

## ABSTRACT

Title of thesis: FORDS OF MY DREAMS: STORIES  
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*Fords of My Dreams: Stories* is a literary manuscript-in-progress featuring girls and women rising up from rural poverty. These linked stories bear witness to coming-of-age as a ritual marked by extreme rejection of others, and even violence; to the adulthoods shaped by invisible pasts of need and neglect; and to the survivor's guilt that plagues those who sacrificed or abandoned others whose futures weighed less in order to rise. In the tradition of Dorothy Allison's *Trash*, these stories complicate the assumption that arriving at a higher economic class always outgains the emotional cost. With *Fords of My Dreams*, the author seeks to open a new set of questions around the American dream of class ascendance.

FORDS OF MY DREAMS: STORIES

by

Dawn Dorland Perry

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Artist's Statement.....	1
How CeeCee Got Her Gimlet Eye .....	5
Ditch.....	50
Father-Daughter Dance.....	63
Fords of My Dreams .....	86

## ARTIST'S STATEMENT

by Dawn Dorland Perry

With these four stories—still very much in progress as a manuscript, and within themselves—I have satisfied an artistic question that has propelled me through my first years as a writer. Propelled me, confounded me, left me stuck, left me exploded, stalled me, restarted me, pushed me, and eventually harbored me in a half-moon of clarity at the edge of a vast mystery.

The question: would the tent poles of my fiction be the same stakes I have in my own, as-lived story at the intersection of legacy, mental illness, and my father's marrying down into rural poverty?

The circumstances of my upbringing—ironic, itinerant, invisible—have positioned me as an adult on the margins of class, race and culture; require new language; and demand the process of deep writing to make even a lick of sense. Like a short story, the facts of my own life have begged for some sort of design, and I am aware of being a person for whom every intimate conversation is a new draft. A different opening, perhaps? A fresh POV? A beckoning back farther in time? Does chronology serve me here, or should I be anachronous? Does the story have a beginning, a middle—an end?

This is to say that the process of intensely reading, studying, and writing fiction during the MFA at Maryland has very closely paralleled a simultaneous, private process of putting my early life in order. In an essay I wrote before joining the program, "Why I Write," I jolted myself into awareness of an unconscious

assumption: that I should avoid being autobiographical in my fiction. Now, at the end of the program, I am jolted again into a new awareness: that I have gone so far in the other direction as to treat autobiography and fiction as fungible. Quite subconsciously, I have operated on the assumption that the stories I've produced in the MFA could be a proxy for my past, some stand-in for personal understanding, and the vessel in which I could communicate the shape and circumstances of my life to others—that the stories could do all of that.

With this collection I have arrived at cathartic, new understanding, a new artistic stance: that the function of fiction in light of memoir is to isolate, deepen, transfer, and expand upon the questions posed by autobiography. I have realized, finally (and counter-intuitively: it's a realization that struck me while in the deep study of fictional craft), that my own, as-lived story requires no invented details or situations—no fictional scaffolding. One day, coaxed into its own design, and beckoning as far back as I'd like to go, the story of my life will stand on its own.

Gone is the urgency for each story to say it all. What remains here of my earlier autobiographical efforts are the same base emotions, harnessed as an inquisitive, propulsive force. Of betrayal, I wonder, who has the right to feel betrayed? Of gratitude, what happens to those serially forced into accepting kindness? Is it fair for love to hinge on an admission of someone's less-ness? Do we have to love our parents? And are we obliged to care for someone who was supposed to care for us, but didn't, and if we are obliged, who it is we're obliged *to*? Finally, in the fourth selection, "Fords of My Dreams"—the story least yet itself, just beginning

to be roughed in—I am interested in a kind of generational reckoning: an origins story that recounts, in fragmented form, the collision and echo of debris scattered across generations by the clash of an unlikely marriage. I hope for it to be a battle for truth in family history, and deeply, about the inheritance of voice, as a daughter, Dinah—a poet—seeks meaning and order in the circumstances of her family, unresolved by fact.

If I have handed off the first thought baton in my long self-relay as a writer, here is the next question that I've seized. The movement and isolation inherent in rising through classes; the psychological fatigue of 'passing'; the loneliness, the perceived lack of understanding, the failure of language, and the code-switching required to thrive somewhere other than where we were born: *Are these immigrant stories?* Do these girls and women not share the same rough calculus of immigrant cost and gain, the inevitable failures, the permanent hope?

If I've distilled my purpose now to a single statement, it's to align myself with James Turrell, the perceptual artist who, through works of light, attempts to remove prejudice from seeing. In my work I'd like to complicate a notion present in literary, particularly debut, fiction of the precocious adolescent in the (choose one) ghetto/developing nation/trailer park/public school who triumphs over adversity by virtue of vocabulary and academic prowess: who achieves better than her parents by becoming a lawyer.

I'm interested, instead, in following the fractals of the class experience laterally, circuitously, and in accounting for ascension's real costs. In bearing witness



to the moments when intelligence buckles under real emotional difficulty, or when a yearning to connect renders someone simply desperate. To the marriages that fail, and the marriages that succeed. To estrangements: in praise of the necessary severance, but in celebration of the unlikely reconnection. As a testament to that person who becomes fiercely independent—perceived as strong, but who worries she'll always have a sad heart—because she was never able to rely on anyone. To she who is burdened by the memory of those she sacrificed in order to rise.

## HOW CEECEE GOT HER GIMLET EYE

by Dawn Dorland Perry

Tuesday mornings in sixth grade Missy and I took a hall pass to the bathroom, and Missy palmed her training bra to me under the stall. Missy wore the bra on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, so it would be in her weekend wash, and her mom wouldn't question, but Tuesdays and Thursdays, it was mine. I took our bathroom exchange seriously, hooking the harness of the trainer around my waist with an air of ceremony. Thin elastic, its edges pinked like athletic tape. I wore the bra all day Tuesday, and again on Thursday, feeling with every breath the elastic around my ribs. The comfort in the stall of circling the fastener around to my spine, of arching my back and feeling the plastic bump lightly up my backbone; the defeat of passing the bra, its thin cotton easily concealed in my twelve-year-old fist, back to Missy at the end of the school day. To be a woman was to suffer a secret.

Our sixth grade science teacher, Elwin Ebber, wore his pants high water, and smelled like burnt coffee, but my love for him was potent and enduring. He gave long-answer tests, and when we corrected them in class, Mr. Ebber sat on a grey metal stool in front of the blackboard. His posture was perfect, his legs crossed. Square, gold-rimmed glasses hung evenly on his nose. Everything about Mr. Ebber—the lapels of his open collar, even the age spots on his arms—corresponded in alignment and symmetry to the straight, centered part that split his hair like a highway.

In Life Science there were seven rows with two tables and a long aisle down the middle like a bus. Mr. Ebber strolled the aisle as we discussed the reading and touched each table as he passed. I knew Mr. Ebber's hands. His knuckles were hairy, but his nails were clean and square, tinged the slightest yellow of a tshirt's underarm. Mr. Ebber wore a big ruby ring from Iowa State, where he'd studied tornadoes and almost become a weatherman. Twisters had struck our town just last year, late in the summer after fifth grade. We—me, Mom, and my brother, who we call Papa—had seen TORNADO WATCH turn into TORNADO WARNING! and a picture of our county come up on TV.

He had a wife, our social studies teacher, who looked like his sister and swung by to take him on smoke breaks. I held to a fantasy, from watching *Unsolved Mysteries*, that the Ebbers weren't actually married, that Mrs. Ebber had witnessed a horrible crime, that Mr. Ebber got paid to keep her quiet in a small town. I imagined an ongoing debate—science vs. social studies—that strained the marriage. Their feud led nightly to an impasse, silent suppers, sheets tugged to opposite sides of their king-sized waterbed. But through the science room window, which granted a perfect view of our teachers smoking on those late winter afternoons in sixth grade, the Ebbers were usually just puffing away out there, the back of Mr. Ebber's bare neck growing redder in the cold, Mrs. Ebber's black-and-white stranded bob. They wore their identical neon ski jackets and faced the same direction across the plains, away from us, touching shoulders.

Mr. Ebber was concerned that we master the water cycle, and when doing experiments, that we form a *hypothesis*. I had a hypothesis that Mr. Ebber married his sister so she didn't have to be a *lesbian*, which is what Mom said happened to Aunt Roz, but then she wouldn't tell me what a lesbian is. I asked my mother if *she* were a lesbian, in order to organize my observations on the subject, to try to piece a definition together. Mom neither confirmed nor denied being a lesbian but laughed her deep-throated way, showing me her molars, pocked with gold fillings and her slick, red tonsils. My mother's mystery remained unsolved.

That February in Life Science, Leslie moved away, and Bruce Swirley took her seat in front of me.

Bruce had been held back, way back. He drove his own car to the middle school: a two-tone, olive-and-brown, rust-eaten Monte Carlo. So we knew that Bruce lived in the country, and having a school permit made him at least fourteen.

Bruce only came to school in the afternoon, and he still never made it on time. As the one o'clock bell toned over the intercom, and we, at Mr. Ebber's instruction, opened the pages of *Life Science*, our discussion of last night's reading was inevitably upstaged by Bruce's arrival. The Monte Carlo, with its characteristic belch, skidded into the gravel parking lot that lay just beyond the blackboard, and a cloud of dust sailed past the science room window. Bruce's arrival indoors was never less an event. He was taller than everyone in our class—even taller than Harmony who had gotten her growth spurt before most of the boys; who'd had her period on the swings

in front of all of us the year before, in fifth grade, just as we'd all grown out of recess. Bruce paused in the door frame, grinned, and puffed up his chest. He had perfectly square, white teeth and a mark under one eye that mimicked football paint. He then crossed to the far side of the room, where I had the supreme displeasure of sitting behind Bruce Swirley in Life Science, my best and favorite class. Bruce kicked chairs and slapped tables as he came.

He wore a leather jacket that had more zippers and studs than pockets, and he slicked his long hair back when all the other boys wore theirs short and spiky, Bart Simpson-style. On his first day I overheard Bruce bragging to Beautiful Jen—one of the prettiest, most popular girls in our class, whose hair had escaped over the summer onto her shoulders in straw-blond waves. Bruce told his tablemate Beautiful Jen on his first day in class that he thought he looked like Elvis. Yeah, right. I couldn't believe I got stuck sitting behind Bruce Swirley in Life Science. When he tipped back in his chair, I could smell his stinky dandruff.

When we had Mr. Ebber's back, Bruce turned and gawked at all of us, and we gawked back plenty at him. Beautiful Jen—who, by sharing Bruce's table, was unluckier in this one way than me—met any interest that Bruce showed in her with a hostile silence. She turned her chair permanently away from him and toward the aisle.

Beyond Bruce and Jen sat Lydia and Melody, best friends who had come back from Christmas break that year with Ogilvie home perms and pink-and-white-banded braces. I shared my table with Harmony, whose premature growth amazed me. I

imagined she suffered a freakish, sixth grade gigantism. She was easily twice my size with broad shoulders and fat, freckled arms, and her new breasts seemed heavy—they'd made her slump-backed—and she tended to sigh and rest them on the table.

Harmony quizzed me constantly about what the insignias on my clothes stood for. She was trying to make me admit that they were used. She might say, “Who do *you* know who went to USC? What *is* that?” When I answered questions for Mr.

Ebber correctly in class she never failed to call me, under her breath, *Goodwill*.

Behind us were Nathan and Ronnie. Nathan, who was obsessed with Michael Jordan and wore some version of a Bulls jersey every day over a waffled, long underwear shirt; and Ronnie, who had a rattail that he tended to nervously with a pick, the only kid in our school who was half black.

Introduce Bruce into the mix, who ceased speaking in the middle of a sentence when his voice dropped, who had started shaving maybe before he needed to. His lip was stubbled with sparse, little black wires growing at defiant, awkward angles. I thought it was one thing to be poor—to live in the trailer park on the edge of town, like I did; or to wear old gym shoes that pinched your feet. To have the lunch lady wave you through because you had no lunch card, because you were the one who got lunch for free—but it was another thing to be poor and *dumb*, which was my impression of Bruce Swirley as he gaped at me in Life Science with his dopey face.

What we learned about Bruce was that he and his dad rented a farmhouse out along the highway that we'd all thought abandoned. His dad drove trucks cross-country, no mom, so Bruce was pretty much on his own. Bruce bragged that he had

simply refused to go to school before, but until you were sixteen, that was called *truancy*. It was considered his parents' crime. Bruce's dad loitered for a morning at the gas station every few weeks, eating his way through a dozen day-old donuts, his belly like a sow's, every other word out of his mouth a swear. He started a conversation with me and my Dad one Sunday when we were buying bismarcks and knockoff Sunny D called Morning Orange. Bruce's dad said, "My boy Bruce is going to go to school with you, or I'm going to kill him."

It became clear after a few weeks that Bruce had about three shirts, and that they used to belong to his Dad. The red one Bruce wore most—*Teamsters 413: In it for the Long Haul*—belled out around his arms like a choir robe. Because the truth is, there wasn't so much to Bruce when he took off his leather jacket and hung it, even in February cold, on the back of his chair. Bruce had a habitual response, a tic, to this parachute of a shirt bunched thickly into his jeans: of crossing his arms on the table, and pushing the tshirt's big sleeves over his biceps, making a fist and flexing, flexing.

Reviewing for our test on the water cycle, Mr. Ebber said, "When water turns into vapor, folks. When we say that it *ascends*, does that mean it goes up or down?"

I knew perfectly well what ascend meant. To rise.

"Bruce?" Mr. Ebber called on Bruce to answer.

"Uhhh...down? Like dew?" Bruce turned his head and cracked a smile. I could see that some of his side teeth were spidery and gray.

When Bruce answered questions in class—and Mr. Ebber called on him a lot—there were usually laughs. But Bruce’s answer today had people puzzled, and everyone looked at Mr. Ebber expectantly, to clarify. Was Bruce—right?

Mr. Ebber dropped his arms at his side and clapped his thighs. “You’re all in real trouble for the test.”

“Mr. Ebber, can we move the test?” Nathan AKA Jordan shouted from the back.

Mr. Ebber coughed into his fist, which made his cheeks shimmy. Heading for the blackboard, he passed my table, wafting the pleasant menthol of his Cherry Halls.

“Life is a test, people,” Mr. Ebber said, pivoting to face us all before the board. “You’re lucky to know you’ve got one coming.”

Across the aisle, Missy groaned. She nudged Scott’s chair in front of her with her foot. He turned around and rolled his eyes obligingly. As of last month Missy and Scott were going out, and they were making a big show. Missy had started poofing her bangs, curling and teasing them high, and plastering them with hairspray so they froze into a kind of blond tumbleweed. She fidgeted now when she talked to Scott in class, flipping her bangs at the roots without disturbing the shellacked curl, like lifting a little cap. Now I gave Missy and Scott a big *Shhhhhh* because I could tell that Mr. Ebber was about to say something important.

“Think of Darwin,” Mr. Ebber said, facing the class, making eye contact with several of us individually before he continued. “Do you think Darwin gave his teacher a hard time about a test? No. Darwin awoke every morning with a thirst for



discovery. He awoke—Now, imagine this—with his foot in a nest on the Galapagos Islands. Because he'd slept there. All night. His test was, How do I move in a way that doesn't disturb these fascinating birds? Did Darwin ask to move the test? No, he made the test. So—you all remember that. I want this in your notes. Darwin was no wimp about tests.” Mr. Ebber wrote the sentence on the blackboard, and everyone copied it down.

At the end of the period, Mr. Ebber offered to answer questions about tomorrow's test. A long line formed at his desk of those students who had not yet mastered the water cycle. Harmony heaved herself up and lumbered forward. Ronnie walked by, stroking his rattail on his shoulder. Lydia and Melody, with their slackening perms, rose together and joined the line. Remaining seated for the last few minutes of class were those of us who had mastered the water cycle—me—and everyone else who didn't care.

Across the aisle, Missy and Scott held hands. Missy shrugged the neck of her sweatshirt over, exposing her collarbone, her tea-colored shoulder, and the flash of a thin, white strap: the trainer we no longer shared.

Scott had turned around. His cheeks were flushed, his hair poky and erect like a hedge. He put his elbows on Missy's table and sandwiched one of her hands between his. I knew Missy's palms to be papery and dry from when we had been young and close enough to hold hands.

As if she could feel me watching them, Missy turned and regarded me from across the aisle. Harmony's empty chair sat like a buffer between us. Missy's

eyelashes appeared darker, more articulated today behind her round, peach glasses, and the effect of the mascara, I had to admit, made her look much less like an owl. I admired the high reach of her bangs, simultaneously delicate and dense, floating over her forehead like a piece of cotton candy, good enough to eat. I thought of my own failed bangs, which had frozen and collapsed on my walk to school. My old brown glasses. How could I get my hair to ascend like that?

When Missy stopped sharing her trainer with me, right around the time she started going out with Scott, one morning before school I called to my mother and pointed to a photo in the JCPenney catalog. Three girls modeled, front and back, three different styles of training bras with small, pale pink bows. My mother found this terribly funny. She laughed, called my father at work, and laughed again. “Wait, wait,” she said, and came out of the bathroom waving Band-aids at me to take to school, but I hadn’t been cut. “For your mosquito bites,” my mother said and made herself laugh so again hard that she had to pee and ran down the trailer’s narrow hallway to the bathroom, leaving my brother, Papa, on the floor. The house shivered with each of her steps. I took a pair of my father’s shoelaces out of Papa’s mouth, kissed his plump and sticky cheek, and locked the aluminum door behind me. I interrogated my mother’s logic on my walk to school, lowering my face into my collar against the sting of the wind. My ears grew stiff, cold and then hot because—it was winter—and the mosquitoes weren’t biting.

So often I felt like I was on the edge of cracking the code, of mastering the cycle that would deliver me into womanhood, college, beyond. Missy was wearing

mascara, Bruce was shaving (sometimes), and Harmony was heaving her heavy breasts daily onto the desk. I'd gotten used to not having plenty of things that other people had—a VCR, storage units, breakfast—but not having a trainer, that wasn't something I could just get used to. It went against science.

In March it started to get warm, almost sixty, and after a long winter, we were all dying to wear shorts. I'd found a pair of cut-offs that morning in the bottom of my closet under a pile of last year's clothes. I didn't notice until later—at school, in the full-length mirror—that the shorts I'd grabbed were dirty and butt-stained from sitting on the banks of the crick last summer. Not something that I now, as a middle schooler, would do. And it's never as warm at school on those first “spring” days as you would hope. In the bathroom, feeling cold, my pores hoisted their tiny wisps of hair up and down my bare, winter white legs. I sulked back to class, disappointed to be stuck all day in last year's stains.

Even Mr. Ebber had caught the cabin fever. He wore peach-colored slacks belted high with white, woven fabric, and his choice of trouser sock for the season was tan. These pants were so light and thin that you could make out the hemlines. You could see the rectangles of Mr. Ebber's pockets and their contents of breath spray and change. All through sixth period, as we worked on our tests that day covering the *Life Science* unit “Introduction to Human Anatomy,” I watched Joe Camel travel up and down the aisle on Mr. Ebber's rear.

Bruce came in even later than usual. We heard the Monte Carlo crunch gravel, backfire, and die when we were almost halfway through sixth period. Bruce hustled in wearing a new—different—coat, a black windbreaker, and Mr. Ebber met him at his desk with a blank test and a smoldering look. Bruce jumped right into the test, reading it frantically before he'd even completely sat down, and hovering his pencil, but he made no mark.

I was composing an essay on the integumentary system—which is a fancy way of saying epidermis, or “skin”—when I felt something land on my goose-pimpley right knee. It was Bruce's hand, meaty and sweaty. I stopped writing and fought an urge to scream or pee. The skin at my knee softened under Bruce's palm. Mr. Ebber didn't look up. Bruce didn't turn around. For once Bruce appeared to be doing what he was supposed to be doing. He mimed writing the test with his left hand while his right arm shot back, suckered to my leg like a sweaty octopus.

The class kept on scribbling as I tried not to yell out. Under the table, Bruce moved his hand to my other knee. His palm was drier now, and his motion more of a caress, settling my shivers and smoothing out the chicken flesh.

I had always thought there was a funk about Bruce Swirley, something dank and musty about him, something like the way the water-warped, chipboard cabinets in our bathroom smelled. A mushroom, a growth, a tumor, a toilet, neglect, which I tried to soak off of Papa when I ran his evening bath, and to scrub off of me. But the smell of Bruce's skin that day came up sweet and clean from under the table, like a

bar of Irish Spring. I sat on my hands as Bruce touched me and lowered my head, nearly bringing my face to the table as a little hurricane happened behind my eyes.

Mr. Ebber called time. Bruce took his hand back. I felt my knee cool as Bruce's sweat there evaporated. I passed my essay forward with a sentence ending in *The*.

We waited for the bell, and people complained to one another about forgetting things. They smacked their foreheads. Everyone was talking except Bruce and me.

Then he turned around, and said, "Hey, CeeCee. I like your epidermis." I bit hard on my cheeks and lasered at him with my eyes. Then, because I realized it might look like I was puckering, I put my face down on the cover of my science book, which was cool to my forehead, smelling like pencils, and the dry comforts of the library.

When the bell finally rang, I looked up, and Bruce was still there smiling at me, with his slicked-back hair and his overbite, his black eyebrows raised in invitation or pure surprise, and it occurred to me that he did look a little like Elvis.

Bruce sprang from his seat and reached the door fast, but before barreling into the hallway like he usually did, he turned. He blew me a kiss. People pushed past him to leave, and no one bothered to turn and look, to trace the kiss's trajectory in the air, to determine on whom it was supposed to land. Who cared? Bruce was always a clown act.

I stood at my table and stacked my notebooks and folders, grossed out, my heart running like a rabbit, my turtleneck way too hot. I caught sight of Bruce fleeing

to his Monte Carlo through the science room window, his windbreaker flapping behind him like a pair of crow's wings. Bruce jumped in his car and whipped out of the parking space, hailing gravel. Mr. Ebber looked up sharply then and dropped the stack of our tests on his desk, joining me at the window just as Bruce drove by. As he sped off, Bruce leaned across the passenger seat and cranked the window down, flying us all the finger. I had no idea what to make of the touching, or the kiss.

Mr. Ebber glared out the window as Bruce's exhaust trailed away. He clucked his tongue. Then Mr. Ebber smiled down at me, issuing his breath like soggy ashes. He placed his hand on my shoulder, which left me flushed and worried about my not-done test. I told Mr. Ebber to have a very nice day, and I fled the room. In the hallway, I went to my locker with its Garfield poster: "CeeCee Needs Less Week and More Weekend."

The next day Mr. Ebber came straight to my table, the one I shared with Harmony.

"Okay, folks, I saw the tests," he said to the rest of the class, while he spread his bearded fingers on our desk, making eye contact with students in front and behind us. "You can rewrite the essay in your pairs."

Mr. Ebber looked down at Harmony, with her fat gopher cheeks and her chin-to-forehead freckles that never faded or disappeared, not even in the dead of winter. Less freckles than *spots*. Mr. Ebber told Harmony to turn around and to work with Nathan and Ronnie. Nathan groaned and beat the Bulls logo on his chest.

Mr. Ebber waited for Harmony to move, but she didn't at first, reluctant to miss whatever he was going to tell me. My ears filled with my own pulse, beating, beating with the shame of failing Life Science. Finally, Mr. Ebber said, "Move your chair," which Harmony did slowly and screechily. The movement made little earthquakes in her breasts.

As soon as Harmony had slouched out of earshot, Mr. Ebber came to my side, between me and the window, and put his smooth, cool palm again on my shoulder. I was almost certain he used a hand cream. I had sniffed testers at Phillips Rx and tried to imagine each one tinged with nicotine.

Mr. Ebber squatted beside me. His collar was open, and I could see beyond the first few buttons, where a crucifix rested on the sling of his undershirt, against a bib of silver chest hair.

"Is Bruce bothering you?" Mr. Ebber asked me quietly. There were tiny red veins in his cheeks, warped and magnified by the lower half of his glasses. "Do you need help understanding the epidermis? There was something wrong with your essay."

"Can I finish it now? Today?" Panicked, I started to recite what I'd memorized. "The integumentary system includes the epidermis, it's the body's largest organ. It has five layers, thinnest on the eyelids, thickest on the palms and soles."

Mr. Ebber straightened up and smiled, looking down at me with his bright, beige teeth, the two on the right rimmed in gold.

“I think it’s time to tell you about the A-C-T. It’s a high school test, CeeCee. Have you heard of it? There’s a science section. We’re hosting the test here, next month. I’d love to see how you do.” Mr. Ebber exhaled, and I braced myself for the pleasant shock of tar. “Principal Barker will let you take it as a special exception. I talked him into it. Well, are you interested?”

I barely let him finish. “I’ll do it!” My face flushed knowing Mr. Ebber thought I could do well on a high school test. I had to look down.

“Splendid. We’ll work ahead each day in the last few minutes of class,” he said. Mr. Ebber rolled back on his heels and pulled at his smiling lips.

“Thank you—thank you, Mr. Ebber. I won’t let you down.” I grabbed Mr. Ebber’s hand in a somber moment of ceremony. Harmony, dragging her chair back to the table, rolled her eyes to hear me yelping about the ACT.

“So from now on, just finish your essays,” Mr. Ebber said, mock stern, taking his hand. He paced to the front of the room. A burning excitement—concentrated, like pain—hummed in my chest. With this opportunity, maybe I could go straight to college. Only the thought of leaving Mr. Ebber, and then Papa, closed my throat. But I couldn’t dwell on it because Harmony called me a something-something *dork*, which got Scott and Missy laughing, across the aisle, we soon heard Bruce arrive, cutting the engine outside on the Monte Carlo.

Bruce blew into the room, a backpack hanging off of his shoulder. He flung his science book onto the table in front of Beautiful Jen, who pushed it away from her with her finger, along the book’s spine, and Bruce slid into his seat. When he turned



to offer me a high-five, unexpectedly, his palm already shone with sweat, and my knee set off on an annoying tingle.

“Bruce,” Mr. Ebber barked from his desk, turning gruff. “You’d better get your act together, this coming in late, this blank test?” Mr. Ebber came toward us, waving and crumpling Bruce’s test in his face, with a big red zero marked and no other writing. “I mean it, Swirley, I mean it,” Mr. Ebber said, losing his cool. “You’re disrupting other students!” Mr. Ebber released the blank test from his fist, and it floated down slowly to the table, sidling in the air like a feather, as Mr. Ebber turned his back on Bruce and returned to his desk.

“Wull, I sure hope I’m disrupting somebody,” Bruce drawled, now half-standing, giving all of us an ear-wide smile, and eventually settling his eyes on me.

Mr. Ebber reached the center of the room again swiftly, surprising Bruce before he was seated, jabbing his finger into Bruce’s chest. Bruce reared in surprise. “If you’re not gonna try,” Mr. Ebber said, “then you’re going to be here next year. Next year, and the next year, and the next!”

“Don’t count on it, old man.”

Someone behind us started a low *ooooohhh*, increasing in pitch and volume, the sound people sometimes made after lunch, or in the idle hour before the school buses came, to bring on chants of fight! fight!

Mr. Ebber set his jaw and gave Bruce the tiniest push—short and firm, a punch with a flat hand—which unbalanced Bruce, and sent him scrambling, clinging to his chair and then grabbing for the table. As Bruce struggled not to fall, not to

wipe out in front of everyone, the chair made short, sad screeches. Bruce's hair folded over its part and covered his face. Harmony sniggered. And then others joined in. Bruce snapped his head back in surprise and glared at all us. A tension like that always made me giggle, and if I burst out laughing when Mom and Dad were going after each other, my mother turned on me, and called me a little bitch—but I swallowed the laughter right down that day when Bruce turned his eyes on me, as cold and blue as ice in the tray.

Mr. Ebber stood, statue-like, looking for whoever had whooped it up, and silence descended on us. Bruce smoothed his hair, took his seat, and stared down at his big red zero. Mr. Ebber, challenging anyone to upset the control he had regained over the class, held his pose.

Then Mr. Ebber clapped his hands and turned sunny, spinning on his heel and approaching the blackboard. “So, you all did the reading. How nifty are the adrenal glands?”

At the end of class that day, Mr. Ebber said he'd go over any questions we had about our tests individually. A long line of people jockeying for a higher grade formed at his desk. Neither Bruce or I had an essay to discuss. The room cleared. It was just us in our seats. When Bruce predictably turned around, I put my finger in his face.

“I have a very important opportunity,” I said. “And I'm not gonna let you ruin it!” I stabbed the air.

“So serious,” he replied.

“*You keep your hands to yourself.*”

Bruce, shrugging me off, turned his chair around, splayed his legs, and collapsed his arms on the backrest. I hadn’t meant for him to get so comfortable.

“You better lighten up on this Mr. Ebber stuff—you know? Everyone already thinks you’re a suckup.”

“Suckup?” My eyes got hot. “Suckup!” I pressed my palms flat on the table. Did any of them honestly have any idea what I was up against? I could see that Bruce was trying hard not to laugh at me. He could barely keep his lips together. How could he know what everyone else thought, and I didn’t?

The next day was bad for Bruce. Mrs. Ebber rapped on the door, swinging her bob, and Mr. Ebber grabbed his lighter from a desk drawer and followed her outside. “Work in pairs,” he said as he pulled on his coat and his backside left the room.

I had done the reading—anticipating the ACT, I’d read three chapters ahead in *Life Science*—and I tried to help Harmony that day understand the nervous system. She said the diagram we studied looked like Reagan, the classroom skeleton, but under a bunch of blue veins. I tried to explain to Harmony that they weren’t veins but nerves—essential neural pathways—the way that cells communicate. She didn’t get it. But we had a good laugh over the line about animals that lack nervous systems. In *Life Science* it said, “Sponges have very simple body plans.”

Beautiful Jen was absent that day. Bruce worked alone with his head down. He hadn’t done the reading. The whole time Harmony and I worked, flipping to the

questions at the end of the chapter and back, Bruce sat stuck staring at that same first page. It seemed like he was concentrating, but every minute or so he sighed and shook his head. His hair came down, his hand smoothed it back. A minute later he'd repeat the process, same page, same groan. Through the window, Mr. Ebber flicked the filter of one cigarette, lipped onto another, and kissed it to the glowing end of Mrs. Ebber's.

Scott drew all of our attention when he stood up suddenly, slid his chair, and leaned over his seatmate, Daniel, who cowered. "Shut your hole. Now." I gathered that Daniel had teased Scott about the color of his polo shirt, so pale pink it might have been by accident in the wash. Bruce was pulled out of his reading—we all were—and Bruce quickly closed his book. "What color are your undies?" Bruce asked.

Scott whirled around to face Bruce. His cheeks always ran red, but now Scott sputtered, and his face turned nearly purple. He made quick checks of Missy, behind him, who sat in complete silence, not coming to his aid. It could have been funny. Scott might have said something like, "Real men wear pink," but he got flustered and took the whole thing way too seriously. It was Brandon who came to Scott's defense. Brandon was one of the most popular kids in our class, and he sat all the way up front, practically at Mr. Ebber's desk, and always seemed to feel like he was missing out on what happened at the back.

Brandon approached Bruce at his table—but Bruce hadn't started it. Bruce stood up at his desk anyway, facing off. Brandon's parents were going to buy him a

blue Trans Am when he turned sixteen, and Brandon wore a tshirt that day with a blue Trans Am on it.

“I could kick your ass, Swirley,” Brandon said. He was dimply and spike-haired, shorter than Bruce, but stout and athletic. “Ja hear me, Squirrely? I said I could kick your held-back ass.” Someone hooted to hear Brandon use a swear. He strode a few feet closer to our tables, but stopped and cautiously checked outside. Mr. and Mrs. Ebber were still blowing smoke out there, giving us the backs of their heads.

Bruce seemed to want to de-escalate the situation now. He remained calm. He sat and re-opened his book. “Whoa-ho, Brandon,” he said, facing the page. “Big man using big man words.”

“I said lay off of Scott, you ass wipe.”

“Watch yourself,” Bruce said sharply. “How fast you think you can run compared to my Carlo?” Bruce shrugged. “At least I can drive.”

“Duh, Swirley, we can all drive,” Brandon said. “We can all get school permits when we’re as old as you.”

“Yeah, well. I can drive to Des Moines.”

“Stupid Swirley,” Nathan shouted from the back. “How could you drive to Des Moines? You can’t even read street signs, you dump dope.”

“That’s funny,” Bruce said, rising from his chair. “Because I drive to Des Moines all the time, I see all the R-rated movies.”

“Only because you have a greasy mustache!” Nathan said. “You’re not seventeen!”

I saw a cigarette butt fly by the window. Brandon saw it, too. He hustled like a point guard to the front of the room and slid into his seat.

Mr. Ebber came smiling, unzipping his coat, into a perfectly silent classroom, with the exception of Bruce saying *You shithead* in his general direction. On the intercom, Mr. Ebber let Principal Barker know that Bruce Swirley was on his way.

Later that same day, in band, Lydia finally had a meltdown over her braces and seemed to give up playing the trumpet once and for all. Lydia now considered getting her braces a tragedy on the scale of war, famine, plague, and dead puppies because, for playing the trumpet, getting braces was like starting all over. Lydia had been frustrated for months now, having to learn everything new. Her best friend Melody, who’d gotten braces at the same time, played the flute, and she rebounded quickly from the dental work. Our chorus and band instructor, Mr. McKay, had gently advised Lydia to sit at the end of the section for awhile, instead of in first chair.

Every day, when we were beginning band, Lydia turned up her lip and showed the rest of us trumpets the imprints that the brackets were leaving on the slick inside. She seemed to agonize over the pain and pressure that any playing put on her teeth, and Lydia’s eyes watered now every time she lifted her horn. I felt sorry for her. Like some kind of bad apology, Lydia’s parents had treated her to a brand new, silver trumpet, and a jazz mouthpiece that Lydia said was designed to help her play high

notes. But then, in the middle of a section rehearsal that spring, Lydia stopped playing. She placed her horn in its case, laid the velvet slipcover over her trumpet, latched the case shut and marched herself out of band. Mr. McKay continued conducting, but followed her with his eyes. He had the misfortune, for a music instructor, of having no neck, a feature that was unfortunately accentuated every day by his occupation of having to raise his arms and wave his hands. The band room's back door, where Lydia left that day, opened onto a long narrow drive where buses parked and an area of stinky, enclosed concrete for the middle and high school's dumpsters.

I couldn't forget Lydia, and when rehearsal let out, the last period of the day, I also took the back door. I couldn't believe what I saw. There in the sunlight, wedged beside a dumpster, in its soft-covered Stradivarius case was Lydia's new trumpet. I thought of my own, gold and scuffed, with a dented bell, which we rented from the music store, the mouthpiece I borrowed from Mr. McKay. There was a month the year before that I'd had to sit through band rehearsals with no trumpet at all because my parents had neglected to pay the fees, and the music store owner had driven all the way from Des Moines to take my trumpet for ransom. Was Lydia really just throwing this all away?

I didn't dare hope that I could have it. Like five dollars I found as a child and turned in to Roy—our town's only police officer, always sitting in the shade somewhere, in his patrol car—Roy seemed surprised that I should turn in the money. He told me to take that bill and go to the gas station and buy myself as much candy as

I could eat. But then it was my turn to be surprised because the five dollars wasn't mine, so how could I just go and spend it? I didn't dare hope to have the horn. But I did make up my mind to take the trumpet.

I approached the dumpsters, holding my breath against the sickly-sweet smell of garbage that's been sitting in a mild sun. I placed my hands on the case and its soft, brown cover; I ran my fingers along its edges and seams. The lunch ladies brought boxes of expired food out here, and John the janitor hurled those big black bags that came out of the cafeteria trash over the dumpster's edge. I pulled on the handle, trying to un wedge it. Lydia had jammed the rectangular case between the cinder block wall and the dumpster's gunky wheels. My heart squeezed to see that the trumpet case's fabric was rubbed in some places with dumpster muck. And then I heard something move—at the far end of the dumpster. I screamed, backpedalling and covering my face, fearing a rat.

What I slammed into was softer than a wall. It was Bruce, who looked as startled as I felt. He was holding onto half a corn dog, soggy with ketchup, what we'd had for lunch that day. The corn dog's stick protruded, pointing right at Bruce's face, at the red sauce smeared there around his mouth.

"Are you—eating?" I asked. It was 3:30. Sixth period started after lunch, and Bruce never ate with us. If he did, I would know, because he'd also get waved through the line like I did, free lunch, no card.

Bruce ran. It was a beautiful, warm, spring afternoon, and I watched Bruce run away along the backside of the school. He hurdled paint cans and scraps piled up



behind the wood shop, flung grey trashcans on wheels out of his way, and soon reached the fragile, pale new grass that absorbed every strike of his heel. I watched Bruce run until he disappeared around the far end of the school—the classroom where we had Life Science, the window where I kept watch—and I imagined Bruce, after that, skidding in his high-top sneakers on the gravel, wiping the ketchup from his mouth, and fishtailing the Carlo out of the lot, heading for home.

“No country singer worth her salt ever started out bagging groceries,” my mother always said. “Or hacking hogs like your father.” Her hair grew all the way down her back, wavy and amber, the color of her name. The thing about groceries was when she and my father fought about money, when my father asked my mother to work, but Mom put an end to all that by having my little brother, Papa. His real name was Cole—we were Cole and Cecilia—but Cole’s first word was *Papa*, and my mother would only call him Papa after that, in a parroting, jealous tone. My father we just called Dad.

Mom told me, “Cecilia, read your Bible I gave you, the one with the lock and key? Jesus will come when you’re thirty. It’s been prophesied. If you ever feel disappointed, you ever think you’ll always have a sad heart, just see Jesus coming for you. Anything gets easier when you’re waiting on Jesus. I’ll make it as a singer, I’m gonna make it.” When my mother told me these things, she shook me awake in the dark to say it. Her hazel-green eyes opened wider than usual in the lamplight, and she slurred her words. She had a gap between her teeth as wide as my little finger then,

and when she spoke too quickly the sentences ran together like a poison she had to spit. My mother rambled, *I'm a gonna make it, gonna make it, gonna make it*, at me in the middle of the night, and lisped my name.

Everyone knows you can't stay in a trailer during a twister, and last summer when we saw TORNADO WATCH turn into TORNADO WARNING! on TV, Mom ordered me and Papa into the van. I sat my brother down in the cargo on his diaper and slid the door shut with a running start and both hands. The smell of onions searing next door: the neighbors would have to abandon their meal. Some people would take shelter at the Laundromat at the center of the trailer court, and others could go to relatives' homes, but we didn't know any relatives.

The single tree whose root expanse took up the back of the yard—a wolf tree, older than all the trailers, that even a farmer might have left standing in a field—somewhere inside that old tree, the wood whined in different pitches as the storm winds changed course. Mom wrenched the door of the Econoline open on her side, that groaning hinge. Slammed it. I climbed into the van, onto the passenger seat with its yellow foam tonguing the backs of my legs. I'd seen pictures of trailers with their insulations bleeding out just like that seat, the aluminum walls half gone, roofs pried up like soup cans. The news took pictures of people standing on plywood doorsteps where their homes had been—nothing now but a blue sky behind them—which is why we call them mobile homes.

Mom releases the emergency brake and backs us out of the driveway. The steering wheel circles dizzy at the heel of her hand. We roll past the other lots to

cross Main, the only two-lane striped road in town, and head into the next neighborhood, looking for a basement. Out here on the margins, Mom's side of the road is split-level, ranch, and two-story houses with garages, double driveways, ball hoops and lawn-tractor yards. The land on my side of the van extends for miles into tasseled, wind-whipping corn. Exposed, the Econoline is buffeted by gusts coming off the fields. The rectangular side mirror reflects the grain elevator against a darkening sky. Mom controls the car with quick, compensating jerks. Storm air drafts in, roaring at the window's edges, *pfft*-ing through the floor's rust. My mother opens the wing vent against the howling air, and the ends of her hair rise. Papa sits on a blanket in the cargo and cries. His scar, a dog claw across his forehead, fills in, redder than the rest of him.

Mom fiddles with the AM dial, swears. The country station's tower is down. She sings one of her own songs—*We bought milk by the gallon, Mama drank it by the quart*—to comfort Papa.

I watch through the window for the funnel, staring down the horizon, as the sky ahead of us turns sallow, the color of bile. If I see the twister, I will direct Mom and Papa into the deep ditches that line the road. We'll wade in, snapping the wild asparagus and let the ditch roses thorn our ankles. I will instruct my mom and my brother, as we've learned to do in school, to lock fingers at the base of their skulls, to save their necks.

Mom turns down Cedar, stomps the emergency brake, and idles the van. She crosses lawns, knocking on doors at a few dark houses, too prideful to approach

houses with lights on and families inside. Picture windows show them giving and taking orders, gathering provisions—water, food, radios, flashlights—to carry down to carpeted basements or crumbling, half-earth cellars. My mother waits uselessly on each stoop, her amber hair flying, hands curved into the high, back pockets of her jeans. Her waist is tiny, and her rear is round and heart-shaped, causing every pair of her Levi's to wear soft and thin under the pockets. The Econoline rocks lightly on its suspension. The radio statics. Papa sucks on his three middle fingers and forgets to breathe. When he gulps air, it sounds like drowning. I climb into the cargo and wipe Papa's face. Next year in Life Science I'll have learned that the temperature of the blanket I use to absorb Papa's crying will be lower when the tears dry.

The door groans, and my mother again takes up the driving. "Nobody home, nobody goddamn home, or not answerin,'" she says.

My mother's voice is a clear soprano, and her singing improved dramatically over the years. When we couldn't find shelter, I stayed in the back with Papa who folded down one of his ears and sucked his thumb. My mother sang us a song then that I don't remember now—most of it lost in the wind—but like any country song ever written, it was about how she had no choice. Around then, the summer after fifth grade, Mom started exercising her voice professionally, singing warmups and scales. Some mornings she sang the Jeopardy theme in every key. The van stopped abruptly. I let go of Papa and climbed back into the front seat. We were stopped at Mr. McKay's house, our no-neck band and chorus teacher. He didn't have a family

yet and directed the high school play in the evenings. He was young compared to most of our teachers, compared to the Ebbers.

Mom got out and knocked on Mr. McKay's screen door, and he answered, appearing from within his dark brick house, wearing a tshirt with a stretched-out collar. He raised his eyebrows at my mom. He looked over my mother's shoulder. He saw me in the van. I waved. Then Mom turned and looked at me, too. She often assessed me this way. Having turned on me and tended to something else, she might spin back around and watch me suddenly, long and careful.

Mom leaned with one hand on McKay's door and looked back at me sitting in the van, studying me over the hair piled up on her shoulder. She worked her tongue between the gap in her teeth like she was thinking, her freckles an explosion of late summer. My mother's face was curious, searching, her eyebrows crimped as if to gauge my understanding, to find out what I really know.

Then she spoke to Mr. McKay, who stood rigidly in the door. He was shorter than she is, squat, with thick hair and shiny eyelashes that seemed unnatural on a man. Later, when Mom opened the door of the Econoline and climbed back in, she said, "Looks like this one's passed us by."

At dark we found my father sitting on the steps in his steel mesh apron. Mosquitoes swarmed above him in the porch light. A wad of bandages was taped to one hand.

“You were supposed to be home hours ago!” my mother screamed, flinging herself from the van as soon as she’d set the brake. She left the door of the Econoline grinding open on its hinge. “You bastard—we almost got swept in the sky!”

“I’m hurt, you see?” Dad offered his bandaged hand to my mother. He sat in the narrow cone of light cast by the porch bulb, and when he offered his hand, extending it, his hand disappeared into the dark.

My mother crossed the yard to the bottom of the steps that my father had crafted from two-by-fours to meet our trailer door. Mom panted at him in anger. Her bottom teeth jutted forward, her small chest heaved. Then my mother swung her own hand back and whacked Dad’s bundle of gauze.

My father cried out, stood, and backpedaled out of reflex, stumbling up the steps until he slammed into the aluminum door. The porch bulb glanced against the fixture, and it burst out into the evening, a crack of light, a puff of glass.

My mother ordered us out of the van.

When I slid the door open, Papa reached up to me with both of his arms. I cradled his bottom, and when I lifted, he wrapped his chubby legs around my waist. Mom slammed the door behind me and circled back around to the driver’s side. Before she left, I stood and looked back at her from the yard, watched Mom position herself in the bucket seat beneath the Econoline’s broad windshield like a movie screen. She cursed, muted by the glass, and smacked her hand on the dash. Where my mother went every night—I don’t know—but I dreamed it was to another family. Where my mother served Hamburger Helper on thick paper plates. She kissed the

children on their foreheads, and sternly, at a certain hour, sent them to bed. I dreamed that one day Papa, Dad, and I could join them, too.

My mother sees me stopped there in the narrow, shoebox yard. Papa's head is on my shoulder, his weight on my hip, the coldness of his pissed-in diaper against my arm. Mom pokes her head through the van's open window. "What?" she says. "Get in the house."

I climb the steps, scuffing my feet against the wood under Papa's weight, and when I reach the top step, I swing him inside. He laughs. I reach out and close the trailer door on the drone of crickets and katy-dids.

Inside, my father is already in his recliner, watching TV. His hand with the bandages is in his lap. "My knife hand slipped," Dad says, but doesn't look up. He has turned on no lights, opened no windows, and the trailer is stuffy, wanting air. The TV is a murmur of blue reflecting off my father's glasses.

We hear the Econoline rev outside with its high, loose-belt squealing. Gravel crunches, pings off the tires, and everything is quiet, my mother is gone. I put Papa on a pillow on the floor and turn a lamp on in the room.

With his good hand, my father switches on his Remington, which he keeps in a pocket on the recliner. By the light of the television, and by feel, he gives himself a dry shave. The mesh apron is already on its hook by the door, smelling faintly of blood iron, ready for that dark hour when he rises. I heat water to make Papa a bottle on the stove.

While the water boils, I sit down on the carpet next to Dad. I ask him for a dollar to buy pizza bread—the gas station at the center of town sells them in revolving, heat-lit cases.

My father does not respond verbally. He doesn't take his eyes from the TV. The blades of the Remington whirl over the planes and curves of his face. In the light cast by the television, a cockroach lumbers across the peaks of the carpet.

Dad stows the Remington, and I look up at him from the carpet. He places his hand on my head. We watch some of *Roseanne* like that, his hand flattening my bangs, pressing their tips into my eyelashes. He clears his throat whenever the studio audience laughs. Dad's hand on my head feels dull, and bigger than it is. Mom never let him touch her in the red silk dressing robe because he'd snag it. I imagined my father's hands as a protective coating, the calluses and wide, rubbed knuckles. I imagined his hands as clumsy, unworkable and numb to all feeling, like gloves he wore over his real hands.

After being bullied in class, Bruce got sullen, less surly. In Life Science, he seemed to just be going through the motions. He didn't invite any unnecessary attention, he didn't try to make anyone laugh. The whole class slugged forward as if in a kind of depression. A spark of interest might ignite around Bruce. Mr. Ebber tried to provoke him handing back tests one April day, saying that he wouldn't have believed the good score if he didn't know Bruce's bad handwriting so well. But if Bruce didn't take someone's bait, a collective despair set in, buzzing above our heads.



Perhaps we began to realize, fairly or not, how thrilling Bruce's arrival had made every afternoon in Life Science, how exciting and full of possibility his antics had made the long, familiar school day.

I never said anything to Bruce about the dumpster. I think I wanted to find a way to help him first. I considered bringing part of my own lunch to sixth period to share with him, which would have been easy enough. We had Life Science right after lunch. But Bruce wasn't assigned a locker, and there wasn't any covert way to do it. I had my own hunger to deal with. Most people complained about lunch—classmates scraped entire portions of the meal into trashcans—but I drank both cartons of milk provided, and I rarely left food on my tray. Not even the infamous tater tot casserole, blazing orange like the rind of waxy fat that rises from canned beef stew. Spiked with chunks of meat that none of us could identify. Smelling foul like cooked socks—I ate it all.

One stormy day towards the end of April, Mr. and Mrs. Ebber left in their rain slickers and huddled smoking outside under the school's eave. Harmony approached Missy across the aisle. I heard Nathan and Ronnie trade Jordan stats. Bruce reached into his backpack that day. The bag yawned open on both sides, its zipper off-track, and he pulled out a yellowed paperback, phonebook-thick, missing its cover. Bloated and wavy as if it had once been wet.

"I brought you something," Bruce said. I didn't even realize at first that he was talking—that he was talking to me. I had uncapped my pink highlighter and was about to score the definition for *mitochondria* that I'd copied from the board.

“Couldn’t think of anything else you like,” Bruce continued. “Except tests.”

His short laugh came out *ha!* like you’d write it.

I stopped highlighting, and Bruce held the book out to me. Its pages were soft and warped, the kind you could pull your thumb across to fan your face with old memory smells. I looked at Bruce. And at the book again. I couldn’t think of anything to say. It’s like Bruce was giving me a present. A book without a cover that started on page nine. When Scott and Missy started going out, he gave her a pair of vinyl lips that said KISS ME.

“I think it was my mom’s,” Bruce said. “It’s by Hee-ming-way, and he’s famous. My mom went to the community college.”

“Don’t you want to keep it?” I asked. He should want to collect any evidence that he had a mother—shouldn’t he?

“Nah,” he said.

I took the book from Bruce with my thumb and finger, put it on the farthest corner of the table and said “Thanks.” We heard the rain start up again outside, pouring off the school roof in sheets. A timpani boom, clap of thunder. Mr. and Mrs. Ebber entered the outside door, and we heard them laugh and shake themselves off in the hallway. Bruce gawked at me. He smiled slightly, like the Mona Lisa. His expression seemed to say, *well?*

Bruce picked up the book like he might open and read it. And a flattened cockroach fell out on the table, belly up, preserved, its legs neatly folded. I saw cockroaches scattering in the kitchen when I turned on the light, so quick to the

crevices, beads of water splitting on a hot-oiled pan. Cockroaches fanning up the wall behind my encyclopedias, the 1970 World Book series that Dad bought me at a thrift store. They laid their beetle eggs in the spines of my books; they smeared brown on the wall where I smashed them. I could never kill them all.

I gasped when I saw it. It was involuntary, but too late to take back.

Bruce flushed and whipped around.

Harmony returned to the table, and the classroom quieted as Mr. Ebber entered the room. I braced myself for Harmony to see the bug on the table and to say something public—*Gross! Trash!* But she pulled a page from her notebook and landed her right shoulder on the desk, obscuring what she wrote, which is what I called Giving Me the Great Wall. I saw my opportunity. I pushed the crackled dry cockroach onto the floor with my pencil eraser and pretended it just hadn't happened.

Shortly later, the school bell toned over the intercom, and Agnes, Mr. Barker's secretary, came on the loudspeaker to announce a tornado drill. She assured us that the current weather, the storm outside, was coincidental. "I repeat, this is a drill, not an actual tornado," Agnes said. "All classes report to assigned areas with hardcover books."

We all stood immediately, almost in unison, with our copies of *Life Science*, so eager to get out of class. Drills should have been dull, but they involved a delicious distraction from routine. And the actual storm that day—thunder and buckets, now giving way to pings of hail—had made the prospect of sitting together

in one of our school's interior chambers, waiting it out in close quarters, seem cozy to me.

Our class was assigned the junior varsity boys' locker room, one of our school's natural fortresses. Mr. Ebber led us down the hall, past the cafeteria and auditorium, and into the bright gymnasium. When we'd crossed the gym, and filed inside of the locker room, it was already full with students from other classes. Mr. Ebber led us into the boys' shower. It was tight for the twenty of us, but everyone would have a place to sit down. Outside the shower, kids from other grades fell in line along the JV lockers, the full-length mirrors, and the toilet stalls. Some students milled around—in typical tornado drill disorder—and some of us sat down with the textbook from our sixth period class in our laps.

The showers smelled chemical, like Comet. But for all that alleged scouring, white scum clung to the blue tile. Mr. Ebber instructed us inside the shower to sit with our backs against the walls, and he began to take attendance in his roll book. Lydia and Melody, the perm girls, resisted sitting at all and complained about staining their jeans in the “dirty boy shower.” Scott and Brandon alternated pretending to turn the showers on them. Ignoring that commotion, I found Bruce sitting in the shower's far corner, his legs extended to the drain. I was surprised that he'd bothered to attend the drill at all—he could have so easily ducked into the parking lot and driven away—but this was the new Bruce. Obliging, obedient, silent.

“Listen up!”

Mr. Ebber clapped his hands, which reverberated loudly through the shower. Many of us flinched, and Ronnie's hands shot up to his ears.

"You know the drill," Mr. Ebber said. Missy flipped her bangs and groaned. "Books on your necks, everyone. We'll hold it for ten." Such was the special torture that we endured several times a year in Midwestern schools.

Anyone who wasn't already sitting now plopped on the floor. Twenty *Life Science* books spread, and on the crowns of people's heads, took the shape of peaks. Logic suggested that we have book open somewhere in the middle, but I cheated mine to the last chapter, the point to which I had already worked ahead. There were just two weeks now until the ACT. Mr. Ebber had signed me out a seventh and an eighth grade book. I tilted my face sideways under my book roof in the boys' shower, put my cheek against the page, and even though the words blurred at that proximity, I began to read.

I was aware of Mrs. Ebber appearing at the shower entrance, and of Mr. Ebber striding across the tile floor, stepping over the shower drain, and following his wife outside. Not a moment later, a student in one of the classes outside the shower removed a can of cologne spray from a JV locker. We heard giggles coming from outside the shower, the slim can being passed and sprayed. The exhaust fans in the outer room kicked on, and this boy musk blew in. It gathered in a powdery cloud beneath the shower's water-sealed fluorescents.

It started quietly, like a whine. I rested my face against my knees. Under the book, my breath blew hot through the denim of my jeans. I heard my name. I looked

up, but couldn't identify the source. I heard my name again and said, "What?" And then I heard it, their whisper-chanting. *CeeCee, CeeCee*.

Missy, Scott, Nathan, Brandon, Lydia, Melody, and Harmony, they were all chanting my name—*CeeCee, CeeCee*—everyone, it seemed, but Bruce. They giggled and jeered at me with their books over their heads, resembling evil houses.

"What?" I said, my skin rushing. "What do you want?"

My voice trembled. I heard it echo off the tile. The boy mist in the shower pulled slowly toward gravity. It coated and clung to my throat.

I was up against the far wall, and my classmates chanted across the shower entrance, a human bridge. *CeeCee, CeeCee, CeeCee*. I looked helplessly into their faces, pleading silently with Missy, even Harmony. Their eyes shone, their faces flushed with thrill.

I thought of the book Bruce had just given me, sitting on the science room table at that very moment, all the way at the other end of the school. The chants of *CeeCee* grew louder, and Harmony broke ranks.

"Kiss her, Bruce," she said.

*Kiss her, Bruce. Kiss her Bruce!*

Bruce stared at the shower drain, despondent. His legs splayed as he slumped against the wall. His only recognition of what was happening seemed to be a slight flinch when the chant came around to his name. *Kiss her, Bruce! Kiss! Her! Bruce!*

"He feels her up under the desk," Harmony said, as everyone took up the new chant. "I *saw*—she let him do it!"

Students from Mrs. Ebber’s class outside the shower now appeared between the faces of my own classmates, their hundreds of eyes.

I don’t know when I dropped my book, or how I could have allowed its pages to fold so carelessly on the floor, when books were the only thing that ever saved me. The chants and echoes in the shower bounded from wall to wall, frantic, like a trapped bird whose instinct chooses power over aim.

“Spread your legs, CeeCee...” they began.

“...*yeah*, show him where you want him to kiss you.”

“Just like her Mom—what my dad says.”

“Snowblower in training!”

“Little suckup. She really does suck.”

I dug my fingers into my scalp, tried to make my skull fit into two hands, squeezing and squeezing until my knuckles popped.

“Go ahead, CeeCee,” Harmony said, sing-song. “Kiss and make up. You can raise your babies in the trailer park on food stamps.”

“No,” I moaned. “I’m taking the ACT.” But this only prompted laughter, new chants of *Suck! Up! Suck! Up!*

I screamed.

I screamed for an age, I screamed so the tornado would hear me, yelled so loud and long that it drowned out the chants, and the laughter, and the pain. I flung myself on the floor. I threw a tantrum like the child I still was then, smacking my

palms against the scummy shower floor until they stung, banging my forehead so it later left an ashen bruise. I wallowed, I reveled in it, and I took Bruce down.

“If you think I would touch that *trash!*” I shrieked, as everyone grew silent. “That smelly *trash!* He eats out of the dumpster—the dumpster he was born in.” My arm shook as I extended it from my position on the floor. I pointed at Bruce. Bruce hid his expression, letting his hair fall in his face.

“Whoa... Coming from you,” they said.

“Harsh, man.”

“No surprise, though, that you were at the dumpster, too.”

“LEAVE ME THE FUCK ALONE!” I roared. I tasted iron. I screamed myself hoarse.

Mr. Ebber pushed through the crowd, stumbling on science books that littered the floor. “Somebody want to tell me what the *hell* is going on?” he said. “Who used that profanity?” Mr. Ebber regarded me strangely as I pushed myself up from the floor and someone handed me my glasses. My palms stung and my knees pulsed with later bruises. The harsh fluorescents, flood-lighting Mr. Ebber, exaggerated every crease in his face.

To everyone’s surprise, Bruce spoke. “It was me,” he said. “I said it.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Mr. Ebber said, shaking his head at Bruce and scanning the room. “I know it was one of you ladies.”

“It was CeeCee.”



Missy, finally, was the one who told on me. In high school she lost her cachet, and became plain. The other transformations among us were more predictable: Harmony gained weight steadily throughout our school years. Beautiful Jen stayed aloof and beautiful. But there were surprises, too: Melody got pregnant in ninth, and she had to leave Lydia for an alternative school that provided daycare and parenting classes. Ronnie became a track star; his rattail flew over state championship hurdles. Lydia made a miraculous switch after dumping her trumpet, which Mr. McKay rescued from the trash, to playing trombone. I ran for student council and came to terms with being respected, but never liked. Put it this way: I kept in touch with the lunch lady after graduation, the one who always waved me through. What happened in the boys' shower and after, are memories I feed and keep alive as an ever-present possibility, so as to meet anything like that again face-on, rather than bump up against it in the dark. With time I realized that not a single one of them had ever promised me anything. And if no one has promised you anything, what right have you to feel betrayed? Betrayal is what we call it when we've pinned secret, longing promises onto other people for ourselves. I don't go into rooms with anyone anymore, so to speak.

We both got sent to the Principal's that day, me and Bruce. And because it was Bruce's second time there in as many months, Principal Barker's secretary, Agnes, said that she must call Bruce's father.

Bruce and I sat side-by-side, watching Agnes dial. The rain and hail blew through during the drill, and the sky beyond the outer office windows was gunmetal grey. Thimbles of hail still studded the grass and concrete.

A study hall student answered the outside line while Agnes left a message for Bruce's father. "Mr. Swirley, hello—this is Agnes from the high school calling on behalf of Principal Barker. We have Bruce in the office a second time now for insubordination. As agreed, you will need to come and remove him from the premises. Goodbye, sir."

Bruce wore his black windbreaker with the collar popped, and as we sat in the office chairs, waiting on the wrath of Principal Barker, Bruce seemed to shrink down inside his collar, to disappear. I willed myself to meet his eyes. I knew I should thank Bruce for how he'd tried to save me, and—I knew now, at such risk to himself—but the weight and sincerity of the gesture, its saintliness, made me feel shame. Our arms ran parallel on the rests of the office chairs, like strangers in a movie theatre. I tried to will myself to do anything at all, even to touch Bruce's hand.

Mr. Barker emerged from the office's embedded hallway—where the Principals for the middle and high schools sat, as well as the Superintendent for the district—and he looked at me and Bruce with surprise.

"I'm sorry to see you both," he said.

Mr. Barker turned and headed wordlessly back down the hallway, and my whole body flushed with a wave of naïve relief. But when Bruce got up and followed Mr. Barker, I could see this wasn't over, and I had to take his lead.

We followed the principal, whose pant-lines were starched and creased, which I focused on to keep my balance as you do the stripes on the highway, into the principal's office. What I decided between sitting in the chairs before Agnes and sitting in the chairs before Mr. Barker—which seems to me now like a long, drawn-out time of calculated decision; it could only have been five seconds—was that Bruce's life, his prospects, weighed somewhat less than mine.

Mr. Barker's office smelled of wood-stain, and he sat in a worn, leather-backed banker's chair. Diplomas, certificates, and commendations climbed the walls behind him like skyscrapers. In the center of his desk, a crystal paperweight said *Educator of the Year*. Beneath it, a slip of paper bearing our names—Cecilia Stanton, Bruce Swirley, Elwin Ebber—from Agnes' familiar pink memo pad.

Mr. Barker pushed his fingers into a steeple and brought them to his lips. “What are we doing here today?” he said.

I had already decided how it would go.

“It's a misunderstanding,” I said. “I shouldn't even be here. Bruce said *fuck* in the boys' shower. Excuse me. He used a swear.”

“Is the allegation true?” Mr. Barker addressed Bruce who remained tense, silent. It seemed at any moment that the dam he'd built up around him might break and give way. I was surprised at Bruce's endurance that day. That he allowed himself to be sacrificed.

Mr. Barker peered intently at Bruce. “Are you hungry?” he asked suddenly.

Bruce seemed frozen, remote. He didn't appear to give any response.

Mr. Barker nodded, swiveled around in his chair and plucked a box of cornflakes from between binders on a side shelf. "Give me a minute," he said, apologetically, and left the room.

We heard murmuring in the hallway with Agnes. Mr. Barker soon returned with a paper bowl, a plastic spoon, and a carton of chocolate milk. "We're all out of regular in the teacher's lounge," he said, presenting the carton to Bruce. "Will this do?" Bruce nodded. He took the supplies, and prepared a bowl of cereal on the edge of Mr. Barker's desk. Bruce filled the bowl with cornflakes and poured the chocolate milk carefully from the carton's cardboard spout. What would have overflowed the small Chinet bowl, Bruce immediately drank down. Then he ate.

Over his shoulder, through Principal Barker's window, I saw the semi bearing down School Street, a banner across its grill proclaiming WIDE LOAD. The rig approached from a few blocks off and took up both sides of the road, which wasn't striped. Bruce's father must have judged that he couldn't turn the semi-trailer around the flagpole and into the lot. He pulled up to the school entrance and, with a flush of hydraulics, brought the whole monster to a rest. A little door opened, high in the cab, and Mr. Swirley emerged, belly first.

His dad's face was crimson, his grey beard long and shaved into a horseshoe with the chin left clean. Mr. Swirley seemed unsteady on his legs coming down from the big rig, and he took wide, side-arcing steps. As he passed the window Bruce's dad hitched up his pants and stopped to notch his belt tighter. We three watched him

adjust the buckle snugly beneath the lowest part of his stomach, concave and hairy, visible beneath his shirt.

Bruce collected his bowl, his spoon, and the carton of milk, which he flattened politely. He stood and placed it all in Mr. Barker's wastebasket.

Bruce extended his hand across the desk, and Mr. Barker shook it.

"I'm sorry to disappoint you, sir," and "I promise to do better," Bruce said, with a rhythm that suggested he'd said and done the same thing before.

Mr. Barker nodded and released Bruce's hand. As he left, Bruce only glanced my way, but he gave me a little smile. He shut the door gently behind him.

With Bruce gone, Mr. Barker turned to me. "I see a lot of potential in that young man. Sure, he's no achiever like you, Cecilia—he might never do well on the ACT. But there are other kinds of potential."

Somewhere in the outer office, we heard a sharp exchange, of which I've never made out the detail since, but the emotion of the voices carried to the back office, one hostile, one protesting. Mr. Ebber leaned forward, listening with the intensity of a pointer. When nothing else reached us, he settled back in his chair. Then, in front of the window, Mr. Swirley passed by again, with Bruce this time, returning to the rig.

Bruce's father had him by the scruff of the neck and marched Bruce roughly in front of him toward the truck by an arm's length. Bruce shrugged his shoulders, in obvious discomfort, though his hands betrayed an ambivalence—they floated, then

migrated up to his neck, as if wanting to dislodge his father's grip, then repelled suddenly by an invisible force, as if they'd met a magnet of the same pole.

Then Bruce's father kicked him. Mr. Swirley stopped them both before the grill, and in front of the yellow banner that said WIDE LOAD, he kicked Bruce viciously, first in the rear, and then as Bruce twisted his body, Mr. Swirley's boot struck Bruce's side.

Finally, as Bruce shrugged his father off and turned to face him, gasping, Bruce took a third kick squarely in the stomach. Mr. Barker stood up at his desk. Bruce's father pulled Bruce up from the concrete by his ear, and he launched Bruce upward into the driver's side of the cab and across the bench. Faster than I would have thought the old man could move, Mr. Swirley was in the driver's seat and the semi was making its back-up noises.

Mr. Barker watched the rig recede, and lowered himself slowly back into his leather chair. We never saw Bruce again—just as I've never again seen that version of myself who walked to Mr. Barker's office down the long, dark hall. I knew that day that what I could do to Bruce, I'd do one day, just the same, to Papa. At that age—twelve, seventeen—the world tells you your whole purpose is your future. It's a lie. Your future is leaden with the weight of all those you sacrificed in order to *rise*.

## DITCH

by Dawn Dorland Perry

You didn't know it then, Ferdi, but I wasn't coming back, not at all. I had a plane ticket and a scholarship, a bra with an underwire. I had a suitcase and a piece of my horse's mane waiting in an airport locker in Des Moines. Sun lit our bodies. We glowed like the nudes in your art books, which slanted at us on a half-filled shelf. Your new college bedroom. Iowa City, 12:15. You'd never been my boyfriend—we'd never even kissed—but I wanted to lose it to you, and leave.

It might have happened other ways. In the outfield after a night game. On the topsoil between rows of your father's corn. I'd savored the summer and turning eighteen. My breasts had swelled up like a present. Men looked at me differently. They looked at me at all. I'd put my hope in strangers.

Your sheets, crumpled and damp, like they'd never be smooth again. My sleeping bag, abandoned on the floor. Sun full in your westerly window. The yeasty smell of our morning sweat. We faced on the pillow like our houses did, with all the acres between us.

You asked me what time my flight was, and I said four. I'd have to be on the road by one.

"Remember things we used to think?" you said. "That virgins came from Virginia?"

We came from farms, from small houses swallowed by fields.

“And that Barry did it with sheep? *Baaaaaarrrry*,” you bleated. That familiar taunt.

“Poor Barry,” I said. All those fault lines at school—behind me now.

In my chest, flock of birds, rising from corn.

In the August sun, you lifted your hand and touched my hair. Your blue eyes burst grey, a snow sky. Your birthmark, that swipe of creek mud on skin, long down your face like California.

“We’re doing it just in time,” I said.

Sun scorched the sheets, which held heat like sand. Your chest splotched pink, letting moisture. You rarely went shirtless because of your concave chest, but it was almost what I liked most about you—shirts floating there, flaccid and unmoored. I dipped my fingers into that air space of your body, where sweat and secrets pooled, and I thought, this must be where you hide your betrayals, Ferdi, where you bury things.

My t-shirt was blue and said FLORIDA. You picked it up where it lay between us and played like you were putting it on.

“I think it’s sexy,” you said, “when a guy comes out wearing the girl’s shirt.”

In the kitchen one of your roommates opened the fridge; we heard water through the wall.

I had never been to FLORIDA. Our whole lives lived on that same grid of gravel roads. The shirt had arrived like the others in a bag of *Jan-me-downs*.



I could see how it would go, that losing it would be some kind of good-bye-sorry. Then I'd leave you and everything behind: town two miles away, just a road down the middle. The slant farmhouse with no cellar, facing your family's two-story across the alfalfa and our yard of pigweed. My father's baby-white and hairless skull, the chair-back where he hung his seed cap, the manure on his boots, the dirt behind his ears. My mother, who only went out to tend pregnant hogs, her bottle-black hairline, penciled eyebrows arched to her ears, who everyone in town called crazy. That hulk of an old tractor planted between outbuildings like a rage. The church ladies who came to the door with their cast-off clothes, Velveeta and Boyardee. Seth's corner of the room, and its silent furniture. The rifle and the cartridges—all those stories, locked in silos, drowning in corn. I didn't need anything I couldn't take with me.

Someone had told me sex is all about hands, so I reached down, and I touched you. Your lips parted. Your breath hushed warm on my eyebrow, faint and fogged like wind from a trumpet's bell.

I lingered in your coarse hair—a finch in its nest of bramble. You groaned softly and licked your lips in the sun. You were pink there and smooth and like brand new, the very same color as a pig when it's born.

“I have condoms,” you said, and opened your eyes. “You don't have to end up like Natalie.” You swallowed, your Adam's apple nodding.

“Run for the border—can I take your order?” I said, playing the pregnant girl we knew at Taco Bell.

You smiled shyly. Just the tips of your canines showed. “Where you’re going, you’ll never have that kind of job.”

“God willing,” I said. Not because I believed in God or His will but because it was something your mother always said.

I was like one of those bulbs you don’t think will ever come up. What if a girl turned eighteen and hasn’t had her period? I asked Ms. Blair.

She blinked at me through her glasses, then came around the desk and shut the door. She said it would be understandable for someone who was small and had lost someone. Late-onset puberty wouldn’t be strange for someone who was staying late, and writing her college essays—for someone who generally had a lot of coping to do.

But if the girl were healthy, she assured me, she thought that time would do the trick. I used the pads my mother gave me for most of senior year to line my bra. And when someone’s elbow, or the inside of my own arm brushed that bulky extension of myself, I swear I could feel it.

Mom didn’t know I’d never bled. No one knew.

Can you imagine what they’d have done to me *if they knew?*

Sun glinted around you, a camera’s flash. The day I turned eighteen, I got a tattoo because I could. You touched the butterfly that hovered below my right collarbone. A monarch, the kind we’d raised from caterpillars in elementary just to

let go. You pressed your palm to my chest. Your wrist brushed my nipple. I stiffened like an eraser, and when you pulled away, I almost choked on the wanting.

You stroked your face with your fingers. What you did when you had to speak in class.

“Ferdi,” I said, “why’d you stop?”

“I wish we had longer.” You turned away, blocking your eyes with your arm. “It feels so rushed. A better good-bye—”

“It’s perfect. What could be a better story?”

“Story?” You turned back.

I needed two hours to Des Moines. I had to be on the road by one. I brought myself close, we were inches. Iowa City, 12:33.

“That we lost it together,” I said. “Best friends.”

Your fingers twitched, and you pulled at your lip. “Tell me.”

I knew everything about you. How you closed your eyes when you started a car. The exact place on your forehead where your hair swirled into its cowlick. You were bad with blood, and when you got called to the coop, I’d go and twist the chicken necks for you. “I’ll say you wet your comb like a grandpa.” I danced my fingers on your eyelids, and then your forehead, moist and hot. “And that you’d never ever live in Los Angeles, not where you couldn’t see stars.” I wondered where you had the condoms.

“But you’ll be back—right, Jan? Mom already asked. Should we set a place for you at Thanksgiving?”

How could I explain, that I had practiced gratitude for so long, I was no longer grateful. The storm shelter we shared below your family's upright house. The shabby land my dad bought from yours for a dime before we were born, like poor relations. It would never be enough to be absorbed into your family, some adoptive sibling.

"And when you tell the story," you said, "would you say I'm your boyfriend?" Your voice got windy. You sat up and took my hands.

My scalp rushed. "I've never had a boyfriend. You know that."

"If you were staying." Your hair hung floppy in your face. "I could be your boyfriend—Jan? I should have said it before."

"No one's staying." I found the clock over your shoulder and could just make out its numbers in the sun. Iowa City, 12:37.

"Mary Beth will keep you company," I said normally, pinching my navel. I knew she'd been accepted to Iowa, too. I saw her cornering me in the break room that summer at Wal-Mart where we had jobs. *Exactly how bonkers is your mom?* she said loudly, in front of managers. She sat across the table from me like a challenge. *You can see her from Ferdi's. Wearing lipstick to slop hogs. Draws her eyebrows on like a clown?* I crumpled my Doritos bag, said that I had to get back to the phones. When Mary Beth didn't move, because I was against the wall, I pushed the table, hard, into her abdomen. She only laughed. I left her sitting there, laughing, tenting the table with her Joni Mitchell hair. Later, I told you I'd made all the money I needed for college, that I didn't have to work. \$176 in the bank. Either you didn't

know what she had done, or you'd known all along, but either way, you were part of it.

“What’s wrong?” you asked, caging me with your arms. “Don’t you like it?” Sweat beaded at your nipples and dripped. “We still have a little while, right? Let me be romantic with you.” We touched foreheads, noses. We kissed.

I had only kissed one other boy, in the barn. He wore cowboy boots and smelled like breath mints and beer. When we were twelve we found your brother’s stash of *Hustlers* there. All those nipples like knots in big balloons. A woman spreading her furry down-there, and its shocking pink center. Can you remember how we hid one in the hay—*Hustler Bitches in Heat*—and went back there after chores, my heart thrashing like a barn swallow?

Your mouth was the essence of you: glue from book bindings, the water from your comb. Moisture pooling in a trumpet’s metal tubes. You grinned as we pulled apart, and started horsing around. You jumped on the bed. My breasts leapt like foxes. I laughed and shushed, but I didn’t care if we were heard. You had at rare moments a smile to climb on and swing.

You forced me over and, face down, I took the tickling. You’d chased me on the playground. I’d let myself get caught. I was a child, my cheek pressing into the smooth, cool pea gravel under the slide. My foot brushed something velvet that swung away.

I rolled over. You were above me, your skinny arms quaking, the CK One whiffing from your pits. I thought how life at the farms would go on without us—the

empty rooms and extra chores. At the next tornado, how our families would crouch in your parents' storm shelter without us. The only time I ever hated you, Ferdi: when we sat out storms, when my family had to be there, too. My mother, who my dad would have dressed, just to get her outside. Next siren, they'd struggle to cross the corn at the last minute, your parents holding a door open into the ground, my parents against the green, wind-churning sky.

"What time is it?" you asked. "Did we run out of time?" You turned to find the clock.

"No, we're okay!" I stroked your shoulder and lowered you onto the pillow. I turned your back on the room.

"It feels so rushed," you groaned. "It went so fast." Your eyes roved, as if waking from a dream, and you found the clock. "Jan—you're leaving."

"We still have time." My hair spread on the pillow like surf. "I'll think of you constantly. Whenever I look at the ocean."

I cupped my hands behind your ears. I pressed my lips to yours. I breathed the air from your nose. I pushed my tongue between your teeth.

"But—" you said, shaking free, "why the ocean?"

"The ocean, flat land, same horizon."

"I've never been to the ocean. Neither have you."

"You've seen it in the movies."

“But it’s different—don’t you think?” You sat up. “When you look at the ocean it’s, yeah, a horizon. But we’re *in* the horizon here. We’re in the fields. We’re grounded.”

My mother, hoarding milk jugs and diaper pins. Stacking empty jars of Vaseline and diaper ointment into towers. She might open a can of dog food and warm it on the stove. I pressed my hair over my ears. Grounded? So much ground, so little to stand on.

“Put your fingers in me, Ferdi,” I said, circling your shoulders. “Quick now so we have time. I love you.”

“Oh, Jan. I love you, too. I so love you.”

Your hand on my belly, and then your fingers, inside. What I felt was not unlike the shock of the electric fence—on the farm, when I reached between the fence wires for my mare—my heart seizing, a moment of blur. Do you remember when we took Seth to the creek and we played Got Your Nose but he was too serious about it even for a little little boy, and you put a mulberry under your shoe and said, Oops, sorry buddy, I squashed your nose, and he cried and cried, all the way back to the house, even after we showed him a mirror, and it was until then the saddest thing we’d ever seen?

“Are you okay?”

I sat up. You were looking at the tips of your fingers, holding them before your eyes. You’d found something dark inside of me.

“You’re bleeding, or something,” you mumbled, then dropped your voice lower. The sound of wonder and shock. “Is this—your *period*?”

My skin flushed, a prickly heat, and I spread my legs. Underneath me, a mulberry stain. You wore the face I knew from the chicken coop. A mixture of fear and pity, the need to puke.

“I can’t do this,” you said. “I don’t think I’m supposed to do this.” And you wiped your fingers on the sheet.

“I don’t think it’s dangerous,” I said, my face unbearably hot, but my fingers gone cold. “Just give me a second. Let me think.”

“But Jan, it’s probably not good—not *healthy* to do it when you’re on your period,” you whined. Sweat clumped hair to the side of your face. “I mean, think about it.”

“I am thinking about it!”

I tried to be practical. I put my FLORIDA shirt beneath me, to save the sheets. “I think you’re overreacting,” I said, controlling my voice. “People probably do this all the time.” I had no idea if this was true. “Look, we shouldn’t stop just because you’re afraid of blood.”

“I really don’t think—”

“If you pussy out on me now, I’ll have to find some real men in California.”

A stunned second of silence. “You haven’t even been there yet.”



“What’s that about?” I said. You knew I couldn’t afford to visit. “Aren’t you happy for me? What is it with you?” I said, too loudly. “You want to make me stay?”

“You said you *loved* me.” Lines appeared on your forehead. “Don’t do this now. You have to go soon.” You belly-flopped and buried your face in the pillow.

“It’s not fair!” They might have heard me in the kitchen, but I didn’t care. “I’ve never done anything worse than you and I’m always worse off.”

“I’m so sorry. I can’t tell you how sorry.” And the way you gushed, your voice tinged with responsibility and fear, I almost realized what you were sorry for.

“What’d you tell Mary Beth? I know you said something. What did you tell her about Seth?” I could see my mother pulling his body from the deep ruts left by the tractor. My father stunned, climbing down from the seat. How my baby brother’s limbs had flopped with every strike of my mother’s foot against the ground, as she ran nowhere, his head an open melon.

“I already lost it,” you said. You were crying.

“What?” I asked, disoriented. “You lost something? What did you lose?”

“I already lost it to Mary.”

In the silence that followed, even the room tried to speak. My head filled with the sound of my own heart, what you hear when you listen to a shell.

You looked up at me, Ferdi, and I had never seen your eyes so blue. All I could think of was the ocean.

“I wish you weren’t moving,” you bawled into the pillow, your voice muffled by the down. “Please come back.”

“I’m never coming back.”

Your shoulder blades scissored. You brought your face up from the pillow, but didn’t turn. You’d jerked just the same way when we heard my father shoot my mare. I had to go to her later, alone—you were scared—to the creek, where she lay half-submerged. Blood wept from a starfish between her eyes. You knew how it was with my parents. My father, *If you go, you’re gone. We won’t be keeping the horse.* My mother, *I feel like I’m losing my arm.*

“What about Christmas?” you said, a tear perched on your nose. “Not at all?”

I have read the same confusion since then on so many others’ faces.

“And I was lying. I don’t love you. I hate you, Ferdi,” and I only felt the pleasure of saying that then, not the pain.

I wanted it more than ever, to take something and leave. So I reached down, and I hurt you. You cried out, velvet in my hand. A nest of mice we’d found as children—we tossed the babies in the creek and watched them struggle then succumb to the current after releasing them from our hands. My fist collapsed around nothing, their soft ears, lightning hearts. And then I let you go and turned onto my face, pulling over me every bed sheet I could grab.

When I came out, you were gone, and the apartment was silent. Iowa City, 1 pm.

I dressed quickly, wearing my new bra for college.

I covered my stain with the sheet and found your boxers. I folded them into a square.

I waited for you, Ferdi. Smoothed the bed with my hand and thought of that long road to Des Moines, the point on the horizon that you can drive and drive towards, but never reach.

I thought of looking for you then, to say good-bye, sorry.

But I was tired, and I had so far to go.

## FATHER-DAUGHTER DANCE

by Dawn Dorland Perry

Nan eyes the catheter bag, drip-filling on her father's leg. He has emerged from the hospital this morning wearing hibiscus-patterned Bermuda shorts and this urine receptacle, secured with two elastic bands below his knee. The air conditioning is on in the Lexus. Nan drives north with her father on the 405. Less than an hour before, when Nan curbed the car at the hospital entrance, her father had fumbled with the door of the luxury SUV, then sat himself upon the calf-hide seat and reached down, freeing his leg from the elastics, the tubing, the bag, and coaxed the whole thing up onto his lap like a cat. "We're off," he said.

Nan frays the ends of her hair between a thumb and forefinger; she switches lanes. Beats of silence roll between them like dashes in the road. The catheter is clear vinyl with white backing, a yolk-broken fried egg. Her father will have to carry his clutch of urine and its coiled tubing, worming from the hem of his shorts, along the Santa Monica beach. She sighs.

"I noticed you don't say 'pop' anymore," her father says.

"They don't say pop in California, Dad." They'd passed a perfunctory hour together the day before, between her fetching him from the airport and ferrying him to his surgical appointment.

"No pop?" He taps his temple, the silver-blurred sideburns. "I didn't remember that."

"We say soda here. We don't say pop unless it's—like you, a father."

“Ah.” Her father looks out the window, at the 405 fringed with palms. He shifts his catheter bag to the other thigh.

The San Gabriels to the north are a hazy presence in the smog, their outlines slipping to the periphery when she focuses there, like floaters. In the French, *mouches volantes*, flying flies, or as Nan once mistook her ex for saying, flying lies, and she never forgot it. When she first moved to Los Angeles, it was days before Nan saw the mountains, really saw them, and—the sudden claustrophobia—to be penned between peaks and tides when you’re programmed for an infinite, foot-steady horizon. When a decent solution to any problem, in any direction, is—drive.

“What’s with the shorts?” Nan asks her father. “You didn’t pack slacks?” Her dad’s calves are hairless, worn smooth from decades of the slight grip of trouser socks.

“I thought I’d wear shorts to the beach,” her father says. “Shorts in March!” Yeah, she thinks. Shorts and your shame.

“But we’re only walking,” she says. “Sand in our toes? You could have done that in slacks and not had your fluids out for Saint Monica to see.”

Her father has tiny blue eyes that almost disappear when he smiles. He shrugs. “It can’t be helped now,” he says. A moment later he adds, “It is what it is.”

Nan rubs her lips, blending stale lipstick. Here outside of Carson the 405 is fourteen lanes across. Cars pursue the horizon in solid rows that recall for her, though she hasn’t seen one in fifteen years, fields of planted corn.

He calls her lately, at odd hours, to report what the raccoons were up to last night. “They turn over trashcans, the buggers. Skitter down the hoods of cars!” He might recite a passage of which he’s proud from the genealogical newsletter that he writes monthly for the Society of Mayflower Descendants in the State of Iowa, signed always, *In Memory of Our Pilgrim Ancestors*. But her father’s recent phone calls, too often, too early, have required explanations ad nauseam of primary care, co-pays—office versus specialist—and the difficult concept of a deductible. “A deductible, Dad. Everyone has one. It’s what you have to pay before the benefits kick in.” She is aware that her father calls from the toilet overnight because he doesn’t conceal the fact. Her Blackberry buzzes on the floor, and Nan sees the cord from the kitchen phone in Iowa roped across the hall to her dead mother’s pink bathroom, where her father is stranded and straining, speaking weakly of his ‘reduced stream.’ Nan’s mother, long gone, had always taken charge of accounts; her father is convinced that the checks he’s been sending to the insurance company all these years—his monthly premiums, which he imagines have accrued to a staggering amount during his doctor-eschewing hermitage, decades long—should apply now to his medical bills and procedures, this recent diagnosis of benign prostatic hyperplasia interfering with his stream. How to explain? “It’s like you were paying it forward, Dad,” Nan said recently at 3 am, her face pressed against the delicate bellows of her sleeping cat. “It’s like, in a ledger of balances, of transactions, you were paying it forward to make sure someone took care of you.”

But three years ago, when Nan married Bartoli? Radio silence. She lifted her own veil and walked herself down the aisle. How quickly her father had boarded the plane *this* time, for something medical. How effortless, how willing to come all this way now just for a little prostate scrape.

“It’s a nice car, Nan,” her father says, speaking loudly, as if his words must travel thousands of miles over cable. “I’ve never been in a Lexus before.” He props his forearm on the door, settling his hammock of flesh. Jumps when the door locks under his elbow.

Nan concentrates, cutting left. Coasts through double yellow into the carpool lane. She is aware of referring to the whole thing now in her mind as Bartoli’s Black Tie Wedding. Three years ago her father didn’t come to Bartoli’s Black Tie Wedding, where they dined and danced in a roped-off section of the Santa Monica pier. Where she and her husband exchanged now naïve-sounding vows: never to go to bed angry, to love each other more every day, and—Bartoli’s addition—to never let Nan feel alone. They didn’t stay married. But that’s not the point. How Nan had searched, involuntarily, at the margins of the crowd, over the shoulders of Bartoli’s diamond-shine family and friends. She’d sent a fine letterpress invitation, addressed in formal calligraphy c/o Rural Route 1, Bouton, Iowa. She never heard back. How her pulse had skipped at the sight of any disheveled waiter serving the perimeter tables seating acquaintances and cousins. How her throat caught at any man’s high, bald forehead whose lenses caught the canopy lights...

“On my Taurus you can program up to five stations,” her father says.

“Yeah, Dad. This car has that, too.”

“Each station gets a button,” he continues. “One through five. You can really focus on the road.”

Nan glances over. “Hey, aren’t you supposed to keep the bag below your—groin?”

Her father pushes the catheter down-thigh to his knee. Perches it there, folded, like a small, slumping child.

It was not a major surgery, Nan reminds herself. The man could have had the benign swelling of his prostate relieved through a simple endoscopy at a day clinic in Des Moines. She knows, she looked into it.

“Is it going to smell like salt?” her father asks. He’s worn the hospital slippers—thin, yellow flip-flops—and his feet are white like pale fish.

“Salt and seaweed,” Nan says. “You mean, you don’t remember?” Her father was raised in California and—inexplicably, to her—relocated to attend college in the Midwest.

“Now that’s what I was just thinking, Nan,” her father says, squinting philosophically. “How much in forty years you can forget.”

She’d seen how he was raised. Had stalked the property in Pacific Palisades—and occasionally still did drive by, when in the area, visiting accounts—though, by the time she’d freed herself from high school and remade herself out west as her grandmother’s keeper, the house had been sold, leveraged to pay off enormous debts she hadn’t known about, and her grandmother moved into a posh nursing care



facility that made quick work of the rest of the Dow Chemical wealth. Her father, shortly after her mother's death, as it happened, had inherited enough cash to buy the house he'd retreat to as a widower, outright. A relief to Nan. She'd worked hard to distinguish herself as a new arrival in a town full of the new and the arrived. She was drawn to restaurants and hosted, then ran the front of the house, then studied wine, then represented an important distributor, and in that capacity, came to call on some of Los Angeles' most well-positioned sommeliers and owner-chefs. Nan proffered her Nebbiolos, her Sangioveses, her Chateauneuf-du-Papes, and those dry white Bordeauxs that she would have plunged precisely ten minutes before the pouring into the deep, camping-size cooler of ice water that she refreshed daily in the trunk of her car. The whole enterprise was strategic, hardcore, and deeply sexual. The year Bartoli was fresh off of his second wife and opening his third restaurant on the west side, which would garner him a Michelin star, Nan landed Bartoli.

It is not lost on the daughter that her father hasn't even asked about the wedding, or the divorce. They have spoken of nothing since leaving the hospital but pop, prostates, and catheters.

"Salt air, that's good," her father says. "That'll be a real treat. We'll smell the ocean and get some sand in our toes."

Her father had insisted on Santa Monica—he wanted nothing more than to see the ocean after surgery—despite Nan's protests that she lives just ten minutes from West and East Shoreline Drives in a place called Long *BEACH*. He pined for a stroll

in the sand, he said, and in that case, there were reasons to steer clear. *Long Beach. Come for the beach, stay for the needles.*

How Bartoli would scream if he knew she'd ended up here! Living above a lot where the food trucks park, renting a life on someone else's carpet. The apartment might pass for cute were she twenty. The floor in the entry has a homicidal stain where the last tenant tended to park his motorcycle. Now, six months single, in a neighborhood of caged windows and incongruous luxury cars, Nan only feels at home when wrapped in the posh interior of the Lexus, cocooned in its sleek velocity and controlled sounds. Hurling herself daily up and down the freeway between Long Beach and her clients one hour north—the boot of the Lexus stocked with her current list, Burgundy, Barolo, and Gavi, each bottle secured at the neck in a rattle-proof stow; *Goddamn, how she needed the Lexus now*—it is only while driving that Nan feels nearly, almost again, like that person she'd set out to be.

She thumbs ^ *volume* ^ on the steering wheel. A Spanish love song floods the car.

“So tell me how your job's going,” her father says.

She lowers the volume. “Good, thanks. Bit of a grind.”

“Oh? I guess everyone out here works those long hours.”

“Gary at the distributor is killing me, pushing all these red blends and Merlot. I have to give the shit away to get it on anyone's menu.”

“Well,” her father says. “That sounds wonderful.”

“What about you? Keeping busy?”

“I wanted to tell you, my supervisor at the library, she’s your same age. A real go-getter.”

“My age, huh? Does she crack the whip?”

“Oh, ha. Ha, no. No, she leaves me to myself.”

“You know, Dad, it was tough to get the time off for this.”

“I know what you mean. When I need a day out, I have to put in for it a whole week ahead.”

“No, I mean—I had to take off yesterday to get you into surgery, and today, for our little ride to the ocean. It’s tough for me to miss the road time, Dad. I work for myself.”

“I haven’t seen the ocean for forty years,” her father says wistfully, as if the whole purpose of having his trans-urethral in Los Angeles was to embark on a nostalgia tour of the West Coast.

“Right. Well, I got married on the beach,” Nan says.

She is stirred—nauseated, even—by her father’s smell, which neither a hospital stay nor the air conditioning can seem to knock off of him. His clothes—his *skin*?—smells musty, stale, pungent. Notes of *terroir* specific to his earth: moldy books with yellowing pages, old TV Guides, the slow drip of urine.

“You know, I told a beverage manager, one of my accounts, that we were going to the ocean today, just to see it. He laughed. Said it’s the kind of thing kids want to do.” She says things sometimes, to people at work, to men she might have

loved, that she knows she should want to take back. The Spanish on the radio tries to soothe her with its hushed *Amor, Amor*.

Her father works a leather wallet out of his shirt pocket that swells with gas cards and receipts. He excavates from the cash fold some brochure for Santa Monica: kids making sandcastles, riding the wheel on the pier. Her father unfolds the paper slowly, his hands knobby with arthritis and wormed with veins, his shirt pocket gaping where the wallet is used to being. This father who, knowing his daughter's social security number like any parent, opened a credit card in her name and maxed it to the ten-thousand-dollar limit. An innocent attempt, he later explained, to square what he figured she owed him for her braces. When she discovered the lapsed account by accident—it came up while she was buying a car—she threatened charges against her father, enough years ago now for the mar to have almost disappeared on her credit. “Can’t be helped now,” her father had said on the phone. “I was hasty. I should have asked you first,” as if that would have made the transaction acceptable.

Because of her credit, she and Bartoli had had to put the Lexus—her car—in his name, and when Bartoli refinanced after the divorce, she was on the hook to him for an ungodly \$1500-a-month. When Nan tried to warn her brother that their father was in financial trouble and had resorted to scamming family, Jake only got very quiet on the line, not speaking until Nan, thinking the call had dropped was saying *Hello Hello*, and only to say she really had nothing to complain about because *he* never got braces.

Nan wonders if she really believes in fighting anymore. If the divorce has softened her edges, or just left her very tired. She can hardly believe that she and Bartoli used to get thrown out of restaurants, some of which he'd started and sold. She can hardly work out why and how it happened that day, on the way to the grocery store in the Audi that she called him a stallion—and not nicely, because in her own lingerie she'd smelled another cunt—and Bartoli raised the back of his hand to her and she said, “Go ahead, fucker. That's all the reason I need.” And by the time they'd lurched into the parking lot at Bristol Farms, the elite SoCal supermarket, the daughter had bloodied Bartoli's nose, split his eyebrow with her diamond, and broken one of his fingers. A stranger yanked open the door, not sure whom to protect. In her vows, she had promised him very little.

“Hey, Dad—what happens when that bag gets full? Did they give you an empty?”

Her father perks at the question and lays the Santa Monica brochure in his lap. “Now, that's interesting you ask.”

“Interesting how?” Nan looks over skeptically. Threads of blood swim in the catheter fluid like sea monkeys. The receptacle has rounded in her father's lap into the kind of bag you'd use to ferry a fish to a child.

“See this blue lever?” her father says. “All I have to do to is lean over a toilet, press that lever, and—*woosh*.” Her father mimics the disposal action with such flourish that Nan worries he'll hit the lever for real.

“Ok! Got it.”

“I’ll fill it with water, of course, before I get on the airplane tomorrow. Otherwise, the way I figure, it might depressurize, blow up and pop!” Her father is pleased to have worked out the aeronautics of the situation.

“But not more than three ounces,” Nan says. “Because of security?”

Her father seems genuinely stymied by this. “Oh. I didn’t think of that.” He turns his attention earnestly to the bag in his lap, calculating its volume.

“Dad, I’m kidding.”

“Oh, ha. Too bad I have to get right back on the plane. But it’s important to be back for the Mayflower meeting. Fifteenth of the month, like clockwork. I’m responsible for taking and drafting the minutes, you know. I capture everything quickly, on the spot—in kind of my own invented shorthand—and spend a good deal of time later going through my notes, carefully reconstructing everything.”

“Right—who’s our ancestor again?”

“Samuel Fuller.”

“Right. And what was he all about?”

Her father lets out a long, exasperated sigh. “Nan, you sure don’t remember much.”

Her father’s forehead has gnarled since she’s last seen him, some five years before. The skin between his eyebrows has seized under the pressure of an invisible clamp, as if someone had taken a flat expanse of forehead, an undisturbed piece of fabric, and twisted. Nan often felt headaches form at this same point in her own forehead. In her early thirties, she has the beginnings of a frown line there. Her

fingers often go to this spot—in traffic, on the phone—to this hereditary crimp between her brows. Her thumb and index habitually spread the skin and the thin, clenching muscle apart, this genetic valley always wanting to close up and curl like a fist on her forehead.

“Dad, it’s like a water balloon.” Nan reaches behind the passenger seat and rummages in her handbag for gum, something to bite.

“It can hold a lot. That’s why I took it off my leg right away. It’ll get fuller and fuller and then it’ll slip down your leg. Sounds uncomfortable. I read about it on a prostate blog.”

Her father, reading *blogs*? The thought of this access to information via the Internet, when he has become so dependent on her lately, enrages the daughter.

“Either way,” Nan says, tearing gum from foil. “We didn’t *have* to go to the ocean.”

She looks up, gasps, and brakes with force. The sudden steel of her femur and locked knee flattens her torso against the seat. Her father lurches forward, grabbing at a little hook meant for dry cleaning. The catheter bag and its apparatus sail to the floor. Her father winces as it dives.

She regains speed. Her father finger-combs his hair. He takes the catheter bag back up onto his lap, pulling it in with the L of his arm.

“That was close,” he says.

Nan bangs on the steering wheel and yells through the windshield, “LA driver!”

The sound of the horn from the car's interior is short and shallow—*meep*—like a toy.

Nan takes a breath, let's the Beamer she's been assing pull ahead. The radio races with voices, selling cars. She needs a smoke. They pass a billboard for a morning show, a man wearing breasts like stereo headphones. Her father asks, "Do you listen to any talk radio?"

"I only listen to the Spanish stations. Helps me tune out."

"Oh? I actually hear a lot about California. Talk radio is my window on the world. So I have a pretty good idea what goes on out here."

"Yeah? So you miss it?"

"Miss what?"

"Living in California."

"Oh, that. I wouldn't say miss."

"But being back now, after all this time. Forty years. Aren't you sorry you left?"

"Sorry? I wouldn't say sorry. Iowa has certain things." After a pause, he adds, "I love mowing the lawn."

Traffic courses on both sides of the divider. The daughter cruises in the carpool lane. The day is growing clearer; from the 405 they can nearly make out downtown. The father squints through his window whenever the freeway valleys to reveal wide Los Angeles boulevards heading east without end.



“I’m surprised you can listen to the radio at work, actually,” Nan says. “The whole silence-in-the-library thing.”

“Not at the library. I listen to AM talk while I deliver the newspapers.”

And that’s it. The *smell*.

“You still have the paper route?” she asks, incredulous. It’s the stink of headlines and want ads rubbing off on his clothes, his forearms and hands. He puts on dark clothes and drives every street in town, just two feet of newspapers and the AM radio in the morning twilight. He’s good enough to place the thing at the door but not good enough to come in—anyone can see it.

“I figure I’ll just keep working until I fall over,” he says.

Her father turns his hands in his lap, and for the first time, Nan is stunned at the age, the deep dry creases like folds in a map. Looking now, Nan can see ink rimming her father’s rough cuticles, caught in the crosshatches of his calluses. And he’d gone into surgery like that, stained, with dirty hands.

“Why’re you still doing that, Dad?” she asks. “Is it because of money?”

Her father considers this. “It pays off for the effort.”

“Don’t tell me you still pick up every pop-can for the nickel!”

“Nan,” her father says smiling. “You said pop.”

“Santa Monica, 2 miles,” her father says. “There it is!”

“Yep, that’s the exit. Just a little street drive from there.”

He spreads his toes in his flip-flops. “Shame, sun’s already on its way down. Maybe sometime I’ll come out and we’ll spend a whole day at the ocean.”

“Maybe sometime you’ll come out when you don’t need an operation.” Nan narrows her eyes against a whine starting in her head.

Her father swats at something. He turns and looks away. Pointing to a fast food sign along the freeway he says, “Look, you have Arby’s.”

She takes them off the freeway. The catheter pitches to the center of the cloverleaf in her father’s lap as Nan turns and slows.

She stops them at a red light. “So you said you go online? You read blogs?”

“Oh, sure,” her father says. “Libraries are all about the Internet now. Hardly anyone comes in just for books anymore.”

Green. “So you couldn’t find a rideshare or something? Like on Craigslist? It was a simple procedure, Dad. I found a clinic. You didn’t have to do this in California.”

Her father is quiet for a moment. He looks straight ahead. “We’re making the most of it,” he says.

She imagines the absurdity of their father-daughter dance now. Their tangled fingers and tango elbows. His ink smell overpowering her perfume, his newspapers staining her dress...

Nan squints into the sun, feels the odd prick of tears. She accelerates, racing down Pico. “Dad, most people don’t travel a thousand miles for this kind of thing.

You could be home right now, recovering in your own bed, but here we are on a Wednesday, your piss in a bag!”

The radio wails in Spanish between them.

“It’s the anesthesia,” her father says. “I tried to drive myself, but they wouldn’t let me. You have to give them a name in advance. I couldn’t think of anyone to drive.”

“You couldn’t think of anyone?” Nan says, approaching an intersection. “Not even a friend?” The question comes out so easily, but what does she expect him to say? She’s never known her father to have friends.

“That’s true. Next time I’ll ask a friend.”

She drives them due west to the beach. The sun, too low for the visor, is murder in her eyes. “Not to harp on this, Dad, but you can’t just fly out here every time you need a little surgery. You need a social network. Back home. You need a plan.”

“Just this once, then.” Her father rubs a weathered patch of neck above his collar.

“And quit the fucking paper route. It’s embarrassing.”

Her father drops his hand to his lap and, bunching his lips, squints ahead, as if trying to see down the end of a long tunnel. Her rubs his eye under his glasses, which jostle on his wide nose. Then he straightens them and says, “It’s been a little tough since you moved away.”

“Fifteen years! It’s been fifteen years.”

“I mean—since your mother passed.”

Nan leans her chest into the wheel, which she and Bartoli paid to have covered with supple, custom sheepskin, laced on with leather cord. Traffic is stop-and-go.

It was all so silly now, such a waste. The crystal-handled cake knife. The wine corks she’d saved from every bottle she and Bartoli shared. Such stupid, optimistic discipline in every failed marriage.

“It’s like you forgot why I moved here at all,” Nan says, “like it didn’t have to do with you, and it did. Someone had to take care of Grandma—I had to—because you never take care of your own!”

Her father looks out the window. “Mary used to say things like that.”

“Don’t put it on Mom.” Nan knuckles her fist into the wheel at that part that doesn’t honk, the part that says *AIR BAG*.

She bites down on her lips until they tingle. She tries to swallow a giggle, but burps out a laugh. “I’m sorry!” she says, shaking suddenly with laughter, and she looses the wheel, nearly clipping the mirror of a parked car. Her father flinches and grabs hold to the passenger door. He turns and looks at his daughter queerly.

“Sorry, sorry, sorry, it’s just—” Nan regains steering. She wipes spittle from her chin. “All of a sudden, I just find this so funny! Taking you to the beach.” File away as fact: Life is a hall of open doors closing. She’ll never have her mother back.

She'll never have a baby, she's too old. Add A DIVORCED WOMAN to that list of things that she will no longer, never not be.

“When Mary was alive—” her father starts to say.

“I said, leave her out of it. She always did the best with what she had.”

“Maybe one day you'll say the same thing about me.”

“Now, that's rich. I could have put you in jail. You're barely looking not homeless these days!” Surely a lot of the guests at the wedding had assumed her father was dead. And she let them.

“You're a slave to appearances, Nan,” her father growls. “You act like some kind of martyr, but you sure thought my mother's money was nice.”

“That's it! I—”

The car blows to the left, rush of steel defying her accelerator and everything she knows about driving. She sees her father's door buckle before air bags flower out of the steering wheel and dash, hitting their faces with the force of cement.

From the passenger side, a popcorn sound, a warm spray.

The air conditioning is on in the Lexus. It blows bits of safety glass sideways like rain.

“Dad? You okay? You okay?”

“I'm all wet.”

“Motherfucker, did you see that? Did you *see him*? Christ!”

“It's all over the leather seat.”

“Don’t worry about. Dad! You’re bleeding!”

“My arm is tingling. I can’t feel the arm.”

“Don’t move now, don’t move.”

“Oh, boy, a wreck. Do you have good insurance?”

“Dad—your arm! Look, I have to talk to this asshole. Stay here, I’m calling an ambulance. Don’t move, Dad, I’m calling 9-1-1.”

Nan cracks open the driver’s door and fumbles with her BlackBerry, slick with her father’s urine. She brings the phone to the side of her face.

“Okay, it’s working. Don’t move.”

Her father watches her against the intact driver’s window. His own window is a pane of shattered, bowing safety glass.

“So we won’t make it to the ocean after all,” he says.

The daughter freezes, her one foot out of the Lexus.

“Oh, Dad. I mean, *Jesus*, Dad.”

“I go back tomorrow—”

“God willing! You’re bleeding and covered in piss!”

“Calm down, Nan.” Her father nods at the driver of the other car. “Go get the man’s insurance.”

“Sir, can you stand? Let’s have you step up in the ambulance.” One of the EMTs sits her father down on a pale blue stretcher and asks him, cradling his injured right arm in his left, her father’s name.

“Ray Worth.”

“That’s good, Ray. Now, can you tell me your address?”

“He doesn’t live here, he lives in Iowa.” Nan cuts in to the examination, leaning against the ambulance bumper.

“Iowa?” the medic asks. “Why on earth?” He smiles broadly. The EMT is stocky and has *Guapo* tattooed across the back of his neck. He says to Nan, “That’s okay, it’s just for recall.”

“Look me in the eye, Ray, and don’t blink. Bright light, I know. Good now, there’s a steady stare.” Guapo stretches the rims of her father’s eyelids down, pulling a finger onto each cheek, depressing the fragile sacks under each of her father’s old eyes. The right lens of his glasses has spidered, and they rest in his wet lap, along with a length of the catheter tubing still feeding into the shredded remains of the vinyl bag. He wasn’t cleared to do so after surgery, but he looks like he’s been swimming.

“So Ray, you live in Iowa? Why? Your kids out there?”

“That’s my daughter. My daughter lives here. My son—” The father pulls away from the medic and asks, “Where does Jacob live now?”

“Portland, Oregon.”

“Oh. I was thinking Detroit.”

“He’s moved since then. Don’t worry about it.”

“Oh. Portland.”

“Let’s head in,” Guapo says, directing his voice to the front of the ambulance. He whistles sharply—her father flinches—and swivels his wrist with his index finger

in the air as if to say, “Wrap it up.” To her father the medic says, “Let’s get some stitches in that arm and some new drainage.”

“Excuse me,” the father says, as the EMT extends his arm to Nan, inviting her to hop up and ride in the back of the ambulance. “How close are we to the ocean?” her father asks.

“Dad.”

“The ocean? We’re there, can’t you smell it? It’s just a block or two away.”

“I thought so. Seems fresh.”

“It’d be kind of hard to see it from here, Ray. But it’s close.”

“Will we see it on the way to the hospital?”

“Dad!” Nan crosses her arms.

Guapo, standing on the bumper of the ambulance, looks down at Nan and then over at her father. “What do you mean see it? See it in the windows?”

“Dad, you’re injured.”

“Well, we’d planned to see the ocean. That’s where we were headed.”

And then, an octave higher, her father says, as if he’s swallowed safety glass or sand, “I’m just not sure, otherwise, I’ll ever see it again.”

“Will you just stop,” Nan says. She is ready to climb in, seize her father, and put him on an early plane. “This is pathetic. You go to the hospital now like you’re told.”

Guapo regards the daughter. For a moment, Nan imagines what she must look like to him.



He reaches down and pulls Nan up into the ambulance, with one hand in hers, and one hand supporting her waist as she climbs. He shuts the doors from inside and shouts up to the driver.

“Hey, Francisco, you hear? Take Ocean Ave.”

Father and daughter ride in the ambulance with the siren off. Francisco drives at the pace of traffic, and Guapo has joined him up front. Nan and her father sit on the stretcher. Their shoes leave wet prints on the floor. Her father’s urine has soaked through Nan’s skirt and hose and dampened her underwear. Her father has wet her pants.

She wants to finally cry for everything. For how much she has missed her mother, her deep regret at disfiguring Bartoli. She might bang her fists on the floor of this ambulance, finally, just cry over her dick brother and her no-show, shyster father, and let every one of her pores radiate scream and surrender.

Her father cradles his injured arm and cranes his neck in the direction of the ambulance’s two oval windows. He smells rankly mineral like the concrete floors of the public beach restrooms. And so does she.

What obligation do I really have to this man? Nan thinks. What law says that I have to take care of him? But if she doesn’t, will she have anyone left?

They feel the ambulance pull to the side of the road, and Guapo whistles, jumping out of the cab. In no time he is at the back of the ambulance pulling open the doors.

“There it is, Ray! Have a good long look.”

Together, Nan and her father watch the sun, framed by the ambulance doors, slip into the Pacific waters, over the side of the earth.

“I’m glad we made it, Dad. You won’t get this in Iowa.”

“Oh, sure,” her father says. “Now I can always visit this place in my head.”

Then her father adds, “It does smell like salt. Not like table salt, but what you’d call ‘sea salt.’” He smears the good side of his glasses with the tail of his shirt and puts them on.

After a moment he turns to her and says, “That’s good. Let’s go.”

The ambulance doors slam again, the siren starts up. They’re off.

“I’m sorry we’re not getting to the pier, Dad,” Nan says finally. “I know you would have liked it.” She reaches with her voice like an arm to a child.

## FORDS OF MY DREAMS

by Dawn Dorland Perry

Their mother had always raised dogs. Frantic, outside dogs, making crop circles of the lawn. “The lot rent will go up,” the children have heard their father warn. No number of righteous speeches from Animal Control, no frequency of Bob Barker’s plea to *help control the pet population*, can persuade their mother to spay or neuter. She loves the bitches best when they mother their own dogs.

Dogs that resemble one another like cousins—which is how the children learn that word. The days are long, and the heat makes the summer long, too, long hours that the children and their mother spend outside. It’s too hot to stay in the aluminum-sided trailer. The government cheese left on the counter sweats.

The oldest girl wakes one morning to a strange, soft howl. A series of yips. Shriill, but undemanding. The girl, Dinah, pulls the cord on the blind next to the sofa. Her younger sister turns, covering her eyes with an elbow. Dinah loves her dog like a unicorn, and as a younger child, had often tried to ride her. The sun is low. In the yard, shadows between the trailers. Their mother has been up all night, nursing the new boy. No one else is stirred by the dog’s cries. Dinah comes out early into the yard.

The dogs are curled at their stakes, quiet as rugs. Punky has shed a litter under the tree. Perhaps the family hadn’t noticed the pregnancy because of the dog’s great white fur. The bitch lies on her side panting, her pink spotted belly. The newborn

pups, white, wriggle at her teats. They paw like blind men to get fed, instant to the world. Lollipop sounds as they latch on to nurse.

Once the family had an indoor dog, a dachshund named Jimmy Carter. Dinah remembers the bitch's belly distended, swollen like a tick. The mother prepared a low box for her, emptied of commodities—their father's word for the government butter, cheese—and the children padded the box with their soft stained t-shirts, and Dinah's mother, with her old bras. One of the pups gave Carter trouble, and Dinah remembers the dog dragging herself around the box, and from somewhere deeper than its throat, making desperate, donkey sounds. The girl remembers her mother twisting her hair on top of her head and kneeling to the floor. Then her mother wedged her fingers into the birth canal, stretching the dog's cervix, prying this unconscious grip from the puppy trying to emerge. Dinah's mother never said a word, during or after, about entering the dog in this way, but the oldest girl watched the backs of her mother's ears grow red with the effort.

Standing over Punky's litter in the yard, Dinah senses something silent and still. One newborn pup, not moving. One puppy, like a stone. Dinah plunges her hands into the wave of dogs. Their torsos writhe warm at her wrists. Her fingernails scoop dirt, and she closes her hand around the cold, dead puppy.

One hand holding its body, the other supporting its head and sealed eyes, Dinah sets off beyond the tree. She reaches the back of her family's trailer and crosses the next yard, where she comes to the corn. The field extends here for miles,

which, to Dinah's view, brings her flush with the ends of the earth. When she later, as an adult, sees the ocean for the first time, she is filled with same sense of horizon.

Dinah holds the dog. She has not called for her mother. She has not made any peace with Punky, who tracked the girl with her eyes—whose head, two trailer yards over still turns in the direction that the oldest girl carried her dead pup away, the dog the bitch licked clean of mud and afterbirth.

At the edge of the field, Dinah holds the cold dog in two hands. She tosses the puppy as far as she can into the corn. Her arms not yet strengthened by softball, her womb not shedding its own lining. The puppy arcs in the air. Its limbs hover in zero gravity. And then it falls, head-heavy, *foosh* through the stalks. I do not know, even now, why this girl threw the dog. Why she concealed it from her mother, who later whooped at the litter of five. It took the girl's two hands to carry, her two arms to throw. Why would this girl, in the company of adults, take the knowledge and disposal of death onto herself? Perhaps I took death so early into my hands, in the form of that cold limp puppy, because questions that do not haunt most children had not been answered by my parents when I'd asked.

On the back of the photo in my grandfather's delicate hand: *Dinah, 1981*, first grade. And over that, in my mother's heavy and cartoonish script: *Dinah, 1980*, kindergarten. Slight smile, bottoms of jagged new teeth. Brass studs in my ears, one higher in its lobe than the other. The declarations, truths, the very order of your childhood becomes what you question as an adult. Who were we hiding from,

blowing around in a van the color of the sky, our books and toys in trash bags? *I call Grandpa from a payphone, Dinah. We don't need our own telephone.* Then what is a telephone *for*?

First my mother pinched my earlobe until I couldn't stand it and screamed, and then she numbed it with an ice cube until my ear turned stiff and took on a fuzzy warmth. My mother first used a sewing needle too slender: she made the hole, but the stem of the earring couldn't fit through. She'd have to force it. My mother returned from the kitchen with a potato and brought it behind my ear.

Involuntarily, I snuggled against it there, at the back of my jaw, earth cold. Then came the push and parting of skin, a heat sensed but felt elsewhere. The swift sudden pain of an insertion. It all comes back to me—the highchair, the potato, and that fat little earring post—if ever my body is raw and resistant to someone else.

## 2.

I know you've heard this all before, Dinah, but let me talk, there's no one to talk to anymore. No one really speaks English here, but my Spanish is good and so is my Brazilian. Oh? Didn't know I spoke Brazilian? Well let me tell you Dinah with your fancy college, there are plenty of things you don't know about *me*. I used to sleep with a Brazilian. I made love to a Brazilian man—many times. Now how many dairy farmers' daughters can say that? He spoke to me in Brazilian, and I understood him perfectly. He complained that my pointy earrings were sticking into his chest. I can tell you this, Dinah, now you're a woman. I can tell you I almost

married that Brazilian and not your too-proud, limp-wristed father. Language wasn't even an issue. My people are good at languages. My mother spoke German and Polish until the day that she died.

See by your age Dinah I'd already carried two babies and I can see you're well on your way to becoming a spinster. But no matter what you do, kids or no kids, one day we're all kicking these cans down the road—boobs, I mean. Just don't get any surgery, and for chrissakes Dinah, take that organ donor thing off your license! What? It's in your wallet. I saw it while you were in the bathroom. It's my right. You came out of me! Honest to God, I can't believe they'd let people into heaven these days without kidneys and hearts.

Is that Fabiana going by? Hey, Fabiana! Call her for me? I want a bath today. It's pitiful here sometimes. Can take an hour to get someone's attention just to help take down your pants.

Sit down, Dinah, I want to keep talking. My people are storytellers, not like your father's. You could have stuck a pin in his ass, he wouldn't squeal. They say in the beginning of something is always the ending, and in the beginning your father drove a red Econoline Ford past our farm lane on a Friday, he and his Hawkeye friends from Iowa City on their way to the small town Solon bars to pick up girls. It was that same hour I got the mail and walked the quarter-mile from the barn to the road. The dust kicked up in the distance, and about a minute later, your dad and his red van tore by on the road from Iowa City. If the windows were down, he'd have had his skinny arm propped on the door, his hair blowing back above his horn-

rimmed glasses, freckles just under his eyes. He said the boys insisted that he play “Cinnamon Girl,” but the day I got in it was Dolly, and Dolly was like my own people because she had a rack. See Dinah, with men what you need to learn is it's all *come to mama*. You were behind your sister in that way. I sometimes wondered how you even came out of me. I can tell you that, now you're a woman.

But how I met your father was he had this box-spring mattress laid out in the back of the van. He told me the college boys sat on it drinking while he chauffeured them down gravel roads into Solon. But they weren't really his friends. Your father didn't have friends, only people he wrote letters to like the Indian Chief he met once on a Greyhound bus. Your father never went into the bar neither, but sat listening in the Ford to Cat Stevens, and I kept him good company on the box-spring. Yee-ha! And then I married him. Because I knew he came from money but he'd never make any of his own. Oh, don't look at me like that, I knew. My people are farmers. The secret of life isn't money. We drove that van till you were twenty.

Oh—I'm boring you? Oh, oh I see. You've heard it all. Well, where's my wedding ring, Dinah? I haven't worn it since we hocked it so you could stay in the hospital. You got yourself so dehydrated that summer, puking everywhere and needing an IV. Why you didn't just help yourself to water when we had it coming from the faucet for free, it's beyond me. What were you, five? It's not as if you didn't know where water comes from.

So let's say you owe me a wedding ring, Dinah, or ten minutes of your time. You know, what you've never realized is that every good thing you've got comes from



*me*, it comes from my people. I didn't know what I was doing that day when I saw your father's hair blowing and left our mail sitting in the box. My mother was the most intelligent woman you'd ever met, and she didn't go to college. She spoke German and Polish and kept the bankbooks for the farm, and when her eyesight started to go, she balanced the ledger with a magnifying glass. Nothing that happened after that was her fault. The box-spring creaked, it was rude. My mother knew the Bible. She's the one who named you Dinah. She wanted to see you so badly, she squinted at your baby photos with her magnifying glass. Then she died and you were three days old at her funeral. Your father's mother, what did we get? A visit in a hotel every year? New York dame in a fur coat, eating at Long John Silver's in a *mink*? I laugh, Dinah. I will die laughing. I'm dying here.

Meeting a college man, I thought I could go to college, too. And I would have even before that, but my dad found the books. He threw them at my head, beat me with their spines, and told me to get on milking the cows. My ears rang for hours and trickled blood. My sister went to college, and I milked my cows and hers from four to eight every morning before school. By eighteen I had carpal-tunnels, and I couldn't grip a pencil, so that's why I couldn't write my college applications. I thought maybe your father had a little money, a little money for me to get surgery on my wrists and go to college. College or no college, I could always sing. I was the best singer in the whole goddamn church. I did the solos at Christmas, and I would have even been in the choir, but I ruined the robe one Sunday morning chasing Chucky's 4-H hog. That purple robe—so shiny and perfect pleated—I tore it on the

barbed wire fence and stained it in shit and I didn't go back to church after that. They didn't come after the robe. But I thought your dad would make a little money, see, on top of the money he had. I thought, here's a college man from New York with glasses and a big car with a box-spring. I thought we might have a house with a bookshelf. Books that stayed on the shelf and didn't fly at my head. But after my mother's funeral, Grandpa threw your city-boy father up against the wall. Your dad's wrist flopped. He broke the wrist. Your father never threw books at me, no, but when he found out I was still sending your photos, your dad swung at me and hit me in the jaw with a bag of the government flour. I know you saw that, Dinah, my face made white and streaked to the chin with tears and mascara. I saw myself in the mirror after that, and I choked. All night that cloud of flour hung in the air and it's just as well that you saw it, Dinah, it's how you learned that some things are ugly.

But when you were five and your sister was three and Chance had just been born we all drove to Nashville and I cut a demo with a country band. Your dad took a week off from the library, and we used what we'd saved to pay a bandman to put my songs on sheet music for guitars and bass. When we made the cassette, I sang into the mic. I shook my boobs like Dolly Parton. I still have that recording, the song about hitting homeruns in love, the chorus where I whistle and yodel. Have you heard from your sister? She never returns my calls, but I get a real kick out of her married name, Hong! I keep asking her, on the machine, when's she gonna make some Chinese babies? And then I sing a song that I wrote about it, but I don't think

she ever hears because that beep cuts me off and the angry lady comes on who says I have reached my maximum recording.

Now you're a woman, Dinah, I can tell you these things, that when your father and I got married, I was technically a little pregnant. So we couldn't have a wedding, on account of you already showing, and so that's why we never had photos. Your other grandpa, your dad's dad, he was too sick to travel anyway, almost dead. And my dad, he'd already started hacking through his emphysema and pulling his air on wheels. Your father and I, we did buy rings, but mine went for hospital bills for getting you born. Years later we sold your father's, the day the band teacher came to the door and said it'd be right for you to have a trumpet.

What I always have to remember is that I got what I wanted. That's what I tell myself here. I stood at the top of that quarter-mile drive, felt the barn at my back—and the heifers, their aching full udders. Just the thought made my wrists hurt. So I climbed up and into the van with your dad. Well, right around then Lee wrote to his mother, he said, I got Martha pregnant, and I'm going to do right by marrying her. This is why I could never be in the same room with her, your grandmother, that bitch! With Chucky gone, killed on his motorcycle, and my mother gone blind—no one to defend me anymore against my own dad taking down my pants—all those years, his mother, your grandmother, the bitch, she never stopped saying that I got pregnant on purpose—Ha!—to help myself to their money. I laugh, Dinah, I laugh. What did we ever have but a thrift store couch? You tell me it's a crime to have survived? Is it too

much to expect a little more out of life than what you had clenched in your fist when you were born?

We all know there's no one in the world who could have stayed married to your father but *me*. When we were happiest I put my hands in his hair and called him Lee-wurt, my skinny warthog. You're a decent person for coming, Dinah. Your sisters and brothers never do. I'm not someone who's said I love you more than five times in my life, and I haven't heard it any more than that, either.