



The Magnolia Review
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Welcome to the fourth issue of The Magnolia Review! We publish art, photography, poetry, comics, creative nonfiction, and fiction. The Magnolia Review publishes previously unpublished work. We publish two issues a year, deadlines on November 15 and May 15. The issue will be available online on January 15 and July 15.

While The Magnolia Review will not have physical copies at this time, the editors may compile a print version if funds become available.

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Into the Ease

There is hope.

Brandon feels it, even if others said there is nothing more to be done, if he ever needs anything, or time will heal all wounds. He smiles at the ceiling. People think he smiles and they nod at their own wisdom, perhaps touching, rubbing his shoulder. But he isn't smiling.

Lying on the couch and staring at the ceiling, he can feel his teeth where he has ground away the enamel with what others think is a smile. Was a smile. Now nobody thinks much of him one way or another. The time for cheering has since passed to this, this time of hope. And he is at the helm of some terrible craft hurtling through the eons. His only passenger is in the next room dying.

A fly buzzes against the window. It takes a while for Brandon to notice and recognize the sound, but when he does he thinks reflexively: stupid fucking bug.

The black dot of the fly buzzes nasally and, with a hollowed rhythm against the glass, bounces and taps. He turns to watch. Beyond, the world is a blur of blue and shadow and yellow and dark and light. The fly, the stupid fucking fly, doesn't realize that the sliver of air at the cracked window, the same opening it flew through into this horrid reality, this house moving through time at an incredible rate, the sliver of air is still there. To the left. No. More to the left. Left. The left! Down at the sill again for a moment of silence then up, buzzing and bumping to the top of the glass and now to the left, more, almost there. Can you feel the breeze and freedom, the blur of light and shadow that is the world? Will you escape this mysterious warren? The fly taps at the glass an inch from the opening, and Brandon stops breathing to watch, to curse and cheer this epic struggle that must end, that can never end.

The monitor, a little walkie-talkie thing made for infants and such so it's ridiculous and cute and brightly colored, gurgles suddenly, a scrapey sound, a dried stick rasping against rusted metal beneath a blanket. She must have turned over. The monitor is extremely sensitive, he thinks, remembering the packaging. *Extremely Sensitive!* it had said in the bulleted list of attributes on the glossy box. Come to think of it, *Comes in Playful Colors!* was also on the list.

The fly edges to the right and away, bumping, buzzing, pathetic. Brandon imagines getting up and grabbing a dry fold of newspaper or grocery store flyer and making it into a roll, imagines doing this and striding to the window, to the fly, to end the struggle, but instead rubs his eyes and pretends to not hear the buzzing, lower in tone now, growing tired, the whispered thumping against the glass lighter and less frequent, longer rests upon the sill. But his mind turns to another matter. She will need to be bathed soon. Warm water in a plastic basin. Towels and washcloths, soap and lotion.

He will have to grind his teeth and try not to show the rings under his eyes (keep the lights low) or the tremor of his lip, hand, eyelid. His voice will rise, too high and will sound strange, even to her. When he turns or reaches down for something, he can let his face go, let the eyes bulge, let his lips tremble, then wipe with the back of a sleeve or cough or say something in a silly voice to mask the change and smile at her again, the sweet child so tired and so old (due to the velocity of the house) having lived from the cradle to her waiting grave in only eight short years. He must go into her bright room, see her surrounded by stuffed animals and balloons and flowers and wash her bird-thin body as they stare into each other's eyes and talk about whatever

can be talked about to take away the reality, and he'll have to do it. Soon.

The monitor gurgles again, this time with something that might have been an utterance. She may have shifted, or quite clearly called out "daddy." The piece of shit monitor.

Sharp, Clear Reception!

Either way, he has to get up. Warm water and things.

He rises and stretches and his back cracks three times. Looking about, the place is a wreck, once a living room and now a room in which he actually lives. Like a Neanderthal. The fire-ring is missing, spears leaning against the wall... He ignores the pictures he cannot look at, the cave-paintings of this period. Her small handprint in a frame.

"I want to eat my soup outside," she says brightly, a dry luster in her little voice.

Brandon smiles at her and busies himself with great gestures, swooping arms and bent knees, torso doubled over one moment, over-arching the next, his face contorting from grimace to goofy smile to blankness as he moves and gets her in the chair. He makes her put her arms around his neck so it doesn't seem like this is all, this is all she weighs now.

Once on the back porch, she talks brightly and Brandon forgets everything, becomes as light as light, pushing away every other thought but this moment now, dappled shadow on the yellow lawn, the exact temperature and direction of breeze, Elaine's glossy copper eyes, the shape of her mouth in smile, and the commotion of twenty or thirty blackthroated sparrows contending for the ridiculous mound of seed he placed for their amusement. And she tells of her dream about a maze, a labyrinth (he blinked stupidly when she used that word) that can never end but—and this is the good part, she said and took another labored breath. You don't even realize it's a maze because it's life. But you can escape, sometimes even on accident.

Having fetched a pen and paper, he writes this down. He wants to remember everything. She watches the sparrows chirp and bump each other over the excess. Enough seed to pop all their bellies three or four times, she says at some point while he writes. But he has questions. If the maze is there but you might not know, and... if it doesn't even matter—

"Does it even matter, Lainey?" Brandon asks.

She is asleep, her head nestled in a fluff of pillow and blanket, and she might sleep for a couple of hours. Especially after so much light, so much movement and a healthy amount of soup (with morphine, of course). She could sleep until eight, maybe even nine. He turns to the side to avoid her lovely face contorted slightly in pain and exhaustion and takes out his phone. He pushes the send button. The line clicks alive and rings four times.

"What's going on?" It is a buoyant voice, familiar enough for Brandon to sense the tiredness and resignation there. "How you holding up?"

"Good, man. Good."

"Lying sack of shit."

"Yeah," Brandon sighs and clears his voice, blinking at the sky fading in darker blue with melon-tinged clouds, his brother on the other end of the phone, waiting. "I'm just calling, you know. Hoping you might be able to swing by and have a beer? I could really use a beer, could use you sitting here and talking for an hour about accounting, or anything that doesn't—"

"You really know how to tempt a guy," he interrupts in a dry voice.

Eventually, his brother relents and agrees to stop by for one, just one, beer.

Brandon hangs up the phone and stares at a pile of birds struggling upon the enormous

mound of food and remembers what Elaine said while he was writing about the maze and thinks: It's just like us and the world, sweetheart.

Brandon lifts crumpled clothes strewn about the living room to his face until finding a rare deposit of clean—a load done some weeks ago, dumped and forgotten. A blue shirt with the collar pointing out at odd angles, sleeve twisted in wrinkle and tight against his skin. A pair of jeans. Shoes without socks. He's tying the second sneaker when there's a knock on the door, sharp.

"Hey," Brandon says after opening the door and grinding his teeth for a flash. He turns in silent invitation to enter.

"Whoa," his brother says. "This place is a disaster. Elaine see any of this?"

"No," Brandon says and attempts to run a hand through his hair, tangled and matted, but ends up patting it into place. "Her room is impeccable. We move through the hall and onto the back porch. That's all anymore."

"You look like shit."

"Thanks, Will," he says. Taller than Brandon and five years his junior, he has gained a lot of weight, is still putting it on. "You lose some weight?"

"God, no," William says and waves an arm. "Can we go outside? On the porch? This is depressing." He spasms and then looks horrified. "I don't mean... you know what I mean."

"Sure," Brandon says and shrugs.

When he joins his brother on the porch, a cold can of beer in each hand, the street in front of the house is a silent river of dark. The only light comes from the Gomez place across the street, the lighting features beneath their ash trees fluttering leaflets at the tips of sketched branches. The dappled darkness and false light cast a pattern of shattered shadow.

Brandon hands over a beer. His brother sits in one of three mismatched wooden chairs.

"The Mother still AWOL?" William says and takes a long pull of beer, still refusing to use her name since she left two months after the diagnosis, when Elaine vomited blood on her way to school. The Mother dropped Elaine off at Brandon's work and drove away.

"Yeah, she's nowhere," Brandon says quietly and sits. He places his beer on the empty seat between them. "Her folks said nobody's heard a thing, but I can't give a shit right now."

"Okay," William says and shakes his head. "You know I don't wish her harm, really, just a horrible, horrible death."

"Will," Brandon pleads.

"All right. Okay. I'm sorry."

They're quiet again, in consideration of shadows, sipping from their beers. Brandon scratches his thigh.

"So. How's Elaine doing," William says in a give-it-to-me-straight manner.

"Better?" Brandon mutters and clears his throat. "The same. I don't know." He doesn't mention the fat hospice nurse and her visit this morning, her final visit, and if he wanted Elaine to die in a hospital then call an ambulance at the end. If not, keep her hydrated and comfortable. It wouldn't be long. A day, two at the most. The end will be mostly sleep. She left enough morphine to kill the neighborhood.

"Can I see her?" William asks after a gulp of beer.

"She's sleeping."

“Tell her I came by.”

“Of course.”

“Give her this,” William says, contorting to fish about in his pocket. He hands over an envelope, squarish and thick.

“If this is some kind of fucking card...”

“It isn’t, okay? Tell her it’s from me and I’ll see her again.”

“So you want me to lie.”

“Brandon,” he says and sighs and looks down at his feet. “You’re going to have to weather this by yourself. I’m sorry. Mom would know what to do, but I’m not strong enough. And it’s not fair because life isn’t fair, but I’m doing the best I can just like everyone else.” He gulps at his beer and when he sets it down there is a hollow sound.

“I know, I know,” Brandon mutters into his hands and wipes his face clear.

A car passes, bleaching them out in minute detail so anyone who saw them would say, of course they’re brothers. They sit alike and have the same dour expression, with eyes that hold their gaze a moment too long.

“You think we can escape this?” Brandon says, thinking about Elaine’s dream. He waves an arm at nothing or everything. “Do you think there’s a way to live without being as stupid as a bug?”

“Not really,” William says and stands. “The trick is to remain occupied. That’s all we need, from worm to man... to remain occupied. And it could be much, much worse. Don’t forget that.” He looks down at Brandon still seated and holding a mostly-full beer. He puts a hand on his brother’s shoulder and holds it there a moment, shaking him slightly. “I’ll come by in the morning before work. Okay?”

Rather than watch television or read or eat or sleep, every moment not spent with Elaine or recovering from Elaine or in providing basic sustenance to his physical body, Brandon contemplates ceiling, the idea of ceiling.

A different era, he thinks and settles further into the lumps of the couch, a wad of socks or something at his kidney. Probably the sixties, carefree and hopeful, a decade of vaulting change and popcorn ceilings. The house continues to hurtle through time at an incredible rate. And while part of him finds the bumpy surface of the ceiling abhorrent and ugly, there is also a part of him that finds it beautiful and transcendent in its conterminous, mild disturbance. The texture doesn’t alter or shift except in darkness near the ductwork, a result of accumulated dust, skin cells and expelled breath. His eyes blur and lose focus. He stares at the ceiling with rapt attentiveness. And looking at the expanse of whitish undulations, darker motes and tricks of eye, his mind dissolves. The ceiling lowers itself so he can smell his own stale breath reflected, feels his eyelashes brush against its surface.

A deep hum comes from the ceiling, a low tone felt in his bones.

As the sound grows, he ignores the dark, darting motes on the edge of his vision and focuses so deep into the whitish expanse that he feels the beginning of a headache. But it’s there, deep in the ceiling’s texture. First he sees endless white and then endlessness itself, colorless and indifferent and absolute. Brandon imagines swimming through the void and giddiness overtakes him even as the hum grows louder and turns into a grumble. He can feel the sound surround his body and wonders if it is time, the rushing of time, and as soon as the thought rises in his mind

there comes a sensation of movement. He is slick, agile, able to move in any direction. The void is cold, comfortable and wet but as natural as air and breath. The rumble grows, reverberates against his skin, and the house (what must be the house) shudders around him floating in void and hurtling through the everything. The sound crescendos in a lurid roar and tearing of air, and then the monitor garbles from the coffee table and Brandon is lying on the lumpy couch staring at the ponderous ceiling.

A plane passes unseen and shreds through the sky, receding like a roving thunderclap into the distance.

He looks at the window. It is night again. Or still. He looks at the monitor and it is quiet. Maybe she only shifted or—

“Craegle,” the monitor emits, a red light blinking with the sound.

He gets up and follows her voice down the hall, her patient voice calling out to him, breathy and almost desperate.

Soon he’s standing over her. He clicks on the blue light above her bed and she blinks.

“Daddy,” she says, relieved.

“What is it, baby?” he looks at her blushed face for a grimace or wince, her body for signs of obvious discomfort, a darker stain of wetness, but she merely looks at him, a smile at the corner of her mouth. “What’s wrong?”

“I figured it out,” she says with mischief in her voice, dry.

“That’s good, Lainey,” he says and yawns. Her lips are chapped and he smiles at her eyes crinkled mischievously, not seeing the sunken rings beneath.

He hands her a sippy cup of water and lifts her head so she can drink. She empties the cup and sighs and leans back into the pillow. She burps loudly.

“My goodness,” Brandon says as if insulted. He dabs moisturizer on her lips.

“I’m so embarrassed,” she says, making a face.

Brandon smiles, now fully awake. He blinks at her and manages a grin, biting down so his teeth don’t click. All he sees is the bluegray of her eyes.

“I lied to you the other day,” she says playfully.

“You wouldn’t dare.” He tickles her thin ribs.

“I did!” She giggles and squirms weakly, the most of their play.

“About what?”

“The maze,” she says. “It’s not a dream. And I figured it out. Just now.” She pulls a blue square of plastic from the fold of her blankets. “Uncle Billy’s present helped,” she says.

“Okay, okay,” he says and snuggles the blankets back to her chin. At least it wasn’t a card, he thinks. He nudges the simple maze of movable squares set in a plastic shell. The solution must be an image, but the maze is unsolved and a jumble of lines, color. “Settle down and tell me in the morning. You’ve got to get some sleep.”

“All I do is sleep or pretend to sleep,” she says, a sadness in her voice.

“And why do you pretend?” Brandon watches her face go through a series of emotions. She looks away and bites her lower lip.

“So I don’t bother you,” she eventually says.

A stab of pain courses through Brandon’s body, and he has to let it pass before able to move, to tell her it’s nonsense.

“And to prove it,” he says too brightly, “I’m moving in here with you. We’ll be roommates! I can move the bookcase and drag the couch right over there.” He points to a place she cannot see. “Then I can take these goddamned things—” He picks up her monitor and

pretends to strangle it. “And go out in the back yard and crush them with the hatred of a thousand suns.”

“No,” she says and places a hand on Brandon’s arm. He nearly flinches at the touch, so small and cold. “You’ll drive me nuts, lying there, doing nothing.”

“I can do things,” he says lamely.

“Can you listen about my maze?” she asks, pulling on his arm.

“Of course,” he says and moves a chair next to the bed. He doesn’t tell her that to listen only shows his weakness, his inability to save her, to protect her from the world even though he is hopeful, still hopeful. The world flashes by, darkly indifferent to their little hollowed candle of love and hope. Even William waved a hand at the struggling flame. The fat hospice nurse who looked like a body found floating dead three days in a canal... the heads shaking side to side, sadly, his constant questions and what ifs dissolved in compression of the doctors’ flat lips. No, he thinks and crunches at a bit of tooth chipped off in grinding, this is all there is. Hope. My daughter. Listening to her voice lilting between breaths.

Brandon fetches the notebook and pen again and settles in, writing down what she says, asking questions, laughing at her giddiness and light and energy while the rest of the world turns away in the darkness of morning. He wonders, in the back of his mind beyond the now of her speaking and the rarity of this time that used to be so familiar, talking and teasing each other, he wonders if she might find a way to remain here, forever. She doesn’t notice him wipe at his eyes.

When she finally falls asleep, there is still inky night at the edges of her aquarium-themed curtains, but Brandon hears the trickling call of a little bird waking the world from slumber.

Dawn comes in flamboyant pink and orange at the window, and Brandon bears witness from his place on the couch, eyes rheumy and blurred, thinking. At one point in the night, he handed Elaine the notebook and she sketched a kind of spiral with strange knots and dark tangles of lines almost like scribble, like she was making sure the pen worked. She handed Brandon the notebook and said she couldn’t draw her maze, that it’s three-dimensional.

Brandon wonders if there may be a kind of sense or logic. Her thoughts on the maze collided with his ruminations over the past weeks. Where has his mind been while the house rushes onward through time? How many years has he spent thinking and wondering in the last week alone? And now, as Elaine sleeps (or pretends to?), does she not realize each moment is a silent, thunderous rush to the next, then the next, and suddenly a day, a week, four years have passed? We are barely held to the earth, Brandon thinks, rubbing at his unshaved jawline. And if nothing matters except for what we make of it, and the maze ends or is escapable—

Brandon closes his eyes and breathes in, holding it in his lungs. And with the silence of his perpetual breath, the wet thudding of his heart marks time, and he can think in the redpurpleblack behind his eyelids. The maze forms there, almost too bright to see, and whirls and undulates as he tries to perceive its shape. Swirls and links and ladders and angles and tangles and then smoothness, calm, cacophony and chaos. His vision grows red, and he blinks into morning light streaming through the front window, recognizes his home, the living room, the pictures on the walls he will not look at, the coffee table and notebook. He breathes and swoons with the fresh air pouring into his body.

She said the maze isn’t an option. And not only for us, but for the birds and trees and stones and mountains—they too participate in the maze, are part of the maze. She said I am a

wall to another person, that I am a part of the maze and might be a wall or a blockage, a dead-end for myself or another—perhaps a Chinese farmer living five hundred years ago or a fish swimming deep below the sea.

“But how could I be...” Brandon asked, noticing her eyelids fluttering to remain open. “Couldn’t I be something smooth, an easy part of the maze?” He didn’t know what he was saying, what to ask or how to put into words—

“If you are, you don’t know,” she said softly, in a whisper. “The easy parts of life are only other people and things making it easy.”

“Because?” Brandon interrupted, leaning forward.

“Because?” she said, trying to sit up but lying back down. She coughed. “The because can’t be known,” she eventually said.

“Okay,” he had said, and tugged the blankets under her chin, watching her eyes tremulously close into sleep.

Now he isn’t so sure.

He stands up and looks around the living room, his gaze coming to rest on the window, a large rectangle of light and color, but doesn’t allow his eyes to focus. The window remains a blur of blue and shadow, peach-green from the trees across the street, the tea-colored sunlight shimmering in the leaves. And in the blur, Brandon imagines the house coursing through time—each slow blink of his eye a decade, a century. We are travelling too fast, he thinks with a bounding heart. We cannot endure.

Looking to the hallway, he considers waking her yet again, shaking her shoulder and asking about the... how the folding of the maze over and upon itself renders time... how did she say it? Brandon brings a hand to his forehead and is surprised to find it slick and damp. He hears a car pull into the driveway and die.

William paces in hard footfalls against the wood of the porch, his shirt-tails and tie flapping. He grimaces while Brandon finishes telling him about the past night, the maze, how there might still be hope for—

“You told her there’s hope?” William says too loud even for being outside, and squints in the glare of morning light, the trees of the Gomez place across the street throwing a pattern of limbs and leaf shadow into the dark ribbon of the asphalt.

“Please,” Brandon says, wiping a hand through his hair. “You’ve got to listen to me.”

“I have, and you sound insane,” William says in a calmer voice. He shakes his head and looks sideways at his brother. “Listen, Elaine needs comfort. Leave her alone. She needs to know you love her and she needs her father, not this goddamned... interrogation.”

“William.”

“No. She needs you.” He touches Brandon on the shoulder. “You’ve got to keep it together so she can leave this—”

“You’re not listening to me,” Brandon says and grinds his teeth into a grimace. “There might be a way to escape, for her to live, if the maze can be folded on purpose. I think.” He pauses for protest, but William is silent, standing, staring. “On purpose,” Brandon repeats. “Do you understand what this means?”

“What the hell are you talking about?” William asks after an interval of silence. A car shushes by the house, passing in a sigh of sound. “Is this about that damned toy?”

“No,” Brandon says and tries to relax his face but it remains fixed. “And only Elaine can fold it and she might not be strong enough. If only she had a few more days of seeking, probing...” He closes his eyes and sees an interconnected impossibility in the redpurpleblack and follows the lines and voids. His voice comes from far away, not his own. “Of finding the best course, the smoothness that will ease her back.”

“Brandon,” William eventually says and sits, putting an arm across his brother’s shoulder awkwardly. “You need to sleep.” He shakes Brandon and stands, facing him. “Take a hot shower, drink four fingers of scotch and sleep. Sleep till noon. And when you wake up, if Elaine is even conscious, smile at your daughter and let her know you love her. No more questions. Understand? No more notes. Let her go in peace.”

Brandon nods his head but can only look at the porch between his feet, blurred in tears, the light wood scuffed beneath peeling paint.

After checking on Elaine and seeing the rise and fall of her chest, slower and shallower now, he washes and stares at the monitor dangling from a string connected to the showerhead.

Water Resistant!

The soap passing over his flesh feels wrong, as if it’s a stranger’s hand or a stranger’s body and his own hand, but it doesn’t matter. She will find a way. He knows this. There is hope. She will find a way to stay, defeat the path of sickness and death. The house will slow down, or the illusion of time will resume, and ceilings will return to their simple purpose. The maze will become effortless and boring once again. Brandon shaves for the first time in days. The razor is dull and burns his skin.

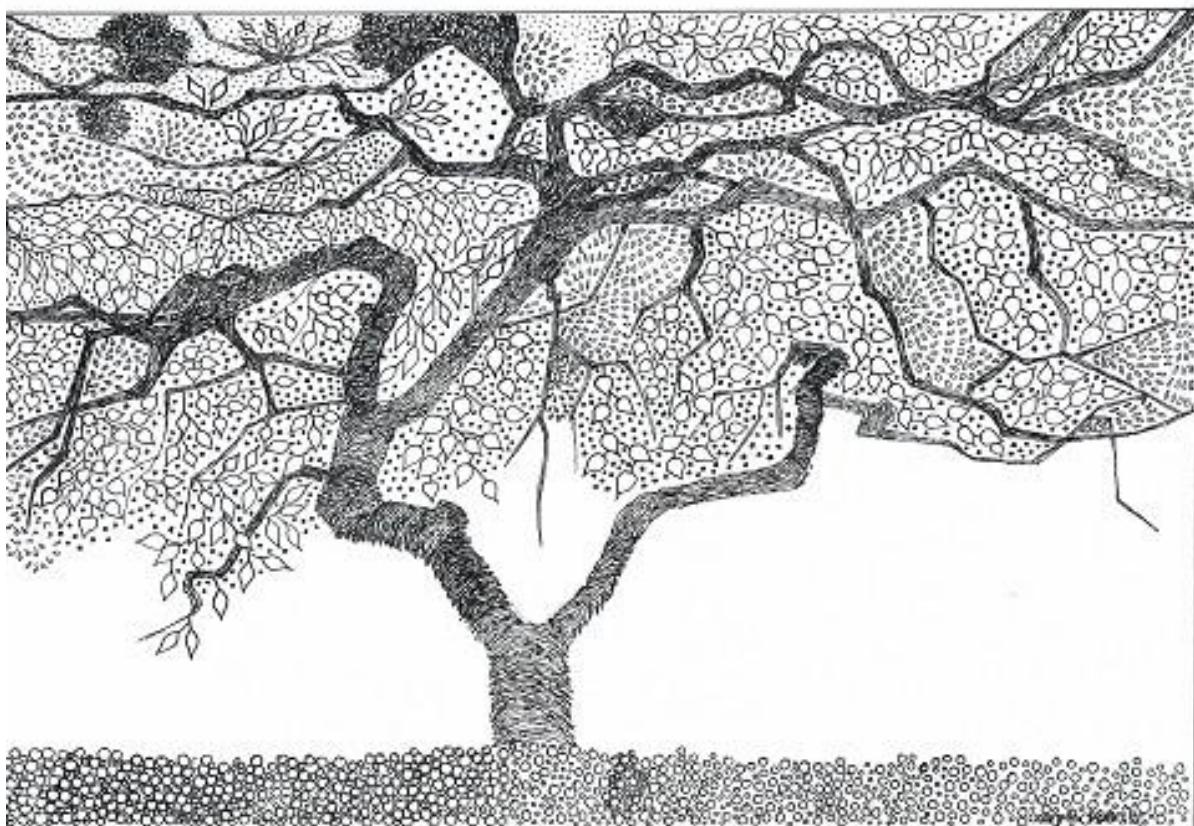
Draped in an odorous towel, he decides to clean the living room, to make it less cave-like and shocking. Brandon surveys the gore of dirty clothes and dishes, empty beer cans, fast food wrappers and cups and containers, pizza boxes and envelopes of condolence and final notice and foreclosure. Everything is bathed in late-morning light and glows about the edges. The house is as silent as the void of space.

Brandon grabs a few garbage bags and starts to clean—that is to say, he stuffs everything into one bulging bag, then fills another. The process soothes him. Putting all the mail in the trash brings a great feeling of satisfaction, of conclusion. Negotiating a deposit of Chinese food containers into a bag, he drops everything to the ground and his legs nearly give way. Standing beside the window, a breath of air caresses his cheek.

There, on the sill and only a few feet away, is the fly. At first, Brandon thinks it’s dead, and his stomach sinks until he sees the wings rub and the fly rise, slow and heavy, buzzing smoothly. It bumps against the glass once, then again. Brandon watches with a held breath as the fly hums near the sliver of opening, so near, bumping and buzzing against the screen a few times before it finally slips outside and is gone.

Joshua Daniel Cochran

Tree of Life



Capotă Daniela Lăcrămioara

Letting Go, Attempt #10

sauced, you slurp spaghetti up and down limp arms
 the burgundy sleeve reeks of beer and garlic
each time you try to scream you choke on Old Sober You
 holding on for life, you near the rocky cliff, stop and reach
for me as if I could make you stop drinking, the difference
 of a year progressed to this immense digression—
my wrists are too stiff, too taut within your blood tied around them

Laurie Kolp

Scents of Three Summers

Wood-and-sugar breath of planted lavender,
near wild honeysuckle nectar my sister's blackberry perfume
towels freshly folded sweet tea in the afternoon
black lacquer and dust on the old guitar wet dog

White chalk and Channel salt tart cool shock of rhubarb wine
rotting wood aged lace shoulder sweat, mine damp sandstone
Aspall cider tikka masala, split four ways
cold rain cigarettes milky sigh of clotted cream
seagull droppings bergamot wildflowers at Rufford Abbey

White lilies wilting at Montparnasse absinthe
and dark chocolate mint mojitos on a too-bright evening
mint green tea in the afternoon chlorine in Laveran Fountains
grapes sun-plump in a Montmartre yard chèvre Seine-side piss Nutella
yeast of strange men's lips on my throat yeast of kneaded dough, still baking
shoulder sweat, not mine dust cocoa blush wine cologne

Sue's Suicide

When I heard that my Aunt Sue died, I felt cold. The feeling spread from the base of my spine and over the top of my head; sank into my chest and pushed out my breath. I felt like I was falling.

Sue was in pain and drinking, and she did what she felt she needed to do: she committed suicide. I don't blame her. I understand how it feels: the crushing panic, the feelings that can only be described as darkness, not being able to find any space to be calm. The fact that I understand how it felt scared me.

I try to be as honest as I can with my children, who are 13, 10, and 7, about the history of mental health issues and substance abuse in our family. My family history remained largely hidden from me as a struggling, depressed child. My children need to know that these tendencies could be lurking inside them.

More than 41,000 people die from suicide each year in the United States. On a global scale, suicide claims more than 800,000 lives every year: that's the entire population of Ft. Worth, Texas. Imagine every man, woman, and child choosing to end their lives, en masse. The parents, siblings, and children of people who commit suicide have a forty-five percent greater chance of dying from suicide than the average person. The National Institutes of Health sponsored a study that revealed clear genetic risks associated with mental illness, something long suspected by the medical community, and those who suffer from the disorders. The genes you are born with strongly influence the way your body responds to stress. In other words, your genes don't necessarily control if you will end up with depression or schizophrenia, or any other number of mental illness. Life experiences, how you deal with stress, and the choices you make can all influence whether you end up with a disease.

My youngest daughter asked, "If Aunt Sue was so sad, why didn't she come to us?"

"I don't know," I said. The words felt like cotton in my mouth

When I was in my late teens and seeking treatment for my depression, Aunt Sue sought me out to reveal our family history of mental illness, substance abuse—a desperate attempt to self-medicate the pain away—and her struggles. I had no idea about any of this. She saved me. She made me feel like I wasn't alone, that we were both a part of the same tribe. Sue was twenty-two years older than me, but it never felt that way at all. My aunt and I were very close, and we naturally fell in together. We bonded over our shared interest in making pretty things. While the rest of the family went hunting, we armed ourselves with glue guns instead of rifles.

Sue was my dad's younger sister. Their father left when my dad was four and Sue was an infant. The rumor amongst family members was that my biological grandfather was schizophrenic. My dad and his little sister didn't have a very good childhood.

People would always say that Sue and I looked alike: the same thin light brown hair, doe eyes, and sharp nose. I loved my aunt, but I was afraid of becoming her. Every so often when she became convinced that her depression was untreatable, she'd stop all medication and therapy and hole up somewhere. No one would be able to reach her for months at a time. Then, she'd show up again and act like no time had passed at all. It was shocking to outsiders, but this was her normal.

When I got married, she insisted on taking care of all the decorations. Sue was incredibly talented. She arrived hours before anyone else and set up the entire reception. She transformed an empty banquet hall into a twinkling forest complete with “dead trees,” branches that she gathered from the woods and spray-painted white and then covered in silver glass glitter, and hundreds of silk flowers that she had gilded with silver foil and woven into arches.

At the actual party, she disappeared.

Genes don't necessarily determine a person's destiny; certain triggers can alter the expression of those genes. Choices have an effect, and the environment we are raised in has an effect as well. This is why the study of these diseases is so complicated and difficult. How do you identify who might be contemplating suicide?

One of the problems with treating mental illness and suicidal thoughts is that researchers only know what the patient is willing to share with them, and they can't talk to someone who has committed suicide. This has led researchers to study the survivors — the family members of those who have died — and those who have attempted suicide and survived — to advance research on the subject.

One of these researchers is Matthew K. Nock, who directs Harvard University's Laboratory for Clinical and Developmental Research. His hope is to develop a series of computerized tests that can calculate a “risk score” for suicidal behavior in real-time. One of the tests determines if a patient is associating themselves with living or with dying through word association. The researchers observed that people who are contemplating suicide hesitate a few fractions of a second longer when the word on the screen related to dying. A word like “funeral” caused hesitation; a neutral word like “ice cream” would be dealt with immediately. Another test measures a subject's eye movement in response to certain photos that appear on the screen. Nock's group follows up with questions to measure the reliability of the tests like: Are the test takers more depressed? Have they attempted suicide? What no one can really agree on is what to do with the patients who are determined to be high-risk.

Another study, published in the *Journal of Psychiatric Research*, suggested that the healthy relatives of people who have committed suicide often have poor decision-making and impulse control. If this is an inherited trait of suicidal tendencies, what keeps the rest of the family members from committing suicide? The research showed that these living “risky decision makers” were able to identify alternative solutions to problems. Another study, that focused on how life experience affects gene function, found that childhood abuse could cause changes in the body's ability to regulate cortisol, the stress hormone. The change leaves the brain in a constant state of alertness, causing a person to overreact to stress. The combination of these two factors: impulsive genes and a tendency to overact could lead a person to see suicide as an immediate solution. Every depression and attempted suicide is different. Because every case presents differently, one would assume that all the treatments should be different. However, the treatments are not very distinct at all, and the global suicide rates are not declining. Marsha Linehan, a psychology professor at the University of Washington, and a person who suffers from mental illness herself, developed Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT). This therapy combines behavioral science with concepts like acceptance and mindfulness. This therapy is designed to change thought patterns, and subsequently, behaviors. DBT gives patients a skill set and requires work on the part of the patient—weekly meetings, one-on-one counseling sessions, and workbooks. It is a huge time commitment, and because of that, it seems to have been relegated to the most severe cases. Most people attempting to navigate the mental health system are not getting this type of therapy and don't know where to begin to look for help. My aunt would

check herself into the local behavioral health center from time to time, but she never got the help she truly needed.

When my youngest daughter was two, Sue showed up. Her house had a small electrical fire, so she stayed with us for a month. My kids grew close to her; she would read to them and build forts and do crafts. I remember her smoking on the back porch. The smoke swirled around her head as she exhaled, standing wrapped in a sweater, sweatpants, and bare feet with her left leg bent and foot resting on her other knee. I called it her flamingo pose. She stood like that all the time.

Then her father died. He told my dad once that he never went to the dentist because he believed that they installed radios in your teeth so that the government could listen to your conversations. He also believed he was the Lindbergh baby. He left no will, a trailer full of paperwork, and at least 200 identical pairs of eyeglasses. Sue, whom never really held a job, and didn't have any income except for a small pension from her ex-husband's retirement, inherited a significant amount of money from her father. After his death, Sue started shopping. She bought everything from trampolines to gorilla costumes. Within a year, she had spent all of the money, and things went back to how they always had been. Sue disappeared from my life again.

In January 2015, I was hospitalized for a week. Sue's granddaughter was in the hospital at the same time, having a baby. We were on the same floor just across the hall from each other. Sue stopped to see me despite not having spoken to me for several months. She offered to stay at my house to help with the children. She promised to come back the next day and catch a ride home with my husband.

She arrived in the afternoon with a gigantic suitcase. "I'm so excited!" she said, spinning the blue suitcase on its wheels in the corner of my hospital room. "I'm going to go smoke! I'll be right back!" she said as she darted out the door.

My husband walked in a few minutes later, glancing at the suitcase standing in the corner. He pointed, "Whose is that?" he said.

"Sue's."

"Wow...she showed up," he shook his head.

I was discharged a few days later. Sue was radiating energy, walking my husband through roasting a chicken and cleaning everything in our house.

That was the last time we saw her.

Our communication became relegated to Facebook. In April, she messaged me that she wanted to come over and plant a fairy garden for my oldest daughter Amelia's birthday. She never showed. We didn't tell Amelia.

At this point, she was borrowing money from her brother, my dad. From time to time, she would message me and ask if I thought she should sell her house, and if I thought that my dad would help her do that. She told me that she was embarrassed to talk to my dad because she owed him money.

On September 4, 2015, about four hours before Sue killed herself, she sent me a message on Facebook:

It has been a while since we have spoken. Just want to send my love and say how proud I am of you. You are a star in my world! Think of you often. Keep plugging away and it will all make sense in the end! Give the kids a hug and tell them Aunt Sue loves them with abandonment!

I can pick that message apart for the rest of my life, and I likely will. I'll analyze her word choices, and I have no idea if she intended to say goodbye. Just what the hell does "abandonment" mean in this context? I have no idea if she planned her death or if she got drunk

and made an impulsive decision. I imagine that in the moment, just before she did it, she felt like I often do: alone, and drowning in her own thoughts.

I want my kids to know that they aren't alone, that no one would be "better off" without them. I want them to know that even the most impossible situation might not be so daunting if they ask for help. I want them not to suffer like Sue did, and like I do.

Depression makes you feel isolated. The only thing you can do is go against what your body and mind are telling you, and reach out to people for help and support. At a certain point, even that becomes too difficult. Sue desperately wanted to feel needed, to be caring for someone, and I see that in myself. In quiet moments, I find myself thinking of the sound of her voice. I don't want to forget.

Joslyn Neiderer

I Know Why Marianne Did It

In Memory of Marianne Psota

When I think about freedom, I imagine you standing
at your kitchen sink in the suburbs, choked
by the China patterns, the curved branches of the pear
tree in the back yard reminding you daily of
Mansfield, literature, the high you get from a poem
when it lands on the back of your hand, ready to

quake. You start to resent him, hope he burns
through the smoke lingering around the party
still raging in the smolder behind your eyes. Crack open
the wood, glass, sill for air, for your fingers to slide out –
they tremble for fruit, escape, metaphors. A Greyhound
bus takes you to the whirl of Reno, away from the dull

outskirts, marriage, the soon-to-be wife of a soon-to-be
doctor. He has a beautiful smile but you couldn't stand
to sleep inside of the skin of a woman you never were
meant to be. Tell the driver(s) you'd rather be a cocktail
slut, skip town after town in a white slip. A living tribute
to Blanche, you live like one of Tennessee's girls, down

to the seizure they say rattled your brain, your sleep.
Someone should've saved you. I wasn't there or else
I would've woken you up, thanked you for the back
bone you slid inside my soul when no one was looking. Out
the window at the sink in that kitchen, how could you
have known it would be fleeting, that the seconds do

count. You once told me, "The suburbs will kill you." I feel
the weight of your words years later, miles away from the week
of Christmas when we meet, move in, become liars, lovers
of poetry, each of us sleeping with Rilke, Verlaine, Courtney
Love. A man - he tried to stuff me full of cotton. Said Georgia
would keep me sweet. I bit hard and here I stand. This kitchen

doesn't even have a fucking window. But there's an empty lot
where the neighbors throw dead Christmas trees on a path
to Walmart cleared by a tornado last summer. Places
to eat, work, die. Today, I tried to nap away ambition. You woke
me up, read me poetry. Then whispered in my ear, "Go."

David-Matthew Barnes

Meditation on a French Fry

You're saving the crispy ones
stacking them log-wise
kindling in a fireplace
a fire to light your way
you tell me

It takes more than that
I think, having lost my way
somewhere between the yes
of wanting and the no
of hesitation

Angled across the stack
a perfect fry glistens oil and salt
its skin left on to prove provenance
to guarantee an origin in the ground

which is where we begin and end
grubby, humble, having dreamed
our lives away, somnambulists
between first wakening
and final sleep

Sally Zakariya

Watermelon Summer

We sniff each blossom end,
thump each rind,
listen for the hollow ring
that marks a perfect melon—
ripe and sweet,
July's bounty field fresh
from Uncle Birch's garden.
Mama pierces thick hide,
tiger-striped green on green,
with her heaviest knife,
lays open succulent flesh.
Black seeds glisten
like small dark eyes. She cleaves
and cleaves again—four sections
drip juices onto flimsy paper plates.
Scent subtle as pear or cucumber
rises in sweet uprush,
hovers on her airy back porch.
The melons chilled all morning
in a washtub of ice,
are served with knives or spoons
and shakers full of salt.
Save the seeds for later—
G'ma says if you swallow them
vines'll grow out your ears,
but put one on your tongue,
suck in your cheeks and blow.
Fat Thom to Red Allie, all cousins
take part, boys claim no edge here.
Go for distance. For accuracy.
Hoot and shout. Fall laughing
to the ground. Listen
to chattering aunts and mothers,
voices on the breeze; pipe smoke
drifts from shade where men gather.
Everyone you love is with you.

Ann Howells

Dreaming



Fabrice Poussin

Lord of the Song

Coming late,
near the end of time,
when Keats and Byron,
Wordsworth and Frost
have grown sleepy and silent,
their lutes rusted over,
their music, a whisper,
he comes
wearing a crooked crown
believing it is made of their gold.

The tin crown slips
and tilts as he enters
and clinks like his hollow music.
But he is the Lord of the Song now
and if we sing,
we must sing only like him.

He raises his baton
banishing the old notes,
for they have already been used
and must never be used again.
What is left to us then
is to grunt and hum:

Ummmmmmmmmmmm
Ummmmmmmmmmmm

He smiles a crooked smile,
touches his crooked crown
and nods, well pleased,
at our unique
but pointless noise.
Departing,
he pats himself proudly;
he has shown us the light
and the truth.

Now we sing only his way.
For he is the Lord of the Song
and he knows best.

Susan Speranza

Arrays in C

Include irrational exuberance
Include risk adversity
Include emotional rescue

{open

My prayer beads have lost their crosses and there is only glass
left to press
against my thumbs in petition for truth, and by truth I mean that when I pause
for the hymn
and find only false bells, it is time.

It is time to climb the fire tower to assay what I have delivered
in desolation.

From the tower, I blow the French horn that calls in the horsemen.
From the tower, I recede like my fist into a pocket.

/*these are the choices
and they cannot be made again */

But the season is long and dry and there are no fires to call out
because love is a choice that cannot be made again.

Here there are ranges of solvable limits for which
I will not derive any answers.

I have calculated the rise of the slope
I have sketched the strokes under the rising lines of
each point of inquiry.

Each is an apology rising like an Ave Maria

I am my own axiom of extensionality, all my sets the same.

return 0

close}

*Note: This poem uses some elements from the archaic C programming language
Rita Chapman

The Star Sage



Kelci Crawford

Imprint

The first thing anyone noticed about Katja were the tattoos that coated almost every inch of her visible skin. And, except on the meanest winter days, there was a lot skin to see: buffed arms; regal neck; tight, clenched stomach; and legs that looked ready to sprint at a moment's notice—all a smooth canvas on which lethal animals lay in wait. A viper sprung from each bicep; a tiger crept down one thigh and a panther roared up the other; a scorpion sat hunched on each shoulder; and encircling her spare waist, a jade green cobra, open-mouthed—its forked tongue resting over her navel.

Her face was just the opposite; pale and unmarked by even a memory of emotion, like a painting, never changing, unaffected by the life outside it. Her hair was the exact same shade as the countenance it protected: long and straight like albino wheat, with a feathered fringe that draped over her eyes, shielding them from intrusion. And even if a glance were exchanged, obviously unintended on her part, it revealed nothing. A glaze of some sort dulled the lush blue irises, forbidding entry.

Katja had more piercings than she did close friends: seven of the former, only three of the latter, including her boyfriend, Sam. Sam was a miracle—better than any of the anxiety medications she took daily. Even his name was normal and soothing, like a glass of warm milk. But it was bad luck to say his name out loud, so she just said it to herself when she was nervous or afraid. Like a mantra, it would calm her.

Some nights when she woke with the surge of panic in her stomach that made it impossible to lie there one more minute, she would turn to look at Sam sleeping beside her, his mouth relaxed in a contented smile, like nothing bad had ever happened to him. She would lie back down, not able to sleep, but at least not having to throw up like she used to.

While he was the best thing that had ever happened to her, while she could call him on her way to doctor's and he could get her to stop shaking, while she could tell him to answer the phone when she knew it was bad news, while he texted her the instant his plane landed to say he was safe; he really had no clue what she went through. He called her a worrywart. A worrywart. Even the word was frivolous, with no more weight than a comma in the middle of simple sentence. He had no clue.

But then again, she herself had no clue why she was like this ... always poised on a narrow beam, calamity lying in wait, open-jawed, on either side. What she did know was that ever since she could remember, she was on alert for what could happen, what could go wrong, what could *be* wrong. She remembered being nine years old, lying in bed at night and thinking about the death of her parents. It hadn't happened yet, but when it *did* ... at the thought her body would turn suddenly cold. Not the kind of cold like when she went sledding and it started to get late and her clothes were wet from the snow. But the kind like when she had a fever and was too sick to even watch TV; the kind that didn't go away, even when she wrapped herself in a wool blanket. Every night, before getting into bed, she would gather up her stuffed animals, seven of them, and tie them to her with string so they would protect her from the beasts that crept under the covers and scared her out of her sleep.

As she got older, she realized that most other people never considered what could happen. How disaster could explode in an instant. Her friend Sarah's father traveled all the time

for business. Katja could never tell when Sarah's father was home or on the road; Sarah acted like it didn't matter. How could she go to parties while her father's plane was taking off? Didn't she know it could crash? Didn't she picture herself and her brother and mother at the funeral? Couldn't she see herself opening her father's closet, running her hand over his jackets, putting her nose up to smell them, hoping to be with him one more minute?

Katja could see it all.

On that particular Friday evening, Katja sat behind the deck getting ready to play the first track. She started with their song, as she had every night since she and Sam got together, as a tribute. No, not a tribute. That was the wrong word. A tribute was something that was given when someone died. How could she have thought that word? At this very moment, Sam was riding his motorcycle to his Mom's in Napa. Her stomach lurched and she felt a sudden warmth in her armpits. She gripped the controls to steady the music with one hand, while the other reached into her back pocket for her cell phone and texted. *R U OK? XOXO*

It was a full twelve minutes before she saw the red light blinking on the phone and read, "*Yes, hon. Here w/Mom. All good. ;).*" She could breathe again. If anyone were looking at her closely, which of course they weren't, they would have noticed an event rarely seen in public. It was a smile—a small one, nothing flashy. She used the equalizer to switch to the next track, raising the volume to celebrate.

When Katja got home on that particular night, Sam was already back from his Mom's, waiting for her. She went to hug him but stopped when she saw his face. There was something different about it—a frightening look that didn't quite know how to arrange itself on his features.

"What's wrong?" Katja grabbed his hands. "Come on, tell me!"

He pulled her over to the sofa and made her sit down.

She knew it must be terrible, whatever it was. Her body shook. "What's wrong? What's wrong? Tell me!"

He held her shoulders. "Hon, I'm afraid this time it really is bad news."

"For God's sake, tell me, goddammit!"

"Your grandmother passed away."

For a moment, she just stared at him. Then a scream—raw and savage—uncoiled itself. "Nonica!"

"Hon. I'm so sorry." He tried to pull her close to him, but her body was rigid. She sat frozen for several seconds, all of her senses shut off except for what felt like a vibration in her head. It seemed to emanate from that spot at the base of her neck, the place she could feel a hard knot, a lump that doctors told her wasn't there. The spot that would throb like a raw wound, but only from time to time. Only when it saw fit. The inner sound now came from that exact place.

So many times in her life she had prepared for the worst; imagining its shape, how it would feel on her skin. But it had never actually happened. Now it lay there in front of her—a seething hole, inviting her in. *I've been waiting for you*, it said.

Until her grandmother had become ill four years ago, she had visited Katja's family every summer. She stayed in the third-floor bedroom with the slanted roof and dormer window that looked out onto the city. Katja would spend hours up there, listening to her grandmother talk about her childhood—how she walked six kilometers to and from school every day, through blizzards, storms and glorious spring days; how she eventually became a teacher; how her

students would bring her daisies and figs; how she met a handsome young writer at a dance in a castle; how they married and had a family.

Katja would tell her things she never told her mother; how she was bullied at school for being different; how she was seeing a boy who lived in the projects at the other side of the city; how she dreamed of getting a job that involved music. But mostly, she would complain about her brother, Sasha; how he started to sneak liqueurs from the liquor cabinet when he was twelve years old; how he switched to vodka when he got older; how he lived with a bunch of guys in a rundown house now, smoking pot and staying holed up in his room, stoned most days.

“Be happy you have a brother,” her grandmother would say. “It will be better when you are older, you will see,” she said.

The only thing Katja didn’t tell her grandmother was about the nameless fear that always hunched on her shoulders, warning her not to relax or danger would come and swallow her. No one could know about that.

When her grandmother could no longer make the trip to America, Katja would call her every Sunday at noon. They would talk as they always had. But in the last year, Katja had to strain to hear her, and she noticed that the old woman’s voice had a new occupant—surrender. The personality that used to engulf that whole room on the third floor was dwindling to an anemic flicker.

In the last couple of months her grandmother listened quietly as Katja told her what had happened in the last week, no longer laughing at the funny bits or offering advice, just murmuring an occasional “hmmm.” Except when Katja would complain about Sasha. She was no longer speaking to him, she told her grandmother; he was just not worth it. She heard her grandmother take a raspy sandpaper breath, summoning a spurt of energy to get the words out.

“Katja, be grateful,” she said.

For two days after she heard of her grandmother’s death, Katja didn’t leave the apartment. She spent hours looking through scrapbooks of pictures; her grandmother as a young girl, as a mother, on her visits to America. She read and re-read all the greeting cards her grandmother had sent her over the years, written in the elegant, formal loops of her old-world penmanship. And then there were the postcards from all over Slovenia. Her grandmother had wanted so much for her to see the “homeland,” as her grandmother called it. She shuffled through them again and again, the idea poking at her, refusing to go away. Finally, Katja made up her mind.

“I’m going to the funeral in Ljubljana,” she told Sam.

“Ludge-blaj-na!” Sam had trouble wrapping his tongue around the strange word. “But you don’t know anybody there. You can’t speak the language.”

“I have to go. I can’t explain it. I just know I have to.”

“Not even your mother’s going!”

“My mother was never close to Nonica anyway.”

“A strained mother-daughter relationship?”

“I’m not really sure. My Mom always seemed angry with her, or resentful. I could never put my finger on it. Anyway, I don’t care if she’s not going; I am!”

“Ok. I’ll go with you.”

She hugged him hard. “Oh my God, Sam, you are so sweet. But no, I want to go alone.”

Three days later she sat in a small church just off Preseren Square in the center of Ljubljana. At least two hundred people were squeezed into the pews of the musty chapel.

Centuries of incense and candle smoke hung in the air, offering comfort. There were people of all ages. She didn't know why this surprised her. After all, her grandmother had been active all her life until the last few years. She had returned to teaching after her children were grown and tutored after she retired from teaching.

The church swelled with music; monotone Latin chants, heavy-hearted organ pieces, and somber Slovenian religious songs. Everything Katja hated. To distract herself she dug her fingernail into her hand so hard that a small trickle of blood formed. She stared at the viper on her arm, willing its strength into her veins.

Then the tributes started. First, a priest who looked to be almost her grandmother's age stood at the pulpit and spoke about her. Even though she didn't understand what he was saying, she heard her grandmother's name, "Mara," every so often. She could tell that the priest must have known her grandmother quite well. Several times, his voice would be lively or have a joking tone and the congregation would laugh. After he was finished, a string of people, one after another, stood up from their seats and spoke. Some were reverential and serious, others more lighthearted. A couple of older women rose and tried to talk but were swallowed by emotion. They had to sit down without saying a word.

Katja kept digging her fingernail into her flesh, harder and harder. Later, she told herself, she could fall apart later.

When it was over, she joined the procession leaving the church. One of the older women who had tried to speak, but couldn't, caught up with her at the door. She seemed to have recovered and was smiling at Katja as though she knew her.

"Are you Katja?"

Katja blinked twice. "Yes, I'm Katja."

"I thought so. I am Ursula Benko. Your grandmother and I were good friends. She used to show me pictures of you when she got back from her trips to America. She would tell me all about how much fun she had with your family. But she talked especially about you. She really loved you; I am sure you know."

Katja's eyes were stinging. She looked away.

The woman reached out and took Katja's hand in hers. "My dear, would you like to go with me for a cup of coffee, or a little wine? It would probably be good for both of us to talk about your grandmother—to remember her."

Katja wanted to run. She didn't know this lady, and she didn't want to talk with her. She just wanted to go back to the hotel, lock herself up, and cry.

"No, sorry, I have to go," she told her.

The woman looked at her as though she could read her thoughts. "Mara said you were shy. She said that you reminded her of herself when she was a young girl."

"My grandmother wasn't shy." Katja was surprised at the anger in her own voice.

"Oh, yes she was—in high school, anyway. She wore her hair long and over her eyes, just like you."

"Look, really, I have to go. I'm expecting a call from my boyfriend. He was supposed to call earlier this morning, but I didn't hear from him." She fingered her cell phone in her pocket nervously. *Why hadn't he called? Morning her time would be late night his time. She had tried to call him, but no answer. An accident. Maybe a bad asthma attack and he had passed out, alone in the apartment. She had to call her friend Monica, who lived down the hall, ask her to go knock on the door, make sure he was all right ...*

“She said you were a worrier, just like her.” The woman’s kind eyes found Katja’s, and she smiled gently.

Katja shook her head. “She wasn’t a worrier. She was always happy, optimistic...”

“That wasn’t until much later, dear.”

“Much later?”

“Long after we were in prison.”

It took a moment, and then Katja began to feel the floor sway under her. “What?”

“I was in prison with Mara.”

Now the church bells had begun to chime wildly. *It’s a funeral, not a wedding.* Katja thought she must be having a crazy dream. “What prison? I don’t know what you mean.”

The woman started to say something, then stopped. She bit her lower lip. “I’m sorry. I thought you knew.”

“Knew what? My grandmother was in prison? For what?” Just then she felt her cell phone vibrating in the pocket of her skirt. She pulled it out. It was Sam. *Thank God.* She gestured to the woman that she would be right back and, ear to the phone, hurried away from the crowd.

“Are you okay? I was so worried. You didn’t call this morning.”

He was so, so sorry, he told her. He had meant to call. He had set the alarm on his cell, but didn’t realize his battery was almost out. The alarm never went off.

“I tried to call you.”

The battery was dead, he reminded her. He was fine. Everything was fine. How was the funeral, he wanted to know. More importantly, how was *she*?

“The service was beautiful. Really awesome. But I just heard the weirdest thing about my grandmother. I’m sure it’s a mistake, but I’ve got to talk to this lady who was her friend. I’ll call you later, okay?”

He told her to just take care of herself. That was the main thing.

“Love you!” Katja kissed the receiver and put the phone back in her pocket. Then she looked for the woman. She was there, standing under a pillar, exactly where she had left her.

Katja hadn’t paid much attention to the woman’s appearance until now, but seeing her from a distance reminded her of her grandmother and how she loved to dress up for special occasions. Not like American elderly ladies dressed up, but like ... well, like this woman. She wore a close-fitting ebony and white tea-length silk suit; a touch of black lace flirted under the hem. Multiple pearl strands encircled her neck. Her glossy black hair was swept up in a classic chignon, secured with a jeweled clasp. A deep rose lipstick accentuated the creaminess of her skin and brought out surprisingly blue eyes that were still those of a young woman. She was stunning. Her only concession to age seemed to be her sturdy walking shoes, which no doubt she was mortified to wear. Katja narrowed her eyes until they were almost closed; until the woman was out of focus; until she looked just like her grandmother. The spot in the back of her neck twisted into a painful spasm.

The woman was waiving at her and walking toward her. “Did you reach your boyfriend?” she asked.

“Yes. Yes, I did. Everything’s fine.”

“Of course it is. It almost always is.” Her words had the weight of experience. “What is his name—your boyfriend?”

Katja looked away, seeming to examine the pillar at the far end of the church entrance. She could feel the quickening thump in her chest. “I would rather not say,” she addressed the pillar.

The woman nodded, as though she were used to this unusual response. "That's okay."

"Mrs. ..." Katja paused, "I'm sorry, but I don't remember your name."

"You can call me Ursula."

"Ursula, if you still have time, I would love to have a cup of coffee with you and hear more about my grandmother ... if you have time," she repeated. She would have preferred to just ask her about the prison right then and there, but the woman—and the subject—deserved more deference.

"Of course. We'll go to the place Mara and I used to meet."

They walked along the river and made their way down one narrow street and then another. The pain in Katja's neck had shrunk to a dull throb; she kept her head down to avoid the light. The unlikely pair drew more than a few double takes—seeming, as they did, to come from different worlds and different eras. They picked a window booth and each decided on a glass of Terrano, the hearty local wine purported to cure all ills.

Katja couldn't wait another second. "Please tell me about my grandmother being in prison."

Ursula looked out the rippled glass window. Her eyes traveled—not to the scene immediately outside, or even to the hills in distance, but seemingly to a place and time deep in the past. She lingered there for some moments before she spoke.

"It was in the nineteen-forties. You know the Communists occupied Slovenia and wanted to ... how do you say ... suppress ... they wanted to suppress all opposition. Mara's family, your great grandparents, and my family were anti-Communist. Our fathers and brothers were very active in the resistance. But they paid the highest price. Your grandmother told you about them, I'm sure."

Whatever her grandmother had told her did not weigh as much as Ursula's words. "She told me that times were very hard; that there were shortages of food, that sort of thing. She said that her family was involved in the resistance, but she didn't talk about her father or brothers specifically." Katja felt as though she was standing at the outermost edge of a high cliff, her toes clutching the earth to keep her body from pitching forward, steadying her for what she was about to hear.

"Well, then, it is not my place ..." Ursula was saying.

Katja leaned forward. "Yes! I want to know! Tell me what happened!"

The woman shook her head.

Katja reached across the table and grabbed the woman's hands. And she did something she almost never did with strangers; she looked way into her eyes, and pleaded. "Please. Tell me."

The woman shifted in her seat, took a sip of her wine, and continued where she had left off. "My father and your great grandfather were taken from their homes in the middle of the night to a prison camp on the island of Tremiti. Both of our fathers—your grandmother's and mine—were there for seven years. No one in the family knew whether they were dead or alive. Can you imagine?"

"Oh, my God," was all Katja managed to say.

"But that was not the worst part."

"You and Mara were taken to prison too?"

"We were. But that was not the worst part."

The woman stared out the window, her arms folded and pressed tightly against her chest.

"Are you okay?" Katja asked.

“Yes. It just never gets any easier, no matter how many times I tell it.” She paused, drawing in a deep breath—her voice trembled as she released it. The words crept out in a monotone. “My brother and Mara’s brother were buried alive by the Communists.”

Katja stared at her. She could see that the woman was no longer in the café. Her body was there, but otherwise she was back in the middle of the horror. The look in her eyes was one Katja hoped never to see again on anyone, as long as she lived. It was one of utter desolation, like death would be a relief.

Katja went over to her and put her arm around the woman’s shoulders to comfort her. This simple act was something she had never done before in her life. She would have done it for Sam, probably, but nothing ever troubled him. And as for her family, that sort of emotion was kept well in the back of a bottom drawer.

She stood there for several moments, holding the woman, and letting what she had heard sink in. The pain in the back of her neck surged to the tip of her skull, and she could see sparks at the periphery of her vision. The woman reached up and patted Katja’s hand.

“Thank you, dear, I’m okay now. Please sit down.”

“I’m so sorry … Ursula … I can’t imagine how horrible …”

“Yes, it is unimaginable. Your grandmother and I had to endure our own hell, but at least we survived.”

“Tell me.” Katja’s voice was a whisper.

The woman looked out the window again. “We were eighteen at the time; we had just graduated from high school. We thought we were grown up and should do our part to fight the occupation. We distributed anti-Communist leaflets all over the town. One day we were caught and thrown in prison.”

Ursula took a deep gulp of the Terrano, then placed her glass back down and stared at it as she continued. “It was a small prison. There were only about twenty cells all together. There were usually about ten of us in our cell.” Her eyes returned to the past, a film of fear covering them. “They would call us into an office for interrogation, one by one. This happened many times. They would ask us for the names of our leaders. We would refuse.”

Katja’s hands gripped each other under the table. She didn’t want to ask the question, but it forced its way out anyway. “Did they hurt you?” She was afraid to hear the answer.

Ursula gave an angry laugh, “Did they hurt us? They did not beat us, but they killed us. Not Mara and I, of course. We were lucky—very lucky. Every morning at dawn a soldier would stand at the end of the long corridor leading to the cells and call out names. Mara and I, we held each other so tightly as they read the names. When they were finished, and those poor people were taken out of their cells, sometimes out of our cell, never to be seen again, we were at first so relieved and then felt guilty that we were relieved. But with each hour, the next … how do you call it … roll-call … came nearer and nearer. When the sky began to turn light in the morning, the nausea would start and the cycle would begin again.”

The two women—one old, one young—sat in silence for a full minute, reliving what had been told; one for the millionth time, the other for the first.

“The reading of the names out loud. That was the worst part for us. Expecting that the next name would be ours, and then the next. I don’t know how we were able to breathe.”

“You were together in the same cell the whole time?”

“Yes, except when Mara was put in solitary.”

“Solitary?”

“Yes. Solitary confinement. A room with no windows, down in the cellar of the building.”

“How long was she there?”

“Several days. She fell on the way in. There was a steep, narrow flight of stairs leading to the dungeon; that’s what it was, really, a dungeon. The guard was angry that she wasn’t moving fast enough, so he pushed her and she fell. She hit the back of her neck on the stair when she landed.”

Katja felt a jolt surge through her. It took her a moment to recover. She touched the back of her neck and felt the hard knot that no one else could feel.

“How long were you in the prison?”

“Nine months.” Ursula let out a long breath that sounded like it had been coiled at the base of her lungs. “It seemed like centuries.”

“How did you get out?”

For the first time since they had arrived at the café, Ursula smiled. “A family here in town—my parents knew them. The mother of the family supplied bread for the prison, so she came to know some of the commandants there. She pleaded on our behalf—and finally, after many months, she wore them down. She was successful. We stayed with the family for several weeks after we were released, right in that house over there.” Ursula pointed across the street at an unremarkable building: a two-storied structure, peeling and sallow, with splits along every seam. A plain wooden door hunched in the entryway.

“That was a bakery, and the family lived upstairs. The shutters used to be bright red. I will never forget seeing those shutters when we first arrived … so joyously red, full of life.”

Katja squinted at the shutters that were there now. Under the dull black coating she could just make out scabs of a rosy under-flesh. “That’s why you met here for coffee all the time!”

“Yes. It was like a shrine to our freedom, that house.”

Katja thought about all the time she and her grandmother had spent together; the private talks; the sharing of confidences. She couldn’t come up with an answer. “Why didn’t my grandmother tell me all this?”

Ursula swirled the last bit of Terrano in her glass. “Mara suffered greatly from all that happened. We both did. For many years afterward, we would wake just before dawn, our ears tuned for the brisk steps that would be followed by the calling of the names. Even today, it still happens to me.” Her body shivered. “We escaped the prison, but not the fear; that was always with us. We knew what could happen. People who have not been through something like that cannot understand what it is like to survive. For those who died, there was an end. For us, the terror continued.”

“But my grandmother always seemed so happy.”

“She *was* happy, especially when she was with you. And it does get a bit better with time.”

“I still don’t know why she didn’t tell me.”

“Well, I don’t know why either. I was sure she would have talked with you about it—what happened to her father, her brother … to her … it was such a big part of her life. The only reason I can think of that she didn’t is because of your mother.”

“What does my mother have to do with it? She and Nonica never really got along.” The mention of her mother’s name was like an unwanted guest at the table.

“Got along?” Ursula cocked her head, not understanding.

“Uh … they didn’t seem to like each other.”

“Ah, that! Well, I do know a little about that.” She nodded to herself, as though something had suddenly fallen into place. “And maybe that is why she didn’t tell you about it. You see, while your mother was growing up, Mara would often talk about the terrible things that happened to her family when she was younger … about her father and her brother and about the prison. She would repeat the stories over and over again.” Ursula’s eyebrows arched as though something had just dawned on her. “It was a sort of therapy, I imagine. Anyway, when your mother got older, it seems that she resented it. She told your grandmother that hearing those stories all the time ruined her life; she said that Mara had passed the fear on to her so that it haunted her, too. *I wish you had just kept it to yourself*, your mother told her.”

Ursula nodded vigorously. “Yes, that must be it. Your grandmother wanted to protect you—so you would not inherit the fear.”

Katja’s words came out so softly that they evaporated as soon as they crossed her lips, never reaching Ursula. “It didn’t work.”

They had finished their wine long ago and the café was starting to fill up with the teatime crowd.

“Ursula, thank you so much for telling me the whole story. Now I know why I was supposed to come here. I’m sorry I forced you to talk about the prison and everything else. It must be very painful for you.”

“The prison,” Ursula gave a curt laugh. “It is still here, you know. You will never guess what it is now.”

“What?”

“It is a hotel. The Celica Hotel. “Celica” means prison. It is a hostel, really. It is quite interesting.” Ursula told her that the hotel was decorated by eighty local artists. Each cell had its own unique style and decoration. All were ultra modern and pieces of art in themselves.

“I have never had the courage to go there,” she said. “But maybe you should go. They have tours, I understand.”

After all she had heard, Katja was having trouble keeping her thoughts under any sort of control. Here was one more startling fact. The prison was there for her to see. “I’ll have to think about that,” she said.

They paid their bill and made their way to the door. Ursula wrapped her arms around Katja and rocked her from side to side like her grandmother used to do.

“I am so glad I met you, Katja. I am so glad you came. You are right. You were supposed to come so that I could tell you about your strong, brave grandmother—and also to tell you that she loved you very much.”

Katja swallowed hard, trying to quiet the lump in her throat. “I know she did,” she managed to say.

The next morning Katja went back to the café. She ordered a coffee and sat at the same window as the day before, looking up at the shutters. She hadn’t slept much; thoughts careened through her head all night, like crazy bumper cars. They had finally settled down a bit, pulled over to the side to let her catch her breath.

The prison hotel. She felt pulled to it, like she was supposed to go. On the other hand, maybe it was too much, too soon. She wasn’t sure she could take any more. But here she was, in Slovenia. Who knew when she would be back?

She took a cab to the Celica Hotel. In her mind she had pictured a dull grey building with small windows, but in fact the façade was a riot of colors—blocks of red, purple and orange, with a glass-enclosed public area running all along its side. The very look of the place cheered

her and convinced her she had made the right decision. She paid the driver and entered through the persimmon-colored front door. A young man, college student type, greeted her with a boyish grin and led her to the tour group that was assembling in the hall.

The tour started with a walk down the bright first-floor hallway. The doors of some former cells—now hotel rooms—were open. As Ursula had said, each was an installation art piece in its own right. One cell replicated a small cabin on a ship, with a round portico and a wooden ladder that led to a sleeping loft. In another cell, the entire side wall was a hand-painted mural depicting the outside of the prison in its original state—a scaled, fish-like creature with a human head swam above the rooftop. Within its body, a face stared out of a barred doorframe.

The entire place was filled with color and light, but there was a distinct heaviness to the air, as though it was thick with its own history. It wasn't an aura of sadness, Katja thought, but more of sacredness. This impression became even stronger when she and her group got to the second floor. The hallway was lit by streams of sun that poured from the skylights of the steep, A-framed ceiling. A row of thick beams stood like soldiers down the middle of the hallway, extending all the way up to the ceiling. About three quarters of the way up on each, lay a horizontal plank—its arms outstretched wall-to-wall. Katja felt a shudder. Did anyone else think they looked like crucifixes, she wondered.

The last stop on the tour was the place Katja was dreading; the solitary confinement cell. She debated whether to veer off to the side while the others, two by two, descended the stairs that led to the dungeon. But she had come this far, she thought, she might as well see it all. She followed a middle-aged man down the steep stairs. There were no handrails; one side was a solid concrete wall and the other was totally open to the floor beneath. You were meant to feel unstable, in danger, she thought. Her skin tightened as she prepared herself for the shock of the small, dark room.

It was about the size of a bathroom. The walls were thick and sludgy. She ran her fingers along the ridges, wondering if her grandmother had touched them in the same place. She could imagine the suffocating blackness that must have filled the space when the door was closed. But the cell on view now wasn't frightening at all. It had been turned into a "Point of Peace" by the hotel—a spiritual place for contemplation, meditation and prayer. There were six niches on the wall; five with altars representing each of the major world religions; and a sixth, empty one, to symbolize freedom of belief. Exactly what the former occupants of the cell had been fighting for, she thought.

A strange calm came over her. It rippled over the lethal creatures etched on her body, quieting and soothing each. Finally, it rose to the back of her neck and hovered there—slowly releasing it, like a knot untied.

She turned back to the cell one more time before leaving and bowed her head in tribute.

Marsha Roberts

Scurf of Memory

In China, nearly 50,000 kissing fish,
a kind of small fish

that can live in hot springs
and eat the scurf of human beings,

have been put into bathing pools
to swim with tourists. The fish

therapy has proven
to be effective at healing

some skin diseases. If only
I could find a fish

to eat the scurf
of memory.

Jean A. Kingsley

Quijote's King



Fabrice Poussin

Orchid and Rose

The patio's radiant heat
loosens my shoulders like a sauna;
an oldies station plays *Canadian Sunset*,
and I recall a boy I once knew.

A lifetime passed. Under a gauzy sky,
I whistle for the dog,
go inside to my husband of thirty years,
vortex of a raucous family.

But I remember that boy
who, on my wedding day, sent a postcard
from Prince Edward Island.
It's lovely here, he said, *and lonely*.

Ann Howells

Gypsies Next Door

“Did I have fun yesterday? “

“No, Mother. I said, how did the funeral go, yesterday?”

Mother can’t hear out of her left ear, ever since a bug flew into it when she was young. It’s one of her favorite stories and one that I never get tired of hearing.

“I was washing out some clothes on the back porch. The only light was a bare light bulb and lots of bugs were flying around. A bug flew in my ear. “Is how she likes to begin the tale.

“That was before your Daddy started preaching. He was working for a dry cleaners. I’d wash the clothes, we got a little extra money for that, then he’d take them over and have them pressed.

“Anyway, a bug flew in my ear. It hurt like the devil. I could feel it flapping around in there. I tried everything, but I couldn’t get it out. I guess I should have gone to the doctor right then, but I waited several days. When I did go, the doctor couldn’t find anything in my ear. I never did get it out. “And she’s been hard of hearing out of that ear ever since, which can lead to some pretty funny conversations.

But Mother’s hearing has always been something of a puzzle. I mean, I know she can’t hear out of that ear, but sometimes she can’t seem to hear even if you shout. And other times, she can hear a whisper from the next room. Rick says she hears and sees what she wants to hear and see, but that isn’t *completely* true.

“How did the funeral go yesterday?” I repeat my question.

“Why do you ask?” Mother gives me a questioning look.

“I was just curious.” I answer, avoiding her eyes by pretending to study my oatmeal. Usually, I don’t talk while eating breakfast. Certainly not about church functions which I’ve managed to escape.

Perhaps I make conversation this time because I’m lonely, since Rick isn’t here this morning. He quit his job with Fuller Brush (he let me help him with his deliveries, once) and started a new job as a pest exterminator. He leaves early Monday morning and doesn’t come home again until Friday. He’s due home today.

But really, I brought up the subject because it was the funeral of Mrs. Savage’s father. What I really want to know is how the Savage’s oldest daughter Barbara took the loss of her grandfather.

School has started again, so I see Barbara on the bus each day, but we never talk. My romance with the young girl ended months ago and though I hide it, the flame refuses to die. In my mind, I can see her at the funeral, tears leaking from her big round eyes and wish that I could have put a comforting arm on her slight shoulders and smelled her butter-colored hair.

“You could have gone, you know.” Mother tells me as she looks back to the dishes she’s washing.

“I didn’t want to. I hate funerals.” Though they don’t frighten me like they did my brother Eli. Mother says that when he was young, they used to take him to all the funerals, which are one of the common duties of a preacher. That is, they did until the day Mother looked around and found Eli missing. She searched until she found him, terrorized, cowering in the back floorboard of the car. After that, except for rare occasions, Mother and Daddy let us decide

whether or not we want to attend a burial. "I just wondered how the girls took their grandfather's death."

"It was sad, but they held up pretty well." Mother lapses into the memory and her hands grow still, a soapy dish held motionless. "Connie just broke my heart."

Mother finishes washing the dish and turns toward me.

"You know how she loves to sit with me." Connie is the youngest Savage girl, a tiny, red haired beauty. "She came and sat on my lap, and she was fine until they closed the casket. That made her absolutely frantic, she started screaming how they were going to smother her Granddaddy."

A drop of moisture forms on the outside corner of each of Mother's eyes as she continues. "*She just didn't understand.*" The outside edges of her lips lift in a sad smile. "But that's a hard thing for any of us to understand, isn't it."

It is too much for me, so I jump up from the table and grab my books. Regaining control of my emotions, I speak on my way out the back door. "Well, I'd better hurry or I'll miss the bus."

The bright sun is already warming up the Ridge and little tornadoes of dust swirl behind each step I take as I hurry across the empty trailer park next door to our house. Walking briskly down Highway 231, I pass Red's store and reach the stop just as the bus comes grumbling up the hill.

I even gain enough control of my emotions to stop and offer my condolences to the Savage girls as I get on the bus. It is the first time I've gone out of my way to speak to Barbara in months. She smiles that same sad smile I saw on Mother's face and when her eyes look into mine, they nearly pull my heart out through my throat. But then I sway with the bus back to a seat, across from my friend Buzzard, a serene calm enveloping me.

Barbara even looks back and gives me a smile as she gets off the bus at Pleasant Grove School. My thoughts are disconnected from my body for the entire day at school.

There is unusual activity and commotion at Red's store when I get off the bus after school. Jeffrey comes running when he sees me.

"The gypsies are here! The gypsies are here!" He shouts.

"What do you mean? Who are the *gypsies*?"

"They're up at the trailer park! They came in this afternoon! They're right next door to you!"

"What do you mean, *gypsies*?" I'm sure he's lost his mind. Gypsies exist only in the movies.

"Gypsies! You know, *gypsies*!" Jeffrey is so excited that he hops from one foot to the other, as though he needs to pee. "Come on in, everybody's talking about them."

We walk into the store. Several men are standing around in a circle, talking with Jim and Red. I know it is a big deal, because Red never comes into the store since he sold it to Jim. The only time I see him is when he climbs on that huge, ancient, monstrous old red tow truck of his, grinds its motor to life and takes it rattling and thundering off down the road. It is an even greater shock when he looks up and speaks to me.

"Well, boy, you got you some *neighbors* now," he grins through several rotting teeth and continues with his tale. "Yep, you've got to watch them every minute, they'll rob you blind. They came through here once before, back when Crazy Hawkins ran the store for me."

I didn't know that anyone else ever ran the store. And even though Jim runs it now, we still call it Red's.

“Well, he told me how they sent this one pretty young girl in, and she wasn’t wearing nothing more than a slip. Crazy said you could see everything she had, right down to the hair down south.” Red nods as the men snicker in unison. “Their women don’t have no modesty, they’ll just as soon show you everything. Well, Crazy said he’s watching her and she’s just kind of walking around, giving him a real good show. He said he wasn’t paying no attention to anything else, and she finally just buys some little something. And while old Crazy’s watching her, why the gypsy men are just filling their pockets with this, that, and the other.

“When they left, Crazy suddenly realized what’s happened. Well, he starts to get mad and he follows them outside. He said when he confronted them, why, all the gypsy men just pulled back their coats and showed him how they’ve all got big knives, every one of them.

“Well, Crazy wasn’t crazy, no sir. He said he decided that cowardice is the best part of valor and he just let them go. But he closed the store down till after they left the Ridge. He said they came up to his house, banging on the door and trying to get him to open up again, but he just walked out on the front porch with his shotgun and didn’t say a word.”

“Are you going to close the store?” someone asks Jim.

“I wish they’d send that girl down here and give me a show,” Jeffrey says to me. The men overhear him and they all laugh.

“No,” Jim says. “I’m not going to close the store. I hope they come in. I can use the business.”

I think this proves that Jim is a cut above the rest.

“They’re welcome here, but I’ll keep my eyes open.” The men look at Jim like he is crazy, until he laughs. “But I’m going to double the prices. And besides, I’ve got my gun right here.” He pulls a small pistol out of his back pocket and shows it to the men.

“That’s what I’d do,” Red ratifies Jim’s choice.

“Nobody’s going to close me down,” Jim says, then looks at my young friend. “I’m like Jeffrey, I wish they’d send a good looking woman down here to give me a show. I’ve got two eyes. I’ll keep one on her and one on the rest of them.”

The men all roar their approval.

Though I’m disappointed in Jim, I’ve still heard enough to get my curiosity aroused. The sight of the gun kindles a fear in me, too, though I take all this as country tall talk and add a grain of salt. Just to be on the safe side, I decide I’d better hurry home to make sure Mother is safe and to see what’s actually happening.

I slip quietly out the door and walk beside the highway toward home, my head filled with visions of gypsy men with knives and beautiful gypsy girls in flowered skirts dancing around campfires. I’m startled by the sound of feet running on gravel, coming up fast behind me. I spin around and crouch, bracing myself for an attack.

It is only Jeffrey, running full speed after me. He barely avoids tripping and sprawling in the road when he sees my defensive maneuver.

“Do you mind if I go with you?”

“No, come on.” Actually, that little uncertainty inside me welcomes his company.

As we round the corner and the trailer park comes into sight, I see twenty big, bright, shiny new mobile homes parked in a circle. Yes, indeed, these are gypsies, but the days of wagons and campfires are long since gone. Only a couple of men and several children are to be seen and they’re all dressed like anyone you might see in Shelbyville, at least during *Walking Horse Championship Week*.

Jeffrey and I still give the camp a wide berth, staying next to the road until we reach the front of my house. Rick's car is parked alone in the driveway.

"Rick's home. Come on in, let's see what he thinks." We climb up the small plateau onto the front yard and Jeffrey follows me in the front door. "Rick! Hey Rick."

"*In here,*" Rick answers from the bedroom.

"How long you been home? Where's Mother and Daddy? What do you think?"

"They drove to Huntsville. Daddy had some business there." Rick has been watching the gypsies through the bedroom window. "I got here about one. They've sure got nice trailers. And look at those trucks." Each trailer is pulled by a large, new truck; a few smaller ones are pulled by shiny new Cadillacs.

"Did you see any guns or knives?" Jeffrey asks.

"No," Rick laughs. "But I'm sure they've got some."

"Did you see any *sexy gypsy girls*?"

"You better be careful, the men don't like you looking at their women," Rick warns Jeffrey, a grin on his face. "I saw a few women, but I stayed out of sight. A couple of the men started arguing a while ago, then they went back inside their trailers. I thought maybe they were going in to get their guns, but they haven't come back out, yet."

The story has Jeffrey hopping again, but I'm not sure if Rick is telling the truth or just playing.

"Let's go outside," I say to Jeffrey and he follows me out the back door in more of a bounce than a walk.

"Remember, don't be staring at their women, they don't like that!" Rick calls after us as Jeffrey and I make our way through the screened back porch, out into the yard.

Jeffrey and I wander into the side yard and stand there watching. We stare, transfixed, though nothing much is happening.

Then there is the muffled sound of a gunshot, the bedroom window glass breaks and a bullet thuds into the ground beside us. Time and the air itself are as heavy as the water on the ocean's floor. Jeffrey and I look at one another in disbelief, neither one of us breathing. It's like one of those dreams, where something is chasing you and everything is in slow motion.

"Was that a bullet?"

"Somebody shot!"

We both exhale in a laugh and turn, running and diving on our bellies onto the back porch. I roll toward the wall to the right and Jeffrey to the left. We lie there for a moment, looking at one another, then I slide along on my belly and slither on the floor toward the kitchen door. Jeffrey mimics me.

"Are we going inside?" he asks.

"I'll have to stand up to get to the door. Can you reach it from over there?"

Jeffrey reaches up and turns the knob, then he pulls the door open. I climb into a crouch and dash into the kitchen, with my friend right behind me.

Rick is standing in the hallway with my Winchester .22 caliber rifle. His right hand grips the weapon by the barrel, just below the crosshairs of the sight.

"They *shot* at us! They *shot* at us!" Jeffrey babbles, so excited he's almost giggling.

"Did they shoot at us?" I ask, when I see the lopsided grin on my brother's face.

"No. I'm sorry, I was horsing around, and I shot out the window. It was an accident."

With this confession the former sailor takes the wind out of our sails. But, Jeffrey doesn't want to believe him. His head whips back and forth from me to Rick to me and back again.

Rick and I look each other in the eye and laugh. I find the relief greater than the disappointment.

Jeffrey turns away, then back again, almost angry. Then he decides to believe what he wants to believe. "I've got to get back to the store. Wait till they hear that the gypsies shot at us." With that, he starts out the back door.

"They didn't shoot at us."

He stops in the doorway, twisting and contorting his neck to look back at us, with disgust and finally resignation. Jeffrey uncoils his neck, then walks on through the door, letting the screen slam behind him.

Rick and I chuckle to one another.

"I better go down to the store and make sure Jeffrey doesn't tell any tall tales. He's liable to get a lynch mob up."

"No, we don't need a war next door."

As I'm walking past the full trailer park, two men and a woman get into a brand new 1960 Cadillac and drive toward Red's, leaving a cloud of dust behind.

The Caddy is parked by the front door when I arrive at Red's. Jeffrey is standing in silent agitation next to his father and Ollie Hinds, while Jim keeps a wary eye on the three gypsies as they browse among the shelves. I pull a coke out of the big drink chest, snap off the cap and ease over next to Jeffrey. He moves to the other side of his father and Ollie Hinds, so that the two men are between us. I crane my neck to look at him, but he won't look at me. Red and Ollie Hinds stare intently at the gypsies, who huddle together in conversation.

One of the gypsy men walks up to the counter, while the man and woman stand several feet behind. He talks very quietly with Jim. I strain, but can't hear what they're talking about. The man then motions toward the door and the three gypsies walk outside and get into the Cadillac. We watch through the door as the big, shiny car pulls out onto Highway 231 and heads toward Shelbyville.

"What'd they say?" asks Red.

"They said my prices were too high. I told them, if they didn't like it, they could take their business elsewhere."

Red and Ollie Hinds nod their approval. Jeffrey looks at me and then leaves through the back door.

"That Jim's alright," I hear Ollie Hinds say to Red. "I wasn't sure about him, when you sold him the store. But I reckon he's *Ridge folk* after all."

I look Jim in the eye as I pay for my coke. He looks away and back to the other men.

The events of the day ebb and flow through my mind like stormy seas as I walk back to the house. If gypsies are thieves, then they have to be watched, but I never saw them do a single wrong. Did Jim feel guilty? Does Ollie Hinds speak for the folks on the Ridge? I'm anxious to ask Rick what he thinks about all this, but he's gone when I get home.

I pace around the house until Mother and Daddy get home. Daddy acts like he wants to talk to me, but I'm so excited about the gypsies I can't sit still. I make two more trips down to Red's. Actually, I don't go into Red's, just down to within sight of the store, as an excuse to walk past the gypsies' camp. It's all very quiet, hardly a soul is stirring.

About ten o'clock, I finally manage to calm down enough to sit and watch some TV with Mother and Daddy. There's a new *Maverick*, played by someone named Roger Moore.

Tomorrow night *Gunsmoke* starts a new season. The newspaper says Marshall Dillon and Miss Kitty have a romance this year, though it'll take a few weeks before they kiss.

A last look out the window reveals that all the gypsies' lights are out. And Rick still isn't home, so I go to bed.

In the morning I wake to hear Rick's cheerful voice in the kitchen, which is unusual. I know something must be going on, since he came in after I was asleep and he's up before me. Besides, he's never cheerful in the morning. He's a real grouch until after he's had his coffee.

Remembering the gypsies, I scoot up the bed and pull back the blinds to look outside. Past the bullet hole in the glass, I see the bright sun bouncing off the dusty lot next door. The trailer park is empty again, the same as it has been every other morning that I've lived here. It's not the way I hoped the day would start. But, there's nothing else to do but get dressed and join my family around the kitchen table.

"I saved you some bacon and eggs." Mother tells me as I stagger into the kitchen, rubbing my eyes. They've already finished eating. Daddy has gone and Rick is sitting with a cup of coffee while Mother washes the dishes. "Sit down and I'll get it for you."

"Looks like we ran off the gypsies, *kemo sabe*." Rick says with a knowing smile.

"When did you get up? Were they already gone?" I ask him.

"The last ones were leaving when I got up, about seven o'clock," Mother informs me, setting my breakfast before me.

"I wish you'd woke me up. I wonder why they left so soon."

"Maybe they were afraid someone would shoot at them," Rick grins at me again.

My laughter wakes me enough so that I can face the warmed-over scrambled eggs, toast and bacon. Mother thinks you're supposed to eat the moment you get up. I'd rather wait an hour or two.

Rick and Mother make small talk while I eat. Oddly, their conversation seems more like that of visitors, rather than the talk of people who live together. Then Mother takes her leave and goes to meet Daddy at the church, leaving Rick and me alone.

"Let's go in the living room." Rick says, and I can tell by the serious look on his face that he has something on his mind.

"What's wrong?" I ask and Rick's neck tenses.

"What do you mean?" Rick's forehead makes a furrow. "What makes you think something is wrong?"

The tone of his voice confirms my suspicions. I don't say a word, but sit down next to him on the couch and wait.

"I've got another job." He laughs and puts his left hand on my right shoulder. "Hey, it's not like somebody *died*." Then he continues. "Killing bugs is kind of interesting. I spent this week crawling around in the basements under Sewanee University. But there's no future in it."

I can't argue with that. "What are you going to do?"

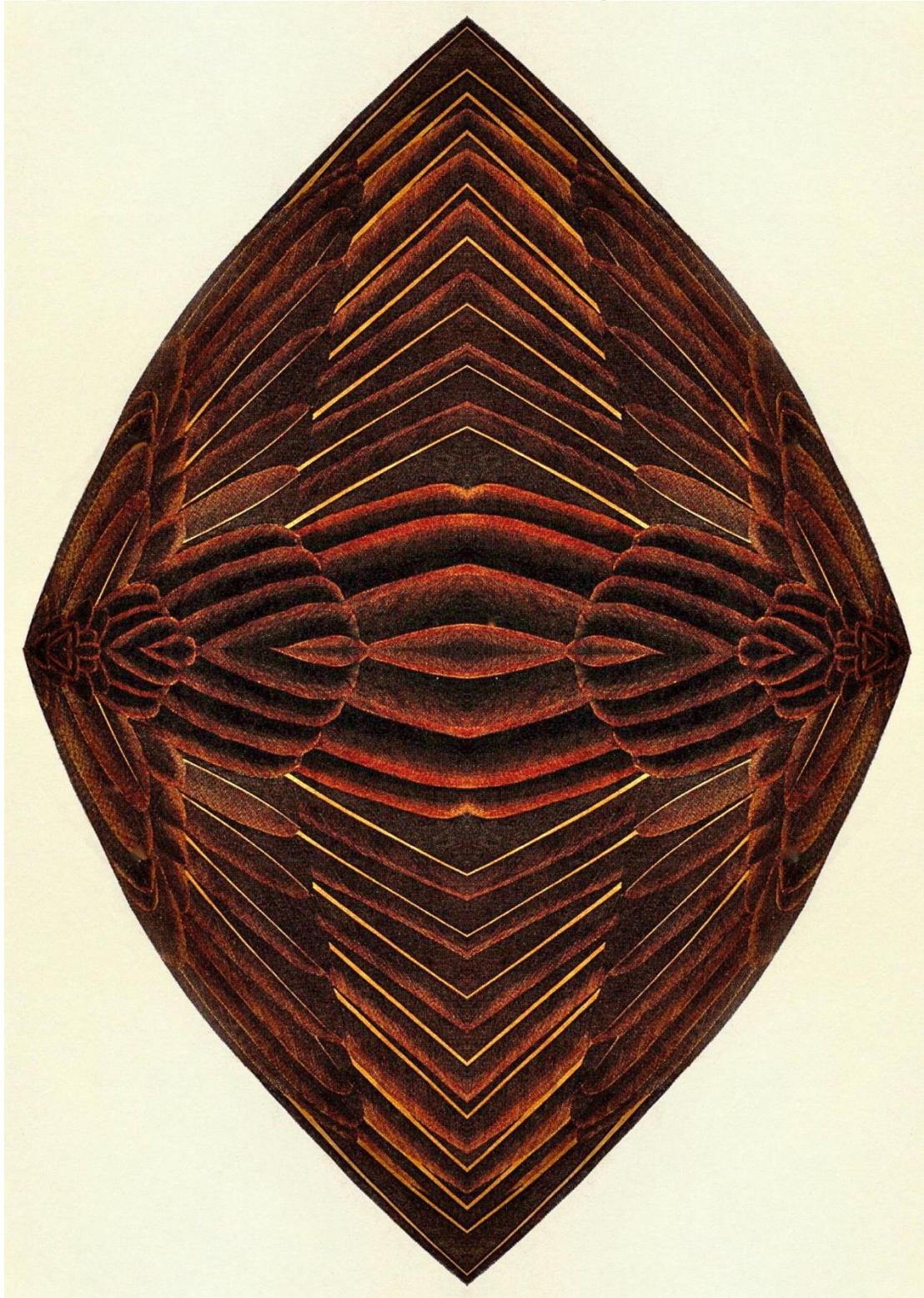
"I'm going to the *Beeweeds*."

"What's that?"

"The British West Indies. I've got a job as a radio operator down there." He puts a hand on my shoulder and shakes me gently as my chin drops to my chest. "Hey, buck up *bunk*. I tell you what I'm going to do. I won't need a car down there. I'll leave mine here for you."

Tom Harper

Openness Without Seeking



Bill Wolak

Olympia Unmoderated

I am bare and it is not clear when I undressed.
Layers shed glass by glass –

the flute skirt and slender leg, the broad goddess foot,
the dress spelled in sugar:
you explain that the vocabulary of wine, like breasts and kohled eyes, is feminine.

This is the closest yet that I have come to an exchange.
We will haggle and storm and I will play Madame Desbaresdes

I could be her, I think, tuck a fat bloom in my chest,
breathe, spill sweat and pollen, manage spells in grape and rock:
crystal body poised between your fingers, your eyes magicked intent
on the bloody rim my lips made.

Blood lips, black lids, the black ribbon at my throat signals
that I am ripe for transaction.

Let this wine glass be my mercy; you encroach:
elbow on my thigh, your finger scrapes an eyelash off my cheek, your left arm a fishing net
ask me *now* if I'm afraid
once you've said
I am always looking at you
once you've said
Now see, my face is turning

the shade of your lipstick
it is sunset and the sky is bloody and I know
that this is not my place; they are all staring
while we barter words for bouquet grazings of our knees.

Let this wine glass be my tutor: I am learning how to sell myself, and moreover,
how to buy,

and that the body, like the earth, was fashioned for joint-ownership;
that the body is a craft that demands –

come, we have entered a new age, and these days the watcher
is implicated. There is ribbon in my voice-box, magnolia in my lung.
I have made up my mind to stare back.

Marissa Davis

Spark Plugs

I was nine years old the first time I saw Crazy Kenny.

It was a summer morning and my Dad was driving us to Hopper's BBQ for breakfast, and as he turned onto Main Street, he nudged me and pointed up ahead. "Look yonder," he said.

I pressed pause on my Game Boy, looked out of my window, and saw a man walking where a sidewalk should've been. He was wearing blue work pants and a lighter blue button-up that was stained and loose fitting. His gray and white hair blew high and backwards, like weeds in the wind. For every few steps the man would take forward, he'd stumble one step back, then he'd turn around as if someone had tapped him on the shoulder. I asked Dad what was the matter with him.

"Always been that way," Dad said. "Your uncle went to high school with him back in the sixties. Always been an odd bird. Folks call him Crazy Kenny. Got millions he ain't never spent a dime of."

"He's rich?"

"What they say."

The man shrunk in the rearview. I turned to look out the back window and watched until he was gone.

The summer before, a house on Thayer Road had stolen my attention during those morning drives to breakfast. The house was large and white and sat at the end of a gravel driveway. Tim Farlow, who ran a local lumberyard, had lived in that house for over thirty years before shooting himself on the front porch. He'd used a hunting rifle, but he hadn't left a note. I'd heard Dad tell the story on the phone one morning when he didn't know I was listening.

Every morning for those few next weeks I'd sit on my knees and press my face against the glass as we passed Tim Farlow's house, but I never saw a drop of his blood on that front porch. I always wondered if I'd feel something as we passed by—maybe a chill, maybe something I'd never felt before—but I never did.

On the days we ate at Hopper's, I'd search the roadsides for Crazy Kenny. I'd usually see him once a week, a couple times if I was lucky. He was always wearing the same dirty clothes, doing that same walk: two steps forward, one step back, turn, and repeat. The "Kenny shuffle" Dad had named it.

I'd only see him for a matter of seconds, hoping during that snapshot I could put a finger on why people called him crazy. Sometimes I wondered if he sat around and mumbled about the war like my Great Uncle Robert, or if he had conversations with the imaginary person that forever tapped him on the shoulder.

One morning, I saw Crazy Kenny standing in front of Cook's Fill 'R Up. He was watching another man squeegee the window of a big-rig. That man was wearing the same blue pants, the same button-up as Crazy Kenny. Crazy Kenny worked at Cook's: a millionaire working at a rundown service station.

My dad never stopped at Cook's for gas. He was always partial to the Zip-Go because he'd played in a bluegrass band with the station's owner back before I was born. As far back as I could remember, they'd been telling stories of banjos and harmonicas, crowds and screaming girls, how they almost signed a record deal in Nashville back in 1980 or 1982 (depending on who

was telling the story). Those stories had grown tired. I just wanted Dad to go to Cook's, but he never did.

In my teenage years, my boyhood curiosities had given way to other fascinations that, for a time, seemed more important. Like my friend Jeremy Cooper's attic and the Judas Priest record he'd play backwards, the messages he swore were hidden in Rob Halford's voice if I just listened closely. Like Sarah Reynolds, who kissed me on the lips the summer before 8th grade, how she grew and changed that next year into a girl who no longer liked skinny boys with long hair.

Those experiences came and went like the seasons, and somewhere in the back of my mind, the memories of Crazy Kenny still lingered. He was like Tim Farlow's porch in that way. They were like unread books I'd put away on a shelf.

The week I turned sixteen, there was no question where I'd stop for my first tank of gas. It didn't matter to me that gas was three cents cheaper at Zip-Go, four cents cheaper at the BP they'd opened off I-85.

When I pulled up to the pump at Cook's, a man asked me what he could help me with. His nametag said Neil; he was tall and fat and his shirt didn't quite cover his belly. His question confused me. At Zip-Go's, Dad always went inside to pay for the gas that he'd pumped himself.

I told Neil I was running low. He smiled and set the pump to unleaded, then wiped his hands with a greasy rag. I looked around him and the pump that had numbers that slowly scrolled and fought back a smile when I saw Crazy Kenny sitting inside the station. There were a couple other men inside too. They looked old, but not quite as old as my Papaw was at the time (eighty-two, I think).

I got out of my Jeep and walked towards the front door that had a "No Loitering" sign duct-taped to it. I could see an old metal Coke cooler through the window and figured it was plenty enough reason to go inside.

"Howdy," a man in a boxy John Deere hat said as I opened the door. He was sitting in a metal chair, as was the man to his left who had no hat and no hair. Crazy Kenny sat across from them in an old bus seat. He said nothing, but watched me as I neared the Coke cooler. His mouth hung open just enough to reveal dirty, long teeth. He was wearing a plaid winter hat that day, the side flaps covering his cheeks.

Inside, Cook's was a mess. It smelled like oil and gasoline, neither of which could cover the stink of urine coming from the tiny bathroom that was left open. The tiled ceiling was stained brown and drooped. The concrete floor beneath it was pockmarked and cold. On the wall behind the register hung framed pictures of The Andy Griffith Show. One of the pictures was of Neil with his arm around the actor who played Floyd, the barber. The display reminded me of the shrine Papaw kept of John Wayne in his basement. Below those pictures was a wooden shelf cluttered with boxes for oil filters and spark plugs. Most of the boxes were open and empty. A space heater glowed and oscillated near Crazy Kenny's feet, but I felt no heat from it.

I said hello real quiet, then took out a bottle from the cooler and laid it on the counter.

"Neil will ring you up directly," Baldy said.

"Lord knows Kenny ain't going to ring nobody up," John Deere said.

Baldy slapped his knee then held his hands in front of his chest. "Not unless he was a gal with a nice set of knockers."

“Both of you is liars,” Crazy Kenny said in a high-pitched voice that sounded part possum screech, part grumpy old man.

The sound of crazy, I thought.

“Kenny,” Baldy said. “You know you get all tight in the pants ever-damn-time a gal with a big ole rack walks in here. Only time your ass leaves that seat.”

“Ain’t nothing but liars, the two of you,” Crazy Kenny said, leaning forward until his round gut rested in his lap.

The jawing went on for another minute or so, then Neil came inside to ring me up for twenty-three dollars and four cents. I paid cash and emptied a dollar ninety-six change into my coat pocket.

“Hell, Kenny wouldn’t know what to do if a gal wanted to look at his pecker up close,” Neil said. “Heard he’s partial to men, anyhow.”

“Heard that, too,” John Deere said. “There’s a picture of him and Sid Lewis all hugged up at the prom. Damn thing even made the yearbook. Took up half the page.”

Baldy scooted up in his seat. “Jimmy Lewis’ brother? One that works over at the funeral home?”

“Same one,” Neil said.

“Hell, I believe it,” Baldy said. “He drives that damn hearse around town even when there ain’t a funeral.”

I didn’t know if Neil and the old men were just joking with Crazy Kenny or not. And I didn’t know if Crazy Kenny was really as angry as his voice lead on. Cook’s was a spectacle, like a weekly cable show. From then on, it was the only place in town I bought my gas.

John Deere and Baldy weren’t at the station every time I stopped by, but most times they were. Sometimes a guy with an oxygen tank was there. He wore tubes under his nose that made a squealing sound as he smoked cigarettes one after the other. Even the mayor, Roger Barnes, would join the group from time to time. And as far as I could tell, those men just came in to shoot the shit, and Crazy Kenny took the brunt of it all. Rarely did those men need a tank of gas.

“Hear what that priest up in Maine done with them little boys?” Oxygen Tank Man said one afternoon.

“Yeah, Kenny,” John Deere said. “You Catholic, ain’t you?”

“Catholic my whole life,” Crazy Kenny said. “Media ain’t nothing but a bunch of liars.”

“Sid Lewis Catholic, too?” The mayor asked. “Lord knows he’s a damn democratic. Has been for years.”

“I don’t talk to Sid Lewis. Ain’t friends now, never was.”

The mayor crossed his arms. “Could’ve sworn I seen a real sweet picture of you two.”

I drank my Coke and laughed quietly. That’s what I always did. I watched and laughed. I think the old men liked an audience.

Sometimes I think Crazy Kenny did too.

One day I stopped by Cook’s and found myself alone with Crazy Kenny. He looked at me when I came in and, like usual, he didn’t say hello. I sat in Baldy’s seat nearest the register and scraped my thumbnail across the ridges of my Coke bottle, clearing my throat every so often to break up the silence.

After a few minutes, Crazy Kenny finally spoke: "Bought some salt yesterday," he said. His voice was calmer than usual.

I looked up at him and raised my eyebrows.

He stared at the ground. "Been eight years and a month," he said. "Eight years and a month since I last filled up the salt shaker at the house."

"Yeah, guess it takes a while to go through a whole thing of salt," I said.

"Cost me a dollar-nine," he said. "Prices gone up since eight years and three months ago. Gone up on everything."

"Mmhmm," I agreed. And we said nothing more.

There were other such occasions when the two of us were alone, and Crazy Kenny usually had something to say. And whether his ramblings about politics or chemtrails or the value of the dollar were directed towards me, or just any open ear, I never could tell. But I'd listen anyways.

And it was on those days—after I'd pay Neil and drive away—that I'd think about what Crazy Kenny's house might look like. Far as I knew, I'd never seen his house, nor had I ever asked anyone where he lived. Some days, I imagined the house to be small and made of brick. Other days it was big like the houses in Steeple Point, the neighborhood on the north side of town where a NASCAR driver used to live. Regardless of where his house was or how big, I imagined a closet filled with light blue button-ups, all of them hanging neatly. I pictured a kitchen with an old range stove, a cabinet above it with a box of salt.

Crazy Kenny died when I was twenty-two, but I never found out how. I was in my last year at Appalachian State and had come home for fall break when I heard about it at KC's Diner. One of the waitresses was talking to a customer about the strange fellow who worked down at Cook's. *Kenny Something-or-another* she called him. She said the mailman saw him sitting in his living room with his eyes open, and that Crazy Kenny didn't move an inch when the doorbell rang.

A couple of days later, I read his obituary in the paper. He had no surviving family, at least none close enough to speak of, and no funeral arrangements were listed. His life was a small paragraph.

He was seventy-eight. And he had a real name.

That evening, I thumbed through a phonebook until I came across Crazy Kenny's last name: *Allen*, and I wrote his address on a piece of paper. I knew the street he lived on, though I'd rarely driven down it. It was just a few blocks from Cook's.

For weeks, that address stayed folded in my wallet. I'd thought about throwing it away several times, but I never did. And even if I had, 112 Franklin Road had tattooed itself onto my brain.

The day I decided to visit that address was a Sunday. It was early in spring and beautiful outside, but the air still held the breezy remnants of a North Carolina winter. I drove slowly that morning, taking my time to look at the houses that were cramped on each side of the two-lane road. They were all single-story clapboard, some blue, some white, one mint green. All of them

looked to be built in the '40s or '50s like the houses on my grandparents' street: attached carports, walkways that led to painted concrete steps that led to tiny porches shaded by white awnings. I pictured Crazy Kenny walking up those driveways with his unsteady gait, turning back toward the road after every couple of steps, pulling his pants up by the belt loops.

When I came to his address, I stopped and pulled into the empty driveway. I walked to Crazy Kenny's front steps and studied the plainness of the house: white, flaking paint, green shutters, a brick chimney jutting from cracked and faded roof shingles. On the left side of the house was a single window, and the blinds had been left open.

As I walked closer, there was a part of me that didn't want to see inside. It was the same part of me that didn't want to visit the house to begin with, yet I found myself next to the window, cupping my hands against its dirty screen.

The inside of the house was lit with what sun the windows let in and my shadow was cast on a far, white wall. Besides the sun-gold dust that flecked the air, the room was empty. I strained my eyes and could see imprints on the carpet of furniture that was once there: perhaps a recliner and a TV stand, maybe an old radio.

I turned and walked back towards the small porch and sat down. I thought about those stories Dad had told me, the things the old men at Cook's had said over the years. I closed my eyes and could hear Crazy Kenny's voice, the way it changed when he said the word *liar* and the name *Sid Lewis*. The way it changed when he spoke to me.

I opened my eyes and looked at the overgrown grass, the number 112 hand-painted on the leaning mailbox. I looked at the houses to the left and right and the ones across Franklin Road, then I pulled the piece of paper from my pocket. I imagined a different address scribbled on it: an address in Steeple Point, or somewhere like it. Some place where Kenny didn't walk three blocks to work and three blocks back home. Where his walkway was brick and led to a house that looked like it belonged to a millionaire. And there was a family inside that house who talked about what was on the news and what was for dinner.

As I walked back to my Jeep, a scrawny dog crossed the driveway into Kenny's yard. It was a brown mutt with black circles around its eyes like a Zorro mask; its long tongue hung from its mouth and swayed left and right, dripping as the dog slowly hobbled. The collarless dog sat and looked toward the front porch for a moment, and then toward me. I squatted and called for it softly, but it only turned and lumbered away, looking back only once before vanishing behind the house next door.

I looked down again at the address in my hand. I balled the piece of paper up, tossed it into my floorboard, and drove away. When I passed Tim Farlow's old house on my way home, I didn't think about that gunshot on his front porch. I thought about whom he left behind.

It was better than a year before I stopped by Cook's again. I avoided it. Some days I took the long way home from work down I-85 just so I wouldn't have to pass by it.

Eventually, I did pull into Cook's one afternoon for an oil change. It wasn't something I'd planned; I just went. And things were different at Cook's; it was quiet inside. Baldy and John Deere were there. They looked the same as they always had—maybe a little older—and they still said hello, but they didn't say it the same way they used to.

The old bus seat where Kenny used to sit was empty save for a newspaper that was neatly folded. I slid the paper over and sat on the cracked, blue vinyl. The seat was hard, the rips and

tears in it scratched against my back. Baldy and John Deere squirmed in their chairs and they watched me.

I picked up the newspaper and opened it to the sports page. The North Carolina Tar Heels had won a basketball game the night before. They'd beaten the Virginia Cavaliers by seven; I'd watched the game at a bar with friends. On page C4 there was a picture of a basketball player going in for a lay-up, a box score to the left of the picture. On the opposite page was an ad for a two-liter Cheerwine: Buy one, get one free.

"Know what I heard?" Baldy said. My mind left the words on the page and the pictures of basketball players and soda bottles. "I heard them Tar Heels ain't nothing but a bunch of cheats."

"Mmhmm," John Deere said. "Heard folks do their schoolwork for them. Ain't even got to go to classes down there so long as you winning games."

"All about the money these days," Baldy said. "Damn shame, ain't it?"

John Deere said it was.

I cleared my throat.

"You two ain't nothing but liars," I said, my voice high-pitched. I smiled behind the paper. "Media too. Nothing but liars."

The room was silent again.

Outside I could hear the grumble of an engine, the service bell ringing, and Neil's faint voice. I heard a car door shut.

The door to the station jingled open.

It was a teenage boy. The old men greeted him as he walked towards the counter. He stood next to the Coke cooler and leaned his weight against it, but he never opened it. We met eyes for a moment, then my eyes went to the ground and became lost in the scars of the gray concrete.

"Neil will ring you up directly," Baldy said.

Scott Blackburn

Two Ladies



Kelci Crawford

Simply Money

I bought a new pen.
Mechanical, multi-colored, “cool.”
At the cashier, I felt so happy then,
but I’m still doing the same in school.

I bought myself new clothes.
New style: yoga pants and Nike shoes.
I’m excited for the change,
but the next day, nothing’s new.

I remodeled my room.
Covered the previous layers of covered paint.
Saying goodbye to the past, the pain,
but one month later I still feel the same.

Today I went shopping with my mother.
I picked out a few things, but then put them back.
When my mother asked why I simply replied,
“I don’t need them.”

Because changing my environment
simply will not change me.
Because covering the old walls with new paint
simply will not get rid of the past or the pain.
Because wearing new clothes
simply will not change who I am.
And because money will not change a thing.

Kayln Maria

Dear Miss Hines, Rosie Missed School Because Nittins Had Kittens and She Ate the Placenta Which Made Her Sick

By her mid-20s, Rosie Randall was a winner at most endeavors. She'd formed her own online advertising company and hired two dozen geeky but earnest employees. Colleagues agreed that, of all their acquaintances, this was the woman who came up with the best comebacks, could work magic with a spreadsheet, and had perfect eyebrows. She took weekend brunch at chic bistros and flirted with men who knew all about superior Pinot Noirs, but life had not always been so generous. Indeed, in her youth, the thoughts Rosie had had had an odd cadence.

Two years before reaching her teens, Rosie convinced herself that her friends had more friends than she did, and her friends were richer to boot. Dorlene Kurtcher bragged to everybody in school after one Easter break that she would be touring Spain in June for ten days, and RuthAnn said she was going to Florida sometime, and it seemed as though almost everyone else planned an exotic vacation according to everyone else. When everybody kept harping on how excited they were about their summer prospects, Rosie felt worse than before. Eleven-year-old Rosie Randall judged her life at that age through appraisals, almost exclusively through repeated comparisons with peers, but the oddest part was that she—a good twenty pounds overweight and still “rather plain for her age” according to her Aunt Bea—was absolutely correct in what she believed. Her friends—or more precisely, acquaintances—*did* have more friends than she, and they *were* richer, happier, and healthier than she was or might ever hope to be. Rosie’s only tangible features on the plus side of the prepubescent balance sheet were her blond locks and dainty feet.

Rosie knew nothing about the historical fact that way back in 1961 a person named James Coleman had suggested most people have fewer friends than their friends have, then 30 years later another sociologist, Scott Feld, confirmed the idea after studying social networks. As unlikely as it might sound to the average person, and unknown to young Rosie Randall as she suffered through school, the “friendship paradox” turns out to be true of practically everyone everywhere, but even had the unhappy girl understood all the statistical details supporting the claim—that the friends of an individual on average have more friends than the individual—it would not have spared her from feelings of inadequacy as a human being.

When Nittins started having kittens a couple of hours before breakfast one Wednesday morning, Rosie found herself mesmerized by the spectacle. Just like that: one kitty, two kitty, three kitty, four entered the world as the young girl sat cross-legged on the wooden floor amazed by the fact that she suddenly had lots of something. Rosie ignored her mother’s call to breakfast three times until Mom shouted in that tone of voice she sometimes used. After Rosie gulped down a soft boiled egg and slice of toast too quickly, she begged to be excused from the table and—time for school or no school—dashed right back to the hallway closet where Nittins had chosen to deliver her kindle of kittens on a pile of purple pillows, and the biological saga continued. Five kitty, six. At the exact time in the morning that Rosie returned to the hallway floor to watch, the sixth and final calico kitten emerged, and Nittins took a curtain call. Mama cat meowed once while lowering her head and immediately started eating her own afterbirth.

What the heck was this, Rosie wondered. At such a tender age, she did not appreciate that some animals consumed their own afterbirth to help keep prey at bay and reduce odors associated with newborns, but the rationale wouldn't have mattered in the least even had she understood. Rosie watched Nittins chew the slime with rasping noises until her stomach did somersaults under her skin, after which Mom sent daughter straight to bed where she tossed and turned in fevered distress the remainder of the morning and much of the afternoon. The same motion picture kept playing over and over on the gray screen of Rosie's not-yet fully developed parietal and occipital lobes, and she simply couldn't stop the matinee. She'd always dreamed of having babies of her own, lots of children one day, preferably daughters in pink dresses, but now the fantasy was fouled by an empirical discovery that mothers ate bloody placentas or whatever the stuff was, and the very idea made Rosie hate bloody life itself.

Some people accept in due course what life has to offer; others interpret the consumption of afterbirth as a personal affront. Most people have a few friends, but some have lots and lots of them; most people have a modest amount of money, but some have piles of it. Same thing for happiness and health and other assets. It's those rare folks with huge amounts of friends that accounts for the friendship paradox, but Rosie could not have cared less about paradoxes even had they been explained in a way she could understand. She only knew that the other kids in school seemed to have more spending money, newer clothes, and more fun. She also did not know that most of the other kids in class felt the same way she did, but once again Rosie just didn't care. What she cared about was the way Mr. Blodgett had almost brushed his thick, hairy wrist against her arm one day when she'd hovered at his desk after delivering a sealed envelope from Miss Hines as a special favor to her homeroom teacher. Yes, the handsome man had almost touched her skin but not quite, and the move wasn't even intentional on his part, but Rosie felt the heat coming off that wrist, or she *almost* felt it. What would it be like if Mr. Blodgett actually touched her hand one day?

Of course there was little chance that anyone would go the extra mile—or inch—to touch Rosie's hand or anything else, she believed, because all the other girls in school were prettier. She was convinced of that truth. And the other children in class, girls and boys alike, were taller and faster on their feet and smarter as well. All of it was true, as true as the others having oodles of friends and maybe as true as mothers having to eat their own placentas after giving birth to babies, and just about as upsetting.

Rosie Randall sat at the kitchen table the evening of the Nittins affair and watched her mother put away some groceries when Uncle Chico walked in through the rear door straight from his late-afternoon NRA meeting that was held weekly in the back room of a local gun store. His face was red, redder than usual, as the screen door slammed noisily behind him.

"You know, the only way to survive those gangs of hoodlums is with guns. That's the way it is nowadays."

Uncle Chico did not bother with casual greetings. He just jumped right in, so Rosie's mother nodded in the manner she had adopted years before of responding noncommittally when her younger half-brother started in on talking big talk. That's really all a person could do in reaction to his metaphors about gangs of hoodlums and the like.

"It's the unholy trinity of elite hypocrite government people, the brainwashed media, and pop culture that's sending our rights straight to hell and inviting massive social disorder."

When Uncle Chico continued ranting about his abridged civil liberties in language that was not natural to his tongue and about being robbed by those lazy food stamp people and pop culture and socialists, Rosie's mother deftly slid into her purse some leftover food stamps that had been lying on the counter. She worked swing shifts in a big box store but didn't earn enough money for

the essentials, as she put it, so she'd applied on the sly for food stamps to help out on the home front. This information she kept private and only shared it with Rosie, who promised not to tell.

"Then you have to consider those massive storms of violence they're planning against our power grid," Uncle Chico was saying. "You gotta arm yourself for that stuff." Mostly metaphorical massive storms and power grid stuff, he meant, but the weapons he had in mind were real enough.

His point seemed to be that everyone needed guns to protect themselves from crazed terrorists living among us. For her part, Rosie believed every word her uncle uttered, except maybe the part about food stamps because her mother said she needed them to get staples at the grocery store. As for the rest of what Chico claimed, what reason would her uncle have for lying?

Not five minutes after her uncle said his goodbyes, the neighbor lady everyone on the block called Callie, even though it was not her real name, knocked on the front door and let herself into the house as she was in the habit of doing. Callie was a tall, dark-skinned woman with spacious ideas in her head, and mostly they stayed that way: in her head. For years she'd been telling everyone she knew up and down the street that she was planning to buy a used RV and take her good old time seeing old Route 66—or what was left of it—from one end of the country to the other, through the vehicle and trip never materialized. Today however, Callie's thoughts were far afield from the scenic highways and byways of America.

"You been hearin' bout all these folks wanna raise the minimum wage again?"

Mom nodded her head, offering Callie a stool at the counter at the same time.

"Well honey, I was in my early thirties working two jobs when I finally made \$15 an hour at one job, and it took 17 years to make \$20. Fair to pay someone \$15 an hour to start flippin' burgers when flipping burgers isn't a career job? You bust your ass in a filthy dirty factory with nondesirable working conditions and hazards that can kill you working 12 hours a day 7 days a week not knowing what day it is, then you can say you deserve \$15 an hour!"

Callie's eyeballs searched the room for consensus as her lids fluttered. Mom, who earned \$7 an hour at the big box store after eight years on the job, part-time, shook her head. As she carved a second slice of Spam and tossed it into the skillet, Callie went for broke.

"Oh, I know what you're thinking all right, honey. But it's well known, dear, that Confucius thought Geminis are doubting Thomases."

Perhaps Callie was confused. Both Rosie and her mother had been born in November, but Mom let it go.

One morning about a week later, out on the playground, Dorlene said she was Episcopalian, and Rosie wasn't anything, nothing at all. Just nothing. This did not give a leg up to Rosie's ego doldrums.

"Yes I am too."

"Are not. You don't believe in anything."

Rosie didn't have an answer ready for Dorlene, but she believed lots of things in her heart, which she mostly kept to herself, including the value of food stamps and the ugly truth about afterbirth. She believed Dorlene was happier and prettier and maybe mouthier than most people as well, and that Dorlene's daddy drove a fancier car than anyone else in the neighborhood—a new Buick every year—and that you needed to arm yourself for the power grid takeover, so she asked her mother a question that night.

"What *are* we anyways?" In the religion department, she meant, but her mother was way ahead of her daughter.

"Don't you remember when you were a baby and got dunked in that big bathtub thing, honey?"

Rosie thought for a while. "Maybe I do. So what are we then?"

"Your daddy was Baptist. You were baptized Baptist and you were given the last rites too. You were given the last rites on the day you were born."

"I was? How come?"

"Because the doctors didn't expect you to live through the first night. But you did." Mom patted Rosie's head and gave the top part a smooch.

A boy came up to Rosie on the sidewalk after school about a week later and said he thought she was OK just as she was. He did not care about how many friends she didn't have or how pretty she wasn't or whether the unholy trinity was inviting massive social disorder unless you carried a shotgun when you went to the outlet mall to buy a pair of socks. He said it didn't matter if she was Baptist or not. He asked Rosie if she would like to be his friend, and right then the entire world took on a better disposition.

Rosie had been baptized and given the last rites and finally had an excellent friend who believed in her. She was good to go.

Robert D. Kirvel

A Recipe for Good Health

*“5 out of 5 stars! My family has been using ‘A Recipe for Good Health’ for years!
We’ve only had 3 miscarriages, 2 ER visits, and shingles!”*

Ingredients

4.8g Lialda
500mg Florastor
2 capsules VSL#3
10mg Brintellix
50mg Amitriptyline
1200mg Calcium
1000mcg B-12
2000mg Omega-3 Fish Oil

Optional

50g+ Protein
20mg Dicyclomine
5% Lidocaine Ointment

Directions

1. Start simple. Start with good intentions. Save your body from the trans-fat slaughter with wholesome healing. Add B-12.
2. Stir until sick (IBD should take anywhere from 2-5 Years). Add 4.8g Lialda, preferably in the form of four tablets. (For an optional but *fun* twist, rely heavily on Dicyclomine like it is the only thing that will keep you living from now until then. Become the only 20 year old addicted to an anti-diarrhetic.)
3. Pay tithe to the colon. Eat only grade-F eggs and *lightly* buttered toast.
4. Develop Vulvodynia. Add 25-50mg Amitriptyline. (Optional: Add 5% Lidocaine to taste).
5. Grow increasingly malnourished, allow your hair to fall out in clumps. Watch each strand closely as it drifts into the snow. See a nutritionist. Eliminate any ingredients containing wheat or dairy. Add 1200mg Calcium.
6. Wonder when you’ll be able to get off the painkillers.
7. Go to the cupboard and see if you have Entyvio. Ponder the Entyvio. Watch it cautiously, closely. Stick your entire hand into the sodium chloride-mixture, let it freeze and burn in equal parts. Taste. Return Entyvio to cupboard.

8. Face the fact of your own mortality while ripping the clothing tags off of ten-year-old gifts. (This is to make sure your mother doesn't think you hated your presents when you abruptly die). Have a meltdown. Cry. Add 5-20mg Brintellix.
9. Do the following additions in timed increments, because there is a chance they may make you sicker. Add 2 capsules VSL#3. Add 500mg Florastor. 2000mg Fish Oil. 5g L-Glutamine. (Optional: Add 50g+ protein.)
10. Ignore the creeping sensation of disappointment and failure. Wait for good health.

Recipe by **Hannah Carmack**
Co-authored by Many Lovely Physicians

Mile Markers

We stand by the side of the road
with our thumbs out,
or rather my mother stands by the side
of the road with *her* thumb out.
I am pouting beneath a shade tree
a few feet from the shoulder

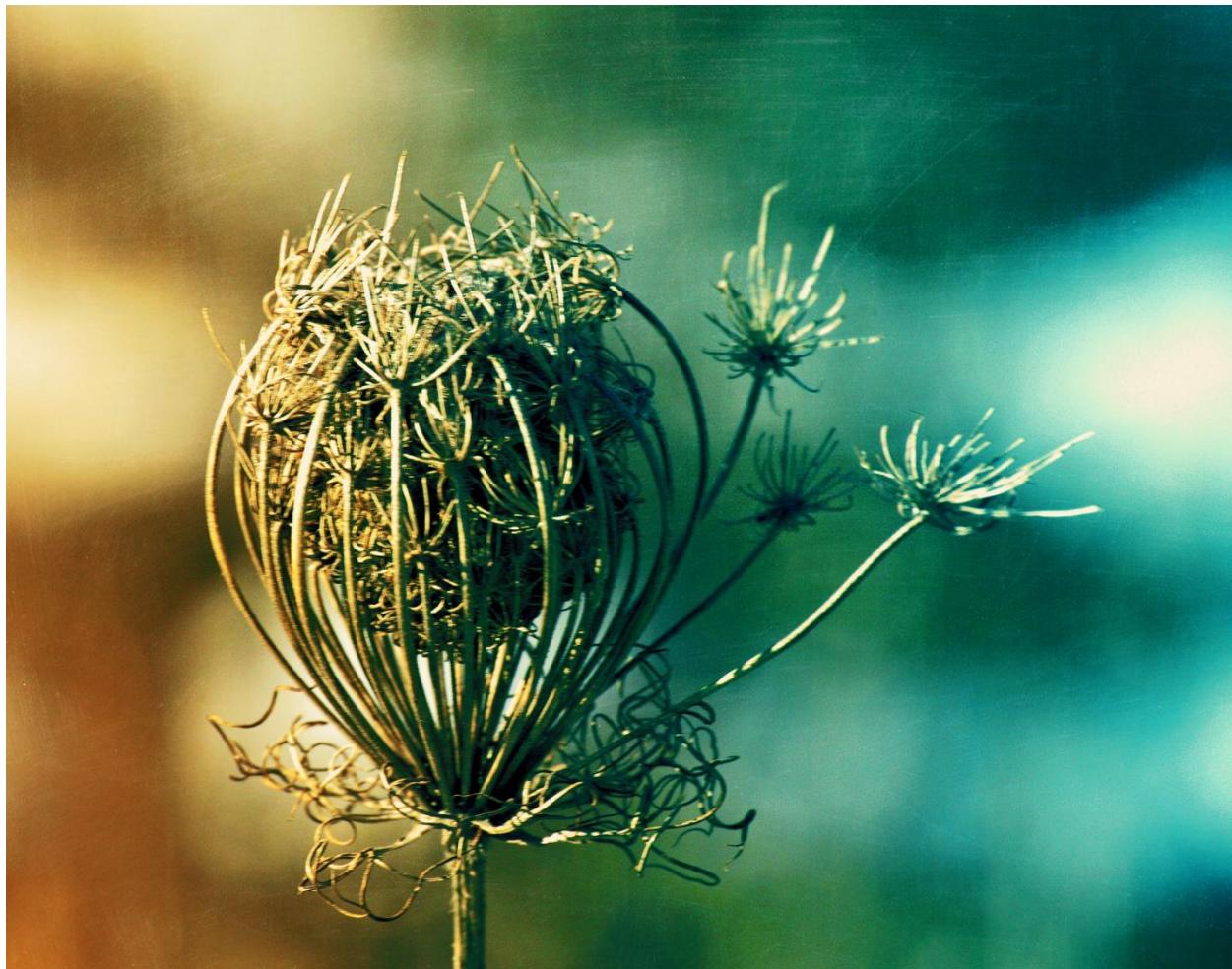
sitting on my green, child-sized Samsonite.
Inside the suitcase, a marionette named Pepe,
unwashed jeans, a copy of *The Lion,*
the Witch, and the Wardrobe. Missing:
my security blanket and a pair of tennis shoes
left by mistake on the floorboard

of our last ride. We are on a highway
somewhere between Albuquerque
and D.C., maybe the Midwest,
maybe even Kansas, I don't know
which highway because I'm eleven
and the significance of highway numbers

is lost on me. I pout because of the blanket
lost to that underwater world between sleep
and wakefulness and the time between gears
and asphalt. No, that's not the real reason
I am pouting. I am pouting because while my mother
sought a Ginsberg-esque experience,
I wanted a *Paper Moon* kind of life.

Lisa M. Hase-Jackson

Theatrics



Louis Staeble

The Eighth Grade Graduation Speech I Never Gave

To my fellow Leland Stanford Middle School graduates, the class of 2013:

Our teachers and principal refuse to call today's gathering a "graduation," and instead refer to it as a "promotion," because apparently leaving middle school is a stepping stone rather than a milestone. But in actuality, leaving middle school is worthy of being acknowledged as a graduation. After all, a lot of us experienced many "firsts" here. Our first lockers. Our first phones. Our first dance. Our first "F's." Our first relationships. Our first bad words. Our first real best friends. In perhaps the most awkward phase of our life, the phase when we're adjusting to our new bodies and mindsets, we were forced into classrooms together to watch each other change drastically, these experiences consuming three years of our lives. If leaving that behind isn't worth being called a graduation, I'm not sure what is.

Some of you may not know me as well as you think, but recently I've realized that I may not know some of you as well as I think. On the last week of school in sixth grade, I made it my mission to ask almost every single person in each of my classes to sign my yearbook and was returned with looks of confusion and remarks of "What's your name?" That night I was satisfied when I saw every corner of my yearbook scribbled with names, even though the only message that many of you left was "HAGS," lazy code for "have a great summer," or even no message at all. But with a slow realization, and the help of my mom who told me I looked desperate asking complete strangers to sign my yearbook, I realized I hardly talked to any of the names scrawled in between the pages, and that left me feeling a bit empty inside.

For most of my time here, I thought I knew all of you. I thought every popular girl who wore makeup and short tight skirts and talked to all the boys until two in the morning only cared about how they looked or who they kissed at so-and-so's party. I thought that every person who yelled at me in P.E. was my sworn enemy and had no soul (the problem being that many of these people were P.E. teachers). I thought that every boy who never did work in the group project was not going to get very far in life. These were all of the things I believed wholeheartedly, and from then on out, I let it define my relationships.

I was wrong. Completely, utterly, terribly wrong. Since that last week of school in sixth grade when I realized I knew no one, I thought that meant that I just never established a real relationship with you and that the stereotypes I created for you all were who you truly were. What I failed to realize was that you are multilayered; you are three-dimensional. What I failed to recognize was that you all have stories.

As I started to get to know you, I saw that you've lived with the pain of having parents who have passed away, rough family lives, health issues, or a past with bullying. But despite every hardship, you've turned them into larger-than-life dreams about what you want to be when you grow up, a passion for helping others, and a desire for something bigger than who you are.

Multiple times in these classrooms, I have been proven wrong. Most of the time, we don't like to be proven wrong because it feels like an insult to our intelligence. But the few times I have enjoyed my judgment being seen as unreliable are when my perspective has changed about you all, when I understood that who I thought you were is not who you truly are. If not for this, I

wouldn't be friends or on good terms with the popular girls who I thought were self-absorbed, but I was actually just jealous of, with the people who made fun of me in P.E. but who are truly passionate about athletics, with the boys who didn't work on the group projects but knew how to make people laugh.

If you lay my yearbooks from all three years of being here next to each other and open their covers, you'll notice a difference. Names turned into messages turned into letters. Strangers turned into friends. Desperation turned into contentment. This past week, as I read these messages over and over again, I felt like I had real friends for the first time. For all the years I was teased in school, for all the times I had to sit alone at the lunch benches, this was worth it.

But now it's graduation day. I wish I could say I am going to easily walk off of this campus and never look back. I wish I could say I am not going to spend the next few years consumed in stalking your social media profiles just to see how you are all doing. I wish I could say I won't spend high school wondering what would have happened if I went to this school or that school. But this is what happens when people have an impact on your life. This is what happens when you make real friends, when you meet people who have changed you in such a way that you will never be the same.

I may never talk to some of you or never see some of you again. But right here and right now, I want to apologize for my lack of understanding, for failing to look past the superficial. I want to apologize for any time I've ever hurt you or made you feel like less than who you are. Because even though there have been plenty of moments here that I've felt like less than who I am, every time you lifted me up cancels out all those moments. I want to thank you for that, whether you love me or hate me or know me or are a stranger to me.

Congratulations, graduates. Thank you for helping me become who I am today.

Hannah Robison

Collage On Paper

I've come to you
with holes for eyes
and water for brain,
snip here snip there.

I can't cut a straight line
So I tear it out instead.
When the voices say
it's not enough,
ask them what is.

I need one full lemon
sliced and zesty, peeling
around her naked frame,
her head emerging
from the curve.

You study the curve
and say she's not enough,
you need her to listen
you need her to speak.
I tell you I've done
all I can.

Arielle Lipset

Pinning

I played tennis with Madeline Morling each Monday. Everly Trickett and I did tea on Tuesdays. Wednesdays, Thursdays, and Fridays I lunched with other ladies who lunched. I spent weekends shuffling my children to play dates with the Morling, Trickett, and Kipling children, and shuffling my husband, Andy, and me to dinner dates with their parents sans the Kiplings. Andy didn't approve of Russ Kipling, our newest neighbor, because he had secured their home through what my husband called "a tacky foreclosure." Also, his wife worked in the non-profit sector while Russ cared for their twins. Andy often said, "Never trust a man with unscuffed shoes, Corrine." He insisted this pointed to laziness and an unwillingness to provide for his family.

Despite Andy's barely scuffed Spectator Wingtips, I agreed with him about Russ, and I reassured him I was proud of what he did every day for our family at Bank of America. If he didn't oversee those who were collecting people's outstanding debts, who would? I understood there were two types of people in this world: workers and the individuals those workers kept in check.

My mother had been the latter, but I knew since my sophomore year of high school I wanted more. I suppose my mother had wanted more, too, as most conversations with her boyfriends she started with, "You have to treat me better, asshole." But she never encountered the Cliff Note's to *Pride & Prejudice* and, despite our living in Pennsylvania instead of England, while reading I understood the easiest path to attaining that more I desired—marrying up. My childhood best friend, Shelley, agreed, but Shelley had acne and back fat, and even someone like Andy—red-faced, gray-toothed Andy—wouldn't notice her once presented with options.

A cold snap arrived in early October, causing autumn leaves to accumulate like snowdrifts on our lawn and my loyalties to my husband to get buried along with my social life. It grew too chilly to play tennis or lunch on fancy patios, so in a moment of boredom I accepted Russ' request to follow me on Pinterest, and I followed him back. I imagined his account was no different than mine or Madeline's or Everly's: a space to curate other, more talented people's ideas, then make lists of similar items to scavenge for at craft festivals. As Halloween approached, however, Russ' pins started flooding my feed.

"Look at these costumes I made for Vicky and Ricky—a spider and its web!" he wrote. Both had more glitter than a Mariah Carey album, and Everly exclaimed both were shoo-ins for Lower Gwyneth Elementary's annual contest. My daughter's cowgirl costume and my son's plastic Batman mask, recycled items from previous years because they dearly loved them, paled in comparison. Could I honestly blame myself if Emilie and Ethan cared for their belongings, though? Isn't assigning sentimental meaning to objects a positive trait, despite it shoving them off of the judges' radar? Hadn't Madeline and Everly bemoaned those children who only won in years past because their mothers had tried too hard, ordering expensive costumes in an attempt to fit in with the wealthier families, a misstep I too made before Madeline took me under her wing? She'd told me she was bored at the Bank of America events her husband made her attend. "I need an ally, someone to have fun with," she'd said. "The other wives are too old or too nouveau." She tacitly acknowledged I fit into the latter category when dispensing her first piece of advice: "Always remember, money screams, but wealth whispers."

But then came Russ' jack-o-lanterns. "Here's some pumpkins I decorated between Vicky's piano lesson and Ricky's soccer game!" he wrote. This was followed by photographic evidence of his carving excellence: Ziggy Stardust, the Eiffel Tower, and the shower scene from *Psycho*. They taunted me online. Later, they taunted me while I walked my pug, the tangled swirl of Greek Revivals and English Tudors falling away in my mind like an uninteresting landscape might as his pumpkins took center stage. Madeline repinned Ziggy Stardust, likely as a way to remind herself she once was edgier and had listened to more than just *Kidz Bop*. In case it wasn't a vanity repinning, though, I stressed that Russ' carvings were ill conceived. I reminded Madeline of her own ideas, pointing to the likely possibility of delinquent children in neighboring developments just waiting to muck up our ordinarily pristine roundabouts. I suggested they would seize this opportunity to smash his pumpkins to assert further their delinquency, Russ' décor serving as mere bait to entice these adolescents to act like savages.

But Russ was relentless. Later that evening he wrote, "Check out these cupcakes fashioned after witches! I whipped them up while my children played in their tree house!" I imagined the chocolate mousse from the pointy iced hats ringing Vicky and Ricky's heart-shaped mouths. I also imagined their blood sugar skyrocketing. My children's apples and peanut butter might not have been as photogenic, but I was preparing them to become more photogenic adults, the type who didn't need root canals and didn't have diabetes. This dedication made me feel like a martyr. Still, when I picked up my children from a play date the following afternoon, Emilie exclaimed, "Mrs. Morling made Mr. Kipling's cupcakes! I had two!" As she pushed her unopened lunch pail towards me, she added, "They were dee-lish-us! Yummers!"

"Use your words," I said, even though Emilie had used words. "Use prettier words. Grammatically correct words."

"You can't always push vegetables on us, ma," Ethan whined. "Mrs. Morling agrees."

"Don't sass me, especially in front of your younger sister," I said. I considered asking if Mrs. Morling planned on taking him to the dentist, but I knew it was ridiculous to attempt to have a rational conversation with a seven-year-old. How could ordinarily rational adults whom I considered friends begin paying more attention to Russ than me, though, not noticing the damage his pins caused? Poor eating habits which put children in nutritional jeopardy. Backtalk. Russ was a monster, a monster that was destroying my community and my children.

Like most monsters, Russ was ruthless. The next morning he wrote, "Look at this wreath I assembled using the berries and foliage I collected while walking the twins to school! Before their dismissal, I'm going to repaint our front door to better match it!" This pin soon was followed by images of their new aubergine door. I had been begging Andy to hire a painter to touch up ours for months, but when I showed him Russ' pin, he insisted it looked ostentatious. "You should appreciate our shabby chic look, Corrine," he said, a catchphrase I was certain he'd simply come across while perusing one of my *Southern Livings* on the toilet.

"I don't appreciate our shabby chic look," I said. "It's trendy." I hoped to appeal to his classic sensibilities or, more so, his desire to avoid spending money on styles that quickly fell out of vogue. As I aged, I saw a definite need for an appendix to the Cliff's Notes for *Pride & Prejudice*, one that illustrated how most rich people get and stay rich by being stingy. I sometimes missed my mother's insistence on new school wardrobes each fall, filling my closet with cheap, unsturdy garments I easily could replace the following September. There was something exhilarating in knowing I didn't have to commit, a certain excitement an inexpensive asymmetrical blouse lent that a costly yet sensible wrap dress never could. I'd shopped enough with Madeline and Everly to train myself to spot classics on the racks and, by measures, begin to

love them. Still, when my mother, who had moved to Florida, occasionally sent clothing for my birthday or Christmas, it sometimes proved difficult to add those presents to the donation pile.

"I'm sorry you feel that way," Andy said, giving Russ' pin another look. I should have been pleased that at least one person hadn't joined the cult of Russ, but this made me angrier. Andy's allegiance to Russ' ideas would have benefitted me or, at least in the immediate sense, my door.

I tried to ignore Russ' Pinterest by watching reality shows about housewives like myself and, while I still felt as glamorous as these women, I knew my life wasn't as interesting. Emilie and Ethan should have been enough, but they'd become ghosts of me, really. When couples consider children in the abstract, they often are drawn to the promise of unconditional love and dressing their offspring in perfect outfits. Perhaps the love part remains, but the fact that these children will want to assign stupid names to household pets and select their own garish attire is rarely considered. I was unable to orchestrate the ways they represented themselves and, by extension, me. Emilie recently wore pink carnation spandex to a roller skating party. Ethan gave the Fed-Ex guy the finger for no other reason besides being able. Our dog's name was Cowboy, a name I was forced to repeat in dog parks and whenever he tried to greet houseguests with unwanted jumps and barking.

Knowing I couldn't craft like Russ, I grew desperate to draw attention to myself in other ways. I considered engaging in catfights with my friends like the women on Bravo, but this seemed unlikely. Madeline was anorexic and, as a result, too frail to fight. Everly was a Quaker. Russ was a man and, since it wasn't acceptable for us to hit each other, I found it inappropriate for Madeline and Everly to even consider him part of our inner circle. Perhaps I didn't need a catfight if I could just prove to my friends that I was a domestic goddess who loved her children more than Russ loved his, a trait I never imagined Madeline and Everly cared about until now.

Despite having plans to dine at the club with the Morlings, I took on some of the au pair's duties for a change, dumping water into a pot on the stove, preparing it for whole wheat pasta. I combed the market's weekly circular while I waited for the water to boil, listing items the au pair could purchase that I wouldn't ordinarily approve of, items the children loved like animal crackers and Pop Tarts. I justified my choices by clinging to the "high in calcium" labels I knew these items bore to lure in oblivious mothers. My children needed to smile more, and I was willing to loosen the reigns if these small concessions made that possible.

Then, Russ pinned a photograph of the homemade bread and beef stew he concocted so his family could share a hearty meal together to kick off the weekend. Suddenly, my whole wheat pasta looked uninviting from its box, the jarred sauce beside it even more so. I tossed the not-yet-bubbling water into the sink. I phoned Madeline to tell her Andy was feeling unwell, so we were unable to keep our plans. She likely only had room for one project in her life, one person who didn't fit automatically. I had to do something to stay in her good graces before next seeing her, something that would prove I was more worthy of her attention than Russ.

"What's wrong with Andy?" she asked.

"Could be bronchitis. Maybe bird flu," I said. While she rambled about a Korean shop downtown that sold designer medical masks should we need them, I pillaged Google for images of stews that went beyond Russ' pedestrian meat and potatoes. Disconnecting with Madeline, I settled on Boeuf Bourguignon. I pinned the photo and its recipe, claiming both as my own. I wrote, "Just a little French cooking for my children and sick husband on this chilly autumn night." Madeline immediately inquired about the brand of Cognac I'd used and if it was safe to allow minors to consume liquor-laced stew. Everly overlooked this discrepancy and repinned the

recipe without follow-up questions. Russ wrote, “Peux-tu cuisine?!?” Trying also to sound fluent, I responded, “bon appetit!” When he wrote, “merveilleux!” I was stumped, unable to come up with a single French word on my own. I Googled “obscure French phrases,” but felt so anxious I simply bid adieu to Russ and the rest of our cul-de-sac rather than giving myself away. I knew I should have paid more attention to Mademoiselle Duncan in high school. I knew I should’ve insisted on a European au pair, instead of one from South America. Still, I was already in better spirits about the responses to my stew and, after ordering a pizza, I settled into an episode of *The Real Housewives of New York* while waiting for the au pair to return from picking up my children from ballet and karate.

The questions about my stew persisted the following morning as I tried to field them, hunched over my laptop in bed. *Are you French? Is this a family recipe? Have you always had such culinary prowess?* I told all of those who asked that my inclination to make the dish came to me like a magic trick, that my inspiration was akin to any great artiste and that, once one discovered his or her gift for sculpture or music or food preparation, denying that calling was impossible.

But my followers demanded more recipes once they tested my first. I considered comparing my stew to a masterpiece, pointing out how it would have been better for many celebrities to sink into obscurity once they reached their pinnacles. Paul McCartney with the last Beatles’ album, *Let It Be*, the title itself practically nudging him to disappear. Ice-T with NWA. The interest people had in my pins prevented me from stopping, though, drunk on their attention. Russ pinned an afghan he completed for his daughter’s bed, and I knew I quickly would lose the ground I’d gained if I didn’t counter his creativity.

“Why did Madeline ask if I recently traveled outside of the country?” Andy asked as he entered our bedroom to adjust his tie in the full-length mirror. He leaned in to kiss me but instead pulled away, likely noting my morning breath. “And why haven’t you showered? You’ve been on that computer all morning.”

“I told her you might have bird flu, or something like it. Just tell her work sent you to Egypt.”

“Bank of America wouldn’t do that,” he said. “Besides, I work with her husband.”

“Well, make up something. I hate going out with the *Borlings* sometimes. Madeline always pushes her food around her plate to make it look like she’s eating, and it makes me feel like a pig.”

“Then you better get out of bed and hit the gym before dinner tonight,” Andy said. “I rescheduled.” I didn’t give him my usual affirmative speech before he headed to work on a Saturday morning, but he didn’t seem to notice. Andy couldn’t see with his ears the way I imagined a significant other should, detecting those smaller things that either were hinted at or left unsaid. He only saw with his eyes, thus he was disappointed not by my lying, but by my looking unkempt first thing in the morning.

My children begged me to let them play at the Kiplings, but instead I told them they could have free range of the television and eat unhealthy snacks all day. I also promised they could let Cowboy on the couch. If I was going to convince Russ and the rest of the neighborhood women that I was more talented, securing friendships for my children and me, Emilie and Ethan had to be implicated. While the au pair served them Eggo Waffles, peanut butter & jelly

sandwiches, and Planters peanuts straight from the jar, I pinned photos of crème brûlée French toast, peanut butter & jelly crepes, and bourbon pecan chicken. As they shoveled in these snacks, I coached them on what to tell everyone else. “If you want to go back to celery sticks and carrots, you can,” I warned. “I would hate to have to do that to the two of you, though. You deserve to be spoiled.”

After seeing my pins, Madeline called to see if we were still on for the club. “Andy never told me he rescheduled,” I said. “I’ve already slaved over dinner for my family. I can’t possibly skip out.”

“We don’t mind coming to you,” she said. “I do love anything with bourbon!”

“Andy’s probably contagious,” I said. “Even though he went to work, he was up all night coughing.”

“I can bring some of those designer medical masks we discussed,” she said.

“Trust me. You’ll want to stay far away for at least a couple of days.”

When I texted Andy to explain we weren’t going to the club again tonight, he said he would go to the club’s bar alone. “I can’t stand another night in,” he wrote. I’m not sure what time it was when he came home because I was busy pinning images of meals and snacks I never made, meals and snacks that were being re-pinned at far greater rates than Russ’ contributions. When Andy finally came to bed, I didn’t bother asking about his night at the club because nights at the club were always the same. He quickly fell asleep while I continued to pin, the glow from my computer screen flickering in the reading glasses he forgot to remove. Despite his snoring, I also eventually slept well knowing there were people out there who wished their lives were more like mine.

Over the next few weeks, I broadened my interests on Pinterest, moving from culinary creations to crafts and home décor. I pinned broaches, earrings, and necklaces. I pinned children’s barrettes and headbands. I pinned greeting cards, doorstops, and paperweights. I pinned a chandelier.

I started knowing Andy by the gobs of toothpaste stuck to his side of our double-sink, a half-eaten English muffin left on a plate on the counter, dress shirts placed in a bag for our au pair to take to the cleaners. We rarely conversed when together, me bent over my laptop while he stared intently at the television, even during commercials.

I stopped allowing the Morling, Trickett, or Kipling children in our house, as their parents would have to drop them off and pick them up and, in doing so, they would notice I didn’t have any of my crafts on display. I also stopped meeting Madeline and Everly for lunch, aware I had none of the handcrafted accessories they would expect to see paired with my outfits. Most days, I didn’t change out of my sweats. I noticed Madeline and Everly had stopped repinning my creations, but their cold shoulders didn’t bother me as much as they ordinarily would because women as far as Tuscaloosa, Boise and Tempe were repinning me.

Eventually, Everly cornered me in Target, our au pair unable to shop for me because she was traveling for her birthday, a trip she’d worked into her contract. “Did I do something to offend you?” she asked. “If so, I want to make amends.” Her pacifist nature prevented her from ignoring the signs of a deteriorating friendship like a normal person might.

“I’ve been so busy with the children and Andy’s pneumonia,” I said. “It takes weeks to recover from an illness like that.”

“Madeline thought Andy had bird flu.”

“Heavens no,” I said. “He would have to be quarantined were that the case.”

“I thought I saw him at the club a few nights last week,” she said. “Well, at least I thought I saw his car when I drove by.”

“You know Andy. He’s always go, go, go. I’m proud he’s such a hard worker, but I do wish he’d listen to his doctor. He would’ve recovered much sooner!”

“Well, I’m not going to set foot outside of this store until you agree to have me to dinner,” she said. “Your constant culinary pins have made me so hungry!” Aware the housewives on the shows I watched prided themselves on their abilities to throw memorable dinner parties and proud that Everly had just admitted out loud she was still paying close attention to my activity on Pinterest, I extended an invitation to her for the following night. I told her to invite Madeline as well. “We’ll be there.”

When I reached my car, I asked Siri to locate a caterer. “Fast, Siri,” I added. “Fast.” She recommended Mitch’s Kitchen and, although it had five stars on Yelp, I’d seen the establishment a few times on the restaurant report for improperly storing meats and cheeses. Besides, I didn’t trust Yelp users. Even Arby’s had five stars, people utilizing phrases like “the perfect lunch spot” and “simply mouth-watering.” Siri recommended the club, but Madeline and Everly would recognize any dish prepared there. Andy and I had a decent caterer for our wedding, but he was no longer in business.

Then, I remembered Shelley’s brother, Louie, whom I heard had opened his own restaurant. During my second semester of college, my mother’s boyfriend had cleared out her scarce savings, momentarily forcing me to leave school behind to help her. Shelley found me a full-time job managing a coffee shop where she worked as a barista and suddenly, rather than studying art history from learned professors in lecture halls, I spent most afternoons in the café staring at the images of Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera imprinted on the women’s and men’s bathroom doors respectively. I stayed up late drinking cheap liquor and playing cards with Shelley to distract myself from my life. Louie had been attending culinary school, and he often whipped up midnight snacks, saving us from pilgrimages to the all-night salad bar at Lancer’s.

Soon, I’d met Andy, a business major studying at Wharton who frequented the café. Shelley adored him, despite his always coming with his girlfriend in tow. But Andy showed up solo one morning and specifically asked for Shelley, wanting her to prepare his dry cappuccino and dispense advice about his unexpected break-up. She was taking an exam at the community college, so I stepped up, sensing an opportunity to get out of that hellhole. I was far more attractive than Shelley, plus Andy was depressed, the perfect combination. “I was going to ask out Shelley today, but I never thought to pursue you,” Andy had said. I never told Shelley about the conversation. By the end of that summer, Andy and I were living together, and I had no need to return to college or talk to Shelley or Louie again.

“Siri,” I said. “Find Chef Louie Taylor.” She pointed me to a location just seven miles west but, despite its proximity, I was certain Madeline and Everly had never ventured there. Louie Louie’s Creole Catering had excellent reviews and, unlike Arby’s, its pictures actually looked mouth-watering. The food also looked far more sophisticated than his quesadillas and pizza rolls that had once impressed me. I called right away.

“Corri!” he said. “I thought you were dead!”

“It’s Corrine now,” I said. As I placed my order, he insisted he needed to prep the food onsite due to a recent grease fire. Still, I was determined to make it work and I figured he could use the money.

"I'll pick you up. You're right next to the Pizza Hut on Main, right?" I asked, aware I couldn't risk someone spotting a catering truck in my driveway.

"That Pizza Hut's a daycare center now. Drop-a-Tot."

"Then I'll pick you up in front of Drop-a-Tot," I said. "You have to be out of my house before three, so what time should I get you?"

"Eleven." As we negotiated price, I thought of all the times Shelley and I walked to that Pizza Hut, playing Joan Jett or Journey on the jukebox and trying to capture the attention of the pimple-faced high school boys who worked there. It had been the highlight of our adolescence.

When Andy returned from work, I told him he instead would need to attend the children's Halloween parade the following afternoon at one. "But they'll be devastated that you're not there," he protested. "What if they win?"

"They won't win," I said. "Besides, I have a mammogram scheduled for the morning. I found a disturbing lump, like a pea." I felt ashamed for saying so, but I'd just been watching *The Real Housewives of New Jersey*, so Amber's story was what came out.

"Why didn't you start with that?" he asked. "I have an important meeting in the morning, but I can go to the parade."

As I pulled up to Drop-a-Tot, I waved Louie to my car. "You look great," I said. He'd aged, probably because he wasn't using the right skin products. "Throw your stuff in my trunk, then get in the back seat."

"The back seat? I should charge you extra for being difficult, especially after not hearing from you in almost ten years," he said. "You seem—different. Still painting?"

"I don't have time for stuff like that," I said. "Shit!" I read a text from Andy: "Can't make parade. Had to reschedule meeting to afternoon."

"Excuse me?" Louie asked.

"Oh, nothing. Just lay across the back seat. Please."

"Well, this is going to cost you extra," he said, though he did as I'd requested.

"Whatever," I said. "As long as no one sees you. I can't let anyone know I had help making this meal and my neighbors notice everything."

"Damn, Corri," he said. "Sounds messed up." Though he seemed to accept my explanation, I grew more and more nervous he'd pop up at any moment as the Dollar Trees and boarded up houses began to be replaced by yoga studios and homes with sprinkler systems. Madeline, Everly, and Russ shouldn't be on the road—they'd already dropped off their kids at school, and it wasn't yet time for lunch. Rush hour had passed and their husbands and wife already were settled into work. As we drove by the club, however, I almost was certain I spotted Andy's car in its parking lot. I was angry at the thought of him skipping out on the parade, yet having enough time for breakfast. I also was angry at the thought of who he might be having breakfast with, but I knew I couldn't stop with Louie in my backseat. I didn't let him out of the car until I'd safely pulled into the garage and closed its door behind me.

While he prepared blackened catfish, fried okra, and red beans and rice, I snapped photographs with my phone of his process, carefully cropping out Louie before pinning a few. He was working faster than I'd expected, and there was a good chance I could still make it to the children's parade. Also, the images I shared had been quickly repinned. I felt a surge of excitement each time my work was shared, like anything was possible, like my name was on the

tips of so many people's tongues. "Don't you ever put down your phone?" Louie asked. "You're not as talkative as you used to be."

"I have work-related stuff to tend to," I explained. His messiness made me nervous. My house needed to look pristine for the dinner party, so I cleaned around him while he worked. I thought of how I used to take comfort in his sister's messiness during my unexpected return from college, as it was something stable, something that seemed like it would never change. "How's Shelley?"

"Nearly finished her PhD," he said. "Took her a bit longer to get started, but hey, that's often the case with most of the interesting people I know." Then, he added, "Maybe there's still hope for you?" Even though he was always a jokester, I couldn't help feeling like this was a jab.

Rather than asking what Shelley had studied or where, I headed towards the dining room to set the table with placemats I'd ordered on Etsy, careful there were no tags or signatures that would give away their true origin. I pinned photos of the settings once I'd completed my inspection, then re-inspected and pinned other items in my living room and foyer that I also had purchased through Etsy and planned to pass off as my own. Like the food, these images were quickly repinned. I noticed Russ hadn't pinned anything in days. Perhaps he felt overwhelmed by my output. Perhaps he realized he needed to step aside and let someone with true talent shine.

Louie called from the other room to tell me the meal was complete but, before I could reach the kitchen, he shrieked. When I reached him, Andy was waving a spatula over his head.

"I knew you were cheating," Andy screamed at me. "Why else would you let yourself go so much? You barely change out of your pajamas when you're around me and you're up until all hours chatting online with this—?"

"I don't care if I knew you way back, you people are strange" Louie said, rushing toward the closest door. "I'll be sure to mail you the bill." With that, he let himself out. I was relieved he was gone and even more relieved none of my neighbors would spot him, as the parade was about to start.

"Everly and Madeline must know all about the two of you, too. No wonder you've been keeping them from me," Andy said, now waving the spatula at me. "How was the doctor? I decided to meet you there, but the secretary said you never had an appointment."

"I don't have cancer," I said. "But I'm also not cheating on you. Can you say the same? Weren't you at the club this morning?"

"Yeah, the club right across from your doctor's office," he said.

I wanted to tell him I'd hired the chef, a dear childhood friend, to teach me how to cook Creole for him, but I was distracted by a notification on my phone. Russ had repinned me for the first time, sharing the catfish I'd spent the past two days stressing over. I knew I'd arrived. He was the real deal and in that moment I fully understood what I'd been up against, as well as the weight of Russ' admitting publically that I'd done something noteworthy he first hadn't considered. Andy tried to swipe my phone, but I ducked.

"I'm going to stay with my brother for a while," Andy yelled. I knew he'd be back by morning. His brother had married a Baptist who didn't drink, and they didn't belong to a club. I'd deal with my husband tomorrow, but first I had to execute without him the most repinnable dinner party possible, a glimpse into an exclusive world where I did the picking and choosing, where I decided what was elegant and what was tacky, where I was what others aspired to be.

Lindsay A. Chudzik

Bravado



Emilio Pinedo

The 12 on Tenth Street

I ride this bus with envy. The man with his *mujer* makes me wish he was my own boyfriend. Mexican romance radiates in her candle light eyes. His catch and kiss the commuter sun that bathes his face, illuminates his goatee, his lust. The morning crush of the crowded bus, I'm oblivious to as I breathe for him. Baited, I peer over the edge of the seat, the cliff hanger of a *novella*, I wait for his lips to touch her cheek. The wisps of her hair pressed against her pillow creased face reveal their last minute love making that must have devoured the hours before. The bus. I rush each Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday from the train to my anxious view, where I wait in their shadow. Words like *amor, siempre, fantástico* call to the empty city in my heart, ride against the inside of his arms, curved. He guards and claims her. I wish I was his prize. I ring the bell, exit the back door. I catch my breath on the broken edges of his broken English when he speaks to me all weekend long.

David-Matthew Barnes

As we are married, my thoughts run backward

Our hands jostle and slide across the jungle gym, the metal cool against our young, unbroken skin. I stop on the bridge to watch you dangle from the monkey bars as sharks stir the molten sea below. They breach, snapping at your ankles. You kick at the air with your red shoes, laughing.

This was the only structure that we recognized, yet day by day it changed. One day: bridges and battlements. The next? A spaceship. Tomorrow—who knew? All we had were options.

Quinn Ramsay

Those Two Legs

Maurice's entry into our family by marriage in the early 1980s was a traumatic event for certain of my family members—especially my mother, Mary. After all, her father, Glenn, hadn't even been dead for a year.

Mary's mother, Lucille, was a spritely and sassy 82-year-old widow at the time she started dating Maurice. Maurice had just turned 96. The widow and widower met at the Senior Citizen's Center in the southern Indiana town of Bloomington. Maurice and Lucille's friendship deepened over a period of months as they attended outings and other senior activities together. Soon, it fermented into a winter love. Surprisingly, the elephant that occupied a large corner of the room didn't seem to bother my grandmother: she was white, while Maurice was African-American. I suspect that Lucille reveled in the shock value of it.

"Shock? Married to a colored man? I cried my eyes out," confessed my mother, years later. "I hadn't been told. My sister, Glennie, knew about it. Maurice used to come up to Bert's a lot—the old colored lady that lived there beside of your mamaw's and papaw's house on Lincoln Street. But I didn't know she's a goin' with him. Why hadn't they told me?"

As it turned out, Mary's mother never did actually break the news to her. It came instead from Maurice.

"I was standin' in mom's kitchen, and the table was all set real pretty and a candle in the middle ready to be lit. I come in the front room and I said, 'Looks like you're gonna have company?'

"Yeah," she said. That was the end of it—not another thing said.

In a little while, the front door slammed. I said, "What was that?"

Someone come through the dining room into the kitchen, I looked up and said, "Huh?!"

It was Maurice. The octogenarian looked at Lucille and Mary. Then he asked Lucille, "Haven't you told her yet?"

"No."

"Don't you think it's about time?"

According to Mary, Lucille never said one word.

Maurice reached down into his pocket and produced a little velvet box. He opened it up. Inside was a diamond engagement ring.

"Well," he said, "If you can't tell her, I will."

He turned to Mary. "Your mother and I are engaged. And we're getting married."

I asked my mother how she felt at that moment when she heard the happy news.

"I had two legs under me, but—oh, help! Those two legs didn't amount to two cents right then."

Mary recounts that she retreated quickly to the cellar where her husband, Earl, was doing chores. He immediately sensed that something was wrong.

"What's the matter?" asked my father. The tears began streaming down my mother's face.

"Get in that truck. Don't you ask me one word until you get me out of here."

As they headed down Henderson Street, Earl asked her again why she was so upset. My mother recalled the conversation with my father on the way home:

“You know my daddy’s been dead less than a year?”
‘Yeah.’
‘She’s gettin’ married.’
Your daddy looked at me.
‘She’s what?!’
And I said, ‘She’s getting married.’
He said, ‘Who to?’
I said, ‘A colored minister.’ That’s exactly how I answered your daddy. I begin to cry, and I want to tell you, I squalled.
He said to me, ‘Now look—you’re gonna have another stroke. You have to calm this down.’”

My mother needed to make sense of (what seemed to her) this senseless act taken by her mother that would undoubtedly bring shame and embarrassment upon the entire family. She sought an explanation from the pastor of the First United Methodist Church, Ross Myers. The church was a fixture in the community. Lucille and her first husband attended services there for nearly their entire lives. Maurice, although a part-time minister in the Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church, also attended First United with Lucille. I still vividly recall the building—a tall, stone monolithic structure located downtown on Fourth Street. It sported a three-dimensional cross on the roof that lit the night sky. As a young boy, I once stood on its roof with my grandfather, watching him shoot at pigeons with a pellet gun. It was a fruitless attempt on his part to clear the building of pigeon droppings.

“Reverend Myers? I gotta talk to you.”
‘I’ve been expecting this call.’
‘It’s a good thing,’ I said. ‘How soon can I see you?’
‘Well, you wanna come up here this afternoon?’
‘Fine I’ll be there,’ I said. [Earl] took me up to the church. I went back to Ross’ office. I turned the doorknob and went straight in. I didn’t knock.
‘Mary, I’ve been expecting you.’
I said, ‘Ross, I was never so knocked down—so floored—in all my life.’
‘Mary, sit down there. I want to talk to you.’”
Mom said she did take a seat, but added, “It didn’t help much.”
Ross suggested to Mary that she take into account the ages of the Lucille and Maurice, and consider *their* happiness.
‘Reverend Myers said, ‘Your mother is of so-so age. Maurice is so-and-so years old. You know they can’t have any children.’
I said, ‘Thank heavens.’
‘Let them enjoy what little life they’ve got left.’
But Ross didn’t know how I felt. Nobody knows how I felt.”

My mother admitted to me that the events made her angry, especially the fact that her younger sister knew well in advance about the secret courtship and the wedding plans. Mary confided her feelings only to her husband and to a few other close friends. The story does have a happy ending. The two lovebirds lived together for four years until Lucille’s death. Maurice survived her for another three years, living to the ripe old age of 103.

As a young man, Maurice was full of anger over the injustices perpetrated upon him by a society because of his race. But as an old man, he possessed an inner peace; a peace that, I believe, resulted from his having the capacity to forgive those who hurt him. I was truly proud to have had him as my “papaw.”

As I interviewed my mother in the nursing home for this story, she confided to me that Maurice had treated her with much more kindness and affection than her own father and mother. She recounted how her parents had forced her to drop out of school to babysit her younger sister. According to mom, her mother “didn’t want that chore.”

She told me of the physical abuse she had received at the hands of her father. One night she had returned after a ten o’clock curfew following a date with her soon-to-be husband, Earl, only to be met at the top of the stairs by Glenn. Without so much as a “Why are you late?” he punched her in the face. She went tumbling down the staircase, suffering permanent physical and psychological injuries that would remain with her for the rest of her life. (Earl’s car had had a flat tire.)

My mother eventually got over the embarrassment of the interracial marriage and of what friends and neighbors might have thought. She had also come to accept her new stepfather, and to develop a true love and respect for the gentleman barber-turned-preacher who always dressed in his Sunday finest, regardless of the occasion. Mom also had a profound change of heart regarding her biological father, and in acknowledging the role he had played in the community in the oppression of African-Americans, Catholics, and other minorities.

“Right before they closed the lid on his casket, I kissed Maurice. Right here.”

She pointed to one cheek on the side of her face.

In 2007, Maurice finally passed; the auctioneer for the estate sale was surveying the items in one of the closets of my grandparents’ home.

He asked Mary, “What do you want to do with these robes?”

The auctioneer was referring to the ritual garb worn by Glenn at local meetings and gatherings of the local chapter of the Ku Klux Klan, a fraternal organization dedicated to “Americanism” and “purity.” The Klan rose to great prominence in the early 20th century in Indiana and elsewhere. Why Maurice hadn’t discarded the robes years earlier remains a mystery.

My mother’s response to the auctioneer was curt and unhesitant. When she recalled it out loud to me, I felt genuinely proud of her.

“I said to him, ‘You can take ‘em outside and burn ‘em!’”

Phil Temples

Elephant in the Forest



Maria Picone

The Dog Said

The dog said Christ
is there no limit to man's cupidity.
Looking up from his bone the dog said
there are cities on fire and rivers damned,
mankind's cruelty effortless,
their nature *unnatural*.

Gnawing a tick, the dog continued:
I can't get their taste out of my mouth;
and the stench is spellbinding.
Man's stink is of ordure and fear.
The sounds he so stubbornly crafts
are the noises Death makes when weeping.

The dog pulled at his chain and growled.

A strange meat was his dinner.

Imposter

I have been living
someone else's life too long.
Take a breath. Slow down.

Penny Altars

The dense foliage of the wild bird garden looms ahead, a living cave. Bryce forces himself forward, feeling as if he's on a jungle hike rather than an evening jog around Tower Grove Park. Ordinarily, the loudness of the tree frog chorus inside the thicket would have annoyed him; now it intensifies a sense of safe harbor. He pauses, listening for the footsteps that have shadowed him since he rounded the corner near the pond and ruins.

Bryce hasn't always been so skittish, but since Cynthia's death last December, he's changed. She hadn't even died a violent death. It was more of a suicide, a prolonged surrender to alcohol and drugs. Yet ever since that horrible night when a crew of EMTs pushed through the hallway with a stretcher while red and blue lights lit up the alley, Bryce has fallen victim to a hateful, pervasive fear. Some days it clamps around his shoulders like a scratchy shawl; other times, it grips his chest and throat so tightly he can hardly breathe.

Tonight, Bryce tried to snap himself out of his worsening paranoia by taking a quick run around the park at dusk. Now, as he crawls into a dense hedge to hide from the pursuing footsteps, he berates himself for his recklessness. Crouching, heart pounding, struggling not to sneeze in the overload of springtime pollen, he promises himself that, should he make it out of the park alive, he will finally seek grief counseling.

The footsteps keep coming, faster now. Bryce perceives a second set, heavier ones, and then he hears the panting of the front runner. Branches rustle behind him, and the walls of his hiding place separate. Bryce is about to stand and sprint when the heavier feet stop nearby.

"Robin! Robin Ray Blackstrom!" The woman's voice is strident. "Just wait 'til I get my hands on you!"

The small breaths of Bryce's assumed stalker become shallower still. He turns his head ever so slightly, and almost laughs out loud. A small boy in cut-off jeans and a wrinkled seersucker shirt has crawled into the thicket and now crouches just inches from Bryce. The child is apparently hiding from his infuriated mother, whose angry, hysterical voice reminds Bryce of Cynthia's.

The boy spots Bryce and edges closer, putting a small, dirty finger up to his mouth. Bryce doesn't know whether to speak up or stay quiet. What, he wonders, would park security think of a frantic mother finding her son in the bushes with a grown man? What if the boy should try to get himself out of trouble by accusing Bryce of pulling him into the thicket?

The child manages to lock Bryce into a frightened but determined stare, and even in the growing darkness Bryce senses desperation in those small eyes. Against his better judgment, he remains perfectly still, huddled in a privet shelter with a young boy he doesn't even know, while an enraged and frightened mother runs around the edges of the grove before rushing away, screaming threats and obscenities at her missing son.

When the woman's shouts have faded away toward the perimeter of the park, Bryce tries to extricate himself as quickly as possible. As he rises onto all fours and moves forward, his knee bumps into something that rattles and slides around.

"Damn! What the....?" He cuts himself short, remembering the young ears behind him.

"What's wrong, mister?" The boy whispers, even though his mother is long gone.

“Hey, son. Who are you, and what’s the idea here?” Bryce asks the question even while knowing the probable answer. “The idea” is likely no more complicated than a youngster trying to escape maternal punishment. But judging by the woman’s outrage, Bryce suspects that the punishment could end up being out of all proportion to whatever offense the child has committed.

The boy says nothing but gestures toward the object at Bryce’s knee. It’s a large bowl, black lacquered wood with gold edging. It’s of a Japanese design and probably quite valuable, but the oddest thing—apart from finding it in the middle of Tower Grove Park’s wild bird garden—is that it seems to be filled with coins. Again, Bryce mutters, “What the...?” and stops short.

“It’s okay, mister. Go ahead and say it. Do you really think I haven’t heard cussing before?” The boy laughs. “Say, mister. Who are you hiding from, anyway?” While he speaks, he inches forward and runs his fingers through the coins. Bryce is brought up short by the question.

“Well,” he mutters. “I thought it was you, but apparently it was no one. I guess I just scared myself.”

The boy doesn’t look as baffled as Bryce would have expected, and it occurs to him that maybe this kid could use an adult friend, or at least some sort of advocate. He decides to take a low-key approach and see what he can find out. He extends his hand.

“I’m Bryce. Bryce Goodson. What’s your name, son?”

“Didn’t you hear it already? ‘Robin Ray Blackstrom’?” He does a perfect imitation of his mother. Bryce realizes he’ll have to stay on top of the conversation if he wants to get any useful information about the boy’s living situation.

“Yeah, you’re right, I did hear it. Sorry. So, Robin Ray Blackstrom, do you have a nickname? What do your friends call you? Robin? Ray? Rob?”

“Just Robin.” The boy sounds proud. “My pa named me that, after his favorite bird. I like it, even though some kids say it’s a girl’s name.”

“Oh, no. It’s a great name, for a boy or girl. Where is your pa now?” Bryce knows he’s pushing it, but he doesn’t have all night, or at least he likes to think he doesn’t.

The boy’s eyes narrow slightly and it takes him a few seconds to answer. “My pa’s dead. Shot. Mom said he was about to go to prison anyway, so he wouldn’t have done us no good even if he didn’t get shot.”

Bryce feels almost dizzy. Here it is right in front of him, up close and in the flesh: more evidence that the world is indeed the brutal, deadly place he has come to fear. He wants to run away now, and wait out the dark and dangerous night from the safety of his apartment. But he looks back at the boy and forces himself to take a deep breath, inhaling the earth’s rich patchouli smell.

Out of questions for the moment, he reaches toward Robin again, intending to offer the boy a sympathetic hand to hold. When Robin looks puzzled, Bryce withdraws his hand and clears his throat. To cover the awkwardness, he straightens the upended bowl. Robin crawls over and starts picking up the coins, which Bryce can now see are all pennies, some of them dull and others brilliant. He is surprised when, instead of pocketing the pennies, Robin places them back into the bowl.

“This must be someone’s penny altar,” the boy declares. He sounds so certain that Bryce finds himself agreeing, even though he actually has no idea what a penny altar is, or why such a thing would be in an obscure thicket in the middle of a public park. He tries to pick up the bowl,

intending to bring it out of the bird garden and into the enlightening glare of a streetlamp, but a small, dirty hand darts out to stop him.

“Hey! Don’t you know any better, mister? Why would you mess around with someone’s penny altar?” The boy has apparently been on the receiving end of enough shaming talk in his young life to have the technique down pat. Bryce feels guilty without understanding exactly what he’s done wrong.

“Umm...sorry. I guess I don’t know any better. Why don’t you explain it to me? Why would someone put a bowl full of pennies under a bush? And an altar to what, or to whom?” For a split second, Bryce has forgotten to be afraid of black-coated pursuers and rabid bats and a malevolent mom and park security who might think Bryce is the malevolent one.

Robin sighs. “I’ve known about these since I was just little. I even have one of my own at home, but don’t tell. I keep it way back in my closet under a pile of old clothes so no one can find it.”

The boy, tiny enough that Bryce can’t imagine what he means by “when I was little,” continues without noticing Bryce’s raised eyebrows and half smile.

“When someone has a problem, like, say, a bad habit, somethin’ they do that hurts ‘em or hurts someone else, they can make a bargain with themselves, only even more serious, like a pact or an oath. They can set up a bowl in some special or hidden place, and then they can put a penny into the bowl for each time they don’t do whatever it is they’re trying not to do.” Robin explains all of this with a bit of impatience, clearly finding it hard to believe that anyone could live to be Bryce’s age without encountering a penny altar.

Bryce lets the boy know he gets it by placing the bowl back under the privet hedge. He tries to be reverent enough to appease Robin’s ruffled sensitivities. “There. May the owner of this altar find peace and achieve great success.”

Robin doesn’t seem impressed, or perhaps he’s just bored by the whole situation now that his mother has disappeared. Then a thought seems to strike him. “Hey, mister, you wouldn’t happen to have some change would you? I haven’t had anything to put into my penny altar in a while.”

Bryce, skeptical, fishes a handful of change out of his inside pocket and hands it to the boy. “Do you want to tell me what your altar is for?”

Robin shakes his head before scrambling out of the thicket and running away. Bryce climbs out as well, hoping that no one is watching. His heart is pounding again by the time he emerges from the wild bird garden, and his fear of pursuit and attack from behind and in front has returned full force. But he can’t stop thinking about Robin and manages to let go of his panic long enough to wonder what the boy will face when he finally shows up at home.

Without making a conscious decision to do so, Bryce looks around until he spots Robin racing up the bike path toward the park’s west exit and starts to follow. Bryce runs ever so quietly, not wanting to give himself away or to frighten Robin. When they come to the first major intersection, the boy crosses the street and heads south.

Bryce has to force himself to continue, knowing that eventually this route will lead out of the Tower Grove South neighborhood and into an area of rundown bungalows and shabby apartment buildings that Bryce considered dangerous even before the onset of his phobias. But he is now determined to find out if there’s a way he can help this child, so he waits until the boy is safely across and then follows, even though that means playing chicken with the cars waiting at the freshly-green light. He tells himself that perhaps this will be a short walk after all, ending in somewhat familiar territory rather than in unexplored urban wilderness.

After half an hour, the boy shows no sign of stopping. The farther they go, the more uneasy Bryce becomes. He's horrified when Robin finally turns down a side street and into a section of town that Bryce wouldn't drive through in broad daylight, much less walk after sunset. News reports of armed robberies and drive-by shootings mention this neighborhood often enough that whenever he hears fireworks in the distance, he assumes it must be gunshots coming from this direction instead.

Dusk has long since transitioned to overcast night and as the darkness deepens, Bryce struggles to suppress a full-blown anxiety attack. He leans against a stop sign and catches his breath while he watches Robin open the door to a brown brick bungalow. The place appears not to have been tuck-pointed or re-roofed since its original construction at least a century ago. Moths and other flying insects swarm an uncovered yellow light bulb, and three rusty metal chairs fill the narrow front porch.

After he hears the screen door slam, Bryce sneaks across the yard, taking care to avoid the porch light's beacon. It isn't a welcoming light, and Bryce has no wish to test the hospitality of Robin's family. What could he say, anyway? "Excuse me, but I just had the most fascinating conversation with your son in the bushes in the park, and I wanted to continue the connection so much I decided to follow him home"? Bryce thinks not.

Untrimmed box hedges surround the porch's low brick wall, and Bryce squeezes behind a prickly shrub and stretches his neck as high as he dares. Inside, he can hear a woman's voice, hysterical, and braces himself for the sound of slapping or spanking, followed by a child's cry. Instead, he hears soft, choking sobs.

"How could you do something like that? Don't you know how hard this is for me, and for everybody else? And there you go, running off to the park at almost dark. What is wrong with you, Robin?" The words are less strident but still desperate, and the weeping intensifies.

"I don't know, Mom. I guess I was scared about Miss Estella. I'm sorry." Robin's voice is mature and steady enough to impress Bryce and calm the distraught mother.

He sticks his head up over the porch railing to try and see inside. He can make out a flimsy, ratty couch with some of its cushions scattered onto the floor. He sees Robin's mother slumped over, her head in her hands. Robin sits beside her, leaning his head on her shoulder.

"Hey! What the hell are you doin'?" A deep voice behind Bryce sends his heart into overdrive. He freezes, knowing he should turn around and try to make some plausible excuse. Before he can move, the voice continues.

"You a cop? Huh? Ain't nothin' illegal goin' on in there, I can tell you that. Or are you some freako stalker? I oughta just take you out, right now." The voice is accompanied by heavy footsteps crunching through last fall's leaves. Bryce decides he'll die here, one way or another. If the man behind him doesn't shoot him, his heart will give out from the adrenaline overload. Convinced he's facing his mortality at long last, he stands the rest of the way up, raises his hands, and turns.

He is confronted by not one person, but a whole group, a ragtag lot drifting over from the front porch of the house next door. Bryce hadn't even realized he'd had an audience as he came following Robin home like a lost puppy who thinks he's top dog. To make matters worse, Bryce catches a vaguely familiar, sickening odor for the first time, and connects it with the box fan in the next door window. He knows the smell of a meth lab all too well. He'd had to fetch Cynthia home from one once, and he would never forget the nauseating ammonia stench. The wind is blowing in his direction, as if following the neighborhood crowd, and Bryce has no doubt about the situation he's stumbled into.

As the group starts to close in, he grasps at one microscopic fleck of hope. Surely the likelihood that these people will call the police is astronomically low. In fact, Bryce would almost be willing to bet his life on it, and that's what he decides to do.

"Umm...hi." Bryce hates the quiver in his own voice, which suddenly sounds high-pitched and phony. "I know what this looks like, but no, I'm not the police. I just followed the boy home from the park."

Several of the neighbors titter and snort, and the owner of the deep voice, apparently the self-appointed spokesperson for the group, narrows his eyes and takes another step toward Bryce. "Say what?"

"What I mean is, I met Robin in the wild bird garden where he was hiding from his mother, and when he ran away, I thought I'd..." Bryce trails off as he picks up on the suspicious outrage now emanating from Robin's protective neighbors.

The leader yanks off his stained paisley bandana and a thin, dirty blond ponytail falls halfway down his back. "Why you filthy son-of-a..."

Bryce thinks it might be time to make a desperate run for it, but there's nowhere to go. The box hedges and angry neighbors have him hemmed in on all sides. He clears his throat. "Now, listen. There's a perfectly good explanation, and I'd like you to hear it." Then he pushes his luck, feeling stronger by the second. "Not that it's any of your business." "All right, chump, let's hear it. Not that it'll do you any good." The leader imitates Bryce's scared-but-bold voice so well that several neighbors clap.

Bryce tries to make his voice deeper. "Well, you see, I was out for a run when I heard footsteps behind me." He realizes he's about to make himself sound more like the coward he's been of late than the don't-mess-with-me persona he's trying to project. "I wasn't in the mood for a confrontation, so I ducked into the bird garden and crawled into some hedges under the mulberry tree." He ignores the smirks and sneers among the crowd and continues. "The next thing I knew, a young boy ran into the garden and jumped under the bushes with me..."

"Okay, pal, I've heard all of this half-baked crock I'm gonna listen to. I don't know what you did to that 'young boy,' who happens to be like a son to everyone in this neighborhood. But I do know that you followed him home and now you're slinking around his house, looking in at him and his poor mother. And you know what? We ain't gonna put up with such as this. I'm gonna go back next door and call the cops, but first, we're gonna have a little talk all on our own. And if you so much as think of trying to run away, we'll bring you down so fast you won't even know what hit you. Now just step on out here, real slow."

The neighbors have closed in so tightly that Bryce has nowhere to go but straight into the big pony-tailed man's grasp. The man pushes Bryce up the steps and onto Robin's front porch, then knocks and presses his face up against the screen. "Melinda? You need to come out here right now!" The man sniffles as if he's suffering a cold or allergies, and Bryce's germophobia kicks in. He tries to turn his head the other way, which the man interprets as an attempt to escape. Huge hands grasp Bryce's shoulders so hard that he winces.

He can see Robin's mother walking to the door. She seems to have gotten a grip on her emotions because her voice is now level and controlled. "Hey, Jake, I was just on my way back over. Robin ran away again and I had to go look for him, and when he showed up, we had to have a little..." She stops short as she becomes aware of the gathering. "What's going on? Oh, no! Did I miss saying goodbye to Estella?"

Robin sticks his head out from behind his mother and spots Bryce. "Hey, mister! What are you doing here?"

“That’s what we’re trying to find out, son. Why don’t you tell us how you know this man?” Jake assumes the air of a wise, old mediator, an irony not lost on Bryce, considering that the man has just sauntered over from the neighborhood meth lab.

“Oh, I know Mr. Bryce from the park. When I got scared and ran away, I went into the bird garden and hid under some bushes. Mr. Bryce was already there. We stayed real quiet until Mom left, and then we talked some. Hey, did you guys know there’s a penny altar in the bird garden? It’s a real pretty one. Can you believe Mr. Bryce here didn’t even know what it was?” Robin delivers the last bit of information as if it’s the most remarkable thing he’s ever heard, and Bryce feels as if he’s fallen through the looking glass for sure.

But Jake isn’t through questioning Robin. “Son, I have to ask you a tough question. Don’t be ashamed if the answer is yes. Remember, whatever might have happened in them bushes, it’s not your fault. Understand?” Robin nods. “Did this man touch you, in any way or at any time, before, during, or after the two of you were in the bushes together? And if he didn’t touch you, did he try to? Or did he even look as if he was thinking about trying to?” Jake has now adopted a tone that sounds more like a bad imitation of a 1950s television prosecuting attorney than a real-life tweaker. His revved-up implications make Bryce’s head spin.

While Robin stares up at the circling moths, apparently searching his memory, Bryce does his own flash rewind, even though he knows for an absolute fact he did nothing inappropriate. All he can remember in the way of “touching” or attempted touching is his initial handshake and his later sympathetic gesture.

Just as Bryce is about to heave a sigh of relief, confident that no one could possibly misinterpret a proffered hand, he sees the boy’s face light up. Robin looks at Jake and with a slow and thoughtful nod says, “Yes.”

Bryce feels faint. “Excuse me, but I need to sit, please.” His earlier bravado deserts him, and the shocked whispers of the neighbors sound like an ocean.

Robin’s mother screams. “Oh, my God in heaven! Robin, get back inside, right now!”

Jake shoves Bryce into one of the rusty chairs and instructs the person nearest him to go for a cell phone. “And if Estella’s awake, be careful not to let her know anything’s wrong.” Jake places both of his work-booted feet on top of Bryce’s and leans forward to pin his arms to the chair. The porch light creates a halo around Jake’s large head, and Bryce quakes.

A shout from next door interrupts the confrontation. A woman emerges from the meth lab and dumps a number of garbage bags, a mop, bucket, at least half a dozen cleaning fluids, including ammonia, and a stack of empty litter boxes on the next door front porch. She removes a soiled face mask and makes her way toward the group on Robin’s porch, pushing clumps of sweaty hair out of her eyes.

“I thought I’d never get done! Lonnie talked to someone at the humane society, and they’re gonna get over here as soon as they can. We promised Estella her favorites could stay in the neighborhood. I know she’d want Robin to have one.” The woman pauses when she notices the angry faces on the porch, and Jake, red-faced, standing on a stranger’s feet looking ready to commit murder. “Umm... well, folks, I don’t know what’s going on over here, but Estella’s slipping in and out of consciousness. The nurse says it’s close to time, so...” The woman’s voice cracks and she reaches toward Melinda

“Melinda? Robin’s back, right? Everything’s fine?” The woman stares at Bryce.

Jake answers before Melinda can say anything. “Hell, no, Alice, everything ain’t fine! This perv got our Robin into some bushes and...”

At this, Robin jumps back out onto the porch and tries to interrupt, but a yell from next door cuts him short. “Hey, everyone, the nurse says it’s mighty close to time.”

The mood shifts as the neighbors turn their attention away from Bryce. Melinda pulls Robin along by the hand, and the group makes a slow parade back to the house Bryce had judged as a meth lab. Sad piles of garbage and stacks of litter boxes tell a story he’d never have believed if he hadn’t seen it with his own eyes.

“Hey, you.” The others might have forgotten Bryce for the moment, but Jake hasn’t. “You ain’t leavin’ here, bub. We don’t have time to fool with you right now, but I’m not lettin’ you slink away while we’re all sittin’ with Estella.” As he speaks, Jake steps off Bryce’s feet and pulls him up by both arms.

Bryce is forced down the porch steps, across the yard, and around to the back of Estella’s house. He spots a padlocked dog run next to the back porch and instinctively tries to break free. “No, sir, no way! You’ve got this all wrong! I need a chance to explain. You’re making assumptions. This is false imprisonment, and you have no right to do this! I want to speak to my attorney, and I want to speak to her now.”

“Well, bub, that ain’t gonna happen, at least not just yet.” Jake frisks Bryce, running his meaty hands around and through all of Bryce’s pockets. Bryce draws back a fist, ready to take a chance and run for it. Unfortunately, Jake’s strength is as abundant as his greasy, unkempt hair, and Bryce finds his swinging arm gripped and twisted, and feels himself being shoved into the dog run. He realizes with a single sickening inhale that the space hasn’t been cleaned in recent history...maybe never. At least, he consoles himself, the pen isn’t currently occupied.

Jake steps in after Bryce. “Digger don’t bite, unless someone’s trying to climb his fence. Don’t know why, it’s just a quirk he’s always had. Couple young fellas came along last year and double-dared each other to climb in. One of ‘em left without three fingers on his right hand, and I’d say he got off pretty good, knowin’ what Digger’s like when he gets riled up. But don’t worry. Just stay down from the fence and keep your distance, and Digger’ll keep his. Won’t you, boy? That’s a good boy.” The biggest dog Bryce has ever seen emerges from a falling-apart dog house, walks over, and puts his massive drooling head into Jake’s hand for a scratch. “Tickle, tickle, tickle!”

Jake’s falsetto is the last thing Bryce hears before shrinking into the corner and closing his eyes. The next sound he hears is the dog run’s gate closing, followed by the padlock’s sharp click. As he curls up into a tight fetal ball, trying to convince himself that he’s just experiencing an especially vivid nightmare or a spontaneous hallucination, perhaps as part of a long-postponed breakdown, he hears something else. The dog, which appears to be a mixture of Rottweiler and Mastiff or American Bulldog, snuffles up, down, and around Bryce’s body, ending at his head. He tries not to breathe and stifles the urge to weep. Droplets of dog spit hit the top of his head. He shivers. Digger plops down in the fetid dirt and scoots up against Bryce, who almost loses it. Hot smelly dog breath forces its way between Bryce’s arms and into his sheltered face, and a large tongue licks every reachable piece of skin. He wonders if this is Digger’s attempt to get acquainted, or the prelude to an all-night feast.

All of a sudden, Bryce is ready to give it all up. Not just his life, if it comes to it, but everything that has made that life miserable lately: hypochondria, germophobia, fear of death in all its forms and permutations, fear of illness, fear of accidents, fear of traffic, fear of strangers, fear of someone chasing him in the park, fear of some little kid’s pony-tailed friend, fear of a damned carnivorous mutt. Death, he decides, couldn’t possibly be worse than being mistaken for a child molester and getting locked up in a dog run outside a house where a bunch of people he’s

never even met are gathered around the death bed of a sick old woman who's probably been growing enough toxoplasmosis culture to wipe out the entire neighborhood. Whatever. What the hell. Bryce is done.

He starts to uncurl his arms and legs, pausing every few seconds to allow Digger to adjust to each stage of the unfolding. Digger stops the lick-fest and watches, but shows no sign of attacking. After five minutes or so, Bryce has positioned himself with his back against the corner of the fence, upright but still seated, legs straight out in front. He reaches out to Digger, who belly-crawls closer and places his head onto Bryce's outstretched hand. Bryce knows what's expected, although he feels like a class-A fool doing it.

"Tickle, tickle, tickle." His awkward Jake imitation rings across the backyard just as singing and muted crying drift out through the open living room window. Raising himself up a little, Bryce manages to get a glimpse of the scene inside the house. Estella must have gone on across the great divide, because the folks who a short while ago had encircled him on Robin's front porch are now gathered around an in-home hospital bed. A few people hug each other, while others take turns leaning over the bed to kiss the tiniest woman Bryce has ever seen.

Strains of "Amazing Grace" reach the dog run, and he realizes that no one is going to remember him anytime soon. The thought of spending the rest of the night in the pen, tickling Digger's chin and waiting for the next shoe to drop—whatever that shoe might look like and wherever it might land—shakes Bryce to the core. All his indignation and horror become focused on one goal and one goal only: to escape from this whole situation and get safely back home, and back to the normal life that's eluded him since Cynthia's death.

He sizes up the fence and judges it to be about seven feet high. Digger has seemed mild mannered so far, and Bryce wonders if Jake made up the story about fence-climbing and missing fingers. Bryce decides to give it a trial run. He feels confident he can get up and over the chain link without alerting Jake, unless Digger starts to bark or, worse yet, really does attack. For a few seconds, he actually feels sorry for the dog, living his life in a filthy pen. He wonders what will happen to Digger, and suspects that he won't have as much luck finding a new home as the cats. Keeping one eye focused on the house, he sees more people arriving to pay their respects to Estella. It occurs to him that soon, an ambulance or an undertaker will arrive to take the body, and he wonders what he should do then. If he calls out for help and presses charges against Jake for false imprisonment, Jake will make his own accusations. Bryce has to admit that proving his innocence could become a long, difficult process.

He decides to climb and run. After giving Digger one last chin tickle, he stretches his right hand as far up the fence as he can and pulls up just enough to raise his left foot off the ground. When he lifts himself higher and raises his right foot, he hears a low rumble. Looking back over his shoulder, he sees his fickle tickle-buddy crouching right behind him, hackles raised and teeth bared.

"Hold on, boy. Good Digger. That's right, easy now." By the time he gets both feet back on the ground, he's breaking out in a sweat. He reaches a tentative hand toward Digger, hoping the snarling dog is more eager for another chin tickle than for finger food. "Yes, good boy. Good, good Digger."

When Digger finally plops back onto the ground, Bryce feels like a hero and a survivor. He is, after all, still in possession of all his limbs and appendages. Somehow this convinces him that he is capable of getting out of this mess alive and with his freedom and integrity intact. He decides to yell as loudly as he possibly can to whatever EMT, coroner, or police officer shows up

first. He knows he's innocent, and he further knows that Jake—bereaved or not—is oh, so guilty of a host of charges.

Bryce's resolve is still strong when a long, black hearse backs over the curb into Estella's front yard. A police car pulls up right behind, and he is just about to start screaming for help when Jake's voice pops out of the shadows on the other side of the dog run.

"Hey, there! How you doin'? Are you ready to get out and go home?" Jake doesn't sound as if he's being ironic, but Bryce assumes that this is the worst kind of taunting.

Ignoring Jake, Bryce takes a deep breath and cups his hands around his mouth, determined to make himself heard before the undertaker and police officer get through Estella's front door. Jake, however, has already whisked the padlock open and rushed to Bryce's side, neglecting to shut the gate. Out of the corner of his eye, Bryce sees Digger slip out.

Jake, oblivious to the dog's exit, leans in close. "Hey, listen. Me and Melinda had a little talk with Robin a while ago, and he told us what really happened back there in the park. I'm sorry. I didn't mean you no harm. I'm willin' to let bygones be bygones if you are."

Bryce suspects that Jake's change of heart has more to do with the arrival of the police and the realization that Bryce could legitimately press charges, than from a genuine desire to make amends. He's thankful that Robin has apparently cleared things up, but he's not sure he's ready to let Jake off the hook so easily.

Bryce pushes Jake's hand away and stares him down before speaking. "You do know that this could get you into some serious trouble if I file a complaint, right? Assault, false imprisonment, intentional infliction of emotional distress..."

As Jake listens to the list, he starts to look terrified. "Dude, look. I know how you must feel about me right now. But don't you think both of us could just let all this go? I was just tryin' to protect the boy, and you have to admit it did look mighty fishy, especially when Robin said you had touched him. And what in tarnation were you even doin' in those bushes, huh? Come to think of it, maybe I'm bein' an idiot right now by lettin' you go."

"Hold on. I can explain. I was in the bushes for my own stupid reasons. I was out for a run, and I hid there because I thought someone was chasing me, but it turned out to be Robin, running from his mother. And then I wanted to make sure he was going to be okay, because his mother sounded crazy and I was afraid she was going to beat him when he got home or something." Bryce wishes he had just let well enough alone and left when he had the chance.

"Why on earth would you assume Melinda was about to beat Robin? She was scared plumb out of her wits. And what made you think you had the right to be judging her, anyway?" Jake sounds steamed again.

"I...thought she must be drunk or high or something." Bryce realizes the weakness of his argument even as he's speaking. "Sorry. I guess I was wrong."

"I'll say you were wrong, buddy. She has never laid a hand on that boy, and I'd bet my life she never will. Now, why don't you get on out of here before I change my mind?" Jake turns around to leave and notices Digger's absence. "Shit."

"Was he your dog? I thought he belonged to the deceased." Bryce doesn't know whether to feel sad for Jake or happy for Digger.

"Naw. Not mine. You're right. He was Estella's, and no one's gonna want him except Robin, and Melinda'll never stand for that. He'll be lucky if she lets him have one of the cats. No, we'll just have to locate ol' Digger and try to find him a new home. One more thing to take care of, on top of everything in the house. Man, Digger didn't know how lucky he was to be out here in the fresh air."

Bryce disagrees with the “fresh air” part, but doesn’t take the time to say so. He just wants to go home, so he reaches a hand out to Jake—only vaguely uneasy about germs now—and walks away. If he’d had a hat, he would have tipped it toward Estella, but instead he just looks at the ground as he passes between the hearse and the patrol car. He’s been in the dog pen so long he’s lost all sense of time, and he starts to feel more elated than he has in months, maybe years.

He retraces his steps, not even trying to avoid the shadows as he makes his way back to Tower Grove South. He hears occasional music and laughter emanating from some buildings, raised voices from others. Far in the distance he hears a popping that might be fireworks or might be gunshot. Rather than fearing the worst and imagining that the perpetrator is about to find him and take him out on the spot, Bryce keeps moving forward, thankful to be free from Jake and the smelly dog pen.

He makes it back to his own neighborhood without incident, and congratulates himself on his bravery and navigational skills. As he approaches his own street, he hears footsteps behind him. His throat tightens and his heart jumps, but he resists the urge to dive into the nearest privet hedge. Whoever just happens to be sharing the street with him might misunderstand his intentions, and he has had enough of that for one night. Instead, he glances backward as casually as he can manage, hoping he appears neither vulnerable nor threatening.

No one is visible, and the footsteps have stopped. Bryce moves forward again, and again he hears footsteps. He stops. The footsteps stop. Bryce breaks into a sprint, realizing that some fears are well worth keeping. He makes it to his building and fumbles for his key. The footsteps don’t stop this time.

Before he can fit the key into the outer door, Bryce hears rustling in the shrubbery. He looks around, expecting the worst, but instead of a man with a gun, he sees Digger’s huge, ugly head, perfectly framed by the hedge and looking like a grotesque, green-maned lion with an enormous, dripping tongue. Bryce turns the key and steps inside, determined to ignore the stupid dog. If it’s still hanging around tomorrow, he’ll call animal control. Before starting up the stairs, he looks back and sees Digger’s face pressed up against the glass door.

He pauses and tries to talk himself out of what he knows he’s about to do. He thinks about the pet deposit he’ll owe, and about the unpleasantness of dog walks in extreme weather. He thinks about vet bills and grooming fees, and about having to stoop down to pick up super-sized loads of dog shit at least twice a day. No scoop bag could be thick enough for that to feel okay, but he nevertheless opens the door and lets the brute inside.

After presenting Digger with a plastic mixing bowl of water, Bryce jumps into a hot shower, flooded with gratitude for at least the fiftieth time in the last hour. Before he turns in, he rummages in the linen closet and finds a ratty old blanket and spreads it on the bedroom floor. Digger settles in quickly, and Bryce is just about to turn off the light when he has a thought.

He goes into the dining room and searches in the bottom of the china cabinet until he finds the ornate, carved wooden bowl that Cynthia’s late father had brought home from Africa as a wedding gift. Returning to the bedroom, he clears the surface of an antique chest that has recently become a catch-all for everything from spare change to old gum wrappers and gas station receipts. He reaches into the chest and retrieves a multi-colored, hand-woven dresser scarf that Cynthia had created for their first apartment together. After placing the bowl on the chest top, he arranges the scarf’s bright softness around it and steps back to admire.

Tomorrow he will locate other objects, artifacts to remind him of life before Cynthia’s final downturn, as well as a few things to represent his returning hope for the future. For the

present, he finds a dozen shiny pennies and places them in the wooden bowl. He knows he must have confronted at least twelve fears tonight, and tomorrow he'll think about where to go from here, and how to get there in one piece.

Teressa Rose Ezell

Fiercely Loyal

There wasn't a fiercely loyal
cloud in the sky.

They came and slipped away,
wound up on winds,
shuffling aside for master blue.

It was the nature of things
to move, but not sky,
squatting sky.

Her friend drifted like denied lovers.
Her sons found wives of their own
for mothering and debasement.
Her daughters swallowed sons of their own.
Her husbands and lovers
turned into the wind
and waited for the next generation
to blow into their arms.

Edward Lineberry

Notes to the Wind

I dream of paper
airplanes, of pristine folds
poised for takeoff. Each
aerodynamically inked with random
thoughts. Together, a fleet
of fanciful verse, waiting for respective
paths to cross. Marking myself
as director, I begin approaching,
signaling in flurry, projecting
symphony's flight. Rising,
rolling, roaring in a space
that could never be enough, they erupt,
choreographed fire[less]works,
crashing, crumbling
into anonymous hands, incapable
of comprehending true scale.

A.J. Huffman

On the Hill



Fabrice Poussin

A strange shade of white

Thrice I have fallen out of my bed while dreaming.
Hopping between dreams and reality, I have tried to
relive my every fall again and again.
Outside, the city breathes out a nasty Summer.
Mundane days, useless nights
useless, just like us.

The shirt I am wearing is much older than Jaydeep's dog.
Perhaps 10 years have passed, my body now wearier.
Ashes fly all over the room. My fingers grey in expected rain.
Sometimes, a ceiling fan can vanish everything.
My smoke clouds the sky under our roof.
I do smell something, somewhere is rotten, once in a while.

Who'd Be A Weatherman?

Today's weather,
a chance of crows in the elms
and cleansing fire by morning.
The light will finish late
after having started out early.
Many are cold, but few are frozen.

Today the sun will roll across the sky,
encouraged by the will of the people.
The sky will reflect upon the waters,
as skies have since Eve first spanned
and Adam delved into her mystery.

Tonight, a hail of blood
and the folly of Man's invention.

And plenty of wind where there is none.

Bruce McRae

Forecast

A stray cat lounges
across a blue Formica table
in the wallpapered conference
room of our hotel. Rain drizzles from

a slate sky; the ice storm has slid
north a good twenty miles
exactly as the innkeeper said
it would in a tone suggesting she
controls the weather like
she controls access to clean towels,

though not the stray cat
lounging across the blue
Formica table in the conference
room downstairs.

Lisa M. Hase-Jackson

Late Night Radio

It's late night in America,
What's on your mind?
Tell us something good.
Has your life changed?

He had the letters *USA*
burning in his head.
I wonder how long he's been
on the wrong side of crazy.

I wonder if you're awake,
Long time listener.
How will you survive?
It's morning in America.

Barbara Buckley Ristine

The Estelle Show

“And what exactly do you expect me to do all day, if I can’t watch television?” Estelle asked her son-in-law.

“Read a book or a magazine. Enjoy the sunshine. Call one of your friends,” he didn’t even bother to look up from his laptop.

She struggled to keep her voice even. “You don’t understand. My show comes on at noon.”

He had sighed at this.

“I actually do understand that. You watch it every day. Unfortunately, you will not be watching it today, or for several days, because the television will continue to be broken. I perfectly understand the situation.”

“No. No. You don’t. My story comes on at noon. Yesterday the doctors said that James will come out of his coma today.”

“Good for James, but you are going to have to find a new hobby until we can buy a new one. You watch too much TV anyways. Didn’t you used to knit? You could make me a hat.”

He still hadn’t looked up from his laptop.

“No, thank you. I guess I’ll just have to sit here all day and stare at a blank screen. You might as well throw me out, too, when you take the TV to the dump.”

Her son-in-law sighed, folded up his laptop, and left for work. He always left their conversations unfinished, and Estelle hated that she couldn’t follow him to finish them.

Estelle stared at the blank, unplugged television for a few hours, just to spite him. Eventually, her daughter came out from her home office and wheeled her to sit on the front porch, saying the sunshine would be good for her. Estelle was in time-out, or at least that was how she saw it. She was too old for a time-out, but her daughter didn’t seem to recognize that.

It was a perfect day, right on the cusp of summer and fall, with a mixture of sunshine and cool air that made it perfect to sit outside. Estelle thought it was a little stuffy, and the breeze annoyed her.

The little family lived in one of the only subdivisions in the town of Acorn, Tennessee. The houses were all close together, but not too close together. They were cheaply made, but not too cheaply made. And most importantly they all looked similar, but not too similar.

Estelle hated it. It provided no visual interest whatsoever.

For the first hour, she sat fuming on the porch, thinking up ways to punish her son-in-law. She decided to write him out of her will. Of course, he had never been in her will. And her will really only consisted of a few physical possessions, since she had no money. But she could tell him that she had decided to write him out, and he would think that once upon a time he had been in her will, and then he would feel just awful.

Once that plan was decided, Estelle had nothing else to think about or to do. Sure, she had a few magazines her daughter had left her with, and she had a phone to call her friend Carol or the inside of the house if she needed something. And she had a radio. And her old knitting

basket. But if she really thought about it, there was nothing for her to do. Especially when she checked her watch and saw that right at this very moment her show was on television, and everyone else on the planet was watching it, without her.

All she got to watch was cars drive by. When her son-in-law got home, Estelle decided she would have done nothing but count cars. She would tell him exactly how many cars drove by, and he would feel so bad that he would figure out a way to get the money to get a new TV sooner. She thought maybe he could take out a loan, or pawn something.

In her boredom, she must have nodded off a little. She dreamed of cars driving by. She wanted to chase after them, and she was just lifting herself out of her wheelchair and starting to run for the first time in years when the front door opened and she woke up.

“Do you want to come inside, Momma?”

“What? Oh. No. I’m fine out here. Just watching the cars go by, you know,” she said, gesturing to the street, which was empty except for a bird pecking at a grate.

“Ok, then. Call me if you need anything.”

“Ok.”

Her daughter went back inside. Estelle decided to count the cars she saw in her dream toward her total, and she estimated there had been about forty. She checked her watch. The show had ended fifteen minutes ago, which meant it was about time for Carol to call her.

As she waited for the phone to ring, Estelle noticed a car drive up and park at the start of the street. A boy and a girl got out, and they both walked off to different houses. The boy looked to be in his late teens, and the girl was scrawny, maybe eight or nine, and wearing a floral dress that covered her arms and fell all the way to her feet. They might be here for an interesting reason, going off to separate houses like that. Why did something potentially interesting have to happen right when it was time for Carol to call?

The phone trilled. Estelle ignored the children and answered it.

“Hello?”

“Can you believe that?” Carol’s voice was clouded by years of smoking, and it was hard to understand her with the static. Estelle did her best to discern the words, since Carol was the only connection to her story now.

“Believe what? Our TV broke. I didn’t get to see anything.”

“What? You missed it? But Celeste rejected Ricardo’s proposal! How could you miss that?”

“He proposed? How? When? Where? Did she say no because she’s still in love with Jean Pierre?”

“It was at the pier, with the sunset in the background. And no! She said it was because she still had feelings for Joey. I had already guessed this might happen, of course.”

“No.”

“Yes.”

“But she hasn’t even dated Joey since...”

“Last year, I know. But he isn’t gay anymore, apparently.”

“Wow.”

“I know.”

“What’s going to be on tomorrow’s episode?”

“From the previews, it looks like Celeste might confess her feelings for Joey—but get this—Alejandra overhears their conversation.”

“But Alejandra’s dead!”

“Not anymore. She’s back, and she had face replacement surgery. Now she’s a blonde girl with a petite nose, instead of that honker she used to have. Didn’t you read last week’s issue of *Soap Opera Digest*? They already announced she was coming back.”

“No, I didn’t.”

There was a pause, while Estelle absorbed what had happened to her family in the one day that she hadn’t been able to tune in. During the lull, she noticed that the little girl was now walking up her driveway.

“Oh, Estelle? I won’t be able to call tomorrow. Irene and I are going to a luncheon up church. We’re in charge of the appetizers. I’m going to tape the new episode and call you tomorrow night, though.”

Estelle sighed, but agreed. She sometimes felt like another one of Carol’s charity cases, like she was just the old lady who needed to make conversation about her television show, another thing for Carol to mark off of her do-gooder list.

The little girl stepped onto the porch.

“Alright then. Well I need to go, I have to volunteer at the food pantry this afternoon, and Edna and I are going to dinner afterwards,” Carol said.

Estelle rolled her eyes. She could picture Carol at dinner with Edna, discussing poor, sweet Estelle who couldn’t leave her house and needed someone to discuss her show with every day. Carol would probably slip the topic in between conversations about solving hunger in Africa and planning next week’s Sunday school lesson.

“Talk to you tomorrow then,” she sighed.

“Bye, Estelle.”

The little girl was now standing on the edge of her porch. Estelle continued to hold the phone in her hand, ready to call her daughter’s cell phone. Maybe instead of her daughter she should call the police. Or child services. She wasn’t really sure. She hadn’t had to make a decision in a while.

Of course, there was a chance that this was happening for a reason. Maybe the sweet little thing was an assassin; maybe Estelle had done something to anger a local mob boss. Except there were no mob bosses in Acorn.

They stared at each other for a moment, a silent stand off to see who would speak first.

“Hi,” Estelle finally said.

“Hi.”

There was an awkward pause.

“What’s your name?” Estelle asked.

“Jubilee.” The little girl addressed her shoes. “What’s yours?”

“Mrs. Estelle.”

Jubilee nodded, like this was the most obvious statement in the whole entire world, and she looked up at the old lady for a moment before returning her eyes to her shoes.

“What do you need? Are you selling cookies?”

“No.” Jubilee reached into the little messenger bag that hung off her shoulder and pulled out a pamphlet. She held it out, but Estelle did not take it. The little girl stepped forward, balanced the pamphlet precariously on the thin arm of the wheelchair, and stepped away again.

The old lady looked at the pamphlet, and she immediately regretted letting the little girl on the porch. The pamphlet was from The Church of the Beloved One, Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, The Jehovah. The name of the church was printed in massive red letters on the front

of the brochure along with a phone number. Underneath the text was a photorealistic painting of Jesus bleeding on the cross.

Everyone knew what the ‘church’ was, though most usually forgot its name or got the order of the words mixed up. They were a religious group who all lived together in some sort of commune about fifteen miles up the highway. They were crazy. They were worse than Estelle’s soaps. Every few months, the nightly news would air a new investigation into the religious group’s doings. Last month’s had been entitled: “Good behavior stickers earn religious group members their food.” They were easily the most exciting news the county had.

And now she had one of the little cultist children on her front porch.

“I wanted to talk to you about joining The Church of the Beloved One, Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, The Jehovah.”

Estelle already knew that, but hearing the little girl say it, she suddenly didn’t want her to go away any more. She had been bored to the point of counting cars and dreaming about it, but now an actual member of a cult wanted to talk to her. Estelle bet a lot of drama went on in a cult. She had had an insider glimpse into the life of a nudist cult three years ago, when Jaime (before he got eaten by an elephant at the zoo when Celeste pushed him over the railing) briefly joined one and almost got conned out of billions of dollars. There had also been an episode almost ten years ago where Jack had moved in with a suicidal cult in California, but then he came back a few months later with his beard shaved. Estelle realized that she could get the inside scoop on the local cult, and then she could call Carol. She figured that she wouldn’t be a charity case then—she’d be the one to know something interesting.

“Really? What do you want to tell me about the church?”

Jubilee actually looked up and into the old lady’s eyes at the prompting. It occurred to Estelle that this might be the first time she had ever actually had someone listen to her about her crazy beliefs. Estelle glanced across the street and saw that the older boy had already been to approximately fifteen houses. He hadn’t talked to anyone for more than two minutes yet.

“I...I just want to tell you about us.”

“Tell me what?”

“About how we live.”

Estelle gestured that Jubilee should continue.

“Well, we are...um...a community that all lives together,” she said. The little girl looked over her shoulder, probably seeking backup from her big brother.

“Tell me more,” Estelle said, leaning forward in her wheelchair.

The girl’s eyes widened. Estelle was now convinced, if she hadn’t been before, that no one had ever actually listened to this kid.

The child started to use her hands, making big gestures as she spoke. Her shyness seemed to dissipate as she spoke of her family and what they did. “We do worship services every night, and during the day we work to make sure we have everything we need. Everybody takes care of everyone and loves each other. That’s what Pastor Jeff says. He says that love is the most important thing.” She paused for a moment. “He says that humility is the second most important thing, and purpose is third.”

“Who is Pastor Jeff?”

“He started the community, and he still runs it. He’s the best. He gives everybody their jobs.”

“Jobs?”

“Yeah. Like, my brother and I go around to houses and try to educate people about the church. That’s a really special job. Most of the other kids just clean dishes or something.”

“I bet they wouldn’t have any jobs for a little old lady like me?” Estelle laughed at her own question.

But the little girl took the query seriously, shaking her head.

“No, there are. Mr. John, he’s super old, like a hundred, and he tells stories every night after dinner. And he helps stuff envelopes during the days. He’s super nice.”

“Really?”

“Yeah.”

“What could I do there, then?”

“Lots of things, like—”

The little girl was interrupted when Estelle’s daughter walked onto the porch again.

“Who are you?”

The little girl took a step back and didn’t answer. Estelle’s daughter spied the pamphlet balancing on the wheelchair’s arm.

“Oh, you’re one of them cultists. Shoo. We don’t want to join. Good-bye now.”

“But—” Estelle started to protest.

“Good-bye now,” her daughter repeated.

Jubilee stood on the porch, unmoved. “I was just trying to tell her about the jobs that we have at the community.”

“Jobs? Honey, I think that you are talking to the wrong person.”

“Nobody is the wrong person.”

“Mmhmm. Go away now child. We aren’t interested.”

Jubilee looked straight into Estelle’s eyes as her daughter pulled her backwards into the house. Estelle felt as if the child was daring her to speak up, and she opened her mouth to tell her daughter to wait, but the screen door was already slamming between them. Jubilee waved to Estelle through the Plexiglass. Estelle raised her hand in a sort of half response. Her daughter rotated her to face the broken television, and Estelle craned her neck to see Jubilee take off running down the driveway and into the road, where her brother was probably waiting.

“Sorry about that, Momma. You should have called me.”

Her daughter walked towards the kitchen to start preparing dinner. This was her daughter’s job, Estelle realized.

“Can I help?” Estelle asked.

Her daughter stopped and turned around slowly.

“What?”

“Can I help you make dinner?”

“No, I should be fine. It’ll be faster if I just do it myself. Thanks for the offer, though, Momma.”

Her daughter shook her head, gave her mother a questioning look, and went into the kitchen. Sitting in the empty living room, Estelle listened to her daughter begin to prepare dinner.

She stared at the television for a little while, before trying to call Carol back to tell her about Jubilee. There was no answer. Estelle remembered that Carol was probably at the food pantry, and she had no obligation to pick up her phone right now.

Estelle felt very alone and very small sitting in the living room with the broken television. This morning, the television, just its shape and presence and sound, had been a comfort. It had been her best friend. Now, she was practically sitting alone in a funeral home with her friend’s

corpse. She noticed how quiet the room was; she could even hear the cars drive past, the backdrop of her daughter chopping vegetables. Without much to do, she dozed for a few more hours.

Odd dreams where Jubilee slipped in and out of her thoughts filled her head. She awoke when her son-in-law slammed the car door in the driveway, and she was convinced for a moment that Jubilee was her granddaughter.

He walked into the living room.

“How was your day?” he tossed his things down on an empty chair.

“Awful. I saw 78 cars drive by when I was outside.”

He did not seem to realize the gravity of her boredom.

“Estelle, I’m sorry you didn’t have your show. We should be able to get a new television within a few weeks.”

“Fine. Is there anything I can do to help buy a new one faster?”

“No, sorry. Hopefully it won’t be more than a few weeks.”

Her son-in-law went back to the kitchen to say hello to his wife. She couldn’t take another day sitting on the porch, watching cars go by. When she thought about it, she couldn’t think of a single reason why they would want her, and to be honest, she didn’t really want them either. Estelle picked up the phone and dialed a number.

The phone rang once before it was answered.

“Hello, this is The Church of the Beloved One, Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, The Jehovah. This is Pastor Jeff speaking. How may I help you on this lovely day?”

She liked the tone of his voice already.

“Hi. My name is Estelle Anderson, and I spoke to a little girl this morning about your...uh...group.”

“Oh? Did you speak with little Jubilee? Do you have any more questions?”

“Yes. Well, just one, really: do y’all have a television?”

Micah Bradley

Quits

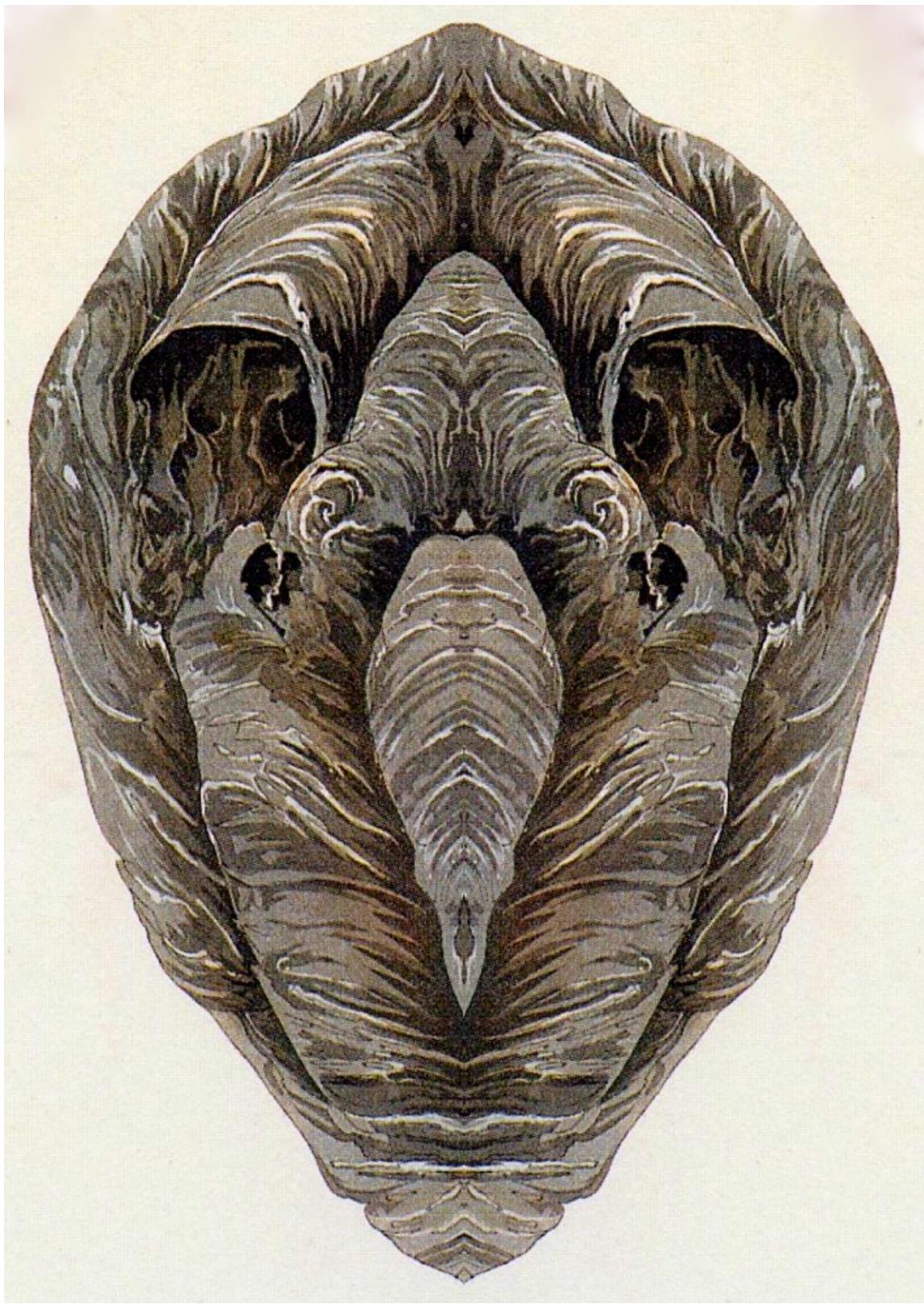
Call it quits. Call it reality
or giving up or the finger
that popped the gum bubble.
The future: junkyard rubble.
The present: still in tact
but sucking air from you
while you swim underwater.

Call it moving on
or euphemism for a messier thing
making love or making up love
from the unmade pieces.

The barrenness of everything
the homelessness of your body
a misread melody now sung
in the right key and you,
you are all locks.
no refunds. Only quits.

Hillary Kobernick

A Scream in the Forest



Bill Wolak

Lines Written to the Sun

You are a mass
of incandescent gas;
there is nothing
between you and me,

and I can reach only
a small way through
our emptiness.

What a team we are!
Holding our gorgeous
on the inside.

We might spin against the world at any time, sister.

For now, we are bolted
together by shear purple universe
and streams of ionized gas

You reach through me,
the kinks and twists in my
magnetic field where nothing is solid

Surrounded by a fierce solar wind,
we are hydrogen,
the lightest of all elements:

We are nothing to stand on.

Rita Chapman

They Don't Make Reruns Like They Used To

Edith Spellman was sitting on the couch watching an infomercial on the TV when the doorbell rang. She knew she shouldn't waste her time like that, that she shouldn't buy it because none of what they said could be true. Yet it was so tempting, so easy to get taken in. Edith would try to remind herself of what Harold always said when the boxes came: *The only kind of guarantee this crap should come with is that it'll break.* She always defended herself as if she was without doubt, even though, while she watched him carry the box inside, she kept repeating to herself, *Please, God, please let it work just this once.* Part of her prayer was inspired by wanting Harold to be wrong, and part by wanting herself to be right. Very little of it had to do with wanting the item waiting inside—Edith usually forgot the details of whatever was caged up behind the corrugated cardboard during the six to eight weeks the thing had taken to arrive.

The doorbell rang again. Before the echo could bygone itself, there were knocks on the front door: three, sturdy and severe. Edith Spellman started. Though she'd heard the first ring, she'd forgotten it just as fast. So this returning jarred her more than the original, almost as if, before a thing happens, some back part of your brain is aware of every possibility, and once a thing happens, that part shuts off so you can act instead of expect. But if you don't act, the expecting still hasn't kicked back in, so then you're no longer ready for anything, even if what happens next is perfectly normal or ordinary or the only reasonable way for things to proceed.

“Coming,” she said, loud and like a question, chiming higher at the end. But her eyes hadn't left the screen. All she could think was *what a contraption!* and *what a price!* She wanted not to need to walk to the door, was almost angry with whoever was out there.

The knocking cried out again. It was like the marching orders of a drill sergeant, so strong and strident, clean and unconnected as bugle calls.

“Coming. Com-ing. Lordy, enough already. I'll be there in a second,” she said, this time as if to a child who'd been whining *Mommy!* from the other room for the past five minutes.

With eyes still stuck to the screen, she stood and smoothed her slacks. She began backing toward the hallway that led to the front door, but quickly crashed right into the curio cabinet that rested against the wall just a few feet behind the couch.

Somehow the impact didn't break anything except the spell of the three-speed, set-and-forget, fastest slow cooker on the market. Again came the doorbell. Again came the knocks. Edith Spellman began to feel like she was trapped inside a grandfather clock that spat out noises that could turn your whole head into a maze and a migraine at the same time.

Again she said, “Coming.” Again she said, “I'll be there in a second.” But these were said softly, just to herself really. She sighed and smoothed her slacks again and started for the front door but facing the right way this time.

Though Harold had a fair number of friends, she couldn't imagine that any were stopping by as a surprise. For one thing, that wasn't the way things were generally done, not anymore at least. For another thing, all of Harold's friends—those who weren't with him—knew he was away for five days on a fishing trip to Lake Mataran, and that this was only day two.

Harold had been going on many fishing trips that spring, more than usual, but Edith wasn't nearly as upset about it as she made out to be. Really she just assumed it was her duty, a show of fidelity, to act as if she were against the idea of his going away for several days at a

time. She wasn't all that convinced Harold cared one way or another, so long as she relented, which she did every time. She also wasn't all that convinced he'd let her stop him if she actually wished to try, but she didn't, and so it never came to that.

Edith Spellman smoothed her slacks again even though they didn't need it. While she turned the knob, the doorbell went off again, and the initial impact of a knock wailed out as well. Outside was a scene full-stopped halfway through: There were two men making up the picture, both in suits—one brown, the other navy blue—both with white collared button downs between their bare skin and the jackets.

Edith Spellman had neither met nor seen these men ever before. They didn't look dangerous, not by her ability to judge, anyway. They didn't look like loafers or drifters either, nor any of the other sorts of people who, if you were to find them standing on your front step, you'd regret opening up the door for. But this didn't mean she could excuse or swallow that little bit of in-poor-taste she'd drummed up by being bothered in the midst of the infomercial, and not just slightly by, say, a ringing phone, but by persistent knocking and ding-donging which would not relent.

Both men were silent save for excessive blinking that, though technically soundless too, felt somehow loud to Edith, as if pace and preponderance could swap in and serve up decibels.

“Can I help you?”

Both of the men backed away a step. The man in the navy suit reached up to his neck to straighten his tie only to be reminded that he didn't have one on.

Edith tried to train one of her ears to listen for the TV and permitted that the other be ready to hear whatever it was that these men were preparing to say.

“We're looking for Mrs. Edith Spellman.” This from the man in brown.

Edith wasn't entirely sure what to think. There wasn't any reason she could conjure why anyone would be looking for her. She smoothed her slacks, not entirely aware she was doing it. “What is this regarding?”

The man in navy said, “It's, um, well, we—”

The man in brown held up his hand without looking back at the one whose speech he was signaling to stop. “We really can't discuss the matter with anyone but Mrs. Edith Spellman.”

“Well...can...can you at least identify yourselves?”

The man in navy glanced at the man in brown, then began to pick between his bottom teeth with his pinky nail. The gesture disturbed Edith. Though she wasn't raised on a diet of Deb balls and cotillions, she still had certain standards of decorum that didn't welcome the transplanting of personal grooming habits out of the bathroom and onto her front patio. But the man wasn't looking at her, not at all, so the message couldn't be relayed with a facial expression, and that's as far as Edith would've been willing to go.

While the man in navy worked at whatever had made a home of the sliver of space between his lower incisors and waited for the man in brown to act, Edith Spellman tried to listen for the TV. She knew she wouldn't be able to hear anything, at least not clearly enough to place a call later to get her cooker. But knowing she wouldn't be able to hear it didn't mean she could keep herself from trying.

Harold had threatened on several occasions to cancel the cable package if she kept watching the infomercials—and not just watching but also getting herself wrapped up enough that she wound up on the phone spelling out *G-R-E-N-O-X Street* and saying, *yes, the shipping and billing addresses are the same*. But he'd never done it, not even briefly to teach her a lesson or to prove he was serious. She was sure he wasn't, that he wouldn't be able to go a day without

the news and access to sporting events in faraway places. So Edith wasn't scared and already had it in mind to buy the baking-broiling-browning contraption (which came with a free baster, among other accessories!) and endure Harold's disdain once the box sat waiting where the two men stood.

The man in brown sighed and straightened up some. The man in navy was still struggling to do something to his teeth.

The man in brown looked slightly below Edith's eye level and said, "I'm Detective Sanders. This"—he gestured behind himself without looking to see where the man in the navy suit was actually standing and nearly took out his eye—"is my partner, Detective Thurman. So, are you Mrs. Edith Spellman?"

Oh, how she wished she could ask them to go away, how she wished they'd never appeared at all. Then she'd still be on the couch getting ready to call the toll-free number that would connect her to a sales representative so she could open a box in six to eight weeks in which she'd find what had been awing her across the screen for a large part of the afternoon.

"I...I am," Edith said. She smoothed her already-smooth slacks.

Detective Thurman pulled his pinky out of his mouth and took a quick look at the nail, which was by then pretty mangled. He touched the tip of his tongue to the thin space he'd been picking at. He didn't appear to be particularly satisfied. Edith looked at him and he looked at her, but it was as if she hardly surpassed hazy on his radar.

"Your husband is Mr. Harold Spellman?" Detective Sanders asked.

It was clear he wanted to get things going, that he wanted this handled, so he could put in the paperwork and get home already. Maybe he had a wife at home who'd been planning to make meatloaf for dinner if he'd be back at a reasonable hour, and all he wished for was that he could call her up soon and say, *Honey, go ahead and get that oven on*. Or maybe he had no wife but a girlfriend who was often left wanting for attention, and he'd promised tonight would be different, and a lot was riding on whether he could make good on that promise. Or maybe he had no one, and all he wanted was to go home and be on his own like he knew he would be no matter what, and do just like Edith Spellman did all day and let the TV keep him company.

For Edith, hearing it had something to do with Harold was a relief at first—that is, until she realized it shouldn't be. Quite the opposite really. But Edith just didn't have room for any selflessness towards Harold, so she had to fake it and feel guilty that that was how things were.

She forced her hand up to her face like people in TV dramas do when they're shocked. Then she said, "What...what's this about?"

"Well, Mrs. Spellman, maybe, uh, maybe—"

"Please, come in...come in," she said and swept inward towards the dark interior.

From outside, you could hear just enough tittering and tremolo to know that there was something in there speaking somehow. Leaning forward just a bit and peering past Edith Spellman, Detective Sanders tried to see whether anyone stood or sat in the rooms behind her. Edith's eyes were empty and her head was hanging a little leftward—she was trying to listen for the TV, still attempting to be let in on what sorts of opportunities were being offered and to how many callers and how long she had to be one of them.

"You got company in there?" Detective Sanders asked as he returned to an almost straight-up sort of standing.

"Company?" Edith looked from side to side as if expecting that the answer was written somewhere like a street sign. "No...no...there's no one here but me. Come...come in. Please—"

again she made, in the most mechanical of manners, the sort of gesture that seemed appropriate to usher someone inside with—“Come in and tell me what all this is about.”

Detective Sanders sighed and stuck his hands in his pockets. “Thank you,” he said, more to his feet than to her. Then he elbowed in the direction he thought was the one that led to Detective Thurman and walked inside.

Detective Thurman had somehow become consumed once again with the efforts to dig something out from between his teeth with his pinky finger’s feeble nail, so he didn’t seem to notice he could *carpe the diem*, so to speak.

“Thurman!” Detective Sanders was glaring at the gap between himself and his partner.

“Huh?”

“Anytime now,” Detective Sanders said and jerked his head towards the way they were meant to be traveling.

“Oh, of course.” Still somewhat zombified, Detective Thurman lurched after him and stumbled on the border separating outside from in.

Edith Spellman shut the door behind them and wished she could’ve said, *I’m in the middle of something—could you please come back later?* She didn’t because she was afraid they would’ve asked what, and she’d have failed to make something up in time.

Instead, she showed them to the sitting room and chose the seat closest to where the TV set was housed, and then she remembered her manners and offered them beverages, but they declined. So she listed everything she had, and once they said no again, she let it go and sat down. They all sat there in silence for a moment with their hands stuck in their laps, and their eyes surveying the spots where their hands were stuck.

“Mrs. Spellman,” Detective Sanders said, “the reason we’re here is”—he looked to Detective Thurman, who gave no indication of having noticed, and then back to Edith, who also appeared to be largely absent—“Mrs. Spellman?”

“Hmmm?” She turned her head up so she could see him, or at least come close to it. “What was that, detective?”

Detective Sanders again looked over at Detective Thurman, but Detective Thurman could’ve just as easily been somewhere else entirely given how little attention he seemed to be paying.

“We...we’re here because—”

“Can I get either of you something to drink? A snack maybe? I’m sure you’ve—”

“Mrs. Spellman,” Detective Sanders said, moving himself forward so he was en route to standing, though not quite there. “We’re here because...because of your husband.”

Edith sat there for a moment, her face entirely unmoved by this news, waiting for a cue as to how she should react. She wasn’t worried enough to know how to warp her face. Harold was so much a stranger to her in so many ways that this still felt more like a hassle, something interrupting her day, than it did anything else. Really, she just wanted to find out how to order the new gadget for cooking food extra fast and how much it cost, and then wait to see what new and exciting product she’d get to become enamored with next.

“Mrs. Spellman, there’s...there’s been an...an in-ci-dent.”

“An incident,” she said. She put her hand to her chin, which was swiveling back and forth, so everything swiveled together. “What did Harold get himself into now? I knew him and his fishing buddies would create some kind of ruckus some day and get themselves into trouble. So what sort of shenanigans were they up to, officer—I mean...detective? I always told him, ‘Harold, those friends of yours are a bunch of knuckleheads, and you all should behave

yourselves. You're in your sixties for goodness' sake, and you all go around together acting like schoolboys. You should be ashamed is what you all should be.' But he never listened to me. Not about the fishing trips. Not about anything, really. But that's how men are, I suppose." She laughed, but it came out slow and staccato; then she shook her head, though more swiftly this time, as if to snap herself out of something. "But I'm sure your wives know a thing or two about that, don't they?" She wasn't really looking at either one of the men as she said this.

Again Detective Sanders looked at his partner as if on the verge of pleading for some sign that he wasn't the only one seeing or hearing this, but Detective Thurman was single mindedly pursuing whatever was trespassing between his teeth. His trance was as deep and dark a trench as the one Edith Spellman had been in when they'd begun knocking and ringing the doorbell. When Detective Sanders looked back at Edith, she was again shaking her head from side to side, now with eyes set open wide like she was in awe of something so much bigger and grander than the silliness of sixty-something-year-old men.

"Mrs. Spellman," he said.

She didn't seem to hear.

"Mrs. Spellman?"

"Hmmm? What was that, detective?" Her head snapped towards him, but her eyes were just shy of focused on his.

"Mrs. Spellman, I think...I think you've misunderstood. You see—"

"Of course I have. That's what I was trying to say. I just can't understand full-grown men behaving like they do. It's—"

"No, no. That...that's not what I mean. There's no easy way to say this, but there's been an accident and...and...your husband...your husband was seriously injured. The paramedics couldn't do anything for him. I'm...I'm very sorry."

Edith was watching Detective Thurman digging at his teeth and had her face slightly scrunched like someone stuck in an elevator with a bad smell who's trying not to offend the source too terribly but is having a hard time of it.

"Mrs. Spellman, did you hear what I said?"

"Oh, excuse me. Do I need to come down to the station to bail him out or—maybe I should make him stay and learn—"

"Mrs. Spellman, I don't think you understand. Your husband was...was in a car accident...a fatal car accident. Both him and the passenger were...were killed. I'm very sorry."

She said, "Oh." Then she said, "Oh, I see," but she didn't seem to be seeing anything.

"If you'd come to the station with us, you can...identify the...the body and say...and say goodbye."

"Who was driving?"

"It...it was your husband behind the wheel, ma'am. We're still trying to find the family of the passenger. We...we're having some trouble determining who...who was in the car with him. I know this must be incredibly hard, but if...if you could help us figure out who was with him so...so we could inform the family, we would be—it'd be a big help to us."

"Poor Miriam," Edith said to someone who didn't seem to be there.

"Miriam? Was Miriam the name of the person your husband was with?"

"Hmmm?"

"You said, 'Poor Miriam.' I asked if that's who...who might've been in the car with him." Detective Sanders tried to catch hold of her eyes, but she didn't give him much chance. She was acting like one of those women who spent their later years popping Valium and

pretending they hadn't become obsolete. That would help to explain the hokey-pokey dance her eyes were doing.

"Miriam? In the car? Why...why no, no. No, of course not. How silly! Miriam is a woman's name after all. No, the passenger...the passenger must've been Abe. Abe Goldblatt—Miriam's husband. Poor Miriam. Poor Abe. Miriam, the passenger. How silly."

Detective Sanders gritted his teeth, tightened his jaw, scratched at his inner ear even though it didn't itch. It was hard for him to understand why he was the one so very alone in this. "Mrs. Spellman," he said.

Her stare didn't switch from where it sat.

"Mrs. Spellman?"

"Hmm?" she said. She turned her head to Detective Sanders, but somehow she overshot it so she still wasn't exactly looking at him.

From the TV set, sounds of *oo-ing* and *aah-ing* and *awing* issued forth, and a few words were distinct enough to be heard. Words like *our gift to you* and *never seen anything like it*. Words that could get Edith Spellman salivating like the ringing of a bell would to dogs of a certain disposition.

To Detective Sanders, the room seemed too dark for that time of day, the décor too heavy, like pancake powder on a woman's face. It was all the deep-wash wood furniture, how it overflowed, took up most of the floor space. Then there was the enormous Persian rug and all the overstuffed upholstery and needlepoint pillows piled up like stack after stack of silver-dollar pancakes. There were too many curio cabinets with too many china dolls and porcelain, pouty-faced cherubs, too many silver thimbles, bronze bells, and glass flowers.

"Mrs. Spellman," he started again. "I don't think you're hearing right. The other person...the passenger...wasn't a—was a woman. A young woman. We...we wondered if maybe it was a colleague, someone you've met?"

Detective Sanders was blushing. Detective Thurman wasn't—he still wasn't listening; all he was doing, all he'd been doing, was digging at the detritus between his teeth.

"A young woman? How silly! Miriam's my age. Maybe older. You must be mistaken. Harold was on a fishing trip. Him and Herb Walker and Abe Goldblatt and Mort Herman. They went to Lake Mataran to catch fish. All four of them. They left Wednesday. I told Harold not to go. Those four are always acting like boys. Not the way full-grown men are meant to behave. I'm always telling him—"

"Mrs. Spellman, please. I know this must be upsetting. You're...you're in shock. But your husband...your husband—we're"—Detective Sanders gestured to Detective Thurman and shook his head like he was finally accepting the reality that it was *I* and not *we*—"I'm sorry to be the one...the one delivering this news. I know it's a lot to...to take in at once, but your husband—"

"Harold."

"Yes, your husband, Harold, wasn't with any of the people you mentioned. Not at the time of the accident at least. The passenger was...was definitely a woman. If there's anyone you can think of...anyone it might be, it'd be very helpful if you could try to give us some names so we could notify the family." Detective Sanders tapped his fingers on his trousers, just above the knee; he scratched his ear with his other hand; he cleared his throat even though you could tell from the sound it made that he hadn't needed to clear it.

Edith Spellman put her hand to her chin and swiveled slowly. "Why...why would he...a young woman...on...on a fishing trip. I don't—"

“I’m sorry, Mrs. Spellman. Truly, I am. But—” He could tell no one was hearing him. His neck was red and growing redder. It didn’t look good next to the brown of the collar of his jacket. “Mrs. Spellman,” he said.

She was silent but seemed to be mouthing something. Detective Sanders again tapped the top of his knee through his trousers. He rubbed the back of his very red neck. He turned to glare at Detective Thurman, who continued to fiddle with his teeth. The TV was the only thing talking. *Two for one. First one hundred callers.*

Detective Sanders’s eyes traveled quickly to check on Edith Spellman, but she was still staring at the wall and twisting her head with her hand attached. She was lip-syncing something, but he couldn’t make out a single shape that would help him identify the words. He returned his stare to his partner; it was so sharp it seemed impossible that Detective Thurman couldn’t feel it slice through him, but he was stuck in some sort of quicksand, mentally speaking.

“Mrs. Spellman, if you could please just think of some names. I know this must be—”

“Poor Miriam. Poor, poor Miriam. I told him—”

“Would you knock it the hell off”—Detective Sanders was glaring at his partner, primed to pounce, tilted towards him so his butt was hovering above the cushion he was meant to be seated on.

Edith Spellman was still silent.

In spite of having been screamed at just seconds ago, Detective Thurman continued struggling to free the something stuck between his teeth. A vein was making itself visible across Detective Sanders’s forehead. He turned back to the faraway woman. Someone on the screen in the other room was saying *double your order and won’t find a deal like this anywhere else.*

“Mrs. Spellman,” he said softly and started to tap the top of his knee through his trousers again. “Mrs. Spellman, some names, please. We need to notify the family.”

“Grown men gallivanting around like that. I knew he should’ve stayed home. But...but what could I do—”

A crash cut off Edith Spellman’s speech. It wasn’t a violent one, nothing like the sound of, say, cars crushing together, but something breaking or being broken nonetheless. Everyone but Edith jumped at the sound. Detective Sanders was drilling his fingers into the arms of the easy chair in which he had not taken it easy at all. Detective Thurman had finally stopped digging. Edith Spellman was silent and staring.

Then she stood. Then she walked into the room the TV was in and stared at the screen. Next to her sat the curio cabinet she had slammed into earlier. A small china something lay smashed into shards and larger shares on the bottom-most shelf. It was hard to discern where it had fallen from because of how overfilled the thing was. Nothing seemed to be missing; there was no empty space. And yet, something had fallen and left emptiness where once there’d been none.

Samantha Madway

For You Must Wander

darkness bends over
the length of
your body:
play with me, it said,
for I am a museum
of carvings where
shadows
are the desperation
you sleep beside--
so you peel your fingers
off from the light,
committing to mind
how this gathering
of skin and bones can
feel like sliding
into an old ghost tale,
in which you are a poor
thespian, ill-dressed,
sitting silhouetted
beneath a study of colors—

Lana Bella

Evergreen



Capotă Daniela Lăcrămioara

Speaking of Lillian

I loved the way she said “balloon.” She said it as if she were blowing bubbles. I poked the flashcard in front of her face. “Buhhhh...” she started. And then a sonorous “Loooo....”

At 54, Lillian Cruikshank is unusual. She’s one of the few non-elderly patients that I encounter in my capacity as Speech-Language Therapist at Carlson Rehab. My patients are stroke victims, usually beyond 70. I’ve even worked with patients over 90. Like Lillian, all my stroke survivors struggle to communicate. They fight to articulate simple sounds. My first name, Miriam, requires mastery over minute vowel inflections. I’ve become accustomed to a hesitant and stuttering endearment, usually something like “Mem,” and occasionally “Ma.” My surname is Chapman and depending upon the level of speech impediment, is perhaps easier to distinguish in terms of consonant variants.

Earlier today, as Lillian and I sat facing each other in the deserted day-room, like two old chums, I presented the flash card in front of her face. We’d been through the entire phonetic exercise twice, and she understood precisely what I required. I noticed a minuscule pull at the corner of her mouth, and I wondered if this was perhaps an attempt at a smile—or a facial expression of discouraged resignation.

“C’mon girl. You can do it.”

“Puhhh...” she began, and then, “Puhhhrrrr....” once more as if she blew bubbles. “Purhhhhrrrrr... pohhhh.”

“Yes! Lillian, you’ve got it! You’re absolutely correct. It’s a purple balloon. Excellent!”

The balloon card was the last of the bunch. I chucked the cards together and slid the deck into my bag. Afternoon sunshine refracted from the highly polished day-room floor and softened the angles and shadows around us. Other staff members and patients had not come into the room to distract us, and we had managed the entire session. Lillian sagged to the left. I resisted the urge to reach over and prop her into a straighter posture. She’d been on-task for a long time. She’d earned that slump.

Before I became one of her therapists and long before she came out to Carlson, she was a vibrant and independent woman, active in her community. Four months ago, she suffered the catastrophic stroke. On a fine blustery Sunday, Lillian was busy packing a picnic lunch of sandwiches and cookies to take out to Bluerock Beach when her son, Graham, arrived to pick her up. He found his mother lying on the floor of her living room, mute and unable to stand. Graham called an ambulance, and Lillian was carted off to Glenview Emergency.

An MRI confirmed the diagnosis. Specifically: a left hemispheric CVA, which resulted in right-sided hemiplegia and aphasia. Translation: Lillian was paralyzed on her right side. She couldn’t talk. Prognosis: Guarded. She spent three weeks in acute care before she was shuffled out here to Carlson for the usual stint of rehab.

Graham was doing the best he could. He seemed like a conscientious young man, age 27, and he helped me understand a few things about his mother. He visited each day. I made time to speak with him on Fridays.

“She sings in a choir,” he said. “At least, she did. And she runs around to various things, rug-hooking class, book club discussion. She even plays pool. Her favorite is snooker. She plays at the Glenberry Social Club, and she beats all the guys. She’s merciless even when I play a

game with her, and I'm pretty good." He looked down at his hands and gripped the armrests of a vinyl blue chair. We were seated in the visitor's lounge down the hall and outside his mother's room. "She's got her own cue," he went on. "A fancy one that unscrews into two sections, and she carries it around in a little case. My mom's a real shark. I tease her all the time and call her a hustler or Minnesota Skinny. I'm not sure if she likes it when I call her that."

I had to scurry off to another patient's appointment, so I thanked Graham. I planned to speak with him again if I had the opportunity.

When Lillian and I had finished today's session, I noted details that I would chart later. Her articulations were less strained. I could not verify improvement in enunciation, but hesitation and stutter had diminished or softened.

"Good effort today, Lil. Thank you for your amazing hard work!" I hoped this didn't sound condescending. "You're coming along, you're learning." I put a hand on her shoulder. "I know it's hard work. You must be exhausted." I stood. "I'll take you back to your room now. Okay?"

Her chin jutted forward.

I levered the wheelchair and spun her toward the door. We rolled out and down the hall until we edged onto the blue linoleum in front of the main desk. Dave Pearson, one of the personal care aides, leaned out from behind the half-wall.

"I'll take Lillian," he said.

"Yeah, okay." I relinquished the wheelchair, and Dave took my place. "Okay Lil," I said as I bent down to her side and touched her arm. "Have a good week. Don't give them too much guff. They do mean to make you better." I tried to wink. But actually, I can't. I scrunched one side of my face and closed an eye. "I'll see you at ten o'clock next Tuesday. Enjoy your lunch. I think it's chicken pot pie with gravy and Brussel sprouts."

Did I detect a grimace?

Dave rolled her down the hall. I watched them go as I waited for the elevator.

Dr. Paul Gardner chaired our Grand Rounds meetings. He's the Medical Director. Also present was Dr. Ron Chafney, the second year Neurology Resident, Erica Siemmens, the Primary RN, Tyler Bainbridge, the Physio, and Nancy Sherwood, the Dietitian, who sat in today. I sat beside a young medical student who told me his name was Halim. We spent a few minutes chatting about nothing in particular. The first case on the agenda was Lillian Cruikshank.

"No improvement," Dr. Gardner stated. "She's still at grade one levels. Put her on to maintenance—Phase Two."

Dr. Chafney looked up. "Yes, I agree," he said. "There's no reason to keep trying."

"Concur?" Dr. Gardner looked over to Erica Siemmens, who was busy scribbling some notes into an orange file folder. "She's reached her goals, has she not?"

Nurse Siemmens consulted a sheet of paper, which she smoothed flat on the surface of the table. "Yes, I agree. She's ready for Phase Two."

"With regard to her physio requirements—what's the status?"

Tyler Bainbridge cleared his throat. "Patient's range of motion is up almost 17% with some demonstrable core muscle improvement. I suspect she may actually surprise us, and she'll walk straight out of here." He drummed his fingers on the table. "Uhh.... She still needs significant physio and monitoring, but you're right about the adjunct therapies. She's hit her plateaus. That's the truth."

“Her appetite is unremarkable,” the dietician said. “Blood markers well within the range of norm. She’s as fit as she’s going to get. I’m okay with a Phase Two.”

I was struck without words for a protracted space of time. Phase Two meant Lillian’s speech therapy was history. She’d also be discontinued and turfed from occupational therapies. She needed all of these to have any hopes of regaining milestones. She needed someone to bolster her self-esteem, share her struggles. But I didn’t think Dr. Gardner understood the whole scenario. If Lillian was to get better, she had to speak. Oh, the numbers and statistics dictated how much we could do, what we should do and when we should stop, but I knew my patient. Lillian needed more. She needed me.

“But Dr. Gardner, she’s made progression here,” I said. “Significantly—steadily! Did you get a chance to read my chart notes?”

“Subjective. We go by proof here; empirical proof and our well established parameters. Put her into Phase Two.”

“But—Dr. Gardner. There’s more to it than that. The numbers don’t always show....”

“Next case.” He leaned back and gazed up at the ceiling as if he were bored.

I took a deep breath. “I know she’s got language potential. I’ve seen it in her eyes.”

“Look here, Ms. Chapman! I’m the first to grant discretion, but I see no rational reason to keep going on this. It’s the way we function. We have finite resources. We’ve got to move along. Next case.”

Nurse Siemmens closed the file on Lillian Cruikshank and opened another.

I looked across the table at Dr. Paul Gardner. Heartless old dipstick, I thought. But I knew it was useless to argue. Gardner was the big cheese. I was a mere crumb—the lowest of the low—well, except for Halim.

Sometimes, I know that with time and determination, stroke patients do make progress on their own, but it was a long shot in Lillian’s case. I saw that she had an iron resolve. She had the power to move ahead, but I should have helped, could have helped, if Dr. Gardner had allowed me and Lillian more hours. I worried and I wondered.

My work schedules conflicted. I changed part of my job, and I was posted to another facility. Time heals. Or so they say, and I had to let my patient go. I took my leave from Lillian.

Months later, to my surprise, I ran into Graham Cruikshank at a trade show. He’s a computer whiz kid, a specialist at demonstrating new software applications that fine-tune speech recognition.

“How’s your mother?” I asked during his mid-day break.

“Unbelievable,” he said. “One thing at a time. Let me tell you.” He sat down beside me. “She came home from Carlson and sat staring into magazines all day like she was glued to the pictures. She wouldn’t let anyone turn the pages for her or allow anyone to set the magazines aside. She sounded out the words associated with the pictures; each image, one at a time, just like she used to do with you. She got better at it, slowly, mind you, but she did get better. Painful to watch at first, especially when it took several minutes for her to turn a single page. I tell you, she

was intent and focused and determined. And get this! Already she plans on singing in the choir again, and eventually working part-time.”

“Wow!”

“I think I’d call that a complete recovery,” he said. I could hear the pride in his voice. “My mother is truly amazing.”

“She did this alone?”

“I helped when I could. But yes, she’d just sit there sounding out words, sometimes for hours and hours.” He grinned. “She can say darn near anything she wants to now, and I mean anything.” He looked over at the far wall. “She swears at me too often.” He rubbed his hands together. “My mother had to relearn new ways.” He took a deep breath. “We’re having a big party, you know, to celebrate, because she’s getting her driver’s license reinstated on Monday. Party time is any time after 4 o’clock. Why don’t you come along and join us?”

He wrote the address on the back of a software brochure.

The day Lillian learned to drive again, I knew her recovery was complete. It was gratifying for me to see her strong and mobile. Her speech was unaffected; good cadence with perfect clarity. No hesitations. Excellent fluency.

We had a wonderful time. Her place was decorated with party streamers and balloons. Graham set her newly minted driver’s license on display like a centerpiece in the middle of the dining room table. When it was time to go, Lillian squashed me in a tight meaningful hug.

“Thanks,” she said. That was all.

She reached up and released a single balloon from a bunch clustered beside the door. She held it out to me.

It was a purple balloon.

Katrina Johnston

Brink of the Nile



Maria Picone

Work in Progress

In the shop window, the
skeins of yarn are spread like
uncut gemstones, tumbling
from wooden shelves onto glossy tables.
Riotous shades of amethyst and amber,
rubies fading into pinkish coral, clear
ocean blues bright against the white.
My fingers itch to touch them,
to run through their soft threads
as if to absorb the fibers through my skin.
I see my mother's hands grasp her needles,
hear the metal click and clack as the
yarn falls into her lap like unfurling sails.
Knit-purl, knit-purl, the rhythm
tap-tap-tapping in my head.
She tried to teach me but my clumsy hands
twisted the wool into tangles of hair
and she despaired and taught me no more.
If only there had been more time, I
would have tried again. She left me
some yarn and a sweater with one
sleeve, a work in progress.

Barbara Buckley Ristine

Reviews

The Goodbye House by Lawrence Coates. Reno, Nevada: University of Nevada Press, 2015. 221 pages. \$26.00, hardcover.

Lawrence Coates weaves a powerful story of a family dealing with the aftermath of financial ruin. Scott, the father, invested in internet start-ups, and the family loses the house. Katherine, the mother, moves in with her father Henry, who is dealing with chemotherapy. The son, Carter, changes high schools and has trouble fitting in. The daughter has moved in with her boyfriend.

The novel opens with Katherine remembering her childhood home: “She remembered this: the time she stepped onto the roof of her childhood home in San Jose, the time she felt the tilting shingles under her feet as her father held her tiny hand in one of his and kept his other hand broad and strong at the small of her back. Katherine was five, and her brothers, eight and ten, had been throwing a Frisbee across the back lawn while she sat on the cement slab patio and toes the soft grass with her sneakers. ‘You’re too young to play,’ they’d said. She watched with some resentment the disc spinning back and forth in the lowering sunlight as they all waited to be called in to dinner” (1).

One of my favorite moments is when Scott sneaks into Henry’s house and takes naps in Katherine’s bed. When she discovers him, “She snatched the pillow from the upper bunk and hit him across the face with it. He sat up, startled, and she smacked him again. Sitting outside in the Buick, Henry witnessed a miraculous sight. There was his son-in-law, bursting out the front door and running with his arms raised about his head. Followed by his daughter, splendid in her anger, raging after him with a pillow in both hands. When he slowed to try to speak, she whaled away at him, buffeting him about the shoulders, until he finally broke into a run for the Fury. He locked the doors and started the car with a smoky roar while she beat upon the driver’s side window. As the Fury pulled away, she raised both arms, like a goddess rampant and triumphant” (22).

Carter takes a drama class with Nu. One day they work with makeup and Carter is “...paired up with a girl who wore a nose ring and dyed her hair black and had the funny name Blossom Haven. She explained once by saying that her mother was an old hippie. They now lived alone, she said, just the two of them, and her mother was still kind of a hippie, but had learned enough about massage therapy and Reiki to make the rent every month” (37). For the audition the boys recite Prospero’s speech. Nu wants him to redo the speech, ““And I want you to speak as though you don’t believe a word you’re saying, as though you find the whole idea of being able to ‘bedim the sun at noon’ somewhat ludicrous”” (44). So Carter takes a breath, and “Then he began the speech again in his own high tenor voice. He pranced lightly through the lines, making some of the most serious declarations into doubtful statements or questions. He heard some giggles, and when he came to the line about calling forth the mutinous winds, he turned his back to the audience and stuck out his buttocks and made a loud farting noise. There was laughter as he finished, and he made an exaggerated, loose-jointed bow” (44).

Each character attempts to solve his or her problems. Some characters succeed and others go in circles. The story is a piece of suburban life, one that is complex and beautiful and funny. It's a story I won't soon forget.

Coates is also the author of novels *The Blossom Festival*, *The Master of Monterey*, and *The Garden of the World*, and the novella *Camp Olvido*.

—Suzanna Anderson

Day One by From Ashes to New. Better Noise Records, 2016. \$8.99, CD.

The first album from American rock band *From Ashes to New*, from Lancaster, Pennsylvania, is a must for rock fans. I heard the single “Through It All” several times on Sirius radio and had to get the album. I haven’t stopped listening to it.

“Through It All” is still my number one favorite song. It was not long before I fell in love with the rest of the album. As a musician myself, I appreciate the repetitive motive that connects all eleven songs but also the variety among the songs. The order of the songs is perfect, circular from beginning to end, ready to start again after a breath.

“Through It All” begins with a brief introduction with the motive and backup vocals before the lyrics begin:

There's not a day that passes by
The pain has not amassed inside
It's breaking me down to the ground
It's like I crashed and died
It's hard to leave your past behind
Especially when you're last in line
And half the time it acts like vines
And wraps inside my fragile mind
Hiding in plain view it seems
The same old shit I choose between
Taking who I used to be
And keeping it subdued beneath
Close to dead and losing me
You took a chance and you believed
So did I
I let you lead
And grabbed the line you threw to me
And through it all
You saved me, you made me
And through it all you changed me forever

My second favorite song, though I love them all, is “Every Second.” There is a short introduction and then the lyrics begin:

I'm broken
I'm hoping
For a reason to keep on going
Doors open and closing
Everything seems like slow motion
I've chosen this moment
To stop my self erosion
I'm focused on owning
Myself
My own opponent
But in this moment that it's falling apart
I keep thinking
Is the path I've chosen where I should start
I keep sinking
I'm dying every second I'm alive
Every second I'm alive
I'm trying to feed the fire that's inside
Feed the fire that's inside

The rhythm of the lyrics and the music draws me in to sing and tap along. I love this debut album, and I hope fellow metal and rock fans will give *From Ashes to New* a listen.

From Ashes to New and Grant McFarland wrote the music. Matt Brandyberry, Chris Musser, and Branden Kreider on vocals, Lance Dowdle and Branden Kreider on guitars, and Tim D'onofrio on drums.

—Suzanna Anderson

Gargoyles by Robert Krantz. Middletown, DE, 2016. 44 pages. \$5.38, paperback.

Robert Krantz's book *Gargoyles* is a brilliant read. He begins with poetry and ends with a story. In the first volume of *The Magnolia Review*, Volume 1, Issue 1, January 2015, we published his poem "arwen."

The first poem in *Gargoyles* is "Hansel:" "I followed the crumbs you left / spattered on the pine forest floor / before sisters / and witches / and moons dredging the lake for bodies / I noticed vaguely then quickly / they formed a shanty / built of ash" (1). The poem "Which Way Does your Beard Blow, Bob Baxter" is for Allen Ginsberg, and "Harvest" is for Carl Sandburg. "+ 4" is one of my favorite poems. The narrator is playing Uno, "I worry that you are not understanding the rules / because you are happy when you draw more cards / more cards, more colors, more options / you are happy / I should see things your way / look at all these cards" (8).

Several poems are three lines, like "Clipper Ships" and "Tacked." In "Clipper Ships," "the future is the sail / the past a rudder / now is the edge of the world" (9). "Dandelion Suite" has three numbered stanzas. In 1, "Plucked and blown apart, / spread to the corners of this meadow / pieces falling / between grass blades and dewy leaves / you never asked my wish / never noticed

the milk-white blood / dripping from my center" and 2, "You pick the seeded globe and hold it close / kiss a thousand spores into the Michigan wind/ what did you wish for, daughter / if I tell you, it won't come true" and 3, "I hold by breath / and in my inside, inside voice / the desire rises— / mother" (17).

"Good Morning" has different indentations and uses them well:

I ask painted questions
am I right?

there is a wolf in me
huddled and remembering
killing the stillness of shadowed sorrow
and the morning music it holds
(23)

The story "Red Geraniums" follows Lana as she connects to her elderly neighbor, Mr. Hall. He falls on the ice as he takes his garbage out. She calls for her parents to help him. He broke his leg and hip, so the family helps with chores. Mr. Hall has her water his plants and plant red geranium seeds. Lana thinks, "How could they become plants from just almost nothing? How could something grow like that. And she thought of Mr. Hall and the opposite of growing, of aging and becoming sicker. It felt quite complicated to her, but try as she would, she couldn't stop thinking about those two things" (42).

It is fantastic to see Krantz's work with more of his poetry and read his story.

—Suzanna Anderson

Romeo and/or Juliet: A Chooseable-Path Adventure by Ryan North. New York, New York: Riverhead Books, 2016. 476 pages. \$20.00, paperback.

I encountered Ryan North's work on the Kickstarter project *To Be or Not To Be*, a chooseable-path adventure of *Hamlet*. I loved changing the traditional Hamlet story with North's humor and the work of illustrators for the different endings.

There are heart icons that mark the choices that Shakespeare made. I recommend reading the Shakespeare choices first and then doing a run through of the choices you want to make. Personally, when I read the play in high school freshman English, I wished that Juliet, upon hearing from Nurse that she should marry Paris, just picked up and went to Mantua instead of the tragedy that follows. North's book gives me the opportunity to do just that.

Reading sections and choosing the numbers is easier with the numbers at the bottom of the page so as other choices are not spoiled. The reader can choose to read about the author and then learn about the artists, with their biographies.

And of course, marriage is an option for Juliet and Romeo. They consummate their marriage. As Romeo, “You park your horse under a tree and make your way to Juliet’s window. The rope ladder you sent is hanging there, just as you hoped. You climb up the ladder, and Juliet is waiting for you. She looks gorgeous. You feel yourself get EVEN HORNIER. And yes, this is it, gentle reader. This is the moment you’ve been waiting for. Here is the only reason you picked up this book in the first place, because you knew this scene had to be in here somewhere. If only you just somehow made the right choices to find it. Welcome ...to the CHOOSE-YOUR-OWN SEX SCENE. Choose-your-own-sex-scene!! I CAN’T WAIT. Turn to 239. Haha what? No that’s—that’s fine. Skip over to when the sex is done, please. Turn to 246.”

There is a trick to reading a choose-your-own-adventure book, of using your fingers to keep track of where you were so if you lose your place or forget the number you chose, you’ll be able to locate it easily. The other trick is to not read the book sequentially. North addresses this in number 2, “Okay, so the only way you could be reading these words right now is if you (SOMEHOW?) ignored all the very clear instructions to make a choice, and instead (again: SOMEHOW??) thought you were reading a regular boring book in which you can just sit back and enjoy the ride and never ever get to make any choices. THIS IS NOT SUCH A BOOK. You agree to start making choices and say that your first one is to go back to the previous option and, you know, read harder this time. You promise that you’re going to read really hard until you understand how a choice works. You swear it. I BELIEVE IN YOU. Alright, go do that. I don’t want to see you wandering back here again!! Try again, chuckles: turn to 1.”

There is a secret character, a mini-dream sequence, a mini-comic *The Most Lamentable Comedy And Most Cruel Death of Pyramus & Thisbe*, pro-power miracle shake recipe, Nurse side quest, and so much more. You even get to break a code in the Nurse side quest. It has its own font.

Even though *Romeo and Juliet* is not my favorite Shakespearean play (*Much Ado About Nothing*, if you’d like to know) I love what North has down with *Hamlet* and *Romeo and Juliet*. May you have many adventures in North’s world! Choose wisely.

—Suzanna Anderson

Go Set a Watchman: A Novel by Harper Lee. New York, New York: Harper Perennial, 2016. 288 pages. \$9.59, paperback.

Just skip it.

—Kristin Brooker

Journeymen’s Songs the music by Steven Winteregg, performed by Daniel Zehringer, trumpet. North Hampton, OH: Navona Records, 2016. \$14.24, CD.

Daniel Zehringer performs on the trumpet various pieces by Steven Winteregg. The CD starts off with *Reflections of Quoheleth*, which has five sections. The booklet says that “Quoheleth is the name given to the author of Ecclesiastes, one of the Wisdom books of the Bible. Except for the Prologue, the titles for each movement are taken from this book: ‘A Time for Searching,’

‘Chasing the Wind,’ ‘A Time for Loving,’ and ‘A Time for Living.’ The mood of each movement is reflective of their title.” Zehringer plays Bb and C trumpet, flugelhorn. The trumpet’s beginning notes swell and fall in the *Prologue*.

Winteregg’s trip to Narbonne, France inspired *Two Souvenirs. African Fanfare* “...was inspired by the akadinda music of Uganda. The akadinda is a xylophone-type instrument of African royalty. It is often played by more than one person at a time in the style of a ‘hocket.’ Written for two trumpets, *African Fanfare* reflects this unique type of music.”

The City is one of my favorites on this CD. It has four movements without break. “While the piece could represent any city, it was directly inspired by the city of Chicago. Daniel Zehringer commissioned a piano reduction of the piece and performed the premier of the piano version in February of 2015.” Zehringer is on the C trumpet and Steve Aldredge is on the piano. *Rhapsody in B* by Gershwin comes to mind.

Winteregg’s trip to China in 1992 inspired *China Crossing*. The style “...is a reflection of the composer’s impressions of Chinese music. The title has a double meaning in that it not only describes the composer’s journey across China, but also describes the ‘crossing’ or blending of cultures...The second movement was suggested by a visit to the mysterious Lingyin Monastery near Hangzhou with its giant Buddhas and pervasive incense. The clicking sounds assigned to the tuba represent the sound of sticks being hit together in the monastery. The third movement depicts the cosmopolitan city of Shanghai, with its crowded streets and neon signs. A favorite evening activity is visiting the jazz clubs found in some of the hotels, but the jazz heard there is an older type. The music of this movement alternates between the bustling streets in the daytime and the American jazz in the evening.”

Popular Variations on a Classical Theme “...was commissioned by the Dayton Philharmonic Orchestra for their Dayton Philharmonic Mixed Trio, which performed concerts for young people in the schools. The mixed trio consisted of trumpet, flugelhorn, double bass and, electric bass, and various percussion instruments. The theme of this composition is the famous ‘Going Home’ from Dvorak’s New World Symphony. The theme is then presented in variations that are in the popular style of particular decades: 1940’s Big Band, 1950’s Rock Ballad, 1960’s Situation Comedy, 1970’s Disco, and 1980’s Broadway Musical.” One of my favorite orchestral experiences was playing the Dvorak symphony on the violin.

Zehringer is Associate Professor at Wright State University. He received his Master of Music degree in Performance and Literature from the Eastman School of Music, and his Bachelor of Music in Music Education from Bowling Green State University. My piano professor, Dr. Solungga Fang Tzu-Liu, professor at Bowling Green State University, was also at Eastman and accompanied Zehringer on piano for his concert. What a small world.

Steven Winteregg is a professor of Music at Cedarville University. Winteregg’s compositions have been performed throughout the world, including North and South America, Europe, Africa, Asia, and Australia. These performances have included multiple international concerts and festivals.

Throughout the CD, I am impressed by the clarity and richness of the trumpet. Zehringer is a master of his craft. And through Winteregg's music, the listener is transported throughout the world, tapping along to the beat.

—Suzanna Anderson

Matthew by Omer Zamir. Cumberland, Maine: Deerbrook Editions. Forthcoming.

Omer Zamir's collection *Matthew* is a great group of poems. The length and type of poems vary. Zamir's word choices keep the word-music alive. I read the poems aloud.

Matthew begins with "Chrysopelea," and the first stanza is "Young, tall, slender, / Wind-tangled hair / Dancing like fire." The second stanza, "He leans against the railing. / His eyes are dry, / His heart flutters / Like a butterfly" mirrors the last stanza, "And, back first, / With resolute thirst, / He leans into air."

Zamir's language choices are impeccable, verbs hungry and alit with images and soul-moving metaphors. In "The Sahara Desert," the couple is "...tigers at night, / Who hungered and thirsted / For the flesh and blood of each other. / We are each other's scars."

"She & He" explore the romantic relationship, and "She came very far in life / Before getting too close to him. / He got the best accolades / Up until he was sucked dry of himself. / She thought the future would smell of strawberries / And lemonade with added sugar, / But such fragrances were soon devoured / By the stench of their relationship."

Zamir uses repetition wisely in "Zeroing In," and the last four stanzas: "Silently it stalks, following tracks, / Holding nothing back: designed // To perfect this act. / Bloody moon, green eyes, // Zeroing in, zeroing in / Hidden, all seeing, // Unblinking, heart steadily beating, / Zeroing in, zeroing in." Repetition is also key to "Rooms:" "No widow, he said he'd call when he reached the hotel. / No widow, he said he'd be back at night. / No widow, she's just waiting for him to call. / And when they showed her the pictures of the plane, / There was no belief. / And when they lifted the sheet, / There was no belief. And when he was lowered, / When he was covered, / When the plants he would water withered, / When the newspapers would pile on the front porch, / When his books accumulated dust, / There was no belief." The poem "No One Is Coming" is pure repetition that goes straight to the heart:

No one is coming
No one is coming
Aside from sameness
Aside from sameness

In her flat, cold and quiet
In her flat, cold and quiet
She forgot *touch*
She forgot *touch*

She forgot touch
In her flat, cold and quiet
Aside from sameness
No one is coming.

The long lines in “Gates Agape” are rhythmic, a reminder of Walt Whitman. The poem begins, “Beckoned by the rage-red moon and the glinting eyes of the owls, / The empty streets fill her with a piercing peace that kills the past, / Sets the future on fire and the ashes do not choke her.” Zamir continues with three-lined stanzas, ending with “Rain, the bells up high, she forgets the *I*, that tilted bone in the throat. / Flashlights encircle her now and the vividness of forgetfulness vanishes. / The sleepless house welcomes her with gates agape.”

Zamir includes a prose poem, “Rushing Away”: “Rushing away from the house where she penned *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To The Lighthouse*, the lighthouse she lost sight of in the storm she wrestled and to the river and moss-covered rocks...”

Every word is potent and necessary in “The Pills”:

Each a whip on the heart
It's a sounder sleep
Knowing where they are...waiting.
Safely sealed in their little tin wombs,
Impatient for birth,
Impatient for a throat.
I see them, little saints,
Unborn. Powerful. Feared.

Zamir was a contributor in the first volume of *The Magnolia Review* (Volume 1, Issue 1) and we are proud of him. Zamir’s collection is a brilliant and engaging read.

—Suzanna Anderson

Contributors

David-Matthew Barnes's poetry has been featured in *Memoryhouse*, *Red Booth Review*, *The Comstock Review*, *Glitterwolf Magazine*, *Chelsea Station*, *Sonic Boom*, *Wicked Alice*, and more. He is the national winner of the Hart Crane Memorial Poetry Award, selected by Kent State University. He has been an educator for more than a decade. He lives in Denver.

A Pushcart nominee, **Lana Bella** is an author of two chapbooks, *Under My Dark* (Crisis Chronicles Press, 2016) and *Adagio* (forthcoming from Finishing Line Press), has had her poetry and fiction featured with over 200 journals: *Columbia Journal*, *Poetry Salzburg Review*, *Third Wednesday*, among others. She resides in the U.S. and the coastal town of Nha Trang, Vietnam, where she is a mom of two far-too-clever-frolicsome imps.

Scott Blackburn is a graduate of UNC-Greensboro (Journalism '07/ English '10) and a second semester MFA student at Southern New Hampshire University. He currently lives in North Carolina where he teaches high school English. Blackburn also holds a second degree black belt in Ju-Jitsu. His work has appeared in *Flash Fiction Magazine*.

Micah Bradley is originally from Nashville, Tennessee, but she is currently living in Winter Park, Florida, to attend Rollins College. She has had several pieces published in Rollins College's literary magazine, *Brushing*, and she was an intern for the college's literary festival, *Winter With the Writers*. Bradley has also published articles with several journalistic publications.

Goirick Brahmachari lives in New Delhi, India. He hails from Silchar, Assam. His poems have been published in many Indian and international poetry magazines.

Hannah Carmack is an emerging writer from Roscoe, IL. She has been writing since the third grade but only recently discovered her love of non-fiction and poetry. She enjoys reading and writing in her spare time, as well as staying politically active due to her passion for people with disabilities. This passion was spurred from her life being changed by being diagnosed with ulcerative colitis. Since then she has spent her time making her voice heard and paying tithe to the all-mighty colon.

Rita Rouvalis Chapman teaches high school English in Webster Groves, Missouri. Recently, her poetry has appeared in *Semaphore Magazine*, *Anomaly*, *SHANTI*, *Fourth & Sycamore*, and *Poetry Quarterly*. She is a student in the MFA program at the University of Missouri, St. Louis.

Lindsay A. Chudzik received her MFA in Creative Writing from Virginia Commonwealth University. Her one-act plays have appeared in a number of festivals, and Chudzik's short stories have appeared or are forthcoming in *Dogwood: A Journal of Poetry & Prose*, *Ghost Town*, *Haunted Waters Press*, and *Map Literary*, among others. Her creative nonfiction has been anthologized and her short story, "Check Yes If You Like Us," was a finalist for the 2015

Dogwood Prize. Currently, she is an Assistant Professor of Writing at Virginia Commonwealth University and facilitates creative writing workshops for ex-offenders at OAR in Richmond, Virginia.

Joshua Daniel Cochran is a graduate of the University of Arizona and City College of New York. His first published short story won the Fred Scott Award in 2002. More recent publications include *Bourbon Penn* and *The Gathering Darkness* anthology from Black Cat Books. Cochran's second novel, *The Most Important Memoir Ever Written Ever* (SEARCH), was released in January 2014. Currently Cochran lives and writes in his hometown of Tucson, Arizona.

Kelci Crawford is a comic artist and illustrator based in southeast Ohio. She is the creator of the comics "Johnson & Sir," "Charlie & Clow," and "Mini-Comic Theater," as well as the co-creator of the comics "Validation" and "Seeing Him." More of her work can be found on their website, www.kelcidcrawford.com.

Marissa Davis is a writer from Paducah, Kentucky, currently living and studying in Nashville. Besides writing, she enjoys baking, yoga, and world travel. Her work has appeared in *Teen Ink*, *Kindred Magazine*, and *The Vanderbilt Review*.

Teressa Rose Ezell's short story "Water and Fire" was included in *Main Street Rag*'s recently released anthology, *Coming Off the Line*. Her work has also appeared in the *Mulberry Fork Review*, *Apeiron Review*, *99 Pine Street Literary Journal*, and the *Bethlehem Writers Roundtable*. She received her MFA in Creative Writing from Lindenwood University.

CLS Ferguson, PhD speaks, signs, acts, publishes, sings, performs, writes, paints, teaches, and rarely relaxes. She and her husband, Rich Ferguson, are raising their Bernese Mountain Border Collie Mutt, Sadie in Hollywood, CA. <http://clsferguson.wix.com/clsferguson>.

Tom Harper is a poet, playwright, journalist, and editor. His work has been presented on stages, in newspapers, journals, and on the BBC World Service Short Story Programme. After a two decade hiatus, he has recently published stories in *The Opiate* and *Blood and Thunder: Musing on the Art of Medicine* and has a short story upcoming in *The MacGuffin*.

A recent graduate of the Converse College Low-Residency MFA program, **Lisa M. Hase-Jackson** teaches English and Poetry at the College of Charleston in Charleston, SC, and is a freelance writer, workshop facilitator, and writing coach. Hase-Jackson's poems have appeared in such literary magazines as *Midwest Quarterly*, *Sugar Mule*, *Kansas City Voices*, *Pilgrimage*, and *Fall Lines* as well as anthologized in several collections. She is the editor of *200 New Mexico Poems*, a celebration of New Mexico's centennial, and *Zingara Poet*, a space for practicing poets.

Ann Howells has edited *Illya's Honey* since 1999, recently taking it digital: www.IillyasHoney.com and alternating issues with a new co-editor. Her publications are: *Black Crow in Flight* (Main Street Rag, 2007), *the Rosebud Diaries* (Willet Press, 2012), *Under a Lone Star* (Village Books Press, 2016), and upcoming: *Letters for My Daughter* (Flutter Press, 2016),

and *Cattlemen & Cadillacs*, an anthology of Dallas/Ft. Worth poets she is editing (Dallas Poets Community Press, 2016). Her poems appear widely among small press and university journals.

A.J. Huffman has published twelve full-length poetry collections, thirteen solo poetry chapbooks, and one joint poetry chapbook through various small presses. Her most recent releases, *Degeneration* (Pink Girl Ink), *A Bizarre Burning of Bees* (Transcendent Zero Press), and *Familiar Illusions* (Flutter Press) are now available from their respective publishers. She is a five-time Pushcart Prize nominee, a two-time Best of Net nominee, and has published over 2,500 poems in various national and international journals, including *Tabletter*, *The James Dickey Review*, *The Bookends Review*, *Bone Orchard*, *Corvus Review*, *EgoPHobia*, and *Kritya*. She is also the founding editor of Kind of a Hurricane Press. www.kindofahurricanepress.com.

Katrina Johnston is the winner of the CBC/Canada Writes True Winter Tale. Works of short fiction may be found at several online sites and a couple of print issues. She lives in Victoria, BC, Canada. The goal of her fiction is to share a human journey and to explore together.

Jean A. Kingsley earned an MFA in Creative Writing from the Rainier Writing Workshop at Pacific Lutheran University, and lives in Rochester, New York. She is the recipient of the 1995 Academy of American Poets Prize, a finalist for “Discovery”/*The Nation* and The Constance Saltonstall Foundation of the Arts Fellowship. Her poems have appeared in numerous national literary journals, and she won a poetry book award for *Traceries* from ABZ Press in 2014, selected by C. D. Wright. She is a recent reviewer for the *Antioch Review* and has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize.

Robert D. Kirvel, a 2016 Pushcart Prize nominee for fiction and a 2015 ArtPrize winner for creative nonfiction, has published stories or essays in the UK, New Zealand, Germany, and a dozen U.S. literary journals, such as the *Columbia College Literary Review*.

Hillary Kobernick writes poetry for both performance and the page. She holds a Master’s of Divinity, meaning she has, in fact, mastered the divine. She currently pastors a small church outside Chicago. Her poetry has appeared in literary magazines in the U.S. and Canada, including *Bellevue Literary Review*, *Barely South*, *Ellipsis*, and *decomP*. Her work can always be found at <http://hillarykobernickpoetry.tumblr.com/>.

Laurie Kolp is the author of *Upon the Blue Couch* and *Hello, It’s Your Mother*, and she has poems in *Prelude*, *Crack the Spine*, and *Gargoyle*. An avid runner and lover of nature, Kolp lives in Southeast Texas with her husband, three children, and two dogs. Learn more at <http://lauriekolp.com>.

Capotă Daniela Lăcrămioara studied Public Relations and Communication at Danubius University in Galati, Romania. She had a drawing exhibition “Mystery and shapes” and graphics “The fascinating leaf,” “Rustling in ink.” She is interested in haiku, Japanese stampa, sumi-e, watercolors, poetry, and literature. At the moment she is a member of the Romanianukai group.

Edward Lineberry is a poet who has lived most of his adult life in Atlanta, Georgia. After writing novels for many years, he switched to poetry to explore story and character in compact

verse forms. Previously his work has appeared in *Prelude* and *Gap Tooth Poetry*. Edward received his degree from the University of Georgia.

Arielle Lipset studied creative writing at Franklin & Marshall College. She currently lives in Prague and teaches English as a foreign language. Find more of her work at www.ariellelipset.com.

Samantha Madway is engaged in the lengthy process of transcribing hundreds of pages of her writing from barely legible blue ink into reader-friendly (twenty-first century) Times New Roman type. She loves her dogs, Freddie and Charlie, more than anything else in the universe.

Kalyn Maria is sixteen-years-old and a sophomore in high school. She started writing poetry at a young age, and is eager to emerge as a new writer. Maria writes a lot of her poems about love and its ups and downs, as well as poems about her own experiences.

Bruce McRae, a Canadian musician, is a Pushcart nominee with over a thousand poems published internationally. He has performed across Canada and the U.K., and has been on a number of CDs. His latest book, *An Unbecoming Fit Of Frenzy* is available now on Amazon and through Cawing Crow Press.

Joslyn Neiderer lives in central PA with her husband and three children. Her work has been published or is forthcoming in *Kind Over Matter*, *Warren*, and *PennUnion*. She has a BA degree in creative writing from Bloomsburg University and an MA degree in science writing from Johns Hopkins University. During the day she is a multimedia specialist at Penn State, and at night you'll find her knitting, drawing with pastels, and creating other types of mixed media art.

Maria S. Picone has an MFA from Goddard College. Her writing and art appear in *Homestead Review*, *Vine Leaves Literary Journal*, and *GTK Creative*. Her photography documents the interesting and unusual places she's been, including Cambodia, Uganda, and Australia. Her Twitter is @mspicone, and her website is mariaspicone.com.

Emilio Pinedo was born in Mexico City. Since then, Pinedo has lived in three different countries. He is a passionate traveler, bookworm, and movie buff. Pinedo loves great literary works, anything by Wes Anderson, a good espresso, and long talks with friends. He is interested in foreign affairs and sociopolitical issues. Pinedo is committed to giving back to his community and to the world in which he lives. He takes advantage of every opportunity to learn, grow, and mature. Life has been hard, but Pinedo has learned to overcome those hardships and express himself through his photographs.

Fabrice Poussin is assistant professor of French and English. Author of novels and poetry, his work has appeared in France at *La Pensee Universelle*, and in the United States in *Kestrel*, and *Symposium*. His photography work has also been published in *Kestrel* and is scheduled for upcoming publications.

Quinn Ramsay is a native Oregonian and graduate of the University of Glasgow. His prose and poetry have been published in *Paragraphiti*, *From Glasgow to Saturn*, *Santa Clara Review*,

PLUM, and *Gemini*, and he has been a recipient of the Amy M. Young Award in Creative Writing. He was recently a co-editor and designer of *Williwaw: an Anthology of the Marvellous*.

Barbara Buckley Ristine is from NY but she moved a lot before finally settling in Reno, where she's remained for over twenty years. She thinks that she qualifies as an "emerging" writer/poet because it has taken her over thirty years to return to her first passion of writing. She's led several lives up until recently: lawyer, mother, small business owner. Now she has embarked on her fourth act as a student at the University of Nevada, Reno, studying creative writing. When she's not mindlessly staring at the Sierras, she writes short stories, historical fiction, and the occasional poem. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Meadow*, *Bewildering Stories*, *Route 7 Review*, and *Earthbound Journal*.

Marsha Roberts' short stories and essays have been appeared in *Thrice Fiction*, *Loud Zoo*, *Gravel*, *Biostories*, *Hospital Drive*, *The Marin Independent Journal*, and *Laugh Your Shorts Off*, among others. She recently completed her first novel, *The Agent*, about an elegant con game. It has not yet been published.

Hannah Robison is a junior in the Creative Writing conservatory at the Orange County School of the Arts located in Santa Ana, California. She is also part of the Los Angeles-based program "WriteGirl" and Cottonwood Church's Youth Unleashed Creative Writing program. Her dream is to be a professional songwriter, but she also loves writing scripts and nonfiction pieces.

Susan Speranza is in her last year of the MFA Writing program at Lindenwood University. Her poetry has been published in various literary journals, including *The Literary Yard* and *The Voices Project*. In 2012, she was a Quarter Finalist in the Amazon Breakthrough Novel Award contest. The same novel was on the short list of finalists in the 2012 William Faulkner-William Wisdom Competition. It was subsequently published as *The Tale of Lucia Grandi, the Early Years* by Brook House Press. It has since garnered favorable reviews and has been compared to the American classic, *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*.

Louis Staeble, fine arts photographer and poet, lives in Bowling Green, Ohio. His photographs have appeared in *Agave*, *Binders Journal*, *Blue Hour*, *Conclave Journal*, *Elsewhere Magazine*, *GFT Magazine*, *Fifth Wednesday Journal*, *Four Ties Literary Review*, *Inklette Magazine*, *Microfiction Monday*, *Paper Tape Magazine*, *Qwerty*, *Revolution John*, *Rose Red Review*, *Sonder Review*, *Timber Journal*, *Tishman Review* and *Your Impossible Voice*. His web pages can be viewed either at <http://staeblestudiola.weebly.com> or <http://lstaebel.wix.com/closeup>.

Phil Temples lives in Watertown, Massachusetts, and works as a computer systems administrator at a university. He has published over one hundred works of short fiction in print and online journals. Blue Mustang Press recently published Temples's full-length murder-mystery novel, *The Winship Affair*. And his new paranormal-horror novel, *Helltown Chronicles*, has just been accepted by Eternal Press.

Bill Wolak is a poet, photographer, and collage artist. His collages have been published in *The Annual*, *Peculiar Mormyrid*, *Danse Macabre*, *Dirty Chai*, *Hermeneutic Chaos Literary Journal*, *Lost Coast Review*, *Yellow Chair Review*, *Otis Nebula*, and *Horror Sleaze Trash*. He has just

published his twelfth book of poetry entitled *Love Opens the Hands* with Nirala Press. Recently, he was a featured poet at The Mihai Eminescu International Poetry Festival in Craiova, Romania. Wolak teaches Creative Writing at William Paterson University in New Jersey.

Sally Zakariya's poems have appeared in *Tishman Review*, *Apeiron Review*, *Broadkill Review*, *Boston Literary Magazine*, *Emerge*, *Third Wednesday*, *Evening Street Review*, and elsewhere. Zakariya has won prizes from Poetry Virginia and Virginia Writers Club. She is the author of *Insectomania* (2013) and *Arithmetic and other verses* (2011) and editor of *Joys of the Table*, an anthology of poems about food. Zakariya blogs at www.ButDoesItRhyme.com.