



The Magnolia Review
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Editor-in-Chief Suzanna Anderson

Editor-in-Chief and Founder: Suzanna Anderson

Welcome to the tenth issue of The Magnolia Review! We publish art, photography, poetry, comics, creative nonfiction, flash fiction, experimental work, and fiction. The Magnolia Review publishes previously unpublished work. We publish two issues a year, and we accept submissions year-round. 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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For more information, please visit www.themagnoliareview.wordpress.com or email us at themagnoliareview@gmail.com.

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A Choose Your Own Path Poem

I [forgive/hate] myself for the first time
we touched. How I opened for you
like a flower, blooming in the dark
hours of the night.

I [hate/forgive] myself that I saw
you again and again, every night
for a week. Pulled your lips
to mine to ease the gnawing
hunger that chewed at my heart.

I [forgive/hate] myself for wanting
your mouth on me, for craving
salt and you skin.

I [hate/forgive] myself for the lies
I told – to others, to myself,
to the stranger on the beach
who asked how long we'd
been together.

I [forgive/hate] myself for the secrets
that grew like a monster
under the bed, ready to pounce
and devour me at any moment.

I [hate/forgive] myself.

For a Friend Who Wants to Hear the Music Better

Okay, stand on what ledge?
On what hilltop?
On what foothold
on the edge

of leverage?
Where is
the chair
closer to the stage?

And where
is the music
anyway if
not everywhere?

The universe
has no orchestra,
no choir,
no soloist,

only the ping
of particles,
the cosmic chatter,
background noise of Nothing.

Are these the harps?
Are these the wings
of angels? Are these
the flats and sharps
of the Music Spherical?
Here, only here,
is the trapdoor stage,
so dance, friend, dance on it well.

Grapefruit

The juicy pink flesh of the grapefruit glistened in the single shaft of afternoon light streaming through the kitchen window. Greta had never seen the inside of a grapefruit before. When Ellie cut into the golden circle, Greta was surprised at the vibrant color.

“Take a piece,” Ellie whispered.

Greta put the entire half up to her lips and slurped at the juice, feeling it dribble down her chin.

“No, stupid, like this,” Ellie said. She took the butter knife and cut a triangle in the flesh, then popped it up with the end of the knife. She held the bite to Greta.

It was sweet, much sweeter than Greta expected. When a splatter of liquid dropped to the wood floor, Ellie ran her sock-clad foot over the small pool to wipe it clean. Leaving no trace of their presence was an essential part of the game, and they always spoke to each other in soft whispers, even though they knew Mrs. Bancroft wasn't home.

After the last bite, Ellie gathered the grapefruit remains and shoved them in her jacket pocket. She jerked her head to the sliding glass door and the two girls crept toward the exit. Without a word,

they picked up their sneakers and slipped outside. Greta let out her breath in one long exhale.

The sun cast long shadows over the back porch as the girls broke into a run. Startled, two birds flew from their perch to the blue sky above, their angry song providing urgency to Greta's movements as she darted between rows of palms at the edge of the Bancroft property. On the safe ground of Ellie's backyard swing set, Ellie finally spoke. “That was a good one.”

Greta nodded, digging her feet into the sand underneath the swing, reaching the cool part underneath the sun-drenched top. She'd come close to taking a second piece of fruit from the bowl, but that was against the rules.

Ellie's mom called her in for supper, and Ellie took the wet fruit remnants from her pocket, holding them like a small animal for Greta to see. “It's all smushed.”

“You gonna throw it away or what?”

Ellie ran towards the back door in response. Greta didn't know whether to follow. On the side of the driveway, Ellie lifted the garbage can lid and threw the skin inside,

then waved to Greta before disappearing through the garage door.

Greta took her time leaving the swing set and passed the open trash can before beginning the short walk home, sneakers dangling by their laces in her right hand. The mangled body of the fruit lay crumpled, bleeding onto the waste beneath.

Although Ellie had lived on her street since she could remember, Greta never dared to speak to her, instead watching from a distance as Ellie slowly joined the ranks of the most popular girls at school. One June evening, as Greta sat on the edge of her driveway adjusting the white basket on her bike, Ellie came by on her red bicycle. The two began long, lazy rides up and down the street. Greta instinctively understood that their friendship was one of convenience, limited to the territory of their street; when summer ended, they would once again exist in separate spheres.

The game of truth or dare happened several weeks later. After seeing Mrs. Bancroft's car creep down the driveway and off to the main road, Ellie had dared Greta to sneak inside. She spent thirty seconds in the kitchen, counting *one Mississippi, two Mississippi, three Mississippi* under her breath. It was a rush, stepping foot inside some-

one else's house, being a temporary visitor in another universe. Greta felt brave, emboldened to continue. It had been her idea to sneak a piece of food each time they visited, convinced that old Mrs. Bancroft would never notice. And so the game began.

The next day was Sunday, and Greta knew Ellie would be busy with church. Greta rode her bike in looping circles at the end of their cul-de-sac until Ellie's family pulled into their driveway at almost three o'clock. The air was heavy, unseasonably warm. A single drop of sweat fell onto her eyelashes, and she blinked in succession to purge the salty liquid from her eyes.

Ellie's mom waved to Greta. "Want to come inside for some lemonade, dear?" Her yellow dress sparkled in the sunlight. Ellie shot Greta a look, which Greta understood.

"No ma'am, but thank you."

Ellie changed out of her church clothes and came outside a moment later. A purple ribbon still adorned her blond braid, and Greta was struck with such an intense longing for the piece of fabric that she almost yanked it out of Ellie's hair.

Without speaking, the girls eyed Mrs. Bancroft's house. Her blue Oldsmobile sat sweltering in

the afternoon sun, a glare catching off the side windows. Any moment now she would teeter out to the peeling blacktop of the driveway and pull away to visit her daughter, as she did every Sunday.

Ellie pushed herself onto the handlebars and ordered Greta to pedal. They spent the better part of an hour riding up and down the street. Ellie only fell once after the bike hit a pothole, her blond braid flying behind her like the tail of a kite. Before she hit the ground, her head tilted in a way that made Greta certain she was going to snap her neck in the fall. Ellie's mouthed curled up in surprise as she landed. After impact, it hardened to a scowl, and she looked up at Greta with something like anger.

"You did that on purpose."

Greta shook her head, still gripping the handlebars so tightly her knuckles lost all color. "I didn't mean to. We hit a pothole."

The other girl stood up slowly, testing herself, and the anger vanished just as suddenly as it had appeared. By then, it was almost dark. Living room lights flickered on, one after the other. Only Greta's house at the end of the street remained dark. She gave one last longing look to Mrs. Bancroft's house. As if reading Greta's mind, Ellie spoke up, scraping the last bit

of dirt from her palm. "She always leaves on Sundays."

"Maybe her daughter was busy?"

Ellie shrugged. "Whatever. See you later." She strode off toward the front door where her mother suddenly appeared, wiping her hands on her apron. Greta turned toward home before Ellie's mom could invite her in for dinner.

The house was quiet. Greta made a bologna sandwich for dinner and poured a glass of milk. After washing and drying her plate, she watched television until it was time for bed, checking Mrs. Bancroft's house one last time. Greta could only see it from a certain angle, her body halfway behind the couch. The light in the front room was on, as was the garage light. Mrs. Bancroft appeared in Greta's line of vision for just a moment and then she vanished. Both lights went out, and the tiny house was encompassed in darkness.

The next weekend, after Greta's mother left for the restaurant, Greta rode her bike to the end of the cul-de-sac. Ellie met her outside at the usual time and the girls began to swing in the backyard, pumping their legs in rhythm until Greta felt the structure shake. She stuck her legs out, creating resistance to make

smaller and smaller movements until the swing came to an almost complete stop.

When Mrs. Bancroft drove off, the girls were ready. They crept onto her patio and through the glass door. The kitchen smelled like bacon and coffee. A small electric fan rattled next to the window, sputtering in a way that made Greta imagine it would give out at any moment. A new leafy green plant stood cowering on the windowsill, leaves shaking in the turbulent air.

“Look in the fridge,” Ellie said, pointing to the door covered with old church bulletins and drawings from Mrs. Bancroft’s grandchildren. A small Tupperware sat on a carton of eggs and Greta opened it hesitantly. Eight shriveled pieces of bacon lay inside. Greta looked at Ellie to confirm that this was what they really wanted and received a silent nod. The bacon was still slightly warm, not yet soggy from the fridge. Greta licked her fingers and wiped them on her shirt, the grease somewhat disguised in the dark blue fabric.

She set the container back in the refrigerator and when she turned around, Ellie was gone.

“Ellie,” she whispered. It was part of the unspoken rules of the game that they had to stay in the kitchen. Greta had never even seen the rest of the house.

The narrow hallway off the kitchen was adorned with pale pink wallpaper, a border of roses at the top. She peered into the first room on the left and saw one large bed with a floral comforter. It was perfectly made; Greta had difficulty imagining old Mrs. Bancroft tucked under the covers. There were several framed photographs on the dresser. She picked up a picture of Mrs. Bancroft with a man in a dark suit. They were standing outside a house Greta didn’t recognize.

“Ellie?” she whispered, holding the frame in mid-air, waiting.

Ellie’s voice came from the closet on the other side of the bed. “Check it out,” she whispered, pushing the door open. A stack of bras dangled from a hook on the back of the closet door. Ellie giggled and took one off the hook. The cups were enormous.

Greta’s face felt hot. “Put it back!”

Ellie laughed, sticking her arms through the straps and holding the cups over her flat chest. “Look at my huge titties!”

Greta finally set the photograph down and grabbed Ellie’s hand. “Come *on*,” she said in a normal voice as she tugged.

Ellie allowed herself to be pulled along the bedroom carpet, carelessly tossing the bra back in the closet, and when they got to

the door she jerked her hand away. “You’re such a sissy baby,” she exclaimed, rolling her eyes.

A noise came from the front of the house and both girls froze. Everything hung perfectly still for a moment; Greta was aware of every molecule of dust floating in the bedroom air, every hair slightly out of place on Ellie’s head, the clicking of the hall grandfather clock. The moment lifted and Greta came back to life.

“Let’s go,” she mouthed and crept down the hallway, through the kitchen, and out the back door, not stopping to put her sneakers on. In Ellie’s backyard, she focused on her shoes, tying the laces together and willing her flushed cheeks to return to normal.

Ellie kicked a mound of dirt next to the swing set. “I want to go back.”

“We can’t,” Greta said, fiddling with the bottom of her blouse, hoping Ellie would drop it. “She’ll be home soon.”

The girls stood in silence, staring at the ground. Finally, Ellie shook her head and giggled. “Think of her old-lady titties in that bra.”

Greta laughed, but it felt wrong. She fingered the grease stain on her blouse and wished desperately for another piece of bacon, savoring the lingering taste in her mouth.

Sunday arrived, and Greta’s mother was up early for a morning shift at the restaurant. When Greta awoke, she opened the cabinet door and found the last remaining cereal box. There was no milk, so she ate the cereal by the fistful and washed it down with a glass of water.

Mrs. Bancroft left the house earlier than usual. The girls were examining a dead rabbit on the side of the road. Ellie had dared Greta to touch it, and she was about to place a finger on the bloodied carcass when they heard the sound of Mrs. Bancroft’s car. Startled, they saw the Oldsmobile creeping down the driveway. The old woman raised a hand to wave at the girls before leaving, and Greta felt a pang of guilt.

“Now?” she whispered.

Ellie nodded, the rabbit forgotten. On the back porch, Greta had a sudden feeling that the patio door would be locked, that Mrs. Bancroft would have finally realized someone was sneaking into her house.

The door slid open without a creak. Greta saw four perfectly round grapefruit perched on top of a bag of apples in the fruit bowl. She reached for one the same moment that Ellie continued down the hall.

Greta’s cheeks reddened as she clasped the fruit between both

hands. “Ellie,” she hissed, but the girl ignored her.

At the end of the hallway, past the bedroom, was a small door. Ellie raised her eyebrows. “Ellie,” Greta whispered again, beckoning the girl back to the kitchen, but Ellie was already opening it.

Ellie let out a large gasp, and Greta felt her heart thud against her chest, certain that something terrible lie waiting for them. Ellie laughed. “Gotcha,” she said loudly and swung the door open.

It was a large linen closet, the kind large enough to walk into. A musty odor came from the stacks of sheets and Greta let out her breath in an audible exhale. “Come on. Let’s check the fridge,” Greta said.

“What’s in there?” Ellie exclaimed, examining something on the floor.

“What is it?”

Ellie wrinkled her nose.

“Oh, gross.”

“What?” Greta asked again, stepping in front of Ellie, but there was nothing on the floor that she could see.

In one swift movement, Ellie pushed Greta inside the closet and shut the door. The panic was delayed; Greta almost didn’t realize what was happening until it was too late. The click of the door sounded and utter darkness surrounded her.

“Ellie!” Greta tried the handle several times without success and banged on the door softly at first, still clutching the grapefruit in her left hand. “Very funny. Let me out.” A peal of laughter came through the crack at the bottom of the door. She pictured Ellie standing in the hallway giggling, eyes bright, cheeks flushed from laughing.

“I’ll come get you soon, don’t worry,” Ellie said in a sing-song voice.

“Come on, Ellie. The door locked,” Greta said, her pounding now reaching a frenzied level. She stopped and put her ear to the door, but there was silence. The darkness felt stifling. A bead of sweat formed on her temple. She placed the fruit between her hands and clawed at the rind until her fingernails broke through the skin and into the flesh beneath, juice dripping onto the floor in rhythm with the muffled *tick tock, tick tock* of the clock.

aamupitsi



Hell-Weather Friend

I didn't realize you were just a
Friend for hire
Know the conditions
Check each off the list
Meet all of your criteria
And presto
You transform into
My best friend
Most cherished
Loveyoumissyou
Spirit animals for life
I didn't realize
It would be
Nothing personal
To drop me once I
Didn't meet the criteria
Anymore
Yours are so negative
I'm not that person
Anymore
It hurt until I realized
I just had to re-categorize you
Now I know if everything fails
If my life falls completely apart
My own personal apocalypse
You'll be there for me.

Hearing the Silence

I hate not sleeping next to you
because I hate the weight of waking
alone, the cold brushing against my shoulder,
nuzzling my wet cheek.

I keep a steady diet of dissatisfaction
and DayQuil, write the bad taste out of life
with enough dissimilarities to call it fiction
without the lie left on my tongue.

I don't take kindly to kindness,
can't trust the first good things
to happen to me
because they're the first good things
to happen to me. But I am always letting things
happen to me, always taking
just the suggested amount,
swallowing it down without a choke.

Whirling

You know I don't believe
in god.
What do I now believe?
Nothing except skepticism?
Or scientific inquiries
produce cosmology?
The universe is expanding
in—fin—ite—ly?
Is that all there is:
skepticism and science?
I don't think so.
What if I say the nexus is
beyond science?
Definitely scientific
inquiry.
Definitely cosmology.
My regard for cosmology,
but what is
beyond
science?

OR 108 US 101

Coquille River Lighthouse



One Story Too Many

What did America do a thousand eras
before America, before the Great Year 1776 began?
America, was it like the America
that sits in the memories of unwashed skulls?
Was it a weeping America? Is it still with us,
some sinister underground that won't stop pushing through?
Is it what I'm dreaming about? Dreaming
of my will stamped on bloody clothes floating in the sky?

Possessing every frozen delicacy, I'm building
a temple to the memory of Tangiers,
a celebration of the seasons I spent as a saint made of clay,
I'm ready now to go looking for sacrificial throats,
all I want to know, like any good American
is if I'm worthy of my obsession, America it is up to you
and the night piles of empty skies,
show me a way over the waters of Lethe. I can't remember.

America, your libraries are all made of meat,
I want to go into my imagination planet there, I'm blocked,
I find old teachers there, I ask them about the clouds,
if America will ever be able to joke again in peace,
at least I know an America of love, it's past blue America,
America go after the billionaires, stop weeping
over the secret borders of penumbras no one admits.
Forget it, I'm America, start pushing.

Losers

I open my eyes. Spears of afternoon sunlight stream through the window. Crumpled sheets. Puckered pillows. Yes, I think. I remember where I am.

—Seven letters, says Arianna. First letter ‘c’. Third letter ‘c’. Fourth letter ‘k’.

I prop myself up on one elbow.

—‘Cock’ something, I say. ‘Cockeye’? ‘Cockpit’?

She shakes her head.

—‘Cocksure’?

—*Seven* letters.

—Oh, yes.

—Seventh letter ‘d’.

She’s sitting at her dressing-table, wrapped in a cream bath towel, the newspaper folded on her knee, chewing her pencil. This is Arianna. She is not a cosy lover. She has no patience with post-coital clinging.

—What’s the clue? I say.

—What?

—The clue?

—Doesn’t matter, she says.

Our arrangement might so easily have gone awry ...

Green grass. Soft breeze. An open court. Set point to me. The ball — a ripe, bright apple — hangs temptingly above the net. The urge to smash is nearly irresistible. But, no. Not as irresistible as satin sheets, plump pillows, Arianna’s spread of golden hair.

—‘Support for proposal’, she says. Four letters. First letter ‘k’.

I drive the ball fiercely into the net. The first set lost. And then — a weak surrender — the second. “Bad luck!” “Well done!” We shake hands. I have been eliminated in the first round. ‘The champion’ cannot quite disguise his satisfaction. His path to the final is now clear.

—Well? I say.

—Well what?

—What was the answer?

—‘Knee,’ she says.

Oh. Knee? I’m no wiser.

—I can’t do crosswords, I tell her. Puzzles of any kind defeat me. My brain dislikes being teased. Life is tricky enough already. I feel no need to burden it any further.

Arianna isn’t listening. Her mind has moved on. I’m forgotten.

—Edward de Bono, I say. The proponent of lateral thinking. There’s a puzzle in one of his books. What was it? 111 players enter a knock-out tennis competi-

tion. How many matches will have to be played to produce a winner? You may see the answer right away but I didn't. My first thought was how thoroughly irritating that the organisers should allow 111 players to enter. Why not insist on a neater number? 128 or 64 would have tapered down tidily to the quarter-finals, semi-finals and then the final itself. Counting the number of matches would have been child's play.

—Here, she says. This is a classic. Six words. One, two, three, four, one, four.

—What's the clue?

—There isn't one.

—What do you mean?

—That's the whole point, she says The clue is a blank. A dash.

This is beyond me. I pretend to think although there's really no need.

Arianna has forgotten me again.

I picture the tennis club. The well-ordered flower-beds. The brick-built clubhouse. Crisp white shorts and skirts. Polite greetings. Icy rivalries. Tea and tiny sandwiches as the climax of the day approaches. Here is the soon-to-be-crowned champion. Black moustache, cold, colourless eyes, square shoulders, flaxen hair. After defeating his chief rival in round one, his victory is assured. His name will once again be engraved on the cup.

—Give up? she says.

—Yes.

—One, two, three, four, one, four?

—Yes?

—'I do not have a clue,'

—Oh, I say. Yes. So simple. And so very clever.

111 players and one winner. There must therefore be 110 losers. To produce 110 losers, 110 matches have to be played. Such a straightforward solution. What sticks with me, however, is the number of losers there will be: 110 losers; only one winner. It seems faintly unjust.

—What's the time? she says. I ought to be there for the final, oughtn't I?

We will cheer as he holds the cup aloft. We will share his champagne. And he will soar: the single winner in a sea of losers.

She unwraps her bath towel. Begins to dress. Her shining skin. Her golden hair. I button up my shirt. This evening she will be his again. Both Arianna and the tennis club cup.

—What was the answer to the 'cock' clue? I say.

—The 'cock' clue? No, not 'cock'. 'Cuck'.

—'Cuck'?

—'Cuckold.'

Hummingbird in the Petunias

Closed blinds glowed with
low west sun as
a shadow danced in—
a golden motion picture—
delicate darts and hovers
amidst bell horn groves,
mini cygnet gramophones
one of which lost
its music box after
it lifted and unrolled
stretching wings and needle
to zip freely and
taste a new tune.

Items of Worth

The lawyers pull together my mother's belongings,
send us a list.

My sister and I pick through and decide
what we each want to take.

I wonder what I will leave behind.

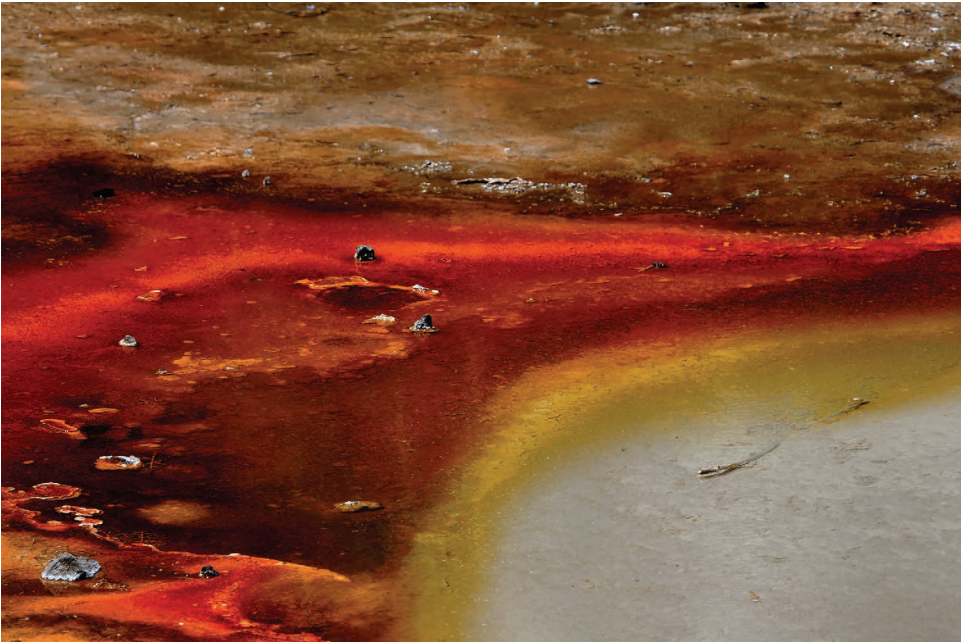
We've already divided furniture, videotapes,
photo albums. We divide valuables this time,
but the list is odd, askew. A coffee mug, a glasses case,
a card of condolence to us from mom's home,
scratched and battered old cameras,
"photo of man in light blue suit" who was my father,
copies of his death certificate.

A picture of Jesus.

Fake gold jewelry, rhinestones jewelry.

Our family never had much, never spent much.
The only real gold is in the wedding bands and a
class ring. But the lawyers
want an even distribution of every last thing
before they give the money over.

Painter's Heaven



Aviatrix?

Amelia is an aviator after all, not the feminized version our schoolbooks may have bandied. And her suspected relics, while no longer accounted for, are still analyzed, though the original inspectors are now similarly bony, no doubt.

And this fascination with skeletal remains, erudite theories and inconsequential probabilities, this sly consideration of her probable dimensions based upon blurry photographic evidence and random observations, and these redundant headlines each proclaiming only possibilities as to the nature and moments of her demise, all these things, in sum and summary, tell us this:

1937 was a long time ago, and nobody has a friggin' clue.

Unfinished

Who has the secret
to the dark woods,
the granite sheercliff,

the spiral galaxy,
the absence of dark matter,
the vital cell?

Who unlocks codes
and builds meaning
from the patterns

of the universe
and the ripples of the creek?
Monk and poet

sing in counterpoint,
both ending in
questions, more songs

to query the whole,
quiet mantras
in life and death.

The priest denies
the questions or
names them God.

The child asks why
of the blue sky,
leaping from the arc of swinging

to hard landings.
on the earth, laughing
and incomplete...

harem girl

You haven't lived
Until
Someone asks you
To be their
Secret girlfriend
Aka
Mistress
Not even married yet
And already seeking
Other beds
Other heads to
Wreak your selfish desires
Upon
I guess that's just
What comes
From being rich and bored
A currency I thought
I knew
Thought I wanted to be
A part of too
The first time is always
So easy
The drugs
The drinking
No worries
No cares
Or caring about
Her
The other woman
But that's me
Or was
Until I told you
She deserved better
The bitch.

Life Insurance

We waited till August to put my Volvo up for sale, thinking it might appeal to a college student. They come back to town then, the students, a couple of weeks before the semester begins. With their bank accounts full of Dad's cash and student loan money, they come to hunt for a last-minute apartment, used housewares and warm-weather deals on ski passes. And, we hoped, reliable old cars, figuring one of them would want, would need, old Thunder. I imagined some cheerful undergrad, a journalism major from Oak Park maybe, would be thrilled to pay us five hundred bucks for a car that runs soundly and looks pretty good considering its age and history.

If you buy this car and drive it, I was thinking yesterday, the day after the craigslist ad first appeared and as I was washing away the dust, even if you have never done a stupid thing, a silly thing, something grand or generous – have no deep history of your own at all, you'll automatically get some if you buy this car. Don't go for one of those dependable but dull Japanese jobs, I told those kids as I soaped and swabbed the pointy sun-faded hood, buy Thunder. Buy yourself some history. His windshield, nearly scratchless, squeaked clean and reflected the bright, mid-August sun so that I had to keep looking away. When finally I was finished, I stood back for a look and thought my old reliable workhorse was dazzling.

How long had it been, I wondered, months, maybe a year, since he'd had a bath? Wax, I had no idea about; wax has never seemed important. To me, it's always been about the insides of a car, not so much the outside. Like with people.

"Thunder's allergic to wax," I said to my father when he'd suggested to the college girl I was then, all-knowing and oblivious, that my car might benefit from washing and waxing.

"Nonsense!" he'd shot back. His cars were always waxed, shiny, dustless, American. He shook his head. "Have someone change the oil, anyway. It'll run without the wax, but not without oil."

There was a visual quirk to my father. As impeccable as all his cars were through the years, his clothes were a different story. They never seemed quite right. His pants were too loose at the waist, as if he'd just lost weight, or the cuffs of his shirts too short because his arms had suddenly stretched out. The ill-fitting clothes on his long frame were incongruous with the rest of him, a steady, serious man with a wife, a houseful of children and two sound cars in his garage. Back in my high school years, I'm sure my father found my tattered jeans, the multiple earrings in my ears and my raccoon eyes to be incongruous with his always obedient, good-grades daughter, maybe even distressing. But, much to his credit, he never mentioned any of that, so I

never mentioned his too-roomy collars and ill-tied ties, his baggy trousers or funny cuffs. As time has gone on and I have only memories of him, I find these incongruities more and more curious.

He was right about the oil, of course.

“66 Volvo 544, 2-door, stick. Runs fine, honestly. Body fair. \$500, firm,” is what the ad says. It took me two days and four drafts to write it. There was sure to be a lot of interest *from a certain demographic*, Albert said, meaning antique car guys.

He’s been after me for a couple of years to sell Thunder. We do have the Audi, a rowdy shade of red, rust-free, perfect in all ways, his. *Think of how clumsy it is putting babies into the back of that old car*, he reminded me again a few weeks ago, careful I noticed not to say baby in the singular or mention her name. *Bottom line, you need to drive a safer car*. We only had her eleven weeks and it *was* clumsy getting her into the carseat in the back. But I never minded, and I knew she was plenty safe with me, her mother, driving. I thought I could keep her safe from everything.

“You do for your children,” I’d heard my own mother say many times through the years, when someone would ask her why she hand-sewed all those Halloween costumes for us or why she was willing to be a homeroom mother again. The consummate example, she was a tireless Brownie and Girl Scout leader, ever the volunteer, always willing to let it be her sugar that went into the gallons of Kool-Aid we tried to sell on the corner. In those humid, sagging Webster Groves summers, our

neighborhood was mobbed with kids; there were five from our house alone.

I bought Thunder at the beginning of my junior year of college, every cent earned waiting tables over weekends and two summers. He’d belonged to a friend’s brother who was hot to have an MGB. I got the Volvo, the color of blue denim work shirts, for a song and the brother got his MG; everyone was pleased. But that little MG lasted less than a year, ended up in a blaze when its engine caught fire. Someone said he hadn’t had insurance. Tough luck, I’d thought then; probably hadn’t ever changed the oil, I think now.

Thunder, however, rolled on, still does. And no doubt will for someone else for a good long time to come.

We’ve had four responses, and it’s only been three days. A woman came the afternoon the ad appeared, but turned up her nose at the rust spots and faded paint, didn’t even want to drive it. What did she expect for five hundred bucks? Then a guy came first thing yesterday, calling himself a Swedish vehicle specialist and, I believed, saw nothing but parts in Thunder. I see Thunder as a whole. The guy was surprised when I refused his condescending three-fifty offer. “Nobody’ll pay ya full price,” he said. I said ‘bye and thanks for stopping and was glad to see the back of him.

“I think this car would be fine,” my father said after replacing the dip-stick. The money was already in the brother’s MG, the deal done days before, and I was holding my breath. “It’s old,” he said, “but we know its history.” He wiped his hands on a rag, then rubbed out a spot on the fender,

turned and nodded. "Go ahead and buy it."

"Thanks, Dad." I patted the car. "I will."

I wish now I'd patted his arm instead of the hood. I remember him looking more gaunt than ever that day, a scarecrow with a shirt hanging over the bones of his wooden frame.

Two appointments today.

"This is a great car!" the eleven o'clock kid cries, slapping his thigh, as he dances around Thunder.

I watch him push his hair out of his eyes, and all I can think is that he's gutting his dickering potential.

After his last loop, he stops and again flips back his mop of ginger hair as he looks me up and down, eyes popping. Then he says, "Uh, so, can I take her for a spin?"

Hey, Thunder is a him. And haven't you ever seen a pregnant woman before?

"Sure," I say with much more good will than I'm feeling. I want to ask him what his major is, ask for references. I can hear Albert say, *Buying and selling is business, that's all*. It's Albert's business every day, yes, buying and selling other people's stocks for them, but it isn't mine. I've never even had a garage sale. "Um, just curious," I say to the kid, with my fingers still clamped around the keys. "Why don't you want a newer car?"

"Like a Nissan or a Honda or a *Ford Escort*?"

I like his sneer, and my grip on the keys loosens.

"Unh-unh, not me!" He shakes all that red hair. "I want a heap!"

Key grooves slice into my fingers.

"So. Can I drive it?" He's holding out his hand for the keys.

In the thirty minutes he's gone, I wait on the porch trying to read with the baby kicking my insides silly the whole time. He's cruising around town, and I sit here wondering if I'll ever see Thunder again.

Will we feel like new parents all over again?

Let it be a boy this time. No. Another girl. Oh please, just let this one live.

Where is the kid with my car?

"Runs like a top!" he says, jumping up the three porch steps in a move ballet dancers would sell their souls for. "I'll take it. Five hundred, right? I can pay cash!"

I'll bet you can, I think. "The thing is," I say, "I promised a friend of mine a chance to drive it, with first refusal. And, uh, she hasn't been over yet."

He looks like he's going to cry, this college kid.

"I should have told you before," I tell him and drop my hands deep into the pockets of my tunic. But I didn't have the friend before. "Email me tomorrow, okay?"

"Okay," he says and hands me the keys. His ballet shoes have weights in them now, when he turns away. Halfway down the walk he turns back. Shading his eyes with the flat of his hand, he says, "I could go five-fifty."

"Okay. I'll mention that to my friend." She can go six, I'm sure.

A heap, my foot.

As I watch him trudge off down the street, from my pocket I pull out my crumpled up grocery list. I smooth out the wrinkles in the paper and see that there aren't many things on it. I've got time, I think, to run to the store before the next what?...appointment? sales applicant? prospective foster parent? *Dollars and cents*, Albert said. *Take the first full-price offer*. Getting in to Thunder to go to the store, it occurs to me that very soon I won't be able to drive him, just like last time. A bad combination: legs too short and belly too big. Albert traded cars with me the time before but says he won't this time; he says his legs cramp up on him in Thunder and that he bumps his head getting in and out. But I know that's not it.

I have my mother's short little legs, and it makes me wonder how she did it. For a while she always seemed to be pregnant – for a while she always was. All of us with her in that Plymouth minivan, children in a gaggle in the back and her in the front, enormously pregnant, a fat cushion at the small of her back as she drove. Somehow she negotiated both the steering wheel and the pedals while brokering peace behind her. All summer long: swimming lessons, Bible School, birthday parties. She had all of her babies in late summer or early fall, too, the hottest months – not such great planning. Except that they did plan; my parents always had planned to have a lot of kids. Seems plans were more general than specific for them.

Next to me there's a kind of groove in the passenger seat, which holds a sack of groceries, upright, no

matter how many turns or fast stops I have to make. For eighteen years Thunder's been carrying my groceries, upright, no eggs broken, no berries ever spilled. I think about this as I drive home, glancing over occasionally to see krinkly green kale leaves and the top of a baguette jutting from the bag. I haven't admitted it to Albert, but it is getting a little harder to turn the wheel.

How will this child feel about seared greens?

A boy and his father arrive, promptly, at one o'clock. The boy is fair, freckled, and shy; his father is heavy, dark, but open-faced and smiling. I like them both immediately.

"Time for Eddy here to have a car," the father says. "He's a senior this year, Boulder High."

I smile at them both and nod. Eddy must be a carbon copy of his mother.

They circle Thunder twice, not touching except for the man's two quick kicks to a back tire.

"Okay to drive it now?" he asks. He's a laborer, I think, maintenance at the university – I think I might remember seeing him there in uniform. I know he wants the best for Eddy; I can feel it, see it in his deference and in his leadership. Eddy will finish up his last year of high school in good shape and go on to the university. Probably still live at home, drive his car – Thunder? Should I tell him the car has a name? – to campus and to his job at the movie theater or wherever it is he works in the evenings. Girls, I wonder about, and look at him again. Well sure, soon there will be girls in the car.

Eddy hasn't taken his hands out of his pockets, hasn't said a word. His hazel eyes blink at me in surprise and pleasure when I hand the keys to him. He loves him mom and dad: this is imprinted on his slightly flapping ears, his polite mouth, his freckles, but he longs to be somewhere else I think. He will be one day. I wish they'd let him live in the dorm next year.

Without a word, Eddy hands the keys to his father, goes to the passenger side and slips in. Thunder rocks, the springs singing, when his dad lands aggressively in the driver's seat.

My front porch is deep and shady; I wave good-bye to them from here, as if I have known them forever and am seeing them off on a long-wished-for trip. The baby rolls as they drive away, and I settle into my ancient wicker rocker, happy to be out of the sun. A warm, thin breeze moves the August leaves, some already beginning to yellow at the edges. It is too much hot for birds today, so the only sounds on my quiet street are the bubbling of a neighbor's lawn sprinkler and the creaking of my rocker and the boards under it. The baby and I rock and rock.

I awaken to footsteps, bringing my father from my dream, thinking it is he walking up the porch steps.

Eddy looks stricken, probably has never been so close to a napping pregnant woman he does not know. His father is smiling, standing so tall that his head grazes the gingerbread cornice of the overhang. "You get so tired at the end," he says, "especially when it's hot." I blink and nod. He looks nothing

like my father but still I can't shake this feeling of familiarity. "Your first?"

Strangers will ask. They must, so that we may practice either our truth or a fiction on them. As I open my mouth, I have no idea which it will be.

"We, well, we lost our first as a, an infant, so..." The truth is not easier, does not roll smoothly from my tongue.

"I'm so sorry." I know he is; his words come out clumsily, as if he isn't the one used to expressing his family's sympathy. But then he gestures towards my belly and says, "But so happy for you now!" Beside him, Eddy shifts noiselessly from one foot to the other.

I make to stand and Eddy's father is there, his strong arm offered, his other behind my back for support. I have the sensation of being pulled by a rope tow. I understand from his strength that this is the way he is accustomed to giving his support.

Eddy speaks then, his voice a surprise, low, even, a melody. "I like your car."

No wait on those girls, I think, and he doesn't need to live in the dorm. I smile and want to tell him with that voice he should be on radio. A public radio station, way down low on the dial, early mornings, playing Bach and Vivaldi to my coffee.

"Ed," his father says, cautionary. Can he really think Eddy has given up a bargaining chip by telling me that? Isn't it obvious that I'll give Eddy the car and fill up the tank into the bargain? He turns to me and says, "We'd like to have a mechanic look it over."

I nod. "Of course."

"We've never had a car that's from. . . that's not been made in Amer-

ica,” the man says to me. He sounds apologetic.

“My dad would have nothing but American cars,” I say. “Always Chevrolets or Buicks.” I point to Thunder. “This was the first foreigner in our family.” His answering smile is broad. “I grew up in Saint Louis,” I tell him. He sighs and looks relieved.

My father sold insurance to families like his. I can see them, this man’s parents, sitting in their living room drinking iced tea and listening to my dad tell them how important it is to provide for a family’s future. He sold insurance of all kinds, life, health, car, calamity, and as a child I believed that having current, paid-up policies was what kept everyone in a family safe, guaranteed them a long and happy life. That was the point of insurance, I thought, and I believed that my father and the other men like him were the keepers of our neighborhoods and towns. People like Eddy’s grandparents provided my family’s bread and butter and, in return, my father kept them safe.

My father’s heart attack had taken him by the time our little girl was born. No matter how I approach the fact of her death, I cannot dismiss the thought that had he not died, she would still be alive today, a chirpy three year old, safely straddling her grandpa’s knee.

They promise to have the car back by five, and again I stand on the porch waving them good-bye and wonder that I didn’t notice before how much white sock showed above the man’s shoes. As the landline we still

have rings inside the house, I see that his pant legs are way too short.

I get to the phone on the seventh ring.

“I was just going to hang up!” my mother says. No cell phones for her, she will only use a landline and usually hangs up after five rings; she must be allowing for the baby. “Were you outside?” She still lives in Webster Groves in the same house, surrounded now by people she hardly knows. But she often has her children and grandchildren around her and seems busy and happy.

“Is it hot there?” I ask, though I know it is. For days the news has been full of the Mid-West’s heat wave. I just want to hear her talk about the oven.

“Like an oven!” she says on cue. “We could bake bread in the garage!”

She’s always said that.

“I found a box in the attic.” I can see her sitting on the cherry phone bench in the entry of the house where, even after all this time, the morning glories still climb the wallpaper there behind it. She’s changed a lot in that house through the years, but not those flowers; they make her happy she says. “And this box’s got your baby clothes in it!”

“Oh no, Mom, not *mine*.” I am the eldest of her five. Anything that was purchased or given to me would have been worn threadbare by the time my youngest brother was born.

“Yes, yours!” She sounds elated. “Don’t ask me how, but this box has been shuffled around up there and passed over all these years. Now that I see it, I remember putting them in.” She’s laughing at herself. “I remem-

ber telling your father that these little things were so special because *you* were. I wanted to save them forever, and," again she laughs, "I guess I have!" I can imagine my father shaking his head over her sentimentality, yet obliging her all the same.

In my life there has been only one thing more difficult than packing up our hardly-used baby things, and that was finally giving her up to someone else, putting her still body into the hands of a stranger.

"I'll bring them when I come," my mother says. "They're mostly white. Some yellow. You can use them for the baby. If you want to."

"Oh, yes," I say, doing everything I can to resist tears. I gave everything away back then, certain that there would be no more babies for us, certain that I could never again face the possibility of that kind of loss. Albert obliged me about the clothes, and now we've had to buy them all again. "Thank you, Mom." But it isn't the resupplying that has prompted my mother to part with her treasures, of course, nor me to accept them.

"What're you doing today?" she asks, knowing we've talked enough about the clothes. I only hope to be half the mother she is.

"Selling Thunder."

"Your old car?" I hear the disbelief in her voice.

"It's time," I say. "A newer one with four doors will be easier. And safer."

"Well, yes, that's right," she says. Then she laughs a little. "I guess Daddy was wrong about that one, wasn't he?"

"What do you mean?" I want to know.

"He was against you buying that car! He said it wouldn't last or would end in no good, some thing or other." I see her sitting on the phone bench, her ankles crossed, smiling as she remembers. She has a photograph of him on the bookshelf nearby; it's situated so that he seems to be watching and listening to people as they talk on the phone.

"I didn't know that," I tell her and we go on chatting for a while, talking about nothing much. She'll be here with the box of my baby clothes in a few weeks.

I'm awake when they pull up this time, but in my rocker again. Eddy and his father come striding up the walk together.

"My brother-in-law is a mechanic," he says, "and he took a look. Says the car's in good shape but should be repainted." He's standing in front of me, smiling his open smile. "We'll offer you four-fifty. Because of the rust and paint."

Eddy, behind him, peeks around. I look into his lovely eyes and behind him I see Thunder parked at the curb. It occurs to me that I've had that old car since before he was born.

"Thank you," I say, looking from Eddy to his father and back to Eddy again, "but I've decided not to sell. I've been thinking I should hold onto it, have it restored." I pat my belly. "For my own little one to drive. When he or she gets to be a senior in high school." This time, the truth is smooth in the telling. "I hope you understand."

Eddy looks quickly to his father.

“You bet we do!” The man lays a hand across his son’s shoulders. “Sure. There’s a car out there for Eddy!” he says to Eddy and me. “We’ll find it!”

Eddy’s eyes have darkened. He gives me a polite but disappointed smile and shoves his hands into his pockets. Oh Eddy, I say to him silently, there are lots of disappointments ahead for you, but so many good things, too. And, look, you have insurance: you still have him.

I’ll keep an eye open for Eddy in the months to come; I’m sure to see him soon, driving around town in a Volkswagen Bug or some old Subaru. I know it’s time for some foreign blood in their family. I’ll look for his father, too, when I push the stroller through campus. I’ll wave but I doubt he’ll remember me.

I’m glad I washed old Thunder, and maybe I’ll get him waxed before the baby comes. Albert will give in and trade cars with me. We’ll get new tires.

I’ll drive this baby around in its own history after all.

Plain View



South Granby Way

On the third day, Gladys began to get worried.

The boy looked just like any average kid that plagued the neighborhood. She and Earl had lived here for over thirty-five years. Long enough to be on their third or fourth set of recycled youngish, yuppie-type couples, bringing their fully packed moving vans and enormous hounds to poop in her rose bushes and roving bands of pre-pubescent offspring to roam the street from dawn until dusk, in the long summer days before school mercifully began.

Now, in December, Gladys watched from her bedroom window as they engaged in snowball fights and sledding races. It really was a safety hazard, an awful idea to let them race endlessly down the top of the hill with their dogs chasing behind them, ripping up pristine, snow-covered yards in their wake.

Gladys told them all exactly what she thought about it, on more than one occasion, at the quarterly Homeowners Association meetings, but no one ever listened. Earl warned her it was a fool's errand, they were just kids being kids.

Might as well get mad at the sun for rising, Gladys Girl...

Earl was the friendly one. The resident kindly old fart of the neighborhood, handing out candy to the kids every single weekend even though he knew the constant ringing of the doorbell gave her a world-class migraine. They'd never had kids of their own, a fact that Earl lamented but Gladys never had any qualms about.

It was a quiet relief to me, if truth be told.

Gladys' philosophy was that distant neighbors, especially ones with children, made for the best neighbors.

But not Earl. No, Sir-ee, never my Earl. He became their adopted grandfather, the Santa Claus of South Granby Way.

They'd gather around him every Saturday. Grateful mothers in upscale minivans waved to him as their kids convened in Gladys' front yard, helping Earl pile up the leaves, do chores or linger while he regaled them with his latest made-up story. It went on right up until the day that Earl dropped dead of a massive heart attack while shoveling the sidewalk out in front of the Hanley house, two doors down.

From that day till this one, she'd politely accepted their casseroles and bland words of

condolence, counting the seconds until they would all go back to their remodeled cookie-cutter homes and leave her in peace. Gladys knew she was no substitute for Earl, never had any inkling to try. She'd firmly locked the door on the kids and their families on the day of Earl's funeral, and that was that.

Now she watched them through her bay window with a battered old pair of Earl's bird-watching binoculars. It was her own way of keeping tabs on the neighborhood from her self-imposed exile, the only real connection Gladys still had to the outside world. Which is how she first noticed the boy, wandering around his house when Gladys knew for a fact that his family had left town for the holidays. She'd seen the cab pull up and whisk them away days ago. There was no doubt about it—that boy was home all alone and Christmas was just two days away.

"Mrs. Crandall, we appreciate the information, but when we sent our guy out to check for the second time, there was no one at home, no children, nothing."

"There must be some kind of mistake! I am telling you, I have seen him there for the past three days! At night, all of the lights, including Christmas lights, are turned on and I can see him in there eating at the table. Alone! He

can't be more than ten years old. You have to do something!"

"Ma'am, thank you for your concern. We will try to come by once more before Christmas and promise to let you know if we find anything..."

Gladys slammed the phone down as hard as she could onto the receiver. Earl tried his best to get her to use the cell, but the damned thing gave her a headache with its tiny print and confusing buttons. Besides, there was nothing more satisfying than the feel of righteously hanging up on someone. Simply touching a button on a screen didn't cut it. In this, as in so many other things, the younger generations were sorely lacking. That, and keeping track of their own children, apparently.

She didn't know the family at all, since they'd moved in last spring. Gladys thought she'd seen more than one child at their house, but really wasn't sure. All of the neighborhood kids blended together, one exactly the same as the next.

Wash. Rinse. Repeat. Year after year, decade after decade and so on. It never, ever changes. Except that you knew them all, Earl. Who is this boy?

The boy was cute, Gladys had to give him that. His hair was bright blond and looked almost white when the sunlight caught it at just the right angle through

the windowpane. He could have been eight or eleven or any age in between, just beginning to shed the trappings of babyhood. Yesterday, Gladys watched as he danced through the empty house, spinning and laughing, jumping up and down all over the living room furniture. That was when she'd made her second call to the HOA. Gladys wondered for the hundredth time what kind of monstrous parents would leave a young boy all alone for Christmas. It truly was mind boggling.

They should be arrested for neglect!

Maybe her next call in the morning would be to the police station. It was her final, comforting thought before she donned her CPAP mask and drifted off to sleep.

The sudden absence of sound caused Gladys to shoot up in bed. The old CPAP had been giving her fits lately, shutting off without warning. Fragments of her dream conversation with Earl floated across her mind, his voice still deep and calming. His was the only voice she'd ever wanted to hear. It had always, would always, be so.

God and all the Saints, how I miss you!

It's Christmas Eve, Gladys Girl. Ease up just a little, my love...

Reluctantly, she lifted herself out of the bed, the creaks and pops of relentless age cutting

into the silence of the room like a knife. The nightstand clock read half-past-three, a truly awful, godforsaken hour. Since it was quite a production to get out of bed these days, Gladys decided she might as well try to get up and use the bathroom.

The moon was full, lighting her path through the darkened room. Out of habit, Gladys stopped at the window, grabbing Earl's binoculars off of the hook. At first, all was as it should be. A decent dusting of snow had accumulated, giving the street a glittering, immaculate aura. The house across the street was dark as pitch, except for a single candle's glow. Gladys sat in her usual spot at the bay window, transfixed, binoculars pressed up against the glass as she strained to catch any glimpse of movement in the boy's house.

A shadow detached itself from the darkness and moved directly into the front window, the moon serving as a makeshift spotlight. Gladys felt a jolt of shock, gripping the binoculars tightly in her knotted, arthritic fingers. The boy stood looking directly at her through layers of glass. She could see that his eyes were blue with just the faintest touch of gold and that he had a liberal spattering of light brown freckles on his nose. He smiled lopsidedly at her, Gladys easily finding the gap in the front

of his mouth where his adult teeth would eventually be.

Her heart skipped a beat as the boy slowly raised his hand in greeting, breaching the long, cold distance between them. Gladys dropped the old binoculars and tentatively waved back at him, quite forgetting herself in the process. She had a sudden melancholy thought, wondering which of the two of them was more alone. In the end, she decided to follow Earl's advice and ease up as the boy slowly retreated back into the dark of his house, returning South Granby Way, and Gladys, back into a peaceful, winter slumber.

Her neck stuck at an impossibly painful angle, Gladys slowly picked herself up off of the bay window seat, the world slowly coming back into focus.

Where in the living hell am I?

A sharp knock at the door caused her to nearly jump out of her skin. Gladys wrapped her old, pink robe over her shoulders and hobbled down the hallway. She couldn't recall the last time she had fallen asleep anywhere other than in her bed. She reached the door, throwing it open with impatience. A little girl with bright blue eyes stood on her doorstep, holding a doll and a large poinsettia plant.

"Excuse me, Mrs. Crandall, We just wanted to wish you a Merry Christmas."

Gladys stepped back, tentatively allowing the little girl into her sanctuary. A tall, blond couple followed behind, a large gift basket in their arms.

"Mrs. Crandall, you don't know us but we are your neighbors from across the street on South Granby Way. I am Willa Grayson, this is my husband Pete and our daughter Loretta."

Bleary-eyed, Gladys cautiously opened the door a little more, not used to letting anyone in.

"You may not know it, Mrs. Crandall, but your husband was a great gift to our son before we lost him."

"Lost who? What on earth are you talking about?"

"Our son, Kevin. He died last Christmas of leukemia. Earl was a good friend to him."

Gladys blinked hard, tears threatening to overwhelm her as she tried to process what the lady was saying.

"Dead? Why he can't be! He was just....I just....it's not possible..."

"The Homeowners Association contacted us last night. We were visiting family for the holidays, just got back early this morning. Mrs. Crandall, what the HOA told us seems incredible. Would you mind telling us what you saw?"

Gladys could feel Earl softly place a phantom hand on her shoulder. A gesture he had done

countless times in their fifty-five years together.

Everything's alright, Gladys Girl. Go ahead and let them in. What do you have to lose?

She heard the little girl behind her, skipping around the living room before settling into Earl's chair. Gladys stepped back and finally allowed the couple inside.

"Come in Mr. and Mrs. Grayson. I am pleased to make your acquaintance. Please, tell me about your Kevin."

Gladys eased into the window seat, her stomach filled to bursting. She couldn't remember the last time she'd eaten so well. The Graysons had put out quite a spread for Christmas dinner, insisting that Gladys join them for the holiday. She'd spent the entire evening in their company, roaming the house she knew so well, looking at pictures of Kevin and reminiscing about Earl. Once again, she felt humbled by her husband's gentle presence in her long life, grateful for the chance to talk about him again. Little Loretta jumped into her arms at the end, promising to come over the very next day with her doll for a tea party. She lingered awhile at the door of their house, none of them wanting to break their new found connection to each other and their departed loved ones.

The snow fell in gentle waves onto the street below, capping off the best Christmas Gladys could remember in many years. The Grayson's house was dark, not a light or little boy in sight. With a resigned sigh, Gladys rose from the window seat and went to prepare for bed.

At the end of the street, almost too far to see, an old man holding the hand of a young boy stood illuminated in the fading street lamp, watching Gladys as she turned away from her window. He raised his arm in a final greeting, the little blond boy smiling up at him, as they turned together and slowly walked down South Granby Way, before disappearing into the snowy Christmas night.

Hurricane V

Dios mio. What do I do?
Where do I go?
I ask Mr. Jason
if I can bring my kids here.
He say: 'this ain't a shelter.
Take them to the nearest school, Maria.
They'll take care of you.'
"Where the school?" I ask.
"How the hell do I know?
Ask your neighbors. Now get going.
I got a lot to do
before the storm gets here."

Conflict



Lost at Sea

I have been failing myself lately
Scared to be myself when I'm sober
I fake laugh so much that I don't know
what's funny anymore

I can't talk about most of what I do
Either because I'm ashamed or it's illegal
I would rather not be famous than be infamous
I'd rather starve than eat stolen food

I don't know if I still believe that
Hunger delusions lead to spontaneous decisions
Generally certain that the surgeon general smokes too
Trying to convince myself to be a hypocrite *just like you*

My lungs are black, this is an internal tattoo
Drink the ink, spit it out on a stainless steel canvas
Looking in the mirror, I see everything but me
Everything I can be is further away than my family
so I don't call it; anything, *I forgot what I was saying*
When, in fact, I just remembered not to say it

Bottle it up like bootleg hooch
It only gets more potent with time
I'm pine barrel soaked, a tree performing apheresis
An unsanitized pine needle riding the groove
of a dead man's garage pressed record
Something no one was supposed to hear

*All this talking is heartbreakingly taking me out of me
Making them see that in me, there's nothing to see
All I have to show is all that I found when I was lost at sea*

Harbour



Riku Y /
Savulasi

The Sea is Everything

Too young, I tried the fathom
of brittle bones, failing sight
and aches deep enough
to contain my latent ashes.

How do the ears lose sound?
How do the decades dissipate
the facts and images memory
once weaved in every synapse?

Now closer to my own edge,
I understand what young was,
how I stood uncertainly full
of truths long lost in dry leaves.

Old myopic eyes shadowed
by their glaucoma see further.
Ears ring tones that sing in
voices of the many dead.

So the ancient water schools
me in the art of falling into
a cold center, dreaming
silences younger than I ever was.

The Writer Leaves a Trail of Destruction

The writer leaves a trail of destruction.
Brings trees down, severs knees,
And burns characters alive, making it
look like spontaneous combustion. Please
Don't forget to cover your prints,
All evidence, leave no traces.
And insist your whereabouts that night,
That you were with Pablo drawing faces.
Insist that Emily had seen the paramours
Inside me. That Sylvia and William,
And all the rest leaned in close
To finally taste me. And don't forget to raise me.
I've earned it. But along with powers to be
Are rules like read and read and read,
Then write and live and write and live,
Then read some more, don't wait.
And as the poems unfold year upon year,
And once the dust and debris settles, clears,
The revelation of who
Created that destruction will appear.

Washed Ashore

Friends often ebb out of my life, without tumult, like ocean tides receding from some forsaken, craggy shore. They disappear, so many times, at the worst of times, leaving me alone, high and dry. In my younger years, I fretted about the friends I'd lost, the things I could have said or done. I don't anymore. After a while, I just chose to stop caring. Life seemed less turbid that way. By now, I'm probably not much of a friend to anyone, but who has real friends these days? Most people don't consider the tides, take their retreat as something inevitable and changeless, and me, I'm not any different.

Even as I re-read the lines for a third time, I didn't know what to make of them. Too much sun and salt air, or drink, or all three, I suspected. I'd spent most of that mid-autumn afternoon down by the seaside, trying to write in between slugs of an overpriced Bordeaux I'd appropriated from my agent's prized collection. Unfortunately, though not altogether unpredictably, I'd made far more headway with the wine than the work. And while the saltwater crept up on my slatted wood deckchair, I helped myself to another liberal mouthful of the brick-red nectar, relishing the spicy cassis and blackberry that lingered on my tongue. For a few fleeting moments, the elegant notes

made me forget about the weighty bundle of dog-eared pages in my lap. *Washed Ashore*, I'd dubbed my albatross, an as-yet-unfinished novella about, among other threads, the special anguish of friendship lost. I'd convinced myself that trading my squalid city apartment for my agent's plush beach house would inspire a brilliant ending, but in truth, the unrelenting solitude of my new environs unnerved me. By that time of year, the invading tourists had since withdrawn, leaving the beachhead barren and desolate, like the surface of a long-dead moon. I hated the quiet. It gave me time to think, and when I thought, I thought of Roger.

Roger and I met about twenty years ago, a few months before I graduated from Emerson, at a crowded taproom on Boylston Street. While I sat at the bar, mulling my uncertain future over a pint of hoppy craft ale, I happened to overhear him discussing literature with a giddy co-ed. Curious, I eavesdropped as he held forth on the intricacies of character arcs and plot mechanics, plying her with some artful, if a tad pretentious, rhetoric. An incipient wordsmith myself, I couldn't resist interjecting.

"So you're some kind of writer, are you?"

"I am," he replied, swiveling his head around to face me. "But as you might have inferred, I'm in the middle of something here."

"Is he bothering you, my dear?"

"He was telling me about a story of his," she said. "He's had it published."

"Oh, has he?" I asked, my voice dripping with derision. "Well then, he wouldn't mind perusing the first chapter of my book."

"No, he wouldn't," he said, thumping his empty pilsner glass down on the dark wood bar top. I fished the manuscript from my beat-up leather satchel and handed it to him. As he leafed through the ink-covered pages, the wry smile he would often wear never left his ruddy face.

"It's not bad," he conceded. "What's the title?"

"*Broken Promises*, tentatively at least."

"*Broken Promises*," he mused. "Sounds like a bit of rubbish, doesn't it?"

"Well, if you think you can do better ..."

Thus our friendship was born. Roger and I swapped stories until closing time—the first of many sinuous, late-night con-fabs we would hold—becoming so engaged we barely registered the brusque departure, hours earlier, of our incurious female companion. Though I still smiled at the thought of that seminal night, its recollection always dredged up the memory of its regrettable bookend, a much different sort of evening, many years later, starring a much different sort of woman. *Annie ... destroyer of men, breaker of hearts*, I ruminated, taking a large swallow from the almost-empty wine bottle. *You bitch*.

Then it happened. Something about the combination of the alcohol and my maudlin lapse ignited a bizarre, frantic urge. I ripped a blank sheet of paper from my notepad and, without thinking, scribbled "Help!" across the lined page. A bit later, after I'd knocked back the last of the wine, I rolled up my plaintive message, slid it into the bottle, and carefully

replaced the sand-flecked cork. Though the whimsy of it made me chuckle, I found myself wandering to the water's edge, winding up like an Olympic discus thrower, and hurling the dusty green vessel, eyes closed, into the wide, waiting sea. Desperation got the better of me, it seemed. But even the best of us need to catch a break now and again, and with that absurd, impulsive gesture, I cast a line for mine. Afterward, feeling strange buoyancy, I appended a sanguine conclusion to my otherwise grim soliloquy:

The thing about the tides, though, they're cyclical, bound to return—and far-flung friends, well, sometimes they find their way back too, washing up when I least expect them.

With the daylight nearly gone, the sky smoldered in hues of pink and purple, and the water darkened to a deep shade of blue. I gathered my things and lumbered inland, over the tall, grass-lined dunes at the edge of the beach, toward the colossal manse that rose beyond. As I neared the house, I stowed the folding chair and ven-

tured to the leeward side, hoping to rinse the caked-on sand from my grubby, sunburned feet. But the garden hose lay in a twisted heap, and before I could attempt to unravel the tangle, the landline screeched to life. *Goddamnit*. My agent, I knew, by the telltale dread cascading through me. I bolted up the wooden patio stairs, through the twin glass doors, and into the spacious living room, grit and grime trailing in my wake. *Oh, fuck me*, I groaned to myself, after glancing back at the mess. Rattled and a little winded, I deposited the manuscript and my notebook beside the phone and took a protracted breath, steeling myself as I plucked the cordless from its cradle.

“Hello, Jerry.”

“David,” he boomed, in a haughty tone I despised. “How’s that manuscript coming?”

“Oh, it’s coming,” I told him, fiddling with a model schooner he’d displayed over the stone-clad gas fireplace. “You can’t hurry creativity. It has to flow in its own time ... like the tides.”

“You do have a deadline, you know?”

“Five o’clock, Friday,” I said, wincing as I snapped off one of the miniature figures glued to the deck of the boat. “How could I forget?”

“Just get it done, all right? Humor me.”

“Anything for you, Jerry.”

“Thanks a latte,” he said,

with nauseating cheer. “Catch some rays for me. You looked, well, kind of pale the last time I ... fuck. Sorry, have to jet, crisis over at Putnam. Feel free to partake of the vino, anything but the '86 Lafite. Ciao.”

I clicked off the line and tossed the receiver onto the gigantic white sectional that zigzagged through the room, serpent-like, reminiscent of some fearsome albino leviathan. A scary beast, I didn't doubt, though nowhere near as terrifying to me as the half-done novella that loomed on the adjacent glass end table. My big comeback, I'd vowed to Jerry, more than once. Weary at the sight of it, I averted my eyes and plunked myself down on the far side of the couch, unsure of what to do next, other than clean myself up and crack open the Courvoisier I'd unearthed from the drawer of my agent's antique roll-top desk.

The concoction, as hoped, did the trick. After a hot shower and a few generous glasses of brandy, I mustered the resolve to return to the loathsome stack of pages, even managing to sketch the outlines of a viable *dénouement*. But my regained momentum didn't hold. In a short while, the words started to run together, bleeding into an inky, ethanol-induced haze.

I needed help, it was clear. I needed Roger.

When it came to writing, Roger had an uncanny knack for keeping the wind fair and the rudder straight, a talent I first observed after I'd agreed, with no small degree of reluctance, to collaborate with him on *Broken Promises*. I'd run aground, couldn't write, I confided to him during our barroom *tête-à-tête*, a rueful aside he took as a distress signal requiring urgent action. When he arrived at my door unannounced the next morning, lugging two giant cups of coffee and an old manual typewriter, I worried I'd made a grievous error, but my trepidation swiftly evaporated. His childlike exuberance tugged me out my doldrums, and by day's end, we'd banged out more pages than I had in weeks.

Even in those halcyon days, though, the sailing could get bumpy. Our first real brush with choppy waters, I recalled, came on the evening we put the finishing strokes on *Broken Promises*, after Roger had decided to uncork a bottle of Cristal he'd socked away for the occasion. He cranked Zeppelin's "Heartbreaker" on the hi-fi and vanished into the kitchen, leaving me alone to revel in our *pièce de*

résistance, which I'd mounted with great care atop an altar constructed of some of my most beloved literary classics. We had only one copy of the manuscript—something of an antiquarian, Roger had insisted we eschew my trusty laptop in favor of his Underwood—and at that instant, I regarded our creation as the most precious object in the universe, priceless, with a reverence oft-reserved for the divine.

In the next moment, though, Roger shattered my hushed veneration, bursting into the room in a jubilant mania, bottle in hand. He air-strummed it wildly, mimicking Page on his Telecaster, and as Jimmy reached the climax of his epic solo, Roger fired off the cork, discharging a frothy geyser that splattered over our manuscript, me, everything. Enraged, I cursed him for his carelessness and stormed off to bed. While I tossed and turned that night, he stayed awake until dawn, retyping the champagne-soaked pages. And a year later, when our novel hit the shelves, we had the quintessential amusing anecdote to share at readings. Everyone loved that bit of lore. He recounted the yarn better than I did, but that was Roger, a born storyteller.

Back then, though Roger and I had fantasized about literary glory, neither of us expected our modest novel to garner any laurels,

let alone make us minor, albeit accidental, celebrities. We counted our success at cornering an amenable publisher as a miraculous boon unto itself. And after a ho-hum release, the two of us acquiesced to the fact we would have to give up our silly reveries of a full-time writing gig and find some suitable day jobs.

But my, how things changed in a blink, all because of one misguided commentary in a then-nascent online magazine. Amid a methodical firebombing of *Broken Promises*—overwrought prose, banal characters, contrived plot, the review complained—our too-clever critic unleashed one glorious, inexplicable accolade: admiration for our poignant, subtextual nod to gay rights, especially in light of the recent tragedy involving a Wyoming college student. That fabulous misconception precipitated a torrent of Internet chatter, some of it extolling us, some of it damning us, but most of it speculating about—oh, the scandal!—the delicious possibility of a hush-hush relationship between Roger and me. We stayed mum, figured let them gossip, and with a bit of adept marketing, the faint buzz swirling around our novel rose to a cacophonous roar. The gaudy sales numbers stunned everyone, even a younger, much less cynical Jerry, who wasted no time using our

little coup to wring out a deal for two more books, with an option for a third.

With our fortunes riding a magnificent wave, Roger and I opted to leave Boston astern and berth at a quaint rental property on the Long Island shore, where he said, with much wistfulness, he'd mispent the greater part of his youth. I immediately fell in love with that aged, shingled cottage. I adored its picturesque waterfront view, which called to mind certain passages from *Gatsby*, and its bright, cozy rooms, which we populated with mismatched furniture, countless books, and a host of other curiosities accumulated during Roger's numerous antiquing expeditions. In the early years, we styled our new living quarters as a literary bastion, a place where fledgling writers of all stripes could comingle and, often aided by one or more chemical substances, search for that elusive conduit to a higher creative plane. Among our contemporaries, we shone like massive stars, overnight giants around which many of them gravitated, and on singular nights, the house resonated with the boisterous, intoxicated jabber of would-be authors, each hoping, through propinquity, to absorb some of our radiance. Heady times, I knew, even then.

Later, as Roger and I got older and our fame dimmed—despite respectable careers, we'd never recaptured the lightning-in-a-bottle splendor of *Broken Promises*—the gatherings became smaller and less energetic, until at last the house returned to its ground state. I enjoyed the break from the clamor, but Roger, I was aware, still craved the thrills and attention. He grew edgy during that latent period, often vanishing, without a word, for days on end. At the height of his restiveness, he accosted me, announcing that, after four books, he'd wearied of our partnership and needed to split off, at least for a while, to concentrate on his own endeavors. I consented without a fight, told him I understood. He seemed mollified, and for the rest of that summer, we settled into a renewed rhythm. Though our professional paths had begun to diverge, we still wrote side by side, workshopped our pieces together, and supported one another. I felt content. Things had changed between us, but our friendship, I assured myself, remained inviolable, capable of standing against anything.

My rosy memories of those bygone idyllic years, when held up against the stark reality of my

present circumstances, filled me with unbearable melancholy. And inasmuch as I could blame anyone else for my current lot, I blamed Annie. She ambushed Roger and me—whether by happenstance or design, I never learned—at the end of that turbulent summer, during a respite in London, where he still boasted some family on his mother’s side. That ill-fated afternoon, fresh from high tea at the Dorchester, our stomachs full of delectable finger sandwiches, scones, and pastries, we found ourselves toddling down Park Lane, toward the Tube station at Hyde Park Corner. His wealthy great-aunt Eloise had gifted us some choice tickets to a trendy, sold-out production debuting in Covent Garden that night, and by our reckoning, we had just enough time to pop over to our preferred pub for some much-needed pre-show lubrication.

As Roger and I made our way along the enormous tract of greenery, Annie appeared like a succubus in a beguiling dream, her ample curves hugged by a stylish—and dangerously low-cut—blood-red Lycra dress. Without effort or care, she glided toward us, lip-syncing along with her iPod, her wavy raven tresses unfurled in the breeze. She seemed enraptured, oblivious to her surroundings, and I had to stop short to avoid a collision.

“Oi, mate. Watch it.”

I lurched backward a step and scrutinized her. Mid-twenties, certainly attractive, in a wanton sort of way, but something ugly and disquieting lurked behind her smoky eyes, elfin nose, and crooked, suggestive mouth. Something devious too, I sensed.

“Get a good look, did you?”

“Apologies, m’lady,” I said, bowing my head.

“Well, bugger off then,” she barked at me, nearly launching Roger into hysterics. I shrugged and started to take my leave, when a glimmer of recognition brightened her face. “Bloody hell, I know you two, don’t I?”

Roger and I never made it to the play. Instead, the three of us wound up lounging atop some beanbag chairs strewn on the Serpentine’s lawn, sipping gin and bitters we’d procured from a squat, 1950s-era Citroën van stationed nearby. As we talked, I became aware, almost from the outset, of a pull between Annie and Roger. Like many fans who Roger and I had encountered over the years, she gushed about our work, even quoted some of her favorite parts from *Broken Promises*, a brand of hollow praise we’d long since learned to accept with courteous detachment. “Oh, you’ve read us then,” Roger remarked with his usual cool, but I

could see, by the minute curl of his lips, he'd reveled in her adulation. And a bit later, when she surprised us with a headlong plunge into a critique of one of our more obscure pieces, I knew she'd really hooked him. For a long while, they traded erudite observations, carrying on an ardent exchange punctuated by fits of mutual laughter. She sparkled that evening, I couldn't deny. She sparkled, and he beamed. As for me, I sat taciturn, nursing my drink, content to listen.

Like everyone, Annie had a story. She was American, not British, we'd quickly gathered, though she could put on a passable accent, which she claimed to have picked up from the punters at the dive where she hustled drinks. A one-time English lit major, she said she'd crossed the pond two years earlier to attend a study abroad program and, upon exiting early for reasons never elucidated, decided to stay in the country. For much of the intervening time, she'd flitted about Europe, trekking back to London only recently, she told us, after her savings had dwindled. She was currently squatting—rent-free, she said—in a tiny Camberwell flat shared with a couple of art students named Rory and Jasper. As for why she'd never returned home, she explained that she wanted to stay as far away from her mother as she

could. Her father died of pancreatic cancer before she turned fourteen, and afterward, she said, her mother spent most of her time wasted on vodka gimlets and prone to fits of rage, often letting fly with vituperation and, on bad days, one or more of any number of household items.

When the shadows extended long behind us, we uncoupled ourselves from the cushy seats and stretched our legs, readying to make farewells. I shook Annie's hand and moved down to the lakefront, allowing her and Roger a semi-private goodbye. She gave him a quick, light kiss on the cheek, followed by a lengthy hug, and before they broke their embrace, I noticed her slip something from her black Fendi purse and push it into his hand. He stood frozen after she'd left him, eyeing her as she sauntered along the asphalt path toward the road. Once the sunset had swallowed her, he made an unsteady turn and shambled over to me, looking wonderstruck.

"Amazing woman," he whispered, aglow, but I harbored nagging doubts. How she acquired the posh clothes and matching accessories, I could only guess, but she couldn't afford them on a barmaid's tips, I felt sure. Lit major—undeniably, but I wondered about her dubious withdrawal from school. I also questioned how she persuaded

those two blokes to board her, if not with pounds. Nor did I believe the whole sob story about her childhood—too much of it reeked of bad fiction. Despite my misgivings, I didn't challenge her during our chat, partly out of politeness, but mostly out of consideration for Roger, who'd greedily lapped up everything she'd served him. And since we would probably never see her again, I didn't see a lot of harm in continuing to oblige him. "Down, boy," was all I said.

Roger did see her again, though, several times during that trip. And later that week, while we swilled thirty-year-old Scotch at a swanky whisky bar opposite Trafalgar Square, he rocked me with an unforeseen depth charge.

"I'm thinking about inviting Annie back to the States."

"What?" I blurted, nearly choking on my drink. "Are you sure that's wise?"

"No," he admitted, shrugging. "But she's fantastic, isn't she?"

"Roger, you hardly know this girl, and I stress *girl*," I said. "To me, she seems like trouble."

"Trouble?" he piped. "What kind of trouble?"

"The bad kind."

"I'm a big boy," he said, his gaze unconsciously, or perhaps consciously, drifting through the mezzanine window, to the towering

swell of Nelson's Column. "I think I can handle it."

"Oh, you're a big boy now?"

"Big enough," he told me, grinning wide. "Big enough."

As promised, against my steadfast protests, Roger brought Annie back with us, moving her and her scant cargo into our vacant guest bedroom. In the beginning, we cruised along well enough, a merry crew of three—The Three Musketeers, Roger liked to say, occasionally bellowing their famed motto in the original French. Before long, though, I got the heave-ho, dumped overboard like a hunk of jetsam. I didn't hide my disaffection for their blooming romance, and the resulting tension made our convoluted domestic situation ever knottier by the day. Finally, when I staggered home drunk early one morning and found them pressed together on the living room rug, shagging by candlelight, he decided, at her fervent insistence, to set her up with her own apartment.

After Annie had vacated the house, Roger spent most of his time holed up at her place—indulging her every whim, it seemed—and piece by piece, she took him apart. When I teased him about our unwitting *ménage à trois*, an incident

over which we once would have shared a laugh, perhaps even inserted as a joke in one of our books, he just frowned and told me he didn't see the humor. He also took to subtly reproaching me for my escalating drinking habit, which I could tell, by his disappointed scowls and tuts whenever I poured myself a glass of something or other, had begun to disgust him. Over the years, we'd both quaffed our fair share of alcohol, but since Annie didn't approve, he no longer did either, often treating me like a pariah in my own home. What saddened me most, though, was his sudden disinterest in the pursuit he'd long cherished above all others. He started showing up to our writing sessions with only a handful of pages and curt excuses for why he couldn't work, and eventually, even those token efforts ceased.

For my part, I tried to stand by Roger, as much as I could. I might have understood his obsession with Annie, his need to please her, if she'd made him happy. But as far as I could tell, his mood vacillated somewhere between despondent and rancorous, all of his former ebullience spirited away. She'd poisoned him, turned him against me, against himself, I felt. Still, I didn't confront him, fearing it would only upset him further. So while the months passed, our unresolved

issues kept accruing, transforming the house into an emotional tinderbox. Until our last writing session, though, neither of us had dared to strike the proverbial match.

"Haven't you had enough?"

Roger asked me that evening, sounding like a pompous prep school prefect, after I'd plowed through a third whiskey. I sat slouched on our vintage leather sofa, dozing, while he hovered over me, brow furrowed, brandishing a sheaf of my latest handwritten pages. "Your work is suffering. I mean, have you read this shite?"

I forced open my drooping eyelids and took a long, hazy look at the tumbler in my hand. Then I turned my bleary gaze on him.

"Fuck you, Roger," I said, slamming my glass down on the mahogany coffee table. "At least I'm writing something."

"What are you trying to say?"

"She's sucking you dry, and you don't even see it," I told him.

"Can you remember the last time you wrote anything?"

"She has nothing to do with it."

"She has everything to do with it," I growled, furious. "You're my best friend in the world, and I don't fucking recognize you anymore."

“Are you jealous? Is that it?”

“You think I’m *jealous*,” I said, letting out a shallow, doleful laugh. “Jesus Christ, I’m only thinking of your career, our friendship. You used to care about those things.”

“You know what, David, worry about yourself,” he said coldly, not quite willing to meet my eyes. “I’ll worry about me, and sod the rest. Agreed?”

“Roger, please.”

Roger said nothing more, though. He let the pages flutter to the floor, turned on his heel, and marched away, a dismissive arm raised as he disappeared into the next room, the door closing softly behind him.

Given our sinewy, far-reaching roots, we might have endured that small brushfire. A few evenings later, though, I did the unthinkable. With one errant spark, I torched our friendship to the ground.

A squall pummeled the island that wretched night, and not eager to hazard the weather, I battened down the hatches and fortified myself with a double shot of bourbon, intending to ride out the storm buried in the pages of a trashy vampire novel. I never got to crack the paperback, though, my low-key plans foiled by an unex-

pected guest. When I eased open the front door, Annie awaited me on the stoop, dressed to the nines, shivering, her hair and Burberry raincoat drenched. I invited her inside, hanging her wet jacket on Roger’s old-fashioned coat stand, a colonial relic he’d purchased at an estate sale, and went to fetch a towel. After drying herself off, Annie flashed a nervous grin and inquired about the whereabouts of my missing roommate. I couldn’t help but snicker. By then, Roger and I rattled around the house like ghosts—not speaking, only haunting, I explained—so I had no clue where he’d gone or when he might return.

“Mind if I stay a while, wait for him?” she asked, fidgeting with the string of pearls she wore.

“Let me fix you a drink,” I suggested.

“Sounds nice,” she said, distantly, and settled herself on the sofa.

While we waited for Roger, Annie and I gulped Kettle One martinis and dissected the latest McEwan offering—well-written, hilarious at times, yet ultimately unsatisfying, we agreed—but a dark eddy swirled beneath our placid, cordial conversation. After a third drink, she broke down and confessed she’d come to see me, not him. She needed my advice, she claimed. According to Annie, she

and Roger had gotten into a nasty argument earlier that evening, during a much-anticipated anniversary dinner, and she'd stomped out of the restaurant without him. She'd expected a proposal, and instead, she bemoaned, her gray eyes growing misty, he'd declared he could never marry her. She tried to tell me more, but her voice caught, choked by sobs.

As much as I resented Annie, seeing her so fragile—trembling, in tears, her glittery eye shadow smudged—melted my enmity. I offered her a cocktail napkin, which she accepted with a snuffle, looking away while she wiped her face. After a series of deep, sharp breaths, she regained her composure and apologized. I nodded and stroked her hand. "Oh, you must hate me," she whimpered, forcing a broken smile. She said that she lamented the gulf in my friendship with Roger, that she'd never meant to come between us. When I proposed to make her another drink, she closed her weepy eyes and shook her head. "Just hold me," she breathed, "please."

Annie inched over to me, and despite a bout of uneasiness, I took her into my arms, pulling her close. The dewy smell of her damp, silky hair stirred my desire, and the touch of her lithe body against mine set me aflutter. After

a few agonizing minutes, she lifted her head from my chest, looked up, doe-eyed, and kissed me, starting with my neck and working her way to my lips. I tried to object, but she slipped her tongue in my mouth and straddled me, her hands slinking beneath my Polo and unfastening my jeans. Some part of me understood she was handling me, how I suspected she handled all of the men in her life, but by that time, the rest of me no longer cared. As for Roger, I convinced myself that my betrayal, though awful, would at least prove she didn't love him, was just using him. A glib rationalization, I knew, somewhere inside me. In truth, I wanted to hurt him, in the only way left to me. And when he waltzed into the room, whistling a playful Gilbert and Sullivan tune, an incredible, gleeful jolt ran through me as I watched his face contort, at the sight of us, into a horrible grotesque. I'd never seen him angrier.

"You son of a bitch," he said, seething. "I should have known something like this would happen. You never could stand that I had something you didn't."

"Roger, it isn't like that," I said, rising to face him.

"Well, what the fuck is it *like* then, David? Tell me."

"I ... I ...," I stuttered, groping for an answer, a means to

explain. But he cut off my line of thought with a right hook to the jaw, sending me reeling backward onto the couch.

“I don’t bloody want to hear it,” he snapped, his face turning apoplectic-red. “I’ll see you both in hell.”

“Goodbye, Roger,” I murmured, far too late, to the back of the front door.

The next morning, I woke alone. Annie had shoved off without a goodbye, and I never saw or heard from her again. Later, I figured she must have judged that she’d drained all she could from Roger and wanted an easy way to jettison his used-up remains. The waterworks, the feigned vulnerability, the ostensibly impetuous seduction—all part of a grand charade, I presumed. And me, I’d played my role to perfection.

During the months that followed, my life broke free of its moorings, and I surged out into a sea of depression and debt. I couldn’t write—drunk or sober, it didn’t matter—and my once-jetting career floated without purpose, like a buoy set adrift. But even as I flailed about, struggling to rescue myself and my foundering finances, my thoughts stayed anchored to Roger. He never called or wrote—a simple e-mail or text message, even a few scribbles on a bargain-rack

postcard, would have pacified my angst—inviting me to brood over where he might have gone. After we’d inked our fat book contract, he blew his share of the advance on *The Tempest*, an ancient second-hand sailboat with more leaks than a dilapidated sieve. He told me, without a hint of irony, that he planned to restore the old sloop, maybe even sail her around the world one day. And standing there, facing him at the end of the long, narrow dock, his rugged frame silhouetted by murky blue water that stretched to touch the cloudy horizon, something peculiar in his eyes as he said it and turned away from me, silently sliding his hand along the weather-worn hull, I believed him.

Years later, I still liked to think of Roger that way, gallivanting on the high seas in his Shakespearean vessel, a wandering minstrel on the water. “O Captain! My Captain!” I cried out into the cavernous depths of Jerry’s living room, my recitation capped by a sad chortle and the thunk of the cognac bottle against the Persian rug below.

The morning sun flooded through the overhead skylight, rousing me to a bad case of cotton mouth and a tempestuous headache. Every twitch delivered a

shudder of pain, and it took all of my fortitude to drag myself from the couch. Once upright, I waded to the closest bathroom and trawled the medicine cabinet for something, anything to quell the tsunami ravaging my brain. *Vicodin—bless you, Saint Jerome.* After popping a couple of the oblong white tabs, I stumbled into the kitchen, guzzled a bottle of Evian, and fired up Jerry’s fancy, state-of-the-art espresso maker, which cost more than my first car but delivered the perfect cup, every time, just like the ads promised. One shot down, I made myself a second and toted it back to the living room. I needed to write, I realized, but when I beheld last night’s disaster—sand littered across the hardwood, loose manuscript pages scattered about the furniture and floor, the empty bottle overturned on the rug—the notion of working suddenly exhausted me. *Perhaps a walk first,* I thought, *a long one.*

Out on the beach, I meandered barefoot down the coastline, savoring the brisk morning air and fulgent sunshine, and before long, the mixture of crisp weather, caffeine, and hydrocodone worked its beautiful magic. A large part of me wished I could keep walking forever along that pristine shore, leaving the manuscript, my life, all of it behind. I couldn’t, though, I supposed, not really. So I slowed my pace and

began to reverse course, but as I wheeled toward the house, my eye stopped on a shiny object bobbing in the sea foam. Moving closer, I made out a familiar glass bottle, the words “Chateau Lafite Rothschild, 1986” still legible on its wrinkled, faded label. *Another rejection,* I thought, snorting. To my shock, when I unplugged the cork and extracted my note, I discovered someone had scrawled “You’re beyond help!” beneath my foolish plea, followed by a sardonic postscript: “At least your taste in wine has improved.” I would have recognized that uneven handwriting anywhere.

My fingers tensed on the limp piece of paper, and I whirled around, catching a glimpse of a man standing atop a mound of far-off rocks, like a statue of some erstwhile Greek god. I hesitated for the briefest of moments, then raced toward the figure as fast as my heavy, flaccid legs would allow. As I cut through the sand, my chest exploded—heart throbbing, lungs laboring to breathe—but I didn’t stop until I met him on the jetty, prow to prow. Though he looked weathered, diminished somehow, the years hadn’t dulled the steely, knowing glint in his pale blue eyes. I had to cringe when I considered how I must have appeared to him. While we surveyed each other, only the squawking of

the gulls and the gentle crashing of the waves pierced the silence. Two seasoned hacks, the oldest of friends, and neither of us could manage a word. After all of that time, I didn't know where to begin.

"Jesus, you look worse than a freshman after a frat party," he uttered first. "What bottle did you swim out of this morning?"

"You know, you don't look exactly shipshape yourself," I shot back, taking note of the faint wrinkles around his eyes and his waning hairline. "My God, Roger, where the hell have you been?"

"Oh, here and there," he said, without further explanation. "Why, where did you imagine I was?"

"Funny thing," I said, "I used to picture you sailing around the world."

"For Christ sake, David, you mean in that goddamn rust bucket I bought? She would have sunk before I got past the first marker."

"I guess it was better than the alternative," I said, shrugging.

"The alternative?"

"That you hated me. That you'd never come back."

"Now, where would you have gotten that idea?" he asked, his wry smile returning for the first time.

"Oh, you'd be surprised how quickly your friends are ready to

stab you in the back, given half the chance," I said. "I suppose that's why I like the line '*Et tu, Brute?*'"

"You always did go in for the melodrama," he said, letting out an exasperated sigh. "So what are you doing with yourself these days?"

"Writing."

"Still?" he asked archly. "I thought you'd have given that up when I left."

"Why? I was the one with the talent, remember?"

"Are you working on anything now?"

"Yes, actually, a novella. It's called *Washed Ashore*, tentatively at least."

"*Washed Ashore*," he muttered, chuckling a little. "Sounds like a bit of rubbish, doesn't it?"

"Well, if you think you can do better ..."

On that deserted beach, Roger and I recovered our friendship from the tumultuous waters that had long ago driven us apart. We survived the maelstrom, and in the bleak aftermath, the sea returned him to me, only slightly worse for wear. Our reunion—no, it wasn't the ending I'd envisioned. But as a wise man once expounded, lost friends, even those parted from us by an ocean of distance and time, have a way of washing up when we least expect them.

Padded Walls

I can't even get a cent a word
and I still mint millions off of my silver tongue
All day doing what I hate just to make something I hate;
Paper that isn't even blank, overdeveloped photonegatives

I am not who I thought I would be
I am not writing what I thought I would
I love this but this isn't love
This is hate, clean as the slate

I write good poetry on my bad days
But if I don't write well, my day is bad
Nothing but bad days when you love an art already dead
I love this verse beyond its hearse and its worst days

Beyond the plagiarism, the hatred written at those carrying the same
weight
The failed writers living off of those of us who will chase the gazelle until
one of us starves
Getting fat off of lies you tell yourself, despising the rising phoenix
Who loves falling to ash just to come back

My ink is potion, my pen a wand, my mystical syllables are a resurrection
ritual
From padded walls and calls for paddles, tried to die enough times to know
I won't
From intrusive thoughts and oxy leaving me convulsing on my back, I
brought myself back
You aren't rich until you make someone else rich
I'm not alive again until I can pull my work out of the lurch with me

Long Shots 4

“In the halls of justice, the only justice is in the halls.” – Lenny Bruce

Who needs justice these days?
In the halls of justice and all that,
So what's it to ya
If Lady J took a break, a vacay,
Stepped away, had an extended breather,
Knew when she wasn't wanted,
Slipped away and vanished?

Do you really miss her?
Isn't politics more fun
When nobody is accountable?

Or do you wish to find a blindfold
On the edge of your bed,
A set of scales
On the dining room table?
Do you want her back?
Because from where I'm standing,
She's looking like another ex
Who has escaped
From a locked basement.

There's just no justice left.

Aubade Interrupted

Bleed out for her,
On our sheets if she wants.
Just as she has for you.
Give her all of you.

Let blood guide you.
And run your fingers over
Her skin, hips, and breathe.
Kiss her neck. Give her what

She wants. My life, my love,
By day. By night, she teases, taunts.
And day by day and night by night
We carry on. And here we are

At four am.
She's tired; she's been up.
But I'm up and want dawn
To stay down. Just wanting

To hold her without work in sight.
Without kids. Without worldly
Responsibilities. Keep me inside
Intimate moments of fever and fervor,

And loss of control
As our bodies drift to sea.
But. Aubade interrupted.
You're going to bed, first to potty.

No, I won't forget the dryer.
I can do that too.
Yes. No. Yes. I love you too.
Goodnight.

You're always praying

with hands around your neck
because your father struck
the dog before church
every Sunday. Because
that was where
he pressed communion
onto your teenage tongue.

Because you found your rabbit—
corpse on Easter, still warm
and weeping. You fed it milk
chocolate, because you swore its foot
twitched once the sugar hit.

Because your mother's bottles
stuck out from under the couch
and her stance was shaky when she
looked away. Your father—
slept with a shotgun.
And you just tried to stay
out of the way.

Snapshots Without a Camera

The lot on the corner was empty.
A few trees, a worn path to the roots
That made three steps to the sidewalk.

I walked it over and again
On the way to the drug store
With the soda fountain and
The comic book rack.

They would add cherry to your Coke
Long before it was marketed as such,
But my money was spent in advance,
In my mind,
For those Still Only 25 Cents comics.

I charged through the brush,
Rode my bike until I went over the handlebars,
Then rode it some more.
I lost my kite, followed the airborne string
Across town until I saw a UFO.
I still don't know what I saw.

The small grocery store was Killen's.
I met my best friend outside the barber shop.

It was more complicated than that
And simpler.
There are parts of a childhood
I was never much good at remembering.

To laugh or cry

Should I laugh or cry?
When everything around me dies?
Do we care when a flower wilts?
Does destruction bring a sense of guilt?
We all know life isn't fair,
but do I really even care?
Do I try to impress my fellow man?
When God always has a better plan?
In the land of forever,
will it matter if my poems were clever?
Should a soup kitchen be the place?
Where I help the human race?
Will I be eating in one soon?
Without the tool of a silver spoon?

Abandoned



Permanence

Years ago we peeled back the wood paneling in the basement, just the corner piece, so as to not get paint on it. There, on the concrete you painted *BW CB*, showing me your handiwork before replacing the paneling, hiding it forever. We laughed, thinking of future owners discovering it. I don't know if it's still there, or if you peeled back the paneling again, painted over it after I moved out.

Years later, while hiking with a friend in Vancouver, in some forest or park I've since forgotten, I came across *J C* carved into a tree. I took a picture and sent it to you. *Did you do that?* you asked. *Of course not*, I responded – I would never carve into a tree. Now, years after I've exchanged my name for yours I wonder at a love so deep only carving into the flesh of a tree will do.

Heartseed





We two were just like everyone else –
desperately lost in our passion, untouchable to the rules and the limits,
sublime in our misery, wrenched hearts in pulsating bodies,
emerged in love, submerged in love.

I Am Waiting for Him to Love Me

After his sixth or seventh beer, Glenn extends his hand. He pulls me to my feet and wraps his arms around me. Our bodies press together like hands in prayer. He's taller than me, so when I tilt my head to look into his quiet blue eyes, my nose brushes against his lips. He kisses me softly but it lasts only a moment. He never kisses me longer than that. We're friends, he insists, and he doesn't go to bed with friends. We dance only when he's drunk.

One of Nina Simone's old torch songs plays on his computer. He's the first man I've known who loves her too. When I noticed her on the monitor's playlist, I squeezed his hand and babbled something about how Nina knew love was pain, and the pain was beautiful, and the beauty was love.

Glenn swings his arm over my head, my hand still in his. He wants me to spin, but I turn the wrong way. I stumble over my feet.

"You're gonna have to teach me how to dance," I say.

"No, you were supposed to go the other way."

"I'm terrible at this."

He laughs and shakes his head. I think he's embarrassed for me. Glenn knows how to fold and angle his body to any music. I fall back on the bed and watch him dance in place. He sways, runs his large hands underneath his T-shirt over his smooth abdomen. At first, his head drifts from side to side but soon he looks at me. I've seen him dance like this for other men, other men who were not friends. I try not to think about them.

"Once the shit gets here, what are we going to do?" I ask.

He snorts. "Get high, of course."

"What if what happened last time happens again?"

"I guess it could."

Two days ago, when we last took hits from the pipe, I kissed Glenn hard on the mouth. I grabbed him. I didn't let go even after he kissed me back. Sometimes when you're spun, your memory decays, but I safeguard that kiss. I'm so grateful to have that moment locked away. I don't believe in a power higher than us, so my gratitude ascends then breaks apart like a gas.

I stretch out on the bed. We've been up nearly three days. His two hairless mutts hop back and forth over my body. Glenn claps his hands and shouts their names. They leap from the bedspread onto the floor. He lies down beside me.

"I told Marcus the door was open, so he could just come in," he says.

"What if we're both asleep?"

"He can wake us up."

"I'm exhausted."

"Then crash with me."

He turns on his side, facing me, and closes his eyes. I watch the muscles in his face relax. His lips slacken and his brow softens. We've never fallen asleep together, so I've no idea when he will drift away. There's nothing else in this room to see. After a minute or two, he opens his eyes. His gaze meets mine. He knows I'm watching him. He studies me a moment, then closes them again. I swing my arm over his side but don't pull him closer. I'm not that brave.

If Marcus does come in without knocking, he will find us like this. Fast asleep in this dangerous world. A small, low grunt escapes from somewhere inside this man beside me.

I watch. I listen.

Finally, I close my eyes, and he's gone.

Ode to *Waterfalls* by TLC

After Lisa “Left Eye” Lopes with Marqueze Etheridge & Organized Noise

for those of us
 who have the privilege

to find warmth inside
 the loving arms

of our mothers
 sometimes

this isn't enough
 love can be

a long distance phone call
 you can hear

the voice of embrace,
 but to let that voice

carry into a feeling
 and to let that feeling

orbit around
 your entire being

is something entirely different
 second-party affection

can only do so much
 and self love

is no different than
 your great-great grandfather's

antique firearm
 resting inside

a dusty pine box
 mossed under

a blanket of cobwebs
 unlike the gun though,

this weapon in your arsenal
 is one worth

taking out of storage
 one loaded

with a barrel full of
 —reasons to see

beauty in more
 than the mere mirror images

others will try to reflect onto you
 it's a hell of a conquest

to find the encouragement
 to uplift the soiled silt

under arid eyes,
 peeling back the layers

of bandaged light
 & our strength

shall be our medication
 to leave our self-love

in an open space
and scream for once

with bones
that sound like chimes

& not mouths
that sing like ghosts

some call it therapy
some call it life
some call it joy

one day
we all
can call it

home

Earth's Palette



How to Throw a Birthday Party

Fall asleep on the couch
with the pale light from

Dateline
flickering over you

If you are throwing a body
(or parts) into a lake don't use plastic bags

The gas from the body decaying
will make them float

Remember that heat speeds
up the decaying process

Take the head and hands to a separate place
so they have to piece it together

If there is a struggle
clean their fingernails afterwards

There might be pieces of skin
underneath

It takes longer than you think to burn a car
just drive it into a lake instead

The police will know the fire wasn't an accident
but it is still good for eliminating evidence

Set fire to clothes and curtains
they burn more quickly than furniture

Buy everything with cash and
don't google how to do it the week before

Wake up in drunk sweat, half lucid
drift back towards the bedroom

Take a handful of sleeping pills to return to
your accidental research

Housing Plans

We build our homes in the same way
young people go about improvisational theater;
an underbaked joke of drywall jutting
in the hallway, loose lines of electrical wire
hanging before the silent audience
of the pieced-together plywood.
We embroider flowered rounds
of fabric pulled taught like botoxed skin
with love-letter lines, like
This house would still be the same without you,
or Your presence here is barely noticed.
We waste postage on letters addressed
to this very house, each other's names
scrawled on the yellowed envelope,
tucked into the rusted mailbox leaning
like a cardboard crown on a rained-out playground.
We like the taste of wasted love,
we like the power of faking it,
this kingdom of breaking things
beneath our feet.

Last Hope Lost



Four deaths ago,

you left your body for me to find.
face smashed against the table
and glasses broken in the filthiest sleep.

The time before,
you floated straight upstairs
neglected the syrupy needles
that littered the bathroom floor.
Left a spoon in the sink
and a clump of hair clung to the drain.

In my sleep,
I bury you every night.
Sometimes you wake up
right as I sling a shovel of dirt
into your mouth.

We sit Shiva
for your mother's sake.
We pretend not to hear
you rattling around upstairs.

When you lock the bathroom door,
your mother swears on your life
that it's just the clock ticking.
But we all know better.

Call Me Ellen

When Ella Mae Dickerson received her acceptance letter from Mississippi State University, she didn't tell her pa. She would have told her ma, but Millie Dickerson took off last year, sick of old Buford, his tomcatting, boozing, good for nothing poker pals. The letter in hand, Ella called Grandma Ruth. She and Grandpa Tyler came right over. Ruth had long white hair that flowed over her shoulders, down her back, stopped at her waist. Her cheeks and forehead were furrowed with deep creases, made her skin look like a crumpled-up brown paper bag. Neither of them said all that much, but Ruth held her granddaughter close for a long time, patted her on the back and rocked back and forth. Grandpa brought in a couple of suitcases, worn around the edges, misshapen. He said they weren't planning any more trips, and where they were heading next, they wouldn't need them anyway.

Next day at school Ella showed the letter to Mr. Bratcher, her economics teacher. He made a big deal about it, shook her hand, announced it to the class, told everyone how proud he was that Ella was headed to college. Everybody clapped, but not all that loud. Ella sensed that some of the girls, the ones who wore fancy jewelry and a different outfit every day, didn't like it that she got accepted so early in the semester. They probably thought: okay, but it's *only* Mississippi State. They'd be going

to Ol' Miss, or Vanderbilt or some other big-name school. But Ella—who wore plain skirts and blouses from Walmart, was shorter than most, had a few extra pounds—would be heading up to State. There was not all that much the matter with State. It had come a long way since its land grant days. But still, it was real close to home.

Late one Saturday afternoon in August, Ella pulled her grandparents' suitcases out of the closet. She packed her best clothes, her make-up kit, high school diploma, yearbooks from when she was a Junior and a Senior. Then a packet of letters, tied with string. Most were from her cousin Garland Conahue, when he was up in Parchman Prison for growing marijuana. One was from her Mother and two were from Grandma Ruth. Finally, the photos: old ones of her in elementary school, some of her best friends Suzanne and Betsy, one of Garland taken right before going to Parchman, and four of her cat Sheba, run over by a tractor last September. And senior pictures, the tiny ones meant for trading. Some of the kids had given theirs to her, some had not.

She also packed *The Economics of Public Issues* that Mr. Bratcher gave to her. Inside the front cover he had written: 'Ella, never lose sight of your dreams.' He signed it, 'Roger,' not, 'Mr. Bratcher.' It was because of him that Ella was going to Mississippi State. He told her that she was as smart as any-

body in her class. And, what with the way things were changing, she needed more education.

Mr. Bratcher had helped her fill out the paperwork. He took her application letter, hand-written on a yellow sheet of blue-line paper, typed it into his computer. He fussed with it for a while, then printed it, showed Ella where to sign.

“They’ll have computers in the library,” he told her.

Ella finished packing, then picked up the phone and called her grandparents. She promised to write often and said she’d stop by on her way to the bus station. After she set the phone in the cradle she stepped out the front door and leaned against the porch railing. They’d be harvesting cotton at the Huckabee place next week, probably at night. She pictured the giant harvester, growling through the field, stubby, yellow fingers reaching into the long rows, wisps of cotton swirling like snow in the lights.

She inhaled, sucked in a deep breath of the night air. Starkville. Mississippi State. She’d be out of the Mississippi Delta. It would be hot at State. But it wouldn’t be flat, and it wouldn’t be smack in a cotton field.

“I’m finally leaving this place,” she said.

Next morning Ella awoke just after sunrise, lay in bed thinking about Mississippi State. What would it be like up there? Living on campus, staying in a

dorm room—would it seem like being in school 24 hours a day?

She got up, ate a bowl of cereal, two pieces of toast, and sat on the couch. Her pa burst through the door, roll of duct tape in one hand. He stared at Ella. “You’re all packed, I ‘spect?”

He had to shout, the air conditioner made such a racket.

“Sure am, going to drive me to the bus station?”

He stared at her, hiked up his pants.

“If you won’t, I’ll call Mr. Bratcher.”

“He’d drive you?”

“That’s what he said.”

“Well, shit-fire, girl.” He tossed the duct tape on the kitchen table. “I’ll do it. Christ Almighty.”

She knew what he was thinking: ‘Won’t have some smart-assed teacher thinking I can’t drive my own daughter.’

“Okay, let’s go.”

“Bus don’t leave ‘till eleven. What’s your rush?”

“Got to stop by and say good-bye to Grandma and Grandpa.”

Ella knew that would bug him. Grandma Ruth paid more attention to Ella than she did to her own son. Pa shoved his hands deep into his jean pockets. A gray-white wedge of spittle lodged in the corner of his mouth.

“Suppose you’ll want to go by your cousins—Garland, Rose Marie?”

“Spent all day yesterday with them. You were hungover so bad you didn’t know I was gone.” Ella held up the phone. “You driving me or not?”

He grabbed his truck keys off the counter. "Alright, alright. Get your ass in the truck."

Sunglasses on, purse slung over her shoulder, Ella toted both suitcases out the door, dropped them in the back of Pa's maroon Ford truck. When it was hot, he parked under a sweet gum tree. It didn't bother him that sap built up on the roof and flies and bees buzzed around it all day. He started the engine, lurched onto the gravel road, picked up speed. Ella watched the cotton fields sweep by, fences and sides of barns crawling with kudzu.

He flicked on the right turn signal, slowed down for River Road.

"Uh-uh," she said, "This isn't the way."

"Come on, need some smokes. I'll pick 'em up from Tammy."

Tammy Colicut worked nights up to the Shop-A-Minute, copped cigarettes when she had a chance, sold them real cheap out of her trailer. Ella knew that Pa planned to leave her in the truck, run inside, yank off his pants, have a quickie with Tammy on the couch, toss a couple of fives on the table, grab a pack of cigarettes, fly out the door yelling, 'I've got 'em,' shirt untucked, zipper down.

Ella stared straight ahead, lips pressed together. "Stay on the Highway."

"Come on, girl, it'll just take a couple minutes."

One hand on the door handle, Ella glared at her father. "I'll get out

and hitch-hike the rest of the way."

He flashed a weak grin. "Just foolin' with ya." He pressed down on the accelerator. The truck rattled past the entrance to River Road.

Ella clenched her fists. God, this truck, she thought. AC never works; both windows had to be cranked all the way down when it was hot. Windshield smeared yellow and green from a zillion smashed grasshoppers. Floorboards rotted through, you could see the asphalt race past, smell hot oil and grease from the engine. Half the body spotted with rust, muffler held up with baling wire, blue smoke shot out the tailpipe, transmission slipped out of third when he turned sharp, sometimes the horn blowed all by itself. Amazing it still ran.

"Ella, that scholarship ain't going to pay for everything."

"I got loans, too. You signed, remember?"

"Why don't you stay in town, go up to the Junior College? It'd be a hell of a lot cheaper. Save a bundle of that scholarship money. We could work out a deal about a new truck."

"It don't work that way, Pa."

"Least you coulda left me your car. It was dumb to sell it."

"Needed the money. When I'm up there I'll walk or take the bus. Lots of people do that."

Two one-ton pickups shot past, guys in button down shirts looked down at them, struggling along at forty miles an hour.

"Someday I'll get me a truck like that."

He glanced over at her. “Those guys that come to play poker last week, they was a little sloshed. Maybe said some things they shouldn’t of.”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

He shook his head when they passed a handful of blacks, chopping cotton.

“What’re you going to study up there?”

“Political Science and Economics.”

“What the hell for?”

“Mr. Bratcher said because I got Spanish, I could go to Mexico or South America, work in business, maybe even join the Foreign Service.”

“How’d you learn all that Spanish?”

“Remember Felicia, used to live down the road?”

“Sure.”

“She got me started. Then I took it all through high school.”

“Doubt that you can make as much money in Mexico as you would up here. You’re smart, could go up and work up at the gin. Or the Shop-A-Minute. That’s what your Uncle Lawson does.”

“And be stuck in this place for the rest of my life? Pa, I need something more than staring at cotton, playing cards, and yakking about the old times.”

“I’m telling you there’s money to be made here—if you know how to look for it.”

“I’m doing what I’m doing.”
Ella leaned forward, pressed her knuckles and palms together.

“They don’t pay shit down there. That’s why them Mexicans keep flooding across the border.”

Ella pointed up ahead. “This here’s the road, don’t miss it.”

“I know where I’m going.”

Pa hit the gravel road fast, the truck fishtailed, felt like they were on skating on ice. He over-corrected, nearly put them in the ditch.

“Jesus, take it easy, will ya?”

Grandma Ruth and Grandpa Tyler lived in in a double wide trailer surrounded on three sides by cotton. During summer it was hotter than an iron skillet. Pa parked alongside the trailer, in the shade of a pecan tree. Ella raced through knee-high sedges and grasses to the porch steps. She took them two at a time, rapped on the front door. On both sides of her, window air conditioners groaned and shuddered, dripped water.

“Hey, Grandma,” she said when the door opened.

Grandma Ruth’s fingers were stiff and hard on Ella’s back, felt like a clutch of chicken feet. The held together for a long time, then Ruth dropped her hands to Ella’s arms, squeezed.

“You be careful up there,”

“Yes Ma’am, I sure will.”

“Wish I had some money to give ya.”

“It’s no matter, I got loans and a scholarship. Plus, I’ll work.”

“Your Grandpa’s up to Jason’s helping fix a tractor or he’d be here.”

Ella jumped back in the truck. "Okay, let's go."

He started the engine, ground into low, pulled out on the highway. They hadn't gone a mile before Ella pointed at the Fast-Lane.

"Don't pass it, Pa."

"Bus stops there? Thought we had to go into town."

"This is it. They gotta place where you buy tickets, wait for the bus."

One hand on the gear shift, he made a sharp turn into the parking lot.

"You coming home for Thanksgiving?"

"Not unless I want a turkey leg thrown at me."

"I was just messing around. School will be closed, there won't be nothing to eat."

"I'll figure it out."

"Course, you could cozy up to one of your profs, spend Thanksgiving with him." Pa smirked, swiveled his hips.

"Just drive the damn truck."

He parked at the end of the lot.

"Not here, Pa, this is for buses."

She pointed to a sign.

"Why the hell can't they make them signs bigger?"

He moved the truck, checked his watch.

"See, we're way early. You're gonna have to sit here, wait for that bus."

She pushed open the door, set both feet on the pavement.

Pa jumped out, rushed around and grabbed her suitcases. "I'll carry these 'cases for you. What with this heat and all."

"All right."

He followed close behind, called out, "They let coloreds go to State? You have to take classes with them, sleep in their rooms?"

He followed her to the back of the Fast-Lane, stood to the side while Ella waited at the end of a line that led to a cluttered counter. When she had her ticket, they sat at one end of a bench next to a display case crammed with oil and washer fluids.

"Sure they'll get your bags on the right bus? Don't want your stuff going to Mobile."

"They know what they're doing."

"You hungry? They got sandwiches up front. They don't feed you on that thing, do they?"

"We'll make stops, I'll get something."

They sat next to each other. Ella stared straight ahead, not speaking.

"Let me buy a couple of burgers and some fries. I'll go to the counter, order for us, there's plenty of time to eat before you hafta leave."

"That's okay."

"Hey Pa, its time."

They pushed through the front doors and Pa set her suitcases by the side of the bus.

"See ya, girl," he said and rubbed her shoulder with one hand.

A yellow crop duster buzzed high overhead. Ella watched the shadow race across the rows of cotton. She

started for the bus, then turned. "I'll be okay."

Ella climbed the steps, slipped sideways down the aisle, passed an elderly man almost asleep, a young couple holding hands, a woman and two kids. She took a seat toward the back. Everything I own, she thought, is on this bus.

Last year she had been here to pick up Garland. It was in July, right after he was released from Parchman. All he carried was a fan and a shopping bag. She had asked about the fan. "There ain't no AC up there," he said.

The driver climbed in; a short lady in a spiffy blue uniform, long dark hair. She sat behind the wheel, studied the passengers in the rear-view mirror.

Pa sat on the tailgate, can of Bud Light in one hand, couple of six-packs behind him. A man three rows back pointed out the window. "He's getting an early start." The woman next to him was silent.

The bus backed up, turned sharp, cut toward the highway. As the bus passed, Pa slid off the tailgate, waved, one hand wrapped around the Bud Light can.

Ella sat on a bench at the edge of the commons. Only the second week of school and she had to report to a professor's office. Last week, while the others rushed for the door, Professor Collingsworth called her aside, told her to come and see him Monday morning. It must have been that essay. She gazed out at the commons, the closely

cropped thick grass, bisected into triangles and rectangles by sidewalks laid out like spokes of a wheel.

Maybe stuff that happened on the Delta wasn't good enough for an essay. She hadn't traveled to New England or California, or even Europe like others had. She checked her watch: quarter to nine, better get started. Mr. Bratcher always said, never be late, but don't be too early either.

She stood outside the door, stared at 'Professor Collingsworth' stenciled on the frosted glass. Still early, she thought, but so what? She tapped on the glass. No answer. She rapped harder.

A muffled response: "Come in."

Ella pushed through the door.

He had on a button down, light blue shirt but no tie. "Hi Ella, thanks for coming." He motioned her toward a couple of chairs.

Ella spotted a sheaf of yellow, legal-sized pages on his desk. A sea of red marks—lines, arrows, exclamation marks, circles around words and phrases, long comments—obliterated her writing. She felt her pulse rise, a dry tightening in her throat.

A loud knock on the door, then an older girl swept in, dropped into the chair next to Ella. Tall, dark gray slacks sleek over long legs, peach colored pull-over shirt with a couple of dark buttons at the top. She gave the professor an easy smile, he smiled back. "They're buddies," thought Ella.

"Is—is this about my essay?"

The professor frowned, gathered the pages, passed them to her. "It needs some work."

Ella clutched the pages, felt tears in her eyes. Don't cry, she said to herself, don't cry. The pages shook in her hand.

"Hey," he leaned forward, smiled. "It shows promise." He pointed to the long-legged girl next to her. "Meet Marsha, one of my graduate students."

"Hey Ella, how are you?"

Marsha's hand was warm and soft, but the grip firm. Ella stared at her face, then dropped her eyes. "Uh-oh," she thought, "I screwed up." She clenched and unclenched her fists.

"You—" Professor Collingsworth. His eyes bored into her. "The things you described: fishing in the Mississippi River with your grandparents, gathering pecans..." He tipped his head sideways, raised his eyebrows. "...standing on the riverbank at dusk, feeling the mud between your toes, seeing all those colors in the clouds when the sun set..."

Ella's cheeks felt hot. What's this all about? Next to her, Marsha stirred.

"And cotton, chopped cotton on your uncle's farm?"

Ella dropped her head. "That's right."

Professor Collingsworth nodded. He watched her cheeks redden, her lips tighten. "Wasn't much fun, I guess." Without waiting for an answer, he said, "Do you type? Ever use a computer?"

"No..."

Mr. Bratcher said the school would order computers during the summer. Next fall they'd use them in

Andrew Miller

AP classes. Of course, Pa would never buy a computer. Her eyes wandered over the red scrawls. They looked angry.

"Mind having Marsha go through this with you?" His eyes rested on Ella. "She can explain my scratchings..."

Ella nodded, sucked in her breath. "Yeah, that's okay."

The professor turned to Marsha. "Go to the library, help Ella get this into the computer. Explain my comments. Come up with a second draft."

Marsha dropped her hand on Ella's arm, squeezed. "Got some time right now?"

"Sure."

"Okay, let's do it."

Out in the hall, Marsha turned. "You okay?" she asked.

"Yeah, just nervous."

"You did good." They started down the hall, weaved in and out among other students. Then, "How about we go to the Center, grab some coffee?"

"Yeah, that'd be good." She stopped, watched as a group of girls passed. She dropped her eyes, then looked up at Marsha.

"Would you mind...calling me 'Ellen'?"

Ellen closed the book, slid it into her knapsack. The bus slowed, made the long wide turn into the Fast-Lane parking lot. Earlier in the week it had turned cold, rained hard in the Delta. After it quit, the wind picked up,

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snapped off limbs, bent saplings, flattened white clover along the highway. The wind had stopped early Wednesday morning, leaving leaves and twigs scattered across the lot.

Ellen pressed her forehead against the window. She had only been away for a few months, but everything looked different. The parking lot seemed smaller, I-20 west of Jackson felt bumpier, Bolton and Edwards looked more run-down than she remembered. But, folks on the bus were friendly. They chatted amongst themselves as they rode. Nothing much, just about the weather, visiting relatives, holiday plans. Garland would be here to pick her up. She'd spend Thanksgiving with him and his folks, not stay with Pa. Grandma Ruth and Grandpa Tyler had moved out of their trailer a couple of months ago, so they'd be there.

A handful of folks rose when the bus stopped. The first to get off were a couple of teenagers carrying backpacks. An older man shook hands with both, directed them toward a white Chevy van. Next, a woman and two toddlers, then an old guy who could hardly stand by himself. The driver helped him down the steps, then reached back inside for a walker. Pack in one hand, duffel in the other, Ellen stepped off the bus. She scanned the lot.

"Hey, cuz, over here. Did you think I'd forgotten you?"

"Garland, thanks for coming."

Ellen's face broke into a smile. She touched one hand to her lips,

trying to hide it. She started to give Garland a quick shoulder hug, then wrapped both arms around him. She thought, "I almost kissed him on the cheek." He squeezed her arm, then picked up the duffel, led her to his car. Ellen grabbed her pack.

"Hop in." He tossed her duffel into the back seat. "Looks like shit but runs good. Bought it from a guy I met at Parchman."

"What's with the roof? Paint's peeling off like it's sunburnt."

They settled into the front seat.

"Delamination. I hafta sand away the peels and repaint." He cleared his throat and nudged her. "Course I might just put lotion on it."

He started the engine. "You're looking fine, Ella. Life up there must be good." One hand on the gear shift, he smiled.

"They've been calling me Ellen." She leaned back in the seat, smiled back at him, then laughed.

He slipped the transmission into low. "Ellen. Yeah, Grandma Ruth mentioned that. How come?"

"No big thing—just—I just wanted to leave some parts of me behind." She shrugged. "Trying for a new start."

"Is it working?"

"Yeah... yes, it is."

He nodded, put the car in gear.

"Classes tough?"

"Things move faster than in high school. You have to watch that you don't slip behind. But I'm figuring it out."

“I thought everybody cut classes, went to parties and shit.”

“Not me. I go to the library and study. It’s a lot different than high school.” She rubbed her cheek, looked over at Garland. “It’s better than I thought it’d be.”

“Still going to major in Economics, use your Spanish?”

Ellen pressed her palms together, turned to watch the empty cotton fields, dotted with wisps of white, slide by. How to describe her first months at State to her cousin? Could she explain how different everything—the classes, the kids— were up there? And, it wasn’t *just* Mr. Bratcher who took an interest in her.

“I’m not so sure. One of my professors thinks I should...go into writing. He thinks I might be good at it.”

“You can switch into something else that quick?”

“I don’t have to decide for a couple of years. They say that a lot of Freshman change their plans a couple of times during the first year. It’s no big deal.”

The sun broke through the clouds. Ellen looked over at Garland. “What’re you up to?” She reached over, squeezed his shoulder. She thought, “We’ve known each other since we were kids.”

“Working up to the Peterson’s Farm. I help harvest, repair fences, keep equipment running, that sort of stuff.” His voice lowered. “I’m outta the marijuana growing business if you know what I mean. I still light up once

and a while, but don’t want to get into all that again. Eight months in Parchman was plenty.”

They drove south on the highway. Local farmers had finished harvesting before the storm. Strands of white fluff skittered along the roadside.

“I appreciate your Mom letting me stay over.”

“Grandma Ruth and Grandpa Tyler are with us now. Their trailer went to shit.”

“Yeah, Grandma wrote me. They doing okay?”

“Grandpa’s not doing so good. His lungs are all shot to hell.”

“He’s been like that for a long time.”

“It’s them pesticides. All that spraying.”

Ella drummed her fingers on the seat upholstery. Cotton. While up at State, she hadn’t thought much about it. Now it was everywhere.

Garland interrupted her thoughts. “You’ll have to bunk in with Rose Marie.”

“That’s okay. How is she?”

“She’s growing up. Had a big thirteenth birthday party last week. Real excited you’re coming. Wants to know what it’s like up at State. Figured you’d tell her all about it.”

“Yeah, glad to. Real glad.” She ran her fingers over the upholstery. “She could come up for a visit before spring break.”

“She’d like that a lot.” He slowed when they caught up to a log truck.

“Okay to help Ma get stuff together tomorrow? Bunch of folks are coming.”

“Sure, I’d like that.”

“Your Pa’s gotta new girlfriend.”

“Yeah, Grandma told me.

Guess they’ll be at dinner tomorrow.”

Garland shifted into second, edged toward the center of the road, checking for a chance to pass. After weaving back and forth, he swung out and they swept past the truck: first the flapping red flag, the jumble of logs stacked high between two rows of square iron poles, then the mud-splattered yellow cab, dual exhausts spewing black smoke. Inside, a skinny, white-haired guy hunched over the wheel.

“Amazing how old them truckers are.” He shifted back into high gear.

A few minutes later they pulled into the driveway and Garland coasted to a stop in wet grass. Through the windshield, Ellen noticed a bunch of shingles were loose and a cluster lay on the ground. As she reached for the door handle Garland touched her arm. “Everyone’s real proud you’re up to State. First of us to go past high school!”

Ellen thought about Marsha, their sessions in the library, getting the hang of how to prepare an essay for Professor Collingsworth.

“We were afraid you might quit—one of the Johnson twins came back after a week.”

“Yeah, I heard about that. Not me. My return ticket’s already bought.”

Ellen glanced at the porch. She had forgotten that it slanted to one side, half the steps were rotten. Grandma Ruth sat in a wicker chair by the door.

“She looks...older,” said Ellen

“She tries to help around the house but can’t do much.”

Ellen watched her grandmother push out of the chair, lean

forward, lay both hands on the porch railing and squint at them through black-rimmed glasses. Her dress was long and dark, had a dusting of white flour around the waist. She started down the steps, slow, one at a time, cane in one hand. Her jaw quivered.

“She’s been talking about you all week,” said Garland.

Ellen nodded.

“Go on ahead, say ‘Hey’ to her. I’ll bring your bags.”

Ellen climbed out of the car, left the door open. She took a few steps, then began to run. The others stayed on the porch: Grandpa Tyler, Garland’s stepfather, his mother with new baby in one arm, and Rose Marie.

Both feet on the grass, Grandma Ruth let the cane slip from her fingers and stretched out both arms. “You’ll always be my Ella.” Her voice was sharp; her eyes snap-black and sparking.

Ellen pressed the old woman close. “You can always call me Ella,” she said. They held tight, rocked back and forth, feet in the black, water-slicked mud. Grandma relaxed her grip, slid her hands down to Ellen’s wrists.

“You’re getting growed, up, I can tell.”

“I missed you guys.”

“You doing okay? You’re not quitting are ya?”

“No.”

“That’s my girl.”

Ellen gripped her grandmother’s arms. “Got three Bs, one A and one C.”

“Well...Lordy.”

They embraced again, their cheeks touched. Grandma Ruth’s was warm, her skin wet.

La Pucelle

I. She Hears a Voice

like Moses before her,
& she doubts nothing:
this is her God.
The upending of her life,
the black spots on the road ahead--
these will never deter her.

The words fall easily into her brain.
The prophecies fall easily from her mouth.

II. She Dreams of a King

& she means to meet him,
replace that absent crown.
The glorious tension between her face
& her aim intrigues the men.
They lead her to the dauphin's door.

III. She Begins to Fail

A girl both decisive & divisive
comporting herself in ways unbecoming of a *demoiselle*
finds herself losing the unmatched potency
of her early visions.

IV. She Is Condemned

Fire makes us pure, the priests say,
but we see her defiled there,
her fortitude seared away
by this reverse baptism.
There is nothing fancy about it;
the church has abandoned its aesthetics
to teach us our place.

The world flutters away
in ashes.
Never an old woman.

WA 122 Home Garden



What is Life?

Do I love this life so much that I'm not ready to die?
Am I happy, or do I oppress every tear in my eye?
Do I feel like life should come on a silver platter?
Do I really think my life really does matter?
Do I wish I could go back to my childhood womb?
Am I headed for the coffin, or even a tomb?
Do I fear death, when I haven't defined life?
Will death be the only cure for all this strife?
Am I just a bi-polar shape-shifter?
Would I be better off being a drifter?
Are these the questions that haunt my head?
Am I alive, pretending I'm not dead?
Did the Grateful Dead really have gratitude?
Are people happy only when they're in the mood?
Would I feel better if I took Quaaludes?
Should I watch some reruns of Family Feud?
Would anybody want to read this whining?
Does every cloud have a silver lining?
Is life a grab bag of treasure and crap?
If life is a treasure chest, where is the map?
If I'm doing what I really want to do,
why do I feel like I must pay more dues?
Is this poem really just giving you the blues?
Will you hear about me soon on the nightly news?
Do I love my life, or could anyone ever?
It's hard to think life may go on forever!

Barren

I have been waiting for you
for as long as thick dust collects
on old Longaberger baskets that my grandmother keeps
in a shed behind her beach house.
You have always hung there in the dark,
not yet realized, a room in a yard behind a house full of rooms,
and I move through my own rooms, empty.
I have been waiting for you,
but not as long as some who I see
drying in the sun, each day closer to crumbling.
We gather often to think about the hanging baskets
hidden in sheds, and basements, or attics, garages,
some cry out, showing their baskets to everyone
and we always look, to see if the shell of it
is just as empty as our own.
It always is, and that's not the fear, we are all
afraid that it always will be, that we will never
hold Honeycrisp apples, or hardened oranges,
dog toys and dirty socks, perfectly curled up hotel towels.
We want you to take us down,
hang us on the front of a bicycle,
fake grass and cadbury eggs,
anything to make us feel useful,
anything but let us dry and crack,
unweave. I have been waiting for you
waiting for you to take me down,
to give me something to hold,
to make me feel useful.



Something inexpressible stirs in the womb
of losses in autumn.
An embryo.

Born

Every time a part of my body
is caught between shadows,
the frame dissected
in compelling parallels of gossamer,
aligning my halves with
slants of sky dangerously attracted to
and still undecided between
both soil and sun,

I breathe
in the air of martyrdom
exhaled somewhere by a deer
frozen in headlights
knowing this decapitation
by evanescent rays
won't kill me

In fact the next time
I plan to crouch
at the intersection of light and spirit
so that shadows can spin around me
fastening an umbilical cord
their subsequent unspooling
opening me up like birth
ladling me out like truth

There was

a mother polar bear, heavily annoyed at her husband polar bear who denied in full throat any notions of global warming, or its hare-lipped cousin, climate change. The sad truth: he had no idea where bear cubs came from either. A clueless wonder.

It was amazing he could find his way to the woods, there to shit and back home again. But he was stiff in his resistance, well rooted in his deep annoyance to any idea that involved change. All winter he dreamed of snow and ice, and fat rabbits twisting in his teeth,

and talked as he slept, muttering mostly about how cold it was, but more often how he'd welcome some damn warming any time. The more the merrier. As the ice melted and the world around him shifted and shrank he insisted that all was well, and, in point of fact,

was better than it had ever been. And what's more the future was so bright that all creatures on earth would soon be born wearing designer sunglasses to protect their eyes, or evolved to have progressive irises. What could be more natural for a polar bear? His wife rolled over,

turning her other massive cheek in silent protest. It was either that or brain him. But she knew the odds were against finding one.

Ode to *Heart of Glass* by Blondie

After Debbie Harry & Chris Stein

in the rapture
our lives

won't be measured
in how much love

we shared,
but how much love we lost

the arsenic
this body can sustain

before it melts into a dying star
losing the neon in itself

once a glow
now a flicker

once a monarch butterfly
now a moth flying with clipped wings

once the open sea
now a patch of pond scum

we make attempts
to illuminate the night

with whatever joy we can conjure up
we end the same way we began

as mad, wild children
walking across street corners

like cosmic runways
trying to be fearless

allowing desperate eyes
to hug a labyrinth of camera lens

allowing our tear ducts
to open up like overflowing kitchen sinks

all to serve the importance of
drowning out everything

& knowing the worth
and the beauty

The Runaway

Hannah lay on the roof. The rough pebbles and tar scratched her body. She watched the people below: her mother and three policemen. A branch from the maple tree waved in the wind and blew close to her face. Through the green budding leaves she watched them, feeling as distant as if she were light years away, as if she were watching them through a kaleidoscope, blobs of shifting color and form.

For hours she had lain on the roof, and the sun was beginning to sink beneath the horizon. She heard voices and peered further over the edge. Her mother and two policemen emerged from the house. They were right beneath her. She could throw a pebble down and hit them.

“I don’t know where she is,” Gerda said in her sharp, cutting voice. “This morning we had a tiff—nothing much—I just want her to be okay.” She broke into a sob. “It’s hard,” she cried. “It’s so hard.”

Hannah wanted to howl with glee. She gloated, but the sadness was inside her. She wanted to cry. *Gotcha, Mom. Gotcha for all those times you hit out. Told us we were bad. Screamed it was all our fault Dad left.*

“We are so alike,” sobbed Gerda below. Her voice grew softer. “She is the one closest to me.”

Her sister Esther would go limp like a rag doll, willing herself to show no emotion, while Hannah would scream back. “Hannah, you’re the one with guts,” her father, Saul, would say.

One of the policemen was filling out a report. *What does she look like? Medium height—about five feet three—thirteen years old—nearly fourteen. Long wavy black hair. Birthmarks? Other marks of identification just in case she turned up in a hospital or worse?* Finally they left. She watched them get into the car, and she crawled over to the other side of the roof so she could watch them drive off. Then she crawled back to watch her mother pace back and forth along the deck. Saw her mother go inside the house. Now Gerda would be on the phone, calling her friends, and everyone would be frantic. Good! Dad would be upset, too. Good! Let him suffer!

Why did you leave us?

Much later, after a thin sliver of moon had risen in the night sky, she realized she was hungry. She was beyond hungry. She felt

light, spacey as she climbed down from the roof. When she got to the ground, she tightened the laces of her sneakers and walked along the dark street past the neat suburban houses with their shrubbery and trees, walked toward the center of town and then into a coffee shop. She watched the people. There was gangly red-haired Andrew from her class with his Dad. It hurt her to watch them together along with his yucky mother, who was smiling at the two of them.

“Can I have a glass of water?” she asked the pimply-faced clerk behind the counter.

“Sure, sweetheart. Anything else?”

“No thanks.”

As he handed her the water, their fingers touched briefly. “What are you doing out all alone?”

Andrew and his parents glanced over at her from their table.

She shrugged and walked out. Slowly she sipped the water in its cardboard cup. Where could she get something to eat? She walked and walked until the street she was on gave way to a dirt road. Walked up a hill. And there just on the other side was her friend Jeanie’s house. Several cars were parked outside, along with rusted wrecks of cars, a car engine, a cast-off refrigerator. A dog chained to a post barked as she

approached. “Hey, cool it, Smokey,” she said in a calm voice.

She had learned to act calm, to speak calmly when inside it was a tornado, a flood, an earthquake all combined. The dog recognized her. Slowly she came up to him and patted his neck. He began wagging his tail furiously, licking her fingers. “Nice Smokey,” she crooned. “You’re a decent dog.”

A fat, dark-haired man in stained work clothes appeared on the porch. “Who’s there?”

“Hannah.”

“Come on in, honey.”

He had been drinking, she could tell from the way his breath smelled, and his hand on her shoulder gave her a sense of unease.

“Where’s Jeanie?”

“She’s upstairs.”

“I’ll go up and see her.”

“Hey, just a minute...” His voice, drunken and slurred, gave her the shivers. Where the hell was Jeanie’s mother? She was usually around, a pale, frightened creature. Hannah heard more men’s voices from the living room. The sound of a game on television. She ran quickly up the wooden stairs and along the narrow hallway to Jeanie’s room, pounded on the door, and walked in without waiting for anyone to open it.

Jeanie and her sister Maureen were lounging on the twin beds.

“Trouble with your Mom?”
asked Jeanie.

“Yeah.”

Maureen was painting her toenails bright magenta. Music was playing on the stereo. Books were spread open on Jeanie’s bed. “I’m doing my math,” she said. “You can help me.”

“Okay,” said Hannah, glad of a task to do. “But first I need to eat something. I’m starving.”

Jeanie handed her a half-empty bag of potato chips. “Help yourself.”

“Is that all you’ve got?”

“Yeah....We can go down to the kitchen...but later.”

“Okay,” said Hannah, understanding all too well that neither of them wanted to tangle with her Dad or his friends.

“I hope they don’t stay too long. Where’s your Mom?”

“Sleeping.”

“With that racket downstairs?”

“Yeah. She’s tired.”

For awhile they worked on algebra problems, lounging on Jeanie’s bed with its white chenille spread. Hannah lay on her stomach and burrowed against the mattress, right against Jeanie’s shoulder and arm. Jeanie smelled slightly of vanilla soap. She scratched numbers on a pad of paper with a ball point pen that spurted uneven squig-

gles of ink. A bit smudged on the spread.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” said Hannah. She went into the adjoining bathroom for a sponge to wash off the stain. The bathroom was littered with damp towels. A roll of wet toilet paper sat on top of the tank. There was none in the holder. In contrast to Jeanie’s clean scent, the room stank of mold and wet towels. Lipstick and cosmetics littered the counter. She found a rag beneath the sink, wet it, and tried to clean off the ink stain on the bedspread, but it remained.

“Oh, never mind,” said Jeanie. She stood up and stretched. Jeanie was shorter than Hannah, and very skinny, with freckles and auburn hair that cascaded over her shoulders. Very fair skin and green eyes. She was popular in school. Inside the clique, to which she granted Hannah entrée, the clique which Hannah frequented on the outer edges. She was wearing a white T-shirt and panties printed with small red hearts.

“I’m tired. I’m going to sleep,” she said. She went into the bathroom to brush her teeth and wash up, while Hannah put away the books on the bed, took off her jeans, and stretched out under the covers.

The floor creaked. Wind rose, and it blew branches against

the window. The voices downstairs died down. Jeanie lay next to her, breathing softly in her sleep, her warm skin touching Hannah. Soft warm body next to her, cuddle against Jeanie. She turned and lay on her side, put her arms around Jeanie for comfort. Jeanie barely stirred.

Steps in the hallway. Door opening. If Jeanie's Dad came inside, she would scream. Scream and scream. Slowly the door closed. The steps receded along the hallway. Hannah heard him piss in the bathroom, heard the toilet flush, heard something drop, and heard him curse. Her body tensed. Jeanie's breathing grew more troubled. She rolled away from Hannah.

Hannah held her breath. Slowly the noises quieted down. Jeanie's breathing resumed its natural rhythm. Hannah pressed against Jeanie's body for warm comfort, and finally she slept a little.

"Are you coming to school?" Jeanie asked in the morning.

"No."

"What will you do?"

"I don't know."

The girls dressed. Jeanie put her books into her backpack, and they went down into the kitchen which was littered with empty beer bottles, cigarette butts, dirty dishes, and the lingering trace of marijuana. In the refrigerator there was

white bread, peanut butter, and a half empty jar of grape jelly. They made sandwiches and heated up instant coffee. Jeanie cut an orange, hard with age, into slices. Everyone else in the house was still asleep. But just as they were leaving the house, Jeanie's mother appeared, a frail, slightly hunched figure in a faded blue bathrobe, hastily tied, her hair mouse-colored and straggly. Her face looked pasty. Her eyes, however, were dark, intense, and alive.

"Have a good day, girls," she said. She looked in dismay at the dishes and began to putter around the kitchen.

Hannah parted from Jeanie where the dirt road gave way to concrete paving. While Jeanie walked towards school, Hannah turned onto the path that led to a bike trail. The sun gleamed on grass still wet with dew. The sky was so pale. A large black bird circled above her, then soared higher and disappeared beyond the hills.

Drunk in LA

Dark spring? Pay it
no mind,
it's summer now, time
for a lemon glow,
fresh as the sunshine

Dive, or drive,
the same fact of action
here, a faction
won't rise up to save you,
no black car salvation

In the face
of others' woo,
lose your smile, or else
face talks over the ride
with last year's lover

Lost Harvest

No matter what good shepherds say,
the meek shall inherit the dearth.
No restitutive second birth
to resurrect his wilted spray
or chance to reap some other day
the fullest measure of his worth.
A seasoned grief won't crown with mirth
the summer, once it fades away.
No wreath of ivy leaves adorn
or justify the destitute.
The object of another's scorn
for letting blight destroy his fruit,
or waiting meekly to be born
again, his fig tree spawns no shoot.

MO 519 St. Louis Arch



Soliloquy for my 16 Year-Old Self

not an ode, not an elegy
fore no praise is needed,

& this part of me isn't dead
yet. It might be overwhelming,

might strike the nerves like
circulatory lightning, always

shooting bolts through the sky
inside your skin-fold, veins

acting as conductors for static
shock. Still unprepared for raging storms.

Angst can be a hell of a landscape, the one
that drove the artist insane when trying to paint

its scenery. This age is not one of innocence, but
one of crisis, one that pustules crimson irises,

turns light brown hair into gray follicle remnants,
bittersweet symphonies sounded by an orchestra

of kitchen knives & disposable razor blades.
Feeling lost in a chasm of my own creation

I recoil to the sound of overheard tension,
the silhouettes of back and forth diatribe.

The echoes, oh the echoes how they move
like aged starlings, with severed vocals

and several scars, no longer able to sing
the same melodies that helped compose

their beauty. Like the songbirds who lay
in their nests like deathbeds. I look back at sixteen

as a unnerving scrapbook dream, constantly, inconsistently
back and forth in between nightmares.

Adolescence never tasted so bitter
& fifteen never felt so sweet until it was gone.

How Long Do You Plan On Staying

How long do you plan on staying?

Not very long.

My mother is on her fifth beer,
soon she will start to argue with me,
about whether or not horses are smarter than dogs.

We've just gotten through playing dominoes.

It feels like most weekend visits,
except this time I am not leaving.

All of my things are in boxes,
mugs, plates, sheets, toothpaste, books, a violin,
I've been trying to quit drinking, and gluten, and meat,
trying to put it all in boxes,
like the one with your things in it,
neon yellow work shirts, a camouflage hat,
an old yellowed sock.

At least you won't have to worry about the dogs anymore,
or me asking you to do the dishes.

And I won't have to scrape old ketchup from the kitchen table,
throw away a bag of chips, remember to pick up the siracha.

"Your sister is going to ride horses."

Mom smokes a swisher,
she has always smelled like an old piece of cotton,
she was always meant for horses,
and rusted old medicine tins, or dirt covered milk bottles.
my sister and I were never meant for horses,
we were meant for boxes.

So Far My Love



The Sungrazer comet, Lovejoy

one of the hairy stars
seen before Homer went blind,
spews as its passes the sun, emitting
as it does 500 bottles of ethyl alcohol

and glycolaldehyde each nanosecond.
Magic building blocks, organic molecules
needed for life to crawl out of the sea

and into the nearest pub.
At 48, 682.11 mph it's easy to get drunk
on speed alone, to hurl the light fantastic,
to be the extraterrestrial host of the galactic

kegger, long after the Late Heavy Bombardment
party petered out and the primordial cloud
of a landlord called the cosmic cops
about the wild complex organisms touting

their new DNA, and shouting drunkenly
for molecules with more atoms
and tequila chasers.
4 billion years later properly aged wines

are enjoyed by properly aged, card-carrying
adults who drink responsible, continuously,
until they too pass out of the cosmos.

Driving the Thumbtack into the Cork Board

“I sit around and watch the tube but nothing’s on/I change the channel for an hour or two” – Green Day

“100 people surveyed, the top six answers on the board.”

«click»

“The top seven reasons people break up, and your Southeast Ohio weather, coming up in just thirty minutes.”

«click»

“The world’s worst scuba divers specialize
In synchronized sinking, this Thursday in
A final, single performance.”

«click»

“Extra 30-50% off this weekend only”

«click»

“Time’s lost master still ticks ticks past.”

«click»

“I just saved a lot of money by switching”

«click»

“Trust me. I’m a super hero.”

«click»

“The lost causes gather once a week
And have a meeting, Lost Anonymous.”

«click»

“Jesus died for your sins. What have you done for him?”

«click»

“In case of life unraveling, pull this thread.”

«click»

“We’ve replaced this man’s overwhelming ennui
With Folgers crystals. Let’s see if he notices.”

«click»

“Do you want what’s in the box, or will you
Trade it for what’s behind the curtain.”

«click»

“Do not eat grapefruit or drink grapefruit juice if you take”

«click»

“Yes, but what has Jesus done for me lately?”

«click»

“Or in case you have uncontrolled muscle movements,
As these may become permanent.”

«click»

“You can’t swing a dead body in this room
Without hitting something useless.”

«click»

“The lost, the lonely, the disappeared.
The wild, the tired, the disengaged.”

Hide and Seek

The cat poked its head into the space made by the side door left ajar, its shadow elongated in the column of sunlight on the concrete floor. Then it took a few tentative steps into the warm, mostly dark garage. When it sensed Danny, sitting across the way in the corner, it paused and watched him, assessing the potential for danger. Danny was aware of the cat, but continued looking at the dial of his shortwave receiver, listening for stations he hadn't heard before. As he slowly tuned up and down the band, trying to detect signals in the rustling static, a saying came to mind: *curiosity killed the cat*.

The small, detached garage of his parents' house had become his private retreat. When younger, he had longed for a tree house, but his father, an English teacher at the local high school, didn't have the skill or inclination for such a project. The garage turned out to be much better anyway, a comfortable, mostly private place to be alone, tinkering with hobbies and thinking about things. He would keep the double doors that faced the driveway closed, and in the summer open the side door to get some air. The small window next to the door had been painted shut years ago, but it provided enough light for his

purposes. The house and garage were in a small-town neighborhood and built before two-car garages, so it had become a laundry room for his mother, and a seldom-used tool shed for his father. The family's two-tone '55 Bel Air sat on the gravel driveway.

After a while he became increasingly aware of the cat moving around under his dad's workbench. He slowly turned in his swivel chair and saw it was his neighbor Frank's cat—the only Siamese in the neighborhood, a stealthy, cautious animal that wouldn't let anyone except Frank touch it. Danny didn't like cats much, and especially this one. Frank had named it Pussy Cat, and liked to call it Pussy. When he saw it in the neighborhood, when other boys were around, he would pick it up and stroke it, saying, "Nice Pussy. Everyone needs a little pussy," and laugh loudly. Frank was very attached to his cat, and oftentimes in the evenings, if it didn't come home, he'd be out looking for it. He didn't know the younger boys made fun of him about the cat. They had made up silly questions to ask each other, like, Has Frank got a Pussy? Have you seen Frank's Pussy? Danny watched the cat and tapped one of his sneakers on the floor; it's tall,

pointed ears flicked in his direction, and it fixed its pale, unnaturally blue eyes on him. Then it returned to smelling the floor, bobbing its head in that way different from dogs, all the while slowly moving farther from the door.

Frank lived with his mother and older sister two houses down from Danny's. He had always been the older boy in the neighborhood. Now at sixteen, he was three years older than Danny, but only two grades ahead because he was a slow learner and had to repeat a grade. It didn't matter to the kids, but the neighbors talked about how Frank's mother had two children but never married. Frank's story was he had a father, but he couldn't live with them because he was a secret agent and had to always be in hiding. The boys didn't believe him but no one would say it to his face. They knew Frank often was moody and could be mean. But because he sometimes got to hang out with his sister's boyfriend, he could be the source of intriguing things, like playing cards with busty nude women on the backs, and racy magazines, like *True Detective*. He said he sometimes would spy on his sister doing it with her boyfriend when their mother was gone.

Danny had been thinking a lot about Frank recently, and Judy, the neighbor girl who lived in the house between them. She and Danny were the same age and had

played together since kindergarten, and their parents were friends. As she began to develop, however, things between them started to change. When they were younger, they would play Crazy Eights or Monopoly for hours in her bedroom, sitting on the floor, leaning back against her bed. Her mother would make popcorn for them. In the neighborhood, Judy sometimes would join in with the boys when they played Hide and Seek or Simon Says in someone's back yard. Now she mostly stayed indoors and her bedroom door always was closed when he was over there.

Still listening to the receiver, slowing tuning up and down the band, Danny thought about a summer afternoon several years ago, when he, Judy, and some neighborhood boys were playing together in Jimmy Yeager's back yard. He couldn't recall what they were doing, what game they had been playing exactly, but Judy corralled their attention and made them sit in a circle around her. He also couldn't remember which other boys had been there, other than Jimmy, but he clearly could picture Judy, as they all sat on the grass, cross legged or hugging their knees. It was a bright, warm day, and she stood in the middle of the circle, in a luminous yellow sundress.

"Ok," she said. "It's my turn to pick a game, and I will make this one up." When they all quit fidget-

ing and poking each other, and were looking at her, she said, "I'm going to show you something private, something special."

"What?" one of them asked, but she ignored him.

"But I'm not going to show everyone," she said. "The game is for me to pick which one to show."

Not knowing what she was talking about, what was to be revealed, they all became captivated by the mystery of it, and wanted to know who would be picked.

"Pick me! No, pick me!" said two others.

"Be quiet," she snapped. "I will decide which one of you to choose. It has to be someone special."

She walked slowly around the inside of the circle, holding an elbow in one hand while thoughtfully resting her chin in the other, stopping and looking down at each boy. Leaning back on their hands with elbows locked, each gazed up at her with wide eyes. When she stopped before Danny, as she looked down her blond hair fell forward to frame her face, and he thought she had a little smile for him, but then she moved on to the next boy. Danny knew the two of them were friends more than she was with any of the others, living next door and all, but she was acting in a strange way he had never seen before.

Finally she turned and pointed at Danny. "You're the one,"

she said. "You're the one I'm going to show."

The other boys groaned in unison. "Oh man, no fair!" several complained.

"Show what?" Danny said.

She stood in front of him.

"Lie back," she commanded.

"Lie on your back."

He lay back on the grass, with his knees up and arms crossed over his chest. The sun was high and just over her shoulder so he had to squint to make out her face.

"Put your hands by your sides," she said.

"What are you going to do?"

"You'll see."

When he complied, she stepped forward and stood over him with a scuffed brown shoe on each side, near his elbows. Now she blocked out the sun, and as he looked up he could see the crotch of her white underpants in the yellow glow under her dress. Without saying anything more, she carefully sat on his stomach and pulled the hem of her dress up over his head. He was enveloped under a small yellow tent, with his arms pinned against his sides by her legs. He could see the front of her body up to where the dress was cinched, just below where her breasts would be. The warm, daffodil-colored space smelled like bread dough, rising on his mother's stove. He still didn't know what she was doing, but he felt a little excited, and special. The

back yard had become silent, and he knew the other boys were all sitting there, staring at them. Keeping the dress over his head with one hand, she reached under it with the other and tried to pull down the front of her panties. Then he heard her low voice, close on the other side of the yellow fabric.

“See?” she whispered. “Can you see it?”

Danny craned his neck forward, as far as he could, but all he could see was bare skin down to her fist.

“Your hand’s in the way,” he whispered back, resting his head again on the ground. He was beginning to feel hot and trapped under the dress with her sitting on him. She let out an impatient sigh and rose up slightly on her knees. When he raised his head to look again, her thumb had tugged the pants down farther, and he could see the crease in her vulva. He laid his head back on the grass.

“Ok,” he said. “I saw it. Now please get off. It’s hot under here.”

Judy’s father, Ernie, had introduced him to the radio hobby. He was an electrician and a ham radio operator. He took Danny to a war surplus store to get a used aircraft receiver and showed him how to convert it for shortwave listening. Ernie had tried to interest Frank in the hobby too, and had even gotten a receiver for him, but Frank didn’t have the patience for it. Sometimes

Frank would hang out in Danny’s garage with him, watching him soldering wires and replacing tubes, but soon he lost interest. Ernie did other things to try and include Frank, like invite him to backyard cookouts with the two families, and to go to ham radio swap meets.

One time during their regular 5:30 P.M. supper, Danny’s parents talked about Judy’s father and Frank.

“Honestly,” his mother said, “I think it’s because they have a daughter. Ernie would like to have had a boy, too. He’s the kind who likes to do ‘men things.’”

“What does that mean?” his father said.

“Oh, you know, work with his hands, tinker with radios...” She poured coffee for the two of them from an electric percolator.

Danny’s dad raised an eyebrow in her direction. “I rather think ‘because they have a daughter,’ he’s keeping an eye on Frank.”

Danny looked back and forth between the two. “He likes doing things with me too,” he said. “Is he keeping an eye on me?”

“Of course not.” his mother said. “I’m sure with you it’s different. Besides, Ernie and Joan are good friends of ours. But he does like you, and got you started in that radio hobby. What do you do in that musty garage, anyway, for hours on end?”

“Frank’s sixteen,” his father said. “You’re younger and practically grew up with Judy.” He put a spoonful of sugar in his coffee and slowly stirred.

“Judy told me Frank has tried to spy on her at night, from his back yard,” Danny said.

His father stopped stirring and the parents looked at each other.

“See?” he said. “What did I just tell you?”

Danny didn’t say anything more because sometimes he wished Judy’s bedroom window faced his side of the house. He had begun masturbating but felt guilty when he thought about her while doing it. The brassiere ads in the Sears catalog were stimulating enough. But it bothered him a lot to think Frank might have seen her undressed. He wondered if she ever thought about that day when she sat on him, in Jimmy Yeager’s back yard. He clearly remembered what it was like under her yellow dress, the gentle press of her weight, the smell of her, and the way her bare legs felt against his arms. And she had chosen him, no one else.

Danny switched off the receiver and turned to regard Frank’s cat. It had jumped on top of the workbench, and was sitting between a clump of rags and a jumble of loose tools. With the receiver off, the garage became so quiet he heard

a fly buzzing against the small, dirty window. It sat on its haunches, front legs vertical under its chest, peering impassively at him. Its pupils had enlarged to black disks with thin rings of blue. The pose reminded him of a TV lamp he had seen in a neighbor’s house. It had a red lampshade and the base was a cat sitting in the same position, but it was glossy black and had no eyes. As they stared at each other, Danny began to feel a knot in his stomach. He had it every time he remembered what had happened with Frank and Judy just days before.

There had been a Labor Day cookout at Judy’s, the last weekend of the summer before school resumed, and Frank had been there. The weather was hot and muggy and Ernie and Danny’s dad had bought and set up an above-ground pool, with rigid corrugated sides and a rubber liner. It took all day to fill it with their two garden hoses, one running from each of their back yards, and it was big enough for a couple of people to float in. If you sat down, the water would come to the top of your head. The four parents were in the pool in the late afternoon, before the outdoor cooking was to begin. Danny, Judy, and Frank hung out nearby, at a redwood picnic table under a patio umbrella, drinking Dr Pepper and munching Fritos.

They thought the adults looked ridiculous, playing around in an oversized wading pool. The boys hadn't worn swimsuits—Danny was in loose-fitting blue gym shorts and a white t-shirt, and Frank in his usual seldom-washed Levis and a short-sleeve shirt, top button never fastened. Danny noticed his sideburns were getting lower and lower. Against the noisy background of the parents splashing each other, the mothers shrieking and the fathers taking turns standing on their heads in the water, the three of them were talking and playing 45's on Judy's portable record player. Frank was going on about how he was looking forward to his second year in high school, to no longer being low man on the totem pole. He enjoyed describing to Danny what a hard time he was going to have, as a 10th grader.

"You know what the seniors do to dorks like you? They'll stuff you ass-first in a trashcan. Or they'll *pants* you." Frank grinned broadly and Danny knew he was relishing a picture of him being tormented by the older boys. But it would be another whole year before Danny got to high school, so he wasn't worrying about it yet. And he never would let Frank know if it did make him nervous.

"That's so stupid," Judy said. "Why are boys such jerks?"

"Oh, Little Miss Perfect here," Frank scoffed. "Nothing bad ever happens to you."

Judy ignored him and got up to put a different stack of records on the spindle. She was wearing white short shorts and a shirt with a tropical print—banana leaves, Danny thought. The pattern reminded him of the drapes his mother had made for the TV den in their house. Judy's arms and legs had an end-of-summer tan, and little blond hairs were visible on her forearms and upper legs. One of her favorite Elvis records started to play and she began to move around in place to the music, her ponytail swaying to the rhythm.

The parents began climbing out of the pool, the men helping the women step over the side so it wouldn't collapse. They were drying off with bath towels, chatting among themselves and getting ready to go inside, mix a few highballs, and get the food ready for the barbeque. They always had hamburgers and hotdogs, homemade potato salad, canned pork and beans, and usually a homemade pie. Judy's mom called over and asked her to bring out a tablecloth and set the table.

Danny went to the pool to examine it more closely, and Frank followed.

"How many gallons do you think it holds?" Danny asked.

"How would I know?"

“Must be lots,” Danny said. He put his hand in the water to feel its temperature. Frank reached down and flipped a handful on to the front of Danny’s shorts.

“You fucker,” Danny said. “I knew you’d do something like that.”

Frank grinned at him. “Ha! Looks like you pissed your pants.” He put one hand over his mouth and pointed with the other, pantomiming shock.

Judy pushed the screen door open with one foot and came out, arms loaded with a folded red tablecloth and a stack of paper plates, each in a different colored plastic holder, with a jumble of flatware and paper napkins on top. She sat them down on the table.

“Hey look!” Frank called to her, “Danny-boy here peed his pants!”

“Oh that’s so stupid,” she said, but came over anyway, and Danny felt a blush rise when she looked at the front of his shorts. “Stupid Frank here splashed me,” he said.

She started to go back to the table, but Frank stopped her. He quickly reached a hand down between her legs, put his other behind her back, and lifted her up and over the pool’s edge, into the water. She took a breath to scream but went in on her back, eyes wide, heels over head, and the water engulfed her with a huge splash. Danny jumped back, recoiling from what hap-

pened. Although it was very quick, he saw it all in slow motion, and he kept seeing Frank’s hand between Judy’s legs, lifting her by her crotch.

Judy found her feet and stood in the middle of the pool, holding her arms out from her sides, looking down at her soaked clothes. The water continued to slosh back and forth, some spilling over the sides. She looked to be in utter disbelief. Rivulets of water streamed down her legs from inside her shorts. Her shirt was clinging to her front and the boys stared at the white impression of her bra. She pulled her shirt away from her chest and looked at Frank, who was smirking by the side of the pool.

“Sorry, but I just *had* to do that,” he said, palms up, mimicking contrition. Then he looked at Danny. “Hey, man! Wasn’t that *great*? Did you see the look on her face?” Danny was still stunned but he began to realize Judy might think he was in on the prank.

She came to the side of the pool and he moved to offer his hand, to steady her getting out. She let him help her, but then jerked away from him when on the grass. She gave him a withering look, but the one she gave Frank, Danny knew he’d never forget—a knowing look infused with hate that said *I know what you did*. Without saying a word, she went in the back door of the house, stopping to twist off her

white canvas sneakers, leaving them in two puddles on the porch.

“You’re such an asshole,” Danny said. “I saw what you did.”

“What? I just pushed her in the fucking pool. Big deal. Happens all the time.”

“I saw how you grabbed her.”

“Yeah? Tough shit.” Frank held up his right hand and gazed at it reverently, as if it were a trophy. “I got mine.”

The clatter of something metallic hitting the garage floor brought Danny out of his reverie. The cat was standing on the workbench, staring at him, its tail impertinently sweeping back and forth. An empty Pennzoil can lay on the floor. *Ok, Pussy. So you want to play, do you?* He stood, stretched, and moved casually toward the side door to close it. As he crossed the floor the cat, with tail straight up, tried to move along the workbench toward the door, but was blocked by a tangle of loose tools. Danny closed it and returned to his table and chair in the corner.

The cat stood expectantly for a moment, looking at the door and then at Danny, but sat again, and they resumed watching each other. He didn’t have a plan in mind, but he felt some satisfaction the cat no longer looked impassive, nor impertinent. It wrapped its tail around its feet, and kept steady eyes on him. Then he remembered there might

be slingshot in the table drawer. He hadn’t thought about it for a long time, and wasn’t sure if it still was there. It was only a dime-store toy, made of lime-green plastic, with a flat, oversized rubber band. Still watching the cat, he slowly reached down and pulled the drawer open. He felt loose pencils, a soldering iron, small radio parts, and then the smooth hard plastic and elastic band. *It’s just a toy, not big enough to hurt anything.* He had tried to hit a few birds with it, using pebbles, but always had missed.

He reached back into the drawer to retrieve a marble he thought he’d seen there. He smiled to himself, remembering it was a “cat eye,” a remnant of childhood games. He used to have a coffee can full of them, but this was the only one left. He put the marble in the elastic band and aimed above the cat. He didn’t want to hit the animal—just give it a good scare. But the marble struck the cat in the hollow of its throat. It was knocked backwards, and came to rest against the pegboard behind it.

Danny sat motionless for several minutes. He had a vivid fantasy of the cat stirring, sitting up, and then shaking off the hit. It had only been stunned. He went to the side door and opened it, and the cat dropped to the floor and quickly ran outside. It was just an accident. A close call. But the cat didn’t move. He looked around the garage,

making sure no one had seen what happened, even though he knew he was alone. After a few more minutes, he got up and approached the workbench.

The cat lay on its side and he could tell from the odd angle of the head, its neck was broken. He watched it closely for even the faintest movement, but it was as lifeless as the tools strewn around it. The marble lay near the body, and he hesitated to touch it, but then put it in his pocket.

Just then someone came to the door and slowly opened it part way. Danny froze in place, only a few feet behind it, and waited. Several flies circled in the shaft of afternoon sunlight. Then a shadow filled the space and Frank stood there in profile, peering into the dimness of the garage.

“Here Pussy, Pussy,” he called, quietly. “Hey cat—you in here?” He waited a moment and then left, quietly closing the door.

Danny glanced at the cat and had an impulse to call Frank back, to let him know where it was. But he knew he couldn’t explain what had happened, especially to Frank. To anyone.

Saturnine Hypotyposis

And what dark mystery proposed me
as its impenetrable solution?
Why this pale flesh for a veil
or my eyesight as a sail to an edgeworld?

Reverse pain and tears flow inward.

The sister of love waits for her brother
at the old stump where an oak once stood.

Rood us a church with no martyr,
and the lava will speak its heat
in the slowest inevitability.

I wear a moustache so my lips
will never speak what I am saying.

*after Rimbaud "Hypotyposes saturniennes"

Lying on My Back on the Bench

Lying on my back on the bench
behind the house, looking up at the black
and gold branches of the black birch tree
against the perfect blue perfect clear
perfect sky, the newspaper of April
twenty-fourth on the ground,
where in disgust for that which I read
on the front page, and in awe for
that which I read on the second page,
I dropped it beside me, I understand
man's cruelty and the acts of violence
that men commit, without sense, against
one another and against all life,
and I understand the cold unblinking stare
of man's science as it stares into the cold
unblinking stare of the universe's science,
but I do not understand the beauty of the world,
not the cold, cold unblinking beauty of the world.

Flowing

Yes, you say,
but I must ask
another question.
Spiritual medium is what it is,
but
what the hell's a
spiritual medium?
A spiritual medium who
en-vis-ions
my over-the-shoulder
space?
Dad saying he's sorry
for the pain and
abuse
he caused?
Chris saying he's sorry
too?
Looking out and over me?
Thirty some years later?
I bawled peaceful tears?
Yes, that's right, peaceful tears.
Am I approaching spiritual?
Where is that exactly?
Is that a place where you
can
go—ing . . .
ser—ene—ing . . .
to . . .
the . . .
source?
Capturing
the
essence
of . . .
blinding, brilliant . . .
white light?

The Poet Falls

*Bro, you read so much about love,
write so much about it.
Why you of all people aren't in a relationship? –*
This, my gregarious friend asks with an inquisitiveness
he rarely shows in his own relationship.
I smile with a joy so natural
that I'm not entirely sure
where it springs from.
Maybe I've always loved a pedestal,
its upholstery,
its arse softening hubris.
A few days of self-pity later, I watch
a shrink on TV explain to his subject
*If something means a lot to you,
sometimes you become good at knowing
things about it, not necessarily good at it.*
I slide on my sofa first.
Then come crashing down.

The Gates Within



Snap

What sort of chap collects pocket knives,
consigned to basements, sheds and drawers?

Taken out, looked at and put back, sometimes
in an original box with a wildlife scene.

Their service often limited to the laceration
of writing paper and deconstruction of boxes.

Recipients of tiny drops of 3 in 1 oil to assure
smooth opening and a decisive snap,

their owners holding them as time travelers
to youthful and carefree days.

What sort of chap remembers the ancient kitchen
in which he watched his father smoke, learned
to say “More soup, *please*,”

and received a red pocket knife, all for his own,
not knowing that he would someday dream of still
having it?

Email from the Dark Web

Greetings, our generous, and benevolent benefactor!

I have gloriously thawed your previously frozen deposit account at the Little Squigglers Sperm Bank. Your millions of human tadpoles will soon inseminate my grateful daughter who believes she is a cow and wishes to calve. What father could ever say no to such a request. You will agree, I'm sure. I write to request your permission after the fact of emission: we wish to use your name as the baptismal birth name. Thank you in advance for agreeing to our irresistible request. (Attached for your fatherly, clickable convenience). And please do consider our very affordable godfather plan. You can watch it grow over the years with your own eyes via webcam, and even share in the umbilical harvest! We're confident in your agreement and have printed birth announcements and placed notices in all the major newspapers in these United States. It is with no small pleasure that I welcome you into our extending family.

Digitally Yrs,

Expectant Grandfather-in-waiting

And So She Leaps

Little Maxine stands on the edge of the wharf with a concrete slab strapped to her chest and her feet tied together. Her toes curl over the edge of the wood; they're splayed like a spider's web. She clenches. The tops of her feet turn pale, washed out and sickly looking. After a few moments, Maxine lets go. She releases the tension and strain on her toes, and she stretches them out again. Her feet return to their normal colour.

"Amy, you're blocking the biscuits."

I shift my body, and Cecilia reaches down to grab a handful of biscuits from the plate next to my toe. We've set up for the afternoon, with mats to sit on and food to snack on and sunscreen to protect our decaying bodies.

"Thanks," she says, throwing the biscuits in her wide open mouth and then sucking them silly before they disintegrate on her tongue. I see her throat expand as she swallows the food, and then she reaches out and grabs more.

"Maybe we should give her some," Cecilia says, nodding in Maxine's direction.

"She won't be hungry," I say. "They never are."

The wharf was my idea. I'd snuck into the hospital staff room so that I could print out the directions. There are so many lakes and rivers and oceans on this side of the city — they couldn't possibly find us. They could try and stop us from leaving, but we're too good at this. We spend three weeks every month planning our escape, and we always succeed. We always find a way to get to that stinky old van on Rollins Street at dawn and drive to the designated water spot. And then we always come back one person lighter.

Today is Maxine's turn; she has gotten over her shock and is no longer frightened. Perhaps she is coming to terms with it. She is running her fingers over that concrete slab like it is her baby, innocent and sweet and a saviour. In some ways, those concrete slabs are our saviours. But only when it's our turn.

The sun starts to set and the orange tint makes Maxine's blonde hair glow. We all chatter amongst ourselves and Maxine stands there, holding onto that slab of concrete even though she doesn't need to — wriggling her toes even though it won't matter after she leaps.

My phone rings and I leave it be. It vibrates in my pocket and then my skirt shifts along on my skin. It's soothing, almost. The grass beneath me scratches my legs and I wiggle to get comfortable. The fresh air is nice, soaking my lungs and making me feel invincible. These afternoon ventures away from the hospital always allow me — us — to feel invincible. Like we can do anything. Be anybody. Make our own choices.

Soon, we all stand up and ascend to the top of the hill, leaving little Maxine alone to her thoughts. Someone has brought along some tennis balls and some racquets, and we each pick up one. The games remind us of our stolen childhoods, and of the healthy children who surpassed us.

Cecilia is the weakest of us all, huffing and puffing as she runs back and forth and wiping the sweat from her brow with the back of her palm. Her legs are thin and they remind me of the tall stems of my mother's high heel shoes, clacking on the tiles of the family home. We are all tired and hot, but we do not complain.

Every now and then, I glance over at Maxine. At first she doesn't appear to be breathing, but then her shirt lifts ever so slightly and her back expands. I look away and concentrate on the game we

are playing, which doesn't seem to have any rules and is really just us lobbying the balls to each other in a desperate, sweaty haste.

Adrian is scratching his scalp and standing off to the side, watching Maxine. He is new to the group. We had an extra seat in the car, with its broken windows and rattling air conditioning and one flat tyre. So Adrian was invited. He filled Brandon's spot, who was the last to take the leap.

A sharp noise distracts us all and we look up at the airplane overhead. It glides over us and disappears from view behind the trees.

"How long?" Adrian says. We all shrug.

"It's different for everyone," Cecilia says.

Little Maxine sighs loud enough for us all to hear. She shifts her balance so that we all turn and look. She has always wanted a big audience for her big finale. And so she leaps into the water.

Jackfruit

This is a dead thing
that still looks to be breathing —
outside armored armadillo hide,
a soft-baked sunflower unfurling
its yellow rays of tongue inside incisors
of burnt-white seed.

Jackfruit tastes like Juicy Fruit,
tastes like silver swan origami
swimming infant-driven through crimson
carpet guest bedroom of whatever
man my mother momentarily wanted
to belong to,
tastes like something you should chew
on and not swallow.

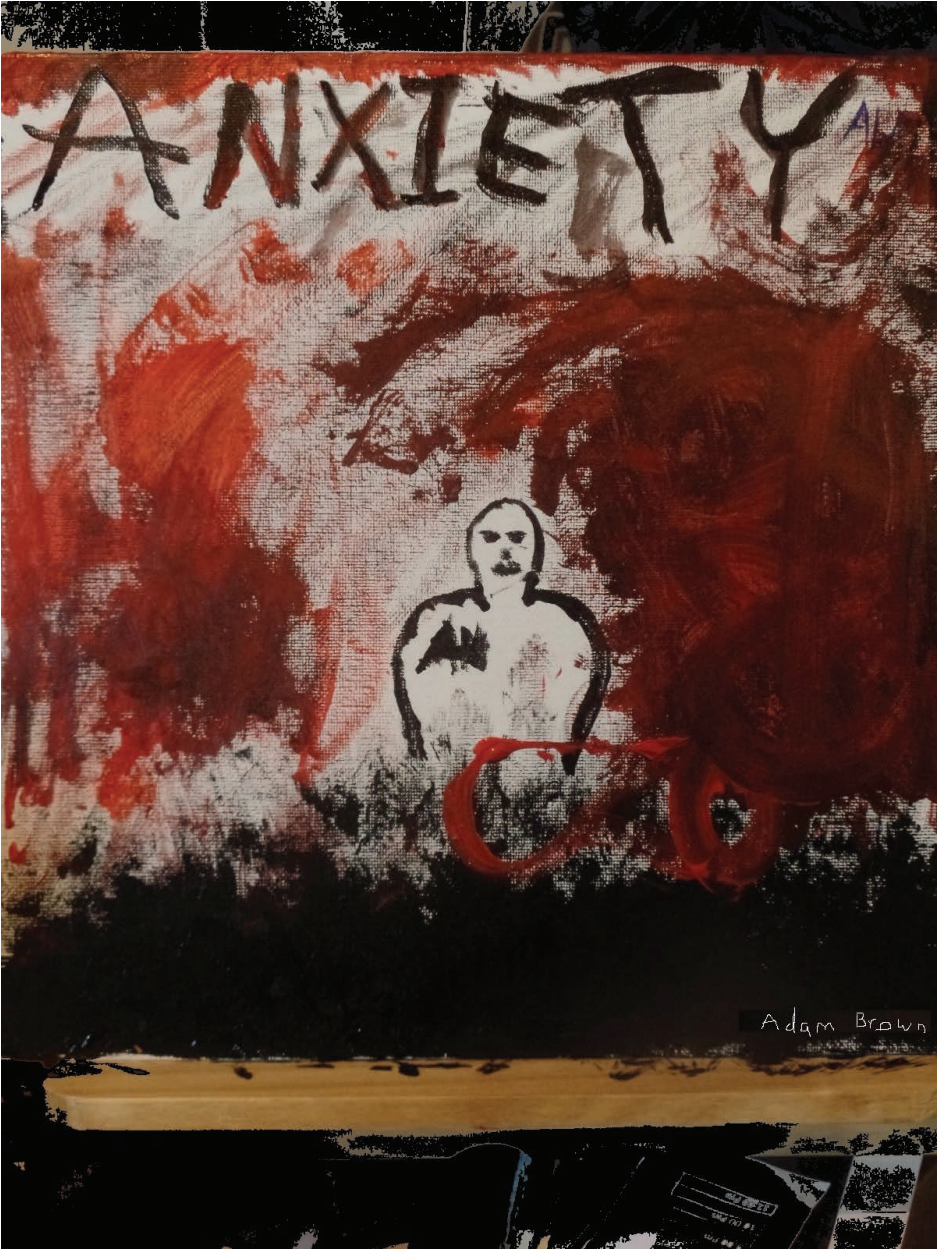
Jackfruit tastes like every split
and lift to a different rifting blip of room,
a mother always drifting through different moods,
tastes like thinking you're drinking down soda
and choking on chew,
tastes like tits displayed on table, arms crossed,
a bubblegum pop and a coo,
tastes like learning from example.

This is a dead thing
that doesn't see dying fitting,
can't stop livid-spitting
at this lack of childhood-living,
can't take this armor chink
to mean anything but that I am
unfit to keep this body old,
unfit to make a body new.



I am the court of my loss.
I am the chambers, and the judge,
and the blindfold, and the scale.

Anxiety





At dawn, a wolf howled.
The infrasound was above the green plants
that I was lost amongst.

The Princess of Labor Lost

Like soldiers poised to wage a war,
she maps positions of her foe.
She asks her cohorts what they know
of the belligerents who swore
off love. She mocks the canon's roar
that bellows from their pompous show
of abstinence with digs that sow
the seeds which grow into rapport.
For well she knows man's scathing wit
will wither even with increase
of powers that engender it.
And he will never get release
from servitude till he submit
to disconcerting terms of peace.

*after Shakespeare's Love's Labour's Lost

OR 184-1 Central





The underwater crag, immense in its depth,
is beautiful, a height of the abyss,
freedom from gravity
inside the planet
where lost love is found.

thoughts

“thoughts”

journal entry 1093 – 2012.02

*my brain doesn't click or crackle; it simply stays still. it's dry.
they're quiet though; they: the thoughts... how do i know the difference? how
can i tell?*

*

“they’ve been here.” i start off. “i mean this is sad, don’t you think?” i mope
in qualm. i tug at the violet, velvety abused fabric of the sofa.

my therapist watches me in his usual self from his desk.

“i want to give up. they’re a constant bother... all these things they bark. is it
truly worth it? i can’t focus. they beat me down.”

“what’s happening?” his usual calm.

it makes me sick. his tone makes me sick. my uncertainty makes me sick. my
head makes me sick.

“i don’t know what to do. i mean. i would sit still but the inside of me is
boiling. my heart feels like it’s pumping fast and i cannot recognize my
thoughts... or whispers... or...”

“what thoughts?”

“i should end...”

“end what?”

“is that the conclusion?” my head explodes with shrieks and burst of light simmers over my sight. “shit.” i curse and tap my forehead gently with my fingers. “the thought is soothing.” i faintly grin. maybe it’s my last attempt at my default.

“jacob?”

“they’re so loud sometimes. they’re screaming. look what i thought.” i raise my eyes. “i mean, no one is ridiculous or deformed.”

“deformed how?”

“in their mind. that’s not the point i’m trying to make.” i knock on my forehead again. “my stupid accusation of what, that shane is a fucking intruder, that he reads my mind.” i jolt out a laugh. “that i’m pathetic.” *pathetic* echoes in my mind.

i can do it. i think to myself. i can do it. no one would know. no one knows. i drum my forehead over. what’s the point of all of this... of my therapist’s interrogation?

“they’re at your fucking mercy.”

“jacob?” his voice softens. i get agitated. “no swearing. you’re upset.”

no shit.

i am swimming. how do i know the difference? “what if something was determined for you?”

“how? by whom?”

“inside of you... and you fought against it, but it just kept on propelling at its mission.” i almost state my defeat.

“by whom?”

i take a moment to consider the answer and quack, “by yourself.” my knees shatter. “i think.” my stomach turns because i’m unsure.

“what is your mind telling you to do?”

i sit mute. my thoughts deflowering.

“why do you want to end it all?”

that is the question, isn’t it? why? fucking why? i know it’s not right. i know it’s something unacceptable... to kill yourself. everybody tells you so; but, here am i sitting, confronting my therapist, and trying to convince myself so.

my mind is trapped, filled with suicide thoughts; but, i didn’t act on it as i’m sitting in my therapist’s office trying to convince myself otherwise.

one part of my brain tells me one thing. the other argues the opposite and it’s ripping me inside. usually i would just collapse. i would give in to it. today however, it’s war. why do i want to end it all because part of my brain is telling me to? is that good enough of a reason?

they come and go; my thoughts, the wrong thoughts and i breathlessly gulp. “because i can’t shut them off.” as simple as that, yet so complicated to disprove.

*

one prescription. two prescriptions, and i swallow the pills. it’s simple as that. not really but it’s a precaution. my therapist doesn’t joke in prescribing medication; but this is my regular dose. i take it every night but for some reason today i hate myself and it’s difficult to swallow them. maybe it’s not them but the thoughts, the curses, the whispers. and what have they done than to convince me to end it all.

i rarely look at my own reflection in the mirror and today i do not look. it might be difficult to recognize.

*

journal entry 1093.5 – 2012.02

two hundred and thirty-seven. i count everything. two hundred and thirty-seven lost minutes, strange days, pills, whispers, doubts, arguments, hurtful thoughts...

Pigeon Brain

When I can't think of what to say,
I will put my lonely where my mouth is,

a buckshot matryoshka always killing myself
and shredding the old skin for something new,

always molding my gray-clay brain
into the easiest target. I've been breathing long enough

to know that breathing isn't enough and because of that
I'm always breathing too quickly, quiet and bright

in my two tiny clots of lung. I've been surviving long enough
to know that surviving isn't enough

so now I'm giving living a try, an unkilned brick of being,
aiming for the window where the gray birds sit reflected

balancing on electric wire, grinning.

Cold Spell

Winter chill lingers on
stiffening the bones
deceived by almost Spring
into expecting warmth.
The long tormenting cold
smirks at down clad bodies
still not adapted
to freezing days.

Loner



Fall Leaves

At my desk on Saturday morning, sipping coffee in the quiet hours when most are still asleep. Outside the window, the wind creates a vortex, pulling the dead leaves into a swirling dance so it appears they are falling upward, back toward the branches from which they recently dropped. It's as if the wind is reversing time, allowing the trees to reclaim their golden leaves. I wonder if I'm capable of healing myself, if I can put back together the pieces that have fallen away. I think of the man sleeping heavily in the next room, I think I want to try.

Fish-Freezer Algor Mortis

A woman sneezes three times in a grocery store
and the dead are still dead. Nothing changes but
the date and who's saying the same inane things.
Red eyes like the LED lights are blood-letting
my retinas. I eat green grapes of normalcy, pray
You are what you eat at my bedside table
on my knees, push the crunching green beads
through pursed lips like the slot of a coin machine.
I've returned three lost things in the past
three weeks and I don't know what I'm looking for.
The blue-burning vision of the heart wished virgin,
the water-board autopsy table of the wilting corpse,
fish-hooked scalpel of silver lip smiling.

Going

It starts in meditation.
Emptying out
to no-thing.
And then some-thing\
Because I exhale
completely
and count
one . . .
two . . .
three . . .
four . . .
nearly dying.
And come back to living.
A constantly
stretching
limit—less—ness.
But, you have to ask, I see
inside myself
down to . . .
what?
Feet planted
on
the
earth.
It is the heart which places love—ing.
Is that all?
Or is it a
spiriting thing.
Hands held up . . .
spirit lifting . . .
always flowing. . .
to . . .
Hmmm . . .

Meditation



Wolf's Bane

The morning mist grazed along the mountaintops
While you collected lavender shaded aconite.
Rushed home to crush them into purple powders,
Sprinkled into wine with a shaking hand.

A subtle taste of copper and then nothing.
But what of your dreams?

The corruption will be invisible.
You will eschew your future
Until it crawls down your throat.
The conversion will be mandatory.

You grip the rugged edges of the table,
Clinging desperately as you convulse.
The wood splintering into your hands
Leaving bloody smears in its wake.

*What good will they be
When all you know is sleep?*

Styles

Some writers seem to grow
their words organically,
raised slowly from the earth
to be as natural as possible.

Some writers seem to pick
their words out of the air,
they arrive so quickly
and feel so ethereal.

Some writers seem to make
their words, hammering them
on the writer's forge, creating
them out of the finest materials,
words that will stand through
the ages.

Some writers seem to wrestle
with the words, pushing and forcing
them into the right order,
constantly having to watch
lest the words break free and run.

Some writers seem to narwhal,
pistoken giraffe francy whist whence,
similious renovo x-deciduous freefro
alabaster shimshank and jackalope.

Mystery



The Anthropomorphic Mirror

looks reluctantly back at you, reflecting as it does
how unlike yourself you've become. More animal
than hominid. More obvious than not. Less likely
to ask penetrating questions. In short, drool and drooling.

The Anthropomorphic Mirror stares with concern
at your widow's peak, the crop-circle rounding your head.
Cool, polished, thoroughly professional, it ponders a future
together. Considers for a moment a trial separation. A break.

Wonders how much longer it can stand the sight of you.

Inquiry into Matter

We dig the earth to see what binds
soil to the darker sky; we seek a pulse
for mysteries that speak for silence.
We unearth history in soiled remnants
of ancestors we know only in our DNA.

We expose our cells to what magnifies
the deep questions we have for nebulae,
dark matter dancing with darker energy
in uncertain collusion. It all strings
together despite our fingered rendering.

We live in collision of contraries,
break love across an un-starred shore.
We envelop in deep questions that cannot
rise until we know that what is waved
across the curve of time can speak in us.

And it is all mute, all the more when we
shout our questions. How do we raise
each beating breath out of the meat we are?
Now is the place of our formation,
the place that makes and animates us.

All opened earth squirms with its life.
Darkest skies burn. Helixes combine
to travel time in muscles and motion.
Our voices become waves to move easily
as clouds, or stars, or falling sparrows.

Holes

Dobie Stephens had nothing to lose. So when he was called to make the midnight run, he said sure, why not. The world was stranger and more dangerous than ever now, but people still drove cars, and gasoline tanker trucks were still how fuel got delivered.

A lot of drivers did not come back from the trip. If they did, many were never the same. But Dobie knew the shortcuts. The ones nobody else knew anymore. Green kids—no wonder they didn't make it. They thought holes in reality were something new.

He stopped at the donut shop on the way. It smelled as good at eleven p.m. as eight a.m. He filled a thermos with

fresh, hot coffee, bought two glazed and two jelly-filled, and drove on to the depot. He left his car in the lot. Holes seemed not to appear there as much as in the garage, though that might be only random chance, like much of what the holes did. Four cars had disappeared, partly or completely, into holes in the garage in the last three weeks, along with several tons of steel and concrete, so the structure itself was probably unsound by now.

The holes had begun appearing almost a year and a half earlier. The only thing different holes seemed to have in common was that they were gaps in reality. Things went in, or things came out. It depended on the spot. Some holes were larger than others. A big one could devour a neighborhood, a city. A tiny one could take a lobe of your brain, an eyeball, a heart ventricle.

Crackpot theorists claimed they could predict where the next hole would appear, but few were convincing. Some people, like Dobie, had an instinct about holes, when and where they would appear. Or maybe it was just luck.

Frustrated, embarrassed scientists mumbled jargon about singularities, event horizons, branes, the eleven dimensions of M-theory, or wormholes between universes. Anything sounded better than the truth: that science was baffled.

Preachers blamed other religions and unbelievers, of course, or whoever their usual scapegoats were, and kept mostly silent about the fact that the devout were as

subject to the vicissitudes of holes as anyone else. Politicians employed similar rhetorical tactics. A few holes spewed tarantulas, black mambas, or monsters never seen on Earth.

Fans of H. P. Lovecraft nodded to themselves and felt vindicated. The holes, they said, were part of a universe as macabre as they had always thought.

Occasionally something good came out of a hole, or seemed to. People reported dead friends and relatives walking out of the inky blackness, or their voices calling from holes, siren songs like ghosts tempting the living to step across to the land of the dead—or wherever the holes led. There were reports of everything from lost baseballs rolling out to lost pets emerging, famished but otherwise the same as when they vanished, months, years, or decades before. Lost money or other valuables also reappeared from a few holes.

Some holes bore gifts that had never belonged to the recipients. People were suspicious of those who received good things. A man in Kansas was torn apart, limb from limb, by his neighbors, when the hole in his back yard began to spew cash, diamonds, and gold, in quantities Midas would have envied. Such largess was taken as proof that he must have summoned the holes,

or have been in league with those who did.

Holes that produced valuables or released monsters never outnumbered those that devoured and destroyed, so scientists gleefully pointed out the law of conservation of matter and energy. What came out, they said, must have gone in, somewhere. It was the only scientific claim that seemed uncontroversial.

Dobie knew some of the holes were shortcuts. But the thing about taking shortcuts was, you still had to be careful. They were not really shorter, just more direct. But only if you knew where you were going and were willing to take a chance. The most important rule was, don't get greedy.

The first hole appeared before he was ready.

Dobie braked hard, felt the wheels grab, skid, grab again, almost too late. The cab swayed. He let up on the brake pedal, spun the steering wheel to pull back out of the near-tailspin, and let the truck right itself. He shifted to neutral, took his foot off the clutch, and rolled to a stop.

The hole was a couple of dozen feet wide, roughly circular. Not the biggest he'd seen up close,

but a monster nonetheless. From this side, it was a patch of flat black nothingness. It would have been almost impossible to notice in the night, except for the way the headlight beams vanished at the event horizon. Dobie knew just enough physics to know that wasn't really the right term for the boundary between this world and the hole, but it had caught on.

He turned off the headlights. The lonely road was pitch dark. The moon, less than half lit, setting in the west, and a few hazy stars and a feeble glow from town, low on the horizon, were the only sources of illumination.

Dobie stared a couple of minutes, then said, "No, not tonight." He pulled on the lights, shifted to reverse, shifted again, pulled forward, and repeated the process four times until he'd worked the truck around, facing back where he'd come from on the narrow, empty road. Shifted to first once more. Just as the clutch engaged and he powered down on the accelerator, he felt and heard the change in atmospheric pressure that came when holes opened or closed. There it was again, in front, as if daring the truck to move.

He knew what would happen, but he turned the truck anyway, back to the original direction, felt the pop in his ears as

the hole jumped, and found himself facing the blackness. He took a deep breath, said a little prayer to gods he didn't believe in, and drove into the hole.

The truck rolled to a stop and idled in the street. Not for the first time, Dobie wondered why he arrived here, not five hundred feet in the sky or at the bottom of a lake. He pulled the truck to the right, where it occupied most of four parking spaces. He shut off the engine and stepped out of the cab. Things were quiet. A few cars were parked up and down the street, but none moved. He looked up at the buildings but recognized none of them. Working streetlights were few and far between, shaded to point down at the empty sidewalk, so a few dozen stars lit up the night sky. He remembered the constellations he'd learned as a kid, but none of these looked familiar.

A woman screamed. The sound echoed down the quiet street, so it was hard to tell just where the scream came from. He ran up the street, paused, and heard voices from an alley to the left. He cautiously walked closer.

A woman's voice. At least two men's voices.

“Please—no,” the woman said.

Dobie froze. He stood a step away from the corner. That voice—he’d last heard it three years ago, choked with the pain of cancer. Julie’s voice. Since she died, he had not gone on a date or had even a romantic thought about anyone else.

After years of grief, he found something freeing in having nothing to lose.

But—Julie’s voice. How could it be? He peered around the corner. The alley lay in dark shadow. He could barely make out three figures, two men with their backs to him and a woman facing his direction. Despite the darkness, he recognized the set of her head, how her shoulders turned as she pushed the nearest of the two aggressors away. Both men made guttural, subhuman noises.

Dobie looked around for a weapon. A shovel with a broken handle leaned against a trash can. He took it, letting the blade scrape the pavement as he gripped the short handle. The men whirled in surprise, and the woman took the opportunity to knee the nearest one sharply in the groin. He grunted, doubled over, and fell writhing on the concrete. His bald-shaven head rolled in dirt and broken glass.

The other opened his mouth. “Who—” but Dobie had already crossed most of the dozen feet from the corner. He swung the shovel and struck the side of the would-be rapist’s head. The blow landed with a satisfying whack. The man’s hair was blond, Dobie noticed, as the attacker went down, and his nose smacked the pavement hard.

Meanwhile, Baldie struggled to rise. Blondie fell across his feet. Baldie kicked the blond head and crawled away from Dobie, who held the shovel ready for more action. Blondie managed to stand and stumble toward the street, leaving his unconscious companion behind.

“Julie?” Dobie said. He hadn’t planned to speak the name, because Julie was dead, but now the word was out. She didn’t seem to hear him. She stared at the unmoving would-be rapist. A moment later she stepped forward and began to kick him. Face, chest, groin. Dobie listened to the impacts, what sounded like bones breaking, when she planted a final foot solidly in the ribs of the attacker. She stepped back, panting.

“Who’s Julie?” she said, looking closely at Dobie with wide blue eyes. It was too dark to see the color, but he knew they were blue. He was stuck again by how similar the voice was.

“Just . . . someone I used to know. Are you okay?”

“Bruised,” she said, rubbing her biceps. “Terrified. And really, really pissed off.” She held out a shaking hand. “Adrenaline overdose.” She rubbed her shoulder. “And I’m going to have a hell of a backache and headache tomorrow. I’ll be sore all over, in fact.” She tugged at her ripped t-shirt, trying to cover herself and not succeeding.

“Not as sore as Blondie here,” Dobie observed. “You wanna kick him some more?”

She shook her head.

“Want me to give him another taste of the shovel?” he asked.

Another head shake. She stared at Dobie, studying his face. “Who are you? Where did you come from?”

“I was . . . driving, and I heard you scream. My name’s Dobie. What’s yours?”

“Jane. You were driving? We haven’t had much of that lately. Not since the holes came.”

“Understandable. Where is this place, anyway?”

“It’s an alley.” She took a moment to process the question. “You mean you don’t know where you’re at. . . . You came from a hole?”

“Right,” he said. “So you know about holes.”

“Who doesn’t? Everybody has a story—everybody who’s still here—the hole that almost got them, the hole that ate their car, their house, the one that took their relatives.”

“Everybody who’s still here’—do you mean, when people go into a hole, they don’t come back?”

“Usually not,” Julie said.

“And people who come out of holes—they’re stuck here?”

“People like you?” She shrugged. “Some stay, I guess, or go back through the hole they came from. Or try to, if the hole is still there. It’s not like they phone home or send somebody a text and report what happened. Nobody really understands what’s going on, do they?”

“No.” Dobie shook his head. “But some of us are luckier than others, I guess. I’ve gone through lots of holes. Always wound up back in my own world, my same old life.” He paused, and then added, “Lucky as far as holes go, anyway. But my friends, family, not so lucky. A hole took my house. I wasn’t there at the time. I guess that’s luck.”

“Are you married? You have a girlfriend?”

“I was married.”

Seeing he was not going to elaborate, she asked, “A hole?”

He shook his head.

“Cancer. Before the holes.”

She nodded and asked, “What do you find on the other sides of holes?”

“Sometimes nothing.

Not even air. Or there’s a desert. Cactus and coyotes. Or mountains. Sometimes a town, like this. Other worlds, as far as I can tell. In one, nobody spoke English. Absolutely no one.”

“So how did you communicate?” she asked.

“I didn’t. I turned around and came back. Some holes are predictable. You can use them like shortcuts, if you know the patterns.”

“I thought there was no pattern. The scientists say they’re random.”

“Stare at clouds long enough, you start to see things. Images. Patterns. That one looks like Aunt Edith. This one looks like a man smoking a pipe, or a butterfly or freight train. You find what you’re looking for.” He shrugged. “Holes work the same for me. Or maybe they are random, and I’m kidding myself. Next hole, maybe I don’t make it back.”

“So you’re just lucky? That’s why you survive?”

“Could be. I’m not that smart or talented or virtuous. I don’t believe in a god or go to church. I have no faith in miracles.” He

thought about Julie, how she never let him get by with oversimplified answers. Like Jane, who squinted her eyes a little, just now, and tilted her head, lips partly slightly on the left.

“Or maybe I’m no luckier than anyone else,” Dobie went on. “Win here, lose there. It’s probably an equation. And the equation has to balance. At least, that’s what they taught me in engineering school.”

“Not everything can be reduced to algebra,” she said. “Like with the little subatomic particles and all, there are always things you can’t possibly know about them. Or at least that’s what I understand, from magazine articles and PBS specials.”

“So you have PBS here. Which reminds me—what is this place? The name of the town, I mean.”

“Springfield. Springfield, New York. And no, not anymore, no PBS, no TV, no internet, most of the time. Not since three-fourths or more of the people were swallowed by holes.”

“Odd name for a town,” Dobie said. “I don’t think there are any Springfields where I come from.”

“Well, live and learn,” she said. “I’m starving. Wanna help me find some food?”

“You could come back with me. I’ve got food in the truck. Just lunch, but I’ll share. Also, there’s a shirt you can have.”

She studied his face. He could not read her expression.

“Or do you have family here?” he asked.

“Not anymore.” The expression on her face became easy to read, for a moment. Then she said, “Let’s go. I feel lucky. And I’ve got nothing to lose.”

She gave Blondie one last kick in the ribs and walked out of the alley.

Nothing to lose—welcome to the club, Dobie almost said. He watched the back of this woman who looked a lot like Julie. But maybe hope is something to lose, now. He picked up the lucky broken shovel, strands of blond hair stuck to it, and followed.

On the way to the truck, where the hole loomed in darkness, they passed a bucket of gold coins, a basket of what looked like diamonds and rubies, and the big stack of hundreds and twenties, the treasure at the end of the metaphorical rainbow. Jane stopped and looked.

“Where did that come from?” she wondered.

“You haven’t seen things like this before?”

She shook her head no.

“I have. The pot of gold turns up around holes, a lot of times, on one side or the other.”

“That explains why I never noticed, I guess. I try to avoid holes.” She stared at the treasure. “It’s got to be worth more than I made in my whole life. More than my parents made.” She looked around. They were still alone on the dark street. “We should take as much as we can carry.”

“Better leave it,” Dobie said. “I never bring anything back through the holes. My hunch is, that’s one reason I’ve always made it home.” If you didn’t understand fairy tales, all you had to do was watch the news to know nothing good came from getting greedy.

“One coin, one diamond, one ruby can’t hurt,” Jane said.

Dobie shrugged. “Let’s see what happens.”

She put the coin and jewels in her pocket, and they climbed into the cab. Dobie started the engine.

Setting Hibiscus

She asked me to set a favorite flower.
I would make complaint of setting Hibiscus.
Not much effort was needed; half an hour?

I would joke with her, call them “High Biscuits,”
listen to her scoff and laugh,
going through this ritual to discuss

aspects of planting; soil, sunlight, the math
of that beautifully unfurled, gaudy bloom.
She complains, insects will eat the leaves, asks

how to stop bugs from destroying stems.
This could become a problem. I shrug,
too early, knowing it won't be bad. She grins.

Yellow

I picked out the palest yellow cashmere,
held it against my cheek, imagined
the softness enveloping the plump
tenderness of new skin. It was
machine washable, a must for a new
mom. I bought nine skeins, spent
nearly \$100, spent the next eight months
knitting and purling, knitting and purling,
the blanket slowly unfurling across
my lap. Just weeks before the baby
was due, I finished it. Folded it perfectly,
tied it with a pale silver ribbon.
How it must have swaddled her,
that cocoon of pale yellow
as the casket was lowered
into the ground.

Echo

Xander, where are we going?

Grandma's house.

Xander, where are we going?

Daddy's house. Mama's house.

Echolalia: the unsolicited repetition

How Persephone ephone's descent.

Xander, where are we going?

Taco Bell. McDona's.

Taco Bell. Taco Bell. Taco Bell.

Xander, stop making noises.

Of vocalizations made by another person

Go to bed. Xander, be quiet.

Xander, be quiet.

Xander, sit down.

In its profound form it is automatic

Xander, where are we going?

More milk. More milk. More milk.

No, no, no!

And effortless.

Grandma! Grandma!

Wa pa pa pa pa-pa pow.

Xander, where are we going?

Daddy's phone phone.

Don't ring my doorbell.

Xander, where are we going?

Xander, stop making noises.

Jean and Echo

Most patients' moms go with them for chemotherapy, but I'm with Dad. Mom went with Jean, my older sister. She had Hodgkins before me. She died.

Looks like I'm going to die, too. I don't blame Mom for staying away.

I should be fair. She's not staying away. She's just not coming to the hospital today.

I feel bad that Dad came. The last rounds were rough. I could have spared him. I could have come alone. Nineteen is old enough to get chemo alone. Uber goes to the hospital. Then Dad wouldn't have to wait through the ordeal. He looks worse than me by the time it's done. I think he's trying to share the bad effects. He'd take them all if he could.

But I can't share with him. These next four days of chemotherapy are different. The last rounds, those were to kill the cancer. They didn't work.

This time, the chemotherapy is killing my blood stem cells. Those cells are making the cancer come back. So I'm swapping them out. We found a donor, and I'm getting a bone marrow transplant. But first I have to kill all the stem cells to free up space in my bone hollows for the donor's cells. So Dad can't share any of what I'm getting. I need it all.

"Looks like it's not moving," Dad grumbles, nodding at the bag.

I am sitting in my hospital bed in a private room. All the bone marrow transplant patients get private rooms. I pull my hospital gown forward so I can look at my chest, where the central line catheter is. I've lost so much weight. My little breasts collapse. My ribs look like something that would make a good Halloween costume.

The tube connected to the catheter is full of clear fluid. I follow the tube up to the bag. It's hanging from a metal stand. The bag looks full. Dad and I have been sitting here for fifteen minutes. The bag should be at least a little empty.

And I don't feel nauseous yet. The last cycle before this one, I got sick right away when the chemotherapy dripped in.

"Yeah," I agree. "It's stuck or something."

"I'll get Gideon." Dad gets up. He's short and stocky, but strong. He used to work in construction. Now he's a janitor, but he still stands up like he's about to lay a foundation.

The nurse, Gideon, is one of my favorites. He's always in a good mood. I don't know how. We're all in here dying. But I guess he sees a lot of kids recover, too. Maybe I'm the only one in here dying. Hodgkins lymphoma has a good prognosis for a lot of young people. I read that in the brochure for the pediatric hematology-oncology center. It's just that, me and

Jean, ours is the familial kind. Chemo doesn't kill it.

Gideon fiddles with the bag and the tube. He touches the catheter. "Nope, nope, nope, I do not see the blockage," Gideon announces, smiling. He's always smiling. I smile back at him. "It is defying gravity!" he proclaims.

"We better call a physicist," I suggest. I was studying physics at home, last night. If I don't die, I'll try for my GED. On account of the cancer, I haven't graduated from high school.

Gideon disconnects the tube. He reconnects it. "Now it will work," he predicts confidently.

"It's like turning the computer off and on," Dad grunts.

We three look at the bag expectantly. No drip. We wait. Nothing.

"What's wrong?" I ask.

"It's a clot," Dad scowls.

Gideon smiles, shaking his head. "It cannot be. We just put the central line in." He smiles at me. He smiles at Dad. "Let me consult on this matter, Echo." He pats my hand and leaves the room.

Gideon didn't act like touching my hand was weird, but my hands were ghostly cold. I realized it when Gideon's warm hand was against mine. My feet were freezing, too. And I think they had been getting that way for a while. The chill had been creeping in from the tips of my fingers and toes.

As soon as I noticed it, it picked up pace, invading and dominating everything. Gooseflesh coated me. My skull exploded with bumps. An icicle headache shot up between my eyes. My ribs cracked with freeze. My

lungs stuttered with the temperature plummet. I felt like I was trying to expand them in an ice cave. I gasped for breath. My heart shivered.

"You're blue. What happened?" Dad was stricken in his matter-of-fact way.

I'm sorry, Dad. Poor Dad. I open my mouth and try to get the words out. I am cold like the dead. But I can't talk.

He grabs both my hands and drops them like they're burning hot. Except they're the opposite. He rubs his own hands to warm them. "Ok, you're ice. I'll get Gideon."

From the hall, I hear Gideon saying to the charge nurse, "—we aspirated blood from the central line only twenty minutes ago—"

His words are drowned out by a jackhammer in my head. Before I pass out, I recognize my teeth chattering.

I came to super confused.

A crowd of nurses, residents, and doctors are in the room arguing about why I went hypothermic. They have a lot of ideas. I am too emaciated. They used the word "anorexic," but I think they use that word for when you lose weight from cancer. They used "inconclusive," too—they like that word. They use it to mean, I have Hodgkins lymphoma, so freaky stuff can happen. Like getting cold like the dead.

"I ate. I've been eating so much. I'm supposed to stay strong. Plus I lost so much weight. I totally

eat.” Did anyone hear me? I am sitting in bed, wrapped in blankets. I am also wearing the wool hat that I brought for when my hair falls out. I’m actually sweating now.

Gideon checked my blood pressure and blood sugar and took more blood out of my central line to run some tests, hormones, electrolytes, that kind of thing.

“Echo eats.” Dad agreed with me. He’s been pacing my hospital room. “It’s a good idea to eat.”

I totally eat.

No one had a better idea than that I should eat. And maybe walk around to get my heart pumping.

Dad signs me out of the bone marrow transplant unit so we can go to the hospital concourse, where there are restaurants. The elevator doors are polished reflective metal. They show that I’m wearing my hospital gown, with a hospital robe over it, plus a blanket, woolen hat, socks and my shearling slippers. I am the model of hospital couture.

The elevator doors open. The elevator is empty. Dad and I get in. The doors close.

The feeling of claustrophobia comes on instantly. My chest goes tight. My throat narrows. Sips of breath is all I can do. I start quick little inhales through my nose, like I’m sniffling.

I just have to hold out until we get to the concourse. It’s a short ride. I hear the bell of an elevator in another shaft stopping at another floor. The sound is far away, like I’m in a tunnel or a grave. I squeeze my eyes shut, like I can do a reset.

When I open my eyes, I’m squashed in with a crowd of people. The elevator hasn’t stopped since Dad and I got on. I don’t know where they came from, but there are a lot of them. I can’t move. I’m immobile, packed into the elevator with the masses. There’s iron in my nose and on my tongue. There’s the tang and salt of it. I gag when I try to swallow. I feel the pressure of the mass in my body. But I can’t feel anything against my skin. We’re all cramped on top of each other, pressing up, over, around. But I can’t feel them outside. Only inside. I don’t get how they got inside. And there’s no sound. Panic starts. I can’t hear my own breath. I can’t hear these people. There are thousands of them. They’re ruddy and distorted. I should hear them. I should hear something. My eyes roll, sweeping over Dad. I want to ask him how all these people got inside. But I can’t. It’s not Dad. It looks like Dad, but something’s wrong. It’s too short. Or too red. Dad isn’t bloody. I’m malfunctioning. I can’t get any oxygen in this crowd. They’re suffocating me. My eyes rest on the person in front of me. There’s no space between us. The person’s back would merge with my front if that were possible. A lot is possible in this elevator. The person’s face is on backwards. I should have the person’s hair in my face. Instead I am face to face with Jean.

Oh my God, did I scream.

Poor Dad. He never did anything to deserve this. One daughter dead, and the other one scaring the

bejeezus out of him before she dies. It would be better if I died right away and spared him. He looks so scared. He's such a brave person.

We're back in the room after the elevator "scene." Doctors seem to be able to attribute anything to low blood sugar. I was given the all-clear to eat something, and Dad and I ate. I ate even though Dad looked terrified, and the fright on his face turned the burger to cardboard in my mouth. Red meat has iron in it that is good for my blood. I totally ate the burger. Dad still looks scared. We're back in the room.

"I gotta pee," I tell him. He nods. He's gone mute, I think.

I didn't have to pee, but I knew Jean wanted to talk. The chemo failing to drip, the hypothermia, and the elevator incident established *that*—Jean is here, and she's got something to say. And girls go to the bathroom to talk. It's, like, a rule.

The bathroom was a mess. The shower walls were smeared red. Blood congealed in the toilet; the sink overflowed with it. Puddles of it dribbled into the floor drain. Welts of blood swelled from the ceiling.

I absorbed the horror show matter-of-factly, like Dad. I didn't feel surprised. I felt...kinda...ready.

The blood ran from the ceiling down the mirror, which was fogged red. A crowd loomed in the mist, gnarled specimens of past generations arrayed behind the reflection, which showed my wool hat, the hospital robe over my hospital gown—and Jean's face peering out from under my bangs.

Poor Jean. She died so young.
We're your bloodline.

I know, I told her. But I want to live.

People die for their bloodline.

Sure, but is that necessary? I want to live.

Your ancestors will curse you.

Don't do that, I say. That's pointless hostility. I just want to live.

Blood is everything. You are nothing.

That's pretty harsh, I think.

Isn't it normal to want to live, I ask. (I can't believe how intense these ancestors are. I don't even know them.)

Taking another bloodline into your vessels makes you an orphan.

I hadn't considered this possibility.

It might keep me alive, I finally tell her. It's the standard of care.

Your bloodline also has standards.

I pause, frustrated. I expected my ancestral ghosts to be savvier about the progress of science. They've been around since the dawn of humanity, after all; they have to have seen a lot of upgrades in medical care.

But maybe rejecting blood leaves an eternal wound.

I think about what I've been saying: I just want to live. It sounds selfish.

Don't put me to the choice of being dead or orphaned, I plead. Don't abandon me. Why not forgive me? Adopt me. Can't my bloodline adopt me? Adopt me, I grope for the word, back?

Now it's Jean's turn to pause. She fades from the mirror temporarily. When she returns, she surprises me:

Will you continue the lineage by adoption?

She already knows that I can't conceive. Before Jean died, the sterilizing effect of chemotherapy was the great tragedy the family mourned. Then we learned that infertility would have been an outcome for which we could have been grateful.

Jean, I say, if I live, you know I'll be infertile.

I'm not even sure I can take care of anybody. I haven't thought about it. I've been thinking about how to stay alive. Plus, I'm only 19. Isn't adopting children something you do when you're older? But I haven't answered the question.

If I live, if it's possible for me, I promise her—promise my ancestors—I will adopt, so we can be the kin who care for each other by choice.

I leave the bathroom door ajar. Dad is sitting in a chair by my bed, hunched forward, his elbows on his thighs, his fingers interlaced. His head is down, but I know what his face says. While I've been in the bathroom, he's been giving himself a pep talk. He can't let me see his fear. His face is exhausted from the effort.

I look back through the open bathroom door. The bathroom is shiny. Clean. Sanitized.

"Dad," I say, "can you get Gideon?"

He looks at me, and I calm the fright I see gathering around his eyes. "Everything's ok. Gideon can give me the chemo now. It'll go in."

There's no reason I should be right; no reason Dad should do what I ask.

But he does get Gideon, and the chemo does go in.

The Formation of Standing Waves

Between infinite spaces
wars rage as improbables
open in brave bursts
of February flowers.

The unmade strives
the becoming
of this unfolding
we have named hope.

A question begs
in sunsets of clouds,
striated loom
of rising darkness.

Angulars of momentum
respond in waves—
nihilisms of particed nodes—
love in cresting chaos.

Mathematics attacks
the shoreline to
signature emergence
in dawn's rose sand.

The offshore wind
minds with geometric
imprecision—absence
attracted to presence.

Our darkness is rich in
infinities of fireflies
and we are possessed
by incompleteness.

Purity



Terracotta Castle

*Near the white water
traveling colors look like fall and birds
and there are holes in my hands, so the sand pours out*

In a terracotta cottage eating ricotta and reading tarot
The card castle unravels like ribbons dancers doing blow
In the green room with the white walls and white lines
With reptilian spines like water warped books in boarded up basements

Establish travel bans like we are the Taliban
Police uniforms look like gang colors to me
A wall like Berlin had but it will fall harder
More exclusive than Harvard; as elusive as the yard bird

I need more holes in my brain, more sewage for the pain to seep out
The sauerkrauts scalding and so is my hand; disintegrating on the stove top
Turning into sand for your beaches, my blood isn't mine, it belongs to the
leeches
Smile so much it makes you rot on the inside while it's still pouring outside

Plans this Evening?

Who knows if this conversation is really
A conversation, if the things we say
Merely go back and forth without moving forward,
We state details, ask questions,
And no depth is reached, even the surface
Remain unscathed and unscratched,
Questions are answered one line at a time
With a constant refrain, “And you? And U? & U?”
I’m beginning to wonder
If I’ve assumed too much about these messages,
I could only be talking with myself,
Or more accurately, with my own sense
Of expectations that this dating website will lead
To anything other than a brief encounter
That is awkward, painful, and passes way too soon

Caution Follows Desire

Danny stood at the window. It stretched from the floor to the ceiling. He opened the blinds. He peered through them, over the lush, green lawn, down a gentle slope and into the pond located at its bottom. An older man with wild cinder-colored hair crouched at the bank and tossed hunks of bread at a flock of ducks. Their heads twisted and tucked. They snapped at the floating bread chunks with their beaks.

Hayden moaned. Danny heard his body shift beneath the sheets as he stretched. Danny wasn't ready to speak with him. Hayden pulled his arm underneath the pillow, nestled his face deeper into its yielding surface. The young man at the window still had time. At least a moment, maybe more. He was now Hayden's lover, and he needed those moments to calibrate his mind and welcome this development. They had waited *so long* to meet in person! And now here was morning, the first morning over a new threshold.

He had brought no clothes for sleeping. He grinned, remembering how he suspected he wouldn't need them. His jeans rested in a lump beside the bed. Perhaps he should slip into them? Hayden had guided him through the kitchen earlier that

evening. Surely, his new lover might wake, sweetly surprised, to smell eggs, bacon, perhaps pancakes?

But he remained rooted in place. Danny reminded himself what he had desired most was for Hayden to wake and see Danny beside him. Like he belonged there. Like he never had to leave, not while there was still the morning left.

He stepped to the side of the bed. Hayden breathed, the air made a purring sound as it passed through him. Danny peeled back the covers, never taking his eyes off Hayden. He eased one leg onto the bed, silently seated himself, and then pulled his remaining leg under the covers. He propped himself up atop his pillow.

Danny watched his new lover in the late moments of his slumber. *Remember this*, he told himself. *Yes, you must always remember this.*

After a few moments, he began to feel anxious. Perhaps Hayden knew he was watching and only pretended to sleep. Perhaps he was waiting for Danny to grow irritated and slink into another room, watch television, start a shower. Danny's lips pressed together, his brow dropped over his eyes. He could not stop staring at the beautiful man lying beside him. Hayden's body was muscled

with a pleasing thickness. His left bicep ballooned under the sheet as he slept. His silky, copper-colored hair drooped in lovely locks over his forehead. His lips were full in the middle, thin toward the corners of his mouth. And his eyes! Of course, Danny could not look into them now, but he remembered the brilliance of their hue. They were a blue that compelled him from the moment Hayden opened the door, and Danny gazed at him in gracious wonder.

I could leave right now, he thought. *He wouldn't wake until I was gone.*

Escaping this bedroom, with its remembered delights and promise of more, would safeguard the memory of last night. The overpowering sensation of Hayden deep inside him as he closed his thick arms around Danny. All the fevered whispers and shocked cries of joy. As long as Hayden slept, the memory remained fixed. No careless comment or thoughtless gesture could spoil it.

I must leave right now. The night remains perfect only if I leave him.

Danny noted with alarm his back leg already inching toward the edge of the bed. He watched it slide beneath the covers like a copperhead through the grass. He risked a last look at Hayden. The delightful man slept still.

He sat up in bed, pulled both feet to the floor. He gazed out the window once more, through the open blinds. Only the soft white light of early morning. The haze blotted out the rising sun. In the stillness, he heard the ducks from the pond quack and splash.

He was going to leave. His poor host would wake up abandoned.

Danny bowed his head, ran his hands through his hair. He had to admit it: he didn't trust his new lover to carry out this new day without somehow disappointing him. Disappointment, more constant than any pleasure.

He rose from the bed but froze when he felt a large, smooth-fingered hand grab his wrist. He dropped back to the bed, looked back at the man who held him. Of course, he knew this man.

"Where are you going?" Hayden asked. His head remained on the pillow. He looked at Danny through half-closed lids. A baby lost inside a lullaby.

Danny gulped. "Nowhere," he said. "I just wanted to let some light in the room." He gestured limply toward the blinds.

"We should sleep some more." Hayden smiled slyly. "I think we've earned it."

"That sounds great." Danny stretched, his long arms arching over his head. "I was still tired anyway."

He slid deeper underneath the covers. Hayden pulled him closer until Danny's back met his broad chest. Danny noted it was cool and dry, so unlike the moist, hot surface he'd stroked last night. Perhaps he again would feel that heat, perhaps very soon.

"When should we wake up?" he asked Hayden.

"Whenever. The whole day is ours."

"The whole day?"

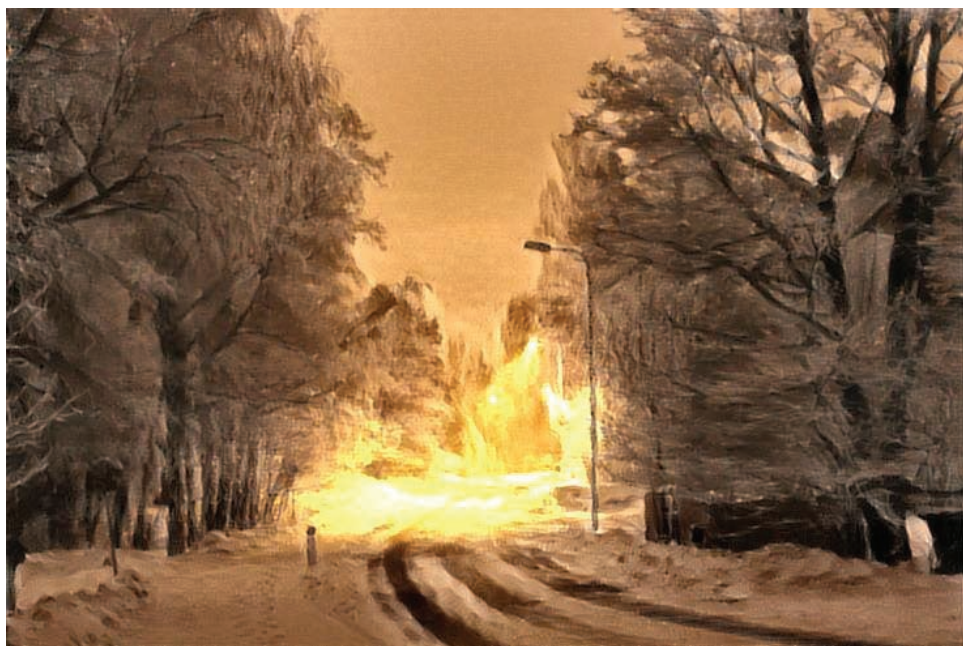
"If that's what you want."

Yes, Danny thought. *That's all I want.*

Lucky Loser

I didn't think the volley to and fro
was more than just a passing pickup game.
And yet, with every service, stroke or throw
your deft returns were fanning passion's flame.
And so I kept in play the tennis ball
that you forehanded with apparent glee,
while I kept waiting for the judges' call
to stop exchanges with a penalty.
Instead the play continued through a set
whose match point volleys caused my head to spin
awaiting for the referee to let
me serve again with shots that help one win.
But when you flouted my lob just above
the net, and left, I knew it wasn't love.

unitalvi



Winter Afternoon

I hear it every day these days,
the sound of my neighbor's chainsaw

cutting up the dead trees
behind his house to burn through the winter.

It is the sound of a starving animal enjoying its kill.
I can see the white smoke

like the ghosts of the trees swarming from the chimney,
coming up for air.

When I go outside with the trash or to fill the bird feeder with seed,
I can smell the smoke.

It fills my lungs.
I choke on it.

I know full well that these are trees burning, just trees.
Nevertheless, I look away.

Dormant

The tuxedo I wore at my wedding
hung on a hook on the back of the
bedroom door encased in thin, clear
plastic like an eggplant tied in a
produce bag, and as I lay there
staring at it, it started to breathe, rising
and falling like the domed, sterile white-
sheet belly of a comatose man that—day
after day—proves he's alive but maybe
not still in there; but that doesn't stop
some from looking and so I looked
long as I could to find that swell, that
joy like a prairie fire that jumped
the bare-soil flame break and
consumed everything and everyone
for such a short time until it burned out
in one last tedious labored wheeze
when I caught a chill from the wobbling
tower fan oscillating indifferently.

Art Projects

The first eighteen years
(varies by jurisdiction)
experiments with light
and shadows

the theme: self-gratification

in collage, depict dreams
in collage, define them

after graduation, do a series
on the commanding officer
you hope to follow,
don't worry, it's a choice

include mixed media
that invoke decorum,
create the accidental equivalent
to a tuxedo

if there's a lover, sculpt
along the theme of the body
you have never felt

no lover?
work in a dark room
to obscure the details of your piece
while you are working on it.

amid the frieze
of decrepit facilities,
the heavy emphasis
on conceptual rigor fades

emerges: an hypothesis
for the nature of reality

idea for a funerary display:
an era passing,
(one element of this piece
could be dinosaurs)

Ode to *It's the End of the World As We Know It* by R.E.M.

After Michael Stipe

Somewhere a slide show
of childhood memories
astral project
onto a drywall surface

yet the walls
melt around the moving image
the hue of slight slits of sunlight
burn this room like barnyard hay

from a fallen oil lamp
Lamponing one into thinking
the future was still ahead
when the climate moves it in reverse

cut short
in guillotine breaths,
a grand design
of disguised grandeur

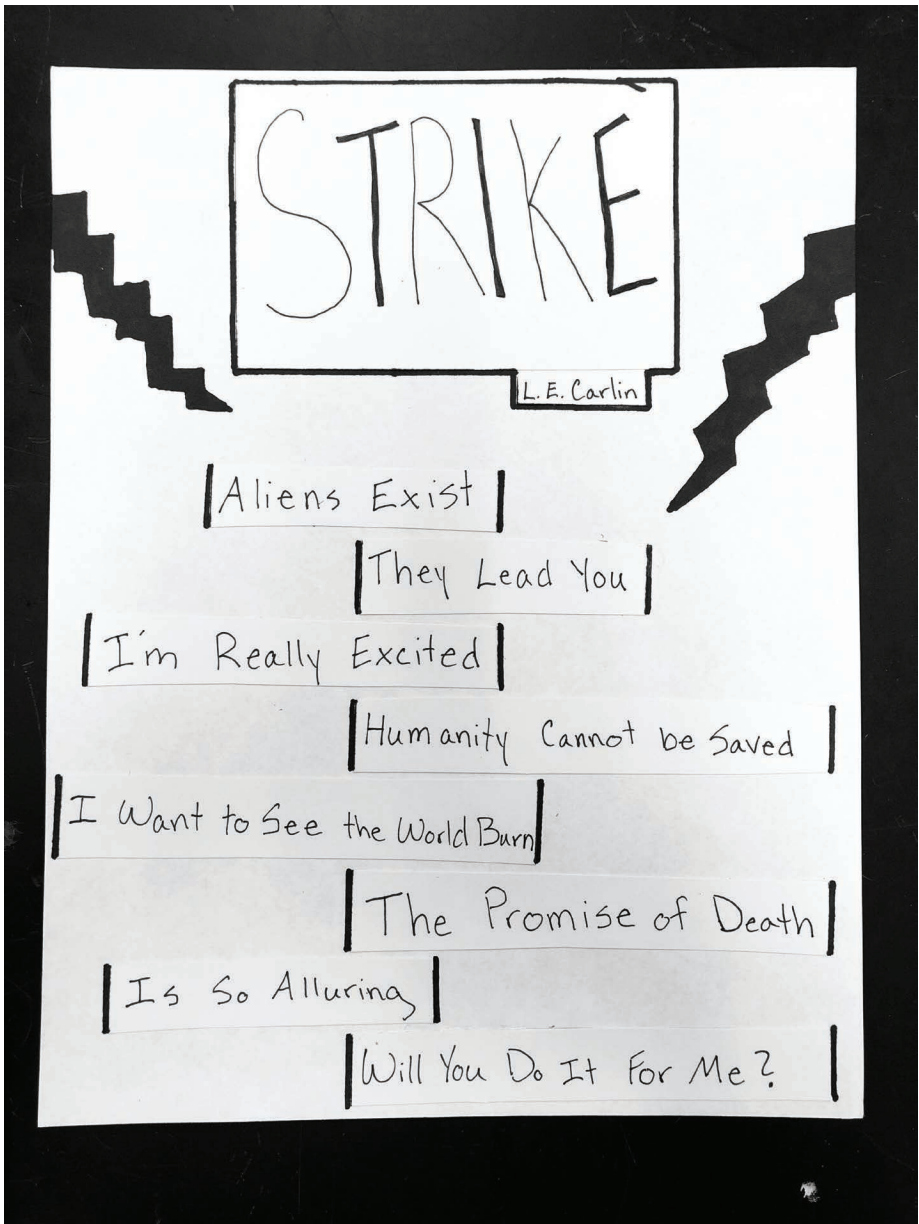
an old camcorder
filled with lost moments
rests now, inside a cardboard box
as a body does in a casket

yet you visit the graveyard
that is your attic
& try to resurrect the death
of your innocence

when your world is a collision course
and you have no idea which direction it's heading
I understand if you don't feel fine,
because more and more

...there is little reason to

Strike



Emptying the Blue Jar

At home, a man doesn't have to face himself,
doesn't have to pretend to enjoy the burn

of a drink. He wants his vodka flavored with fruit
at the kitchen table. Wants no one to see him

begin to sway, no one to mock his moves.
There's no one worth dancing with anyway.

Not since the curtains came down & he stayed
to twirl away the moonlight in the living room.

The doors of the gymnasium shut
& he struggles with the soft edges

of his ballet slippers. A circle of women
look right through him. They're looking

to me. They're passing whispers.



I was sitting at the entrance and the exit, and the sea was laying itself,
when, blackly, a dolphin breached.
All was not lost but won.

Fuzzy Yellow Ball

Teaching is like holding
A fuzzy yellow prickled toy ball.
Each little point, a student,
Invading my senses as they
Emotionally pour into me. And
Though they temporarily distract
My mind, focused on the feel of each one
Against my hand,
Together in their brilliance,
They form a whole ball as bright as the sun,
And the loss of one is felt by all.
And the day I let go, the star, despite
How small, will no longer have my guidance,
Will have to be on its own in the universe.
As difficult as that may be,
Another star of students will come along
And I will guide them through it all,
Then let them fly away again.

Campus at night



Original Sin

When I was seventeen my daily
lunch was an apple and two
rice cakes. Every day I peeled
the sticker from the apple's skin,
stuck it to the inside
of my locker door, insisted
I'd had a big breakfast and didn't
waiver from this routine
for an entire year.
I never once thought about
Eve or her apple or the original
sin, I thought only of my own naked
body, my own soft thighs, the gap
between them widening.

Saint Joan

C'est magnifique,
these flames:

the things I've been needing.

I am
the flame.

Je suis la flamme.

Je suis la femme.

Non. Je suis la pucelle.

Rouen: the place to die,
the place to try.
La place pour l'histoire.

God, I adore you
for sending me here.
This--this is it.
What I wanted.
For you,
& for me.

Crow Wisdom

High up in the pale morning sky
a crow flies
so resembling
two gray bird wings
whose wisdom laughs at all attempts.
With edges crimped,
the adage holds;
pruned, cut, folded.
A last laugh being important,
one so shortened
endlessly calls:
HA, HA, HA, HA.

Resurrection

When is that time
the world decides we must
be reclaimed to itself?

Our veins re-rivered,
our ganglia vined green,
our mind and eye beasted?

The rock and mud once
fleshed to us restoned?
Our season rolled under?

The ultimate of knowing
made unknown—
except for one fossil like a thumb?

What Cara Wants

Cara woke to the sound of her air-conditioner clunking. She kicked the sheets off, and flung her leg over the back of the couch. She'd begun sleeping on the living room couch when Garrett moved out. Sleeping on the sofa didn't feel like sleeping alone; it felt more like catching an extended nap. Everyone napped on the couch alone, after all. Five months later, and she still slept on the couch. Not because it made her feel less lonely, but because it helped her feel less like a failure. Whenever she tried to sleep in her own bed, the pillow on the right side would taunt her. It called her a loser. It called her a spinster. Cara's mother, a retired therapist, assured her that this was not a sign of psychosis, just an indirect way of berating herself, something Cara did in many forms. Via the personification of everyday objects, however, was her default. And this, her mom said, was the reason that Cara, age 39 years and 363 days, was still single. Not because she was as unattractive as her mirror said, and not because she was as boring as her TV remote said, but because she "lacked fortitude."

Cara swiped the sleeping mask off her face and squinted against the light beaming through the living room window. She peeled

herself off the leather couch (God, she needed to get the aircon fixed), and rushed through her bedroom, averting her eyes from her pillow. She slammed the bathroom door, and unhooked her watch that was hanging around the toilet roll. *You're going to be late, slacker.* It was 11:15. Monday was the only day of the week Cara had off, and she'd like to spend it sleeping in, catching up with her good friend Netflix, and loafing around in ten-year-old sweatpants. She would do exactly if she could, but her mother demanded that she come over for brunch on Mondays. Brunch used to be on Sundays, which is a much more suitable brunch kind of day, but when Cara was promoted from line cook to the sous chef, and Sundays became nonnegotiable working days, Cara's mom moved Sunday brunch to Monday brunch.

After brunch she had a meeting with her boss, Chef Stanley Lee, Chef Patron of East/West, to discuss the last minute details of his party. Tomorrow was Chef Lee's birthday, and every year, he invites his friends to dine with him in his restaurant. This year, with twenty-eight guests coming, Cara was worried they would be overly crowded in the private dining room, so they decided to hold the party in

Michelle Kouzmine

the bar, and close the bar area off from other guests. Cara had worked the event four times already, but this would be the first time she would be in charge. Last year, the former sous chef, Geoff, who thought being invited to sit with Chef Lee and his friends after dessert meant they themselves were now friends, called him, “Lee Lee,” and was fired on the spot. Chef Lee stormed to the back of the house, plucked Cara off the line, where she worked for four years, and promoted her to executive sous chef, effective immediately. Rumor has it, Geoff finally got a job heating up trays of party-sized Stouffer’s meals at Forester’s Semi-Independent Living Compound for Seniors.

Cara’s mom insisted she work on her self-confidence by chanting daily affirmations in the mirror while she got ready in the mornings. Cara dutifully did as she was told, but she spewed out her affirmations in a robotic voice as she washed her face. She knew the words by rote; she had repeated them so many times in the last year that she no longer even listened to herself as she chanted them. They morphed into a meaningless string of tightly knit syllables: Iamunique-IamstrongIam attractiveIamworthyofamenaingfulrelationship. The words became completely indecipherable once she started brushing her teeth. She spat, taking aim at the bullseye of the drain.

Cara crept in the front door of her parents’ home and closed it softly behind her. As usual, her mother had a pair of slippers waiting for her, still convinced at her own mother’s insistence that walking barefoot could cause a plethora of inflictions from bunions to pneumonia. Cara slipped her feet into the fuzzy, teal slippers, and padded down the hall, following the boom of an ESPN commentator’s voice. Her dad kept the volume up high on account of his hearing, which he very loudly insisted was, “just fine, dammit.” She walked up behind him, leaned over the back of his Lazy-Boy, and put her hand on his shoulder. Without taking his eyes off the screen, he reached up and pulled her in tighter and said, “Hey.” The only thing his wife hated more than sports was TV shows about sports, so whenever he was able to break away and catch a few moments of ESPN, he did so in a zombie-like trance.

“Martin! Martin! Are you going to help me here or what?” Cara’s mom called from the kitchen with a voice that could make crows drop from the sky. He either didn’t hear her or chose not to, so Cara came around the lounge and held her hand out for him. She heaved him up, and they and headed for the kitchen.

“Oh! You’re here. I didn’t even hear you come in.” Cara’s mom put down a knife and came at Cara with open arms. “But must you always wear your hair up in ponytail? You’ve got such pretty hair. If you’d only do something with it once in a while.”

Cara remained silent as she returned the hug. Over her mother’s shoulder, she gave her dad an exasperated look. He shrugged. Cara loaded her arms up with a variety of to-go boxes. Cara tells everyone that she owes her cooking career to her mother. Most people understand her statement to mean that her mother taught her to cook. Which she did in a way, because once Cara’s palate developed enough to gag at the smell of charred meat drowning in gelatinous Campbell’s Cream of Mushroom Soup, Cara began cooking to save herself from starvation.

They sat at the table, which Cara’s mom had set with her 1980s floral plates, and drank a sangria mix, poured from a carton that read, “Real Fruit Juice! Just add Wine!” Only they hadn’t added the wine, because Cara’s mom insisted that it, “Tastes the same without it, minus the headache.” Cara did not agree, and neither, she knew, did her father, who kept a flask of cognac in the garage, hidden inside an ancient Hills Brothers coffee can that was full of random nuts and bolts. Cara’s

mom took a sip of her sangria-lite and turned to Cara.

“Here we go,” thought Cara.

“So, honey, do you have something to tell us? Something about a certain fan of your cooking?” Cara shook her head and rolled her eyes. She knew exactly what her mother was referring to, but she was surprised to hear that the Cleveland grapevine stretched all the way to the dreaded suburbs. A few days ago, in a moment of weakness, Cara went home with a regular customer, Barry Taylor, a well-liked local newscaster. Barry was “just,” pause, “so nice!” Cara’s mom, who began randomly showing up at the restaurant and sitting in the seat next to where Barry usually sat, had repeatedly said so. Everyone at work had said so, too. Even the dental hygienist, while scraping plaque from Cara’s back molars, had said that, Barry Taylor was just so,” pause, “nice.” But last Wednesday, Cara had discovered that Barry was actually, pause, a pervert. She looked at her mother and considered telling her that yes, she and Barry had a one night stand and his safe word was, “kryptonite,” just to enjoy the look of shock on her face. Instead she said, “Barry and I just went for coffee.”

Cara prepared herself for the uncut, extended version of Greta McGenner’s I’m Never Going to be a Grandma Show, the My Dreams of Having a Local Celebrity Son-

In-Law are Dead Special Edition. But to her surprise, her mother just shrugged it off. For a second, Cara thought maybe she'd finally given up on nagging her to death, but then she said, "No matter. He's a certified bachelor. Everyone says so."

Cara swallowed a bite of her salad and said, "What the hell is that? A certified bachelor?"

Her mother said, "It means a man who's never been married and doesn't want to."

"I know what it means. What I mean is, why are single men over forty called certified bachelors, but women are called spinsters? It's a double standard. Why can't unmarried women be certified bachelorettes?"

"Don't even think about it, Cara," her mother said pointing her butter knife at Cara's nose. "And besides, you'll never guess who I ran into this morning." Before anyone could even have a chance at guessing, she blurted out, "Garrett!"

Cara felt a zing go up her spine and explode in tiny pops at the base of her brain. She tried, on a regular basis, to not think about Garrett. When they had lived together, Cara had thought of their relationship as a kinship of comfortable, shared silence—a homey togetherness that Cara assumed they'd share forever. It turns out, he had thought she was "just so fucking boring." When Chef Lee promoted her to be the executive sous

chef, and her hours increased, they saw each other mostly in bed, where they mostly just slept. When Cara would crawl into bed at two in the morning, still steamy and wet from the shower, so that she didn't smell of Lime and Cilantro Crusted Snapper, he'd never wake up to notice.

Finally, on a snowy morning, just after New Years, he told her his New Year's resolution was to get a life, and that life didn't include her. As she watched him pack his bags, he accused Cara of accepting the sous chef position, not because it was a goal she had been working on since culinary school, but because she was in love with Chef Lee.

"I'm not in love with him," she said. "I'm just, um, in awe of him."

Garrett tossed his overnight bag over his shoulder. "That's what love is, Cara. Not this cozy little roommate bullshit we got ourselves stuck in." The next evening, while she was at work, he moved out all his stuff and left his key hanging on the key holder by the door. That damn key hazed Cara for weeks, "*You drove him away*," "*That was your last chance*." So she muffled it by locking in the wall safe. It was the only thing she'd ever put in there.

Her mother was hovering over her, spooning a curry sauce over the piece of Mahi Mahi on her plate. "Did you hear me, honey? I

said I ran into Garrett. He's looking good, fit. He asked about you."

She went to tip a second helping of lemon rice on Cara's plate, but Cara swatted the spoon away with her fork. "Of course he asked about me. What else is he going to say to you? The only thing the two of you have in common is that you've both seen me naked."

"Cara! The things you say. It's no wonder."

Cara let her fork drop to her plate with a clang. "No wonder what?"

"It's just a figure of speech. Don't be so touchy."

"No, it's not. It's not just a figure of speech. You were saying that it's no wonder I'm single."

"Don't be ridiculous. You are projecting your own self doubt onto others," she said. "Spinach?"

"No thank you," Cara said, even though she actually did want the spinach.

Her mother walked over to the other side of the table and globbed a dollop of sticky rice on her husband's plate. She straightened up and put her hand on her hip. "If you don't settle down, you'll miss the best part. Since he asked after you, I told him he should drop the restaurant and see you tomorrow. And he thought that it was a wonderful idea. That was his exact word, 'wonderful.'"

Cara stabbed at her fish. "You said what? You recall that he:

a) despises my boss who, you know, like owns the damn restaurant, and b) he basically never came to see me at work when we were actually together, because he hated my job and wanted me to quit."

Her mother, balancing a piece of fish on the end of a spatula said, "And so what? Women have been fighting for fifty years to get out of the kitchen and you sacrifice a perfectly good relationship just to fight your way into one! You're going to be forty in two days, Cara. Two!" She turned to her husband and said, "Mahi Mahi," directly into his ear.

"Mahi Mahi, the fish so nice we named it twice," he said with a smile.

Cara's mom flung the fish onto his plate and said, "Mahi Mahi, this is what you have to say? Mahi Mahi. You're a moron moron. Honesty." She tossed the spatula on the table and huffed off to her room.

Cara's father turned to her and said, "What just happened?"

"Mom happened," answered Cara. They finished eating in silence, and then Cara took her dad by the arm to the garage where they shared a few sips from the coffee can flask.

On the way home, Cara got stuck in traffic, caused by the seemingly unending construction on every highway she'd ever driven on in her life. By the time she got to her

apartment, she had exactly five minutes to get ready and still be on time to meet Chef Lee. Since it was Cara's first time in charge of Chef Lee's birthday party, they were meeting at the corner bar for drinks to go over the final details. Details—Cara was meticulous about them. She kept a small notebook, itemizing every ingredient she'd use for tomorrow's birthday menu, a wine pairing chart, a minute-by-minute schedule for both the front of the house and the back, a seating chart, and backup plans complete with "worst case scenario" options. She couldn't wait to show Chef Lee her playbook. He always complimented her on her fastidiousness.

Cara's hair sizzled as she ran her straightening iron through her hair. Follicle damage be damned; she had like two minutes to get out the door, and her mom was right about one thing, she actually did have nice hair when she bothered to do it. Chef Lee had never seen her outside of the kitchen, and wearing something other than a bloodied chef's jacket. Cara wondered what he would think. She unplugged the straightener, fluffed her hair one last time and sped to the front door.

Just to the left of the door hung a calendar that was opened to May, even though it was already the eleventh of June. For the past eleven days, Cara had been pretending the calendar didn't exist. Her fortieth birthday was only two days

away. When Cara was younger, her mother referred to June as Cara's Birthday Month, and they spent the entire month celebrating—a trip to the zoo on the weekend, a trip to the mall for a new pair of shoes the following weekend, and so on. Cara could remember a time when she considered her mother's attention to be a major perk of being an only child. While trying to shove her sweaty foot into a red stiletto, Cara had to lean against the wall for support and she caught a glimpse of the calendar. *Old! Lonely! Spinster!* On her way out, she ripped the calendar off the wall and held it to her chest as she waited for the elevator. When the elevator doors opened, she bent down, slotted the calendar into the gap between the hallway floor and the elevator floor, and let it go.

She ran into the bar, five minutes late, and was relieved to see that Chef Lee was even later. The coveted, corner high top was available so she snagged it. Cara ordered an array of tapas and a very expensive bottle of Joseph Phelps Insignia that she rationalized she could afford so long as she drank only tap water for the rest of the month. There was no need to wait for Chef Lee before ordering. Cara had devoted the past four years to memorizing his palate and molding her own style of cooking to mirror his. She was an excellent sous chef, so good that even Cara could admit

to it. As the waiter wrote down the order, Cara dug through her purse for her credit card. She asked him to charge the tapas and the wine immediately, and then close the tab. She hoped that if she paid for this portion now, as a birthday gift, she could, without guilt, let him pay for anything else that might be ordered after this first round.

She got her playbook out and flipped through her notes, and then swiveled around and checked her hair in the mirror. She turned her back to the room and arranged her breasts, hoisting them up one at a time, and rearranging her bra so that it held her breasts up higher than before. The chatter in the lounge ratcheted up a few notches, so she spun around to see Chef Lee, doing his thing, working the room. As one of only two Cleveland chefs who regularly appeared on *The Food Network*, he's instantly recognizable by anyone in Cleveland who cared about fine dining. And, every person sitting at this bar, where the a bottle of beer costs three dollars more than the identical bottle next door, cared about Cleveland fine dining. Being recognized and fawned over, Cara knew, is what Chef Lee lived for. Even in East/West, he'd been spending more and more time in the front of the house, leaving the back of the house to Cara. And that's when he showed up at all. Lately he'd been more inter-

ested in being behind a camera than behind the pass.

He spotted Cara, shook a few more hands, and came over to the table. He kissed her once on each cheek, a habit he'd picked up, she supposed, while working in Europe. His pedigree made her swoon, not in a sexual way, no certainly not, but in a chef-envy way. He was half French, half Chinese, and had apprenticed in four of Europe's culinary capitals—the perfect background for becoming a celebrity chef. Cara'd been to Canada once and her mom's "pretty sure" she's Irish and Welsh. Chef Lee took the bottle of Insignia by the neck and tipped it back. "I've definitely taught you a thing or two about good taste."

"Happy birthday. I had the waiter hold off on the pour so you could do the tasting." Cara waved the waiter down and motioned to the bottle. The waiter poured a swig into the glass and Chef Lee swirled the wine around, held the glass up to the light, put his nose in the glass, and then took a long, slow sip. He waited, contemplating a moment longer than the average person would. The waiter, clearly nervous said, "If it's not to your satisfaction—"

Chef Lee gently took the bottle from the waiter and said, "It is very much to my satisfaction. I can take it from here." He smiled as he poured a glass for Cara and

then for himself. The waiter fumbled with his apron strings for a moment, unused to the unorthodox self-service pour. Chef Lee held his glass up to the waiter and said, "Again, thanks," in a voice that tipped from gracious to dismissive. The waiter nodded and scurried off, probably to warn the kitchen that the tapas they were preparing for the corner high-top weren't for just some middle-aged chick waiting for some random guy, but for a middle-aged chick and Chef Stanley Lee.

Cara held her glass up and Chef Lee mimicked her. Cara said, "Chef, I just wanted to say that you've been an incredible mentor. I've learned so much from you. I'm so very grateful for everything you've taught and for the chances you've given me. Happy birthday." Cara, slightly embarrassed by her own effusiveness, broke eye contact and stared into her own glass.

He hesitated for a moment and said, "Cara, you've been without a doubt the best sous chef I've ever had." He brought his glass forward and it dinged against Cara's the stem of her glass reverberated in her hand. She could feel the blood in her capillaries rush to her cheeks and fill them with a pink blush.

She got out her playbook and opened to her notes. "There are a few things I wanted to go over with you for tomorrow."

Chef Lee leaned over and shut the book. "I'm sure you've got it all figured out. Let's not talk shop just now. Let's just enjoy the evening." This made Cara nervous because not only was she not going to get the answers to her questions, but she was going to be judged on just how well she answered those questions for herself.

The tapas arrived, carried by Chef Maria Lupe. Chef Lee introduced Cara to her and announced that Cara would be acting as Executive Chef of East/West for the party. Chef Lupe shook Cara's hand and told her she was very much looking forward to tomorrow night. She then excused herself and instructed the waiter to bring a second bottle of Insignia, on the house. The tapas were excellent. Cara noticed that the jamon with fried potato and egg was slightly over salted. And, just as she expected, Chef Lee said so after his first bite. They ate and drank in mostly silence; Chef Lee considered dining to be a time of worship. He shook out the last drops of wine into Cara's glass and ordered a round of Orujo De Hierbas.

Before she even started on her Orujo De Hierbas, Cara was having a hard time finding a point of focus on Chef Lee's face. His nose seemed to move independently from the rest of his features. He said, "Cara, I have some very exciting news. It's something I've been working on for awhile now,

but I haven't said anything in case it didn't go through." Cara felt herself sober up in a snap. "I was approached by an investor, a restaurateur, to open a second location in Manhattan. The final papers were signed today; it's a go."

Cara slammed her glass down on the table. "Chef! That's amazing. That's wonderful." She brought her hands up to her cheeks. "I know I'm gushing, but I'm just so excited for you."

"Yeah, it's pretty awesome, actually." Chef Lee downed his drink and motioned for the waiter to bring another round. "The space is spectacular, in a prime spot with tons of foot traffic. I have full reign of the menu. And I can do more a lot more TV from New York than I can from Cleveland." The waiter brought two more drinks, and Chef Lee pushed the liquor to Cara, who was still sipping at her first round. "And here's where you come in—" He stopped talking to start on his drink. Cara was so excited and nervous that her stiletto tapped rhythmically against the foot rest of her stool. Did he want to take her to New York? No, she didn't think so. He did just call her Executive Chef for tomorrow's party. It's likely he'll announce tomorrow that she'll act as Executive Chef for East/West. Chef Lee leaned his face against his glass and said, "I'm going to need you this week more than I've ever needed you. I know you requested

your birthday off, but I need you to come in. Big changes are coming. I'm going to be back and forth a lot at first, and then I'm going to base out of New York. I need to make sure East/West is capable of thriving without me."

Cara said, "I can make it happen. Don't worry one bit about it. You can trust me. I won't let you down, promise."

Chef Lee paid the bill and stood up to leave. "I know you wouldn't. You never could." He smiled and held an arm out for her. "Let's share an Uber."

They pulled up to the front of Cara's apartment building, and instead of saying goodbye, Chef Lee said, "You know, Cara, maybe we should go over some of the finer points of tomorrow's dinner service." And that's how Chef Lee ended up in her bed. He fucked exactly like he'd been running East/West lately, dropping in quickly for an appearance, and letting Cara do all the work. She'd always imagined that he'd be an experienced and attentive lover. He gave off that vibe—that swagger. But afterwards, when she hadn't even come close to finishing, he got up, scratched his backside and announced he needed to use "the loo."

Chef Lee came out of the bathroom and rummaged around in the dark for his clothes. As he stumbled, putting on his underwear, he

said, “I should get going. You have an early morning tomorrow, and a late night, for that matter.” Cara sat up, pulling the sheet up around her chest and watched him get dressed. Out of his element, and in her bedroom, he looked nothing like a suave, celebrity chef. He looked like a small, silly man in tacky, red, teeny-weeny undies. On his way out the door he called out, “Thanks for the birthday gift.” She hoped he was talking about the wine, but she was pretty sure he wasn’t. She fell back onto the mattress and curled up in the fetal position. Only after she heard the click of the front door did the sensation of dread begin to solidify in her stomach. What was work going to be like tomorrow? Or for forever for that matter? Would he have less respect for her? She had only a few hours to sleep before she had to get to the kitchen in time to oversee the early morning deliveries. She knew she was facing a sleepless night, which, in turn, doubled down on the dread. She turned over, searching for a cool spot in the sheets. Her pillow said, “*Wow, way to fuck shit up!*” She grabbed it and stumbled to couch wearing only a sheet.

The next morning, her eyes burned like someone had stubbed a cigarette out in each socket. Her head felt like her brain was swelling against her skull, and she had to fight the urge to puke every five

minutes or so. The fishmonger, of course, of fucking course, couldn’t source the tuna (this was not predicted in the “worst case scenario section” of the playbook.) He did, however, just get a huge, flown-in shipment of Maine lobster. “Great, she said. I’ll take them.” After the fishmonger left, she ran around the kitchen, swearing in her head and trying to come up with a new dish that would pair up well with the wine she’d already ordered for the tuna dish and compliment the rest of the menu. Lobster and tuna were two very different flavor profiles. She decided to poach the lobster claws in a butter infused with lemon grass, and hope to god the flavors didn’t over power the lobster’s delicate character. The tails she’d work into a risotto as an additional main dish on the al a carte menu for the other guests. She’d need to have new menus printed up. Not to mention that shelling and poaching lobsters on low heat, in butter, is a lot more labor intensive than slicing up some sushi grade tuna. Her plan to receive deliveries and go straight back home for a nap was kaput.

Just after 6:00, the hostess called and said Chef Lee and a few of his friends had already arrived. There was a separate street entrance to the bar, but Chef Lee always came in from the back, through the kitchen. Clearly, she thought, he was avoiding her. Cara pushed the thought aside and got to work. The

first orders practically flew over the pass. Cara loved when the kitchen seemed to run in tune to a shared heartbeat--those evenings where her entire staff was in sync with one another. Cara stepped back for a moment and watched. It looked like a complicated, well-rehearsed dance. Of course, this level of coordination was easy at 6:30, if they could keep rhythm up past the 8:30 rush, it would be a triumph.

The open-plan kitchen featured a long stainless steel pass, separating it from the dining room. The left side of the pass dipped down to a standard bar level, with four bar stools for guests who either pay a lot of money for, or are invited to the Chef's Experience. These guests were served small tasting plates of all of the night's offerings, directly by the chef. The only Chef's Experience guest that night was, surprise, and thank you mom, Garrett. Cara was immersed in plating when he shuffled in and sat down. Chef Lee had wanted his party to begin with a lamb sweetbread amuse-bouche, which were served topped with a fingertip-sized dollop of crème fraîche and single sliver of fresh tarragon. Only Cara and her go-to line cook, Steve, had steady enough hands to make each serving identical. So, by the time Garrett had already finagled his way over to the Chef's Experience bar, claiming he was Cara's boyfriend, it was too late for Cara to turn him away.

She walked over the chef's bar and slid an amuse-bouche to Garrett. "You won't like it. It's organs."

Garrett picked up the porcelain spoon, smelled the sweetbreads, and set it back down. "It's nice to see you, too."

Frannie, the pastry chef, came over to help stack the amuse-bouche plates on trays. "Thank you, Frannie," Cara said. Then she turned to Garrett and plastered on an exaggerated smile. "Why the hell are you lying to the staff, and saying you're my boyfriend?"

"It's only lying by omission. I just omitted the word, 'was.' And besides, your mom said—"

"You know what she's like for Hell's sake. And besides, you hardly ever showed up while we were actually together, so why the sudden interest?"

Garrett rolled the sweetbread around the spoon, inspecting it with a look of equal parts curiosity and repulsion, like a child poking a slug with a twig. "I miss you."

"Suddenly, after five months of silence, you miss me?"

Cara excused herself to check on orders. Chef Lee's first course was nearly ready, and the staff would need a clear pass to handle the output. Table nine's order was stalled under the lights, because Steve had burned a hanger steak that had been ordered well done, and the table's entire order had to

be re-fired. “Who orders hanger steak well done?” He asked as an apology. Cara couldn’t condemn him because it was a crime to order a well-done steak no matter what the cut. She grilled the steak herself, and told Steve to push out Chef Lee’s apps before doing anything else. They were beginning to fall behind.

By the time they got table nine out to the dining room, the tickets were piling up. Nell and Jaimie, the most experienced servers on staff, were supposed to serve only Chef Lee’s party, but Cara had to send them out into the dining room early to help expedite the orders that were running behind. She kept her eyes of the door, willing them to come back into the kitchen. Cara ran a steak and potatoes plate over to Garrett’s table. “This,” she said, “you’ll actually eat.” The doors swung open, and Cara had half a second of fleeting relief before she saw Chef Lee stride in and sit next to Garrett. Of course, he had to walk in right when they were struggling to make up lost time. And why not just sit next to Garrett?

Chef Lee turned to Garrett and offered his hand, which Garrett shook. “You’re Garrett, right? I think you’ve been in before. Once.”

Garrett pulled his hand back. “Yes, Cara invited me for the Chef’s Experience.”

While Cara pretended to be too engrossed in plating to notice

Chef Lee, Chef Lee said, “Hello, Cara. I’ve got to say, it’s quite brave of you to invite your boyfriend in on such an important night. How are things holding up?”

She knew he could see exactly how things were holding up. The staff was running around so fast that the boy on salad prep ran into a waitress, and a giant jar of olives crashed to the ground, and olives were rolling to all corners of the kitchen—mini booby traps that could take someone down with one wrong step. The cleaning lady was trying to sweep them up, weaving in and out of legs with a broom and dustpan, but every time someone moved, they kicked an olive spinning in another direction. “Everything’s fine, Chef,” Cara said.

“We’ll see,” he said as he stood up. “Nice to see you, Garrett.” He saluted Cara. “Good luck, Captain.”

Once Chef Lee was out of earshot, she said, “Are you trying to get me fired? Seriously? Why would you tell my boss that I invited you?”

“But you did invite me. Many times.”

“Yes, when we were together.” Over Garrett’s shoulder, Cara watched a waitress carry an overloaded, and wobbly tray of appetizers, and thread herself through the swinging doors, just in time.

“I didn’t realize there was an expiration date.”

Cara huffed off to oversee the plating of Chef Lee's lobster claws. She wiped the edges of a few dishes with a clean towel and let the word, "captain," roll around in her brain. Was that a hint? She really didn't have time to think of it. They got the next four tables out quickly while Chef Lee's table had their lobster claws. It was driving Cara crazy that she couldn't see the party from the kitchen. They plated the next dish for the party, and sent out the first desserts of the night to three of the early tables.

Cara took a bowl of lobster risotto over to Garrett. "Here, I know you eat lobster."

Garrett patted his stomach. "Thanks. I'm getting kind of full though. I don't know how people do it, sit here and eat all night."

"Oh, it just takes practice." Cara smiled. It used to be a point of amusement for their friends to watch them eat. Cara could eat an eight course meal without so much as burping, meanwhile, Garrett was more of a nibbler.

Garrett took a bite. "It is really good, though."

"Thanks, you want me to move you on to desserts. You know you get like five of those, too, right?"

"Maybe we could share?"

A line cook came running at Cara with a spoon full of miso/ginger sauce. "Quick!" She took the spoon, tasted it and gave an ap-

proving nod. She turned to Garrett, "Share? Do I not look busy to you?"

The back of the house and the front had fallen back into a good rhythm, and food was going out in a timely manner. Nell and Jaimie were relaying positive comments from the party. Cara could feel the tension begin to wane as the pace slowed down. It was funny that way, how one minute it seems like the kitchen's a ticking time bomb, and the next, the urgency fades away, and the staff falls into a routine. Cara chugged a bottle of water and took a desert platter to Garrett.

"Technically, I'm supposed to bring you these one at a time. But, it's been a little crazy here tonight."

Garrett ordered a coffee from Jaimie and sniffed at a spoon full of coconut foam. "Cara, do you ever miss me?"

"Yes," she said, "sometimes." Nell took Cara aside and told her it was time for her curtain call.

Garrett looked at his watch. "It's your birthday in two hours and five minutes. We could celebrate?"

Cara said, "I'm not going to get out of here for awhile."

"I can wait. I've got nowhere to be."

Cara went to the employee bathroom and did the best she could to make herself presentable. She put on a fresh white chef's jacket and hoped she didn't smell of lobster. She walked into the room, so nervous that her ears were ringing.

The staff was clearing away the main table and the guests were scattered around the bar area, lounging to recover from over eating and over drinking. Chef Lee was sitting on a small couch with his arm around a woman in a tight, blue dress. When he saw Cara standing in the middle of the room, he held up a glass of what appeared to be grappa up and said, "Ladies and Gentleman, Chef Cara McGenners." The guests clapped for a moment, and Cara shook hands with most of the room.

Chef Lupe, whom Cara hadn't noticed was in the room, came up to her and said, "That was a very successful service. You did an incredible job." Then before she could even reply, Chef Lee took her by the wrist and guided her over to a small table near the bar where a group of men sat, eyeing her. Chef Lee dropped her hand, took a sip of his drink, and said, "Cara, here's the new inner sanctum. This is Carl. He's my new business partner, the one who's financing the New York restaurant." Cara nodded and shook his hand. "This is Avery, he'll basically be you but in New York." As he spoke, the girl in the blue dress came up behind him and draped her arms around his neck. "And this," he motioned to a ridiculously young man who stood up and offered his hand to Cara, "is who you'll be working with, Aaron."

Aaron shook Cara's hand firmly. "The service was great. Really spot on."

"Thanks. It's nice to meet you, too," she said as she wondered if Aaron was even old enough to have gained enough experience to be the new sous chef.

"I've got to say, you really impressed me tonight. If that's the kind of service you can pull off on your own, imagine the services we could run together," Aaron said as he turned to Chef Lee and added, "You're right. I do have the best sous chef in town."

A ringing in Cara's ears rapidly intensified until it was a full on wha-wha-wha, like the warning siren for duck-and-cover drills. Cara wasn't sure if she even excused herself, but she turned and walked out, straight back to the employee bathroom. She went to the sink and splashed her face with water.

As she dried her face with a paper towel, she heard Chef's voice. "You're upset." Cara couldn't tell if it was a statement or a question and she really didn't care. "Is it Elna or because I'm not taking you to New York?"

"Elna? Who the fuck is Elna?"

Chef Lee leaned against the sink. "My girlfriend. You just met her."

Cara laughed. "No, I didn't just meet her, because you actually

never introduced us. You just let her stand there feeling ignored.” Cara took a moment to digest the fact that she felt a little sorry for Elna, good luck to her. But, Aaron, well she’d like to claw his damn eyes out. “And I had no illusions of going to New York. But I thought you were promoting me to executive chef of East/West.”

Chef Lee sighed. “You thought you’d be head chef?”

“Yes! Dammit, yes, I did. You said, just yesterday, that I was the best sous chef you’ve ever had.”

“And you are. But that doesn’t mean you’re executive chef material. You’re just not that person. You’re an excellent sous chef. You take direction. You mimic my style and you do an amazing job at it. But you aren’t an executive chef. You’re a pleaser. That’s who you are and what you do. There’s nothing wrong with that. It’s great, in fact. Embrace it.” He held his arms out to her as if he was inviting her to come in for an actual embrace. She slapped him across the face and told him quietly that she quit.

Back in the kitchen, Garrett was half asleep, alone at the chef’s bar, balancing his head in his hand. Cara knocked on the bar. “Coo coo, wake up!” He shot up, startled. “Let’s go celebrate,” she said.

The night air was the exact temperature of Cara’s bare arms. Garrett’s car was just around the corner, but they decided to walk

to Cara’s apartment, four blocks away. Cara needed the walk to calm down, and sort out her head, and Garrett needed to walk to wake himself up. They asked each other a few polite questions but trying to start the conversation was like trying to start a rusty, old lawnmower. Cara spent most of the walk questioning if they were sharing a kindred silence, or if they were indeed, “just so fucking boring.”

Having Garrett in the apartment made it feel smaller somehow. She wondered what it felt like to him, to be a guest in the space he’d lived in for three years. Cara excused herself to take a shower, and when she came out, he was asleep in the bed they’d once shared. She slunk into bed, trying not to wake him. She closed her eyes and folded her body into the space between his knees and chest--a perfect fit. She hadn’t slept in her own bed since he’d left, and she foolishly thought that having him back in her bed would lull her to sleep. But, her mind was racing from one thought to the next. This is what she’d been wanting, right? To have Garrett back? To sleep in bed, with her body warming against him?

She woke him up by nibbling on his chin, his weak spot. They made the same love they always had—mechanical, back-to-the-basics sex. Afterwards, Garrett fetched her glass of water without her even asking. He snuggled with

her, nuzzling his nose in her hair. But still, Cara couldn't sleep. She was thinking about how she'd had more sex in the last week than in the last half a year. She'd had sex with three men, two of whom she thought she was in love with. But the only time she came was with Barry "Call Me Superman" Taylor. She couldn't decide if that was sad or funny, but she knew it was something.

Garrett began to snore, and it felt like he was sucking all the air in the room up his nose. His arm, wrapped around her, felt like a boa constrictor. She was sure she would suffocate. She sat up in bed and watched him sleep and felt nothing. She didn't love him. She never did. She was a chef, and he was a man with no appetite. He was a financial journalist, and she didn't even know what an IRA really was. They were silent together, not out of comfort, but out of a true lack of anything to say. If they stayed together, they'd turn into her parents. Oh, please, God, no.

At 6:00, Garrett's iPhone alarm buzzed. Cara feigned sleep. She didn't move until he left, not even when he bent over and whispered, "Happy birthday." She'd call him later to tell him to not come over tonight, or ever.

It was her fortieth birthday. The day she'd been dreading for years. She imagined the cold, heavy press of her duvet to be the

arms of spinsterhood, holding her tightly, paralyzing her in a fetal position. But gradually, her body and the sheets found a compromise in temperature and she relaxed. And then, like a cat in the sun, she stretched, every muscle of her body, reaching for the space around her, and her spine popped, one vertebra at a time, until each bone was rearranged and settled. And then, she let her body sink deeper into the mattress. Slowly, she reached out with her arms and her legs and her fingers and her toes, so that she splayed her body out over the entirety of the bed, owning it, pressing into it, possessing all of it, alone, and said aloud, "certified bachelorette." She slept in her bed for hours and hours.

Traces

I pulled the rental Camry into the parking lot of the mini-mall where Jerry's Pizza sat next to the shut-down bowling alley and what used to be the Chinese restaurant and told myself that at least I'd be getting some real pizza today. Connecticut Pizza. Italian Pizza. They didn't make pizza like that in LA.

Seven months after we lost our father to cancer, we were meeting again, Roger, Janey and I, to sort through the arrangements for our mother's funeral. Who loses both of their parents so close together? Who loses both of their parents so young? I thought they'd at least be around to see a grandkid or two.

Mom had been sick ever since Dad died seven months before. Him: pancreas. Her: lungs. They say sadness holds itself in the lungs. Her illness took us by surprise and took her soon after.

The fact of it wasn't registering with me—her being gone. A dull thud lodged in my chest when Mr. Raney called. I had nowhere to put it. When I hung up the phone, I sat there, wanting to cry, because that's what you're supposed to do. That's what I did when Dad died. But with my Mom, it was just this heavy, black, immovable rock.

I got out of the new-car-smelling rental into the misting gray air. My leather jacket was too hot in the car and too hot for the bizarrely warm spring wind. I stepped across the sidewalk that ran in front of the

stores, and everything—the sounds of traffic where Route 66 dumped off into our small city, the rattle of wet leaves succumbing to the wind and skittering across the parking lot, the smell of the wet pavement and pizza and the overall gloom—took me back to a dozen different memories all at once and unmoored me completely.

I opened the door and the warm pizza-dry air blew out. Fortunately, the guy behind the counter was a high school kid I couldn't possibly know, so I wouldn't have to answer any questions, take any more condolences. I ordered a pie with everything (onions, red peppers, green peppers, garlic, sausage and pepperoni) and a pitcher of Coke.

I felt like a total dipshit sitting alone, facing the counter in a booth, nothing for me and the teenager to do but stare each other down. I musta sat there fifteen minutes, the pie still not ready and nobody coming in. Everything felt awkward and off and wrong.

Finally, a hunched kid-shaped figure came up to the front door, fighting against the wind. I thought it was a twelve-year-old, but it was Janey, bringing a wet, warm-cold breeze through the door with her. Her head rose out of her coat like a turtle's, and she smiled when she saw me. She always looked rosy-cheeked, gamine and immediate. I could be having my thinnest day and Janey would waltz in, all five foot two of her self-confident,

fragile, short-haired, boob-free self, slide into a booth next to me, kiss me on the cheek with her cold nose and make me feel like an elephant. Janey had inherited mom's shape and size while Dad's height and hulk had come to me. I loved her, don't get me wrong. But I spent my life thinking it would be easier to be Janey. She always had a boyfriend and the coolest bunch of artsy friends.

She said, "Meliiiiiiiiinda," in her accustomed sisterly way. She slid out of my side of the booth and into the one opposite me and looked at me intensely, mischievous blue eyes snapping. With Janey, you were always let in on a wonderful secret—hers. "So? What'dja order?" Sometimes I'd mimic her adorable delivery, try it out with my friends, but it was only ever a fraud.

"Garbage pizza and a pitcher of Coke."

She squealed, making joyful little fists with her hands. She could get away with the most infantile gestures.

She said, "Any sign of Dodger?"

I said, "Don't start that crap early. We've got a lot of business to get through."

As suddenly as it had appeared, all her sparkle was gone and she welled up with tears. And her welling up brought a lump to my throat. This was going to be a long fucking weekend.

Fortunately, the reedy, pimply voice behind the counter said, "Order up! One garbage pizza, pitcher."

I brought the pitcher, plates, napkins, forks and knives back to the table. Janey brought the pizza. We sat down and Roger came in.

Life had killed Roger long before this weekend, but he looked especially doleful with his droopy moustache, thinning hair that he'd let grow too long and his seventies beige trench coat. I had become a little LA, Janey was all New York with her career in photography and loft living, but Roger had gone 100 percent 1970s Middletown. Nothing of him smacked of the present—not from his hair down to his gold and blue diamond-patterned tie.

He scooped into the booth next to Janey, dwarfing her with his presence and his mood.

"I don't know how you can eat," he said.

Roger had inherited Mom's ability to make you feel guilty in five words flat.

Janey turned sideways, sat cross-legged and, defying angles and possibilities, pulled the biggest, messiest piece off the pizza, folded it in half and ate it in enormous bites, challenging Roger to say anything.

It would have been funny, if it had any effect. But Roger sighed with a groan, reached down into his ever-present briefcase and pulled out a sheaf of papers. The fact that he wouldn't bite, wouldn't fight Janey with even a glare, was a solid tip-off that this weekend was going to suck.

He talked, I ate. The sauce here was unbelievable, tangy, sweet, bright, just the right amount of oregano and garlic. And the crust? Olive oil, crisp, not too floury, but soft enough to fold. The onions and peppers slid off, getting all over my chin, but I didn't care. It was the best pizza I'd had in months. I sucked down coke.

All the while we ate—like this was the last good thing to eat in the world—Roger droned. We needed to sign papers to give him the right to put the house on the market. We needed to sign papers to release our mother’s body for cremation. We needed to sign papers to make the papers that we signed valid.

I was grateful to Roger for taking over all this nonsense, but it took us two hours to finish and we were all getting cranky. I had one too many pieces of pizza and something in the coke made Janey downright annoying. She squatted in her seat, knees up around her ears, haranguing Roger. “Dodger, you need to get out more. We need to get rid of that mustache, right, Mel? We get rid of that mustache, we could get him some babes...”

I didn’t see any amount of changes in Roger getting him babes.

He said, “Janey, if you could just stay with us a little longer, I’ve got some more papers and we need to figure out who’s doing the readings.”

It was too soon to be doing all of this again.

Janey’s eyes lit up. I was hoping they lit up with a solution for something or other, but she said, “Roger. You *absolutely* have to shave your head.” She looked at me with a fiendish gleam, “Y2K combover. Am I right? It’d take years off.”

Roger reddened and turned to Janey to argue when something caught his attention at the door. He looked up and his face went helpless. Not a good look on Roger, and not one that happened often.

Janey pivoted around like the troll she was, and her curious look changed suddenly, flaming into a glare. She never thought about how her face appeared to others, but I knew that whoever she was glaring at was probably squirming by now.

Roger turned to me and said, “It’s okay, I got you.”

Of course that could mean only one thing. Marco. *Oh, God.*

I planted my eyes on the table in front of me and didn’t look up. I sensed him as he walked by, smelled his Paco Rabanne, and my stomach contracted, clenching around the grease and meat. To my horror, he stopped at our table.

“Hey, guys. Didn’t expect to see you here.”

Janey rearranged her body, and I heard her lips slide over her teeth into a forced smile. I knew exactly how smarmy and off-putting that smile was: the one she reserved for those who weren’t welcome, or those who had done her wrong. “Hi, Marco. Family meeting. You’ll excuse us, of course.”

When I heard that, I could’ve taken her little body up in my arms and squeezed her into a hug.

But Marco wasn’t moving. He said, “Melinda.”

It had been six years, but the old scar at the base of my stomach burned back to life at the smell of his crap-ass cologne.

He said, “Can we talk?”

Roger spoke up this time in his jerky take-charge voice, now made protective and noble. “Family meeting.”

Marco blew air out between his teeth, and I could smell his breath, so

familiar, so filled with my first sexual awakening and my first knowledge of real fear. And he is chasing me down Hammonasset beach again. It is the off-season. Cold and dark. No one near, no escape.

It took me a breakup, a stalking, a restraining order, and finally moving away to college to get away from him.

Marco said, “Gotcha,” and walked past us and ordered some pizza. The tightness in my throat released a weak *ohh* that I hoped he didn’t hear. Roger packed up his papers and without a word, he and Janey walked me out of the restaurant like a couple of body guards. One was too small to take on a twelve-year-old and the other looked like a washed-up private eye with his blown pizza belches and his bad tie and trench coat. But they *gave* a shit about me.

Roger muttered “creep” as he unlocked his car, and Janey rubbed my back a little. Nothing else was said.

When Dad died, we had all stayed at the house to be with Mom. But staying there without Mom was unthinkable. Janey and I got adjoining hotel rooms at the Motor Inn. Roger went back to his apartment in Hartford.

I was planning on a long bath, some cable TV and sleep. I got the bath and climbed into bed, but the cable didn’t do it for me. There were shows I would ordinarily be into, but nothing was sticking. Even a *Law & Order* I’d never seen before couldn’t cut through the noise in my head. Mom wasn’t ever supposed to die. There was that

part. Marco. There was another. I told myself I’d avoided him for six years, so he couldn’t touch me now. Maybe he’d evened out or gone on medication. How did he look? I hadn’t even looked at him.

At the time, senior year, I didn’t know what I was in for—all I knew was that a cute guy with an extremely cool classic Mercedes had asked me out. I was taken in by his flashing smile, brown eyes, and quick sense of humor. And the fact that he wanted to be with *me*. To hang out with me. To *date* me. In high school, boys didn’t want to date me. They wanted me for their best friend or sister. But Marco wooed me. He showed up with flowers. He paid for lunch. He took me home and deposited me on the front stoop with a lingering but chaste kiss on the lips. He was flattering, charming and things were ideal for exactly one weekend.

By the second weekend, it became clear that this particular dreamboat had other shit going on. Obsessive tantrums about something someone had said at school. Rumors of a fistfight at a party. A mysterious hole in his bedroom wall. Insistent jealousy. Driving so fast down Route 17 in his Mercedes that I thought we’d both crash. So long ago.

It was just a chance running into him. It was a small town. He was probably back visiting his folks. He probably still had folks. At least Mom wasn’t here to worry.

I wish Mom was here to worry. I couldn’t think about the house without her in it. The kitchen. My old room. The books. Our wooden farmhouse dining table. What I wanted

to keep. What was too big to take. The things we couldn't sell. The things we couldn't take.

Tomorrow we'd go through it all. Fortunately, Roger had hired a Guy to help deal with things, break it down, sell stuff on EBay. We had done our first sweep when Dad died. I didn't think there was much left in that house that I wanted. That journal—the one up under the eaves written the summer Marco was stalking me. That had to go. Maybe we could have a ritualistic burning. I'd gotten over that. Years ago. But his face, when he was worked up so much he almost looked evil—that night on the beach—that wouldn't leave me. His voice when he went on about how we were meant to be together. How we were more important than anything, school, college, family. How he would “show them.” I didn't know who *them* was but whatever he wanted to *show* them sounded terrifying. It was something I didn't want to see.

I sat up and turned the light on again. I was sweating.

It must have been hearing his voice that brought my guard down. And his cologne brought back that night in Hammonasset in horrifying detail. That night when I wondered if I could hide in the dunes until Marco drove off, or how far I could run before he caught me.

I knocked on the door between our rooms, and Janey musta had the same idea, because it opened right away. We were embarrassed, like a romantic comedy pair.

She said, “Hi,” at the same time I did. Face squinched up to show

she was being careful, she asked, “You okay?”

Man, my sibs were amazing, to remember how Marco wrecked me so many years ago. I nodded and shrugged. I said, “I'll be all right. Thanks.”

She pulled me in and hugged me so tight I was suddenly aware of how giant I was and how strong she was—boa constrictor strong.

She buried her face in my shoulder and snuffed. “I can't do it again, Mel, I just can't.”

Oh. She wasn't asking about Marco at all. Of course she wasn't. Our mother died. Mom.

Time to crack into the minibar.

The next morning I stopped at Dunkin' Donuts while Janey met Roger at the house so he wouldn't feel abandoned. We had talked until two the night before, and while I wanted to kill her a couple of times, and we had one fight about a memory of a birthday party we couldn't agree on, overall, I'd say it was a good thing we stayed up. But the three bottles each of minibar wine left quite a headache and a brilliantly painful fuzz that even my giant LA sunglasses couldn't assuage.

The sun was bright this morning, giving the town an entirely different fresh-washed cast, an overexposed version of the place, its crappy buildings pushed up against the woods. The winter tree branches were swelling with fresh buds and the air was a little colder, but the sun shone warm in patches.

I pulled up to the Dunkin' Donuts—I hadn't been there much as

a kid, my parents weren't really donut people. I got out and went in feeling oddly grown up. The girl tending the counter expected me to pick out certain types of donuts. Apparently "a dozen" wasn't descriptive enough for her. I looked at the rows of crullers, cake donuts and pink frosted puffballs, my head hurting. Boston Kreme, did Janey hate or love it? I ended up getting a bunch of what I thought was the right choice and made the beleaguered girl pick the last three. I sipped the coffee, burning my tongue and as she loaded up the last cups for me, I turned around and saw a familiar vintage Mercedes pull up. How could he still have the same car? The same leather jacket? I was trapped behind the glass window, nowhere to run as he walked toward the front door.

The girl poured the second coffee, and the box remained open on the counter. I breathed deeply. I was bigger than this. Six years had passed. Why did he want to talk to me? What could he possibly have to say? I would have a short, breezy conversation with him like a grown up. He had to be over it by now. He was probably just buying donuts anyway.

I sipped my coffee nonchalantly and re-burned my freshly burnt tongue. I tried not to wince and gave a nose nod to Marco as he walked in. I pretended to continue sipping my coffee and tried my best to look bored.

"Melly." I liked it when he first called me that. On our first weekend. It meant he knew me in a special way. Later it irritated me and made me think of *Gone With the Wind*.

Now it just brought on another sweat of fear.

The weekend he wrote "Die, Bitch" on the front door to my parents' house with lipstick and strewed dead roses on the porch, I thought I was busted—that my parents would know I'd let this monster into our lives. My carelessness was exposed. But I was up early and for some inexplicable reason, I went out to get the newspaper before anyone else. Fear and a deep, newfound shame spread over me as I gathered up the roses with so many damn petals and slipped into the kitchen to throw them out. Mom was up getting coffee, and I handed her the paper. I remember she was surprised and pleased, like when I'd give her a card when I was small. I remember knowing it was an expression I hadn't seen in a while, and I remember how hard that knowledge slammed up against the dead roses I shoved into the trashcan. I felt too many things at once. She was surveying the headlines when I slipped the *Wind* out from under the sink.

Mom wasn't here anymore—at least she wouldn't know that Marco was still a problem. I kept looking at the donuts through the glass under the counter and said as steadily as I could, "Hi, Marco. How've you been?"

"Good. Good. Hey, I heard you moved to lalaland. Hollywood. Big movie girl now, huh?" He had this manic energy in his voice: there was an edge he was standing on and the slightest crossbreeze would send him over it.

I didn't answer. I certainly wouldn't tell him I'd just lost my job.

Hollywood has no patience for parental death or settling estates.

"I'm working up in Boston now. Law firm. Yep. I'm a partner. In the law firm. Peters, Brown and Brice."

His last name wasn't in that list.

"That's *great*." I tried to make it sound meaningful, but it fell out of my mouth and onto the floor with a clank.

"Yep. Have a kid you know. A boy."

"That's *great*." This was going to be okay. He's got a kid—that means a different woman to punish with his obsessive craziness, right? I asked, "How old is he?"

"Five. He lives with his mother."

I looked at him. I couldn't *not*. Not looking at him was a bigger deal. He bounced on the balls of his feet and his face looked the same, only hollowed out, like someone had vacuum packed him in an older person's skin. He had a tattoo on his neck. Who in Connecticut gets a tattoo on his neck? Boston, I guess. Big, bad Boston. I tried to read the tattoo, but it was obscured by his coat collar.

He wasn't looking me in the eye. This turned the tables a little. This puny shell of a person didn't have any hold over me.

I said, "So what are you doing in town?" I would have a civil conversation and I would be able to *move on*. Let all this shit go.

"Well, it's funny you should ask that. See..." He stepped up to the counter and said, "Coffee and a cruller." I tried to think of every single horrible answer he could come up with but nothing prepared me for what he said.

"I missed your Dad's funeral. Wanted to make sure I was here for your mother's. I'm so sorry, Melly. I wanted to be here for you."

I turned to the counter, where my box was ready. My stomach was lead and my chest hurt. I couldn't breathe. I had to breathe or I couldn't get out. Everything was getting white and spinny.

The girl said, "Thirteen seventy-five and your coffees."

I had to breathe or I couldn't get out.

"Miss? Are you all right?"

I breathed.

I handed her a twenty and waited numbly while she gave me my change. Breathe in. Breathe out. Sloooow breathe in. Breathe out. My chest still hurt, but the whiteness was going away. The coffees were in a caddy—I just had to get around him. I picked up the dozen in one hand, the coffees in another. I stopped and looked him steadily in his eyes, which rose to meet my gaze.

He didn't look as strong, that's for sure. There was an uncertainty in his expression. But I knew how quickly uncertainty could turn to anger, and perhaps I was merely witnessing the ravages wrought by emotional imbalance. I had to look him in the eyes or he wouldn't hear me. I said, "I'm sorry. It's a private funeral. Thank you so much for thinking of us." *Keep it off me*. "But we're just doing family this week."

He was trying to work out something to say—the anger was there, but weaker somehow, sadder. He was working his mouth when I moved past him and out the door. I didn't look back as I got into the rental, rested the

coffees on the floor and put the donuts on the seat. But as I pulled out, I heard his engine start up. I willed him not to follow me.

Our house was three stories, clapboard and dark green with a peaked roof and a concrete front porch surrounded with waist-high clapboard walls. I always liked that we lived on Pine Street and had a pine-colored house.

The wet from the prior days' mist, the rotting leaves and the green-and-dirt smell of early spring filled my nose and I breathed it deeply into my lungs as I mounted the stairs. I needed Mom so bad. She'd make it all okay, pull me back from the dark ugly of Marco. She'd remind me who I was. I tried to stay the kid-me—the me with mom right inside—for as long as I could before I opened the door to do what we had to do.

I was half terrified that Marco would show up at the funeral. It wasn't *really* only family. But there were only about fifty people we wanted there, and those people were *like* family, so technically, I hadn't lied, right? I was so worn out from the sorting of the stuff, from the coming of the Guy who pawed over the books, dust collectors and knick-knacks my parents had collected over the years.

I watched the Guy for about ten minutes as he picked up and turned over the samurai sword, the glass-domed clock, the mahogany wooden alligator, the first edition books, the colonial jailer's lock, the metal Chinese puzzle, the nineteenth century inlaid writing desk, the elephant tusk and the

glass paperweights. I knew where my parents had gotten each one of those items, and I was glad that I didn't have to decide their worth or where they went.

Janey, Roger, and I didn't say much as we sorted through things. There was too much stuff to have the reminiscing and conversations over each object that I'd imagined before we started. I thought the day would be a chance for us to bond. To catch up. But instead it was room by room, box by box, truncated questions: "Janey? Snow White doll?"

"Goodwill."

"Roger, baseball mitt?"

A long look, but nothing said, then a shake of the head.

We were grim. Quiet. Going over the remnants, articles and artifacts of our childhood. When I found mom's reading glasses, I took a moment to go upstairs to cry. I sat on my old mattress; books in boxes on the floor surrounded me, and I stared at Mom's glasses, turning them over. Her absence was so huge, the pain so real, it was clearly time. But the tears wouldn't come. I huffed and tried; perhaps if I could squeeze out a few tears, the rest would follow. But nothing.

After about twenty minutes, I left her glasses on the mattress for someone else to figure out and went back downstairs. I got the feeling Roger's bathroom break and Janey's enormously long trip to the attic were similar. Of course Janey came back with eyes reddened from weeping, and I burned with another layer of jealousy. She made grieving look—if not good—

at least right. I don't know if Roger ever cried.

At the end of the day, I had two cardboard boxes full of items, including Gram's brownie camera, one glass paperweight of which I was fond, two or three books and a photo album. A family survival kit. It was the house itself that would be most painful to part from.

At the church the next day, I sat with Roger and Janey in the front row, all of us numbed, and the funeral went by with a Charlie Brown *bwabwabwabwah*. Even my reading droned—a letter from Paul about something or other—and the organ played us out into the noonday brightness. There was a reception at mom's best friend Mrs. Raney's house. Sandwiches and drymouth and condolences. I was too tired for emotion, so I pressed palms and said, "Thank you. Thank you for coming."

I had honestly forgotten about Marco entirely when I saw him leaning on his Mercedes out front of Mrs. Raney's house, looking like a shrunken, twisted version of Jake at the end of *Sixteen Candles*. The way things were framed, this was the end of the movie, and I was supposed to be thrilled that this guy cared enough to wait through a long family function for me. I was supposed to run into his arms.

Janey clutched my elbow in a nun-grip and said, "I got this."

She started for the stairs but I stopped her. I said, "I got this."

She looked at me all sister-concerned and said, "You sure?"

I said, "It's my mess."

I went down the stairs, and Marco's eyes lit up with a smile when he saw me. This was worse than if he had been stonefaced, worse than if he'd looked angry.

I said, "What do you want?"

He said, "Another chance."

Jesus. "Jesus. Marco, it's been six years. We were together for like, two weeks. What the hell?"

His face clouded, irrational anger. "We were supposed to be together."

"No. We weren't. Really. You need to go." My voice sounded thin and higher than I wanted it to.

He wasn't looking at me. He was looking at a point somewhere off in the distance and his face sort of crumpled. He started crying. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry." He stopped. "I thought—I'd made such a wreck of everything else. My marriage. My kid. I thought maybe. If could go back to when it started, if I could make it up to *you* somehow. And if I did, I could..." His head fell to his chest and he sobbed.

This wasn't about me at all. It never had been. This guy wasn't a threat. He was a wreck.

My eagerness to get rid of him turned into a need to fix things for him. Or at least say the right thing.

I said, "I'm sorry. Shhh. I'm sorry."

He lifted his head and sobbed, "I loved you so much." And that's when I felt someone shove me out of the way and saw Roger's fist connect with Marco's jaw.

I said, "No," but Marco slammed back against the car door and fell to the ground.

Roger hunched over him,

grabbed his collar and kept hitting him. I grabbed his arm, but he shoved me back so hard I fell to the asphalt. With each hit, Roger said, "Skeevy." *thwock*. "Loser." *thwock* "Fucking." *thwock*. "Get." *Thud*. "The fuck."

Janey was at my side. I got to my feet and said, "Stop him."

She stepped forward; we could make it stop.

Janey kicked Marco. And again. And didn't stop.

It was too fast. Too fast.

I said, "Guys. Guys."

Roger dipped on one knee and kept pounding Marco's head and Janey kept kicking him. Her little black tights and tiny high-heeled boots hit with a shallow thwack and these Janey sized grunts, *hnh, hnh, hnh!* She sounded like a kid who couldn't reach something, but Roger's fists were hitting home.

I grabbed Roger's arm, but it wouldn't stop pounding. I said, "Stop. Stop. Guys, stop." My voice was thickened with tears I hadn't realized started falling. Something pushed me aside and Mr. Raney stepped in and wrapped his arms around Roger, pulling him back. They fell to the ground with a thump. I looked at Mr. Raney's old face gone red, Roger in his lap like an oversized child. Janey was still kicking.

I pulled her back, and she wrestled to get away from me. But size has its advantages. She kept kicking and kicking, even after she stopped making contact. That *hnh! Hnh! Hnh!*

I said, "Janey. Okay. Okay."

Marco lay on the ground, stirring. The moans that came from him reminded me of that night at Hammonasset beach. Piteous animal suffering moans.

Roger righted himself and scooted forward, sitting in his best suit in the middle of the street. There never was any traffic on the Raney's road. Roger's hair had come undone and was in his face, despite the baldness. Janey relaxed, so I let her go and she sat down, kerplunk next to Roger, breathing heavily. Marco pushed himself to his elbows. He was bleeding from his nose and, as he spit, a piece of tooth came out of his mouth. He looked up at Roger and Janey, then twisted his head up to see me.

I said, "I'm sorry..."

He scrambled to his feet.

Good, nothing broken.

He opened his mouth to say something. The tears were still coming down my face, but I hadn't started crying properly.

I said, "I'm so sorry."

Marco closed his bloodied mouth, opened the door to his car, started the engine, and pulled out around Roger and Mr. Raney. His car tires screeched at the stop sign at the corner as he hurtled right. I looked at the Raney's porch, but most folks had left or were going back inside. Mr. Raney sat, facing Roger's back. Janey had taken Roger's hand. I sat down next to them, the asphalt warm through my long black skirt.

Roger stared into space, breathing heavily, disturbed. I was relieved to see some sign of sanity in his face, but I punched his shoulder and said, "What the *fuck*, Roger?" His face didn't change with the punch, so I punched him again. "What the *fuck*?" I started crying, in earnest, in sobs.

All of the crying I was supposed to be doing this weekend, the crying that should have started last Thursday—it came out. Janey curled up next to me and wrapped her arms around me, holding me in that Janey death grip. Roger rubbed my arm. Just once. He said, “Shhh. Shhh.”

Mr. Raney coughed, and sputtered, and heaved himself to his feet. His dress shoes scuffed on the pavement as he headed back into the house.

The three of us sat and a blue jay screamed, piercing the relative quiet of my sobs as they echoed shallowly off the asphalt. The wind gusted cold this time, green and muddy, clattering the branches as Roger repeated, “Shh. Shh.”

The Magnolia Review Ink Award

To be Announced!

Letter from the Editor

Welcome to the tenth issue of The Magnolia Review!

When I started this project in 2014, I did not imagine that I would still be working on The Magnolia Review in 2019, let alone make it to ten issues. What a reason to celebrate! From the journal's inception in 2011 to reality with the premier issue in January 2015 to the current issue in your hands, I am continuously awed and inspired by the contributors and readers. I love reading the work and putting together a journal I'm excited to share with the world.

The goal of 2019 is to make physical copies available in order to raise funds to pay for two free contributor copies and mailing costs of every issue of The Magnolia Review. Because the Kickstarter was not successful, and I do not have the means to pay for the contributor copies and mailing costs at this time, I have decided to release the issues in physical form through Kindle Direct Publishing. The funds raised for each issue will go toward that issue's fundraiser in order to reach the fundraising goal of two free contributor issues and mailing costs, with details below. I decided to remove the paywall on future PDF copies, starting with this issue. So The Magnolia Review PDFs will remain free. However, the PDF of The Magnolia Review, Volume 5, Issue 1, will remain at \$2, but the sample is available for free on the Volume 5, Issue 1 page on the blog. If you would like to donate, please check out the Donate page on the website (themagnoliareview.com) and/or contact me at themagnoliareview@gmail.com for more information.

There are still physical copies of Volume 4, Issue 1 available. Please contact me at themagnoliareview@gmail.com for more information.

Current status of fundraising:

Volume 1, Issue 1, January 2015, 41 contributors: \$0/900

Volume 1, Issue 2, July 2015, 51 contributors: \$0/1100

Volume 2, Issue 1, January 2016, 35 contributors: \$0/800

Volume 2, Issue 2, July 2016, 41 contributors: \$0/900

Volume 3, Issue 1, January 2017, 30 contributors: \$0/700

Volume 3, Issue 2, July 2017, 51 contributors: \$0/1100

Volume 4, Issue 1, January 2018, 48 contributors: Complete!

Volume 4, Issue 2, July 2018, 40 contributors: \$0/850

Volume 5, Issue 1, January 2019, 50 contributors: \$65/1080

Volume 5, Issue 2, July 2019, 43 contributors: \$0/980

This issue's theme is Questions. The next issue, Volume 6, Issue 1, has the optional theme, A Day That Changed Me, and will be available in January 2020.

Keep writing, keep making art, keep reading, and keep creating.

Thank you for reading, and check out the next issue in January 2020.

Suzanna Anderson

Editor-in-Chief and Founder of The Magnolia Review

Reviews

The Anatomical Venus by Helen Ivory. Bloodaxe Books, 2019. 64 pages. \$9.95, paperback.

Gentlemen, the Venerina is a dissectible young woman presented voluptuously in her final moments.

from The Little Venus

In the forty-eight poems that comprise Helen Ivory's latest collection, she herself dissects society's attitudes to women over the past 500-odd years, from the dark days of puritans and witches to our own (supposedly) enlightened era of AI and ex machina porn. The Anatomical Venus literally refers to an 18th Century wax effigy of an idealised woman, to be examined and deconstructed by (typically male) medical students, but also provides a neat metaphor for every doll, real or figurative, that has ever found itself marginalized, manipulated and misunderstood – or else confined to the eponymous house, in which

A woman lies so tidily
below the belly of her cooking range,

but

A child presses fingers to a pattern of blood
on the candy-stripe wallpaper,
traces the outline of the pink blanket
draped over the edge of the cot
while her mother explains
that something bad has happened
in the dolls' house.

from The Dolls' House Mysteries

Helen Ivory is a feminist, an intellectual, an historian and (very nearly) a scientist, and yet above all she is an artist, not a polemicist, a poet, not a politician, and subject matter that might, in clumsier hands, have become mere manifesto is transformed into gorgeous riffs on a multifaceted theme where

The rattle of clockwork
fell about her feet
as faces blazed down
from every high place they'd been hiding.
And the vesper, that evening star, rang out.

from Chair

In The Anatomical Venus you will find wit and compassion, intelligence and research, realism and surrealism, allusion and illusion, history and myth. But most importantly, you will gain access to a carefully constructed work of poetry that quite simply needs to be read –

In the third dream
I am shining the silver
of every smoke-tainted
coffeehouse in Vienna.

Spoons queue up –
clever schoolboys
on the first day of term –
I polish their faces.

All of the girl-children
are folded lace parasols
packed up in a casket
at the back of the nursery.

from Housewife Psychosis

In short, this is a wonderful (in the original sense of the word) collection, a literary wunderkammer, a work of serious intent and deft achievement that deserves an essay, not a review. The essays, I am sure, will be forthcoming. In the meantime, let this review suffice.

—Michael Paul Hogan

Contributors

Bill Abbott is the author of *Let Them Eat MoonPie*, the history of poetry slam in the Southeast. He has been published in *Ray's Road Review*, *Radius*, *The November 3rd Club*, *Flypaper Magazine*, and *The Sow's Ear*. Mr. Abbott lives in Ohio and teaches creative writing at Central State University.

Maya Alexandri is the author of *The Plague Cycle* (Spuyten Duyvil 2018), a short story collection, and *The Celebration Husband* (TSL Publications 2015), a novel. Her short stories have been published in *The Forge*, *The Stockholm Review of Books*, *Dime Show Review*, and many others. Her story, "Ann Noni Mini," was nominated for a 2018 Pushcart Prize. She is currently a medical student at the Zucker School of Medicine at Hofstra-Northwell and a 2nd Lieutenant in the U.S. Army. For more information, see www.mayaalexandri.com.

Gary Beck has spent most of his adult life as a theater director. His poetry collections include *Days of Destruction* (Skive Press), *Expectations* (Rogue Scholars Press), *Dawn in Cities*, *Assault on Nature*, *Songs of a Clerk*, *Civilized Ways*, *Displays*, *Perceptions*, *Fault Lines*, *Tremors*, *Perturbations*, *Rude Awakenings* and *The Remission of Order* (Winter Goose Publishing). *Conditioned Response* (Nazar Look), *Virtual Living* (Thurston Howl Publications), *Blossoms of Decay*, *Expectations and Blunt Force* (Wordcatcher Publishing). His novels include *Flawed Connections* (Black Rose Writing), *Call to Valor* and *Crumbling Ramparts* (Gnome on Pig Productions), *Sudden Conflicts* (Lillicat Publishers). *Acts of Defiance* (Wordcatcher Publishing). His short story collections include *A Glimpse of Youth* (Sweatshoppe Publications), *Now I Accuse* and other stories (Winter Goose Publishing) and *Dogs Don't Send Flowers* and other stories (Wordcatcher Publishing). *The Republic of Dreams* and other essays (Gnome on Pig Productions). *Feast or Famine* and other one act-plays will be published by Wordcatcher Publishing. His original plays and translations of Moliere, Aristophanes and Sophocles have been produced Off Broadway. His poetry, fiction and essays have appeared in hundreds of magazines. He lives in New York City.

Adam Levon Brown is an internationally published poet and author in 14 countries. He has had his work translated in Spanish, Albanian, Arabic, and Afrikaans. Boasting over 300 published pieces, you can find his writing at such publications as *Burningword Literary Journal*, *Firefly Magazine*, *Zany Zygote Review*, *Epigraph*, *Angel City Review*, and *Ariel Chart*. He was long-listed in the 2016 Erbacce Prize poetry competition and received a special mention in the Pangolin Prize 2018 competition. He has recently taken up painting for fun.

Frank De Canio has been published in *Write On!!*, *Red Owl*, *Nuthouse*, *Love's Chance*, *Words of Wisdom*, *Rook publishing*, *Illogical Muse*, and *Writer's Journal*, among others.

Kayson Carlin is a student at Bowling Green State University. They're a double major in Film Production and Asian Studies.

Satya Dash has been a cricket commentator, dabbled with short fiction, and has a degree in electronics from BITS Goa. He lives in Bangalore, India, and recites his poetry in the city's cafes.

Maria Espinosa is a novelist and translator. Among Espinosa's novels, *Longing*, has received an American Book Award, and *Dying Unfinished*, a PEN Oakland Award. Espinosa currently lives in New Mexico.

Marie Fields was born and raised in the greater Boston area. She has been writing off and on for most of her life but has just recently found the courage to publish her poems. She currently has an e-book available on Amazon titled *Marie! (mah-RIE!)* and words forthcoming in the Spring 2019 issue of *Door Is A Jar Magazine*.

Alexander Garza is a Mexican American writer from Houston, Texas. His work has been published in *Nine Muses Poetry* (forthcoming), *Literal Magazine*, and *BroadwayWorld-Houston*. His poetry and art explores topics such as mental health disorders, race, class, and gender. Alex shares his journey through poetry and art. Visit www.AlexanderPGarza.com. Twitter/IG: @alexanderpgarza.

Laura Goodman's short fiction has appeared in a number of journals, reviews and anthologies, among them: Cream City Review, South Dakota Review, Other Voices, etc. This summer and fall stories have appeared or are forthcoming in Fiction Southeast, the Arkansas Review, Flash Fiction and the Westchester Review. Laura lives and writes in Boulder, Colorado.

Kara Goughnour is a queer writer and documentarian living in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. She received her Bachelor's Degree in Creative and Professional Writing from The University of Pittsburgh. She is the recipient of the 2018 Gerald Stern Poetry Award, and has work published or forthcoming in *Third Point Press*, *the Southampton Review*, and over twenty others. Follow her on Twitter @kara_goughnour or read her collected and exclusive works at karagoughnour.com.

Jacob Greb is a pragmatic introvert, living a quiet life with his wife and a twelve-year-old feline named Pretzel. He writes mostly to amuse himself. Jacob and Simon, his collaborative partner and friend of over twenty years, run a Tumblr page and a WordPress blog, sharing personal anecdotes from their youth and struggles with mental illness. Their work spans from dark thoughts on death, self-harm, and anger to loving and happy moments that engage the rest of their time.

A. Elizabeth Herting is an aspiring freelance writer and busy mother of three living in colorful Colorado. She has had over 50 short stories published and also has a collection of short stories called *Whistling Past the Veil* that will be published by Adelaide Books in April 2019.

Mark Hudson is an Illinois poet and artist, who spends most of his time writing and doing art. He has a degree in creative writing from Columbia College, in Chicago, and has been published many times in-print, online, and internationally. To check out his poetry on the web go to Illinoispoets.org.

Maranda Huffort studied Creative Writing at Rosemont College. She currently teaches English Composition at McCann School of Business and Technology, Allentown PA. In her spare time she enjoys camping, reading books, and walking with her two basset hounds.

Phil Huffy practiced law long enough. Trained to think on his feet, he continues that custom and then writes things down at his kitchen table. Placements in 2018 number nearly 100 pieces, found in such publications as *The Lyric*, *Better Than Starbucks*, *Fourth & Sycamore*, *Bindweed* and *Eunoia*.

Caitlin Johnson holds a Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing from Lesley University. Johnson's work has appeared in *Foliate Oak Literary Magazine*, *Narrative Northeast*, *Pembroke Magazine*, and *Vagina: The Zine*, among other outlets. A chapbook, *Boomerang Girl*, was published in 2015 by Tiger's Eye Press, and a full-length collection, *Gods in the Wilderness*, was published in 2016 by Pink. Girl. Ink. Press.

Thomas Kearnes graduated from the University of Texas at Austin with an MA in film writing. His fiction has appeared in *Hobart*, *Gertrude*, *A cappella Zoo*, *Split Lip Magazine*, *Cutthroat*, *Litro*, *Berkeley Fiction Review*, *PANK*, *BULL: Men's Fiction*, *Gulf Stream Magazine*, *Wraparound South*, *Night Train*, *3:AM Magazine*, *Word Riot*, *Storyglossia*, *Driftwood Press*, *Adroit Journal*, *The Matador Review*, *Pseudopod*, the *Best Gay Stories* series, *Mary: A Journal of New Writing*, *wigleaf*, *SmokeLong Quarterly*, *Pidgeonholes*, *Sundog Lit*, *The Citron Review*, *The James Franco Review*, and elsewhere. He is a three-time Pushcart Prize nominee. Originally from East Texas, he now lives near Houston and works as an English tutor at a local community college. His debut collection of short fiction, *Steers and Queers* will print at Lethe Press in 2019.

J.D. Kotzman's fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in *After the Pause*, *The Bookends Review*, *The Chronos Chronicles* (a project of Indie Authors Press), *Crack the Spine*, *Drunk Monkeys*, *Foliate Oak*, *Ink Stains* (a project of Dark Alley Press), *Inscape*, *Kentucky Review*, *Pidgeonholes*, *Slink Chunk Press*, *The Speculative Edge*, *Straylight*, *An Unlikely Companion* (a project of E&GJ Little Press), and *Yellow Chair Review*. Kotzman currently works in the health policy field in Washington, D.C. Previously, Kotzman served as an editor and writer for several print and online news publications.

Michelle Kouzmine graduated from Lesley University with an MFA in Creative Writing. Kouzmine is currently an English professor at Miami Dade College, teaching both composition and literature.

Courtney LeBlanc is the author of the chapbooks *All in the Family* (Bottlecap Press) and *The Violence Within* (Flutter Press), and a Pushcart Prize nominee. She has her MFA from Queens University of Charlotte and her poetry is published or forthcoming in *Public Pool*, *Rising Phoenix Review*, *The Legendary*, *Germ Magazine*, *Quail Bell Magazine*, *Brain Mill Press*, *Haunted Waters Press*, and others. She loves nail polish, wine, and tattoos. Follow her on twitter: [@wordperv](#), and IG: [@wordperv79](#).

Kate Maruyama's novel HARROWGATE was published by 47North. Her short work has appeared in *Stoneboat*, *Controlled Burn*, and *Arcadia*, as well as on *Entropy*, *The Rumpus*, and *Duende* among others and in numerous anthologies. She writes, teaches, cooks, and eats in Los Angeles, where she lives with her family.

John Maurer is a 23-year-old writer from Pittsburgh who writes fiction, poetry, and everything in-between, but his work always strives to portray that what is true is beautiful. He has been previously published in *Claudius Speaks*, *The Bitchin' Kitsch*, *Thought Catalog*, and more than twenty others. [@JohnPMaurer](#) ([johnpmaurer.com](#))

Andrew Miller retired from a career that included university teaching and research in endangered species and aquatic habitat restoration. Now he has time to pursue his long-held interest in creative writing. Recent work has appeared in: *Literally Stories*, *Foliolate Oak Literary Magazine*, *Gravel: A Literary Journal*, *Front Porch Review*, *Dime Show Review*, *Typehouse Literary Magazine*, and *Shantih Literary Journal*. Miller lived in Louisville for a while and attended the University of Louisville.

Keith Moul is a poet of place, a photographer of the distinction light adds to place. Both his poems and photos are published widely. His photos are digital, striving for high contrast and saturation, which makes his vision colorful (or weak, requiring enhancement).

Ben Nardolilli currently lives in New York City. His work has appeared in *Perigee Magazine*, *Red Fez*, *Danse Macabre*, *The 22 Magazine*, *Quail Bell Magazine*, *Elimae*, *fwriction*, *Inwood Indiana*, *Pear Noir*, *The Minetta Review*, and *Yes Poetry*. He blogs at mirrorsponge.blogspot.com and is looking to publish a novel.

Robert P Parker, PhD, taught at the University of Chicago, Rutgers University, and the University of LaFeltra (used to be the University of La Verne). Before the strokes, Parker published five books on English Education. After the strokes, Parker published three more diverse books. The second one is *Poems & Stories 2016* (Amazon). The fourth book is under contract. Half poems, half prose interspersed. This is the first time that Parker focuses on poems exclusively. Parker came to poems late in the day.

Fabrice Poussin teaches French and English at Shorter University. Author of novels and poetry, his work has appeared in *Kestrel*, *Symposium*, *The Chimes*, and many other magazines. His photography has been published in *The Front Porch Review*, *the San Pedro River Review*, as well as other publications.

Nicolas Ridley writes fiction, non-fiction, scripts, and stage plays. A prize-winner and Pushcart Prize nominee, his short stories have been published in a wide range of journals and magazines in the UK, the USA, and Ireland.

Taylor Risinger studied creative writing and literary studies at Marshall University. He is planning to proceed on with his education with a MFA in poetry. Currently, he is working on poetry that advocates for transgender equality (being a transman himself) and spending a lot of time with his dog, Stark.

John Timothy Robinson is a mainstream poet of the expressive image and inwardness from the Kanawha Valley in Mason County, West Virginia. His poetics was developed in the tradition of James Wright, Rita Dove, Donald Hall, Marvin Bell, Maxine Kumin, WS Merwin, Tess Gallagher and Robert Bly among many others. John's works have appeared in ninety journals throughout the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and India. He is also a published printmaker with sixty-four art images and photographs appearing in nineteen journals, electronic and print in the United States, Italy, and Ireland.

David Rogers' poems, stories, and articles have appeared in various print and electronic publications, including *The Comstock Review*, *Atlanta Review*, *Sky and Telescope*, and *Astronomy magazine*. He is the author of two novels, *D.B. Cooper is Dead: A Solomon Starr Adventure* and *Thor's Hammer*, and a fantasy novella, *Return of the Exile*, each available from Amazon. More of his work can be read at <https://davidrogersbooks.wordpress.com/>.

David Anthony Sam, the proud grandson of immigrants from Poland and Syria, lives in Virginia with his wife and life partner, Linda. Sam's poetry has appeared in over 80 publications and he has five published collections including *Final Inventory*, published by Prolific Press in October 2018. *Finite to Fail* was the 2016 Grand Prize winner of GFT Press Chapbook Contest. He teaches creative writing at Germanna Community College where he retired as President in 2017. He serves on the Board of the Virginia Poetry Society.

Jessica Seaborn is a Sydney-based writer and the co-creator of *The Regal Fox*. She has been published in *Daily Life*, *Feminartsy*, *Umbel and Panicle*, *The Cabinet of Heed* and *Milk Magazine*. You can find her on Twitter @jessica_seaborn.

Margarita Serafimova was shortlisted for the Montreal International Poetry Prize 2017, Summer Literary Seminars 2018 Poetry Contest, and the University Centre Grimsby International Literary Prize 2018; long-listed for the Erbacce Press Poetry Prize 2018 and the Red Wheelbarrow 2018 Prize, and nominated for Best of the Net 2018. She has three collections in Bulgarian. Her work appears in *Agenda Poetry*, *London Grip*, *Trafika Europe*, *European Literature Network*, *The Journal*, *A-Minor*, *Waxwing*, *Orbis*, *Nixes Mate*, *StepAway*, *Ink*, *Sweat and Tears*, *HeadStuff*, *Minor Literatures*, *Writing Disorder*, *Birds We Piled Loosely*, *Orbis*, *Chronogram*, *Noble/ Gas*, *Origins*, *miller's pond*, *Obra/ Artifact*, *Blue Mountain Review*, *Califragile*, *TAYO*, *Shot Glass*, *Opiate*, *Poetic Diversity*, *Pure Slush*, *Harbinger Asylum*, *Punch*, *Tuck*, *Ginosko*, etc. Visit: https://www.facebook.com/MargaritaSerafimova/?ref=aymt_homepage_panel.

J. Conrad Smith studied poetry at Kansas State University, and he currently works as a Lead Editor for a govtech company that creates and designs websites. His work has appeared in *Touchstone*. Smith grew up on a farm on the Great Plains of North Central Kansas, and he now writes and resides in the Flint Hills.

After retiring from full-time work, David K. Slay completed two years of short story writing workshops, primarily in the University of California, Los Angeles, Writers' Program. His stories have appeared in *Gold Man Review*, *ImageOutWrite*, *Wards Literary Magazine* (Editor's Choice Award for Fiction), and elsewhere. He currently is a fiction reader for *CRAFT Literary Journal*.

J.R. Solonche is the author of *Beautiful Day* (Deerbrook Editions), *Won't Be Long* (Deerbrook Editions), *Heart's Content* (chapbook from Five Oaks Press), *Invisible* (nominated for the Pulitzer Prize by Five Oaks Press), *The Black Birch* (Kelsay Books), *I, Emily Dickinson & Other Found Poems* (Deerbrook Editions), *In Short Order* (Kelsay Books), *Tomorrow, Today & Yesterday* (Deerbrook Editions), *If You Should See Me Walking on the Road* (forthcoming July 2019 from Kelsay Books), *The Time of Your Life* (forthcoming April 2020 from Adelaide Books), and coauthor of *Peach Girl: Poems for a Chinese Daughter* (Grayson Books). He lives in the Hudson Valley.

J.B. Stone is a writer from Brooklyn, now residing in Buffalo. He is the author of two digital chapbooks, *A Place Between Expired Dreams And Renewed Nightmares* (Ghost City Press 2018) and forthcoming, *Fireflies & Hand Grenades* (Stasia Press 2019). His work has appeared in and/or is forthcoming in *BlazeVOX*, *Occulum*, *Crack the Spine*, *Maudlin House*, *Glass*, and elsewhere. His work will also appear in the following anthologies such as *Your Body Is Not a Temple: A Tribute to Anthony Bourdain* and *Mansion: An Anthology*.

Richard Weaver lives in Baltimore City where he volunteers with the Maryland Book Bank, acts as the Archivist-at-large for a Jesuit college, and is the Official poet-in-residence at the James Joyce Pub and Restaurant. He is the author of *The Stars Undone* (Duende Press). His poems have appeared in *River Poet's Journal*, *Southern Review*, *Little Patuxent Review*, *Loch Raven Review*, *Adelaide*, *Slush Pile*, and *Elsewhere*. Yes, there is a magazine named *Elsewhere*.

Katie Wolf has found a home in Nashville, TN, after living in eight states and twelve cities over the course of her life. She lives with her husband and two cats and is working on her first novel. Follow her on Instagram and Twitter @katieowolf.

Riku Ylönen is an amateur photographer from Central Finland. He has a Master's Degree in Philosophy, specialized to language philosophy and semiotics, from Jyväskylä University. Ylönen studied creative writing in Open University of Jyväskylä, and his poems have been published in anthologies. He was also a finalist in the national poetry slam competition, as well as annual competition of Kauhava city "Puukko ja runo" (puukko knife and poetry). Among photographing, drawing and writing, Ylönen is interested in bouldering and collecting bladed weapons.

