowned. “You’re probably worrying too much. I’m sure it’s fine.”

“Alright. It’s just that if Tana wants a big heart-to-heart, if she’s worked up some kind of confession and that’s the real reason they’re coming over—” Laurel shrugged. “Well, I’ll just have to be prepared for that.”

She stayed up late, dusting and cleaning out the refrigerator and pantry. At least the air-conditioning was finally working again. The workers had been waiting in the driveway that morning when she’d gotten home from school drop-off and the grocery store, the new compressor wedged in the back of their van.

She worked on a list of things to say when Tana and Dillon arrived. No nuts, just in case Dillon has an allergy. I wasn’t sure and you can’t be too careful. Certainly we don’t keep any guns in the house.

It was too late to paint the front door an Easter egg color like she'd seen on HGTV. Should she mention the dog next door, make some excuse about his barking? Or would it only draw attention to the neighbors' chain link fence?

But the following afternoon Tana didn't even get out of the car. Laurel trotted up to the driver's side window, which Tana rolled down without removing her sunglasses. Her long brown hair was pulled back in a ponytail.

"I'm off to yoga, okay? Big Dillon will swing by in a couple hours to pick up Little Dillon if that works with y'all."

Laurel nodded. "Sure, okay. I thought I'd let them play out back for a little bit. Soccer or whatever." She cleared her throat. "I can give them a snack when they get hungry—"

"Sounds perfect. Listen, I've gotta run or I'll be late." Tana waved at Dillon and sped off in her white SUV.

The boys played well together at least. Laurel listened for any arguments she might need to break up, but all she heard was talking and laughing. They didn't even get hungry. She covered the cookies she'd made with plastic wrap and went to change clothes. It wasn't that she was trying to impress Dillon's father. She'd just decided that she could make more of an effort. Remembering Tana's shiny sunglasses, Laurel traced her finger over her eyebrows. Nothing to be done about them now. In the closet she picked out a loose mint green shirt and the sandals with the highest heel, the ones she wore at her father's retirement party.

Mr. Brightwell—she refused to call him Big Dillon—pulled up right on time and Tana called out back for Dillon. He came in red-faced and sweaty, but smiling, his white teeth already so straight Laurel couldn't imagine why he needed an orthodontist. She smoothed out her dress as they walked out the front door to find Mr. Brightwell coming up the sidewalk.

"They had a great time," Laurel announced.

"Great. Hey, that's good. Buddy, did you have a fun day?"

"Yes, sir." Dillon nodded and headed for the car.

His father followed behind him, waving. "Thanks so much."

"Certainly, yes. Anytime at all. We'd love to—gosh, is it only Tuesday? I was trying to figure out our weekend plans. What did y'all do this past weekend? Anything fun?" She pressed her lips together and waited for his answer.

He turned around, squinting. "This past weekend? Oh, let's see, Dillon and I were out with a group from the Y. Guide stuff, you know. Awesome weather for it."

Laurel nodded. She couldn't think of how to ask what Tana did while they were gone.

"Sounds fun," she finally said, quickly turning away so he wouldn't notice her flushed cheeks. She scurried up the front sidewalk and was halfway up the steps when she landed wrong, the heel of her sandal twisting until her foot was sideways against the brick. She yelped, coming to rest on the step and clutching her ankle. The pain shot through the bone, something close to anger.

"Oh no, how did that happen?" Mr. Brightwell rushed back. "You don't think it's broken, do you?"

"Goodness, no. Just a sprain." Laurel was surprised she could talk with such authority. "I'll be fine." She motioned for him to leave. "I promise."

He frowned, passing his hand over his shaved head. "Well, if you're sure you don't need any help—"

"Not at all," Laurel answered, pulling herself up. The hem of her dress had started to unravel and she tugged at a loose thread. "See you around school," she managed to call out.

When Jay got home, Laurel assured him there was no need to make a fuss, especially after his long day working. She'd already ordered a pizza for supper so she didn't have to cook. "At least it's the left one," she said, trying to sound undaunted. "I can still drive no problem."

Her ankle hurt enough that she had to lean on the table for support as she gathered up the dirty dishes. Jay had two Vicodin left from when he'd had his wisdom teeth out and Laurel wondered if he might remember them, but he didn't say a word. After she washed the dishes, she went to the pantry to get them herself. Without bothering to read the label, she swallowed both pills and tossed the bottle in the trash, already feeling a tiny rush. Who knew she could be so bold?

Oliver, who'd finished his homework, begged to watch television before bedtime. So they sat together on the couch—even Jay—and watched a story about the Old Testament. An older man dressed in a linen robe poured oil on Saul's forehead, anointing him as the first King of Israel.

"That's so gross," Oliver said, and Jay laughed, patting his son's knee.

After Oliver went to bed, Laurel did too, not bothering to change out of her dress. She was so tired and the pills made everything seem fuzzy and floating. Almost as soon as she closed her eyes, strange images began flickering in her mind. Jay was sitting in some sort of stone palace. Instead of his normal buzz cut, the Jay in her dream had long, curly hair like Saul's. Suddenly he jerked his chin up, struck by something across the room. Laurel, who in her dream looked exactly the same, pulled herself up from the satin cushion where she'd been resting—just in time to see Anne Boleyn

twirling around in a fur-trimmed cape. When Anne disappeared around the corner, Laurel turned back and picked up the cruet she used when she made homemade salad dressing. Smiling, she inched closer to pour the oil on her husband's forehead. He finally looked at her then, but the yellow liquid that came out wasn't oil after all. It was much more fluid, not really the least bit oily. And what was that smell?

She woke up with her cheek pressed against the foam pillow. Oh god, had it been urine? That was disgusting. Why would she dream something like that? She reached over for Jay's shoulder, but his side of the bed was empty.

Still in a daze, Laurel limped through the house until she found him in his home office, slumped over in the chair and snoring, one hand still resting on the computer keyboard. She shook her head. The Vicodin made everything so warm, didn't it? So loose and jiggly. She straightened the shoulders of her dress and poked Jay's leg with her bare right foot. He didn't stir. It didn't matter. Trying to stay quiet, she crept back to the kitchen where she found the car keys on the hook by the back door.

Too fast, much too fast. Wasn't she driving awfully fast? It was so hard to tell. Laurel looked for any other cars, a way to gauge. Nothing but street lights, a crosswalk light flashing in the distance. She eased her foot off the gas, but that seemed unbearably slow and she sped back up. Her eyelids were so heavy.

Maybe this was a mistake. If she went back home—but there was the store up ahead. She couldn't turn around now. Nodding at the blue awning—hard to tell in the dark but it might have been the same color as Tana's bikini—Laurel swung the car into a parking spot by the front door. Inside At Your Service, a tall floor lamp was turned on, the light pooling around the silver bamboo-shaped column. She could make out display tables piled with zebra striped pillows and woven blankets.

What now? The door had a wooden frame with glass insets, like an oversized window. She didn't have anything in the car that she could throw through the glass. Nothing in the parking lot either—no cinder blocks or bricks laying around. Laurel shrugged and shoved her left elbow through the pane of glass closest to the doorknob. Even as the glass shattered, she felt only a slight tingling in her arm. She checked and didn't find any scrapes, no blood. Shrugging again, she reached in through the hole she'd created and turned the lock, then pushed the door open.

An overhead light clicked on. Motion sensor? She checked the front door again, finding the Home Tight sticker on the bottom row of glass. How

much time did she have? She'd never asked Jay. The store was quiet and she didn't hear any sirens outside. Shouldn't there be some kind of sound? Or was she wrong about that too?

She tried to focus. It was almost overwhelming really, all the things displayed in the store. Soft cashmere ponchos, glittery headbands, leather bracelets with metal snaps, a scrapbook with dried flowers glued on the front. "80% Recycled Paper," the label boasted. Laurel picked up a spicy-smelling candle and checked the bottom for the price. Someone—was it Tana or did she have a staff?—had written "\$44" on a white sticker. Laurel carefully put it back where she'd found it. On a blue and white tiled table she found an old-fashioned crystal punch bowl filled with tubes of bright lip gloss. She picked one at random and smeared the gloss on her lips, surprised to taste coconut. When she smacked her lips together, they started to burn and she wiped off her mouth with her arm.

What was that along the right side of the store? Coolers? Fresh flowers maybe. Laurel hobbled over and opened one of the doors. A tiny light revealed rows of aluminum pans with clear plastic lids. She pulled one out, surprised at the weight, and read the script label on top: chicken pot pie. The other shelves held vegan lasagna and Cuban pork with rice and beans. She shook her head, the Vicodin still making her aware of the crevices that must be in her brain, the places where the fluid rippled and settled whenever she moved too quickly.

Why casseroles? Did these women pick up a new bracelet and supper at the same time? And who made the food? The thought of Tana in a huge, light-filled kitchen, rows of pans bubbling in a commercial-size oven made Laurel nauseous.

Finally she spotted a large owl made of mercury glass, the tassel necklaces draped around its neck. There must have been a dozen of them. Some had white beads strung between the pale wooden ones. From the middle of the stack, Laurel picked up the only necklace with a multi-colored tassel, dark blue threads mixed with peach. She ran her fingers over the wooden beads and held her breath as she reached for the tassel, already imagining its cool silkiness. But the threads were limp and damp. Wasn't the whole thing a little cheap feeling? Now that she felt how light the beads were, she guessed they were hollow.

Still, she lifted the necklace over her head, admiring how the tassel nestled between her breasts. Maybe she could take off her dress. It was a little warm with the store's air-conditioning turned off. It might be nice to—she stopped herself. What would it look like to be found here in her underwear? It would be embarrassing and silly, like something a drunk person would do.

The best thing would be to stay in her dress, pile on as many necklaces as she could, maybe try a different lip gloss if there was time. Trying to hurry, she reached again toward the display and knocked over the owl.

“Sorry,” Laurel whispered, checking for scratches before setting it upright again. One by one, she looped the strands over her head, nudging the tassels around to the front. Yellow and purple and blue and pink. When he came—if he came—she wouldn’t look unhinged, but instead adorned in this new and exotic way, like a flashy bird, the kind nobody can look away from.

TOMMIE MARIE CASSEN

Fragile Fingers

Behind billowing
curtains, they wait. Beeping
machines and bustling
nurses surround them,

unseen. Shadows beyond
the screen's filtered
light. Hunched in a cold,
callous chair, coat arranged
across thin shoulders,

he holds her hand. His
thumb stroking paper-thin
skin. As she lies there,
bundled

in warm blankets,
holding his gaze.
Fragile

fingers entwined. Weary
eyes meeting. With
a steady voice, he
whispers of a youth spent
together, a family

forged by faith,
and a future they cannot
yet see.

JAMIE CREPEAU

Type I

At my snack time, other children
stare, pressing on my solitary face, pale
as a burned out light bulb,
I sit and guzzle an eighty-
seven octane juice box and granola
bar, my eyes and ears floating
back from the haze to re-

focus on the chalked out scrawls that
sharpen like a pencil, questions explode
like mortar shells, my throat
fills itself with rubber cement
and I become an island at my desk
while the carpeted ocean
still brimming with waves, no tongues

will be bitten, this high rising
chorus of jackhammer voices pounding
at my head, digging for
answers the way a needle digs
into the skin for embedded splinters,
take my wall down and scatter
nerves like airborne pebbles.

JOHN DELANEY

Briggs & Stratton

Yup.

Jerked out of its hibernation
with a few quick pulls on the cord,
the lawnmower revs up once again—
now seven years without servicing.

Why do I expect it to start each spring
but am honestly surprised when it does?
Something I count on but shouldn't, even
though I, who am never sick myself,

seldom bother to seek a doctor's help.
I feel yoked to a kindred machine,
solid as this Briggs & Stratton engine,
that keeps on sparking and whirling

towards a breakdown I know must be coming.
Till then, I'll blade the growing grass
with rpms. As long as my heart
can be tugged, I intend to start

up.

GERSHON BEN-AVRAHAM

The Ecstasy of Alma Leitner

*When I wished to sing of love, it turned to sorrow.
And when I wished to sing of sorrow, it was transformed for me into love.*
Franz Schubert

Doctor Neuer closed the file on his desk and looked at Alma. “Mrs. Leitner,” he said, folding his hands together and resting them on the closed file, “I am sorry. There is nothing more we can do to treat your illness.”

He paused to give her time to take in what he had said.

“How long?” Alma asked.

The doctor looked at his hands, “Perhaps a month,” he said, then looking at the couple, “sometimes longer. There are,” he continued, “some palliative measures that can be taken to alleviate...”

Alma raised a hand slightly to stop him, and shook her head.

“Thank you,” she said, “but they won’t be necessary.”

“Mrs. Leitner, I am not sure you fully understand what...”

“Oh, but I do,” Alma interrupted. “I do understand, doctor. I want my mind to be clear, to live to the end, even if that means experiencing the pain of dying,” Alma said.

Erich took his wife’s hands into his own, looked at her briefly to make sure, then turned to the doctor.

“Thank you,” he said, “for all you have done for us. We won’t require anything else.”

The couple rode home in silence. At home, Erich made them tea. They sat down at the dining room table. The house was quiet. One could hear the clock ticking in the hallway.

“Erich,” Alma began, “I want to go home, to die in Heimlein and be buried beside my parents there in the cemetery of St. Teresa.”

“Of course,” he said, “if that’s what you want.”

“It is what I want,” she said. She hesitated briefly before continuing. “I know it is selfish of me to refuse medication. I can’t ask you to come with me. I have some idea of what lies ahead.”

“Ask me? You don’t have to ask,” Erich said, looking down and running his thumb along the edge of his saucer; then looking at her, “We will leave Friday.”

“Erich, I will leave tomorrow. Alone.” She paused. “I will call you when it is time for you to come.”

“Alma, you can’t be serious. This is too much to ask. I want to be with you. I...I need to be with you. Are you sure? Are you absolutely sure this is what you want?”

“I’m sure,” she said. “Please, try to understand, and forgive me.” She looked at Erich, then leaning forward and taking his face in both her hands whispered, “Don’t worry Erich. You will be with me. I promise you. I will call you in time.”

That evening, Alma packed. The next morning Erich drove her to the station. She took the early train to Heimlein, the small village where she had grown up. She arrived in the afternoon.

* * * * *

Alma’s father and mother had owned and run one of the two inns in Heimlein. Her grandparents on her father’s side had owned and run it before them. The family’s hope had been that Alma’s brother Kurt would do it after them, but Kurt’s death in the flu pandemic of 1918 had ended that hope. After Kurt’s death, Alma’s parents had wrapped themselves tightly in the consolation of their faith.

Her mother had always been devout, but now she began to wear only black clothing, to attend mass every day, and to go to confession every week. There was no doubt in her mind that her son was with God. She set up a small shrine in a corner of the bedroom she shared with her husband. There, she kept a picture of the Sacred Heart beneath a wooden crucifix, along with a small vase of wildflowers and a candle she would light each morning.

Alma would often accompany her mother to church in the afternoons, when there were no services, and the sanctuary was usually empty. In the darkened church, she would sit quietly in one of the pews, surrounded by the smell of wood and burning candles, and wait for her mother to finish her prayers. Kneeling before the statue of St. Teresa of Avila, the saint in whose honor the church was named, Alma’s mother would pray the rosary.

When Alma was old enough, her mother asked Father Keller, the parish priest, to prepare Alma for her Confirmation. So every Wednesday afternoon, Alma was walked to the parish house by her mother, who waited while her daughter learned with the priest. On the way home she would ask Alma what she had learned. Alma would tell her. She enjoyed these walks with her mother. It made her feel grown up to discuss such serious things with her.

At the end of three months, Father Keller pronounced the girl ready and told her mother that she should be taken to Stuttgart for the next Confirmation service to be held by the bishop.

“If you don’t mind, Mrs. Brauer,” the priest said, “I would like to suggest that Alma take St. Teresa as her confirmation saint. She has told me that St. Teresa is someone she would like to be like. I think it suits her well.”

“Of course, Father Keller. I agree.”

“And, if I may be so bold,” the priest continued “next year, the Holy Father has declared a special Jubilee year in commemoration of Our Lord’s death. You should think of taking Alma to Rome. You could see the Vatican and also take the opportunity to see the wonderful sculpture of our St. Teresa in the church of Santa Maria della Vittoria. Mrs. Brauer, Alma is a special child. She has a sweet soul. She will be sensitive to these holy things.”

In bed that night, Mrs. Brauer told her husband of the priest’s idea concerning the trip to Rome and what he had said about Alma. At first he resisted.

“And what of the money?” he asked. “We don’t have money for a trip to Rome. If the priest wants her to go, then let him pay for it!” he said. Then immediately, “I’m sorry. I will need, of course, to stay here and to work,” he said, “but you and Alma, you should plan to go to Rome.”

For her Confirmation, Father Keller gave Alma a copy of St. Teresa’s Autobiography. She wrapped it in paper and placed it in her suitcase for her trip to Rome with her mother.

* * * * *

Alma and her mother stopped and stood a few feet within the entryway of the Church of Santa Maria della Vittoria to give their eyes time to adjust to the change in light. It was cool inside the church and reminded Alma of stepping off one of the hiking trails around Heimlein on a hot summer day into the coolness of the forest. Soon, they were besieged by several men offering themselves in a cacophony of languages as guides. Alma’s mother shaking her head tapped the cover of her guidebook with the index finger of her right hand. The men understood, and moved away in search of other clients.

Alma’s mother opened the guidebook and looked at the map of the interior of the church to get her bearings. Mrs. Brauer located the Cornaro Chapel, to the left of the main altar, and began to make her way to it with Alma.

Standing outside the altar railing, they were disappointed to find that the altar’s centerpiece, the sculpture of St. Teresa, was covered by a long canvas drape. Scaffolding on the roof of the chapel gave the reason; workmen were repairing parts of the ceiling and had covered the sculpture for its protection. Disappointed, Alma’s mother turned to her daughter and said, “I’m so sorry. Perhaps if we come tomorrow they will be done.”

At this point, a thin angular man dressed in a worn gray suit, holding his hat in his hands, stepped out of the shadows behind them.

“Mi scusi, signora e la signorina, posso aiutarle?”

Mrs. Brauer turned to look at the man. She paused, and then said, “Parli tedesco?”

“I do,” he replied in German.

“We came here specifically to see the sculpture of St. Teresa,” Alma’s mother began. “How disappointing for us to find it covered! Do you know how long it will be covered?”

“At least another week,” the man replied, “perhaps longer. However, I know these workmen. Right now they are enjoying their lunch. If you would like to see the sculpture, please, follow me.”

Mrs. Brauer looked at Alma, then at the man, and nodded. He opened an entry in the altar’s railing. Alma and her mother first looked around them, then passed through the open gate. The man took them to the right side of the altar where the end of a long rope attached to the canvas lay. Taking hold of the rope with both hands, he pulled it gently, slowly drawing the canvas curtain up and exposing the sculpture.

Alma stood transfixed. Never before had she seen anything so beautiful. She stared at the sculpture for several moments.

“Beautiful, no?” the man asked.

Alma gazed at the intricate carving of the folds in the saint’s robes, the details of her hands and feet, the smile on the angel’s face. But it was the face of the saint that drew her most. Never before had she seen an expression like that worn by the saint, an expression full of what seemed to be both tremendous joy and tremendous pain. She felt dizzy, and turned her eyes away.

The man lowered the canvas, covering the sculpture again. He bowed slightly at the waist, and gestured with his right hand to the opening in the altar railing. When they had exited the altar, Alma’s mother turned to thank the man and to offer him some money. However, she could not find him. He seemed to have disappeared back into the shadows.

On their way out of the church, they stopped by a small shop near the exit where they purchased a post card with a picture of the sculpture and a small booklet that gave its history.

That night after dinner in their hotel, they returned to their room, where Alma read the booklet. It contained an excerpt from the saint’s diary which had served as the inspiration to the sculptor. She read the words of the saint, “The pain was so severe that it made me utter several moans. The

sweetness caused by this intense pain is so extreme that one cannot possibly wish it to cease...”¹

In bed, Alma lay next to her mother in darkness, thinking of the sculpture, the saint’s face, and what she had read.

“Mama,” she whispered.

“Yes?”

“Can you help me to understand something?” Alma asked.

“I’ll try,” her mother said.

“The saint’s face today looked like she was happy and sad at the same time. It seems strange to me.”

Mrs. Brauer turned on her side and faced her daughter in the dark. She placed a hand on her daughter’s head and began to stroke her hair gently.

“Sometimes,” her mother said, “joy and pain come together. When you were born, for example, I suffered the pains that childbirth brings, but your arrival also filled me with joy, so much joy I didn’t feel the pain anymore. I know that sounds odd to a young girl. But someday you will understand.”

* * * * *

Erich was teaching his freshman class in logic when he noticed the department secretary in the hallway trying to get his attention. She was standing outside his classroom door gesturing to him through the door’s window. He excused himself and stepped into the hallway.

“Sorry to interrupt you Professor Leitner,” the secretary said, “but there is a call for you in the office. It’s your wife.”

* * * * *

Erich took the same train to Heimlein that Alma had taken a few short weeks earlier. When he arrived, a light snow was falling. The station attendant asked if he needed transportation. Erich thanked him, but told him no; he had only his rucksack and not far to go.

As he left the station and headed for the cottage, Erich was overcome by a host of memories. They came rushing at him from all sides, roused by scents carried on breezes from the deep darkness of the woods, by the blues and grays of the afternoon sky, and by the sounds he made walking, stirring memories of mountain hikes with Alma. As he approached the cottage, he saw her standing by one of the front windows. She waved a hand in greeting.

1. Teresa of Avila (2004-07-29). *The Life of St Teresa of Avila by Herself* (Classics) (p. 210). Penguin Books Ltd. Kindle Edition.

That evening Erich built a fire in the front room. He moved a small sofa close to the fireplace and set an ottoman in front of the sofa. Alma and he sat together. He rested his arm on the back of the sofa and gently rubbed Alma's neck. Mostly, they sat in silence. When they did speak, their speech often began "Do you remember...?" When the fire died down, Erich folded the grate against the fireplace and he and Alma went to bed.

In bed, they moved close to each other, Alma borrowing the warmth of Erich's body. How cold she felt. Both were tired and soon fell into a deep sleep. At some point in the night, a sharp stabbing pain rose from deep inside Alma and woke her. She lay quietly for several minutes struggling to control the pain, forcing herself to breathe slowly, deeply, and rhythmically. Gradually the pain diminished, but it did not leave her. She turned on her side and faced Erich in the dark.

"Erich," she whispered. "Erich."

"Yes?"

"I want you to make love to me."

"Alma, shouldn't you save your strength?"

"I did," she said, "I did save it."

Erich turned towards her. He placed his hand upon her cheek and began to rub it gently.

"I'm not sure..."

Alma silenced him by placing the tips of her fingers against his lips.

"Shh," she said. "Do you remember our honeymoon?"

* * * * *

Erich rose with the morning light. He walked into the kitchen and put a pot of water on the stove for coffee. He placed two rolls, some butter, and jam on a tray. When the coffee was ready, he took the tray and coffee into the bedroom. He placed the tray on a table beside the bed. Alma, with her eyes still closed, said, "I smell something wonderful."

"I've brought a light breakfast," Erich said.

Alma opened her eyes and looked at Erich.

"Thanks," she said, "but I'm not hungry."

Erich poured them coffee.

"Would you mind reading to me?" Alma asked.

"I wouldn't mind at all," he replied. "What would you like?"

"You pick," she said.

Erich walked to the bookcase, and scanning it quickly, pulled out a small leather-bound volume of poems by Wilhelm Müller. He drew a chair up close to the bed.

“Not there,” she said. “Read here.” She patted the bed next to her.

Erich placed a pillow against the head of the bed, and got in beside Alma. He sat, leaning his back against the pillow, and Alma put her head on his lap. With his left hand holding the book, and his right hand stroking Alma’s head, he began to read.

He did not notice her leaving.

* * * * *

Alma was buried, two days later, next to her parents, as she had wished, in the cemetery of the Church of St. Teresa. Only Erich and the parish priest, a young man just out of the seminary, were present. After the service, Erich walked back to the cottage. He sat down at the kitchen table. He sat for a long time, not moving. Finally, he rose and began to pack for his return the next day. Although he planned to send most of Alma’s things back later, he wanted to check to see if there were some things he might want to take with him now. In the bedroom, he noticed a book lying on Alma’s side of the bed. He picked it up. It was her copy of Saint Teresa’s autobiography. He opened it and saw on the inside cover an inscription: “To Alma, from Father Keller on the occasion of her Confirmation, May 16, 1932. May she grow in wisdom and virtue.”

Alma had placed a postcard in the book. The postcard was a picture of Bernini’s sculpture, *L’Estasi di Santa Teresa*. On the page where Alma had placed the postcard, she had underlined a passage neatly in blue ink.

...it was our Lord’s will that I should see this angel in the following way. He was not tall but short, and very beautiful; and his face was so aflame that he appeared to be one of the highest rank of angels, who seem to be all on fire.²

In the margin she had written “Erich”.

* * * * *

The next morning, Erich locked the door of the cottage, and stepping off the porch, headed in the direction of the train station. The sky was cloudless. The morning air was cold. He headed into it, pulling his jacket tighter. A sudden gust of wind blew his hat from his head. He did not turn back for it.

2. Teresa of Avila (2004-07-29). *The Life of St Teresa of Avila by Herself* (Classics) (p. 209). Penguin Books Ltd. Kindle Edition.

NICHOLAS DEMSKI

Winter Is Coming

My eyes shutter open to your little wails, you crawling
again, toward some apparition, or monster

you met in your sleep. Your swollen eyelids dripping
like leaky faucets trying to keep me awake

through a ghost-cold Michigan night. This night
is full of creaky floor panels, yawning

and whispering in the dead language
of dead trees. Leafless hardwoods

clattering, tickling the stars and moon, coaxing them
to not fear the coming light

crawling across the sky, the trees full of giggling
birds, whistling songs of brave babies

and frightful satellites, each with monsters
to conquer and apparitions to endure.

TIMOTHY B. DODD

When Astronauts Come from West Virginia

One week of summertime heat and a four-day Christmas blur—my twice-a-year returns aren't enough anymore. Twenty years ago, my curmudgeon father preached hellfire, sold insurance, and kicked me for wanting long hair. Now he's ancient storyteller, beating me at my own game. He speaks of feeding hogs as a boy and trapping mink in hollows I've never known, with a wit closer to the Old Country than those great cities of the north where the people are sharper than us hillbillies. He recalls little places with post offices and general stores that have dried up or headed farther back into mountains where no one breathes anymore. And the nagging

OCD mother who filled my ears with turbulence, complained each time I opened the frig, now fixes magical beans and cornbread, sits quietly with a crossword puzzle each evening, smiling when I help with 16 across. She doesn't care these days when I put on raggedy shoes. There's no more passive aggression, no more "should haves" or "don't know whys" for the lawyer, doctor, and businessman I never touched. And the "when are you gonna get saved?" has turned to "when are you coming back home?" Oftentimes

I think about manned rocket ships blasting into space from Canaveral, astronauts strapped to their seats until they're able to float inside their craft for a few days. At what moment do they begin to ponder their return to our planet? At what point do they believe that falling back into the earth's atmosphere is more magnificent than shooting into the sky—no matter how many years they were taught, and dreamed, otherwise. With no children of my own, what

Thomas and Elizabeth did back then, good and bad, I can't much understand. But I know they're leaving soon. It's their turn to go to some new and distant place—a lonely thought after years of wishing to be far away from them. Which leaves me wondering on this third day of March, how to board the spaceship back home.

MATTHEW DULANY

April

Having failed again she opens
wide the garden doors,

props them with the brick,
optimistic some fresh accession,

some seasonable breeze,
will balm their stale interiors,

and yet the scenery is unavailing,
pale vapors drifting between

sleek trunks, rising through rain-
laden limbs, inscrutable

as unseen birds' unknown songs,
while their disaffectionate seething,

their irresolute machinery,
is steadily mocked by winter's debris,

the merciless measures of the clogged
gutter's stillicide, the drips,

in common time with the mantel clock,
dropping on every second tock.

LINDA BRAGG

My Sister's Hands

My sister's hands were elegant with long, slim fingers and not a snag of cuticle. They were the sort of hands you see on television where the handsome prince-of-a-husband slips a diamond ring onto his beloved's finger—not hands like mine, utilitarian, scrub-a-day sort of hands—but hands that were made to lift a teacup with an aristocratic curve of the pinkie.

Yet these graceful hands had nothing to do with tea parties or expensive rings. They dealt with the raising of four children, cooking countless meals, and rolling crust for holiday pies. Her hands washed mounds of laundry and dishes after a day of work pounding at her company's computer. They cut the hair of homeless people as part of a ministry she loved. Her hands didn't pick up teacups, but dainty seashells from her favorite Turtle Beach.

I never realized how one day her hands would become such a focus for me. She was dying from cancer and confined to a nursing facility. Her hands, folded precariously like a house of cards, lay atop her belly. Her body, once plump, had withered to the point that the one ring she wore now swung loosely on her finger like the earth around the sun.

She had many visitors; some came alone, others visited in a group to pray with her. Although weak, my sister greeted each one with a dignified lift of her hand. As if a plan had been agreed upon previously, each of her visitors commented on her beautiful hands. Her face, having lost so much substance, was one they could hardly recall. They all told her they loved her. I came to realize the depth and breadth of my sister's life by the number of people she had touched and who loved her in return.

She cried only once. The holidays were near when she focused her ravaged, sunken eyes at me and said, "I don't want to die on Christmas because of my kids."

On Christmas morning, I entered my sister's room to find a colorful Christmas bouquet had been added to the others. Someone had brought in a tiny Christmas tree complete with twinkling lights and sprinkled with button-size decorations. I read the cards to her. Former co-workers—people she hadn't worked with for over a year—had sent the bouquet and festive tree. "They don't know how much this means to me," she said as I dabbed away her grateful tears, reminding her of all the people who loved her.

She was rag-doll weak and wasn't able to unwrap her gifts. I opened them for her as we waited for her daughter to arrive; I prayed that she would

get there in time. I showed her a photo that her daughter had sent—my niece and her husband holding my sister's first grandchild, a grandson. I placed the picture in my sister's hand; she studied their lovely, fresh faces. In a rush of sudden fatigue, her hand dropped to her chest, clasping the photo to her heart in a mother's final hug. Her eyes closed in a silent goodbye to her only daughter.

As I left that day, I did what had become a habit for me: I turned to look at her. Sometimes I was in my car only to return to her to hug her one more time—to tell her I loved her once more. At the doorway, I paused to look at her. It was the first time she was turned away from me. It was the last time I would see her alive. She died the next day. She had lived through Christmas.

My sister was cremated. Her children wanted to return her to her beloved Turtle Beach. On a dim, bitter January day, we drove to Turtle Beach and huddled together in the salt-rich squall as the pastor bore the box that held my sister's remains. Her bits of bone looked like chipped pieces of polished shell. They looked as though they were going home to their proper place. Her big sister hands had once held mine, but now my hands – short-fingered, utilitarian hands – nothing like my sister's, held the box containing what was physically left of her. My hands dug into her essence. I grasped the fullness of her. Unfurling my hand, I watched her fly away with the wind as I prayed a silent prayer: Goodbye. I love you. I'll see you again.

KEITH DUNLAP

Soul Train

The Dramatics sing “Whatcha See Is Whatcha Get,”
inside the bricked-up fireplace,
on the oldest television in the house,
the black and white cathodic tube
laboring to steady the signal
from the rabbit ears whose metal wands
are stuffed inside the window well.
They move their hands to dramatize
the lyrics that they sing, each one
taking a turn to deliver a phrase
about the kind of things of which people
and their hearts are made:
plastic, stone, and wood.
I am supposed to be outside and playing,
on this suburban Saturday afternoon,
but instead am lying on the fabric couch
covered with cigarette burns, the one
in the basement where my older brother
has constructed a Sixties pleasure den.
And as I watch, my eight-year-old heart yearns
to be able to sing, to spin and turn
with such precision.

SAMUEL J. FOX

Owl Watching

He shows me the pelt of fur, the neat curl
of mouse bones coughed up. He tells me
that I might see the denizen of the dark,
might hear the hosannas of wide wings.

I had already seen them without a guide.
They roost and call in the backyard plenty
of nights, especially when the moon is full:
a stone skipping inch by inch across placid black.

My guide takes me to a small, sandy inlet,
where that moon refracts in ringlets on the lake.
Drowsy boats lift and drop, nearly asleep
in docks, moored by single loops of rope.

He plays a CD in a boom-box; the sound
of mating calls, like a cardiogram, rippling
between sentinel trees, soldiers at rest
listening intently, swaying to the wind's orders.

And we wait. There is no sound except
the hollow hoots reverberating from a CD
and our soft breathing rising as fog in the chill.
My father, my guide, huddles with me

as I shiver in the September night. He glances up,
glasses glinting in the moonlight, eyes
peering while his arm drapes around
a pubescent me, trembling like the leaves.

I go back to that night: the first memory
of my father firmly embracing me without encroachment
from open arms to which he would oblige. The spice
of his cologne soft, vigor in his chuckle.

We sat spotting owls. The Great Horned
swooping in to sit before us on a low branch.
We could see its silhouette in low light, the tufts
of its ears impish, its low hoot a hunting cornet.

Now, years later – sitting on my own porch,
listening to owls in conversation – I conjure that touch,
September raising my hair to stand, of my father
pointing to the owl, his arm pressing me to his chest.

JONATHAN GREENHAUSE

My Drab Office Metamorphs into a Tropical Desert

as dozens of butterflies cling to my desktop computer screen,
their wings plastered to the grey landscape by static,

while others flutter around the office phone
pressing the redial button to communicate with butterflies in other offices,

reminiscing about sunlit clearings & the dizzying sweetness of nectar.
Tree frogs rearrange the order of the bulletin board,

turning black-&-white pictures into mosaics of color
& giving a rainbow tress to a collection of bald former coworkers.

These photos are nestled & strapped around their hind legs,
& brought through an open window where the outside world adopts them,

all these staid images & hackneyed holiday cards made brilliant
& sent into the private lives of strangers; then they, too,

will be surrounded by these benevolent swarms,
flash mobs of butterflies & conglomerations of tree frogs

splashing iridescence on bleak surfaces
& turning the sterile urban landscape into a flapping exaltation of life.

JOHN BRANTINGHAM

All of Those Boys Are Dead Now

It's March when Everett's wife comes down to the shop to tell him that his baby brother has left for Europe. Jon said he was going to enlist, but Everett figured he meant to finish high school at least. Everett hoped that in the time it took Jon to graduate and cross the entire continent to sign up for service, the war would be over. He's never spoken that thought to anyone, knows how its premise is rooted in cowardice, but he's always known that he has no backbone when it comes to his brother or his wife or his son.

Jon must have known of his fear. That's why he lit out without telling him. Now that the weather's good and everyone's coming into Everett's little store, they both know there's nothing he can do to stop his little brother. What he can do is sell clothing, make himself smile, and think about his brother standing knee deep in trench water waiting for the huns to charge over the edge. He's read about Europe. Everyone knows what it's like.

In June, Everett gets a formal note from the government saying Jon died in a training accident, but in July another one comes saying that the first note was a mistake. Someone else named Jon Mitchell died, not Everett's brother. That August, Everett decides to build his sixteen-year-old brother a house next to his overlooking the Eel River.

On a late August Sunday afternoon, Everett's clearing the moss off a boulder when he comes across the ancient pictures. They're dim, but he can see them sketched in red and yellow dyes or paint. They're stick figures, kind of, but there are big circle things too, elaborate kinds of things that look like someone's religion from way back.

When Mary comes out of the house to check up on him, Everett's sitting crosslegged in the dirt in front of the boulder staring at it. She sits down next to him and puts her hands on his leg. "That's what I think it is, isn't it?"

"I'm almost sure of it." Back when they were going to school, they'd had a teacher who taught them about these kinds of pictures.

"If they see it..." Mary doesn't have to finish the sentence. She doesn't have to say who "they" are.

"So we won't let anyone see."

Everett stands and picks up the sledgehammer he's been busting stones with all week. He hefts it and stares at the pictures, but something

stops him. Maybe he's a coward. That's it, he decides. He just can't bring himself to destroy something with that kind of historical power.

Mary watches him silently. He knows she supports him, but when he puts his hammer down, she smiles at him and nods her righteousness. He throws a tarp over the boulder instead, and he's glad about that. Twenty minutes later a Sunday school class full of ten-year-olds come chattering down the road on their way to a picnic. They flow onto his property like the ocean, asking him about Jon and the house for two minutes of chaos before they flow out again.

"We need something better than a tarp," Everett says.

"All we need is for the moss to grow back."

It's true, but they need something until then.

In September, Everett takes the tarp back off to see if there's been any growth, but of course, the tarp has kept anything from growing at all. It's the first time he's seen the paintings since that day, and they look no different. In that time, he has brought three hired men onto his property, and Mary's folks have come over for dinner. When people are around, he worries about them relentlessly. When he is away, he thinks about them in the same way he used to think about Jon.

He works on the house through October and November when the weather is good. He buys an extra pallet of bricks, which he stacks in front of his boulder, like it's there only waiting to be used for some building project.

He's ready to put the finishing touches on the house in December. He'll paint if he has a dry day, but then he gets another formal note from the government saying that Jon is dead. This time he's supposed to have been shot during a charge.

And so Everett waits for the follow-up note saying that someone made a mistake again. He smiles and shakes his head at the way the government can foul these things up, and when Mary cries into her hands, he holds her and tells her it's probably all just a mistake. Everything will be right in a month or two.

By February, Everett finally has the feeling that no note is coming, and on the first of March he tells Mary that they should write to the university and tell someone about the paintings. Someone is going to want to study them.

"What about Jon's house?" she asks.

But Everett shrugs. He's a coward when it comes to these kinds of things. He doesn't think he has it in him to fight or to hide.

The day Everett's son comes home from Japan, Everett asks him what he wants to do now that he's back.

"I really just want to walk down by the Eel River," he says.

Everett meant more like did he want to get married or start a business or something like that, but taking a walk along the Eel sounds just about right for the first day home. When Everett starts to put on his shoes, Sam smiles at him. "I kind of wanted to go down there and think about things by myself."

Everett nods and smiles, tries to understand, does understand in his way. It makes sense, he thinks. There's no knowing what the young man might have seen or done, if he's been a coward or hero. Everett suspects that his son's been a hero, but maybe that's hard, too.

By the time Sam comes back four hours later, Everett's about ready to go out looking for him.

The next morning when Everett comes down for breakfast, Sam's gone out already, and he stays out until nearly one in the afternoon.

"Maybe he's gotten a job," Mary says.

But when Sam comes home and Everett asks him where he's gone, Sam says, "I was just walking and thinking."

"Thinking about what?"

Sam narrows his eyes, leans against the door frame, and folds his arms. "I don't know." He's stumped by the question, really stumped. Disturbed maybe, too, but he sits down and starts to eat the leftover lunch Mary gives to him.

"You want to talk about anything?" Everett asks.

"No." Sam coughs into his plate.

Everett looks into his eyes, wonders what's back there, wonders what kind of guilt he feels, terror, anything. He wishes there was something he could do, some kind of action that he could take to make things even a little better. He thinks about his brother who died in a war. He thinks about his neighbor, Frank's sons, how one day when they were all young he took all those boys rafting, all five of them and Sam and Mary and Frank, too. He thinks about how it was a foggy day, but they said the heck with it and rafted straight into the fog, and they had two rafts and there were times when he couldn't see the other one, but he knew they were there because the laughter of those kids came skipping across the water, and how they all got silent at that moment when they got close to shore and saw a bear standing by himself. They saw bears all the time, but they knew this one was special.

All of those boys are dead now except for Sam, and Everett wishes that he could do something for any of them, wishes he knew what is missing right now except the kids and that laughter.

Everett lies in bed awake that night. When dawn begins to blue the room, he gets dressed and goes downstairs to wait. Five minutes later Sam comes out and walks to the door. Everett says, "Could I join you today?"

Sam blinks and nods. They go out into the cold Northern Californian morning, one that reminds Everett of that day twenty years ago on the rafts. They plunge their hands in their pockets and walk down toward the river.

"So," Everett says. "Where are you thinking about going?"

Everett meant should they go right or left on the river, but Sam says, "I don't know. They offered me the job as bank manager again. The owner says there's a raise in it for me since I was an officer. Maybe I'll do that."

"I didn't know that. Are you going to take it?"

Sam shrugs. "I don't know. It seems pointless."

The hopelessness of his son's tone knots Everett's stomach. "It's good pay. You could settle down."

"Maybe," Sam says. "I'm not sure I want to settle. Maybe I want to get that Ph.D."

"Philosophy?"

Sam shrugs. "Maybe. Maybe business. I was thinking about Eastern religions, too." They're walking on the bank, and Sam looks up into the sky.

"What are you looking for?"

Everett means is he looking up into the sky for an eagle or did he hear an airplane or something like that, but Sam says, "I'm looking for something bigger. I don't know if that makes sense."

"I think it does," Everett says. "You want something more than bank management."

"Yeah, I want to find something good in my life."

"Do you remember the day on the rafts when we saw that bear?" Everett asks.

Sam nods. "That was a good day. When I was in Japan, we saw a moon bear. This is after the war was over. I was with four other guys up in the mountains, and it was kind of up in a tree. I told my buddy about that day we saw the bear in the fog and what it meant to me. Then he shot the bear."

"Why'd he do that?"

Sam shrugs. "I don't know. He'd been to Nagasaki and watched a lot of people die. Maybe it had to do with that. Maybe he was just a hunter."

There's a meaning down at the bottom of Sam's story, but Everett doesn't know how to get at it. It explains all the losses the world has felt in the last ten years. It means something to Sam, but there's no way in for

Everett. What does it matter anyway? Everett will walk with his son. He'll listen to him talk. He'll help him if he can. Maybe tomorrow he'll suggest rafting, and maybe Sam will say yes. It won't be the same as it was before the war, but maybe that's all right, too.

3

Two mornings after his grandson's high school graduation, Everett walks next door to his son's house before dawn, slips in, and wakes Carl. The boy nods and stands. Except for his shoes, he's already dressed and packed, and the two of them are out the door before Everett's son, wife, or daughter-in-law are awake or have a chance to argue with them.

They get into Everett's truck and head north toward Canada, but they get only as far as Eureka just as the sun is beginning to rise, and Carl asks him to turn around.

Everett pulls over on the road in front of a breakfast place. "You don't want to go to Canada?"

"What would I do up there?"

"You don't have to do anything. I have four thousand dollars for you. Just live on that for a while until you figure things out."

"I don't know, Grandpa."

"It's your choice," Everett says. He looks at him directly, like he's a man, which he soon will be. "But if you stay, they're going to send you to Viet Nam."

"Yeah." Everett gives it another fifteen minutes, but he knows it's hopeless, and he turns around.

They're back home and downstairs making breakfast at Everett's house before anyone gets up.

The next week, Everett is awakened in the middle of the night by Carl at his bedside. Mary's breathing next to him is unbroken as he gets out of bed and grabs some clothes. They make it all the way to Grants Pass, Oregon this time before they turn around.

"I want you to know what a bad idea it is for you to stay here," Everett tells him when they stop for lunch in Crescent City. "My brother died in the First World War."

Carl shrugs with affected courage. "Dad made it through World War II."

Everett tries to make himself look wise by staring wistfully out the diner's window. "Your father came back changed."

"Dad would never forgive me for leaving."

"Your father can fuck things," Everett says. He blushes. It's the first time he's ever cursed, and he knows he got it wrong. He looks around to see if maybe the waitress heard him, but if she did, she doesn't care.

Anyway, it makes Carl smile, and he nods.

“I’ll take you up to Vancouver, and you can live on that \$4,000 for a long time. Give me your address when you get settled, and I’ll send you more money.”

Carl stares into his eggs.

He doesn’t say anything, so Everett says, “Your father will forgive you. Fathers always do.” But that’s not true. If Carl dies in some war that even Walter Cronkite says is wrong just to please his father, Everett knows that he’ll never forgive his son.

Everett’s read about that war, knows what’s going on there. He knows about napalm and Agent Orange. Somehow in his old age, he’s come to hate war, or maybe he’s just a coward. He doesn’t know. He doesn’t remember being a coward like this when he was younger, but maybe he was.

Nothing Everett says makes any difference to Carl, and they drive back home before dinner time. When Mary asks him where they were, Everett says, “Fishing. I told you last night we were going fishing. Don’t you ever listen?”

Everett wakes up at 3 a.m. every morning for the next ten days. When he gets up, he goes outside in that space between his house and his son’s house, next to the mossy boulder that’s right under Carl’s window. He waits for the light that never turns on, and he watches the stars and listens for bears. Each morning he imagines that moment when they’ll cross the border, and Carl will be safe. He thinks about how he’ll visit his grandson every once in a while. He wonders how long it will take for his own son to begin to hate him.

On the tenth night, Everett hears a door open. He hears the crunch of boots on gravel. “Carl,” he says.

“No.” It’s his son’s voice. He looms up to Everett in the darkness.

“You’re up early this morning.” He can’t see Sam’s face, doesn’t know how angry he is or if he’s angry at all, but knowing Sam, he probably is.

“He got the letter yesterday,” Sam says. “The one from the government.”

“The draft?”

“The draft.” He can hear Sam take a deep breath. “Take this.” It’s a moment before Everett understands what it is, but he figures out it’s an envelope stuffed as full as it can get. “That’s two thousand dollars. When you take him this time, make sure not to stop until you’re across the border.”

BRANDON GREER

Wondering about Death

I wonder what death was doing last night
when my elbow almost tipped the radio
into the bathtub while I was soaking.
The way my heart raced as the Sony rocked
back and forth on its plastic bottom told me
he was close by,
but he didn't stop.

I wonder where he was this morning
when I headed to work in fog so thick
that I could hardly see the hood of my car.
Perhaps he was perched on the bumper,
ready to strike as I leaned towards the
windshield to see the interstate better,
but decided that hopscotching among the
cars and trucks ahead might be more lucrative.

I wonder what he is doing right now
as I write these words beneath the glow
of a desk lamp with the radio playing low.
Maybe I'm on the back burner of his plans,
but then again he might be lounging
ten feet away on my side of the bed,
not creaking a single mattress spring,
waiting for me to turn off the computer
and sink into his invisible embrace.

MARYANNE HANNAN

Zeitgeist

Everywhere I look these days,
words are getting repurposed.
Must be the zeitgeist of our age.
Speaking of which, zeitgeist itself,

in its German-compound, loan-word
kind of way, seems to me a new kid
on the block. Not that I'm claiming
mid- 19th Century creds. But my

personal lexicon has been slow
to incorporate time's spirit, zeit's geist.
But lo and behold! now there's TZM,
The Zeitgeist Movement, looking

forward to the post-scarcity, money-less
society. I'm not sure my personal geist
is sustainable in those circumstances,
but, come to think, it's better than the

rewilding plan I heard about on the radio,
whereby we, as a society, take steps
to uncivilize, undomesticate ourselves.
Holistically, of course, but big-time.

No puny efforts one day a year, but
let the lions roam our streets, if they will.
Sorry — no analogue with the Romans,
who kept their lions at the Coliseum.

But the predicament couldn't be clearer:
My friends, we are running out of words.

TOM HARPER

What I Was

Would you question my voiceless fury?
I have spent last moments.
I have seen grave dirt thrown
On human sunlights. Every day

I see dried wrinkles sewn
Over young faces.
It is a lie,
Each cloud and sun comes once.
Time rains moments on us
And there is no Ark
To save us from our forty days
And nights.

Each raindrop is my friend
And each is gone or coming.
But which will be my end
And finally make me what I was?

LYNN HOGGARD

Bearing Witness

He sits reading in the next room,
having done his required exercises
to delay the coming rigor of his muscles.
The medicine has helped: his hand
no longer collapses as he writes;
his speech appears less halting,
his mind more clear,

Clear enough to let him say,
I feel like the ghost of a man,
as the disease has its way with him,
slowly, slowly turning him—
while he shouts and thrashes in his sleep,
trying to escape the inescapable—
into a torture victim in a cell.

He turns to me. All the love
in the world cannot release him
from the coming darkness.
I touch his face, then turn away,
so he does not see me falter
or know my struggle
with this tremor in my hands.

BRETT BUSANG

Baby Pictures, Sibling Unrest, and the Lotus Position

Parents take more pictures of their babies than any other kind. They are the most abundant images in the dog-eared, faux-velvety scrapbooks that are jointly owned by me and my brother. There I am, a barely recognizable human, looking pucker-faced at the hospital. My beet-red coloration is universal: it flames from nose, mouth, forehead—as well as the chewy little fingers disaffected adults love more than any other thing. There I am, some hours later, in a bassinet, surrounded by the grainy light that doesn't exist in color photographs. And there I am again—in a pseudo-angelic swoon my mother probably saw in passing and just had to photograph.

Shortly after she died, my brother and I cleaned out the attic. He was going to move into the house and wanted to purge it of such flammable substances as no doubt resided there. (We are all paper-savers, as well as collectors of durable goods that will end up on shelves as-yet un-built and boxes that have not been extracted from fen and forest.)

After plowing through old magazines and newspapers, which I wanted to save more than he did, we found a box that contained a blanket we immediately recognized. It looked like a collaborative project, with many patterns and textures weaving through it. It was somewhat moth-eaten and smelled like something that had been stuck inside of something else for a long, long time. If somebody cared to express “confinement” nasally, he or she could do worse than to trap that smell. We passed the blanket back and forth, as if to find, in its tucks and folds, earlier versions of ourselves. My brother observed that it always popped up when we were sick—which is indelibly true. I remember burrowing underneath it when in the grip of a fever. Or being doused with a washrag by a motherly hand. But it was more versatile than that. It had warmed us at innumerable drive-ins; comforted our feet when we dangled them from a makeshift bed; given us a sense of home when we woke up, on the road, during the wee hours of the morning. Underneath it were boyish clogs, an assortment (surprise, surprise!) of baby-clothes, the infinitesimal shoe that had been candified in brass and...a scrapbook neither of us had ever seen.

Leafing through it, we saw my babyhood, as it were, in slow motion—though with a larger cast of characters and accompanying narratives our mother wasn't, as yet, too tired to cut off in the middle or choose not to write

at all. Her prose was goofily enamored, as if this puffy little thing had come among them to spread not only glad tidings, but the notion that life was good and could very well have a happy ending. (In context of my mother's life, her optimism was hopelessly quixotic.) Yet here were my parents in a phase of their lives I would glimpse, now and then, in a startlingly intimate gesture; a word or phrase that hearkened back to something I could know nothing about; a Big Band number one of them would hum or whistle—at least until the other would say “Shut up!”—or mutter something the other was supposed not to hear. And here I was, a rough draft, a sketchy notion—a piece of kindling that might eventually catch fire and become...one (or both) of them.

“I wonder where mine is?” asked my brother, whose feigned bitterness is a kind of running joke. He claims that people remember me first; speak to me as if I were a potential friend; and give me more stuff. He is the dutiful brother who sweeps up after he finishes with a project; gives all the proper notices; and asks for nothing more than to do the right thing. I am the empty charmer who forgets keys, significant numbers—and I can't follow directions to save my life.

“Maybe yours is down here somewhere,” I observed, pointing to the big box.

“Down where? We've hit rock bottom.”

“I don't know. Let's keep looking.”

“We've done that.”

I attempted to change the subject with a question.

“Dad's smoking in this one. You remember that, don't you?”

He considered the question, answered it privately, and pressed on.

“So you get the big scrapbook and I...?”

“You got the brains and talent. I needed the attention because I had nothing else.”

“As a baby?”

“They knew,” I said, preening as I might have then.

“I guess they ran out of steam when I came around.”

“That's right,” I said, marveling at the character-neutral quality of babies. Even this baby, which would become me.

“That's right,” I repeated, “they were tired by then. We're three years apart. That's a long time in the life of a parent. Besides, I was insatiable. See that?”

I pointed to a kind of publicity shot, in which my mother entertained me with a rattle.

“I gave the poor woman no rest. No rest at all.”

“What a little shit you were.”

“Right again! So, by the time you came around, they were disillusioned. You should have been first. You would’ve appreciated it. I took everything for granted.”

He waved the thing away, though he still managed to look at it. There I was again. And again. That little scrapbook was the biopic he had to do without. I felt badly for my brother, whose second banana status was, in fact, very real. I was the flashy one. I could attract, maintain, and perpetuate any form of human attention. Because I was so front-and-center, he developed a talent for recession. Yet within that talent were multiple capacities: he could stick with something for an unconscionable amount of time. While I paced and fretted, he built small airplanes, which he decorated with Testor’s paint. As I spluttered with frustration, he would get whatever was upsetting me done. He could sit with a book and seem to absorb the thing as if it were spirit-in-his-hands. I’d watch him with a troubled admiration, then glue something to something else and not release either part until one was fused comfortably with the other. There was no reason for me to be gluing one thing to another. I did it in order to feel, amidst my brother’s gurglesque concentration, that I done something. While he may have been unhappy with the hit record of my social life, I could scarcely endure the notion of his quiet brain, his sweet silent little thoughts, his dignified prowess.

“Are you done?” he asked me, as he kept the thing to himself.

“I am.”

“Are you sure?” he asked with prosecutorial asperity.

“I’m sorry you didn’t get yours. You should have but for...being in the middle. It’s a hard little place to be. But it was also accidental. I got here first and there’s an end.”

He put the scrapbook on the very bottom, where it had been for thirty-odd years.

“It really doesn’t bother me. It really doesn’t,” he said, trying to look bother-neutral and only half-succeeding.

* * * *

I wasn’t nice to him when he came, ratlike, into a home that had been filled, exclusively, with my caterwaulings. My housewarming gift to him was—as family legend had it—a gooey bit of feces, which I placed, like some sort of *piece de resistance*, on top of his bedroll. I didn’t mind being caught because I was sending a message.

Sometime later, I flushed a facsimile of him down the toilet. I had my pick of ox and ass; all the Wise Men—even Mary and Joseph—but I picked the little boy. Just as Herod had done centuries ago, but with a more cruelly ecumenical hand.

“What did you do that for?” asked my mother, shaking me, mostly for show. She and my father were obscenely amused.

Had I taken an interest in symbolism, I could have told her that the baby Jesus I had chosen to flush was a stand-in for my brother, whose body-weight was such that I couldn’t lift him and flush him down as he was. All I could do was find something that, when the water took it down, could suggest the elimination of an alien presence.

Instead, I ran into a closet and camped out there for a while.

* * * *

His baby-pictures are, however, as numerous as mine. He was a more cherubic figure, with obvious rolls of fat, a happy-baby’s attitude, and the calming presence of a Buddha-in-training. I laughed uproariously. When he erupted in a smile, a New Day had come; peace was restored the world over; and humanity was given, without being made to feel guilty about it, a second chance. While I threw things that didn’t please me, he played nicely, as if he’d studied the instruction manual and was aware of the tolerances of glass and other breakables. He did not inspire hot love, but the comfortable adoration that was supposed to go hand-in-hand with parenthood. I made everyone marvel at the precocity of my voice. My brother was the unspoken presence to which troubled people always gravitate. If you wanted a good time, you came to me. If something bothered you, my brother was there to hold at arm’s length, to sit with for a while, and to seek out for healing. I made people laugh, he made them whole. I shimmied up things and fell down. He assumed the lotus position, which he could maintain indefinitely.

Our scrapbooks are in chronological order and show us from our babyhood to those years when trouble was among us and we came together, as it were, by default. Yet our birthdays were never missed, Thanksgiving dinner was a sit-down affair, and Christmases were celebrations of filthy lucre. Our parents had started to drift early on. And two letters, one in my father’s more strident hand and the other with the loops my mother learned to make after her brain operation, which had disabled her right hand, chronicle their disaffection. In the first, she worries about him being gone on a business trip. She wonders whether he has enough to eat; has made any friends; will be “bright-eyed and bushy-tailed” in the morning. Such ordinary questions—uttered with a care and a concern that can’t be faked—

speaking volumes about my mother's devotion. I wish she had kept his reply. It is heartbreaking to hear a voice subsequent years would strangle. And, sometimes, bend away from kind-hearted feelings.

Ten years later, my father writes her about a slew of problems that are doggedly physical: a car title, some broken concrete on the front steps, a suit that needs to be pressed right away. In these simple instructions, I see a man who refuses to descend to the personal. When I came across it, I imagined my mother opening it, reading it, and going off by herself for a while. I'm sure she took the suit in. And found the title. And swept those concrete scabs away from the porch.

* * * *

When I was three years old, my brother was born. I have admitted to an only child's jealousy; acknowledged the differences in our natures; repented of my crimes, which came out of a childish narcissism.

This last time I visited, however, I looked very closely at the pictures our mother had taken of him. (Our dad wasn't motivated in this way. For months at a time, we don't exist.) I like the one of him on his third birthday. He's got a cowboy hat on, he smiles goofily—as if to cover up a missing tooth—and he looks like he's keeping a little secret. In another, he's blowing at his three candles. I'm giving him a skeptical look, which doesn't seem deter him. My pictures are self-admiring. He accepts the great gift of another year, but feels grateful. I had about as much gratitude as a fox with a constant supply of chickens. I'm a nicer person now than I was then. Thank God! I was on track to become a munitions salesman.

If one's babyish self can last into adulthood, my brother's has. He has developed the testiness that comes from managing people. He is cynical about the politics of human cooperation. And his compassion runs on a track that is animal, rather than human, friendly. Yet as I parsed this human embryo, this quasi-symbolic creature whose emotions can be so flagrantly unkempt, I had a kind of epiphany. Whereas I'm a typically fractured adult, my brother's babyish self lingers at the edges. I saw it in the way he became attached to the stray dog I presented to him, suppliantly, to take off the world's knotty hands. At first, he resented me. But, as he came to know this benighted creature, his guard took a pratfall and would not be seen again. Once engaged, my Buddha brother tended this bangy creature, this canine flotsam, with the kind of caring my mother showed my father in that letter. I saw it in his eyes, which dilated with concern; in his largish hands, which protected the animal as it stroked him; and in his body language, in which his babyish self—which was quietly expansive—had survived without a dent.

Find me in my baby pictures and you'll be on an existential goose-chase. I'm an infantile wonder, which cannot go anywhere. It is what it is while it is. But it can't go on. Yet it seems that quieter spirits have not just a stake in survival, they last through all the noise other people make in order to assert themselves. And while my brother can yell at people over the phone, his center—which those babyish pictures show us—is essentially calm. He's always been like that. And it's never a bad thing to see.

LYNN MARIE HOUSTON

Not All Who Wander Are Lost

for Eric F.

A week after his divorce, the panic attacks start.
Heart racing, he can't catch his breath.
His job, his health, his friendships could end
as suddenly as his marriage.
He imagines dying homeless on the street.

I learn about his depression
as we hike a talus ridge,
a mountain summit of tumbled rocks.
Their blackness, the beauty of subtraction.
Boulders, once part of inner earth,
were not deposited here.
They remain after a cataclysmic event
forced them up and tore
the tree-green surface away.

On the drive back to camp, he tells me
about the time he got lost in the Galapagos.
The last in a group of hikers, he passed out
from dehydration and came to alone in a field.
Blinded by volcano mist, he couldn't find
the trail, ripped pages from a field book
and left notes impaled on branches:
the time, direction he was travelling,
how long since he had eaten, that he was out of water.

Somewhere on an island,
waterproof and undated,
his notes remain—
I'm lost, heading uphill.
Alone and out of supplies.
Somewhere on the other side of the world
someone begins to search again
for what has already been found.

LYNN HOUSTON

That night I wake to the sound of sleep-breathing
in the tent next to mine. The mountain silence
has steadied him, but he is so thin now
I want the tent to breathe for him,
or a backpack, a rucksack of lungs, something
he can carry with him when he goes.

LINDA IMBLER

Beautiful Ruin

Within peeling walls,
Where spiders and specters now dwell,
And hold court with the dust,
They alone remain
As the nonderelict guardians
And holders of this history.
No more to hold the roof aloft
Than time itself,
A roof crushed under the weight
Of leaves and detritus,
Outside would-be invaders
Who threaten to force entry
And destroy the sanctity
Of broken glass and tiles,
This grand deconstruction,
Splendid in its disrepair.

LOWELL JAEGER

Noise

Put any instrument with strings in Dad's hands
and his fingers automatically found how to play.
Couldn't read notes on the page, but he stored up
melodies like muscles on the bone. Made sad drunks
smile, sent oldsters whirling on the dance floor.

Mr. Driller, our school band teacher, smirked at my brag—
Dad's god-given gift to close his eyes and conjure
tunes from thin air. Driller insisted sharps were sharp,
flats were flat, and nothing between. Black marks
on a black staff. Anything less was . . . well, second class.

He didn't say it, but I heard it in his tone, as I lumbered
through dirges with my trombone. Learned to dread
lashing that albatross to my bike and lugging it
home to school and back. Did it mostly for Dad,
who sat somewhere out there beyond the concert lights

in darkness, beaming. I squeezed my lips and blew,
chasing Driller's baton. Nothing but noise. No one
jumped up to dance, lacking whatever fuel
Dad's strings juiced in their feet. Drunks everywhere
yawned, shook their heads, stumbled home to sleep.

GREGG CUSICK

Holiday

Cal Mabe stood on the fourth-from-top rung of the extension ladder, thirty-five feet over the lushly sodded lawn. He guessed that were he to fall he might bounce softly the way he did in his youth in the barn when he'd jump from the rafters into a huge mound of unbaled straw. Mabe dipped his brush into the bucket and continued stroking the white paint along the soffit beneath the roof's edge. A well-built 1940s colonial, the three-story house boasted vented soffits all around, a rare feature of conscientious craftsmanship that few but Mabe even noticed. As he brushed the new paint onto the underside, he heard a voice from below.

"Leave it, Mabe!" It was Dabney, the owner of the small, not quite a year-old company. He stood on the front flagstone walk looking up, his palm shading the brim of his paint-splattered Yankees cap. "That soffit don't need it, man. That's a holiday," he yelled up rather angrily.

A holiday was a painters' term for an area that they didn't have to worry about painting—the undersides of shelves or the wall behind the refrigerator, the tops of doors—and some workers lived for them. Mabe hesitated, scowling in the sun, looking up at the roof overhang which, he had to admit, that if the new paint hadn't been shiny wet he would not have known where he'd just brushed.

Mabe started cutting-in the side trim until Dabney went back to work, and then he quickly but carefully finished painting the soffit. Each time he dipped his brush into the can he looked off in the distance. From this height, he could see down the street to a small park, a lush grassy oval surrounded by mature oaks and sweet-gums. He wished he were on the park bench he could make out, painting the verdant landscape before him. Mabe was a person who daydreamed in bright color—the scene he envisioned filled him with longing, flushed in deep reds, but also with a calmness, the greens of leaves and mosses. He thought of his wife, Daphne, just now at the end of her teaching day. He thought of the longing she'd voiced, again, that morning.

Over cereal—hers hot, his cold—she'd been quiet and he could feel, moody. Her eyes moved over the newspaper while he worked the crossword. She lifted her spoon toward her lips and then set it back down into her bowl,

even though it had a bite of oatmeal on it. “You said you were going to think on things,” she’d told him.

Mabe looked up from the puzzle, his own cereal spoon in midair. “I did,” he said. “I have.” He ate the spoonful of Cheerios.

“Well?” she said.

Mabe chewed slowly, swallowed. “Well, for one, we don’t have the money.”

“We’ve talked about that. We’ve got the money. We’d just have to alter our spending habits a little.”

“My job’s secure—Dabney’s got plenty of work lined up,” Mabe said. “But it’s not very lucrative. There’d be new expenses.”

“Tell me something, like what you’re afraid of,” Daphne asked. “You said you’d given it a lot of thought.” She waited.

He looked at his soggy cereal. Her oatmeal completely abandoned. “What are you afraid of?” he asked back.

“I’m scared I can’t love.”

“You love me.”

“But another. You know what I mean.”

When they had first started seeing each other, Daphne had confessed that she had some sort of irrational fear related to the story of the mythic figure of her same name. Mabe told her how beautiful she was, and she reminded him the story. How Apollo made fun of Eros, and so Eros had shot Apollo and the nymph Daphne with love arrows—Apollo’s made him fall forever in love with her; Daphne’s made her never to love him. So when Apollo lustfully pursued her, Daphne begged her father, the river god Peneus, to save her. He did, by turning her into a beautiful tree, the laurel.

So Mabe’s Daphne explained that she feared she was, like the mythic nymph, somehow not capable of deep feeling. They had been married now a dozen years. But the fear still surfaced in her at times. Like that morning.

“I think another person. A small, dependent person. I’d *have* to be capable of love, don’t you think?”

He didn’t answer, away somewhere with his own concerns.

“I’m afraid, too,” he said. “I don’t know that I want to handle it, Daph. We got it so good just now.”

Mabe reached over to put his hand over hers, the hand that still held her spoon. He then rose from the table, dumped his soggy cereal into the sink. He brushed his teeth, kissed her, and headed to work.

Where at day’s end he stood on the ladder as the rest of the crew packed it in and he climbed down to do the same. Walking to his truck, Mabe saw Dabney and Pete, Dabney’s old frat buddy, watching him. When Mabe looked over and gave a wave, the two glanced away.

The next day, Tuesday, Dabney and Mabe and the other three members of the crew moved inside the big colonial. The homeowners—a British-transplant couple with jobs in sales of pharmaceuticals and software, childless—were away at the shore, drinking Mai Tais at a beach Mabe had never been called Emerald Isle. The words, the place, conjured in Mabe’s mind the island of the Cyclopes in Homer. If he and Daphne had a child—he envisioned a little girl—he would tell her the dramatic story of Odysseus, just as Mabe’s father had told him. How the hero blinded the one-eyed Polyphemus and escaped his cave tied to the belly of a sheep. And how the gloating, then livid Odysseus nearly had his ship sunk by the boulders flung by the Cyclops. But at work, Mabe mostly continued to think of his conversation with Daphne the night before. Daphne had been quiet at breakfast, not exactly hurt or angry-seeming, but subdued.

Since virtually every surface of this house was to be painted, Dabney assigned them partners. Mabe had been teamed for months with Enrique, a good-natured hardworking father of four. But Tuesday Danny put Mabe with Pete, a fast, sloppy painter. Pete and Dabney had been fraternity brothers back at Clemson. When Dabney married, Pete kept partying. But when working together, they could still relive the Tennessee game sophomore year, a story everyone had heard, which ran like a joke involving a cheerleader, a fat guy, and a goat in a bar. Mabe much preferred working with Enrique, and while he found Pete likable enough, he had little in common with him. To start, Mabe had twenty years on Pete, and their work styles were a hundred-eighty degrees apart. And Mabe could never figure out what Dabney was thinking. Perhaps that his buddy Pete might learn something from the careful Mabe.

But that didn’t seem to be the case. When Pete and Mabe set about painting a huge den, Mabe first laying dropcloths over every surface. Pete frowned. “Jesus, Cal, let me know when we can start work.” He stepped out the French doors onto a stone patio to smoke a cigarette.

When Pete returned, they got going, Mabe cutting in and planning on moving to the trim when he finished, Pete quickly and somewhat messily rolling ceiling, then walls. Dabney stopped in midmorning to check progress. He was dressed un-painterly in white slacks and a pink knit shirt, looking to Mabe like he belonged on the fairway at Augusta.

“Looks good, fellas.” Dabney’s practiced eye scanned the entire room, careful to miss the drips. The partly still wet, partly shiny walls looked terrible, spotty, but would be acceptable once fully dry. “Whew, Pete, you’re really knocking it out, huh?” Dabney added. “I’ll swing back later after I do a couple of estimates.”

Mabe offered no comment and had no idea whether this was true. Frankly he didn't care. Continuing the trim-work, he was much more preoccupied with his situation at home, his conversation with Daphne. With each upstroke of the brush, he constructed arguments and counterpoints to her proposal to grow their family. Each down stroke was her words smoothing his objections, quietly asserting they could afford a child, how he needn't fear anything, and that she wanted to love another in addition to Mabe. He thought of his own family, too, his sad mother, his distant father, his cold and successful younger brother. And Mabe worried that Daphne was angry at him, felt he was not considering seriously the issue of a child. One thing he sometimes loved, sometimes hated about painting was that a person had time to think.

Mabe frowned over the window molding. Part of him wished he could be fast and carefree, or even careless, like Pete. That he could just relax and let go of the, what, perfectionism? No it wasn't quite that. Or Daphne, who wasn't bothered if dishes piled up in the sink, who could pass litter without pulling the car over and picking it up (or worrying if she didn't). Daphne would probably hit it off well with Pete, Mabe thought morosely. Pete was probably good with kids, too. Mabe bet they loved him. He probably did card tricks and could twist animals from balloons, giraffes and dachshunds. Mabe felt his depression descending, covering him like a dropcloth.

The rest of the day went much the same as the morning. While Pete blazed through two more rooms, Mabe spent the afternoon still in the den, painting the trim of the doors and many-mullioned windows. He'd be at it again tomorrow, he knew. At the end of the afternoon, Pete joined Mabe to help with trim. It was as if they'd been running on a track, and Pete had lapped him.

Back at their little ranch house that itself could use a paint job, Mabe needed a drink. Really needed it, he thought. Daphne had been home and left a note that she was going to her yoga class and the grocery, that he should get himself dinner. He patted Chiron distractedly—their big, shaggy mixed breed bore no resemblance to the wise centaur of myth—and headed straight for the refrigerator and a cold Pabst. He downed the first in five long slugs.

Working on his second beer, Mabe continued thinking of his father and his brother, who had been visiting his mind much while he painted that afternoon. Mabe had been nine when his brother, Freddie, was born. A surprise, since Mabe's parents had not planned on having more children. His father, Jacob, had always been a drinker, himself the son of solid Irish

drinking stock. But Mabe's parents had been tight in the close sense, too, and engaged parents. That is, until Freddie.

Mabe's younger brother incited some change in Jacob and Maura, something Mabe noticed even at nine. His father's drinking increased; there were no heroic tales of gods for Freddie. While his mother began battling depression, although it was years before doctors diagnosed it as such. (She called it a fog; what Mabe, the painter, sometimes called a tarp.) While his parents never fought, openly or not (as far as Mabe could ever tell), the feeling of the home had changed somehow, like it was being lit, and even heated, by a thirty-watt bulb.

In this dim light, Freddie was kept (and soon kept himself) at a distance from his brother and his parents. He wasn't given chores, as Mabe had been, and steered clear of the barn Mabe had loved. Freddie had read much of Adam Smith and *Gray's Anatomy* by age twelve, but he had no friends. He'd won scholarships to Columbia and Harvard med school. But he never shook the nickname given him in middle school French class, "froid-y," for his lack of human warmth. Now thirty, Freddie was an eminent anesthesiologist up in Richmond, had married and now lived in an oak-filled neighborhood of stately homes much like the one Mabe was currently painting. He visited his parents only rarely, his brother even less. At the holidays mostly, and he never stayed long.

Mabe popped open another beer and stood at the kitchen sink, feeling his father's need to inebriate himself and his mother's fog of depression. He looked out the window at their muddy back yard that he'd started but never finished landscaping. Chiron, a shaggy brown and white part-Airedale—who looked nothing like horse *or* man and was as wisdom-free as any canine—looked up from the overgrown garden. To the dog, Mabe said aloud: "With my genes, any kid of ours would be a depressed alcoholic." Chiron went back to sniffing the dried stalks of last year's tomato plants. "She'd be obsessive-compulsive, or screwed up like Freddie." Chiron ignored him. "But at least she'd know her mythology." Mabe twice rinsed and neatly flattened the beer cans and carried them to the recycling tub on the back deck. He was drinking fast enough to require almost constant rinsing and crushing.

"How was work," Mabe asked without energy when Daphne came home. He was still at the kitchen sink. "How was yoga?"

"Okay" was her only response.

Then she kissed him, patted Chiron in the same distracted way he had when he came home, and went to their bedroom to read. Mabe made a note to himself to talk to her about his thoughts, his fears, but he opened another Pabst instead. He waited until the bedside light went out before crawling in beside her.

The next morning, back at the oversized colonial, Mabe was again partnered with Pete. Dabney gave the crew their marching orders and disappeared as he often did. Never very talkative on the job—although he and Enrique, a fine, careful painter, used to joke around and discuss stories they'd heard on NPR—Mabe battled a vicious headache and painted quietly. Pete continued his speed-rolling through room after room, and it was all Mabe could do to get the surfaces prepped and cut in before Pete blew past with the wide swaths of beige and olive and canary yellow and even magenta. When the rest of the crew headed to Hera's Deli in town for lunch, Mabe stayed behind painting catch-up. He broke for ten minutes to eat a cheese sandwich he'd brought, and then was back at it, this time in one of the smaller bedrooms, yellow with white trim, for a child's room.

Mabe opened the door to a small closet. Inside the empty space was a clothes bar and above it a white-primed plywood shelf. He stared up into the dusky light of the closet ceiling. With the rest of the crew gone, the house was completely silent. He would have to get a stepladder to reach, to brush the upper edges and cut in and then to roll the ceiling that no one else would ever see. Like the day before, Mabe thought of the barn of his youth, his place of refuge.

Mabe watched the room's light angling into the closet and thought of the shards of sun that came through the cracks in the barn's pine siding. How the hay dust swirled in the spotlights of sun. He smelled the sweet warmth of the place. He thought again of leaping from the huge hand-hewn crossbeams into the piled straw.

Mabe set his paint can on the shelf, the underside of which, he noted, had been hastily and sloppily primed decades ago, never painted. Perhaps never noticed. He went to the hall, where he picked up the stepladder and carried it back to the closet opening. He took a step up and looked at the closet ceiling again, sighed. He couldn't just let it go, neither the ceiling nor the underside of the shelf. Or could he?

His mind dipped and stroked on. Could he try to have a child like Daphne wanted? Despite the risks, and what seemed so irresponsible, should they bring a child into this messy world, with its careless paint jobs, its drips and missed spots? He could try to control, to paint, carefully and neatly this tiny space; he could try, but he couldn't control much, not at all, really. He could coat the holidays, the ceiling and underside of the shelf. Or he could force himself not to paint the places. His brother could go on to greater success as a doctor but might never outgrow his coldness; their parents would die, sooner than later, he knew. And what he couldn't control or know

was blended—like a complex paint formula—in the fear and excitement of the leap from the barn rafters. Mabe stepped down and took the ladder in one hand, his bucket in the other, and backed up. He used the toe of his paint-dappled sneaker and edged the closet door closed.

When the crew returned from lunch, Mabe had left the yellow room. He was trim-painting window moldings in the large magenta guest room when Pete got back to work. He nodded at Mabe, perhaps acknowledging Mabe's progress, and filled his roller pan. It was all Mabe could do to keep his brush moving steadily over the moldings and mullions and sills.

What a feeling! Mabe wanted to scream. He'd made the decision, he felt, without yielding to Daphne's influence—the answer came from somewhere inside himself. He wanted a child! He'd climbed up and crawled out and knelt on the rough-hewn beam high in the barn. And despite the fear, and after some hesitation, he'd leapt.

Yet even excitedly looking forward to getting home to Daphne, Mabe had trouble finishing and getting cleaned up by five. The rest of the crew had left when he headed across the lush lawn to his truck. Dabney came out the front door and trotted toward him.

"Hey, Cal. I want to talk to you for a sec." Dabney was winded by the thirty-foot jog. Mabe looked down to his tasseled loafers and up to his flushed face. His cheeks pink as a newborn hamster Mabe had had as a kid. "I wanted to say I appreciate all your hard work."

"Well I thank you for that, Dabney," Mabe said genuinely, feeling something like surprise to hear his efforts acknowledged by the boss, especially one who'd said as little to him as Dabney had over time. Mabe turned toward his truck, but Dabney continued, his voice steady. "Which is why it's a hard decision for me to take you off the crew."

Mabe wasn't sure he'd heard this right. In his ears there was a slight whirring, like the box fan that blew hot air into his attic bedroom growing up. Sometimes when he heard this sound, Mabe worried about his health, had even asked Daphne if she thought it could be a brain tumor. She'd laughed.

"See, Cal," Dabney went on, "I view you as a quality painter, but what I need is *quantity*. I got to do what's best for my business—to be profitable we've just got to complete more jobs. I'm sorry." Dabney did his best to look genuine and regretful. Because he was trying, Mabe would think later, he was unconvincing. Mabe's mouth opened slightly but he didn't say anything.

"Oh, kay," Mabe finally got out. He extended his right hand, a gesture he'd be angry at himself for later. Fucking nice guy—mabe felt somehow he was condoning the boss' action, was even complicit. Dabney shook it, a hint of surprise on his face.

“I’m sorry,” Dabney said again, like a mourner at the funeral of someone he never liked. Mabe walked stiffly to his old pickup, feeling nothing. He opened the door and climbed in. Directed the key into the ignition, started the truck, and pulled away. Dabney went back inside the house, as if he owned it.

Mabe headed north of town where the narrow U.S. 101 wound gently through farmland. He stopped at Poseidon’s Gas & Bait near the lake, and bought a six-pack of Pabst. By the time he had drained two and circled twenty miles or so back to town, Mabe remembered what had put him in such a good mood that afternoon. After a quick stop at the roadside where he picked a bunch of wild daisies, he turned toward home.

To get there, he had to pass the entry gates of the Parkwood neighborhood where he worked that day, just a few blocks from the stately, near-painted colonial. In front of which that frat-boy prick Dabney had cold-cocked him, had given him the pink slip. The sun was falling fast but still circular, not yet sliced by the horizon. Mabe couldn’t help but drive by the scene.

In his mind, he’d pull up and the homeowners would be in their front yard with Dabney. They’d be screaming at him: You sloppy, unprofessional son of a bitch! You irresponsible lorry full of shit! The wife would be picking up Pete’s cigarette butts and throwing them at Dabney, and he’d be cringing like they’d hurt if they hit him. The husband would gesture wildly at the soffit that Mabe had painted—you’ll see it all in the lawsuit—you might want to find yourself a barrister! You’re finished in this hamlet! At the end of the scene, Dabney would sheepishly stretch his hand out to the man and his wife. The couple would just look at Dabney and laugh, incredulous.

But when Mabe eased his truck to the curb, all was quiet at the Parkwood colonial. No front yard altercations, not a soul in sight. He popped the top on another, now not-so-chilled Pabst, and pulled a Camel from the glovebox, a long-opened pack he kept on hand for just such an occasion. He lit it and inhaled deeply. The warmth of the day stayed on the manicured lawn, while Mabe sat smoking in the cool maple shade of the street. He felt unexpected relief, realizing that he wouldn’t have to work for Dabney again, not tomorrow morning, or ever. He leaned back against the headrest.

Mabe woke, dried-sweat cold, and realized where he was. Beside him on the seat sat wilted daisies. The dashboard clock read 8:19. He rolled up the windows, started the truck, and headed for home. On the way, his mind replayed the day, flipping through the scenes like the windblown calendar pages in old movies. At the end of the show, Mabe remembered what he’d been so excited about in the afternoon, before Dabney fired him.

But his resolve, at least his sureness, had dwindled. He didn't have any odds on whether he could still pull it off. His confidence waned. He was hardly Odysseus returning home to Ithaca and his Penelope.

Pulling into the driveway, Mabe saw the bedroom light go out. The porch and kitchen remained lit, and he could see into what looked like an empty house. Chiron trotted to him when he stepped inside, a slobbery tennis ball in his mouth. Mabe quietly moved through the house, drawing curtains, turning out the lights. Then he stepped into the bedroom.

"Hey, Daph," he said softly. "Can we talk?"

She murmured in a way he loved, but he knew she wasn't asleep or even close. "You can turn on the light," she said.

He did, and sat on the bed beside her. Daphne sat up, her eyes red but taking no time to adjust to the lack of darkness. "Remember what you said when I was telling you about Pete and his sloppy painting?" he asked her. "Remember when I told you I was scared to have a kid because I could pass on my craziness, my depression, all my faults?"

"That's two questions," she said. "Can I start with the second?"

"Sorry. Sure."

"Okay, well you never did tell me why you were scared."

"Maybe I couldn't tell you until I wasn't scared anymore. You know how I said about depression, that in that fog you can't see? A part of me knows it, that I can't see clearly. Like being blinded by rage, or jealousy, we know, the myths are full of it. Blindnesses anyway." Mabe took a breath, tried to figure what he'd planned to say, what he needed to say. "When I start to come out of the fog, I start to see things differently. I know I will, but I can't at the time, in the fog, see them. Only a little part of me knows I will. It's a voice I can hear but can't act on. I'm not saying this well, but you know."

"Thank you for trying," Daphne said.

Mabe got the feeling she understood, knew his words before he said them. The feeling didn't bother him at all. He was grateful for it.

"So the first," Daphne reminded, "Pete's painting."

"Forget it now," Mabe touched her neck just below the ear. Ran his index and middle fingers down and across her shoulder, a carpenter feeling the smooth finished edge. And looped the fingers under the strap of her camisole. While in his mind he could hear her softly repeat, remind as if she were sure he knew, what Chiron should have told him, that the world is full of drips and missed spots.

ESTHER WHITMAN JOHNSON

Empty Bed

He left her bed a year ago,
still she clung to the side,
folded like a fetus on the edge,
back turned to silent space
where he used to lie.

Her part of the mattress, worn,
burrowed like a rabbit's nest,
threw her against the wooden
frame, bruising her shin and knee,
the other three-quarters empty—
smooth, unmarked, pristine.

Last night she declared herself
free, claimed his vacant place,
rolled uphill and stretched
full across the space, crucified
on the wide, cold plane,
spread-eagled Leonardo-man.

This morning she awoke, again
huddled in the hollow with her pain.

RICHARD JONES

Portraits

In London my older sister was my father's favorite subject to photograph. He has a picture of her talking to a Bobby in Trafalgar Square. Standing at attention at Windsor Castle beside a soldier of the Queen's guard in his red coat and tall bearskin cap. By the Thames pointing to Big Ben. Posting a letter at a red letterbox; peeking out from a red phone booth. At her one room schoolhouse, she stands in her school uniform—blue blazer with heraldic patch, blue-green tartan skirt, black knee socks, saddle shoes, and a straw hat with a long, blue ribbon. There is a photograph of her—she is so young it breaks my heart!—waiting with her mother for a red double-decker bus near Piccadilly, both of them wearing fancy hats, smart outfits, and elegant gloves. When I was two or three, my father took pictures of my sister and me together—in the snow at Cape Cod or scavenging the rocky shore along the Bay of Fundy. In these portraits I see that I, too, am always nattily attired, sometimes decked out in a cowboy outfit with six shooters, chaps, pointy boots, kerchief, and red straw hat, and other times dressed to the nines in gray suit and black tie, my hair slicked back and shining, a look of nonchalance on my face as I gaze off into the future. I don't know if it was a man or an angel who held the camera, but I am often pictured midstride, stepping beyond the frame toward some great blessing. Once I learned to walk, the camera could see I had somewhere urgent and important to go.

JANET JOYNER

Bird Brain

The little crow brain does very big things
besides hide seeds and learn human speech.
The bird can invent, make twig do for tool,
or wire for hook, to extend his reach

for that oily pine seed beneath a rock.
He struts in lordly black like a feathered ape
scattering wrens, finches—even robins—
never doubting the world's his grape.

There must be method in corvid culture.
He's not missed those pocketfulls of rye,
the sixpence songs of four and twenty
dainty-dished black birds baked in a pie.

Though highest nest be named in his honor,
and every wrecking crew rely on his bar,
his feet are still feared in every eye's corner
and all of us, everyone, hate to eat crow.

KAREN DI PRIMA

Of Guts and Glory

My father used to say you needed guts to lead a great life. Because of guts, our country survived the Great Depression. Our army's guts won us the war. Eight year-old me figured guts was something you grew into, like high-heeled shoes. Except, my father made it sound like guts came stomping in on scuffed dusty boots. Guts didn't step lady-like in patent leather pumps, like I'd be wearing someday. Then that summer I stumbled across what was behind the fence in Billy Baxter's back yard, and well, that discovery changed my notions about a lot of things.

Turns out, guts is different from what I imagined when my father talked about it. Guts can be sitting barefoot, right next to you, so quietly you don't notice. And sometimes, having guts doesn't guarantee a great life, a good life, or even, one that's good enough.

Our neighborhood was acres and acres of little brick houses all alike, inside and out. Rows of them as far as you could see, split down the middle by a ribbon of paved concrete. To the side of each house was another strip of concrete where fathers parked their cars. Most of the cars looked the same, too. Every other driveway had a station wagon in it, to stuff in all the kids for Mass on Sundays. Three doors down from our house, the O'Leary's had a white one with wood on the sides. Next to them, the Trombetta's had a brown one with plain doors. Four houses up, the Baxter's station wagon was blue on the front and a mottled gray-green in other places. My father called his car a sedan.

People visiting our neighborhood on weekends were bewildered by the sameness. When my father was outside cutting the grass, they'd ask him for directions. He'd point either up or down the street and say, "It's the house with the blue Town and Country next to the house with the green Plymouth four-door." The fanciest car in the neighborhood, shiny and red, belonged to old Mr. George across the street. Mr. George washed his car every Saturday, and when he unfurled the hose and brought out the bucket and wax and polishing cloths, my father watched from the living room window. He'd smile wistfully and say to himself, "A brand-new T-Bird convertible," over and over, as if he liked the way the words felt in his mouth.

On our street, Dennis O'Leary and his gang claimed they had guts, but I knew better. Those boys were just mean, plain and simple. My father said Dennis acted tough because he was so short for a ten year-old, and

his sidekicks, twins Frankie and Tony Trombetta, got away with murder on account of Tony's club foot. I noticed Tony's brace didn't bother him when the gang threw nails under cars in people's driveways, or ambushed a first-grader to make him cry. It wasn't brave to steal candy from Montbard's Market, no matter how much they bragged about it. I reckoned, if they really had guts, they'd stand up to Billy Baxter, the worst kid around. I knew I'd do it, if I were a boy.

Twelve year-old Billy was the oldest kid in the neighborhood, and a boy so bad that mothers banned him from their yards. Once, Mrs. O'Leary ran out of her front door brandishing her big iron skillet to chase Billy away just for walking down the sidewalk in front of her house. Somebody yelled "Here comes Billy!" and we girls shrieked and ran inside. Dennis, Frankie and Tony stood behind Mrs. O'Leary and threw pebbles at Billy, and when one glanced off his back, they scrambled behind the shrubbery. But Billy just kept walking, as if it didn't matter or he just didn't care.

Like everybody else, the Baxters belonged to Our Lady of Sorrows Parish. Billy's little sisters went to school at Our Lady, but Billy didn't. Mrs. O'Leary told my mother that he'd been kicked out of Catholic school for fighting. "Good riddance! A boy like that belongs with the other public school heathens," she said. I'd never seen Billy do the things people whispered about, but when I saw his black eyes, I figured the rest was true.

Mrs. Baxter kept her curtains closed, day and night. Billy's sisters never came out to play, and I didn't even know their names. When the family drove somewhere, Mrs. Baxter sat in the front seat, staring straight ahead through her sunglasses. "Don't know what they put on airs about," Mrs. O'Leary sniffed, "that Rambler wagon of theirs is older than dirt."

My mother didn't care what people said about Billy. She didn't even care that when he came around, all my friends were on strict mother's orders to come home. One day she motioned Billy over as he was walking by. I'd been playing with my friends in the front yard, but because of Billy, they ran away to Laura Trombetta's house. Sitting alone on the grass, I glared at Billy's back, mumbling, "I hate you, Billy Baxter, I hate you."

My mother opened the screen door, and offered Billy a plate of cookies fresh out of the oven. The way she acted, you would have thought Billy was Father McCann dropping by for the annual parish visitation.

"Nice to see you, Billy. How are you?"

"I'm fine, thank you, Ma'am."

"That's good, I'm glad to hear it. Go ahead; you can take more than one. I know growing boys like to eat."

"Thank you, Ma'am. Don't mind if I do," Billy said, pocketing a fistful.

“Billy, how’s your mom? Last time I saw her, must’ve been weeks ago, her arm was in a sling. Fell off a stepladder, did she?”

Billy paused in mid-chew and lowered his eyes. “Yeah, um, she’s not wearing it any more. It was an accident. My dad was upstairs when it happened.”

“I see.” She tilted her head and contemplated him. “Please tell her I said hello, and I’m glad she’s feeling better, would you?”

“Sure, Ma’am. Thanks for the cookies.”

When Billy stepped off the porch, I stuck my tongue out at him, but he just laughed, spitting crumbs. Well, that made me so mad I got up and swung to punch him, and missed. So I yelled, “You get out of here Billy Baxter and never come back!” and then I charged at him. But he just sidestepped around me and grinned, and mussed my hair like I was a baby.

* * * * *

It was fitting, I guess, that such a terrible family would have a terrible dog, too. The Baxters kept theirs inside the fence in the back yard. The fence was made of tall, thick wood planks hammered tightly together with not even the slightest crack in between. Nobody had ever seen the dog, but from the height and sturdiness of the fence, and the heavy lock on the gate, we kids had decided it was a huge, vicious animal. Dense, thorny bushes lined the perimeter of the fence. Tony said the dog was so fierce, Mr. Baxter had buried metal spikes in the underbrush as an extra precaution, so if the dog ever escaped, the spikes would prevent it from ravaging the neighborhood. I didn’t know if that was true. No one had ever ventured close enough to the fence to find out.

A couple of days after summer vacation began, Dennis dared Frankie to climb onto a garbage can and ogle the dog inside the fence. Frankie said no; Dennis laughed and called him a sissy. Frankie knocked Dennis on the ground, and then Tony jumped on top of both of them. They tussled on the grass, arms and legs flailing. A dozen kids who’d been playing at the houses on either side came running. Dennis’s little sister Colleen hurried to get her mother. Somehow Dennis extracted himself from Frankie and Tony and staggered to his feet.

Cursing hotly, Dennis declared, “I ain’t scared of no dog! I’ll go over that fence, just watch me!” He marched down the sidewalk and stood parallel to the Baxter’s fence gate, hands on hips, surveying ahead. The twins caught up to him. Everybody else congregated in a nervous lump behind them.

Frankie sneered, “Go ahead, O’Leary, you say you got guts? Now, prove it!”

Dennis stalked toward the fence and kept going. He was a yard away from the gate when we all heard it—scuffling, and chains rattling on the other side, followed by a low rumbling noise. Dennis froze.

“Why doesn’t it bark?” I whispered to Laura beside me.

“Some dogs are like that,” she hissed. “The really mean ones are trained to be so quiet you never hear them ‘til they bite you!”

Just then, we heard a crash, like a battering ram crashing the fence from the inside. Some of the planks bowed out slightly. The rumbling turned into a full-throated growl. Everybody screamed and scattered. Dennis whizzed past me, shouting, “Coming, Ma!”

After that, none of us went near the Baxter’s house for a while. When Laura and I had to walk past it on our way to Montbard’s Market a few days later to get bread for her mother, we crossed the street.

Weeks later, on the Sunday after the Fourth of July, I fidgeted in the pew at church, my bare legs beneath my dress sticking to the wood. Every few seconds a fan stationed in front of the confessional blasted me in hot, soupy air. I studied the socks inside my Mary Janes, wondering if I could take them off without my mother noticing.

The first strains of the organ floated down from the balcony. My mother reached for the hymnal and then stopped, her arm poised, her hand empty. She stared into the aisle. I followed her gaze and saw the Baxters hurrying past on their way to a seat.

Mr. Baxter came first, followed by Billy’s little sisters, and then Mrs. Baxter in a raincoat buttoned to her throat. She had forgotten to take off her sunglasses. Behind her was Billy. A bruise festered under his left eye. When the family knelt to pray, Billy sat down and slouched against the back of the pew. Quicker than I could blink, Mr. Baxter’s arm flashed. His fist pounced onto Billy’s collar, yanking him onto the kneeler, while he muttered angrily into his son’s ear. As Mr. Baxter berated Billy, the giggle that had bubbled up from my chest suddenly evaporated. Next to his father, Billy looked very small, with his elbows plastered to his sides and his head tucked down into the pew. I forgot how much I hated him. I wished Mrs. Baxter would ask her husband to stop.

The Mass began. Other people’s heads and shoulders swallowed up the Baxters. The priest read the Gospel and then said he’d spare us the homily due to the hellfire already circulating in the church. He raised the chalice; the altar boys rang the bells. The celebrants moved to the foot of the altar. People scuffled to their feet and filed into the aisles for Communion. When I returned to my seat, the wafer stuck to the roof of my mouth, the Baxter’s pew was already empty. They were one of those families who left before the announcements and the Blessing at the end.

We ate dinner early that afternoon, so my mother could turn off the oven. My father pulled out his chair in the dining room, his eyes on the TV in the next room. “Storm’s coming,” he said, “hope they can get the rest of the game in. Bunning’s got a no-hitter going.”

He sat down. My mother poured the iced tea. Too hot to eat, I pushed my peas around on my plate. I propped my elbow on the table, and chin in hand, asked, “Do you think the Baxter’s dog has a little house back there he stays in when it rains?”

She answered, “I don’t know, maybe. Then again, I can’t see Mr. Baxter being nice to his dog when he’s so awful to—”

My father interrupted sternly, “Big ears, Sally.”

I knew he meant me. Whenever they talked about something interesting, if I were around, they’d say “big ears” and change the subject. But this time, my mother didn’t.

“I’m sorry, John, I can’t get over it. A raincoat. In this heat.”

“Don’t jump to conclusions. We can’t just go sticking our nose into it, Sally. Better to mind your own business.” I heard the crack of a bat and an excited voice on the TV saying, “It’s outta here!” My father grimaced, and stabbed his fork into his plate. My mother pressed her lips tightly together and crossed her arms.

Into the silence I said, “The other day, Dennis tried to climb the Baxter’s fence, but he got scared and ran away.”

“Stay away from that fence and that dog, do you hear me? You shouldn’t tease animals anyway,” my mother said. Again, she turned to my father. “Lillian’s wearing a raincoat and Billy’s got a new black eye. Put two and two together. It’s not right, John, someone has to do something. Someone besides Billy. He’s still just a child himself.”

My father put down his fork and sighed. “Billy. That kid’s got guts, for sure. But even if you’re right Sally, we can’t just walk up to Tom Baxter and—”

My head jerked up. “Billy? Billy’s got guts?” I squeaked, incredulously.

“Never mind,” my father said. “Eat those peas, don’t play with them.”

“John, I—”

“Enough, Sally.”

My mother’s hand shook when she refilled my glass. Some of the tea sloshed onto the tablecloth.

The air had cooled when I ran outside after dinner. A breeze rippled my hair. I sat down in the yard, and the grass prickled the underside of my

thighs. The sky hung low, and the street was still. A car door banged shut. I turned my head toward the sound and saw the Baxters piling into their Rambler. They pulled away and turned the corner. I stood up and started walking, until I was standing a few yards away from their house. My eyes scanned the fence. Something I saw made my heart flutter. About three-quarters of the way down, one of the wooden planks sat slightly askew.

I stared at the chink in the fence. I thought about Dennis, and Billy, and high-heeled shoes. And then I squatted down, held my breath, and slithered into the bushes.

I sank onto my hands and knees. Thorns on either side of me stabbed my arms and tangled my hair. I crawled ahead a foot or so and then stopped, suddenly remembering the spikes. A cold bead of sweat trickled down my back. I pulled off one of my sneakers, using it to stir the leaves and roots ahead of me before scuttling forward. After a few swipes, I dropped my sneaker. Tony Trombetta, you're a liar, I thought.

A swizzle of light flashed across the sky, and a rumble reverberated in the distance. The dog had heard it too. His chains rattled in response. My heart pounded so hard and fast I could barely breathe. I heard the flit-flit-flit of fat raindrops hitting the fence; a few penetrated the foliage and plopped onto my shirt. The dog moaned. It was a strangled, gurgling sound, like on *Wild Kingdom* when an antelope is trapped by a lion. The dog was in trouble. I had to help it. I crawled faster down the fence line, indifferent to the thorns. I'd find out what was wrong, and run home and tell my father. He would know what to do. The harder the rain fell, the more the chains rattled, the louder the noise from inside the fence, and the more desperately I inched toward the post. I tasted hot, salty tears mixed with the cold rain splashing across my face. At last, I reached the crooked plank and pulled myself upright. Heavy rain soaked my head and shoulders. I swiped my hair away from my forehead with muddy hands and jammed my face against the tiny opening.

The yard was only tightly packed dirt, turning darkly speckled in the rain. A thick metal ring protruded from the center of the yard, a length of chain attached. My eyes followed the chain. I blinked in disbelief. There, in profile on the dirt, stood a boy, whimpering. Shackles attached to the chain bound his wrists. The restraints around his ankles were loose enough for him to shuffle from spot to spot. His face was upturned at the sky, and rivulets of water dripped through his hair and onto his cheeks and chin. As I watched, he shook his head from side to side. He opened and closed his mouth like a fish, as if struggling to speak. Garbled noises, words but not words dribbled out, softly at first, but then grew angry, louder. Suddenly, he whipped his

wrists above his head and poured out a mighty wail. I squealed in horror, and then clamped my hand over my mouth, but it was too late. His head pivoted in my direction. He turned completely around so that he was facing me. With a growl, he hobbled toward me.

I couldn't move. I was paralyzed, like in those dreams where your feet and legs won't do what your mind tells them to. I found myself eyeball-to-eyeball with a face that looked like Billy's. But it wasn't Billy. This boy was taller, heavier. His mouth gaped, and the crooked teeth in his misshapen jaw were bared in either a snarl or a smile. A few millimeters of wood separated us. His breath scorched my cheek. He roared and threw his shoulder against the fence.

I screamed. My knees unlocked. I fell backward into the bushes, clawing, scrabbling against the branches, the thorns digging into my skin like talons. I peddled frantically, twigs snapping and breaking under my feet. I closed my eyes, raised my leg and pushed myself into a leap – up, over and out of the bushes. A limb ripped away my remaining sneaker as I crashed onto the wet grass. The boy's other-worldly cries and my own shrieks rang in my ears. I skittered to my feet, my legs wooden and cold. I pushed through my front door just as a clap of thunder rolled across the sky, and collapsed in a wet, grimy heap onto the entryway floor.

My father's arms around me. Moving through space. My mother's voice, urgent, strange, muttering, "She says it's a boy, not a dog? A boy in the back yard?"

Afterward, only wisps of sounds and sensations bumped and collided in my brain, there and not there, too blurry to hold onto, floating near, then snatched away. Water running. Goose bumps on my skin, eclipsed by warmth, wetness. Iodine stings. White, softness. My father's voice. The shush of the front door opening and closing. The rat-tat-tat of the rain on my window. Dogs. Spikes. Thorns.

The harsh ring of the phone downstairs woke me. Bright morning light spilled from the edges of my closed curtains and bounced off the walls and the ceiling. My head ached. I left my bed and crept down the steps, sitting on the last rung. I listened to my mother speaking. "Yes, she's all right, still asleep. Some scratches....No, we had no idea. Lillian told John and me she'd fallen down the stairs when she was pregnant and that's why.... She says she's clumsy. Accident-prone, that's what Tom says....The boy's fourteen now and too strong for her....A terrible shame, all of it..." I ran back to my room and crawled under my covers.

I saw Billy one more time a few days before school started. He was climbing into the cab of a U-Move-It truck, Mr. Baxter at the wheel. I

overheard my mother say Billy's brother was going to a special place in the country. Mrs. O'Leary said, "Might as well lock up Billy, too, while they're at it."

The new owners of Billy's house paid men to tear out the bushes and dismantle the fence. I stood on the sidewalk and watched them cut the posts apart and throw the pieces in the back of a dump truck. Then they scraped the ground with rakes until it was smooth and even. The next day they laid rolls of grass like cut-up pieces of green carpet on the earth until, patch by patch, the dust in the back yard was all covered up.

KEVIN FITTON

Crashums

“Come on, Dad, I’m playing Crashums,” Stanley called from the living room. Stanley was four. Crashums was a game we made up where we sent one of Stanley’s toy cars down a track and into another one with a crash.

I was standing in the kitchen with my then-wife, Mariah. She was still in her pajamas, a get-up I called her prison stripes. It was white with blue pinstripes. She used to argue with me saying that prison clothes had horizontal stripes, and that right there is one of the differences between us: she can’t take a joke. From the living room, I heard a car go flying down the track and slam into its victim. Zip, crack.

Mariah’s thick hair was piled on top of her head and held together with these fat hairpins that looked like chopsticks, and she was leaning forward to take a sip of coffee.

“Tate seems to be handling things all right,” I said. Tate, our ten year old, was upstairs. He often disappeared with a book, sometimes for hours. I knew Mariah disagreed, but it seemed to me that Tate, as mature as he was, could handle the situation. Possibly he could manage things better than his parents.

Tate had confronted his mother weeks before, and he knew the basic run down. Apparently, he said to Mariah: “I know something is going on with you and Dad.” Mariah tried playing dumb, but he kept at it until she admitted we were separating. Tate had a way of seeing through you even if you put up a good front.

Mariah rinsed her coffee mug in the sink and stared blankly out the window. I walked into the living room and stood behind Stanley. He had run a stretch of orange track from the couch down to the floor using a cushion to hold the top of the track in place. It was a nice effort for a four year old except the track kept slipping out from under the cushion.

Stanley sniffed. His nose was dripping.

I found a roll of clear packing tape and taped the track to the couch, fitting the tape into the contours of the plastic. Then I ran a Mustang GT into a fire truck. Zip, crack. The fire truck barely budged.

When I’d entered the house that morning, Mariah met me in the breezeway and told me that she had taken the boys to a rescue shelter the day before, but that they had come home without a dog. She decided at the last moment that she couldn’t do it—she didn’t want anything else to take

care of. To make it up to the boys she took them out for ice cream, and that was enough for Stanley, but Tate was still upset. I didn't blame him. It was the sort of thing that drove me crazy about her.

"Dad," said Stanley, "it's not working." His nose was completely clogged, and his consonants sounded gooey like he was eating Elmers, and the glue was stuck in his throat. He seemed to always have a cold.

The packing tape had come unstuck, and the track had fallen to the floor. I picked it up and started removing the tape while Stanley pushed his cars around on the hardwood.

"Be right back, sport," I said and went to the basement looking for a roll of duct tape. But when I returned with the roll dangling around my wrist, I decided not to use the heavy tape on the new microfiber couch. I started trying to convince Stanley that we should move our set-up to the window, but he shouted, "I want it this way," and threw himself on the floor, face first, legs flailing as I started carrying the track across the room.

Until this moment, I had been able to hold it together. I'd survived Mariah's whole routine about the shelter and the fact that she'd barely said a word to me all morning. My mother had given me a pretty good speech about keeping things civil, and I was doing my best. But Stanley's little tantrum put me over the edge, and I'll admit I got on his case pretty good: "For crying out loud, Stanley," I said. "Don't be such a baby—I'm just moving the track." But it was just like Mariah to appear right in the middle of a difficult moment, hovering, hands on her hips, still in those ridiculous pajamas, and judging me like she always did.

"This is exactly the problem," I said to her. "You won't ever just give me a break."

Mariah turned and walked back into the kitchen, and I was left with Stanley, who was sobbing and making a puddle of tears and snot on the floor.

"Come on, bud," I said. "I like your track, but it isn't working."

He looked up. "I want it this way," he said again. It sounded like, "dis bay," his nose was so full of snot.

It was at this moment that Tate decided to appear, stepping over Stanley and flopping onto the couch.

"What's for breakfast?" Tate asked.

"The rest of us had breakfast an hour ago, but you can make yourself an egg."

He swooned, falling backward like he was suffering from heat stroke.

"I don't like eggs," he said.

"That's news to me."

"Well," he argued, "things change."

I looked down. The oak floor was scuffed and scratched from its years of sacrifice. “Make yourself a piece of toast,” I said.

“Fine,” he said, but he didn’t move. He just lay on his back staring up at the ceiling as if awaiting some heavenly revelation. At a loss, I again started for the window hoping Stanley would now go along with the change. But he started up again.

“Stanley. For shit’s sake,” I said.

That was enough to bring Mariah back from the kitchen. “If you can’t get your act together...” She stopped, but I knew exactly how she intended to finish that sentence. She was threatening to throw me out of my own damn house.

It’s strange how rage works. On the one hand, when it comes over you, it takes over completely like a second brain overruling the first. But on the other hand, even while you’re being carried away, there is still a line of rational thought that continues, evaluating everything while it’s happening. And so, even as I was doing it, I remember thinking that it was a childish thing to do—that it was the very thing Mariah kept harping on—and yet it didn’t stop me from swinging that plastic track hard against the wall, the track swinging like a rope, cracking against the wall like a whip snapping at its apex, breaking the air. I was so carried away that I swung it a second time and a third, but the track got twisted, landed awkwardly, and the sound didn’t come. A stab of pain grabbed my shoulder, and hot tears started burning my eyes.

“I can’t do anything,” I yelled.

Stanley and Tate were both frozen. Mariah stood there watching me, but instead of looking angry, now she looked frightened. She looked like the top of the house had blown off, and we were sitting together in the open air—the four walls of our suburban home without a ceiling or a roof, and rain pouring down on our unprotected life. And it’s the strangest thing, but I remember at that very moment thinking about what it sounds like when a flock of geese passes overhead, their cries dissipating as they fade into the distance.

For a little while I stood there, and then I sat down next to Stanley, and I took him in my arms, and we rocked together, hot tears filling my eyes. Tate slid closer until his foot was touching mine, and Mariah came around behind the couch and put her hands on Tate’s shoulder, and the four of us made a sort of chain.

Tate said, “I’m still mad about the dog,” and we all laughed, Stanley laughing the hardest, though he didn’t have any idea what we were talking about.

“Hey Stan,” I said. “Let’s play Crashums outside in the driveway.” I knew he’d like the idea for its novelty.

“Yeah,” he said, wiping his nose on his arm.

I took the packing tape and the track, and Stanley brought the cars. I taped the track to a drain-spout, and the cars went flying down the blacktop. Eventually Tate followed us outside. His hair was pin-straight, and it kept falling over his eyes.

He asked for the GT. It was our favorite, and I pulled it out of my pocket.

“How far do you think she’ll go?” I asked. But he had that faraway look he gets sometime, and it was like he didn’t hear me.

“Dad,” he said. “I’m worried that everything is going to change.”

I saw Mariah in the window peeking around the curtain, and I wondered what she would say. I’ll give credit where credit’s due. She always seemed to know what to say even when the shit was all caving in.

“Sometimes it feels that way,” I said. “But it’s not really true. Some things always stay the same.”

Tate wore glasses, and he did this thing where he touched the hook of his glasses where it wrapped around his ear and then held his earlobe between his fingers, and he was holding onto his earlobe while we talked.

“Like what?” he asked.

“Mom and I will always love you,” I said. “And Stan the Man here will always have a runny nose.”

“That’s true,” he said. “What else?” Stanley sent a car flying down the track out of control, flipping over itself. He came over and sat in my lap, and I wiped his nose with my shirt.

“What else?” I repeated. I patted Stan on the head and felt his thick hair and remembered how he had nothing but peach fuzz for the first year of his life.

“You,” I said. “You will always be you, the only Tate in the world.”

He made a face at me like, “What the hell, Dad? That’s not an answer.”

Just then Mariah came out the front door and stood beside us. “What are you guys doing?” she asked.

“Unfolding the mysteries of the universe,” I said.

“Let me know if you have any luck with that,” she said.

“We’re trying,” said Tate. “We’re doing our best.”

“That we are,” I said.

“Sounds like quite a conversation,” said Mariah.

Then I had a thought that made sense to me: this whole thing was like an earthquake shaking our life, and all we could really do is wait it out, hoping that there's something left when it's all over.

I looked up at Mariah. Loose strands of her hair were dancing in a breeze. She had another cup of coffee and was sipping it the way she does with her head bent over her mug.

"What's the four-one-one?" I asked.

She shook her head. She looked like she was going to speak but nothing came out.

"I know," I said. "I know."

HELGA KIDDER

Woman with Folden Arms

We can guess why Picasso painted
melancholy into the woman's
gaunt face, her slumped shoulders.

Hair pushed under a dark cap,
she stares into the blue space
of middle age.

Arms crossed beneath her
languid breasts as if to lessen
the pit in her stomach.

He said he found
a younger model, that today
would be their last session.

She sits quietly. No tears
escape her averted eyes.
No sniffles into a handkerchief.

She knew womanhood
would bring her
to this day.

He dips his brush
into a darker blue to finish
quickly, eyes on tomorrow.

CHRIS CARBAUGH

The Great American Ping Pong Ball Drop

Johnny, BB, Curt and I were excited about what was billed as “The Great American Ping-Pong Ball Drop.” The always entrepreneurial merchants of downtown Greenville had borrowed the event from other cities in hopes of attracting a crowd to their shops on Saturday morning. Evidently, it had been a grand success in many places, especially small towns with only one main shopping area. The plan as announced in both *The Greenville News* and *The Greenville Piedmont* was that a helicopter would fly fairly low and also slowly over the hill that was Main Street, from the Ottaray Hotel at the top, to the Poinsett Hotel at the bottom, then returning in the opposite direction. As it passed over the people in the street, it would drop hundreds of ping-pong balls which contained small slips of paper naming prizes given by each of the town’s merchants. MamaLu declared that it was Greenville’s version of airborne Chinese fortune cookies, just ping-pong balls instead. We could not imagine what the furniture store would give away, at least, anything that would be of interest to us; but, we could think of countless items from the two five-and-dime stores, F.W. Woodworth’s and Kress.’ Also, some of the prizes were money, including the coveted one-hundred dollar Grand Prize, which I knew I would win. I was only five-years-old, but I knew that this very special ping-pong ball was going to land ever so gracefully and effortlessly into my small, but ready, hands. I could barely catch a baseball, even with a glove, but the ping pong ball was a different matter. I had already made a list of potential purchases, ranging from candy to clothes to gifts for everyone in my family.

MamaLu made sure that we were ready to attend the event of the summer, all of us except Paul, who was just too young to be left within a crowd of people. We were, however, expected to bring him a surprise, including his favorites, wild cherry Lifesavers. Our clothes were ironed, our socks matched, and our hair had been combed via the all-purpose dishrag. I always looked to see if some extraneous grits might have shown up somewhere in my very black hair. My shoes actually fit, were made of real leather, and the soles didn’t even have holes in them. They had been my cousin Mac’s but they never fit BB, who was next in line for them, so I lucked out. I didn’t know at the time that I would have a specific need for them later in the morning.

We could hardly eat our “Snap, Crackle, and Pop” fast enough because we wanted to get to the downtown area before the crowd arrived. The bus didn’t start running until eight o’clock, but we wanted to be the first ones on it when it stopped at the intersection of White Oak Drive and the Super Highway. We downed our cereal, claimed that we had brushed our teeth, ran out the front door, and set our sights on a morning of unimaginable prizes.

The four of us walked to the end of White Oak Drive and waited impatiently for the bus. Johnny had our dimes for the ride downtown and BB had our dimes for the ride back home. The bus finally arrived and very much to our surprise, it was packed, a sight we had never seen before. Evidently, everyone else had the same idea that we had—arrive really early and stake out a place even though the helicopter would not make an appearance until around noon. And some of the people looked like they were going fishing. They had poles with nets on them. How strange it seemed at the time!

After twelve additional stops, the now really-packed bus arrived at the downtown area where everyone disembarked. Main Street was blocked off by police cars for this special event. Johnny, BB, Curt, and I jumped off the bus on a side street and aimed toward the heart of the action. We could hardly believe what we saw. There were thousands of people already there! Big people, little people, old people, young people—the most people I had ever seen anywhere. I searched out an area where I could stand to make my grand catches. I knew I would collect many. My pockets were empty and ready to be filled with these light-weight prize announcements descending from the sky.

People, once strangers and now competitors, were talking and milling about. Some of them were so tall that they completely blocked me from the rays of the sun. Was there an astrological event, perhaps an eclipse that I was unaware of? I thought about shimmying up a light pole. BB had the same idea and started his ascent, but was stopped half-way by a policeman who stated—“there’ll be none of that young man,” BB, however, never dealt with obstacles very well, especially man made ones, so he just moved on to a pole where there was not policeman in sight and proceeded to climb it almost to the top.

Close to noon there was a progressively thunderous sound in the air as well as a general agitation of people. The low-flying helicopter was approaching. I held up my small hands, ready for the catch. Sadly, I realized that my hands did not even reach the chest of some of the adults who were around me. My brothers quickly scattered looking for an opening among the crowd. I did the same. The sky was quickly transformed into a massive hail

storm of ping pong balls. I jumped, I ran, I jumped again, all to no avail. Now I understood why some people had brought nets, not fishing nets but butterfly nets. They just thrust them in the air and scooped up bunches of potential treasures. Their advantage did not seem fair, but, it just made me more determined than ever to change my strategy in order to receive my special Grand Prize ball.

Being close to the ground, I noticed that a few of the balls were falling through the crowd and landing near my feet. I eyed one really close by. It was mine! I had it and no one else was going to get it. I knew that it was the one—the one-hundred dollar ball. I bumped my way through several people and dived for the ball. Just as I grabbed it, a woman in an ugly green dress just out and out clobbered me in the head with her even uglier large, green plastic pocketbook. It was an unmitigated and unwarranted assault on my cranium.

“Give me that ball,” she demanded as she tried to yank it out of my hand with her pointed fingernails digging into my skin. I saw stars for a moment or two. Did this wicked witch in green have a brick in her pocketbook? My head felt like it had been attacked by one. But, regardless, she was not going to get my ping-pong ball. What could I do in this split-second? All that I could think of at the time was to kick the daylights out of her. So I pulled back my right leg with its heavy leather shoe and kicked her several times in her shins. She responded with a long series of very unkind words that she spewed at me as she continued her efforts to wrestle the ball out of my hand, using both of her weaponed hands. Finally, another adult who was nearby, yelled in an agitated mood: “Lady, leave that boy alone!”

“It’s mine,” she yelled defiantly as she looked at the intervening man. Fortunately for me, as she spoke she lost her tenacious green grip on my hand which held the ball. This was my cue to take my rightful prize and run as fast as I could. I fiercely edged my way through the crowd and eventually lost sight of her green self. When I finally stopped, I realized how much my head hurt, how mean an adult could be, and what a struggle it had been just to get the one ping-pong ball. Putting all of that aside, I couldn’t wait to open my treasure. But first, I put it in my pocket and started a long circuitous search for my brothers. The helicopter was long gone, making both a downward and upward sweep of Main Street, and so were they. Every now and then I thought that I had found other balls on the ground, but they were just the halves of ones that people had caught, had already opened, and then, thoughtlessly tossed away, totally oblivious to the “Green” part of our beautiful city, “Greenville.”

Eventually, I reunited with my brothers, only to learn that they had been more successful than me. Johnny had five balls, BB had two and Curt

had one. We went to the side of the Woolworth's dime store where there was no longer a crowd and we began to open the balls. I was still very cautious and mindful of the "green menace," as she had severely wounded me, hopefully not permanently. Johnny was our best hope, having five balls in his possession. They all said the same thing—"Enjoy shopping on Main Street,"—no prize at all. What a disappointment! "Shop with what?" he asked. He then provided the details of his five-ball grab—somewhat similar to mine. BB also had an "enjoy" one and one that said: "Buy the top of a Singer Sewing Machine and we'll provide the bottom—free if charge!" (Then there was a telephone number to call). BB decided that he would call the number and aggravate the daylights of anyone who answered. "Oh please tell me about your machine," as he put the phone down on the kitchen counter. They could talk for hours as far as he was concerned. Curt's paper said nothing, just a blank strip of white. It did not even have the "enjoy" statement. He really felt betrayed, saying that he might as well be considered invisible. Now it was my turn. My brothers looked to me as a last hope for winning something besides platitudes and wordless papers. I had to have the \$100 ball. I had to redeem our efforts within "The Great American Ping Pong Ball Drop." Cautiously and carefully, I opened my hard-earned potential treasure and I saw a dollar sign. My hopes ran sky high. Then there was the rest—\$1.00's worth of merchandise at the Hotel Greenville's candy stand. I didn't even know that the hotel had a candy stand. Not the \$100, not even \$1.00, just \$1.00's worth of candy. "Better than nothing," I said disappointedly.

So we all walked down a side street to the old dilapidated hotel with poor lighting and even worse furniture and appointments. When we got there the clerk behind the counter acted as if we were to be ignored. I kept trying to get his attention, especially since I had a winning "ticket" to some candy. Finally, I went behind the counter and approached him in as assertive voice as possible for a five-year old: "I would like my one dollar's worth of candy." He just looked at me with the most blank expression. I continued, "I have a ping-pong ball and it says: one dollar's worth of candy from the Hotel Greenville." He just stared—like he was going to wait me out. He was clueless about my tenacity; he had met his match. I had been whacked soundly in the head to get this prize, so I was not going to give up until I had it. So, I repeated my request as I produced the winning slip of paper. Still, he stood emotionless before me and my brothers. I would not leave until I had my rightfully, and painfully, achieved rewards. There was silence.

Finally he said: "Get your candy and get out of here." He was so unfriendly, even to a child who had just received an undeserved and most

probable concussion. So I chose several candy bars and several packages of chewing gum, and of course, the wild cherry Lifesavers for Paul.

Midway through my selection, he yelled out angrily—“Wait a minute—you have too much, that’s much more than one dollar.

“No, I don’t. They’re only...”

He stopped me mid-sentence and yelled, “No, this is a hotel, they’re more expensive here.” I decided that I had had enough, especially for this run-down establishment!

“Come on, let’s get out of here,” I said to my brothers and we took off with the candy.

“I’m calling the police,” the man yelled.

Emboldened, or perhaps punch-drunk from the blow to my head, I yelled back: “Good! Tell them I said hello!” And I meant it. The entire affair had tested my limits of honesty and decency. Several blocks later we sat down and ate our candy bars. They had already started to melt, but we saved one for MamaLu since Hershey’s was her favorite. We also saved cherry Life-Savers for Paul as those were his favorite flavor. Then we moved on. We were really thirsty so we used our return-home bus money to buy Dr. Peppers, also buying one for MamaLu.

As we walked home in the hot sun, I thought about what “The Great American Ping-Pong Ball Drop” had meant to me. I had received a big knot on my head from a very mean and vicious adult. I had been put into the position of forcibly taking my own prize candy. And, lastly, I had developed a lifelong aversion to the color green.

MamaLu, who always presented the best side of human motivation, tried to explain my bruising situation by saying that “the pocketbook-as-a-weapon-welding-woman” might have been in distress and may have needed the Grand Prize money in order to feed her family.

Besides, she said, “Life is an adventure, and you just had an interesting one with ping pong balls and a crowd of people—always try to enjoy every moment,” as she put some more ice on the big knot on my head and took a sip of her Dr. Pepper.

LEE LANDAU

Roberto and the Snow Globe

Dedicated to Margaret Atwood, Poet

This world you took
away with you,

so small it fit
in the callused

palm of your hand
not unlike this

snow globe, where you
in white relief survive.

Here trees crawl like spiders
to catch the wind,

snow perplexes
a blue sky,

while branches shake
from the weight of it.

Only the ground
hints of substance,

you more like outcropping
of rock.

Blind to this hardening,
snow shapes you.

Soon only snow will be
visible, our love shaken apart.

MARC LAROCK

On the Frozen Continent

Great God! this is an awful place...

—Robert Falcon Scott, Antarctica, 17 January 1912

There is a gravesite
weighted with tombs
made of ice,
no one
will ever see.

There are dreams
instead of stones,
motionless and dark,
at the bottom of the sea.

And there is a silent
migration
of dead men
with ashen faces,
leading dead horses.
They leave their footprints behind,
which become little hollows
where the moonlight rots.
Their voices are buried
inside the wind,
like battered violins
locked in
dark cases.

It's true,
every heartbeat fears
the silence that follows it.
Even shadows are afraid
of the dark.

MARC LAROCK

But when you're too tired
and too hungry,
oblivion waits,
with a sigh
of frozen ashes
that lasts too long.

EVALYN LEE

Weeping Wall

My neighbor and I share
A weeping wall.

The roofer came on Friday
To seal the leak.

But a wall takes weeks
To heal and dry.

We had not spoken,
Two years had passed:

Newspapers, milk, children,
Dogs, husbands all needed attending to first.

But her landlord's reluctance
To address the seeping water

Sluicing through our dry paint,
Forced an awkward conversation.

*I've been in Surrey. I am sorry, she says,
My mother has dementia.*

*Oh, so did my father-in-law, I say,
He died this past June, on his eighty-fourth birthday.*

We look into each other's eyes.
The roofer, she says, will return next Tuesday.

Now, each day, we pass, waiting
For the weeping to end, joined in

The fellowship of life's attention
To duty and a shared wall.

MARTIN H. LEVINSON

The Penitent Sea

A sea is a large body of salt water
surrounded in whole or in part
by land and the projections of
beach walkers who stare into
the roiling surf and see friends that
disappoint, jobs that didn't work out,
a world gone awry due to climate change,

terrorism, poverty, and sorry I forgot it
was your birthday, not a hanging crime
except in the State of Perfection where
everyone remembers everything and
nothing falls through the cracks, which is
a complete impossibility due to faulty
human wiring that leads people to screw up

from time to time: Chernobyl, Titanic,
the twelve book publishers who
turned down Harry Potter, the
fourteen relatives I offended when
I showed up a day late for
my family reunion and said life
is an adventure in forgiveness,

a quest for clemency,
a search for absolution,
a mix of metaphor mornings
and makeshift afternoons
where the sea surges
and laughs at the
errors I make.

ALAN GARTENHAUS

Double Date

He glanced at his watch before calling the young waitress to the table. “Seems I’ve been stood up.” He requested another glass of red.

The young woman returned with a glass of wine filled nearly to overflowing. “On the house,” she said as she placed it before him.

He lowered his eyes. “You’re too kind.”

She pointed to the yellow rose on his table and asked, “For her?”

He smiled. “It’s a bit old-fashioned, I know, but I’m a romantic.”

“I wouldn’t feel too bad,” she said, nodding toward the empty seat. “People get hung up for all kinds of reasons.”

“I half expected it,” he said with a sigh. “We’ve only met online. Who knows? She might have come in here, seen me, and decided to leave.”

The waitress handed him a menu. “Might as well eat.” She cleared the place setting across from him with a few swift moves. “You’ve got to be hungry, right?”

“I always thought eating alone in a restaurant was pretty pathetic. Don’t you?”

“No,” she replied. “It shows self-confidence.” She pushed thick, black-rimmed eyeglasses higher up her nose. “How about some lentil soup or a small salad to start?”

“Actually, soup sounds good.”

His eyes followed her as she threaded a path through the crowded restaurant with the fluid elegance of a dancer—lithe, yet erect. When she started back to the table, he dropped his head and let his shoulders slump.

She set the bowl of steaming hot soup in front of him and handed him a spoon. As his hand grazed hers, he noticed several star-shaped tattoos on her forearm, which seemed to him incongruous. She projected such innocence and freshness, as though she’d come from someplace in the heartland, like Bloomington, Indiana; Youngstown, Ohio; or Normal, Illinois.

“What else would you like?” she asked.

You, he thought. “The veal,” he said.

“Good choice,” she replied.

As she turned to leave, the man raised his hand. “May I ask you a question?”

The waitress paused.

“What kind of a person stands someone up?”

The young woman rocked slightly as she ran her hands over her tightly pulled hair. “I don’t know. I’d never go out with someone I hadn’t met.”

“But if you did, and you saw me, would you leave without even speaking to me? I’m not trying to make you uncomfortable,” he said. “It’s just that...”

“I’m sure you’re a nice guy,” the waitress replied. “You shouldn’t let it get to you. These things happen.”

The man held up the yellow rose. “I’d like *you* to have this.”

She looked at him quizzically before accepting his gift. “I’ll check on your veal.”

“You’re sweet,” he said.

She blushed. “It’s my job,” she mumbled before heading toward the kitchen.

The man ate his dinner slowly. The veal was tender and the creamy gravy delicious. He used bread to sop up the last bits.

When the waitress returned, she complimented him on his appetite. “Guess you got over your shyness about eating alone.”

He smiled slightly while placing his napkin back onto his lap.

“You had no trouble cleaning your plate!”

“I was pretending to have dinner with you,” he replied.

She dismissed his comment with a shy wave of her hand.

“No, really,” he said.

She smirked. “So, will *we* be having coffee and dessert?”

His face fell. “You’re laughing at me.”

She chuckled, in spite of her attempts at restraint. “No, I’m not. Really.”

He lowered his eyes and folded his hands as if in prayer.

“Sorry,” she said and touched his shoulder lightly. “I’m easily embarrassed.” She collected herself. “What else would you like?”

“For you to have dinner with me sometime—for real.”

She glanced at him over the top of her glasses. “I never go out with customers.”

He exhaled and tilted his head to the side. “You can’t blame a guy for trying.”

She smiled as she put his check on the table. “I don’t.”

* * *

When the bartender saw the man leave the restaurant, he gestured to the waitress to join him at the bar. “You’re an evil genius,” he told her.

She laid the yellow rose on the counter and asked for a soda water. “Not evil,” she crooned. “Just cautious.”

The bartender shook his head. “You get a guy to come in here, be interviewed, and leave *you* a tip! Seems like genius to me!”

“I was honest. I told him I would never date someone I hadn’t met.”

The bartender stopped rinsing glasses and raised his head. “Think he recognized you?”

She removed her eyeglasses and untied her tight ponytail. She shook her head a few times, fluffing her hair with her fingers. “And you’d be amazed at what the right makeup and hot rollers can do. Besides, I doubt he was expecting me to be wearing an apron and waiting tables.”

The bartender nodded. “He was too old for you anyway.”

She took a sip of soda water. “Way too old.”

* * *

After leaving the restaurant, the man strolled toward the river along Frenchmen Street, stopping in front of a café that had recently opened. He watched an attractive waitress with long brown hair deliver espressos to an elderly couple, and made a mental note to buy a yellow rose on his way there tomorrow, after work.

MILES LISS

Christmas Morning, 2014

Cold December wind in North Carolina
no snow
just rain puddles slick with gasoline

Lights on motels swarm
a sea of bees
that give off unnatural brightness

Flags American and Sleep Inn
flutter to the east in prayer
to holy silence

Few cars now
drift where snowflakes
fail to fall

I am far away from home
and have no destination

Snap of car doors
from other weary travelers
who pass through hotel lobbies
eyes glazed
from the thousands of miles
they have crossed

I have lived a life
tormented by desire
slowly learning how desire
tears one apart

I have not received the gifts I felt
were rightfully deserved
when nothing was deserved
or undeserved

MELISSA MADENSKI

After Your Death

pushing aside raincoats
and a torn umbrella

I took your carpenter's apron
from its hook where you left it
three days before you died.

Laying it flat on the table,
I looked for clues to explain
your heart's sudden halt.

Three nails in one pocket,
plans in another for connecting
cedar strips into a rose support.

Nothing there.

I moved to your toolbox,
uncovered penciled designs
drawings with measurements

in the margins where vines
crawled up a lattice and wound
teardrop leaves around an arbor.

Spicy cedar curls
covered the shelf
under the tools

where a small level,
2 C-clamps and sandpaper
fit together like a puzzle

with one missing piece

MELISSA MADENSKI

at the very bottom
an old note:

*Gone for groceries
love you
be home soon.*

MICHAEL M. MARKS

My Doppelgänger

The earth and sea fend off too close the moon:
eruption destruction in defense of life.
Battered with blurry scars of confusion
I drank the apple juice out of my chicken pocks
dancing to the tunes of TV commercials
wearing clichés tattooed above my toes
under Fred and Ginger waltzing pines
losing bees and trees to disease.
Abe Lincoln thought we all start equal;
Al Einstein knew there is always equal
opposites—my doppelgänger
on the other side of my reflection
dying to cancan to the closer side,
dying to correct my actions like my mom.

BRUCE MCRAE

Lull Before Storm

Earth was going to hell in a bone-basket.
Townspople were assembling the perfect fear.
On their eyes grew a thick sleep.
A black snow fell, like spurious fallout.

Days such as these we turn a little mad.
Losing a hand. A right leg up to the knee.
Sacrificing a good son. The last daughter.
Throwing money under a burning wheel.
We stop to kick off our shoes, let go a few rounds.
We're at the end of a string,
half way between the stars and excrement.
In a lull only violence transcends.

But a bomb is coming and our terror is sublime.

LINDA HEURING

CTA Walkabout

“Stranger things have happened.”

It’s my signature line. I weave it in and out of my comedy routine like a skater does her double Axels, and it usually gets a laugh. I draw out my words in what they think is a put-on Southern accent, and I strut around the stage in my mini and boots and spiky hair. It’s the incongruity between my appearance and my drawl that sets the stage at Chicago’s Laugh Tower, and for a week now I’ve basked in the spotlight. I think they’re with me, but when I get on the El at 3 a.m., with a weary head and a wary eye on my fellow passengers, doubt settles over me like the mid-winter grit of my newly adopted city.

Tonight, or this morning if you really want to get all technical, it’s 3:30 before I slap my CTA card onto the reader and push through the turnstile. I’m late because Eric, the manager, wanted “a word.” After my set I waited around at the bar, sipping my free diet soda, always afraid to order something stronger since I’d just turned 18, not 22 like I said. A word. I was expecting something like “excellent” or “hilarious,” or, could I dare hope to hear “stupendous?” Turns out he didn’t want a word at all, but a whole fucking sentence.

“We won’t be needing you back, kid,” he said. He clamped a hand on my shoulder, like that would make everything okay.

I stayed on my bar stool and sucked the juice out of the lime slice on the rim of my glass, and folded the skinny plastic straw into a triangle. Portia was up after me, her hands clasped together in a pretend swoon over some politician, and I noticed something. The house was laughing. Really laughing. For me, it wasn’t the same. They had been laughing *at* me, at my small-town life, at the grand champion crossbred market gilt hog that financed my escape from the farm to Carl Sandburg’s butchering metropolis to try my luck at stand up. I bet they’d be crying if they knew most of my routine was for real.

My mother, Grace, was called “BB” by her four older sisters, short for “baby,” as if they were just too worn out to bother with her name. BB loved all things Los Angeles, or her perception of Los Angeles, since she’d never been out of Blanchard, Illinois, in her life. She fancied herself rollerblading along the ocean in Santa Monica like all those bikini-clad blondes on TV.

That ended up being the death of her: at 27 she collided with a UPS truck in the parking lot at the feed store, the only place with enough asphalt to get up some speed. I can still see her zooming along the lot with her hair swinging back and forth, pretending to breathe in all that salty ocean air. I can't see her running into the side of that boxy brown truck, but I consider that a good thing.

I was 12 when she died, and anyone who can do the math knows she didn't even have her driver's license when she delivered me, but that didn't stop her from being a mom other girls envied. She had these two sides to her, the California girl free spirit side and the practical side that made sure I ate my vegetables and did my schoolwork. But that was a while ago, and my memory may have dressed things up a bit.

The day my mother died, the paramedics squeezed me into a corner of the ambulance as they hightailed it to the hospital. I don't know if they kept working on her on my account or if they thought there was a chance to save her. At the hospital they made me sit in the waiting room while they called Aunt Vivian, who came running in with foil on her hair from the beauty shop. She had the windows down when she drove me to her house, and the little squares of foil on her hair raised and lowered like airplane flaps.

Aunt Polly was on the phone when we got there. Aunt Kathy was in the kitchen making grilled cheese sandwiches for my cousins. They were crowded around Aunt Barbara in the living room, while she tried to figure out how to work the VCR. When we came in, the sisters all stopped what they were doing and squeezed Vivian and me into some giant group hug, and the cousins stood there looking at us. I rolled my eyes at them, and one of them laughed. Aunt Polly was on them like a badger.

"You think death is funny?" she said.

They flattened themselves against the bookshelves and shook their heads from side to side like backup singers in perfect sync. No one tangles with Aunt Polly.

We ate lunch under a low fog of gray smoke from a few burnt sandwiches. Aunt Kathy scraped the worst of the black off with a butter knife. With a little extra ketchup to dip them in, you couldn't hardly tell. Aunt Polly got right into a list of things that had to be done, like deciding what was going to happen to me.

"It's just like BB to leave this up to us," she said, as if my mom had planned on a close encounter with a chocolate brown truck.

Aunt Vivian ran her hand up over her hair, and her fingers crinkled a piece of foil.

"Oh, my God," she said. "My highlights!"

She pulled the foil sheets from her hair with both hands as she ran to the bathroom. Polly followed.

The second they left the room, Aunt Barbara grabbed her own hair and said, “Oh, my God!” and ran around the table like a chicken with her head cut off, and Aunt Kathy started laughing, and we were all laughing so hard we had to hold our sides, and my cousin Jimmy squirted milk out of his nose.

I sat there with my eyes half-closed from laughing and saw everyone else in something like slow motion. They shook their shoulders. They wiped their eyes. They held their stomachs. They doubled over. I wanted to make people do that. I wanted to be an actress and make people laugh. I hopped up and ran around the table like my Aunt Barbara had done, but Aunt Polly grabbed me by the back of the shirt and plopped me into my chair. Everyone got quiet. I had a lot to learn about timing. Maybe I still do.

The plastic around the edge of the train seat was cold on the back of my legs. I was surprised how much colder it was here than back home. It was only September, but already I needed a coat at night.

This is a Blue Line train to Forest Park. Next stop is Monroe. Doors open on the right at Monroe.

The announcements were easier to hear at night. Not so much commotion in the cars. I always tried to get in the first car, the one with the driver. I’d heard it was safer.

The train slowed, and the doors opened.

This is Monroe.

As the recorded voice began “doors closing,” a man in a backwards ball cap carrying a black, zippered guitar case and a fat backpack squeezed through the opening. He lurched against the seat across from me as the train took off. He settled in.

I clutched my own backpack to my chest. Inside was my copy of *A Thousand Jokes You’ll Love to Tell*. Of course, I didn’t tell any of those anymore. I had my own material, worked out in my black and white composition book. I told the one about the blonde who skated into a UPS truck. The woman with the wind-powered foil in her hair. The farmer’s wife goosed by a wet-nosed hog. The permanent haze of smoke in Aunt Kathy’s kitchen.

“My aunt K is such a bad cook, my uncle installed a fire hose next to the sink.” I had practiced in front of mirrors. I’d mimicked the Chicago TV reporters on cable to create my city accent. I thought if I looked and sounded metro no one would believe my jokes were the family stories of a downstate motherless teenager. Now I was a downstate motherless teenager with no gig.

I touched a finger to my lower eyelids to catch a couple of tears. I looked out the window at the dark, wet walls. Why did they call it the elevated train when so much of it was underground? In the window's reflection I could see Guitar Man counting change in his hand. We rocked on the tracks in the night, running parallel to the Eisenhower Expressway, which as far as I'd seen wasn't much in the express category.

UIC-Halsted. Doors open on the left at Halsted.

Aunt Polly had said I should go on to college instead of jumping right into "this comedy business." I don't think she really saw it as a business at all. Aunt Vivian said if I wanted to follow my dream, she'd stand in my corner, and Aunt Kathy had a college friend who let me stay in her Forest Park basement. If I'd followed Aunt Polly's advice, I might be studying theatre here at the University of Illinois - Chicago, getting off the train after a night out bar-hopping with my friends or listening to music somewhere. Maybe watching Guitar Man perform. I glanced over at him. He was looking at me, too. He stretched out his arm like he was yawning and put his legs sideways on the bench. His heels were worn down to nothing. He grinned.

"Late night?" he said.

"Work," I said, pulling down on the edge of my skirt.

"Waitress?" He moved closer to the edge of his seat.

"Comedian." I yanked on my spiky hair.

"Wow," he said. "We're both performing artists, then."

I nodded.

Racine. Doors open on the left at Racine.

A man got on, dragging a huge black trash bag, which he used to block the aisle. He only had one shoe. He looked straight at Guitar Man then sat down.

"Where's your gig?" Guitar Man said.

"Was. Laugh Tower."

"Touch you. That's a hot place."

"Was. I got canned tonight. How about you?"

"The station."

"I don't know that one."

"The train station. I play down there for tips."

"The change you were counting..."

"Some bills, too."

It looked like I'd hurt his feelings.

"I didn't mean..." I said.

"Sure you didn't." He put his legs back under the seat in front of him. He pulled out his cell phone and started texting, or tweeting or something.

I'm on the El with a real bitch who thinks she's a comedian, I imagined him typing.

I pulled my notebook from my bag. "Twitter," I wrote down on my idea list. One Shoe started singing and waving his arms around. A nasty smell wafted my way. I couldn't tell if it was him or what was in the bag. Probably both. There weren't many homeless people where I came from. Could I end up like him, living on lower Wacker with my joke book for a pillow?

We were underground again, and the train slowed, then stopped.

My window was inches from the wall. No one announced anything. I'd lost track of the stops. The driver opened the skinny door from his compartment and stepped into our car. He walked past us without a word, and I could see his yellow safety vest bobbing as he disappeared past the opposite windows.

One Shoe spread himself across the floor by the exit. I didn't think he could smell any worse, but now his stink filled up the entire car. I held my fingers in front of my nose. They smelled like lime. Guitar Man craned his neck to look after the driver.

"Can you see anything?" I said.

He shook his head. "He's just walking away."

"Permanently?" It was a joke.

He chuckled. "Yeah, the comedian."

"About before," I said. "I didn't mean..."

"Whatever," he said.

It was quiet down here, like a cave without the dripping water, although I'd seen dripping water in the El tunnels before. I sat on my hands to remind myself not to chatter away to fill the void.

Guitar Man looked at his phone and flipped it closed. The snap echoed in the car.

"How long's it been?" I said.

"Five minutes."

It just seemed like an hour.

"Wouldn't you think they..."

"Yeah." He stepped over the sleeping man and held onto the metal bars on each side of the steps. He leaned out of the car and looked both ways.

"Nothing."

"How about that blue call button?"

"Yeah, well the guy who's supposed to answer has left the building."

A radio squawked inside the driver's booth. Surely someone knew this train wasn't moving. Didn't they have computers for that?

Guitar Man tried the driver's door. It was locked.

"Maybe you could call someone," I said.

"Why don't you?"

"I don't have a phone," I said.

"Everybody has a phone."

"Not on me."

In the distance was a train, coming closer, from the opposite direction. Its headlight beam glanced off the wall. It sped past. What if another train was coming behind ours? How often do they run at night? I couldn't remember. How long since we stopped?

"Will you please call someone? What if there's another train coming?"

Guitar Man shoved his hands in his pockets.

"I can't. I don't have any minutes."

"But you were on the phone earlier," I said.

He shrugged and turned his ball cap around, shielding his eyes.

"I was just pretending."

I narrowed my eyes. He wasn't as old as I first thought. In fact, he could be my age.

"Are you from here?" I said.

"I'm not some foreigner, if that's what you mean," he said. Prickly. Defensive. With just a bit of Southern Illinois woven in, but enough to make my eyes start to burn. I buried my head in my backpack, while the wave of homesickness forced the tears from my eyes. He hovered at the edge of my seat, then sat down next to me.

"Downstate," he said.

"What?" I wiped my eyes on my sleeve.

"Downstate. Where I'm from," he said.

I nodded. "Me, too. Blanchard."

"Corydon. I wrestled at Blanchard," he said. "Last year. Seems like forever ago."

I nodded again and wiped my nose on my arm.

"I thought I was doing so good, then tonight I got canned."

It was his turn to nod.

"Yeah, it's feast or famine up here."

One Shoe farted in his sleep. We both laughed and fanned the air.

"What if this is one of those game shows?" I said.

"Like that one, *Punked*, or whatever," he said.

"And old One Shoe there is really some celebrity with a whoopee cushion in his pants, and he's going to get up and give us a check for, I don't know, ten thousand."

“Sorry, but I’ve seen him before. He’s the real deal. Sleeps on the train every night. If you work it right you can stay on till morning. It’s warmer than the street, and it’s usually pretty safe. You just move from train to train. That, though,” he pointed to the man on the floor, “sleeping stretched out like that will get you thrown off.”

“How come you know so much about him?”

Guitar Man shrugged. His guitar case bulged. His backpack was overstuffed.

“Oh,” I said. Experience.

He moved back to his own seat. I was used to that. Killing a relationship before it even got going. It was part of my routine, too. When your mom’s famous county-wide for something as ditzy as rollerblading into a truck full of undelivered packages, you learn to cope. I must have inherited her two parts, though, because there was the joking side of me that sometimes got me in hot water and then the serious side that got me on the honor roll. Regardless of what Aunt Polly said, I thought I could put these two sides together and make a go of it. Right now I wasn’t moving at all.

“Should we be getting off and walking?” I said.

“Suit yourself. I’m staying on to the end of the line then riding her back,” he said. “Doesn’t matter to me if I’m moving or not.”

I said I guessed I wasn’t in any hurry myself. Especially alone in the dark. With a third rail lurking out there somewhere. I pulled out my notebook. I liked that lurking rail.

“Do you ever think about giving up?” he said.

“Permanently? Like our driver? No,” I said, but I lied. I thought about giving up every time a joke fell flat, when yet another panhandler, with more money in his crumpled drink cup than I had in the world, asked me for spare change. When I was stuck on a train in the middle of the night with a boy who reminded me of home and my vulnerability and the long odds of making it here or in my mother’s utopian city of angels.

“Me neither,” he said, but I knew he was lying, too. He had no minutes on his phone, no heels on his shoes and played for quarters in a filthy subway tunnel.

When the new driver arrived, he roused One Shoe and folded him into one of those front seats reserved for the elderly and handicapped, and an inspector grilled us on what caused the driver to just walk out, like we would know. Afterwards we sat together and whispered the inspector’s questions to each other, making up the answers we wished we’d had the foresight to say at the time. When the driver announced the end of the line at Forest Park, Guitar Man slung his backpack over one shoulder and his guitar case over the other, but instead of going our separate ways I took him home.

He lathered up with my strawberry-scented soap in the basement shower, tossed his clothes in the washer, and after we made homesick love we sat cross-legged on my bed and ate Ramen noodles from the pan with chopsticks, the famous singer-songwriter and the darling of David Letterman, escaping from their fans to get some John and Yoko peace. Later, after making bruised-dream love, we fell asleep, and when we woke in the afternoon we turned our eyes away. He folded his clothes, and the door scraped against the basement threshold as he left.

I scribbled in my notebook about the officer who took our statements, One Shoe's protests at being awakened, and the CTA driver who decided to pull a Forrest Gump and take a walkabout across America in the middle of his shift, crafting part of my new "city" routine that I hoped would get me another gig and another. I would weave in the antics of my cousins, my idiosyncratic aunts, and the farm, but I would never ever mention the Guitar Man. I hoped he would never give up until he was a very famous singer-songwriter because we could meet again sometime, flying first class, with unlimited calls and data and fine leather shoes, and pop out somewhere for a meal that didn't come 10 for a dollar from Aldi. We could, you know. Stranger things have happened.

STEVE MEADOR

From a Stone Ledge on Rabbit Mountain

Sunrise arrives from Kansas
pushing gifts of roses and gold.
Soon, valley mornings crusted
with hoarfrost and dead wind
shall crunch beneath our feet.
Yellow rays strike like a match
down the face of The Flatirons.
Clouds will butt against Long's
Peak, be immovable until noon
when Utah answers a call to haul
the flotilla to Nevada, where
an arid vacuum dries the sky.
As Californians sip fuzzy martinis
our sunrise dips and sizzles into
a beyond known as the Pacific.

ASHLEY MEMORY

Why I Love Used Books

Leafing through Perrine's *Sound and Sense*
the handwriting of Jeannette Venable scrawls
like Whitman's noiseless and patient spider.
Was she a poet, I wonder, perhaps a student?

Religious, no doubt, judging from circled passages
of John Donne and Gerard Manley Hopkins.
She pens a sad face by Arnold's 'Dover Beach,'
Only a return to truth will save us, she muses.

She scoffs at the mudluciousness of e.e. cummings
Not for me, she scribbles, and the verse of Sylvia Plath
perplexes because here she is strangely silent.
'The Spinster,' I imagine, squeezes a nerve.

Even though on page 41 the highlighter draws
a pink line through *The purest form of practical language*
is the scientific, I know that a romantic lives
at Cashew Court, #45A, in Clio, California.

Ahh, she writes beside the villanelle of Collins,
Why can't goodbye come back to hello?
A single tear warps Browning's 'Sonnet 14,'
If thou must love me, let it be for nought.

In the glossary, she checks off *haiku*,
stars *masculine rhyme*, and questions *triple meter*.
When the highlighter runs through understatement
I know that Jeannette is a poet after all.

Jeannie, reads a yellowed index card
tucked in the middle. *Sorry I missed you.*
Couldn't pass up the job in Portland
Fondly, Frank.

JOHN KRISTOFKO

A Farther Place

“Well, at least there’s a note on this one,” Perry Jenkins said as he looked at the small white rectangle.

“A note on what?” James Rowe asked, stepping up beside his friend.

Perry turned, startled. He had not meant to speak that out loud.

“Oh, hello James,” he shook his head. “This latest rejection I got from *A Farther Place*. It’s the first one I’ve ever got that isn’t just the damn slip of paper.”

James nodded. “I’ve sent some stuff to them a couple times myself.” He stretched to glance at the form. “In fact, I have some work there right now.” He squinted. “Yep, I’ve seen that little devil before.”

Perry read, “Thanks for the read. ‘Breaking Point’ came close. Keep us in mind.”

The signature was essentially two blurred lines, like a segment from rocked seismograph paper, but it was above the editor’s name printed in blue ink, Times New Roman, twelve point: *Alexander Eddington*.

The two stood before the short wall of mail slots in the Evans University English Department office. The small boxes were arranged by rank from left to right, the professors first, then the associates, the assistants, and instructors. The adjunct faculty had a separate stack of smaller slots.

“You use the University address when you submit work?” James asked.

Perry turned to him, nodding. “Yeah, I figure it creates a better picture of me than Apartment 2-B, Sunrise Gardens, Spring Blossom Road.”

“I suppose it does,” James grinned.

“Any advantage you can get,” Perry offered as he slid two textbook ads back into his box in the middle of the assistant professors. As James turned to his own spot among the adjuncts, Perry stood back and looked across his colleagues’ names, not necessarily seeking anything specific, but certain he would find something to think about at lunch.

The first mailbox among the assistant professors belonged to Melody Anguish. Like Perry, she was completing her third year at Evans. She, too, had just gone through the annual Retention Review Meeting. Though he hadn’t spoken to her about it, Perry was sure she had done well, was solidly on track for tenure.

Melody Anguish came from the University of Iowa, where she had earned her Ph.D. two years after completing her M.F.A. in creative writing there. She had already distinguished herself as a poet during her assistantship, and she arrived at Evans with two chapbooks already published and a manuscript under review at The University of Pittsburgh Press. Eighteen months ago, *The Flower and the Brick* was released to strong reviews, including “This is one of the important new poets of this generation,” from highly regarded Horace Ambrose at Burley University.

That blurb and others had earned her an article in *Evans Day*, the University’s quarterly magazine. “A Rising Evans Star” was the title, and it included Melody Anguish’s dower and poetic pose glaring from the page. ‘I know stuff, and I’m more clever than you are’ seemed to be the message from those small but deep gray eyes.

“I’m more clever than you are,” Perry mouthed to himself, bobbing his head like a twelve year-old mimicking his sister.

There were several items filed in Dr. Anguish’s box, including the textbook ads that everyone else received. At the top, though, was a white envelope from The University of Georgia Press addressed to her, and not a label address either. ‘Christ,’ Perry thought, shaking his head, ‘and she’s not even all that good...’

Melody Anguish’s resume included three pieces appearing in *A Farther Place* among her publication credits.

James had three notes from students in the Comp I section he had just taught and a stack of class handouts back from the Copy Center. He had three classes at Evans, two Comp I and a Comp II, and two sections of Comp I at Central Community College about ten miles away.

For the 16 credit hours he was teaching, he would receive \$12,800 for the term. His wife was a social worker responsible for making home visits to clients. They had three children, two in school, one in day care, and they lived in a rented house on the south edge of town.

James had finished all the classes for a doctorate at Kent State, but he never got the dissertation completed. He had used A.B.D. after his name for the first three years teaching college classes, but he got tired of explaining what it meant to some or watching the ‘you poor thing’ looks on the faces of others.

As he gathered up his items, James noticed Perry scanning the mail slots. Perry was something of a hero to James and the other part-timers. He had been one of them, a ‘gypsy adjunct’ as he had called himself. But he finished his Ph.D. from Penn State, persisted in the classroom, establishing a reputation as a first-rate teacher, and, three years ago, crossed over into the promised land from the isle of the lost souls.

Perry earned \$56,000 for the regular academic year (teaching a total of eight classes) and \$1,400 a credit hour for up to six hours in the summer if he chose. He lived in an apartment near downtown and, as far as James knew, was dating two women presently.

“You know,” James said, “I like ‘Breaking Point.’ I think it’s a fine poem. I’m sure it will get published somewhere.”

Perry looked puzzled. “You’ve read it?”

“Sure, you showed it to me a couple weeks back.”

Perry didn’t seem convinced at first, then he nodded. “Oh yeah, I remember now, at lunch; I still had it in my folder.”

James nodded. “Yep. I think the central metaphor of hate as a coiled spring works very well. It effectively unifies the piece.”

“Thanks,” Perry said with a sincere grin. He had read several of James’ poems and thought they were excellent. He had a very unique sense of language and put words together in combinations, in phrases and lines, that were spare and fresh. Perry valued his opinion.

“I appreciate that, Jim, thanks. I wanted to establish that core comparison, extend it, and then break it just as the emotion would break the person.”

“And that’s exactly what you did.”

“And I wanted it to be slender and tight, trimmed. You know, like your stuff.”

James smiled.

“Not like some of the prosy crap you see so often today,” Perry’s voice rose. “Some of the stuff today looks and reads just like clipped up prose, randomly stopped off, no sense of line at all.”

“Words build to lines, and the lines build to poems, I’ve always believed,” James agreed.

“Some of that stuff, hell, some of the stuff in pubs like *A Farther Place* read like essays, or, at best, pre-writing for a poem,” Perry continued.

He stopped and turned to James, his voice quieting to a near whisper. “Have you ever read any of Melody Anguish’s stuff?” he asked.

“Some. I have *The Flower and the Brick* at my desk.

“Whaddya think? Pretty prosy, no?”

“She has some prosy pieces, yes, but some of her stuff is quite good. She writes like a painter.”

“You think so?”

“Yes, I do.”

“But she seems stuck on gender and politics, no?”

“Well, those are sure dominant themes, at least in that book. But I do think she’s got more going on than that.”

“Do you ever think that’s not her real name...I mean ‘Melody Anguish,’ really? It’s like she paid an ad firm for it, no?”

James laughed. “It is the perfect name for a writer isn’t it?”

Perry started walking again. He shook his head slowly. “My Retention Committee told me that I need to step up my publications if I wanted to stay on track.”

“You’ve published a fair amount, no?”

“About forty pieces in the last three years.”

“That’s not bad. I’m sure I haven’t got to twenty yet.”

“But most of my stuff is in some lightweight journals, you know, with 15%-20% acceptance rates.”

“Oh,” James nodded.

“That and the fact that my chapbook came from Starting Block Press has got Perisillious and the others pushing me for more and better.”

“Perisillious is on the committee?”

Perry shrugged his shoulders. “He’s chairing the committee.”

“You poor man,” James shook his head.

Louis Perisillious was the second-senior member of the Evans University Department of English faculty, arriving there forty-five years ago with a freshly-minted Princeton doctorate. He taught literary criticism, the Augustan Age, and the Age of Johnson, courses for which the audience, always only a niche group, had been progressively eroding, so that for the past several years he had been teaching classes with as few as five or six students.

He was an academician-scholar first, a writer of arcane books second, a departmental and university icon third, and a teacher fourth (maybe fifth or sixth). Dr. Perisillious still fancied himself to be an astute evaluator of young faculty talent, and basked in the aura of departmental sage, if not wizard. He felt that serving on RTP committees was among his highest duties, and he carried them out with prodigious zeal.

He also viewed himself as Melody Anguish’s faculty mentor. It was not at all clear that she shared that view of his role, but it had been observed by more than a few English faculty members that Melody Anguish’s few moments of coquettish behavior came when she was walking in the presence of Dr. Louis Persillious.

Perry winced as he thought of his meeting with the committee.

“I don’t envy you that whole business,” James offered. “What about your teaching? You must get among the best peer and student reviews in the department, no?”

“Yes, I suppose so. Actually, Jeff Gregory and I reviewed all of the numbers from last year’s student evaluations. I had the best student GPA—student evaluation ratio of any of the full-timers.”

“The...what?”

“Jeff and I calculated the difference between the cumulative class grades and the student evaluations, based on the view that some people hold that folks who get high student evaluations must get them because they hand out high grades.”

“Oh.”

“And for several profs, that seems to hold true, but my aggregate class GPA last year was 2.82, and my student evaluations 3.86.”

“That’s an interesting way to look at it, but I’m not surprised. I hear students talk about your classes all the time. That should sure count for something in RTP, no?”

“Well, to some people, perhaps. But Louis Persillious would prefer a national book award nomination and pieces in *Poetry*, *Prairie Schooner*, and *A Farther Place*, even if the author couldn’t teach a child how to eat ice cream.”

James nodded.

“So, it looks like I’ll have to win a couple of national chapbook contests and get at least one book published by a decent university press.

“And that could have started with “Breaking Point” in *A Farther Place*.

“Yeah, I suppose so.”

The two men were about to go their separate ways when Perry turned to James. “Jim, less than twenty pieces?”

James looked out past his friend to the windows beyond the hall. He drew a deep breath.

“Perry, I teach five composition classes both semesters and another four during the summer. That’s fourteen sections of about twenty students. They all write six essays a term, two drafts each. If you take teaching hours, prep hours, travel time, office hours, test and essay grading into account, I average 78 hours a week for the forty weeks I teach. Even if you stretched that total over a 52-week year, you get 60 hours a week. I barely have time to do what it is I do for the \$32,000 I make. I write when I can; it’s just that I can’t very often.”

Perry shook his head slowly, suddenly much less articulate than he usually fancied himself. He knew all of this only too well. “I know...I...”

“You knew Perry, but nature is kind; you forgot, a little like a mother in a second pregnancy.”

“But your work is so good, Jim. You need to write.”

James looked at his friend with tired eyes. “Perry, all of this started for me because I love to write, and I will always do it when I can. I may just never get to do it as much or as well as I might have, could have...”

“But...”

“Look, my mother could have run G.M., Perry, she was that smart, that savvy, but all she ever had the chance to run was Walter Rowe and the five kids he gave her.” James’ voice lowered. “Hell, she never attended a single college class, but I’ve never talked to a wiser person, not while I was in college, and not since I’ve been teaching. But she did what she did every day like it all mattered, like things depended on her doing what she did all the time. Did it bother her that she was smarter than most of the people who ran the things that shaped her world?” James looked away again. He shook his head.

“Well, if it did, she never squawked about it. Maybe it kept her up nights, what might have been, a different place and time, but she never said a syllable about it. She got up at 5:30 every morning and took up her day like it was the most important business in the world.”

“Because it was,” Perry heard himself say, and he looked at James like he was seeing him for the first time.

James looked at him and grinned. “So, hell, at least I get a little space to write, and don’t worry, Perry, I’ll make the most of it.” He looked at his watch. “Oops, I have to go. I’ve got a Comp I student coming in for a make-up exam.”

And with that, James Rowe walked off down the hall. Perry Jenkins watched as he turned into the large room filled with workstations and chairs where the adjunct faculty took up their posts. He drew a long breath then headed toward his own private office.

Three months later, a manila envelope appeared in the mail at James Rowe’s house on Wilson Road. He opened it and slid out the Spring Edition of *A Farther Place*. There on page twenty-eight was the poem “Entropy” by Melody Anguish.

On the facing page was “5:30 a.m.” by James Rowe.

The Anguish poem was a bit prosy, but it was filled with images that both disturbed and stirred him. He liked it.

He looked at “5:30 a.m.” once again and nodded with a small grin. He then closed the Journal and set it beside the stack of essays he was reviewing for the next day’s classes.

“I’ll read it when I’m done,” James said to himself, and he picked up the next essay from the pile.

TOM MONTAG

Father's Son

I am my father's son.
It cannot be otherwise.
Flat land, green fields, sun
at sunrise, at evening light.

The pang at seeing what
his blue eyes saw, doing
what his hands did. The chores
and fields. Hogs, cattle,

the corn, the beans. The blur
of our belonging.
His leaning his shoulder
forward, into the day,

pushing his way towards
these lives he's left for us.

JED MYERS

Love's Home

The body emits. I remember
my mother gathering up the sheets
as I stood by the bed, convinced

I was worse than useless. She hid
her grimace as best she could. Then
there was blood, red ooze at the knee

as I'd done it again, careless, her wince
as she daubed it, cotton wet with Bactine,

and the cries, so often
storming up from the lungs
to force open the grit-gate of teeth.

It's impossible not to emit,
not to press love to its tolerance
limit. How is it

I checked my gag each time as I mopped
my sick kid's chin and chest
again with the rinsed rag?

And wasn't there the elder who fell
as he sat where you'd removed the chair?
Scalp a shell cracked on the floor,

it dripped. You fled—didn't help.
And hadn't a matchbook flared
in the old man's palm, that weeping

crater in flesh a terror, a wish
he'd never touch you with that hand again?

Haven't we each more than once failed
love's test? And as I get old,
I'll emit more, not less—

the whimpers and fluids and breaths
we've dreamed we controlled while it was
chaos taking its time with us—

till it exceeds your threshold, I can't
wash or shower or wipe fresh
any part of myself enough, and you,

young lover, will have had enough,
like my mother, her hour

every two days or so in the chair
in the far corner of my father's last room,

the tumor inside his skull insisting
his body emit every last thing.

Or is there a turn? If you fall
first, is it in me to change
the soaked surgical dressing? Or you might

learn, by love's stubborn duration
alone, this concoction of scents,
this collage of the unhealable

wounds and their seepages, must prove
at last enduring. This is love's home.

JENNIFER NEELY

Unusual Pathos

There is an ancient cemetery, still in use.
Nearby, a beach named for it:
The Beach of the Dead
(As if they might be in need
Of a constitutional swim from time to time).

The oldest graves are at the back,
Nestled in the jungle.
Dust covers the silk of old offerings
And crumbling monuments collect trash,
Blown and deposited, as if further gifts.

In a mausoleum, spiders also find rest,
Old webs, abandoned, brittle and brown,
Still stretch the length of the tomb.
The paint peels from the walls, while
Outside, words are buffed from the stone by windblown sand,
The inhabitant's identity worn smooth.

By the newer graves,
The things often sacrificed for in life
Are offered as sacrifices:
Liquor, candy, cigarettes,
Oranges,
Action-flick video cassettes,
And photographs
That, come rainy season,
Will melt into their respective chemicals and paper
And either leach into the earth,
Or blow away in the wind.

The dense canopy casts shadows and
Without the sun to illuminate them,
The gifts look paltry.

JENNIFER NEELY

Hence, the candles,
Glamorously burning unguarded all day and all night
Until they too, ghost.

MICHAEL PHILLIPS

Elegy for a Coward

I saw them playing in the surf before the riptide got them.

It was mid-September. The start of the off-season. I was walking south of the vacation area, far from the boardwalk, hotels, and attractions. Here were private homes—some palatial but mostly rental cottages—fronting a narrow beach. The two kids were the first people I had encountered that afternoon. My thoughts were elsewhere, but the kids—brother and sister, I presumed—caught my attention because they looked too young to be playing in the ocean unsupervised. They were tossing a ball back and forth, seemingly unaware they were getting pulled out farther and farther. Although the waves weren't especially large, an offshore storm had the ocean riled up. I increased my pace, looking around for any parents to yank the kids out of the water. As I neared, I could see they were caught in a riptide. One minute they were tossing a ball and the next they were riding a conveyor belt out to sea. As a dye-in-the-wool coward I was an expert on everyday threats and dangers. In other words, I knew a lot about the things that can hurt us.

I snapped out of the paralysis of disbelief and yanked my sweatshirt off and ran into the surf. A wave knocked me back, but I recovered, lunged forward, and flopped headlong under the next breaker. I was barefooted but wearing jeans, which quickly absorbed gallons of water, making me as agile as an anvil. The rush of adrenaline, which buzzed from my fingertips to my toes, made every passing second seem like I was outside my body, a spectator rather than a participant.

It had been forty long years since I had won the county swim championship as a senior in high school, but I still had a strong stroke. I tried to keep the kids in sight, but I caught only intermittent glimpses of their heads beyond the rise and fall of the tide and through the salt spray in my eyes. My heart sank when I saw how far they had been pulled out. They weren't shouting or crying for help, which suggested they lacked the strength to do so. I hoped they weren't struggling against the riptide, which is a common and fatal mistake. About thirty yards out, I began making unlikely progress, and I realized I was caught in the same rip that had grabbed the kids.

When I reached them, they all but tried to climb on top of me. They grabbed and clawed at my arms, and it took all my strength to get them to stop panicking. The little girl even grabbed a fistful of my beard, and I had

to peel her hand off. I put an arm around each of their waists and pulled them close. They were warm and slippery against me. They were breathing hard and sort of whimpering and gasping, though we all lacked the air and strength to speak. We were spitting water and flailing our legs. I rolled onto my back, still clutching the kids, and began kicking parallel to shore, trying to escape the riptide. I kept peering to the beach, willing rescue to appear, but there was only the shore quivering through my stinging eyes one-hundred yards away.

The kids were shaking in my arms, clawing for a better grip on me and on each other. We were all kicking but making little progress, trying to keep our faces out of the water. I believed we were drowning, that these were our last moments. I even wondered what drowning would feel like and whether our bodies would wash up or drift out to sea.

I managed to shout to the kids to kick harder, and I heard the panic in my voice, a sort of shrill run of syllables, which frightened me. I realized that we were no longer moving away from the beach and that we had kicked ourselves out of the riptide. My arms and legs were dying, and I could sense the children weakening in my arms. The little girl, whose long hair draped her face like strands of seaweed, had her eyes shut. Her grip on me had slackened. She was the younger of the two, probably eight, and I knew she didn't have long. She let go a couple times, and I had to grab her arm and pull her back in. It was all I could do to keep from slipping beneath the surface.

My jeans were an anchor. I tried to wriggle out of them, but I couldn't spare the energy or let go of the kids to free my hands. A wave lifted us, and I turned my head back to the shore to gauge our distance. I saw no one, but I shouted anyway, instantly regretting wasting my breath. The wave pushed us a few feet closer to shore, which renewed my hope. I tightened my grip on the kids and kept kicking. I stared up at the gunmetal sky and found a tiny patch of blue between clouds that I used to mark our progress.

Another wave passed. Rather than pick us up, it tumbled over our heads but still provided some forward motion. I spat out a mouthful of water and tried to keep focused on the patch of blue overhead. Foam fizzled in my ears. Another wave surged through us, dunking us under its foaming torrent. I lost my grip on the kids, but we found each other again quickly. I didn't look back to check our progress. I just kept kicking and watched the blue hole in the sky until another wave came. After the next wave, I put my legs down to test the depth and felt sand on my toes. I kicked again and then found I could stand. The kids had begun crying from the pummeling waves and our repeated immersions, but I regarded their tears as a good sign that their strength was returning.

It took forever to fight our way back to the beach. We let the waves pick us up and push us in. Between waves, I planted my feet and tried to hold our ground against the ebb tide. When we made it all the way, I practically tossed the kids onto the beach and collapsed. The sand was warm on my face, and I felt like I was sinking into the ground. My legs and arms were useless. The kids were still crying and crawling along the sand. Strands of snot issued from their noses as they coughed and convulsed.

I heard a shrill cry, which was too strong and full to belong to one of the kids. I managed to lift my head high enough to see a woman running toward us. She was young, probably late twenties, and her face was gray and twisted with fright. She scooped up both kids with surprising strength, as if they were weightless. She was blustering now, as were the kids, and she kept repeating “Oh my god! Oh my god!” She thanked me and asked if I was ok. Still sprawled out on my stomach, I kind of waved at her to let her know I was alive. I still couldn’t muster the breath to speak. By the time I sat up, she was running off the beach. She held her daughter in her arms and clutched her son’s hand, practically dragging him behind her.

When I made it to my feet I dry-heaved, which left a brackish taste in my mouth. I shivered in the wind and instantly felt ridiculous standing there alone and covered with sand from head to foot in my undershirt and jeans, which sagged off my hips. My body refused to move, as if I were waiting for something else to happen or for someone to excuse me and tell me I could go now. I managed one step and then another and began the long walk back to my rental cottage.

I peeled off my wet and sandy clothes on the deck and got in the shower. I began to shake all over, as if wriggling out of old skin. I hadn’t cried in maybe fifteen years after my lab died, but it was like something had broken loose inside me and I had to expel it.

I didn’t have much of an appetite, but I forced down a turkey sandwich and settled on the deck with a double bourbon. In the right proportion, alcohol has always provided me an adequate counter balance to my proclivity to brood, but too much has the opposite effect. I promised myself I’d limit my alcohol intake that night to two doubles to prevent becoming overwrought about the day’s events, but I knew it was inevitable.

The elevated deck offered a view of the dunes and beyond to the beach and ocean. I watched the light change from yellow to pink and then fade altogether until full dark came on. It was a warm evening, but without a trace of humidity.

I was in the middle of a two-week rental of the fully furnished cottage, which was in serious need of updating. I read, fished, walked the beach, and generally savored my time away from my apartment and job. When you're 58 and have no wife or kids, this is what vacation looks like. I always went in mid-September because the weather is still good, the rates are cheaper, and fewer people are around.

What I had done that day was so unlike me, so far beyond my typical behavior, that I felt completely thrown out of orbit. I had spent my life convinced of my cowardice. I had believed I was incapable of any heroic action. I just didn't have it in me. Could I have been wrong? I had to wonder whether I had always been capable of this or whether I changed somewhere along the line. I couldn't understand why such a transformative experience should happen so late in my life. Why couldn't this have happened in my teens or twenties so I could've lived my life feeling good about myself? It might've allowed me to build a sturdier platform on which to construct my life. Now I was nearly sixty and had wasted so much time with a faulty notion of myself.

It's hard to admit cowardice. I actually laughed out loud to think how preposterous it was to be dishonest with myself, even though I had nothing to lose by admitting the truth. Movies, especially the Westerns I grew up loving, have taught us cowardice is the most disgraceful of character flaws. It wasn't one act of cowardice that marked me a coward, but an accumulation. I had lived my life shying away from any threat—real or perceived—in whatever form it assumed.

My litany of cowardly acts is probably pretty ordinary: You fall prey to a bully as a kid and carry that feeling of shame and weakness for the rest of your life. Then as a teen you display the garden-variety cowardice on the ball field, actually pleading the ball doesn't come to you. You dislike yourself until you decide sports aren't your thing. Then in college you decide your sensitive nature and above-average intelligence are better suited to poetry than sports. You work in secret, burning with a slow fuse of desire, with photos of Whitman and W.H. Auden on your dorm room wall. Your first workshop is a nightmare when you see how superior others' work is to yours, followed by the acute pain of critique. So you major in marketing instead, justifying the concession in that it will appease your practical father. You continue to write in secret but share your work with no one. You submit a few poems for publication, suffer over the rejections, and finally give up. After college you fall in love, but you're afraid to commit, or you wait too long to decide to commit and by then you've lost her. Then you marry the next girl who comes along before she has a chance to leave, but you divorce

in three years. So you focus on work and a career. You move up gradually and get comfortable in your position. You barely notice the years streaming by. From time to time you consider applying for another job, one more commensurate with your talents, but why rock the boat? At some point you look back over your life and decide to accept your faults and failures. After all, what choice is there? You accept that, at our core, we remain the little boy on the ball field hoping to be spared shame and humiliation. No single act is utterly contemptible, so you manage to live with yourself. Then one day while strolling the beach, you save two children from certain death and nearly drown in the process and are no longer the man you thought you were. You have to re-evaluate your whole life through this new lens. How do you account for an action a million miles removed from your normal behavior? It's jarring. And that's why I broke down.

I understood that a single action—however extraordinary—can't redefine a life or undo failures, which are indelible. I wasn't so delusional. But my regrets now seemed forgivable somehow, as if the missteps of an unformed man. Most people knocking on the door of sixty figure they've reached their peak—however lofty or modest—and that only further decay awaits. As adults we are no longer the pliant beings we are in youth, when one's identity can change monthly. A man is nearer a cable car than a bird, as far as freedom of movement goes, I thought. So maybe I couldn't become a new person, but perhaps I could choose to view myself differently.

Such contemplation made me return to the kitchen to pour another drink. I came back outside and listened to the roar of the surf. The moon had swung into view, cutting a silver swathe up the beach that splashed across the dunes. As I concentrated on the surf and smelled the salt on the air, I imagined I could taste again the brackish water in my mouth. My limbs were still heavy with exhaustion, and I wondered how the kids were doing. I wondered what their names were and why their parents had left them unsupervised in a rough ocean. It made me angry. I never had kids, but if I did I'd certainly keep a better eye on them. I thought about how the event would color their lives, how it would loiter in their memories. They were young, but I doubted they'd ever forget it. Would it make them brave or fearful adults? It was a choice they'd have to make for themselves.

Aging involves accepting by slow degrees the condition of our character and life. The dreams and ambitions of youth give way to a humble resolve to simply make the most of the time left—in other words, to not make too big a mess of the remaining years. Old men, we're told, should know themselves. So where did this leave me? It was likely too late to find and marry a true love or embark on a life of adventure, but I had the urge to

hatch plans. I was overcome by the impulse to see what else I could do, to find my limit. If you can almost drown one day while strolling the beach, why the hell not do what you want? And what did I want to do? I hadn't the slightest notion. But I was fifty-eight, I reasoned, not ninety-eight, and in reasonably good health. The possibilities were infinite, if a bit hard to see.

I fixed another drink—ignoring my dictum to keep to two— and thought again of the kids and the look on their faces when I pulled them into my arms. I heard again their gasps and whimpers as we floundered so far from the beach. I don't know if they had a concept of death, but they understood fear; they fathomed the desperateness of the situation. That was evident on their faces and in their frantic clutching.

Looking back, there was something less than human about us in those moments. We were snarling, spitting beasts driven only by the instinct to keep breathing. At the same time, the ordeal contained a measure of grace—a collision of the internal and external, of the infinite and the present, where all is indistinguishable and inseparable. That's my clumsy definition of grace anyway. It was simultaneously awful and beautiful.

I wondered if the children would remember me throughout their lives. I supposed they would. It made me feel responsible for them, that their lives would forever be linked to my own, that I had some fatherly stake in their futures. I wanted the world to see me as I hoped they did, to judge me on that one act. Of course, it was a vain hope for a foolish old man, brought on by shot nerves, whiskey, and moonlight. But I had grown old with the wrong impression of myself, and I wanted the best years back, those middle decades of power and possibility. But the knowledge that I couldn't get a single second back wouldn't deter me from seizing the final quarter of my life. I had to laugh at the thought of myself as another fifty-something bozo in the sad throes of a mid-life crisis. Is there anything more unattractive? No matter, I thought; it was high time I dismantled my remaining ego anyway.

I finished my drink, promised myself I'd call it quits, then fixed another. I went inside, fed up with atoning for my own nature and regrets and determined to allow this day's deed to define whatever time I had left. It was a strange resolve. I guess the best way to describe it would be to say I felt more fully in possession of my life. Previously, my life was a remote object fit only for examination and study, like a rare bird seen through an ornithologist's field glasses. I'd become more involved in my day-to-day existence on earth. The "how" would have to come later.

I used the bathroom and though I normally avoided the mirror I stopped and took a long look. I almost expected to see a younger face. I stroked my chin and combed my fingers through my salt-and-pepper beard.

On a whim, I took out my disposable razor that I used for touch-ups, lathered up with soap, and painstakingly shaved the whole thing off. After, I stood at the mirror five full minutes marveling at my smooth face, which I hadn't seen clean-shaven in twenty years.

Before crawling into bed that night, I opened all the windows and the sliding-glass door onto the deck to allow the sea air to fill the room while I slept. My flesh still buzzed. The room seemed to expand and contract when I closed my eyes. For the first time in a long time, I felt on the verge of something, like I was teetering on the cliff's edge of change and had only to let go. I stroked my smooth chin and smiled to myself in the dark.

SHANNON LEIGH O'NEIL

Salvage

Crashed ashore out of nowhere, the rudder
corroded, devoured by rust
broken from an ancient sunken vessel,
rose, hurled over wave after wave
then surfaced here, on spume and barren shells.

Retrieved in a grief-surge, tremors of joy
freed from clinging sand, the relic—
I pore over every battered angle,
my fitful recall of that wreck
as uneven as the ocean's surface:

Blind drunk at her wheel, eyes cast to blurred stars
no maps, charts, azimuth circle;
two swordfish caught, harpooned, glinting silver
by the spirit lamp, costly freight,
with blood of a fish heart pooled on the scales.

I found the tremulous flare of Venus
before shocks of lightning: cloudburst—
a disproportion of water to air
booming blasts against straining hull;
in the Devil's Triangle, all was lost.

There will be no letting go, to the sea
treasured debris, full keel reclaimed;
I cleave to her scrap like a trove of gold
as our last breathing survivor,
the wasted pilot who clambered to land.

RON McFARLAND

War Games

For a year or two when I was maybe ten and my brother Tommy was eight, we allowed Ginger, the little girl from next door, into our war games. Even then, sixty years ago, I *think* I remember thinking (can't be sure), so I think I remember thinking that Ginger did not realize how exceptional was her involvement in these wars, mostly World War Two or the Civil War. War, we guys agreed, was a man's game. Girls were *strengstens verboden* in combat zones and were of course denied *Eintritt* into the crate-roofed foxhole that constituted HQ of The Armed Forces Club, coveted membership in which was limited to my brother and me, Homer Dean (when he wasn't being a jerk, which wasn't very often), Albert Larue "Poochie Junior" Dixon, III, and sometimes Larry Williams, from down the street, although his mother disapproved.

Al Dixon's father had served as a Chief Petty Officer (CPO) in the Navy, and his nickname had been "Poochie," though we didn't quite know what to make of that. Presumably, he was somehow dog-like in his demeanor. Anyway, although he was a good pal, Al was hard to work into our war-play, as he always wanted to be a Navy man, and we were more inclined toward infantry and artillery. In our collective imagination, a baseball bat could be a cannon or a mortar or a bazooka, but we found it hard to think of our clubhouse as a battleship or of the surrounding field of palmetto and scrub oak as the sea, even though the Atlantic Ocean lay just ten miles east. We often assigned Al to a Seabee unit, as a Construction Battalion sailor, who would leap from his D7 bulldozer firing his M-1 carbine into the face of a Jap banzai attack. This action gained credibility thanks to a movie we'd all seen: John Wayne in *The Fighting Seabees*.

Back to Ginger, though, whose credibility in our play was trickier to establish, yet somehow necessary, at least to me. We could discover no role for her other than combat nurse, but how could she not feel diminished by being deprived the opportunity to shoot, stab, or bludgeon the enemy? Tommy and I felt a little better about her noncombatant role because our father had served briefly as a medic in an anti-aircraft battery in Washington, DC. One of our favorite snapshots showed him bandaging a soldier's head (it was just a drill—"fortunate," Dad maintained, for the soldier in question). We also had access to one of Dad's clippings that showed where guys from

his AA battery decorated the frieze on the Lincoln Monument with a few .50 caliber rounds. Dad claimed he wasn't on duty at the time. We had an old Boy Scout first aid kit that had belonged to our uncles, Jim and Dick, who'd enlisted in the Air Force. Jim served as a radioman on B-29s flying out of Okinawa over North Korea, but the Korean War was not part of our play. Maybe it was too close. Or maybe we couldn't stretch our imaginations to fabricate an F-86 Sabre jet or a B-29 bomber any more than we could a cruiser or a battleship.

So anyway, Ginger became our nurse, our battlefield nurse. Al complained once or twice, but Tommy didn't care one way or the other. He and Al were the same age. Wearing Dad's captain's bars ("railroad tracks," he called them), I outranked them, but I knew better than to overstep my authority. Tommy and Al were noncoms of varying ranks. We had a pretty good army patch collection our uncles had saved up at the end of WW2, so we could pin on the stripes of a corporal or a buck sergeant along with the heraldry for any number of divisions or corps. Of course "Poochie Junior" wore his father's CPO stripes, but although I thought they looked out of place in our theater of action, I never said anything so as not to hurt his feelings. Our Uncle Stony had served in the 10th Armored, so that patch proved popular enough to be a bone of contention from time to time, although the tank destroyer patch, which features a panther whose jaws are crushing a Nazi tank, was also a favorite. We uniformed ourselves in various additional bits of war surplus regalia: pistol belts, canteens, helmet liners or garrison caps. Our weaponry rarely measured up to our needs, but we made do, concocting machine guns and rifles or pistols from scraps of lumber. Pine cones, obviously, served as hand grenades.

The enemy had to be imagined, but that proved feasible, whereas imagining a plane or a ship did not. We were always gravely outnumbered. The enemy often overran our position and we had to resort to fixed bayonets and hand-to-hand combat. Under these circumstances, our casualties were high. A skilled nurse, attentive and caring, and very cute, Ginger provided the medical assistance we so desperately needed. I found myself getting wounded quite often.

One afternoon under the blazing sun of Guadalcanal, battling jungle-rot and surrounded by merciless hordes of Japs—or maybe it was Nips—who screamed "Yankee Malines, you die!" I was seriously wounded. A grenade fell into our foxhole, and I bravely threw myself onto it, slamming my helmet over the thing before it exploded. I would survive, thanks to my thoughtful decision to deploy my helmet in this fashion (I'd seen this in an issue of *Star-Spangled War Stories*), but I was in bad shape. Nurse Ginger

came to my side and cradled my sweaty head in her lap. Blood oozed from the corner of my mouth in the form of saliva. This may or may not have imitated the oozing from the wounded Private Johnny “Chicken” Anderson in *Guadalcanal Diary*, but certainly I had seen plenty of blood oozing from the mouths of wounded Hollywood soldiers in various wars.

Ginger popped open her first aid kit and dabbed at my lips with a Kleenex. “This looks bad,” she said grimly, but sympathetically.

“I know,” I whispered, my teeth clenched. I tightened my hand over the wound in my side and imagined blood seeping between my fingers.

“Hold on,” she whispered. “Stay with me, soldier.”

I groaned just a little.

“This is going to hurt,” she said as she lifted my t-shirt. I winced against the pain I knew I must have been feeling. Al and Tommy sat apart in respectful silence, passing the canteen back and forth and pretending to smoke cigarettes. Candy cigarettes dangled from their manly lips—Lucky Strikes. Ginger pulled a butter knife from her kit and pressed it lightly in the vicinity of my wound. I gritted my teeth and writhed just a little.

“I’ve got to get these grenade fragments out of there or...” she paused. “Um.”

“I’ll get an infection?” I muttered helpfully.

“Yeah,” she said, “or maybe you’ll bleed to death from a cut artery!”

It struck me that Ginger seemed a bit too pleased with her dire diagnosis. “It could just be a flesh wound,” I suggested. “I could be back in action in just a couple days and rejoin my unit.”

“Not likely,” she said, her voice taut. “I’ll do what I can. You need to see a doctor. They need to get you back to the hospital. Quick.” She closed her clear blue eyes, thinking what to say next. “You’re going to be okay,” she whispered in that tone of voice that means you aren’t going to be okay at all. “I’ll take care of you, I promise.”

Then you know what she did. She lowered her pretty face and kissed me right on the lips. I felt the breath come right out of me.

Years later I would discover how Hemingway had nailed it in *A Farewell to Arms*: “I tried to breathe but the breath would not come and I felt myself rush bodily out of myself and out and out and all the time bodily in the wind. I went out swiftly, all of myself, and I knew I was dead and that it had all been a mistake to think you just died. I breathed and I was back.” That’s how Hem put it when Lieutenant Frederic Henry got hit by a mortar, which is how Hemingway himself said it felt when he got hit in World War One in Italy, and which is just how I felt, sort of, when Nurse Ginger kissed me that sultry Florida afternoon as imaginary bullets from a Nambu Type 96

Light Machine Gun whizzed overhead and Tommy and Al hit the dirt and began to return fire, their voices rattling with M-1 blams and the staccato of a .30 caliber air-cooled Browning machine gun.

I was not a precocious boy, and at age ten-and-a-half I had no big brother to fill my head with exotic or erotic notions about girls. I hadn't a clue. But thanks to the movies, I did know a few things about romantic love, particularly in wartime, so I knew this feeling I had would not last, and I knew it would end hard for both of us. Ginger would probably be left at a train station weeping, and I would most likely be killed on Omaha Beach or the Battle of the Bulge, where my uncle had been wounded, or on bloody Tarawa.

Years later, when I encountered *A Farewell to Arms* in a college class and learned about Lieutenant Henry's great amour with nurse Catherine Barkley, and about Hem's ill-fated affair with nurse Agnes Von Kurowsky, I felt that I had been there.

ALICE OSBORN

My Lost Son: Fastnet Race 1979

A weatherman declares on the telly, “They’re in for it.”
Stanley tells me not to worry about Nick,
but he knows better. Our black cat Tom is missing
whilst our youngest is one of the *Grimalkin’s* six crew,
racing over 600 miles. At 15 Nick suffered a brain hemorrhage
leaving him partially paralyzed—he’s technically an epileptic.
If the boat’s turned over, how can
he take his medication every four hours?

During the war we waited by the radio
to find out if our cousins died in an air raid,
and now we do the same this morning;
so many terrible reports of lost boats and men.
Stanley sometimes holds my hand or escapes
to his study. I hear him cry by the dusty lamp.
Noontime, we learn three *Grimalkin* men
turned up in a life raft—but no Nick.
Tom the cat’s still missing even though I leave
three bowls of tuna out by the front step.

At 9:30, the phone rings—Nick got lifted off
Grimalkin and we’ll visit him
tomorrow at Treliske Hospital.
Goodness, Tom—glad you’re back with us too.

My son tells me over tea and biscuits
his crewmates decide to abandon ship
after their skipper’s harness is snipped
and he drifts away. More capsizes and wreckage.
Buttons in the wash, Nick and the first mate were left for dead.
Dammit, how much time does it take to check a pulse?
Even I know not to ever abandon your ship!

After holding Gerry as he died of hypothermia,
Nick ate his medicine with diesel-smelling milk.

Bailing and bailing for twenty hours.
He said he heard the ghost of Winston Churchill screaming,
“When you’re going through hell, keep going!”
Perhaps it’s true since Churchill called him “Nicholas”
and nobody does that.

No broken left leg,
but Nick will be broken for a long time.

RICHARD KING PERKINS II

Pith and Gull

Into the pale straw of autumn I ask you to go—
the sky strained with pith and gull
the earth wearing thin, streaked in soft chamois.

Our conversation spills upon grizzled light;
simple confessions of twigs and soul,
the deconstruction of handholding toward disdain.

Bodies walk nearly together, but the canine-sharpness
of our devotion lies empty as harvested grassland
taken by the swoop of mistrals, wrinkled blue.

The unmoving car has been parked in the driveway
for more than a year, its future blank and deflated,
dreaming of days it jumped canals and hawthorn trees.

Even this irony eludes us; a season buried in cold,
thinking the return of robins and sharp shadows will
change anything; that crocuses ignite life in themselves.

ANNE M. RASHID

Near to Death

Every time I walk by the bend in the road
by the Wildwood trails parking lot,
I remember my mom stopping the car
in a downpour to bury the dead dog
that looked even more forlorn in the heavy rain.
I was too squeamish and saddened to help her.
It wasn't our dog or any dog we knew,
but I had trouble getting that near to death.

This was only a few years before I lost her,
too, only forty, cancer stole her away.
We buried her in an old Detroit cemetery
she used to love to walk in between Mt. Eliot
and Lafayette, across from MLK, Jr. high school,
in earshot of marching band practice.
Sometimes we'd see hawks circling
near her maple, sometimes robins
and swallows darting between headstones.

She had the strength to bury
the dead, even in the harshest conditions—
shovel, mud, puddles.
The day we buried her was almost too pretty:
sun filtering through cirrus clouds.
I kept worrying about her
not having shoes in Heaven,
being barefoot in the clouds.

It is still hard for me to bury the dead.
My kitten is learning to hunt,
is starting to bring me what he finds.
My hands still shake, I feel queasy,
wish for the resilience and strong stomach
of my mother, who knew what to do,
who always knew what was right.

HOLLY MORSE-ELLINGTON

What the Mechanic's Wife Salvaged

Russell was more ghost than grandpa. I developed a closer relationship to the family lore haunting him than I developed with him. He lived in Ohio, far away enough from my hometown in Kentucky, but he also remained just out of reach on the rare occasions we drove up to visit. Grandpa Russell Myers had a red, bulbous nose that I feared with fascination. "Quit your staring!" Mom would say, lips clamped over an impolite volume like a purse stuffed with old receipts and snagged panty hose. I'd studied noses from an early age. Mine was somewhat aquiline. Different from other girls with noses turned up. Fair and freckled, but not dainty. I'd never seen a veined and blistered nose like Grandpa's. I imagined pinching it. How it might squish like a clown's nose. Then pop back in shape once I let go. *Boing*. I kept my distance, though. I was too young to connect this nose to that of an alcoholic. I was, however, plenty familiar with the quick temper. The bounce from good mood to bad.

Dad and his ten siblings issued insults upon my grandpa like merit badges. Honorable Hotheaded Hillbilly. Prized Piss-Poor Boy of Podunk. Distinguished Drunken Wanderer. Grandpa was no hero, but they were sensitive to a heroic quality in the struggle against self and situation. Grandpa had been one of seven born to a German immigrant father and a Cherokee mother near the unincorporated town of Kincaid, West Virginia. To this day no leader has stepped forward to deem this town worth incorporating. What little there once was is fading from the landscape. The coal mines are bare and gone. Dud Nutters' General Store is boarded up with graffiti. Their childhood home lingers only on the imagination, having collapsed and rotted into the hillside just above the railroad tracks. Only those tracks—and a cemetery resting two separate families of Myers between wrought iron fences—survive.

Dad and his siblings foraged for flecks of coal along those tracks. Passing trains rattled their windows and shook bits of black cargo loose on their front yard. Grandma cooked on the fragments they emptied from their pockets. Grandpa'd come home from the tunnels and demand, "Where's the grub? Get it on the board." And Grandma would get supper on the table. A meal warmed by shards from the mine Grandpa dreamed of leaving behind. Like a train, without effort. He found other ways to escape. He played his guitar and sang on a local radio station. Envisioned himself live

at the Grand Ole Opry. Rumor traveled that his wife, born Edith Tucker, was the granddaughter of an infamous cuss who inspired the ballad, “Old Dan Tucker.” *Tucker was a hardened sinner, He nebber said his grace at dinner; De ole sow squeel, de pigs did squall, He ‘hole hog wid de tail and all.* Grandpa played up to it just in case Nashville came calling. He directed home movies. Elevated his accent from hick to haughty, coining the terms “camery” and “filim” for his camera and film. Just in case Hollywood came knocking. He’d skip out on family and town for months. Maybe he needed to get out there. Get discovered. Or get lost. Dad and his siblings never knew his whereabouts. If Grandma did, she never spoke of it. She bared it alone. She bore one of their last children alone while Grandpa was off wandering. Grandma sent her two oldest girls down the hill for the midwife. They played the piano in the church instead. “If there’s no midwife, there’ll be no baby.” So they thought. Grandma had done enough yelling alone in delivery to yell at the girls when they came home, empty handed but for the sticky residue of ice cream.

Grandpa turned up one day with a truck full of junkyard parts. Metal he’d scraped from heaps off of backroads and backyards. Souvenirs with a purpose. His oldest sons needed a car. One man’s junk is another man’s treasure they say. One train’s loss is another family’s fortune.

Trains and cars and parts fueled their dreams of moving on. Grandpa’s oldest daughter accepted the first proposal, partly ‘cause it meant leaving West Virginia. Grandpa packed up everyone to accompany his eldest girl, a trousseau of siblings bound for Akron, Ohio. Where tire factories replaced coal mines. His eldest sons, bullied in Akron as inbred, half-bred outcasts, fist and knuckled through adolescence. It was basic training for Vietnam. An excuse to fight and wander, harder and farther than Grandpa. Like the merit badges they pinned on Grandpa Myers, there was something heroic in a struggle against selves and situations, even bad ones. If for no other reason than to make the government foot the bill for college.

My dad likes to reflect on his childhood in the hills, saying, “We were too poor to afford sunshine.” He bought railroad lanterns at yard sales and flea markets. “Let’s the light in,” he’d say. He was always on the lookout for lanterns built with red glass instead of clear. I observed him on the hunt and watched the way his eyes lit up when he’d discover one, muted and dusty and surrounded by costume jewelry. It was as if he’d spotted a whole piece of coal instead of a shard. I was careful not to disturb their place in our home when I reached for a book off the shelf. I read the stories of adventurers and dreamers bookended between the lanterns. Artifacts that stood in for Grandpa and the distance between us.

* * *

I was a sophomore at Indiana University, scrambling to make time for a thirty-page paper on *Émile*. I hadn't even finished reading it. It was Thanksgiving weekend. I doubted how I was going to find the time to drive the four hours home to Kentucky for the holiday and write a thesis about *Émile's* relevance to modern education and the Montessori method of teaching. I threw a couple of sweaters into a bag. I'd make do without whatever I forgot to pack. Dad had fought a war to earn his education. I could manage a few family dinners.

Then Dad called.

"Grandpa died this morning," he said. Sadness softened his gruff coach's voice. He choked back tears as he continued. "I'm driving to Akron for the funeral. Want me to pick you up?"

I remained quiet, shaking, but quiet. It was the first time I heard him refer to his father as my grandpa. The nasal quality of *pa* rang in my ears like a crow cawing on a wire. Unnatural and forced. Before I could speak Dad gave me an out.

"Your mom's staying home."

"I don't see how I can make it," I said, shoving books and papers into my backpack. "I shouldn't even be going home what with this paper. It's due Monday. The day after a holiday weekend." I shoved more papers with incomplete thoughts into my bag. "Can you believe the nerve of this professor?"

"Do what you need to do, girl. We'll understand."

A small funeral service was scheduled for Black Friday in Akron. I drove home to Kentucky instead. With Mom and I in Kentucky and Dad in Ohio, we were scattered across the southern Midwest like grain across the fields. What grew were buried tensions at home.

Within hours of being back home I shut myself inside my old bedroom. Mom had swapped out my bedspread, a Van Gogh swirl of sun and sky, for a neutral comforter. It was out of place. She'd yet to repaint the walls. The beige cover fought with the psychedelic splotches of yellows. Circles of color I'd stamped on with a crinkled garbage bag instead of a brush. My mind whirled like the pattern, not knowing where to begin with thirty pages about *Émile*. I was in the right place for help when it came to opinions about the education system. Mom had taught every age group for as many years as my paper had to be long. But Mom was having company over for dinner.

"Do you really need to vacuum right now?" I yelled from my bedroom door. "I mean, really?" I pointed to the carpet outside my door where she stood as if to say, "Who's going to come upstairs?"

“We’re all overwhelmed,” Mom said with her signature reserve. “We can’t tiptoe around because you waited ‘til the last minute.”

I pursed my jaw taught as a high-tension wire. Aware that the weight of one more word would snap this hold over my temper.

“We’ll have supper in a few hours,” she continued. “I expect you’ll put a smile on by then.”

I hurled my copy of *Émile* against the wall. It smacked dead center into one of the yellow swirls of peace, love, and understanding. *Thud*.

Mom turned off the vacuum. She breathed. And then opened up. “You are such a Myers.”

I grabbed my unpacked duffel bag at the foot of the bed. I crammed papers into my backpack and slung both bags over my shoulder. Mom pulled the vacuum aside as I stamped down the stairs and out the door. I was loading the car when she joined me in the driveway.

“Your tags are expired,” she said handing me the keys to her new Infiniti.

The sun was setting. The amber hue of the late afternoon light shimmered against the opalescent white of her car. She’d taught summer school to be able to splurge.

“You ever seen such a color for a car?” she’d asked me. “It’s like a pearl.”

I moved bags from my car to hers. While she wasn’t looking, while she’d gone back into the house, I allowed myself to cry. I began to form a thesis about *Émile*. The book’s model student was a joke. He had no temperament. He had no obstacles. He was a character, flat.

I went back inside to say goodbye. Mom stood in the kitchen, reaching in and out of the refrigerator. “Here,” she said, “help me with these.”

We grabbed Tupperware bowls of stuffing, green beans, turkey, cranberry salad and a loaf of sourdough bread wrapped in foil.

“A little carryout for you,” she said with a smile and wink.

“I just have to get through this week, Mom.”

“I know, baby. I know.” Her look, though soft, said otherwise.

“Are you sure about this?” I asked, jingling her car keys.

She nodded. We hugged.

“Play some good music to keep you awake,” Mom said. “Roll the windows down for some fresh air too.”

“I will.” I smiled as tears fell. “I’ll call when I get there.” I wouldn’t be back to my apartment, and a phone, for four hours.

I buckled in. I drove from Kentucky to Indiana, awake with hunger and anger. I sustained myself on insults along the dark highway. Selfish

Student. Distant Daughter. Hotheaded Hillbilly. I hit my fists against the steering wheel.

An hour outside of Bloomington, Indiana, I turned off the major interstate and onto the state road toward campus. I steered right and left along the S-curves of southern Indiana. Winded the two-lane road that cuts between cornfields and the occasional house. The headlights on Mom's car beamed through this mining tunnel of a backroad. The radio hummed as white noise to drown out our fight that replayed in my head. I whispered to the dark road as if she could send a message to my mother. *I'll patch things up over Christmas. I promise.*

I crested a hill at 50 mph. The high beams cast a glow on the horizon. Faint outlines of fences divided farmland. The hood of Mom's Infiniti dipped down the hill. A blur of browns and blacks loomed feet from my windshield. I slammed on the breaks. Mom's car heaved forward. It took seconds for the furry mass hulking across the lane to come into focus. And cave through the windshield. The seatbelt constricted around my torso. The car skid. It crashed into a fence and rolled sideways into the ditch. I sat strapped, nose-to-nose with the busted and bloody windshield. Glass shards pocked my face like a diamond mine. Larger chunks of glass fragments sparkled against the black leather seats. Thanksgiving dinner had burst on impact, littering the backseat in shredded turkey meat and cranberry sauce.

I thrust my shoulder against the car door and squeezed my body out, falling into the ditch. I stumbled into the road. A buffalo lay on its side. Moans lifted like steam off the road. I couldn't tell if they belonged to the buffalo or to me. I fumbled catty-corner across the street toward an unlit farmhouse. It was the type of house to have a wrap-around porch and wide horizontal planking. The type of house to have a screened door open to cool night air and cricket chirps to lull a family to sleep. I stood at the front door, debating whether to disturb this family peace I created. Then I knocked. Then I banged. Then I plead, "Help. Help." I banged harder. "Please, I need help." No one answered. It's possible my knuckles never touched the door. It's possible my voice never rose from my throat. Maybe I'd clamped my lips like my mother's, like a purse.

I plopped down in the yard and stared across the field. I pulled stalks of grass from the dirt and bundled them in my fists. Émile strolled fields, collecting flowers and bugs to examine. The student as teacher. The environment as classroom. I squinted and opened my eyes until they adjusted to the coal-black night. Until they adjusted to the scene before me. The shimmer of bent car metal in the moonlight. The glisten of crimson on the pavement.

Flashing lights and sirens broke the silence. Police cars and ambulances pulled into the driveway. A semi had jackknifed right in front of me. I hadn't noticed. Not as it built momentum down the hill. Not as it screeched to stop. Not as it spun across the wreckage of car and buffalo.

Paramedics squatted beside me in the grass.

"What's your name, Miss?" one of them asked. "Miss, can you tell us your name?"

"I have to write a paper," I said.

Another medic scanned a flashlight over my body. "Can you tell me where you feel any pain?" she asked.

"I really have to get back. I'm fine."

Two men in uniforms rolled a backboard and stretcher from the ambulance. The woman kneeling in front of me said, "I need you to understand the seriousness of your situation."

A shot rang out. The buffalo had been gasping his last breaths. The sheriff put one bullet into its chest.

"Miss we're taking you to the hospital," the medic was saying, "you need to go to the hospital."

"I'm fine, I promise," I said.

Her patience gave. "I shouldn't be telling you this," she said, "but the sheriff asked where your body was." The team of medics stabilized my head and neck onto the backboard and loaded me into the ambulance.

One of the EMT's monitored my vitals as we rode to the hospital.

"Is there someone I can call for you?" he offered, opening a bag with a phone. I didn't know how to reach my dad in Akron. I struggled to remember my mom's number. He tried several variations before one worked. He handed me the ambulance's phone. "It's ringing."

"Hi Mom," I said, attempting a cheerful tone.

"Did you make it back okay? Not too tired?" she asked.

"Well, not quite." I laughed. "I hit a buffalo."

Mom interpreted the news as a punch line.

"Ahh, did the buffalo forget to look both ways before crossing?" she asked.

The EMT grabbed the phone from my hand. He convinced Mom that this wasn't a joke. That she should meet us at the hospital as soon as possible. As I lay in the hospital, waiting for the results from CT scans and X-rays, Mom drove up from Kentucky and Dad drove down from Ohio. Mom arrived first, having driven in the early morning hours, in my car with expired tags. The hospital staff, satisfied that I was only scratched and shocked, released me to go home and rest.

“I’m sorry,” I said to Mom as she helped me out of the wheelchair and into my car.

“I know,” she said. “I know.”

Mom was making coffee in my apartment and searching through empty cabinets when Dad came in. He’d driven across three states in three days, buried his father, and answered that dreaded midnight call about his daughter. He’d stopped by the garage where they’d towed the car. He stood in my den, cheeks puffy and eyes swollen. He’d seen what I couldn’t. What I still couldn’t look at weeks later in the photographs. The once-new car crumpled on the mechanic’s lot. The mold of the buffalo’s body pressed into the hood. Tufts of coarse, chestnut-colored fur matted into cracks of metal and windshield. Blood smattered across the pearl-white paint. Flecks of glass on the black leather driver’s seat.

I stepped away from the computer screen and the half page of words I’d typed. Dad set down a plastic bag and wrapped his arms around me.

“It’s good to see you, baby,” he said.

He picked up the bag. The mechanic’s wife helped take inventory of cars hauled in. She’d gathered what wrapped leftovers she could salvage from the car. She stored them in her refrigerator over night. It was no feast. But it was more than we had.

“She wanted us to have something to eat,” Dad said.

Mom sliced the sourdough bread. I joined Dad on the couch, resting my head on his shoulders. He dabbed at his almond-shaped eyes with a handkerchief. Strangers identified us as father and daughter by these eyes. I closed mine. The glimpse of a beast, a legend broken free. Splayed and bleeding on the road. The image projected on my lids as if they were movie screens. In this version the buffalo turns his head toward the oncoming lights. We stare at each other before colliding.

I didn’t even know where he’d come from. I shifted on the couch.

“Grandpa,” I said, “Grandpa’s gone.”

I cried. I’d given *pa* the Midwestern accent it deserved. Like soda *pop*.

FRANCINE RUBIN

Utterance

After Lady Writing a Letter with her Maid, by Jan Vermeer

My lady spills her thoughts onto the page.
My thoughts remain untold, and I say few words:
“yes, ma’m,” “no, ma’m,” each syllable
revolving around the lady’s dictates.

Cold light spills through glass, illuminating
an undusted corner, a smudge on wood –
tasks for afternoon. I gaze outside:
red tulips. The impressive plot of land

to which I’m tethered at the periphery.
In evening, I am centered in my own scene –
one windowless room, one small bed,
no desk, no paper, no ink.

My thoughts spill in dreams of reclaiming
my time – one afternoon in fresh light,
wearing a red dress. I speak fluently
to passersby in a wild garden owned by no one.

DOMENIC SCOPA

Swimming Pool

for Martín Espada

Past the gate where convoys spilled
their cargo of prisoners,
and concrete cells
too narrow to sit down,
and rooms where doctors
tried to calculate
the amount of pain
the body would take
before it gave out,
and the double fences
where guards patrolled
with Dobermans
for runners brave enough
to risk the razor wire,
where the condemned listened
to the inmate band perform
on execution mornings,
there is a swimming pool
on the commandant's estate
at Terezín.

Here the officers would congregate
for barbeques, here the splash
of sunburnt children.
The commandant would coach
his son—*kick your feet,*
turn your head to breathe—

would daily throw
a son and father
into the pool,
saying to them: *whoever kills*
the other will live,
and toss them 2x4s.

Here his wife served
homemade cookies
to the winner.

When the crematorium whistle
cried out, and the sound
pelted tree leaves,
the swimmers would dive
below the surface, touching
the bottom of the clear,
 soundless world.

There is a swimming pool
on the commandant's estate
at Terezín—white tiles,
white steps—where human beings
would plunge and wade
until they dissolved forever,
vanished like the blood
of fathers spilling
in chlorinated water.

CLAIRE SCOTT

Endings

a cigarette flicked

from a balcony
at Motel Six

embers fade

a dog licks
open sores

are you listening?

sweltered heat

streets shimmer
in suspended sun

*I never knew there
were so many*

a cat snags a sparrow
eats in silence

a man staggers
down Chestnut Street

clutching a brown bag

*doctors, scans, blood tests
probing and poking*

your wasting body

a woman smells
perfume, not hers

CLAIRE SCOTT

empty syringes
behind Wong's Chinese

sultry, suffocating

*pills in plastic vials
counted carefully*

a mouse scrabbles
in the cistern

a soft wrist waits

forests are vanishing
fish are vanishing

and you my love?

L. B. SEDLACEK

Magnolia Tree on High Street

The magnolia tree
giant, now abandoned.

Somehow it didn't
seem so tall
thick green leaves
white flowered blossoms
beautiful, but abandoned.

It was my
tree house, my
secret reading place
the neighborhood fort
empty and abandoned.

It was my
spy's lair where
I spied on
all the neighbors
deceased not abandoned.

I miss climbing
up high in
the branches or
playing games with
cousins or friends
grown and abandoned.

I miss watching
the neighbors holler
or cooling pies
set on windowsills
gone and abandoned.

L.B. SEDLACEK

My magnolia tree at our
family home stands empty

and mightily, abandoned.

MARK SMITH

Starfish

Celestial namesake of sparkle shapes
aisle lighting the theaters of space,
pimply lover of the tide pools,
plucky swimmer with pliant arms
or bleached shell a child recovers from
the littered strand, how like the dead
and living stars your asterisk has been
designed to send through time and space
the measured flounder of your matter.

MATTHEW J. SPIRENG

Sunrise, Assateague

Clouds on the horizon far out
over the ocean—the only clouds
in the sky—began to glow as if
an enormous fire raged below,

as it did, though this was the sun
that consumed the clouds when it burst
from the water so one could no longer
look directly there. And maybe it was

something like this blinding light
that a half-hour earlier caused
a great blue heron illuminated
by the headlights as it stood

in the dark on the opposite side
of the road to run out at the front
of the car, only to be saved by my
braking, as I am saved each day.

JO BARBARA TAYLOR

Wooring in the Ancient Gengii Tradition

Makiko silently greets the chosen husband
from the shadow of the ebony lacquered screen.
Wild poppies leap from the shiny barrier
into the soft papery room, glide
across the grass-matted floor.

As she folds a seductive crane,
the drape of her kimono sighs,
and the suitor answers,
panting
and finally, a whimper.

In next morning light he writes
on scented rice paper

*the whisper folding
night into day in your hands
thrills my springtime heart*

and bears it to her gate.

She folds still. A thousand *kami* cranes
strung together to flutter in the wind
will grant her wish for long life,
eternal good luck, poppies
red in her garden,
and love poems.

MARGARET STEINER

They

In Africa, they say, they don't count their dead. I guess they mean (and, no, I don't know who they are) that there have been too many who died in tribal wars and such, their limbs bent or akimbo, all those milky eyes staring up in the sun that lacerates with its fierce heat, the flies that circle in a hot halo. You would think, wouldn't you, that there would be acres of bones, white and bare, but there are not.

Can you bury without counting? In America we would use a bulldozer for all that digging for just one big grave. But when there are so many idle hands, they just pass out the shovels.

Last week I counted my dead. I killed a man, his black skin shiny in the first rains after the Dry. I didn't kill him immediately; it took a while. Since it was only one man, he got counted by the police, by the men and women who ran from the shops to surround me, by his family, and by me and my history. I counted one.

Death had been everywhere that day, in my nose and in my eyes and in my headlights. I had smelled the dead baby hippo that morning beside the road before I saw it. Mid-morning I had seen a mamba strike a tabby cat and watched the cat leap once, its stripes turn and blur as it tumbled off a concrete wall and into the Chobe, the splash louder than my choked-back scream. I had watched a crew of townsmen, just at dusk, carve up a carcass of a road-kill cow. Their knives had glinted in the sunset light, and as I drove by, one of them glanced up and waved me on with his muddied, blood-slicked sleeve.

And I thought, if the elephants don't get you, the cows will.

Or the bone-jarring potholes that can swallow a whole tire and its axle.

Get your dumb American ass back to the lodge, I thought. And as I made my swing to turn right, he had hit me. And I had killed him.

They, the Botswanans, drive on the left side of the road so for weeks I had chanted, "Swing wide for a right, hug in for a left." I had done very well until that Monday. I swung wide to go right; he swung into me. I saw my dead man's face for a moment like the deer I killed the first time I drove my first boyfriend's first, only slightly used, pickup truck. The deer's face pressed against the glass of my window; I could have kissed it. The ruined

quarter panel caved in to the perfect outline of the soft sides of a young whitetail buck. For months when I closed my eyes, I saw those eyes. And now I would see this man's. I counted two—eyes dark as that deer's and as mournful.

The street had filled with Africans, dressed willy-nilly in stripes and plaids and checks, some cloth so threadbare you could see their skin. One woman carried a cardboard box on her head; it said Prissy's Party Favors on the side. Who's Prissy, I thought as I removed myself from the car, unfolding my limbs in serious slow motion like the bud of a cactus flower that hesitates to open in the fierce heat.

First I saw the bicycle, its frame bent and one jagged metal shard piercing the fallen man's side as if I had lanced him to the pavement, but when I saw the white bone sticking up from his shin, I sank to the hot road, my hands pulling my hair so hard that weeks later my scalp would ache. "Oh no," I cried, "oh no. Oh God in Heaven, no."

I actually saw my tears hit the pavement and I waited to see them sizzle; only tears don't sizzle, do they? And then the obliterating rain began. And as suddenly, Phillip was there—Phillip who owned, had built with his huge hands, the lodge where I had lived now for a month, its strong walls resplendent every night in windowed light. "Oasis," I had said the first night I had arrived there, so tired from two days' hard journey that I had slept without eating or bathing or disrobing.

They, the owners of Chobe River Lodge, had taken me in, these lost white Zimbabweans, the whole family: Phillip at its head, his daughter Daisy, and one of his sons, Rand. I hadn't made a reservation and, even though they were full, Daisy had said, "Well, we have this tiny room, very tiny." It was mostly a bed and a ceiling fan that creaked, the room so dark I felt the closeness one feels in a cave.

That next morning at the breakfast table as I looked around at the smiling guests, all Germans, each of them part of a pair, I had said, "Am I your first widow?" Widow was my favorite new word. What rhymes with widow, I would have asked my dead husband Rory, the poet. But he was dead, his ashes now floating in the Okavanga.

Phillip had reached over, solicitously patted me on the shoulder, and answered, "This is Africa. If you aren't a widow, you will be sooner than later—or dead yourself."

Then I had remembered the AIDS statistics I had read about Botswana—two out of three adults are HIV positive—and the visual proof I had seen on my way here—whole villages wiped out by the disease: huts abandoned; fire pits cold; tree shade with no takers.

That afternoon I sat on the hot pavement, wanting, needing, hoping the injured man would rise from that road, get back on his broken bicycle, and ride away. Finally Phillip picked me up off the ground and steadied me in the strong circle of his arm while the police and the white ambulance sired through the rain, the first rain I had seen in months. The fat drops beat down, and an EMT lifted the limp, now wet, body of the man I had hit and said, "He's breathing. Don't worry, Ma." I still looked around me when someone called me Ma, a respectful term of address in Botswana. "I know Diran. He is tough," he continued. "We'll get some blood in him. He should be fine." I wondered where they would find clean blood.

"Phillip," I said, "I'll give blood tonight. Lots of blood."

"No, you won't," Phillip said and he pulled me into the lodge. By then the lights were on, a rich respite from the dark poverty of the street.

Even through the rain, Diran Mothei's blood stayed in the street for days, a deep brown stain; I watched an old dog, mange-pocked, sniff and sniff some more and then walk stiff-leggedly away. Phillip called the hospital that week and reported that Diran had been moved to Gaborone, the largest city in Botswana. "Complications," he explained, "from the broken leg." And then several days later, "He didn't make it. An infection."

Phillip called his attorney who came in his shiny suit and slim red tie—all the way from Kazungula. The maids served us tea, dark and hot, in white china cups and black, coarse bread with Zambezi honey. The attorney's voice was so low I had to listen hard for his advice, "Do nothing until they come and ask." By the end of the week, Diran Mothei's wife had contacted the lodge.

*

The day the family come, I walk into the open-air living space, porch and dining room too, of the Chobe River Lodge. Phillip stands as I enter. He was always standing for the entrance of women. I want to turn around and leave and then come back and then leave again to see if I can have him doing a jack-in-the-box. This thought is just the edge of the hysteria I have been feeling for days now. I count my new dead every night.

I had thought at first that I might have a hard time sleeping, what with my being a new murderer, but instead I was having a hard time not sleeping. I had become a she bear in my tiny cave with no plan of ever returning to the light. I was beginning to wonder if you had to be conscious to call it life.

First, I see the light tan of Diran's mother, so tiny that she does not make an impression on the soft sofa. Rory would have known her tribe by

her hue or facial features. She looks like a bird tribe to me. Chirp, I think, chirp.

“Mrs. Southerland, this is Diran Mothei’s mother, Mpule, and his wife, Beauty, and his three children—Abraham, Isaac, and Ruth.” I think he goes on to introduce me. It is hard to hear anything past a sort of manic buzzing deep in my head. I am relieved to see a cicada-like insect hovering and then darting away.

“Tea,” he says, holding out the fragile saucer.

The cup rattles in my hand. I take a yoga breath.

“I buried my husband a month ago,” I say in a response to no question. Beauty stares so hard I think she might be counting the lashes of my eyes. I blink. I blink again.

Yes, I think, I’m a rich American. And yet now I have no more than you, I want to say, nothing left any more important than those sticks you women carry on your heads that are turban-wrapped like a multi-colored onion.

Unlike you, I don’t have anything left to balance. I can feel the back of my throat tighten the way it does just before I cry.

Her children’s dusty feet do not shuffle; they do not move at all. A lizard runs across the floor and the smallest boy’s hand whips out and catches it. He smiles and glances at his mother. The look on her face, although I can see no change of expression, makes him drop the lizard that scurries free under the leaves of a potted philodendron.

Phillip speaks to the mother first, “Mrs. Southerland is so very sorry about your son.” Then to the wife, “Diran was a good father and a hard worker. This town will miss him.” He pauses, “But he ran into Mrs. Southerland. She could not have missed hitting him. It was an accident. So terrible.”

I forget that Phillip had told me not to talk. “I am so sorry. I know how hard this is.” The words keep falling out. “I lost my husband last year. I...I...” I stop because I begin to hiccup. The children stare at me as my chest rises and falls. As a child, I had been renowned for my hiccups, the loudness and the longevity. A magic maid appears with water. I drink it down so fast I choke. Water comes through my nose, but the hiccups stop. I wipe my nose on my shirt. Diran’s bird mother watches me now, her head tilted just a bit.

“What can I do? What can I do for you?” I say.

“We have come to ask you for funeral expenses,” Beauty says. Her hands float up like lithe brown butterflies as she speaks.

“You want funeral expenses only?” Phillip takes control again.

“In days past, my husband angered a witch doctor. He put a curse on Diran. My husband had to die. That is why we know it was not your fault. It was the curse,” Beauty finishes and refolds her hands in her lap.

“How much? How much do you need for the funeral?”

“Fourteen hundred pula is enough.” One thousand pula was about a hundred American dollars.

“Your husband was...what did you say? Cursed?” I stare now. “Did you say he was cursed? Why? What did he do?”

“Fourteen hundred pula is enough,” Beauty repeats.

I count out the pula, adding an extra thousand and then one more thousand. I can feel Phillip wanting to stop me, but I lay the money in front of Beauty. Her lovely hand slowly cups the pula and puts red and pink bills into a deep pocket.

Phillip walks them to the door. Beauty turns in the open doorway and says, “I am sorry too for you.” And they are gone.

“Whew,” he says, “that could have been interesting. And expensive.” He wipes his brow with a huge white handkerchief. “Let’s get out of here for awhile,” he continues. “I’ll get Daisy and whoever else wants to go. We’ll see if we can scare up some lions, maybe a leopard or two. We need to get out of here.”

I cannot move. Phillip takes my hands and pulls me to my feet. He says, “Diran ran into you. Maybe it was no accident. Maybe he needed to make a prophecy come true.” Phillip’s eyes are bright as if he has hope for me. “Stay here long enough and you might think black magic is a valid claim,” he says. “Whatever happened, it is done. And you can do no more to help them.” I don’t even know that he has ordered me a gin and tonic until the maid places it in my hand.

“It’s Africa,” he finishes.

In twenty minutes, the open-sided jeep is filled—Phillip and Daisy in the front; Rand in the back with a rifle—just in case—four other lodge guests, all Germans, and me in the middle. The Germans are happy for this free bit of safari.

We bounce past Diran’s bloodstain on the road, then past the deeper red of the slaughtered cow, and on past the rotting corpse of the baby hippo; last week’s rain not strong enough to wash away all the evidence. Down the narrow highway, carrion birds sit in a tree, each holding a piece of red meat in its beak. For the benefit of the German birdwatchers, Phillip points. “White-backed vulture and the stork-like ones are marabou,” he tells them. The Germans crane their necks in a fair imitation of the storks.

Phillip turns onto a rutted dirt road. Beside me, the fat German woman's breasts bounce so hard I think they might knock her out. I hold my gin and tonic tightly, protecting it from potholes. Every time I try to take a sip, I spill more than I get to my mouth. I shift the ice-cold glass to my forehead.

The sun dips lower and we drive for thirty minutes, maybe more. It is full dusk when we stop only a hundred yards or less from a watering hole, so close that we feel the air vibrate from the four female elephants who trumpet at our approach, their babies at their center. The Germans aim and snap pictures from every angle until almost all of the light is gone. The elephants, fanning their ears, lumber off in a long, single line. A baby's trunk grabs its mother's tail.

We sit awhile. My cocktail is gone but I suck on one gin-flavored piece of ice. One of the Germans stomach growls. "Leopard," he says in English. Phillip laughs the loudest like a good host. We sit some more.

"Look," Daisy whispers and points, "straight that way."

Two lions, a male and his mate, stand at the top of the waterhole. A small jackal sees them and changes direction. The rocks scatter as the lions descend towards the water's edge. The male's great gold head faces us; the dreadful eyes blink. The lioness bends her head first to drink and then her mate.

We all hold our breaths because we realize that in this absolute quiet we can hear them, actually hear them, lap the water. They drink.

"Africa," Phillip says, like a benediction, like a blessing.

There is such a reverence in his voice that I want to say, "Amen" but instead I repeat, "Africa."

As we pull away, they are still there in the quickening dark that envelops utterly as black as magic.

KORY WELLS

We Come Undone

Because we fail to measure twice,
cut once. Because the floor beneath us
threatens to give way. Water drips.
Hardwood warps. Finish and shine

wear thin. In the week before spring,
two bluebirds dead in the yard.
There's so much we can't explain.
Machines level mountains.

Corporations jack the costs.
Bullets ricochet through vital
strangers. We forget to listen,
bring the tickets, check the ingredients,

breathe. Because long ago I veered from
the curve of your innocent cheek.
Because you're caught in the traffic jam
of my heart. Because the street names keep

changing. Construction is delayed.
We've only just realized the detour
is the scenic route. And now in my throat
a lump persists. The ultrasound lights up

unknowns. Someday, the widowmaker
will cleave us, leave one of us
lamenting artery's plaque, sweetgum's
deadwood. Let us never mind.

Today we thrive. Today a warm
hillside slopes to the lake. Today
our blanket blooms showy
and wild beneath budding oak.

KORY WELLS

The moist soil thirsts and the constant
geese call. Today we are that call
across the charged empyrean, all joy
and ache and home.

JOHN SIBLEY WILLIAMS

Waiting for the Body to Catch Up

Fingers laced tight
and eyes down-
cast like rainclouds,
we are anchored
in place, posed
for grief, unsure
why we are
weeping, what is left
here to sing
or pray for.
Death works its way
through the living
swiftly. What is
buried beneath
shows us our name.
I am here, repeat,
I am as here as stone,
repeat, where the world
goes in our silence is
where I'll learn
to say it, repeated
until blackbirds finish
ripping open this empty
piñata of sky.

HOWARD WINN

Neighbor

I live next door to a ruthless man
who clear cuts his back lot.
Trees lie across that land
like brown and black dead crocodiles,
waiting to be dissected into
chunks of firewood,
split and stacked in quantities
too great for any single woodstove.
The pile reaches for the sky that is
denied the trees he has massacred,
jumbles higher than his head.
Does he fear a new ice age
that he must prepare for
when storms freeze the roads
and he is snow bound,
or does he just like seeing
his woody possessions
dividing his land from mine?

LISA ZERKLE

In Flight

We board fast in order to miss the storm. Back near the gate, a man had thrashed and flailed on the carpet, foaming from the mouth, circled by EMTs who spoke slowly and too loud. Fast food workers peered over their counters. The men at the bar chuckled uneasily. *You have to be careful*, said the lady who sold me an apple, *They can swallow their tongues*. The man shrieked and the hair on the back of my neck stood up. In ancient days, demons would have been blamed, these convulsions proof of the dark struggle for our souls. Our plane shudders through thunderheads, airborne by sorcery I don't understand. We've beaten the front. Across the aisle, a woman underlines her book in pencil adding emphasis to words she's already highlighted in acid yellow. One row ahead another woman sleeps, slumped over the pillow of her coat bunched on her tray table, her mouth soft and open. Between the crack in the seats in front of me, football players scramble across the screen of an iPad held by a man's hairy hand. The woman with the book has perfect, squared nails painted glossy red. Nosy and bored, I try to see what she's so carefully studying. A figure crouches on her book cover, inside a circle with a slash. *How to S_____Proof Your Home*, I make out. *Squirrel?* Once I had the same trouble when a nesting mother intent on shelter gnawed her way into the attic and I could hear them scratch in the walls. Now, the attendant delivers drinks to those still awake. The smell of scotch. The figure on the book is holding a spear, no, a pitchfork, like the Hormel devil. Satan! Vanna, I'd like to solve the puzzle, she's trying to *Satan-Proof* her house. What steps would you take, I wonder, and think of ropes of garlic. No, that's vampires. She doesn't look crazy, quietly marking another passage of note. The fragile magic of a list to tick, a murmur of words. Later I'll learn the storm we skirted flung tornadoes here and there. Black thumbs rubbing out houses. A miracle really, all the days we make it safely home.

CONTRIBUTORS

HEATHER BELL ADAMS has published short fiction in *Clapboard House*, *Pembroke Magazine*, *Thick Jam*, *Deep South Magazine*, *First Stop Fiction*, and other journals. She is on the fiction staff of *Raleigh Review*.

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LINDA BRAGG worked for over 21 years as a public relations specialist. A chapter from her memoir *Heart Thieves* was published in October 2015 by *The Penmen Review*. Bragg published two personal essays in the *Tampa Bay Times*, as well as won first place in the essay and short story categories in the American PEN Women's Writing Contest, Pinellas County Chapter. Additionally, she received two honorable mentions in the Writers-Editors Network International Writing Competition (2013 and 2014).

JOHN BRANTINGHAM is the author of seven books of poetry and fiction and is the editor of the *LA Fiction Anthology*. His work has appeared in publications such as *The Best Small Fictions*, *Writer's Almanac*, and *The Journal*. He teaches composition and creative writing at Mt. San Antonio College, and he teaches and directs a nature art and poetry program that is free to the public in Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks.

BILL BROWN is the author of six collections of poems, three chapbooks and a textbook. His new collection, *Elemental* (3: A Taos Press) was released in November, 2014. The recipient of many fellowships, Brown was awarded the Writer of the Year 2011 by the Tennessee Writers Alliance. His work appears in *Asheville Poetry Review*, *Atlanta Review*, *River Styx*, *Southern Humanities Review*, *Potomac Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, *North American Review*, *Southern Poetry Review*, *Tar River Poetry*, *Smartish Pace*, *Rattle*, *West Branch*, *Borderlands*, *The Literary Review*, and *Connecticut Review*, among others.

BRETT BUSANG often tells people that he became a writer because he'd run out of everything else to do. Ultimately, he started to read fiction and, while he didn't understand it very well, he was immediately drawn to the columns of careful prose, sophisticated dialogue, and great English laws he encountered between the covers of a book that, when dropped, made people jump out of their skins. Busang also became an artist, but came to dislike all the stuff he had to schlepp around. His work has appeared recently in *Lost Coast Review*, *Gastronomica*, *Coldnoon*, and *Loch Raven Review*.

CHRIS CARBAUGH is a retired high school teacher who has written the stories that his children and grandchildren have asked him to recount time and again. “The Great American Ping Pong Ball Drop” is one of twenty “MamaLu Stories.”

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GREGG CUSICK’S fiction has appeared in more than two dozen journals and has won numerous awards, including the Lorian Hemingway Short Story Competition and *The Florida Review* Editor’s Prize, and has been three times nominated for a Pushcart Prize. He holds a master’s in English/Creative Writing from North Carolina State University and lives in Durham, North Carolina, where he bartends and tutors literacy.

JOHN DELANEY is a former Curator of Historic Maps at Princeton University Library (2000-2014). Delaney is also a kayaker and letters-to-the-editor whiner. He thinks of poems as waypoints.

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Other poems by **MATTHEW DULANY** can be read in recent issues of *The Chaffin Journal*, *San Pedro River Review*, and *The Sow’s Ear*, and are forthcoming in *Pisgah Review*, *South Carolina Review*, and *The Worcester Review*. This year Hard Nock Press is publishing his first novel, *The Quitter*.

KEITH DUNLAP’S collection of poems, *The Foot in the Elevator*, was a finalist for the *New Issues* Poetry Prize and a finalist at Brickhouse Books New Poets series, as well as a semi-finalist at Brooklyn Arts Press. He is a former co-editor of *The Columbia Review* and former co-editor of *Cutbank*. His poems have been accepted for publication in *Borderlands: Texas Poetry Review*, *The Brooklyn Review*, *The*

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JONATHAN GREENHAUSE was longlisted for this year's National Poetry Competition (UK) by The Poetry Society. He was also named a finalist or honorable mention in 2014's poetry contests from *Naugatuck River Review*, *New Millennium Writings*, *Peregrine*, *Red Hen Press*, and *River Styx*. Greenhouse's poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *The Bitter Oleander*, *The Dark Horse*, *Potomac Review*, *Quarter after Eight*, *RHINO*, and *Stand*, among others. His work has appeared previously in the *Broad River Review*.

BRANDON GREER has lived in southern Illinois his entire life, where he is a meat cutter at a local grocery store. Besides writing he enjoys reading, video gaming, and spending time with his son, Hunter.

SAM GRIEVE was born in Cape Town, and lived in Paris and London prior to settling down in Connecticut. She graduated from Brown University, and has worked as a librarian, a bookseller and an antiquarian book-dealer. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in numerous magazines, including *A cappella Zoo*, *Daily Science Fiction*, *PANK*, and *Southern Indiana Review*. Stories of hers have been recognized as Notable in *The Best of American Nonrequired Reading 2014* and by the 2015 *storySouth* Million Writers Award.

PATRICIA L. HAMILTON is Professor of English at Union University in Jackson, Tennessee. Her first volume of poetry, *The Distance to Nightfall*, was published in 2014 by Main Street Rag. Additional work has recently appeared in *Third Wednesday*, *Red River Review*, *Broad River Review*, and *Innisfree Poetry Journal*. Hamilton has received two Pushcart nominations.

MARYANNE HANNAN has published poetry in *Rattle*, *Light Quarterly*, *upstreet*, *WomenArts Quarterly*, *Gargoyle*, and *Minnesota Review*. A former Latin teacher, she lives in upstate New York.

TOM HARPER was born in Gadsden, Alabama, and educated by travels through the evangelical South. A poet, playwright, journalist and editor, his work has been presented on stages, in newspapers, journals and on the BBC World Service Short Story Programme. He's had stories published from Canada to New Zealand and various places in the United States. Currently, though he is growing quite old, he still hikes Pohick Creek with his old dog, grows tomatoes and continues to write. Recent stories appeared in *The Opiate* and *Blood and Thunder: Musing on the Art of Medicine*, with stories upcoming in *The MacGuffin* and *Valley Voices*, as well as a long prose poem to be published online in *Gravel Literary Journal*.

LINDA HEURING is a short story writer known for her character-driven narratives and her penchant for the overheard phrase. Her short fiction has appeared in *Crannog* (Ireland), *Crack the Spine*, *Rosebud*, *Kestrel*, and *Dos Passos Review*, among other publications. Her story "Breaking Point" appeared in the 2015 issue of *Broad River Review*. She has been awarded the *Fish International Short Story Prize* (Ireland), was a finalist for the 2014 Rash Award in Fiction, and was shortlisted for the Bristol Story Prize (UK). She lives outside Chicago.

For several years, **LYNN HOGGARD** was an arts writer for the *Times Record News* in Wichita Falls and wrote more than six hundred articles, features, and reviews. She has published five books: three French translations, a biography, and a memoir. Hoggard taught at Midwestern State University as professor of English and French and the coordinator of humanities. In 2003, the Texas Institute of Letters awarded Hoggard the Sourette Diehl Fraser award for best translation.

LYNN MARIE HOUSTON is a poet, essayist, and educator. Her writing has appeared in *Painted Bride Quarterly*, *Word Riot*, and *Squalorly*, among others, as well as in her first poetry collection, *The Clever Dream of Man* (Aldrich Press), which contains a Puschart-nominated poem, as well as a poem nominated for The Best of the Net Award. Her poetry has won or placed in contests sponsored by *Prime Number Magazine/Press 53*, *Whispering Prairie Press*, and the National Federation of Poetry Societies (Arizona State Poetry Society). She is currently pursuing her M.F.A. at Southern Connecticut State University.

LINDA IMBLER is the author of several poetry books including *The Weather in My Head*, *Doubt and Truth*, and *Precious Vibrations*. She has written such diverse poems as "Tomb," "We," "Leviathan," and "Walking the Road." Her work has been called evocative, provocative and beautiful. Linda has designed her own book covers. This poet, yoga practitioner, and acoustic guitar player resides in Wichita, Kansas.

As founding editor of Many Voices Press, **LOWELL JAEGER** compiled *Poems Across the Big Sky*, an anthology of Montana poets, and *New Poets of the American West*, an anthology of poets from 11 Western states. He is author of six collections of poems, most recent of which are *How Quickly What's Passing Goes Past* (Greyson Books, 2013) and *Driving the Back Road Home* (Shabda Press, 2015). He is the recipient of fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Montana Arts Council and winner of the Grolier Poetry Peace Prize. Most recently Jaeger

was awarded the Montana Governor's Humanities Award for his work in promoting thoughtful civic discourse.

ESTHER WHITMAN JOHNSON is a former high school English teacher and counselor living in Roanoke, Virginia. She now travels the globe doing volunteer work and often writing about her journeys. Johnson's writing has appeared previously in the *Broad River Review*, *Main Street Rag*, *Artemis*, *Colere*, *Dirty Chai*, *Blue Lotus*, *Virginia Literary Journal*, and *Virginia Writers*.

RICHARD JONES was born in London to American parents and later raised in the United States. Otherwise, he has published six books with Copper Canyon Press. More info can be found on his hard-to-find website, richardjonespoetry.wordpress.com.

JANET JOYNER'S poems have appeared in numerous magazines, with prize winning poems honored in the 2011 Yearbook of the South Carolina Poetry Society, *Bay Leaves* of the North Carolina Poetry Council in 2010, 2011, and in *Flying South* in 2014, and 2015. Her first collection of poems, *Waterborne*, is the winner of the 2014 Holland Prize and will be published by Logan House Press this fall.

HELGA KIDDER is a native of Germany's Black Forest and lives in the Tennessee hills with her husband and dog. She was awarded an M.F.A. from Vermont College. She is co-founder of the Chattanooga Writers Guild and leads their poetry group. Her poems have been published in the *Louisville Review*, *Comstock Review*, *Relief*, and many others. She has three poetry collections, *Wild Plums* (2012), *Luckier than the Stars* (2013) and *Blackberry Winter* (2016).

JOHN KRISTOFKO'S poetry, short stories, and essays have appeared in over a hundred different publications, including *Rattle*, *Folio*, *Cimarron Review*, *Sierra Nevada Review*, and *Slant*. He has published three collections of poetry and been nominated for the Pushcart Prize five times.

LEE LANDAU has poetry forthcoming in *Breath and Shadow* and *Avalon Literary Review*, was a Finalist for the 2015 Anna Rosenberg Prize at *Poetica Magazine*. She holds a B.A. in English Literature from Monmouth University and an M.L.S. in Library Science from the State University of New York at Albany. Landau's work has also appeared in *Elsewhere Lit*, *Tipton Poetry Journal*, *ICEBOX Journal*, *Rockhurst Review*, and the *Monarch Review*, among other publications.

MARC LAROCK is the author of many works of fiction and nonfiction. He studied philosophy at the University of St. Andrews and the University of Colorado, Boulder. He currently lives in Denver.

EVALYN LEE is a former CBS News producer living in London with her husband and two children. She has produced television segments for *60 Minutes* in New York and the BBC in London. She has studied English literature both in the United States and in England and had the opportunity to interview writers, including Joseph Brodsky, Seamus Heaney, Dick Francis, and Margaret Atwood, about their work. Lee's broadcast work has received an Emmy and numerous Writers Guild Awards. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Amarillo Bay*, *Diverse Arts Project*, and *Willow Review*. Lee is currently working on her first novel.

MARTIN H. LEVINSON is a member of the Authors Guild, National Book Critics Circle, and the book review editor for *ETC: A Review of General Semantics*. He has published nine books and numerous articles and poems in various publications. Levinson holds a Ph.D. from NYU and lives in Forest Hills and Riverhead, New York.

MILES LISS lives in Northern Virginia and teaches literature to struggling readers. His poetry is strongly influenced by place, and based on various travels, whether it be a roadside fruit stand, or a spiritual community in South India. Along with the *Broad River Review*, previous poems have appeared in *Blue Moon Literary & Arts Review*, *Poets for Living Waters*, and *Open Minds Quarterly*. A recent submission won the DASH: Poetry in Motion contest for the city of Alexandria. Liss is presently at work on a full-length manuscript.

Starting in Cincinnati, still entrenched in the Midwest, **MICHAEL M. MARKS** was schooled during the cold war/fallout shelter era evolving to anti-Vietnam war college days, from Beatniks to Hippies, from Elvis to the Rolling Stones, earning his passion for poetry under the tutelage of Gwendolyn Brooks in Chicago. The first of the baby-boomers, he is a generation apart, always fighting to be heard.

RON MCFARLAND teaches literature and creative writing at the University of Idaho. His twenty or so books range from a composition text and chapbooks of poetry to a critical study of regional memoir, *The Rockies in First Person*, and most recently *Appropriating Hemingway: Using Him as a Fictional Character* (2015), and a biography, *Edward J. Steptoe and the Indian Wars* (2016). His most recent full-length book of poems, *Subtle Thieves*, came out in 2012. He is currently at work on a book blending nonfiction and poems about fishing.

Pushcart nominee **BRUCE MCRAE** is a Canadian musician with over 900 poems published internationally, including *Poetry.com*, *Rattle*, and *The North American Review*. His first book, *The So-Called Sonnets*, is available via Silenced Press and Amazon. To see and hear more poems, go to 'BruceMcRaePoetry' on YouTube.

STEVE MEADOR has published three books of poetry, and when he is not on a road trip you can find him in Florida working as a real estate broker. His work has appeared regularly in print or online journals, resulting in numerous nominations for awards. However, he has yet to see his name at the top of the list. He is too humble to provide a long list of his publications, so, by the grace of God and the good work (evidently) of Al Gore, you can Google Steve and he will magically appear in the internet search results.

ASHLEY MEMORY'S work has most recently appeared in *Pinesong*, *Carolina Woman*, *Thomas Wolfe Review*, and *Brilliant Flash Fiction*. Her poem, "The Murder House at Sweetwater Ridge," was named a finalist in the annual narrative poetry contest sponsored by *The Naugatuck River Review* and appeared in the Spring 2016 issue.

TOM MONTAG is most recently the author of *In This Place: Selected Poems 1982-2013*. In 2015 he was the featured poet at *Atticus Review* (April) and *Contemporary American Voices* (August), with other poems at *Hamilton Stone Review*, *The Homestead Review*, *Little Patuxent Review*, *Mud Season Review*, *Poetry Quarterly*, *Provo Canyon Review*, *Third Wednesday*, and elsewhere.

HOLLY MORSE-ELLINGTON'S work has appeared in *Wanderlust and Lipstick*, *Matador Network*, *Three Quarter Review*, *The Journal of Homeland Security*, and elsewhere. She co-authored the play, "Fifty Miles Away," the 2015 winner of the Frostburg State University Center for Literary Arts One-Act Festival. She is also an editor for *The Baltimore Review*.

JED MYERS lives in Seattle. His poetry collections include *Watching the Perseids* (winner of the 2013 Sacramento Poetry Center Book Award) and the chapbook *The Nameless* (Finishing Line Press). His work has received *Southern Indiana Review's* Editors' Award, the *Literal Latte Poetry Award*, *Blue Lyra Review's* Longish Poem Award, two Pushcart nominations, and, in the UK, a Forward Prize nomination. His poems have appeared in *Prairie Schooner*, *Nimrod*, *Crab Orchard Review*, *I-70 Review*, *Fugue*, *Crab Creek Review*, *The Briar Cliff Review*, *Atlanta Review*, *The New Guard*, and elsewhere.

JENNIFER NEELY received an M.F.A. in fiction in 2001 from Southern Illinois University-Carbondale. Her work has been published recently in *Spoon River Poetry Review*, *Pacific Review*, and *Origins*, and has work forthcoming in *Crab Creek Review*.

SHANNON LEIGH O'NEIL is the managing editor of a bimonthly magazine and works as a freelance writer. O'Neil studied creative writing at the Writers' Studio and graduated magna cum laude with a B.A. in art history from the City College of New York.

ALICE OSBORN is a poet, singer/songwriter, editor-for-hire and popular writing and workshop coach. *Heroes without Capes* is her most recent collection of poetry. She lives in Raleigh, North Carolina, with her husband, two children, four loud birds and one messy guinea pig. Visit her website at www.aliceosborn.com.

ILARI PASS is a new graduate student at Gardner-Webb University, pursuing an M.A. in English Literature. She has been working for the United States Postal Service for close to 18 years. Pass received a B.A. in English Literature from Guilford College this past May. She won the Betty Place Prize in Poetry in April 2014 and 2015-15, as well as the Guilford College Arts Merit Club Award in Poetry in April 2015.

RICHARD KING PERKINS II is a state-sponsored advocate for residents in long-term care facilities. He lives in Crystal Lake, Illinois with his wife, Vickie, and daughter, Sage. His work has appeared previously in the *Broad River Review*.

MICHAEL PHILLIPS has published several short stories and poems in literary journals such as the *Roanoke Review* (forthcoming), *Philadelphia Stories*, *Rathalla Review*, *Stone Highway Review*, *The Monongahela Review*, *Pebble Lake Review*, *Red River Review*, and *River Walk Journal*. Phillips has a B.A. and M.A. in English and works as an editor for a nonprofit healthcare research institute outside Philadelphia.

MARYKATE POWELL is a 2016 graduate of Gardner-Webb University with a degree in English. With a true heart for writing and a passion for story-telling, Powell is eager to enter the working world as an enthusiastic writer capable of academic, creative, and professional works. She has been featured in Western Carolina University's *Imagine* magazine and is excited to be the recipient of the J. Calvin Koonts Poetry Award in this edition of the *Broad River Review*.

ANNE M. RASHID is an associate professor of English and director of Women's & Gender Studies at Carlow University in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. She has published poetry in *Adagio Verse Quarterly*, *Lit Candles: Feminist Mentoring and the Text*, *The Metro Times*, *Pittsburgh's City Paper*, *Forum*, and *Paterson Literary Review*. She was a finalist in the Pat Schneider Poetry Contest in 2014.

FRANCINE RUBIN'S poetry has appeared in the chapbook *Geometries* (Finishing Line Press), the pamphlet *The Last Ballet Class* (Neon), and the David Mikow Art Gallery. A former ballet dancer, she now works as the Director of Academic Support at Roxbury Community College. Online, she can be found at www.francinerubin.tumblr.com.

DOMENIC SCOPA is a two-time Pushcart Prize nominee and the 2014 recipient of the Robert K. Johnson Poetry Prize and Garvin Tate Merit Scholarship. He is a student of the Vermont College of Fine Arts M.F.A. program, where he studies poetry and translation, and he is a literature professor at Changing Lives Through Literature at UMass Boston. His poetry and translations have been featured nationally and internationally in *Poetry Quarterly*, *Belleville Park Pages*, *Visions International*, *Cardinal Sins*, *Misfit Magazine*, *Poetry Pacific*, and others. He resides in Boston, Massachusetts.

CLAIRE SCOTT is an award winning poet who has been nominated twice for the Pushcart Prize (2013 and 2014). She was also a semi-finalist for both the 2014 Pangaea Prize and the 2014 Atlantis Award. Claire was the grand prize winner of *The Maine Review's* 2015 White Pine Writing Contest. Her first book of poetry, *Waiting to be Called*, was recently published by IF SF Publishing.

L.B. SEDLACEK'S poetry has appeared in publications such as *Pure Francis*, *The Foliate Oak*, *Illumen*, *Main Street Rag*, *Third Wednesday*, *Mastodon Dentist*, *Big Pulp*, and others. She publishes a free poetry newsletter resource for poets and received her M.A. from Wake Forest University. She is also a former Poetry Editor for *ESC! Magazine*.

Long a novelist, **MARK SMITH** came somewhat late to poetry, and in the time since has published some eighty poems in various journals including *Poetry East*, *Pleiades*, *New Letters*, and the *Gettysburg Review*, and most recently, in the *Missouri Review*, *Atlanta Review*, *Tampa Review*, *New Ohio Review*, *New Delta Review*, and *Meridian*. Smith has received grants and fellowships for fiction from the Guggenheim, Rockefeller, Ingram Merrill and Fulbright Foundations and the National Endowment for the Arts. His best-known novel, *The Death of the Detective* (Knopf) was a finalist for the National Book Award in 1974.

DAVID STARKEY served as Santa Barbara's Poet Laureate (2009-2010) and is Director of the Creative Writing Program at Santa Barbara City College. He has published seven full-length collections of poetry, most recently *It Must Be Like the World* (Pecan Grove, 2011), *Circus Maximus* (Biblioasis, 2013) and *Like a Soprano* (Serving House, 2014), an episode-by-episode revisioning of *The Sopranos* TV series. In addition, over the past twenty-eight years, Starkey has published more than 400 poems in literary journals such as *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *American Scholar*, *Antioch Review*, *Barrow Street*, *Beloit Poetry Journal*, *Cincinnati Review*, *Georgia Review*, *Massachusetts Review*, *Notre Dame Review*, *Poetry East*, *Southern Review*, *Southern Humanities Review*, and *Southern Poetry Review*. *Creative Writing: Four Genres in Brief* (Bedford/St. Martin's, 2012) is in its second edition and is currently one of the best-selling creative writing textbooks in the country.

MARGARET STEINER was born in Charlotte, North Carolina, and grew up in Galax, Virginia, in the kind of poverty that never leaves your bones. She attended Madison College (now James Madison University) in Harrisonburg, Virginia, where she began writing poetry. Steiner taught in Virginia and Georgia for thirty years and is now and living in Asheville, North Carolina. A member of the North Carolina Writers' Network, her stories and poems have appeared in the *Georgia State University Review*, *Helix Literary Journal*, *Chrysalis*, *WNC Woman*, *Fresh*, *Moonshine Review*, and *Red Fez*. She has completed a collection, *Convergence*, of inter-related short stories about two Southern women, and a novel, *Flight*, about an abused woman. Steiner is presently writing a novel about a female arsonist.

JO BARBARA TAYLOR lives near Raleigh, North Carolina. Her poems and academic writing have appeared in journals, magazines, anthologies, and online. Four chapbooks include *Cameo Roles* from Big Table Publishing and *High Ground* from Main Street Rag. A full-length collection is forthcoming from Chatter House Press in 2016. She is a freelance editor and writing coach, leads poetry workshops for OLLI through Duke Continuing Education, chairs the Brockman-Campbell Book Award for the North Carolina Poetry Society, and coordinates a poetry reading series for a local bookstore.

KORY WELLS is author of *Heaven Was the Moon* (March Street Press). After many years in software development, she now works as a writer, teaching artist, and advocate for various causes. Twice a finalist for the Rash Award for Poetry, Kory's work appears in *Christian Science Monitor*, *POEM*, *Unsplendid*, *The Southern Poetry Anthology*, *Broad River Review*, and other publications. Kory and her poetry also appear on the album *Decent Pan of Cornbread* with her daughter, roots musician Kelsey Wells. A seventh generation Tennessean with deep roots in southern Appalachia, Kory lives near Nashville.

JOHN SIBLEY WILLIAMS is the editor of two Northwest poetry anthologies and the author of nine collections, including *Controlled Hallucinations* (2013) and *Disinheritance* (forthcoming 2016). A five-time Pushcart nominee, Williams serves as editor of *The Inflectionist Review* and works as a literary agent. Previous publishing credits include: *American Literary Review*, *Third Coast*, *Baltimore Review*, *Nimrod International Journal*, *Hotel Amerika*, *Rio Grande Review*, *Inkwell*, *Cider Press Review*, *Bryant Literary Review*, *RHINO*, and various anthologies. He lives in Portland, Oregon.

HOWARD WINN'S fiction and poetry has been published in such journals as *Dalhousie Review*, *Galway Review* (Ireland), *Descant* (Canada), *Blueline*, *Evansville Review*, *Antigonish Review*, *Strange Frenzies*, *Squawk Back*, *Break the Spine*, *Taj Mahal Review*, *Borderlands*, and *Xavier Review*. Winn earned a B.A. from Vassar College, an M.A. in Creative Writing from Stanford University, and a doctorate from New York University. Winn has been a social worker in California and is currently a professor of English at SUNY.

LISA ZERKLE'S poems have appeared previously in *The Collagist*, *Southern Poetry Anthology*, *Broad River Review*, *Tar River Poetry*, *Nimrod*, *Sixfold*, *poemmemoirstory*, *Crucible*, and *Main Street Rag*, among others. She is the author of *Heart of the Light*. A former editor of *Kakalak*, she lives in Charlotte, North Carolina, where she works with the Charlotte Center for Literary Arts.