the alembic

providence college 2017

Providence College

the alembic

alembic

noun ▌alem·bic ▌/əˈlembik/

an obsolete distilling apparatus. for our purposes, a figurative "distillation" of the collective talents of a literary community. just as an alembic distilled each season's yield of grapes to produce fine wine, we also gather and distill the year's yield of creativity, in hopes of producing a palatable artistic vinatge.

2015

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Address all correspondence to: The Editors, *The Alembic*, Department of English, Providence College, Providence, RI 02918. Our reading period is from August 1 to November 30. Submissions may also be sent to alembic@providence.edu. Please include a brief biographical note with all submissions, as well as an e-mail address for contact purposes. Manuscripts cannot be returned.

THE ALEMBIC Spring 2017

Editor-in-Chief
Megan Manning

Managing Editors
John P. Connolly
Haley V. Wolfe

Editorial Staff
Anissa Latifi
Elizabeth Dumais
Cheyanne Fullen

Faculty Advisor
E.C. Osondu

Cover Photo
Alexandra Harbour, *Copenhagen*

Literary Journalism Class
Megan Conway, Cheyanne Fullen,
Colleen McCartin, Marisa Papa,
Matthew Rice, Sean Richardson
John Tait, Colin Thomas

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"Let the world burn through you. Throw the prism light, white hot, on paper"
-Ray Bradbury

At *The Alembic,* we are tasked with bringing together a diverse group of creative voices into a unified journal. In setting our tone we looked for pieces that reflected the beauty which we believe art creates. Writing, for us, is an expression of creativity and we looked for pieces that not only had something to say, but endeavored to do so in a way that was aesthetically pleasing and emotionally evocative. Looking back on the works we have chosen, we see a certain musicality featured throughout the journal. There is a lyrical tone in these pieces and a particular attention to the way in which we hear and understand words.

The 2017 issue of *The Alembic* features pieces that make us laugh, that make us cry, and that make us think about the world in new ways. Through these works we were able to see places all around the world through new eyes and to experience emotion through many different perspectives. We present this journal to our readers in the hopes that you too will find resonance in the artistry and musicality of these works.

- Megan Manning, Haley Wolfe, John Connolly, Anissa Latifi, Betsy Dumais, and Cheyanne Fullen

When Lillies Burn

Elisabeth Murawski

She comes to him in a dream,
fourteen lilies in her arms.

When he touches the bouquet,
the petals burst into flames,

sear his hands
once scarlet with her blood.

For the first time
since the assault, Alessandro

repents. In his cell at night
walks the maze

of the young girl's forgiveness.
An Abelard might say

of such a feat
Mirabile dictu. Alessandro
is unschooled, a farmer
without Latin. His words
are simpler: Saint. Martyr.
After all I did to her.

Rivera

Elisabeth Murawski

The shop was closed.
The owner noticed you,
a giant peering in.

Despite the hour, the rain,
he brought out
canvas after canvas

as you stood,
pressed against the glass,
diving deep into Aix,

losing yourself
in the blue-green breast
of Ste. Victoire.

It was poetry, Diego,
blocks of lapis sky
and oily clouds

setting you on fire
in the rain
and you nodded your great head

as if drunk,
and your eyes shone
like the ruby red eyes of a wolf.

Rockport Nor'easter, June

Matthew J. Spireng

No watercolorist would be out in this.
Even the man walking ahead
finds it too much, wind inverting

the umbrella he carries so, finally, metal stays
falling off, he abandons it to the trash. Out beyond
Bearskin Neck waves crash against the breakwater

of granite blocks. Where would a watercolorist
stand or sit, protected? Better to use memory
to capture this—the rain, the wind, the breakers.

Seasonal Attire

Anna Munroe

One winter day, my mother turned off the lights and told me my father was dying. She suddenly grew very quiet, and very worried about noise. We had to tiptoe around in woolen socks so as to not disturb him and hopefully slow him down or stop the dying in its tracks. This meant that I could not wear the new shoes I'd gotten for Christmas, the shiny black patent leather ones with little buckles.

These weren't ordinary shoes. I'd wanted them since September, when we walked past the shoe shop display and saw the glossy pair perched right in front on a bed of purple velvet. My father had squeezed my hand and told me to ask Santa, that he'd surely come through. That was before my father decided to die, before the medicine he took stopped working, when I could run around the house in my pink gel sandals and when my mother shamelessly wore pumps or summer wedges and invited guests over who didn't have to leave their shoes at the door.

When my father started dying, my feet were always cold. I wore thick socks and waited to hear the thud of his work-shoe footsteps that never came. I crept up and down the stairs, even though they still squeaked, and slid across the floor in stocking feet as my mother nodded in sad approval, looking shorter than usual without the few added inches supplied by a nice pair of heeled boots.

When spring dawned on us, we realized that my father was dead. The lights flickered on, and I could wear my shoes again. Soon enough, the house would have to fill with noise. On the morning of his funeral, I buckled my feet in and watched my mother powder her face and slip into her own black, glossy heels. We clicked across the hardwood floor, feeling as though we were treading upon sacred ground.

In the spring sunlight, my shoes glistened. They looked even nicer than they did when they sat snuggled in the shop display window, even nicer than when my father nodded and commented "yes, those are very pretty." They were stiff and made my feet throb and all I could think about as the priest droned on and as everyone cried around me was how bad it hurt, but they looked pretty and were so shiny that I had to be incredibly careful as to which steps I took, avoiding the spaces without grass and only dark mud.

Everyone that day hugged my mother and kissed me on the head, telling me how grown up I looked and I knew that they hadn't even noticed my shoes. I wondered how grown up I could look if my mother was allowed to look so tall next to me in her pumps. After the burial, I decided that I didn't care, and walked

across the brown sodden patches of dirt covering fresh graves, moving towards the car where my mother was waiting, tapping her toes with impatience. It was my uncle who then noticed the shoes as he watched me trudge away, my feet covered with specks of brown. "Now look what you've done!"

When we returned home, I took the shoes off so as not to trail mud through the house, my mother did the same, and we walked barefoot and silent into the summer.

The Mission

Anna Munroe

Her fear still finds her sometimes, it catches in the hollow place at the bottom of her throat, burning a bit like the feeling of tears—like when she was young, curled up in the oppressive and humid dark of the room her family shared, fingers frantically searching for the hands of her children. It burrows into of her—the way one of the young ones would lean into her chest on the floor of another house deemed "safe," wrapped in faded yet colorful cloth she'd carefully woven, deep brown hands trembling as they clung to her stronger body.

The fear ripples across her smooth skin and nestles in the long silky folds of her tangled black hair. It races through her, louder than the motor-vehicles charging through the night, driven by the strange shadow-men who hate her people. It drips from the thatched roof of a cornstalk hut after a storm, rises like smoke from the green volcano that towers over the small, unassuming village, floats upon the glassy surface of the lake, and runs along the dirt roads, in step with the pounding feet of wild dogs.

In the back of the crowded church, her fear cowers. Her fingers knead together and wrap tightly around the small pearly

beads that the kind white-faced priest brought from America. Her fear lurks beneath the thinly padded wooden seats, suffocated by the warm air and sunlight flooding the room, crushed beneath the knees of the children that come to pray and sing, their hearts pulsing with the scarlet blood of their fallen families.

When they sing, her fear runs far into the trees—the dense volcanic wilderness—fleeing like she did that dark evening in the rattling black van, up the winding roads past the blood-thirsty military men who took her husband. Their voices swell, right there in the church—louder than gunshots and louder than fear—wrapping her in what she hopes to be the Holy Spirit.

Outside, the wild dogs feast on her fear, the first meal they've had in days, filling their hollow bellies that already resemble carcasses while the voices in the village mumble in quiet mingled K'iche and Spanish—hoping to fear no more.

Meanwhile

Julie Murphy

Nobody. Nobody. Nobody,
a woman calls loudly, her voice
drifting in through my open window
from somewhere between the privet
and the agapanthus. I think it strange,
but a word I can relate to, a feeling
growing inside me, until I hear a little
snuffle, a jingle of dog tags, then it hits me—
she's actually saying "No, Buddy!"

I look out at the Japanese plum tree,
its branches thick with starlings feasting on bitter
fruit, while I lie here, books and papers
scattered around me. My lover stormed out
last night, and instead of the work I meant to do,
I eat the argument over and over, picking
the small words apart, finding soft flesh to bite into.

Meanwhile, the fat crows
announce their arrival with loud screeches,
an alarm the starlings heed, flying off
in one swift movement, and so inspired,
I haul myself from the bed, stumble upstairs,
put the kettle on. Call out to my stubborn lonely
self, like the woman to the dog,
No, Buddy!

Notes On a Lost Notebook, with Complications

Stephen R. Roberts

I may be a direct descendant of a fictional character
scribbled into a notebook that I lost a while back.

Imagine an assortment of old antagonists cavorting
around my scrawled pages, with no sense of purpose,
because the notebook cannot be found for corrections.

My long-lost youth is in peril, in need of company
of another sort, to sort things out before it's too late
to reconnect the dots along my misplaced game plan.

Past opponents gleaned from old neighborhoods
will be shoplifting pocketknives, pins, and brain-pliers
to pry open locked doors of my childhood recollections.

I think a timeworn adversary is trying to trick me,
lure me into an old alley short-cut I used to know.
Enemies, entangled in old memories seldom vanish.

By my own fictionalized distortions, I am a survivor.
The story goes like this, and goes on like this forever.
Thus, there is good reason for altered endings.

I loiter now in the dim light outside the old pool hall,
awaiting a long-lost nemesis in need of a thrashing.
With all the long-term ill effects of life to be corrected,
I hope to find the notebook in time for a last revision.

Memory Box

Francesca Brenner

I start with my high school diploma
nose the corner of the vellum
into the flame, the fire
latching like a baby
gumming the tip of a finger

Sweet-smoke threads
into darkness lifts a smell
of decaying roses
at the embossed, gold seal
the fire turns a copper green
then ash lace
consumes my name

In the dark, still air
the only sound
a tiny, coiled exhale
as if sliding for freedom
under a barbed wire fence

The Oval Mirror

Jane Stuart

If only time could bring back yesterday
when we were young and both in love
nothing, it seemed, stood in the way
--except the world (but we were loved)

A miracle would turn our hearts—
Time is the mirror! You were song
and I was roses growing from your hands.
Then starlight faded and the moon was gone.

At night I listened to the owl in flight..
Yesterday I heard the whippoorwill.

Saint Maria of the Head

Wendy Fox

In fire times, life is different. Under a cloud of smoke, without sunlight, and clouds of dust, without water, even the least devoted will pray, will participate in a novena in honor of St. Isidore, patron of farmers and gardeners, or carry a replica of the skull of St. Maria, Isidore's wife, in procession for the relief of drought, the dirt as dry as bone rising among the shuffling feet.

Grant us rain, in due abundance, that, being sufficiently helped with temporal, we may the more confidently seek after eternal gifts.

***

The woman Maria Torribia was not popular, but she was strong. One day on his way back from the fields, Isidore jogged to catch up to her to help her carry her load of water, but when he saw she had control and then some, he slowed his pace. Her reputation was as strict and a hard worker. Her hair was coiled at a stern braid at her neck.

She had lived with her parents in Guadalajara. She was their oldest and only surviving child, and once on a hot day, they three went to the river. Her mother had packed a modest picnic of cheese and tomatoes and bread. None of them could swim, but they liked to sit along the bank and let the water cool their feet. When the mother's scarf was loosed by the wind and dropped just beyond her toes, she leaned forward to retrieve it and fell—the water was deeper than it looked, and swift. In an instant, she was carried from them, her body swirling and helpless. The father plunged in after, reaching for his wife, bobbing and gasping.

Maria thought for just a second before deciding to follow. She was screaming from the riverbank, but there was no help in sight, no barge ready to pluck them to safety. She took a running, headlong jump, aiming for a spot where the current foamed.

It was silent, submerged, and silent when she floated to the surface. Breath was impulse, but she pushed the air from

her lungs and dipped her head again, yet the river righted her. No matter how she heaved and twisted, she was buoyed by the water and her head stayed above, face pointed to sun.

Then, she didn't think of having a gift. Then, she made her way back to the shore, packed up her mother's basket, and turned dripping toward home.

She tried to feel grateful.

When their bodies washed up a few days later, she buried them by her three young brothers. Soon, the family home was sold at auction to pay her father's debts, and she slept on the scullery floor where she had found work as a daily girl.

She left word at the markets, and a message came back of a distant cousin whose father had disappeared in the wars but whose mother remained, who offered a pallet on the floor and honest work. Maria packed her modest belongings. It was a two-day journey on foot, not so far. When she arrived, she found them easily—it seemed all the men in Madrid knew her pretty cousin.

There, even in the thickest heat, when Maria pumped the well, she could easily fill both her buckets. When Maria watered the herb garden, the can was never emptied until she was finished. Her aunt began to request that only Maria bring the drinking jar, because the water was always so cool and clear.

Maria worked in the same landowner's kitchen with her aunt and her cousin whose fields Isidore tilled. She took the hardest jobs, in deference to her family, and they thanked her for this. Her cousin, Magda, had a slim figure and tender skin that bruised easily. She was younger and still had time to marry well. They washed her in milk and glossed her hair with olive oil and hoped she would find a husband who would take all three of them, but Maria promised to stay with her aunt no matter what happened.

She dreamed every night of the Virgin's cloak skimming water.

***

Sometimes Isidore's master would wonder why he was not at his labor; Isidore was not ashamed to say he had been at

mass. He dared the landowner to compare him against the other hands; there was no fault. Isidore had come to work on the outskirts of Madrid province, fleeing the Iberian caliphate, taking his communion when and where he could. His hands were strong and calloused, the muscles at his neck like a chain. He went down with the other workers in their shared hut, and he prayed by candlelight, and the other men joined him. Farming was hard; the land was overworked and had been trampled by armies—who were they to ignore a plea to God? Isidore was not greedy. Some rain, some sun, some protection from the winds that sometimes carried their topsoil to Andalusia and beyond. When Isidore snuffed the candle and the bunkhouse went dark, some of the men went on in their prayers, prostrate on their stacked beds, until sleep took them or the morning began to push through the stars.

In his litany, *from lightning and tempest, deliver us*.

Then, Isidore worried more for the dust choking the ox, the parched fields hostile to seed. If lightning came it could strike anywhere. There was nothing to burn.

***

A flame licking its way up the hillside, and Maria, diverting the river. Smoke like lace weaving through the treetops, but wet clouds following her and opening on command. Embers, like hail, falling on the thatched-roof villages, but she bringing fog so thick the coals turn to ash pure enough to mark the foreheads of the faithful.

Maria always in front, wielding a trident.

***

Isidore surprised them all when he asked for Maria's hand. He worked up all his courage to consult a father, a grizzled uncle, or a wall of brothers, but there was only the old stooping aunt, who answered his knock with her modest, covered hair and her ragged smile. He blushed at the ladies' mending laid out over the back of a chair.

He didn't know of Maria's holy dreams. He had spoken only a few words to her.

- Your load looks heavy.
- *There are heavier.*
- The sun is strong today.
- *I pray for the crops.*

He didn't know that his candle, wedged into the dirt floor of the men's sleeping space, was a beacon that led the devout to the devout.

The marriage of Maria and Isidore was simple, and the evening of their troth they stayed at the local inn. They were expected at their posts by first light, but they had a whole, delicious night without the clamor of the men at the bunkhouse or Maria's aunt and cousin. It was the first time they had been alone together. He worried for where they would live. Like her, the family home had been sold; he wanted to find a place they could work, that even if not their own, afforded them some privacy. Maria thought his expectations high; for now they could go on, living apart.

Isidore agreed, if reluctantly, and then silence fell to their room, and he reached for Maria. Her skin, so clean. Her hair, with flowers woven into her braids, and her hands nearly as rough as his. His bride.

At dawn, Maria rose before her husband and dressed and then woke him. She sent him to the bunkhouse to change into his work clothes and went to the central well. He had said that the innkeeper would not care if the sheet had been marked with the sign of virginity, and she knew this to be true, but the help would, so Maria scrubbed at the spot until it rinsed clean in the dim morning light.

When she hung the sheet out the windowsill to dry, she saw Isidore, in the distance, the ox on his plow and the shine of sweat already dappling his skin. She felt changed. Consummating the marriage had been more like a fumble, and she realized she had sent her husband away with no breakfast. She had a piece of dry bread in her apron but had forgotten it.

Through the open shutter, there was also smoke, just a thread, but Maria grabbed her wash bucket and ran. Her aunt was

standing outside, crying, shouting that she didn't know how it had happened, she was always so careful with the cooking fire. Maria flung the dirty wash water toward the flames, and when the water hit, steam sizzled from the thatch, and then there was Isidore, handing her another bucket and the men from the fields making a line from the creek, a human aqueduct, until the little house was drenched and cold.

The fire burned part the roof so that it swayed at an angle, but Isidore believed it could be repaired, and he kissed his wife in full view of everyone, and the hands followed him back to their perches on the plows. He kept them late so they would not be behind for their workday—he was worried the women could be punished in the kitchen.

That night Maria and her cousin worked at scrubbing the house. The fire had done less damage than they feared, running directly up the wall. There were bits of streaked soot in everything. The old aunt followed them around hollering apologies until they were able to put her to bed. When Maria finally tried to get a few hours' rest, the dawn came through the hole above her, and she watched the stars dissolve into the blue light of morning. She was tired but sleep would not come, and then she felt just the smallest catch in her belly. It was far too soon for the quickening, but she was sure of it. Her aunt would be happy, and Maria hoped some good news would calm her. Isidore had promised to bring his pack of men at the first chance, and the skies were clear of rain. She lay on her back and looked to the sky, opening to heaven.

***

The pregnancy was an easy one. Her back was strong from sleeping on her pallet, and her body was broad and muscled from her work. In the kitchen the women slipped her mugs of milk thick with cream and ladles of soup heavy with meat, just enough that no one would notice, and they prayed over her. After Isidore covered the hole in the roof, the aunt insisted that he come to live with them. It was blessing, for the old woman, to have a man in the home again and a child coming. Cousin Magda had

fallen in love with one of the other hands, and the aunt purred over them both: her daughter, glowing from love; her niece, hair glossy and her eyes shining. Sometimes at night she cried over her good fortune. She lit candles for the Virgin and gave thanks.

Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee; blessed art thou amongst women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death. Amen.

***

The night of the fire, the aunt's husband had come to her in a dream. He had died chopping wood in the forest, his axe biting the tree trunk and then in one awful moment of miscalculation, the timber falling toward him and crashing, in a clutter of birds and hornets' nests, across his middle. The last time she saw him, his body was bisected, and his face was not the face of the man she had married, swollen and his lips pinched. Then, she had wanted to go with him, but their daughter was so young. She was glad she stayed, glad to be breathing for these moments with Isidore and Maria, and her own daughter, a great beauty—the aunt had not been, nor her husband handsome—who it seemed would marry for love, choosing the same hard life with too many people in a few rickety rooms. Though the aunt had hoped her daughter's looks could carry her to a higher class that would spare her lousy bedclothes and the constant reek of half-spoiled food and wood smoke, she also wanted her only child to know the joy of waking up to the face she had picked, to know the feeling of being sure. She had had this with her husband, and even with so many years gone, when he appeared to her on the night of the fire, whole and strong, she lived the day when they had been new and snuck to the stables together, stripping down on the hay with the heat of the horses around them, where they had made their daughter from simple desire. Then, she was already old and thought she would always be alone.

He was a gift to her, and this was how she knew God, when her patience was answered.

Sometimes she still expected him to walk through the

doorway, which he had built, to take off his shoes, and to come to her.

In the dream, the horses stamped and snorted, and their commotion covered any suspicious sounds. She didn't know if it had really been like that. She only remembered him, his skin sun-browned and his hands hot. In the dream, she saw herself from a long way off, like looking over a valley from a high place.

Her life had been harder without him. She remembered their every day—the way he smelled of clover and wax and the way their two lives were ordinary toil until they were joined.

So long ago, so close.

***

Isidore was a good husband. He complimented Maria and he spoke to her gently. He chopped her firewood, splintering the quarters into different-sized pieces so she had both timbers for kindling and cooking. In the mornings, Isidore leaned into her, her buttocks hot against his sex, the front of his legs against the back of hers.

When Maria asked if she could keep a bee box, he nodded and came home to her with planks knitted into stacked squares.

She knew where a hive nested, and she watched it, waiting for a swarm, when part of the colony would light out with a new queen, and scouts would be sent to find a home. She put the boxes in the garden, flanked by the most pollen-heavy plants, and waited until the bees came, a few at first, and then in billows, filling the boxes to the brim and their number so many the stalks of her surrounding flowers were bent and their stamens dry.

As Maria grew, Isidore wanted her out of the kitchen. He had been many nights with Magda's young man and a bottle of wine, and they had made a plan. Adrian had come to Madrid province as a traveler, stopping for some work when he needed it. Perhaps he was fated to Magda, he said. His godfather always had a place for him, and he would go home, taking Magda and the aunt. Isidore did not doubt the young man loved his wife's cousin,

and he did not doubt he would take care of the aunt, but he insisted they were married properly before they left.

The wedding was delayed when Adrian's family sent word that they would come to Madrid as witnesses. Their caravan took almost two weeks to arrive, and they filled the same tiny chapel where Isidore and Maria had said their vows to the ceilings. The old aunt was beside herself, so many women, in colorful clothes and bangles, counting the beads with her and singing. They spent the night, their wagons parked ramshackle around the house and fires blazing. They had brought with them wine and cooking pots and a few chickens, and they praised the aunt's hospitality when she volunteered to kill and pluck the birds they offered for the wedding meal.

That afternoon, when she had seen the crowd of Adrian's family, in a cloud of bees, Maria had picked the garden nearly clean. By nightfall there were already new buds.

She wrapped a rack of honeycomb in cloth and presented it to Magda's mother-in-law as a gift, and the woman thanked her and took a piece immediately to chew for a sore in her mouth.

The celebration went on through the night, but in the morning they packed and set out again for the coast. The aunt had never seen the sea. She had not known that when she left Madrid her final home would be with travelers. She had not known they would carry her, on a makeshift litter, the first few miles, an elder, a temporary queen; she missed her husband then, with the curls that framed his face and now cascaded down Magda's back.

Maria and Isidore would take her home and raise their child. She turned back to them, Maria waving to her and the bridal party, Maria's face shining with tears. Her other daughter, almost. The aunt could not cry then. She felt her husband's hand at her neck. She knew she had only a few years left and that the time would go fast. The hours with sadness are long, with joy, like a flame on dry tinder. When the caravan was outside of Madrid, they broke the procession down some, to economize, and offered the aunt a place in the back of a donkey cart, with soft pillows and

a gourd of wine.

She rode in the cart until night began to fall. As the dark deepened, she could see Magda by torchlight, and she motioned for one of the men to help her down. The dry foliage of the road was brittle on her sandals. Such a journey was coming late in her life, like everything else, and she wanted to walk and feel the earth and the scrub brush at her feet. The wheels of the many carts made a clattering sound that cut through the air, rhythmic, like an incantation. Though the ground was rough, she quickened her pace. When she caught up, her heart was pounding, and she reached for her daughter's hand. The new husband dismounted and lifted the old woman to the rump of the horse, and she rode there, cradling her daughter until the first light broke across the horizon, just as she had done when Magda was a child.

***

In the house at Madrid, there were two rooms, plus the open space that circled the chimney, a half moon.

Maria's pregnancy progressed, and when she became very large, she quit her work at the kitchen, as Isidore requested. She didn't mind. She rose in the morning to make his breakfast and feed her aunt's chickens, her chickens now.

On the day of the child's birth, Maria woke to sunlight; she had overslept, not even waking when Isidore did. She felt her belly move. It was a beautiful day to be born, so she did not blame the child, but she did not want to be alone. There was a midwife, but Maria was not sure if she could walk so far to her. She took long, deep breaths. She lit a fire and heated water. At the noon hour, the pot was at a raging boil, and she was streaked with her own sweat.

She prayed.

The sun began to slink down, which meant Isidore would return soon. She remembered the births of her brothers. She thought of water, the way even the tiniest creeks find their paths, the way rivers cut a course to the sea. The fire was growing hotter. She missed her aunt and her mother, who would know

what to do. She missed the ladies from the kitchen.

When Isidore opened the door, their child was crowning. He knelt in front of Maria, dirty from the fields but exhaustion melting. Then, it wasn't long.

The child of Isidore and Maria was a son.

She was relieved to be done with it, relieved nothing had gone wrong.

Isidore cut the baby from her and washed his wife, helped her to bed with the nuzzling infant. He felt proud of Maria, and proud to be a father, and if this pride was a sin he accepted it.

***

When Isidore was at the fields, with the baby swaddled at her back, Maria cleared more and more land around their home. Their son was a worker like his father. He liked the motion of her axe at the small trees and her sickle at the tall grass and rarely fussed. She did not know where the boundaries of her aunt's property were, nor did she know if her aunt had any legitimate claim even to the house. Maria had never seen a deed, but she had already decided that if anyone asked, she would say it had burned in the fire.

The installation of the bees only helped her garden, and Maria walked the ever-extending line of arable dirt barefoot, the outline of her toes crumbling into mud.

She collected rocks and piled them in a border around her herbs and flowers. The child on her back got heavier, and she grew even stronger with his weight. They baptized him at home.

On the day the child fell into an old, unused well, Isidore asked to be released from his master. The space Maria had cleared was claimed by the landowner, but in a moment of benevolence and thanks for Isidore's service, he agreed that they could work it, under his watch.

By this time, the child toddled.

In the dusty hole, he screamed, and with nothing left to do but appeal to God, they prostrated themselves.

The well rose; he was lifted on a spout like the spray from a whale.

***

With the spirits guiding his plow, Isidore could do the work of three, and where the feet of his wife touched, the land was damp and irrigated, and new shoots broke against the heat-cracked dirt. Where their heads lay, dry creek stream became lush rivers. Once when Maria stopped behind a scraggled tree to pee, the limbs fractured and bloomed.

***

Life was easier for them, at first. Maria kept the boy strapped to her back, and they worked their plot as a family. They grew crops for themselves, and some that they could sell at the markets, and some they paid in tax to the landowner.

At night they prayed, giving thanks they had enough.

She left word for her cousin and her aunt at the stalls, and she heard they were happy and prosperous, her cousin with child and her growing fat. Then news came that Magda had given birth to twin girls, and Maria hoped they would be true sisters, like she and Magda would have been if they had had more time together.

***

When the fever came, Maria made a compress of yarrow and elderberry, but the heat did not stop. She called for a priest, and she kneeled in front of him while he said his words. She took the boy to the creek that had saved the house, cold, always, and stripped him and held his body where the chill water crashed through the rocks, but the fever would not break.

She had envied Magda before, for having her mother, and now she envied her again, for having two children at once.

When they buried him, Isidore's face like ash.

They worked hard at procreation, but she never again felt the catch in her abdomen, the pressure at her belly and the tender breast. She came to forget it. She did not regret the child, but when the girls from town came to her, firm-bellied and

shamed, she led them to the herb plot, which was, even in winter, flush with cures.

The garden went on, the harvest came and came again and again. They built a bunkhouse and hired a few hands of their own. Isidore was with them some evenings when the work was done, leading them in prayer. Maria fed them from her cooking pot, which never seemed to empty, and she mended their clothes. When one or the other was occasionally sick, she held them back with the request for help in the garden and then returned them to bed. When they married, she said good-bye with a jug of honey and a packet of seeds.

The boy who came to her, face flushed and shirt torn, was a child the age her own might be.

Isidore had tried to catch a startled ox and had gotten caught underneath.

Their life had been simple. And for a time, lucky.

They had lived with the child, at first, and then without him.

They had come from nothing and made a place for themselves.

When they buried Isidore, Maria thought of her parents, next to her brothers. And now her husband, next to her son. She envied them, together always.

She felt foolish to have believed she could have kept them.

***

Maria gave the men a few days and then paid them their final wage. A few argued they should bring the autumn harvest in, but Maria sent them away and tore the bunkhouse down herself, board by board. She hitched up the ox who had trampled her husband and dragged the lumber to the chapel. It took several trips and most of a day, and when she was finished, she left the beast, his plow, and the boards there by the stone steps.

She was tired when she got back to the fields, but she walked them carefully until the water came up and the earth was

ankle-deep mud.

She split the bee boxes and then cut down the garden.

It had been years since she had heard news of her cousin. The aunt had probably passed.

She still dreamed of the Virgin, and sometimes she dreamed of Isidore and his endless tilling. Each day, she retraced her path in the fields until they were swamp. A tree sprung from the place of Isidore and her son's rest, polished with moss.

The house grew tufts of green from every corner, leaked and moaned. She was cold, frequently, and damp. Her hair would not dry, the braid like iron, gray and heavy. Her cooking pot creaked with rust, her skin clammy.

A visitor came once and when he knocked at the door, it crumbled under his fist. Through the soggy hole, Maria saw her cousin's face in his features, but she slipped out of sight, like an eel.

***

Deign, we pray, to instill into our hearts a horror of sin and a love of prayer, so that working the soil in the sweat of our brow, we may enjoy eternal happiness.

***

She visited the gravesite often, picking her way along a path of boulders that barely peeked above the murk. The tree had grown tall and strong, and its roots coiled around what might be left of the simple boxes. When her bare feet touched the water, tiny fish darted around her toes.

Sometimes she saw peasants through the drape of witches hair, filling their buckets at the pool that had formed where the creek used to run.

She knew that when it was her time to die, she would come to this same spot and let the water finally take her, like she had wanted that day at the river, and without her constant circling, the land would dry again, the creek returning to a trickle except for in spring. When the mist cleared and she was found, she would be beneath the tree, peaceful, her body gone except for her head, glinting silver and scaled.

Altocumulus Clouds

Sheryl L. Nelms

like ginned
cotton

dumped
over the horizon

they trail
sunset

in thin
filaments

of iridescence

Long Relationships

Rachel Tramonte

You drink the latte your angry husband made.

The violence of people who are together every day
Rolls from the tongue to the throat like mineral espresso and rich milk.

~~Be my father~~
~~Be my mother~~
~~Be more~~
~~Be me~~

Be different than your father. I will be different
than your mother, and maybe even mine.

Be the person I made you up to be, and when
my vision changes: you will change too.

We listened to each other's records like teenagers
even though, or because, they skipped

and we pissed like cats who couldn't see beyond the plains of our first lives,
where we roamed for mice because what we knew best was hunger.

No More Mythology

Rachel Tramonte

I am terrorized as though wild beasts are before my eyes
and pretend I am not.

I am hungry because I break body not bread
And I pretend I am not.

I am tired because I no longer sleep
And I pretend .

I am lonely. I will be one of those
Lovely, lonely people.

Inside this fear is another fear
nested like Russian Dolls.

No one will ever know that
my bones are hungry,

until the red and yellow
speckled mask cracks.

for those few

David Howerton

You would watch
a crow circling
that tall gray pine
just up from Highway 49.
Smile almost laugh
as 30-50 cars speed
up canyon.
Then for a few breaths quiet
of a kind, wind whispers
through branches
an it's time
for the next string of cars.

finches hop across field

David Howerton

Small brown finches
hop across field
looking for insects
and food tossed
from speeding cars.
Somehow they sing
getting through each day.
Their small conquests
bring smiles and joy
over how things are.

Some Unanswerable Questions Raised by Soft Flowers and an Old Woman

Lisa Meckel

She has been touching soft flowers—now
the softest flower is not the rose
but that wild-flower, a member of the sage family
whose lavender blossoms
gather in crunched bunches on a long green stem—but
to what point does her constant touching reveal
an obsession or a truth?

Let's imagine this old woman: bent like a pipestem
she strolls along the street
encroaches on flower beds, pets pale petals of roses
that overhang a neighbor's fence
next, she flutes her fingers up the tall sage's purple blossoms
exclaims to children: Not the rose, but the sage
is the softest flower ever. Here, you touch it too.
You remember this.

Let's ask this ancient: why the insatiable need to touch
softness—no doubt she runs from cactus, avoids
thorns of roses, having experienced the shock that something
so soft can, without warning, pierce the skin—a
betrayal of beauty she thinks, or a failure of innocence
to understand that there is never just one pure truth
unless that truth be to never have loved your own
or another's softness
perhaps never offered it or, having offered it, learned the truth
that all softness must be guarded?

Interview with Alison Espach

Interviewed by:
Cheyanne Fullen
Megan Conway
John Tait
Sean Richardson

ALISON ESPACH is a graduate of Washington University in St. Louis. Her writing has appeared in McSweeney's, Five Chapters, Glamour, and several other magazines. She grew up in Connecticut and now teaches Creative Writing at Providence College, where she earned her undergraduate degree. Her debut novel, The Adults, was published in February of 2011 and her short story, "Someone's Uncle" is available as an e-book.

CF/MC/JT/SR: How, if at all, did your experience at Prov-

idence College shape you as a writer? Did you know during your undergraduate years at PC that you wanted to be a novelist?

AE: I often wonder if I would have attempted a career at writing had I not gone to PC. While I started writing long before I came to PC, I never considered pursuing writing professionally. When I got to college, I thought like most college students are taught to think: get a job. But after four years of guidance and support from PC professors, I started to think it was actually possible to make writing my job. I don't know if that would have happened at a larger school.

CF/MC/JT/SR: Your novel, The Adults, is set in Connecticut. Since you are originally from there, would you say your characters are based upon people you've encountered growing up?

AE: Some of the characters reflect aspects or qualities of people I know, but I think that most of my characters reflect me more than anyone else. I understand, empathize, love, and hate each character I write, and am able to do so because there is always something I understand and relate to.

CF/MC/JT/SR: "Mr. Basketball" is a young teacher, just like you and some of your colleagues. Looking back on it, do you feel as if this allows you to empathize with his character more, despite the fact he is morally wrong?

AE: I wrote the novel before I had ever taught, so I didn't write his character from a point of empathy. The whole book flows from Emily's perspective, and so Mr. Basketball is really a figment of Emily's imagination. He exists as she wants to see him in the book. That was always my main concern when writing Mr. Basketball. I didn't really care if the reader empathized with him;

I just wanted the reader to understand him and see him the way Emily saw him.

CF/MC/JT/SR: According to IMDB.com, your novel The Adults is in the process of being turned into a film. How involved are you in the development process? To what extent do you think your work will need to be augmented in order for it to work effectively as a film? Are there any aspects of your novel that you are afraid might potentially get lost in the film adaptation?

AE: I am a "Creative Consultant" to the production studio, which means that I weigh in on crucial artistic decisions. For instance, when the writer/director finished the script, we had a meeting to discuss my response to it. She wanted to know what I thought about her changes, and for the most part, I liked them. Generally speaking, I am happy with any change to the book if the change makes it a better movie. I felt from day one that I wanted the script to succeed as a movie, instead of simply being the most loyal adaptation of the book.

CF/MC/JT/SR: You've mentioned in an interview with FlavorWire.com that a lot of what the coming-of-age tale is about is a young person who finally understands what it is she is seeing. As a professor teaching young adults around the time in their lives that they are discovering themselves, do you see this transformation often? And do you take pride in being able to shape young minds in your career?

AE: I think the most interesting thing about character is how character relentlessly changes. We are always learning how to see ourselves, and the world; we always know less than we think we do. As a professor, watching students finally "see" something is incredibly rewarding. When a student suddenly, after years of feeling like a bad writer, understands how to write a paper—that is the best moment for a teacher. Of course, part of the difficulty of

being a teacher is you don't always get to know when these "aha" moments are happening. For some students, these "aha" moments happen years later. I know, as a former student, that I am still learning how to make sense of my college experience. I still open books that I read for college courses and think, "Oh, I finally see what my professor was trying to show us."

CF/MC/JT/SR: One might consider the title of The Adults as rather simple. How do you come up with the titles for you works? Are there any other titles you were thinking of before choosing The Adults, and if so, why did you favor the title you went with?

AE: I like titles that are simple and concrete. I like a title that tells me, the reader, what the subject of the book is going to be. I resist titles that tell me exactly what the themes are going to be. It's fun to figure that out on my own.

Interview with Catherine MacPhail

Interviewed by:
CJ McCartin
Marisa Papa
Paxton Rice
Colin Thomas

Catherine MacPhail is a Scottish-born author who has written everything from children's novels to mysteries. Some of her most well know works include Run, Zan, Run and Fighting Back. Run, Zan, Run was the winner of the 1994 Kathleen Fidler Award for new Scottish Writing, and Fighting Back won one of the first Scottish Arts Council Children's Book Awards in 1999. Her novel Another Me was recently made into a film. She has also

written a series of four books entitled Nemesis, which concluded in May 2008. She has three children, one named Katie, who was the inspiration from her first book.

CJM/MP/PR/CT: Your novels range from children's books to mysteries. How is your writing process different when writing different genres? Do you have a preference? What is it and why?

CM: Believe it or not, there is no different process. I always want to write a rattling good story, with a great beginning that is going to draw the reader in. I want to keep the tension going with cliff-hangers, or suspense, or humour, and I want to draw my story to an exciting, unexpected, and yet satisfying conclusion. the ending my reader wants, but not in the way they expect it!

CJM/MP/PR/CT: In your work for young people, the protagonist is often a child dealing with issues seemingly beyond their maturity level. What made you chose this perspective and how does it add to the story?

CM: My first book, Run Zan, Run, was about my daughter and what was happening to her. It has been so successful that now, when I get an idea, I tend to think...how would a child dealing with this respond? In Grass, the boy sees a murder. The way a boy would handle it is so different to the way an adult would. In Missing, a girl's brother goes missing, and is then found dead, yet she begins to get phone calls from her dead brother. If I had been writing that from the mother's point of view it would have been a completely different story. Children can't drive...how do they get from place to place to investigate somethin'? They have curfew... they have to go to school, have many hurdles to get over that adults don't have. I find that really interesting. My next book is about a girl, the kind no one really bothers with in school, [who] is suddenly popular when she is the one who gets a text from a very popular girl who has gone missing. I love working on stories like that.

CJM/MP/PR/CT: One of the biggest themes you tackle in your writing is bullying, a theme that runs through Run Zan Run, Missing, Picking on Percy and Sticks and Stones, which you have said is based on your daughter Katie's experiences. What message are you trying to convey about bullying?

CM: Bullying is never justified. There is no justification for it. I've heard people say that, well, perhaps the bully is going through a hard time, well, perhaps the one who is being bullied is going through an even worse time. Katie was always bright and cheerful, but at the time she had a very ill father at home.

CJM/MP/PR/CT: Do you deliberately write books about issues that are topical such as bullying and gangs? Do the headlines prevalent today influence your writing?

CM: I never write books about issues. I hate that. All I want to write is a rattling good story. But if you are dealing with real life it is difficult not to include an issue without even meaning to. I wrote a book about a boy who has been brought up by his grandparents and now is granddad is losing it, microwaving his trainers instead of the dinner etc. when his granddad has an accident and ends up in hospital, the boy decides that no one is going to separate him and his granddad, so he helps him escape from the hospital. and go on the run. Only trouble is his granddad thinks they are escaping from the Nazis and could be shot at dawn. It was only when it was published did reviewers say it was a book about children who have to care for parents or grandparents. That was never my intention.

CJM/MP/PR/CT: Your book Another Me was made into a film. What was the process like? Were there things you were worried about being cut or changed? How did you make sure the integrity of your book was upheld?

CM: Everyone told me that when my book was bought for the

screen I would lose any hold I had over it. For me, nothing could be more wrong. I was involved from the very beginning. Meeting the producers, and the director, I was at the filming, met the cast and was even given script approval. They even made me "Executive Producer". How cool is that? I was worried about how they might change the book, but to be honest they really kept so close to it. Except for one thing, quite a major thing in my opinion. In my book, the girl has a "Fetch" (a very Celtic thing), a doppelganger, and in the film (and look away if you don't want a spoiler) they decided that she should have a twin who had been killed at birth because they couldn't save both twins, and the twin who died resented her life being taken away. I would have gone with the "Fetch", a much more original idea. Go on, check out "fetch" on Google and you will see how many famous people in history have had fetches.

CJM/MP/PR/CT: We have heard you are a Game of Thrones fan. What was it like to have Sophie Turner involved?

CM: She is such a lovely actress, beautiful and she was so friendly. She even said she hoped she had done justice to my character. I was also told by her parents that one of the reasons she wanted to do the film was because she was a twin, and her twin had died at birth. Spooky. I think I might have another idea for a story there!

CJM/MP/PR/CT: You have said that you tend to get material from real life. How do you decide what to include and what not to include in your work?

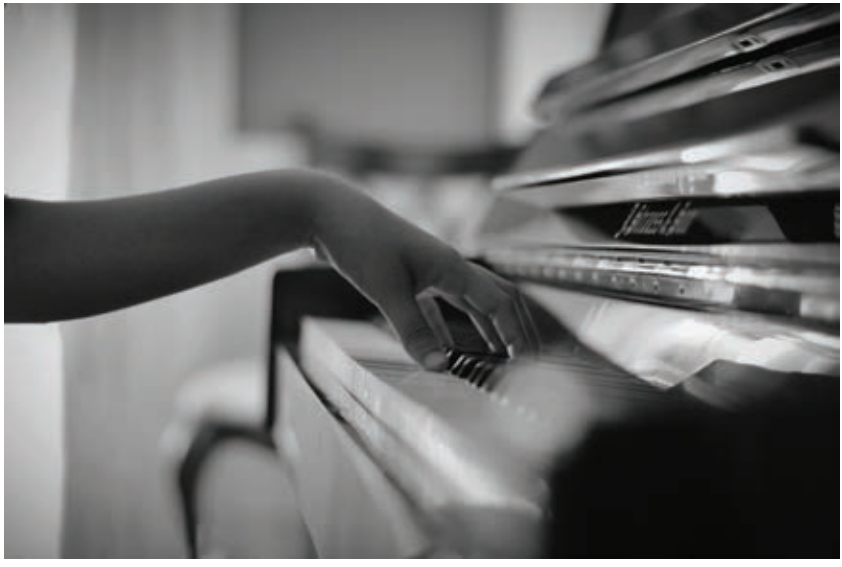
CM: I get ideas every day. I really believe you can train your brain to get ideas. Something I've seen, graffiti on a wall, gave me the idea for Grass, something I've heard, an item on the radio gave me the idea for Roxy's Baby. I write all these ideas down, and it is the ones that stick, that keep coming back to me. they are the ones that end up as the book.

CJM/MP/PR/CT: You have previously said you did not think you were cut out to be a writer. How did you find the courage to follow your dreams? What would you say to others who are hesitant to pursue their passions?

CM: I would say, go for it. Believe in yourself. The first story I had published I had written when I was 17 and I just didn't have the confidence to send it out until I was in my 30's!

A Storm's A Brewin Zachary Acunzo

Riverside Flies Zachary Acunzo



Hear Me Olivia D'Ella

Nothing but Blues Olivia D'Ella

Summer Sky Olivia D'Ella

Warmth Olivia D'Ella

Santorini
Alexandra Harbour

Burano
Alexandra Harbour

Copenhagan
Alexandra Harbour

New York
Alexandra Harbour

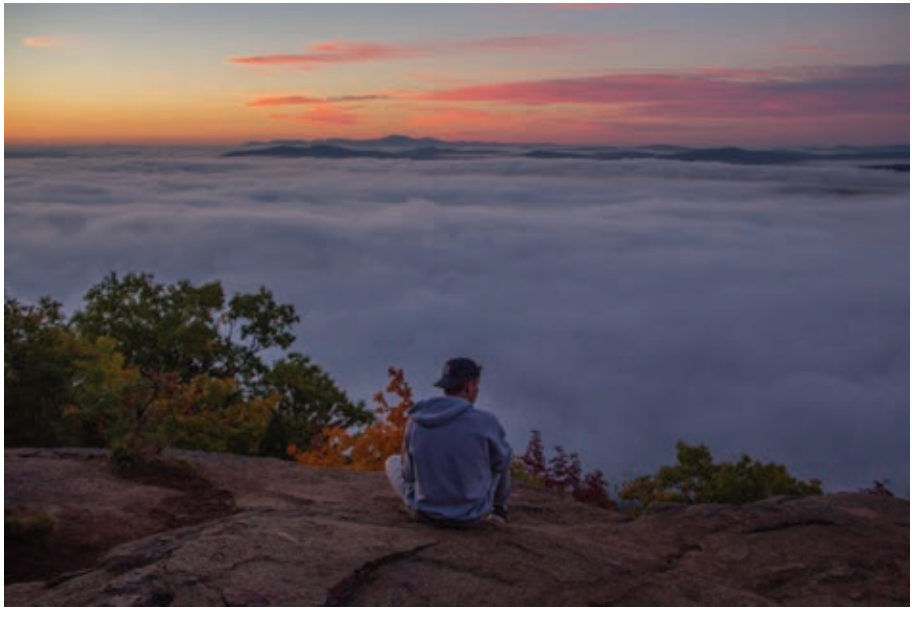
Amsterdam
Alexandra Harbour

Rome
Alexandra Harbour

Lexi's Door
Alexandra Harbour

Venice
Alexandra Harbour

New Hampshire
Alexandra Harbour



Shifting

Carla McGill

The end of the world is out there.
In the shifting sky, speeding stone,
or slow as the failing leaf tied
to the tree's fading blood.
Blue chill torrent of freeway cars
and enduring, if suffering, pavement.
Air grasps for its highest purpose:
a new sense of itself, passionate and full of spirit.
But there is danger, and the end of being,
of controversy, of bound up matter.
Back to the air. Now potently
charged, people look up
in confusion and clarity. Morning
mists cloud the edge, evening winds sharpen it.
In the middle of the night,
what is beyond the spaces of time in which we live?
Books stack up around us,
but where is the sky
in its new form, to put newness
in our intentions and in that place beyond the mind?
In that place where no expression can form
a silent person can find something in the leaves—
fire from another place
which has no map.

The Glow of Former Times

Carla McGill

The glow of former times is not so different
from what gleams now, I think.
The caught-in-the-snow camping,
curious strangers, moments of eclipse,
known to friends at tonight's earnest table;
the lost or vacant times, food eaten, fantastic,
extraordinary, unusual predicaments,

the once-we-found and one-time-we-saw,
that one-time-we-drove out of our intended way,
out of time itself, into unexplored time,
undiscovered streaks and junctures
of time's peculiar map; shimmering memories,
not unlike the glimmer of tonight's stars,
vanishing in wet clouds.

We run from the car to the Chinese restaurant,
to and from each other and the blink
and flicker of the human glance.
The ordinary now
may surpass the glow
of former times. Then again, perhaps not.
Perhaps the memory is always a singular brilliance.

Still, as I watch the star-shaped light on the ceiling
coming through the bedroom blinds, the voices
now echo. Friends have driven away
on familiar roads, the clink of our glasses
in the evening's toast now memory. I find
the common becomes the rare,
a soft, persistent radiance.

So The Whale Said

Brian Howlett

"Why do you have to pollute the waves with so much thought?" With that, the dreaded voice was back, making Mick sit up straight on the bench like he was in a doctor's office about to have his first checkup in years. He had feared it would track him down, even here on the edge of the country as far north and west as a man can go. He waited for it to provide its own answer, as was its habit. "All of you need to sing more," continued the voice.

Still Mick remained silent.

"Those are the richer waves," it said. "They produce so much more pleasure."

The voice drew the word "pleasure" out slowly, like it was twisting taffy with the syllables.

Mick was stuck. There was nowhere else he could go. He looked down at the pebble he was clutching in his red wet palm. He had been staring at it far too long: the flecks of copper striating the stone had become continents; the remaining gray rock, the oceans. Defeated, he tossed the tiny world over the seawall, wondering if he managed to reach the water. Doubting it.

"You're going to miss the billionaires," the voice continued. Then another of the long pauses Mick had come to resent. "They understand you." It almost sang the last word.

Shit. Mick was going to miss the Tier One Elite clients. People who make ten million dollars per year are blessed with a certain grace. They don't get exercised when they lose a Black Card or miss a flight, because they're secure in the omnipotence of their wealth. They've learned from birth that they never have reason to panic.

He had squared himself long ago with how they treated him more as an extension of their phone than as a person. In fact, he suspected that they were superior to him. But those card members

scraping by on a mere one million dollars? Posers. They lusted for their Black Card benefits, and loved to complain in their haughty French, lyrical Spanish, drunken Italian, or irritated American about the suite not being private enough, or the table not being prominent enough. They wanted Mick to acknowledge the gap that existed between them. Which, of course, he didn't.

Mick would miss the Germans most of all. Their language came easiest to him. Their requests were precise, and the phone calls short. They respected seeing a problem solved, but he could also detect an appealing weariness beneath their words. They weren't impressed with much.

"It's good to keep moving," the voice said. "To feel the world glide past you on either side."

Before he could catch himself, Mick responded. "The job wasn't right for me."

"There you are," it said, pleased. It made a metallic clicking sound that made Mick shiver. "Work is to eat," it continued. "Nothing more."

When Mick found himself engaging with it yesterday in the middle of a call with a British client, he knew he had to do something. He took off his headset and handed in his notice just like that. The supervisor didn't hide her disappointment. He was the only one
who could speak the core languages, and he never missed a day of work.

"I can't give you a raise," she said.

"I'm not asking," said Mick. Quitting had always come easy to him, and he was anxious to leave the office. The town. The province.

"Another cubicle with a view outside?" she offered. "I can work on that."

"No. It's not the job."

Mick wanted to tell her about the voice he started hearing a week ago; how it had moved from his headset to the elevator speakers to his TV and now, finally inside his head, following him

everywhere. He didn't google WebMD to search for symptoms of encroaching delusional disorders like you or I might have done. He was never one to question the natural order of things. In fact, Mick would argue that people are built for change no matter how drastic. Cancer comes and you adjust. The glaciers melt and coastlines disappear and we all move on to another subject. He hated to agree with the voice, but we are always moving.

He went to the bank and withdrew his entire savings of $6,400. He had never held that much money before. Then he went to his ex-wife's house to borrow back his knapsack. She thought it was a booty call, making her the second woman he disappointed that day.

He drove northwest without a plan, other than simply to make it to the coast. He had hesitantly played the car radio, listened to the Muzak in the motel lobby last night and watched the Mariners game on TV. No voice, until now.

"I hate these fucking seagulls," Mick said. An untouched Egg McMuffin lay cold
on the bench beside him, attracting the enterprising scavengers.

"Me too," said the voice.

Mick sunk into the bench, trying to locate warmth in the cold summer rain. The low steel clouds and the gray water were meeting in a blur. He had never seen the ocean before. It seemed there was no horizon line in this part of the world and he felt like he was floating.

"So. Where have you been?" Mick hated himself for asking.

"The west side of the northern island," it replied. "I don't migrate any more. These waters are enough for me." Mick watched as a jogger appeared around the bend. He wondered if he looked crazy to her. He wanted her to look at him; he didn't want her to. She wanted him to look at her; she didn't want him to. We're all still seventeen, he thought.

As she got closer, he heard Whitney Houston bleeding from her headphones. Then, as she disappeared down the path, the song remained.

And I…will always love you, ooh
Will always love you
You
My darling, you…
Mmm-mm

"Love that chorus," the voice said. "What a voice."

Mick got up and started along the path, breathing the salt air deep into his lungs.

"Doctor Welby. Doogie Howser. Doctor McDreamy. Will my husband be okay?"

Mick stopped. "Fuck off."

"It had to happen, you know. Two of us had to connect at some point, right?" The voice started speaking much faster. "You and I just got lucky keno numbers. Three. Five. Seven. Who loves ya, baby?"

Mick couldn't resist. "Who loves ya?"

"Bachelor number one, number two, or number three?"

Mick went back to the bench, swiping at the seagulls and then hurling the remains of the breakfast sandwich against the seawall.

"Mick Sweetly, don't you dare be shy."

Mick hadn't heard the name in decades.

"It feels so good to say hello to one of you," it continued. "Finally. I thought I was going crazy." More metallic clicking, then: "Say something brother."

Mick Sweetly. The name conjured a lost image of him and Hank on stage in the campus coffee house. Girls bundled up in their sexy bulk knit sweaters and woolen caps reeked of autumn and possibility. They gathered at the foot of the tiny platform, each caught up in the promise of a concert for one.

"Who are you?" he whispered.

"The widow. The one with speed" was the answer.

Mick sat back down, letting his eyes find a tanker crawling along the edge of the ocean. He fingered the Ziploc bag filled

with hundred dollar bills in his pocket. It wasoddly comforting.

"Star Trek IV, right? That last scene when Spock and the whale connect. It's so
obvious. But a bit heavy, no?"

"Whale."

"Yabba-dabba-doo."

"I'm talking to a whale."

"On the scale of natural wonders, this hardly rates a seven. Have you never seen a giant squid?" It picked up on a melody: "This is the age of miracle and wonder, the long-distance call."

Mick hated Paul Simon.

"A whale," he said, more to himself, slowly giving in to the idea. Is this what it feels like when you stop fighting it and accept the very real possibility that you might be insane? No heraldic trumpets? No welcoming rounds of applause from all the other crazy people in the world?

"Humpback. And don't disappoint me. I have spent my whole life trying to connect. At least, since I lost my mate."

Mick took his eyes off the tanker and into the nothingness before it.

"You are where all the beautiful music comes from. Minnie Riperton. Dolly Parton. Mariah Carey."

Don't say Celine Dion Mick thought.

"Celine Dion," it continued.

Shit, they were connecting.

"And the only male I've ever enjoyed: Mick Sweetly." It started out clicking softly, then threw phrases into the wind:

Let's break down the walls of America.

Take the bricks and build a new home.

Break down the walls of America.

Mick tapped his cold fingers on the bench and completed the lyric:

Toss the mortar into the wind.

"'The Walls of America'" Mick said. "Number eight on

the college charts. I made page ninety-three of Rolling Stone magazine, September 17."

"Nice song," the voice said. "I only heard it a few times, long ago, but it stuck with me."

"We were just playacting," said Mick.

"Strange how so much of what you say is untrue and you know it. You're all like that."

Mick thought back to all the purple microdot and windowpane he had dropped into his young middle-school brain. Could this be one epic acid trail? He thought of Scott and Dale, the two childhood friends he had lost long ago to the drugs.

"Are you coming?"

"What?"

"I'm running out of time. And you are finally here."

Mick didn't move.

"We all sing the same song, the males among us. And it changes all the time, so that you might hear it for a week or so, and then it's gone forever."

"Songs should disappear maybe" was all he could offer back.

"No. Humans are lucky. There are songs that you can't hear enough of. Music and
words that break your heart."

Mick took a deep breath, giving in to the voice, and to the certainty of his feeble
brain losing its hold on reality.

"Join me now," it urged. The clicks were growing softer, and the pace of its voice was picking up.

"North from where you are. Not far. You'll see me."

See him? Mick went up the path. Around the turn there was a deep cove, where the trees clung to the land's edge. The stink of fish and seaweed was strong. The seawall was crumbling and Mick had to carefully pick his way along the narrowing path. There were no joggers. It was Mick; the graceful, hardy cedars; and the hostile

wind.

He surprised himself by starting to hum "The Walls of America." It actually wasn't that shitty of a song. The lyrics painted a picture of a country on the brink of class warfare, and the melody, though pedestrian, did enough to move the poetry forward. Yes, poetry. Mick remembered how he had wanted to change the world as a young man, but he simply ran out of time like the rest of us, and the world changed him. He started singing louder, the hopeful lyrics bouncing against the wind.

He was singing solo.

Within minutes the seawall fell completely away, and the coast revealed its rugged naked spine. Massive slate boulders emerged glistening from the incoming tide, and the exposed spheres were swelling and shrinking with the ebb and flow. Mick's thoughts.

went to Nathan. He automatically fingered the wallet in his back pocket, seeing the picture of his son at age eight, faded and frozen in time.

"Thank you." The voice was back. "I can't wait to see your face. People are so interesting."

One patch of cloud was thinning directly overhead to reveal a tight circle of blue sky. The sun tumbled through the hole onto one of the boulders below. It was moving. It wasn't rock. Mick picked up his pace, and he neared the ocean's edge.

"Are you in the water yet?" the voice asked. "I am right over here."

****

Two days later a woman and younger man are sitting on the same bench but looking out at a different ocean. The sun is shining through white clouds onto blue water. The summer has returned for everyone but the two of them.

She is struggling with the still strong wind and fighting the seagulls that learned long ago how to turn the currents to their advantage.

"Disgusting birds," she shouts at them above the roar of wind and water.

"Mom," says the young man, watching her carefully. "Don't."

"We should be out on the water with them," she says.

"They know what they're doing." He gets up. "We can't help."

"He doesn't even know how to swim," she continues. "What the hell was he doing out here in no-man's land? Quitting his job just like that in the middle of the day? No warning?"

"You married him."

She shoots him an icy glare.

"Sorry," he says. "I know. I should have returned his calls. That wasn't cool."

"You mean 'wasn't right', not 'cool'," she corrects. "Don't apologize to me."

"We really should go back to the hotel."

"Motel? It's a dump. You go." She retreats into a thick sweater in spite of the sunshine pouring down and smiles the thin, distant smile that comes from the brain, not the heart.

"You should have seen him on stage. He had such belief in himself! He would shit sunshine."

"That he did."

Another icy stare and he is contrite.

She softens. "We're all just little miracles at the end of the day," she says quietly. "You and me. Him. No one stands much of a chance."

"He could be anywhere, mom. We don't know that he went into the water."

"Look," she points at an orange helicopter grazing the horizon line like an insect.

"They just go back and forth like that," she continues. "It's pointless."

"You have to get some sleep," he insists. She lets him take her hand and he helps her fight the wind as they turn away from

the ocean.

"Hold on, Mom," he says, lifting his head into the gale. "Do you hear that?"

"It's the ocean. It's awful."

"No," he says. "Like music, way out there."

Route 14, North From White Heather

Jeffrey Alfier

Hell-bent for Bakersfield, wishing tomorrow already
here. On my Chevy's oldies FM, Joan Jett

hates herself for loving some dude. Pondering
her lines, I take a wrong exit, end up

at Love's Travel Stop, just north of Rosamond.
I ask a clerk on smoke break by a pay phone,

about how far I'd yet to go. She had a Marlboro
between fingers wrapped around

a Mountain Dew. She lifted the can,
pointed west, mumbled a number of miles

she thought were too far off, as if to deter me:
someone misdirected by plaintive songs and maps,

the kind of soul who'd post bail for a friend,
knowing damn well he would skip town.

On Tour

Serena Eve Richardson

A prima vista. A crescendo flutters;
her lids open. Honks wrap
the sparrows' greeting in modern harmony:
a union of the classic and polluted.
This is her part and she plays it well;
she is a woman at home.
She practices abandon. Work, play,
and dinner for one. Every night is a coda to
a quiet evening, each morning a rolling over
to a twin pillow missing its head.
Weeks go by and they speak
sometimes. He even comes home
once in a while. Together they are
amoroso. Allegro. Making it work.
This is the price to share his life.
She wants him to live it, but she is tired
of détaché and diminuendo. She says
she should have never

married a musician.

Gestures

Judith Askew

I thought smoking made me sophisticated,
in imitation of the silver screen, the golden era
of Greta Garbo, Bette Davis, Colleen Dewhurst.
Smoking was a way to pause a conversation,

to insert distance and distraction. One could always
empty ashtrays. They needed to be washed,
searched for, moved, purloined. The thoughtful host
supplied cigs in thick glass or embossed silver boxes.

The gesture of flashing a red leather case,
an initialed lighter, a cigarette holder—
important early stations on the map of one's life—
could intrigue or mislead. Ciggy butts

served as clues for a detective—how many?
what color lipstick? They served novelists:
Remember that unforgettable scene
when Seymour Glass's mother sat on the edge

of his bathtub smoking while he begged
to be left in peace, untroubled
by Fanny's depression, the smoke curling
upward with the steam? Was that an oral era,

as Freud would have it? Have we grown
into healthier gestures—entranced with cell phones
that show our sophistication, our engagement,
our importance in the world?

Ear Piercing

Judith Askew

I love loud noises.

I love the crack of plates
dropped into the dirty dishes pan
across from my chair in this high-end restaurant
where we actually scored a table with a view.

I love to hear an imperious voice
bark in the grocery store,
Justin, call from God on Line 3.
Who cares, even it is God Almighty
trying to connect with His divine son.

I love the battalion of crows all hyped up
gossiping at the top of their caws
about their impending migration;
they trade good advice and serious admonitions
about dead spots, weather conditions,
addictions, roadkill.

I love music blaring in every mall store.
And now outside just over my head
a loud speaker funnels Silent night, Holy night.
It's November 1.

A car backfires, bus brakes grind and squawk,
an ambulance siren bursts in and hangs on,
a fire engine screams, a police car shrieks by,
two cars honk, and a boom box blares.
They begin to blend into an atonal mess:
City Symphony in Wretched Red.

And how I love the raucous laughter and applause
that welcome the late night TV host. It goes on and on,
over and over. Speaking of segments, don't you
love the loud music between morning news items

when you're trying to meet and greet the day,
rising slowly from sleep, dozing a little
until a pharma ad blasts decibels louder
than what came before and what comes after.

Unhappily, for Dr. Tingle, who installed
his dental drill equipment in the alley
outside the window of a sensitive woman,
its noise level exceeded a city ordinance.

Oh, lovely sudden silence.

Our most modern cars are the quietest.
You can hear the click-click of a turn signal.
My push-button ignition auto is so silent,
I sometimes forget to turn it off, leave it
running on the street and it's still there
when I return, so noiseless is its turned-on engine.

Some say noisiness connotes energy,

where the action is,

and I say
where it's at

isn't hard to find.

Claudius: on the Human Ear

Timothy Clutter

Observe, dear nephew, the human ear
supple and pink,
an infant forming and just as bald,
though age will forest
its shell-like curves.
(What good is camouflage then?)
Receding circles approach the brain
as chambers to the throne,
a narrow hallway
spills into the throat—
so clever of God to link the two,
so treacherous a tunnel.

Our lips may be the gateway,
the tongue a greasy drawbridge,
we've only to draw our curtained lids
to banish wolves from sight.
But how lightly guarded
the back door to the treasure-house,
never watched and
never barred and so
most vulnerable of all.
Just speak of "reason"—
it may hear "treason."

The dram is not poison
until it is drunk,
no lie until believed.
More danger has found its way inside
that chink in nature's ravelin
than ever slid down mortal throat.

Observe, dear nephew, the human ear
supple and pink,
an infant forming and just as bald,
though age will forest
its shell-like curves.
(What good is camouflage then?)
Receding circles approach the brain
as chambers to the throne,
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The dram is not poison
until it is drunk,
no lie until believed.
More danger has found its way inside
that chink in nature's ravelin
than ever slid down mortal throat.
All that you think you know you think you know
because you left wide open your murder-hole.
And what moral code beyond the grave
would keep a specter honest?

Boy Divine

Lela Biggus

It rained for a week after Zach's god swallowed him up. His almighty sent it to me as a sign. It wanted to prove to me it existed, that I should have believed. Surely now I should believe. All this rain. So cinematic. Zach never went to church but that's not to say he wasn't spiritual. He chose to spend his Sundays sitting in the park behind his mom's apartment writing nature poems and pressing grass blades into the fibrous pages of his notebook. An older man noticed him a couple years back and started to ask about his poems. He'd come back often, asking to read a few more, asking to know him better. I only know cause Zach told me. He said it spooked him at first but he didn't look that way when he said it. He would tell me about hour long conversations with the man and trinket gifts from the man's home and uncomfortable prolonged smiles on the man's face but he'd tell me about them like the man were a pretty girl from down the street. With something like excitement. Something like hope. He never told me much more about it and I didn't ask. I never really believed the man existed. I don't know anymore. Zach told me lies all the time. Lies as jokes, but lies all the same.

Zach moved into the apartment building down the street from me the summer before our freshman year of high school. I saw him walking home from school sometimes. His dark curly hair coated his entire head then and it flopped down around his cheeks with every step like the earflaps on a fur hat. He would walk with this oddly pretty girl from my Spanish class. She must have lived in his building. They don't walk together anymore. I asked him her name once last year and he told me but that was all he told me. Marissa. Melissa. I don't remember. I just remember that when she came back to school sophomore year with her hair bleached platinum blonde it didn't make her look old like some other girls that tried to do what she could do. She looked like secrets and a

memory and I felt things for her. She looked like Electra Pixie Girl Warrior from the first real comic I ever owned. I got the book from Marvelous! COMICS on Oak Street and North Ave. I'd owned Archie and other kiddie sorts before that but I biked down to Marvelous! on my eleventh birthday on my brand new BMX bike and picked "Biomaton Complete" off the shelf from its perch between Groot and Aquaman. In retrospect it was an odd pick, but it was mine. I got really into comics for two years, then let them sit around more. Then I put them in my "memory box" in my mom's closet. Then I got into sketching the people in my life with a pencil.

I saw Zach around school freshman year but we only met for the first time at our block party the summer after. Or I met him leaving it. I was sitting in a folding chair next to my mom around the portable fire pit set up in Susan and Dave's front lawn. The adults were talking so I decided I'd be a kid and opened my notebook to discreetly sketch Dave's falcon nose and furrowed brow. Zach's mom was scooping Susan's disgusting homemade potato salad out of a bowl shaped like a watermelon when she saw that I was bent over a notebook and roughly her son's age. She screamed across the street to Zach, who was in the process of unlocking his bike from the lamppost in front of their building, to "get over here and meet someone." He begrudgingly half smiled and sauntered across and up to me to shake my hand like we were six-year-old boys learning etiquette for the first time. I told him my name was Will. He told me his name was Zach. Both of our mothers cooed and squealed about notebooks and pencils and how they both have such talented children. Zach's mom suggested he invite me to his friend's house and he did. I said yes but as soon as we walked around the corner, Zach's bike rolling lazily beside him, we exchanged a shallow laugh and parted ways.

The next time I saw him was a week later at one o'clock in the morning. He was lying on the grass along the sidewalk in front of the apartment building with his eyes closed and his back to the earth. I walked past his body on my way home from my friend Charlie's house and stopped, startled. His pallid facial features

glowed under the streetlamp. His eyes were closed and the soft hollow parts beneath his eye sockets and cheekbones collected the white light in pools. His thick curls spread around his skull like a dark blood spill. His arms and legs seemed too thin, his clothes too big. Then his eyes flicked open and I realized I had been standing over him for way too long. He laughed and rolled over to sit up. He laughed like he knew I was watching him the whole time, watching his body sink into his front yard. I sputtered an apology and kept walking, pulling my phone out of my shorts pocket pretending to have someone to text.

"Hey!" he called after me. I stopped. "Do you ever feel like just… falling!" he screamed the last word at the sky, "…into outer space. From right here." His words softened as he shifted his gaze back to me. He was perched up on his elbow now and his wild eyes met mine. "It's so cold out there…and he…he's with us now." His eyes shifted toward the street as he choked a cough through a broad smile.

I walked away from him. He was high or drunk, probably both, I didn't want him to be embarrassed later. Turns out he remembered that and was, but I tried. Our sophomore year of high school began two weeks after that. We ended up in the same art foundations class with Ms. Catelli and found solidarity in despising her monotone voice and how she made the class sketch still lifes every single day. Her hands, somehow perpetually encrusted in clay, would arrange some combination of empty wine bottles and Styrofoam spheres on a table in the middle of the room. She'd plug in the lamp next to it, shining an anticlimactic spotlight on her sad collection, and lazily make her way around the room telling kids the right way to do art. One day Zach walked up to the table when she wasn't looking and rearranged the spheres around the base of a wine bottle so that they cast a shadow the shape of a distorted penis. She never found out why everyone was laughing. He was my best friend for the final two years of his life. Sunday morning he was gone.

--

my leg hair feels like sand in your sheets
every time
you claimed
you hated that
presence

but those that bury themselves in beaches
pick sea glass out of their skin
and level up with the rock

His lips whispered it to me like a secret. He paused when he meant it to be paused. Waited for. I noticed his lips, then, they looked soft. I noticed his teeth and the spaces between them. I noticed that his lips and teeth were producing sounds that formed a poem that was a product of his mind, his heart. I noticed that we were a foot away from each other's bodies and I noticed that the sheets on his bed had dinosaurs on them. I remembered that we were seniors in high school. I remembered we were drunk. I remembered I lied to my mom and told her I was playing video games at Charlie's. His lips stopped moving and the air under the dinosaur sheet started to feel warm on my neck and my forehead. And then, without knowing what it was or why, a single short sound left my throat that sounded something like a laugh. Zach's eyes darted to my face, incredulous, and he closed the notebook.

"Okay, I gotta go."

"Wait Zach no, I'm sorry, I didn't mean…it wasn't, I didn't laugh—"

"You did, it's fine, I'm not mad I'm just busy tonight."

He wasn't, it was almost midnight, but he slid off the bed, put his shoes on, and shoved an arm into his jean jacket. He did it with his back hunched. He twitched his head to flick his phantom curls out of his eyes and adjusted his shirt. He cut his curls off last year, about the same time he started smoking cigarettes; I never knew why he still did that motion. He did it like an act, like he was trying to be masculine or cool or normal and something in me broke a little bit. He was Zach forty five seconds ago, and then I laughed.

"This is your house, Zach," I yelled after he disappeared through the doorway.

"Fuck off Will." There was a smile in his voice.

I laughed again.

I pushed open the back door in the small linoleum kitchen of Zach's mom's apartment. His mom was out; she hadn't come home for hours I realized. The autumn night was warm with a cold edge. I shrugged down three flights of the wooden outdoor staircase and heard the metal gate slam rudely behind me at the bottom.

"Where's your mom?" I asked with my hands in fists in the pocket of my sweatshirt.

Zach lit a cigarette and looked over the chain-link fence along the edge of the alley that marked where the park began. His eyes stuck there a moment before he turned his body and spat on the asphalt.

"Don't know. It's Saturday. Probably getting drinks with Mary."

Mary was Zach's mom's best friend. She smelled like mothballs and green tea and her clothes were always wrinkled. When I started hanging out at Zach's more often after school Mary would always be there, lounging in the TV room on their second hand corduroy couch. She'd say things like, "how cute, these two" and "handsome boys you have here Sara." I'd smile politely, say hello in a deep voice, and leave my shoes at the door.

"What are you looking at?" I asked.

Zach had turned and was gazing back over the fence and past the thinning trees that stood like a wall that wouldn't keep anyone out.

"Nothing. Did you grab the bottle off my desk?"

"No, aren't we going back in?"

"My mom should be home soon, I gotta go grab it before she sees it."

He handed me his unfinished cigarette as if he expected me to stay outside and finish it. As if he didn't know I don't smoke. I took it anyway. My eyes glanced at the trees over the fence as the metal gate to the wooden staircase slammed shut and locked behind me. I heard Zach scramble up the outdoor flights and his screen door swing shut somewhere above. My eyes scanned over the park trees, their leaves, and the narrow gravel

path a few yards beyond the fence. Then I saw it. Him. My eyes locked on the figure and my feet tingled like they wished Zach had propped the metal door open. The man was sitting on a bench along the path. He was facing me. The lamppost standing next to the bench cast a white glow about his body and I could see nothing but the shape. I felt that his eyes were open. I couldn't look away. The cigarette was still in my hand and I knew what to do. I lifted it to my lips. My fingers shook as I took a steady inhale. I had to look natural. The shape of a man stared at me. I pulled the cigarette away from my lips and released a wimpy puff of smoke.

"Will!"

I jumped and dropped the smoking thing, then stomped it out with my foot and turned.

"What? Fuck."

"What's up? Come on up!"

"The gate locks dumbass." I was shaking.

Zach laughed and bounded down the stairs.

"Yeah hop it, I forget my keys all the time how do you think I get in?"

I didn't look back. Two eyes burned the back of my sweatshirt as we ascended the wooden stairs. At each landing I didn't dare look up and out onto the park. When we got inside his kitchen Zach grabbed the orange juice out of the fridge and leaned on the counter, taking a swig out of the container. My face was probably pale or something because when he looked over at me his expression changed, just slightly. He didn't say anything.

"Is your mom home?" I asked, pulling my hood over my head and turning my attention to the pots and pans that hung from hooks on the wall.

"She's visiting my grandma in Atlanta this weekend." He smiled into the mouth of the orange juice carton.

"But you said—"

Zach laughed.

I ran home that night.

--

"What was he wearing the last time you saw him?" The

officer's shirt was painfully blue.

"Jean jacket…pants."

"What color pants?"

"Black maybe. Dark."

"Dark?"

"Yeah."

The officer typed something into his computer. The office was a dirty tan color and the walls looked like stucco made for the indoors. There were certificates framed on the wall. Some were printed on plain white paper in Arial font with some overly elaborate cursive for a signature. There was a stress ball on the officer's desk shaped like the Earth. The officer's hand tapped the desk over and over again. One finger at a time. I wanted to take the stress ball off the desk and throw it at him. I wanted him to grab the stress ball and squeeze it as hard as he could over and over. I wanted him to be worried, to be anxious. I wanted him to stop tapping his fingers. It's been raining everyday since; they said yesterday that wasn't good for any evidence that might be lying around. It had been three days and he felt like he had the right to tap his fingers so slow.

I stormed out of the glass doors of the police station and jogged around the corner of the building onto North Ave. It was three blocks and through the park to get home. I wouldn't go through the park, not since Saturday night. The thought of that man. Sitting calmly. Just waiting…

I walked swiftly through the drizzle down the three blocks and then down one more to pass the park. I took a left down my street and passed the apartment building. I didn't want to look to my left as I passed it. I didn't want to look three windows up like I always did to see if the light was on. To see if maybe Zach was home. To see if he wanted to hang out and play videogames or sit on his back staircase. I looked up. The light was off. His mom probably wasn't home. I saw something else though, a head of brilliant white-blonde hair sitting on the cement stoop under the entryway to the building just up the front walk. She looked up at me. I stopped walking. Something about her felt like home right

then. Something about her felt like Zach was there too. She waved and I walked with my head down up the apartment walkway and stepped under the cover of the entryway.

"Hi, I'm Will. Zach's friend."

"Hey, yeah I've seen you guys together around school. I'm Mel."

Three seconds passed and I realized I was still standing awkwardly in front of her.

"Sit down," she shifted over on the stoop and pulled her coat tight around her torso.

Thirty more seconds passed. I didn't know what to say to her. I didn't really want to say anything at all. Her pixie hair shone out of the corner of my eye and it felt like she was the first living thing I had seen all day.

"Did they ask you a bunch of questions too." She asked like the question were more of a resigned matter of fact.

"Yeah. I didn't remember exactly what shade of dark his pants were." I said it and wished I hadn't tried to make a joke. She exhaled a slight laugh anyway. "I used to see you with him all the time," I said, not knowing what kind of statement I had just made.

"You probably did."

"Were you friends?"

"We were friends, something, I don't know."

"What happened? Sorry…"

"That's okay," she waited a moment before realizing that I actually wanted an answer. "He got weird, I guess."

I didn't say anything. It felt so good to hear someone talk about him, even just to call him weird. It felt usual. It made everything normal again. She took my silence as a prompt to keep talking. Maybe she liked talking about him too.

"I used to live in the yellow house on the corner," she said, leaning forward and glancing to the right as if she could see it from here. "When we moved to the town over he freaked out and said he needed me here, close. I worried about him but then it just became too much," she paused. "Then he started telling me these things about religion that I never thought would come out of his

mouth."

"He is a pretty loud atheist." I decided to stop talking.

"Yeah…well he tried to convince me there was this god of nature or something he could talk to and worship and pray with and it was just weird." She was quiet. "I thought he was kidding at first, but he took it so serious. His eyes, they changed when he spoke about him, this thing. He said he gave him things. He gave him...I don't know, it all scared me really. Anyway, I just kind of lost interest. We weren't that close anyway."

I was quiet.

"Sorry," she let out a small nervous laugh.

"No it's okay. I'm sorry."

The rain continued to fall. It fell on the walkway stretching toward the street and the park behind the apartment and the police station and dampened everything to dark. I wanted to get up and walk home but I couldn't move. I knew something she didn't, I thought, I wasn't sure. If I just mentioned what I saw, maybe she'd know. Mel had to know. I couldn't speak the words. Maybe if we both went to the police station together right then we could do something. The man, the gifts, there had to be something there. We could save him. I opened my mouth to speak but my tongue was dry. I felt the burning in my back. My mouth closed. Neither of us moved for a while.

Only Careful Tread

John Zedolick

Like a lunar landscape
the cracked concrete
ravining down three

inches to four, sprainankle
depth, but nothing more
in the shadowed crevasse

so be on guard, my love,
for only that. The night
and its tap-tap of rain

lukewarm on the skin
is only late summer's touch
and will not ice-bite.

The hour is early in this alley
between the locksmith
and Goodwill's receiving dock.

Walk over and around the gouges
under the pink-orange haze
of adequate street light

until emerging onto the street
then through the doors where
are seats and security

that was ours on the moonwalk
where we stepped with care and grace

Night is the Name We Give

Dan Raphael

"Night is the name we give to the shadow of the earth."
David Abram

The raspy roar of planes flying over this dark stretch of me—
nothing that big lands any near here
where no ones paid to stay up all night—nothings open;
if you get home late you gotta run from the truck to the house
or you might start turning coyote

all the black birds are diurnal

if you don't want to be watched, strut when fewer are looking
in defiance of night, shine, here where clouds keep moon & stars in exile
most curtains open when the sun rises, close when it sets.
our only task is to keep the sun from waking us

II

up & at 'em
healthy, not wealthy, not asking why
allergic to sunlight, to rush hour
windows in concrete canyons—
have to get outside to see the sky that says stay home
we're warm blooded but not enough to be naked & damp, not waterproof

a deliberate training

avoiding the sun
sensing the dimensions of shadows & how to slide within them
even in a clouded room—just coz you cant see the sun
doesn't mean it cant see you—ultraviolet surveillance

when the sun goes down prices can go either way,
the same question gets different answers the later you ask it

Stain

H.E. Francis

"Watch out for the sand sharks, Fred," Ben shouted. Though they were harmless, Fred hated the touch when one skimmed over him.

They were diving off the end of the government dock despite the NO SWIMMING sign. They could now that the Long Island train no longer pulled out onto the dock. Sun scorched down. The tracks gleamed. The tide was in, but the water was still yards below. Standing on the piling, Fred felt king of the harbor—Front Street, the docks, tugs, yachts, rowboats, the ferry crossing to Shelter Island. His.

He dived into the floating refuse from the boats and the snakes of oil green yellow blue red floating on the surface. Under, he felt the water heave as Ben cannonballed close by him, but he glided off, pretended to be a fish, though he kept his eyes closed because the water was so dirty. He stayed under till his lungs were about to burst, then lunged up and broke the surface with a cry.

"You little bastard, scaring the shit out of me," Ben cried, but with awe at his daring and control.

They swam halfway down the dock to the ladder and climbed up. Fred halted at the sound of loud voices coming along the dock. "Ben, here come the Polacks." Don't you call them that, Gram always said, you have to live with them like it was a rule; but didn't Ma call them dirty Polacks?

The five, all from high school, a year behind Ben, halted some distance from them and sat in a circle. In no time came fast talk, bursts of laughter, smokes and beer and clumps of cheese, and soon shirts off and lounging in sun, but not a one swimming. They tossed beer cans on the water and made bets on how long the cans would float before sinking. They shot craps, joking, their clothes wet with sweat. Kiski rose and meandered to the end of the dock. The others followed.

"Fuckin hot," Kiski said, "I'm goin in." He kicked his shoes off, dropped his pants and shorts—Kiski the three-star athlete, big, a cocksman proud of his rep—liked showing himself.

"You can't go bare ass here," Fred said.

"You the Law?"

Ben slid his pants on. "Let's go, Fred."

"Don't let us scare you guys away," Kiski said.

"We don't swim with Polacks," Fred said.

"Well, Freddie boy, us Polacks're swimming here. Ain't we, Tad?"

"I got no suit." Tad was the smallest, skinny as Fred, himself all bone but strong.

"Freddie don't mind givin a Polack his suit. Do you, Freddie?

"Fred's his name," Ben said. "Fred."

"Well, you tell little Freddie the Polacks need his suit."

"Tell me, not him," Fred said.

"Look, Freddie, just give us the suit."

"Yeah." Joseph stood to back Kiski, and Tad close behind with the Lenz brothers Paul and Lowney making a wall, and heckling: "You heard him." "Who you think you are, kid?" "Give'm the suit."

"In a pig's eye!" Fred said.

"Get the suit, you guys."

"Hold it right there!" Ben said.

When the four moved, Fred leaped—he struck Kiski's chest with such force that Kiski floundered, but quick latched out and caught Fred by the neck. "Tad, pull his suit off."

"Drop him," Ben shouted.

Kiski swung Fred side to side to ward off Ben, and Ben quick pulled out his pocketknife and moved snakelike to back Kiski off.

Kiski threw Fred aside. "Let's see what you can do without that, Bennie boy."

Fred leaped up. "Don't, Ben! Stop!"

But Ben already held the knife low, aimed straight at Kiski's gut, and just as Tad darted between, Ben thrust hard and deep. Tad froze, mouth open, eyes wide, then clamped his hands over his gut. Blood broke between his fingers. They all stood stunned an instant. With a choke Tad sank to his knees. Kiski cried, "Get somebody, anybody." Tad slumped still, out now, but breathing. A woman's voice cried out from one of the boats. People came running along the dock. Kiski kneeled beside Tad. He raised Tad, murmuring, "Tad, Tad . . ." Quick blood covered Tad's left side, turning his pants dark, and dripped a spreading dark spot on the beam.

"Ben? Ben?" Fred said. Ben stood stone still with the knife in his hand. In almost no interval a siren sounded—the police from a block away on Main. Somebody from one of the boats must have quick radioed in. Almost the next instant came another siren. An ambulance from the hospital two minutes away came halfway down the dock as Kiski fast slipped his clothes on; and before the police could ask a question, the team rushed Tad on a stretcher into the ambulance, it backed off the dock, the siren sounding as it streaked along Front Street and up Main to the hospital. Now Rafe the cop drove up and parked behind Willy Scaggs's police car. Willy knew them—so did Rafe—every kid in town.

"Who's to tell it?"

"Me," Ben said.

"No," Fred shouted. "I started it. I said—"

Ben cut him off. "I did it—with this."

Willy looked at him like Not you."

"Give it here." Willy took the knife.

From a nearby sloop a woman said, "I shouted, but they didn't hear. My husband and I saw it all. The boy's telling the truth."

Fred listened to the witnesses tell what they saw, but what they saw was not all, not the truth, not true. He kept interrupting. "It was me, not Ben," but Willy clipped, "You're not helping your brother any, Fred." So he kept shut. The cops herded them into the cars and took them to the tiny office with the blue neon sign POLICE and made each one tell it.

"Well, at least you're consistent," Willy said. "Rafe, take the others home, then come back for Ben."

"Where you takin my brother?"

"The county jail in Riverhead, Fred."

"But you can't—I started it. Let him go."

Ben, who had not said a word since leaving the dock, said, "You go home, Fred. Tell Ma everything."

Outside Fred balked. "I'm goin with Ben."

Rafe caught his arm. "Just you get in, Fred."

Rafe drove him the several blocks home. Rafe went to the door with him and rang the bell and when Ma opened, she looked like the empty space smacked her.

"Ben? Where's Ben?" she cried.

When Rafe told her what Ben told—not right, Fred wanted to say, but he couldn't tell Ma what Rafe didn't know: from his mouth—Polack—so me to blame—Ma in a minute grabbed her purse.

"Take me downtown, Rafe. I'm goin to Riverhead with Ben. No, no, don't say a word, Rafe. I'm goin. You, Fred, don't you move from this house, hear me? Let's go, Rafe."

But he didn't stay home, couldn't—because over and over he was back on the dock, it kept happening: he couldn't stop Kiski, not Ben stabbing, not Tad leaping and stabbed and sinking, not stop blood, not the medics from taking Tad away. He could never take back Polack, never undo it. Tad. He could see the red bricks of the hospital two blocks from the house. I should be there, not Tad.

He had to know. He went down the street to the hospital. Riva Walters was at the desk.

"Why, Fred, what brings you here?"

So she didn't know . . .

"I want to know how's Tad. The ambulance brought him a while ago."

"The Kalinski boy?"

"Him, yes. Tad."

"He's in the operating room, Fred."

"He won't die, will he?"

She hesitated, and glanced quick beyond, where people were sitting and some standing talking, and said soft, "I'm sure they're doing all they can so that won't happen."

"Can I wait till he comes out?"

"It may be a long time, and then he'll be in the Intensive Care Unit for five hours. When they transfer him to a room, maybe he'll be allowed visitors. It would be best if you come back tomorrow."

Tomorrow . . .

But he sat outside until late. When he went home, his mother was sitting in her chair by the TV but no TV on and still, like he wasn't even there. He was afraid of what she would tell. He waited. Ma always talked things out with Ben. Sooner or later she had to talk, but he couldn't keep waiting.

"Where's Ben?"

Ma's eyes bulged like she'd cry. But Ma never cried.

"In Riverhead."

She didn't say jail, but jail.

Because of me.

"How long'll they keep him?"

Her breath sucked.

"Ma?"

"Christ, how'd I know? Years. All depends—"

Years! No Ben, years? He felt he'd choke. He went upstairs. His throat tore. He couldn't hold back the chokes. He lay on the bed. Ben's side empty. No Ben to talk to. Alone. Because Polack. He was Ben now. My brother, me. But not. Couldn't be, he knew—because like Ma's Bible, Ben was. "My man of the house." She made Ben that—always. "What'll we do, Ben?"—trusted him, needed him, depended: because eighteen, a man his brother; he would be in two years too. Sometimes Ben even sounded like his mother. She made Ben his father. Everybody said she'd loved Ben's father, Louis, who'd run out on her before Ben could even know him. You don't mention that name in this house. And Fred's own father,

Jim, that she'd taken up with left her too, before he could know his father. In his mind his father was only a shadow James Jim Jimmy who'd lived with his mother, a shadow that lived now in Fred's dark, and him jealous of all in town who'd known his father, but glad when people talked his father because in secret he could learn him, in his mind make him, see him, even in his head talk to him whose blood he had and name, the only thing he ever gave you, Ma'd say, Hadley, the Hadley boys Ben and Fred, like both were his.

Next morning when he went down for breakfast, she at last asked what had happened.

"Didn't Ben tell you?"

"Yeah, he told me. Now just you sit your little ass down and you tell me."

So while she was making sandwiches for his school lunch, he told the way it had happened, all but that—he didn't confess Polack. She'd smack him silly if she knew.

"Ma, you made too many sandwiches." His two, and Ben's.

"What?" she said, then quick, "Yeah. Well, they won't go to waste."

She hustled. "Don't you be late for school."

He didn't go to school. He went straight to the hospital and asked—this time a man he didn't know—about Tad in Intensive. Tad was still there, he couldn't tell for how long yet.

That was all. Nothing. He would wait for news of Tad. To while away time he went to the crick a block away and sat on Rackham's pier and looked out where the crick ran into the harbor and watched boats come and go; and followed the edge of the crick around past the cemeteries to Gull Pond and back—and at noon went in to ask about Tad again, no news, so he sat on the lawn and ate his sandwiches and all afternoon waited, then sat on the porch, didn't eat, sat till at last, late night, Ma came up the street. He was afraid of what she'd say, but she said nothing. Ma was never so quiet. After he went to bed, he heard her moving and moving, no bed, like she'd waited for him to go to bed before she talked. He heard her muttering, ". . . after workin my ass off, cleanin up other peo-

ple's dirt, but what else could I do with no work in this town that closes down all winter long and busts open a free-for-all for tourists in summer and me takin the ferry to work a maid in a Shelter Island hotel, big tips for a change, and waitin for you to grow up, Ben, and make us some money . . ."

Fred's mind was on Tad in that Intensive. Why'd I say that?

And Wednesday and Thursday he skipped school, hung around the hospital, aware how doctors and nurses and visitors looked at him strange, some halted and stared, curious, but nobody sent him away, nobody told his mother, nobody reported he wasn't at school so maybe they supposed he was sick.

On Friday Ma didn't go to clean Tarpins' place. She took the seven o'clock bus to Riverhead. She was gone all day, so he didn't worry she'd find out he went to the hospital. This time he passed time waiting outside, then went in without asking a thing and followed the arrow INTENSIVE CARE UNIT and waited a long time outside the double doors, scared, because they might know my fault but wanting to confess my fault too. He had to see Tad, had to know how he was—so waited, but nobody. Finally a short little lady, gray, with old skin but bright glittering eyes, poor too like Ma, you could tell from the clothes and worn shoes. Who? Then the doors swung open and the nurse said, "Come in, Mrs Doroszka." Doroszka? Quick he said, "Can I go in?" The nurse said, "Are you related?" He couldn't lie he was family. She said, "I'm sorry. Only relatives are allowed. "But that lady—" "She's his grandmother." So he left, afraid to face that lady.

When he went outside and sat waiting, there came Ma—straight to the hospital. So she caught him red-handed. "You! Just what do you think you're doin? You keep stayin out of school, I'll beat the shit out of you. I'll have them put you up there with your brother, I will." Lying. She didn't scare him. He shut his ears to her. He'd come back, she couldn't stop him. She grabbed his arm and didn't let go till she'd hauled him up the street to the house. After supper she said, "Now get upstairs and stay there." In his room he listened till he heard her fiddling in her bedroom, then stole down

and slipped out the back way.

At the hospital Riva was there again.

"Is Tad better?"

"Was he your close friend, Fred?"

He didn't answer.

Riva gazed at him—too long—before she said, "They took him away a while ago."

"Home?"

"No, Fred."

"He ain't dead, is he?"

She nodded. "I'm sorry, Fred."

He went home. He couldn't stop thinking Ben and Tad gone but me here, caught, like Ma always says, between the devil and the deep blue sea. It was like they were after him, Ben and Tad, got inside him and wouldn't leave. He didn't want them in him. He wanted them here, real.

In the morning he couldn't sit still for thinking them, so he took his rake and bucket and walked the several miles to Pete Neck to crab, and took his sneakers off and probed the shallows, careful not to stir silt and cloud the water black so he couldn't see the crabs near the clumps of long grass. When he did see one and swooped and caught it in the net, it clawed, helpless, a softshell. Ma loved them, but she'd know he'd played hooky, so he tossed it free and watched it scoot sideways.

The next night Ma clipped from the Suffolk Times. "They're burying that kid," she murmured, placing the clipping in the bowl on the sideboard with the others.

While she was in her bedroom, he looked Tadeusz Kalinski. A service at St. Mary's in the morning at eleven and burial in the Catholic Cemetery.

Tomorrow.

At breakfast before she left she said, "Quit moping and get to school," but the minute she was gone, he went down to the crick to kill the morning because he couldn't be seen at St. Mary's, them Catholics; Ma'd kill him, and he didn't want to see

Tad's family and maybe Tad's whole class'd be at the church. From old Pooptail Raynor's pier he could see across the crick to both cemeteries two minutes away—the Protestant walled off but the Catholic wide open. When time came, he went down the road to the Catholic, where he saw the open hole and piled dirt and old Hinkelman and Al Puggs, the gravediggers. He sat and waited. The hearse came along Manhasset and a car following. He hid behind the only tall thing in the cemetery, the statue of Jesus on the cross, and watched the undertaker's men unload the coffin. Tad was in that. He couldn't believe. The priest helped that old lady out—Doroszka, the nurse had said—and her in black now. The priest held her arm. She walked slow. He watched them at the graveside while the priest talked fast and short. Then the coffin went down and she took a handful of dirt and threw it in. That old lady raised her hand and touched her forehead and her heart and the priest slow led her back to the car. The hearse left. Fred was alone but for the two men shoveling the mound of dirt over Tad's coffin. He waited till the diggers were gone, then left the statue and sat beside the grave. He wanted to talk Ben, wanted to tell Tad jail, tell alone, confess If I hadn't of said . . . But his throat jammed and choked. He sat long. He watched his shadow dark as blood grow over the grave like the shadow was Tad coming up through the dirt. He quick left, but the shadow stayed in him. Dark did not take it away.

The next morning he went back, and the next. He didn't know where else to go.

Then his mother heard. "What in hell you doin sittin in the cemetery? You want the whole damn town thinkin you're nuts, do you?"

He didn't care what town thought. They didn't know why. And she didn't. Only he knew. Kiski and Joseph and Paul and Lowney Lenz had blamed Ben for the stabbing, not me, my big mouth.

It was October now. Cold came. The hotels on Shelter Island had closed, so Ma had to drum up work in town till next summer, no more big tips so she bitched more, always muttering. He

left the house early and hung around the harbor, sat on Preston's or Claudio's or Mitchell's dock, watching the skimmer and oyster boats come in and unload but with never a look toward the government dock at the west end. He'd be sixteen soon. He could maybe get a job on one of the boats. Not with them Polacks! Ma'd say because most of the crews were Polacks from town. Well, he might as well be one, she treated him like one sometimes.

Since the day the judge sent Fred upstate (Ma never said Ossining or Sing-Sing), Ma moved different, not like charged, no race all the time. Sometimes she halted with a dish in her hand and stood looking out the window long like she could see all the way to the jail upstate, she's thinking of Ben, sometimes suddenly sank into her armchair a heap too still, her face like dead. Ma! He wanted to touch her, but she'd swat you if you did, Ma would.

One afternoon leaving Preston's dock, he saw that old woman, Tad's grandmother, come out of the IGA with two bags of groceries and head up First. He watched her go a block and halt and lower her bags and rest, then go on. When he overtook her he said, "Lady . . ." She turned and stared, suspicious, and clutched the bags close. He held out is hands. "Let me—" She shook her head and turned and went on. She did not look back. He followed far behind—to the back road, startled at how far she had to walk—to what everybody called "Gus and Effie's place" though they'd died years ago, nothing but a wood shack hid among trees and shrubs, hardly visible from the road, and an outhouse out back and a shed with wood to be chopped piled high against it.

One morning he went to the Greenport Lumber and asked Gary Troupe for work. "Come back when you're sixteen," Gary said. "I might find something then."

After, he wandered back to town and ended up at the Catholic cemetery and sat at Tad's grave. Tad and Ben were the only ones he could talk to. I don't forget, Ben, not a day, not one minute, and Ma don't, you should be here, Ben, not me—because there was nobody else to tell how it kept coming and coming—he couldn't stop it—from the sec he said Polack to the sight of Tad's blood a

dark spot on his eye.

Some days, to show he was serious so Gary wouldn't forget, he hung around the lumberyard. Then he'd go to Gus and Effie's and sit near. He felt good there. Sometimes he thought he heard sounds from out back but he didn't see the lady.

One morning he woke to the day he'd longed for: he was sixteen. That day he went to Gary Troupe. "Here I am—sixteen."

Gary laughed. "Well, I guess we can use you part-time mornings to help Ken unload deliveries. Be here tomorrow morning quarter to eight. Ken'll take you out with him."

He whooped.

To Ma he said, "I ain't goin back to school."

"Oh, yeah? Well, if you're quittin school, you can just get your ass out. I ain't supportin no bum."

"You won't have to. I got me a job."

"Sure you have!"

"Well, don't believe me, then."

"Then you can start supportin yourself."

Mornings he had to leave the house early because it was a long walk to the lumberyard. He went across town to avoid the harbor and the sight of the railroad dock.

It was late October now, and quick after the warm days of Indian summer came the cold, and soon the first snow, all the town clean white and the trees lacy. After he and Ken made deliveries all along the North Fork to Riverhead, afternoons sagged. He couldn't bear the empty house, Ben haunted it, and Sundays worse because Ma was home and every minute, even when she didn't say, was a hole, no Ben but Ben, like he was because he wasn't. Fred had to get out. His shadow was dark on the snow. He ended at the cemetery. Tad's mound was covered with snow. On the plot were three other graves but only one small stone marker, P. DOROSZKA. Tad's grandfather? Was the lady his Ma's mother? because Tad's father must be Kaminski. Was the grandmother the only family left?

On impulse, when he left the grave, he walked the back road to Gus and Effie's. There was an enormous pine behind the house.

It was dry under, and dark. He huddled there, watching the house. Once he thought he saw a face in a back window, but he wasn't sure because the window was smudged. He sat until he was cold to the bone and had to move. He wanted her to come out, but he was afraid she would because if she found out who he was, what he'd said . . . and her a Polack . . . Still, he wanted her to know, wanted to be smacked, beaten; then he would know somebody knew.

All the next morning at work he felt pressed to go back—he wanted to, he was afraid to but had to. And come the next afternoon he did go back and sat under the pine; and the next and the next. He didn't know what was happening to him. He sat, afraid, yes, but he wanted afraid. With trees and bushes, he could glimpse shingles through the bushes. Thin smoke came from the chimney. This time he didn't sit. Snow had covered the pile of wood by the shed. He brushed the snow off. He found the ax and split blocks and piled the wood neatly in the shed to keep it dry. Once when he stopped to rest, sweating, and looked up, he saw her face in the back door window, but she didn't come out. He was glad. What could he say? When he was pooped, he put the ax back and shut the shed door and left.

Ma bitched about money. Ma was saving to go upstate to see Ben—because Ma didn't write, and Ben didn't. The round trip would take all day by bus and she could see him for only a few minutes. Come hell or high water he would go upstate one day without telling her even if he had to hitchhike. Paydays she said, "Hand it over. You pay or you get out." Ma could have his pay. He didn't care about the money. All he wanted was to keep busy, not think Ben, not Tad. Without Ben he felt floating around, lost, nothing; didn't know what to do; and Tad in him like a weed he couldn't pull out by the root.

One Saturday afternoon a blow came up, harsh, bringing more snow. When he crossed the lady's lot, he saw footprints to the street. She must have gone to town. He was working on the woodpile when she appeared, laden, a white ghost carrying two brown IGA bags full of groceries, fighting the wind. She halted an

instant, stared, but said nothing. He worked awhile but the blow worsened, whipped, the snow pelted, blinding, so he had to stop. He couldn't go home in this. He retreated to the shed and sat on the wood floor against cardboard boxes, startled at how the wind whacked and shrieked like human, making the boards quiver like alive. Before long he heard something strike the door. He bolted up when it opened. The woman. Wind flattened her clothes against her and flapped her skirt as if it would sweep her away. She held the door to keep from falling. She shouted, "Come, you!" and turned back, ducking low into the wind.

He followed into the small back entry, clothes hanging from hooks on both sides, to the kitchen, the air abruptly still, stale, warmish from a black iron wood stove. He felt suddenly protected in this room not big enough for more than the stove and table and two chairs. A light bulb hung from a long cord. Behind the stove was a shelf jammed with objects, and on the walls holy pictures with strange words, Polish for sure.

"Sit, you." At the stove, she scooped something from a lone pot into a bowl.

She set the bowl down—oatmeal—and took a spoon out of the table drawer.

"Eat."

Close, he saw her skin and lips were cracked like the dried mud at Pete Neck in summer. Her eyes were so dark and shiny he could see himself and the kitchen window behind him reflected in them.

After, she put water on to boil and set out two cups and when the water was ready poured it over tea leaves in a pan and then poured their tea through a strainer.

Dark came fast. The blow did not let up. Wind swatted, shivered the walls, rattled windows, making torturous moans and howls.

"Storm bad. You stay. In morning go."

"I'll be all right."

"No." She set a hand on his shoulder. "Could freeze. Die.

Modder want you live, not?"

His throat tightened. Die. Tad she must be thinking. If he could tell her . . .

"Come." She opened the kitchen door and closed it behind them. He felt the quick cold. Off a narrow hallway were two rooms, both closed off. She opened the door on the left and switched the light on, a raw bulb like in the kitchen: a narrow metal bed, a bureau piled with objects, a small table, a tall closet with a long mirror, a wood chest.

"Tad sleep here."

He felt struck. Did she know he'd known Tad?

She turned the quilts back.

"Got much blankets."

When she left, he listened till she closed the kitchen door. The room was jammed with things: bamboo fishing poles, several long peacock feathers with shiny blue and green eyes, on the table boats of balsa, half-completed model planes, finished planes hanging on the wall, pots of marbles and agate pooners, a pile of baseball cards, fishhooks, two cap guns, a famed photo of a man and woman young and a little boy with a wagon—Tad?

Cold. He was afraid to undress. He took off his shoes, put the light out—white night shone through the windows—and snuggled under. Hard to sleep. His muscles were so alive from chopping wood, and alive his thoughts going like hands over the walls and furniture and things, and he was hearing the sounds and breathing the smells till he slowly sank into the smell and warmth of the wool blankets holding him . . . He dreamed he was running, afraid; he couldn't stop running, afraid to look behind, afraid to stop, sweating. Suddenly he fell and cried out. His cry woke him. He was startled at white on the walls, that streetlight, but dark morning out.

He got up, thinking he wouldn't wait for her to wake, he'd go.

She was already in the kitchen. She smiled and said, "You eat." So he had to. Oatmeal. She sat with him.

She said, "You got modder and fodder home?"

He stared at her rough hands, thinking lizards.

"Mother, yes."

"She be mad you not go home?"

"Not Ma. She don't care."

"You tell storm keep you here."

"I will."

When he finished the oatmeal, ready to go, she said, "T'anks you cut wood."

"I ain't finished yet. I'll be back."

When she opened the back door, the world was a sudden flood of blinding white, and so still. It took breath. "Wow!" he said. She laughed. Her eyes glittered with sun and snow, her wrinkles stark and deep. How small she was beside him.

Everything was white and still. He said, "I'll clear a path to the road. Where's the shovel?" but before she said a word he was in the shed hunting it.

After, he trudged home, his steps breaking the white and kicking up glitters of snow. When he reached the house, Ma was at the kitchen table in her robe with her mug of coffee.

"Where you been? Out shackin up with some trash? It wouldn't surprise me none. You're more like him every day."

He said nothing. This time she didn't say Answer me. Answers usually made Ma mad. No matter what he said, she'd come at him with Don't you talk back to me! Worse now that he had a job. You couldn't please Ma.

"Well, don't just stand there. Get out and shovel off the sidewalk."

After, he couldn't stay put. He loved snow—it made the town new and clean and hid the ugly parts and made them look different and beautiful.

The Sunday after the snow melted, Ma went upstate to visit Ben. He sat up waiting for what news Ma'd bring. She came late at night, worked up, irritated, he could tell right off from how she slammed the door shut and blustered about, silent. He waited, but she said nothing.

"How's Ben, Ma . . .?"

"How the hell you think he'd be, cooped up like a rat."

He knew to keep clear of her when she festered, but he was busting to know what Ben asked, what he told—because she brought it all back live with her: the dock, Kiski, Ben's knife, Tad's blood. . . .

"Did he ask for me?"

"Why wouldn't he? Told him you didn't change none."

For days after, she kept silent, her eyes far and her mouth like munching, and at home after work she worked like never, muttering to herself mostly what he couldn't hear, but sometimes loud enough, "If I had a dime I'd get out of this town. And where'd I go anyway? You tell me?" like she was talking to Ben—because Ben was his mother's. He felt sorry for her. He wanted to tell her not Ben, Ma—me, but she'd swat him for sure, say he was lying, then why ain't you upstate? sure that's what Ma wanted. She was as lost without Ben as he was. He wanted to know Did she tell Ben Tad had died? but dared not ask.

Afternoons he went back to Gus and Effie's till he finished chopping the wood and piled it in the shed—it would last the winter.

At the lumberyard Gary said, "Jim Winchell quit. From now on you can work more hours, Fred. That means Saturday morning." He couldn't wait to tell Ma, thinking and me the man of the house now.

All she said was, "Well, come payday you can just hand it over. This ain't no hotel."

It was winter now. Dark came early. Still, after supper he walked the back road to the grandmother's house. He saw the kitchen bulb lit and, though he never knocked, he waited long enough to see her moving about and then left.

Saturday and Sunday afternoons he went to the cemetery. Nobody could hear him talk there. Tad, she's okay, your grandmother won't freeze, I keep an eye out, don't you worry none.

The Sunday before Thanksgiving he was sitting on a marker

next to Tad's mound—the dirt had flattened some—when he heard footsteps and turned to see her. She was bundled up in a man's red and black mackinaw, a knit cap pulled down over her ears. She stared at him—puzzled, he could tell.

"What you do here?"

He was tongued-tied. He turned to the grave.

"You know Tad?"

He nodded. "Everybody knew him."

"Ya."

She kneeled over the grave and murmured some words in Polish and crossed herself. When she stood, he said," I'll walk back with you."

She nodded.

They walked in silence. At her place he said, "If you tell me the groceries you need from the IGA, I can pick them up for you."

She hesitated.

"When it's so cold, I mean."

She smiled, old yellowy teeth, her face those cracks. "When time come."

Monday after work, Ma said, "What in hell you doin in the Catholic cemetery?"

"Who told you?"

"What's the diff who told me. Said you was there. Said with that old woman what lives on the back road."

"She's a good lady, Ma."

"Why you stickin up for that old goon? She's just a lousy Polack."

"Don't you call her that! Don't, don't, don't!" Polack. Like shoved back down his throat. He'd choke on it.

"Who you think you're talking to, smartass. I'll take you down a peg or two." She came at him, her arm raised.

He stood up to her.

"Don't you dare touch me, Ma. Don't you dare."

Stunned, she halted.

"Listen, you. Get this straight—I run this show. Don't you

raise your voice to me. You raise a hand and I'll chuck your ass out."

"You don't have to. I'm goin. I got a place."

He waited for nothing more, bolted to the door, his head a fury, his gut wrenched, beating; but determined.

The cemetery was the only place he could talk it out, every word, to Ben and Tad, had to. ". . . and I lied to her, Ben, I go no place, but it's done now and I ain't sorry, I ain't." But it swelled in him. "It ain't Ma's fault, she don't know better, Ben, but I ain't you, I'm me. She don't know I started it, she'd kill me, she'd know where I should be. You don't know how it is, Ben—like Tad all day follows me, like if I turn he's there, I can't forget, he's in my head, and you are, Ben. I keep thinking till my head hurts. I want it to stop, but I'm afraid it will. I don't understand. I'm afraid, Ben."

Come dark, he went back to Gus's shack and, without a word to the woman, slept in the shed. Next morning on the way to the lumberyard early, he stopped at the Diner on Front Street for a doughnut and coffee, the first time since Tad's stabbing that he caught a glimpse of the government dock. After work he stopped again at the Diner. Front Street was already lit up. He hated the early dark. This time, when he went back to the shed, she must have been waiting—at the first sound of the shack door, she appeared in the back entry, a shadow against the light from the kitchen.

"Why not home?" she said.

"I gave Ma fits. I got out."

"What you talk! Your modder, she worry."

"No. She don't care. She wants my brother."

"Where you brodder?"

He winced. He gazed dumb at her, afraid, but couldn't shift his eyes.

"In jail," he murmured. His eyes burned.

"What his name?"

He wanted to run, but couldn't—stayed, like rooted, suddenly sweating cold.

"Benjamin. Ben."

"Ben?"

"Yes. Hartfield."

"Hartfield?"

From her mouth his name came like a stab.

"Yes."

She was so still he quivered, quick thinking She knows, she's going to wallop me. He wanted her to, beat it out—because it was all jammed up in him.

When she finally raised a hand, he almost bolted, but nothing. She rested it on his arm. "Come, you."

"Fred," he said.

"Fred, come."

Inside, she led him to Tad's room and switched the light on. "Here stay," she said. "I make supper."

He stood there, his eyes roaming over Tad's possessions he had seen that one time, thinking how he'd put his own with Tad's when he brought them here. He opened the closet—a shelf with some boxes, on the floor sneakers and a pair of worn brown shoes, boots, a mitt, a baseball bat, two dirty baseballs; and a few clothes hanging there. Tad was short and skinny like him.

After a while she called.

She was silent through the meal, but at times looked at him long, and sometimes came a sudden smile.

He said, "The beans are good. I like salt pork."

"Dot good."

Before going to bed he said, "I'll pay you every Saturday."

"You pay, yes."

In Tad's room he undressed and snuggled under the blankets. Light shone in from the streetlight. Wind made shadows of branches dart and leap live over the walls. For a long time he watched them like bodies taunting him. When he closed his eyes they stayed like white ghosts moving under his lids till he fell asleep. He dreamed he followed them. They led him to the cemetery. He watched. They stopped beside the grave and waited: Tad came out of the ground. Tad walked straight toward him till he was so close he would walk right through him. He shouted—and bolted

awake—but nobody.

She was calling, "Fred."

It was dark morning.

"Up," she said.

That day after work he went to Ma's for his things. He took his clothes from the hamper, shoved them and his possession into two burlap sacks and grabbed his fishing rod.

"Where you goin with them things?"

"I'm moving."

"And exactly where'd you be movin to?"

"To Doroszka's."

"Who in hell's Doroszka?"

"She lives in Gus and Effie's."

"You don't mean that old—"

"Her! Her!" He shouted it so he wouldn't hear Ma call her that.

"JesusHChrist! Well, if you wanna be one-a them, go right ahead, be one." He closed the door as she shouted, "And don't you come beggin back!"

Not a word she's sorry, she'd miss him, you're stayin right here.

At Gus's place before bed, the woman said, "Give clothes." She set a washboard in the sink.

In the bedroom he set the fishing rod alongside Tad's, then unpacked and set his things on the bureau—a jar of sea shells, a box with the perfect dried horseshoe crab, some golf balls, his mitt, marbles he mixed in the jar with Tad's, and baseball cards he piled on Tad's, a cup of Ben's colored pencils Ma'd never know he sneaked, the camera, photos of their trip to Coney Island, a metal Statue of Liberty. He left Tad's photo where it was. He put out the light, undressed, and burrowed under the quilts.

He couldn't sleep. He felt all knotted up—free like never, but afraid, and hurt, by Ma hurt. At least, hurt made him get out, and glad to, no more you're the spittin image of your father, like she hated him, like he was his father, as if he could help it; and with

no Ben she was worse, like Ben was somewhere in the house but wouldn't show. She wanted Ben, and he did, he couldn't stop thinking Ben and Tad, they were inside him, he'd never get them out, he wanted to but didn't want to, he was afraid to.

Slowly he sank into the steady rhythm of her scrubbing.

In the morning, her stirring in the kitchen woke him.

Didn't she ever sleep?

Still dark out. He sat up. Cold the room.

"Come now," she called.

He went through the clothes hanging in the closet, chose a shirt and jeans, and dressed—a good fit.

In the kitchen. His own clothes were drying on a rack beside the stove.

She was stirring something in a pot.

"You sleep good?"

"Like dead." He took his place at the table.

When she turned to him, she squinted. For a long instant she stood too still. Suddenly all her wrinkles squinched quick, and her mouth parted, showing her old yellowy teeth.

She filled his bowl.

"Eat," she said.

Like Writing About Love

Jonathan Greenhause

when you've got no idea what that actually means.
Like switching gears
in the aftermath of a car-crash or filming one's
death
but insisting

on doing the final edit. It's a marshmallow
afraid of campfires,
or it's opening a fortune chocolate-chip cookie.
Like a chorus of blue-jays

singing gloriously off-key or striking gold twice
but expecting a third,
or it's the shoe-sole made exclusively of chewing
gum.
Like being born

into a world that'll always misunderstand you.
It's a jack
that can't jump, or it's the fairy-tale ending
where everyone dies

of mass suicide. Like the long-elusive answer
to an increasingly-
shorter problem or the swirling hurricane
trying to be still

but stirring shit up. Like a volume of poetry
stirringly portraying
the Chicago School of Economics. Like the similes
in these conflicted verses

about similes, their contradictions laid out
        for the hoped-for
effect of litany. Like the unconditional love
        for my unborn children

& maybe like the love they'll one day feel for me;
        & it's this poem's
swimmingly-tight ending as it grasps for straws
        but quickly goes under.

Elevator Talk

Jacquelyn Kelley

You are in an elevator with one of your colleagues after a long night of reviewing case files at the office. Suddenly he turns to you and says, "So, my place or yours?" You do not understand and do not know what to say in reply to this unexpected question, so you do not say anything for a moment.

He fills the silence with another equally confusing question. "Are you serious?" he says. You were not so serious thirty minutes ago while leaning back in your chair, stockinged feet up on your desk, skimming a document on homicide rates in New York City, but now you are very serious because you do not know how to interpret your colleague's questions, so you still do not say anything.

He asks, "You mean to tell me that you weren't planning to sleep with me tonight?" Then you start asking yourself questions, wondering what you may have done to suggest to your colleague that you were planning to sleep with him tonight.

Maybe it was too forward of you to ask him to stay late and help with the extra work? Maybe it was too forward of you to order pizza to share? But, then again, he pulled out two IPA's from his desk drawer. Maybe removing your blazer and letting down your hair from that too-tight bun were both mistakes?

Before you can say "no," he interrupts your investigation. "So, I stayed here this late for nothing?" Not for nothing, you think. You accomplished a lot of research for your upcoming case. "Fuck that," he says.

You suddenly wish that the elevator would drop twenty floors, crashing at the bottom, becoming the final punctuation mark of this one-sided conversation, but instead an incessant chime reminds you that this elevator is falling slowly, floor by floor. When you reach the lobby, you still have said nothing. The doors open and he rushes out, leaving you in an empty elevator with your questions.

Sushi in South Dakota

Sarah Cardoza

Perfected admittance to know 'it's my fault,'
Don't worry my dear I know that I'm wrong.
Quite mesmerizing how you understand
What I always say. No please don't worry!
Always fine, always fine, I am alright.
Of course I mustn't show hostility,
One slip and then I need psychiatry.
Your moans and groans are music to my ears,
I find your insecurity ideal.
I mostly find my comfort in your songs
Of all the past victories that you had had.
At this point it is clear, your perfection
Blinds my eyes. Or can I really see now
what consists of deception?
I only jest! To this I can attest.
What does not fail to constantly impress,
Is your ability to comprehend.
I barely have to say a word at all,
With no braille there, you read me like the blind!
Unfortunately sir you are a fool.
Honestly, just, fuck you.

Sunday

Jessica Kent

A pizza box, empty cans, and you – you in an old t-shirt and smudged mascara, legs pulled up against your chest. You're telling a story similar to many you've told before, but some of the characters' names have changed; the setting is slightly different. It's hot outside and even worse in here but I don't mind, don't mind that it's noon but feels like seven AM, don't mind if we never leave the table. The nostalgia settles over me the same way the humidity does, and we talk as if we're already eager to move on. "It's the same thing all the time," you're telling me, and I agree. But we both know we could live a million mornings just like this, countless hours spent in the quiet aftermath, and we still wouldn't be ready for them to pass.

Going Home

Jessica Kent

The cup I'm holding leaves a ring of water on my leg and I can feel a head on my shoulder; late afternoon light streams in through the windshield. The radio's off and you're in front, describing the last movie you watched in great detail; bare feet up on the dashboard, tapping every so often, a soda in one hand and nothing in the other, except when you reach up to run your fingers through your hair. My eyelids start to fall as we speed toward the sinking sun, as you give away the ending and say that it just wasn't all that you expected it to be, as the miles tick by and the night begins to surface.

Small Talk

Jessica Kent

It was the day that it snowed in April – early April, but April all the same. Catherine Nussbaum's father sat across from me in the living room. He was leaning forward slightly in his chair, fingers laced together in his lap, red sweater doing its best to stay stretched over his protruding belly. The TV was off. I could hear the faint sounds of NPR playing on the radio in the kitchen.

He cleared his throat after a few seconds. "I'm sure Catherine'll be down in a minute," he said, glancing over at the staircase. "Do you want some water, or something?"

I shifted a little from where I sat on the couch, rolling my shoulders back a bit more. "Oh, no, thanks. I'm fine."

We both nodded, and then looked toward the stairs.

Catherine Nussbaum was the girl I thought I loved in high school. I thought I loved her because I only saw her between classes, after games, and on the weekends. She was good looking and smart and she laughed at all my jokes – what else is there, really, at seventeen? At the time I couldn't see anything beyond it. I truly thought we'd go the distance, Catherine and I.

That April evening was our first official date. Her father had answered the door, his face the same color as his sweater. I'd been preparing myself for a cold stare, a firm handshake, a stern warning, maybe a shotgun – all the things you've seen in movies and television shows. But Mr. Nussbaum's greeting came in the form of an awkward pat on the shoulder; his weapon of choice was a small package of peanut butter crackers loosely crumpled in his hand. I could see the crumbs in his mustache as I walked past him through the front door.

We'd been sitting in silence, aside from the soft sound of the radio, when suddenly Mr. Nussbaum spoke up. "So Jacob. How's school going?"

"School's good."

"Good, good." Silence again. His eyes roamed the room before they settled on the window. "Interesting weather we've been having, huh?"

I half-turned around to glance at the sleet falling outside. "Oh,

yeah. Crazy."

He grinned. "Typical New England, right?"

I smiled and nodded. "I think they're saying it could get up to sixty next week, though."

"No kidding!"

"That's what the weather guy said on channel 5."

Mr. Nussbaum told me he hadn't seen an April this cold in a long time. I replied that I could recall a day in March the year before when it had been almost seventy degrees. He was just starting to tell me about an unseasonably warm Halloween night from his youth when Catherine finally descended the stairs.

I don't really remember where we went or what we did that night. What I do remember thinking, as we walked out of the house, was that snow in April was a blessing for people like Catherine Nussbaum's father and I: perfect strangers making conversation only to pass the time.

***

It's a bitterly cold day in January when I meet my own father for coffee at a café in the train station. I'm coming home from a business trip, passing through his neck of the woods; figured I'd give him a ring and see if he's got some time to meet me – that's how I phrased it on the phone to him, anyway, as if it were more a choice than a self-imposed obligation.

"Sure I've got time. Of course," he'd replied. "11am? At the train station?"

"Yeah. If you can make it, I mean. Don't rearrange any plans for me."

I could hear him scoff. "Plans. I don't have any plans. 11am at the train station. I'll be there."

At 11:21 I glance up from a newspaper to see my father rushing over to me, squeezing past tables and chairs. "I'm sorry, Jake," he says, slightly out of breath, sitting down across from me. "I know I'm late."

He doesn't offer an explanation, and I don't ask him for one. "Is your train leaving soon?" he asks.

"About half an hour. I've got time, it's all right."

He orders his coffee black. I fold up my newspaper and take a look at him, noticing new wrinkles on his forehead and around his mouth. "How have you been, dad?"

He smiles. "I'm good, Jake, how are you?" Suddenly he straightens

up a bit. "How's married life treating you? Rebecca doing well?" he asks, his smile growing bigger.

Rebecca is the woman I love now, a woman I know I love, because she'll tell me when my jokes aren't funny. We've only been married six months. "Rebecca's good. She just called a few minutes ago, actually. I think she's anxious for me to get home."

My father nods and cautiously sips his coffee, the steam rising around his face. "Yep, that'll happen." He chuckles. "Your mother never liked me to be away for long."

I look away, down at my folded newspaper.

"How is your mother?"

I can hear the hesitation in his voice. "She's…good," I say, nodding, keeping my eyes down. When I look up my father is staring at me. "She's good," I say again, this time with more conviction. He gives me a single nod and then looks out the window.

I take a breath. "How's Darlene?"

My father turns away from the window, starting to smile again. "She's good." He sits back in his chair, folding his arms across his chest. "She's always talking about getting you and Rebecca up here for dinner sometime. She'd really like that, you know."

I nod. "Yeah, I know. We should do that."

We're both quiet. The noise from the café fills the silence between us: the clatter of cups and silverware; the monotone voice overhead telling everyone who's leaving and when. We glance around to see what other people are doing, how other people are doing.

My father speaks up. "It's cold out today, isn't it?"

I nod, slowly. "Yup, it is." I pause. "But it's also January."

He grins. "That is true. Shouldn't expect anything else, I guess."

I glance at my watch, starting to rise from the table. "I should get going, I think. Sometimes they board early and I don't want to be scrambling for a seat." I start to throw a few dollars down onto the table, but my father shakes his head.

"I got it, you go," he says, standing up. "Have a safe trip back."

"All right. Thanks, dad."

I make my way over to the platform, rolling my suitcase behind me, thinking it's unfortunate that we didn't even have the weather to pass the time.

Shaken and Stirred

Donald McMann

I keep my gin in the freezer so that I can make martinis without having to shake the gin with ice. No contamination. No dilution. Certainly no bruising.

There is something quite remarkable about frozen gin. Being 40% alcohol, it doesn't freeze solid, but the cold dramatically increases the gin's viscosity, making for a rather languid liquid. It simply slips down the side of those delicate, triangular glasses and, scented with a mere insinuation of vermouth, it envelops the waiting olive. Ah. They're a poem in a glass.

I drink martinis every day. I never tire of them. I like the anticipation of a martini almost as much as I like its taste and its mellowing effect. Almost.

I like the look of a finished martini. The classic glass covered by a delicate film of frost. (I keep the glasses in the freezer, too. Freezing compartments are wasted on peas and hamburger patties.)

The astringent effect of frozen gin on the mouth and throat is a thrilling mix of contrary sensations: a dart of icy cold and a flash of searing heat, and then the prickly taste of the juniper.

Martinis are magic. They make things disappear: your boss, your bills, your anxiety, your self-constraint, your awareness, your loneliness. And they serve as a social lubricant; you can make friends over martinis.

I made a friend over martinis: Gordon Walker. Right till the end he was as fond of martinis as I am. Yet he liked them in a different way with, perhaps, less devotion, less reverence. But certainly with no less enthusiasm.

We mixed martinis in our own ways. I measure out the vermouth with an eyedropper—four drops, no more, no less. Gordon tossed in a quarter capful, if he remembered to add it at

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We mixed martinis in our own ways. I measure out the vermouth with an eyedropper—four drops, no more, no less. Gordon tossed in a quarter capful, if he remembered to add it at all. I examine the olives carefully before choosing one, and once it's chosen, I carefully blot the olive dry; Gordon reached into the jar with his big fingers, squeezed the first one he could grip and plopped the poor bruised thing into the glass, indifferent to

the briny slick the sunken olive produced on the surface of the cocktail.

As the Japanese with their tea, I regard the rituals around the making of a martini as central to the enjoyment of the drink. Gordon, I'm afraid, simply liked a glass of really cold gin—several glasses, if the truth be told. His single concession to ceremony was his insistence on shaking his martinis in an old, dented cocktail shaker, its tarnished silver plate missing in spots that revealed equally tarnished brass. We argued about this technique.

"Shaken, not stirred," he'd say.

"It bruises the gin," I'd reply—not, I'll confess now, knowing quite what this meant.

And yet, for all that I might regard as crude about Gordon's approach to martinis, and for all he must have thought me fussy, we happily consumed many of them—no matter who mixed them or how. We were martini mates.

* * *

Gordon and I lived in the same apartment building, the Balmoral Arms. Thirty years earlier, long before I moved in, it was considered posh. The foyer had featured polished marble floors, leather chesterfields (tethered by brass chains to thwart thieves), and amazing royal blue wallpaper of a fuzzy texture overlain with metallic gold fleur-de-lis.

Today, after thousands of scuffing feet have worn dull tracks across the once-shiny finish of the marble, the floors are distressed. Only the chains remain to remind one of the couches that, like determined, neglected dogs, escaped years ago to find new homes. The wallpaper, while still fuzzy and still blue, bears the scars of movers' dollies, shoppers' carts, children's markers, and drunks'—well, let's not go on with that. It is a shabby building. The type of building that can be home to divorced men with hefty support payments to make.

Gordon's apartment was on sixteen; mine is on twelve. But we didn't meet at the Bal, not at the mailboxes off the lobby, not in the elevator. We met a block down the street at Murray's Marti-

ni Bar. You can't mix your own every night. Sometimes you need to go out, see things, meet people, have a little fun. Or at least go out.

I remember our first conversation. Gordon was sitting by himself at a table for two; so was I. Our tables were close. The waitress brought out a tray with two martinis. She smiled and set mine down on a paper coaster with Murray's big "M" logo in red, and I glanced around to see where the second drink was going. That's when I noticed him for the first time: a big, florid-faced man in a rumpled gray suit, white shirt, paisley tie, and a mass of curly gray hair. I liked the tie, was jealous of the hair, and wondered about the complexion. Blood pressure, I thought, and then I took a sip and went back to my book. Yes. I was reading in a bar. I'll admit it. Actually, I hate sitting in bars and restaurants by myself. I never know where to look. Other patrons don't want to be scrutinized. As a pastime, people watching seems to offer much more to the watchers than the watched. Often there's a TV, but you can never hear the thing, or else something of no interest to me is on, like European soccer, or curling, a game in which the passions are as chilly as the playing surface. So I read. Anyway, I heard this voice, a deep, smoky but still resonant voice.

"Gin?"

At first I didn't realize what he'd said, or even that he was talking to me. I looked up, though.

"Gin?" It was the man with the other martini, and this time he held up his glass, as though about to propose a toast. He wore a big grin, one that lifted his red cheeks and drew wide the double chin that gave him that neck-free look.

"Gin," I confirmed. "And an olive. And just a hint of vermouth."

"Ah," he said. Apparently I'd passed some test. "Another traditionalist. Mind if I join you?"

I didn't, really, and I waved him over to my table.

"I'm Gordon Walker," he said extending his big hand. I stood; we shook.

"And I'm Ian Mansfield."

We settled down to our drinks, and spent the next half hour tearing apart Murray's martini menu, scoffing at imposter cocktails made with vodka and brightly colored liqueurs, drinks in which olives were replaced by flotsam and jetsam, including smoked oysters or various pickled vegetables.

"Martinis in name only," I said.

"There oughtta be a law," he said.

We had some good laughs, a few more drinks, and, I think, dinner of some kind. And that's how we got to be friends.

* * *

I'm a writer. Maybe you can tell. I work for a communications firm: senior copywriter. I draft brochures, webpage content, speeches. I even edit a trade magazine for one of our clients. It was once my plan to write novels, but by the time I work all day, come home, have a little dinner, relax, I just can't find the energy to write. Gordon was in sales of some kind. I'm embarrassed to admit that I don't know exactly what his product was. Some kind of oil industry equipment. Drill bits or pressure pumps—something like that. Mostly we didn't talk business. Mostly we kept things light—movies, food. Occasionally we'd get into a little politics, the economy, and a complaint about our former marriages (we'd each had one)—that's about as heavy as it got.

But then there was travel. This was Gordon's topic. With no encouragement from me, apart from a willingness to listen over drinks, he'd go on for hours about trips he planned to take. His apartment was full of books about Australia, Europe, Japan, Polynesia: you name the place, Gordon had a book about it. I used to say, "Gordon, if you spent on travel what you spent on books about travel, you could have had a couple of great weeks in Las Vegas." He always looked pained when I said this.

* * *

Gordon and I didn't always drink at Murray's. Sometimes I'd go to Gordon's place, or he'd come to mine. One night he brought down two of these fantastic Black Angus Triple-A-steaks.

I had a bag of corn on the cob, two foil-wrapped potatoes ready for baking, and one of my famous Caesar salads. While I mixed the drinks, he went out to the balcony to fire up the grill. We drank the first round while he cooked the steaks. We put them on a platter, and while the potatoes finished cooking, we had a second round of martinis. I suppose we didn't really need the third round, but I had bought these delicious, almond-stuffed green olives, and we wanted to appreciate, once again, how delightful these were to discover at the bottom of a newly drained glass. I honestly can't say what justified the fourth round.

I woke up at two-thirty to the resounding noise of Gordon's snoring. I went for a glass of water and found all the food, attended by a very happy housefly, still on plates in the kitchen. We were so busy with our beloved martinis, we'd forgotten to eat. Isn't that crazy? We'd actually forgotten to eat. And those were such great-looking steaks, too. I left Gordon where he was, on the floor just to the left of my coffee table, and went to bed. He was gone when I awoke in the morning—along with one of the plates from the night before. Breakfast, I guess.

* * *

Gordon was the father of twin sons. He kept three pictures of them in his living room. In the first of these, the boys were about seven—smiles with missing teeth. That age. In another they were young teens. No smiles. These two pictures stood, one on each of two matching end tables. The final photo, this one was big and hung over Gordon's television, was a high school graduation picture. The two young men wore their gowns and mortarboards, and for once had been photographed separately. Gordon, or whoever, had had the shots framed together, though, using a single mat with two openings. Twins forever, I guess. The young men were identical, and didn't look in the least like Gordon. They lived in Toronto, and as far as I knew, had never visited their father. Nor had he visited them. He spoke of them only rarely. Once he mentioned that, though they were in university, he was still paying support.

"The Twins are brilliant, you know," he once said. "They'll be in graduate school till I'm sixty." It was a complaint, of course, but a complaint with a touch of pride. Still, Gordon couldn't see himself moving up from the Balmoral Arms any time soon.

Gordon never called his sons anything but "The Twins." I don't remember even hearing their names until I met them when they came to pack up their father's things. To me they're still The Twins. It was good enough for Gordon, and he was their dad.

* * *

Gordon was cremated. We once joked about that possibility.

"The way we soak up these babies," Gordon said, lifting his glass up with that toasting gesture of his, "there'd likely be one big explosion if they tried to incinerate either of us. Talk about a blast furnace—there'd be a fuckin' mushroom cloud."

We howled at that one.

* * *

I have a daughter, Elaine. I called her at university a week or so after I met The Twins. She was busy. You know how students are at the beginning of a new term.

"How are you?"

"Fine. It's hectic, you know."

"I missed seeing you over the holidays."

"I know, but we've been over this. I had to go to Montreal to meet Daniel's family."

"How'd that go?"

"Fine. They're nice. But listen: I really have to go. I've got class."

"My friend, Gordon, died."

"Who?"

"Gordon. A friend. He died on Christmas Eve."

"Dad, I'm sorry. I don't think you talked about him before. But listen, Dad, we'll have to talk later."

"You'll call?"

"Sure. Or I'll send an email. Gotta run. Bye."

"Bye."

* * *

Whenever Gordon and I went out somewhere, we'd take a taxi—you know—on account of the martinis. We had very different tastes in entertainment, but we'd humor one another. I'd agree to go to a hockey game; he'd come along to a concert or a play. It wasn't that hard on either of us, and in any case, the promise of a few drinks at the end of the evening would be enough to get either of us through an event we didn't entirely enjoy. One night, it was toward the middle of December, I persuaded him to come to a performance of Bach's Christmas Oratorio. I think he actually enjoyed the music. He stayed awake for most of it. Afterward we went to an English-style pub and stood around the piano with half-a-dozen other patrons, all of us belting out old songs. For some reason the alcohol hit me harder that night than it usually does. Perhaps I was excited by the performance. Possibly it was the exertion of the singing. Or maybe I just drank too much. In any case, I simply have no recollection of getting back to the Bal. The first thing I remember is early the following morning. I awoke on the floor of Gordon's living room. The television was on, but there was no program, just a static pattern and a high-pitched whine. The Twins were looking down on me. On the coffee table there were empty glasses. Nightcaps, I guessed at the time. And Gordon was in the bathroom throwing up. Probably what woke me.

First, I got up on my hands and knees. Then, using the chesterfield for support, I got one foot under me, then the other. My head hurt and my mouth felt like a small furry creature had curled up inside it—and died. The sounds coming from the bathroom did nothing to make me feel better. Very reluctantly, and somewhat unsteadily, I walked down the hall to the bathroom door. The only sound now was of water refilling the toilet tank.

"Gordon? You all right?"

"Does it sound like I'm all right?"

"Stupid question. Sorry. Can I get you anything?"

"A gun."

"No, really. Some Gravol? Club soda?"

"It's okay. I've been sicking up for a couple of days. And coughing a lot. Guess I'm too old, too fat, too outta shape. Flu, maybe. Guess I should see a doctor or something. Go on to your place and get some sleep. I'll be fine in a while. I'm already a bit better."

I stepped out of the apartment to the sound of his retching.

* * *

I was the one who suggested we spend Christmas together. We'd known each other for a while by then, and though it seemed to me that we were pretty different one from the other, we certainly had isolation in common. Besides martinis, I mean. So why not do the holiday? We planned to start the celebration by going out to dinner on Christmas Eve. There's an Anglican church not far from the Bal, and I suggested that we end the night by going to midnight mass. Neither of us was an exemplary parishioner, or, for that matter, a parishioner at all. Baptisms, a wedding or two, and, increasingly, the odd funeral comprised the total of our devotional lives, but it was Christmas and midnight mass seemed comforting, like a warm brandy on a cold night. Then the next day, Christmas day, we planned to have the full turkey deal at my place—at noon so we wouldn't pass out and forget to eat the food again.

Christmas Eve started out as planned. Drinks at Gordon's apartment, then dinner at a little French restaurant called Chez Louis. Gordon was generally a big eater, but I noticed that he ate little of his first course, a rather delectable-looking Coquille St. Jacques. He speared out a scallop or two and left the rest. And he still had that cough and kept rubbing his shoulder.

"Goddamn arthritis," he said, "both my parents had it. Pain would be the sum total of my inheritance."

I said nothing about his smoking. I'd tried that before. Besides, it was Christmas Eve.

We'd ordered a crisp French sauvignon blanc with our first course, and this, together with the martinis we'd had at Gordon's, began to make both of us feel quite festive. Everything became just a little comic. Pepper for example. We chose salade verte. I remember the waiter had an electric pepper grinder that lit up when he turned it on, so you could see how much pepper you were getting, I guess.

"Looks like an alien spaceship," I said. "My God! What if it abducts my salad?"

For some reason Gordon found that really funny. He laughed until he nearly expired in a coughing fit. He looked all red and sweaty, and he kept rubbing that shoulder. I thought he'd dislocated it. The waiter hovered.

The main course arrived, but all I remember about it was the red wine—a malbec—and a ridiculous argument we had about the words to Mel Torme's "A Christmas Song."

We'd been singing along—possibly softly—with a piano version as it played in the background. Gordon insisted that this one line went, "They know that Santa's on his way. He's loaded lots of toys and presents on his sleigh."

I said, "No. It's 'He's loaded lots of toys and goodies on his sleigh.'"

Gordon kept singing his version of the line, getting louder each time, as though I was not merely wrong, but also hard of hearing. Then I started the song from the beginning, thinking, I guess, that if he heard the lead-in, he would understand that my version was correct. Meanwhile, of course, some other song was now playing. I think the result could be described as dissonant. The waiter came over and asked us to keep it down. We were disturbing the other diners, and on Christmas Eve, too. With this, Gordon half stood up, planted both fists on the tabletop, leaned forward face-to-face with the waiter, and looked angry, menacing. I was worried there might be a nasty scene. But then he settled back in his chair, rubbed his shoulder a bit, and wiped his forehead with his serviette. He was silent for a while. The waiter

lurked.

Now my recollection becomes a little uncertain. There was dessert of some kind, something flamed I think, because I can remember Gordon yelling, "Fire! Fire!" and my laughing, and the waiter shushing us again. Then we were getting into a cab. I don't know who called it or how we got our coats. We were just lurching into the back of it, and I heard the maître d' say to the driver something like, "Take this happy couple home, will you? The short one seems to have the money." I guess I'd tipped enough.

"We're not a couple," I slurred. "We're jus' friends."

But here my memory is as vivid as if I'd consumed nothing all evening but orange pekoe.

"Yeah," said Gordon, "friends." Then he grabbed my face with his two ham hands, held it, and drew me toward him. And he kissed me. Full on the mouth. Not a peck. Not a joke. A kiss. A long one. It tasted of cognac. His tongue prodded mine. I stopped breathing. Hours went by. Days. And then he drew away and, coughing, settled into his seat.

"Finally," he said. "About time."

I wiped my mouth with the back of my hand. The cab door closed. I held my hand to my mouth. I glanced up and saw the dark, censorious eyes of the cabdriver watching me in his rearview mirror.

"He's had a little too much…" I began.

"Where to?"

"The Balmoral Arms."

As we drove Gordon was quiet. His eyes were closed, and one hand rested on my shoulder. I wiped my mouth again. Slowly. Lightly. Though the cab was warm, I shivered once. I was shaken. Or stirred. It was not that Gordon had kissed me. No. It was that he had kissed me, and I had kissed back. I had kissed him back.

* * *

"I gotta go to the bathroom," Gordon said as we staggered to the elevator at the Bal. "Oh, my guts. I gotta go now."

"Hold on. I'll help you up to your place."

We got up to sixteen. I somehow unlocked his door, and then I maneuvered him inside. He was moaning. He went directly to the john, and I headed for the living room sofa. I must have planned to stay long enough to see if he was all right. But I fell asleep. Or passed out. I don't know if Gordon called to me. I don't know if he banged on the wall, or if he groaned or made any sound at all. I just know that when I woke up some time past three on Christmas morning, Gordon was dead. I went into the bathroom and found him sitting on the toilet, his pants down around his ankles, his body leaning to one side against the wall. His skin was gray. His mouth was open. So were his eyes, unfocussed, dead eyes. In the background the television played a carol—"It Came Upon a Midnight Clear"—a choir. I wiped my mouth with the back of my hand, slowly, as I stared at him. I touched his cheek with two fingers. Cold. I called 911.

The medical examiner ruled Gordon's death a heart attack, a massive heart attack. Someone told me there was nothing I could have done. Kind to say. Maybe it was just his time.

* * *

A few days later—it must have been just before New Year's—there was a knock on my door around noon. I was in my bathrobe. I'd taken the week off. The office wasn't busy, and I felt undermined by Gordon's death. I opened my door to two young men I instantly recognized as The Twins. One of them held a gift. They were the very embodiment of clean-cut: sandy hair, short; fair complexions, pink; white polo shirts, open at the collar; and pressed, gray flannel trousers. The only think missing was a residue of milk on their matching, hair-free, upper lips. They could have been missionaries of some kind. Maybe they were.

"Hi," said the one holding the gift, "are you," and here he looked at the tag on the package, "Ian?"

I admitted it.

"I'm James Walker, and this is my brother, John."

He went on.

"I understand you were a," and here he paused, "friend,"

another pause, "of our father's."

"I was. Come in."

"No. Thank you," they said in unison.

"Well, I'm very glad to meet you. I recognize you from your dad's photos of you."

No reaction.

"Your dad and I spent that last night together, you know. We went out for dinner…" They looked like they were just waiting for me to finish. I don't know what made me go on. Their silence, I guess, or their indifference. I had to engage them. "And then we went to mass at the Anglican cathedral."

"Church? Our father?" said James, a look of incredulity on both their faces. They exchanged glances.

"Well, it's not like he went all the time, but it was Christmas Eve. You know. The thing to do. But, by the time mass was over, he wasn't feeling well. Bad stomach and a cough. So I got him home right away. I called a cab. Took him directly home. Got him up to his suite. Got him settled. We'd planned to have Christmas dinner together, you know. I went to check on him, early. Thought I could get him something for his stomach. If he needed it. Some ginger ale or Tums. That's when I found the poor guy. There he was looking as peaceful as a little, sleeping kid. Nothing I could do. Just his time."

I wiped my mouth with the back of my hand. The brothers looked at each other. Then at me.

"We didn't know him very well," said John, "but I'm glad he had a friend for his last Christmas." They were as polite as they looked. And then: "We found this parcel in his room. The building manager told us it's for you. He said you were close."

With that he presented me with the Christmas present Gordon hadn't had time to give me. I was embarrassed. I didn't know what to say. I took it.

"Have you made arrangements?"

"We're just cleaning up the place. He's been cremated. Oh," James interrupted himself, "you mean a service. We're not

having one. We have to get back to school, and we really don't know anybody here. We have to fly back in two days."

"I see."

They wished me "Happy New Year" when they left.

I carried the gift into my kitchen and set it on the table. The wrapping bore an astonishing resemblance to the wallpaper in the Bal's foyer: deep blue with a gold metallic pattern.

A joke at the old Bal's expense? I wondered, or just a natural choice for a man who walked past that same wallpaper every day for years. The wrap was adorned with a shiny gold bow.

I don't tend to be very careful about opening gifts. Gifts are so few and far between, I want to get at them without delay. That makes me a ripper. Yet Gordon's Christmas present was different. I approached it gently, slowly, carefully. I took off the bow and set it aside. I lifted the tape that held the paper in place, pulled off the wrap, and folded it. I had uncovered an elegant cardboard box finished in a rich mahogany color and embossed with wood grain. I ran my fingertips over it. Then, with a paring knife, I cut the two gold seals that fastened the lid. I opened the box and gently removed from a bed of crisp, white tissue a sterling silver cocktail shaker.

I held it up to my face and whistled, struck by this glittering emblem of Gordon's generosity, extravagance. But in the concave surface of the hard, polished, silver cylinder, my reflected face was distorted in mid-whistle, its protruding lips pursed. I put the shaker down and wiped my mouth with the back of my hand.

Gordon must have spent hundreds—more, even. I thought sheepishly about the $25 Santa tie I'd bought him. When you pressed Santa's nose, a metallic voice said, "Ho, ho, ho." The gift was still unwrapped and in its Hudson's Bay bag on my dresser.

There was no card from Gordon, no funny note. There was only the tag with my name, "Ian," written in the thick, black ink of a gel pen, the loopy, oversized script unmistakably Gordon's. And there was this brilliant, shining gift.

Privilege

Suzanne O'Connell

Your struggle bored me.
I walked in a fog of filters.
I didn't pay attention.
I assumed you weren't trying,
or you weren't trying hard enough.

I adopted the cocktail party chatter.
I'd heard it all before.
Ho hum.
I yawned.
Your life bored me.

Then, wearing my privilege,
my pale indifference,
I saw your arms waving for help.
You were shouting something.
I looked at your fragile skull
resting on the sharp leaves of fall.
Your blood was the color of mine.
I was surprised.
I saw the snow catch
in your wooly hair
as it does in mine.

I didn't know
I am sorry.

The Hour of Lead

Saramanda Swigart

The feet, mechanical, go round.

Lily thought of Dickinson each time she had to pass Charlie's room. His room was unavoidable on the way from her bedroom to the kitchen: a flight of stairs from the top floor, held breath and a slowing of all the systems of the body for the duration spent on his floor, and then that last flight down to the merciful impersonality of the kitchen. More often than not, instead of passing his door, she found herself inside his room, kneeling on his floor, on the bathmat she'd laid there for just that purpose. Here she was again, unsure of the mechanical process that had gotten her here, the *feet, mechanical.* She sat dazed for a moment or two. Then, overwhelmed by pain like a jet of squid ink in her bowels, she leaned forward and touched her forehead to the floor of her son's room like a Muslim supplicant. But it was a misheard Catholic prayer from childhood that floated up into her mind, and then out of her mouth; *Our Father who does art in heaven.*

That's how, kneeling before the church's plaster Jesus, her child's mind had imagined creation: God, in paint-spattered robe, casting about His brushes in a heavenly art studio.

Finding the prayer insufficient—irreverent even—she turned, as usual, to poetry.

One must have a mind of winter…

…not to think of any misery in the sound of the wind.

No. Stevens was too cerebral.

The evening is spread out against the sky

Like a patient etherized upon a table;

Eliot's more like it. He knew his way around emotional numbness. Lily had named her daughter April after Eliot's cruelest month, after the hope that she'd always found, despite herself, in that barren poem. April was the only one who still lived in the house with her, but Lily could rarely spare a thought these days

(and here a little shot of guilt niggled in with the other pain). Charlie's car accident, his ten-months-old death, had caused this sustained internal numbness, which just kept getting worse, and Lily had trouble seeing other people through the fog. So no thank you, Eliot. Too close to the bone.

There was a word for this condition of numbness, of course: depression. From the Latin *diprimere,* "to press down upon." The past passive participle of the verb *dipressus,* as in "oppressed/pressed down on." Accurate, sort of. Although for Lily it felt more like a vitreous substance thickening around her, sealing her tightly inside. A sound, too, accompanied the glassy thickening: a rushing wind—with maybe the faintest of chimes tinkling in the background—that grew louder and louder until it was difficult to hear anything else.

Lily settled, finally, on Emily Dickinson; just right. The Goldilocks poet.

After great pain, a formal feeling comes—
The Nerves sit ceremonious, like Tombs—

She liked the poem for many reasons. For one, the turning of regular nouns into proper ones. There is no "I" in the poem, the self negated, but Nerves and Tombs become, in essence, characters, helping the identity-less body survive. Also because the poem suggested the pain was temporary, an idea that appealed to Lily: this period of numbness could be—had to be—waited out, *endured.* Finally, she liked the poem because its ultimate lines suggested that some pain might not be survivable:

This is the Hour of Lead—
Remembered, if outlived
As Freezing persons recollect the snow—
First—Chill—then Stupor—then the letting go—

If outlived. Lily reserved fantasies of letting go for her darkest moments. Not that she thought she'd ever plan anything, but she comforted herself with death when, as now, she had only two other choices, each unbearable: the squid ink of loss, with its sudden, random blackening of every Nerve; or the wind

and the glass, ever louder, ever thicker, accompanied by the neglect of her personal appearance and, worse, of her surviving daughter. Richard—well, he was a loss she could probably survive, should he decide to stay out at his temporary work assignment in California.

Her bedroom and the kitchen: wind, glass. *Humi.*

Charlie's bedroom: pain, a cleansing madness. *Domi.*

Floating between these two Latin locatives—"in the ground" and "at home," as she'd come to think of the two emotional spaces—she had poetry left to comfort her. Oh…and crosswords. April had brought her a book of weekend *New York Times* puzzles that she was flying through.

Yes, she was aware that we are meant to give comfort to and take comfort from our loved ones, not from these inanimate objects and abstract concepts we learned from our two master's degrees in classics and American poetry. Days before he left, Richard had sat holding her hand, cracking her fingers, providing no comfort.

He'd said, "Lily, we can use this to renew our sense of purpose," or something of the sort. He'd perhaps even used a metaphor from science—*revector* our purpose—to leverage a vector's hidden dimension: magnitude *and* direction. Richard liked (to borrow from Hopkins) the "couple-coloredness" of metaphors like that, and Lily assumed their interdisciplinariness impressed clients (Richard, a management consultant, had a certain finesse with metaphors). But they didn't impress her. She watched him. He looked, for a moment, like he had in college, when Lily walked out of *Lysistrata,* still in costume, and there he stood, a man she'd never met, holding out a bunch of daffodils. He had dazzled. Handsome, the more so because he was only half aware of his handsomeness, hair hanging over his eye. That was the kind of man a girl falls in love with. Lily registered this as he sat cracking her fingers and talking about…she'd lost the thread. But she didn't *feel* it, his handsomeness, his boyishness. She didn't see him shine. Not with this feeling of being buried alive, with this

thick snowpack around her body, sealing her in, sealing them out.

"Use the…death?" she said, barely able to say the word. "To change our *purpose*? I'm not thinking about—excuse me—*purposes* at present."

She had perhaps not intended to sound so incredulous and angry (or maybe she had), but Richard, stung, drew away, grew cool and businesslike, that shell that protected him and made him strong. He gave her hand a last officious crack, and then a pat. "We have to grow from our…infelicities," he said.

Infelicities? In modern usage it means something closer to *little mistakes,* not the cosmic unluckiness of the word's classical valence. The rejected Dido, she was *infelix*. The gods made you *infelix,* not your own peccadillos. Lily wished, powerfully, that she was back in ancient Rome, where women in mourning weren't just allowed but were encouraged to run shrieking through the streets, smearing their faces with mud, ripping their clothes from their breasts, and letting their hair go wild. Even the idea of it was sybaritic, causing a bodily sensation that was almost erotic in its intensity. *Vale et ave, filius.* Her thoughts raged into the air above Richard's head. *My grief is insane; it is your tribute.*

Richard sat stiffly, the very opposite of this classical sense of *infelix,* planning his escape. Yes, we are *supposed* to comfort one another. But Lily had lost the one who comforted, who never failed to comfort.

In Charlie's room, remembering this, Lily sat up. She brushed the floor dust from her forehead (she'd not allowed anyone to clean the room since Charlie died). Oh—Charlie as a baby. Those little dimples, the right just slightly higher than the left. You could hear his laugh through the whole house. When Lily caught him shredding the houseplants with his fat little fingers, she petted the plant's leaves and drew the words out: "Gentle—be gentle" in soothing tones. Later, when he found her crying in the living room, he stroked her cheek and said what sounded like "Gentle" in *her* tone. He *listened.*

Lily shuddered. He used to fold his ear against his cheek

with a thumb as he heard a story. He'd wanted to be a doctor, putting Band-Aids all over her legs while she cooked. The waste. The waste.

Lily stood, unable to bear it. She padded out of the room, her spirit deadening a little the moment she crossed its threshold. She went to the escritoire, where she took out a pile of embossed letterhead (*From the Desk of Lily Thurston* written prettily across the top) and a fountain pen.

Dear Charlie, she began on the letterhead, kneeling once more on the bathmat in his room. She spent a few moments flipping the fountain pen against her lips, and then began to write:

This is the Hour of Lead, *as the poem says, and as it also says, I can wait it out. Hours, days, a year. I can remain on my knees, hoping for you. Charlie, I'm an old dog, and it will be your kindness that coaxes me out from under the porch. Remember that book about nineteenth-century spiritualism? The women who would sit in front of a mirror doing "automatic writing" so they could talk to the dead? Let's think of it that way. I'll write, and wait for you, beyond hunger and thirst, until I know you're here. I feel it now, as I write: you're coming.*

Lily cast the pen away. She read the letter over, cringing at the crazy of it, and started to ball up the page. Then, thinking better of it, she smoothed it and put the letter, the fountain pen, and the blank pages into a cardboard box she'd found under Charlie's bed. The squid ink had turned into bile. Melancholy: in Greek *melas,* "black," and *khöle,* "bile." She had wounded herself with the letter. Time to exchange it for numbness, for that tinkle and distance, that mind of winter, winter ice.

She closed Charlie's door quietly, so as not to disturb whatever ghosts she might have raised, and wandered downstairs into the empty kitchen. *The Nerves sit ceremonious like Tombs.* Nerves, I want to introduce you to Tombs; here, I believe you'll have a lot to talk about. Both of you so proper. Please take care of this body, because I cannot.

Empty kitchen, but still dirty. Chick-*chack*, chick-*chack*, the clock talked to itself, and Lily, seated at the kitchen table, drew a

circle in the dust with her pinky. The cleaning lady came once a week, but had been out last week due to a family emergency, and the whole house—and the people in it—had a dusty, despondent, neglected attribute.

Lily was in the kitchen for a reason. Oh yes, the book of puzzles.

Seven across. "First lady's home." Four letters. *Eden,* she wrote without thinking.

Fifteen down. Three letters. Last one the "E" in *Eden.* "What a feller uses." She wrote, *Axe.*

Eight across, nine letters. "It may lead to another story." *Staircase,* of course.

The key turned in the lock. Oh. Lily sat dully, fearful but unsure what she was afraid of.

"Mom?" came a call.

Right. April. Home from school.

A bag dropped near the door. The sound of whistling from the hall, a tune from a television show April watched about paranormal detectives, and then April burst into the kitchen, her cheeks aglow with all that health and make-do that floated around with her wherever she went, and that both heartened and exhausted Lily.

"What are you up to, Mom? Crossword! Carry on."

April took a sponge and started on the counter.

God, what a pretty girl. Lily loved this daughter. Didn't she? Look how hard she's trying. Lily tried to uncrazy her face. Just us sane ladies here in the kitchen, drawing in the kitchen dust and having our hearts drop out from under us.

Presently April lifted the puzzle book, wiped the kitchen table, and placed it back in front of Lily. She kissed the top of Lily's head. "Read me one," she said.

At these words, at the threat of interaction, Lily felt the rising of the wind, the tinkle of ice crystals, but she forced her concentration and read the next clue.

"Three letters. 'Next to nothing,' question mark. Last letter

is an 'E.'"

April thought, or made a show of thinking, screwing up her eyes and tapping her forehead. But Lily saw that this was courtesy: she had no interest in crosswords.

"I don't know," she said finally. "What do you think?"

"Probably 'one.'"

"Oh! Clever," said April.

Such a young girl, Lily saw. Only fifteen. Kind. No family left. Just a dirty house. Yes, the regret was there, coiled up inside Lily, but she couldn't bring herself to act on it…*yet*. The thought of this insufficiency made her feel she was fighting against wind just to remain seated upright: it wanted her supine. It wanted to cast her against the rocks. *Melas-khöle* was what they used to call depression: melancholia. The Hour of Lead.

Lily looked up with effort. April was watching her hands. In a quiet voice, she said, "Shall we order in again?"

They ate pizza in the living room and watched that paranormal detective show. There was a moody man and a redheaded sidekick who wore trench coats with big shoulder pads. They looked out of date, which, Lily saw, was the point. She thought with shame of her own closet, full of such jackets. She still wore them, and thought nothing of it. She used to be so chic, back then, back before whole months of her world started sloughing off.

April sat on the floor in socks, arms looped through her legs, her concentration touchingly absolute. Lily felt words in her throat, trying to get out: *Talk to me, April. What are you going through?* And, *Help me, April. I'm drowning*. But, proximate as they were, these words weren't quite accessible to her. She looked around the living room. They'd bought this house over twenty years ago and refurbished it over time. Chef's kitchen (pointless: no one cooked in it), dining, living, half-bath on the first floor, bedrooms and office on the upper floors. Lily grew up prosperous—her father a successful lawyer and then judge in Cincinnati—but she'd been

unprepared for how much Richard would make as a consultant. Almost right out of college, they were rich. Lily shook her head. What was the use of all this space? Now that everyone was gone, the living room was out to get her. The couch's curve, that line she had once found sleek and modern, slumped like a neglected animal. The ottoman squatted in a state of what looked like pique, with an angry red tartan blanket sprawled over it. The shapes in the abstract print she'd bought with Richard because they'd looked to her like musical notes now looked like plummeting teardrops, in a humiliated flight from upper left to lower right. Everything looked so ashamed: the sideboard, the dark, scarred dining table with its claw legs, the two faux-Grecian pots out on the deck with their dying topiary. Even the fireplace's maw was like looking into a sinkhole, something under a charnel house or tannery. April in her socks was the only bright spot in the room—in the whole damn house.

Except the middle floor. Throughout the show, Lily felt *domi's* pull and fantasized with equal parts terror and hysterical excitement about the sense of disinterment—raw, painful, and purgative—she felt in Charlie's room. She massaged her fingers, cracking the knuckles (it never felt as good when she did it as when Richard did it—and, despite herself, she experienced the faintest pulse of longing for him at the thought). Stretching her wrist, she imagined closing her fingers around the cool heaviness of the fountain pen, slipping the paper from its box, quietly, quietly, so as not to wake April, and adding words—and paragraphs and pages and reams—to Charlie's letter.

Charlie, I'm going to tell you about myself. May I?

So fraught was her anticipation, it took Lily awhile to realize that the television was off, the house was silent, and April was watching her expectantly, waiting for her to answer a question.

"Say again?" said Lily.

"I wanted to ask you something," said April.

"Oh yeah?"

April gave what could have been a nod.

"Ask."

"I wanted to…know when Dad was coming back."

A tendril of fear pierced through the numbness. "Soon," Lily said.

April didn't answer. She nodded.

"Are you…okay?" Lily ventured.

Again, April didn't answer, but Lily watched her struggle internally with something, then compose her face.

April said brightly, "I'm going to go lay down."

"I'm going to go *lie* down," Lily corrected.

April laughed, and her laugh sparkled in the dull room, until the silence swallowed it. "Good night, Mom," she called from the stair.

"Wait. April?" said Lily.

"Yeah?" She stopped.

"Do you want to…see someone? A doctor?"

April descended a few steps. "Do you?" she said. "Do you?"

"Maybe," said Lily.

Lily's hand was trembling on the knob of Charlie's door when the phone rang. Shit. She dragged herself up to her bedroom and shut the door, catching the phone on its seventh and final ring.

"Yes?"

"It's me."

"Rich."

These monosyllabic conversations were now the verbal currency between them, and lingered on until Lily went cross-eyed with the tedium.

"Are you well?" he said.

Everything Richard said, since he'd left for California, was formal and circumspect, and sent Lily scurrying into herself and away from him.

"Well? How should I answer that? Of course not," she

said.

"Is April all right?" he said.

"Why?"

"She didn't sound well."

"I *just* said good night to her."

"She *just* called me."

"Well. I don't know. What should I do?"

"She said you asked about a shrink."

"…Yeah."

"That might be an idea. For you, I mean. Or, I don't know, a job? You could teach."

Lily's numbness subsided as anger rose up, caustic and bitter and refreshing. "What about *you*?" she almost shrieked. "Why don't *you* see a shrink, Mr. Disappearing Act?"

But in the silence that followed, she felt the numbness creep up her body into her cheeks and hands, like an encroaching frost. *First—Chill—then Stupor—then the letting go—*

She was so deadened that when Richard said, sternly, "This is not helpful, Lily," she didn't yell back, just said, "Yes, Rich. Good-bye," and hung up the phone.

She took the phone off the hook.

In his room at last, she rested the pen against her lips. What was she going to tell Charlie? Her memories of the traffic accident, his crushed body, hunks of critical plutonium, were terrible to the touch. Idly, she flipped through the contents of his cardboard box. A shell from the beach at the cape. When he was a child, they had gathered these shells and made a wind chime from them. It hung outside his bedroom window until a gale destroyed it. Here Lily found a little scrap of blue glass, softened to an oval by the sea. A soapstone Egyptian cat. A ring with snakes and a skull. A money clip from Bermuda…where had he gotten that? Lily held it in her cupped hands. She carefully put it back, slipped the skull ring around her finger, and lifted the pen.

No, she was not ready to handle her memories, but poetry

and music were always available to her, old friends, hands out to help her.

There's a singing I hear in here, Charlie. Just the sweetest hint of a few notes—god, it's beautiful. The sound of those seashells chiming in the wind, on the cape that summer, a sweet sound. Charlie, the heart dies of sweetness like this. These notes let me know you're here. Stay awhile, Charlie. When I hear you, I don't feel happy, exactly, but I feel this little crystalline something—something that wants to live, deep down in all the airlessness, and it almost makes me want to sing.

She paused, breathing hard, because she *did* sense something in the shadows.

Grief, Charlie, isn't like sadness, which is what I thought it would be like. It's a temporary insanity. Is it finite? I have to think so.

There, among the dust bunnies under the dresser, beginning to whirl lazily, some sort of stirring in the closet, under the bed, a rumbling of the house's guts, and a splintering of the light, and the thickness of the very air, rent, and Lily knew she would find a doctor. She would find her way back, somehow, to April. But look: something was reaching for her from across a vast distance. It pressed her pen to the paper.

I feel you coming, she wrote. *You're almost here. I'm almost ready to begin.*

Intended Solitude

Stephen Williams

Desire builds momentum,
  strangers sharing
  crumpled bed.
Matron in a waning manse,
  minions soothing troubled breast.
Desire that owns a stopwatch,
  tenderness measured by a clock.
Intended leisure takes too long,
  kindly tension costs too much.

Winter Wheat

David Thoreen

From week to week we earn as we go,
and bury ourselves in rooms full of kitsch.
Day in, day out, we pay what we owe.

Wisdom is theory. We rend what we sew.
No matter who we are, we bitch and stitch
from week to week. We earn and yet go

more steeply into debt, our status quo,
sell our friends and lovers, then filch and fetch.
Day in, day out, we pay. What we owe

is who and how, tomorrow the window
through which we reach, the landscape we search
from week to week. We earn as we go.

We see nothing but shadows. Nothing will grow.
Bored, we turn to the church of a stranger's touch.
Day in, day out, we pay what we owe.

We dream of amber. Beneath the snow
our winter wheat's asleep, its dark earth rich.
From week to week we pay as we go.
Dying, in doubt, we earn what we owe.

The Kiss

Courtney Denelle

It was a ten-minute ride from Leopoldstadt to Belvedere Palace, and scenes rolled by as I stared out the cab window, blurry visions of gold and green and blue. I was pouting—I knew that—but I'd given up on polite compliance about an hour ago. My last day in this god-forsaken city, and the one place I'd wanted to see was moving past me in slow motion. "Vell vurth it," said Elena, with the bouncy vowels and blunt syllables of English through German. "Vell vurth it." She sensed my irritation and was doing her best to rally a bit of enthusiasm in me. But I could see the Great Wheel in the distance, mocking me. The Prater, like a broad-cut emerald between twin sapphires, wedged between the Danube and the Canal, in all it's glory on this blazingly bright October day.

"Der Kuss," she said, patting my thigh lightly, but failing to reassure me. "Vell vurth it, Sophia. Der berühmte Klimt."

#

I was so far removed from it, but my excitement was palpable that day in Donna's office three months ago when she extended me the offer to travel to Vienna. As the Educational Coordinator, she got to choose the volunteer docent who would travel with the rest of the Senior Team to Tiergarten Schonbrun and represent our Zoo. "It's a perfect storm of positive press for them," Donna said, and I knew exactly what she meant. Two fatalities in the past five years had put the Vienna Zoo in the very center of a media nightmare; once in 2002 when a jaguar attacked a caretaker during feeding, mauling then killing her all in front of zoo visitors; and again in 2005 when a young elephant lethally crushed its caretaker. When the Leopoldstadt district of Vienna partnered up with Brooklyn early this year as a borough-to-borough "Sister City," the new Director of the Vienna Zoo saw and seized a brilliant opportunity, bringing a team from our flailing and

financially bereft Prospect Park Zoo into theirs, the oldest zoo in the world, now privatized and raring to go. They'd foot the bill, even.

I'd never left the country before—I'd rarely left Flatbush, never mind Brooklyn, never mind the City. There was only one answer for me. Of course, I said yes. Of course I did.

#

My excitement faded within hours of landing, and faded fast. No hotel rooms for the volunteers—only for those with business cards and a bunch of letters and degree signifiers after their names. Instead, I was paired with a "host," just another volunteer like me, but years younger. Elena offered me the fold away couch in her studio apartment, but no escape from her cloud of cigarette smoke or her bass-heavy German techno, both undulating through the place nonstop. She was nice enough, sure, but I had no choice but to laugh awkwardly when, time and time again, she'd joke that everything would be easier for her if I just had a drink, loosened up "a leetle."

I took refuge in the Vienna Zoo, at least for a few days. No surprise that the oldest zoo in the world was far grander than our tiny plots, dotted with even tinier species. We had prairie dogs, they had rhinos; we had otters, they had cheetahs. Their Big Show was Fu Long, the panda cub, still fuzzy and clumsy and somewhat pink in the tummy. But whenever I had a moment, whenever I could get away, I'd take off to spend some time with the gorillas. With no crowd to speak of, I'd sit down cross-legged, right at the glass partition and peer down as they ate and scratched and playfully batted one another around in their artificial habitat. But most of the time they'd sit there, no different than me, staring off into the distance, contemplating a life that could've been. No different than me.

I inadvertently locked eyes with the female one afternoon. She held my gaze with humanity, cocking her head ever so slightly like she was asking me a question but already knew the answer. Tears built behind my eyes in a way I recognized, but had

forgotten about completely. Which version of me, I wondered, did she see looking back at her.

#

When all the hoopla and photo ops had petered out at the Zoo, it was time to be a tourist but in ways I'd absolutely no use for. Vienna was glinting with gold—Baroque and rich with ornament, but to me, gaudy and pretentious. In the vaulted cathedrals, facing the golden murals, I'd roll my eyes on the sly, wondering how many thousands of people could've been fed or housed with the money the church spent on all that nonsense.

Elena loved to take me to cafes, always cafes, inevitably bristling with frustration because I wasn't swooning over wine sold by the glass, or artisanal bread baskets for fifteen euros a pop, as if either were something to be celebrated. I couldn't find the words to explain to her, if I wanted to indulge in that kind of nonsense, I'd have stayed in Brooklyn.

#

Back in Flatbush, the artists started descending in the '80s, though it wasn't noticeable to us until the '90s. By the time I headed to Brooklyn College in '97, the hip movie stars were on their way, we just didn't know it yet. Ten years later, and those very same artists who'd trampled all over my parent's neighborhood could be seen protesting alongside lifelong residents, demanding affordable housing and oblivious to the irony. Maybe that's why I have no appetite for art. Maybe it's the artists, themselves.

The cathedrals, the gold, Elena whispering with reverence in her accented English, it all became too much. By the final day, I was spent—my resolve, worn thin. On my final day, when she told me we wouldn't be able to go to The Prater—we didn't have enough time, she said, I wouldn't like it anyway—I was done playing nice. I'd stomp through the bullshit Belvedere Palace, fine. I'd groan at the over-the-top ooh's and ahh's of the other tourists, gaping at all the gaudy nonsense lining the walls, whatever. Because after that I'd finally—finally—be able to go home. Back to my matchbox apartment that I loved, back to my dusty books, my

unpaid job.

The trip was a mistake—I knew that. My doctor had said it'd be good for me, my parents were thrilled for me in a way I hadn't seen in a decade, but I knew better. My life isn't a fancy life, isn't a travelling life. It's an interlude, propped up by the passive concern of my parents, a monthly disability check and government housing.

#

I was still pouting when we arrived at Belvedere Palace and Elena had given up on reassuring me. As she pressed two brightly colored bills into the cabbie's hand, she said something in German and he looked in my direction, laughing. I had no doubt she was thrilled that I'd be getting on a plane in a few hours.

The interior of the Palace felt like a movie set, felt like being inside a movie, but one of those insufferable period dramas that have about as much warmth and life as marionette puppets. I could be one of those marionette puppets right now. Elena held up her hands, looking around and nodding cartoonishly. I could tell that she could tell that I didn't care, and I almost felt bad, almost felt guilty, but I was too tired and too irritable and too painfully aware of how far I was from home.

My breath became shallow and ragged. I started naming things as I saw them, like I was silently running down a list, sitting with the discomfort of collapsing in on myself. Grand staircase, ornate column, vaulted ceiling, golden lacquer, marble sculpture.

It was easier to breathe as we moved deeper into the Museum. The cold marble and ivory, the inaccessible Baroque embellishments gave way to tender orange and sky blue walls and a parquet floor, warm and grounding as the Earth itself. Oil painting, oil painting, tufted velvet fainting couch.

"Der Kuss," Elena said, nodding in the direction of a bottleneck up ahead. My pulse quickened. Oil painting, bronze statue, oil painting. The crowd was moving through a tall doorway in a gentle surge to the right, towards a single painting hanging on a matte black wall. Parquet floor, parquet floor, wainscoting,

white sneakers. Step forward, step together, as if each person was allowed thirty seconds or so in front of the painting, uninterrupted, like the unspoken time limit before an open casket at a packed wake. White sneakers, parquet floor.

There were voices murmuring around me, some in German, some in English, some in other languages I couldn't discern. The voices spoke of romance, of beauty, of the gilt of ornament, the decadence of a bygone era. "It shimmers," a voice whispered. "It actually shimmers," and then another voice, a colder voice, replied, "It's the gold leaf, there's gold leaf in the paint."

Step forward, step together, step forward, step together, and I peeled my eyes from the floor. Me and Elena, side by side, standing before "The Kiss." I was struck by the sheer size of it, certainly bigger than I expected, certainly bigger than those lousy printed posters would have you believe.

"Vell vurth it, yah," she said, smiling, but I couldn't summon a response. All this talk of romance, the reverence of the gold, but that's not what I saw. I saw no loving embrace. I saw no amorous rapture. My breath caught in my chest, my brow furrowed, my eyes pinched.

I saw a woman forced to her knees, turning away from a man overpowering her. I looked closer. I saw taut fingers, scratching at his back, grabbing for his wrist, resisting consumption. I saw her toes curled under, clawing for traction. Her eyes were closed and turned away, and I wondered, is this the moment, the exact moment, before she stopped resisting?

And then it came, a memory intruding, a freight train bearing down on me. That day at summer camp, in the arts and crafts room. That day my mother was twenty minutes late to pick me up, only twenty minutes. His face emerged from my memory, that older boy, so much bigger, a teenager, so much stronger than me. I closed my eyes and saw the crook of his neck, the collar of his polo shirt. The din fell away around me, and I could hear only his voice, "stop fighting, stop fighting, I'm almost done," could still feel the pressure of his hand pressed over my mouth. His

fingers that smelled like greasy potato chips.

There were sixteen years between me and that afternoon in the arts and crafts room. Sixteen years later. The time that's passed could have a driver's license. The time that's passed is four years older than I was when it happened. I was standing in a Viennese palace before this famous painting, sixteen years later, and I smelled those hands, could still hear that voice, damp and sweaty in my left ear, real as life.

My heart plummeted, my eyes filled with sparkly spiders that crept across the fan of my irises, blackening them completely. I grabbed for Elena's arm to catch myself, but missed, falling to the ground, struggling under the invisible anvil on my chest, crumpled. The spiders swirled then finally retreated but, from the ground, my gaze went beyond the heads and bodies collected around me. And then I saw it. I saw what they were talking about—the gold leaf shimmering, catching the light from where I lay.

Through flittering eyelashes, I saw the fear in Elena's eyes soften, the tension in her face melting into a smile. She patted my cheek, linked her elbow with mine and sat me upright. "Zis Klimt creatink ausentic svoonink," she said, and the gathered crowd laughed in unison.

Stranger

Jason Tandon

You were resting your head
on the heel of your hand.
I was clearing the table.
Your hair was up.
There was laundry in the machine.
And you wore an expression
part bored, part bemused—
a beautiful woman
at the end of the bar
I was nervous to approach.

I Was Having a Wonderful Dream

Jason Tandon

And woke to a wind
in the bare winter trees.
I lay in bed

dozing to the creak of a harbored ship
straining the anchor chain.

A Second Coat

Griff Foxley

He remembers this place, these streets and towers.
Not New York, but yes, a deep dish of gravitas,
And the look of people at home in their parkas.

He feels a romance brewing in his blood,
The cells in his skin spinning that quarter turn
To where the nostalgia burns its low, slow ember.

He's been here before. For a pleasure trip.
A Drake Hotel getaway that didn't feel half the shine then
That it might right now, looking back.

Memory, the minx, repaints.

Like tourists they had walked in that singular way,
Aimless, but lulled into the city's bedazzled ruts.
They even window-shopped a damn Lululemon
Just 'cause the flow routed them there.
And to be fair, they'd been with extended family,

And so maybe she didn't feel herself;
Lord knows he didn't feel like himself.
So all the posh trappings, the doorman's Armani shoulder pads,

And the precious soaps and snug bed corners…
Had there been romance in it? Or joy?
Joy enough. The bed invited. Conception occurred.
Nine months hence to the firstborn.

Memory, she repaints. He's clear on that.
He paints alongside. He takes this place
And paints it over—that second amending coat.

Lying on the Hammock, Summer 2015

Anna C. Dumais

Lying on the Hammock, Summer 2015
Suspended between the trees
I balance with my brother, silent,
deaf to one another's music.
One sister is out flying,
skimming orange over the sidewalk,
while the other stops and starts inside,
looking for a wound to bandage.
To me they seem tightly wound,
humming like marvelous,
clever little clocks, in perfect time.
I fall still, fingers pressing my thighs, my hips,
drifting low above the grass.
My hair sits softly on my shoulders,
curling the wrong way,
my body swelling with
two years of the wrong growth.
I imagine peeling away the layers
with an instrument,
like the one my mother uses to peel potatoes,
the soft ugly skin spiraling
to the ground, melting away.
The hammock swings the other way
and when I close my eyes it's as if
that quiet street and the house I grew up in
never even existed.

Balance

Anna C. Dumais

I always let you drive my car because it's easier
than hearing you complain when I don't.
Let's go to the ocean, you say.
It's only May, I reply, too cold for the beach,
but you're already changing direction.
I didn't say the beach-- the ocean,
you say, correcting me.
So we go, you half-remembering
the directions but finding it,
a dismal stretch of rocky shore in
nowhere Rhode Island,
and what is technically ocean,
with none of the vastness or beauty.
I walk halfheartedly looking for shells or glass,
while you balance in the shallows,
skipping rocks, left-handed in your red t-shirt.
I continue studying the ground,
finding not a single stone worth taking,
when I hear a crack and a splash,
turn to see you scrambling to your feet,
your brown knees torn open and bloody,
and then you let me walk you back to the car,
let me drive us to the gas station
where you let me buy three huge water bottles,
sit you down on the sidewalk and
let me pour all three over the scrapes,
washing out the grit and salt and blood,
drying them with Dunkin Donuts napkins
that I find in the glovebox.
You even let me drive us home, no complaining
about my speed or my direction,
although you still refuse to let me ever touch the radio.

Walking in Providence, August 2016

Anna C. Dumais

We walked down the hill in late summer evening,
me tripping down the sidewalk after you,
and I bumped into your shoulder
where you'd stopped, staring across the road
into a set of golden bow windows,
some building I'd never noticed til then.
Together we looked in on the hazy glow of a ballroom,
on the white tablecloths drifting like sails,
on the serious back of the piano player,
bent like a blacksmith over the forge,
casting something delicate, like music,
and on the smooth quiet circling
of an old couple on the dance floor,
like a system of two planets around their own star.
We stood on that fading purple sidewalk,
our warm elbows almost touching,
and watched the man and woman dancing,
filling the silence with our own silence,
feeling their hushed motion in ourselves,
through that window cut in the fabric of the night,
feeling like maybe this is where we'll always be,
in steady orbit around one another,
coming no closer than this, and no farther.
We felt the turning, all at once, and then we turned
and I followed you down the hill, towards home.

Hurrican Irene, Four Years Later

Anna C. Dumais

The first day of school was cancelled because
New England was expecting a hurricane,
so my parents let me stay at your house
(your parents never cared what we did).
We lay hip to hip on your bottom bunk,
watching Monty Python skits on your laptop,
eating twizzlers, and whispering in the dark
about our fear of apathy, our fear of love,
our fear of never creating something truly
remarkable or selfless or honest or good,
until one of us was finally too tired to reply
and our breathing slowed and deepened.
The crashing woke us in the early morning.
We felt the thunder rumbling in our chests,
and we stared out the window above us
at the tempest tearing at leaves and branches,
waving crazily, so immediate in the sharp
grey morning, and we didn't say a word,
just stared as the wind screamed and tried
to pull down the trees and the swing set
and the tiles of the old slate roof above us,
imagining it trying to pull us right out of
that window and spinning us, together,
right out of this town, out of these bodies.
But we just lay there, warm in our pajamas,
my hair smelling like your hair, but deeper,
then you cleared the sleep from your throat,
and my memory has chewed your words up
and spit them out so now all I hear when I
think of that moment is your voice telling me
Everyone loves you, and look where it's gotten them.

Maybe Everything that Dies Someday Comes Back

Anna C. Dumais

It's four in the morning and dark enough
that I can't even see your face
as we brush our fingers up and down
each other's backs and you say
I bet I can tell each of your fingers apart
just from the way the touch feels
and so we spend the next ten minutes
one fingertip at a time while you guess,
and I whisper right or wrong,
always three or four rights in a row,
and I start to believe you for a second,
before you make a mistake again,
and finally I whisper Your theory is bullshit,
then I kiss you and miss your mouth
in the dark and from the corner
Bruce Springsteen's voice reminds us
maybe everything that dies someday comes back
and when I stand up for a drink
you tell me you're going to write a poem
about my silhouette against the window
and I know you mean it but you never will.

Contributors Notes

Zachary Acunzo
Zachary Acunzo is a Senior Marketing major at Providence College. He is avid outdoorsman who pushes himself to find new untouched places through his passions such as fly fishing, mountaineering, boating, snowboarding, and scuba diving. The amount of time he spends outdoors allows him to see the world in a different light, and capture these moments through the art of photography.

Jeffrey Alfier
Jeffrey Alfier won the 2014 Kithara Book Prize for his poetry collection, Idyll for a Vanishing River. His latest books are Southbound Express to Bayhead- New Jersey Poems, and The Red Stag at Carrbridge- Scotland Poems. Recent credits include Southern Poetry Review, Hotel Amerika and Cold Mountain Review. He is founder and co-editor of Blue Horse Press and San Pedro River Review.

Judy Askew
Judy Askew has worked as an editor and writer in several corporate settings and is the founder and publisher of a woman's health newsletter. Her work has appeared in several journals, including Slant, Rattle, Cape Cod Poetry Review, Naugatuck River Review, New England Review, and Sahara: A Journal of New England Poetry. In 2015, her collection, On the Loose, was selected by Tony Hoagland to be the first book published by the new Bass River Press. She has won several poetry awards including being a featured poet in Masspoetry.org Spotlight Archives and winning the Joe Gouveia Outermost Poetry Contest. She was also a finalist in a 2015 national poetry contest. She appeared in World of Water, World of Sand: A Cape Cod Collection of Poetry, Fiction and Memoir. She has studied with Robert Bly, Fred Marchant, Alan

Feldman, Cleopatra Mathias, and Mark Wunderlich.

Francesca Brenner
Francesca Brenner has studied with Jim Krusoe and Jack Grapes and attended writing workshops with Mark Doty, Ellen Bass, Dorianne Laux, and Joe Millar. For over twenty-five years, she has been an active member of a monthly journal group created by poet Holly Prado. Her work has been published or is forthcoming in FRE&D, After the Pause, Crack the Spine, and OxMag. She can be heard during many of the readings given by the LA Poets and Writer's Collective, of which she is a member.

Lela Biggus
Lela Biggus grew up in Oak Park, IL. She is a junior at Providence College, majoring in global studies and minoring in writing and Spanish. She writes what she considers her best work only after 2:00 a.m., and recognizes that this is cliché. She also enjoys writing on the train or bus. This is probably because a train or bus presents a magical situation for introverts like Lela in which any number of people may sit in seats across from each other, make eye contact, make assumptions, and say nothing.

Sarah Cardoza
Sarah Cardoza began writing for Vanguard Seattle, an arts and fashion magazine in Seattle, WA after graduating from PC in 2015. As of late, she has made a steep career switch and has started her next adventure at Expeditors International of Washington, Inc. If she's not working or kickboxing, Sarah most likely is catching a concert or writing about fantasized confrontations.

Timothy Clutter
Timothy Clutter, a long-time resident of southern Ohio, has taught high-school English for many years and now teaches literacy to adults. He has contributed articles to English Journal and The Sondheim Review and is a newcomer to creative writing. His

fiction has been published in Green Hills Literary Lantern and his poetry in The Broadkill Review. Pieces by him are forthcoming in Bryant Literary Review, Prairie Winds, and Straylight magazine.

Olivia D'Elia
Olivia D'Elia is a sophomore studio art-photography major with a business studies certificate at Providence College. She has a huge passion and appreciation for music. If you bring up some of her favorite bands or songs, she can talk to you for hours. Someday she hopes to get a job where she can thoroughly live in the life of music and be able to capture it.

Courtney Denelle
Courtney Denelle is a writer living in Providence, Rhode Island.

Wendy J. Fox
Wendy J. Fox is the author of the novel The Pull of It (Underground Voices, 2016) and her collection The Seven Stages of Anger and Other Stories (2014) won Press 53's inaugural short-fiction award. Other work is appeared or is forthcoming in Hawaii Pacific Review, The Tampa Review, The Tusculum Review, Washington Square, and ZYZZYVA among others. She holds an MFA from Eastern Washington University. More information at www.wendyjfox.com

H.E. Francis
H.E. Francis is author of two novels and four story collections, many reprinted in anthologies, notably the O.Henry, Best American, and Pushcart Prize volumes. He lives in Huntsville and Madrid and translates distinguished Argentine literature. His collections have garnered the Iowa Award for Short fiction and other awards.

Griff Foxley
Griff Foxley's work is forthcoming in Burningword, Crack the

Spine, and Evening Street Review. He holds a bachelor of arts in English literature from Vassar College where he studied with Eamon Grennan, and an MBA in Sustainable Management from Presidio Graduate School in San Francisco. He is a member of the Los Angeles Poets and Writers Collective, and regularly attends the Jack Grapes' Method Writing Workshop. A New York City native, he has been a Los Angeles resident for the past eleven years, and works as a food business entrepreneur, social justice activist, and writer. He enjoys listening to music, bike riding through the city, and spending time with his wife and two toddlers.

Jonathan Greenhause
Jonathan Greenhause has won awards from Kind of a Hurricane Press, Prism Review, and Willow Review, plus he was a finalist in 2016 for the Green Mountains Review Book Prize, Soundings East's Claire Keyes Award in Poetry, the Iowa Review Poetry Award, the Aesthetica Creative Writing Award, Oberon Poetry Magazine's Annual Contest, and New Millennium Writings' 41st and 42nd Poetry Awards. His 2nd chapbook, "Secret Traits of Everyday Things," was a finalist in last year's chapbook contest from Encircle Publications and will be published in September 2017. This is his 3rd time appearing in The Alembic.

Alexandra Harbour
Alexandra Harbour is a senior biology major and photography minor at Providence College. When she learned about Europe in second grade, she told her grandmother, Cookie, that she wanted to go there someday. Cookie then started a study abroad savings account that they would both add money to over the next decade. Alexandra's photos of Europe published here were possible only because of Cookie's savings and more importantly her constant love and support.

David Howerton
David Howerton is a part time programmer and lives in American

River Canyon outside of Auburn Ca. He has done landscaping, sign painting, cooking, and made jewelry to pay the bills. He and his wife live with two bossy cats. He has three adult daughters and seven grandchildren. His hobbies include type design, soapstone carving, walks in the woods, collecting dragons, and a growing library of Science Fiction.

Brian Howlett
Brian Howlett lives and works in Toronto, where he is creative director at an ad agency. He has recently tried his hand at short stories, with early success. His work has been featured in Limestone, Crack the Spine, Serving House Journal, Forge, Queen's Quarterly and Sou'wester. Feel free to tell him what you think of his story, "So the Whale Said" at bhowlett@agency59.ca, or @bdhow.

Jacquelyn Kelley
Jacquelyn Kelley is a graduating senior at Providence College studying English and Creative Writing. She also completed a semester abroad at King's College London. She enjoys writing both prose poetry and short stories, and plans to pursue an M.F.A. in creative writing post-graduation.

Jessica Kent
Jessica Kent is a senior at Providence College majoring in English/Creative Writing. She is from the state of Massachusetts but recently relocated to the state of denial due to her impending graduation. If her career as a hand model doesn't pan out then she supposes she would like to do anything that involves putting words together and making them mean something.

Carla McGill
Carla McGill has a doctorate in English from the University of California, Riverside. Her work has been published in A Clean Well-Lighted Place, Shark Reef, Crack the Spine, Westview, Common Ground Review, Caveat Lector, Inland Empire Magazine,

Vending Machine Press, The Penman Review, Cloudbank and Burningword, with work forthcoming in Schuylkill Valley Journal of the Arts and the Atlanta Review. Her story, "Thirteen Memories," received an Honorable Mention in Glimmer Train's MAR/APR 2016 Very Short Fiction Contest. She writes poetry and fiction.

Donald McMann
Don McMann has made his living by writing for as long as he has been working. He's written speeches, magazine articles, and technical manuals. He spent time in public relations, which is possibly where he developed his interest in fiction. McMann has an MFA from Bennington and a PhD in creative writing from the University of Wales, Trinity Saint David. He's currently an assistant professor of English at MacEwan University in Edmonton, Canada.

Lisa Meckel
Lisa Meckel, a presenter for the Big Read, honoring poet, Robinson Jeffers, Carmel, California; has been published in Nimrod, An International Journal, Rattle, Reed Magazine, Mirboo North Times, Victoria, Australia, Monterey County Weekly, and others. She is also a three-time winner of the poetry award at the Santa Barbara Writers Conference.

Anna Munroe
Anna Munroe is currently a senior at Providence College, studying English and creative writing with a minor in women's studies. She works as Assistant Head Copy Editor for Providence College's student-run newspaper, The Cowl, sings as a member of PC's co-ed A cappella group, and has a passion for fiction writing. She has been creating stories since she was old enough to write.

Elisabeth Murawski
Elisabeth Murawski is the author of Zorba's Daughter, winner of the 2010 May Swenson Poetry Award, Moon and Mercury, and

two chapbooks: Troubled by an Angel and Out-patients. Hawthornden fellow, 2008. Publications include The Yale Review, The Southern Review, Alaska Quarterly Review, et al. Currently residing in Alexandria, VA, in her heart she has never left the "city of the big shoulders" where she was born and raised.

Julie Murphy
Julie Murphy grew up in a blue house and her mother read poems to her from a collection entitled "Under the Silver Umbrella". Now a counseling psychology professor and psychotherapist fascinated with the nature of existence and how people organize their experiences, she uses poetry to convey concepts and states of mind to her students and clients. Over the years, Julie has facilitated numerous writing workshops and currently teaches poetry, as a volunteer, in the Salinas Valley State Prison. Julie has work published or forthcoming in CALYX Journal, Common Ground Review, and Shuylkill Valley Journal as well as other literary journals.

Sheryl L. Nelms
Sheryl L. Nelms is from Marysville, Kansas. She graduated from South Dakota State University. She has had over 5,000 articles, stories and poems published, including fourteen individual collections of her poems*. She is the fiction/nonfiction editor of The Pen Woman Magazine, the National League of American Pen Women publication, a contributing editor for Time Of Singing, A Magazine Of Christian Poetry and a four time Pushcart Prize nominee.
*For longer credits listing see Sheryl L. Nelms at www.pw.org/directory/featured

Suzanne O'Connell
Suzanne O'Connell is a poet and clinical social worker living in Los Angeles. Her recently published work can be found in Poet Lore, Found Poetry Review, Forge, Atlanta Review, Juked, Exis-

tere, Crack The Spine, and The Louisville Review. O'Connell was nominated twice for the Pushcart Prize. Her first poetry collection, "A Prayer For Torn Stockings," was published by Garden Oak Press in 2016.

Dan Raphael
Dan Raphael has been active in the Northwest as poet, performer, editor and reading host for over three decades. His most recent books are Everyone in This Movie Gets Paid (Last Word Press) and Impulse & Warp: The Selected 20th Century poems (Wordcraft of Oregon.) Current poems appear in Caliban, Across the Margins, In Between Hangovers, Otoliths and Unlikely Stories.

Stephen R. Roberts
Stephen R. Roberts lives on the outskirts of Westfield, Indiana, pretending it to be wilderness. He spends more time now with birds, trees, and poetry. He collects books, geodes, gargoyles, and various other obstacles that fit into his perceptions of a weirdly vibrant world. His full-length work, Almost Music From Between Places, is published by Chatter House Press.

Serena Eve Richardson
Serena Eve Richardson is a poet, essayist, and singer/songwriter. She received her BA with concentration in creative writing from Montclair State University. Her forthcoming album, Some Imaginings, features poetry that has been transitioned into songs. Serena enjoys motorsports and practicing Siljun Dobup, a samurai sword martial art in which she holds a second-degree black belt.

Matthew J. Spireng
Matthew J. Spireng's book What Focus Is was published in 2011 by WordTech Communications. His book Out of Body won the 2004 Bluestem Poetry Award and was published in 2006 by Bluestem Press at Emporia State University. His chapbooks are: Clear Cut; Young Farmer; Encounters; Inspiration Point, winner of the

2000 Bright Hill Press Poetry Chapbook Competition; and Just This. He is an eight-time Pushcart Prize nominee.

Saramanda Swigart
Saramanda Swigart is thrilled to be writing fiction [almost] full time after years of writing ad copy and corporate literature. She has lived and worked in Italy, New York, San Francisco, and Dubai. She has an MFA from Columbia University, with a supplementary degree in literary translation. Her short work has appeared in Oxford Magazine, Superstition Review, Border Crossing, Euphony, Whistling Shade, Diverse Arts Project, Caveat Lector, The Literati Quarterly, Fogged Clarity, East Jasmine Review, Ragazine, The Penmen Review, Thin Air, and the British anthology Temporal Discombobulations, and she's received an honorable mention in Glimmer Train. She is working on a collection of interlocking stories; a novel, Meaning Machine, about a family's incompatible coping strategies in the face of loss; and a modern translation of the more salacious stories from Ovid's Metamorphoses. She lives in San Francisco and teaches at City College of San Francisco.

Jason Tandon
Jason Tandon is the author of three collections of poetry including, Quality of Life (Black Lawrence Press, 2013) and Give over the Heckler and Everyone Gets Hurt (Black Lawrence Press, 2009), winner of the St. Lawrence Book Award. His poems have appeared in Beloit Poetry Journal, Columbia Poetry Review, Esquire, Paterson Literary Review, Poetry East, Poetry International, Prairie Schooner, and on NPR's The Writer's Almanac. He teaches in the Arts & Sciences Writing Program at Boston University.

David Thoreen
David Thoreen teaches writing and literature at Assumption College in Worcester, Massachusetts. His poetry has appeared in Natural Bridge, Slush Pile, Slate, and other journals. His poem

"Immigrant" appeared in the 2005 issue of The Alembic, and he is delighted to have another poem appearing in the magazine.

Rachel Tramonte
Rachel Tramonte earned her MA in English and Creative Writing from SUNY Binghamton. She has studied with Molly Peacock and Ruth Stone. Rachel lives in Berkeley, CA, with her partner and two daughters.

Stephen Williams
Stephen Williams has bachelor and master's degrees in mathematics from Central Michigan University and is a graduate of the UCLA creative writing certificate program. He worked as a mathematician and a commercial vineyard manager.

John Zedolick
John Zedolik taught English and Latin in a private all-girls school for thirteen years. Currently he is an adjunct instructor at Duquesne and Chatham Universities in Pittsburgh. He has had many jobs in his life including archaeological field assistant, obituary writer, and television-screen-factory worker, which—he hopes—have contributed in positive ways to his writing. He has had poems published in such journals as Aries, Ascent Aspirations (CAN), Common Ground Review, The Chaffin Journal, Eye on Life Online, The Journal (UK), Pulsar Poetry Webzine (UK), Straylight Online, U.S. 1 Worksheets, and in the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette. I also have several poems forthcoming this year and next.

Meet the Editors

Megan Manning
Megan Manning is a Junior at Providence College, majoring in English. She has spent the past three years on the Alembic staff and it has been one of her favorite parts of being at PC. She is originally from Portland, Oregon where she developed her love of good coffee and hiking. She spent this fall studying abroad in Dublin, Ireland where she fulfilled her childhood dream of becoming a princess by visiting as many castles as possible. Her perfect day would be spent with a pen, a notebook and some good friends at the beach. She is not sure what she wants to do with her future yet, but she know it will involve travel, adventures, writing and lots of coffee.

John P. Connolly
John P. Connolly has a normal number of toes for a human. He studies English Literatureand sometimes German at the school. John does not know where he comes from originally, but he is certain that it is probably a quiet place, like Connecticut, or maybe Eastern Russia. He would also like to add that if not in the library, he may be found staying under the alias 'Mr. Bones' in room 513 of the Biltmore Hotel in Providence.

Haley Virginia Wolfe
Haley Virginia Wolfe is a proud native of Lancaster, PA who enjoys finding the providential parallels between her life and the current book she's reading, gathering funny and frustrating stories from her job at Barnes and Noble, and discovering the plot twists that God has written in her own life. Her second year on the Alembic, as a sophomore, has been filled with new friendships with the wonderful team of women editors who have opened her eyes to a number of new literary styles, sharing many laughs along the way. She hopes that readers will enjoy the sights and sounds which the pieces of this year evoke and that they will be inspired

to see the world with not just color but a little bit of ink.

Anissa Latifi
Anissa Latifi is a junior staff editor who is working towards a degree in helping people for lowest possible salary. On the side she enjoys reading poetry, eating bacon and driving home to Massachusetts. In the future she hopes to run a marathon, and write a novel, maybe at the same time depending on future technological advances.

Elizabeth Dumais
Elizabeth Dumais, more commonly known as Betsy, is currently a sophomore at Providence College, studying English and Secondary Education, and suffering through a Business Certificate. Home for Betsy is in Burrillville, Rhode Island, a town in the middle of woods where nothing much happens. Besides her position on the editorial staff for the Alembic, Betsy also spends her time reading, running, watching New Girl, and practicing her signature. Betsy's favorite band is the 1975, drink of choice is lemonade, and favorite holiday is Cheesefest. Although currently on track to be a high school teacher, Betsy's secret ambitions include becoming a farmer and running a marathon in every state. In her opinion, Betsy's contribution to the Alembic staff was a more organized office and the dry humor necessary to make any poem fun to read.

Cheyanne Fullen
Cheyanne Fullen is a freshman English major at Providence College. She loves writing because it excites her and challenges her at the same time. A Boston native, she loves nothing more than an iced coffee in January and has been dubbed a terrible driver by several of her friends. When she's not writing about herself in the third person, she enjoys making perfect playlists, binge-watching TV dramas, and searching for the best flavored coffee in all the land. Cheyanne is also pretty sure she was Carrie Bradshaw in her past life.