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BRIDAL
Susan R. Williamson

I dreamed that wild horse dream again. The one where we are herded up on the mesa: Maverick, Mustang, Appaloosa.
I have never been truly tamed, never found.
Hell, who could find us when we run with the wind in our manes? Who could ever catch us?
Sometimes a vision of harness comes upon me, mid-run, Saddled with stirrups, out of my back I feel the birth of a dark-hatted heroine from long ago. She rides cruel—drives me into unknown country.
I waste under the snap of her whip, cry out with my wordless equine whine, each crack another reason to run wild, to flee to the mesa. There we contend against each other, flesh and muscle, sweat and wet dust streaking copper-colored sides. But when I look up—look over— The long neck I felt bridled and strained up on the mesa collapses. I am only here beside you—quiet, covered in flannel, full moonshine lights the edge of the bed. My throat is dry and it is difficult to breathe.
TAKE OUT
Susan R. Williamson

In my film noir dream, two nights before we married,
I labored in a Chinese laundry. Steam—linens, hung like
sails without wind, in fog—cauldrons, collars, cuffs and towels.

Calloused hands, quick with bleach, bluing, and shirts
dipped in tubs of starch—the great hiss and thump
of the mangle as it worked loud and hard.

A lumbering, arm-waving, Manchu man, his black queue laid
flat on a naked hairless back, leads me down into hazy chambers,
where a crank-handled extractor is bolted to the floor.

My work: to feed flattened mouthfuls of clean washed clothes
into this wringer, watch it squeeze from them a few last drops,
look for someone to ask, “Why was I brought here, left among
these strange inscrutable faces?” A white bride, draped
in clouds of mist and vapor, a new slave among the other
bondmen, sequestered in a dank underworld.

Nothing to do but swelter and work—until dawn, when
my groom returns, finds me tangled in the warp and weft
of brand new cotton sheets—sticky, damp, breathless.

Wide awake now—gone, this flickering dream. How will I
answer the priest’s question, two days from now?
“Oh,” said the letting agent, “just as well I’ve remembered. There’s a wandering tomcat too. Do you like cats?”

“Yes I do,” I said straightaway.

“Good, because the whore begged me to find somebody well-disposed. She was even prepared to give me a bit of money for that, but as an honest man I said I’d do it for free—and didn’t even ask her to service me, ha-ha! It seems this stray appears and disappears but when he does show up he behaves like a domestic cat, so you should be nice to him, feed him, welcome him and make him feel at home.”

“I’m always nice to animals.”

“He comes and goes,” said the girl. “I called him Vasya.”

She was a call girl, baby-faced and giggly. She went on and on about the cat: how gentle he was and how, when he came, he stayed for weeks—licked your hands like a dog—and then one day would just leave, again for weeks.

“Why did you become a call girl?” I asked.

She showed me photographs of her ex-husband—a young man, quite dashing (I also saw an emptiness in his eyes) and of her son, a boy of about six, with a pudgy face and an infant’s expression.

“My son’s with my parents in our home town in the Urals,” she said. “I’m a call girl because I fell in love and married an alcoholic.”

“Was he already one when you married him?”

“Getting that way.”

“Why did you marry him, then?”

“He was so handsome, so dishy. Even now when I look at his picture my heart misses a beat.”

“Looks can be deceptive,” I said. “You fall for a cute guy and end
up being a call girl."

I had been very lucky: the couple who owned the flat (off Arbat, downtown Moscow!) were just about to leave—the husband had been posted long-term to South America—when the neighbours complained about more and more men coming to their flat and the staircase being like a Metro escalator in the rush hour: some going in, others coming out. (And in fact, for quite a while after I’d moved in, men went on phoning and ringing the door bell asking for Lyuda and Larisa: not that prostitution was legal in Moscow, but the police seemed to turn a blind eye, perhaps themselves being on the take.) So the husband and wife had instructed the agent to lower the price in order to find somebody suitable they could have a look at before leaving. They did interview me, very briefly, for only three or four minutes—and apparently liked the way I looked and sounded. At least, that’s what the agent told me afterwards: both the husband and the wife said, “He’s nice, he’ll do”.

“I bet after the call girls, anybody would look nice to them who had no lofty pretensions in that line of work,” I said, a little embarrassed. I had never met Lyuda: it was Larisa who came to talk to me about the cat, on the morning I moved in.

The flat was on the ground floor. About two weeks after I’d taken up residence a cat, medium-sized and short-haired, jumped onto the kitchen window ledge. It had black rings on its tail and legs and was surely meant to be pure silver, but it was dirty and looked haggard and sick. It wheezed and brought up blood. I gave it a sausage to sniff at, then put the sausage on the floor. The cat jumped down and devoured the sausage. I saw it was male.

“You must be Vasya,” I said. The tomcat didn’t react.

“That name’s all wrong,” I said, “I’ll call you Odysseus, because you’ve wandered so far and wide and must have endured so many misfortunes. Odysseus!”
The cat pricked up his ears.

"Yes," I said, "that's your real name. We must get you a vet."

"He's got some kind of a URI—upper respiratory infection," said the vet. It looks to me like a case of Bartonella Henselae."

"I know nothing about these things," I said. "Can you cure him?"

"I'm sure I can. Let me give him a shot—a sort of multi-purpose one—and see how it goes. If he stays sick give me a ring."

Odysseus clearly held me responsible for the jab: he took offence, went into the farthest corner and sulked. However, over the next twenty four hours he gradually got better, put on a little weight and stopped wheezing. After another day or two I noticed a change in his coat: it began to look healthy, and from looking dirty and rough to the touch it turned sleek, smooth, glistening.

And then, just as I was becoming increasingly fond of him, Odysseus disappeared. One fine morning, having partaken of his morning meal, in one graceful leap he got himself up onto the window sill, had a good look around, and, with no leave taking, no goodbye, no we'll-meet-again, jumped off and was gone.

I missed him terribly.

He came back three weeks later, this time with bald patches on his head and neck. He kept scratching them till they bled; he was mewing piteously. I rang the vet.

"A contagious skin disease, they get them from one another in no time. From what you're describing it sounds like scabies. I'll come and give him another shot. I'd spay him if I were you, by the way. If you want him to have a chance that is. Average life span of a stray is two or three years. A spayed cat usually becomes domestic—a pet—and lives its full nine lives."

"Don't you think it's wrong to deprive an animal of his natural endowments?"

"Not when you weigh it against survival. Tomcats especially—
they’re always getting into fights over females.”
   “I heard they become docile, lose all their aggressiveness.”
   “Patent nonsense.”
   “It’s all right, Odysseus, it’s for your own good,” I kept reassuring
   him as he swayed to and fro, bumping into the cage bars.
   “He can’t hear anything, he’s under anaesthesia,” said the vet.

My girlfriend Vera came over. “I can’t make love with this horrible
   cat perched on our feet,” she said.
   “He’s curled up, and not on our feet but next to them, really, Vera, he’s so gentle.”
   “I could never understand your passion for cats, they’re so dirty!”
   “That’s not true: they’re among the cleanest animals.”
   “They rummage in dustbins!”
   “But they clean themselves afterwards. Anyway, this one’s completely
domesticated, he doesn’t rummage anywhere.”
   “He goes or I do.”

I sighed. “I’ll have to think about it,” I said. In fact, I didn’t, I’d already thought. He was staying. Anyway, I’d recently been having doubts
about Vera, with her deep-rooted aversion to all animals—dogs, cats, pigeons.

Like a little dog, Odysseus would follow me when I went out for
an evening walk around the block. “Here’s our young friend doing his daily
constitutional with his cat,” the neighbours would say. On Sundays I’d take
him to the park across the road; although there wasn’t much traffic, still I’d take him in my arms before crossing and release him on the other side. In the park he made the acquaintance of local felines and seemed happy to exchange sniffs with them, but he never resented going home. I’d call to him: “Odysseus, time to go,” and he’d immediately rejoin me and follow me to the curb where I’d pick him up again.

He had an uncanny way of knowing whether I was leaving to go
far or near—for a walk or to the café two blocks away: in the latter case he’d beg to be taken along. So I started taking him with me every time I went to the café. He always lay quietly by my feet, like a dog. Once, however, a real dog happened to be on the scene—a huge German Shepherd. It was also lying placidly beside its owner, a pretty young girl, in her mid twenties by the look of her. I was also about her age, in my late twenties—though far less attractive.

All of a sudden Odysseus leaped at the dog—about ten times his size—eyes blazing, paws stretched out menacingly. The dog recoiled, terrified, and cowered behind the legs (very shapely legs, I must say) of her owner. This seemed to satisfy Odysseus, who came back and lay down again by my chair. So much for the theory that tomcats lose their aggressiveness when spayed, I thought, and began to stroke him. He purred happily and licked my hand from time to time.

The whole café watched this scene in amazement. People started discussing the events—the fearless and fearsome cat who behaved like the most docile of pets at my feet.

The funniest thing was that upon their second meeting the dog and the cat became great friends and would lick one another.

And thus it was that the girl and I began to date.

In no time we fell in love. Her name was Tanya. She lived nearby, actually. “I did see you on a couple of your walks with him,” she said, “the two of you looked so incredible together that I even wanted to speak to you—but I felt too shy. We should call him Cupid, by the way, he’s brought us together.”

“No,” said I, “he’s Odysseus, the itinerant, the wanderer, and he’s now come back for good.”

Translated from the Russian by Justin Lumley with the author.
A Russian teacher in an Estonian school and an Estonian one in a Russian one. All very strange somehow, the boy thought, as he fell into snowdrifts. He walked on them deliberately on the way home from school because he enjoyed sinking into them. He’d arrive home dry from the waist up but all wet below it (his parents would be telling him off), would change his clothes and sit by the warm stove. At home the new issue of the Pioneers’ Gazette awaited him, full of the young pioneers’ adventures in space. At the approaches to the Lembitu cinema the drifts happened to be especially deep. Having relished them, he made his way towards Tornide Park, on the other side of the railway station. At home they’d warned him not to go beyond the station. In the park, both in winter and summer, the iron Kalinin’s arm reached forward, pointing the way back to the station and home, but the boy didn’t feel any pangs of conscience. He knew the outstretched arm of the monument to the Great Man hid something much more significant than a reproach for primary school pupils hanging around here at the end of their afternoon school shift. How interesting, he thought, that the little wedge of Kalinin’s beard should point downwards, but the spire of the Oleviste church at his back (not actually at Kalinin’s back—some ten minutes’ walk away from it—but with the trees bare and everything visible, the spire seemed right nearby), that spire made you look up. Contradictory movements, as it were. But the Great Man’s horizontal arm balanced these movements—you could even say reconciled them. The boy glanced upwards. There, ice-blue gems stood against the velvety blackness. They would tremble a little, every now and then, even rise and fall ever so slightly, to the rhythm of his breath. One star was simply huge, more white and more blue than the snow, he’d never
seen anything like that before. Throwing back his head, he opened his mouth wide to savour the sky. The taste was fresh and crisp as an apple. Grateful for his interest in it, the sky received his condensing breath. The blades of the frosty wind were moving slowly, rhythmically.

"Kuidas sa elad!" he shouted into the sky, sending it the gift of the singing Estonian syllables. What an interesting life people must have, he thought, living in such a language with such unusual vowels and syllables.

Unwillingly, he turned back home. Passing the Lembitu again, he noticed two tempting drifts in an alley branching off the main street and decided to round off the day by falling through them.

The street was quite dark. He first heard, then could only just make out the young fellows on the other side of the drifts. The sounds and the outlines looked like fights among the older boys in school. He forgot about the drifts and went to have a look.

Two fellows had a third one in their firm grip, and a fourth kept punching him in the face. The victim was sobbing and piteously mumbling something. His face was covered in blood.

"Don’t beat him," said the boy, coming up close to the one who was hitting. The latter turned round. One of those holding the bloodied man swore in Estonian under his breath. The boy knew they were swearwords and shouldn’t be uttered.

"Don’t beat him, let him go," he said.

"Clear off, none of your business," said the torturer in Russian with a thick Estonian accent. He grabbed him by the shoulder, dragged him to the street corner and shoved him back into the main thoroughfare.

"Mister, please, over there behind the snowdrifts, they’re beating somebody up, there’s blood, a lot of blood, they need help there," the boy pulled a passer-by by his sleeve. The man tore himself free and quickened his step. The boy had better luck with a couple, husband and
wife most likely. He led them round the corner, they had a look, exchanged hasty whispering remarks between them and began stopping other passers-by. The woman went to the cinema entrance—empty of people—and stood there, while the man, together with two more fellows, one about his own age, the other younger, advanced into the alley. The boy watched from afar, from the security of the main street, its passers-by, street-lamps and cars. When the two groups met, a blade glistened in the weak light, tumbled into the snow. From the first group—the one farther from him—two shadows detached themselves and ran away into the distance. The second group, on the other hand, came nearer him, leading—gently, an arm around the shoulders and hands under the arms—the lad covered in blood.

"Go back home, boy," said the one he'd stopped.
"And what'll happen to him?"
"We're going to call an ambulance, he'll be taken to hospital. All will be well, go home, young man, you've done a good deed."

The stars gave a silvery cry and vanished; snow began to fall from the damp sky—more and more thick flakes, white on white, swept up by the wind. On the corner of Käsperti and Valgevase it was especially windy. The boy opened the dark cavity of his mouth and again asked how are things, this time of the wind. But the wind had lost the rhythm, lost its symmetry, and with a challenge tore the phrase into shreds—into words, the words into vowels and consonants, the vowels and the consonants into sounds, the sounds into their tiny particles.

"This isn't looking good," said the boy out loud. "The sky's gone sick. The wind's given it a chill."

He pulled his coat more tightly round himself, but it was too late for that, something in his chest seemed to have gone blind. Once more he summoned up and repeated the Estonian greeting in a whisper, several
times, till it had become meaningless and turned into an absurd cacophony of alien sounds.

It was warm by the stove, and the children in space spoke Russian. All of them, boys and girls, got along with one another.

He dreamt of the sky, all in white snowdrifts. They were solid, because—it had dawned on him—they had all frozen over. A spaceship flew among them, trying to navigate its way. But, escaping the drifts, it still crashed—into an ice-blue star that had turned red.

Translated from the Russian by Justin Lumley with the author.
Half an hour before her execution, 
she sat in the backseat of our sedan. 
My father focused on the road. 
I stared at eyes 
that were marbled tanzanite.

Inside the office, the receptionist read the nature 
of the appointment on her computer and arranged 
her face into the appropriate expression, 
two parts sympathy and one part solace.

We were led into a room, wallpapered 
with halos. She sat on the examining 
table, looking into the fluorescent lighting above. 
I traced my finger down her arm, feeling 
every ridge of bone.
SOUTH KINGSTON, RHODE ISLAND
Micaela Cameron

The first time I went to Matunuck, I walked with him. Headlights from cars and lamps inside windows broke through the darkness. I imagined families together in living rooms, innocent and cursing the noise outside. We stumbled through the grass, arms reaching around each other, my hands encased in royal blue, his in mine. When we returned home, I sat on the couch while he sat on the porch, his fingers burning from the fire of a Marlboro. His artwork hung above my head, a galaxy of planets and stars. Music boomed from the kitchen, the bass crawled up my toes and into my head, steady, yet still spinning. He entered through the front door and lay down next to me. All was silent now, the television blank and the lights turned off. Smoke and skin embraced me, and we stared up at the galaxy he created. He let my fingers explore and trace the orbit of the moon, warm in my hands against the November air.

We dreamed face to face, until I opened my eyes, stale with sleep, and saw him looking back at me. I watched through the window as the world turned from black to purple and consumed the stars that had once lit our way, as I walked with him, the first time I went to Matunuck.
OUR LAKE HOUSE
Karen Douglass

began as a summer cottage on Intervale Street. We moved into it and out with the weather. We pulled down the sleeping loft, tore out walls, added rooms that cost so much we had to live in them forever.

One year Mom made a small sofa from a bench-style car seat. She propped it up with cinder blocks, skirted and slipcovered it in fabric printed all over with English fox-hunting scenes.

By sixteen I was thin and shy. Mom slipcovered me in white dotted Swiss with lavender spaghetti straps and sent me, dateless, to the prom. She told me to have a great time.

That might have been the same year my bedroom walls had bare studs and panels of fiberglass insulation labeled, “Just Naturally Better.” We could not see the lake from any part of that house.
In late August they brought me to Linden Lodge and put me in a Quiet Room. The walls of the Quiet Room were light pink, and there was no furniture except a mattress on the floor, covered with a sheet. There was one high window. The overhead light, protected by a metal grid, stayed on, dimmed, even after they gave me a shot and told me to go to sleep. I thought the light was part of the presence, communicating with me, so I watched it all night, its dim, pink beacon my master and my friend.

The presence was in my ear. It was Toby, my therapist. I didn’t call him Toby, or any name, to his face. Toby alone was too familiar; Mr. Campbell or Dr. Campbell ridiculously formal; and what I called him to other people, Toby Campbell, too odd, too telling of my discomfort, both in general and with him. Discomfort or not, though, he had been there with me, guiding my movements, since March. I weighed less than a hundred pounds because I had behaved as he had told me to, which had included eating very little for very long. It wasn’t all bad; we’d been talking together all day and all night long for all these months.

But my second day at the hospital, they told me that they didn’t allow outside therapists to visit, which meant Toby wouldn’t be welcome. So I was on my own. Rather, I had the presence, but not the real thing. I wasn’t used to getting along without my weekly visits to him in the flesh.

They moved me into a regular room and gave me a roommate, Vera. Vera was fat and she was in her forties, which was much older than anyone else on the unit. She smoked heavily and always ate what she called a “bacon sangwich” for breakfast, which irritated me. She’d say, “Oh, I just had a bacon sangwich,” as though it were the most natural, and not the most fattening, thing.

Vera snored. The room we slept in was hot in the late summer on
the locked unit, so we slept with the door to the lit hallway opened. Staff patrolled all night long, sticking their flashlights into the bathrooms and bedrooms, announcing “Checks!” and making mysterious marks on their clipboards when they saw us.

After a couple of days Vera said, “There isn’t anything wrong with you, Sophie. You’re just sad.” I liked her for that. I told her that Toby was my whole life.

The presence in my ear told me to resist the hospital. I refused the medication they offered me. For the first two weeks I didn’t leave my room except for meals, what little I ate of them, but after two weeks the presence made me walk out into the hallway, stand in the middle of the smoking room, and fall face forward onto the floor without putting my hands down to break the fall. I obeyed so fearlessly that I didn’t hurt myself. I felt invincible.

Staff made me go back to my room. I fell again, obeying the command of my ear, but this time I was afraid, so I tried to break my fall with my wrist. It hurt.

Months of dieting, practicing yoga, and moving as the presence had told me to do had made me flexible and physically strong. I was light-headed, but that added to my sense of the presence’s power. Whooshing and popping in my head, the presence said that I had to keep falling if I didn’t want to lose my strength. Falling also had something to do with sex, the presence indicated, though I didn’t know precisely what. I was straining to make the connections. I wanted to have sex, at some point. It had been two years. I kept trying to fall, but with less and less success. Every time staff saw me do it, they swooped down yelling and caught me. Every time I managed to fall, I hurt my wrists more.

***

One day, as I stood in my room planning a fall, a small, redheaded man strode pompously up to the threshold. Immediately he threatened me with a court order if I didn’t take the medication he held forward in
his hand. The man was so small that I considered trying to beat him up, because I was angry and powerful, even though I was still thin. He promised me that the judge would go along with him and commit me if I didn’t cooperate, then turned on his heel and strode out, checking his watch.

I turned to Vera. “Who was that?”

Vera said, “That’s Dr. Fox, the head dawktah. You have to do what he says.”

I stood at the window of my room and looked out across the hospital grounds to the hills beyond them, and I wondered what to do. The screen was thick from generations of black paint. I had to give in, I knew.

I was still standing looking out the window when a woman came into the room. I hated the way there was no privacy at Linden. Then she introduced herself as Emma Rydell, a psych nurse, in a friendly but not overbearing way. And then I didn’t mind the nurse so much because I thought she looked as though she could be a friend of mine—almost pretty, not quite ten pounds overweight, tough, fun. She wore sweaters and corduroy pants. Was it a specific friend?

Emma came to the window. “You have so much right now, Sophie. You have an apartment and a job.” Her voice was soft.

How did she know these things about me? Where did staff get their facts? They seemed to know all about me, and, as far as I knew, I hadn’t told anyone anything. The job and the apartment didn’t really matter, though. I cared only about Toby, who seemed further and further away.

Emma went out to the nurses’ station and came back with a light-orange pill and a blue Dixie cup full of water. I liked her, so I swallowed the pill, which she called Haldol. She said it would calm my thoughts.

“Vitamin H,” she said, leaving the room, and laughed.

I appreciated her humor.

But right away I felt horribly sick. I wanted relief, so I went out to the smoking room and sat on an orange leather, or rather plastic, chair.
Terry, a patient Vera had told me had been on the unit for a long time, lay on the other orange chair. I had first encountered Terry in the bathroom late one night when she was in the stall next to me, laughing at each little plopping noise she made. She had big Shirley Temple curls. Between us was a coffee table with a jigsaw puzzle of zoo animals on it, three-quarters finished. Terry half-closed her eyes and started whispering to herself, smiling. I envied her; she seemed so happy and so self-contained. I was so, so sick. I decided that if Terry could just lie down, I could too. I held my stomach.

Right away Emma came in and said to us, “Terry, Sophie, sit up. Someone coming in here might think there was something wrong.”

I guessed that was more evidence of her sense of humor.

* * *

After a few days of Haldol, the whooshing and popping in my head stopped—Toby, the presence, who had been there all those months. I felt restless and ventured out of my room and into the hall every few hours. Walking up and down, I grew accustomed to the unit. I could no longer sleep through Vera’s snoring, so they moved her to another room. I was alone and starting to eat more and sleeping well.

One day I was sitting in a big chair in the hall watching Emma, who was filling out paperwork in the nurses’ station. Every few minutes she wrapped her hand around a coffee cup and drank.

“Emma,” I called out to her. “Can I say something?”

She looked up, face blank. She was probably used to weird utterances.

“You have beautiful hands,” I said, because they were. I had never seen such beautiful hands.

She nodded. “People have told me I should model my hands.”

I felt good.

* * *

Then they gave me lithium, which made me ravenous. For the few
months before, the Toby months, the months of the presence, I had eaten only rice cakes and vegetables and, at the very end, had narrowed my intake down to one orange per day. Now, in addition to my three meals, I ate all the food that Housekeeping left in the unit kitchen at night. The kitchen was raw wood and screened-in, like a cabin in a nice summer camp. I felt contented as I ate. There were small boxes of cereal from the wooden drawers, with cream out of the big, silver refrigerator, ice cream, leftover cake and pie, white bread and butter pats, and I ate all of it in no particular order. Every morning I felt depressed, but every night I ate like that again. I was glad that Toby, the real Toby, couldn’t see me, even though I missed him.

One day at lunch a boy’s visiting parents smiled at me and said, “You look much better.”

Two weeks later the father said, “Frankly, we’re shocked.”

I got fat.

* * *

In late September I got a new, anorexic roommate, Jane. She checked herself in wearing a yellow slicker and gold earrings in an attempt, I gathered, to look normal. She told me that she had been married for four months and that marriage was fabulous, so I couldn’t figure out what she had checked herself in for. Most people had been tricked, restrained, committed, or all three.

Right away she told staff she demanded exercise. She put on a pink T-shirt with “God’s Greatest Miracle” sequined across it, along with a pair of pink sweatpants. She took me to the Rec Center, and we danced crazily to pounding music on a boom box she had brought.

Jane told me that she and her husband were members of a network that tried to locate missing children and were also born-again Christians. Her husband worked for a Saab dealership. I couldn’t put all their pieces together in my mind.
On her first evening in the hospital, her husband came to visit, and she lay weakly on her bed. I lay on mine pretending to be asleep, even though there was still light penetrating our shades. I peeked and saw that her husband was a stocky man with a dark mustache and that he was wearing red-and-black leather driving gloves.

Jane said to him, in a melodramatic voice, “I want to be your wife.” That seemed to irritate him. “You are my wife,” he said.

Jane enacted a ritual, as soon as he left, still very early, still before dark, of spreading out a patchwork quilt on her bed, then carefully smoothing over it the sheets and blankets provided by the hospital. She got into bed and lay stiffly. Soon I heard a gurgling sound. It was loud and bubbly and it lasted most of the night, while Jane remained otherwise silent in the half-lit room.

In the morning, her muscled doctor came to the door. Somehow he had an idea of what had gone on in our room the night before. He put out his hand. Jane picked up two shiny chocolate bars from her bureau and handed them over to him.

“Laxatives,” she told me.

* * *

It was always mysterious, in the hospital, how people knew what they knew. Who told Emma that I had a job? Who told the vain, muscled doctor that Jane was using laxatives? No one wore white coats or name tags. Staff came and went. I never knew what any patient’s diagnosis was. Some people seemed fine, others displayed varying degrees of maladjustment. Between the mental patients and the staff, life on the ward seemed simultaneously slow and chaotic, lonely and overpopulated. I was exhausted, even though I had done nothing for weeks. I missed Toby but I didn’t want him to see me in this state.

* * *

Jane and I danced a few more times in the Rec Center, but then
they secured tiny electrodes on her head with splotches of white glue and made her walk around the unit that way for two days, carrying a heavy control box. She told me that she felt sick because she was getting off Xanax. Then Vera told me that Jane had tried to escape from the hospital through a window, using a fork, so they put her in a Quiet Room with just her patchwork quilt on the floor.

* * *

In Jane's place they gave me a third roommate, Edie. Edie was a genius, nurse Emma Rydell told me. Edie had been a programmer at Apple Computer in California. She had an athletic body and went running every day on hospital grounds. She was cute in a tomboy way, and I was jealous of her in every way, and I couldn't see why she was a patient. She ate dinner later than everyone else's normal four-thirty, and then she played Trivial Pursuit with the male patients. She stayed up past midnight every night writing pages-long entries in her journal and keeping me awake.

Edie's parents were Hungarian. Her mother brought books from the library, like Look Homeward, Angel and The Red and the Black. She was a lawyer who obviously thought being in the hospital was a function of Edie's weakness. The trim, businessman father came only once and smoked a cigarette impatiently, standing outside in the hall.

Edie told me that she buckled under the social pressure at Apple. Linden was diagnosing her as obsessive-compulsive because she couldn't stop thinking about it, she said. She continued to distinguish herself from the rest of the patients—messily dressed, eating and smoking and drinking Cokes all day, slothful, hopeless—by standing up most of the time, talking to staff members rather than to patients, wearing neat clothing, smiling; pretending, in short, that she wasn't in Linden for the same reason everybody else was, that she wasn't a total mess. I pretended to myself that I was concerned that her behavior wasn't good for her cure because she wasn't relaxing enough, but really I hated her because she was smarter than me, and thin.
While Edie was asserting her good health, I continued my marathon eating and gained fifty-five pounds in two months. Because of the lithium I was taking, I started losing my hair, the only beautiful thing left about me. It was falling out by the handful on my pillow.

One day there was a hurricane. Staff made us stay in our rooms. I lay on my bed and watched the purple maelstrom outside, interrupting the show only to drag myself down the hall to the kitchen and cut myself another square of congo bar.

* * *

Then Toby came to see me. I didn’t want him to look at me. We walked around the grounds and afterward went back inside to my room. He told me that he and I had done enough work together and that he was going to terminate with me. I stared at the institutional logo on the corner of the bedsheets—a Massachusetts Native American—listening to him say that he would come one more time, while I was still in the hospital.

For the next few weeks I lay on my bed, motionless. Staff started me on antidepressants. They didn’t make any difference. I couldn’t speak. The last time Toby came, he told me that he liked me and had learned from me. It felt like a slap. The mental health worker at the door took a key from his ring and let Toby out. Vera was sitting in the lounge, looking at us.

“He’s no good,” she said.

I knew she was wrong.

I went to my room and watched him out the window. He walked down the path in a rust-colored suit against the blue October sky, head turned back once for a moment and then forward again, down the steps and away.

When I looked back at the room, I saw that Edie had stuffed a used Kotex in the top of our wastebasket with the bloody part sticking out. I noticed that my wrists still hurt from the falling I’d done in my first weeks at Linden.
Then staff said I was ready to be discharged. I didn’t know what they based it on, but I was as glad to leave as to stay. Two days later, on my last day, staff served apple juice in the hallway as nurses handed me paperwork. I packed what few belongings I had there with me.

I had lent Edie a book of Graham Greene stories, and she hadn’t returned it to me. I wanted it back because I had put a book plate with my name in it. I thought I might need it. Edie told me she had lost it, but I knew she was lying because I could see it on her bedside table.

Staff wanted to call me a cab, but I wanted to take the trolley. I went outside and stood at the top of the hill on the hospital grounds, holding an Adidas bag with my clothes stuffed into it. I felt swollen and numb, and as though I were surrounded and lined by fuzz. At the last minute Edie rushed out with my book.

Each house I saw along the trolley route took on significance, but the messages weren’t clear. I was wondering how I would get along without Toby. What would my life be like now?

Right away, when I got back to Harvard Square, I ran into an old college classmate. I felt huge with my trench coat belt tied over my stuffed body. I told her I’d just been discharged from Linden Lodge.

“You’ve been through hell,” she said, and for some reason I was surprised.
A FALL
Robert Rothman

Fruit falls: a thud; the sound so loud that all
alone I turn for cause: Could something
so small resound so loudly? No great height,
no great weight; the ground reverberates.
They fall: like bowling pins, like dominoes,
like soldiers shot. When atomic bombs reach ground
they show no sound on screen: just the mushroom
eating up the space. The mind fills in
the screams. It's June, it's warm, I shake.
A GREATER CREATURE

Jed Myers

Heard it on NPR—sharks
gather in waters around tour boats
pumping out rock 'n' roll
from submerged speakers. Wow.

Especially AC/DC, they said.
The sharks don't pound the hull.
They are calmed.

I told my friend at the bar—he plays
electric bass. He pulled a swig
off his beer and stated it's the big
heart of the band thumping. There

in the straits off Australia, those dread
beasts listen to what seems
a greater creature sounding
the psalm that rattles their teeth.
BROTHER AND I
Anne-Marie Cadwallader

We walked across the fences bisecting home from home,
On foot by foot across the wobbly wooden ones
Or smooth concrete—we dreaded those,
Embedded with the shards of broken bottle glass.
(Where I grew up it was essential
To keep out the thieves and little boys
Who crept and darted through the yards
To steal what careless objects lay
About the shadowed dining rooms,
And even boldly plucking through
The rows of rice and cans of milk
Stored in pantries ripe with smells of garlic balls and tamarind.)
I was surefooted in the game, pretending
That we walked the planks from pirate ships—
The ground was seething with the jaws and dorsal fins
Of alligators and of sharks lurking in
The rooted grass and humid earth
Of neighbors’ yards and washing plots.
My brother balanced best of all, his body
A loose and stringy marionette, skimming
High along the very thinnest edge,
Skipping past the spikes of glistening glass.
There was a time when he and I
Were head to head, of equal height,
Though most of him seemed made of leg,
Propelling him, at comet speed—
The magnet glove of center field.
By nineteen months he is the older, and I—
Sweet and pesky little sister,
It was my mission in those days of Musketeers and Daniel Boone,
To keep up with him, my brother.
To join the club of pirate boys,
I was tasked a simple mission—
Retrieve the ball that they had tossed into the weedy sea next door,
A house marooned by pitted grounds
And tangled jungles of neglect,
(My parents whispered that at night it came alive
For gamblers and their entourage),
Patrolled by giant, hungry dogs,
They snapped at all that had the fate
To fall into their rank domain of kitchen scraps and chewed-out bones.
I was delighted with the challenge, but
My brother had the skittish look as if
He heard the rumble of a storm’s approach

Or perhaps oncoming tides of wrath from
Parents as they held in grief a sister sacrificed and eaten—
A postulant slain in the quest to be the one: Girl Musketeer.
And so I jumped—I saw the taunting in their eyes—
The grimy two-some, who with my brother,
Championed whimsy, warred with bandits,
Ran from amahs bent on capture,
Scorning girls and shadow sisters.
I landed in the barest strip, a patch of dirt exposed beyond
The tangled screen of vine and trees,
And shadows breathing, shadows shifting...
Glowing blue as summer skies—the ball, an orb from outer space,
Imploring rescue from the beasts that slowly woke to scent the air.
I charged the ball and threw it as
I felt the surging wind of bodies
Coming at me in full voice,
Surely drooling at the prospect of girly tidbits for their tea.
The ball sailed over as I scrambled up the wall again,
And slithered down to land headfirst
Into the safety of my mother's ruby vines of bougainvillea.
I stood in triumph, skinned and dusty, waiting for the grand salute.
Instead I saw the backs of them, spinning dirt clods in their haste,
The Valiant Three, running
Away from me.
Perhaps a shadow flicked across the happy sunshine of my youth
Perhaps I heard the footsteps then
As my brother moved into the world of men,
There was no joining him.
I had an ocean yet to swim, to find the shore of womanhood—
Standing in my tomboy clothes
I knew I was alone.
Hector’s lecture on different types of snake venom had gone on for over an hour and I was ready to get out into the field to start setting up our research project. Impatience and caffeine joined forces in my body to keep my fingers drumming a steady rhythm on my rain-soaked notebook.

Hector finally asked, “Any questions?” and my research partner, James, immediately raised his hand.

“Hector, if you had to pick one, what would you say is the most dangerous animal in the rainforest?”

Hector’s name was not “HECK-tur.” It was “ECK-torr.” The Spanish “H” is more like the ghost of a consonant. It is camouflaged into a word and is more suggested than spoken.

Hector tilted his head to one side like a bird. “What?”

“If you had to be locked in a tiny room with one animal for three hours, what would you not want it to be?”

“That is a strange question, James.” A couple of us chuckled. “I suppose it depends. But I am sure I have told you about the bocaraca. If it bites you, you die in two minutes.”

James wasn’t done instigating. “What about a jaguar? If it rips open your carotid artery I think you’ll die in less than two minutes.”

“Sometimes the jaguar misses. The bocaraca does not miss.” Hector’s eyes were round and serious, and conveyed a personal warning to all fifteen of us where we sat taking notes. We were silent. When we first landed in San Jose, we went to the antivenom research facility there so that we could see a bocaraca and a fer-de-lance and a coral snake for ourselves so we’d recognize them in the wild. We’d heard this before but it
still hadn’t lost its effect. Two minutes was a staggeringly short period of
time to come to grips with your own mortality.

I looked at James and his hazel eyes crinkled as he smiled. I smiled
back and shook my head. James asked these questions for the benefit of
scaring Krissy, who swore at him yesterday when he put a gecko on her
shoulder.

That was James. He was the kind of guy who wouldn’t outright
confront you when you pissed him off. Even when angry, he’d contribute
to the overall happiness of the group by embarrassing the object of his
anger. Presently Krissy was pale enough to showcase the dark circles under
her eyes. She had it coming. She’d been in the jungle with us for three and
a half weeks and she still started crying whenever she saw a big grasshopper.

“Well, there is antivenom,” drawled Chad. Chad was my other
research partner. He was the one who heroically offered to save girls in our
group from aforementioned monstrous grasshoppers so long as he didn’t
actually have to get within three feet of them (the grasshoppers, that is. He
had no problem getting close to girls and had gotten very close to at least
three of them. One would think that, if you knew you were going to spend
two months in the jungle with the same fifteen people, you would refrain
from doing stupid and incriminating things with them.)

James twisted around in his seat to face Chad and I saw his eyes
flash like a coyote’s. “Two minutes, Chad. How the hell are you gonna get
out of the forest, go to a hospital, and get antivenom in under two minutes?”

“He has a point,” Hector rested his hands on the podium in front
of the class. “Do not step on a bocaraca. And wear your snake boots. They
are not just there to help you attract a mate.” I could feel James glance
over at me and I doodled a quick heliconia in my notebook. “Speaking of
snake boots, go put them on now. We have to go get started on our field
projects before it gets too hot or starts raining. Does everyone know what
they want to do for their research projects?

"Yes!"

"Then meet me by Sendero Tres Rios after breakfast in about twenty minutes."

***

Breakfast was rice and beans. Breakfast is always rice and beans. The Costa Ricans call it gallo pinto and they eat it for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. There's usually other stuff with it, like mangoes or pineapple or delicious plantains, but there is always gallo pinto.

I sat with James in the cafeteria to discuss our project while we ate. "Did Hector say we could use the motion-sensitive cameras?"

I nodded. "Yeah. We can place them when we go out after this. I'll ask Hector if he knows where the jaguars are most likely to be."

"You are going to do a project on jaguars?" A short man with cocoa-colored skin like Hector's sat down at our table with us.

"We were going to try to, yeah," James answered.

"That's very interesting. I've seen many different groups from the American study abroad class come through here and I do not think anyone has ever attempted to do their project with jaguars."

"They're probably just scared." James shrugged, casually lifting his glass of orange fruit juice (think grapefruit mixed with cranberry with a splash of mango) and taking a swig.

The man chuckled. He had a laugh that was surprisingly deep for his size and that made his sternum leap up and down. "It would not shock me. The rainforest is not up to your American safety standards."

Appreciation swelled in my chest. Like hell it wasn't. That was why I loved it there so much, and still do. "My name is Dr. Camacho. I study jaguars. I usually teach at the Universidad de Costa Rica in San Jose but I'm on sabbatical here to study the cats."
“Really? Do you know where good places to find them are?” James asked. “By the way, I’m James, and this is Skye.”

“Nice to meet you, James and Skye. And yes, I do know where they tend to be. What were you planning on doing with them?”

“We want to draw them out with bait so that they can be photographed on our motion-capture cameras.”

“I’m going out tonight to see if I can find any. You are welcome to come with me if you want to see the spots where they usually go. It would help me, too; I’ve been studying jaguars for ten years, and I still only get to see one about once a month. The bait could help increase my chances.”

James and I looked at each other. “That sounds great! What time are you going out?”

“Seven o’clock.”

Time. I looked down at my watch. “James, we have to go meet Hector now.”

“Ok.” James got up and grabbed his tray. I did the same. “Nice to meet you, Dr. Camacho! We’ll see you tonight.

***

It had been forty-five minutes since the lecture ended. We weren’t late yet. Costa Rican time translates to American time like this: take the time someone tells you to be somewhere and add a half-hour. You might think it’s a lackadaisical way of doing things but they have a much lower incidence of heart disease and stress-related mood disorders than we do. They’re friendly, too.

We crossed the suspension footbridge separating the dormitories and cafeteria from the trails and biology labs. It rained hard the previous night, so the river was fierce, and it looked like a twisting tide of creamy coffee surging below us. Leaves and bromeliads and entire tree branches plunged along in its current. By this afternoon, it would be calm and
sluggish again. Things change quickly in the rainforest. The sky overhead was bright blue that day, but I'd put on a raincoat before I left my cabin. I'd learned from experience that it was a smart thing to do.

The sign on the footbridge said "Aviso: crocodrilos." I couldn't see any today, though. The river was too swollen. That didn't mean they weren't there.

***

James asked Hector a tough question. Its difficult to pick a "most dangerous animal in the rainforest." There are plenty of contenders. There are bocaracas like Hector said but there are also coral snakes and bushmasters and fer-de-lances that can destroy you just as well as a bocaraca can. When you're stuck in the middle of the jungle with your body collapsing in on itself it doesn't matter if you've got two hours or two minutes left to live; you're not getting out of there.

There are poison dart frogs, too; beautiful and precious like perfect sculptures that dare you to touch them. There are tailless whip scorpions—they're harmless, but type that into Google Images and see how well you sleep tonight. There are acacia trees covered with spikes that are filled with ants which swarm over you if you get too close. They inject you with stinging venom like a thousand scalding hypodermic syringes. There are the famous ones: crocodiles and jaguars that my family kept writing me to tell me to watch out for. Then there's the assassin bug, which bites you while you sleep and infects you with a disease that lies dormant for thirty years until it causes your heart to rupture without warning. I still haven't figured out if this last one is an urban legend.

It is not easy to name any one of these the most dangerous.

***

It is hot out already. The temperature here is always between 75 and 80 degrees, but it's the humidity that gets people. It's the humidity that
draws thunderheads and monsoons every day at 4 p.m. during the wet season. It is the humidity that sets the sweat dripping down your back from the moment you wake up to the moment you go to sleep. The humidity is like wading through a lukewarm bathtub. Sometimes even breathing feels like drowning. That bothers some people, but it doesn’t bother me.

When I was in America I was always cold, even in summer.

***

Our group clustered by the entrance to the Sendero Tres Rios trail as we waited for Hector to arrive. He joined us five minutes later with his black woven satchel filled with equipment for recording bird calls. There weren’t many bird calls that Hector couldn’t make on his own, but some rare complicated ones called for recordings.

“Chad said he’d borrow some bait from Dr. Marten, right?” James asked.

“Yeah. Where is he?”

“I’m right here. I got some meat and leftovers from the cafeteria and shit.” Chad looked like the Platonic form of “Gringo.” He had on khaki pants, a long-sleeved button-down khaki shirt, a floppy khaki hat with a chinstrap that dangled about a foot below his shaggy chin, and big rubber boots. We all had big snake boots. They were hot, inflexible, and covered with a month’s worth of caked-on mud, but they were the only thing that stood between us and a bocaraca’s fangs. Only Chad managed to make the boots look farcical.

If you ever go to the tropics, do not get your ideas for jungle clothing from Raiders of the Lost Ark. “Gringo” is not a term of endearment.

“Uno!” called Hector.

“Uno!” someone chanted back. Someone else yelled “Dos!” and so on, up to “Quince!” We all had Spanish letters. It was Hector’s method for keeping track of 15 American college students in the jungle.
Having us count out our numbers was Hector’s way of saying “Shut up, pay attention, follow me, and get to work,” but in a nicer, meeker sort of way. I still use the Spanish number technique when I lead the class. I haven’t lost anyone yet.

***

Most people have some misconceptions about rainforests. For one thing, rainforests aren’t absurdly colorful like the jungles from Tarzan. Rainforests are predominantly green. In the morning sunlight that day, it was a million shades of green. It was dark and deep where the golden light couldn’t penetrate, yellowish in the spots where rays filtered down through the soaring canopy.

People think the rainforest is a scary, threatening place. Nightmares take place in jungles. They shouldn’t. The rainforest has its dangers but they are easy to forget about when you’re there. If anything, the forest is innocent, somehow. It’s like the Garden of Eden before the Fall. I guess the distinction is that danger exists here, but evil doesn’t. Evil is an alien thing that we bring in, like guns and plastic.

***

“Hector, look there!” Krissy pointed to a fern and her voice cracked like a sharp violin note.

“It’s the Golden Skultula!” James cried. I craned my neck around Krissy’s back to see what she was shrieking at.

The “Golden Skultula” was Nephila clavipes, but at the time I only knew it as “spider the size of a large hamster.” The metallic silver patterns on its thorax did seem somehow skeletal. Its web was like a fishing net cast between two cycads. The spider’s abdomen was copper and gold, about the size of a quarter. It looked like something you’d find in an Egyptian tomb, a gleaming gemstone creature with banded black-and-silver legs. Krissy shrank away from it and huddled against Chad’s side. I took
one look at Chad’s face and had to bite back a smile.

In cartoons, scared peoples’ eyes swell up to take up almost their entire heads. I never thought that could happen in real life until that moment.  

***

Lots of people agree with Krissy and Chad. Lots of people think that the rainforest is scary, dangerous, and even otherworldly. That’s what I thought at first, too, but I’ve found a beautiful underlying simplicity to life here. The entire forest community has a single goal:

Survive.

If you don’t threaten another animal’s survival, then they won’t threaten yours. Just because you see a bocaraca doesn’t mean that you’re in danger. It’s only when you aren’t paying attention and don’t see it that there’s a problem. If you scare the snake, it will bite you. The snake never flat-out wants to kill you for the sake of killing you. That’s something that only members of our own species can understand.

I love this rule of survival. It is so much simpler than the way life works in America. I don’t look like someone who would understand a jungle better than I understand a city or a university. If it weren’t for the shelter of the canopy, my Eastern European skin would curl like bacon beneath the latitude-10 sunlight. The first time Hector taught me to slurp down the sweet, slimy innards of a passionfruit, I got sick for three days. People see me and they think I belong somewhere else, as part of a blonde, blue-eyed, North-Face-clad flock. Kind of like how people see a bocaraca and think it’s just a pile of leaves.

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Chad pointed to the ground. “Leaf-cutter ants!”

I watched the ants in their diligent, single-file march and my gaze drifted to the right, where an almost theatrically huge jet-black ant lumbered over a patch of mushrooms in the leaf litter. “Hector, what’s that?”
“That is a bullet ant.” I took a step toward it to get a closer look, but Hector put his hand out to stop me. “It got its name because its bite is like being shot with a gun.” That stopped me.

“Awesome.” James grabbed my sleeve and gave it a light tug. “So that encounter with the thorny acacia tree didn’t give you a fear of ants?”

Thorny acacia trees form a symbiotic relationship with Pseudomyrmex, stinging ants that attack anything that strays too close to them, plant or animal. While I was sick a few days previously and was out trying to do some field work, I leaned against a thorny acacia tree to take a rest. You can imagine how that turned out for me.

I looked from the bullet ant to James. “It taught me not to walk into thorny acacia trees.” I saw James’ gaze drift to my hand. I pulled it back self-consciously. Tiny red dots peppered the skin where the ants punctured my flesh. My hand didn’t hurt anymore, but the same could not be said about my neck and shoulders. Putting your hood on to escape stinging ants is only an effective defense when there are no stinging ants in said hood.

“Speaking of bullets, Hector, if there are so many damn monsters in this forest why don’t you scientists just carry guns?” Chad crossed his arms and leaned against a tree trunk with what would have been an air of suave disaffectedness if he didn’t cringe away from a line of leaf-cutter ants scaling the park.

Hector’s eyes became flint. “Guns are not allowed here. Guns are for poachers.” He turned his gaze up and whistled some call into the trees. Distantly a bird echoed his song. He called again and started walking, and James and I exchanged glances and followed him.

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I am a terminal student. At any given time there is always someone that I want to learn from, someone that I designate as my mentor. It’s rather
unfortunate for them because then they have to deal with my following them around and asking them questions all day. While I was in Costa Rica for those two months, that person was Hector.

I learned important things from observing Hector. There is a way to disappear into the rainforest like a chameleon vanishing against a tree trunk. When you make yourself fade you feel the life all around you. It thrums through you like a deep resonating bass note on a cello. Back in America I never thought I was a loud person, but here I had to learn to be quiet. Watching Hector I learned to pull my personality back into me, dampen my presence like the “H” in Hector’s name. I learned that when the forest goes quiet, that silence is an alarm bell. When a hawk flies by, an eerie hush transforms the jungle from the canopy to the undergrowth. I learned these things by shutting up and listening. To survive, one must adapt.

I adapted fast. The first night we all went out on a hike, Krissy cried “There’s a bug on you!” and I looked down. I expected to see maybe a big moth or a centipede. No. It was a wolf spider the size of a saucer, mostly legs, hairy and lithe. I jumped a mile and screamed so loud I heard things scrambling away in the bushes in all directions. Most people are scared of tarantulas, but tarantulas are lumbering and awkward compared to wolf spiders. The next time it happened (and it happened many times after that) I didn’t scream. Wolf spiders never hurt anyone.

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“I think we should put out some of the bait here.” I pointed to a spot behind some heliconias. The flowers looked like tongues of fire. They would attract moths, which would attract other animals, which might attract a hunting jaguar.

Chad crossed his arms. “This close to the orb weaver’s web? I don’t want to walk into that in the middle of the night. It’s like freaking Shelob’s lair.”
"We have headlamps, you know," James pointed out. "I think Skye's right. This is a good place." He dumped the bait onto the ground. A bunch of insects converged on it at once and I suddenly saw why biologists used to believe that flies came from piles of old food.

James straightened and folded his empty sack. "We should pick one more place, in case Dr. Camacho winds up not being able to come with us. What about down by the river?"

Hector stepped out from behind a tree, his RadioShack recorder in one hand. "What is it that the three of you are planning to study?"

"We want to get some pictures of jaguars with the night-vision cameras," I explained.

"They are very difficult to find."

"We're going out with a visiting researcher who studies them tonight. That's ok, right?"

Hector nodded. "Yes, of course. Just be careful. And do not put the bait too close to the edge of the river—crocodiles."

"Don't need to tell me twice." Chad's upper lip wrinkled. "Besides, do you know how many mosquitoes will be there at night? I don't know about you, but I don't plan on getting a botfly."

Hector blinked. "Chad, you are in a rainforest. If you do not like mosquitoes, you should go someplace else. And I do not understand why all of you are so afraid of botflies. Even if they grow to full size, they cannot really do that much harm."

This is one point that Hector and I did not see eye to eye on. Botflies might not kill you, but the fact that their larvae burrow into you and eat your flesh until they're old enough to erupt out of you like a phoenix rising from its own ashes makes me squamish. I would take snakes and spiders over botflies in a heartbeat. Thankfully, I still haven't gotten one yet (Knock on wood. There's plenty of wood to go around here.)
In July in the tropics the sun sets at 6 p.m. on the dot. You can go into the lab at 5:45 and it’ll be bright as noon out, and then when you leave the lab at 6:15 it’ll be pitch black. The sun falls from the sky like a shot bird.

At seven James, Chad and I put on our headlamps and our snake boots and crossed the bridge over the black river. “Do you think Dr. Camacho will meet us?” Chad asked.

“I think so.” I froze. Chad and James lurched past me and stopped, then turned and gave me “What the heck?” looks. I held up a hand which meant “listen.” A soft symphony of light trills and chirps came at us from all angles from the twilight. “The frogs are out already.”

“I’ll bet you the jaguars are too,” James added with a twinkle in his eye as we resumed walking. His shock of blonde hair was like a beacon in my headlamp.

Up ahead was a burst of red light that turned out to be Dr. Camacho’s headlamp. “It is good to see you,” he greeted us. “Are you ready?”

“We are,” we chorused.

“Then let’s go.”

James moved over so Dr. Camacho could fall into step next to us. “We put some bait at two spots we thought looked promising, and we’ll go to any other places where you usually see jaguars.”

Dr. Camacho nodded. “Okay.” There is no silence in the jungle at night. It is a cacophony of insect noises and strange, low-pitched cries that must be birds but that sound otherworldly. “Do all three of you come from the same school?”

“Nah, I’m from Duke. Skye’s from Providence College, and Chad’s from…” James glanced at Chad and Chad winced as a sudden blast of
headlamp light burst through his ridiculous mesh mosquito hat.

"Notre Dame," he said around a wrinkled lip, "Dr. Camacho, how often do you see jaguars here?"

"About once a week or so. But they have a saying about jaguars." He threw us a sideways smile, distorted in the red light of his flashlight like how people light their faces up when they're telling scary stories. "Everytime you're in the jungle, there is always at least one jaguar watching you."

My spine pricked and I felt the clammy warmth of the night like a sudden constriction of claustrophobia. The green forest is black without the sun and the black is close and heavy. Even the space illuminated by our headlamps that night was spectral shades of gray. I glanced up the path behind me. There was nothing but black and sound. The darkness swallowed our footsteps and muffled them with rustling fronds, dripping water, and droning animals.

"What about bocaracas?" Chad's voice broke and he cleared his throat. "Do you see them often?"

"Often enough."

I tried to speed up to walk in the middle of Chad and Jimmy. When you're in a big group on a night hike, you feel secure. "Safety in numbers" is imprinted on our brains through thousands of years of trying to survive. The four of us that night was not a big group. I felt small, exposed, my eyes and my headlamp beam darting from fern to tree trunk to shrub. I saw eyeshine against a tree and my stomach dropped. Two round pinpricks of diamond light scintillated like fallen stars before me. They were the eyes of a wolf spider the size of a mouse with a dead hummingbird lanced on its jaws.

Jimmy turned to face the darkness behind us and cupped a hand over his mouth. "Hey, Jaguar! Don't try to mess with us tonight! We've got a professional with us!"
Chad grabbed his shoulder and yanked him hard. “Shut up!”
Dr. Camacho glanced at us. “Do not worry. There is nothing on this trail that does not already know we are here.”
“Funnily enough, that really doesn’t make me feel any better,” Chad quipped.
“Pussy,” said James.
I stepped on a twig and it sounded like lightning. “The insects aren’t chirping,” I murmured. Everything was silent except for the wind rustling leaves above and the drip-drip of raindrops from the canopy to the forest floor. The animal sound was gone. “Something’s wrong.”
“Shh,” said Dr. Camacho.
I stepped closer to James. Maybe being in the jungle at night was something a gringo couldn’t adapt to. I tried to learn from Hector and from the jungle but maybe I hadn’t learned enough.
“It will help you if you turn off your headlamps,” said Dr. Camacho. “The animals cannot see red light, so my flashlight will not disturb them, but they will be scared off by your headlamp beams.”
I looked at James to see how he would respond. Chad was pale and I was sure I was, too, but James still had his usual easy smile. “Oh, excellent. This feels like a brilliant idea,” he said ironically. Then I saw the creases on his brow beneath his shaggy blonde bangs right before he switched his headlamp off.
We stayed close to Dr. Camacho and his red light. “That’s where we left our bait!” I saw the gleaming massive web of the golden orb weaver, a gossamer curtain slung across shadows. I saw the heliconia flowers where we left the bait. We crept behind the heliconias and crouched down in the wet soil. I heard Chad swear and swat something big crawling on his foot. James did not laugh at him and this made me nervous. Dr. Camacho shone his red light between a gap in the branches and the bait lit up with
a bizarre Martian glow.

Motion came at once. A horde of peccaries swarmed over the bait. They smelled like sweat and body odor. When I first came here we’d walk past groups of peccaries in the forest near our cabin and I’d think one of the guys in our group had been neglecting to bathe. The ugly little pigs rooted through the muck, snorting and chomping.

James tapped me on the shoulder just as Dr. Camacho’s light caught a flash of motion and the crimson gleam of mammalian eyes. A graceful tail curled behind a tree and I knew.

“Jaguar,” whispered Chad.

Dr. Camacho’s face was rigid. He reached into his backpack and pulled out a pistol.

My lungs clenched in my chest as if saturated with snake venom. Guns are for poachers.

“You’re not here to study them, are you?” James croaked. “You’re hunting them!” his voice rose. The jaguar froze, twitched its tail, and bounded off into the dark. The peccaries didn’t notice. Dr. Camacho rounded on James. The red flashlight lit up the poacher’s face like some ghoul. His black eyes were worse than his black gun and all of them were trained on James.

Slowly, in unison, we stood up. I wanted to run but I knew he would shoot me. That conflict was physical agony. It was almost more unbearable than being shot.

“What are you saying?” Dr. Camacho asked softly.

James should have said nothing. I stared at the side of his head, tried to force silence on him with my eyes. He didn’t notice; he squared his stance and glared through the dark at Camacho. “You’re a poacher.”

Camacho smiled and his teeth were stark white, almost disembodied against the black jungle. I thought of the Cheshire cat. “Yes. Your
countrymen pay very well for jaguar skin purses. They seem to ease the aging process for your middle-aged women. Cougars, I believe, you call them?” He sniffed. “Ironic.” Then he laughed. My stomach twisted.

I grabbed James hand and squeezed it. Shut up. I thought fiercely. He did, though I felt the muscle between his thumb and forefinger clench. I saw Chad standing there, trembling, his mouth a wavy line and his brow glistening. “Ok,” I said. “Its ok. We understand. We won’t tell anyone. We won’t stop you. Just let us leave.”

I realize it would have been a whole lot more noble to spring at him and wrest the gun from his fingers, drag him back to camp to call the police, and throw the gun into the river. But I was operating on Jungle principles. The law was “Survive” and that word was like a bloody tyrant oppressing everything else in my brain.

Chad started to creep backward and Dr. Camacho turned the gun on him. “No! You will tell someone. Do you think I am foolish? Do you think you will act as if nothing has happened?”

“She told you, we won’t say anything!” Chad cried.

“That is a lie!”

Maybe I could turn my headlamp on and temporarily blind him so we could escape. If we made it to the trees it would be much harder to shoot us. More likely, though, that would just piss him off and he’d shoot us faster. You come up with lots of really stupid ideas when you’re trying to save yourself. The black hole of the gun drifted lazily between the three of us, like the head of a coiled snake. I followed the red beam of the flashlight with my eyes as it swept toward the ground and I saw something.

Something coiled in the soil between us and Camacho. It pulled into a silent S-bend. It wasn’t just James and I that Camacho had cornered.

Camacho was a hunter, and he moved like it. We were his prey. He took a step forward. “You would not be so foolish as to try to run.” It was
ironic that he moved like a jaguar. Maybe he spent too much time stalking them, kind of like how Hector acted like a bird because he studied them.

You think of weird things when you’re going to die.

Camacho took another step and his fourth captive exploded at his ankle. He screamed and crumpled. A flash of light rent the air like lightning splitting oxygen.

James howled and collapsed. Chad turned and ran. There was another crack and Chad screamed but kept running.

Camacho fumbled for his gun on the ground with one hand while the other clasped his ankle. Blood seeped between his fingers and the snake was gone. Sweat glistened on his forehead, spectral and hellish in the crimson glow of his flashlight. I took a step and kicked the gun out of his reach. It crackled into the underbrush. Then I turned to James. “Are you okay?”

The answer was obvious. This was the first time I’d ever seen him silent. All the color was leaching from his tan skin and a dark spot spread across his chest.

Camacho’s screams sounded distant, like voices in a dream that you’re half-awake from.

My knees slammed into the ground next to James without my consent. The cloying smell of blood rose to my nostrils and I could feel my stomach trying to hurl its contents up my throat.

“G-girl.” I turned. Camacho sat coiled in a shrub, his shaking hand around the pistol.

The barrel stared at me inevitably. I stared back, frozen. There was no point in trying to move. I kept one hand on James’ still chest. Its funny how fear is designed to help you escape. Once you know there’s no escape the fear is gone.

There was madness in Camacho’s tortured face, a grimace that pulled his lips back in a smile that I hope was inhuman. I saw intent flash
in his eyes. His finger moved.

Nothing happened. Madness turned to terror as the bocaraca’s venom ripped through his nervous system. The gun slipped from his rigid, clawed hand. It hit the ground at the same time as he did. Dead or paralyzed, I didn’t know. James’ shirt slipped from my hand as I got up and ran.

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People find out what happened that night and they wonder how on Earth I was able to dedicate my life to working in rainforests, let alone that same rainforest. I don’t follow their logic. If it weren’t for that forest and that bocaraca, I’d be dead.

Last summer I taught a course with the Organization for Tropical Studies, the same course that I took thirteen years ago. After evening lecture one night one of my students raised his hand and asked, “Dr. Starling, what’s the most dangerous animal in the rainforest? I mean, what animal should I be most scared of?” A couple other students laughed and the student sat back with a roguish grin that felt like a screw twisting in my heart.

I saw a bocaraca kill a man in two minutes. I saw a man kill another man in a fraction of a second.

I told my student, “Us.”
BLACK DOG
Dzvinia Orlowsky

Solstice Summer Writers’ Conference, 2006

It’s a lie we go on forever
if we love a favorite song or poem deeply enough.

But tonight under the college president’s dining room’s
best-bet dimmed lights,
ice coolers are packed with beers,
and outside, a sudden summer thunder storm
has just missed the campus.

My 14 year old son, drafted as the night’s DJ,
doesn’t know what writers want to hear.
He wants to make sure he gets it right:

Paperback Writer, Respect…?

He flags me over, about to select a song
he’s seen me let go of the steering wheel for
shimmying my shoulders,
clicking my fingers,
air conditioner cranked,
feeling deliciously dangerous
mouthing lyrics to strangers
staring as they pass.
For him, I'll make sure
whatever he chooses appears to be
an immediate hit,
not care who's looking
across the empty dance floor
as I throw myself in wild abandon
into its center,
hoping for one willing partner.

But I have worried for nothing.
When Max switches to Led Zeppelin's "Black Dog,"
Trooper, the director's three-legged lab,
cameo, mascot, limps excitedly onto the dance floor
as if on cue.

It's a lie we go on forever
even if we love a favorite song or poem deeply enough.
And I have loved this song for a long time.
But tonight, it's mascot's.

Judging by the way his whole back wags,
swinging its weight, risking his balance
on the polished floor,
he can barely contain himself
that we have come.

The ending line in "Black Dog" that we have come is inspired by
James Wright's they can hardly contain their happiness/That we have
come. ("A Blessing")
NORTH OF PATSY CLINE

Dzvinia Orlowsky

for HB

My daughter presses a mini recorder
like a conch shell up to my ear

and whispers Listen.
It is her seventeen-year-old voice

singing about heartache—
mommas and daddies crying, cursing the wind,

swearing never to love again.
But we are still safe, just months north of that day

when our hearts will truly break,
when even my lit silk orchid branches

reaching up from the floor can’t lift us,
when together, as a family, we won’t quite clear

the tree tops, but shatter instead on rocky ground
with Hawkins, Copas and Hughes,

into the swamp of Cline
some five jagged miles off the Tennessee River—

years of hiding it in Poland Spring bottles
at the bottom of a gym bag, one or two

at a time, not a lick of water in any of them
from that well kept, long running, secret well.
STUNG
Dzvinia Orlowsky

Barbed wire fences
keep score,
each knot a hitch
on thorn rope—

petal-less rose
grasping its steely life,
guitar string just before
snapped broken,

last note flung into air.
MARY KENNEDY, SARAH MURPHY, AND CAROLINE O’SHEA: How do you get your ideas for your poems? Do you tend to go back to certain poems after they’ve been “finalized” and edit certain things, or do you let them stand?

DZVINIA ORLOWSKY: Often I’ll be struck by a single image or, more rarely, a couple of images that begin to speak to one another. I allow myself to explore the underlying emotional significance behind that image or group of images through free and seemingly random writing. I’m a firm advocate of free-association in early drafts. The human heart and soul are in a constant dialogue with memory, constantly reshaping our inner landscape. It’s like walking down the street and suddenly hearing a song or smelling a scent that reminds us of someone or something we love, or hate, or both. An experience or recollection of an experience will be shaped from that single sensory moment and ultimately, a telling. In short, I like to start from the smallest detail or image and see where and how it looms into its larger subject. Poetry can have that kind of physical power over us. When I’m excited about something I’ve just written or read, I literally pace the floor while I read that particular passage or poem out loud. But then there’s that other extreme—those long afternoons when I sit and stare at my computer screen and feel as though I’ve fallen into some mile-long sand trap. Those are the really trying days—when I feel the right word or right words “almost there,” but they just don’t seem to come. It’s important not to overwork a poem. When you start forcing words or ideas onto the page, it’s best to edit the poem back to whatever feels genuine and then put the
poem away for a few days. A poem rarely feels finished to me. I edit and fine-tune up until galley proofs are due. Even after the book is out, I’ll sometimes feel I could have said something better or differently. But many writers share this kind of relentless questioning.

**mk/sm/co:** Have you found yourself returning to particular themes or images in your writing as your career has advanced?

**DO:** Obsessions are hard to shake, and mine seem to revolve around my family and my upbringing as a first-generation Ukrainian American. As I mentioned at my reading, although both born in the States, my sister, Maria, and I were forbidden to speak English at home. We were kept fairly isolated from the American community in favor of the Ukrainian community, learning English from TV in time for first grade. My parents wanted us to retain our cultural heritage. But the catch was that actual Ukrainians no longer considered us “pure”. Lacking complete cultural context, we became citizens of a kind of “no man’s land”. Ours was a journey into the world of fragments, but one that left space for my imagination and inner eye to fill in.

**mk/sm/co:** At your reading, you introduced many of your poems with personal anecdotes. Do you prefer that people hear your poems read aloud for that reason?

**DO:** Ideally, poetry should be read or performed before an audience. And certain poems definitely benefit from introductory facts or personal anecdotes. In print, the former is often footnoted or endnoted. But talking between poems can also simply be a practical matter. My feeling is if you read past twenty minutes without taking a conversational break, you risk having folks tune out—or worse, quietly sneak out...It’s great to share
stories with a warm, receptive audience. But bottom line—a poem should hold up on its own on the page even if the reader gets a slightly different spin off the poem’s meaning than what the poet intended.

**MK/SM/CO:** What was the inspiration for you to write your first poetry collection, *A Handful of Bees*?

**DO:** Actually, my father’s death when I was 24. It made me question everything I had, up to that event, thought was steadfast in my life: my family, my Catholic upbringing, my self-image and female identity.

**MK/SM/CO:** Which contemporary poets do you find exciting to read?

**DO:** That’s a hard question to answer, as there are too many to list. But four off the top of my head are: Olena Kalytiak Davis, Terrance Hayes, Jeff Friedman, Nancy Mitchell. I’m always interested in anything and everything they write. Finally, anyone who knows me well knows I’m a huge fan of Franz Wright’s poems. Both he and his late father, poet James Wright, are Pulitzer Prize recipients. Franz and I met at Oberlin College. The first time I read one of his poems in *Field*, I had the sensation of being in the presence of something I’d never felt before. I felt physically changed.

**MK/SM/CO:** Your collections tell stories and are very personal, especially your poems concerning treatment for breast cancer. Have you ever felt the need to censor yourself?

**DO:** I don’t mind that they are personal. If I can’t be personal with myself, I don’t know with whom I can be. But I know what you mean. Writers are always struggling with the possibility of hurting or offending someone. I don’t think anyone’s ever come up with a solution for it. It’s critical, however, not to censor yourself *(Never censor your ship* as my mother
advised me in her broken English). Working through feelings is more often than not a healing process. To the attentive, caring reader I hope my work informs him or her about my life—or in the larger sense, the “human nature” operative behind a single life. Poetry is the exploration of one’s heart and soul and the articulation of that journey. It’s bound to enlighten, but also, without question, to hurt. For me, the crucial factor is that truth is worth its own pursuit. Poetry is about paradox and the acknowledgement of life’s paradoxes. Loving beyond words keeps us, oddly enough, in constant search for those words. Poets constantly witness and question. It can be expected, however, that our careful readers question too.

** mk/sm/co: How did you begin translating poetry? Do you find translating a work to be different from writing your own poetry?**

** do:** I’m grateful to the late Ed Hogan of Zephyr Press who gave me the opportunity to translate a number of Ukrainian poets for his groundbreaking anthology, *From Three Worlds: New Writing from Ukraine* (1996). It was through this project that I first translated the poetry of Natalka Bilotserkivets, author of five collections of poetry. Throughout the years, I’ve been fortunate to continue to have opportunities to translate her poems for publications and festivals and have also had the wonderful experience of seeing my work translated by her into Ukrainian. My most ambitious project, however, was translating Ukrainian filmmaker and literary stylist Alexander Dovzhenko’s novella, *The Enchanted Desna*. Dovzhenko is considered by many to be one of the greatest Soviet era filmmakers. To answer the second part of your question: yes and no. Yes, because you’re paying attention to form and craft and language all the time—same as when you write your own poems. No, because you’re working to bring forth another’s voice. Translators often can’t help (or rather, deliberately choose to) impose their particular sensibilities on a poem. Some
poems need that kind of intervention because the poem just isn’t as strong in English. We often complain that a work has “lost something in the translation.” But I’ve seen the opposite too: the work that loses something in the original. Both conditions exist.

MK/SM/CO: In Convertible Night, Flurry of Stones, you introduce each section with a quote from another writer, or, in one instance, the Bible. What informed your choice of quotes?

DO: I use titles and quotes to hopefully lure the reader into wondering why the speaker is taking stock of a moment at that moment. I selected Matthew 10:30 But the hairs of your head are all numbered for the opening section because of the way it played blessed assurance against the fact that I was, at that time, losing my hair to chemotherapy. Thomas Hardy’s quote, Down their carved names the rain-drop ploughs, recognizes how certain acts or repeated experiences, no matter how seemingly minute, cut into our lives. Wislawa Szymborska’s words, The bodies that were offered didn’t fit, and wore out horribly, I believe, speak for themselves. Czeslaw Milosz’s lines, Take a moment, just one, and when its fine shell/Two joined palms, slowly opens/ What do you see? allow for all of life’s possibilities, and seemed fitting to introduce the book’s final section. Open your hands and what do you see? A clump of your own hair? A rosary? Your lifelines? It’s all possible.

MK/SM/CO: You received the Pushcart Prize in 2006 for your poem “Nude Descending”, which appears in Convertible Night, Flurry of Stones. Did you draw inspiration from Marcel Duchamp’s painting of a similar name for this poem?

DO: Yes, I was drawn to Duchamp’s painting and title because I felt as if
I was descending naked and fractured—like the female figure depicted in the painting—in front of my family, my friends, **myself**, in ways I hadn’t experienced before. In the case of my poem, however, the subject is about the specific experience of surgery and being hospitalized. And ultimately, it’s an articulation of faith. Despite my descent through painful experience, I felt bathed in and held by light that was transforming. Poetry helped me in understanding that transformation.

**mk/sm/co:** Did you notice a change in style/subject matter after you became a mother?

**DO:** At the time *Edge of House* was written, I was raising two small children born 15 months apart and co-founding New York based *Four Way Books*. To put it succinctly, I never left the house. Or so it seemed. Desire and domesticity were defined and redefined, reconciled daily. Common physical objects took on greater metaphoric meaning. Poet Melanie Drane recently reminded me of wonderful lines by Jane Hirshfield: *Only when I am quiet for a long time/and do not speak/do the objects of my life draw near.* I really liked working with couplets for their succinctness and punch. I like the way they draw attention to themselves by virtue of the white space surrounding each pair of lines. Because I work a lot with imagery—juxtaposing two or more images allowing them to carry the narrative and lyric content of a poem—couplets allow me to pare down to the essentials, make greater leaps. For me, longer stanzas give a fuller, longer-breathed feel to a poem. The pace is different. They gather more slowly like waves—lifting, then releasing—or crashing.

**mk/sm/co:** As a founding editor of *Four Way Books*, what advice do you have for those looking to enter the world of publishing or literary journalism?

**DO:** Love what you do, as it will carry you through the tougher times when
it feels like no matter how fast and hard you work, you’re always behind, or someone is unhappy about the way you’ve handled something. Just keep remembering that without your work, there’s a good chance those amazing voices that you publish or stories that you share will not have been heard.

**mk/sw/co:** “Jesus Loves Fat People”, a poem from your forthcoming manuscript *Silvertone*, is a hilariously provocative title. Why did you decide on such an unconventional title for this piece? Can we expect to read similarly humorous poems in *Silvertone*?

**AS:** I’m thrilled people find the title funny and provocative as I wasn’t sure how they would respond upon hearing or reading it. Early on when I first wrote the poem, I feared it might offend. I can’t, however, claim authorship for it. Those words were actually written next to a drawing of a crucifix inside my daughter’s 8th grade Algebra book. What can I say? Middle School cruelties are notorious. My daughter took it personally. She was devasted; I was outraged. But once the image and words were erased and hurt feelings mended, I knew I had a poem there. And with enough emotional distance, humor, yes. All I had to do was picture Thomas Lux reading that line...need I say more. I would like to feel there are equally “funny” moments throughout *Silvertone* but I see them more specifically as satire and irony.

*Thank you for your insightful questions. I’ve enjoyed responding to them!*
STOLEN
Dzvinia Orlowsky

1.
Pretending to be looking for Band-Aids,
we pulled them from the back of the drawer
gauzy teddies, zebra-striped baby doll nighties we held

up to the window light, thinking they were missing curtains
slipping freely through our hands
until we could see that we could try them on,

undressed to the waist, each sister exposed
through the transparent cloth. Our breasts were
too small for the under-wired, lace push-up bras

arranged into rows behind the flannels.
We rolled them up and pushed them back.
What else did Mother hide in the heaviest drawer?

Thick shot glasses,
a siren purple wig—
did these make Father laugh, his gold molar

glinting in the dark, before he passed away,
before our mother had his crown pierced,
affixed onto her glittering charm bracelet?
2.
But who took the odd small, rock sculpture stacked like a bear, love written where its belly button might've been
lifting it off the bamboo shelf in the guest room, the ceramic Model T Ford evergreen plant holder from the kitchen window sill,
a poster of a topless woman bending forward, a watering can in her hand, from behind the washing machine—they all appeared and equally quickly disappeared.

3.
Or did we take them in our sleep, our mother lighting the way with a flashlight? Their gone missing was enough to punish us,
send us straight into hell, blistering and teeming, the devils angry and red as her holiday lipstick.

4.
In daylight, we rushed out into the wind, tossed our cloth dolls high over telephone wires, waiting to see if they'd catch or fall,
then stand them up on wobbly legs.
Sometimes we made them
faint in beautiful positions, hand to brow.

Other times, feeling cruel, we punched them,
knowing God, watching, might steal us as ransom
from Pearl Road where we lived

and return us old, too late, our hair
graying, bones too slight to carry
a water pail to our horse in the meadow—

He, too, one day disappeared, neglected,
his eyes rimmed with green-eyed flies
though there were days we swore we saw him

like a mirage in the rising heat
grazing peacefully just past the neighbor’s
heavy lidded gladiolas.
ADMIRATION

Amy Eisner

She was brassy, flourishing, the sass of her aunties all rolled into one.

How could I know the metamorphic wilderness she walked, the heat of change leaving her, finally, immutable, passionate to transform everything once?

Leave well enough alone. It’s my own savagery I can’t forgive—my voice, my face, my grip as I lose patience with my son and soldier on as if the darkness had an end.

You’ll say it’s not the same. It’s not the same. But I could never say that I would never harm him. How could I?

Like anyone else she fed the child, singing in the voice of the fork as she gave him plain, soft vegetables one at a time, to discover what he liked.
ICARUS WINGS
Maura Carberry

My Icarus wings won’t lift this dream-laden load
I’m falling, waxy clean, but not yet free
I need to burn the shrinking sky draped on top of me
Leave nothing but answers, my love, oh my flame,
For bright questions have rendered me melted and lame.

My Icarus wings won’t lift this dream-laden load
As I plunge towards the sea, I see a bottom in sight
The limitless is bordered; Ocean, know my plight
Absorb me, cool water; harden my still-melted heart
Not made for the sun, I was yours from the start.

My father always told me, reach too high and you will burn
A timeless lesson that took a lifetime to learn
Now I’m falling, wingless, fatherless, yours,
Still burning at the core.

Please take me inside, Mother Earth,
And save me from the labyrinth of my birth.
In his freshman year of high school, Bobby was told that he might have free will. His European History teacher posed to the class a conversation between two great thinkers of the sixteenth century. The first insisted that everyone’s fate had been determined before the beginning of time—the good were destined for Heaven and the bad for Hell and only time would tell what group you fell into. The second believed that every man had a choice—every decision of every day was a moment to exercise that choice and the right ones would save you.

Bobby thought about his day and realized he did have a choice. In the morning he was late to school because he’d decided to ignore his alarm clock and in his rush he chose not to brush his teeth. Later this turned out to be a bad decision because when he tried to talk to the girl he liked she scrunched her nose and quickly walked away.

But some other choices didn’t seem to be either bad or good. At lunchtime he had trouble choosing between pizza and a hotdog but ultimately picked the pizza and was now wondering if that had damned him. Still others seemed both bad and good. The second girl he liked had gotten a new haircut but Bobby didn’t like her bangs. He lied and said they looked nice and now hoped that the lie and the compliment had canceled each other out.

Though Bobby had never thought about this before—nor did he consider himself a “great thinker”—he felt that thinking greatly about something was not nearly as effective as actually doing it. For instance, in P.E. he found it was easier to learn floor hockey by playing it than to listen to his gym teacher talk about floor hockey.

Then his teacher introduced a new character into the conversation,
this time a poet, who said that one should never surround himself with only good decisions because that was no better than rejecting the gift of our God-given free will. “To live in the world and experience the bad and the good,” the poet said, “and to still choose the good in the end: that was the most admirable.”

Bobby decided he liked his free will and he didn’t want it to go to waste. He would have to take advantage of it. He had a pretty good idea of what the good was because his parents would yell about it to him at every opportunity, like the time he tied a firecracker to the dog’s collar. If his parents had created a home of only good decisions, how could Bobby ever know that he was a good person? That regardless he would always choose the good?

He couldn’t. So, per the poet’s instructions, Bobby resolved to balance things out. He would leave the good decisions to his mother—his father typically deferred to her—and the bad to himself.

Never having considered the distinction between good and bad, Bobby needed a group of friends that would invariably lead him down the wrong path. Fortunately, the “wrong crowd” at school was easy to spot. They wore ratty clothing and dejected expressions on their faces and none of the teachers or students liked them.

During lunch Bobby joined them in the woods behind the high school where the wrong crowd was known to hang out and get high. Since he was new they let him take a hit without chipping in. As hard as he tried to keep from coughing, the smoke burned his heart and throat and he burped up a gray cloud. This was not pleasant, but it would probably improve with practice. Besides, Bobby was thrilled by these kids’ presence. Conversation among them was sparse, but Bobby got the impression from their silence that they were always contemplating their next sin and this got him excited to come back each day.
Soon the wrong crowd invited Bobby out on the weekend to smoke pot, loiter outside Dunkin’ Donuts, and play billiards at the local bar. They discussed all of the teachers that disliked them as if they were the ones to dislike the teachers first. When they mentioned Bobby’s European History teacher, Bobby agreed that he too was a herb and a total douche.

When he got back home two hours after midnight, Bobby found his parents in hysterics. “Where have you been all night?” they screamed. “We almost called the police, we’ve been worried sick about you!” Seeing his parents in such distress proved to Bobby that he had been led down the wrong path, and he was pleased. He kept his whereabouts a secret and listened attentively to his parents tell him about the good decisions he should have made. It was only fair to them after all.

To make up for his mistakes outside of the house, Bobby obeyed his parents’ every command at home. He vacuumed the carpets, made the beds, loaded the dishwasher, walked and fed the dog, took out the garbage, and babysat his little sister. Sometimes he felt that his week at school had been neutral and other times that he’d been rather good. At these times Bobby would try raising his voice at home, picking petty arguments with his parents, and slamming doors. This of course always ended with his mother in tears and his father wondering where he’d gone wrong and whether his son had fallen into the wrong crowd or if this was just a phase.

On Fridays, Bobby would not come home from school. If his friends weren’t free to play billiards—if they had been grounded for some bad decisions—Bobby would pass the time reading for European History at the park until two o’clock in the morning when he grew tired of his delinquency and returned home. Sure enough, his father would be pacing across the living room as his mother wept on the couch. He would smile at the thought of his free will, placed high on his bookshelf and worn in like an old baseball mitt, and go to bed feeling harmonized.
The more that Bobby split his time between good and bad behavior, the more he realized he needed to methodize this project. Whenever he had a test at school, Bobby found it best to organize the material into pages and pages of notes. So, Bobby took to writing notes about each decision and listing their pros and cons. He could think of no better way to learn from his mistakes. At first he tried to document the everyday decisions like whether or not to make a bagged lunch, what song to play while he did homework, or even which shoelace he should tie first. But this became so tedious that he was writing more than he was making choices, so he focused his energies on only the major decisions.


By graduation, Bobby had filled up five and a half notebooks with the benefits and disadvantages of good and bad choices. Over four years he’d tried three hard drugs, shoplifted two convenience stores, stolen fifty dollars from his parents, pulled six pranks on three teachers, won two fist-fights and lost two, lost one virginity and taken two, dabbled in the occult, tortured four ants, and begun swearing.

He’d also mowed twenty-five lawns, tutored thirty-three students in five grades, visited two retirement homes, attended Mass with his parents every Sunday and every holy day of obligation, and walked eighteen dogs.

Looking through his notebooks the summer before college, Bobby
felt pride stir within him. The idea of a hobby had never interested him—he wouldn’t be caught dead gazing at a stamp collection around the wrong crowd—but the number of decisions he’d made, the number of times he had been able to say yes to any opportunity, could only be something to admire. But he thought that if he kept on going much longer with saying yes, there wouldn’t be many more decisions left to make. And when he ran out, he would have to double back and start saying no, just to have enough decisions left for the rest of his life. He was getting a lot of use out of his free will, but he would hate to use it up too quickly.

College is the perfect place for you to reinvent yourself, Bobby was always told, and now he could see why. But when he got there it seemed that everyone had already been doing exactly what Bobby had been doing in high school: everyone was always saying yes. Except here, at college, it was harder to distinguish between the good and the bad. After all, there were no parents around to yell about the good and the teachers—now called doctors and professors—only had one good, which were tests—now called exams.

“I’m organizing a mission trip to Honduras,” the class president told him at a party over a red Solo cup. “This community’s in like a lot of trouble and they have no running water just this water pump in the middle of the town and like we send a bunch of kids in there to do some good.” The class president was having trouble standing straight and he asked where the bathroom was and walked off in the opposite direction.

Bobby found his RA leaning against a wall, rubbing his temple and squinting his eyes at the party. “I think this is gonna be a real great year, Bryan,” Bobby’s RA told him. “Our floor seems real chill. Say, have you seen Cindy?” Bobby assumed Cindy was the girl with the long legs that had been kissing the RA earlier. He said no and the RA stumbled off. When Cindy returned looking for the RA, she and Bobby found each
other’s mouths and spent the rest of the party together.

Bobby returned to his room that night and tried to write down the pros and cons of drinking too much and hooking up with someone else’s girl. He remembered he was supposed to start saying no, but then remembered that he’d said no to the RA. Then he fell asleep and let the notebook fall from the bed.

Bobby and Cindy began to see more of each other, first at parties and then during the day. Eventually Cindy learned about Bobby’s life and the long, unceasing string of mistakes he seemed to care nothing about. But the more she heard about Bobby’s bad decisions, the more she seemed to want to spend time with him and the nicer she seemed to act. Soon she was taking up so much of Bobby’s time that she prevented him from making anymore bad choices. It was as if Bobby were back at home with his mother in his best behavior and this pleased Cindy all the more.

As much as Bobby promised to continue his pursuit of knowledge of good and bad, college made it difficult for him to distinguish between the two. Going about his day, meeting with students, friends, and professors, he found himself making decisions at every turn with little to no thought. It seemed there no longer was a good and a bad way to act, but just an easy way, a way that allowed him to make more friends, please more professors, and get his homework in with the least amount of effort. Eventually there was no way for him to think about good and bad without having doubts about who he was becoming and what he should have done so that abandoning the project altogether became the most efficient option.

Needless to say, the mission was forgotten.

By the time college had come to a speedy conclusion, Bobby had a quarter of a notebook filled with decisions, a diploma, and a girlfriend. Occasionally he had time, after doing the groceries and the laundry, to attend weekend parties, but usually he was too tired after work to do
anything but watch television. He'd usually been thinking about Cindy all day anyways and leaving work he would find himself giving her a call. Eventually they spent enough time together that it seemed they were never apart, but neither of them had found a problem with that. In fact, it made more sense to buy enough food for the both of them and to share rent for one warm and nicely decorated home.

One time his co-worker invited Bobby to get trashed with the others after a long week at work. Bobby said no thanks to which his co-worker called him "Mr. Goodie-Two-Shoes."

Walking back home that night Bobby thought about how he'd said no thanks and suddenly remembered his high school project. At home he found the five- and one-quarter notebooks stored in an old shoebox and he read them from beginning to end. The mistakes roused in him memories that made him chuckle, gasp, sigh, and shake his head in bemused embarrassment. At the good deeds he chuckled again, but not as he'd done before. Now he was nodding his head approvingly as if he'd just finished a good and hearty meal cooked by his late mother.

Looking around he saw his latest decisions: a warm and nicely decorated home, a television, food like the food his mother used to make, and Cindy. They all seemed good and he was pleased. But having reread his notebooks he could say for sure that they weren't bad. And this made them seem all the better.
You barge in at noon,
disgusted to find me still
in bed burrowed under heavy blankets,
nag about how low I’ve sunk,
raise the blinds.
I squint and squirm, cough up mud,
speechless in my defense.
I was at it all night
hauling leaves and twigs
to cloak your dead cities
filled with your muck,
I emptied myself over and over,
each golden drop of my innards
a metallurgist’s dream.
All the plants in the kingdom wear my crown.
In my tree, parrots alight tonight. 
They are heavy birds, but I feel somehow lighter 
with them on my arms. 
It is as though they are still flying 
though I don't feel air from beating wings, 
and the parrots are looking at each other 
pouring their voices straight into one another's 
beaks. I can tell this because my tree is so still 
and silent. 
I am standing with my arms full of birds, and I wonder 
what will happen when I step down from 
my inner thigh. 
Will the parrots remain with me somehow, 
maybe flocking into my ears? 
Maybe they'll become small enough to perch 
on the small hairs on my arms, 
pulling my skin into goose bumps 
when the miraculous wafts by.
HORSEBACK MEDITATION
A. Anupama

The girl who took me on the trail ride on horseback, her name was Kali.
I am not making this up.

I was upset and trying to cheer myself up. I took a day off and went to the stables near the ski resort. The green of the mountains and forest was so green I couldn’t notice it.

The horse was brown.

I didn’t see any deer or animals, other than birds, on the trail.

I got used to the bounce of the saddle after several minutes as we rode up the gravel road.

The horse was listening. Its ears turned back to me, but all I was doing was breathing. The forest was silent and still.

I wanted to see something. Some sign that I was feeling better. All I saw—some wildflowers at the edges of the forest and gravel road.

The horse paddock had goslings in it. Kali pointed them out. I was grateful. I might have missed that.
HANNUKA—FOR SARA
Matthew Owens

I
In the small guest room
Behind the great home of my host
Under the desert rain,
The burdened sky,
The heavy sea of comforters and quilts,
I pour from my body,
A long time tired,
Into my Israel, in streams of memory,
Like those rivulets running out of the garden
And passing among the white stones
Where those I love pick oranges
From their own trees when the rain ceases,
Where rockets from Lebanon, enchanted land,
Drop with the rain somewhere near their marks
In the north.
“What is important?” I ask from the bottom of the sea,
“What is necessary?”
On the desert freeway, passing an Arab village,
We talk of peace, lost chances, impossibilities,
Returning to the great home to light candles
On the long table one day at a time.
After our music, the wall
Shows itself from the freeway,
A white ribbon
Benign on its green embankment,
Different on the other side.
In the back seat, clutching her daughter,
A new friend asks, “Will they accept us here—
Here in the desert.
You who have spoken with them—Can you tell us?”
In Mizra,
The sky beating its gray wings
Over the shallow valley,
The comfortable souls waiting for Bach and Haydn
Get drenched in the downpour of my strange new melodies.
I long to play for those who suffer differently—
Those who have lost their children here—
And I wait to enter the prisons
Where my cello will sing against the walls.
In the darkness beneath the sea—
In this dark sea valley—
I ask my questions among the circling currents
And their own strange music.
“You are ‘poet of the cello,’” says Dino,
The cembalum player.
“I think of the skin of my beloved only,” I answer.
She lives on the other side of everything,
And I hold her without ceasing when I can.
When she goes she leaves me her perfume
In the sea of that other land
Where I live when I am not here
In this desert, in this other dream of
White stone and rivulets,
White wind near the sea.
The cembalum player says,
“I love my wife—the best part of me,
But cannot speak as you do.
I must have my art, the other part,
Above all, high in the hills above Madrid.”
High art.

II

The soldier with his shaven head shouts,
“It is forbidden to photograph the wall!”
Over there, in another season,
Dust, fatigue, fire in the sky,
The tight blue eyes of the officer
Checking my passport, probing my cello with swollen fingers,
I think only of the hands of my beloved.
What is important in this place or another?
Summer nights in another kind of desert
I walked with young Leanne
While our parents slept in chaste bedrooms
In a neighborhood majestically inert,
Her satin legs longer than my dreams,
Chestnut hair smelling of almond,
Nights mingled with magnolia,
White blossoms oversized like our youth,
Piercing moonlight,
Everything for the first time.
We find our way.
At the park, swinging over glistening sand,
Long fingers grasping the chain links, she says,
“I feel you moving beyond me.”
“I will never move beyond your tragic eyes,” I think.
She swings forward and away,
And finally away forever
When something dies within her, later,
And a strange god takes its place.
These days I hear she goes to funerals, mostly, and prays.

III

Friends of a friend have lost their orange grove
To Israel.
Beyond the fence, in the smaller desert
Where Rana lives,
Eighteen and angry, strong and thin,
Dark eyes larger than the world,
She learned her letters in the living-room
On afternoons when rockets fired
On the streets below
And blood made its way to the gutters—
Curfews, icy showers, alphabet.
She reads history now.
“What is important?” she asks.
Beth, my host, lies upstairs
In a wide, wide bed,
Somewhere near her husband.
The three daughters below are very, very blond.
At the end of each day she pulls the coverlet
Up over her shoulders.
She pushes the night away,
But the questions come.

IV

"A soldier and three Palestinians were
Blown up today at the checkpoint
By a man with a bomb in his jacket..."
"Paradise Now," for four...
The rain has washed away the dust...
Beneath a complicit moon
We kissed without ceasing,
Amazed at the miracle,
While Mr. Armstrong put his imprint
On the moon's white skin,
Announcing to our diminutive universe
The grand dimension of man's collective stride.
We were arrested for being
Too young to kiss in the moonlight...
Michele caresses the strings of his violin,
Pulling a silver ribbon from a moon of his own making.
With his beloved, who plays a darker instrument,
He gives his life to the children of the other side,
London and Rome lost to them now.
Nothing is far from me here.
In this dark sea below the heavy sky—
Eyes of my beloved after breakfast,
A sparrow tapping on the windowpane,
Lunch, then dinner, forgotten.
“In Egypt, police turn water cannons on the refugees.”

We light another candle for the Holy Land,
For the land of immigrants...
I think of you always,
You who have come from the moon—
Music, living in your fingers—
To live in a land forever foreign.
Have you always known what is important?
My father had a long, long stride,
And his laughter could rearrange your molecules.
He was a lunatic striding into oblivion.
His stories were not true,
Not even the story of his life,
So he strode right off the edge of the world,
And that is all he knew of traveling.
“Stay put!” my mother said to me,
Weary of the edge.
Living lifetimes in the valley, far from edges,
In that other desert of my youth,
The bottom, only, of the sea,
She travels richly in her cerebrations.
She has questions too,
And keeps the door between us swinging open when she can.
I play for mothers and fathers
Who reach across the chasm of this place that has
Swallowed their children.
We were children still, when
Kathryn appeared in my little room
In the darkness,
And we held hands for the first time,
Walking two-inches off the ground,
Along the park, formidable in its shadows.
The little room at the end of the house
Smelled of the perfume she used
And kept in her purse,
Mixing its scent with leather and cough drops.

VI

"We fear that Hamas will gain a greater foothold
In the coming election, and Palestine will be
Controlled by religious zealots."
It rained when I left San Francisco,
So early in the morning.
Crumpled in my seat over Tripoli
I watched as overweight men in black suits
With spiraling forelocks
Swung back and forth against the bulkhead
Murmuring as morning came
And passengers lined up to pee.

VII

"The rockets from Lebanon may have been
The work of al-Quaida."
There is a shadow tree in the garden of my host.
Its summer blossoms are crimson explosions.
On the other side, a little man,
His face on fire,
Carries my cello across the checkpoint
At rush hour, one world to the next.
What shall we take from life?
“Were you nervous in Ramallah?”
“Were you afraid on the streets of Jenin?”

VIII

“A woman was kidnapped today
In Gaza. Nobody knows why.”
What shall I take from this place
For young Sara?
She was eight when I put her fingers on the cello.
She asked for stones from
The lands where I play.
She is tall now, and lives in her heart,
And knows the moon well, I think.
I will bring her an orange from each
Side of the desert,
And a stone from the bottom of the sea.
William’s windows mattered—as did his bins, bright with peppermint puffs and pastel mints, and the floor and books and counter and sidewalk and the signs he scrawled in chalk each morning. *We Sell Happy*, he wrote on occasion. *We Sell Joy*. But it was the windows that had left the children who worked for him in tears, had made them storm home, in the middle of their work and without pay, not to come back. If you left a streak somewhere, he’d make you wash them all over again. “You think I like this?” he would ask. “You think I like to pay twice for what should be done once?” The children had thought they had found paradise, working in a candy store. Others their age stood in the snow hawking papers or burned themselves as a crack-off boy in the glass factories or, down river, choked on the dusty air of the coal chutes, picking at the slate. But the windows mattered. Done right, you could look in from outside and see his bright displays, like the collected shards of a shattered rainbow surprised by the sun.

“What will I do when your father leaves a streak?” William said to his wife. In his left hand he held the folded Gazette he had been pretending to read. “Tell him to do it again? Do it for him?”

When he argued with Regina, she would usually keep working at her sewing or cooking, gently chiding him or telling him in what ways he was wrong as her fingers continued to work, as if he were not all that bad a person, she didn’t take their differences down into her soul and could keep on stitching that hem or peeling the potatoes. But tonight they argued at the table, with the kids’ faces turned intently down to their soup. She stared directly back at him. “He understands he’ll be working for you,” she said. “You do whatever you do with the other workers.”
“I fire them, that’s what I do,” William said.

“Then maybe it’s time you did something else,” she said. “Maybe it’s time you taught them first and worried about firing them later. You’re getting a reputation.”

“A reputation?” he said. “My reputation is for candy, good candy. And for a good, clean store.”

There was a moment when William feared Regina would mention his first store, the butcher shop he had had to close, but she only said, “And my father will not change that.”

Lydia looked up from her soup. “Where will he stay?” she asked.

“He will stay here with us,” her mother said.

“Without my reputation,” William said, skipping over his daughter’s question, “we do not eat.” He turned to Lydia. “He will be sleeping in the closet, under the stairs,” he said.

Richard’s face shot up. “Let me,” he said. “I’ll sleep there. Why can’t I?”

“No, it’s for your grandfather,” he said, and then he shook the paper, angry that in a moment’s lapse he had come to defend the man’s place in the house. His wife had insisted, three weeks back, that they take him in, that it was only right. Eight years ago, after Samuel had walked out on his wife and family, Regina had refused to see her father, even though he lived a few blocks away before William insisted he move. Her mother had said before she died that he could be buried next to her, if he wanted. “I don’t think I can do that,” Regina had told William. But now she had a change of heart. Samuel had asked to come back. “We are his only family,” Regina had said.

“And what about your brother?” William said. “Or is he not family now?”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” she said. Her brother had moved to Wyoming,
wandered from place to place, claiming to be on the hunt for coal. Once or twice a year they would get a letter, nearly indecipherable, from cities William didn’t recognize. They could never write back because there was no place to which to write.

“How will we support him?” William cried when she first mentioned the idea. He couldn’t, of course, tell her the truth: that he had paid Samuel to leave. “How am I supposed to feed another mouth?”

“He’ll support himself,” she said. “He’ll find a job.” Then she smiled. “He can help you,” she said. When she first said it, it hadn’t even registered as part of their fight. He thought she was joking.

Samuel had spent most of the last month in a hospice in Allegheny City. He had been found, drunk and unconscious, by Expo Park not far from the river, and by the time they got him cleaned up and sober and found out who he was it was too late to do much for the strokes he had had. They had assumed his slurred speech was from drink, and no drifter over sixty was without a limp, from some sad story of work in the mills or jumping a train or dropping cargo on the wharf. Regina had received a telegram to go up to the home. “They only help those who are dying,” Regina had said, which sounded pretty gruesome to William. “He has to leave.”

Regina had showed William the telegram but had not told him about the letter her father had sent. William had seen it on her bureau, tucked into the mirror. After her first trip to visit him, William had studied Regina’s face for any sign that Samuel had mentioned his and William’s meeting years before, several months after Samuel had left his wife, Regina’s mother, and had taken up with a married woman in a house around the corner from William’s. The woman’s husband had sought work in California two years earlier and had never come back. William had told Samuel they needed to talk and met him in a saloon not far from the mill. The air of the room, tight with mill workers heading home, smelled like metal, like old
blood. "I won’t insult you by being subtle," William had said. He pushed a pile of money across the table. "Take that and go."

"Go?" Samuel said. His face, wrinkled from work and drink, grew smooth in an open look of surprise.

"Leave town," William said. "Take your woman if you have to. You’ve hurt Regina enough."

Samuel gestured to the money. "She know you’re doing this?"

"She knows she’d be happier without you," he said.

Samuel took a sip of his beer. "If only I could be as successful as you," he said. Back then, before the candy store, William had been a butcher, selling to families up and down the hill. He was going to run for city council, he had said. He had looked at property across the Mon, for a second store. This was before he had lost the business, been run out of town and across the very river he had dreamed himself bridging with his money.

"And I have to think of the children," William had said. All three were babies then, younger than four.

"My grandchildren."

"Exactly," William said. "They don’t need to be embarrassed by their grandfather. They don’t need to see what you’re doing."

Samuel was leaning away from the table, his beer in his hand. He was quiet for a good minute. William was surprised at how steady his voice had been, how certain he was that he was doing what was right, what was best for Regina and the children. It was not easy to talk this way to your father-in-law, to an older man, a local brawler who wouldn’t use family as an excuse not to strike. Someone inside the smoke of the saloon was hitting the piano keys, one at a time, in an order that might have been a song. Finally Samuel leaned forward and put his glass down and stood up. He swept up the money and put it in his pocket. "See you in hell, William," he had said.
William stayed in the store while Regina went to pick her father up at the train station. He was dreading the meeting and what he would say the first time he saw him. Was he back for more money? What if he told Regina the truth? Samuel surprised him by coming on his own to the shop, walking from the house during the afternoon. He was so thin that William didn’t recognize him. He was shaven too, his shirt mended, tucked and buttoned. William welcomed him as he came through the door, thinking he was a customer, though he got very few men during the day.

“Hello, William,” Samuel said.

“Samuel,” William said. It had started as a question but ended up sounding like a fact, an answer. William was standing behind the counter, his hands splayed out on its surface. He didn’t know what to do with them and only lifted his hand when Samuel extended his own.

“I hear I’m to be working for you,” he said.

“That’s what Regina told me,” William said.

Samuel nodded. “I hope it works out,” he said. William could hear the hitch and delay in the man’s voice, the way his strokes had made it hard to close off the long drawl of the vowels. “I hope you’ll see past what happened,” he said.

William wondered which event, which events, Samuel was referring to. There were the general ones, the whores he slept with, the drunken nights in jail, the brawls, the time he headed west only to hang his head in failure and catch a freight back. There was the final rupture with Regina’s mother, when Samuel moved in with the married woman. Then there was the more precise one of the evening William had told Samuel to leave town. He had read the letter Samuel had written to Regina from the hospice, the one she had pinned before her mirror. It had been two sentences, barely legible: I need a place to stay, it started. There was a picture in it, of what must have been Regina as a baby with her parents. Her brother had
not yet been born. Please return picture if answer is no.

Now Samuel was looking around the candy shop, running his hand along the containers. “Sure smells better than that butcher shop,” Samuel said. William took it as the first salvo in the battle he saw coming, the mention of the butcher shop he had lost. There had been a scandal—tainted meat, two deaths. Samuel stopped and pointed at one of the containers. “What are these?” he asked.

“Necco wafers,” William said, and finally stood back from the counter. “Let me show you what to do.” He took out the list of tasks he had written for the children who worked for him and went over it as he always did, but he knew it wouldn’t be the same. The children came in for an hour or two at a time, before or after school, on Saturdays. Samuel would be there all day. What was William supposed to do with him? The store was small. There was hardly room for another behind the counter.

“How come you don’t weigh 300 pounds?” Samuel asked. “If I owned this I’d eat it all.”


“You’d die happy,” Samuel said, “sucking on sugar.”

“If I ever catch my help stealing a piece I march ‘em right down to the police station.”

“That what you going to do to me?” Samuel asked, flashing a grin.

“If you steal from me,” William said.

Samuel still smiled, though William couldn’t tell if it was the original one trying to hang on, or a new smile thinking that William was trying to be funny too.

The room under the stairs was only big enough for a narrow cot. William upturned an old crate for Samuel to use as a table for a kerosene lamp, but you couldn’t burn it with the door closed or it would smoke.

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you out. Samuel kept his change of clothes in his suitcase, splayed open under the bed like a pair of dresser drawers. Once, when Samuel was in the kitchen and the closet door was open, William peeked in to see the blanket strictly folded at the foot of the bed. The pillow sat stiffly at the other end.

It was how Samuel was at work also, rigid and precise. William wanted to find fault with him but couldn’t. Even the windows were fine. Samuel walked with a hitch, as if his hip joint was looser than it should be, but he drew the rag down over the bins and counter and window to leave it as clean as William insisted on. “Clean matters,” Samuel said, approving his own work, but William didn’t respond.

The children would watch Grandpa Sam at the dinner table and say little. The younger two, the girls, giggled if they talked to him. “How come you find everything so darn funny?” Samuel asked. “Is it that candy you all eat? You got candy heads.”

“No,” Lydia said, “Father never lets us have candy.”

“Candy’s not a game, it’s a business,” Jonathon said, imitating a deep, serious voice. “That’s what Father says.”

“Well,” Samuel said. “Well, it’s good you listen to your father.”

“They understand it’s a concern,” William said. He felt he had to defend himself, that he was being made to look bad. Didn’t he feed his children with that candy? Hadn’t he taken in his wastrel of a father-in-law on what the candy earned for them?

“Tell us about the war,” Jonathon said to his grandfather.

“The war?”

“Mother told us you were in the army,” Jonathon said.

“Oh, yes, the army,” Samuel said, and he looked over at his daughter. They had told the children that their grandfather had not visited because he was away fighting, that it was too far to come back.

“Did you fight in Cuba?” Jonathon asked. “In the Philippines?”
“Maybe we ought to talk about something nicer at the dinner table,” he said. “Those are stories for another day.”

“Do you still have your rifle?” Jonathon asked.

“Jonathon, you heard your grandfather,” Regina said. “Some other time. Why not tell him about school?”

“Oh, those are stories for another day,” Lydia sang out. She looked over at her brother and the two of them burst into laughter.

William eyed the candy bins, making sure the quantities looked right each day. Over the years he had become expert at judging the inventory, his eye honed to volume and depth. The peppermint sticks were easy, the ones you could number in your head, as were the licorice sticks in the jar on the counter. The smaller pieces, the penny candies, were impossible to count, but he knew his business, could measure with his eye how much he had or needed. He was like a sailor, he thought, who couldn’t name you the speed of the wind but could shift the sails to use them anyway. He would not sink. Once, he put a mirror on a shelf, at an angle, where he could be facing the shelves behind the counter and see everything that was going on in the room. He had caught two children, a girl and a boy, pocketing sweets.

The children William had hired had been an occasional break for him, a chance for him to restock or check the books or send a delivery. But Samuel was there too much, and William struggled to find something for him to do. When not busy, Samuel stood by the door, peering outside at the people passing by. William would see him take a nickel from his pocket and weave it in and out of his fingers. It would disappear, then reappear further along his hand, some kind of magic trick he must have learned on the road. In a few weeks, when the weather grew warmer, he could help with the flavored ice machine William had bought some years earlier. But
now, after the first hour of the day, after they had swept the sidewalk and washed the windows and put out the signs, there wasn’t much to do but wait on customers. William wasn’t about to let Samuel handle the money. No one worked the till but him. It had been true in the butcher shop and true here too. If there was a mistake—and he had never made a mistake, at least not with the receipts—it would be his. At some point Regina would have to be told: paying her father for all these hours was a waste of money.

A few weeks after his return Samuel was standing out on the sidewalk when a group of boys stopped outside the store. William couldn’t hear what they were saying, but Samuel stood before them, talking, leaning into them. One of the boys started to laugh, and Samuel did something with his hands, a magic trick or a little hand game, maybe the vanishing nickel trick he had been toying with, before they went on their way.

“Glass boys,” Samuel said when he came into the store.

“I know,” William said. They passed by on their way to and from the factory. On payday a few stopped in for some licorice or peppermint. Their fingers when they handed over their coins were like pale peppermint sticks themselves, scarred pink and white from the ovens.

“Thought about offering them a piece of candy,” Samuel said. He waited a moment but William said nothing. “Thought maybe you wouldn’t like that.”

“Offer them anything they want,” William said, “as long as they offer me their money.”

“That’s why I didn’t say anything,” Samuel said.

William gestured around his store. “Look,” he said, “you see candy, I see money. See all these treats? Somebody had to pay for them to get here. That somebody’s me. They don’t appear here by magic.”

“I’m not accusing,” Samuel said. He wandered over to the window and leaned against a container of Tootsie Rolls. William was trying to
frame his response in his mind. Leave or pay it back, he would say. But he had to be careful. What if Regina found out what he had done? But Samuel spoke first. “You ever work in a glass factory?” he asked.

“When would I have done that?” William said.

Samuel shrugged. “I don’t know your whole story,” he said. “Don’t know what you did before or since you told me to go.”

William felt a dull knife being scraped across his skin. So this is how it will go, he thought, as they slowly climbed back to their fight. He decided to say nothing. He would not make it worse. He would be able to tell Regina it had not been his fault.

“All I know about is the butcher shop,” Samuel said. William felt the knife pressed more firmly, scraping away, burning at his skin. He looked down at his hands, as if they held something there he needed to see. They had not been right since he had started cutting meat. The cold, the frozen hams and chickens, had done some damage, made him feel as though the blood could only slog through his fingers like thick oil. He had lost the butcher shop when seven people had gotten sick—two had died, one a child. They had blamed his meat. “You can’t prove anything,” he had yelled at them, defiant behind his windows when they had come to burn the shop down. A rock shattered the window, and a shard of glass cut a fine diagonal across the back of his hand he had raised to protect his head. The police came, chased away the protestors, but no one would buy from him after that. Within a month he had to sell, move out of town. It was true he would sometimes lose track of how old his meat was but he had been good at guessing, as he was with his candy now. He’d sample it himself, had made that his deal. He would put nothing out that he wouldn’t eat himself.

Regina had asked him, only once, in the silent dark of the night, did you kill those children? “One child,” he said. “I couldn’t have,” he said.
"I ate that same meat. I was not even sick."

"Then why don't they believe you?" she had said. He didn't know. They happened to be seven people who shopped at his store. He was sure they shared something else too—a privy, a school, a green grocer, a job, a well, a boarding home. Why did they suspect him? Regina never asked again but he didn't know if she believed him either. He hadn't told her that he had mixed the meat up by mistake, that he had sampled a piece but didn't know which hog it had come from.

"I worked in a glass factory once," Samuel was saying. "Hotter than hell. Literally." He nodded out the window, as if the glass boys were still standing there. "We had kids about their age too. I lasted ten days. Never did get my pay."

William had been given a tour of the factory once, when he went to negotiate for marbles he would sell. Shipping them from Akron was more expensive than having someone walk them up the street, and the factory had just bought some marble scissors. The glass balls sat in a bin next to the jelly beans, a kind of candy themselves. "Next time they come by," William said, "offer them some water." He had meant it to sound considerate. "They must be thirsty," he added, trying to pry the weight off the silence.

When he was young William tried to catch the first thought he had waking up, the first time you realized your own brain working since you fell off the night before. It could be a memory of a dream—or a lingering dream, dissolving into his morning, or a desire for breakfast, or a need to pee, or the sound of rain. He had asked Regina to try it once too. "Wouldn't your first thought be, what is my first thought today?" she had said. He had stopped trying years ago, when his first thought was the same, the dead child. I killed children, he said to himself, morning after morn-
ing, then would have to correct himself. “One child,” he said out loud one morning. He heard Regina, her back to him in bed, pause in her breathing, before it continued on in the same rhythm.

Early one morning he found himself at first waking alert to a sound, a dull thud. It was his front door, he thought, and he scampered out of bed. The children were all asleep. Outside it was pure dark, dark as coal, as he stepped quietly downstairs, trying not to wake his father-in-law beneath him. At the bottom he listened but heard nothing. He leaned against the closet door and heard nothing there either. Slowly he turned the knob and pulled it open and listened in the dark until he was certain Samuel wasn’t there. He felt for the matches and lit the lamp. The bed was neatly made but still warm. He ran his hands around in the man’s suitcase and found an empty flask and unscrewed the top and smelled it. Whiskey for sure, but faint, as if it hadn’t been used for a while. Suddenly he jumped, terrified by a figure in the doorway, his wife, he saw, his heart racing. “What are you doing?” she asked. William put the flask back amongst Samuel’s shirts. “He doesn’t sleep well,” Regina said. “He takes walks. His legs cramp if he doesn’t move.”

“At four in the morning?” he asked. “Where do you think he goes?”


The glass boys stopped each day now. They worked the day shift, which was more of hell than night because it was hotter. But the night shift was brutal too. You ended at three and had to walk home in the dark or wait for hours for dawn or a trolley. Some just curled up in a corner of the factory and slept until first light.

Samuel would be waiting for them. He had moved the ice shaver and syrups outside. He would show the glass boys his tricks, with cups or
with marbles or with his hat, his fingers moving like the shuttle of a loom, the marbles or coins flickering in the sunlight as they danced in some complicated pattern between his fingers. One time, as William watched from the window, Samuel offered one of the boys a lemon drop if he could point out in which fist he had hidden it, but the boy was always wrong. William watched in wonder, unable to guess right either. Finally Samuel unclosed his fists, both empty, and opened his mouth and pushed the lemon drop out with his tongue. The boys roared with delight, and then roared louder when a moment later Samuel opened his fists again and held out a colorful circus of hard candy for them all to take. “One each, one each,” he said as they grabbed at him.

“Who taught you that?” William said once the boys had left.

“Time,” Samuel said. “Hands got to do something all day.”

William pursed up his lips. Work would be a good idea was what he wanted to say.


William asked Regina if her father was paying for his board. “Of course,” she said. “God, William, he’s my father. We can afford to feed him.”

“I was only curious,” William said. “And since when this new charity? Wasn’t he the one you told me could go to hell when he left your mother?” It was as close as he could come to saying wasn’t he the one who left you?

“Time passes,” Regina said. “Memories change.”

Did they? As time stretched on, William thought, memories grew smaller, less clear, but the memory itself only happened once and couldn’t be changed. That was what life was—a one way train. The stations would recede but they’d always be there, as you had once been, unchanging even if they changed in your mind. You could never go back but they’d always
be there. He’d love to go backwards, to undo the past, what happened with his meats, but the past was always what would be. William recalled how he had felt when he had asked Samuel to meet him at the bar. The man was thin, wiry, but his muscles strung out on his arms like cable stays, his face etched and narrow. How had William gotten up the courage to tell him to leave? That memory hadn’t changed.

William could never see himself confronting the man now, in the messy life they had found, with Regina’s new forgiveness, the kids’ antic affection. Samuel had brought Jonathon marbles for his birthday, a box of delightful colors as alluring as a pound of candy. Jonathon had whisked it outside, drew a circle in the dirt as he told his jealous sisters to get away. From the kitchen William could hear the glass balls snap against each other as Jonathon shot them through the circle. Each time William expected to hear the marbles shatter, the glass explode, even though he knew better. The glass had become compressed, in the furnace of their making, into spheres as tough as steel. All he heard instead was his children laughing.

Early one morning, unable to sleep, William heard the front door click shut again, and he quietly followed his father-in-law out into the streets. William left for work at dawn most days but it had been a long time since he had been outside in the deep middle of the night. The quiet was strung out around him like a sheet, thin and stiff, extending far beyond what he could see. In the distance a waving orange hand hovered over the city, the light from the mill fires against the night clouds. William caught Samuel turning at the bottom of the hill and scurried to catch up, staying a few blocks behind him, out of the lights. Samuel seemed to be walking with purpose, head down, moving hurriedly. Whores, William thought. Or a speakeasy. Maybe he was gambling away all he earned. Then William realized he was heading for the store.
Samuel let himself in to the shop and turned on a small gas light. William hung back in an alley, across the street from where he could see what Samuel was doing. In a minute the door opened and Samuel wheeled out the ice machine and the carton of syrups. Before long he heard them, shuffling up the street, whispering as if with secrets: the glass boys were heading from the factory, jostling each other in and out of the lamplights. Samuel greeted them as they circled the machine. He poured them lemon or grape or apple. They had done this before, William saw. When he was sure Samuel’s back was turned, digging deep into the shaved ice, he scurried out of the alley and rushed home.

“Where were you?” Regina asked from the bed.

Samuel thought how to respond as he slid beneath the sheets. “Watching your father stealing,” he said.


“Stop that,” Regina said. “Tell me what happened,” she said, and he told her what he had seen. “What are you going to do?” she asked.

William wished he could do something that wouldn’t be awful, he really did. It had been so simple to buy the man’s departure years ago. But he could think of no solution now but the obvious. “Fire him,” he said. “I’ll have to change the lock too. I knew this would happen.”

“Maybe he can make it up to us,” Regina said. “Maybe he paid for it. We should ask first.”

“I’ll check tomorrow,” William said, “but if there’s no money, I have no choice.”

When William got to work, the ice machine was where it always was, clean and dry. The lights were off, the door locked. But there was no money in the till or on the counter, no note from Samuel to say what he
had done. William waited the whole day, waited to see if Samuel would mention it on his own. He even tried to prompt him. When they pulled out the ice machine in the afternoon, William said he thought they were low on syrup, that maybe the machine wasn’t working right.

“Seems fine to me,” Samuel said. He stood outside beside it, his favorite thing to do, and ground the ice and flavored it for the kids who came by. William watched him closely. It would be just like him, William thought, to make the nickels disappear into his pocket.

At home that night the family ate in a brooding silence that Samuel’s jokes could not puncture. The children seemed to sense something was wrong and gave weak smiles to their grandfather’s antics. “What skunk died under this house?” Samuel finally asked.

William leaned back from the table. “Children, why don’t you go do your schoolwork?” he said. They only complained halfheartedly, glad to leave the tension. When they were gone, William turned to Samuel and said, “I saw you last night.”

Samuel seemed to think it over, to decide whether he should joke or lie or pretend not to understand. Instead, he said, “They’re thirsty. I can’t sleep. What’s the harm?”

“The harm is my business. The harm is this family.”

“Oh, hell,” Samuel said.

“Where you can go,” William said.

“William, please,” Regina said. “Maybe he paid for them.”

“The harm is that you’re a thief and a liar,” William said, ignoring his wife. “You think taking things from your family is different from taking things from strangers?”

“I saw it as giving to other people.”

“Aren’t you generous,” William said. “Giving away what isn’t yours. My candy, as disposable as a wife!”
“You bastard!” Samuel yelled, and he leapt across the table and grabbed William by the collar. The table jumped, and a plate fell to the ground, crashing with a noise that brought Lydia to the door.

“Dad!” she screamed.

“Stop this!” Regina yelled, then she turned to Lydia. “Go to your room,” she said.

Samuel threw William back onto his chair and sat back down as Lydia fled away. They could hear her small feet thumping at a run up the stairs. “Get out,” William said, tugging his collar back into place. “You have five minutes before I get the police.”

“William, please,” Regina said. “All this over shaved ice?”


“Forget it, Regina,” Samuel said. “I should never have come.” He stood and walked down the hallway to his room. William could hear him collecting his things, shutting his suitcase, then he came back into the kitchen. Regina held both her hands in her hair, her face torn with confusion. Down the hallway William saw the faces of his children reassembled in the hall and peering around the corner, and when he glared at them they ducked out of sight, except Lydia. “Where is Grandpa going?” she asked.

“Go back upstairs,” William said, and she fled with her siblings.

Samuel stopped at the kitchen table and slammed a pile of bills down onto it. “Here’s your money back,” he said.

“There,” Regina said. “I told you he wasn’t stealing.”

“That’s not for the ice,” Samuel said, his face tensely aimed at William. “I stole that. I gave it away to those boys. Arrest me. The Ice Thief! I can see tomorrow’s headlines.” He leaned in closer. “You never told her, did you?” Samuel asked.
“Told me what?” Regina asked.

“Get out of my house,” William said.

Samuel straightened up and turned to his daughter. “Your loving husband paid me to leave,” Samuel said. “Years ago he paid me never to come back.”

“And of course you couldn’t keep your word,” William said.

Samuel gestured to the money on the table. “Go ‘head, William, count it,” he said. “I never spent a penny. I lived on the street before I sold out to you.”

“You lived off your daughter, and me,” William said.

“William, you didn’t,” Regina said. When he didn’t answer, she said, “How could you? Without even telling me.”

“Get out,” William said again to Samuel. “I took you back in and you stole from me, your own family. But since when did you care for family?” he asked. “When did you ever care about your wife or your children?”

“Children?” Regina yelled, her hands upraised, as if holding an invisible ball. She glared at her husband. “Since when did you ever care about children?” she said. She turned to her father then and was saying something, something about staying, don’t go, they’d work it out, and Samuel was saying something back as he turned and headed out of the kitchen. Then Regina was looking back, saying I’m sorry once or maybe several times as she slipped down the hall behind her father, but William still heard only the echo of her question. It was like a train station he had passed but then saw again, and then again, it shouldn’t be there but there it was, and he grew almost dizzy with the confusion. There was the same man beside the tracks, in the dark suit and hat, with the paper in his hand, in mist under a light, always there. He looked up and saw the retreating back of first Samuel and then his wife as they headed down the hallway. The dark of the night opened before them as the front door swung to,
and then the two of them fell into it and disappeared, as if they had been swallowed up by the darkness itself, or had stepped magically unharmed through a sheet of tinted glass through which William couldn’t see. He wanted to follow them, to see where they had gone and what they were doing, but he was afraid what he might see there, what might be waiting for him. It could be his wife, or no one, or the man in the suit, with the paper, under the light, still waiting.
DESCANSO

Donald Levering

When the hair on the back of my neck signals a lightning-strike,

when two star-struck cars take aim for a head-on.

Because my hands turn up and open to pinpricks of starlight

and then turn down to pick up windshield fragments on the road.

That my fingertips fill with slivers. That her bloodstains on the pavement deepen before they bleach away. Because the needles from roadside pines keep on falling every season, because the needles continue to fall.

Now that a cross marks the curve where the crash occurred.

Now that the highway’s shoulder is turning to pine-needle mulch.
A SCHEMATIC NARRATIVE OF A CONFLICT IN FRANCE

Robert Marshall

I go home to find Dad’s back.
Big mistake at the mortuary.
I wonder, but don’t ask:
Did he wake while he was there?
We’re going to write them
Some letter.
The kind he specialized in.
Ours won’t be as good as Dad’s.
Maybe we’ll just end up paying half.

In his red pajamas, still in his chair
Still central but apart
Does he know what happened?
With his headphones
He listens to a history book, searches for his tea.

My dark sister warns:
He doesn’t have long.
She points out the swelling in his frail legs.
But there’s time, certainly
for lunch.

How to handle, what to do
With this time? Same question, I understand, as before
I wheel him to the kitchen
There's consomme, Saltines, crab salad, Ensure
Set out on the table, in the half-shuttered light.

Still, not enough food. Or for unknown reasons
I can't get enough.
Then after a while, a respectable while
I go to my room, and think about a poem I'm not yet ready to write:
We had not wanted to admit
How relieved we'd been
That the war was over.
I decide to use a metaphor.
I'll write about an unnamed war
Long ago, somewhere in France.
The counting room smelled of old coins, WD-40, and Dan Hansen who hadn’t bathed in a very long time. A small man with narrow green eyes, Dan’s hands were blackened with the tarnish of the coins he poured in the counting machine each hour of his twelve-hour shift. The air of cigarettes was the only other smell that would not let him go. No one talked to him. No one seemed to remember he was there, the back room far enough away from the front casino office as to be a permanent afterthought. The only thing that mattered here was the money.

So no one knew about the small bag he’d hidden beneath the rails of the coin sorter, the sack he’d brought with him four years ago when he’d moved here from the halfway house, the one he’d made almost fifteen years ago that contained all his precious things.

When he’d first started working at the casino, each morning he’d pull the bag up from the deep nest within the pocket of his pocked bomber jacket and hold it in his hand. He’d put the small mouth of the bag to his lips for a kiss, tighten the strings, and place it gently in its hidey-hole beneath the machine. Each night, he’d return it to his pocket and head for the shelter on Ivy Street. Every day he’d repeat the ritual and, once safely back in its little hole, he’d pour himself a cup of milk and drink it slowly. Then he fed the machine that would sort and count the coins. Counted, rolled, stacked quite neat in trays, fat little worms set side by side, they’d wait for the bank truck to be picked up once a day, smelling just a bit like Dan and the old ladies that had kissed them for luck and fed them to the slots.

Dan knew they watched him. He also knew the exact position of the little mouse eye of the monitoring camera. He felt where it hit his back and knew it didn’t reach that far into the corner of the room, focused as it
was on the sacks of the slot takes and tokens, bagged and sprawled upon the floor. But the room held other things. A pile of galvanized pipe lay in a pile against the wall, waiting for the man to come and assemble an outer door. Like a jail, Dan had thought. Security, they’d said, but it gathered dust because someone didn’t want to pay to get it done. Security, Dan thought. That would have been nice.

Over time it grew harder and harder to take the sack with him, the shelter filling now with the remnants of so many hard faces rushing in from November, their mean smiles edged with rot and bad luck. It grew cold even in Arizona. He’d gotten rolled twice but had somehow managed to hold onto it, his little bag. But the last time someone had almost taken it out of his hand. He couldn’t remember when he’d decided to leave in the counting room, but once he had, that, too, became routine. Routine was the anxious feeling that came over him when he left it each night not to return until the next afternoon. To leave this little space, to leave the little bag behind, knowing it would be hours before he could touch it again made him strangely antsy. He couldn’t relax, wouldn’t relax until it lay in reach of his hand.

Some days, he wondered what life would be like without it. He could just walk around, he thought. He could go where he would and not think of it or of the dress he’d cut it from or the fingers he’d stabbed in making it. But beyond the initial thought of lightness, he would open and examine an empty palm, and the thought of its absence would kick him and he’d feel sick. He would then replay how he’d manufactured it with his own hands before they’d come to take him.

After his mother and sister had burned up in the car, he cut it from a Christmas dress his mother had been making, soft red velvet that he often pulled over his palm, and raised to his face searching for a trace of their scent. He’d watched his mother a thousand times feed the fabric
through the claws of the upright black Singer, her foot pushing up and
down on the pedal, the fabric springing forward, the wheel turning and the
needle jab, jab, jabbing the thread through. With her back hunched over,
her eyes pinned on the position of the line, his mother focused all of herself
on stitch after stitch.

Without her, he’d jabbed his finger twice threading the machine
and sucked the tiny drops of blood. What did he know about sewing
at ten? But he’d done it, stitched the little row, pulled the black ribbon
through each side, stitched the sides, and turned them inside out. Voilà, his
special little bag the size of his palm, for keeping his best things.

Once, his last year of school, a boy tried to take it from him, called
him a girl for carrying a purse. Dan ignored him until he’d grabbed it
from his hand. Dan broke the boy’s finger and got the bag back. No more
school. But the bag continued. So did Dan. After he got out of jail the first
time, it was the only thing remaining in the folder of his things that he
took with him. The only thing worth having.

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So it was a shock when Dan came in that Monday afternoon and
met Earnest Rule at the door.

“Hey, Hansen, you’re canned.”

“What?” he’d asked, sticking his hands into his empty pockets.

“You’re canned. Pick up your check at the booth.”

Dan could not speak. He tried to look over Ernie’s shoulder, but
the man filled the door to the counting room.

“Why?”

“Boss’s kid. Wants your job so he got it.”

“But I have to get my things,” he managed.

“What things?”

“Things I left,” he said. “Things I left inside.”
“You didn’t leave anything inside. I been inside. Nothing there.”

A fat man, Ernie Rule had no muscle, no hair. He looked rather like an egg with a nose and a bow tie mouth. Chubby-fingered, always wearing a glisten, he had a dark spot on the corner of his mouth where his cigar usually sat. “Gotta quit,” he’d said, but the spot stayed. He pointed a fat digit at Dan. “Time to go.”

Dan tried to look at the door. Had they found it?

“Can’t leave without my bag,” he said, swallowing hard. No spit in his mouth. “I’ll get it, Ernie. I’ll be out in two minutes.”

Ernie squeezed his invisible eyebrows together. “I’ll give you two seconds,” he said. He opened the door. But he didn’t give Dan that much time.

Dan scrambled to the hidey-hole and pulled the bag up, instantly feeling the heft of it in his hand, the breath in his body returning. He closed his fist around it and brought it to his mouth to kiss. It was then he felt Ernie’s eyes on his back along with the mouse eye. He had his hand inside of his jacket, about to place the bag inside, when Rule stepped up.

“What you got there?” he said.

“My little sack,” Dan said. “Nothing but that.”

“Let me see,” Ernie said.

“No,” Dan said, a bit too quickly.

“Now listen, Hansen, I can’t let you leave here lest I know what you got. Could be a thief for all I know.”

The sack wasn’t big enough to hold half a roll of quarters. But Ernie’s body blocked the door, and he held out his hand palm up.

Dan started shaking. “I’ll hold it up but that’s all.” Slowly, Dan took it out, his fist still tight around it. He held it up.

“Let me see, Hansen. I can’t see it from there.”

Slowly, Dan opened his hand. “Got to go now,” he said. “Let me go now.” But there was no way around Ernie. The big man stood between
Dan and the door.

“Can’t do that,” Rule said. “Show me what’s inside
“Got to go now,” Dan repeated.

Ernie was fat but quick and his hand shot out and grabbed the bag, and he turned and was out the door.

“Let’s see what we have here.” His paws on the bag.

Dan scrambled after, his fists closing. “Give it back,” he said, sounding like a kid.

“My, my,” Rule said, giggling.

“It’s mine,” Hansen said, lunging for it, but the fat hand pushed him down into the doorway. Without the bag, Dan was nothing.

Rule laughed. “You got to be kidding me,” he said, turning as if to show Dan what he was doing.

Dan could see his sausage fingers, his fat greasy fingers on the mouth of the bag prying it open further than it was meant to go, and he felt like Ernie were ripping him open. Then, though it was slow in rising, a rage like a wave washed up from his feet where his toes were on the floor until it felt as if it pulsed right through to the ends of his fingers and flushed upward to his face to the top of his skull and beyond.

“Are you serious?” Rule asked, a grin spreading on his face, his teeth pocked with bits of white bread.

“They’re mine, no give ’em back,” Dan said, thrusting out his own hand.

Rule turned away. “These are kid’s things. I’m gona take ’em and give ’em to my nephew.” Rule’s face returned to the bag, his eyes raking over the things inside while his fat finger twirled within. Dan looked around, wringing his hands.

“No, no, no,” Dan said over and over again. Then he saw it and what happened next was quick and took no thought.
Dan grabbed a length of pipe and felt it coming down, in both hands, on top of Rule’s egg head, and he heard the crack and the splinter of it, his eyes on the bag, the little red velvet bag in the fat man’s hands and now falling. Dan dropped the pipe and grabbed the sack; but before he could, the marbles spilled onto the floor, tipping like beads on a platter, scattering. He dove for them, taking them up into his palm, one by one placing them back in the bag counting them, each one having its own name, one for each year he’d been alive until his mother had gone.

When he’d gotten them all back, all collected back into the little sack, he could breathe again. He could feel the boil of his blood cool, but by then the egg was broken and oozing all over the floor. The lip of the sack was torn, but the contents still inside undamaged from what he could see. He pulled the strings shut and held the bag to his chest and started to cry. No good now, he thought as he watched the fat man twitch, the fat, mean man still leaking.

Dan wiped his face with his sleeve, got up, and put the bag deep into his pocket. When he walked out, the air felt cool, the sun trying to retire. Already a string of stars dotted the sky and somewhere a desert fox called. He could go into the desert, he thought, like Jesus and be purified. But now he had the bag. It would be all right. Hands in his pockets, he walked down the road.

Some three miles along, he stuck his thumb out in front of a semi hauling a double-linked trailer and climbed in the cab when it stopped for him. The driver nodded a good evening. They headed west, the headlights punching a hole into the dark and, in a moment, were gone.
WINTER POOL
Cindy Frenkel

I remember my father, me,
making a quick run
out his studio door in our bathing suits,
steam rising above us. He went first
and then we both went under.
After a few minutes of treading water
we lay side by side,
heads pillowed by the floating mats.
Talking quietly, our breath haloed beneath a canopy of trees,
pines and sugar maples drenched in snow,
curved lines frosting everything,
blue-white night softly coated,
stars dotting the sky.
We dunked our heads under
so our hair wouldn’t bead with ice.
We’d speak here and there, mostly watch.
Soon I’d run, he’d follow, back into the studio
where we’d each slip on terry cloth robes.
Upstairs, he joined my mother in their room,
I in mine, showers running at the same time,
and when I fell asleep
my day slipped easily away,
and night was everything I wanted.
THE SWEET SPOT OF THE UNIVERSE

Holly Day

at the end of the tunnel is a needle
cressing the wire-thin grooves, translating Braille—even without the help of the trumpet, you can hear
the tiny voices if you put your ear close enough.
There are other bells out there,

floating in space, waiting to be shouted into
listened to, where a whisper can be translated
into the voice of God to a fledgling universe
or just as a sign that someone else is out there saying
“hello.” the crank is waiting to be turned. There are

so many more things to learn
about this place, wisdom trapped
in free-floating slabs of vinyl, in tiny boxes filled
with acid-etched diamond microchips, in flat sheets of gold
bearing pictures of male and female genitalia and strings of binary code.
At the end of a tunnel is a needle, waiting

for someone to get close enough to turn the machines back on.
"Would that I could tell you everything; would that you could help me make sense of it all. That skeptical look stretched across your face speaks volumes, Matthew, but I assure you that I am quite alright, certainly capable. And I'm most certainly proud of what you've become."

Such eloquent speech seemed labored as the professor sat slouched upon his weathered armchair. Age tore at his body, but his mind was impeccable, if only flinching with the weight of some unseen burden. Did he suspect? And if he knew, was he actually proud? How I loved him. He coughed loudly.

But still, quite capable indeed. Quite forcefully, he continued.

"Indeed, the life that I once led demanded such capability. Would you recognize and fully comprehend the sensation of being depended upon, Matthew? Fathers, teachers, husbands—it is a frustratingly beautiful thing. Even now I am overwhelmed with both happiness and grief, ever caught in the crossfire it seems."

This last utterance carried a peculiar tone, as if both regret and pride were competing for control of it. I couldn't easily follow where he was leading our conversation. It pained me greatly to see us stray from that elusive fount of honesty. He coughed again.

"As I sit in this state, memories burst forth from the under-used recesses of this seemingly useless mind of mine."

The professor was always convinced that his mind had dulled. If it had, I failed to notice. The warmth of his glance still fooled me into thinking that I was the most important person in his world, that it was only I that he cared to listen to. How I loved him. From the first time I met him, sat with him, drank with him, laughed with him, cried with him, I knew that I had stumbled upon true greatness.
“Stop it, Matthew,” he spoke softly as I rushed to retrieve his fallen book. “You’re too kind, yes, but I refuse the treatment of some helpless invalid.”

He sipped his medicine deeply.

He then moved, unaided, towards the suede daybed.

“Don’t coddle me. Did I coddle you as an undergraduate? But I digress. On to matters of more substance: if there is one intangible something that I would alter in this life, I wouldn’t dare speak it aloud. I suppose it’s been said that all which we seek to change in this world is entirely necessary for the existence of said world; the light, therefore, cannot be perceived without the darkness. Questions of true goodness; and true evil, existing unaltered, untouched by our mind’s own perceptions and limitations. Are there even such things? How difficult it is to ask such questions of ourselves.”

I certainly wouldn’t dare ask such questions.

“My mind once thought in such a way, ultimately the beginning of my fall. Coincidentally, one’s fall into darkness does not diminish the light; it seems distantly aware, as if the light were indifferent to the descent. If anything, a life lived in darkness becomes more attuned to the light, akin to how eyes accustomed to the dark cry out upon their meeting a sudden brightness. One comes to resent the light in such a way. Sadly, one does not see the light until one has fallen.”

Of these thoughts he lamented as he lay there, burning.

And of him I sit here, coldly remembering.

We sat in opposing corners of the windowless room, the professor’s cluttered study. The small room was swallowed by the gap that existed between us that night, an intimately shattering lack in understanding. The professor, however, could never know. He thought himself the ideal teacher. And he was, seemingly, but only at times when conversation was
light and could be broached without mention of anxiety or fear or longing or death or pain. He was never able to handle that well. He failed me as I failed him, neither of us really at fault.

And I suddenly was drawn to the picture above the professor’s couch, set into a shadowed nook, of a narrow hallway leading the viewer to an unopened window. How appropriate that he should bring a window into a room without one. How pretentious. What, was he challenging his visitors to comment on the beautifully painted window pane? I hated that picture for its fakeness; I longed for its realness. But I loved the professor in spite of it.

Or maybe I’m just imagining things again.

He lay back and continued, wheezing and tired. Again he drank deeply from his glass, closing his eyes and his mind to savor the tinge of his life’s nectar. The professor always had this inexplicable sincerity, complexly simple, which he ascribed to the things that he most loved.

“Beginning and ending always with an impeccably stiff drink,” he swallowed, “my life proudly walked the line between what was deemed right and that which was deemed wrong. But to whose authority do we answer? Is there a billboard that I failed to spot? Or one of those fools writing web blogs. Quite appropriately referred to as a web, society’s great all-encompassing encumbrance.

“Pardon my frustration, Matthew. But I’m but an old man in a new world, as I was once a new man in an old world. I present such paradoxes so that you might understand. I’ve always known you to enjoy such probing, enigmatic inquiries, my dear boy.”

My heart always leapt at such rare displays of affection, though I could not give him the answers for which was seeking. I literally had no idea where he was leading this conversation, but I had learned long ago that listening attentively is as powerful as delivering the most moving soliloquy.
I can guess, even now, that he wasn't searching for answers so much as trying to teach me something about life. The ever present voice, never wavering, always trusted to faith—faith not necessarily in a God, but in a Something, the power of self. He made it clear from the very beginning that he trusted in me, that we were partners in our fight through life. And he never gave up on me. His divorce and his daughter's death coincided with graduation ceremonies, at which he was slated to deliver the Commencement Address. He didn't give up on me. He had the stadium effectively stunned, left lost somewhere between tears of abject loss and tears of utter hope.

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I first allowed the professor into my life at the hospital, one fine evening after my father had come home angrier than usual. I remember most his efficient yet tender manner that evening, the way that every question seemed to convey a sense of complete understanding rather than sympathy. The professor has always had this ability to convey everything, absolutely everything that you were looking to know, with the calmness of a word. His genuine concern for my safety lasted well beyond that fateful encounter, and I began meeting him frequently, a result of his professional obligations as psychologist and his personal obligations as philanthropist. He allowed me to thrive with new parents, fresh and eager, and somehow managed to acquire money for my education. "I struck him," he once told me, "as a caged bird placed in a wondrous garden of trees and beauty."

The professor was the foremost teacher at the university for a generation, never failing to lay claim to the exceptional accomplishments of the brilliant minds he'd touched. There was one accomplishment, though, of which he never knew, of which I had never disclosed to him. He simply could not help but unchain me, so to speak.

***
I confronted my past in the interest of my future. I found my father
in one of his seedy holes, places that he always seemed to retreat to after
quitting his latest deadbeat job.

“And to what do I owe this fucking pleasure?” he spat, tie never
tied and shirt never pressed.

He was the sort of man who was always prickly and coarse, even
with a face clean shaven. My father was not one for any show of kindness
or love, and his presence in my life was as suffocating as it was distant. My
childhood was littered with memories of cigarette burns, covered bruises
and tear drenched pillows. And I cannot recall my father ever using my name.

I told him that I wanted to buy him a drink. So I did. Another. I let
him enjoy himself, and he accepted my charity without protest. The dim
light of the bar seemed to suit him, shadowing his already grimly scarred
visage. He never asked how I was doing.

Last call. I walked my father home, then, supporting his weight,
wearing a thick woolen overcoat. This man had never cared enough to
teach me to throw, yet he had completely updated our apartment with
the finest necessities, spending the thousands that never saw his family.
The newest accessory was the scantily clad girl poking her head out of the
refrigerator. How I wished that she wasn’t there. The professor hadn’t
come with me that evening.

I left after washing my hands clean; I descended the stair and
trudged home, freely.

I went to bed late that night with a nosebleed and a smile of
satisfaction, truly believing as if I’d accomplished something good. My
father’s dark coat hid in the corner, draped over my armchair.

I was early for class the next morning, thoroughly engaging my
class in the discussion of the nature of evil. I was left elated, and the
professor was proud of me. His was a retreat from the fury of my other
classes. How I loved him.

***

"I hate to admit how much I’ve come to depend upon you, Matthew."

He coughed as I brought him a drink with his pill. He continued, weakened.

"I simply can’t. And how much you’ve grown. I believe that to be the most overwhelming, the most thoroughly inspiring thing. You’ve grown in leaps and bounds. When I first met you, you were a bird in a cage. Oh how I revel in that quizzical look, Matthew. It shows me that you’ve listened. The caged bird can still hear, most certainly. He lies in wait for his feeding, singing his song all the while; whether night or day, whether covered with a blanket or imprisoned nakedly before the world, he still sings. Now, please don’t even attempt to pick up a tune, my boy —most dreadful I’ve heard. A bird’s song flows freely, beautifully still, unencumbered by the world around his cage. You’ve opened my eyes to the cage of my study, and I thank you for that. It seems as if you were not the only caged songbird, Matthew. Most inspiring indeed.

He coughed, to the point of tears it seemed.

He grabbed his bedside mirror, gazing, probing the depths of his years. What evil deeds are hid behind the lines of this face, I wondered. Such a thin, proud face, never lacking, always forceful, ever searching. But to what end? Like the rings of a great tree, the professor’s lined face revealed at once so much and so little about his life; those eyes, deeps of gray like the pale mist of dawn, were at once welcoming and terrifying.

But it could just be my imagining things.

***

And we come to it at last, the final judgment we all must face.

They found me in my building’s rooftop garden that evening, enjoying a cigar amidst the flaming haze of the setting sun. The professor
had told me to wait patiently. An upturned cage lay at my feet—I had released my neighbor’s bird. Funny how I had to steal it to set it free. She struggled little. I coughed.

It only occurred to me later that they came on account of my father. His mutilated body was found thrown into the corner of the kitchen, crumpled, defeated at last. They failed to mention his female acquaintance.

Apparently there were fingerprints. Apparently there was a witness.

It matters little at the end of things.

The professor obviously anticipated my fall into darkness; he reveled in it, as I lay there, burning.

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With that ominous ending, the prosecutor clicked off the recording.

“As this... testimony was delivered, there was an odd level of calm in the defendant’s voice, quite typical of the profoundness of Mr. Matthew Stuart’s emotional disturbance. The proud confidence in his voice never wavered, as sane voices do when faced with the grim reality of what they’re actually saying. The pictures of the crime scene elicited little response but curiosity. His only emotion came from his account of this professor, the man who “unchained him,” as it were. Mr. Stuart is a deeply troubled individual, a violently paranoid schizophrenic, who I wholeheartedly believe is beyond saving. He is as much a danger to himself as he is to others.”

The court reporter nervously followed every word of the State’s witness. “An absolutely horrific case, Your Honor; and as much as it saddens me to admit, it is my professional opinion that no earthly cage can hold this man.”
AUGUST
Caroline O’Shea

The salt-sea breezes: they linger still,
Gathering the growing will
To fling all cares away to dust—
They speak of lovers, stealth; they lust
To tread upon the salt-sea sands;
To linger upon salt-drenched hands
As briefly, swiftly, one by one,
They wend their ways to salt-sea suns
Where they may waft in sea-salt days,
The golden kin of August haze.
Death lingered in that house. It clung to the curtains, splattered against the walls, and hid in the nooks and crannies. No one could see it clearly, though; it flashed across the line of vision like a shadow or the sun reflecting off a pair of spectacles. Feeling the Death arose suddenly too. It came swiftly like a chill, rose like goose bumps, attacked quickly with a cough. Mr. Wesley, my employer, thought nothing of it. He and Mrs. Wesley cared only about the Great War ending. That’s all anyone cared about.

I felt it, though, the Death. I could sense it as I put the two children, Mary and Dennis, to bed each night when their parents went to see Chu Chin Chow at the Shubert Theater or John Phillip Sousa perform at Willow Grove Park. The Wesleys never sensed what was right in front of them. They ignored the reports of a strange disease in Spain, then the Pacific, then Boston. To them, it was something distant, unimportant, removed. It didn’t fit into their Philadelphia Society of parties, country clubs, and theater. It didn’t matter.

Until, of course, the Death began claiming victims.

Death visited the Mortons first. Sally, their nanny, told me weepily after church that the oldest Morton girl, Martha, began coughing earlier that week. Then a pain spread around her neck and behind her ears. Her fever rose, her pulse quickened, and before long she suffocated from the liquid in her lungs. She died in the night. Death, you see, moved easily at the Morton’s.

Many more had fallen victim to the illness the Monday morning I brought Mr. Wesley the paper in his study. He was busy at work and scribbled away at imperious looking documents. Careful not to disturb him, I placed his paper quietly at the edge of his desk along with a cup of tea.
“What do you know about this Spanish Influenza, Louisa?” He asked casually as he wrote his signature at the bottom of a parchment.

“Sir?” I asked.

“The Spanish Influenza? The illness affecting a few in the city, Louisa. Surely even a maid like you can tell something is amiss.”

“Yes sir, I understand. I didn’t know that’s what people called it.” I paused. Mr. Wesley glanced up at me and removed his glasses. He raised his eyebrows in expectation.

“Well? What do you know about it? Are other children, friends of Mary and Dennis, ill with it?”

“Well it claimed the Morton girl, sir, and there’s been talk that the Winthrop boy may have some symptoms.” Mr. Wesley frowned, though returned to his paperwork.

“Be mindful of them, I suppose. No need to keep them shut up. Just watch out for coughing among their playfellows.” I curtsied and left him to his work.

I see now I should have kept Mary and Dennis safer. Death, you see, kept close quarters near the Wesley home. Mr. and Mrs. Wesley kept their social engagements, went about the city, and visited those who had family exposed to the influenza without the slightest concern. The illness was nothing compared to the Great War, they felt. If our boys could live in trenches, we could shake a tiny cold. Death, to them, was far removed. They could send young boys away to it without a thought, superficially support them with their great talk, but when it crossed the Atlantic, they hadn’t the faintest idea what it looked like.

I, though, knowing better, ignored the signs, the smells, and the irking feeling that something ran amiss. I told myself my keen awareness of Death came from the continuous headlines regarding the Great War. Death was simply on the mind. Death was far away.

Then Dennis began coughing. It began as a little tremor, a tiny
scratch of the throat, hardly noticeable, as I readied him for bed one evening. I paused as I pulled the covers over his little body and ran a cool hand over his even cooler head. I checked to see if his throat was swollen, but it wasn’t. I examined Mary and found her in the same healthy condition. With a sigh of relief, I asked him and Mary to pick a fairytale to share before bed. With a story, a kiss, and a wish goodnight, I had pushed the cough from my mind.

The fever came to Dennis the next morning. The labored breathing. The wheezing. The pain. We called for Doctor Franklin, but there was little he could do. Keep the child warm, he said, keep him hydrated. Send Mary away to a family member. Monitor his fever. All this I did as Mr. and Mrs. Wesley looked on in shock. They hadn’t sensed Death the way I had. They didn’t curse themselves for not speaking up. They didn’t know. They had blissfully ignored the hundreds dying around them. Death, they felt, could not touch them. Death was something that happened on battlefields, in poor homes, with the elderly. Death did not touch the Wesleys.

Death, though, lingered in that house. It just waited to pounce upon its prey until early one September morning. I busied myself running a cool cloth over Dennis’ forehead and lulling him back to sleep after he had woken from a coughing fit. I gently ran the cotton along his cheeks, over his neck, on the sides of his wrists. I did it methodically, gently, for hours, until I finally realized he didn’t sleep. He had gone. Death had claimed its victim.

I rose slowly, then, walked to the nursery window, and opened it to let in the fall air. I felt the Death surround me, blow about with the breeze, until it finally blew away and aired to find its next victim. I closed the window, knowing Death had gone. With a small sob, I went to tell the Wesleys the disease they called the Spanish Influenza was just as great as the war.
SAIL: FOR MARIANNE MOORE

Mary Kate Kelly

I too, know the way you felt, sail,
each time the insipid monarch of brackish brine
felled you down. White majesty you were,
loosed upon wrenching wound-hairs of Poseidon.
Flash-sliced butted against
each gasping bellow from sea-God’s depth.
Crashing on, porcelain carving marbled out.

How far we have fallen, sail,
bosoms swelled by sweat salted kisses melt
hyperbolic hidden tails. Freedom lost in memory
deep mangled places of Darkness without the sea—we,
we, sail, the water-lust wanders of old.
Nestled quietly in the woods of Northern Maine, Beaconsfield had previously been a logging town. If you were to search for its past you would find no record of disturbance, but I assure something had happened here. You wouldn’t see it easily, but if you were to examine the county from a plane, you would see a long straight thread cut through the trees. It was a road; starting at the highway and ending at a deep black hole. It’s closed now—the road—overgrown and colonized by potholes large enough to swallow a motorcycle. It was the umbilical cord for the operation. It was what brought the men in with their empty trucks.

All of it was for the war effort of course. It seemed only fair. So far from Europe, so far from the pace of modern times, we were simply isolated. Some of the boys had left, but many stayed. The draft didn’t find many of them or at least it didn’t seem to mind their absence. Most of the people I knew hadn’t even registered for the draft.

My father owned the local grocery store. His fortunate position made him exempt from over-seas service. I was too young back then, so I too escaped being shipped out. So when we were told the government planned to start a mining operation in Beaconsfield we still felt lucky. Even if it was right on our doorstep, it seemed only fair that the war finally caught up to us. We were happy to do our part; for our lives would be still fundamentally unchanged, but we could be proud of our contribution. Our precious ore would win the war; and we would fight with shovels. We could have victory with all the comforts of home. There would be jobs and freedom and patriotism. We were to go about life as if nothing had changed. We were to live and love just as if peace were upon us; most importantly however, we were to tell no one about the digging going on in
sleepy Beaconsfield.

Today there is a forest of fully grown trees in the way of it. You can barely see the cavernous hole dug in the earth from the road. Back then it was gaping before you, red with iron. The red would leak down as more rock was exposed to the air; now it is only a dark brown. Back then it looked like a bloody hole stabbed in the side of the mountain. Every time I walk by I peek through the fence to catch a glimpse. It seems so much less intimidating than it used to.

Walking by, I decide I'll stop and take a look. There isn’t anything else to do anyway. I disregard the signs warning me of my own peril. The machines are gone, the guard-posts, the sulfur stench of chemistry; all that remains are countless power lines connected to drooping poles. The wires are stapled to the poles in knots. They look like birds’ nests. The noise of them flapping in the wind frightens me. It reminds me of strips of cloth on a weathered scarecrow.

Every time I am here, I can feel it. It creeps up on me; the emotion of so much futile work. It reminds me of my fate. I’m very much like the hole; so full of progress, yet ultimately a tragedy. I can feel a dull ache in my throat. It’s undoubtedly the cancer. It starts with a swollen thyroid, then the nausea, and then it’s different for everyone. I have so many pills. I don’t know how we afford them. I get to be a lucky one; they will keep me alive long enough call it ‘health care’. My hair will fall out. I will become cold all over. I will seize and shake and vomit and bleed. I will lose control of my body all with the consolation of hospice and morphine.

I move slowly to the edge of the precipice like I would march to the altar. I stare at the bottom, expecting to receive some answers out of the stew. I expect to see a disturbance on the water, but it is as still as glass. This time I linger a bit longer. I remember when I learned that it took twenty tons of ore to make one kilogram of uranium. It was so much work
for so little reward. They dug and dug, but never did find what they were looking for. They just cut a hole in the earth and left.

My Dad told me that when the rock was fresh it shone like a marble staircase on a Roman temple. There was a spiraling path cut along the edge so the trucks could reach the bottom. Monstrous excavators would scoop the freshly fractured rock into the trucks. Pregnant with boulders, they would begin their perilous journey to the top; the pit was more than one thousand feet deep. It took at least twenty five minutes for the heavy loaded trucks to complete their ascension out of the abyss. From the top they looked like a parade of yellow caterpillars.

He talks about it like it was a whole different world, a world filled with so much promise. As I stare down to the bottom, all is silence. I imagine the day the trucks left with empty beds, lumbering down the same road they arrived on. I can imagine one of the workers looking back, sighing at an unfinished job. The gates were locked and time soldiered on. Since then, the rain and ice of years had slowly washed away the path to the bottom. Now it's a sheer drop to the black water at the bottom.

Three years of merciless digging were not without consequence. It was about when I was six when we had to start boiling the water. They said it because of aging water lines, but we all knew it was from the quarry. The processing of the rock had left lead, arsenic, and poisons beyond numbering. A toxic ring spread from its epicenter. It wasn't too long before the trees around the edge turned yellow and red. Eventually they all died.

Walking up the hill to my house, I open the gate and travel the walkway to my front door. Mark follows behind me. The picket fence has been painted so many times that when one color chips, you could see a history of colors underneath. It was like counting tree rings. The brightest ones at the center eventually gave way to the current anemic shade of white. The fence frames my house, its modest but bigger than most of the houses
in town. Most strikingly, a prominent picture window takes up most of
the east wall, from it Mark and I used to watch the trucks go by. Every
summer it let in the warm sun. Every winter it would be filled with a fresh
cut Christmas tree. Under it would be gifts for my mother, my father, and
sometimes Mark.

From the window we could see Mark’s house across the street. It
was covered in peeling yellow paint. Underneath the worn coat, the sheen
of asbestos siding would shine in the setting sun. Just as it set, it would fall
behind their house like a red hot ball-bearing to be quenched in the dark
waters of the quarry. It was something to behold, the fading light would
shine through the house, silhouetting everything inside like shadow puppets.
As the sun went out, it would be replaced by the spark of Mr. Gendron
lighting his pipe on the porch. If his Mark had not returned home by this
time, he would receive a beating.

Mark’s Dad, Mr. Gendron had been diagnosed with cancer
too. Unlike my family, they didn’t have any money for the pills. He was
already getting worse; it was hard to tell if Mr. Gendron’s cruelty was
from the disease or from the heartlessness he always possessed. Regard-
less, Mark needed a place outside the claustrophobic walls of the yellow
shack he called home, and far away from his father’s fists. I wanted someone
around me who wasn’t dying—besides, I was alright for now. We could
pretend everything was normal for a little while.

“You can stay with us tonight.”

“Adam, I don’t need to. I think he has enough to put him to sleep
tonight. He needs to sleep. He won’t want me out. He says I need to take
care of my mother. It’s killing him but I don’t even care. He just hates and
drinks and then he turns to me. He hates me because I’m his reflection. He
wants to beat any trace of him out of me.”

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Later that night I could see his parents shouting through my window on the world. It was routine, their fighting, but tonight the muffled shouts seemed more desperate. If my mother caught me staring I would be reprimanded. Today she was outside trying to make vegetables grow out of the dead ground (they would not despite her efforts), and so I fixed my gaze.

It was like a peepshow. I would look through the eyepiece to view a pornographic act—their screaming soon grew loud enough that I could hear their every other word through the closed window.

I had stopped wondering why this happened many years ago. Had there been a job he would have been too drunk to keep it. It didn't matter though because even the best of men couldn't find one. Had he had a beer, he would have drunk it, but beer as with everything worth having, cost something. He had even chopped up the iron banisters of the front porch and sold it for scrap, but those meager earnings were long gone.

I saw him walk to the bedroom to retrieve his shotgun. I saw his wife claw at his face in an attempt for attention. I saw him swat her away. Foolishly, she got up to confront him again. He swung the butt of his shotgun around and struck her jaw with mechanical indifference. She fell limp out of my sight.

I stood motionless behind the protection of the glass. I expected Mark to run to defend his mother, but he remained shut-up in his room. Mr. Gendron mumbled some triumphant slur at his wife and walked out the front door. Coughing uncontrollably, he spit up phlegm on the gravel walk. He wiped the blood off his shotgun with a low hanging t-shirt on the clothes line. Then he froze and gazed in my direction. I don't know if he saw me behind the reflection of the sun, but he raised his shotgun in my direction. I felt my guts turn to stone. He held it there, and for a moment he seemed lost in thought. Was he contemplating pulling the trigger? His gaze was interrupted by the sound of my Father's car lumbering up the
road. I trembled uncontrollably in the empty parlor. When I looked back he and the gun had vanished.

The morning after the incident Mark was gone. He had disappeared from home, but nobody bothered looking for him. His parents didn’t report him missing to the police. I guess Mr. Gendron was glad he could hit his wife without confrontation. Perhaps he didn’t want to answer any hard questions if the police came, like, for example how Mrs. Gendron got the black eye. The town’s resources had been stretched thin; I don’t think the police would have gone to look for him anyways. It was just one more worry in my mind.

The night of his disappearance I sat across from my parents at the dinner table. They must have heard the news. I wouldn’t speak, only chew. I can’t recall when I last had conversation with either of my parents. I don’t think I had heard them laugh since I got diagnosed. I certainly wasn’t going to break the ice with one more tragedy. I had to give my mom credit though; she tried to smile now and then.

I lamented the loss of my only friend. I assumed he had become sick like the rest of us. There had been abuse before, but he had never left like this. Maybe he had the disease all this time and didn’t want to tell me. I understood. I didn’t want to be treated any differently. Everyone knew someone who had the cancer. It was taxing to be the odd one out. Everyone had a burden, and everyone was too tired for sympathy. He was just gone, and I couldn’t think of it anymore.

My mother never spoke of me being ‘sick’. The pills would be on my bed, I would take them religiously after each meal. Soon there would be doctors’ appointments, there would be chemo, and there would be surgery—if we could afford them. I didn’t blame Mark if he decided to go blow his brains out or jump off a highway overpass. It was more noble than dying in a hospital bed. To die drinking the same poison that brought
you to your deathbed; it was an irony only a corpse could smile about.

***

I had fallen asleep on the couch in the parlor. It was not very comfortable, nor was it warm, but it allowed me to fall asleep watching the moths steadily orbit the streetlamps. It would distract me from the pain and the chills. My ‘counts were off’. That’s what they said at the hospital. All I knew was that it hurt, and that sleep would not come easily.

Occasionally, I would see a light flick on as Mrs. Gendron would empty a bucket of her husband’s vomit out the window of the bedroom. Perhaps tonight a fox or a rabbit would also stagger out bewildered under the orange light. Sometimes they lingered a bit longer, long enough for me to watch. I had begun to appreciate these things.

Then I saw something.

At first, I saw only movement. I expected an animal, but instead out of the dark rose a human figure. It looked far too skinny to be alive. It walked forward with an apraxic gait, swaying like a sail in the breeze. I knew it could be only one person.

The figure walked to the front door of the tiny home, he was bathed in the tiny oasis provided by the streetlamp. I considered crying for help, but then I grew silent. He entered the house. A few moments later the emaciated figure of Mr. Gendron was dragged out of the home. I could see his chest heaving for breath in the night air. Like a ragdoll he was taken to the car. The helpless man was tossed into the backseat. The lights flickered as the car cranked over. The engine flared to life. Lurching forward down the hill, the car began to pick up speed. It sped onto the dirt track towards the quarry. Striking the gate at highway speed, the chain holding it shut shattered like glass. It headed straight towards the edge.

The truck joined with negative space, and for a moment they seemed to float under the dark sky. The headlights pointed towards heaven
for a brief moment, but then the gravity took hold. Plummeting down, the car was enveloped in the dark water like a funeral shroud. In a moment all was concealed in the velvety depths.

I stood motionless; before me the water became as still as the dark sky. After some time, I curled up silently on the couch urging sleep to come quickly to my troubled mind. A dull ache rose from my lower abdomen. The pain would only get worse as the night went on. I wish he had taken me with him. I would have ridden that truck into the abyss like I was sticking my thumb in the eye of God.
THE BITCH TURNED PSYCHO

Meredith White

four years on a worn, leather couch
fidgeting with children’s toys and
pillow tassels,
spilling my soul for
$200 an hour
because high school
left jagged cuts
like scratches on glass,

two years learning to love myself,
one year learning to love someone else,
one year learning not to flee in the face of happiness,
and four months trying not to forget it all.

I am stronger than you now—
I can see it as I stand here,
stalwart,
ready,
my arms outstretched,
waiting to let you
collapse in on me.

I see your hesitation
your fear—
a skittish shaky exhale,
darting eyes,
fingers itching for keys and locks—
I know them—
I wrote them—
I composed them like the
god of genesis
created Everything,
squatting in mud and
pulling at the taffy muck to form
gangly, tender limbs.

you will run,
you will run for miles.
I know you will.
I have run too much, myself.
I will not chase you,
(my soles ache from wear)
but I
will
wait.

I am yours when
you are ready to come home
and leave your muddy sneakers by the door.
THE EPIC BALLAD OF MY PARENTS

Meredith White

Sitting on opposite ends of
the dining room table (mom nodding intermittently
at the collective prattle about midterms and
schoolboys, dad
with one eye on the yankees 4th inning)
it's hard to imagine they were once

lovers
drenched in the scent of hormones and delusion—
that they bantered over wood-rotted fratboy porch banisters
and fed the neighborhood's stray cats tunafish sandwich crusts
and tucked tipsy sonnets into the pages of economic textbooks
and jaunted like helium-addled bobbleheads
through European side-streets
(and then picked names from family trees and wallpaper from
home depot)

Perhaps in some other universe,
in a smoky jazz joint
where fat businessmen swirl bourbon in clinking crystal tumblers,
a not-yet-jaded twenty-something
with a BA in english
and endless piles of electric bills
stands on a rose-lit stage
crooning the epic ballad of my parents.

But in this world they
sit in the garrulous and
taciturn dining room,
crushed by the
weighty aroma of mildly charred meatloaf.
O CHRISTMAS TREE
Meredith White

I never got to decorate the Christmas tree in 2010. Maybe I was in school or I think perhaps I’d gotten into a fight with mom and spent the afternoon sulking while my sisters hunted for hooks to the tune of Jingle Bell Rock

but I did get to burn the tree that summer night as it lay helpless in the fire pit, its limbs splayed out for my mercy—

I did deck it—
I decked it with crumpled paper balls shoved between its sickly branches, newspapers dangled like corpses— the sports section lynched, arts and entertainment executed, the poor international half ready to be burned alive.

I strike the match and glow in its transient ignition then light the bundles like a widow at vigil
Boris was a man of quiet disposition with a lazy eye and a professed love of jazz. His wife Nancy was a handsome woman thirteen years his junior, though she was a bigot whose prejudices were merely a reflection of her own inadequacies. She was also a compulsive shoplifter.

In the summer of his sixty-fourth year, Boris sold off the butchery in which he worked, and, with the gentle dignity that is custom to one who has spent his life preparing meat, retired to the countryside with his bride. Since the pair had no family to speak of, and Nancy was past the age of conceiving, together they adopted a small Hispanic boy named Emilio to ease their transition into solitude. He was pleasant company, and Boris was eager to instill in him everything he knew of the world. Under his new father’s tutelage, Emilio learned the subtle nuances of product commercialization, which promised to propel his future as a merchant of carnal eateries. He was taught how to cook, how to build, and how to dance. His mother, indifferent to these private lessons, treated him very much like a stray cat.

One sad afternoon in October, Boris died of a seizure when his jazz record unexpectedly caught on a particularly harsh loop. Shortly after, Nancy ran off with a traveling insurance salesman, leaving Emilio, once again, to his own accord. Now thirteen and twice orphaned, the young man resolved to try his hand at the sacred profession of his beloved late stepfather.

He failed. Disgraced and bursting with Hispanic teenage angst, Emilio traded his bit of real estate for passage aboard a train to the big city. En route he met Gloria, a beautiful divorcee traveling with her
nine-month-old son Cornelius. A thin mustache belying his youth, they instantly fell in love—and with the aid of a conveniently seated speaker of the peace, Emilio emerged from the boxcar a family man.

The early years were hard on the couple, Emilio scrounging an improvised living off the sale of fertilizer with feces harvested from young Cornelius. Like all of his business endeavors, the company struggled—but thankfully, when it seemed their cash cow had run dry, Emilio established a lucrative position in the copper mines. He was finally able to move his family from their humble box and into a proper tenement building, which Gloria subsequently filled with fine silks and tapestries.

Like his late stepfather to beef, Emilio was drawn to copper by an indescribable instinct. Unlike humble Boris, however, Emilio was slowly seduced by the dull gleam of success. Passion soon gave way to obsession, and the frenzied Emilio dug himself deeper and deeper into a copper womb. To Gloria’s dismay, he began spending nights underground; working off the clock to satisfy his sick desire for moderate wealth. One day, the solitary hole that had become Emilio’s habitat was filled in by the mining company—its single occupant long since forgotten by his comrades. Emilio was never heard from again.

Distraught over the loss of her husband, Gloria collected his life insurance and used it to send their child to school. Though no taller than a barstool, Cornelius displayed signs of unjustified aristocratic tendencies, much to the delight of his illiterate mother. The boy would drape himself in Gloria’s exotic silks and pretend to enslave natives in the East Indies like he read about in books. Physically, he was pale, delicate and rather whimsical. In one development, he had taken to stringing garlands through his hair—a habit which he was teased for when a loutish neighbor boy discovered the peculiar custom. Cornelius, realizing his honor was at stake, decided
to retaliate by setting a local logman’s cache of timber ablaze and planting evidence on the bully as he slept. The very next day, Cornelius was given a reward for identifying the alleged arsonist and the neighbor boy was given twenty lashes. Cornelius bought an extravagantly frilled petticoat with his winnings.

Ever fancying himself a gentleman adventurer, Cornelius, full of flaming ambition, eventually outgrew city life and took it upon himself to seek out his real father. As his mother slept, he stole away into the night and boarded a cargo vessel destined for Brazil, where the estranged relation was said to reside. Unfortunately, the ship was not going to South America, but was instead bound for Siam. Mortified by his mistake, the young man abruptly fainted with a violence that sent him careening overboard and into the hungry sea below. That would have been the end of curious Cornelius, had a deckhand not salvaged him with a net, believing the pasty figure to be a stray tuna.

When the naked and writhing Cornelius came to, he was convinced that divine providence had spared him a watery grave and dispatched him upon this dangerous pilgrimage for a reason. He rose with an air of unqualified superiority that was his birthright, and proudly took claim over the already captained ship. When he was met with unexpected resistance to his sudden ascension to command, he staged a brief mutiny and hanged the first mate. Cornelius fared well among seamen—and in celebration of his victory, the ship was strung with painted garlands.

After about a month at sea, the Meatlocker (named as tribute to the new captain’s late grandfather) reached port in Siam. Cornelius was treated to a freshly bedraggled crew as well as the former captain’s payment. The ex-captain himself was in fact still on board, but had been relocated at Cornelius’s request to the ship’s galley, where he was thriving as a saucier.
The first mate was not missed.

While ashore restocking supplies, Captain Cornelius met an enchanting young vagabond named Mu Lan. He was a hulking vision of masculinity; his calloused hands carelessly tousled black locks of hair across a bronzed and deeply weathered face. Drunk with lust for the oriental Hercules, Cornelius made it his duty to woo him. Much to Cornelius’s surprise (and delight) it took little more than a bowl of rice to coerce the native into a darkened inn.

Upon consummating the relationship somewhere among a surprising array of folds and crevices, a liberated Cornelius threw open the window shade with full intent of shouting his affection from the rooftops (which he oft fantasized of doing). Rather a shrill hiccups was all to escape his lips as he gaped wide-eyed at his now fully exposed beloved. To Cornelius’ horror, Mu Lan was not a man at all—but a terribly mannish woman. Unbeknownst to the Dear Captain, the woman whom he just haphazardly bedded was the most feared prostitute in the south of Asia: a wench some claimed Lucifer himself called into service when he wished to spread a new pestilence among men. With the dexterity of a gymnast, Cornelius fainted through the window, awoke upon impact, sprinted back to the Meatlocker, and departed forthwith. Within weeks he died of plague and was given to the sea. The saucier was named captain once again.

Once abandoned by the petite gentleman-sailor, Mu Lan ached with a regret she had not experienced in years. Shaking her enormous fists to the heavens, the behemoth vowed to cease her life of promiscuity and turn to religion. Nine months later, Mu Lan gave birth to a daughter. The child was neither bearded nor diseased, but was in fact the most beautiful girl that the Siamese port city had ever seen. She had chestnut hair and naturally smelled of sweet cinnamon. For the first two years of her life she
could barely open her eyes, which the townsfolk accredited to her potent eastern heritage. But one day her lashes finally lifted, and her brilliant eyes were a color not yet documented by an earthly spectrum. Her name was Prudence.

At the urging of her mother, Prudence studied Buddhism no sooner than she could rationalize. As result of long stretches of conditioned meditation, she was enlightened by her tenth birthday and was even rumored to perform minor feats of telekinesis. She became a local spiritual legend, and many a wayward pig thief attempted to steal her away as they would the freshest of livestock. But Mu Lan protected her cub like a she-wolf, often biting off entire limbs of any man foolish enough to try to pilfer her precious prodigy.

When Prudence was of age, she decided it was time to see the world as a missionary. She said her tearful goodbyes to her mother (who was, as of late, more tumor than she was body), and, like her father before her, set sail to unknown realms. For many months she traveled up the coast of South America, spreading Buddhist doctrine to a largely indifferent audience. After a particularly unsuccessful session with Colombian coca farmers, she was drifting north when her ship became caught in a vicious tempest. It was ripped to pieces amidst the swell, killing all aboard—save for Prudence, who was left stranded and unconscious off the coast of Panama.

The holy woman was saved from oblivion with the aid of a nearly blind old hermit. Even through his dying eyes, the pilgrim was shocked by the resemblance of this exotic young woman to his late wife. And so he took her into his home and nursed her back to health. The man was none other than Emilio, but having no context for either to know their true relation, the significance of the encounter was lost upon them.

Emilio recounted how he had forsook his family for greed and had
been buried alive by the mining company as a cosmic act of justice. Having nowhere to go but down, Emilio continued excavating for years, living off roots and underground moisture deposits until the scarcity of oxygen allowed him to dig no further. Exhausted and hopeless, Emilio curled into a ball and died in the tunnel he had given his world to. Suddenly, he was jolted back to life by a massive electric shock! As luck would have it, the colossal stockpile of copper he had accumulated over the years was conducting electricity from the surface. Since he no longer knew which way was up, he felt for the hottest deposit and began digging in that direction. At first, the frequent electric surges spurred him forward, but as they grew in intensity, he soon began to fear full-blown electrocution. With a heavy sigh, he parted ways with his metallic treasure trove and carried on alone. Emaciated, almost entirely sightless, and brains half turned to scrambled egg, Emilio finally broke through the surface and breathed in his first fresh, non-sulfuric air in nearly seven years. He had burrowed his way to Panama, and it was the generators which powered the Canal that had sent him those hallowed shockwaves. Receiving word that his family all had died, in Panama he remained.

Prudence was moved by the old man’s tale. Owing Emilio the debt of her life, she resolved to stay with him. She taught him how to meditate and he taught her how to dance. Their bond was the culmination of a seed forgotten by time, like a palm tree emerging in a valley of evergreens. Under his granddaughter’s nurture, world-weary Emilio ultimately found peace—and together they opened a butchery that Prudence decorated with fine silks and tapestries.
THE INCONGRUITY OF BEING

Josh Bennett

I remember a time back in high school when my little brother Frank beat the hell out of Robby Schlegal. We’d spent the evening choking down beer bongs and slamming shots of Seagram’s whiskey at some kegger party in one of the old government apartments out in Ray, or at least that’s what I’d spent the night doing. Frank wasn’t much of a drinker back then. I’d handed my keys over to Frank and we were heading for my car when Robby came stumbling out of the party and tried to bum a ride. Frank turned Robby down as kindly as he could. He told him he wanted to get home and get off the road as quickly as possible. He said that he was sorry but considering that I was drunk off my ass and the whole lot of us was underage, he didn’t want to risk driving clear across town to Robby’s house and back again. Robby didn’t much like that answer.

Now, my “little” brother Frank was two years younger than me, but he towered over me. He outweighed me by about thirty pounds back then, and I’d bet he’s got me by more than sixty nowadays. He could palm a basketball in the sixth grade and he wore a size fifteen shoe by the eighth. He started as a linebacker for the varsity team his freshman year and he wore a full beard in his sophomore yearbook photo. Frank Roberts was just one of those guys—a full-grown man before he got his driver’s license, built like a gorilla. But Frank never used his size for anything but football. Even in a football game Frank refused to use his bulk for ill purposes. The center would chuck the ball to the quarterback and Frank would tear across the line and batter his opponent into the turf—but then the ref would signal the end of the play with his whistle and all the fight would go out of Frank like it wasn’t even there in the first place. He would stick out one of those huge paws of his and pull the other kid up out of
the dirt and back onto his feet. Half the time the other guy wouldn’t take his hand. Maybe he’d even slap it away, but Frank offered it all the same, every single play. Some of those guys must have thought he was making fun of them, rubbing it in—but hell, I’d never heard Frank so much as yell at a guy. As big as he was, he could shut down any wannabe tough-guy with a glare, but he never even did any of that. I guess it just wasn’t in him, or he just never saw the need for such behaviors.

Robby Schlegal knew all this and he should have known enough to be afraid of my brother, regardless of my brother’s reputation as a giant with the gentlest disposition. But Robby himself cast quite a shadow and he could scare pretty much anybody easily enough. He’d beat the hell out of more than one or two guys and he had a reputation as a real brawler. I don’t imagine that anybody in our school would’ve wanted to mess with him any more than they would’ve wanted to mess with my brother. And Robby brimmed with liquid courage that night. He was plenty drunk. He threw a few silly taunts at Frank. He accused Frank of thinking he was too good. He told Frank that if he thought he was better than him, then he ought to step up and prove it. Frank just smiled at Robby, told him he had it all wrong and turned to walk away. I guess after Robby gave my brother that first bit of back talk he started thinking whooping up on Frank Roberts sounded like a grand idea. I guess in all his inebriated brilliance he thought he’d thrown a scare into my brother, so he kept at him. Maybe he thought he could tell people that Frank wouldn’t fight him, that Frank had backed down and somehow that would mean something. Whichever way Robby had things figured, he let loose with some more insults for my brother. I chuckled at the poor fool and turned to follow my brother. That was all it took for Robby to turn his attention on me. He grabbed me by the shoulder, spun me around and hit me in the mouth. I stumbled back into a parked car, propped myself up against it, touched my fingertips to
my bloodied lips.

Robby moved in to hit me again but Frank just appeared between us like some magic trick. He smacked his fist square into Robby’s nose. I heard the cartilage snap free from the bone. Robby sat down hard onto the pavement like someone had pulled a chair out from under him. Cords of snot and blood appeared instantly and they hung from his nostrils and dripped down his chin and onto the front of his shirt. The bridge of his nose angled off in an odd and painful way. Robby stared up at Frank. He seemed confused. Frank did not move in to hit him again. He only stood at the ready, leaning forward on the balls of his feet, staring back at Robby. Then he uncurled his fists and turned to me. He took me by the arm and ushered me toward the car. We’d closed half the distance to the car when the scuffling commotion of Robby’s second assault sounded behind us. Frank turned to meet him and Robby sailed into Frank, driving his head into Frank’s belly, locking his arms around his waist, trying his damnest to bring Frank down. Frank did not go down. He took hold of Robby and flung him away. Robby went sprawling, a crazy tangle of flailing limbs. But as soon as he could get his feet back under him, he charged back at Frank. Again Frank’s fist smacked into Robby’s face. This time Frank caught him along the jaw and before he followed through with the punch Robby was unconscious. He collapsed onto the pavement and did not put out his hands to catch himself. He face crashed into the ground and his head snapped back with the impact. A jumble of teeth clattered away, little plinks of sounds as they bounced across the blacktop.

For a very long moment neither I nor my brother moved. Silence. The wind rippled across the endless miles of wheat that surrounded us. Then Robby began to convulse and heave as if he were trying to vomit in his unconsciousness. Then he stopped. Frank stooped down and rolled Robby over. His jaw sagged. The pavement had burned large patches of
road rash into his forehead and chin. Thick blood still trickled from his crooked nose. Frank peered into Robby’s mouth, making sure his tongue hadn’t flopped back into his throat, searching for any broken teeth that might get caught in his throat. He put his ear close to Robby’s mouth and nose and listened. He lay Robby down again. He sat back on his heels, put his palm across his brow, sucked the night air deep into the bottoms of his lungs and let it back out from the corners of his lips, blowing out his cheeks like a trumpet player. He reached out and grasped Robby’s arm with one hand and with the other took hold of Robby’s jeans and eased him back over onto his belly. He cupped his hands around Robby’s head, careful to avoid the jaw, and turned his face out to the side. Then we saw the blue and red lights spiraling and reaching into the side yards between the houses a few blocks up the road, glimmering off of the slanted rooftops. We ran.

We ran out into the wheat fields behind the apartments. We went out just far enough to hide ourselves away. We sat in the thick wheat and the wind sent out huge waves undulating across the field. The furry, seeded heads brushed against our shoulders and our chins. We sat, ready to drop to our bellies and disappear beneath the waves should the need arise and we watched the aftermath unfold. My head still reeled with the booze I’d pounded at the party. My gums ached from the punch I’d taken. My lower lip throbbed and swelled with pressure from grating against my teeth when Robby popped me in the mouth.

A woman from a nearby apartment came out and rushed over to Robby. She bent down toward him and I saw her mouth moving. At our distance I heard none of her words but I knew what she said all the same—Are you okay? Are you okay? I couldn’t really tell if Robby answered her or not. It didn’t look like he did. She stayed next to him for only a second and then she darted off back into her apartment and returned with
a whole roll of paper towels, a big bunch of them wadded up in her hand. She dropped to her knees beside Robby. She did not move him but she used the paper towels to mop up the mess on his face. She'd worked on him for maybe a minute when Robby's hand reached out and closed on hers. He did not roll over and he did not sit up, but he pulled the wad of bloody towels away from her, held it out at arm's length and stared at the thing. The woman took it back again and returned it to his broken mouth and all the while I could see her talking to him. Robby launched off into another fit of dry heaves and the woman ran her hand up and down his back as he writhed there on the ground for a bit more. Then he just lay there, exhausted.

By then two police cruisers had pulled into the parking lot of the apartments. Each one parked and blocked each of the two exits. They left their lights spinning and beams of red and blue ran across the apartment buildings and across the windows.

I looked over at the apartment where the party was and all the lights were out. I imagined all the people in there, standing around in the dark, not saying a word to each other, keeping quiet. I fixed my eyes on one of the windows and when a flash of blue light streaked past it, I saw an ever-so-small part in the curtains fall closed.

One cop got out from each car and they both strolled over to Robby and the woman. As they approached, Robby rolled over onto his back and tried to prop himself up on an elbow but he winced and gave that up and just lay there on his back. The woman stood up and watched the cops approach. They nodded hello to her but they went straight to Robby. One of them crouched beside him and talked to him for just a moment or two. Considering the condition of Robby's jaw, I doubt if he did any real talking himself. The one cop stood up and spoke into his radio. Still Robby just lay there at their feet holding the wad of towels to his mouth. The cops
turned their attention to the woman. We looked on as the woman pointed here and there around the parking lot. She knelt down and showed them a blood spot on the pavement and one of the cops knelt down with her and put his light to it. The other walked laps around them, also with his light on the ground. He stopped when he came upon Robby’s teeth and pointed them out to his partner. The woman stood back up and waved her hands around as she told her version of the story. She swung her skinny little arm in a lame imitation of Frank hitting Robby and finally she turned and pointed out to the wheat fields, out into the nothingness of the North Dakota night.

The cop who found Robby’s teeth on the ground stayed with Robby and the woman. The other strolled toward the wheat fields, toward us. We dived below the wheat and it closed over us, swirling and dancing above our prostrate bodies. The cop reached the edge of the field and stood there. I heard the creak of a stressed fence wire and I thought he was crossing the fence and coming into the field but he must have only placed his foot on the bottom wire and leaned into it because a second later I saw the beam of his flashlight sweep across the top of the wheat. He never entered the field. I wondered if we’d gone far enough out into the darkness. I prayed to God that we had. Whether or not there is a God somewhere to answer one’s prayers I don’t pretend to know, but however it came to be, that cop slung his light back into his belt and headed back over to Robby and the woman and his partner just like I’d prayed he would. Perhaps he thought we’d run off and made our getaway long ago. Perhaps he thought we’d jump him if he ventured out alone into that dark field. Perhaps two high school boys slugging it out didn’t really concern him all that much. I have no way of knowing. But he just turned around and moseyed away. I heard a siren in the distance and I sat up and saw a new set of lights spinning up the street, making its way toward the apartments. One of the cops
went over and pulled his cruiser out of the way and the ambulance drove into the parking lot. It pulled up very near to where Robby still lay on the ground. Two paramedics got out and went straight to Robby. Just like the cops, one stooped down to check him out and the other stood looking down at them. Then the one who stood went and got the gurney from the back of the ambulance. He folded the gurney down and Robby, brushing off the offered help, got himself onto the thing and eased back onto the mattress. They strapped him down and loaded him up and one of the paramedics climbed in the back with Robby while the other came out to talk to the cops. The cops pointed out Robby’s fugitive teeth to the paramedic, who went and got a plastic bag from his medical supplies and with his blue-latex-gloved hands he collected them up. He handed them off into the back of the ambulance and climbed into the cab. Then off Robby went to get his nose straightened out and taped down and his jaw wired shut. The poor bastard. The cops talked with the woman a bit longer. One was writing things down on a notepad. This went on for some time. Finally, the woman turned and traipsed off to her apartment, the cops exchanged a few last words and then the both of them loaded up into their cruisers and drove off. As soon as their car doors slammed shut Frank flopped onto his back and released a huge breath that sounded as if he’d been holding it through the entire ordeal. Frank did not look at me when he spoke. He kept his gaze on the night sky above him and his voice sounded out of place because so much time had passed without words, because it clashed against the stirring of the rippling wheat. “He’s gonna be sucking soup through a straw for months.”

I lay back down, stretched myself out, slipped my hands behind my head and joined my brother in his examination of the stars. “He sure as fuck is.” My lips peeled back and I flashed an unseen smile in the darkness. “I shouldn’t’ve hit him so hard.”
"You had to put him down. You just would have had to hit him more times. He wasn’t gonna quit."

"Yeah."

"I’ll tell you one thing. He would’ve hit you with everything he had if he’d have gotten the upper hand on you. He’d have hit you as hard as he could and as many times as he could."

Frank was a long time in answering. Then, finally, he said, "Yeah. You’re right."

"Let’s head back to the party." I wanted to tell this fresh tale of victory to all who would listen and bask in the sweet glory of triumphant teenage violence, even if technically all the glory belonged to my brother. I sat up and looked over at the apartment that had hosted the party. Even though the cops had left some time ago, no light had yet flicked on inside.

"Let’s just leave it alone. No need to tell ’em all the whole story."

"Come on, Frankie. I’m sure they’ve already got most of the story figured out. We leave. Robby leaves. The cops show up. Things kinda add up, ya know?"

"Yeah. Maybe."

"And the ambulance?"

"Yeah."

Several minutes passed. Nothing to mark the time but the wind across the prairie and the rippling of the wheat.

"You think that woman who came out to help Robbie knows who we are?"

"No. She would have pointed out to the cops which car was ours if she did."

"Yeah. Maybe."

We both stared up at the sky. The early-season aurora borealis cast a faint green-blue shimmer behind all the millions of stars.
“Joey.”
“What?”
“You think Robby gave our names to the cops?”
“I guess it’s possible. Pride might keep his mouth shut though. If he leaves out the details he could go to school and tell everybody we ganged up on him, make himself look good.”
“What do you think will happen if he did give ‘em our names?”
“Cops will show up at the house. Take your side of the story. Try and figure out if they want to arrest you.”
“That would really suck.”
“You got an honest claim to self-defense.”
“Yeah.”
“Or at least an honest claim to defense-of-brother. He did hit me, you know. I sure as hell couldn’t have kicked his ass.”
“Yeah.”
“I swear to God, Frank. When are we going to start behaving like normal brothers? Where the older one takes care of the younger one?”
“I don’t know. The way I figure it, as long as we’re taking care of each other, in whatever way, then I guess we’re doing things right.”

I lay there and thought about that. I liked the idea of it, the sound of it, the feel of it. I would’ve been lying there in the dark enjoying myself quite immensely, but Frank’s guilt oozed from his heart and spread across the ground, seeped through my skin and entered my own heart. I let the guilt eat me up. I let it turn rank inside me and I listened to the sounds of the empty prairie all around me. I savored the misery I shared with my brother. “He wasn’t gonna quit, ya know,” I said. “He was too drunk. And he’s a stupid ass even when he’s sober. Besides, I think those cops recognized Robby and I don’t think they gave much of a shit that he got his ass kicked. To tell you the truth, I don’t think anybody’s going to give much of
a shit. I think this whole town pretty much agrees that Robby Schlegal is a royal asshole.”

My logic did nothing to ease my brother’s guilt. The guilt still leaked from his body and into mine. He lay there and I could feel him thinking. I could feel him thinking of what he had done. Finally he said, “You think the ambulance ride and all that is going to cost his parents a bunch of money?”

I laughed aloud at that one. “You are too much, my brother.”

Frank did not laugh. I got no response but the rustling of the empty prairie.

We waited out in the wheat until the party broke up and we watched the cars head out and we watched to see if any cops pulled them over. When the last car was gone and away, we crept back to my car, headed home and snuck into the house as quietly as we could.
I've never had patience for puzzles
It seemed a meticulous game
I've never thought of melding
Two pieces together with flame.
I never watched the moon
Trade with the sun in the morning.
And as bees court the florals
I've always seen a warning.
I've never admired the swans
Who swim side by side
Never dreamed of the bond
Between a man and his bride.
Until your wit intoxicated me;
Your vulgar display
Infected my soul.
Come what illness may
I reject all cures to you.

I've never had patience for puzzles.
I never tried to make a pair.
But in my romantic stupor
I link us together with care.
VENICE, IT, FROM LIGHT/BLACK, ROSE DICKSON

THE ALEMBIC | PAGE 162
SALMON STREAK
Kenneth Pobo

The motorcycle dudes rev—

the idea, perhaps, is to be loud,
so I think wouldn’t it be ducky
if a library fell on them,
the quiet intensity of an old woman
turning a page

drowning noise out,
shutting down engines,
the calm between a book’s covers
irresistible, like a tiny salmon

streak on a yellow iris.
FADO
Marc Berman

The day before
her botched suicide
my goddaughter
fingers a mushroom salad
at a Portuguese restaurant.
Her plate of baby goat
presented with aroma and succulence
turns tepid and unappealing
as the young Fado singer
lips coaxing
arms imploring
performs until tables are cleared
ovens are dimmed;
my goddaughter,
the sadness
of the songs,
the pity
of the mushrooms,
the sorrow
of the goat.
MERMAID
Betsy Martin

I peer through the porthole
at the handshakes, the embraces,
of the conventional creatures inside,
as they travel as one in their submarine.
I boggle back,
an odd fish.

More sister to jellies,
whose tentacled hair
undulates in silky freedom
as they pulse along,
I perform my deep ballet
with arabesques, twists, subtle drifts,
to lure the admiring eyes
of the sunny set inside.
Then I press my cheek to the glass
to invite their toasty kisses.
But they continue to chat,
cozy and dry,
while I’m unseen
outside in the inky flow.

So I spiral around the sub
with a chorus line of jellies,
then squiggle out alone
shimmering through the uncharted dark,
to entertain myself
and illuminate the murk.
DEER
Mark Belair

As you drive along the highway
at dusk, she seems never to arrive

from the roadside woods but simply
to appear as a foreground gradually
discerned within her camouflaging
background, nibbling grass then looking

up to your headlights, eyes reflective,
receptive—yet ready to run, perhaps

into your car and you keep your foot
hovering over the brake until you pass,

the sleek, graceful animal keeping
still, this time, in the growing dark.

***

Arriving late at night, snowed
out of our tiny weekend cottage,

we dig a long, deep trench
to the door, the whole family
pitching in, our work lit
only by cold moonlight

when a deer, perhaps trapped
by our noisy arrival, suddenly

leaps our trench and dashes
into the woods, leaving light

tracks in the snow which, wind-blown,
instantly disappear.

We all marvel and conjecture
and point and muse and laugh.

Then return—our shovels oddly
heavier—to digging our trench.
CHEAP
James Valvis

If talk was cheap
like they say
we wouldn’t be
sitting here
father and son
after a beating
you silently lifting
your dirty glass
of domestic vodka
me tasting blood
running my tongue
around the tumor
of a fat lip
you too beggarly
to say you’re sorry
and not a single
I love you left
inside my empty
pajama pockets
At the edge of the entire earth, dark falling like a spangled veil, 
air dulled the color almost white

sunglasses. Carrying shiny bags, 
she is wearing those red shoes.

The distant shouts of children leaving school across the street 
had buried me shallow.

She turns her eyes toward him, 
inside what never happened.

Always wear lace. Do you like my shoes 
verdigris, glittering at the moonrise?

I’ve kept it a very long time 
until there was no word for it.
For Doug

David pulled the black Toyota Land Cruiser off the road and into the gravel parking lot at the edge of the field. Killing the engine, he grabbed the vest and the box from the seat behind him. He locked the car and put the keys in the gas tank. He looked around to see if anyone had seen his hiding spot, but only the cows across the road looked back. David removed the fly rod from the front windshield, lifting the wipers first so the reel didn't scratch the glass. He started nervously down the path through the woods.

"The most fun time to fish Anvil Rock is between dusk and midnight," Scott told David during David's first drive to the river. "That's when the monster browns come out, thirty inches long and as thick as your bicep. The older members like Grandpa Rick think your dad and I are crazy, and they're probably right, but you haven't lived until you've stood in the middle of the river in the pitch black of night with the bats flying around your rod and the rises sounding like your dad's cannonballs.

After walking for a few minutes, "Keep the rod pointed behind you so it doesn't catch on the ground or trees," David came to a clearing in the woods where the river curved and slowed into a large pool before continuing its course downstream. The smooth water shone like glass, reflecting the dense trees and the steep hill on the far side of the pool. In the middle of the pool, a gigantic flat rock covered the bottom. Waiting just above the rock were the trout. The trout were facing upstream, "They sit there in the cold water and wait for the river to bring their food to them," resting in the slow current of the pool. Above and below the pool the water moved faster, the submerged rocks creating white ripples. David looked for insects flying just above the water's surface, "Trout like to eat
hatching flies trying to take off from the surface," but the afternoon June air was free of bugs.

David set the rod and the box on the picnic table that sat a ways up the bank. He took his time walking to the top of the pool and carefully flipped over some rocks in the water "See the larvae running away? That's what the fish are eating now," sending several nymphs scurrying for cover. He grabbed one of the slower ones and pictured the fly he would use to imitate it. Before going back to the table, he removed an envelope from the right breast pocket of the vest and emptied its dusty gray contents into the water.

"I'm telling you Scottie, David and your boy are just as crazy as you and Jeff," Grandpa Rick said to David's godfather over dinner at the clubhouse. "They fished Anvil Rock for a few hours after lunch while I went downstream, and when I came back to get them they were half-naked and swimming all around the pool. Of course there were no fish to be seen and when the boys got out they were shaking and freezing, but they had themselves a grand old time in there ruining my pool for the day. Something's wrong with the kids these days."

David held the rod on the table and pulled ten feet of line out of the reel. He doubled the end of the line over itself and fed it through the eyelets of the full flex rod. When he had put the line through each eyelet he reached into the lower right pocket of the vest and took out the green nymph box, "These foam Orvis boxes are the best—they float, the flies don't fall out, and they're impossible to crush." Looking through the Wooly Buggers and Gold-Ribbed Hare's Ears, he saw the three remaining flies that Mary Dette, "She's a good friend of Grandpa Rick and happens to tie the best flies I've ever used," had tied for him on his first trip to the river. He pulled the smaller of the yellow and black stonefly patterns out of the white foam. He took the needle nose pliers, "Always crimp down the barbs of your books. You don't want to hurt the fish any more than you have to," from the lower left pocket of the vest.
David put the line through the eye of the hook, "Make sure you make a good knot, don’t rush it and throw four Grannies on there unless you want to lose all your flies and look like your dads," spun it around itself five times, and fed it through the loop he had made in the line before pulling it tight. His eyes were still good. He finished his knot by putting it in his mouth, his saliva securing the line. He took the clippers from his vest and trimmed the tag end of the line. When the knot was done he opened the box and took out his hip waders. He took off his worn boots and put them in the box. He stepped into each of the single leg waders and used the cinches to attach them to his leather belt.

He made his way back upstream to where he had found the nymphs. He took measured, deliberate steps along the bank, "Take your time boys. Rushing to your spot just spooks the fish and ruins the pool. I’d rather take five extra minutes making sure not to spook them than hurry in and catch nothing," then stepped into the shallow water. He waded over the moss-covered rocks, "Make sure your wading boots have felt bottoms, the felt grips the wet moss better than rubber boots do," until he was in the middle of the stream. The waterproof fabric of his waders pressed tightly against his ankles, and he could feel the cold of the water on his legs. The stream stayed shallow until halfway between the two banks, where it dropped off into deeper fast moving water. Along the far bank there was a pocket of still water, "Look for boulders underwater, the trout sit behind them and wait for the bugs the current brings to them." The afternoon sun reflected off the water, but David’s polarized glasses allowed him to cut through the glare and see each step before he took it. He took a deep breath and steadied his footing in the cold current.

David unhooked his fly from the cork handle of the rod. He lifted the rod high above his head with his right hand, "Lock your wrist," while pulling line out of the reel with his left. He swung the rod behind him, stopping just past his head as the line formed an arc in the air, "Ten
o'clock, two o'clock. Ten o'clock, two o'clock," then swung it ahead of him and stopped just in front of his head. He repeated this motion four times until he had enough line in the air to reach the far bank. On the last forward swing, he continued his motion to send the line and fly shooting towards the bank. The fly landed five feet upstream from the pocket, "Always aim a bit ahead of where you think the fish is and let the fly drift down naturally to it." David let his fly sink in the current and gave the line three quick pulls to make it look like a live animal struggling in the current. As the fly passed the pocket David felt a light tug on the line. He jerked the tip of the rod back "Rip into him!" to set the hook in the fish's mouth.

Jeff and Scott had just come back from a trip to the river a few weeks after the funeral. "Scott and I had gone to Anvil Rock earlier in the day to spread Grandpa Rick's ashes and went back at dusk to finish paying our respects. I told Scott to fish the main pool so that he could be closer to his dad's memory and that I would fish the Chute just above the pool. I had a mouse pattern on like we always use at night was casting across the stream to the deeper pocket of water along the far bank. I made five or ten casts and decided I would move a little closer to the pool. As I was stripping in my last cast I heard a horrible splash some ten feet in front of me, and felt the line come zipping out of my reel at a hundred miles an hour. Scott always got real jumpy in the dark, so when he heard the splash he came roaring upriver ready to dive in and save me from the river monster he thought had grabbed me. I fought this thing for what felt like three hours, the whole time expecting it to break my line and disappear forever, but for some reason it stayed in the same spot in the current, tiring itself out until I could pull him in and have Scott net him. It was by far the biggest brown I had ever caught, and I was already picturing it mounted on my wall when Scott told me that he wouldn't let me keep this fish. I knew he was right, that Grandpa Rick had worked his magic one more time, so with a final look at our fish we let it back into the water and out of our lives."
David cleared his mind and let his memories and instincts guide him. Thinking could only hurt him now. He worked quickly but calmly to get control of the slack line floating around his feet before the fish could use it to throw the hook. The fish jumped out of the water, "Bow to him, good. Now play him, don't muscle him," and David lowered the rod to relieve the pressure on the line. By pulling the rod back and reeling in the line he gained, "Bring the rod behind you and down to the water level," he managed to get the fish close enough to net. David set the rod on the rock beside him and crouched next to the net to look at his fish. He took off his glasses and folded them into the collar of his shirt.

The native brook trout was no more than six inches long, "Anybody can catch a big fish in big water, but it takes a real fisherman to catch a little fish in little water." It had brilliant red and blue spots along its side, "You can tell it's a native from its size—the club only stocks fish ten inches and bigger—and by those colors. A stocked trout will never be as pretty as a little native like this one." David submerged his hands, "Never touch a trout with dry hands if you don't want to kill it," before gripping it in his left hand as he worked the hook out of the side of its mouth with his right. With the barb crimped down the hook came out without a problem. He was proud of how cleanly he had hooked it and how quickly he had been able to bring it in, keeping the fish from expending too much energy and increasing its chances of surviving the encounter.

He looked at his catch, drawing peace from its wild energy. It smacked its tail in his hands and splashed the cold water onto his face.

The trout's mouth opened and closed as it sat in David's hands. Its wet body was smooth, not covered in scales like the bass and sunfish he caught at home, and glistened in the sun. He could feel its natural power and strength as he admired it. Its eye stared through him. A sad smile crept into David's face.

He held it in the cold water, moving it slowly from side to side
to help pass the oxygen-rich water through its gills. When the trout had recovered its strength he opened his hands and watched it dart back across the river. David wiped the water from his face.

David stayed crouching in the water. He looked at the three dead birch trees across the water. He wiped his eyes. He stood and took a deep breath. He picked up the rod and waded back to the bank.

Jeff, David, and Scott’s son stood silently around the picnic table. Jeff had folded the envelope and put it back in his pocket. The water was clear, and had a light coating of gray dust. Jeff opened his bag and handed a Budweiser and a cigar to the two teenage boys. “I know we’re all thinking about the same thing. Scott loved it here and I know he’s happy to be here with Grandpa Rick again.” The three of them sat at the table searching for peace from the river, each feeling their separate and shared pain. The boys would come to lean on Jeff in the months and years to come, and he gave them his strength until it finally ran out.

David walked back up the slope to the picnic table. He rested the rod against the table, keeping the reel out of the sand. With the clippers he cut the line from his fly and replaced it in the green box. After he had reeled in all the excess line he put Grandpa Rick’s reel in its case and placed it in the back pocket of Scott’s vest. He took his dad’s rod apart, separating the halves and slipping them into the protective sleeve before slipping the sleeve into the maroon rod case. He put the vest back on, picked up the rod case and the box, and walked back through the woods to the car. His aging knees forced him to move more slowly than he had on previous trips to the river.

His heart was heavy but his head was quiet. The shadows of his three mentors had stayed on the river, waiting for him to join them. As he drove away he wiped his eyes again, thinking of all that they had taught him about fishing and living and dying.
WITHERING LOVE
Katie Davenport

Scratching the stars out of the sky with just my fingers
would be an easy task
They would quickly be gone and the darkness would reside

Then

I would plant those stars in the ground with just my hands.
No trees would bloom.
Nothing
Nothing.
But isn’t it beautiful anyway when I look up?

I did it all myself.
But, I can’t anymore; I won’t.
And neither can you—though you never did.
It should be easier than this.
Nothing.
Nothing.
We are ugly.
many joys of sidewalk games
were halted suddenly when the
sewer swallowed precious
items in the silence of its yawn:
fallen skate keys, hopscotch
tokens, a collection helplessly
out of reach, floating in oil—
slicked puddles, shored by mud,
reeking debris—
no longer a presence at an age
of misplaced glasses, struggles
to remember names, yet—
two brutal faces appear on a
burned memory—boys, pumped
with hormones, prey at the ready
to reach climax without remorse;
they hid in the dank basement
of an unsuspecting house,
where a childhood curiosity
turned to shame, an innocence
seeped under the door, flowing
like rain water, hugging the
curb, descending unnoticed
into the rank storm sewer.
Yesterday, the vacationers started arriving. These are the people seeking adventure, hoping for a moose-sighting, hungry for the best Maine lobster in this small town of only 2,000 quiet residents. On Fridays, families trek together from their cozy rental cabins to the transfer station, where an old man waits to collect the kitchen scraps and used-up shopping lists from their week. They are unusually inquisitive, far more curious about him than Sanford’s citizens who, in their heads, hardly separate the garbage man from the garbage. The first flock of summer visitors had two kids, one a little boy about five or six.

"Can I touch it?" he whispered to his mother. He pointed at the nest protruding from Frank the-garbage-man’s dirtied chin.

The woman hesitated, waiting for the old man’s reaction. Frank had it all ready.

"Go right ahead buddy! It’s cleaner than it looks." He winked at the nervous mom.

It’s not unusual for kids to ask this, tugging on their parents’ sleeves and speaking as though Frank wasn’t still five feet away. Some allow it, others hush their children and give an apologetic nod. He doesn’t care either way. He even likes the feeling sometimes, their tiny hands jerking shyly at the long gray curls. He imagines Suzanna in all of them.

Frank thought of her this morning as he cooked breakfast at dawn. The swings in his backyard played in the early July wind, coolness pushing against the kitchen windowpane, and he saw her there for a moment. Years ago, he’d make scrambled eggs before school and she called them “scrambles,” but Frank tries not to think of this at breakfast. He thinks about the weather and if he’ll do laundry that night. It’s comforting, the deep churning sound the washing machine makes, noisy as though there could
be someone else in the house with him, tapping a foot or playing the piano
or watching TV beside him. The baby grand in the living room shines with
fresh polish—the one item in the house he bothers to keep clean. At 67, he
sees no point in polishing his own appearance, with no one but the mirrors
to care anymore.

Frank’s beard is looking worse these days, untrimmed for months
and twisting in gray-brown coils like the murky river that curls behind the
transfer station. Day in and day out, bits of orange peels, moldy bread and
fat trimmings cling to his corduroys and drip from the brim of his favorite
navy baseball cap. He rotates the sweatshirts that sag on his aging upper
body each day. But it’s a tough, muscular body, one that’s lifted and torn
and fought its whole life. One that takes pride in doing a job no one else
wants to. His fingernails look as though he claws through garbage all day,
and he’s proud to say he does. His pop always said it was an honor to
do the work that people really, truly need. That’s why Frank chucks their
junk everyday—people need to rid themselves of things sometimes, and his
sturdy hands are there for them.

But despite what the town of Sanford might think, he’s not all
—being the only thing he could get interested in during junior high. He
has one of those televisions with the antennae still on it, can’t take the
technology boom these days. He believes all a man should do with his
hands is two things: work hard and salute his country. Frank’s pop just
about wrote that on a banner and hung it over their garage when he was
a kid. But the 20-foot American flag between the oaks out front did the
trick. Now, Frank can’t stand food processors and Macintosh. Things to
distract a man from these goals, make him sit at a computer all day and
do “research”—when no one really knows what that means. If the 20-foot
flag didn’t do it, fourteen months in Vietnam was enough to harden in
him these responsibilities. The History Channel’s documentaries and those
slow-speaking British narrators keep that determination alive, when the
The newest bored generation is only shooting down the enemy on their computer screens.

The only programs Frank doesn’t watch are the ones on Vietnam; an image caught his eye once, passing the channel, and he’d had to call in sick to work for the first and only time in his whole life. It was of a Viet Cong guerrilla group preparing to attack a South Vietnamese camp, all grainy but he could still see their faces, growling with an anger that Frank hated but that boiled in him, too, every time he remembered the pain they’d poured on the innocent. How very many they could not save. Pop would say that’s another responsibility, though, to remember—always remember, so you know why you work so hard for this country each day. Nights in his armchair by the TV, Frank starts up a long-time habit. In slow, steady circles, he rubs his left kneecap with increasing amounts of pressure. When the pain becomes too much, he lets up, kneading a little softer. It is mindless; his fingers know just when to relieve that dangerous pressure. Like picking at a scab—knowing it will hurt to continue, but wanting to keep going, to feel gratifying pain a moment longer. Or swallowing on a sore throat over and over, unconsciously wondering if the knot is still there. After more than a year abroad, Frank’s knee gave out during a search and destroy mission in 1972. The U.S. had to send him home; besides, everyone assumed the war would be over soon. He was terrified to return limping.

And the return could not have been worse met—millions of Americans in contest with their own nation, a nightmare for the loyal. To Frank’s surprise, little Suzanna was no longer the harmless, bubbling 6-month-old he remembered; she seemed a real person now, standing and pointing, staring at him everywhere he went. His Jeannie was different too.

“Cat got out,” was the first thing she said to Frank when he walked in the door. After fourteen months god knows where, and the damn cat got out. He dropped his bag by the front door and stared at Jeannie a moment,
jiggling up and down there in the kitchen doorway —Suzanna on her hip, but almost too big to be there anymore. His wife stared back and they were not the same; that he could see clearly.

As Frank wandered the neighborhood, he couldn’t get the image out of his head of how Suzanna’d grown. He had remembered her so tiny, a doll he carried in one arm. He wondered if she would even know him, now. She might have, he thought, if Jeannie hadn’t tried so hard to prevent it. It seemed Jeannie thought he was dangerous, a different man from the one who’d left. In a way she was right, Frank knew, but only different for the memories in his head. His love for them was the same, but Jeannie couldn’t touch the hands that had touched, held, fired a gun into a wild enemy. They were all three afraid, but no one ever said it.

Frank finally found Middy that day, sniffing around the Wilson farm down the road. He marveled at that cat gallivanting so near Jim Wilson’s three German Shepherds; he wondered if it might be trying to get itself killed. When he came through the front door again, Jeannie was cooking eggs. Frank put the cat down and wiped his feet on the landing; Middy disappeared in a flash of autumn red.

“So how’s my girl?” he said, home finally.

“Down for a nap, don’t wake her.” Jeannie hardly looked up. Frank glanced at the kitchen floor’s sage linoleum, peeling at the corners even worse than when he’d left.

“I meant you,” he said, but stayed put. There should have been a handbook for this, the great returns, Frank thought.

“I called a guy about the floor,” she said, eyes on the peeling corners, still scrambling those eggs.

This is how it was. She never told him exactly what happened, but Frank knew. He knew those nuts at the university had got to her, made her believe he was part of some terrible plot to bring down democracy and shame the nation. Those silly secretary ladies and their gossip, clacking
their nails and trying to talk politics like the hopped-up professors they
groped in custodian closets—it sickened him. It broke Frank’s heart thinking
of the days they first met, he scooping nuts at the carnival on weekends off
the truck, Jeannie volunteering at the ticket booth. A scoop of ice cream
later and they were falling all over each other in love. It seemed to Frank
that everything was easy in those days, chivalry in dating still valued, plus
he’d inherited Pop’s old Chevy Chevelle...all forgotten when Jeannie landed
the reception job and went to staff meetings with important professors
lecturing about problematical aspects of integrated higher learning. What
hurt Frank most though—his little girl was hers now, on Jeannie’s side by
default because he’d been gone. From then on, the only friend in his own
house was bourbon.

To make matters worse, the bosses wouldn’t let Frank do the
route anymore. He’d been in waste management since he jumped ship
from school at fifteen. Hanging on the backs of roving trucks, chucking
bags and eating lunch with one hand gripping the truck’s behind—it was
freedom; he could feel it in the wind tickling his first facial hairs. It was
just called “trash pick-up” back then, actually, until political correctness
became a fad like GI Joe, Ouija boards or eyeglasses with no lenses. When
the Waste Management high-ups said didn’t he think it would be nice to
try another aspect of the job, Frank said no he didn’t, the current position
was just as nice as needed. He didn’t know what they meant by “aspect.”
But after a few months on the truck’s tiny back platform and three perilous
falls (that damned knee driving hard into the gravelly Maine earth), man-
agement made it clear he would be relocated or released. So Frank moved
to a new platform, a larger one at the edge of a gaping trash pit—the town
dump, where he still is today.

***

As Frank walks to the transfer station, cars pass full of children on
their way to school, or in the case of this July, summer camp in Acton—the
town next door that fights to be “smaller” than Sanford, but will never win. Kids gawk out their windows at the trash man being somewhere other than the station, and Frank chuckles to himself. He doesn’t know them and they don’t know him, but he imagines it must be how he feels when he sees the bank clerk shopping for groceries. He assumes they all think he’s crazy or something, holing up in his house and chucking their trash with a smile, but Frank was just never the type to schmooze and gossip and plan dinner parties. Jeannie always did that.

Sometimes, Frank feels that he’s made a certain impression on the station’s visitors. He likes to think that maybe they remember him for years to come. If only for the loopy smile he can’t set straight, or the wild nest of a beard. He wonders how they see him, the strange character wading in garbage. But their own names and stories are erased from his mind quickly, like a grade school teacher hurrying to wipe the board before the kids get antsy. The bourbon is Frank’s chalkboard eraser. But once in a while, an encounter leaves a footprint in the sand of his eroding mind. Tiny grains shift and reveal a small space for something significant. Something to sneak in beside the dates and names he’s learned on the History Channel, to slide up next to the broken shards of his past and leave Frank wondering for days if there is more to his life than empty milk cartons.

On this July Fourth weekend, Frank performs the day’s labor with his usual commitment. His pop never stood for half-assed work, and to Frank, dedication celebrates the same responsibilities as that 20-foot flag in his childhood yard. He stands at the edge of the enormous garbage pit and shovels excess trash from the perimeter into the cement-surrounded hole. It looks like the foundation of a building that was never built, filled with the things no one wanted. Beside the pit is a platform only a few feet wide, where he positions himself to take people’s bags and toss them in. They drive up, get out, hand him garbage, and he chucks it.

Immediately behind the narrow platform is a shed with a wobbly
wooden door, where Frank sits inside to rest before the next customers arrive. On shelves lining the walls, heaps of knick-knacks lie in messy order. A shelf for old magazines, one for shoes with the heels worn off, a bucket on the floor for fading magic markers. In the corner, electronics ranging from hand-held radios to TVs so old they must be in black-and-white. And so on. After the accident, when Frank couldn’t look out his kitchen window any longer, he realized how very taken-for-granted most things were. He polished the piano to a perfect shine that day, and when he found himself utterly alone not long after, he began collecting pieces the visitors tried to dump. Over thirty years, Frank saved them. That dumping had suddenly seemed so opposite to everything his father encouraged, and he couldn’t bear to watch people toss things someone else might treasure. It was too easy to lose everything, Frank had learned that, and so he held on to the things no one wanted. Everything is caked with dust now, crawling with spider-web homes that have long since lost their owners.

As the July afternoon heats up, Frank pauses to look at the one thing in this room that someone did want. On a high shelf is a small picture frame, unnoticeable among the clutter—he wanted it this way, wanted her to shine above the rest. Half-standing from his stool, Frank reaches up for the millionth time to take the picture in his work-worn hands. In the photo, a ten-year-old girl sits beaming in a pile of leaves just gathered by her father. The image of an ancient autumn burns his eyes as the girl grins in a knitted scarf and down jacket. In the corner of the picture, a father’s boots and brown pants are barely visible—cut off by the person behind the lens. Frank picks a speck of dust off the frame and returns it to its place. Some days, that image makes his knee burn more than ever—a reminder of that treacherous homecoming. Others, he sets the photo down with something like a new sense of purpose and when he gets home, he makes that baby grand sparkle. Just in case.

Around noon, a family arrives in their bright white Honda Pilot.
Mopping lunch leftovers from his beard, Frank emerges from the shed and greets them with a smile. The boyish blonde father in the driver’s seat says a few words to his wife before rolling down the window.

“Hi there,” he says, stepping from the car. “I’m Charlie.”

“Frank,” says the garbage man. “Nice to meet ya.”

“We’re staying just down the road on Lake Wilson, so we’ll be over here a few times in the next two weeks,” Charlie explains.

Frank nods, excited at the prospect of some consistent new-comers to talk to this week. He lifts the trunk for Charlie and the men begin to pull bags together.

“You’re quite the lifter, there, huh Frank?”

“Just been lifting junk my whole life,” Frank says with a wink. “Watch the platform,” he adds. “Easy to misjudge your step.” It is one of his oldest fears, started that first day on the new job. Somehow falling from the back of a moving trash truck seems preferable to the dangers of tumbling into this gaping hole.

“Been doing this a long time?” Charlie asks.

“Since fifteen,” Frank says proudly. “Only time I wasn’t doing it, I was in Vietnam.”


Frank chuckles and hurls the final bag. “On the outside,” he responds. Charlie shuts the trunk and goes to the driver’s side, sticking his head through the open window.

“Beth?” he calls toward the backseat.

A little girl peeks shyly around from behind the car.

“There,” says Frank.

Charlie throws his hands up. “She’s my little wanderer,” he jokes.

Beth, picking at the tutu around her waist, moves toward her father.

“I still can’t find it, Daddy,” she whines, scuffing her slipper against the pavement. Blonde curls are plastered to her head and she balls
her hands in little fists at her sides. When she sees Frank by the shed, Beth moves closer to her father and pinches his pant leg between finger and thumb.

"We'll find Mimi later," says Charlie firmly. "She lost her doll in the car somehow," he explains.

Frank can't tear his eyes away from the little ballerina. She is six, maybe seven. He wonders if she plays the piano.

"Bethy here is my little choo-choo train, right Beth?" Charlie continues. "Always getting into something. Too much curiosity for her age, I think." He laughs.

The garbage man bends down to Beth's level. "You like dancing, huh?"

She shrugs.

"The prettiest dancer I've ever seen," says her proud father. Frank can't help but remember he was that way once, boasting to visitors about next week's recital and the songs too hard for any other eight-year-old to learn but his. He peeks at old sheet music once in a while, piled in one corner of the shed. Even now, the notes are clear in his mind.

A voice calls from inside the car, "Don't forget about your sister!"

"Right," says Charlie.

He explains that the family is meeting his sister and her fiancé for dinner at their house in Acton that night, and asks for the closest liquor store to stop at on the way.

Beth is hopping up and down in the corner of Frank's vision. He imagines the old swing set, still there—he can't bear to take it down, the monkey bars swinging back and forth with no one to grab them. He can almost smell the sharpness of bourbon, oaky and burnt like toast dipped in molasses. His head fills with the screaming and he remembers thinking at first that it was an animal, a wild cat or rabid dog invading his back yard. He had gone inside for just one more drink; she was ten, no need for round-the-clock supervision anymore, right? Those precious sips were the last.

"Try down 109. 'Bout three miles from Sanford center," Frank
directs the father.

Charlie thanks him, takes Beth’s hand and opens the car door. Frank is still in 1978, smashing bottles onto the trees in the front yard, his heart racing and images of his father’s flag flashing in his head, too frantic to bring the half-empties to the transfer station. Not wanting to mix the oak stink into his life any longer. The rough tinkling of shattering glass had seemed almost beautiful in the silence, tuned to the splashes of sun-streaked brown spraying the pines.

Behind him, the shed door is propped, and Frank watches Beth peek into the room of knick-knacks. Eyes widening, she pops onto her tiptoes. “What are those?” she breathes, pulling her hand away from her father.

A row of ten dolls are visible in sitting positions against the wall. Some have buttons or eyes missing, most bear ripped clothing and pen marks on their tatters. They are a sad bunch, the ones that no one wanted. Frank shuts the door hurriedly as Beth scurries over.

“Noooo,” she wails. “I want one!” She kicks at the door.

“What do you want?” Charlie’s hands hang in the air again, confused.

“A dollyyyyy.”

“We’ll find your dolly later,” he says, impatient now.

She will not stop shrieking; it is so sudden. Frank can’t stand the sound, the cry of an abandoned animal in his ears.

“I want one of those dollys,” she cries, pointing at the pitiful shed.

“What is she talking about?” Charlie asks.

“Dunno,” Frank says with a shrug. If the occasional visitor spies the collection, it is always with a look of sympathy. Why? Frank has never understood. So he keeps the shed shut tight. But the wanting of this child is making his head spin, his knee aching from leaning distractedly on one leg for too long.

Charlie lifts his daughter and carries her, howling, to the car.
Frank waves as the family buckles in and pulls swiftly away. He shakes away a few unwanted tears. He slaps the shed door, hard, thinking he should have given that precious girl a doll, damn it. But Frank straightens quickly, wipes salt from the edges of his graying eyes. Pop had never taught sadness. The man had shared nothing about his war when he’d returned—just another thing to plague Frank with guilt all these years, imagining Pop so strong when Vietnam gnawed so terribly at himself. He checks the lock on the shed and decisively brushes the little girl from his mind. Too hard to dwell, he knows, though he’s been doing it for years. If war taught him anything, it was that time doesn’t heal all wounds. It was just too much—that doll, the girl, monkey bars swinging in his head. At that moment he’d taken a page from his father’s book: ignore it and perhaps the pain will go away. Besides, that collection was for his eyes only, a quiet amassing of the abandoned. Still, he can’t push it from his mind. A little girl needed something and he had hesitated.

July’s evening chill sets in and Frank begins his closing duties. The last visitors of the day left in a hurry and one bag had split open as they shoved it into his hands. Sour milk dribbled onto one boot and droplets of white hung in the dank air when he pitched the bag into the abyss. He sweeps the platform of remnants now, and sets his shovel against the wall of the shed, careful to keep it away from the nearby edge of the garbage crater. He is exhausted, finding the days longer than ever this year. He can think only of the old days, the tinkling of the piano; he even misses the cat a little.

Frank ensures the shed is locked and shuffles gingerly across the lot to the recycling building about fifty yards away. He pauses for a moment inside, unsure why he’s entered, then remembers to check that the bins don’t need emptying. He tosses a few forgotten cans to their rightful place. When he turns back to face the pit, a flash of pink catches his eye.
by the shed.

It is Beth, her tiny hands pushing on the shed door, frantic misery on her face. She is wearing pastel-pink pajamas and no shoes.

“Hey!” Frank calls. “How’d you get back here?”

Beth jumps and turns to flee, she shouldn’t be there, they both know that, but the family’s vacation house is so close and Frank can only assume she sneaked away after dinnertime to come back for a doll—those silly dolls he never should have kept, he thinks now, picking them from garbage bags full of old toys that families discard when kids grow up. Always, always, abandoning. He couldn’t take it.

Suddenly the little girl so far away in the darkness is Frank’s, sitting at the shining piano, her tiny fingers making those beautiful sounds. The melodies had seemed, at first, enough to cover his thoughts, the terrible dreams, the looks of fear Jeannie gave when she didn’t know what he was thinking. Couldn’t understand the shame of returning lame. But it wasn’t enough, finally.

As Frank steps toward the girl on the platform, he sees she is scared. Her family must be hysterical and she does not know this man, the trash man who only wants to help her, bring her home safely, pick her up and protect her like he always meant to do. She darts away from the shed and there it is, the shovel, invisible at dusk, and she trips and she is falling. Down, down, down into the gaping depression in the earth.

Frank sees her disappear from the edge, that platform too small for anyone but him to navigate. He stares and then he is running; in his mind the girl at the piano is suddenly ten and Jeannie won’t look at him and his breath smells always of bourbon.

Back then, though he wanted to, he couldn’t stop. “Ain’t hurting anyone but my own liver,” Frank joked to Jeannie, calling to her as she rushed out the front door. His vision swam sickeningly. A drunk, a filthy drunk you don’t deserve us, I’ll take her with me someday and then you’ll
see. That’s what she’d said before leaving. She was on her way to the university again, he was sure of it. Those people who turned her against him. She didn’t know, oh god, the humiliation that he could not try harder for his country, his job, his family. Tossed aside to the dump like a one-eyed doll.

His kneecap sears but he knows he’ll keep going this time.

Frank had left her out back. Suzanna was playing on the swings and when Jeannie stormed off he wandered into the kitchen for just one more, another swig to ease the mind when Jeannie came home to yell again, because he knew she would. Outside was the little girl who seemed every day further from him and closer to her mother. He had dozed off. It was an accident, only an accident. Suzanna fell from the monkey-bars and he woke up to the screaming, Jeannie telling him it was time, look what he’d done. A mild concussion they told him, but you’ll have to give her up because Jeannie’s sure to take custody in court after this. And then they were gone. Somewhere in New York now, and his little girl in the autumn leaves turning twenty-five soon.

But the girl in the pink pajamas still only a child, she is down there, in the gunk and grime, swimming in mold and tossed-away kitchen knives. Frank thinks of the rats he sees each day, gnawing at the things no one wanted, left behind to rot, and he can’t allow it this time, he hopes he can not. He’s been going on a broken knee for fifteen years and he wills his old body to keep moving, to do what’s right this time, but he is afraid. The pain is bearable, only a bit more than the pressure he sets on it each night, a preparation to accomplish something again. Perhaps not for a nation, this time, but for a girl he can save, finally, this time.
THE LINE RECEIVED
Sarah O’Brien

There are several things
Which make situations better
Several correct things to say:
“My prayers are with you today.”
“I’m so sorry, dear.”
“That’s sad to hear.”
“...In a better place.”
I WANT TO PUNCH YOU IN THE FACE
But I’ll just smile, to myself,
Knowing that the several things
Are not easy to find...nearly impossible.
Special people can solve the scavenger hunt—
They can find what should be said.
People who can read my mind, get into my head...
“My prayers are with you today.”
“I’m so sorry, dear.”
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“That’s sad to hear.”
“...In a better place.”

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"Can I get you anything else?" the cheery waitress asked us, a cheesy too-bright smile on her face. Michael glanced down and raised his hand to his forehead, as if to shield his eyes from the brightness of her smile, the sunniness of her demeanor. The sun shone in through the window beside our table. Too bright.

“No. We’re good,” he told the woman, at the same time as I said: Yes, I’ll take another coffee, please. We looked at each other for a half-second; then averted our eyes. He turned his head toward the waitress, and I found myself looking at her, too. Her light brown hair was tied back in a messy bun. She had chapped lips and a nose ring. But her ears were not pierced. Her nametag read, ‘Hi! I’m Lucy!’ I vaguely wondered if that was even her name. “Two more coffees. Thanks,” Michael said to ‘Lucy.’ I’ll be right back with those,—or something like that—was her happy response. Does she really enjoy her job? I wondered.

Michael wasn’t wasting any time with musings. “What’s this about? Is there something else you need to tell me?” he didn’t ask—he demanded. “I thought we were done here.” Eyes glowering. Now making unapologetic eye contact.

I met his violent gaze with a calm and collected look. Manufactured. The opposite of how I felt. Maybe it was the sun or maybe something else. I blinked; I looked away first.

“I just… we can’t just…” A quick peek confirmed: he was still penetrating me with his angry stare. “…Talk?” It was all I could manage.

“I have a life you know. I have a job. I have places to be,” he spewed. He threw his words at me—each phrase was its own separate blow. Then, his tone softened, “I wouldn’t expect someone like you to
understand. Grown-ups have jobs. We have responsibilities. Oh, that’s a big word, how silly of me. Responsibility—it means you have to do certain things because you have to, not necessarily because you want to.”

I did what I always do. I focused. I zoned in, in this case on the syrup dispenser on the café table. There was syrup dripping in a thin line toward the table, and syrup all over the cap. Perhaps a small child, here for breakfast with his parents, had used it before we got here. Under the dispenser was a miniscule puddle of the substance, as sticky and slimy (and, I knew if I tasted it, too-sweet) as the words that dripped out of Michael’s mouth. I heard the double meaning; it was nothing I didn’t already know.

So why did I have the sudden sensation that I had taken a giant sip of straight syrup?

I did not take my eyes away from the syrup, which was shining, changing colors in the sun’s light. Before I could respond, Hi-I’m-Lucy arrived back at the table. She said something. Michael said something. Have you ever seen syrup in the sunlight before?

“Are you even going to drink it?” he snapped, bringing me out of my reverie. I slowly shook my head. What could I say?

“You are utterly impossible,” he reminded me. “Absolutely unbearable. Why must you drag this out? Do you enjoy pain?” But we both knew: on Wednesdays, there was no other way to feel. On Wednesdays, over coffee, pain was indistinguishable, unable to be differentiated from any other emotion. Wednesdays had been her favorite day.

I knew I had to say something. I was the one who ordered the second cup, after all. I finally tore my eyes away from the syrup. Focused instead on his suit. On the red stripes on his navy blue tie. Or was it navy blue stripes on a red tie?

“I just wish...” Wish wasn’t the right word. “...would appreciate...
if we actually talked once in a while,” I muttered to the tie. There. It was out.

“And what are we doing right now?” Michael was fighting water with fire. Just a small puddle of water, as big as the puddle of syrup. It wasn’t even close to being enough to extinguish him.

“This isn’t talking, this is...” We both knew what this was. An obligation. “What I mean is, I just think it could maybe be... good... if we had, like, conversations...” This was coming out all wrong. The more I tried to fix it, the worse it sounded. “She wouldn’t have wanted—” He cut me off:

“How do you know what she would have wanted? You were never even home! You have no right to tell me what your mother would have wanted!” He said it in a scary, low voice. I momentarily wondered what people around us were thinking, what they saw. Two grown men; one with graying hair, the other with dark brown. The older one, in the suit, leaning in, speaking quietly to the other, whose eyes were fixed on the older one’s chest. Maybe they saw friends, talking a business deal. Maybe they saw gay lovers, having a spat. These thoughts perverted me.

The worst part was that Michael was right. I had been away during all the crucial years. I had gone away to college, I had gone away to travel, I had gone away to write, I had gone away to get away. The phone call. That was the only reason I returned.

Michael motioned for the check. “We’re done here,” his brown eyes bore into mine. “I may be a few minutes late next Wednesday. Meeting,” He said this last word with emphasis; he never did consider writing to be a real job. He checked his watch impatiently, money in hand.

“I trust you can handle this?” he thrust the bills into my hand. Contact. Barely. He picked up his things, and turned for the door. Two steps. Away from me.

“Bye Dad,” I blurted, unthinking.
He paused. I saw it; I knew I saw it. Stopped for just a second. One Mississippi. But then, kept walking, at the same steady pace, out the door. Pretending he had not heard.

The water hadn’t put out the fire; and now I felt it spilling silently out of my eyes. “Is this all set, sir?” I blinked a few times. It was Lucy, gesturing to the check and money on the table. I focused. That’s when I saw it.

There, on the inside of her wrist: an intricate design, surrounding one word. “MOM.” With two dates underneath. How had I not noticed it before?

I lifted the money and the check, handed these to her. “Thank you.” I said it with a smile. A genuine smile. She smiled back, still as cheery as ever. Have a Nice Day, sir. I stood up as she walked away; my eyes landed on the coffee, the one I had left untouched. I walked outside, breathing in the crisp autumn air and feeling somewhat lighter. The day suddenly seemed manageable. And one thought, on repeat in my head: Maybe we are all more alike than we think.
I was still little when I realized that I wasn’t like everybody else. It was a long time ago now, a whole five years, so I got used to it. But it took me a while to figure it out.

My teacher handed out a word list on the first day of school for us to learn. The words were ones I’d never seen before and they were weird. I raised my hand and told Teacher that “The words hurt my mouth.”

I don’t think she knew what I was talking about. She frowned at me and I looked around at the other kids. Their faces were wrinkled like they’d seen a squirrel ran over by a car. I tried to explain “they taste funny and the sides of the words hurt my mouth. I don’t like them.”

It didn’t help. The faces of those kids didn’t change. Teacher looked more angry. She told me, “Don’t talk nonsense.”

I didn’t know what that meant then. I didn’t know that nonsense is something that a grown-up doesn’t understand and it makes them shifty and scared.

After, I figured it out. I stopped talking about this thing that makes my friends stop being friends with me and makes my parents take me to a doctor.

He told me “You have Synaesthesia.”

Which, in case you don’t know, means that I’m a freak. The doctor gave me a long, boring, confusing explanation of it, but I didn’t listen to him. Because it didn’t matter. His words and my parents’ faces said Freak as loudly as the kids in my class when they shouted it at me across the playground at recess.

What he should have said was, “You taste words. You feel them inside your mouth and down your throat” instead of “Freak.”
Because that’s what I can do. Or that’s what happens to me. I don’t mean to. I tried to stop it. But I can’t help it and it makes me a Freak.

At first, before the doctor and the Synaesthesia-That-Means-Freak, I was “precocious.”

I liked that one better because that one means that I’m better than the rest of the kids in my class. I was that for a while. I liked it, but it didn’t last. I didn’t think it would anyway. I knew from the Dead Squirrel looks that I wasn’t better. I was Not Like Them.

The first time I repeated a curse word, a really bad one, I threw up all over my best friend’s brand new sneakers. He never spoke to me again. The word, the F-word, was slimy and completely disgusting. I didn’t understand why that nurse looked so worried and confused when I tried to tell her why I got sick.

She wore that same expression later that same school year when I turned up crying in her office because Teacher had given us “Starve” and it made my belly feel hollow and my mouth feel sandy and crackly. That was the time when Precocious-Better-Than-Classmates changed into Synaesthesia-That-Means-Freak.

This was all a very long time ago, when I was only six (before I got to school, I was “so bright” though I don’t know why being bright made me go to school earlier than my sisters and brothers. I looked in the mirror for ages trying to see the brightness, but I never could.) Now, I’m eleven. Old enough to hear Freak beneath other people’s words. Old enough to know what I am. Old enough to know that there is only one thing I can do to make it stop.

I’m old enough to know that there is only one way to make the words stop feeling in my mouth.
IN THE CROW’S NEST

James Doyle

Weeks now, squinting for a palm
tree at the edge of solid air,
for where the waves thin out
to flatten against coral rock,
sidle up like salt
lovers along slow curls
of sand. His eyes are too
pitted to believe anything
but true earth after all
this time staring down
the water’s silt masquerades,
low clouds turning their bulk
on the edges of a hidden
whirlpool, reef’s dark
mound out of thin air
and just as quickly
disappearing back into wind.
He has used up his prayers,
started them over so many
times purgatory grew like
a lining in his blood,
the small shocks that
promised and failed until
his weight shifted,
dizzied, the crow’s nest
suddenly mid-air,
cut loose from the deck
farther below, day
by day. He is detached
now, a moment’s
possibility from flight
towards the volcanic
magnet of land breaking
the ocean’s skin,
first and last island,
the flag planted just
as the surface stops churning.
Sandstorm
wraps the world
wraps the world in a hairshirt
picks up bandages
pulls bandages off the dead
who rise and walk
who rise and walk eyes gliding
eyes gliding abrasive depth
abrasive depth

Wind cleans
its agony
its agony
on brick and stone
on brick and stone
the defining voice
the defining voice
sets suns
sets suns
into mica’s
into mica’s

Glowing feathers
Glowing feathers
somersault
somersault
behind each breath
behind each breath
THE BELL

Kenneth Frost

paces
its
iron
cage
at
evening
then
stops
to
wonder
what
the
hour
has
done.
I read: “Last words Liaison Kenji ever spoke were spoken at his daughter.”

“Why are you being like this?”

“What?”

“I said why are you being like this?”

“Like what?”

“I dunno. So cryptic. Spoken at his daughter. His last words. Relax.”

“You relax, asshole.”

“Just recently, your writing is getting all...mysterious.”

“You wanna hear it or not? It was your idea.”

“Just keep going with the story.”

Sigh. “I’m one line in, and you jump all over me.”

“Just keep going. And watch the language. We’re in a house of God.”

Sigh, and begin again. “Last words Liaison Kenji ever spoke were spoken at his daughter.”

“Is Liaison his first name?”

“Christ.”

“Christ is his first name?”

“No, Kenji is his first name. Kenji is a liaison. Liaison Kenji.”

“Beautiful. And don’t blaspheme.”

“May I continue? Maybe past line one?”

“Be my guest.”

Sigh, and begin again, again. “Last words Liaison Kenji ever spoke were spoken at his daughter. His sons, they were beside him as death took him. But Liaison Kenji, in his final throes of life, wrenched his bloody head toward the picture of his daughter on his desk and spoke his final phrase.”

“Dark.”

“That’s what I’m going for.”
"Too much babble, though."

"How do you mean?"

"First line is good, but only by itself. You can tell you started with that and then felt like you needed another sentence or two to make it a full paragraph."

I'm looking at the sheets of paper in my lap with my words on them. "So leave the first line to stand alone?"

"Maybe. The rest of it isn't bad, though. Just needs some fine tuning. But like I always tell you, try it out, if it doesn't work then you had it right the first time."

I'm scribbling down notes, I can hear people outside.

"Keep going."

Sigh. "The instruments used to murder Liaison Kenji were obvious: the snow globe used to bash his head in lay bloody by his body, and the letter opener was still sticking out of his chest, wedged between his ribs."

"Very dark."

"I feel like I'm rushing it though. Like I need something to intersperse throughout the narrative I've got already, slow it down."

Pause, and then, "Maybe. But you've got a nice touch with the weapon thing there. Unexpected. This is what I'm saying, you getting all mysterious."

Smile. "Just wait."

I hear him laugh through the wooden panels, I hear more and more people outside.

"Keep going."

Sigh. "His sons were nineteen and twenty six, and they cried as they watched their father die. They entered the room after the murderer had gone, and they dropped to their knees and begged their father to respond, to say anything, to look at them through eyes green instead of grey. They begged him to stay with them, they begged him to stay alive."

I stop, I hear more and more people, I hear rustling on the other side of the panels.
“Why’d you stop?”
“Don’t you have to go?”
“What time is it?”
“Five of.”
“Fuck.”
“Thought this was a house of God.”
“It is. But it’s mine so I can say whatever the fuck I want. Keep going.”
“They begged more of him, though, they begged to know who had taken
their father from them, they begged him, Papa, ¿quién le mató? Quién le mató?”
“Fuck is that?”
“It’s Spanish. Is that okay with you?”
“Would be if I had a translator.”
“They’re asking him, Who killed you? Who killed you?”
“So...this guy, Kenji, is it?”
“Yes.”
“What’s that, Japanese?”
“Yes.”
“And he speaks Spanish?”
“Yes.”
“Okay. Why?”
“Why not?”
“Well, why not make him Liaison Pablo, then we’re starting to make a
little more sense.”
“I could make him speak Japanese, too.”
“But you don’t want to.”
Shrug. “Like the name Kenji. Like the sound of Spanish. Plus the title is
in Spanish, and it’s a part of the story, and it’s a good title, and I’m not
changing it.”
“So cryptic, you are.”
“Fuck off. You have to go, or what?”
“Read me a little more. They can wait.”
“Liaison Kenji, he’s minutes from death. As blood leaks from his head and his heart, he manages to wrap his arm around his youngest son’s neck and bring his ear close, he manages to whisper, No que la persona, mi hijo. Qué cosa.”
“Translation?”
“He’s correcting his sons. They ask him who killed you. He says, not who, my son. What.”
“Interesting. So is it like a machine or something?”
Shrug. “Dunno yet, actually.”
“And you don’t think this whole Spanish thing is a setback?”
“How do you mean?”
“I mean I’m gonna have to ask you to keep translating. Is that what you want, for your readers to have to do more work?”
“I don’t really care, actually.”
He laughs. “I respect the hell out of that. When I wrote, all I could think about was the reader, and it made me a shittier writer every day.”
“And the decline continued until now, and now you’re here.”
“Fuck you. At least I have a job.”
“For which you receive no pay.”
“Just tell me the rest of what you’ve got.”
I’m looking down at my lap, my pages, my words. “It ain’t much. Long description of the scene, the blood and such, the picture of the daughter on the desk. The sons ask, ¿Lo que le mató? What killed you? More description of the scene, then at the end Liaison Kenji looks to his daughter’s photo and says, Habla ruso.”
Pause. “And that’s how it ends?”
“And that’s how it ends.”
“What does ruso mean?”
“Russian.”
“Habla ruso. It speaks Russian?”
“It speaks Russian.”
“Referring to the mystery murderer, of course.”
“Yep.”
“So you’ve got a Spanish-speaking Jap murdered by a Russian-speaking machine, all written in English.”
“Yep.”
“And Habla Ruso, that’s the title?”
“Yep.”
“It Speaks Russian.”
“Yep.”
I can hear more rustling on the other side of the panels, the crowd outside is getting talkative. “It’s five past,” I say.
“I know. But I’m not sure about where you’re going with this one. I’ll have to read it straight. Leave it on the seat.”
“I kinda want to take it home, work on it a little. Maybe scatter another something in between the paragraphs I’ve got. Slow it up a bit.”
“Could do.” I can tell by the slight strain in his voice that he’s standing up and getting ready. “Try putting a different ending on it.”
Shrug. “I dunno, the ending’s kinda the only thing I really like.”
“Well you can’t be married to the title and the ending, even if they’re the same two words. If you’re not open to changing either then you’re blocking where the story can go.”
“How do you mean?”
“Think about it. The first thing that is read, the last thing that is read. If you’re married to both, you’re siphoning the entire middle off. There’s only so many places it can go if you bookend it like that, you know?
“I know.”
“Try your interspersed narrative idea though. Maybe translate the fucking Spanish within the story while you’re at it.”
"I'll keep that in mind. So what kind of ending are you thinking?"
"Kid, I haven't even read the damn thing."
Sigh, and the rustling on the other side stops, and I hear the door latch lift.
"It's good, though," he says. "Sounds kinda like the beginnings of a spy novel or something. Habla ruso. Very ominous, very dark. You could keep the ending in that same dark mystery tone."
"Yeah." I'm looking at the pages in my lap, the pages with my words on them. "Or don't. Shock 'em. Give 'em light and happiness and birds and shit. I don't know. It's your story."
"Thanks."
"No problem, kiddo. See ya next week."
Smile. "You'll hear me, anyway."
I hear the latch lift all the way and the door open a crack. "That's what I meant."
I can hear his footsteps outside on the carpet floor, moving by the confessional, moving up the aisle and to the altar. I stand up and fold the pages and put them in my belt.
"Good afternoon, Father," I hear some people say to him.
My hand is on the latch, I can tell by the quiet that he's reached the altar. I slip out, and he's already over the Good Book, facing his people, his back to me. I walk towards the back of the church and hear him start mass as I leave.
"Peace be with you!"
AWAKE IN A DREAM

Chard deNiord

For just a second at the farmers’ market
I glimpsed her on the green as my beloved
stranger in shining garb, sudden raiment,
although I had seen her for forty years
in similar dress and knew her every look
and gesture. Although I knew I was regarding
her in a dream awake and would return
from this waking to go on sleeping.
It didn’t matter. I had seen her bedighted
in a cotton jumper. I had seen her transfigured
in a moment that passed in vain without her.
CRANE’S BEACH
Chard deNiord

The horizon was cleared for darkness.
Kelp lay scattered on the beach like bandages.
“Look,” I said.
“Those little scuttle marks emerging from the surf.
Where’s the body?”
GOING TO TOWN
Chard deNiord

She called to him from the living room,
"It's time the Thompsons went for a drive.
You better hurry, dear, cuz the motor's running."
"Ha! That's what you always say to get me
out of the tub. Just give me a minute."
Click click go the paws of the ancient dog
across the floor. Clink clink go the bottles
into the bag.

"Oh, let him drive. We'll sit
in back and wave at the trees that line the road
for a glimpse of us as we pass by with Mr. Dog
in his coat and hat."

"You're so poetic, honey,
by which I mean ridiculous. I'm ready."
"Let's go to town like the king and queen we are.
Dispose of the bottles and ignore our fame.
Stop at the store and get some cream.
Regard our errands as a mutual dream."
"Whatever you say, sweet heart, I'm yours."
"I think that's best for no reason at all."
"You're so sexy when you decide. Decide again."
"Let's hurry then, my dove, sweet frog,
rank origin of the world, while there's still time."
IT'S HARD NOW
Chard deNiord

I need a scribe to follow me around with pen in hand and notebook open. I've grown lazy and too enlightened to write anything down myself anymore. Isn't it enough to say something once and then forget it? Wonder later if you ever said it? "Refuse all credit," I tell the crow for anything a cloud transmits, or tree, etc. That's what I believe. In the meantime, I'm writing on air as if it were paper. "Let go," I tell the chickadee who's really me. "Empty your head to hear the news, then speak with a tongue that moves like a fish in the deepest waters."
A CONVERSATION WITH CHARD deNIORD

Kerry Vaughan and Max Widmer

KERRY VAUGHAN AND MAX WIDMER: When did you first realize you wanted to become a poet?

CHARD deNIORD: I started writing seriously when I was in high school, but at that age, it’s pretty daunting. It was a hard thing for me to admit to myself that I was a poet; I still don’t. But as a teenager, how do you explain that to your parents that you want to be a poet? I went to Lynchburg College (in Virginia), and started off majoring in pre-med. My dad was a doctor, my grandfather was a doctor. But I realized it wasn’t for me. I was getting Cs in chemistry, and that’s not how you get into medical school. So, I ended up majoring in religious studies, thinking: Maybe I’ll become a minister. I was still writing, reading a lot, and studying the bible. I went to Yale Divinity School. During my time there, my homiletics professor, William Muehl said to me: “Chard, don’t take this the wrong way, but your sermons are way too poetic and your poems are way too preachy.”

KW/MW: Where did you go from there?

CD: I decided to stop writing sermons and start writing more poetry. I went through a long period of what you might call an “apprenticeship,” writing on my own and showing people secretly. I worked in a mental hospital for five years in New Haven. Then I began applying to MFA programs. I was accepted at the Iowa Writer’s Workshop after applying two times. I moved my family there. It was tough at first: no job, no insurance, no financial
aid. I worked at a local church as a youth group leader. Somehow we survived. That was really the start of things.

**kv/mw:** Do you think of yourself as a poet?

**CD:** It’s interesting. I just interviewed a bunch of senior American poets—Donald Hall, Maxine Kumin, Ruth Stone, Jack Gilbert, Robert Bly, Lucille Clifton, Galway Kinnell. That idea of “being a poet” came up. I was probably most struck by Galway Kinnell’s response. He said, “A poet should not call himself a ‘poet.' Being a poet is so marvelous an accomplishment that it would be boasting to say it of oneself. I thought this well before I read that Robert Frost took the same view.”

**kv/mw:** Do you try to read a lot of poetry? Are you at all influenced by what you read?

**CD:** Unconsciously, what I read does influence me. I try to read as much as I can when I’m not teaching during weekends, summers, sabbaticals. I try to review a lot also. Reviewing forces me to read closely and hone my critical eye. It’s interesting to see who’s saying what now. It’s become such a huge field in terms of the number of poets out there. It’s important now for poets to take on reviewing more responsibly. At the same time, there’s too much to read.

**kv/mw:** Do you have a particular audience in mind when you write?

**CD:** I write for the large audience of myself first. I want to make sure I’ve got it right, that there’s an organic quality to my work, language that is also my breath, my heartbeat, and my music. At the same time, I don’t want to hear it in a way that’s outside of myself. My hope is always that it connects; that it’s just as much an art as it is writing. In order to hear with
that “ear of another,” that takes what Yeat’s called a “cold eye.” I try to keep my eyes cold.

KV/MW: After you finish a poem, how long until you share it with the world? Is there one person you let read your poems before anyone else? Do you have a standard practice, or does it vary from poem to poem?

CD: I read my poems to my wife first. She’s heard them for so many years now. She’s become a pretty good reader and is always there to hear the first draft. Then I send it out to a few friends, but not always. Finally, I have to decide if it should go to my editors.

KV/MW: Speaking of editors, do they ever get in the way of your creative mindset?

CD: Actually, most of them have made me more concise. For years, editors said things like: “What the heck is this?”—a whole stanza I wrote and thought was great. I think I was so far inside my own mind that I was actually blind to what I was writing.

KV/MW: You worked as a clinician in a mental hospital. Is your poetry at all influenced by your time there?

CD: You’d think that would be the gold mine of material. And it was. I have stories I’ll remember forever. But you know, I’ve had very little success writing about those cases. I was an evaluating clinician; I triaged folks that came in off the streets. I heard pretty much everything. But I’ve never really learned how to use it all. Maybe I’ve become discouraged. It’s hard to change that gold of strange behavior into poetry. Most of what I heard was stuff not even the best fiction writer could make up. There’s a difference between bizarre true stories, like the ones you hear as a therapist,
and memorable fiction; the first is sensational, pathological news that you hear once and then move on with compassion and clinical consideration, while the second is news that you want to return to again and again for all sorts of literary, emotional and intellectual reasons.

**kv/mw:** So have you ever used your clinical experience in any of your poetry?

**cd:** I actually wrote a play about one case called “Ground Zero.” It might have worked; I’m not really sure. It’s about a patient who thinks he’s from another planet. I actually treated someone who thought that. I also wrote a poem many years ago called “Happy Hour,” which is about my last shift I worked on the inpatient research unit at Yale/New Haven Hospital. But that’s about it.

**kv/mw:** If you were a fiction writer, do you think you would’ve had better luck with such “gold?”

**cd:** I would probably use a lot of that material in some way, but again because those non-fictional, tragic stories—case studies—were too real, too merely real, what the writer Tim O’Brien calls “happiness,” and not enough about the truth that transcends “happiness,” they would need something else, something imaginative and transformative that saves from mere facts, without sacrificing the facts at the same time. I would start there. But I wouldn’t rely on just the stories/narratives. Fiction is composed of a lot more than strangeness. It’s like when a friend tells you a story and says, “You have to hear this!” You don’t want to hear it again. It’s usually one of those stories where you have to be there. The question is: How do you take strangeness and turn it into poetic gold, which is literature?

**kv/mw:** Ever dabble in fiction?
CD: I've written stories. I have a book of short stories called *The Problem of Goodness*, which is the title of one of the stories. I've never shown it to any editors. Maybe I'll work on it during my sabbatical next year.

**KV/MW**: Does it have a theme?

CD: Lots of ironic love stories.

**KV/MW**: *The Double Truth* is your fourth book of poetry. How would you say that your writing has changed since your first book *Asleep in the Fire*?

CD: I hope I've matured since then. Some poems I go back to in that book to look at again. That book, *Asleep in the Fire*, was six or seven years in the making, and there are still poems in there I like. I just don't think a lot of my ideas are as ambitious in that book, compared to this one, *The Double Truth*.

**KV/MW**: "The Police," one of your poems from *The Double Truth*, (and one of our favorites), almost looks like a small chapter out of a novel. What was the inspiration for that one?

CD: "The Police" is a prose poem. It's based on a true event which I then turn into an amusing fantasy. The police came knocking on our door late one night in Iowa. You know the rest.

**KV/MW**: Does that ever bother you, when editors suggest new titles to you?

CD: No, not really. You go crazy trying to figure out a title for each new book. Each time you say that's great. But then you do that every day. It's impossible. I throw my arms up finally after each book and ask editor Ed Ochester at University of Pittsburch Press what he thinks. So far he's been very helpful with my last two books, *Night Mowing*, and *The Double
kv/mw: Do you find people read into your poems in ways you never even imagined?

cd: Yeah, and I’m pretty happy with that if what they’re talking about is actually there. I just read one (a reaction) about a poem I recently published on Slate. It’s called “Augustine’s Pears.” I realized in reading her interpretation, her name was Maryanne, that I actually was writing about all the stuff she was talking about with regard to grace and arc I made in that poem between the pigs Augustine ended up feeding his stolen pears to and Odysseus’ men who are turned into pigs by Circe in the Odyssey.

kv/mw: You said you write “from line-to-line.” How much of a poem is in your head before you begin to put it on the page?

cd: This is the paradox of writing poetry; you’re so intensely in the middle of a poem—you’re really in another world—you’re trying to make sense, to make music, to say something that’s never been said about a very old subject. You’re inside; you’re outside. Ruth Stone claimed her poems came to her from “across the universe.” You have to catch them in a physical way and feel them physically. It’s an enormously intimate, personal, organic experience when you write. But the crazy thing is, after you’ve finished a poem, it’s difficult to talk about it in an intellectual way. If it’s too easy, then I think something’s wrong. I almost suffer immediate amnesia. That’s why poets say things like, “I didn’t write that poem,” when referring to their own work. It’s the best thing he or she can say.

kv/mw: You’ve accomplished so much as a poet, a professor, and a cofounder of the New England College MFA poetry program. Is there a moment in your career that you’re most proud of?

cd: Founding the New England College MFA program was really more of a
professional pursuit than a poetic one. I was happy to do that. More than a hundred students have gone through that program now. I think I helped create something unique there, a single genre MFA program in poetry. I was happy to start it, and I was glad to get out when I did too. But it’s nice to see the students grow and go from rough writers to polished ones. So that was gratifying on a professional level. As far as my own writing, each new book gives me a great sense of accomplishment. But there’s also failure in it. That’s the curse of poetry. You never really know if you’ve written good or great poetry. You might have a hunch, but that’s about it. It’s not like I created the theory of relativity, you can’t stop and say you’ve proved anything. John Berryman said to W.S. Merwin: “If you have to be sure don’t write.” That’s the uncertainty you need ironically. Call it “the uncertainty principle.” It’s the faith you have to have as a writer. You don’t know, you have no idea. The muses say so.

KV/MW: Has there ever been a time when you’ve taken a break from writing?

CD: Teaching makes it hard. Sometimes I write in the car at stops signs and red lights. I keep my eyes on the road, but I scribble notes. I try to get up early in the morning to get some writing done. But yeah, there have been times when I’ve taken breaks. Usually after I finish a book, I really just let my mind rest.

KV/MW: Is there a uniform method/approach you have for all of your poetry?

CD: It’s curious; I continue to go back and forth between free verse and formal poems, “I strive for the fresh, original expression that is also well crafted, but I don’t think of myself as a formalist. There’s something that draws me back to blank verse every now and again. I need to practice my scales.

KV/MW: The Double Truth has four parts. How do you go about deciding on
a sequence for your poems?

CD: You get so close to your poems. It actually doesn’t matter often. But, you do have to think about which poem follows another; that’s where the “third ear” comes in. Charles Simic once told me he throws his poems in the air and then orders according to how and where they fall. Not so sure I’m ready to do that yet.

KV/MW: On average, how long does it take for a book to come together?

CD: It varies. I just finished a new book tentatively called Interstate. I don’t want to publish it right away. I usually sit on it for at least three or four years, because I need that time. I think every writer does. It’s funny what happens to poems when you put them in the dark. You go back to them, and see stuff you didn’t see before that’s glaringly wrong. I’ve worked on one poem for about 30 years, not even a very good poem, and just now felt ready to abandon it, that is to call it finished.

KV/MW: What’s it about?

CD: It’s just about a few boys jumping on a rope swing. I just couldn’t get the damn thing right. It’s probably no good at all. (Laughs). That’s poetry though, some take a while, some just pop into your head. Some have been waiting there for years. Poems with fresh, conversational language, those are the ones that just stay with you. Language is miraculous.

KV/MW: This is probably like asking you who your favorite child is. But, do you have a favorite poem that you’ve written?

CD: God knows it changes from day to day. I’ll go through an old book, or old notebooks of forgotten poems, and I’ll think, Why did I ever throw that away? Let’s see, a longer poem called “Trying to Forget” from Asleep
in the Fire. I also like some of the shorter poems from The Double Truth, “The Mystery,” “The Double Truth,” “Storm Cloud,” “This Ecstasy.”

KV/MW: You teach a number of English courses as an associate professor of English here at PC. What have you learned from your experiences as a professor?

CD: There are three of them I’m doing now, and I actually just introduced a new course English 285: Creative Writing. It combines fiction and poetry. It’ll probably start next year. Right now I’m teaching Introduction to Literature, a contemporary American poetry seminar on Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson. Then there’s the Creative Writing poetry class. I’ve done others: DWC, Intermediate Writing, Literature and Spiritual Crisis. I’ve gotten a lot of material for poems out of my teaching.

KV/MW: What advice do you have for your students? What do you want them to get out of your courses?

CD: WRITE. WRITE. WRITE. Writing teaches writing. You can’t teach writing; it’s almost impossible to teach creative writing. Every writer learns that they have their own mode of expression. The only thing that teaches that is writing, showing it to others, and eventually getting feedback. It’s like walking through the dark. Being in Plato’s cave. There are little glimmers of light here and there. But as a writer, you need to be tough to keep writing. To write even when it’s the last thing you want to do.

KV/MW: No arguing that. Thank you, Professor deNiord.
THE VISIT

Michael Jemal

It was early spring or late winter
I was driving the turnpike,
a miserable road of tired trees
and rusted guardrails,
to visit a friend who had divorced
before falling into a fit of meth and uncontrollable drinking.
A light snow was beginning
when the traffic came to a complete stop;
an abruption much like when the heart refuses to pump
the blood sits in the belly
and cell by cell the body disintegrates
till all that is left is profanity.
I lowered my window letting in the cool air
as an ambulance and two police cars
sped up the emergency road
a half hour after that the cars began to move
away from the smashed hoods and crushed doors
and an SUV in the field having rolled its way there.
A green blanket covered what looked like a man,
his brown leather loafers showed beneath the cuffs of his dress pants.
I imagined on his finger a wedding band
worn thin from the many years.
The medic walking around the body
stepped carefully as if the man beneath the blanket
was a sheet of glass that could shatter.
Too late to worry about breakage
I wanted to think that after cremating her husband
his wife would toss his ashes into the soil of a hemp grove
and miraculously her grief would fade
she’d be able to give up on the vodka
sell the house and move on,
and my friend, intact and durable in detox,
would be happy to live on milky oatmeal and third rate meat.
But I knew that plausibility goes the way of habit.
The wife would bend and never straighten
and my friend, once out of detox,
would continue to damage himself
and anyone else who’d let him.
Yet I continued on, driving steadily,
the snow ongoing, drifting
across the curved windshield with a strange ease.
she steps towards me
shows me her wet hands
as if she has just broken water
opens my fist
spits into my palm
the skin of my unborn baby’s skin
how soft
how soft it is I say to her
how soft
the skin
miscarried because it would not
grow within her body
my fingers uncoil
then recoil
parting the light
the shadows
on what seemed so easily created
I refrain
yes refrain
from crying out
because that’s not what a man would do
cry out cry out
please cry out to the dead
who amongst the dead
are amongst themselves
as the dead in my palm
the same dead
that haven’t yet been named
and maintain a namelessness
as if a name would change anything
as if nothingness
can conform to that something
that need
to put my fingers to my mouth
and swallow the skin
along with the spit
as if I had never eaten anything so bitter
as if the flowers on my palm
were petals of dark chocolate
already melted
The ring startled both of them. It wasn’t Sunday afternoon when her brother sometimes called and it wasn’t the beginning of the month when his uncle hadn’t spent his Social Security yet and could afford to pay the neighbor down the hall for ten minutes on her cell to complain about not having enough money to live a decent life. And couldn’t Jimmy find it in his heart, just this once, to lend his old uncle a little dough because, swear to God, Jimmy was always his favorite?

Nell muted the sound on the television and slipped house shoes on her feet, mottled with the same blue varicose veins as her calves, left worse than right for some reason. She crossed the room to answer the phone, now on its fifth ring. Jimmy wouldn’t bother. When he was home alone, he often let the phone ring, never answering. She knew because some days, she’d been the one calling, though never for a true emergency and thank the Lord for that.

“Yes?” She expected a stranger, likely a wrong number. Confusion, then an apology.

“It’s me, Ma.”

Not a stranger. She glanced at her husband to see whether he guessed who was on the line, but he seemed mesmerized by the screen with its performers opening and closing their mouths without any voices escaping. “Yes,” she repeated, not a question this time.

“I’ve been driving all day. Just crossed into the city. When did traffic get this bad? What’s with the goddamned yellow cones everywhere?”

Now that she was listening intensely, she heard muffled noises, engines rumbling and an occasional horn. “Here? You’re here?”

“Close.”
Jimmy shifted in his recliner. Nell stood with her back to him, but she'd heard that exact squeak of the chair often enough to know what he was doing. He was curious, but wouldn't ask.

"Ma, you still with me?"

"Yes. Sure. I'm right here." She patted the corner table where the phone sat as if in doing this, she might physically confirm her existence.

"Sometimes I lose the connection when I'm driving."

"Right." She tried to sound as if that happened to her all the time too. But Jimmy considered cell phones a waste of money and he'd never been one to waste a dime. He wasn't raised to be a spendthrift. No sir, not Jimmy. Squeeze as much as you can out of every nickel. That was Jimmy's philosophy. And hadn't he done well for himself with that as his guiding principle? Hadn't he raised two children, paid for college for the boy and electrician school for the girl, and always put decent, maybe not fancy, but decent food on the table? Hadn't he sold the appliance repair business for a tidy profit and wasn't their house paid off? No one was saying Jimmy hadn't done right by himself and his family.

"Want to know why I came, Ma? Drove all day yesterday, all day today. Know why?"

Even as a child, he'd been the one for riddles and puzzles. "You wanted to see your folks. That's all." Though her back was still turned and Jimmy's chair gave no hint of movement, Nell knew she had his attention. He was pretending otherwise, but she knew different.

The boy snorted as if she'd told the best joke ever. "The last payment, Ma. Twenty years and now it's the last payment."

She flinched. "No one asked for any of that."

"So, I said to myself, last check I'll be writing on this debt. Doesn't that call for something special? So, I said to myself, why not drive out there, see the old home town, deliver the last payment in person."
She was quiet for such a long time, anyone else might’ve thought she’d hung up or been accidentally disconnected.

“Is the house clean, Ma?” His voice was low. She pressed the receiver harder against her ear so as not to miss a sound.

“Remember how you always wanted the house clean in case visitors showed up? Not many of those, don’t you know. Well today, I’m coming. Be there in 30 or 40 minutes. This traffic gives me a break, I might make it in 25.”

The line went dead and Nell knew it wasn’t a lost signal, was intentional. She held her breath a moment, replaced the receiver.

“It was him,” Jimmy said. “The boy.”

“He’ll be here soon.” She kept her back to him because, despite all their years, conversations were easier that way.

“Didn’t I say he’d come crawling back some day?” He punched a triumphant fist into his armrest.

“Nobody’s crawling anywhere, Jimmy. It’s a visit. Nothing more.”

“The last check,” he said as if he’d been on an extension, listening as carefully as she had. “Am I right? Last check?”

An answer wasn’t necessary.

“Damn that boy. Damn him and his stupid checks. What does he think he’s proved?” The chair clicked, returning to its upright position.

“He wants them back, does he? Oh sure. Yes, ma’am, he wants them all back. Sees the waste of what he’s done. Won’t do him any good, though. Promise you that. Won’t change what he did.” Jimmy disappeared into the kitchen where he’d work today’s newspaper puzzle, in black ink, and drink his afternoon juice.

Some days, Nell joined him with her own juice, usually cranberry instead of the orange he preferred, and skimmed headlines. But for now, she stayed in the living room, plenty clean enough for family. Wasn’t it?
She watched Mrs. Doyle across the street pull her van up her drive and a load of children tumbled out. Even from this distance, Nell saw the sweaty, dirt-streaked faces of the girls in black shorts, shin guards, and bright yellow shirts with black numbers across their backs. Nell made out a 37, a 5 and wondered if it mattered whether you had a high or low number. Were the numbers assigned or drawn at random, earned or fated? Anyway, wasn’t it too early in the year for soccer? Each girl grabbed a sleeping bag, duffel, and backpack and managed to do all of that while chattering like a flock of cheery canaries. A slumber party and a soccer game. Had they won? Whenever she was in the front yard, tending her roses, and Mrs. Doyle brought a daughter home from some game or other, Nell always called out politely, “Did you win?”

There were three girls, all about the same size and all with the same olive skin and black curly hair. Nell was never sure whether she was calling to the oldest or the youngest or the one in the middle unless they were all together. No matter the girl, she answered as politely as Nell asked. “We won,” she said. Or, “It was close.” No one ever admitted, “We lost.” Maybe that had to do with how parents raised children nowadays. Everybody played some sport, often two or three if the children in this neighborhood were typical, and had slumber parties and never lost a game. Nell’s boy and girl hadn’t been in any sports and neither of them had ever asked to host or attend a slumber party.

Now the van was empty and Nell waited for Mrs. Doyle to pull into the garage. Instead, the woman left her car on the drive for any gawking passerby to observe. Jimmy always parked their Taurus—and wasn’t that a fine car—safely in the garage. Why have one, if you didn’t use it?

“I poured your juice,” Jimmy called from the kitchen because that way, he didn’t have to actually ask her to join him. Nell knew how much her husband hated asking anyone, even his own wife, for a favor, no
matter how inconsequential. In his mind, this was too much like begging or like asking for forgiveness, other things he never did. Why didn’t the boy understand that, accept that?

“Be right there, Jimmy.” She turned from the window, wondering whether their boy or girl had secretly yearned for a slumber party or to be on someone’s team. Nell knew all about secret yearnings and if those were the only ones her children harbored, they were fortunate.

In the kitchen, she sat across from Jimmy, took a small sip of her juice, and watched him pretend full concentration on today’s puzzle. When the puzzle was going especially well, he sometimes called out answers for her benefit. That’s why she knew a three-toed sloth was an ai and aleph was the first letter in the Hebrew alphabet and alpha in the Greek. She also knew omega was the last Greek letter, but didn’t know the last Hebrew one, maybe because the last Hebrew letter wasn’t in the crosswords or maybe because Jimmy hadn’t shared the word with her yet.

“You want some paper?” He didn’t look up from the squares he studied so intently, a stranger might think he was actually interested in them.

“He’ll be here soon, Jimmy.”

“The boy.”

“Yes.”

“He’ll be here. So?” He filled in six squares, but Nell couldn’t make out the letters.

“We should be ready.”

“Me, I’m ready. Ready as I’ll ever be.” He hunched over the paper to fill in more squares. “You too. You’re ready.”

Nell sipped and tried to think how to say what had to be said. Even when they’d been very young and courting, she’d had trouble saying what was in her mind. As long as they stayed in her head, her thoughts were clear and straightforward. But when she tried to express them out...
loud, they jumbled into a tangled heap of words she didn’t understand herself. By her age, she should’ve learned to talk to people, at least to her own husband. Jimmy wasn’t to blame for that. Jimmy had always waited patiently, staring while her words got twisted and twisted until she finally said, “See what I mean.” He nodded when she said that, knowing full well even she didn’t see what she meant. For sure, wasn’t that a kindness to her?

“You think I should brew a fresh pot?” she asked, though that wasn’t close to what needed saying.

“If you want.” About half the puzzle was finished and he didn’t look up. “Me, I’d wait for the boy to get here. Maybe he doesn’t like coffee.”

“I’m sure he must still like his coffee.”

“Then brew some and let me be. I want to finish before he gets here.” He added that last as a token apology.

“I’ll wait, if you think that’s best.”

He furrowed his brow, as if in concentration, but she understood this for what it was, a reflection of his irritation and the extreme control he was exercising in order not to yell at her. Jimmy hadn’t yelled for years. Not really. Not the way he used to. And who could blame him, back then? When you run your own business, you listen to complaints all day, yet have to be courteous through it all, can’t ever tell a customer the toaster’s heating element broke when she poked it one too many times with a fork, trying to free a piece of bread. Instead, you had to agree about poor manufacturing standards and how workers—probably including him, though customers never said so directly—didn’t know how to earn their pay these days. After listening all day to that garbage—and that’s all most of those complaints amounted to, according to Jimmy—who could blame him for letting off a little steam when he got home? Or for wanting quiet when he watched the news? Didn’t a working man deserve to know what was going on in the world? Plus he never hit her or the girl. Never. Just
yelled, that’s all. A lot maybe. But sticks and stones…Occasional slaps on the boy’s rump were never harsher than the sin demanded. Boys need discipline. Anyone with sense would agree.

“Jimmy?”

His pen moved faster as if he barely needed to read a clue before filling in the answer. “I want to finish this. Can’t you see I want to finish this?”

“Sure, Jimmy. I see that.” She took a breath, gave herself a moment to compose herself, gave her words every opportunity to arrange themselves into a comprehensible order before she released them. “It’s about the boy.”

The pen stopped, but he still focused on the squares instead of her. “When he gives you the check, the last one…” She waited. He could help, if he wanted, just as he’d helped his customers for all those years.

Some days, instead of packing his lunch, she’d walked the half mile to his shop and delivered one of his favorite homemades, corn beef and cabbage or potato casserole. On those days, if he was busy with a customer, she waited quietly, holding the thermos of food in both hands rather than placing it on a counter or shelf where it might cause trouble, an accident of some sort, though she never figured out the exact nature of the potential trouble. On those days, she tried to disappear along a wall, in that way witnessing the same scene that would’ve taken place if she wasn’t in the shop.

Her trips to his business were infrequent, but what she observed often seemed the same and that led her to believe she knew her husband’s days as well as she knew her own. She never said that to him because she guessed his reaction. How could you think to know my days? I don’t pretend to know everything you do with your time. Don’t pretend to know me any better. The words he might’ve spoken were as memorable to her as some of the ones she actually heard.

He was unfailingly polite to his customers. She’d seen that.
Sometimes, he said something to make the customer smile or, more rarely, laugh. On those occasions, she covered her mouth with one hand, holding tightly to the thermos with the other, to keep herself from crying out. Why, Jimmy, I didn’t know you had the gift for making someone laugh like that. She wished there’d been a way for her to disguise herself into a complete stranger, walk into his shop with a broken mixer and watch his face as he told a joke to make her laugh out loud or said a few words to make her smile. She wanted to know how his face looked at the precise moment when he was trying to be as pleasing as possible, to charm the person across the counter into bringing him every broken appliance in her house and recommending that her neighbors do the same, maybe even breaking a few appliances for his benefit.

Now she wished she was the one with the gift for making someone smile. She would’ve used it right then, at their kitchen table, made Jimmy smile. “When he gives the check. It’s the last one. That’s what he said.”

“And don’t I know that as well as him? Can’t I read figures as well as anybody?”

“You can.”

“And did I ever cash a single one of his blasted checks? A single one?”

“You did not,” she answered.

“Not a one.”

“You never wanted his money either.” They’d had this conversation before, when the letter and first check arrived. A long time ago. But the memory was as distinct as this morning’s breakfast when Jimmy surprised her by wanting two slices of toast instead of only the one. So, Nell didn’t have to reach for words, just recited the conversation as if reading from a script spread out before her.

That day, nearly 20 years ago, had started with an unexpected snow. “Who ever heard of snow in early May and tell me that? And won’t
I be late opening, if I walk." Jimmy pulled on his boots, grumbling the whole time. Nell held his coat and scarf in one hand, his lunch in the other.

"But you'll take the car, Jimmy. You won't be late."

He slipped first one, then the other arm into the sleeves while she held the coat. "That I will."

"I'm not needing it." With the boy and the girl no longer living at home—both of them done with schooling and her already in the Navy—Nell seldom had any absolute need for a car.

"That you aren't and lucky it is too. The streets will be a mess. All the fools find cars when it snows and you never know from what direction they'll strike."

"You be careful, Jimmy." Later, the words seemed prophetic. It was a day when they all should've been cautious, her and Jimmy and the boy and the girl, floating on her ship in the Pacific's vastness. Maybe the girl had known to be careful that day, even without a warning, because she never reported any catastrophe. Nell was certain the girl would've mentioned a catastrophe.

Because the letter was addressed only to Jimmy, she didn't feel entitled to open it, though she knew immediately, from the handwriting, that it came from the boy, knew even before glancing at the return address. He'd been in Aberdeen then. Nell had looked it up on their atlas, studied the shaded area where the boy lived. Snow in May was the norm in that place in South Dakota.

She had a pot of tea waiting when Jimmy arrived home, only a half hour later than usual. By the time he removed his outer layers, a steaming cup waited at the table, two graham crackers tucked on the saucer. She didn't say anything while he ate and drank because Jimmy liked things quiet when he got home. If the boy and the girl had understood that, evenings in their house would've been easier for all of them. Certainly Nell
had tried to explain, but more often than not, the boy and the girl hadn’t
managed a few quiet hours for their Pa. Maybe they never understood
what she told them because they didn’t listen, instead were daydreaming
or distracted by whatever worries plagued them. More likely, she hadn’t
explained properly.

So now, instead of speaking, she placed the boy’s letter next to the
cup and saucer, leaving Jimmy to notice it, open it, read it when he chose.
She didn’t push the letter into his hands, no matter how curious she’d
grown since it was delivered late that morning, along with two department
store flyers and the gas and water bills.

As he took his tea, Jimmy concentrated on the front page of the
evening paper. Soon, by the middle of summer at the latest, according
to both papers, there’d only be a morning edition. For sure, Nell didn’t
know what Jimmy was doing then. He looked at the morning paper with
breakfast, the evening one with tea. What would he do come summer?

She gathered carrots, potatoes, and a paper sack for peelings and
brought all that to the table for the stew she planned for supper. Normally,
she’d have those peeled and washed long before Jimmy arrived, but the
letter kept tempting her all day. She held it, smelled it, worried over it,
only pulling herself away to brown chunks of lamb to make sure supper
wasn’t late. At least there was that. Supper at 7:00, same as always, just
how Jimmy liked it.

Every so often, as she peeled a vegetable, she glanced at the boy’s
unopened letter. Was it possible Jimmy hadn’t noticed? She couldn’t think
how that might be, but should she say something? In case?

Jimmy didn’t look up from the front page, then turned and folded
to the second. He looked at each page in its turn, slowly and methodically,
never skipping to page six or eight or ten where stories from the front page
continued. Nell didn’t understand how he was able to keep facts straight
until he reached the page where a story found its conclusion, but he did. Her Jimmy was a smart one. Even her older sister, who never cared for him, admitted as much.

She’d finished the potatoes, and only had one carrot left to peel, when Jimmy reached for the letter. He stared at the envelope for such a long while, he might've been memorizing the whole thing, down to the curves of the post office’s cancellation mark. Nell slowed her peeling to short swipes, an excuse for remaining at the table.

Jimmy put down the letter, carried the empty cup and saucer to the sink. He didn’t approve of dirty dishes scattered around when they belonged in the sink or, better still, washed and put away.

The boy’s handwriting hadn’t changed since elementary. Each letter in each word was bold and large, demanding attention. In any bin of unsorted mail at the post office, this envelope drew attention to itself. His writing pulled at you, demanded a response. If the envelope had been addressed to her, she would’ve ripped it open the instant she held it, not carefully examined it or, before that, ignored it as Jimmy had.

"Wasn’t I the surprised one when the mail came." She couldn’t be quiet another moment and maybe that was the nudge Jimmy’d been waiting for because he turned back to the table, grabbed the letter and went to his living room chair, a splendid maroon leather recliner used by no one but him. And wasn’t that reasonable for a man who’d done so much for his family?

That’s how it was to be? Nell fixing supper in the kitchen. Jimmy in the parlor with the boy’s letter. How she wanted to follow her husband and if the stew had been simmering, as it would’ve been if she’d seen to her chores properly, she could’ve done just that. Instead, she chopped vegetables quickly, dropped them in the pot of boiling water. With the meat already browned and waiting and it being too early to start a salad or cut bread, she didn’t have to stay in the kitchen, now did she?
The TV was on, though she couldn’t guess what Jimmy was watching. His news program wasn’t until later and he wasn’t a man for most of the silly shows prancing across their screen. The recliner sat stiffly upright rather than extended for a man enjoying the end of his day. The letter was on his lap, unfolded, the envelope on the floor as if tossed with a careless gesture. Jimmy frowned at the set, trying to make sense of what he saw. Some sort of rodeo, cowboys on bucking bulls. Who could make sense of grown men earning a living that way?

“So, he’s coming home?” She couldn’t wait another second to hear the news.

Jimmy tapped the letter three times with the four fingers of his left hand. Tap, tap, tap as if that was enough to let her know exactly what the letter contained.

“I think I should know. Really, Jimmy, I think I should. I’ll have things to do to get ready. His room. Food. I understand the letter was for you, but I’m the boy’s mother. Aren’t I? I have the right, don’t I?”

Before she said more, he pushed the pages across the end table between his chair and hers, a maroon plaid platform rocker. What did she need with a recliner and didn’t the two match nicely anyway? She sat quickly, grabbed the papers before he changed his mind. The letter wasn’t long, though the figures on the second page and the payment chart on the third took a while.

When she looked at the TV again, a bow-legged cowboy pranced around the arena, waving his hat at the crowd who cheered mightily. He must’ve won something and wasn’t that good for him?

“Bull,” Jimmy growled. “Ever seen so much bull?”

Nell looked at him, at the cowboy, back at Jimmy. Was he talking about the rodeo?

“At least his figures look right. At least the damn boy got his
numbers right.”

“Did he, Jimmy?” Her lower lip trembled and if she wasn’t careful, she’d start crying. “He always was good with the numbers.”

Each month for 20 years, the checks had come. Same amount each time. The total equal to every penny the boy figured they’d spent on him. From diapers to college. Jimmy’d never asked for the boy’s money and Nell certainly hadn’t. Didn’t matter to the boy, though. The letter said he was tired of hearing how much Pa’s hard work did for them, tired of having gratitude hammered into him. Too many nights when all he’d heard from his father was a reminder of what a burden they all were. All three of them—boy, girl, wife. Did Pa ever see how much he hadn’t wanted to be that burden? Could Pa feel how those words still squeezed his chest, made him think he was having a heart attack, no matter his age? See how he’d tried when he was a boy, tried to ease his Pa’s burden? He’d kept very quiet, shushing his sister in a spotless corner of the clean kitchen. But that didn’t work, did it? He turned into a demon boy, running through the house so fast, no one could catch him, but that didn’t make a difference, did it? Now, he was done being a burden. Done with it, fully and finally. Here was the amount they’d spent on him. He’d added five percent to the total to pick up whatever miscellaneous items he might’ve missed. Unless he got a correction by the fifth of next month, he was taking this to be a plan agreed upon.

Jimmy hadn’t written nor said a word on the topic when the boy called once or twice a year or visited on rare occasions. His grandmother’s funeral had been the last and that was close to four years past. Because Jimmy hadn’t mentioned the subject, neither had Nell.

After the first time, the checks arrived without an accompanying letter. Jimmy discarded the envelope, then added the newest check to the others in the cigar box on his closet shelf. Some days, when Jimmy was
at work, Nell took down the box, spread the checks across their bed, and tried to understand what they'd done to the boy to deserve so many slaps across the face, a fresh insult every 30 days, sent with a regularity any creditor would've envied. Didn’t most men complain about their burdens as Jimmy had? Wasn’t that the way of most people?

Now the boy was arriving any minute with the final unwanted offering. She looked down at her juice, two dark red swallows at the bottom of the glass. Across from her, Jimmy filled in another block of letters. She didn’t know anyone else who completed crosswords in black ink. What if you made a mistake? “When he gives you the check, the last one...”

“We’ve agreed on that, Nell. We both know the check is the last one, now don’t we?”

She wasn’t getting sidetracked. “Just take the check, Jimmy. Don’t say anything. Don’t start anything. Take the check and leave the boy be. Please, Jimmy.” Her voice quavered and like that first night, 20 years earlier, she was afraid she might start crying. She pressed her lips together, eyes still on the glass in front of her, so she was startled when Jimmy’s hand reached across the table to cover hers.

“If that’s what you want, Nell.”

She looked up, convinced he was making fun of her. But his face was solemn, not the face of someone making fun. She left him then to finish the puzzle. In their bedroom, she opened his closet, took down the cigar box, held it to her chest, right where her heart beat, and planted three kisses across the lid. If he inspected the box closely, Jimmy might notice the smears of lipstick, but wouldn’t say anything about that.
BEACH, LLANES
Donna Pucciani

I'd promised to photograph friends at the top of the cliff, where a concrete cross marks something unmentionable—an accident, war, tragedy at sea—but I prefer to stay below, watching children scatter themselves along the breakers in their tiny red and blue swimsuits, risking and running, huge rocks guarding them like zealous mothers.

I take both photos: friends aloft, children below. What cannot be taken is the boom of the sea like a distant battle, the battered beaches, once sandstone, now kneeling before the tide.
THE BELT OF ORION
Michael Passafiume

To awaken one more day,
to curse the sun’s ragged tyranny,
sit at your morning chair staring
at a blank computer screen
contemplating the nature
of the universe, all of the complex
equations your broken mind
will never understand;
you carry your ignorance
into another room,
reach for a cigarette,
tear off a thin match
(at least you know how this book ends)
and smoke away remembrances
and regrets as the dead walk
around inside of you.

There was Jeff,
in the fourth grade you told him
that life wasn’t fair
and a few years later
two dirt bikes collided head-on
on a lazy spring afternoon and Jeff
proved you right.
Then in high school
there was Rob, a captain
on the football team
who collapsed at home one day
after practice and never
got up again. They said he had
a hole in his heart, much smaller
than the ones his absence opened up.
You went to Rob’s funeral
in an ill-fitting suit,
awkward and solemn,
you hugged his mother, a sweat
dampened sympathy card clasped
tightly in your hand. You walked home
in the warm summer twilight,
a congregation of funeral parlor
tears echoing in your reeling brain.

And, finally, in college there was Joe,
who you’d sometimes hitch a ride
with back to campus after
semester breaks. Joe with his
beautiful voice, easy smile
and quirky sense of humor;
he always seemed to be pleasing
everyone but himself.
You sometimes wondered if he
was gay, wished you’d had
the guts to tell him,
“Hey, Joe, it’s okay with me.”
As if it would have mattered,
as if he still wouldn’t have
hung himself a year after graduation,
hung himself from a tree under a starry night
in front of a high school one town over.
His family thought he might’ve been lynched;
the Belt of Orion never looked
the same to me again.

It’s okay, Joe.
It’s okay.
His mother had put him to bed early that evening, even before his father had come home from work. He'd heard the TV downstairs. The street lamp was, as always, shining too brightly through the orange curtains. A passing van sent shivers throughout the house. Outside, a couple were talking quietly, their voices turning foggy as they headed toward the railway bridge. He heard the nine o'clock train, the one that usually brought his father home.

He turned in his bed, expecting to hear the safe sounds of the key in the lock, the door opening, his mother's voice—"Is that you, Henry?"; his father's joking reply, "no," before he locked the house up for the night. That's when Peter would usually fall asleep.

But he hadn't heard those familiar sounds that night as he lay awake, looking at the slow shadow dances cast by the street lamp.

He'd listened to trains arriving all night that night and all the nights that followed.

***

Peter walked down Sunday streets of deserted pavements, past mountains of wet, raked leaves. He carried a yellow plastic bag from the local discount store containing a bottle of Scotch. He dreaded arriving at his mother's place that gray November afternoon. The hazy autumn light of suburban Denmark made him want to keep the curtains closed all day, but open or closed, it made little difference. Everyone was inside watching TV, drinking coffee. It was, as he always thought, a ghost town.

He felt drowsy. Maybe it was all the time spent on his own, studying. He didn't have friends. Sometimes he went to the pub for a beer. He never spoke to anyone, although that was what he longed for: company. He would get a little tipsy and walk home, alone, always alone, after having
absorbed the smoke and odors and voices of the other customers.

He only spoke to people at the record store, where he worked a couple of days every week. He never allowed himself to consider it a real job, even though he knew the place much better than the owner, Ivan, who'd stopped discovering new music in the sixties. Ivan sat at the counter, chain-smoking, now and then grunting when he needed Peter to find a record. But the clients acknowledged Peter's skills. They'd often come back to tell him how much they'd appreciated the music he'd recommended. He felt a certain pride in those moments. It gave him hope that he would someday succeed in a real job. In life.

His mother's birthday was always a distressing event. Peter, an only child, was her only connection to the world. She longed for the past. He didn't. No, he desperately wanted his life to move on.

His father had stopped coming home twenty years ago, yet he was all she lived for. She had kept all his father's belongings in the closet. Peter suspected that she washed his father's shirts every once in a while, ironed them, and put them back in the same order. His father had probably never opened that closet. She had laid out his clothes for him every day of the year, every day of their lives together.

She never invited anybody but Peter for her birthday; in fact, he had to insist they celebrate it. As it was, Peter didn't visit often although he lived nearby. When he did, he knew what to expect—always the same meal, his father's favorite: roasted pork, caramelized potatoes, red cabbage, gravy. The thought of it disgusted him.

Peter walked past the familiar places. His school, which had been newly built when he went there, looked worn out, lifeless. He found it hard to believe that he'd spent nine years of his life in that place. Nine years of waiting to get away.

He thought about her last birthday, how they'd wound up in an argument. He'd told her to get used to the idea that her husband would
not return. She should stop ironing those shirts, trying to make his closet look as though he’d never left. In his darker moments, Peter wished it was she who had gone away.

As he neared her street, it disheartened him to see those yellow-brick houses from the fifties, their gardens grown wild over the years. He knew there’d be eyes watching him from behind faded curtains. He walked quickly because he hated the thought of meeting one of his friends from school: he couldn’t stand the embarrassment of not recognizing someone he’d known years ago, and he did not want any of them to see what he’d become.

Unlike most of his childhood friends, he’d gone to University. In the beginning, he’d felt above them. His mother had spoken about him to all the neighbors; he often imagined her, coffee cup in hand, on the doorstep of the house, bragging to people as they trimmed their gardens. But he’d never finished his studies. He felt defined by the phrase not suitable. It was written all over his face. Who would hire a philosophy student who hadn’t finished his studies after more than ten years? Not that he really wanted to live like the others. He hated their normality.

Somebody stood in the garden next to his mother’s house. The man looked up, met his eyes. It was too late to escape.

"Hi Peter, how are you? Visiting your mother?"

Peter tried hard to remember his name. Claus? Søren? Niels? They had played together as children. Maybe even been in the same class at school.

"It’s her birthday,” Peter said. “She’s expecting me; lunch must be ready.”

“But Peter, I’ve been wanting to talk to you about her. She’s changed, she seems confused. And keeps repeating the same things over and over.”

Peter looked at the man, for a moment not quite certain if it really was his former school friend or the man’s father.

Finally, pulling himself together, he said, “I know, it’s nothing
new,” and moved on toward his mother’s house.

“No. You don’t understand. It’s like she’s become this other person.”

“What do you mean? I speak to her often. I don’t sense any difference.”

But of course he knew. She’d taken to speaking in sudden bursts and whispers. She seemed to him more and more like a witch, like someone from another century, in a different world.

“She talks about people we’ve never heard of. And we’ve lived here all our lives, and known her for so long. As if she’s inventing people to keep her company.”

Peter nodded to end the exchange. He could sense the man’s eyes following him to the doorstep.

“Do you know that she talks about your father as if he were still around?” Peter heard, as though listening to a voice in his head.

Everything was ready when he arrived. The table was laid out neatly with the best china and the engraved silver cutlery inherited from her parents. There were flowers, candles, and one of the last bottles from his father’s wine cellar, a Bordeaux from the early sixties. An old tablecloth, embroidered by her grandmother and used once a year as far back as he could remember. Everything was as he knew it would be, as it always had been. He shivered. Then he gave her a little hug and pretended to listen to the words that tumbled out of her mouth.

Peter tried to settle in while she went back to the kitchen to finish preparing the meal. He helped himself to a large Scotch from the bottle he’d brought her, knowing it would help him relax. He cautiously sat in his father’s treasured, worn-out, yellow lounge chair. It was forbidden territory when Peter was a child. It wasn’t comfortable, or maybe he still didn’t feel that he was allowed there. He took some hearty sips of the drink, thought about turning on the TV, then quickly got restless and went to the kitchen to see if he could help her. She let him bring the dishes in and then told him to sit down while she served the food.
He started to eat although he wasn’t hungry. He barely noticed the taste of the food. He stuffed himself with pork and sugarcoated potatoes. He knew it would make her happy to feed him. He quickly devoured one glass, then another, of the oaky wine. She sat next to him, staring at him, and barely touching her own food. She kept piling pork and sticky potatoes onto his plate and filled up his glass again. He almost felt sick.

He always ate too fast, and she used to complain about it. For some reason, she’d stopped commenting on it. He hoped it meant that they could just pretend that everything was fine. That she’d accepted it was no use trying to change him.

She finally finished her plate and tasted the wine.

“Would you like a cup of coffee?” she asked him, as she always had, as she always would. She didn’t expect him to stay long. He never did.

“Yes, thank you.”

The room looked exactly as it had thirty years ago.

He wondered how she could live in this museum, why she didn’t sell the house, move into an apartment, and replace it all with contemporary furniture. He looked through the familiar pictures of his father, photos of the three of them, from summer vacations on the east coast of Jutland, at the house they’d rented every summer. Smiling faces. It was always sunny in those photos, though it hadn’t been in real life. Her mother’s best friend, Gitte, had always been there on vacation with them. Gitte had made those vacations joyful. She’d been like a second mother to him. In some ways more real and more available than his own mother.

His mother returned from the kitchen with coffee. He wanted to talk to her. Make her understand that there was no point in living there on her own. She should move to a place where she’d have company. He’d intended to do it. But then he remembered the year before: the argument, the crying, the hasty farewell. The regrets. The week of migraines.

She sat in the chair opposite him, rocking slowly back and forth.
“So Peter, how are you? How are your studies? Have you found a girlfriend?” Her voice suddenly seemed normal, clear, interested.

“Why are you asking me that? You know that I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Well, you are my only child. And people ask me about you. It’s important to me. Can’t I ask how you’re doing?”

“You should be happy that I come for your birthday and spend some time with you. And who are they, these people who ask about me?”

She held her hands together as though praying for something. An old embroidered handkerchief, light blue with red stripes, sticking out between the fingers. She looked down for a long time. He noticed her fingers, all wrinkled. Those fingers, those hands...

Peter felt uneasy. He drank a bit of the coffee, but had trouble holding the cup. He was shaking, slowly, and spilling black droplets on his white shirt. He looked at the stains as they grew bigger; he imagined there was blood seeping out of his skin.

No. It was blood.

“Look at me,” he said. “You make me bleed.”

She didn’t say anything, not at first. She just looked. At him, and then at the picture behind him, or maybe at a spot on the wall.

Then she said, “I don’t make you bleed. You do. You make yourself bleed. What is it you’re doing to yourself?”

He was thinking, It can’t be blood. I just spilled coffee. Then he looked at his cup. It was filled with a red substance, like blood. But why would he be drinking blood? Why would she, his mother, be serving it?

His mother was no longer sitting in the chair. He couldn’t see her anymore, couldn’t hear her. Maybe she’d gone to bed or out for a walk. He didn’t know how long he’d been sitting there. He touched the stains on his shirt. They looked brown now, the way blood looks when it dries. His cup was empty. He was no longer shaking. He felt stiff, like the little
brown stains that had stiffened his shirt, as if he’d been using too much starch. He felt as if he couldn’t move anymore. The starch had invaded his body, his lips wouldn’t move when he tried to speak. Then again, it hardly mattered: he was all alone now.

The next thing he knew, his mother was back in the room. She sat with her back toward him watching TV. She called for him to come and sit next to her on the couch. He managed to put down his cup. His shirt was dry, but the spots were still there. He touched them, undid a button of the shirt, touched his skin underneath. Dry too. There was no wound. He would have to check himself in the mirror when he got home, which would have to be soon. It was already getting dark.

She had cleared the table, maybe even done the dishes; he’d been unaware of her. The only illumination now came from candles, which cast a spell on the room.

“Did you have a nice nap?” she asked as he rose to sit down beside her. She was watching a game show, the one she always watched in the afternoons.

“Was I asleep?” he replied.

“Oh yes, you were. You didn’t even hear me take the dishes out. Probably good for you. Too many things on your mind. You need to relax. More coffee? I left it in the thermos for you.”

“No, thank you.”

He tried to remember what had happened earlier. What she’d said during lunch. He couldn’t remember anything except for the questions about his life, over coffee.

“Mom, I need to go home now.”

“Oh, what a shame. Well, I guess you have your life to live. We’re having people over for dinner tonight. You could have stayed and met them. They would love to see you again.”

“What do you mean, we are having people for dinner?”
She looked at him like before. He tried to focus on her eyes. But they somehow escaped his and went elsewhere, again. He followed her gaze but could see nothing but paintings and photos crowding the walls.

And then he realized what she was looking at. That photo. That summer. He remembered. That conversation long ago. He must have been seven or eight years old. At the time, he hadn’t understood its implications. Gitte had been visiting them at the summer rental. The adults had been drinking too much of his father’s homemade white wine, which Peter always wanted to taste although it made him cough. The heat had been overwhelming; his parents had gone inside for a rest. Gitte had looked at him from behind her sunglasses. And then she had started to speak. She’d had trouble getting the words right.

“You know, Peter, you should count yourself lucky to have parents who really love each other. I mean—they’ve always been together. There’s never...never really...been anybody else in their lives.” She’d taken off her glasses, and he had seen that she’d been crying. He’d felt shy and hadn’t known what to do. She’d gotten up from her chair and walked down to the beach. He’d understood not to follow her. He couldn’t remember her coming back. He couldn’t remember ever seeing her again.

The photo had been taken earlier that day. Gitte had always been in it, standing next to his father.

She wasn’t anymore.

“Well, I guess I should accompany you to the door then, Peter,” his mother said, as she got up, glancing at the TV show, before heading for the wardrobe to find his coat.

“What did you mean, Mom?”

“Oh, you wouldn’t understand,” she said, and handed him his coat. She smiled. “Let me help you with this,” she said. He let her hold the coat while his arms fumbled their way into the sleeves. She helped him do the buttons, like when he was a child.
“Now, you have a lovely walk home, and I’ll say hello to your father when I see him in a little while.”

He nodded, gave her a hug, and let the door slowly close behind him. He stood outside for some minutes, maybe close to an hour. He watched her silhouette behind blinds, moving about the house as she turned off the TV, going back to the kitchen with the empty coffee cups, then into the bathroom. That’s when he carefully put his left hand on the doorknob. She never locked the door. He’d been begging her to do so. But no, “Nothing happened in their neighborhood,” she’d said, “And anyway, who would want to harm an old woman like me?”

He could hear water running in the bathtub. Evening was always her time for a bath. She wouldn’t hear him. He crept up the stairs. The third step still creaked, the one that had always betrayed him when he was a child. He took them by twos. Reaching the top, he ducked into his father’s room, hesitating in front of the closet doors. He looked around the room. It looked as it always had. Peter hadn’t been up there for years, but he knew that this was where she put the shirts she’d ironed. He could still hear the water running, so he decided to take his time. Not that he needed to explain. She needed to explain. She needed to explain what had really happened. Why she had let it happen. He felt unsteady, breathless, and sat on the bed.

She still had some power over him, he felt it again. He’d forgotten it. It was the way it used to be, when his father had not come home. As though all he knew and understood belonged to her. “No matter what you think, don’t tell anybody.” Those words echoed in his mind.

The bed was made. The linen gave off a perfume from the past. And then he felt something under the bedcovers. He stood up quickly, feeling dizzy. He drew back the cover. A framed photo, his father and Gitte, holding each other. They were looking up at him, questioning him. He’d never seen the picture before. Why would it be hidden in his father’s old bed? He
wondered who had taken it. And then he looked closer.

The image of his mother was mirrored in his father’s sunglasses.

And then he started to remember. The images were popping up into his head, all of a sudden so clear.

He’d indeed heard the door that night long ago, unlocked, opened, closed, locked again. But he’d also heard something else. His father’s surprised voice, a thump, something being dragged across the tiles. And later, water running, somebody washing the floor of the entrance. He’d wondered why, why then in the middle of the night?

He opened the closet. It was empty. He opened the drawers. Empty too.

“Can I help you?”

Her voice came from another place and time. It was darker than usual, and cold. She’d startled him. He felt like a child again, expecting to be scolded. He remembered that voice.

“I didn’t do anything,” he mumbled.

She was naked and looking at him with no recognition in her eyes. Water was dripping off her body, which looked young again. He couldn’t look at her, didn’t dare to look at her intimidating body.

“He could have let her go,” she said. “He could have let it be. But he didn’t want to. I had to prevent him from harming us, didn’t I? I’m sure you’ll agree.” She noticed the open closet.

“The shirt is all stained. I can’t get those stains off. Oh, I’ve tried. I’ve washed it every week since then. It’s back in the laundry, downstairs. Want to go and have a look?” Her voice was playful. Its tone slowly invaded him as the remains of his willpower tried to persuade his feet to move past her toward the door, his hands to open it, his legs to take the stairs in twos, in threes, to the front door and the wet streets and the familiar neighbors. To escape this place, that voice, those memories, while he was still somebody.
“The final frontier,” I whispered as the music got weird and jangly, the lights made a ring around Mickey Hart’s drum set.

Afterward, we crammed our way onto the Broad Street Line. We pressed into a seat at the back of the car. People kept piling on, and Amy scooted herself onto my lap. A passenger in the aisle took advantage of the opening, sat down. Took a quick glance at us, turned away.

Amy was wearing an embroidered peasant blouse with gauze sleeves. Her ass rested in my lap. She leaned her head against my shoulder. Her lips grazed my ear. We didn’t kiss or stroke. We didn’t say much. Let motion rock us as we hurtled toward what awaited us.
THE REVELATION OF BREATHING
Casey Wheeler

pAraLyZed.

That’s how I felt ok?

She didn’t pick up when I called either. Common I talked to you til 3am last night. Ring and reject.

Running late per usual.

Trying to type quickly as I could, oh and he was wearing a flannel today and so was I for flannel Friday but the keys were sticking and it was meant to be but the stupid keys and cliché but I was meant to

Be There.

I hope my deodorant lasts because now I’m outside the room and my perspiration is percolating my

Raincoat; black because I like to blend in.

Checked the syllabus just to be sure. You get three skips but common I curled my hair today and it wasn’t for him it was actually just because of the rain and my hair curls better in the rain except those kids from Long Island said technically it was “ice raining” today but I thought it was called sleet.

But apparently today I’m wrong. Or maybe just frozen. Yep just me and my curls and my flannel and my frozen legs standing outside 112 and hoping he doesn’t see me and see my breath fogging up the window watching him write on the board.
At about five in the afternoon in late fall, when the light was just beginning to fade, Sujitha Fernando prepared herself to take the subway. This involved a series of complicated actions. Because it was so cold (the thermometer showed 53 degrees) and she didn’t yet have proper clothes, she had to layer. First the extra-small “I love NY” t-shirt her new husband Rohan had presented to her when she arrived in Queens two months ago, then the long heavy cotton black and white batik tunic her sister had given her as a wedding present, then her burnt orange cardigan the color of a Sri Lanka sunset, and finally a large grey/green parka that dwarfed her delicate frame and into which her long silky black hair surrendered itself, caught in the hollow of the parka’s open fur-trimmed hood. Because she was to meet Rohan in Manhattan—that unnatural world of tall buildings that obliterated the sky—she wore closed blocky shoes with three-inch solid heels.

Once she was dressed, Sujitha had to think about protection. To protect against muggers, she hid her tiny beaded money purse in the inside pocket of the parka. To protect against rape, for she had watched US TV shows and knew what she was dealing with, she placed a silver whistle into the parka’s outer pocket. To protect herself against everything in general, for there were unfamiliar and dangerous things at every turn, Sujitha reached under her layers and pinned her miraculous medal, the one her mother had given her, to the strap of her bra. She then slung her pocket book, brown leather with an embedded black elephant, around her neck. Inside it she placed a packet of tissues, a photo of her parents, a New York City subway map, her newly acquired cell phone and the slip of paper with Rohan’s carefully written instructions on which exit she should take,
which set of stairs etc. to get out of the subway and meet him. She gave a
last look at herself in the large mirror—delicate features, light brown skin,
slightly startled black eyes, looking like a bundled up ten-year-old rather
than her actual 21 years.

Sujitha sighed. Everything in the apartment was foreign to her
—hard-edged furniture, colorless blinds, and bare walls. The apartment
itself was small and airless compared to her parents’ home in rural
Homagama. The apartment was new to her and so was her husband. She
and Rohan had met only four times prior to marriage and always in the
company of her family. Before leaving, she checked and double-checked
the lock on the kitchen window so that no one could climb into the apartment
through the fire escape. She looked out of the peephole of her apartment
three times to make sure no one was lurking there, waiting to rush in
and attack.

The moment she walked out of the apartment building Sujitha
was nearly run over by a tall man running at top speed while pushing
a screaming child in front of him in some kind of wheeled contraption.
Where in God’s name was the child’s mother? And how extraordinary
to be nearly run over as though she didn’t exist. She had noticed that
people did not look at her...they always averted their eyes. They must
hate her, she thought...she must look foreign and they must want nothing
to do with her. Back home she had been surrounded by people who loved
her: her parents, Roslyn the cook, her older sister Deepa and all her
childhood friends.

Sujitha got to the top of the subway steps, looked down, took a
deep breath, clutched her bag and prayed for strength. She wished for a
second that the family driver were here to drive her to her destination.
Never in a thousand years could she have imagined going down into this
hellhole, but she had promised Rohan, who seemed to think that being
able to do things on her own was very important, and she wanted to please him. It was Sujitha’s second trip on the subway but her very first trip alone. She started descending step by step into the gigantic grave. Clunk, clunk went her shoes and it occurred to her that she could have worn flat shoes and carried the other ones in a plastic bag. Some teenagers in t-shirts and shorts rushed down the stairs past her as though they were escaping a fire. She marveled at their near nakedness and at their speed.

Sujitha could not imagine why anyone would have invented this infernal space deep within the guts of the earth and why it was necessary to force people down where the light of the world was completely obliterated. She pulled out the yellow plastic card Rohan had given her—so thin and insubstantial a thing. She pushed it through the metal slot, as he had instructed but the metal turnstile hit her waist with force and didn’t move. She gave a little gasp and pushed the card through again. Nothing. People were gathering behind her and she could hear them muttering in displeasure. Mother Mary, they will crush me, she thought. She flipped the card, sent it through again and saw a message “Swipe card again at this turnstile.” A devilish card. She tried again. Just then a deep magnified voice bellowed, “Miss do you need help?” She was so afraid that the words did not register. He is shouting at me, she thought, watching as the man who had been sitting in a small booth suddenly came to life, emerging from the booth and walking towards her. He was a giant of a man with skin the color of night, just like the armed men she had seen on the TV news the night before. Her fingers trembled and then mercifully, the card behaved itself and with another painful contact with the turnstile and a click and a turn, she was on the other side...running down to the end of the platform. She glanced back quickly to make sure the man had not followed her, then leaned her thin shaking body against the grimy wall and prayed for the train to arrive.
All around her on the platform, people stood like ghosts in the underworld, silent and worried. On the tracks she saw small dark shadows scurrying about, mini yakkas, devilish spirits. A shiver ran through her. Then the rumble started and she could not tell from which direction it came. The very wall she was leaning against vibrated. The rumble grew and Sujitha pressed her hands to her ears while she watched, intimidated by the tremendous force of the huge metallic snakelike creature as it sped into the station.

The train doors swished opened and Sujitha stepped in hesitantly, aware of the gap between the platform and the train and the dark nothingness below. Though there were other available seats, she sat to the right of a pale motherly woman whose upper arm flesh, barely contained in a thin beige sweater, wobbled as the train accelerated out of the station. At the next station, a man with a snake tattooed around his thick neck sat on her other side, filling out the three-seat section. Was he part of some kind of terrorist group? Why else to wear a symbol like this? Sujitha edged her right knee over so that it wouldn’t accidentally collide with his. Across from her was the young teenage couple who had rushed past her on the stairs. She could not get her eyes off them. Their smooth young hands roamed all over one another as though they were alone in a dark bedroom—such confidence, such pleasure and all so out in the open. Back in her home town, men and women rarely displayed physical affection in public; in fact it was more common to see boys holding hands or girls holding hands—the interaction of friends—but never anything like this. The girl’s eyes shone with such unabashed desire that Sujitha suddenly felt awkward and inadequate, her own intimate relations with her husband having been thus far...very careful and shy.

The train screeched to a stop and three sad-looking men shuffled in with guitars and funny-looking hats. They stood in a row in front of the
doors, eyes on the floor. The moment the train started rolling, they lifted their guitars and their gazes and started singing in a foreign language that Sujitha could not understand. Bésame, bésame mucho—the words were full of such sweet feeling—it must be a song of longing for their homeland, she thought. Perhaps a song about the beauty of the landscape or the nature there—the special flowers and trees. Sujitha thought about her favorite bo tree in Sri Lanka—its ancient gnarled trunk, its blessed leaves...

She noticed that the youngest of the three men appeared to be smiling and singing to her. His body had turned slightly in her direction and there was a twinkle in his eye. Encouraged by her gaze, the young man took a step or two towards her and Sujitha felt herself breaking into a full blush. She was sure that the other passengers must be staring at them, but remarkably, no one seemed to be. What was wrong with these people? Why didn’t they react to anything? Why didn’t they talk to each other or look at each other? She had suspected that no one wanted to look at her because she was foreign but now she noticed that no one looked at anyone else. What a strange place.

Just then the train pulled into another station and the men abruptly stopped playing and resumed their former deflated stance—as though something grand and eloquent and noble had opened and was suddenly shut—leaving behind sad, shuffling men with the air of poor relatives prepared to wait hours for a free meal. The oldest of the men, he must be the leader, Sujitha guessed, inverted his hat and started walking from one corner of the car to the other. She noticed a couple of people throwing in some coins or a single dollar note into the hat. I must give them something Sujitha thought and carefully opened her bag a crack. Of course, her money was in her parka but she remembered that she had put a bit of change in the zipper compartment the last time she used the bag. The man was approaching her. With some awkwardness as she did not want her elbows
to bump into either the fat lady or the snake man, Sujitha managed to retrieve a couple of coins which she dropped into the hat. The man’s face nodded...gracias señorita and he moved on.

Sujitha was still afraid but mixed with the fear was something else—a curiosity that she had not recognized in herself before.

The train, which had been sparsely occupied, became more and more crowded as it approached the city. Sujitha decided to check the instructions Rohan had given her, as she could not remember the name of her subway stop. She looked for the piece of paper in her bag but it wasn’t there. She looked again, rummaging through her belongings. Where had she put it? Oh no, it must have fallen when she was pulling the coins out. She looked at her feet, bent down and looked under the seat, then looked up and down the train floor. Nothing. She pulled out her cell phone and pressed speed dial #2 for Rohan.

“That won’t work in here, sister.” The voice sounded amused.

Sujitha startled, snapped her phone shut as though she had been caught doing something illicit and looked to her left. Seated catacorner to her was a young dark-skinned woman with full lips, twinkly eyes and the most extraordinary hairdo Sujitha had ever seen. The woman’s thick black hair was pleated in intricate rows that adorned her delicate scalp in beautiful symmetrical curved lines. Each row shone as though sunlight were hitting it—one row copper, the next green like a brand new paddy field. She stared closer and saw ribbon, expertly threaded into the rows of hair...a queen...a goddess, thought Sujitha, enraptured.

“Sister,” the goddess said, “what are you staring at?” Her eyes had hardened. “Sister?” repeated Sujitha, mystified. The motherly woman slunk back in her seat, to give them more room.

The face of the goddess softened and before Sujitha knew what
was happening, she rolled up her left sleeve to the elbow and showed Sujitha a brown arm, just a shade darker than her own. "See, we’re sisters."

Sujitha thought she understood.

"Where you from?" the woman asked.

"Near Colombo."

"Colombo where? New Jersey, Nebraska, Arizona?"

"Sri Lanka."

"All right, now you’re messing with my head. Where’s that, girl?"

"The island beneath India."

"Oh," laughed the goddess, gold flashing inside her mouth, "maybe in my next life I’ll get to see it. Is it beautiful?"

"Yes," said Sujitha, her eyes involuntarily tearing up

"You just off the boat?"

"I flew in two months ago."

Sujitha anxiously watched as people entered and left the train. She had no idea where to go or what to do next.

"Come here to study?"

"No—I came to get married. I’m married now."

"Married. You’re kidding me. You don’t look old enough."

A moment later she leaned over and said in a loud whisper. "Let me guess. You got pregnant and they forced you into it."

"Oh no no." Sujitha, appalled, felt herself getting hot again.

Just then the snake man got up and a seriously overweight man squeezed himself into the vacated space, forcing Sujitha to move up to the very edge of her seat as his rolls of fat settled back in an entitled way. These seats are too small Sujitha thought given how many large people live here.

"Hey mister, show some respect!" the young woman said, her voice suddenly husky and rough.

A small happiness came over Sujitha, a recognition that this total
stranger was looking out for her.

The man grunted and glared at the goddess as though she had been the one to act rudely.

“So where are you heading?”

“I’m meeting my husband in Manhattan.”

The train loudspeaker announced, “Lexington Avenue—59th Street.” Many people got off the train and Sujitha looked around anxiously.

“Where?”

“I’m not sure. I lost his instructions. We’re supposed to go to a party.”

“Oh honey, you’ll just have to get off and call him.”

Get off—yes, thought Sujitha—but where? The train kept stopping and starting with its relentless announcements. She wished it would slow down just a bit—“57th Street and Seventh Avenue, 49th Street and Seventh Avenue.” The words all sounded the same to her. Oh why had she not memorized the name of the stop.

“Next station Times Square. Transfer available to the 1 2 & 3 and 7 lines.” Sujitha felt overwhelmed.

The goddess leaned over. “That’s my stop—you’d better get off with me or you’ll end up in Brooklyn.”

Sujitha hesitated.

“Come on sister. This is it. Follow me.”

The doors opened and Sujitha, feeling utterly helpless, followed the goddess onto the crowded platform and up two flights of stairs, careful to stay right behind her. She intended to call Rohan the moment she reached the outside but what she encountered at the top was so incredible that she forgot.

It was as though evening had turned into day. Sujitha was surrounded by bright lights of all colors and sizes—blue and green and
red and yellow—more lights even than at Diwali, the festival of lights, her favorite holiday. Some stretched impossibly high into the sky and all were in motion, with text and images flashing in front of her.

“Pretty isn’t it? See the Arch?”

In the distance was a golden Arch—suspended in the air—like a gateway to a new world.

“That’s where I work—McDonald’s—world-famous!” Sujitha was surprised. How could a goddess like this work in a place like McDonald’s. Rohan had taken her to one in Forest Hills and she had found it dreary and depressing.

“I have to run,” said the goddess. “My shift starts at 6 p.m. You call that husband of yours and tell him to come get you.”

“All right” Sujitha said, still in a daze.

“You’re gonna be ok, right?”

“Yes, thanks so much!”

“Any problem, you know where to find me.” The goddess smiled her dazzling smile, waved and rushed off into the crowd.

Sujitha wanted to call after her, “what’s your name,” but she was suddenly engulfed by a sea of people. She held her bag closely to her chest and allowed herself to flow along with the others who seemed to be from all over the world. She passed many wondrous things. Chinese artists who sat patiently drawing portraits of passers by, capturing their likeness through one or two telling features—a distinctive nose, a dimpled chin, a look of longing in the eyes—carts selling what smelled like roasted peanuts which made her realize that she was hungry, stands of clothing for tourists including one that boasted “I love NY” t-shirts for only $2.99 and another set for $12.99. She wondered whether this was where Rohan had purchased her t-shirt and which version he had bought.

Rohan. She realized with a shock that she had forgotten to call
him, but along with that thought came a certain surprise at herself. For two months she had clung to Rohan, convinced that she could never adjust to life in New York without him. And here she was having her very own adventure. This realization thrilled her in a way she could never have anticipated. She noticed that a section of the road had been cleared of cars and that tables and chairs had been set there for people to use. She sat down at a table, fumbled in her bag for her phone and speed dialed #2.

"Where are you, Sujitha, are you ok?" a very anxious Rohan practically yelled into the phone. "I've been waiting here for more than half an hour. Why didn't you answer your cell?" She heard the slight anger in his voice and realized that she had frightened him.

"I'm so sorry Rohan—I'm here at Times Square."

"Times Square. Why on earth did you get off there?"

"I lost your instructions and I made a friend on the subway."

"On the subway? Sujitha please be careful."

"I'm fine Rohan, don't worry."

The line went quiet for a moment and she could sense his surprise.

"Ok—well I'm at Lexington and 59th. I'm coming over to get you but it may take thirty minutes. Just don't move. Where are you exactly?"

Sujitha looked around and her eyes gravitated to the golden arch.

"I'll be at McDonald's," she said, smiling to herself.
DRAGONS BREATHING
Colin Sheehy

Stranded, striking matches across empty thoughts, seeing what will catch. Sulfur stings, seeping, suffocating neurons. Useless, nagging, narcissistic, I can’t find my feet. Company comes at a price, strings leaping out to find someone that will hold on tight, but they never do. Or they might, until time cuts deep, fraying strands, burst into a million directions. Fingers reaching out into the universe to find someone’s hair to dig into, hands outstretched into the biting air, we hope for the best, but all that fills cold dried palms is ember. Burning until you drop it, or close your fingers tight, melting flesh to snuff out the pain. And in the end, all we have left is stark, angry ash and scars to show, where we have been, how we got burned. And for every phoenix that rises, there’s a stone that falls, sinking in someone’s sea with nowhere to go but down. And we all grow up, whether we like it or not, left with the salt taste of tears, mouths open, deaf from our own screams bouncing off the walls of this dark, basement we call home, scratching at stone, nails splinter, echoes stop.
Throat hot and smoking, once dragon breath poured out for another, now burned by that same heat that keeps us warm at night. But I’ll still put up a fight, and I’ll stare into someone’s eyes, arms open, waiting to be burned.
HOLLOW POINT

Bobby Bretz

One night I might just reminisce
On hollow-point half-politics
And shrapnel delegations in my head,
On trying times and tourniquets
And sanguine soldier starter-kits
Where right and wrong are like to live and dead.

One night I might write history
On how my demons went with me
To burn the holy cities in my mind,
On ghostly gangs of grievances
Who sing their reminiscences
And daisy-cut the answers that I find.

One night I might resuscitate
The dreams of old expatriates
Bled out from bullet holes in days long past,
And the drunken theatre congregates
With their armor-plated aggregates
Might pass the plotless playing fields at last.
Adam Templeton told people that after AA he was a better man. What he didn't say was that he had his own private interpretation for AA. In his mind, that meant After Alcohol. And it was true. After a little alcohol, he was always a better man, more benevolent, smarter, and charming, the bon vivant.

Templeton got a kick out of the quiet nods and the small smiles of appreciation for a man who owned up to his failings and took steps to correct his shortcomings. The confession was the best part—the sorrowful look, the gazing into space as he recounted tales of his past indiscretions. Later, he had to be cautious. At parties, people would notice so he always asked for virgin drinks. At bars with buddies, he volunteered to be the designated driver and paced through the evenings with Bloody Mary Mix secretly juiced with airplane vodkas. He always had a half dozen of these handy little bottles.

Dinners were problematic. If the restaurant served non-alcoholic wine, Templeton would order it. If only regular wine was available, Templeton would allow someone to persuade him to have just the one glass. Just one. He would protest but not too much. He had to be careful, more than one, and his house of cards would tumble. So tonight's slipup was just an anomaly.

That was why it was so hard for Templeton to understand Leah's rage over missing his daughter's recital. One frigging recital. A bunch of six-year-olds on a stage, dressed in frothy pink tutus, stumbling around in a semi-coordinated dance. Leah held their daughter Hanna, crunching the organza-wrapped child close to her.

"Wait here, I'm going to get her changed." Leah stalked down the hall. Templeton poured a finger of vodka. He tossed it back, then quickly rinsed
the glass and put it back on the shelf.

“You’re not fooling me, Adam.”

“Jesus, Leah, don’t sneak up on me like that.”

“I wasn’t sneaking. I walk normally. It’s your conscience, Adam. Your conscience makes you guilty.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Leah crossed her arms. Her face was like a mask, pale and stiff. Her lips became slits as she bit back whatever she intended to say. She gave him a cold glare and retreated to their bedroom.

When he went to retire, he found the bedroom locked. At Hanna’s door he looked in at his daughter. She slept in a pile of stuffed animals, her mouth slightly open. By tomorrow she’d forget. He stripped to his underwear and lay on the sofa, staring out the sliding glass doors at the pool reflecting a disapproving moon.

***

The deal had gone well. Old man Edwards had signed the contract, and Templeton’s boss was pleased. It wasn’t as big a contract as it could have been, but half the pie was better than none. Templeton felt like celebrating. He hadn’t had a drink in two weeks, just to prove he didn’t need it, at least not a real drink. But tonight was special. The clock on his desk marked the time as four twenty. Close enough. He shut down his computer and locked his desk, keeping snoopers from seeing the pint of vodka in the file drawer. In the hallway outside his office, his new secretary glanced at him, seeing the briefcase in his hand, noting the jacket.

“Got to go to my kid’s recital, Sally. See you tomorrow.”

In the parking garage, Templeton was angry with himself for saying anything. He didn’t owe her an explanation. He was entitled to leave when he wanted to. Right-on.

Instead of the beltway, Templeton decided to drive north on 97.
See something new. Besides, he wasn’t in a hurry to get home. Leah had not retreated from her iceberg position, and he knew from experience she could keep it up for frigging weeks.

Up ahead he spotted a bar set back from the road, The After Hours. He turned into the strip mall and drove past the small businesses that populated these kinds of neighborhoods. He parked his BMW between two hulking SUVs, and hoped the drivers had sense enough to not bang his doors. Inside, his eyes adjusted to the dim light. The place was muted grays and blues; triangle panels separated the small tables, probably hell on the waiters but a semblance of privacy to the customers. Miles Davies music played to no audience. At a long mahogany bar on the right, one customer, a dark-haired woman, occupied the last seat of the bar. Not a bad-looking woman, full-figured, her face hidden by a wave of brown hair. In front of her was a tall glass with melting ice, a tall empty glass.

Templeton strolled over, pulled a barstool out, and sat two spots from her.

“Evening.” He dipped his head and drummed his fingers on the bar.

“Afternoon,” she said. Her eyes were very blue. Contacts?

Templeton made a great show of checking his Rolex. “Right you are,” he nodded at the glass, “Fill that up for you?”

She glanced down at the glass, seemed surprised that it was empty.

“Well, I don’t usually have more than one, but sure... Why not?”

Jolene was a lot of fun. Templeton couldn’t remember the last time he’d laughed so much. Good kid, maybe not a kid, but high-spirited. He’d bought her more than the one drink, and later, dinner. It was late. He slipped his key into the front door. The house was dark. Leaving his shoes, he padded down the tile hallway. His bedroom door was still locked.
On Thursday, Templeton stopped by The After Hours again. Jolene was still there. Old friends by now, they shared a table and laughter as they ordered martinis.

“So, how was work?” Jolene leaned forward, giving Templeton a revealing view of her melon breasts.

“Same old stuff. Finished out a couple of deals, but I’ve been thinking about looking for a new job.”

“How come? I thought you said they liked your work.” She fished an olive from the martini with a red-tipped fingernail.

“Best time to look.” He winked and signaled the waiter to bring two more. “Fellow told me once that he never stayed in any one place too long. Makes ’em take you for granted. No more than five years, that’s my motto.”

“How come? I thought you said they liked your work.” She fished an olive from the martini with a red-tipped fingernail.

“Best time to look.” He winked and signaled the waiter to bring two more. “Fellow told me once that he never stayed in any one place too long. Makes ’em take you for granted. No more than five years, that’s my motto.”

“Does it work?”

“What?”

“All that moving around. Job-wise. Are you better off?”

Templeton thought about it. Overall, he was pretty happy, a couple of times it backfired, but those weren’t his fault. “Sure. I make good money. They appreciate my abilities.”

“You’re brave. I need to quit, but I don’t have the guts to do it.”

“Start now. Put your résumé out there.”

She smiled. “Maybe I will.”

“Want to go to dinner?” Templeton was proud, puffed up with the good advice he was dispensing.

“Why don’t you come by my place? I don’t live far from here. I’m pretty good in the kitchen.”

Templeton found out that she was pretty good in the bedroom as well. His brief sense of guilt vanished as he watched her strip out of her clothes. It’d been weeks since Leah had allowed him to touch her.

***

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As Templeton pulled up to his house on Friday night after a quick stop at Jolene’s, he wondered why a cab was parked in the driveway. Who called a cab? Inside, suitcases lined the hallway.

Leah’s voice. “Oh, he’s just been so busy. I’m sure that he got caught up in work.”

Shit. Leah’s parents. He was supposed to pick them up at the airport after work. Leah told him at breakfast as she made peanut butter sandwiches for Hanna. She’d also left a message on his cell phone. Templeton forced a smile on his face and walked into the living room.

Ronnie and Adie were on the sofa. Hanna, in Adie’s arms, hugging a rag doll.

“Daddy.” She jumped down and ran across the room, grabbing his knees.

“Do I feel like an idiot!” He picked up Hanna. “So stupid. I was just going out the door when the boss caught up with me, and I just clean forgot. Please accept my apologies. How was your flight?”

Ronnie stood up and crossed to the bar. “A little bumpy. How about I take us all out to eat.”

Leah stood up. “That would be great, Dad. Let me get my purse and run a brush through Hanna’s hair.”

Templeton was left alone with his in-laws. He glanced at the bar, wondering if he dared offer them a drink. He knew that Leah had told them he was on the wagon. Better not.

“Can I get you anything? Bottled water? Coffee?” Ronnie looked buff. For a man of sixty-two, he kept himself in top shape, played golf twice a week. Ronnie was a no-nonsense man. Adie looked hard at Templeton. Two years younger than her husband, she had practically no wrinkles and a tight compact body. Leah once told him that her mother played tennis professionally in her youth.
“Are you coming down with a cold, Adam? You look a little flushed.” Her voice had an edge to it he couldn’t quite identify.

“What? Oh, no, just allergies.”

Templeton slept in his own bedroom that night. His in-laws were in the guest room. It wouldn’t look good for him to be on the sofa. Leah’s icy silence could have sunk the Titanic. All he saw of her was one ivory shoulder exposed briefly as he slipped between the sheets. He knew the territory between them was a minefield.

The next Monday afternoon, Adam found out that Jolene had a husband. They were separated. The divorce done any day. She’d waited nearly a year. Who filed? He did, Jolene said. Things weren’t working out but she didn’t want to go into details. He’d spent an hour complaining about Leah and how she treated him.

“Hey, you’re right, baby. Who does she think she is?” Jolene was shoving the martini shaker up against the ice dispenser.

Templeton walked naked to Jolene’s kitchen. In her apartment that was a three-step hop from the living room.

“You’re a good man, bring in good money. She doesn’t appreciate you like I do. Why if I had a guy like you, I’d count my blessings.”

“I know, but there’s the kid. Leah is treating me like shit for no reason.”

“Didn’t you entertain her parents all weekend?”

“Yeah, but they’ll be another week at least. I probably shouldn’t stop here for a few days.”

Jolene pulled herself close to him. She pouted at him. “Sure you can, honey. You aren’t at her beck and call, are you?”

He smiled. Jolene was right. He deserved to be treated decently.
His in-laws always hated him, didn’t appreciate what he’d done for their daughter.

***

“You just don’t know what I go through with that woman.” Templeton tapped his glass to get the bartender’s attention. Jolene had convinced Templeton to meet her after his late meeting at the office. Leah won’t know when the meeting ends, she’d said. The bartender glanced at him, and Templeton held up two fingers.

“Same for me. I just got my degree after he finished his, and it wasn’t my fault the job market dried up. I’ll get better work. He wasn’t patient with me.”

“Damn straight.” Templeton knew after that first night that Jolene wasn’t as young as he first thought, but she was undemanding in bed and that was refreshing.

***

The bar closed at one. Jolene wanted him to take a cab but he was fine, really fine.

Traffic was light. At the corner of Fern and Broadway, Templeton spotted a black Suburban parked on the corner. It looked like Leah’s car, but hell, it was one in the morning. What would she be doing in that neighborhood anyway?

Templeton circled the block. No, it wasn’t her car. Wrong license plate. Spooky, man, spooky. In his garage, he looked at Leah’s car; even put his hand on the hood. Cold.

He shook his head. Stupid thoughts, Leah would never spy on him. She didn’t care enough to spy.

Suitcases were in the hall. The in-laws. Then he remembered. They were leaving early. Had an early flight to Florida. Something. He was supposed to do something. What was it? The thought stayed on the
periphery of his consciousness, as he lay back on the leather couch, his eyes closing.

***

“Daddy. Daddy.” A noise squeaked in his ear. Templeton opened his eyes. His daughter held a stuffed seal toward him. “It’s today, Daddy!”

Templeton rose to a sitting position. The room seemed drained of color, like everything he saw was black and white, no, not even that, more of a gray, grays that seamed together. He realized that Leah was standing in the kitchen door.

“Morning. Like some coffee before we leave?”

Templeton nodded. Leave, where were they going? Leah walked over and set a large mug on the coffee table.

She sniffed the air around his head. “You might want to shower first. I packed your bag for you.”

God. The beach. They were driving to the beach today. A long weekend before Hanna started school. Christ. How could he have forgotten!

He reached out to take the coffee and realized his hand shook. Templeton drew it back quickly, hoping that Leah hadn’t noticed.

“Right. Right. I’d better get showered and changed. What time is it?”

“Ten.” Leah answered. “I’ll carry your coffee into the bathroom.”

After the shower, after the hot water scourged his skin, after the mouthwash and the coffee, Templeton tried to remember what he had drank last night. The bartender, Joe, must be poisoning him. That had to be it. Cheap booze. Only cheap booze would make him feel like this.

They dropped his in-laws at the airport. Ronnie and Adie were distant, and said little to him. He overheard Leah’s father as she kissed him good-bye. “Now, call immediately if you need something.” His gray eyebrows pinched together as he stared at Adam.

“Sure, Dad. You guys have a safe trip.”
Templeton let Leah drive. He lay back on the seat, his eyes shut. His daughter chattered happily, singing nonsense songs. They’d bought the beach house last year. It was small and needed work. Work that he hadn’t quite gotten to. But it faced the ocean and a long stretch of white sand. Inside, Leah threw open the shutters while he brought in the bags of groceries that she brought. Hanna begged to go to the ocean.

“Take her. Here, take the beach chair. Just keep an eye on her. She knows she’s not to go in the water alone, but still, kids get excited.”

In the kitchen, Templeton checked the liquor cabinet. A half a bottle of vodka, no wine. He’d have to go to the liquor store.

The sun was burning his head. Why the hell hadn’t he brought a hat? Hanna ran up and down, her legs pumping as she played tag with the surf. He’d found a small bottle of gin in his luggage. It wasn’t much but helped the headache.

Hat. His body was dying out here. He scanned the beach. Dozens of families were scattered along the shore. Kids were splashing in the water. Just a second. It would take him five minutes tops to dash back to the house, grab a cap; maybe there was beer in the fridge. Only a second.

The lifeguard gave him an odd look. What the hell was that about anyway? The kid was fine, swallowed a little water. Why was everyone acting so weird?

Hanna blubbered on Leah’s shoulder. Her body seemed tiny and vulnerable.

“It’s okay, honey.” Leah caressed Hanna’s damp blond hair, plastered to her back.

Weekend from hell. Hanna avoided him, casting sideways glances at him as though he’d sprouted horns or some damned thing. Leah didn’t speak. The chaise on the deck wasn’t comfortable, and he picked up sand fleas from someplace. The backs of his ankles and knees were driving him crazy.
He’d found the Sand Dollar by accident during the last trip. When was that, early June? The buzz behind his eyeballs was getting worse. The beach house bored him quickly, and he’d convinced Leah that he liked long solitary walks in the evenings. He’d found the girl, a local, all tan legs and small titties hid by a two-inch square of cloth doing a waitress gig at the bar. They all like to tell you they’re innocent but he knew better.

With the heat and the itch, Templeton roamed further and further out—walking past the property fences, past the summer tourist places, out to the shacks where the locals lived. The Sand Dollar was still there. A small crowd of people were laughing and tossing plastic forks at one another. Kids.

Templeton spotted Cindy, standing by the bar, hugging a circular plastic tray to her chest.

“Hey. Long time no see.” She smiled, showing slightly crooked teeth. Templeton grinned, “Missed you, what time you get off?”

Leah was going to divorce him. She’d met with some female bitch of a lawyer when they returned from the beach weekend.

Jolene ran her hand across his back. “Just don’t let her take you to the cleaners. She doesn’t appreciate you the way I do, honey.” Jolene muttered for the umpteenth time.

Templeton tilted his head and swallowed the Heineken in one long swallow. Jolene had quit going to the hairdressers or something. He could see about a half inch of gray at the roots of her brown hair. The little beach girl didn’t have that sloppy belly either. Hers, you could bounce a nickel off of.

Fuck her, he thought, and then laughed inside. I did fuck her. I fucked them all. Let her divorce me, he would be glad to get rid of her. The
courts would make sure he saw his kid. They couldn’t keep him away.

A bachelor again. God, it would be great. He’d get a slick apartment in the city. Move in the little beach girl? Naw. She wasn’t sophisticated enough. He’d keep her in the background. Someone to bop on the weekends. Maybe Leah would get the beach house?

“Penny for your thoughts, sweetheart?”

Funny, he’d never noticed those small red veins in Jolene’s face before.

***

“What do you mean, you’re letting me go?” Templeton glared at his boss.

“Things are just not working out. You’ve let several deals slip lately. Your mind just isn’t on your job.” Keller rolled his Mont Blanc pen back and forth. “You’ve done great work for us in the past. I don’t think you’ll be displeased with your severance, and I’ll personally be happy to give you some good recommendation letters.”

After his third martini, Templeton had it all worked out in his head. The job loss would be a blessing in disguise. Leah wouldn’t be able to get so much money out of him now. How about those apples? He’d take life easy for a few months, then boom, back into the job market, better than ever. After the switch to vodka shots, and beer chasers, he’d decided to take a year sabbatical. Go to India or something. Be above it all. Leah’d be sorry she shoved him out the door.

He watched as the bartender slowly wiped a wine glass and slid it into the overhead rack. In the mirror, he could see the familiar faces gather. After Hours was a good bar. Lots of laughs, food not bad. Jolene had stopped coming. Maybe he’d been too hasty. He’d drive by her place. That was it. Buy Jolene some flowers. Women liked flowers. She’d be happy to see him, tickled. Somewhere on the boulevard he’d seen the flower stand. Wasn’t that late, they’d still be here.
“Can I see your license and registration, sir?”

Templeton tried to focus on the face in the window. Did he know this person? License? Registration? He lurched for the glove box. Through the rain droplets he saw a boxy thing, pushed sideways. He was real close to it. Lights pulsed in the raindrops, and a dull wail echoed through the night. He wanted someone to stop the noise. There were flowers—so many flowers, scattered over his hood.

“Sir. Can you step out of the car, please?”

***

Leah was decorating the house for the holidays when the doorbell rang. She opened it and saw a young pregnant girl standing there, biting her lips and looking desperately at the ground. Behind her was a tired-looking woman in a white waitress uniform, still wearing her apron with ketchup stains on it. She gripped the young girl by the upper arm like she was afraid she’d slip away.

“Is there an Adam Templeton that lives here?” The woman asked.

“Not any more,” Leah answered. “My ex-husband is in prison. Can I help you?”
PORTRAIT OF AN IMMIGRANT
Derek N. Otsuji

What words kept hidden,
your silences
revealed.

A pocketknife
carried on your person,
your ID.

Love was the garden
carved out on land
held in tenancy.

Blue veins swollen on the back
of your hands, a map
of rivers running

to lost childhoods?—No,
to the graves of parents
you did not bury.

A tree—the tallest pine
in the field—stood
for home viewed
from a distance,
the landscape a palimpsest
of desires.

Ocean waves, like endless
tongues unfolding, babbled
on the shore

of island on which
you discovered yourself
marooned.
in memory of a friend, drowned at twenty-one

The tide slips onto the beach.
I do not think of Meriden or San Francisco,
how your footprints sank into the sand
under the crush of tiny floods.

I do not think of Meriden or San Francisco
as a blood pulse in my skull
crushes sleep with its tiny floods.
I swim above a shifting floor of sea stars.

Blood pulsing in my skull
I watch for the pride of catch and release
trawling the floor for sea stars,
its carapace lashed with nets of moonlight.

I watch for the pride of catch and release
in a dead man’s float,
my back lashed with nets of moonlight.
The earth quakes a mile offshore.

In a dead-man’s float
a cold wave rocks me back.
A mile offshore the earth quakes
from a season mutiny.
A cold wave rocks me back.
My footprints sink into the sand.
A mutinous season
slips the tide onto the beach.
IN DECEMBER, MEGAN COSTELLO

WHILE I WAS DREAMING, MEGAN COSTELLO

THE ALEMBIC | PAGE 296
TO A DEPARTED CAT

Richard N. Bentley

What was the matter with life on my shoulder?
Showing our scratches with rueful delight,
You had to thresh out your breath that much bolder,
Creeping away from the car in the night.
None of us noticed your silent departure,
Tending your terrors you hurlte in dread,
But saunter along through my mind's dreamy summer,
Back to this room where the claws mark the bed. DEPARTED
The name of the boat was Chaos Theory. By weight and volume, it was one of the largest boats in the marina, a shallow-draft houseboat, which Dr. Tim conceded was more house than boat. The exterior was well maintained, the deck recently stained and varnished, the linen clean. It was shipshape in all respects except for the engine, which would not start, but that was unimportant because the boat’s primary function was as a floating bedroom.

When he wasn’t working as a sex therapist in Pasadena, Tim spent his days on the boat. He was fastidious about putting away whatever was left out from the night before: wineglasses, plates, string cheese and crackers; his silk robe always returned to the silver hook. Anna, his secretary, kept everything else going, including the maintenance of the head and transcription of his scribbled manuscripts.

The boat banged against the mooring. Chelsea had gone home at 1:00 a.m. She was underage but got past the doorman with her sister’s expired driver’s license. She wasn’t sure what had happened. They had split two bottles of Bordeaux, and Tim serenaded her with a composition by Segovia, followed by a violent rendition of “Malagueña” with rifling fingers.

Earlier, Tim had seemed so shy. He was dressed in string-drawn muslin pants and a peasant shirt, worn open, exposing a hairless chest. She thought he was a sort of beach guy, his loose whites made whiter by his dark tan. She liked that he was so relaxed, so low-key and interested in what she had to say. Tim talked softly, moving closer, pulling back, moving closer again, talking just above a whisper. He said very little about himself, and this built intense curiosity.

“Stop teasing! What do you really do?”
“I’m an entomologist.”
“What’s that?”
“I study bugs.”
“No, really, I want to know. Are you an actor?”
“No, I’m a psychologist.”
“I don’t believe you. Show me your business card?”

Tim observed that the girl’s eyes were widely dilated and she had more than once wet her lips with her tongue.

“Analyze me? I want to be analyzed.”
“You’ll have to call. It’s time for me to get back to the boat.”
“The boat?”
“Yes, I sleep on the boat three nights a week.”
“I want to see the boat.”

The tide was up and kelp floated close to the boat. First strands, then a ring of seaweed moved across the water to the pylon, where it bumped against a barnacled post. He watched it from the deck as it changed shape, gradually turning from a wavy circle into a sharply defined square. Tim mused on this. Was there meaning here? How could nature produce four perpendiculars? Then beside the floating weed a sea bass appeared.

Tim ran for his speargun. He crept slowly across the deck, following the fish, and waited. His gun had a strong band and fired accurately, but it was a difficult shot. He would have to aim low to compensate for the refracted light, and get close enough by hanging over the rail. Stuck! The spear went through the back of the firm gray fish. When he pulled it up, it didn’t flop, its low-set eyes watching him as it lay still.

***

Tim’s first patient was a trim blond woman whose husband was the owner of a packing box company. Tim was late, dressed in the whites
from the night before. He sat down in his leather swivel chair, pivoting slowly.

“I’m sorry, Virginia. Bad traffic on the 405.”

“It’s fine. Anna made coffee and I helped myself to a book.”

“Splendor in the Glass.” Tim laughed.

“I had no idea there were so many variations of stained glass.”

Virginia put her hands behind her head as Tim lit a More Menthol. He exhaled slowly.

“How’s it going with your focus?”

“I’ve been practicing the exercises. Yesterday I held my pee until I thought I was going to explode.”

“The exercises will help.”

“My pelvic muscles are getting stronger. Buddy says it’s better for him. I can grab him and squeeze, but I’m still not able to climax.”

“You’re saying you can’t.”

“Not that I can’t—but I’m not.”

He was distracted for a moment by the gardener clipping hedges. Why was the gardener looking into his window?

Tim laid his cigarette down in the ashtray. “Let’s go back to junior high.”

“Go back?”

“Yes, let’s go back,” he said. It feels good to repeat, he thought. We repeat because it feels good.

With each telling, she remembered more. She recalled Mr. Barnes, her ninth grade teacher, who exposed himself to her, how she held it in her hand and watched his unusually blue eyes roll back in his head. The doctor heals with smoke. He raised his chin and blew a cloud of mentholated smoke over Virginia’s head.

***

Tuesday night, he slept at the office, staying up late, drinking red wine, and reading. Wednesday, he had another session with Virginia.
“Ask me why I’m smiling?”
“Let me guess.”
“I had a climax! A huge one.”
“Oh, Virginia! I knew you would.” Tim lit a More.
“I did it like you said. I let Buddy play with me, but this time I imagined being with my teacher, Mr. Barnes. Isn’t that crazy?”

Tim started sipping wine in the morning and by twelve had finished his first bottle. There was something going on with his hearing; the ringing in his right ear was getting worse. A walk usually helped. He headed up Lake Avenue past the French Laundry to Burger Continental. He thought he would stop there for lunch but went instead to the Mini Mart across the street, where he bought cigarettes and two bottles of Bordeaux.

An hour and a half later he was back at the boat, sitting in a deck chair. It was a beautiful day for reading outside, unusually warm, and the seagulls that dove at the boat were warded off by the invisible fishing line he had strung. He could almost forget about the cop surveilling him at the Mini Mart.

Happy Hour at Black Rock started at 6:00 p.m. They were famous for beef tacos served with hot chiles and half-price drinks. On top of the wine, he had three margaritas, which made him feel loose. He smiled at the slightly blurry women walking by and chatted with a young woman at the buffet table. The waitress asked him if he wanted another drink.

“Maybe later,” Tim said. He leaned closer to the cocktail waitress. “Do you know that man sitting alone in the booth? Have you seen him before? Is he a cop?”

The waitress, who knew Tim, smiled. “He looks like a cop, doesn’t he? Short hair and buff like a cop.”

Tim went back to the buffet and prepared two tacos on a small
plate. The man in the booth was wearing sunglasses, but Tim could see his eyes. Tim picked up his plate and went down the hall to the restroom, where he checked the space under the partitions. He stood silent for a moment, listening for breathing.

Someone could be standing on a toilet seat. When he was satisfied that he was in the restroom alone, he locked the door and crawled out the window.

***

Five days later, Anna got a phone call from a pay phone in Palm Springs. She found Tim with torn clothes and sand in his hair.

“Tim, look at you! What happened? You’ve been missing for a week. I thought you were dead. What happened to your shoes?”

Tim climbed into the car and didn’t speak. He looked out the window, watching the sand dunes in the headlights, mounding black and white, then swept smooth by the wind.

“I see how it works,” he said, speaking to someone not present.

“How what works? What are you talking about, Tim?”

“Please, don’t stop for the hitchhiker, Anna.”

“I don’t see a hitchhiker.”

***

Anna parked in the street outside the office. “Do you want me to come up?”

“No, I’ll be fine.” He stood in the driveway and waited for Anna to drive away. He didn’t move for several minutes. A man is invisible in the dark as long as he doesn’t move.

He felt better the next morning; he didn’t have a hangover. Anna had emptied the wastepaper baskets and cleaned the ashtrays. He made himself a cup of coffee and went to the window. The gardener was clipping hedges again. So this is how they want to play it. He knew instinctively
what to do. Turn out the lights and move into the reception room. He sat cross-legged on the oriental rug and listened for sounds of people moving. A moment later there was a faint jangle of keys and the sound of a tiny musical triangle being struck just once. Very original, he thought.

***

Tim was losing weight. He drank wine, ate crackers and cheese, and read Flaubert’s Madame Bovary, “She repeated to herself, I have a lover! I have a lover! And the thought gave her a thrill as though she were beginning a second puberty.” He loved this passage. It put him in a good mood. He would reference it in his book.

But that evening, the bouncer at the Black Rock told him he was drunk and he should leave the bar and go back to his boat. This came as a shock. He had been in such a good mood. Without thinking, Tim pushed his middle knuckle into the bouncer’s solar plexus, making the bigger man groan. Another bouncer ran over, threw a punch, and Tim blocked it. He was arrested and bail was set at $2,000.

***

“You’re lucky, Tim. You’re a black belt. They could have charged you with assault with a deadly weapon.”

Tim nodded.

“I had to borrow money to bail you out.”

“Thank you, Anna.”

***

Back on his boat, he only went out by day. He knew he needed to change his pattern. He would eat early in the morning to evade the surveillance. He would anticipate their moves. Now there were female cops watching him, some pushing strollers with hidden cameras.

***

In late October, a detective visited Tim at the boat.
“Do you know a girl named Chelsea Banner?”
“I’m not sure.”
“She knows you. She’s very upset. She said you raped her.”
“That’s not true.”
“Did she tell you how old she is?”
Tim shielded his eyes, looking up at the officer.
“Eighteen, just barely. Lucky there.”

A week passed and the detective came back, finding Tim on deck shirtless with his speargun.
“Careful with that thing.”
Tim put the gun down. He felt unusually relaxed, but there was a pain in his stomach like a cigarette burning.
“It’s not looking good, Doc. Chelsea contacted the DA’s office. We also got a report from the Rape Hotline. They want to charge you. I thought you’d like to know.” He shook his head paternally.
That night, Tim drank three bottles; he remembered being out at night and being cold. He thought that he had fallen into the water, but his clothes were dry and he was in a cell with two other men.
He called Anna.
“Do you remember what happened?”
“I don’t remember anything.”
“You had a psychotic breakdown. Tim, you are very sick.”
“Did I fall into the water?”
“You might have. You were pretty crazy.”
“I think I remember a fire.”
“You lit a fire on one of the big boats. The police chased you.”
“I lit a fire?”

***
Sixty days in County felt neither too long nor too short. There were moments of extreme clarity and moments where time seemed to stop. He sat quietly on the edge of his bed and read a tattered book called I Ching Wisdom.

Make no arbitrary choice of your associates.

There are secret forces at work, bringing together those who belong together.

Within the limits of the small cell, he could do push-ups and stretches. His cell mate in the opposite bunk, a thin, nervous man, badgered Tim with questions about psychology and sexual addiction. From this conversation a discussion on autoeroticism arose.

“How many times have you tried it?” Tim asked.

“A lot?”

“What does it feel like?”

“Like a volcano blowing off my head.”

***

When Tim was released, Anna drove him to a motel room in Eagle Rock and told him this was his last chance. She had rescheduled his patients, but he would have to stay sober. “Can you do that?”

The phone on the bedside table rang. Anna said the court date had been set. The DA was willing to drop the arson charge and he could get off with time served for vandalism, but they were going forward with the rape charge. In the meantime she had found a lender who would take the boat as collateral.

Tim shook out a More Menthol and took a long drag. The cigarette tasted like cloves. He drew until there was a hot ember, snuffed out the cigarette in the shag carpet, stripped off his clothes, and folded them in a chair.

He thought about his brother, who was angry about the distribution
of the estate after his mother died. He thought about pleasure intensified one thousand times, pleasure enough to stop a man’s heart. That would not be his problem. His heart was strong and could be stopped and started at will. He went to the bathroom and looked at himself in the mirror.

His face was lighter but still brown and healthy. His goatee was longer and he had wispy sideburns. He moved close to the mirror and inspected his pores; they were opening and closing like tiny apertures. He walked to the window and drew the heavy drapes. There was no thought of escape, only pleasure. He would put a belt around his neck and masturbate while he knelt. He stood there for a minute, aware of the black and white lines in the louvered closet doors. Then he put the belt around his neck and lowered his weight.

***

Anna came to his funeral. So did three beautiful women, all of them very thin and taller than Tim by several inches. I did not see his brother. Anna stood by the casket greeting the mourners. She said Tim believed he was a pirate, and when he ran from the police, he leapt from boat to boat and at one point had swung on ropes from a tall ship’s mast. Later, I heard her say she had tried to hire several attorneys for his defense who wanted money up front, the cheapest being $20,000. She said when the hard moneylender found out the boat needed a new engine, he backed out of the loan. She repeated the part about the $20,000 up front.

Then she repeated the part about Tim jumping from boat to boat like a pirate, until the image rectified, turning hard, and that word became Dr. Tim’s distillation.
Another Valentine’s Day has passed and, lost for love yet again, I have forced my conscious to ponder an essential question regarding my human capacity for dignity: am I capable of love? But more than this, I thought it would be a fruitful exercise to break down this extraordinarily resourceful question and discover what might exactly contribute to the belief that I might not be capable of love. That said, I began with a research into where I might have gone wrong, and with that, what are the worst influences in my life. “Of my first disobedience.” What immediately comes to mind is, of course, pornography. Could it be the naked women on my computer screen, effortlessly objectifying themselves to a penis (we cannot see the man’s face for the simple sake that we wish it to be our own), ramping on with curse words and preposterous screams? It is possible, of course, to assume this is my downfall in love, but I feel deep down that this is not enough, because even after the porn flick is over, there remains the possibility of another investigation into what new shows and movies are available on Netflix. Books? No books at this hour. I am tired and spent; I need something without stimulation and intellect—a stupid cop show or maybe the latest Queen Latifah movie. The Netflix subscription is not my own, however, it is my older brother’s. Which leads me to believe that maybe he is behind all of this, or one of my other three brothers is behind all of this corruption. Were they not the ones who, at my timid and innocent age of three, tried to get me drunk? “You are going to make him retarded!” my mother screamed.

No, no. It is not my brothers. It is my mother, and my father, the two people who cursed at one another late into the night, screaming the words and sounds you hear in pornos, except that this was no sex scene,
they were scenes of hate and mistrust. It was their divorce, their broken relationship that forced me to dispel love from my life. Their marriage, their tract of love, thrown to the dirt and trampled repeatedly for all to see. After each fight, while my father slouched off to that whore of a neighbor the entire neighborhood knew about, drinking wine and snorting cocaine and laughing about marriage, I listened as my mother dropped tear after tear of self-loathing. It was marriage that ruined love for me—bitter, empty, destructive marriage. And what was the product of this marriage. Children, me. I was the product of that destructive relationship of lust turned hateful, hate. I, the alone child on Valentine’s Day, was that product. And what did those parents ask of me. Grades, good grades, points in basketball games, stolen bases in baseball games, in-tune notes at violin recitals. Those trespassers of love asked me to perform at my best, even in college, making me send them my transcripts and yelling that I had only barely made the dean’s list in a particular semester. These demons of love, demanding I bring in only the best of grades, thinking that only good grades will find you somebody to love, somebody who you will have children with and then while the children are growing up and you think they have gone to bed, you start bickering. You start with a low sniffing comment. “What did you say?” “I didn’t say anything.” “Yeah, but you made that sound.” “What sound?” “That annoying sound you know I hate.” “I did not make that sound” “Yes you did. You know I hate that sound. You crinkle up your nose and then you do the hesitant excuse of a nose sneeze, even though I know you don’t have to sneeze.” “Fuck you I did not do that, leave me alone you know I have had a hard day.” “You! You have had a hard day? Who the fuck do you think cleaned your laundry and washed the fucking sheets and fed your ungrateful fucking kids and made sure they flossed their teeth to prevent cavities and picked them up from school and watched them do their bullshit math problems!” “That? That is what you call a day’s work! Do you know
what the fuck I’ve been doing! Who do you think paid for your goddamn car? Who do you think paid for your earrings, for your kids dental insurance, for that bullshit steak you burned in the oven! Why the fuck did you cook steak in the oven. It’s sixty degrees out and you blast the damn air conditioning and cook steaks in the oven when we have a two thousand dollar grill, which I also paid for, in the fucking back yard, on the patio, which I also paid for.” “I cooked you dinner!” “I paid for dinner!”

Yes, this has to be it; this is why I am alone on Valentine’s Day. This is why I am eating dinner by myself. It has to be. This is why I am downing an entire 1.5-liter of red wine. And if it is not because of those wretched parents, it has to be because of the alcohol; the cheap alcohol that relentlessly consumes my appetite each and every night. That and the tobacco. The cigarettes that damage my bank account. The stupid shirts that I hang up on hangers in my closet. The slutty girls that walk around in high heels, encouraging more lust and less love. The vitamin water that doesn’t support any type of workout habit. The credit card bills, the interest on those bills, the lack of a savings account. The porn. Again the porn.

But then again, maybe I am not alone in this. Maybe there are others, others who realize all of us are just that bag that people carry when they walk their dog. A bag that, whether it realizes or not, will at some point in time, whether it be today, or tomorrow, or for the next forty years, be thrust down into the earth, consumed by disastrous aroma, and hold shit—a harbinger of shit. That is what we are: plastic bags with shit inside of them. And on that special day, which capitalists exploit our naïve and improbable belief that love is anything more than sex and drugs and children, I would like to believe that maybe I am better off alone.
ST. BARTH’S SHADOW
Leisha Douglas

Island mornings duet between stillness and motion.
Doves chant their one vowel.
The occasional car drags sound in its wake.
Absence of distraction is such a relief.

Doves chant their one vowel.
Some people here drift
when distractions are absent.
They feel trapped under an unremitting sun.

Those who become adrift
on this mass of lava, frangipani and jasmine,
get trapped under an unremitting sun
rather than cocooned in paradise.

On this mass of lava, frangipani and jasmine,
without the distractions of the mainland,
they are not in a paradise
but marooned in a tropical purgatory.

Without the mainland distractions,
with the self and its bare interior,
they are like conch shells
wave-scoured and bleached by light.

Left with the self’s bare interior,
they see no alternatives, feel no relief.
First they try alcohol, maybe heroin or cocaine
then a rope or a gun.

The doves chant their one vowel.
Island mornings duet between stillness and motion.
THE BOY IN THE OCEAN
Chuck Tripi

The first time I swam in the ocean,
what could I weigh, fifty pounds?
A tidal wave took me,
twirling the world,
putting my feet where my head was,
my head where my feet.
Gone from the air, breathing the brine,
I was watching the bottom go by and at once
I was standing, alone among swimmers,
coughing the taste of the salt and at sea.
Turning my back to the shore
I was instantly hiding,
making the gestures of splashing,
assuming the postures of glee.
Sometimes we do things because we know they are the right thing to do, not because we want to. We care about the people involved, we put up the good front. We mean it, we really do. We love them, we are worried about them, and we want them to think well of us. And so we fake it.

When Carly’s mother died and she called to tell me, I knew some concrete response was necessary. Carly’s mom, Doris, was someone I had known. Not well, not well at all, she was the mother of my childhood friend. I was in Doris’s home several times in my teen years. I remember Doris in her kitchen. I remember the baked goods she made, the sewing she did. Doris was so different from my own mother. She was domestic. It’s funny to say that. Because my own mother spent her entire adult life in a suburban household, taking care of five children, cleaning and cooking every day. Not like women do now, today. I mean every day. Seven days a week. Without help. But my mother was never domestic. Or maybe what I mean is that she was never domesticated. Doris was both domestic and domesticated.

Carly was 15 when her father died of cancer. We were in school together, friends. Carly was both smart and arty. I was just smart, but Carly befriended me anyway. I don’t really know why. There are so many things that happen to you in your life that you cannot explain. Carly was beautiful, her translucent Finnish skin, her finely chiseled nostrils, her big laugh, her white blond hair. Maybe she took me on because she could respond to me without threat. I wore glasses, had braces late because that was when my parents could afford it. I didn’t have breasts until I was 16. But I don’t think that was all there was to it. I was to have my share of beauty. Not a huge share, but enough. It would come out later, its potential
was not completely invisible. No, I think Carly saw me clear through the roughened lenses of those tough teen years. Later on, she would march to protest our right-of-center presidents and their designer wars that were the heritage of our generation. She would joke about our high school friends who had gone on to live freighted years in finance and corporate competitiveness, who never seemed at ease, who never seemed satisfied. And the person she could talk to about these things was me.

When Carly’s father died, when we were 15, I had no frame of reference. I had suffered no comparable loss. My losses to date were of a different kind. Of a mother who was distant and angry. Of a father who blurred in gin the depression he inherited from his bleak Hungarian immigrant roots. These were losses I dared not share with my school friends, grateful and desperate as I was that I had any friends at all.

I did not know the quality, the heft, the taste, of Carly’s loss when her father died. I suspect she did not think anyone in her life could know, because she very quickly announced her loneliness by losing so much weight that her flesh sunk behind jutting clavicles and hip bones and her eyelids shed their skin. I was 15 and lived in a world of books and yearning for my real life to start. I had nothing to offer that would have helped her in any way. Carly made herself better in college. I remember when she told me how she looked at her naked body in the dorm bathroom mirror one day and suddenly saw herself as she really was, or at least the way a health professional would have seen her. She started to eat again, and she committed herself to healthy eating from that day on. She did that herself, alone. I have always had tremendous respect for that.

So now, 30 years later, Carly’s mother has died and does not want a memorial service of any kind. Carly has two sisters. Kim, the youngest, alone and teaching in a midwestern college. Patty, the eldest, married and embittered for no good reason Carly has ever figured out. And it is left to
Carly to pick up her mother's ... well, to pick up her mother.

OK, now I have to say the word I have come to despise. The word cremains. An advertising slogan. A black and sly pun. I cannot say the word without putting the emphasis on the first syllable. CREmains. CREmains. As if I am from the south. As if I am trying to be funny. I am so, so far from trying to be funny when I say CREmains. I am actually angry that it was so easy to contort the respectable word for what is left when someone you love, or even someone you didn't love, is dead. Because they are dead. There, I said it, they are dead. That person you loved, or didn't love, is dead. Dead like done. Dead like over. Dead like gone forever. It isn't ever quite possible to accept that, is it, no matter how many times or ways you say it? Just dead.

I asked Carly on the phone that day, when she called to say that her mom, the domestic and domesticated woman I recalled with vague but soothing images, had died, what I could possibly do. She hesitated. Then she asked if I could be available to go with her to New Jersey on Thursday. There were things that needed to be picked up. We would have to go to the funeral home and to the assisted living residence where her mom had been when she died. I said I was glad to have some way to help her.

That's what we say, isn't it? That we are glad to help, happy to be there, grateful to have some way to show our respects. Especially in a case like this, where there is to be no wake, no shiva, no funeral where you can make your appearance and sign the book and send the flowers or the platter of cold cuts. I was going to spend Thursday driving Carly out to New Jersey because I had to do it. I didn't give it any thought beyond crossing out the trivial to-do list on my calendar for Thursday and making sure I had enough gas in my tank for the round-trip to the quaint northern New Jersey burg of Georgetown.

On Thursday I picked Carly up on the lower east side of New
York promptly at eleven a.m., as requested. She looked somber, the round cheeks that would plump with laughter slumped, her eyelids reddened, her shoulders pointed inwards. If you are smart, in a situation like this, you say nothing. There is nothing to say. I am 46 so, after making some mistakes, I have learned this.

We left the city through the Holland Tunnel. Carly was surprised to hear that I had never driven the Pulaski Skyway into New Jersey. She made jokes about the industrially polluted waterway below it and the power plants around it. About how her three year old son Sam, when driving out to visit Grandma Doris, would call one of the installations the washing machine. We gazed at it and couldn’t figure out why.

It wasn’t clear to me what our schedule of events was to be. I didn’t want to ask right away, to let on that I wondered how long this would all take and when I might get home. My day was blocked out and we would do whatever needed to be done and then I would take Carly home and go home myself and make myself a big drink. I was surprised that Carly could be so focused on the driving directions. Within an hour we were in Georgetown. Once, long ago, I had been engaged to a man I didn’t end up marrying and we had chosen a hotel in Georgetown for our wedding. As Carly and I drove through the town, I didn’t see a thing I recognized. It was like I had never been in Georgetown before. It was like that ancient engagement, and all the wedding planning, had never happened. And I guess it’s true that it’s just as if they never did.

Carly directed me into the narrow parking lot of a funeral home. It was a modest white clapboard building, like so many of the colonial buildings in Georgetown, where George Washington, as one is proudly reminded by several road signs, spent some nights. I pulled into a parking spot, turned off the ignition, and reached back to grab my purse, which I had tossed into the back seat.
“We can sit,” Carly said. “We’re early.” I guess I hadn’t wanted to think about it, because suddenly I understood that there was a structure to this day. That real things, involving other people, were to happen. I was, absurdly, surprised. I sat with my car key in my hand and my purse on my lap.

“OK,” I said. “You tell me when it’s time.” I had no idea what time it was or when we were supposed to go in. After a moment I asked, “Do you want me to go in with you or do you want to do this alone?” I couldn’t imagine what needed to be done inside the funeral home. As craven as I felt, I truly didn’t know whether she might want to handle such personal things by herself.

Carly hesitated and I could see she was thinking about this. I wondered if she was as lost as I was about what would happen once she walked inside that lonely white building. The sky was a dull gray, and a few snowflakes settled down like an old dog does, slow and creaky. I was so grateful the sky wasn’t blue. It would have been harder to contain what was ahead of us if we had to face the vastness of an open sky.

Carly pulled a tan envelope out of her purse and clutched it with both hands. “Mom died on November 30,” she said. “Social Security called to say they are going to reclaim her November payment because they don’t pay partial months.” She chuckled. We both knew she didn’t need the money. We both knew that wasn’t the point. “The woman was nice, though,” she said. “At the end of the call she said she was really sorry about Mom.” She chuckled again. After a moment she said, “OK, let’s go in.”

We got out of my car and the light snowflakes settled on our hair and the shoulders of our coats as we walked slowly to the front door. I pulled open the door for Carly and as soon as she walked in, a tall, slender African American man greeted her with an outstretched hand. “I am Carly Varis,” she said. “I am Doris Varis’s daughter.” “Yes,” he said. “It’s nice to meet you.”
I walked in behind Carly, awkward, out of place, out of time. Carly introduced me and Gerard Crowell became my acquaintance. My acquaintance by death. My acquaintance by friendship. I thought about how, for this day, Carly had to identify herself as the daughter of Doris. It wasn’t to facilitate what we needed to do there. Mr. Crowell clearly had seen us approaching and knew who was walking in his funeral parlor, whose appointment time it was. It was part of what Carly could do to honor her mother. To be, for that day, the daughter of Doris.

Mr. Crowell walked us slowly through a short center hall and made a turn into a parlor on the right. There was a couch and a chair opposite it, and a coffee table in between. On the coffee table was a file folder and a box. A box wrapped in plastic. A box about the size of a shoe box.

Carly sat down on the far side of the couch and I sat next to her. I stared at the box. I am not sure how long it took me to realize that Carly’s mother was in the box. I guess I knew from the start, when I first saw the box, but it took me some time longer to hear my voice in my head saying, “That is Carly’s Mom. There, in that box. That is what is left of her.”

I felt a surge of rage at Gerard Crowell. Didn’t he know what he was doing? Was he an oaf, callous? How could it be that Carly’s Mom was just plunked down there, with no introduction, with no preparation? I glanced at Carly. Her face was white, blank. She wasn’t looking at the box. She was looking fixedly at Gerard Crowell. For a moment, stupidly, I thought maybe she hadn’t realized yet that her mother was set down there before her like a door prize, her reward for choosing Crowell Funeral Home to attend to her mother’s last needs.

My cell phone buzzed in my lap. Gerard Crowell had begun to take papers out of the file folder, explaining what Carly had to sign and what checks she had to write. I watched him suspiciously from the corner of my eye as I read the text message from a friend that had just
come in. I texted back briefly, thinking I might appear unfeeling to Carly, perhaps even to Gerard Crowell. Gerard Crowell was speaking gently, he had large brown eyes that looked soft, almost pleading. He wasn’t waxen, like other funeral parlor employees I had encountered. I noticed a portrait on the wall of the parlor, a handsome African American couple, elderly, the woman with gray hair and a warm smile, the man with steel rimmed glasses and a strong chin. Gerard Crowell’s parents, no doubt, probably the original owners of the business.

Carly was ripping checks out of her check book and handing them across the coffee table to Gerard Crowell. Carly’s mother sat by silently. I would glance at the box and quickly look away. A woman I had known, whose scratch-made cookies I had eaten, whose arm had gone around my shoulders, was burned down to ash and in that box.

There was panic in me, I could feel it. The way my shoulders got weak, like they couldn’t hold up the rest of me. I stopped looking at the box, tried to follow the conversation between Carly and Gerard Crowell. I watched his face, to see if he showed any true empathy for my friend or whether this was just business for him. I worried that Carly would break down, that the fragility her teen anorexia had exposed might resurface.

Carly said to Gerard Crowell, “I plan to spread my mother’s ashes in my rose garden in the country. I’ll do it in the spring.” She still hadn’t looked at the box. Gerard Crowell began explaining the legalities of CREmains disposal. They shared a joke about how people get around the law when they spread ashes in public places. Carly was smiling. Was this man going to express condolences? Was he going to say something, or touch my friend, to show that her loss was special? Couldn’t he see that I had come with my friend because she needed support?

Gerard Crowell began talking about the recent loss of his aunt and the huge family gathering it had brought about. He said he had 12
grandchildren and 27 grand nieces and nephews. He gestured to the portrait of the couple I had noticed, verified that they were indeed his parents who had started the family business and who were both dead. “I am 67,” he said, “so we’ve been here a long time.” Carly said, “You can’t be that old.” Gerard Crowell had silver in his close-cut hair but he was fit and his face was unlined. He beamed back at her. I realized his job was subtle, and he was good at it. I also realized that Carly hadn’t needed me here, in this room, at all.

“Well,” Carly said, “thank you for everything.” She stood up and he did too, taking her hand in both of his and shaking it gently. “My mother was living in Meadowbrook, so we’re headed over there to pack up what’s left of her things and say good-bye to the staff.”

Gerard Crowell said, “She was lucky to be in Meadowbrook. That is a fine place. You did well by her.” Carly, at last, looked down at the box. Gerard Crowell bent down and picked the box up in both hands. He held it out to her. She took it and I picked up the envelope of paperwork from the coffee table so she would have nothing else to carry. Gerard Crowell escorted us to the front door and, as he held it open for us, we each said good-bye. He may have been merely practicing his craft, but I won’t forget him. My memory of our time in that small parlor with the box unmentioned on the table between us is more distinct than any funeral I have ever been to, and I’ve lost some people of my own by now.

I unlocked the car and Carly placed the box on the back seat. “Let’s have lunch,” she said. “We’ll need at least an hour at Meadowbrook so we should eat first.” She knew the area well after years of visiting her Mom and guided me to a bistro a few minutes away, in downtown Georgetown. I parked on the street out front. I wondered what she would do with her Mom while we ate lunch. It struck me as possible that Carly would bring the box in with us and place it on a seat at our table, or maybe
right on the table. I thought about how cold it would get in the car. Carly got out and headed for the restaurant. I got out too, glancing at the box in the back seat as I pressed the remote to lock the car. I followed Carly, my boots slipping on the lace of fresh snow over the dirty ice-humped curb. We sat down and Carly ordered us both a white wine.

The box sat in my back seat through lunch, and while we spent what turned out to be two hours at Meadowbrook packing the last of Carly’s Mom’s belongings, Carly joking with the nurses whom she had come to know well after years of caring for her Mom. The drug cart nurse cried with Carly for a moment, talked about how sweet Doris was and how lucky she was to have such a loving daughter. I could see she didn’t want to let Carly go, let alone Doris. The box was in my car yet the living was going on in Meadowbrook. Carly moved through the day unhesitatingly but I couldn’t put it all together.

And the box, restful and undemanding, sat through our drive back to Manhattan, Carly and I mostly silent, deflated by introductions, farewells, sadness, and exhaustion. Life in a nutshell, life in a box.

Driving up Avenue B, almost on her block, I asked Carly, ”Where will you keep the box until the spring?” She gave me a startled look and I flushed.

“The...,” she said. “Oh, the box.”

I stopped the car at the gate in front of her building. I would never see the box again. It had been with me all day. Carly had barely glanced at it, hadn’t mentioned it once. We looked at each other while the engine idled and people walked by on the sidewalk, muffled by thick scarves and snow boots. She was still pale and she had faint dark rings of tiredness under her eyes. But she smiled like she smiled when she told me long ago of that reflection of reality in the dorm bathroom mirror.

“I’ve been losing my Mom for months,” she said. “Last week
when she left me I kissed her face. Now what I’m worried about is how to explain to a three year old what it means that his Grandma Doris is dead.” She twisted her body to look behind us at the box and then she looked back at me. “I guess the box goes in the closet.” She leaned to me and we hugged hard. She got out of the car and opened the back door. She picked up the box, shut the door, and waved to me as she turned to her gate. She was digging for her keys in her purse, the box clutched up under her armpit, when I pulled away.

Sometimes we do things because we know they are the right thing to do, not because we want to. But along the way there will be a box, and someone to show us what to make of it.
He burned what remained: two rolls of undeveloped film from Seattle, the bent bristles of her toothbrush, an oversized t-shirt that said, **rehab is for quitters.** Happiness in black in white, she liked to say, popping a pill at twilight as she looked for sunglasses. How she curled on the couch, hugging her knees. Drank water from a cracked mug. Crushed ice not cubed, she would say with a wink. Once, he told her afterwards when their breathing was regular: *I love how your armpits have that new car smell.* Her half-straightened hair backlit by the blue flash of television. His thoughts turned liquid. He couldn't make them flammable. They pooled on the tile floor. Slowly: he was conscious of it no matter what the research said. He used to claim the past was a closet you could walk into. But he'd got the dimensions wrong. The walls tight to his chest, and so he burned all these things. A thousand Marlboros against his forearm. For an entire year he'd felt like he'd been fumbling for a match. Now smoke rose from the smoldering pile the next morning. He stood in the yard and pissed on the ashes.
VANDALISM
Jay Robinson

Twenty miles from his house: an entire subdivision of unsold or foreclosed homes, a perfectly-paved street. Another mile west: a silent factory, boarded shops, green graffiti. Increased vacancy leads to vandalism, he told himself, dripping spoonfuls of wax from an apple-scented candle onto his wrist. Everything reminded him of something else. The eyes of an owl like nipples. And he couldn’t tell lawns from flowerbeds because he didn’t know what a weed was anymore. Some nights he slept in these abandoned homes. Some still had portraits on the walls. He took them home in the morning. Other nights he cooked in their kitchens: How romantic! But he liked to watch: If you know the right people, he would say to a client, you don’t even have to pay for it. But he was talking about tickets to a baseball game. Silence, moonlight—his twin companions. Water boiling: steam clouding the double-hung windows.
He had tried, but there was no talking her out of the pinewood casket.

"Okay, Mom, how about the Rosewood Legacy?"

"Absolutely out of the question," she'd said before slapping the catalogue shut.

Her choice didn't surprise him. She knew the value of a buck. Hell, she'd sat her ass in the same chair by the front window of Haskin's Library long enough to keep the red upholstery from bleaching pink like the others. "The best deal in town, this one or any other," she'd say. That was his mother. Nor was he surprised to discover that she had secretly kept a safe deposit box in a Swiss bank for all these years. She had to do something with all those pinched pennies.

He sat at Emily's rickety table and shrugged at her cat, who stared him down from atop the refrigerator. He'd been by every day since their mother's funeral. Each visit surprised her. Reality was slippery for Emily nowadays.

"Bobby! What a treat! What brings you by?" Emily's eyes drifted to the tabletop. Her smile faded. "Oh, what is the matter with me? Let me get you a cup. It's my special chai."

"It smells great, but really, I'm good." He checked the knot of his silky blue power tie.

"It'll warm you up." She looked at him as if he were missing the point. She placed a cup and saucer in front of him.

"Emily, please, just sit."

She dropped into her chair. She glanced from the pot to Robert and back again. He shifted his weight. His chair creaked; the bright sound bounced off the tile floor.

"So, Geneva is coming up." He watched her process the news. "Mom's safe deposit box, remember?" Her teacup stalled between lips and table.
“Oh yes, right.” She looked over Robert’s shoulder out to her bird-feeder, deserted and dripping in the rain. Robert waited for her return.

“I want you to come with me...think of it as a treasure hunt.” He beamed.

The invitation sat heavily between them.

“I’m not a pirate.”

* * *

Emily held her brother’s arm as they hurried along with their fellow travelers. Everyone bustled and rushed until there was nowhere to go and nothing to do but slide to a halt. She remembered this routine very clearly from the last time she was in an airport. She could see herself, standing in a line with her mother, the two of them dressed smarter than Sunday, looking like real jet-setters. She remembered the polite officer who waved a wand across her front and back, how it whined as it passed her lover’s locket.

At the gate, Robert found a nice pair of chairs that faced out the window. In the distance, a plane slid from the air and dropped onto the runway, leaving puffs of burnt rubber behind. That was all the rage in high school, “burning rubber.” Her boyfriend loved to burn rubber and brag about his four-hundred-twenty, whatever that meant. It hardly mattered. He was Prince Charming in grease-stained denim with magic hazel eyes that you tried to avoid but just couldn’t.

“What’s got you smiling?” Robert asked.

“Just the view.”

“I’m going to get a magazine. Can I get you something?”

“No thanks, I’m fine.”

She turned to the window, frowning through her hollow reflection, which floated above the fuel trucks and luggage buggies. It irked her that she had such a vivid memory of her last trip to the airport. It must have been about a million years ago or she wouldn’t be able to see it so clearly. She’d worn makeup and heels...and perfume for goodness sakes! That
afternoon she had sat across from her mother, feeling peevish and put upon. Her mother had worn her green jade frog brooch and green jade earrings to match. The three frogs clutched to her in a way that made you stare a bit more than you might normally, as if they had hitched a ride.

“You’re going to drive the Frenchmen crazy,” her mother had predicted.

“Who cares?” is what she’d thought. She remembered despising her mother’s sleek, creamy green frog brooch, though it had been extraordinarily beautiful. It was the size of the harmless adolescents that peed in your palm seasons before becoming the big bulls that ruled the ponds in their grotesque, arrogant stillness.

The row of seats jumped a bit when Robert sat beside her. “Here you go,” he said. He held a pillow shaped like a horseshoe. His eyes were glassy and red, as if he hadn’t slept properly. “You put it around your neck, helps with fatigue, trust me.” His boozy smile mixed her all up.

* * *

Robert liked the fact that no matter how much he drank, he always felt sober when he got on the other side of the Atlantic. He got them past immigration, through baggage claim and to the Geneva Rotary Hotel. He dropped her bag just inside her prim little room.

“I’ll call you in a couple hours,” he said.

“That’s fine. I may go down to the lobby or for a walk outside,” she said.

“I wish you wouldn’t. Why not just get some rest?”

“I’m not tired.”

“Just wait for me before you go out venturing on your own.”

“You’re afraid I’ll get lost, aren’t you?”

“Aren’t you?”

In his room, Robert fell flat onto the old canopy bed. His stomach was eating itself, stewing in alcohol-enhanced acids. He forced his eyes
shut in the hope of finding sleep before he could feel any worse. He stirred, his nose pressed in a pillowcase that smelled sickly sweet but familiar. He turned away from the sunlight and slept.

* * *

“Well, if you see her, just tell her to wait for me in her room.”

Robert strangled the handle of his briefcase with one hand and stuffed the other in his pocket as he hurried out the lobby. He searched the sidewalks on his way to the river. She wouldn’t wander too far. He’d find her. Maybe she’d be a little shaken up, but that might not be such a bad thing. A little misadventure would make the bank visit even less memorable.

He searched along the bridge, eying tourists with contempt. This was no vacation. The airfare cost him a bundle, even with Emily in coach. He took a deep breath to combat his hangover, straining the seams of his pinstripe suit jacket. A gamble maybe, but he knew his mother. Despite her eccentricities, she was a pragmatist. His best guess was that she’d put away gold, and enough to justify all the bother.

“Money’s always got strings attached, and I don’t do strings,” she’d say. True to her word, each Sunday morning Robert received a unique reward for a week’s chores well attended. The totems varied in kind and number. One Sunday, Robert picked up the tiny seashell she’d placed next to his plate of steamy silver-dollar pancakes. It was pink and polished, delicate and translucent, and he cringed.

“Couldn’t you just pay me like a normal mom?”

“Chores aren’t jobs, Bobby.”

He dropped the shell in disgust. His mother scowled.

“And what would you do with money?”

“I don’t know, buy something. Save up for something.”

“I see.” She paused. “Well, that’s different. If you want money, then I guess we’ll just have to find you a job.” She pulled out her chair at the head of the table and sat down. She fixed him with her sharp brown
eyes. "But get this straight, Bobby. You do chores to help me. You and your sister do them to be helpful. You do them out of love, and I don’t mix love and money."

"Well, you should."

But she didn’t. Instead, she walked him around the neighborhood the rest of that morning. By the time they got home for lunch, he had landed his first three jobs. And as the Sundays rolled on, he stowed away his neighbors’ dollar bills with his mother’s seashells (and pebbles and marbles and stickers and so forth) in his rusty old Tiger Tobacco canister that he kept under his bed.

Robert stopped and rested his forearms on the rail of the bridge. Safe-deposit boxes were business, and that meant money, not love. And he’d take all he could get. The river flowed beneath his feet, and he watched stubborn, mangy swans work against the current. It was a comical sight and he laughed aloud.

"Aren’t they wonderful?"

Robert’s laugh clipped when he heard her mousy voice. Emily smiled at him.

"Didn’t I tell you to wait for me?"

"Well, here I am," she said.

Robert took her arm and started off.

"Bobby, I just came from that way!"

"Too bad, this is the way to the bank."

* * *

It was more like a museum or even a train station than a bank. There wasn’t a teller in sight or an ATM machine or anyone who appeared like a customer for that matter. Robert took hold of her arm and escorted her past a grand semicircular staircase with a lush, royal blue runner, several elevator banks, an information counter, and a strange little room that looked like a miniature bank. She paused to take a closer look,
but Robert pulled her along.

"Let's not be late," he said.

The vault was in the basement. Robert hurried down the stairs, bouncing down the fabulous runner, deep Swiss red and spongy underfoot. At the bottom, spanning the length of the room was a charming teller's desk with little bays where customers might put down their purses and write a check or fill out a deposit slip. On the far side of the room was a heavy glass door, and beyond that was the round, toothy mouth of a steel vault. Behind the desk stood a female clerk, a pretty thing who couldn't possibly have been more than twenty-five.

"Bonjour." She smiled.

Robert handed over their passports and a document. The clerk looked it all over, typed something faster than fast, handed everything back, and then suddenly the glass doors slid open. A moment later, the girl was out from behind the desk, beckoning them. Emily grabbed Robert's arm, and they followed her into the vault. Emily flushed and felt hot and flimsy under her dress.

They walked past aisle after aisle of pale yellow lockers. Shiny metal bands outlined rectangular doors of various sizes. The compartments on the bottom row were the largest, each one easily big enough to store Emily's entire collection of tea sets. Across the top row were doors about the size of toaster ovens, and in between were rows of little baby boxes. On the end of each aisle was a metal faceplate with a range of numbers, like stacks at the library. A lifetime ago Emily loved the library, loved dodging dusty afternoon sunbeams between the stacks and playing hide and seek with Robert while their mother sat reading in her favorite red chair.

"Here we are," the clerk said quietly as if not to disturb. She inserted her key into one of the baby boxes and held her hand out for Robert's. He hesitated and then recoiled ever so slightly. She took the key
from his partly outstretched hand. The girl slid out the metal box and set it down on the table with a reverberant clank. Emily jumped.

"Will you excuse us?" Robert asked graciously.

"Of course. Call when you wish to leave." The clerk disappeared around the corner.

Robert got a finger under the hinged cover of the box. Emily stood beside him, swiping unwanted tears aside. Robert sucked in the cool, dead air through his nose, his face twisted in a grimace. He flipped open the lid and for a good long moment just stared.

"Son of a bitch."

Emily dropped in a chair. A green hue hovered above the jumble of indiscriminant shapes. She poked a finger into the pile, and the contents took form. The box was filled to brimming with frogs of all sizes and shapes. Some sat on their haunches, smooth and round, compact and at the ready. Others were outstretched, caught in a powerful leap. She pushed her finger slowly about through every shade of green, and more colors appeared, ruby red and gold and turquoise and silver and onyx and more. There were little froggy hatpins and pendants and napkin rings and tie clips and earrings and amulets and on and on.

"Well, isn’t this a hoot!" She reached in the box and plucked out the creamy green brooch. Emily blew on it reflexively, though there was no dust. She held it up to the light. It shimmered, brilliant and alive with beauty. He watched as she picked out one piece at a time and carefully set each on the table. She grouped the frogs by size. She admired each piece, each frog uniquely precious. She held up a paperweight for Robert to see and she smiled.

"Don’t you look surprised," she said with one huge eye blinking through a plump crystal belly.
Rosie arrives at Colors late. Her hair, a tangled mess, shows little evidence of last week’s appointment. “Traffic on the Colonel Havens is snarled,” she says, then inhales loudly, pausing to look calm, though she wants to cheer. Commandeering the car to deliver herself here has been no small feat.

“That bridge—such a sorry state,” Sylvie, the receptionist, covers the phone’s receiver with her palm.

A breath of permanent solution, a whiff of talc, and the salon’s potpourri of scissors, combs, the newest gels, and old-time sprays shift into focus. Dryers hang from hooks at mirrored stations where Mark, Joann, and Caroline tart up faithful customers in swivel chairs. The shampoo girl, Nicky, flits between her loose-lipped sinks, carrying a hot-wax bowl poised atop a stack of folded towels.

Rosie blinks then hurries into the dressing closet where she hopes to find a magenta smock that snaps. There are no magenta smocks, only three gray ones that tie. She shakes her head, knots the gray sash, and leaves the closet. In unison, Nicky and Mark call out to her with “Yo!” and “How you do?”

***

For all these fifteen years of regular 2:00 Saturday appointments, Mark and Nicky have come to hold a special place in Rosie’s heart. The fact that she can talk to one or the other about whatever crosses her mind is worth more than having hair that holds its curl. Especially this year, or however long it’s been since Rosie caught Mark’s eye in the mirror and confessed.

“I am not the person I used to be.”

“Who is?” Nicky, whose black nail polish and random tattoos
belied her years, chimed in.

Mark used his hand to tilt Rosie’s head. She jerked away. “Doug
tells me I’m forgetting,” she said, referring to her husband. “Says I repeat
myself. Same story twice or three times in an afternoon.”

The following week she drummed her fingers on the arm of Mark’s
chair while relating how she’d been driving Doug to Wendy’s for lunch,
but they ended up at Captain Dee’s instead. “Now he’s all a-twitter, afraid
I’ll be driving and forget where I am or where I’m going.”

“Ridiculous,” Mark mumbled, or so she thought.

Next thing they hear, Doug has taken the keys. “He claims to
enjoy toting me around.” Rosie rolled her eyes. “There’s this commercial...
about the vanishing mind…”

Mark switched the dryer to high. When he finished Rosie was
exclaiming, “Ha! The Rosie that you know might soon be empty of the
everyday. Empty, but demanding care.” Rosie couldn’t stand the thought,
she insisted to Nicky. “I’m not the one who will suffer. Douglas is the one
who’ll have to pay.”

A month later, when Nicky remarked on Rosie’s red-rimmed eyes,
she promptly sat in the chair and wept. On their way to her appointment
with a brain specialist Douglas had collapsed. He was dying, Rosie sput-
tered, yet all she could feel was relief. This twist of fate, cruel as it was,
nonetheless ensured whatever burden she would be, would not be Doug’s.

“***

“The Colonel’s guard rails—they’re way too low—that’s the
problem,” Caroline is saying as she trims her customer’s bangs.

The salon’s six front windows and shellacked red door never fail
to cause Rosie to squint. She squints now, before sliding her backside to the
front of the shampoo chair and stretching out to rest her neck against the sink.

“What’s that?” Nicky is leaning over Rosie. “That tune. Did I hear
you humming?”
Rosie blushes. Humming was a private affair.

“Well, whatever,” Nicky says without waiting for a response, “it’s perky, I like it.” She adjusts the faucet, her tattooed underarm flashing into view.

“Nice rose,” Rosie says. She cups her hands in her lap and stares, as she always does, at the ceiling where Mark has painted palm trees, sailboats, and half-dressed ladies with wide open eyes.

“Nothing but an invitation if you ask me,” Sylvie says.

“The bridge?” Caroline asks from her station across the room.

Sylvie nods. “Damaged souls are quick to take the plunge.”

Rosie is determined not to hum. For days now, without warning, tunes have been slipping out from between her lips—unfamiliar, perky tunes.

She studies the ceiling as if seeing the painting for the first time. The women are not young or dainty or even beautiful, but they stand with bare feet planted in the sand, fists on hips, breasts spilling from halter-tops, taking her back to shores of her own. She is remembering a sandy beach at Priest Lake, with pine trees instead of palm, where she and best friend Jill caused quite a stir in halter tops much like these floating in the ceiling scene above.

Rosie closes her eyes. Are beaches out of the question? Her Douglas hates sand. And sweat. And people for that matter. People wear him out, make it hard to relax. She is all he needs. He is happiest with just the two of them—when he doesn’t have to entertain. Or speak. Her friends envy such devotion. But lately, in her worst moments, Rosie fears Doug might secretly relish the idea of her illness, the idea of her actually becoming what he’s always endearingly called her: his pet.

But no. Douglas is about to die. She’s left him at the hospital, in intensive care, with tubes sprouting and numbers glowing from baffling machines that wink his fate.

She’s left him with the day nurse, Betty. Douglas likes Betty. He's
discovered she went to UT and was a Tri Sig like Rosie. The coincidence is what he’s latched onto, what he can share in the ten minutes visitors are allowed to stay. In spite of the tube climbing out of his mouth over his shoulder into the bag hanging from the hook above his head, Douglas feels he must amuse. The coincidence of Nurse Betty and his wife Rosie sharing the same school and the same sorority, though decades apart, is conveyed more than once. “Course a looker like my Rosie, why, I plucked her up and out of there in nothing flat. Couldn’t chance her setting sights on anyone—or anything—but me.” By the end of Douglas’s story, time is up and visitors, supplied with one good antidote, can leave.

The faucet gushes. Rosie hopes the water will be very hot. She feels Nicky’s fingers and hopes she’ll rub hard and long and knead both temples. She does not, and the water turns tepid by the final rinse. “All done!” Nicky chirps. Rosie’s, “Thanks” is flat.

In Mark’s chair, she checks her cleavage as she’s swaddled in a plastic smock.

Mark’s “And how are you?” demands no reply, for he brandishes the canister of auburn dye and begins to squirt. It is cold on her scalp and trickles down the side of her face. Using the smock, she dabs at the wayward dye and when she does something moves inside of her. A familiar something, slippery as a dream, but not as harmless.

She looks into the mirror at her wet-rat self, with her lazy skin and her lips too thin to matter. She blinks behind her glasses and finds Mark’s gaze.

“If Douglas dies tonight, I will not go to church in the morning.”

She waits for something to happen. Some sign that she has contaminated the air—adding to its fumes of peroxide and bleach with the fumes of sin. It occurs to her there’s more where that came from, more wicked threats—to drive for days, to get her backside tattooed, to scream.

Mark spreads the dye with gloved fingers. “Well, Rosie, dear, that
might not be such a bad idea. If Douglas dies, you’ll probably have more on your plate than Sunday church.”

But Rosie is not listening. She is back at Priest Lake, stretched out, perched on her hip in the sand, Aphrodite-like. She is seventeen, with a gift for words, for style. An acceptance letter—all the way from Chicago—waits at home on the dressing table beside the notebook and the silver combs.

“Your glasses,” Mark says, and she removes them.

How did this happen? This life and not another?

She settles deep into the swivel chair. Mark is saying how he stopped going to church ages ago. “These days, painting is what feeds my soul.”

Again, Rosie squints, and with a soft “Lucky you,” escapes back to her lake, her letter, and her seventeen-year-old self. But the scene clouds. She sways forward, willing the girl to return. What comes to mind is her father’s common sense: No use your gallivanting up north, UT is as fine a school as any.

“Rosie, Rosie honey.” Sylvie’s voice is tender. “Phone.”

The salon falls silent while Rosie slips on her glasses, pushes out of the chair, scans her mirrored self, and gently nods. The familiar something moves again, only this time it is more insistent. It pushes her across the room, sifting inside her, becoming more tangible, becoming more like what she used to think of as desire. She swallows a hum.

Sylvie hands Rosie the phone.

“I’m ready,” she says into the receiver. She grips the knot at her waist. “I see,” she says. “I see,” she says again, glaring now at the salon’s red door. “A miracle? Why, yes, of course. I see.”

She reaches over the desk and sets the receiver in its cradle. Her clucking tongue is loud against respectful silence. She turns, lifts her chin and says, to no one in particular, “He’s going to live.”
Sylvie is the first to reach her with a hug. Mark, Joann, and Caroline follow suit. Rosie stands, patiently accepting their goodwill.

"Okay, okay," she says at last, "guess I'd better get on with things."

Only Nicky has yet to speak, and when she gestures toward the bowl of hot wax, her voice registers concern. "You ready for me?"

"Sure." Making her way past the much too bright windows, Rosie takes her place in Nicky's chair.

"You still with us?" Nicky leans closer to Rosie, who, even as she fingers the space above her lip, seized on the shards of what's been said.

"Sorry," Rosie shrugs, recognizing in the Colonel Fate Havens, with its low rails and easy access, an invitation to change what is happening to her. Nicky holds the bowl in one palm and uses a flat wooden applicator to stir until Rosie lifts her face—wide-eyed—to catch the wax.

***

The notion she might do it—might actually drive through the guardrail—sets her pulse to racing. In the salon’s back parking lot, her silver blue Pontiac looks as regal as it used to make her feel. She marches past taller, boxier cars, opens her door, and slides behind the wheel. From the rear view mirror she sees her hair is nice, the color of caramel, fixed so as to add a little height. She turns on the ignition and backs out onto Magnolia Street, which takes her to Tyne then right out Highway 4. Colonel Fate Havens is up ahead.

Rosie guns the motor, trying to decide if she should raise or lower the windows before taking the plunge. Douglas would know. It always surprised her, the sorts of minutia he tucked away in that head of his.

She grips the steering wheel, and her gaze falls on St. Christopher, patron saint of travelers. She snatches the small statue off the dash—a gift from Douglas, years ago. Her heart slows. He gave it to her for luck. She won the local round of radio's Winner Take All and was going to Chicago for the finals. She didn’t win, of course. But Douglas was proud. He made
her buy a new outfit and told everyone they knew of Rosie’s fame.

Now she drives the Pontiac into a small convenience market close to the foot of the bridge. She parks on the side and sits in the car, studying the store windows smattered with ads for slushies, cigarettes, and giant drinks. She stuffs her purse under the seat, gets out of the car, and locks it. Too late, she feels St. Christopher’s staff pierce her palm. She closes her fist, shoves both hands in her coat pockets, and walks on.

It is the time of day she never could get used to. “The gloaming” they called it and the fact that it has a name, that others have felt the vacuum too, has always been a comfort. Today is no exception. She feels a taut smile—the perfect time of day to go.

The store is behind her. She makes her way along the narrow sidewalk, one foot in front of the other. Her shoes are the dark tie-ups she bought for mall-walking after Douglas read how exercise was as good for the head as it was for the figure. They walked faithfully for a few weeks, until one morning he went to the restroom, and she wandered into Dillard’s, where he found her many hours later, toting shopping bags of stuff she claimed to need.

At first there is no sound of water as the sidewalk ascends, only the occasional shadow of geese in flight and a strong smell of old fish. The guardrail is stump size and flecked with bird muck. She deftly steps to the other side onto a collar of concrete the length of the bridge. She presses back against the rail. Watching the river coiled beneath her like a rope, she recognizes what she hasn’t before. The sound, muffling particulars, is huge. Rosie listens, reassured by the water’s wail.

Somewhere a horn blasts, becoming louder and louder, closer and closer. Surely it will pass. She hunches her shoulders as if hiding in her coat, but the honking continues. She raises her hands to her ears and when she opens her palms, St. Christopher flies from her grasp. Her hands move to cover her mouth as she watches the statue tumble through the air then
hit the water.

"Rosie! Rosie!" From the corner of her eye a figure comes panting toward her—an arm raised and shaking wildly, demanding attention. Rosie relents, turning her head and confirming Nicky’s voice.

"Damn. I knew it. I said to Mark..." Nicky eases over the rail and waves her hand, directing Rosie to sit down and scoot over, "I told him you were out of sorts, and for more than the obvious reason."

Rosie sucks her bottom lip, unable to speak, even if she had a thing to say.

Nicky produces a red bandana, spits on one corner and clears her space of droppings. She plops down on the rail and the two women sit, elbows on knees, looking at the thick, mucky water churning beneath them. An empty froth swirls, where seconds before St. Christopher landed face up and reproachful.

Nicky pulls a pack from her pocket and takes out a cigarette. "Would you look at that?" She gestures toward the river and offers the pack to Rosie. "All that water, making its way home."

Holding up her hand, Rosie refuses the pack then snatches it back. "Home?" she asks.

"The ocean, by way of the gulf. But ultimately the water’s headed home."

"Guess it does all end up there. Guess it tries to, anyway."

"Flowing forward. Pushing on, regardless." Nicky flicks open a lighter, lights her cigarette, and holds the flame up for Rosie.

Rosie shakes her head. "Don’t I know."

"About oceans?"

"About pushing on. Regardless." The cigarette pack is wadded in Rosie’s fist. She squeezes tight, and haltingly begins to describe what’s happening to her—how her mind is falling back on itself, back to what had come before, way before, with very little room for everyday. Then
she sighs and opens her fingers, before admitting to the most baffling moments of all—stretches when her mind was clear and every bit its usual self. Only, of course, it wasn’t. “Until today, I thought the only choice I had was pushing on.”

Nicky drags on the cigarette and cranes her neck upward to exhale. “Yep, that’s what we do, alright. Push on. Regardless.”

The sky is evening bright. Rosie has worked a cigarette from the pack and now holds it up to Nicky. The lighter’s flame wobbles with the hint of breeze, but Rosie catches it with a fierce inhale.

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It is full-on dark by the time Rosie, claiming to be fine, manages to escape Nicky’s protection. Reassured the guardrail’s height would not deter her, Rosie returns to the Pontiac and backs out of the parking lot, only to slam on the brakes and slap her hand against the empty dash. Something’s wrong. She switches on the overhead light. There. Her fingers rub the telltale oval stain. She is breathing hard, as if she’s been for a run, or an extra lap around the mall. She looks down at her shoes. Is that where she’s headed? But surely not in the dark. Her fingers rub the dash. Doug will know what’s missing. Doug. What was it someone said? Something about everybody going home. That’s it. That’s where she’s going. Home. She leans back against the seat and stares out at the market, lit now with artificial light that hurts her eyes. She squints and is reminded of earlier today. The red front door at Colors. She turns her head back and forth and smirks at herself in the mirror. Ha! I’m not going home. I’m going to the hospital. Going to see Doug. Doug’s waiting. And won’t he be happy? I’ve remembered!

After a few slow seconds, she presses the power windows wide open, shifts into drive, and nudges the car forward. By the time she’s traveled up the small incline and over the bridge, her hair, caught up in the car’s momentum, is every bit as tangled as before.
Carnelia is watching the premier of “Mermaid Girl” at 9:00, perhaps “Paralyzed and Pregnant” at 10:00. Shiloh the mermaid girl is the only living mermaid. Sirenomelia is the term: one fused leg, a foot twisted inside, one ovary, no large intestine, no rectum, no vagina, half a kidney. She’s had forty surgeries in her seven years. Her mom says, “No one has told her she’s supposed to die.” Shiloh loves butterflies, purple and pink. She says “Some people like me the way I am.” She laughs and a million balloons burst. She paints her fingernails magenta, squirts the doctor with a hypodermic before he draws her blood. She adores her parents and they all get by with jokes.

The fat child in Carnelia who did not meet her mother’s standards loves Shiloh, wants to play with her. For a moment Carnelia thinks she is Shiloh, unable to walk or balance but ripe with games, always different, always the other. But no, Carnelia is a two legged woman. A klutz in ballet, the tutu so tight over her shaking belly the audience laughed at her. What was she doing on the stage with all those skinny Irish girls? Her mother was humiliated, but Shiloh’s mother is beyond shame. Her love is thick pink, like taffy. Carnelia’s shuts off the T.V. and dreams Shiloh is waiting for her to ride the seesaw, to hold her hand. Carnelia finds her in the seaside cottage her parents rented in Maine. They swim together, flying over waves. In the morning Shiloh is with her, helping her to walk. Thank you Shiloh, Carnelia whispers.

The universe spins on Shiloh’s laughter and The Maker shrugs.
COGNAC
Jane Lunin Perel

I touch the skin on your wrist
I smell your cognac breath
I taste the salt of your tongue
I hear the blood in your throat
I see the earth through your body
A CONVERSATION WITH JANE LUNIN PEREL

Christen Baglaneas, Maura Carberry, and Emily Davey

CHRISTEN BAGLANEAS, MAURA CARBERRY, AND EMILY DAVEY: Has writing been rewarding for you? If so, how?

JANE LUNIN PEREL: I've been writing since I was nine years old. I guess it's because I'm always looking for some type of a surprise and seeing the ordinary in an extraordinary way. I would think of how boring life would be without having a passion for something. I love having absolute freedom over how to create and define; I make the rules.

CB/MC/ED: How is it being a published writer as well as a professor?

JLP: Teaching takes up a lot of my time, but I love the balance. My students encourage me to see my own writing in a new way just as I try to do the same for them, it's a two way street. It's great to see how their writing develops. I've taken a few sabbaticals, one of which being when I wrote my book that's coming out next fall titled, "Red Radio Heart". It's a book of prose poems, which is something I've never done before. I wouldn't want to do that continuously though. I like having the dynamic between the students and myself. It's such a gift to see people open up to one another and I still marvel at getting paid for doing what I love to do. When I do eventually retire, I look forward to the freedom of being able to read anything I want.

CB/MC/ED: Has your writing style changed over the years? Is it still evolving?
JLP: I'd definitely say it's still evolving. I was always a verse poet; I was brought up on it. I write mostly in free verse and love working with the formation of lines and use of space. Twenty-five years I've been writing in verse and published four books of it. Peter Johnson gave me a prose book and at first I didn't think much of it, but one day while I was in the waiting room of a doctor's office I started reading it and got so immersed in it that I read it cover to cover. I was so moved by it that I wrote my first prose poem called “Blood Work”, which is about the fear of seeing a new doctor. Peter ended up publishing it in, “Prose Poem and International Anthology”. I even took out some of my old verse poems and revamped them to be prose.

CB/MC/ED: Is there another form of writing you still wish to pursue?

JLP: I've always felt like a little bit of a failure because I've never written a quintessential essay on a topic. I've read a lot of criticism, but never sat down and just wrote one. My new course for the Spring of 2013 is called Searching for Venus: exploring ideas of female beauty and love in history, psychology, and literature. I'm so excited for it because I've worked on putting it together for so many years and figure that even if I can't put a book or essay together, this is a way to talk about those ideas.

CB/MC/ED: When did you first become interested in writing poems?

JLP: I'd say when I was seven or eight years old I first became interested in writing and poetry. My parents got a subscription to Jack and Jill magazine and I couldn't stop reading it! I was fascinated by the different stories from countries all over the world. I remember reading a story from Russia and thought it was just so exciting. Certain TV shows I watched as a kid
influenced me as well. There was this one show, “Howdy Doody”, whose characters I was so drawn to. I think it was because they had such interesting names and I always thought mine was so plain. When I was nine or ten I entered a contest and wrote a poem about the world and how mysterious it was, and I won! It was published in a Jewish magazine for student writing. I also owe much to my father for me becoming a writer. I was nervous about it because my mother never really understood it and always wanted me to do something more practical, but one day I asked my father what he thought about me becoming a poet and he told me well, someone has to do it! By giving me permission, he gave me the strength I didn’t think I had.

CB/MC/ED: What is your inspiration when writing?

JLP: Musical lines just come to me. I like to take something familiar and turn it around. I even wrote about the 23rd psalm from Carnelia’s point of view. Sometimes, I’ll just hear someone say something and get my inspiration out of that. In the case of my poem “Sail Fish” my husband had gone on a fishing trip with some of his friends and I decided to write a poem about this huge fish he caught. When I make that connection with an object or creature, all the lines just come.

CB/MC/ED: Do the characters in your poems come to life as you write or do you have them in mind already?

JLP: Both. Characters will develop while I’m writing and sometimes I already have the idea of them in my head. I like to blend real life with my imagination.

CB/MC/ED: On average, how many times do you edit a poem before you consider it ready for publication?
JLP: I thought I edited my manuscript enough, but when Peter Johnson went over it he completely picked it apart. He has a gift, it's like he can just zone in on exactly what doesn't need to be there. Sometimes I'll revise it twenty times and sometimes I'll write something and it just comes out whole. It really just depends on the poem and what kind of stride I've hit.

CB/MC/ED: What direction are you heading in with your upcoming publication?

JLP: Carnelia's heart is like a radio, she feels all the pain of everything she hears going on in the world. She takes it all in and gives out her feelings like a radio. It's the processing of pain and joy. Carnelia is written in the first person, which is somewhat new for me because I tend to write a lot as animals. I watch her change over time. It's seventy-five pages and will be published by White Pine Press in the fall of 2012.

CB/MC/ED: What steps do you have to go through to finish the publishing process?

JLP: It's important to research journals that would fit you. Once you've found a few, you just have to send out your work and if you get rejected, just send it to another. A lot of times people will dwell on their rejection, but you can't be like that. Everyone gets rejected at some point, you just have to take it as it is and send it out again. I had a manuscript called "Salt for Salt" and no one would publish it. Sometimes you have to change the form, but consistently try to get work out there. Don't give up and be consistent because once an editor has seen your work three or four times you start to get to them psychologically. I use teaching as an excuse not to publish as much as I should, but so far I've been published in about twenty-five to thirty magazines and journals.

THE ALEMBIC | PAGE 345
BE KIND
Doris Ferleger

Be kind to me and linger,
be in two places at once
with your new life eternal
and with me in the woods
climbing toward the statue
of the Indian who looks
out onto the land that once
was his, that once was ours.

A light snow falls
without you,
I do not remember
myself without you.

Lunar crevasses
in my cheeks,
our child grown and graying,
you, a vertical pink cloud,
lavender arms of dusk
the day before snow,
face of the moon
during daylight.
JUMP
Doris Ferleger

Six teenaged boys jump off the bridge into the creek thirty feet below. Shivering, they hike back up onto the wall, squat for some seconds, blue and green tattoos of skulls or svelte girls swell on ripped calves. I like watching them shiver, jump thirty feet, free themselves from fear for today. A skinny blond girl says, Yeah, I dove in head-first last week, which everyone knows must be a lie, though no one calls her on it. The boys wear sneakers except for one who catches a rock on his way in. It’s as if he has talons. He looks prideful, happy. I wish the shortest guy luck, the one still dry, walk over the bridge and deep among wide and narrow trees, upturned and down-driven roots.

Daily death catches in our teeth. Daily I stand on the bridge and pretend to not be watching for the tumor to re-grow. Daily I long for my husband to fling the crystal turtle, toss the tusked elephant, trunk turned ever upward, hurl the hunk of healing amethyst, destroy every hopeful amulet, and leap from his fear that his immune system will fail him if he kisses me, shivering.
I'm on the phone with Amy, and she says that after I get through this difficult time, by which she is referring to the drip-by-drip torture of my wife’s mental disintegration, I will know better who I am, that I may be changed in such a way as to cause me to be better at going out and grabbing what I want.

I explain that I don’t think it’s a matter of not knowing what I want, or even how to go about getting it, so much as a feeling, this will not be for you.

“Oh, Nick,” she says, her voice rising. “Do you think I don’t understand that? Don’t you think I know how that feels?”

I backtrack. “I’m not meaning to say you don’t.”

Recovering herself, she pushes. “Okay, then, why not you?”

“Let’s take a look,” I say. “Let’s say I’d like to fall apart, but I can’t, there’s no space. Karen and the illness and the kids take it all up. I’m the one who has to take care of them, I’m the one who has to keep it all together. Let’s say I’d like adult companionship. Sex. Let’s pretend it’s you. You’d like to get out to readings and so on, but you’re almost fifty years old, you have children, you have a job, how’re you going to do it?”

“People do, Nick,” she lectures me. “People find each other in all kinds of crazy ways. It happens.”

“Well,” I say.

“They do, Nicky,” she pleads. “My old boyfriend Clem found his current wife on Match.com.”

“Yeah, can you see me going on Match.com?”

A certain triumph comes into her voice. “That’s what I’m talking about,” she says. “Maybe that’s something about you that will change.
Besides, you have family,” she adds. “They’ll set you up.”


“I read about that,” Amy says. She takes a breath and launches her rhetorical assault, the desperate attempt I’ve come to expect. “Nick, listen, that way of thinking, it’s one of the things we share, something I’ve had to learn to fight against. It is for you, you’re so constituted—” she breaks off.

“There’s so much in you. You just can’t see how it will come.”

“Not in the short run,” I say.

“No,” she agrees. “You have to get through this first.”

“There are some advantages to having one’s wife die in a car crash,” I say.

[Space]

These are the kinds of conversations I have with Amy. My friend from college, who even jokes herself, “Who other than me would say these kinds of things?” I admit I take advantage of her starry-eyed view of me; it would be difficult not to. Especially when she’s in the habit of trying so hard.

We do talk about other things. The other day she told me about bee space. “It’s a great story,” she says. “This guy, he was a preacher, actually, he was from Philadelphia, and he had this really bad preacher’s block. When he tried to preach his first sermon, he couldn’t speak, so he turned to beekeeping in hopes of curing himself. I don’t think he ever did, but he did realize about bee space, that honeybees will seal up passageways that are either too large or too small, but they’ll leave open passageways that are just the right size for a bee to pass through.

“Anyway,” she continues, “this space is about three-eighths of an inch, and what this guy figured out was that you could put frames in a hive at those intervals and then lift out the honeycomb, rather than have to cut it out.”
“Hmm,” I say. “You’re saying my hive is plugged up.”

“In a manner of speaking,” she says.

I tell Amy about Rae, a colleague in another department with whom I have lunch periodically. I explain there’s a shaving of awkwardness about it. It’s not like I’m hitting on her—she has a husband and kids and for that matter Karen’s still alive—but on the other hand, I probably go up and talk to her more than I would under ordinary circumstances.

“She does know your situation,” Amy says.

“Yes, that’s probably why she agrees to have lunch with me,” I say.

“Nick, I’m sure that’s not the only reason. On some level, she’s got to enjoy your company.”

What I’m trying to say is that I feel needy. And that it doesn’t feel good.

Which is why, in what little space I have to devote to it, I worry about Amy too.

“I hate to think of you lonely,” she says. “If you need to, you know you can call.”

“I’m sure your husband would be big on that, ‘Uh, I want to talk to your wife because I’m lonely—’”

“Well, that might not be the best way to put it,” she says.

I laugh.

“If things were different, I’d take care of you,” she says.

If things were different—Not that Tim would feel any better about that either.

What to do with my daughter for the summer? Now that school is out, she mopes around the house. My parents say to send her up to them. “Don’t ask her, just do it,” my mother says. Then she lets it slip on the
phone and afterward Jilly comes to me and says icily, “I see you’re making decisions without me.”

I did send her up, regardless, though she is my first and oldest, the girl and the child I hate most to have angry with me. I also signed her up for an Outward Bound trip in the mountains out west. It wasn’t easy to get her out there. When my parents show up with her at 5:15 a.m. for a 6:00 a.m. flight, the airline says they’re too late, they won’t let her on the plane. There’s a flight on another airline later that morning, but they won’t let her take that one either.

My daughter went back to my parents’ house. We got hold of Outward Bound, and they said they’d come back to Denver for her the next day. My daughter was upset. She’s shy, not comfortable in new social situations. And here she is, forced to join the group late, after everyone else has had a day’s head start getting to know each other and making alliances. That night I talked to her for a long time, playing the role Amy plays with me, trying to cheer her up, calming her down, inciting her to look on the bright side.

[Space]

When I think back on my past with Amy, and then about my daughter, a shiver passes through me. Is that the fate of every father of a daughter? “Your parents must have hated me,” I tell Amy.

“They’re not judgmental,” she says. “Besides, they know me. They might have had more sympathy for you than you might think.”

“Do daughters talk to their mothers about their boyfriends?” I ask. The mother-daughter thing is a lurid fascination to me, now that my daughter is being deprived of it.

“I did,” she said. “I remember one spring break particularly. She had a lot of patience, but finally she got fed up with me. After you, I cried a lot. I’m not sure how coherent I was. She did say that you didn’t make it
easy for me to let go."

Whose shoulder will my daughter cry on? Who will help her through the minefield of sexuality, who will watch over her, dispense the female wisdom honed and passed down over ages?

Amy wants to know my theory of scientific beauty. I tell her I’m not sure I have one, but put on the spot, I’d have to say it’s orgasmic.

“How do you mean?” she asks.

I say that it’s a moment of illumination, when you figure something out, there’s nothing like it. Then it’s over.

“Doesn’t the beauty stick, though? I mean, isn’t something like evolution or whatever as beautiful now as when the theory was developed?”

I’m honest here. “Not really. It becomes part of the background, your assumptions. It never quite has the same excitement.”

“That’s sad, Nick,” she says. “That’s different from art,” she says, after a moment. “For instance, you can look at a painting or read a book over and over and keep getting more out of it.”

“I’m sorry,” I say.

“Remember those Virginia Woolf T-shirts that were the rage in the seventies?” Amy says. “That’s how I wanted to look when I was Jilly’s age. I suppose I had a kind of Calvinistic idea that a certain kind of outer beauty might mark aesthetic virtue. If I were beautiful I could come closer to creating beauty. Anything to be something other than an ordinary fourteen year old, thrown back on my own resources.”

“You’re a romantic,” I say.

“You are too,” she says. I can’t say I disagree. For instance, I don’t know why I have the feelings I do about the mountains, but I do.
My department chair sends a memo: My colleague down the hall is being ordered to move her lab into mine. This will mean we’ll both lose a room, half our lab space, not to mention the time it will cost us to make the move. I don’t think it’s a coincidence that both our NIH grants are up for renewal.

“Academic territoriality,” Amy pronounces with a certain glee. I think about the bees, about being squeezed out of the hive, but we don’t have a lot of time to talk, since I need to go pick up my son.

My wife Karen has a seizure. It’s early fall, still warm, but without the full heat of summer. She’d had small episodes of trembling before, and this started off like that, and got worse fast. She ended up on the kitchen floor, shaking, and then her body went rigid, muscles contracted, and then relaxed, her eyes rolled up into her head. Now I know this is only normal, if such a word is appropriate when speaking of seizures, but I didn’t know that then. I thought she was dying. I thought she might be dead. The aide who watches her during the day called 911 while I tried to hold myself together. At least my children had left for school.

When Amy asks me about it later, I try to tell her what it was like with the ambulance people, how I try to communicate to them about Karen’s dementia, have some fantasy they will treat her with patience and kindness, but she doesn’t know what’s going on and fights them and they restrain her. I follow to the hospital in my car. Of course it’s not any better there. She’s crying, confused, scared, has no idea where she is, why she is there.

I stop because I can’t go on.

“You don’t have to tell me anything except what you want to,” Amy says.

“It’s not that,” I explain. “I don’t have the words.”
On weekends, I take my family to see Karen. Jillian wants to go; Paul doesn’t. In the beginning I would try to figure out something to do with him, but now pretty much drag him along. He brings a book and reads and doesn’t complain too much. He has no memory of the time she actually functioned as his mother. He regards her as a peer who has gone wrong in an inexcusable way. When I explained to him that Karen needed to live apart from us, he nodded gravely. “Because she peed on the kitchen floor,” he pronounced knowingly.

On a Thursday or Friday, Jilly will sidle up to me.

“Daddy,” she says, tracing a finger along the countertop.

I nod, say “Saturday” or “Sunday,” and she turns her heel, goes back to her room, or downstairs to watch TV. Sometimes she lingers for a moment and I remember how it used to be. Maybe she’s remembering too, I don’t know.

[Space]

Frankly, I don’t understand what the visits do for her. She gets to see her mother, who might or might not be capable of responding. Who could as easily say “I love you” to her daughter as the aide who pushes her down the hall. I explain this to Amy late at night.

“Maybe it’s just something she needs to do, Nick.”

“Needs to do,” I say. “Why?” Amy being the only person to whom I can reasonably consider asking this question.

Amy’s voice becomes firm. “Because Karen’s going to die, and Jilly’s going to have to live with that.”

“The good girl,” I say sarcastically. “That’s okay for now, maybe, but isn’t she supposed to break away, grow into her own person?”

“You can’t hurry it,” Amy says. “Do you think Jilly’s upset by the visits?”

“No.” I say. “But what if Karen’s in there for years?”
“Then things will change for Jilly too.”
I’m silent.
“Nick?” Amy probes. “Are you keeping your appointments?”
“Yes, I’m compliant, if that’s what you want to know.”
“Nick—”
“Okay, try again. Yes, I am.”
“Well, that’s good,” Amy says. I sense there’s more she could say
but is holding back. Probably not a bad idea under the circumstances.

When she asks me about Karen, a wave goes over me. I can tell her
things, like she can’t get her feet to work right. I can say this isn’t supposed
to be a side effect of the drugs, that no one knows what the hell it is. I can
report that sometimes Karen seems affectionate, but since it’s indiscriminate,
how much can it count? Sometimes she barely takes notice of me.

I don’t tell Amy I don’t want to see my wife because that’s not
exactly true. There’s something else I want to tell her, but there’s no way I
can. I can’t even tell it to myself. I’m not even sure I know what it is.

[Space]

I went and fell in love with someone else, and when I refused to
make love with Amy, she pulled the plug, told me she couldn’t be near me
anymore, moved back to her hometown.

At the time, I considered this an overreaction. It wasn’t fair. We’d
fooled around. But what was between us was about more than sex. I was
hurt. Four years, she could toss away. Toss me.

“Why didn’t you listen to your friends,” I say to her now. “When
they told you, He’s a jerk, and gone on with your life?”

“I did,” she said.

“No, I mean when we were in college,” I said.

“I don’t know,” she said, giving a laugh. She kissed me, and I
kissed her back.
“It wasn’t that I didn’t try,” she said. “Where do you think the one-night stands came from? It would have helped if someone had shown a particular interest. If someone had wanted to sleep with me more than once. But that just didn’t happen. Maybe it was a good thing for that hypothetical person. I might have ended up being cruel.”

The kissing wasn’t supposed to be in the program. But I was tired after the drive to the place she was staying, and stretched out on the sofa. She kneeled by my head, watching me for a minute, then she slithered over, found my lips, her tongue burrowing in. I didn’t resist.

“I’m easily seduced,” I told her, and we kissed again, longer and harder. Her body rippled alongside me, I stiffened. Our tongues were now thoroughly entwined, pushing deep, on the edge. I pulled us back. She nodded, the top of her head dropping into the fold of my neck.

I held her, the way I’d originally intended, rubbed her back and shoulders, in the way she loved. She moaned a little.

“That’s good,” she breathed.

“Good,” I whispered back.

“I should reciprocate,” she said. “But I seem to be lying here.”

“That’s okay.” I kissed the side of her neck. Could she have any idea what an exquisite pleasure it was for me to do that for her?

She closed her eyes and we drifted for a while.

[Space]

Ten years, we were out of each other’s lives. Our twenties.

“Sometimes I feel bad that I wasn’t in touch with you while you were in grad school, when you were happy,” she says. “It was always so wonderful when you were happy. Why is it I always seem to show up when things are going badly for you? It’s like I’m bad luck, here comes Amy, uh-oh, sure sign of disaster.”

“The bad luck shows up before you do,” I reassure her, kiss her
eyelids, the bridge of her nose.

The woman I fell in love with was a politician’s wife. The summer between college and grad school I made extra money bartending. Her husband was provost at the university at that time. I was working a gig, and she came up and I poured her a merlot. I make no boasts about my memory, but I can still see the deep color as it filled her glass, her fingers as she held up the glass. She sauntered off, but in a while got bored, came back. She cocked her hip, in her de rigueur little black dress, onto the edge of my table. She leaned forward, confiding in me that her husband was on the brink of announcing a run for state senate. “Shhh,” she whispered, putting a finger to her lips. “He’s raking in money even as we speak.”

I looked across the room and there indeed was the provost, leaning conspiratorially toward the dean of the medical school, a recently anointed “top doc,” and a coterie of other self-important-looking men.

He not only ran, but won. Meanwhile, she and I played around the edges, with the understanding that a liaison with a 21-year-old future grad student was hardly in the cards for her. Not so much later, she divorced the provost, now senator, and ran on her own. While I still lived in the state, I voted for her. It was the chivalrous thing to do. Aside from the fact that she is a remarkable, principled, fierce woman, whose politics and person I admire.

She recently made it to Washington. Her picture shows up in the papers from time to time. I can’t help it, I almost always run my finger down the side of the newsprint.

Amy was wronged, I could see that, but not in the way she thought. It wasn’t my fault, I wanted to yell, absurdly. I never intended. But the road to hell, etc.
I never conceived of myself as superior, it never would have occurred to me that she wasn’t good enough for me. The other way around, if anything.

Would she have listened to me, if I could have told her, would she have been able to put aside her sense of rejection to see how it was for me? That I was protecting more than just myself?

[Space]

“Not exactly the best foundation for a relationship,” I say wryly, after letting my skeletons out of the closet.

“You can’t always have a good foundation,” Amy says.

“I did marry Karen,” I say, by way of showing her that I don’t just yearn after the unattainable.

“How did you get over it?” she asks

“I didn’t,” I say.

“No,” she says. “It doesn’t go away.”

[Space]

Sometimes when Amy and I talk late at night I imagine she’s come from sex with her husband. I want to tell her to go back to bed and lie next to him. I don’t, because first she’d deny it, and second, because I don’t want her to hang up, now that she’s on the line.

[Space]

Romantic I may be, but I’m no mystic. I don’t believe in any unseen realm. I do believe in the world we live in, the one we think we know. Only we don’t. I believe the book of life is clearly written, right in front of us. It’s just hard to read. We have to learn how. That’s what experiments are, attempts at learning how to see and understand what’s under our noses.

As to why that should be so hard, I don’t know. One thinks things should be one way, and they turn out another.
Amy says that’s the way it is with language too.

My daughter hides behind her hair, hides the cuts on her arms beneath long sleeves. We meet with her therapist, the woman from the county agency, her guidance counselor. Four adults and Jilly there curled in a fetal position, hair over her face. We wait, we plead. She won’t look up or speak.

On the car ride home we are silent. She keeps her head down, the hair drawn. Nothing for me to say. I let her be.

I don’t doubt she’s got our number. Getting her message across by becoming the obstacle around which we cannot navigate.

I want to pull her up, pull the hair out of her face.

“Jillian,” I say more sharply than I intend when we get home and she creeps into the house. She stops but won’t look at me. I try to think of some command. Peel the carrots, take out the garbage, something to reestablish the balance. I can’t do it, let my arm fall to my side.

[Space]

It was Karen’s phrase, the idea of no space. When she’d get angry at me, she’d accuse me of taking up all the emotional space, so there wasn’t any left for her.

I adopted it, and on occasion hurled it back.

[Space]

One day in college Amy came up to me in the dining hall, waving two tickets in her hand. “Guess what I got?” she smiled coquettishly. The Grateful Dead, which I’d introduced her to. “They’re behind the stage,” she confided. “But that’s okay, isn’t it?”

A woman in a long white dress twirled in the hallways of the Spectrum. Outside, homemade bumper stickers were hawked, along with various and sundry substances. We vied to be the first to recognize the songs, whispering back and forth to each other.
“The final frontier,” I whispered as the music got weird and jangly, the lights made a ring around Mickey Hart’s drum set.

Afterward, we crammed our way onto the Broad Street Line. We pressed into a seat at the back of the car. People kept piling on, and Amy scooted herself onto my lap. A passenger in the aisle took advantage of the opening, sat down. Took a quick glance at us, turned away.

Amy was wearing an embroidered peasant blouse with gauze sleeves. Her ass rested in my lap. She leaned her head against my shoulder. Her lips grazed my ear. We didn’t kiss or stroke. We didn’t say much. Let motion rock us as we hurtled toward what awaited us.
HIPPOPOTAMUS
CM Pretorius

Listen with your eyes:
Startled. Morning sun cracking
The winter night like
A crocodile's skull.

Stars bleed red into the river,
Liberation from somnambulistic
Hell. The earth burns
Into the pale, yawning sky;

The hooves of a thousand
Buffalo, throbbing hangover
From the lions' midnight feast;
The dust settles, a quiet storm.

You, mystic old man of the river,
Grunt: a pink, plastic toy.
Danny walked slowly out of the locker room letting his eager teammates jog past him as he took everything in. He could feel the light spring breeze against his face as he looked down at the field. The familiar smells of freshly mowed grass and hotdogs filled his nose and the way the overhead lights hit the field as the sun was setting looked like a scene from *Field of Dreams*. He looked towards the bleachers; they were filled with families, friends and scouts. They were all chatting and checking their watches nervously as they waited for the biggest game of the year to begin. Danny usually got hyped-up before a game, but tonight all he felt was misery. Danny scanned the home side of the bleachers, and instantly heard his mother’s laugh as she talked to the other parents. She was wearing the black Knights’ baseball t-shirt she had insisted he should buy for her. The one she vowed to wear to every game so everyone would know who she was rooting for, even though her complaints to the umpires and non-stop cheering made it quite obvious. Next to her sat his dad, texting away on his cell phone with the usual frown on his face and glancing up every few seconds looking for Danny.

Danny sighed. Tonight was it. Everything he had been working for came down to this game, the Knights’ first championship game ever, the last game of the season and Danny’s last college game ever. Everything was happening so fast and it felt like yesterday he was trying out for his hometown’s little league team.

“What’s the score? WHAT! Tampa is up? By how many runs?!” Danny threw the ball up in the air and caught it in his glove. He glanced over at the other side of the yard where his Dad was frantically pacing and
talking on the phone, he had been waiting 20 minutes to play catch with him.

"DAD!"

"What, uh hold on Jack," Danny's dad looked up. Danny was the spitting image of him, brown shaggy hair and ocean-blue eyes with pearl white teeth that gave his smile an innocent look. He was just under 6-foot and had an athletic build. "Hold on son, I'm on the phone. Jack, what is it now? Oh jeez, how could the Sox be down by so much? I bet everything on them I was sure they had this game!"

"Dad, I'm going inside," Danny yelled, throwing his glove on the grass stubbornly and crossing his arms. His father looked up nervously and sighed.

"Got to go, keep me updated." He closed his phone and shoved it in his pocket as he put his glove on. "No way, you need to practice if you want to make the A-team for Little League."

"I don't get why I have to play fall ball, I play baseball in the Spring and in the Summer, I was thinking of maybe going out for the football team—"

"Football?!" Danny's dad looked bewildered and laughed. "Football is a sport for big guys who want to tackle each other, anyone can play football! Baseball is a game of skill and talent, you need to practice. I talked to Coach LeVito, he said if you fix your curve ball you will be the starting pitcher! Don't you want that?" Danny looked in his father's hopeful eyes and bit his lip nervously. Danny's dad was a 'has-been;' he loved baseball and was a star player in high school, but was kicked-off the team his junior year when he skipped practice to go to a casino with his friends. Danny's dad was always talking about all he could of done, the man he could have been, and the money he could have made if his coaches hadn't been so harsh on him. So he tried to relive his glory days through his son. Danny knew if he wasn't really good his dad would be
disappointed in him. He usually just did whatever his father asked of him. Danny finally smiled at his dad and nodded, and picking up his glove he threw the ball to him.

"I bet my curve ball is already better than yours!"

"Right," his dad laughed, and glancing at his phone before throwing it back he said "the day when you are a better baseball player than me... well, we will see if it comes."

Although Danny was pressured by his father, he grew to love baseball. It meant everything to him. Being on the field gave him power; it was the one place he was in complete control. Growing up with his controlling father, Danny grew into a shy, quiet push-over. He was too nice, people told him. But on the field that changed.

"Hey you!" Danny was brought back to reality by Allie, his best friend. Her long blonde hair was down and she wore a black sweater with jeans. They had met freshman year when they sat next to each other in English class.

"Hey Al, thanks for coming." He smiled as she gave him a hug. Allie was the one person who had always been there for him, and they were a great pair. She was adventurous, whimsical and assertive... everything Danny was not. She pushed him to be a better person and was the only person who was able to take his mind off of baseball. Everyone knew how he really felt about her, except Allie herself, of course. But Danny never got the nerve to ask her out, so they remained friends throughout their college years as he watched her reluctantly date other guys, and he half-heartedly attempted to date other girls.

"I brought you a Gatorade, for good luck," she said handing it to him. He looked at the blue bottle and laughed.

"It's half-empty!"
She shrugged and smiled, “I got thirsty walking over here, why aren’t you on the field? Everyone’s warming up.” Danny looked towards the field and gulped. This game meant everything, everyone was counting on him...and he was going to disappoint them all.

“Are you nervous? Don’t be, I am sure you’ll be fine! You have always been great under pressure.” Danny looked at her doubtfully and she laughed, “Well okay, you have always been great at baseball under pressure.”

“I just—” He wanted to tell her everything. So much had been going on with his family over the past few months and he felt like he could explode. Danny’s mom told him that his father had been very busy and stressed about work, but he knew she was lying. Danny always knew his father had a gambling problem, but it had never really affected him before. Sometimes his dad would lose a lot of money, but he usually always made up for it somehow. His dad tried to hide it, so Danny pretended that it wasn’t happening. He trusted his dad; he thought he knew what he was doing. He was wrong. Danny’s dad went too far this time. Over the past few months his father had gambled away all of their money in sporting events and they were now broke. So his father got a loan, then another one, and then another one. Danny had no idea until his father called him asking for help. The conversation kept playing over and over again in his head:

“Dad, I can’t, it’s wrong...its cheating!” Danny whispered into the phone.

“It’s not cheating...I need your help son, I would not be asking you unless I was really desperate.” Danny sighed.

“How much do you owe? How could this have happened?”

“Too much, I’ll never be able to pay it off. Look Dan, all of this will be over if you just do this for me. Everyone knows the Knights are going to win this game, I’ll be the only one betting against ‘em, it’s a ton of money!”
“Why don’t you just tell them you need time, I will get a job and we can—”

“I don’t have any time! They need the money now, if I don’t pay—Look, I owe these people a lot of money, there is no time, they are doing me a favor by letting me even wait until tomorrow.”

“Was this your idea?”

“Well, not exactly—”

“DAD! These ‘people’ you owe, they don’t seem like honest men to me. You’re asking me to make my team lose on purpose! I can’t do that! I’ve been waiting for this game since my freshman year, so have you!”

“All you have to do is throw a few bad pitches and strike out. Your coach will sit you and your team will do the job for you.”

“And if we win anyways?”

“Not going to happen. Harry is out with an injury, so your coach will have to go to Eliot, your third-string pitcher, his fast ball is okay but he is not good enough to hold down the other team, their strong hitters.”

“You have really thought this through,” Danny said in disbelief, his dad was actually serious about this, and sadly, he was right. Without him it was unlikely his team would win.

“I had to. Please don’t be dramatic Danny—it’s not like this game will affect your future.”

“Of course it could affect my future! If someone finds out I cheated no team will want to draft me!”

“No one will find out, and of course they will, you’re the Knights’ ace! You are the best pitcher on your team.”

“Exactly, everyone is counting on me.”

“Do you really think this game makes a difference in the long run? For most of these idiots, this is it, it is just a game and you need to grow up!” Danny froze at his father’s last words, just a game? It had never been
just a game for him. “Are you there?”

“Yeah dad, I’m here.”

“All of our problems will be over. The guys I owe told me this is it—”

“They could be lying.”

“You don’t understand the severity of the situation. If you do not lose this game, I am in big trouble.” Danny sighed.

“Does mom know?”

“No, no one does—and we are keeping it that way. I will see you tomorrow night.” And with that he hung up. Danny looked at his phone and suddenly felt the anger rise within him.

“Shit!” he yelled, throwing it against the wall. How could his dad do this to him? How could he be so stupid? And what could Danny do? He had to help him—he needed him. Danny would never be able to forgive his father for this, or himself.

“DANNY, get over here now!” Danny’s coach was a small man, who was so overweight it made him walk like a penguin. He had a thick mustache, but was bald everywhere else. His cheeks were a permanent shade of light pink and he was always frowning. Danny looked at Allie, who gave him an encouraging smile and mouthed good luck before he ran off.

“Sorry coach.”

“Get your glove on; you need to warm up; you’re starting pitcher.” Danny grabbed his glove and walked over to Bryan, the catcher who was standing in right field warming up Jeremy, the second baseman.

“Tired you long enough,” Jeremy said, playfully punching Danny.

“I’m sorry,” Danny mumbled as he grabbed the ball from him to start warming up. Once the game was about to begin, the coach called everyone together.

“Listen guys, this is our time, this is our game. In all my years of coaching I have never seen such a well-connected, talented group of boys.
You all got talent, but this is Division 1 baseball, who doesn’t? I know there are scouts here, but remember, not one person on the team can win this, we need to work together. This is a game you will always remember, now please, don’t embarrass yourselves or me. Ready, GO KNIGHTS!” Everyone screamed. The butterflies in Danny’s stomach came back. As much as he tried to reason in his head that he had to do this, he couldn’t make the guilt go away. The coach was right, what made their team so good was their ability to work together. They were all friends and they were all good sportsmen. That’s what Danny’s dad always told him made him a good ball player, his selflessness. He always played for the team, never himself. And here he was, doing the most selfish thing ever.

He walked on the field and when the first batter came up, he threw a curve ball, the one his dad had always been so intent on him perfecting. He looked at the bleacher, hoping his dad would suddenly change his mind, realize that this was a bad idea and cheer him on. His father only glared at him, and whispered something to the two men who were wearing suits sitting next to him. Danny sighed and began to play like a dead weight for the next six innings. He gave up runs, let balls pass him and ignored his teammate’s remarks and suggestions. Finally, after giving up another run, the Knights were down by three and the coach pulled Danny off the mound.

“I don’t know what your problem is, but you need to get your act together,” he barked as Danny walked past him and fell onto the bench. He watched the next two innings nervously. Eliot surprisingly pitched well. He only gave up two runs. The Knights were down by three by the bottom of the 8th, and they had one more chance at bat but their excitement was gone as well as their confidence, and it was unlikely they would catch up.

“Please tell me you have lost your mind,” Allie’s familiar voice
caught Danny’s attention and he turned around to see her standing behind the dugout looking in at him frowning.

“You are not suppose to be here.”

“I don’t care, now answer my question! Have. You. Lost. Your. Mind?”

“What? No—”

“Then what are you doing sitting here?” she exclaimed, throwing her hands in the air in frustration.

“Allie,” Danny sighed, “It’s more complicated than you th—”

“What is? This game? Well, basically all you do is throw the ball, and then the other team hits it with a wooden thing called a bat…”

“Stop it.” Danny warned. He did not need Allie of all people lecturing him right now.

“No.”

“Hey!” They both turned back to the field as coach gave the two an annoyed look. “We are in the middle of a game girl, get outta here!”

“One second,” Allie replied in an agitated voice, causing the coach him to frown, and awkwardly turn his attention back to the game. “Listen Dan, I know this is nerve-racking. It is okay you completely choked.”

“Thanks.”

“It’s the truth, you played like crap, and now you’re giving up—I know I sound corny, but this game means everything to you, I don’t understand, don’t you want to be a part of it?”

“I—”

“Look,” Allie interrupted rolling her eyes, “I don’t want to hear your pathetic excuses. All I am saying is please don’t be the kind of person who backs out on his team when they need him the most. You’re not that guy. You still have one more inning to fix this. Man up, get your ass off this bench, and get in there!” Before Danny could reply Allie marched off and took her seat on the bleachers. She stubbornly crossed her arms and
proceeded to watch the game.

Before he could even think about what she said, the coach called him in. “Danny you’re on deck. Please don’t screw it up. You have made a fool of yourself enough for one game.” Danny got off the bench and grabbed his helmet and bat. His teammates all high-fived him and patted him on the back as he made his way out of the dugout. “Hey,” Jeremy said, grabbing his shoulder, “there are two outs, we need this okay? I know you got it in you!” He smiled, Danny nodded, and walked out. He took a few practice swings. As he waited to bat, he looked at his dad. He was staring back at him, a frown on his face. He was miserable. Danny didn’t want to remember this day as the day he became his father, because that’s what he was doing. Looking for the easy way out; it’s what his father had always done. Cheating on the one thing he loved for some money? What kind of person does that? Danny knew if he did this, he would never forgive himself, and he knew his father would feel the same way. Danny couldn’t do that to either of them. He had been letting his father and everyone else make his decisions for him his whole life. He didn’t want to look back at his life and think about what kind of person and baseball player he could have been, he wanted to be that person. It was time he started manning up.

“You’re up, Dan! Get your head in the game, the bases are loaded!” Danny’s coach screamed. He jogged onto home plate and got ready to hit. The pitcher threw his first pitch, Danny didn’t swing.

“Strike one!” the umpire yelled.

“Come on, you got this!” he heard his teammates yell. He took a deep breath, and got ready for the second pitch. The pitcher got ready and threw his second pitch, Danny swung and missed.

“Strike two!” the umpire yelled. Danny hit the plate with his bat and looked into the bleachers one more time. Instead of looking at his
father, he looked at his mom—she was holding her hands over her eyes, peeking through the cracks of her fingers nervously. Danny smiled and turned his eyes towards Allie: she winked and grinned at him. Danny hit the plate with his bat and got ready for the next pitch.

The pitcher got ready and threw his third pitch. Danny swung as hard as he could and hit the ball out of the park. For a moment, the entire field went silent—everyone’s hearts stopped, everyone held their breath, everyone gaped at the ball that disappeared from their view, not a sound could be heard except for the sound of Danny’s cleats hitting the dirt as he began to run the bases. With the realization that the Knight’s had won the game, the moment of shock ended, and the crowd roared. The Knight’s sprinted to home plate and waited as their teammates ran in, Danny beamed as the entire team eagerly waited for him.

“Danny you did it!” they screamed as they tackled him on the plate. All of the team’s friends and families ran onto the field as the opposing team marched off silently with their heads down.

Danny got off the ground as his teammates found their families, and smiled as the coach walked over to him, smiling for the first time. “You saved us kid, this was important to, well—everyone.” The coach pointed to his dispersed team, and Danny laughed. It was true; everyone was crying or laughing and hugging one another. With the year round practices and all the traveling, this team had become a family. They had all worked together for one goal—to win their college’s first ever championship baseball game and they did it. Danny shook his coach’s hand and made his way through the crowd.

“DANNY!” He turned and grinned as Allie came running over to him. She went to hug him, but as she reached him Danny pulled her into a kiss. After a few moments, she pulled away surprised. Smiling, he felt his cheeks flush.
“I—” But he was interrupted with her lips on his, and he eagerly wrapped his arms around her.

“Wow,” she laughed, embarrassed, “what a change of events, who are you and what have you done with my best friend?”

“I guess I figured it was time to ‘man-up’.” They laughed as he saw his mother walking towards him. Allie saw too, and smiling she said “I’ll let you be with your family.”

“Do you want to meet up later?”

“I’d love to, I don’t know what has gotten into you, but I like it.” She walked off and he turned to his mother who gave him a big hug.

“Honey, I am so proud. I wish your father could have stayed to congr—”

“Where is he?” Danny suddenly remembered what he had done, and he felt panic swell up within him.

“He had to go. He had a work emergency so he is walking back to the car—hey, where are you going?” Danny sprinted off the field to the parking lot to find his dad. He looked around, it was dark and dead, only a few cars were left. Then he saw a figure moving in the distance.

“DAD!” he yelled, sprinting over to him, but the figure did not stop. He finally reached him, and grabbed his shoulder. “Dad, I’m sorry, I couldn’t do it.” The man turned around, and Danny quickly realized it wasn’t his dad; it was one of the men sitting next to him at the game. He was a big man with a shaved head, wearing a suit.

“You don’t know what you’ve done kid.” Danny looked around, and suddenly saw two more figures appear, one of them dragging his dad. “Dad! Let him go!” Danny looked around frantically, but they were alone. Everyone was on the field still. The men were standing in front of him, holding his father by the arms. Danny went to make a move forward, but the man tightened his grip on his dad.
“Wait, what—what’s going on,” Danny said, suddenly realizing what kind of trouble his father was really in.

“Dan, how could you do this?” his father yelled, nervously looking at the man next to him.

“I couldn’t Dad, I’m sorry but I would never be able to forgive myself, and neither would you.”

“You’re an idiot!”

“You’re the idiot! Look at you! I won’t let money control my life the way you have always let it control yours. I won’t be dragged down into this mess you’ve made. There has to be a better way, I will help you—” The man holding Danny’s father looked at his two partners, one was wearing a black suit and the other a blue one, they were glaring at Danny. The one in the black took a step closer; eying Danny curiously, Danny nervously took a small step back. “I’ll, I’ll get a job, help you pay off your debt—” Danny continued. He looked around, but there was still no one to be seen.

“You can’t make that kind of money, you really don’t know what you have done,” the one in the black replied calmly.

“I will get it, somehow...I will, dad...” Danny said in barely a whisper. The man sighed heavily.

“You don’t seem to understand, your father owes us a lot of money and we are out of time.” The man looked at Danny callously, and then nodded towards the one constraining Danny’s father; who kicked him in the gut.

“DAD! Don’t,” Danny yelled, he tried to go to him but the man in blue grabbed his waist to stop him.

“So,” the man in black said, looking from Danny to his father, “you made us a promise that you can’t keep. You have disrespected me and my partners, and now no one is happy. You are going to have to pay off your debt somehow—"
“Don’t hurt him!” Danny yelled as he stared at his father who was curled on the ground moaning.

“We won’t hurt him,” the man replied. He turned to Danny and nodded towards the man constraining him. Danny was suddenly pushed to the ground, and felt pressure on his right arm and leg. The man was holding them down with his hands. The man in black suddenly pulled out a bat, and eyed Danny’s arm closely. In a mock spokesperson voice he yelled “The Knight’s ace pitcher gallantly helped his team win their first championship game ever and because of his stupidity, his last game will always be remembered as his best one...”

“What are you doing?” Danny’s father burst out, looking from his son to the bat in panic.

“Like father like son, I’m going to make sure this kid never steps foot on a baseball field again,” the man yelled, the calmness from before was completely replaced by anger and resentment. “You made a promise to us! Now he,” the man said, pointing to Danny, “has to pay.”

“Wait, don’t...I didn’t, I’ll...I’ll help pay the debt, I will, just give me time, Dad, don’t let them do this!” Danny screamed, as the man restraining him forced his leg and arm to straighten and the man with the bat aimed.

“I can’t help you,” his father mumbled, but his voice was hollowed-out by a piercing scream. Tears rolled down his eyes as he watched any prospect of his son playing baseball again get torn away from him.
DEEVL DRAWING POLICE SKETCHES
Charlie Clark

He once did a week of them in purple,
though kept the features plain,
simple, thin-cut angles,
no huge brows shadowed in rouge
or like dramatic trappings.
People would shriek to see
the pearled hum of those lines
cut against the paper's cream.
The hardest part was sitting through
all their sobbed descriptions.
He'd sketch the victims then,
do a wounded eye or mouth.
Not the bruises but the deadening.
The looks he hopes they don't survive.
ORANGE SUN

Amanda Brown

Father pulls the sun through the sky.
Tossing the orange fruit east to west
Against
Panoramic blue.

Sand hugs my miniature toes.
Behold, Apollo's chariot arc!
Again!
Rewind, fast-forward.

My field of vision enraptured.
My Father's orange-juggling act
Repeats.
Eyes follow with faith.

Eager gaze darts steadfastly east,
Anxious for the orb's divine descent.
Thud, blink.
Blank blue sheet above.

Thick laughter booms through the speakers;
I too giggle at my childish mouth
Agape,
Disbelieving heaven.
PEACOCK
Melanie Muto

You strut on wire chicken legs,
a suited peacock brandishing paperbacks and card catalogues.
They can't defend the ravings of your wasted wit.

I see your feathers bristle, pigeon neck bobbing,
your lordly glances stab like the scrape of your vacant claws.
You most prestigious fool,

a fop of squawking speech,
shriII smog that chokes and clouds your
bookish domain. Out among the

book carts and computer tables you preen,
shaking your quills until they bloom full to pinwheel plumage.
A selfish bird, your attendants yawn,

roll past, already bloated by your decadent pomp.
Come here and let me snap off your beak,
I'll pluck out each feather, grind

them, shred them against your bald shame,
and, spoonful after spoonful, feed back to you
your fowl pride.
Who was Irv Turtlebaum? Oh, sure, I knew he was an agent who had survived fifty years in a business that treated five years as veteran status. But that was his line of work. It didn’t explain him. Too simple. He was, at the same time, an advocate, a conundrum, arcane. Sure he was a schmoozer, working both sides of the street, but that was part of the means...not an end. His thing was deals. He was seventy-five years old, but I had the feeling he’d run me ragged on the tennis court. Cut shots, dinks, nothing landing without spinning away from me as if I had the clap. He was a chameleon: the prototype New York Jew, fast talking, wisecracking, ending every soliloquy with his palms up and a questioning look. He knew all the roles: glad-handed, backslapping Phil, circumspect, businesslike, even mundane, bon vivant star maker, the good guy, the bad guy, the I-don’t-get-it guy, your brother, Dutch Uncle, your father confessor—best friend.

But that was the crux of the matter, don’t you see? They were all roles that he played expertly to reach his objective: How to summarize Irv? In a word he was a closer. He played his part at Oscar nominee level; he was a sage, a gadfly, or the worldly figure who could tell you about conversations he’d had with John O’Hara, Maureen O’Hara, Jack Dempsey, or Bo Diddley. Irv was the guy who asks for the order and expects your answer to be whatever he thinks it should be. Let the others be the beautiful people in their Armani best, serving the finest champagne, and laughing at things that were nonsensical, incomprehensible. They didn’t have the stones to ask for your wallet. Not just the cash, but the credit cards, private bank accounts, and stocks and bonds...all of it. He had an unquenchable thirst for money, other people’s money in particular.

Best of all he was my closer. All five-foot-five inches and two
hundred pounds of him. Armani didn’t know a forty-two-inch waist existed on this planet. He always looked as if he’d slept in his suit—but his shoes were shined to a high gloss, and from the neck up he was unbeatable. Do you know how lucky I was as a first-time author to have him as an agent? He was the male equivalent of “Shrimp” Scampi (née Evelyn Scampie), the agent for radio host megastars. I sent her a letter once about a project I was trying to produce, and she sent me back a form postcard that had nothing to do with the subject I had written her about. That’s the usual response in this industry...newcomers not welcome. If you want to write for a living I’d tell you to go with your second choice.

But I wasn’t a newcomer. I was a columnist, better than average. Frank Hamilton. Maybe you’ve heard of me? Probably not. But if you are a regular reader of Time or Newsweek, you have read my articles. Okay, I wasn’t in the class with Scotty Reston, but who was? At the age of fifty-seven, I retired; maybe I was gently pushed, I don’t know. At the time, I really didn’t care. I’d just lost the only thing I really cared about. My wife, Mary, the love of my life, died after thirty-two years of marriage. We were inseparable. I realized how dependent I was upon her. In those thirty-two years, I’d never bought my own underwear or socks, and I’d never seen the inside of a supermarket. Mary did everything, but you know I was just smart enough to know that she was somebody special, and I tried in every way, and usually succeeded, to tell her that I loved her...every day.

Irv has been my agent for my entire career, and after Mary died I’m not sure what part he was playing at the time, but he helped to pull me out of a tailspin by suggesting that the next step in my writing journey was to produce a book. To that end I was about to meet Seth Jacobsen, the president of Highline Publishing. As I entered Irv’s office he looked up at me over his tortoiseshell half-glasses and said, “Jesus, Frank, you look like you flew in an open cockpit.”

“Aren’t you supposed to be building my confidence for this call on
Jacobsen, you fat fuck?” I asked.

Irv looked at me as he shuffled around his desk to shake my hand and said, “Now, that’s the Frank Hamilton I used to know! Enough small talk, let’s get down to business.”

“Okay, Irv, but have you got any java?”

Irv pushed a button and said, “Judy, could you bring my son, the book-of-the-month maven-to-be, some coffee?”

Judy Kehoe appeared in the office, and I said hello to her. I’d known her for years: Judy was just this side of plump...not dowdy, late forties, brunette, wonderful smile, funny, and very competent. Irv Turtlebaum may have been the agent to the stars, but he often came to work with one brown shoe and one black one. I’m not kidding. But Judy Kehoe had the mates to those shoes in the office, and she was responsible for Irv appearing to be highly organized. “How you doing?” I asked.

“I’ve been better,” Judy replied.

“How come?” I asked.

“Well, I was just in the bathroom, trying to struggle into a pair of panty hose. I should have known I’d have trouble trying to get into something that comes out of an egg!”

Both Irv and I laughed at Judy’s comment. She departed by saying, “Cream and sugar, right?” I nodded and she was gone.

“Let’s talk Seth Jacobsen,” Irv said. “His dad, Ira ‘Big Jake’ Jacobsen, was one of the first advertising moguls on Madison Avenue. He founded Black and Jacobsen, the very first national advertising agency, in the late thirties. He realized the power of radio to sell soap and was among the very first to recognize TV for its potential to sell products to the consumer.

“He persuaded a friend and a fellow CEO of a large advertising firm to hire Seth as an assistant account manager when he graduated from college. In truth, Seth needed the job as he was married to wife number
one and she was pregnant. To everyone’s surprise, except Seth himself, he was very successful at the agency. His track record in this regard was unparalleled. By the age of thirty he was a legend in his industry. The ability to bullshit his way through just about anything, coupled with a limitless supply of energy, simply overwhelmed both his customer and the competition.

“Unfortunately, this zeal had a downside to his personal life. Wife number one divorced him when he was twenty-eight, stating ‘extreme mental cruelty.’ But in fairness to Seth it wasn’t an act of commission but rather omission. He just didn’t have time for a family. In the advertising game it was a 24-hour occupation. After his divorce he resolved not to marry again, but he was in an industry where he saw more good-looking broads in a week than some guys saw in a lifetime. Jacobsen was well-constructed, with a pleasing face that had a smile permanently affixed to it, and women were drawn to this high-energy, fast-talking guy who seemed to never stand in the same spot for very long. He took the plunge again, marrying a model he had observed at a high-end fashion show. This marriage lasted almost five years; they were both high-profile people, but their careers started to go in opposite directions. While Seth was ascending, his bride’s career petered out pretty quickly as newer, younger faces took her place on the runway. She started to drink heavily, and there was no regret when he cut her loose...only relief.”

“For Christ’s sake, Irv, you know more about Seth Jacobsen than Seth does. Have you got industrial spies searching his trash?”

“My preference. Always know more about the person you’re negotiating with than they know about you,” Irv responded. “Seth was a lot of things but he wasn’t stupid. He was thirty-six years old, had two busted marriages, which drove him to make an unprecedented move. He quit his job, sold his condo in New York City, and moved to Fairfield County, Connecticut. The industry newspapers had a field day. Never
had anyone of Seth’s obvious credentials in the advertising industry just thrown in the towel and walked away.”

“Okay, he was an advertising whiz, but how did he get into publishing?” I said.

“His reputation for results was known beyond the boundaries of his own industry. In general, the publishing business had seen better days. Big corporations had bought a lot of the independent houses, and had put strict financial controls on them. The days of taking a chance on new writers had passed, too risky for these huge corporations. Personnel turnover was at an all-time high as these publishing houses cut people to come in on a reduced budget. Make no mistake about it, Frank, people were eighty percent of budget, and so the insatiable slaughter of these folks escalated to try and bring profit to an industry where no one much thought about it before.

“Highline Publishing’s board of directors sent their CEO, Al Langevine, out to Seth’s house to sell him on becoming president of Highline.”

“But Seth would be Ovitz to Langevine’s Eisner?” I asked.

“Right. Except for one thing, and I got this straight from Al, who I’ve known for thirty years. Seth has a contract to be CEO in three years upon Al’s retirement.”

“It must have been a hell of a pitch,” I said.

“Al said it was short and sweet. He sat down on Seth’s screen porch, ate a deli sandwich, drank a couple of Heinekens, and polished off a piece of cheesecake. Just before he left, Al took a three-by-five card out of his pocket and put it in Seth’s pocket, and asked Seth to call him the next day.”

“And...?” I asked.

“Seth called and took the job the next day,” Irv said.

“Jesus, what did the card say?” I asked.

“It said, Annual Salary: $1,500,000, stock options, no Manhattan
office required,” Irv replied.

“Great story. I love it!” I exclaimed.

“It’s the worst story on Earth,” Irv responded.

“What, why?” I asked.

“They concluded a very successful negotiation without an agent. Absolute heresy. Tell this story to no one, capiche?”

“Jesus, Irv... I know you’re upset when you start talking Swahili,” I responded.

“Okay, now let me tell you the part that I think is important,” Irv said. “Seth has brought in four writers to the firm from competitors, successfully pumped new life into three others that the industry thought were over the hill, and discovered more than half a dozen new writers, two of whom have already started to pay dividends. They have won a number of industry awards, and their financials, sales, and prestige have never been better.”

“He likes new writers,” I said.

“No, he likes ideas and profit. He doesn’t care about your status. He wants ideas...good ideas,” Irv countered. “He knows who you are. Specifically, he liked your series on Vietnam and your profile of Warren Buffett.”

“That is encouraging,” I said.

“He’ll be here in fifteen minutes,” Irv said.

“Got it,” I said.

“He’s on his way back home. Only comes to the city one day a week. Does everything else by teleconferencing from his house,” Irv said. “If it’s all right with you, I’m going to kick you out of here to the conference room so I can make some calls. It’s straight through that door.”

I followed Irv’s finger into the conference room, glad to have a little time to gather myself before the interview. The conference room was pretty standard except that these modern meeting rooms seemed to have
a lot more computer/video type equipment than I remembered from days gone by. Just as I was pushing buttons I knew I shouldn’t be pushing, the door swung open and Irv entered with his arm around Seth Jacobsen, who was several inches taller than the diminutive Turtlebaum. “Frank, meet Seth Jacobsen. Seth, Frank Hamilton. You know, Seth, Frank is a Pulitzer Prize winner,” Irv said.

“I knew that, Irv. Nice to meet you, Frank. Was it for that marvelous series on Vietnam?” Seth asked.

“No, it was for a series on the relationship of Arafat with Israel,” I responded.

“Oh, okay. I’ve read that as well. Excellent work,” Seth said. “Hey, Irv, Jake sends his regards. He says you never won a Pulitzer, but he’s sure you’d win a pull-your-pud award going away.”

Both Irv and I laughed at Seth’s comment and Irv said, “How is the old bastard?”

“He’s great. Living in Florida, playing golf every day and really enjoying life. I’m very happy for my dad. He’s doing exactly what he wants to be doing,” Seth said.

“Well, tell him hello and also tell him to invite me down already. I don’t care how many times a day he plays golf, I can still beat him!” Irv said.

“I’ll tell him. Frank, tell us why I’m here. That’ll serve two purposes. One, I’ll probably get a lot of nourishment from it, and two, we’ll keep Irv quiet for a while.”

“Okay. I’ve got an idea for a book. A good one, I believe, and I’d like to share it with you,” I said. “I want to profile four or five folks from my high school class...”

“I’m starting to slip into a coma, Frank,” Seth said.

“Seth, be quiet and let him explain his idea, or I swear I’ll stand in this chair and slap you silly,” Irv said.

“All right, already,” Seth said. “I was only interjecting a little
publishing humor.”

“Here’s the premise, Seth,” I said, half believing that the Lilliputian-like Turtlebaum would jump on a chair and attack this larger person. “Tom Brokaw and a bunch of other folks claim that the generation, your dad’s peers, was the elite generation in America, perhaps the greatest in the world.”

“Okay, I happen to agree,” Seth said. “The Harvard Business School Class of 1949, and the generation that won the war that had to be won.”

“Exactly. Well said,” I said.

“But what has that to do with your high school classmates?” Seth asked.

“Oyyh, maybe if you’d button it up for thirty seconds you’d find out!” Irv said, not unpleasantly.

Seth laughed at Irv and so did I. We couldn’t help it. “Okay, press on, Maestro,” Seth said.

“My classmates are the children of the greatest generation ever. And my question is why, then, are we so screwed up when we had the world’s greatest generation to emulate?”

“Holy shit,” Seth said. “You’re right. And I’m a baby boomer, and I’m more screwed up than you are.”

“Tell me!” Irv said. “I know I’m the agent, but this sounds a little bit like psychobabble. You know, I didn’t suck on my mother’s tit for ten years, so that’s why I eat too much pizza. When maybe, just maybe, shit rolls downhill.”

“Jesus, Irv,” Seth said, “Who is interrupting now? Let the guy get it out on the table, will ya!”

“Okay, okay,” Irv said. “Why is that generation so screwed up?”

“September 11, 2001,” I said.

Both Seth and Irv tried to speak at once. From the look on
their faces I knew they thought I’d lost my mind. I held up my hand, and they both fell silent. “Let me explain. I have a friend who is twenty-two and just graduated from college. She’s smart, funny, sexy, a joy to be with. She’s attractive, actually likes older adults, centered, has loads of integrity, and if you were in a tight spot you’d like to have her with you. The other day she was flying from Boston to North Carolina with a stop in Washington, DC. She was having trepidation and some anxiety landing in the nation’s capital. Do you get it?” I asked.

“Oh, sure I get it,” Seth said. “You’re setting me up for an eleven-book series on every generation and why they’re fucked up, from Disraeli to the twenty-two-year-old wunderkind!”

“Right,” Irv said. “Imagine eleven advances of a half mill apiece; finally I can retire. God love ya, Seth...someone has to!”

“Gentlemen. Great stuff, but when exactly did I lose control of this interview?”

“Right in the beginning...” Seth and Irv said almost simultaneously.

“September eleventh is a modern-day analogue. An example of a catastrophic event that may impact a generation’s behavior or psyche,” I said.

“You’re saying that the generation in question, the one that followed the greatest generation, has its own September eleventh, right?” Seth said.

“Yeah, I think so,” I said, “but I think it was a series of events... not just one.”

“Have you researched it?” Seth asked.

“Yeah,” I responded. “Believe it or not I didn’t want to delve too far because I’d make up the bottom line before I did the interviews.”

“Give me something to chew on at least,” Seth said. At this very point in the interview I suspected, and I confirmed it with Irv later, that Seth started to get excited about the project.

“Vietnam is the big one. It tore this generation away from government;
a sacred trust was broken and the fallout is the story. We know the cause is Vietnam, but it’s the effect that interests me,” I said.

“Okay, give me an example,” Seth said.

“Okay, let’s take 1968, just eight years after ‘Don’t Rock the Boat’ Ike and five years after JFK’s death and Camelot. The Tet offensive, General Vo Nguyen Giap is kicking the stuffing out of us just like he did to the French, fourteen years earlier. The Black Power Olympics, riots close down Columbia University, Martin Luther King and RFK are assassinated, LBJ renounces his bid for reelection, the Bloody Chicago Democratic National Convention, and a Youth International Party sponsors a ‘Come Curse Nixon’ demonstration,” I said.

“So much for laissez-faire?” Irv said, with the palms of his hands pointing skyward.


“Now you’re cooking,” I said. “Woodstock, Kent State, Lt. Calley... anarchy couldn’t have been that far behind.”

“What’s the bottom line, Frank?” Seth asked.

“Whoa, whoa,” Irv said, jumping up from his chair. “Think of us as the beautiful starlet showing you a little calf. C’mon, Seth, this isn’t a strip show. You’ve got more than enough to make a decision.”

I was totally caught off guard by Irv’s reaction: I thought that Seth was just warming to the subject when Irv went off like a train that had jumped the tracks. But maybe this was the dance of the whooping crane; a time-honored formula that needed to be followed. Based on Seth’s response, I was guessing he wasn’t all that shocked as he replied to Irv by saying, “Don’t give me that starlet nonsense, Irv. Remember what a very wise man once said, ‘All cats are gray at night.’”

“What wise man?” I asked.
“Warren Beatty,” Seth responded.

I couldn’t help it, I burst out laughing as Irv, trying to ignore me, said, “This session was to give you the idea for a book, and Frank has done that. Time to get along little doggies to the advance part of the meeting: my personal favorite.”

“You’re kidding me, aren’t you, Irv? I need more than the basics. Will it be fiction or nonfiction? What’s the hook? Not a lot, but I need something to go on before I write a check,” Seth said.

“Irv, let me answer a couple of these questions for Seth, will you? For Christ’s sake, it’s not like this stuff is locked in a vault and stamped Top Secret,” I said.

“First, it’s fiction all the way. Historically correct fiction. I have a very rich pool of people to choose from as many of my classmates either created their own fame or came from well-known families. The hook, the vehicle that supplies tension and creates continuity may or may not ever surface. For instance, I could see an ending where I’ve talked to all these ‘normal’ folks individually as the book progresses, and it ends in a group conference. Slowly it dawns on the reader that this conference is a little off-center: The conference table is in a mental hospital, and this is a group therapy thing. The price the children of the greatest generation paid because they couldn’t meet their parents’ expectations.”

“Very far-fetched...but excruciatingly morbid,” Seth responded.

“What do you think? How’s that for a close, Irv?” I asked.

“Frankly, the worst I’ve heard in my brief time on Earth,” Irv said with a smile.

“Would you include Robert Goldman?” Seth asked, almost nonchalantly.

The question really caught me off guard, and I could feel the blood rushing to my face. “How...er...what would make you ask that?” I asked.

“I just put two and two together,” Seth responded. “You mentioned
high-powered classmates, I knew Goldman went to St. John’s Prep, as did you, so it seemed reasonable to assume...

“Now you’ll listen to me,” Irv said. “Sweet, benign, I’m just a country boy, Seth Jacobsen has stripped you to your underwear, and you don’t even know it. The emperor had no clothes, and he didn’t know it either apparently. I told you, Frank, beware of publishing guys with a big smile.”

I suddenly realized that I was in the tank with the barracudas, and it was time to shut up and listen.

“I need an answer, Seth,” Irv said, so quietly that I was leaning forward trying to hear him.

“I’m favorably disposed, but I need a couple of weeks to sell it internally,” Seth responded.

“Sorry, Seth. You know I love you, but I have two other people I want to pitch it to...more to do with film interest, actually,” Irv said.

“Cow shit, Irv,” Seth said.

“You know what they say, Seth?” Irv said, apropos of nothing at all.

“No, what do they say, Irv?” Seth responded.

“Some people put cream on their strawberries, and some put cow shit on them,” Irv responded.

“This idea has all the earmarks of being a bomb. A real snoozer, Irv. Are you willing to shop around a bomb?” Seth asked.

“But it could be a monster hit,” Irv countered.

“Finally, we have agreement on something. It’s a monster or a bomb,” Seth said.

“Yep,” Irv said. I didn’t know where this was going, but I admired Irv Turtlebaum tremendously. Here was a one-man filibuster in the making who responded with a one-word answer...yep!

“Okay, okay, Irv, you’ve beaten me. I’ll give you fifty grand for the first chapter, and that’ll give me enough ammunition to sell it internally for a more substantial advance,” Seth said.
I was saying to myself, Take it, Irv, take it.
Irv countered by saying, “Four hundred grand advance, book all in, all done in thirteen months.”
“Three hundred grand, ten months,” Seth said.
“Three hundred and a year,” Irv responded.
“Done,” Seth said, “but I don’t like it. What gave me away, Irv?”
“Nothing really,” Irv said, “but two things made me think you had more interest than you were showing. First, Robert Goldman. I think we knew you’d done your homework. Always a good sign. Second, and maybe slightly more obvious, was that no president of a publishing company has to sell anything internally. As editor, yes; a president, no.”
“Shit,” Seth said. “Fucked again by Irv Turtlebaum.”
“But you enjoyed it?” Irv asked.
“You know, it could have been worse. I could have bought a story about dykes on bikes or something similarly offbeat, but I think this idea has a chance,” Seth said.
“I’m very grateful for your support and will do my best to see that you don’t regret it,” I said.
“What about Goldman?” Seth asked.
“He’s out. Two reasons. First—access. I knew him slightly, but I was never able to interview him as a columnist. Second, I respect the guy’s lifestyle. Married for thirty-five years in Hollywood, and right now he, like many other public figures, has gone from genius to idiot. My gut reaction is that he would overshadow the other figures, and it would become The Bob Goldman Story.”
“Okay, for now,” Seth said.
Irv looked across the table at Seth and said, “What factors made you buy this idea?”

God, I loved Irv Turtlebaum. Fifty years in the business and he was still trying to learn what generated success. I know it’s a strange comparison,
but he reminded me of Imus In The Morning when he interviewed people on his radio show. Imus always asked the question that I wanted to hear the answer to from the interviewee. Like Imus, Irv had asked a question I really wanted to hear the answer to, but frankly, I don’t think I would have thought to ask it.

“A weird combination, really: First, the idea of explaining why the children of the greatest generation have feet of clay is relevant. It could be like The Best and Brightest, a study of character and why it all went wrong. Second, I’ve been reading Frank Hamilton’s stuff since I was in short pants. He may be a first-time novelist, but he doesn’t write like a first-time writer. And last, Irv, is that I’ve never known you to suffer fools lightly or for long. There may be better representatives in the business, but I haven’t met them yet. So in short...quality all around, ideas, and people. And, Irv?” Seth said.

“Yes,” Irv replied.

“If it isn’t a monster hit, I’ll personally see to it that you’re selling free circulars for a third-rate porn shop.”

With a big smile on his face, Irv stood up to shake Seth’s hand and said, “Before I turn it down, what does it pay?”

“Bupkus,” Seth replied as he stood and shook Irv’s hand and gave me a pat on the back. As he departed the room he said, “Think monster!”
A LONG TIME AT WAR
Stephen Germic

There is a grave, and this is not unusual among those who have lived a long time at war. The fields are rich with graves. But near this particular grave is a cedar bench that has begun to grow rough where it once was smooth from the flesh of mourners. It now offers slivers of itself to those left who have, each of them, lived a long time at war.

And each sliver in the flesh of each mourner is a token of sin, for sins prosper even more than undertakers among those who have lived a long time at war. Palms bleed to rivers of a fine mist of sliver blood.
flowing into ponds of blood, great lakes of blood. When one has

lived a long time at war and the day grows warm enough to put on trunks,

a bikini, and to travel to the beach, be assured one swims in the ocean of those who have lived a long time at war.
The wind coming off the Narragansett Bay swept through the town of Bristol. It moved the trees with their orange, red, and yellow leaves, plucking the dead ones from their high perches. They floated to the ground, unnoticed by the still sleeping citizens. The wind passed through the dark corridor of Hope St. caged in by ancient houses on either side. It zipped through the town and on toward its next destination, but only after messing up the thinning hair of a middle-aged man, waiting by himself at the bus stop.

It was dark outside; the sun would not come up for another hour or two. The man sat on a cement wall next to the bus stop. He seemed lost in thought, a slight smile on his face, staring at the last remaining stars in the sky. The man himself, was dressed business casual. An extra-large light blue polo shirt hid a very round belly. His green corduroy pants had a cream cheese spot on his left leg, and his white Reebok shoes were old and somewhat worn but still presentable.

Once in a while a car would pass by, their high-intensity beams brightening the otherwise dark main street. The man at the bus stop would look intently at the car and its driver, and stare after it, until it was out of sight. Once the car was gone, he would bring his attention back to the sky. He waited there for another twenty minutes until a large rumbling sound came from down the street, to his left. A bus, the "big car," as he called it, bore down on the bus stop. It stopped, and he got in.

He was met by the bus driver, an elderly woman. "Joseph! I'm so sorry I'm late today. There was construction on the bridge, you know how the bridge is always under construction."

"Oh yep," said Joseph blinking. "The bridge is always broken; but
they fix it anyway. They have to, because it's such a fine bridge."

"I know honey, I know. I'm telling ya right now, some people should have as much common sense as you." The bus driver took her foot off the brake and back onto the accelerator, and the big car sped on through the dark corridor of Bristol.

"I see ya got your trumpet today. And it looks like a sheet of music," said the bus driver.

"Oh yep, I'm playing today. It's a lot of fun times," said Joseph.

"Very nice. But where's your auntie?" asked the bus driver. "She usually rides the bus with ya."

"Oh yep, she's not here. She has gone. I'm gonna sit down now. See ya." Joseph waved at the bus driver and found a seat in the almost empty bus. There were only four or five other people there. Joseph chose to sit next to one of them. It was a young man..

"Hey are you going to Providence? I'm going there. Going to play the trumpet."

The young man looked up; he was wearing a Brown sweatshirt. He didn't want to be bothered.

"Uh yeah actually."

"Oh yep me too. You like it there?" said Joseph pointing to the sweatshirt.

"Look bud, I'm really not in the mood to talk to you. I got school and work and other problems. And I don't need you to talk to me at six thirty in the morning."

"Ah okay. Sorry. So do you live around here?"

The kid flashed him a nasty glance. This weird, Forrest Gump-type, wouldn't leave him alone. "Look bud, I'm not answering any more of your stupid ass questions. Why the fuck would I live here, if I go to college in Providence? I live on campus."
“Ya know, you can take the big car to Brown every day. You could still live here, and take the big car to school everyday” said Joseph a little sternly.

This quickly quieted the angry college student, and he turned away, deciding instead to look out the window.

The first signs of light were showing up outside the windows of the bus. The stars were gone and a light hue of blue was now covering the sky. The bus rattled through Warren with little resistance and no new bus riders. The bus crossed a small bridge that led into Barrington. On either side, were bodies of water. An inlet of the Narragansett Bay was on the left; large and formidable, it held many small sailboats. On the right, lay a big lake that started almost immediately after the inlet. The college student looked out into the brightened abyss, pondering what had happened to him recently. Suddenly he looked to his left. Joseph was looking over his sheets of music, studying them intently.

“Look man, I’m sorry. It’s been a rough couple of weeks. I needed a bit of a break. I was visiting my father, he lives in Newport.”

Joseph glanced up from his music and looked at the young man intently. He threw his hand out at the college student.

“Hey I’m Joseph. I’m from Bristol, on State Street. I like it there. It’s a nice place.”

“Oh nice. My name is Jude. And I’m from a place called Manhattan. It’s always busy and always packed with an obnoxious amount of people. And unfortunately now I go to school in a city that’s always busy and packed with an obnoxious amount of people.”

“Why’d you go then?”

“I don’t think you’d understand. I was pressured into it by my father. He went there. There are expectations for me that I’ll never be able to fulfill. But you wouldn’t understand.”

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“Oh yep. Your dad wants you to be him. That’s tough.”

Jude pondered him for a second. “Yeah exactly.”

The bus moved through the massive, rich mansions of Barrington. The washboard white houses, with the expensive BMWs parked in front. It captured the attention of Joseph. He moved his head forward, past the face of Jude, so that he could capture a quick glimpse of the magnificent scene.

“My dad lives in a house just like that one,” said Jude, as he pointed at one particularly big house. “I was just over there last night. I went over to visit; I needed to talk to somebody man. But nope, he’s got this new bitch girlfriend. She wouldn’t let me get a word in. My dad’s a nice enough guy, but his girlfriend is a real bitch. She loves attention.”

“Oh yep. Some people love attention. They need it to feel good.”

“Yeah well anyway, I got to go back to school today. I hate Mondays. It seems everyone else is so perky and ready to take on the day. All I want to do is escape Providence. But when I do that, the escape is no better than being there. And I realized that last night.”

“Maybe escaping isn’t a good way. Make things good where you are. Fix it.”

“Yeah man whatever.” Jude was tired of talking.

The bus was now past Barrington. It was on Route 114 headed onto the highway. Jude had stopped talking. The bus prattled speedily passed an enormous cemetery. Joseph and Jude could see it on their right. The big shiny white crosses and statues of the cemetery resided under the new dimly lit sun. The sun moved through the dark grey clouds, and when the clouds were not covering it, the sun enveloped the cemetery with fresh light.

Joseph saw the cemetery in one of these moments. He had been there the week before. His auntie was being buried. She had been a good woman. She always took him on the bus wherever he wanted to go. She
had showed him the route to Providence. Her stone was in the cemetery somewhere. For the entire time that Joseph stared at the cemetery, the sun shone through. Joseph’s beam was almost as bright as the suns.

“Oh yep. She’s out there in the sky somewhere. I know it” smiled Joseph.

“Who’s out there?” asked Jude quizzically.

“Oh yep. My auntie. She always said that when the sun shines through, whenever it ‘beams,’ that’s when ya know that the ones you love, the good ones, are looking down. They’re looking down at ya.”

“Shit man, that’s some deep stuff. You should teach a class at Brown. Philosophy or some shit. I’d take your class for sure.”

“Oh yep.”

The bus got onto the highway. The bus sped on down past other cars on either side. The sun was once again covered by clouds. On the right, were the large buildings of Providence. They towered over everything.

“Here we go man. Back to the pressures of school. The people. The fucked up society. God, I can’t stand it.”

Joseph pauses. He is lost in thought for a couple of minutes. Expecting a response, Jude becomes frustrated, and turns back to the window. Once in a while though, he peeks over to see what Joseph is doing. Finally Joseph speaks.

“You know the bridge?”

“What bridge?”

“The bridge before Bristol. The big green one.”

“Yeah the Mount Hope Bridge. What about it?”

“It’s been around for years. It’s always getting beat up. Stuff is always happening to it. But people won’t break it. No they fix it. They fix the bridge, because deep down they know it’s good.”

“What the heck are you talking about man? Whatever dude.”
The bus takes an exit off the highway, and drives into the city. It is now fully morning. Now that it’s around eight o’clock, people are in full force, walking the streets of Providence, busy getting to wherever they have to go. Jude glumly looks out the window. Joseph serenely stares at his music sheets. The bus stops at Kennedy Plaza. They both get out.

Kennedy Plaza is full of people. Jude hurries out of the bus, walking briskly towards another bus, which will take him to a bookstore. Joseph slowly gets up and thanks the bus driver. He gets out, and looks for Jude. By this time, Jude has gotten to his bus stop. He’s out of hearing range. Joseph walks on towards the middle of Kennedy Plaza. The clouds are still thick in the air, and a grey fog has enveloped the plaza. The people here are different than the Bristol people. Many of them are “weird.” Some have purple hair, some wear all black, some have tattoos, and others have mouth piercings. To Joseph, they seem to walk fast, heads down.

“Oh yep, finally here. Time to play the trumpet.”

Joseph plumps himself down on a bench and puts the sheet of music on his lap. He puts the trumpet to his lips, and starts to play.

The sounds that come from his trumpet immediately resound beautifully from one corner of the plaza to the other. The song is Louis Armstrong’s It’s a Beautiful World. It echoes, the crash of sound bouncing from bus to bus, from building to building. The people on the plaza become still, frozen in time. Their busy and demanding lives stop. And instead they just listen. They listen to the omnipresence of the slow man’s trumpet. And when Joseph played his trumpet, the fog broke, and the sun shined through. And Jude noticed.
ON THE BREEZE
Michael Milburn

Afternoons
once warm weather starts,
from two backyards away
come my neighbors’ son’s
playtime cries. There’s something
fragmentary in the pitch
at which they launch and break off—
no crescendo, diminuendo,
just peak. Smaller boys
with smaller passions
or any boy
with a smaller passion
would make complete
beginning-middle-end type cries,
but these are caught birds,
throbbing toward release.
If I collected
all of them
from all the times
his sister has outraged him
or shown him something startling,
or he, prompted by nothing
expressible by language,
just shrieked,
I might possess
the sum of his spirit,
but I’d still have to free them
seconds after cupping them in my—
In my what?
They are not tangible,
and do not fit in my ear.
The hand surgeon tells us
if you don’t stitch severed nerves
together they will grow blindly,
seek reconnection everywhere,
tangle with other nerves, spiral
round and around themselves
to form clumps of pain.

With a ball-point sketch
he illustrates the repair: a few stitches
with invisible thread will rejoin
the severed sheath so the nerve
can grow in the right direction—
a millimeter each month.

The hand, sliced by a shard of
broken windshield, is my husband’s
writing hand. Instead of at church,
we sit in the doctor’s office, a rare favor
since my husband is leaving
the country tomorrow.

The surgeon gives us a full hour,
breaks open a plaster dressing,
fashions a clumsy splint, apologizes
that his lab tech could do it better.
My husband, almost mute, still dazed,
holds out his bandaged hand,
squeezes mine with the other.

$1800 per stitch for nerve repair.
My free hand takes notes on aftercare.
JAHRZEIT
Ann Hostetler

Morning mist rises. Behind the trees clouds dark as mountains edge their way elsewhere. Two years ago today you left us, your heart loosening its rhythm as I sat at your feet.

I fall back into a deep sleep. When I wake I have no idea what time it is. The sky is still overcast but leaves have come out on one—no two—trees at the edge of the yard.

Morning coffee on the glassed-in porch, warm as a greenhouse. Bees hum in the forsythia branches blooming in the corner. Outside April wind rattles the panes, tosses prayer flags on their tether.

In late afternoon I finally go out to discover air warmed by sun. Up the lane a neighbor keeps a menagerie she calls The Peaceable Kingdom—horses, goats, llamas, an emu, guinea hens.

Her greyhounds are friendly and want to follow me, but hold back. Perhaps they sense your reluctance in me. “They’re such kind dogs,” Jane tells me. “They always sense what you want them to do.”

On the way home the first orange butterfly of the season chases a honeybee around a blossoming shrub. Somewhere in flight, on the wind, you are blessing me as I carry on, looking for signs.
MEMORIAL PHOTO—SPOLETO CEMETERY

Elisabeth Murawski

Silver hair sleeked back
in a knot, lobes and throat
free of ornament,

her eyes are fierce and dark
as an eremite’s,
as Christ’s

in Byzantine icons
weighing a soul.
Without Pietro

thirty-two years,
did she rearrange her life
the way cut flowers do—
barely noticed
as they shift in the vase?
I touch the drawer

she’ll lie in
undisturbed
for another generation,

mutter a requiescat,
though my faith’s weak
as the candle flame

stuttering
in its red glass house.
Light as a thread,

a ladybug lands
on my wrist, crosses
my skin unafraid

her children will burn.
WORKSHOPPED TO DEATH
Bruce Genaro

The Sunday paper is not in its usual curbside spot. Instead, it’s lying near the front door, under the eaves, protected from the morning drizzle. I am happy not to have to walk the extra twenty-feet, pajamaed and barefoot, to retrieve it. Delighted to be spared the ritual and obligatory nods to the other early bird neighbors on this quiet cul-de-sac. But my good fortune doesn’t last long. There, in the lower right-hand corner of the front page of the San Francisco Chronicle, is a bold headline that I cannot miss; Body of Local Author Deirdre Woodworth Found!

“FUCK!” I shout, forgetting for a moment where I am, how I’m dressed.

“What happened?” Sam, my partner says from the kitchen where he’s making breakfast.

“Nothing. I just—I hit—I hit my elbow. I hit my arm on that stupid door,” I lie. Before I head back into the house, I scan the article for the basics. I walk into the kitchen, place the paper on the counter and pour myself a cup of coffee. I add a little two percent and tell Sam I’m going to go check my e-mail.

“No smooch?” he says.

“Sorry. I’m a little distracted.” I turn and kiss him good-morning. I grab my coffee and the front page, and head down the hall to the spare bedroom that serves as our office. I turn on the computer in case Sam walks in and return to the article. Other than the fact that Deirdre had been missing since Wednesday, the reporter is purposefully vague about important details, like where and how she was found. There are apparently no suspects at this time. The murder weapon, though still under investigation, is believed to be...

“FUCK!”
“Now what?” Sam calls out from the living room.


The murder weapon, though still under investigation, is believed to be a garden hoe. There are more miscellaneous details and a list of awards she’s won. The article ends with information on the memorial service and where to send charitable contributions in lieu of flowers. When I look up from the paper I notice them standing there in the corner, innocent and ominous at the same time; two black nylon bombs on wheels about to go off.

“FUCK!”

This time it’s not a shout but a loud whisper that emanates from the back of my throat. And, while I am certain that Sam hears this outburst, he doesn’t react to it. Those “bombs” in the corner are unpacked suitcases I have been carting around for the past two weeks. The first week when I was at a writer’s conference in Portland, where Deirdre Woodworth was the workshop leader, and then last week, when I drove up to our cabin in Tahoe on the spur of the moment in an effort to quietly recover from my previous week with Deirdre.

I try to conjure up images of people who might have seen me in Tahoe. The first one that comes to mind is Cody, the Golden Retriever that lives up the street. His mom exercises him with frequent walks past our house. The problem is, I don’t know her last name. And even if I did, what would I do, call information, then her? Ask her if she just happened to peek into our house last week while walking the dog? Ask her if by any chance she saw me lounging around in my PJs, working on my laptop, cleaning the microwave, reading in the loft? My mind jumps swiftly to Jim, the landscape architect who lives next door. Maybe he saw me pull the car into the garage a week ago? Or pull out and leave yesterday morning? Truth is, I bought groceries the day I arrived and then never left
So far, Tahoe isn't turning out to be something I never thought that I would need; an alibi.

Sam and I both returned home yesterday from our respective trips. While I was at the cabin, Sam took his mother on a Caribbean cruise for her 70th birthday. Last night he gave me the lowdown on the latest family drama, and I gave him a pleasant, albeit capsulized snapshot of my week in Hell with Deirdre. I feel guilty for the little white lies I've told this morning. Guiltier still for what I am about to spring on him.

Sam doesn't like surprises. He's arranged his life as best he could to keep them to a minimum. I have proven to be the exception to that rule. After fifteen years together he has learned to tolerate my occasional melodrama. Sam is my compass, my foundation, and on more than one occasion, my savior. On transatlantic flights I keep a watchful eye on his face whenever we encounter turbulence. His expressions let me know if I need to worry or not. I have never needed to worry. But today's events just may be bumpy enough to put his poker face to the test.

I pick up the paper and walk back out to the living room where Sam is reading the Arts & Leisure section. I walk around the sofa and quietly stand in front of him. He looks up. I hold out the front page with the black and white photo of Deirdre Woodworth in the corner; the same photo they use on her book jackets. The photo that looks like a glamorized, soft-focus version of the person that sat across from me for a week: long dirty-blond hair parted in the middle, large round glasses balanced on a small nose, and that ever present smirk that seems to imply she will have the last laugh. Sam looks at the paper, then at me.

"What?" he says, shrugging his shoulders.

I don't say anything. I just shake the paper in my outstretched hand as if to say, "This! Look at this!"

"What?" he says again. Then he notices her name in bold print. A dim spark of recognition spreads across his face. "That's too bad. But you
didn’t seem to like her anyway.”

“I never said that. I only said that I didn’t like how she treated me. Maybe that’s the same thing, but that’s not the point. The point is, she’s dead.”

“And?”

“And, last night I was less than forthcoming about all of the details of the conference. I skimmed over a few things I was embarrassed about. Things I didn’t I feel were important. Or relevant.” I toss the paper on the coffee table and sit down next to him. “Until now.”

“Like what?” he asks.

* * *

It’s Saturday afternoon and we are gathered in a large room lit by a string of unflattering fluorescent lights. There are folding tables laid out in a rectangle that we rearrange into an octagon so that everyone can see each other. We all take our seats around a table that is something between a square and a circle: seven lesbians, two heterosexual women, and me. We go around the circleish square and introduce ourselves with the usual unexciting facts of who we are and where we’re from. Two are from New York, one is from Cleveland, two are from the Chicago area, three live in San Francisco, and one resides in Florida. Deirdre reveals that she also lives in Northern California, “in a city that is the most beautiful place on earth.” I feel compelled to share that, while I live just a few miles down the road from her, it is my city that is the most beautiful. I surmise by the smirk on her face, which I have not yet realized is fixed, that she doesn’t see the humor in my statement.

A woman from Chicago wonders, if Deirdre, being a famous author and a public figure, has ever had a problem with fans driving by her place and bothering her.

“Because I was stunned,” Sherry continues. “I used to live in Greenwich and I Googled some celebrities that lived in town. Did you know that you can get someone’s home address on Google? I was shocked!”
Deirdre responds by saying that she lives in a rural area, has a large fence and an equally large dog, so no, it’s never been a problem. She changes the subject by launching into her workshop shtick.

“I am going to be demanding a lot of you this week,” she says. “I am going to require a great deal of energy from you. We are going to work and work hard, and you will be challenged. I expect you to stretch yourself in your writing, to move out of your comfort zone. You should use this time to take risks, to try new things.” She looks around the room as our smiling expressions turn to frowns. “And you should have fun, because if you’re not having fun at least some of the time, then what’s the point?” Her eyes narrow, her mouth tightens. “I will tell you this much...writing is fucking hard. It is the hardest fucking thing you will ever do. But for now, we have to wrap this up.” She opens a folder and shuffles through a couple of pages. “Tomorrow, be prepared to discuss the stories, *Hunka-Hunka-Burnin-Love* and *Rubyfruit Bungle*. And your assignment,” (at this several women gasp, obviously unaware that there was going to be homework,) “I want you to write 300 words. The first two sentences must be, *I could go to jail for this. There are people that would kill me dead if they knew.*”

* * *

“Let me tell you that that exercise wasn’t fun for me,” I tell Sam. “They never are. But I did it. In fact, I spent several hours on it. It started out at 500 words, but I kept cutting and cutting until I got it down to 317.” Sam picks up the paper from the table and peruses the article.

“The next morning,” I say, “Deirdre asked if anyone wanted to read theirs aloud. I was looking at my computer screen as she said this, the curser eerily blinking on the word dead, and suddenly, what I’d thought was clever the night before, didn’t seem so funny. Wendy read first, this beautiful piece about missed opportunity and unrequited love. I thought to myself, now that’s my competition. To be able to create from nothing like that, beautiful language, interesting characters...that’s a gift. Me, I
struggle with every friggin’ word.”

Sam places the paper back on the table and returns his attention to me. He rolls one hand over and over again, which is sign language for “get to the point.”

“Anyway, Deirdre only had a few people read that morning. So I never read my piece. Not aloud. Not to the whole group anyway.”

“What does that mean?” he says.

“You’d better read what I wrote first, then I’ll tell you what it means.” I hand him the piece of paper I’d printed from the computer a few minutes earlier and he begins to read. I interrupt him to say, “But remember, she gave us those first two lines.”

I could go to jail for this. There are people that would kill me dead if they knew. People who couldn’t possibly know the pleasure, the relief of plowing a shovel into the back of Deirdre Woodworth’s head. The joy of seeing her glasses fly across the room and watching her body slump across a pile of bloodied manuscripts because of those comments about story arc, mixing of tenses, and that dissertation on dangling participles. Then the pronouncement that my story didn’t grab her, move her to tears, make her want to be a better writer.

Sure I could go to jail. But only if they find the body, the murder weapon, my fingerprints. An accomplice is what I need. Someone to help me drag her lifeless, Coke-a-Cola laden body through the quad under the cover of darkness, then provide me with an alibi. But who? Who in this group can I trust? Who’s strong enough to lug her body across campus, lift it into the trunk of my car, then tolerate the probing questions of some campus security geek without breaking?

I could plead insanity. Say that I cracked under the pressure of having my words, my life, my raison d’etre ridiculed and trivialized in front of a group of my peers, and her with her southern vindictiveness, taking great pleasure in seeing me crumble. She predicted as much didn’t
she, implying she would stop short of annihilating us if that's what it took to make us better writers?

Well, she wanted a good story. How about this; a student writer beats Deirdre Woodworth to a pulp and finds it's all worth it because of a six figure book deal, a movie of the week, and a reality show on the Fox Network. Wasn't it she who said to move when the muse strikes? I guess she never figured it would strike her, on the back of her skull, with a garden tool.

"I know, I know, it's not funny," I say before Sam can comment. "But at the time I was dead tired from driving for two days and I was operating on no sleep and a diet of PowerBars and Red Bull. So she gives us this assignment and I tried to do something different. I tried to be funny." I explain how awkward the first few days of these seminars can be, how difficult it is to subject your creative child to scrutiny.

"I was trying to be honest, open and vulnerable by admitting that I was nervous about sharing my stuff with people, about hearing what they had to say. I thought it would get some nervous laughs, maybe spark some dialogue about what was about to happen."

"So who did you read this to?"

"Sherry and Wendy. We drove into Portland later that day for dinner. Deirdre had scheduled my workshop for the next morning, so Wendy asked me if I was anxious about it, which I was. And I don't know why, maybe as a way to explain my nervousness, or maybe I'd pendulumed back and thought it was funny again, I recited the piece from memory."

"Well, that's not so bad."

"And then she asked me to e-mail it to her."

"You didn't?"

"I did. To both of them. They thought it was funny. After that it became a running joke, a gag line for the rest of the week. I had no way of knowing that Deirdre was going to handle my piece the way that she did. I never imagined it could be that bad, or that she would be so insensitive,"
I say. I look away for a minute, not sure how to proceed. Not sure if I’m making too much of this, or not enough. Not enough, I decide, and turn back to face Sam. “It gets worse.”

“How worse?”

“Deirdre wanted a hard copy of everything.”

“Tell me you didn’t hand her a hard copy of that?”

“Well, not exactly. I didn’t have a printer on campus, so I e-mailed it to her instead.”

“Oh my God!”

I have to admit that, this reaction, from Sam, makes me nervous.

“But I couldn’t figure out how to get my e-mail working in the dorm room until the last day, so I didn’t send it to her until Saturday morning, just before I left for Tahoe. As far as I know, she never saw it during the conference. And I have to believe, even if she didn’t see the humor in it, she would have seen it for what it was. For crying-out-loud, it was the first day. I couldn’t possibly have meant anything by it.”

The phone rings and for the first time this morning I begin to ponder the implications of what has happened, of what’s still to come. I wonder, do the police call you up and ask you to come down to the station? No, I think, cops come right to your door, say things like “Anything you say can and will be used against you,” and then shove you into the back seat of a cruiser and haul you off to be fingerprinted, photographed and strip-searched. But still, I don’t like the sound of that ring.

“Hello?” Sam says into the receiver.

I flash him a “Why the hell didn’t you let the machine get that?” look.

“Hi, Ma,” he says.

Great! It’s Adele. She’s going to keep him on the phone for an hour now, even though they’ve just spent a week together strolling in endless circles around the Lido deck.

“I got in just fine. No, no problems. Look, Ma, I’m in the middle
of something. I’m gonna have to call you back. Okay. Love you too.”

Sweet Sam. Sweet, sweet, Sam. Now I hate myself for thinking that. I like Adele. I adore Adele. In fact, I like Sam’s whole family. But I’m in crisis mode right now and I need his full attention.

“Thanks,” I say.

Sam responds by giving me a hug that doesn’t condescend or minimize what’s going on, but simply acknowledges that he’s there for me.

“Anyway, the next day we discuss Judi’s piece.”

* * *

So, we’re sitting around our squareish circle and Deirdre is manic, excited, spewing forth a cornucopia of writing advice, warnings, statistics, daring us to hang on to any last shred of hope we might have of one day being published authors. She’s been sucking down diet Cokes since class began and she’s amped up. And she’s lovin’ Judi, who looks more like a young Johnny Depp than a mature woman. In fact, Deirdre so much as told her so the day before as she gazed across the table at the twenty-two year old; “I could fall for a pushy little girl like you. In fact I have, quite a few times.”

Today Deirdre is reading aloud whole paragraphs from Judi’s story, Saphomoric Interlude. She enunciates each word of one sentence in particular.

“She didn’t have arthritis, she was arthritis,” she says, looking up from the manuscript and pausing for effect. “Now that is a fucking great sentence. I know people who have arthritis. They have it in their hands and in their knees and in their necks. And I know what that pain must feel like when it seeps into their bones, when it lodges in their hips, when it cripples their fingers. That pain is all you can feel, all you can think about. You don’t care ‘bout nuthin’ else. This tells me something profound about this person. I am there with her. I am suffering with her. In just a few words we know who this person is.” She takes off her glasses and points them at
us for emphasis. “Now that’s great writing!”

Deirdre pushes the hair off of her face. It falls back down. She pushes it, it falls. She pushes it, it falls. I stare at a silver barrette resting in front of her on the folding table and wonder, Why doesn’t she use it? Is it a prop? Is it a weapon? She sits back down and we go around the room and discuss Judi’s story.

Deirdre breaks up the workshop by having a question and answer session between the two critiques. She does her best to give us an unfiltered opinion on writing, on the process, and about the publishing business in general. She has already commented on how “fucking hard” it is to get published and what a “fucking waste of time agents can be,” when someone in the group asks about self-publishing.

“This is true,” Deirdre says after someone relates a rags-to-riches urban legend about it. “Self-publishing is getting less expensive all the time. But what do you do about distribution? How do you get that product into your readers’ hands? There are all kinds of software programs and printers on the market that simplify the process, make it more accessible. But how do you get that piece of printed material out to your target market? How do you place that piece of work that you’ve labored over into the palms of those readers?” She stands, takes a deep breath, and scans each desperate face in the room. “I will tell you this,” she says, her volume and intensity rising, “publishing is fucking hard. In fact, publishing may be the only thing harder to do than writing. And self-publishing is just another way to kid yourself into thinking that you have some control.” She sits down again and takes a swig from the perspiring can of Coca-Cola.

“Now, what’s next?” she says as she shuffles the manuscripts and regains her composure. “Brian’s piece, Escape.” She retrieves her handwritten notes from a manila folder. “It’s a novel excerpt about a young boy and his abusive mother, his problems at school with a particular math teacher, and some fantasies that mimic familiar literary works.”
She reads from the text.

*Miss Scully glares at me from behind her station and tilts her head in an impatient and questioning manner. How was I supposed to know where my mother was? Probably locked in the ladies’ room trying to make her lipstick look more like Audrey Hepburn and less like Baby Jane.*

The room is unbearably quiet. The windows in the old building don’t open and the summer air that’s trapped inside is stifling, stagnant, suffocating. It is obvious that no one else in the group gets it either, neither my writing style nor my concept.

She closes the manuscript with a look of disdain. And then, with a surprising amount of animosity says, “Now that’s just hateful!” She continues, ignoring the raised hands of the group. “This character isn’t likeable. And there’s too much self-pity in the piece. And the mother...the mother needs to be a monster. I don’t like her, but for this to work I have to hate her. I want to hate her.” Deirdre flips through my manuscript shaking her head as the pages quietly flutter.

“It’s an interesting concept,” she continues, “using the different literary styles as fantasies. But the execution of it doesn’t work. We need the main character to be empowered in them, and they should include his mother and the math teacher, Miss Scully, so that we know how his fantasies relate to his reality.” She folds her hands and scrunches her face and declares, “But what I really want to know is, why does this math teacher hate this little boy? What did he do that she’s so angry with him?” She poses that as a question but doesn’t wait for an answer. She invites the other students to share their critiques, which they do. Unfortunately, no one contradicts Deirdre’s vehement dislike of the piece.


“I enjoyed the literary diversion with Zelda Fitzgerald,” says a
Chicago women, “but it didn’t reveal anything we don’t already know about her.”

I glare at her hoping she can read my thoughts as I wonder, how, since Zelda has been dead for fifty years and been the subject of countless biographies, could there possibly be anything new about her? I roll my eyes at Ms. Chicago as Deirdre, in an effort to wrap up the discussion, puts an end to my writing career before it even starts.

“So, does anyone else have any suggestions on how Brian can fix this piece?” With no other comments forthcoming, Deirdre dismisses us for lunch.

* * *

“Well, that had to be hard for you to sit through,” Sam says. “I know how hard you worked on that piece. But what were you expecting, a love-fest?”

“That’s not fair,” I shout back, my stress level refueled by the memory of that day. “I was ready for anything. You of all people know that I never thought it was Pulitzer Prize worthy. But the thing is, I was “accepted” (I make little quotation marks using two fingers from both hands) into that workshop based on that manuscript. So, I was under the impression, misguided as it may have been, that the piece had some merit. That there was something of value in it. But to be told, in front of a group of my peers, that it was insipid—oh yeah, did I forget to mention that? She called it insipid. She also called it derivative, but it’s been over a week since the “attack” (again, the finger gestures) so I don’t remember if she actually said that or if she just implied it.”

“Look, I know you’re upset, but you shouldn’t let that woman’s opinion....”

“I don’t give a fuck about that wench’s opinion,” I say, cutting him off. “What I care about is going to jail for a crime I didn’t commit. Not that I didn’t think about it. Not that I didn’t plan a hundred different tor-
tures for her on that long drive back. Not that she didn’t deserve it for her sheer meanness, even if it was unintentional. But I didn’t do it. And now I don’t know what to think. What if they find that e-mail? What if they talk to the group?”

“First of all,” Sam says as he walks over to me and wraps his arms around my waist, “you’re not going to jail. You’re innocent, so there’s no way for them to prove that you did it. Any evidence they come up with will be circumstantial at best. We’ll get a lawyer, just in case the police want to question you, and in a few days this will all be over.”

I don’t believe that it will be that painful. That it will all blow over in a matter of days. That everything will go back to the way it was. But I love Sam for saying it, for believing it.

“Why do you care if the police talk to the rest of the group anyway?” he says.

***

The afternoon after Deirdre ravaged my story, she takes part in a panel discussion on story arc and character development with Ron Carlson and Kevin Canty. All three are on stage in the main auditorium, addressing a packed house. Those three seasoned authors confront a room full of people all hoping to hear some gem that will improve their own writing, that will morph their rough manuscript into a best seller, that will transform them into authors with Amazon stats they can obsessively monitor. Or, at the very least, give them the courage to face another day in front of a blank computer screen, hands poised over a keyboard, waiting for a fickle muse.

I am in the front row, partially to support our leader (although I’m not exactly sure why), and partially to introduce myself to Ron Carlson as soon as it’s over and get him to autograph my first edition copy of Five Skies.

Someone in the audience asks a question about “character motivation” and Deirdre is the first to answer. She is looking right at me. I know she is. There is no way that she can’t see me. She responds by saying
that earlier that afternoon she workshops a story that had no redeeming qualities, no likeable characters, and lacked any sense of tension. She adds that she did find herself, “intrigued by the dynamics between the protagonist, a little boy struggling in school, and his elderly math teacher who obviously, but mysteriously, hates this little boy.”

“And I want to know why?” she continues. “Why does this character hate this little boy? What’s the motivation there? What’s the history? Where’s the subtext? How could this hatred be expressed in subtle ways, in pursed lips, in crinkled eyes, in exasperated tones? How can this character show, in those subversive, unconscious ways, why she hates this little boy?”

I can feel the energy in the room shift and the temperature of the air plummet as the students and the panel members ponder the poor schlub who, only moments ago, sat through such a critique. The audience becomes uncomfortably quiet. Feet shuffle. Throats clear. Ganged metal seats creak and groan. The uncomfortableness is palpable, especially from the other members of Deirdre’s workshop, two thirds of which are scattered throughout the room. Some choose to look my way with a sympathetic smile, others turn their heads in the opposite direction, too afraid or embarrassed to call any more attention to it.

I am not quite sure what my face reveals, but more than likely it’s a mixture of horror, befuddlement and shock. And even if Deirdre hadn’t been looking directly at me when she chose to share that with a room full of my peers, that act was hateful. That may not have been her intention, but then neither was it the intention of the character in my novel.

I am scheduled for a private thirty-minute one-on-one session with Deirdre immediately following the panel discussion. Almost every one who has gone before me has said that it was more of a casual conversation than it was about the stories that they workshopsed. I, on the other hand, really want to know if I have any talent, at least in her mind. I don’t know why I care at this particular moment, but she’s in control and I want to please, to
be liked, to be encouraged. To be redeemed? Even though I’m furious. But that was a mistake. Deirdre and I spent the majority of our time together discussing the Miss Scully character, an unsatisfying conversation for both of us I’m sure, with neither of us getting the resolution we were looking for.

“Looking for any kind of encouragement, or helpful advice,” I tell Wendy over coffee later, “I asked her point blank about the writing. Just the writing itself. She said, ‘you need more.’ What the, pardon my Deirdre, ‘fuck’ does that mean? You need more. What am I supposed to do with that? I would have been happier, would have had more respect for her if she’d flat out said, ‘I hate you, I hate your ideas, and I especially hate your writing.’ Apathy is so much worse. Hate I could believe. Hate I could dismiss. Hate I could get angry or sad about. But what the hell am I supposed to do with apathy?”

Wendy makes a comment about Deirdre phoning it in. Then she adds, “After all, she must do a couple of these workshops a month, all filled with Stephen King wannabes looking for ego strokes and introductions to her agent. She’s probably sick of the whole thing and just wants to write. But, as she is so fond of saying during her Q&A’s, ‘writing pays shit.’”

“Really, I’m not upset,” I say to some of my group later, over a plate of lukewarm lasagna dished out at the college cafeteria. “So she didn’t like my work. It’s not the end of the world. She hasn’t really loved anyone’s work, except for Judi’s. In fact, I feel kind of special. My story was so memorable that she felt the need to share it with a packed house.” I am about to shovel another spoonful of pasta into my mouth when the blood red of the tomato sauce reminds me of that first exercise. “However,” I say, wiping the corner of my mouth with a paper napkin, “you should know that tomorrow’s workshop has been canceled. Instead, there’s going to be a treasure hunt. A lovely little outdoor adventure where everyone has to search the campus grounds and try to locate the places in which I’ve
hidden Deirdre’s body parts.” I try to keep my expression and inflection deadpan to underplay the fact that I’m only kidding. “Ya know, I might be a little upset,” I confess, “but not because she hated my piece. Because she chose to hold it up to the whole conference as an example of a story lacking any merit whatsoever.”

Judi is obviously biting her tongue. She looks past me, off into the distance as she chews on a forkful of salad drenched in Italian dressing.

“I should go now,” I say. “I’m exhausted. Besides, I’ve got to get back to my room and start writing all those treasure hunt clues.”

“Oh, stop it!” Sherry says, partially humoring me, partially chastising me.

Wendy just shakes her head and smiles. Judi continues to be silent, but I do believe, even though it’s hard to tell in the fading evening light, that she’s smirking.

* * *

“And that’s why I wouldn’t want the police to talk to the group,” I tell Sam. “Because for the next two days that whole thing about killing Deirdre became a running joke. Someone at the table would say, “Has anyone seen Deirdre?” and the group, in unison, would turn and look at me, their eyes all comically wide, then start giggling. Or during dinner, one of them would see me cutting my chicken with a knife and grab the utensil out of my hand, saying, “I think I’d better take that from you. Just in case!” Again, it was funny because it was so preposterous.

“You know what really puzzles me though?” I continue. “That whole business about Miss Scully. She was this minor character, just filler, color, not important to the story arc at all. And Deirdre must have mentioned her four or five times. In fact, that was the only thing she wanted to talk about during our one-on-one conference.”

“That’s because Deirdre is Miss Scully,” Sam states matter of factly.

“What?”
“Hello? A middle aged, female teacher with a scowl on her face, humiliating the boy in class, and then again, later, in front of the whole school, never once giving him any reasonable explanation as to why. Of course she’s fascinated with Miss Scully’s motivation. She is Miss Scully.”

“Oh my God, oh my God! How did I not see that? That is brilliant, just brilliant. It’s tragic, but brilliant. I love that idea. That whole coming full circle thing. Here he is, this boy, twenty years later, sitting in a workshop, working on a story in which the exact dynamics of the story are being played out in the workshop itself. And yet no one’s aware of it. Now that’s a story. That is a fucking great story.” Then, I think I’m thinking this to myself, but apparently the words somehow manage to escape my vocal chords. “Unfortunately it’s a story I’ll be writing from my prison cell.”

“Oh, would you relax?” Sam says. “I’m going to run down to the store to buy a New York Times, then I’ve got to swing by the office and pick up my briefcase, which you’ll be happy to know has some Xanax in it. You’ll take a couple, we’ll call the attorney, and then we’ll go have a nice lunch somewhere and forget all about this.”

“Thanks,” I say. I hand him his keys from the kitchen counter. “How come you’re so good to me?”

“It’s my job.” He kisses me on the forehead and moments later I am left alone in the house with the San Francisco Chronicle and an uncertain future.

I return to the office, this time to really check my e-mail when there is a loud, hard, persistent knock at the front door. I am a firm believer that a knock at the door, when you are not expecting company, is never good news. And I wasn’t expecting company. I go to the bathroom mirror and comb my hair. I don’t know why I do this. Perhaps I imagine neatness will make me look less guilty. I am nervous, and as I walk towards the door I think, “This plane is going down and Sam is nowhere in sight.”
I stand in the foyer and take in a deep breath. I fill my lungs with oxygen and hold it for a moment. I take a long time to exhale, forcing the air out of my lungs slowly, deliberately, in an effort to both relax myself and to postpone the inevitable. Once again the pounding at the front door fills the foyer with a succession of dull thuds, and me, with apprehension. I open it tentatively to find her standing there, dressed all in black, those glasses, too big for her face, hovering somewhere on her nose, hair parted in the middle and down to her shoulders, and that permanent, unforgettable, I’m-gonna-have-the-last-laugh smirk.

I am speechless. I truly cannot speak. I am so taken aback by the sight of this large woman, I am not even sure that I’m relieved to see her standing there. Time passes. Still I say nothing. Deirdre reaches out and takes my hand, turns it over, and into my palm she distributes a package. The parcel is cylindrical and wrapped in a blue plastic bag. I look at the package. I look at Deirdre. I look at the package. I look at Deirdre. I roll the plastic bag off and let it fall to the ground. Inside is a hard copy of the e-mail that I’d sent her of that first exercise, which she has autographed. And above her signature she has inscribed, in barely legible handwriting, Brian, Nice concept, but it needs work. Underneath that 8 ½ by 11 page is a rolled up edition of today’s Sunday Chronicle with a real front page. The article in the lower right hand corner is no longer about Deirdre, but about the fires that swept through Malibu Canyon yesterday afternoon. When I finally look up from the article, she is gone. And as I watch her dinged and dusty Subaru wagon turn the corner and exit the cul-de-sac, the sound of her laughter is still echoing in my ears.
Every morning Jake awakens with a start, but on this occasion he is surprised to find a stranger lying next to him—on the covers rests a young woman wearing a wrinkled red dress. Her simple, natural beauty grabs Jake’s attention. Indeed, she is quite pretty but also very welcoming. Dried, black eyeliner runs down her cheeks beneath her eyes. Jake deduces that she was crying some time ago, but has recovered. She appears to be muttering to herself. He grabs his watch off the night stand and heads for the bathroom.

“Oh, good. You’re up,” says the mysterious woman.

“Who are you?” Jake calls from the bathroom. “And why are you in my bed?”

“My name’s Amelia,” says Amelia. “What’s your name?”

“Jake.”

“Well, it’s nice to meet you, Jake!” she cries. Jake cringes at her enthusiasm. “I’m sorry for intruding, but I’m new here. Haven’t quite found my bearings yet, but I really needed to talk to someone last night. Your house was the first one I passed, so I let myself in. You were asleep, but I just needed to vent. You know what I mean, Jake? You ever just need to vent, Jake? Jake?” Jake balances his toothbrush on the rim of the sink as he processes what Amelia is saying.

“Wait, were you talking to me all night?” he asks.

“Yes, Jake,” says Amelia. “That’s right.” Jake shakes his head, realizing it was Amelia’s incessant voice that had infiltrated his otherwise pleasant dreams. “It’s just, I left earth without telling the man I love that I love him! And now I’ll never get to tell him!” Amelia hesitates for a moment. “Until he dies, anyway, I suppose. But who knows when that’ll be!”
Jake contemplates Amelia’s plight as he washes his face. Doesn’t seem so bad. He lifts his wrist and peeks at his digital watch. The face is blank; it stopped working as soon as he arrived in heaven, which seems like an eternity ago now. Why does she think it’s too late? If she is patient she’ll have the rest of eternity to spend with the guy. Jake sighs, annoyed by Amelia’s naïveté. He turns off the faucet and looks at his reflection in the mirror. He considers shaving but decides it would be a waste of time.

“When I was alive I just assumed I had all the time in the world,” continues Amelia. “Then it’s taken away from you, just all of a sudden like that! I’m so stupid! There are so many things I wish I’d done! You must know how that feels Jake, right? Are you listening?” Jake is listening, though only because he had never mastered the art of tuning out voices that were speaking directly at him. He exits the bathroom to find Amelia still lying on the bed, staring at the plaster ceiling. She sits up and looks at Jake. “Seriously, Jake, are you even listening to me?” she asks, craning her neck forward.

“No.” She furrows her brow.

“I won’t lie, Jake, that’s kind of rude.” He can’t help but smirk, which seems to annoy her even more.

“I’m going to go now, Amelia.”

“Where are you going?”

“To get breakfast. There’s a diner downtown. Maybe you should get out of here too. It wouldn’t hurt to get some air, I think.”

“If it’s all the same to you, I think I’ll stay here and think.”

“Suit yourself.”

Surprised with how disappointed he is that Amelia declined to join him, Jake goes downstairs and heads out the front door. The sky is overcast. Some rain drizzles from the clouds, which appear to be threatening worse conditions. Jake briefly considers going back inside to grab a jacket
but decides against it. He marches down the sidewalk at a brisk pace. He passes the same playground he passes each morning. Carefree children run around unsupervised. Jake nods his head and continues forward.

Eventually Jake makes it downtown and heads into the diner he frequents for breakfast. It's completely empty, except for the man working the counter. Jake takes a seat and glances at his watch.

"Joe," says Jake.

"Jake," says Joe.

Jake can practically hear Joe's joints creaking as he moves, but he knows Joe feels no pain. Perhaps some discomfort, but no pain. The afterlife may not be perfect, but nobody should suffer. Joe shuffles around behind the counter with no apparent goal. His actions and words are slow and deliberate.

"What'll you have?" asks Joe.

"I'll have two fried eggs and some corned beef hash," answers Jake. "And orange juice."

"Sorry, Jake. Out of orange juice."

"We're out of orange juice in heaven?"

Joe shrugs.

"Just give me a water," Jake says.

"What are you up to today, Jake?" asks Joe.

"I'll probably start a new project. You know I like to keep busy."

Conversation begins leaking into the diner from the parking lot. Jake looks out the glass door behind him and immediately regrets it. The bells hanging on the door ring as two men in the middle of a debate enter. They recognize Jake from behind and take the seats on either side of him.

"Jake! Perhaps you can help us settle this argument," says the man on Jake's right.

"Goodie," says Jake.
“Carl,” says the man on Jake’s left. “You don’t get it. It was miserable being a starving artist. Every single day was a struggle. It was a blessing to—to be shuffled off that mortal coil.” Jake notices Carl rolling his eyes in his periphery.

“You’ve got it all wrong, Karl,” says Carl. “You were a creator. That’s beautiful, man! What did I do as an accountant? Nothing but put numbers in a spreadsheet. Talk about unfulfilling. Sure I made money, but you got to really do something with your life. Compared to yours, my existence was empty.” Karl lights a cigarette and takes a long drag. Jake clears his throat in protest, but Karl ignores him. Joe returns and plops down a plate of food in front of Jake.

“Artists today have destroyed art,” says Karl.

“Oh no. Here we go,” says Carl.

“Art is dead my friend. Art is somewhere up here with us, along with all the great artists who would be rolling in their graves if, you know, they weren’t up here with us. The day I run into Art, I’ll give him your number. All I know is I would’ve been better off going to medical school, or law school, or business school, or any other school except art school. Thinking about being on earth and trying to accept the metaphrastic perversions that these so-called artists today truly believe are original, transcendent masterpieces makes me realize how happy I am to have escaped from that rock.”

“So you would have rather aimed for the middle?” asks Carl. “I lived comfortably, but I sold my damn soul.”

“That’s an exaggeration,” says Karl. “It’s not like you were a politician. I haven’t run into one of them up here.”

“Okay, okay, but still. Where’s the honor in obtaining that generic, white-bread life? I made no difference, left no imprint whatsoever on the world. I selfishly spent most of my time trying to line my pockets.
I had a kid I guess, but he turned out to be kind of an asshole. Basically I wasted all my time.” Jake looks at his watch. With his plate empty, he stands to leave.

“Leaving so soon?” asks Karl.

“I’m done,” says Jake.

“What do you think?” asks Carl. Jakes clasps his hands together and tries to appear as though he is contemplating the question. He momentarily bites his lower lip and narrows his eyes.


“Joe,” he says loud enough for Joe to hear from the kitchen.

“Jake,” Joe shouts back.

Jake heads for the door and sees Amelia standing in the parking lot. How exactly did she find him? No matter. He finds her more intriguing than Carl and Karl. The rain picks up considerably, and Jake wishes he had an umbrella. Apparently going back for his jacket would not have been a waste. He decides to go back to his house and get it now. He steps out into the parking lot.

“You, again?” asks Jake.

“Who were those guys?” asks Amelia.

“Carl and Karl,” says Jake. He walks past Amelia, and she turns and follows.

“They’re both Carl?” she asks skeptically.

“One is Carl with a C; the other is Karl with a K. Carl and Karl.”

This explanation appears to satisfy her.

“I like Carl with a C. His brown suit was very nice. Although, Karl with a K had that cute green scarf. I like Karl with a K too. You walk fast!” Amelia struggles to keep up the pace.

“What do you want, Amelia?” Jake asks.
“This place, it confuses me. I don’t get it.”
“It’s heaven.”
“I saw kids. And that old guy in the diner. How does age work?”
“You don’t age and there’s infinite time. You can be as old or young as you want to. How old are you?”
“Didn’t your mother ever tell you it’s rude to ask a lady her age, Jacob?” Jake can’t help laughing. “But I’m twenty four.”
“Then that’s the age you want to be, Amelia. Trust me. That old guy, Joe, wants to be old, and he wants to run that diner. So he does.”
“This doesn’t feel like heaven. It feels more like purgatory. Is this purgatory?”
“No.”
“But then why is it raining? And why am I sort of cold? And why are my feet getting kind of sore?”
“Is heaven supposed to be perfect?”
“Yes. This feels more like purgatory. Some sort of limbo.” Amelia’s eyes go wide. “Wait, are you God?”
“No.”
“Oh my god, you’re God! It makes so much more sense! This is purgatory, and you’re God! Right?”
“No. This is heaven, and I’m Jake.”
“It’s okay, God, I’ve figured it out. No need to keep up the ploy.”
“No, no, I’m not God.” Despite Jake’s insistence, Amelia doesn’t seem to be listening anymore.
“Okay so I must need to have some sort of revelation in order to get to heaven. This is an interesting test, God, I’ll give you that.”
“AMELIA!” Jake cries. Her eyes lock with Jake’s. “This is not purgatory. It’s heaven, and I’m not God.”
“Well all you had to do was say so, Jake. Next time, don’t let me
get carried away like that.” In spite of himself, Jake smiles.

Jake and Amelia make it back to Jake’s street and approach his driveway. They encounter a man attempting to break into Jake’s car with a coat hanger that has been thoroughly bent out of shape.

“What are you doing?” Jake asks. The man turns and tries to hide the hanger behind his back.

“Locked myself out of my damn car,” says the man. He forces a laugh.

“Curious. I hate when that happens. You live here?”
“Yup.”
“What’s your name?”
“Mark. And you are?”
“Jake. I live here. And that’s my car.”
“Oh. Yeah, I was trying to steal it. Cut my hand pretty bad actually.” Mark pulls his left hand out from behind his back and shows Jake. There is a crimson gash on Mark’s palm, but it is not bleeding.

“Hey, at least it’s your left-hand,” says Jake.
“I’m left handed.”
“Oh.” Jake is unsure of what to say next. “Wait, I don’t lock my car, it must have been open.”

“Yeah. I locked it. More of a challenge that way.”
“So you know this is heaven, right? Why are you stealing my car? You can get your own car.”
“I enjoy theft. I always have. Back when I was alive I did it for a living.”
“How’d you end up here then?” asks Amelia.
“You know, I haven’t quite figured that one out,” answers Mark.
“Fair enough.”
“I spent a lot of time in prison for grand theft auto. I wish I had the discipline to control my urge to steal. Or at least I wish I didn’t get
caught so often. Wasted a lot of my time in those prisons.” Jake glances at
his watch. He regrets coming back to get a jacket. “Fortunately I can’t go
to jail here. So I steal cars.”

“Get the hell out of here, Mark,” says Jake.

“Okay,” says Mark. “See you later.” Mark walks across the street
and begins tampering with the neighbor’s car.

The sky is starting to clear, and the sun is coming out. Now Jake
really regrets coming back. He turns around and starts walking toward
town once again.

“What now?” asks Amelia.

“I’m going to the hardware store,” says Jake. “I’m going to build
a fence. Maybe it will keep Mark out. But probably not.”

“Why build a fence?”

“It’s productive.”

“Don’t you ever stop to, I don’t know, smell the roses?”

“That’s a waste of time. Everybody has regrets, but I don’t like to
dwell. Everybody else here seems to enjoy dwelling, but I don’t. I did that
on earth, and when I died things were left unfinished. Things I wish I had
finished. I learned my lesson. Now I try not to waste my time.”

“You said that we’ll be in heaven for eternity. How can you waste
time if you’re here forever? There’s no such thing as wasting time here if
your time is infinite.” Of course, Jake knows this, but he doesn’t interject.

“So there’s no harm in taking some time to reflect or enjoy yourself. Right?”

Jake stops walking.

“What would you like to do then?” he asks. Amelia looks around
for something.

“That playground, it’s empty. Why don’t we go on the swings?”

Jake looks at his watch.

“Five minutes,” he says.
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LEISHA DOUGLAS: This poem came about by playing with a classical form, in this case, the pantoum and a haunting theme that births itself through words. For me, writing is often about dedicating time and energy to mine nuggets of inspiration with unbiased awareness.

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BETSY MARTIN has published poetry in Pirene’s Fountain and Magnapoets. She works at Skinner House Books in Boston and has advanced degrees in Russian
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**LIZ McQUEENEY** is a freshman at Providence College. She loves waterskiing, Spongebob Squarepants, her cat, laughing, and especially photography!

**CHRISTIAN MICHENER**'s short stories have been published in a number of literary journals, including *The Kenyon Review, Harper's Ferry Review, Crazy-horse, Wisconsin Review, Ascent,* and elsewhere. His short story collection, *Numerology,* appeared in 2006. He has also published essays, mostly on contemporary poetry, and a book of literary criticism on novelist William Kennedy. “The Glass Boys” is one of a dozen related historical short stories, several of which appear in other literary journals.

**MICHAEL MILBURN** teaches high school English in New Haven, CT. His third book of poems, *Carpe Something,* is due out this summer from Word Press.

**TODD EASTON MILLS** received his bachelor's degree from Antioch University. As a young man he defined himself as a traveler, working his way around the world, supporting himself as a laborer, cook, and teacher in such far-flung places as the Highlands of Papua New Guinea. Now, with his drifter days far behind him, he lives comfortably with his Zimbabwean wife in Santa Barbara, California. He co-wrote and produced the documentary film *Timothy Leary's Dead.* His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Legendary, ONTHEBUS, Voices, The Coe Review, Yellow Silk, AUSB Odyssey, Sage Trail, RiverSedge, Paranoia VHS, Collage, Antiochracy,* and in the anthology *Poets on 9-11.*

**KEELY MOHIN** is a sophomore at Providence College, majoring in Creative Writing. She serves as an assistant editor on *The Cowl* for the portfolio section.
ELISABETH MURAWSKI is the author of Zorba's Daughter, which won the 2010 May Swenson Poetry Award; Moon and Mercury; and two chapbooks. She was the Hawthornden Fellow in 2008 and currently resides in Alexandria, VA.

MELANIE MUTO is a senior at Providence College, majoring in English creative writing. She is an obsessive book reader, tea drinker, and Nerdfighter.

JED MYERS lives, writes, and makes music in Seattle. His poems have appeared in Prairie Schooner, Nimrod International Journal, Golden Handcuffs Review, Atlanta Review, Quiddity, The Monarch Review, Fugue, the Journal of the American Medical Association, the Rose Alley Press anthology, Many Trails to the Summit, and elsewhere. He is a psychiatrist with a therapy practice and teaches at the University of Washington. medjyers@hotmail.com.

SARAH O'BRIEN is a freshman at Providence College, studying Creative writing and studio art. She lives in Massachusetts with her parents, four younger sisters, and dog. She thanks her Grandpa for childhood “story time” and his constant support. Sarah aspires to become a published author and a world traveler.

DZVINIA ORLOWSKY is a Pushcart Prize recipient and Founding Editor of Four Way Books. She is the author of four poetry collections published by Carnegie Mellon University Press including Convertible Night, Flurry of Stones, co-winner of the 2010 Sheila Motton Book Award. Her first collection, A Handful of Bees, was reprinted in 2008 as a Carnegie Mellon University Classic Contemporary. Her translation from Ukrainian of Alexander Dovzhenko’s novella, The Enchanted Desna, was published by House Between Water Press in 2006. She teaches at the Solstice Low-Residency MFA Program in Creative Writing of Pine Manor College, and her newest poetry collection, Silvertone, is forthcoming from CMUP in 2013.
CAROLINE O'SHEA is a senior English major at Providence College. She hails from Milton, MA, and when not at school can be heard playing music at various pubs and venues throughout the Boston area. August has always been her favorite month, and not just because it contains her birthday. Dorothy Parker, Ogden Nash, and Gene Kelly also sport August birthdays.

FRED OSTRANDER is the author of two books of poetry, *The Hunchback and the Swan* and quite recently *Petroglyphs*. He is published in various journals and is an editor for *The Blue Unicorn* a poetry magazine. Fred resides in Walnut Creek, CA.

DEREK N. OTSUJI teaches English at Honolulu Community College and works at Otsuji Farm, a family-run farmer’s market, on the weekends. He has appeared or is forthcoming in *Atlanta Review*, *The MacGuffin*, *The Midwest Quarterly*, *Poet Lore*, *Green Hills Literary Lantern*, and *Word Riot*.

MATTHEW OWENS wrote “Hannuka - for Sara” in Israel a few years ago between his concerts there, and before travelling to Jenin, in the West Bank. In the safety and comfort of his hosts’ home, he could not help reflecting on the painful contradictions between the concerns of ordinary personal life and the ongoing conflict, with its almost daily violence.

CATHERINE ARTURI PARILLA has several poems coming out this spring/summer in *The Green Hills Literary Lantern* and *Eclipse*. She has been published in *Poem*, *Wisconsin Review*, *Compass Rose*, and *descant*.

MICHAEL PASSAFIOIME lives in Brooklyn, NY. He is the author of *If I Only Had a Brain: Poems 1992—2002*, and his poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in *Eclipse*, *KNOCK Magazine*, *Paterson Literary Review*, *Soundings East* and *Willow Review*. His writing has also been published in *Art & Understanding* and *Flatiron* magazines and *The New York Times Book Review*. He is
currently at work on a memoir.

**JANE LUNIN PEREL** is Professor of English and women’s studies at Providence College. Her poetry includes four volumes of verse poetry and *Red Radio Heart*, prose poems forthcoming from White Pine Press in fall 2012.

**KENNETH POBO** won the 2011 *Qarrtsiluni* poetry chapbook contest for *Ice And Gaywings*. They published it in November 2011. Also published in 2011 was *Tiny Torn Maps*, a collection of microfiction, from *Deadly Chaps*.

**CM PRETORIUS:** Poetry discovered me in my youth, when I needed the right lines to woo my first love. In the ensuing decades, this passion has grown into a more mature form of expression. A businessman-turned artist (oh, salvation!), I have been a practicing poet for more than a decade. I was fortunate to win the poetry category of the 74th annual *Writer’s Digest* Writing Competition in 2005, which fired me up to push the envelope even further. My work has since appeared in *California Quarterly* and *Ellipsis*. I live in Pretoria, South Africa.

**VICTORIA PROVAZZA** is a junior at Providence College majoring in English and creative writing. She lives in Providence, Rhode Island, and enjoys reading and playing tennis in her spare time.

**DONNA PUCCIANI**, a Chicago-based poet, has published poems in the U.S., Europe, Australia, and Asia in such diverse journals as *International Poetry Review, The Pedestal, Shi Chao Poetry, Spoon River Poetry, Journal of the American Medical Association*, and *Christianity and Literature*. Her work has been translated into Italian, Chinese, and Japanese. Her books include *The Other Side of Thunder, Jumping Off the Train, Chasing the Saints*, and *To Sip Darjeeling at Dawn*. A three-time Pushcart nominee, she has won awards from the *Illinois Arts Council, The National Federation of State*
Poetry Societies, and Poetry on the Lake.

Jay Robinson is a Visiting Professor of English at Ashland University. He’s also taught Creative Writing at the University of Akron, and is the Co-Editor-in-Chief/Reviews Editor of Barn Owl Review. His poems have appeared in 32 Poems, Anti-, The Laurel Review, The North American Review, among others; prose has appeared in Agni, Poetry, and Whiskey Island.

Robert Rothman graduated from the University of California at Berkeley, undergraduate and graduate school (J. D.). He lives in Northern California, near extensive trails and open space, with the Pacific Ocean over the hill. His writing is done early in the day when his family is asleep. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in Diverse Voices Quarterly, Grey Sparrow, Pank Magazine, Front Range Review, and the Meridian Anthology of Contemporary Poetry.

Colin Sheehy is originally from Wrentham, Massachusetts. Poetry for him is his only form of visual artistic expression and he is very new to writing it formally. His poem is very much inspired by beatnik and spoken word poets and is his version of these two forms.

Charles L. Stafford wrote his first short story at the age of 14 about a secret society of wealthy, unscrupulous panhandlers. He has had a passion for writing ever since, studying English Literature at the collegiate and graduate levels. His literary heroes include Hemingway, Vonnegut, Woolf and Greene. After all that schooling, Charles chose to leverage his penchant for fiction as a marketing executive for large CPG corporations. In 2008, Charles came to his senses and left the corporate underworld behind in favor of writing full time. In addition to his short stories, Charles has written a screenplay and is currently at work on his second novel. His work has appeared in
Ven's Magazine and Squawk Back.

JASON TANDON is the author of three collections of poetry: Give over the Heckler and Everyone Gets Hurt (Black Lawrence, 2009), Wee Hour Martyrdom (sunnyoutside, 2008), and Quality of Life, forthcoming from Black Lawrence in 2013.

CHRISTOPHER TANSEY was born in Bristol, RI. He currently resides in Washington D.C. when not attending Providence College. He has two cats.

CHUCK TRIPI, a retired airline pilot, is founder of The Paulinskill Poetry Project, a boutique small press and resource for poets from the Upper Delaware River Region. His poems have appeared in California Quarterly, Confrontation, Hayden’s Ferry Review, Louisiana Literature, and Poet Lore, among other journals and anthologies. He is a member of the Writers’ Roundtable of Sussex County NJ.


BRIAN VIGNATI is a junior at Providence College, majoring in both English and Secondary Education. He is originally from Connecticut and is hoping to inspire his students as a high school.

RYLIE WALSH is a Biology major in the class of 2012 and an instructor of Shaolin Kempo Karate. She hopes to go on to pursue a doctorate in the life sciences. She has spent a lot of time at Providence College haunting the back
hallways of Hickey Hall. Writing creatively has been a part of her life since she was six years old and discovered that keeping a journal was more fun when she made everything up. She knows that she will continue to write for the rest of her life, because her mind doesn’t give her any choice in the matter. It’s an addiction. She grew up on *The Crocodile Hunter*, which filled her with a love for the wild—especially the rainforest—from an early age. She studied abroad in Costa Rica with the Organization for Tropical Studies in 2010, and that experience inspired “Predator.”

**Iromie Weeramantry** was born in Sri Lanka and raised in Switzerland and New York. She is a long-time member of the Writer’s Studio in New York City and has given public readings of her stories which explore multicultural issues. A graduate of Johns Hopkins University and New York University’s Tisch School of the Arts, Iromie exercises her passion for art and technology at IBM where she has received numerous awards for pioneering work in digital design, strategy, and marketing. This is her first published work.

**Casey Wheeler** is a junior at Providence College, majoring in English and minoring in business studies. She is originally from Syracuse, NY, and enjoys playing soccer and traveling in her spare time.

**Meredith White** is a junior from Providence College who is currently studying Classics and Philosophy on a year abroad at Oxford University. In addition to her love for the Humanities, she has a great passion for science and hopes to pursue a career in medicine. Meredith loves Latin lyric poetry, especially Horace, as well as contemporary poetry, in particular the work of Plath and Sexton. She thinks the *Ars Amatoria* is the most entertaining piece of literature ever written.

**C. Rochelle Weidner**’s short stories have appeared in *RiverSedge, Coe Literary*
Review, Diverse Voices Quarterly, and other publications. Currently residing in Oahu, she is working on a novel.

SUSAN R. WILLIAMSON’S work has appeared or is forthcoming in The Alembic, Beltway Poetry Quarterly, Controlled Burn, Crab Orchard Review, Eclipse, The MacGuffin, Paterson Literary Review, Poetry East, Sanskrit, Smartish Pace, StorySouth, Streetlight, Three Candles, and The Virginia Quarterly Review, and has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize. She has been a Virginia Center for the Creative Arts fellow, and is a Joel Oppenheimer fellow in New England College’s MFA poetry program. Poet and arts administrator, she divides her time between Charlottesville, Virginia, where she serves on the advisory board of Streetlight Magazine; and Boca Raton, where she is assistant director of The Palm Beach Poetry Festival.

ALYSSA WOOD is a Web editor living in New York City, where she continues to work on fiction and a bit of poetry. She graduated from George Washington University in 2010 with a B.A. in English and Creative Writing. The idea for “Discarded” began with her yearly vacation to Maine and a trip to the transfer station.

LAUREN YAFFE lives in Brooklyn with her husband, children, dogs, turtle, and 20,000 red wriggler worms. She is currently working in several genres, mostly on the subject of worms—of the earthy or human variety.

JI YEO is a RISD photography graduate student. Her photographs are from two projects: The “Beauty” series uses the wounded or surgically altered body to show the power of societal pressure to conform to the idealized model of beauty. The “Grey Folding Chair” series is about my exploration into the world of eating disorders.