

Typehouse

Literary Magazine



Volume 5, No. 2, Issue 14

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LITERARY MAGAZINE

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Issue 14

Typehouse Literary Magazine

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Typehouse is a writer-run literary magazine based out of Portland, Oregon. We are always looking for well-crafted, previously unpublished writing and art that seeks to capture an awareness of the human predicament. If you are interested in submitting, visit our website at www.typehousemagazine.com.

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Cover Artist: **Jiwoong Yang** is currently in 11th grade in South Korea. His artwork is mostly about his imaginations and the creativity that is inside of his mind. He always gets inspired by looking at other artists' artworks and tries to add to his thoughts. His favorite artist is Jean Michel Basquiat.

Beauty of the Nature shows the beautiful nature of safari. I once read an article about the animals getting hunted at safari and they are taken to the Zoo or used as some products. This piece expresses the complete opposite of the article; happiness. All animals living in the safari are gathered together during sunset and enjoying their time as what real safari would look like.

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*A Best Small Fictions 2015 Winner, **Dave Petraglia's** writing and art has appeared in Bartleby Snopes, bohemianizm, Cheap Pop, Crab Fat, Crack the Spine, Chicago Literati, Five:2:One, Gambling the Aisle, Hayden's Ferry, Medium, McSweeney's, Mud Season Review, Necessary Fiction, New Pop Lit, North American Review, Per Contra, Pithead Chapel, Points in Case, Prick of the Spindle, Prairie Schooner, Popular Science, Razed, SmokeLong Quarterly, Up the Staircase, Vestal Review, and others. His blog is at www.davepetraglia.com*



Eon

William R. Eakin currently lives in Arkansas on a cliff above the river. His work has appeared in most of the big genre zines (like *ANALOG*, *APEX*, *F&SF*, *AMAZING STORIES*, *DAILY SCIENCE FICTION*, *REALMS OF FANTASY*). The stories, many recommended by SFWA members for the Nebula, have been reprinted in five book collections. But his hope is that they always cross genres at the heart, and that they celebrate the beautiful and the compassionate. Bill has Master's degrees (one from U.C. Davis), and a Ph.D. in Philosophy, and has taught humanities, philosophy and creative writing for decades.

Shad Liver

William R. Eakin

There is an arch of trees over the lane. In the fall: golden, red and gamboge leaves on the pavement. Just past the curve the creek runs across the road, fresh and cool. This is where I found Elizabeth dead. For a year I sat from morning to night, looking pitifully at the way the sun and then the white moon broke into the ropes and rivulets of the water there. I suppose she was like Disney's Pinocchio, face down, downstream from where Shad Liver had dropped his bloody-pointed knife. And when the moon ripped into illuminated clouds there was something about that place so still it could never be disturbed, as if all things were shocked into meditation on her.

"I was only eight when you read *Jane Eyre* to me."

She'd loved it. From what I could tell.

"And," she said, "you kept falling asleep in the middle of the words."

"I remember."

Alive, she would never have been able to say these things. Downs and other issues. Which was why I panicked that day when I looked up startled from a nap over a book and went out to the yard edged by the swollen creek, hearing only rain and the ropes and rivulets of the stream, seeing only the same, and not her silent bulk.

I finally found it, Shad Liver's knife, in the water just in front of the house. I knew the people down in the town would *know* who did this to her, when they, too, saw the knife, always blackened with bait and blood. I found it there under the twisting but so-clear fishing stream. "Shad Liver" the people from the town had named him; the world is full of false names, or truer names than the ones we're born with. It was what he did, what he loved, all he did as far as anyone else knew: cut bait, then fish that stream, the one just outside our door, across the yard where other children might have played with her if we'd known any.

A year later, here it was, the knife, in my hand, clean; no blood. No fingerprints, none but mine, having drawn it from the water.

#

Usually there were three eggs a day from her chickens, even a year later; sometimes they were white, more often brown and blue. I kept them on the kitchen cabinet. Many times I picked one up, felt it with my palm and imagined her face, rounded, silly, with that earnest whole-face smile. “Smile, Daddy.” She did say that, often. I found I had yet to relearn to do so, now that she was gone.

I kept the chickens. Each day I went out as she had done and checked for eggs. And sometimes I would see just the tail of a small snake who lived there—probably poisonous—like the end of something. The stream babbled and the fall sky rippled with color—leaves golden, red, crisply outlined in the autumn sun. How long had I watched over her there without her mother? Brenda had left us because, she said, we were both *mental*. That one time I wasn’t watching, when that was all it took to lose Elizabeth, was two years after Brenda left. Thank God. Then another full year with just Elizabeth’s whispers, just breezes really, before I saw Shad’s knife with its point like a viper fang but lying flat among round stones in the clear water.

Shad Liver was thought grotesque by the standards of the town. Hated maybe. I heard them talking about him from across Colb’s Store. Colb was what they all named the old lady who ran the place after her husband Possum died: Crazy Old Lady Beachum. The store was weathered planks of old gray cedar, an unreadable tilted sign and collapsing roof. Sort of like her. Town folk met there and talked about their children riding the school bus down little twisty roads to the valley below where there were real schools, real town, real children. The conversation left quiet blanks at its edges for the one or two children who could not go, could not be “real.” My child. And it turned out, Colb’s son.

The town folk lived in tar paper shacks and old turn of the century never-repaired shotgun houses on gravel, dirt and mud. And even they, these village folks with his name on their lips, thought Shad Liver peculiar, lower than themselves, dangerous, because he lived away from them. He lived alone on things he caught in the creek, buying only a few necessities from Colb’s and that rarely, then always hurrying away. His fingers were perpetually stained, blackened, from running them through Colb’s bait bins—shad, liver, twisting thick worms, his fingers like bait knives.

I found Shad Liver’s lost knife in the creek where he’d dropped it, no doubt, the day he killed her, as if daring me to find it all this time, there where the water is clearest and deepest, where it turns around the house and indeed close to where I sat so often to read in gray and lopsided wooden lawn chairs and where, around back, her chicken coops still produced eggs and taunted snakes.

After a year, I found and finally looked at the thing as if it were alien, incomprehensible, though fitted in my palm. And for a moment, strangely, I couldn't remember Shad Liver's real name, maybe I'd never really heard it here. With that knife, with clear water running over my knees, with that image of her body lying where it had been swept down to the water bridge, I hated him. Found him to be not a man at all. And I thought, yes, there was another use for this knife.

At that moment with the knife in my hand I had to look down the rippling stream with its reflections of yellow and red, wondering how her body looked that day, twisting, bumping into stones. Was she scared? It had been raining, a great deal; the November day had been gray with it, the trees bowed and blackish green, the stream: gray-green, fast, deep. The day I most should have watched her.

#

"Daddy?" Her voice. She had loved my reading to her, must have liked the rhythms and sheer sound of words and names, if not their meanings.

It was the evening on the day I found the knife, the moon shredded. I went to sit where I often did, on the water bridge, the creek tumbling sweetly and with hope over the road, just at the edge of the water where the seat of my own fishing pants would stay wet. Me: looking and seeing her shape if not her body lying there in the moonlit water at the bottom of the creek. Me: with that knife, thinking of how her body had been caught, so that she just lay here. Only now she wasn't lying face-down, she was standing on the bank, white with the moonshine.

"Daddy, you'll have to forgive him, you know?" And her white, water-puckered face—I couldn't tell if her lips moved or not.

"I don't know if you know how it feels!"

"Of course I do, Daddy."

"I never once saw you angry."

"At someone as innocent as Shad Liver?"

She couldn't speak that way. This wasn't her speaking at all. The white shattered clouds kept rolling across the moon and her face came and went with it, and when it went I felt as if there was nothing in its place, nothing but a flash of empty longing.

"Why do you think you have to punish him, Daddy?"

#

Winter came in just a few days after I found the knife. It came as ice and snow, cold as my heart. It came as dry brown twigs and bare branches, all with streams of fog standing above the fishing water. She wandered the house, and watched through the window. Sometimes I sat out in the yard in a jacket and she stood in the doorway behind me. Sometimes we sat at the bridge. And in the bleakest, coldest parts of midwinter we holed up in the house. She was there all season, from beginning snow to ending melt. All season, whispering

to me. And I could not think of anything else, really, except her presence in a doorway, in another room, in the hall, outside on the far bank. And how the one thing that warmed the ice in me was the thought of that knife. I must have seemed like a rock to her, feeling that presence in the cold. Numb. But burning.

And then the winter just went away, me realizing she and I had spent the whole season together, just watching. I started going back down to the creek, with that knife, just sitting. Long, long sitting. Fishing and just staring and hearing her voice though I knew it was just breeze and ripples of white water.

Then Barefoot came to the door. It was the edge of spring.

"Barefoot, what are you doing way out here?" Rumor was his Daddy they called Possum had named him, saying, "That's the way he came in, that's the way he's goin' out."

"They say you seen a ghost." Barefoot's blond hair was spidery thin; his white bone-skinny torso always shirtless even in the still crisp air; his trousers from the Goodwill down in the valley. He was a problem child said the other folks who frequented Colb's, telling it in whispers hushed enough so that no one else, including Crazy Old Lady Beachum, could hear. Problem child in his thirties. And to accent the phrase, they touched and shook their heads.

"What makes you think I saw a ghost, Barefoot?"

"Mama told me." Colb, his mama.

"And how would she even pretend to know such a thing?"

"She says it's that little girl of yours come back from the dead. That you been living out here with her."

I goose pimples. I knew there were no such things as ghosts, just figments of hurt and warped brains, my own. "Why are you here asking about her?"

"I gotta talk to her."

"About what? About how she got killed?"

"About what it's like where she is. And yeah, what you said, too. I'll tell you what she says if you help me find her."

And why, I wanted to know, had Barefoot of all people come asking? I'd seen him plenty times hunkered down in a corner at his mama's store, but he'd never said a word to me or looked me in the eye. Too alien a thing he was to all of us, walking in his bare feet down the graveled roads, running off sometimes and showing up in odd places like Perry Bluff and Bee cliff or where Low Gap Road spread its dust onto the tar of State Highway 7, where a steady stream of sixteen-wheelers rammed space full of sound and hurry.

I wondered if his feet were cold, the evening still nippy.

He shrugged, then took off.

"Daddy, that was Barefoot?" Elizabeth's voice from the shadows of

the living room behind me.

“Daddy? Look. It’s him again. He’s still here.” That was what my daughter said after he’d left our house, her gloomy glowing outline pointing out our window. There he was, sure enough, with his face pasted at the glass, looking right at me. And for some reason he put his hand on the glass, and I did the same, where his was, then he turned and ran.

I felt the knife burning in my pocket. And someplace in my heart.

#

I walked down to Colb’s, no one there but her, and she just seemed to be closing the place. The whole world had cleared Colb a space to do it. Something wrong.

“I saw your son.” They said she was crazy, talked to her long dead husband, Possum Beachum. Well maybe that did make someone crazy. Her face was sorrowed, haggard, older than I’d ever seen it. “Is he here?”

“He and Possum both told me they know what happened to your daughter.”

“Is Barefoot here?”

“You ain’t heard about my Barefoot?” she said. “My little boy?”

“Heard what?”

“Got hit by a semi, down on Highway 7.”

“Just—you mean just now?”

“Four hours ago.”

“But I—”

“Don’t you see I’m closing? Said he hoped to talk to you. That was since the four hours before I even got the call. Had he been your way?”

“He was standing right at my doorstep not more than an hour ago,” I told Colb. Something about Barefoot’s face—goofy, leering, dangerous—had made me suddenly feel close to him. Still felt it. Maybe because I too lived on the edge. Not dangerous, just intent. Maybe his slow brain really did know more of Elizabeth than I did. “He isn’t dead, Colb.”

“Then why do you think they need me signing papers down at the River Valley Funeral Parlor?”

I looked at her, puzzled. They hadn’t called her more than a few moments ago. She was wrinkled in the face, little edges around that mouth I couldn’t remember ever smiling, around the eyes. She was—and then I saw her differently than I ever had before.

Her body seemed to release a structural tension. It was actually neither surprisingly small nor surprisingly heavy as all the other women of the mountain were. She was shapely. And she was not actually old, I realized. The age that had taken over her face lifted. Her dark hair was spackled with gray, but she was probably my age. Crazy Old Lady Beachum was my age! I shook that thought away and backed out the door.

#

My grip on the knife handle tightened. I hadn't used it once, not for bait, not for justice. But I needed to punish someone, didn't I? Maybe the black green trees themselves, lighting up and disappearing into their own void? I'd brought the knife again to the moonlit creek, sitting with it, just sitting.

"You gotta be nice to him, Daddy. I was nice to him! Like you were to Barefoot!"

And something in my gut wrenched, broke; because I could see her holding my hand, stroking my face in the sparks of passing time when she could see out beyond herself and see me, see me for who I really was. Her eyes shone clear and full of something not void but compassionate, humane, beyond what she or I or any villager or Shad Liver could ever be. She could be genuinely, truly, completely nice as she said I was to ole Barefoot, but to me, too, even to Shad.

Find Shad. Put this knife deep into him. Deep into everyone: into Barefoot, into Colb, into every man and woman in the town. Damn it. Burn with it!

A breeze, a whisper, I looked up into Elizabeth's smooth face. Funny, the same change from old age into youth that had happened to Colb's face seemed to happen in my daughter's face, too; except maybe in reverse. Except for just a moment it seemed as if Colb was there, too.

"I love you Daddy. I know you want to kill him. I know you are so angry. Please don't."

I looked down at my fingers grasping the knife, the handle as if it were made for the palm, the blade-point deadly sharp though it had lain there in the water all this time, now in my hand, the point close to my belly. I wanted to end this thing. I wanted to end just sitting. I wanted to end just staring. I wanted to end thinking of her ceaselessly, seeing her moon-shape in the creek, feeling the fiction of her presence. End the loss and loneliness and powerlessness and end Shad Liver.

Sharp enough to press in. Sharp enough to press in hard and bring all my innards out into the open, to press in gladly, angrily, harshly enough to let out all the anger and all the sadness and all my guts spill out. All the sadness.

"They should never have called you that," she said.

But what else could they call a man who pulled away from the valley, from the village, from money, education, family: wife now gone and poor little self-enclosed daughter and him nuts, too, selfish and nuts? What else could they call a monster who pulled back so he could just fish and be alone, be away from everything with what his wife called his madness, pull back so they wouldn't talk and jeer—not with jeering but with special programs and diagnoses and studies—? What else could they call a man who pulled away from everything human to do just the things he loved, read to her and fish and enjoy the silent hopeful stillness of the creek at his feet? And at the same time

stop watching when she needed him most?

Shad Liver. Responsible for her death. If it were possible to grip that knife tighter, I did. I pressed the point into the fabric of my shirt and readied myself to thrust harder, to thrust so hard and so fast that I could do it again and again and again and fall into the damned river myself.

"I don't call you that, Daddy. Never did."

And now I felt the point like a snake fang making a first penetration of the skin, Shad Liver's.

My fault! It had been a November gray-green sky, the creek risen as high into the yard as it had ever been, green and darkish gray, tumbling fast as rope cords of water pulling everything out of the sky and down the creek toward the water bridge. My fault—all I'd ever wanted to do was go fishing. And read. And fall asleep reading with November gray rain, and flashes of unseen lightning. But: the gaping void out there in the trees, and the door left unlocked and her face feeling the rain suddenly with exuberance as if encountering the world for the first time, the rain and the creek water rising and then the wild rush of life: My fault was not watching her under black-green bowing trees and a flashing sky and my own damned selfish backing out of life. What Brenda had called me, "Crazy bastard," as my withdrawal finally drove her from the house. My fault. And the fault of God.

"Daddy!"

I hadn't told a lot of folks my real name very clearly at least, so of course they called me what they could. She did not call me what they did.

Now I felt it: I'd pressed that metal death-point far enough through the fabric of my fishing shirt that it had ripped a small hole in the top layer of my skin. I readied to pull back and thrust.

But then her moonlit hand touched my stained fingers. And it wasn't just *her* hand.

#

I walked to Colb's. She was at the bait counter, tucking things away, putting shad in the freezer, still closing the store. I said "You did lose your son."

She did not respond.

"What's your real name?"

"Audrey. Audrey Beachum."

"I've been too long on the edge." As Shad Liver. "How did you send her to touch my hand?"

"Don't you think even a figment of her coulda stopped you from killing yourself?"

She smiled and pulled a yellowed Ouija board from behind the counter. But I knew she was just kidding, if someone who'd just lost her son could still kid. This was not about Ouija boards. Maybe she was being deathly serious. "I left my own doors open, too, for Possum going hunting that day,

and for Steven. Sometimes, there's no blame, just life, Mr. Chad Liven."

#

When I stepped into the funeral parlor, went to stand over her dead boy, looked up and saw her there, the world stopped. Her brown eyes weren't an old lady's. I now realized this really was a woman, not just some dusty country fixture named Colb. Beneath that gray dress was real flesh. And those wrinkles in her face had a kind of beauty that maybe only someone else with the same wrinkles in his face could see.

I said, "Do you think everybody has a fake name, Audrey?"

She looked up into my eyes and whispered, "I know everybody's got a real one."

***Devorie Kreiman** is a public speaker on the topic of human resilience, faith and joy. She has delivered the keynote address at over sixty conventions and seminars in the United States and Canada. Her work has appeared in Narratively, Jabberwock Review, Our Tapestry, and Mishpacha. Devorie is currently writing a memoir.*

Salt

Devorie Kreiman

I use my sharp knife
on the granite counter
to cut through the royal of the peel,
and expose tender white.
Eggplant slices fall
into a mound.
For later. We'll have this.

I sprinkle salt
harsh on the surface.
The eggplant tears up.
It's the only way.

My husband comes in: "Why so much salt?"
"That's how my mother makes it."
He comes closer. "But why so much salt?"
"It's to take away the bitterness."

I rinse the salt-tears off the pieces
of eggplant. Settle them
into sauce. It will be good. Warm.
With wine and rice and meat.

What's that?
Dusting
my shoulders,
more
flurries,
over my head.

I turn.
My husband,
behind me, is
holding
the shaker of salt
shaking, shaking, shaking
on to me,
but he's smiling
"To take away the bitterness."

You Asked

Devorie Kreiman

Sunny small boy looking up
at me: What's inside the street?

I said,
well...I was tired, so that's why

I said,
More street.

You didn't scare easily: What's inside my head?
I said...

Oh God, how could I?
More head!

Does mommy mean mom of me?
Why can't we print our own money and buy all the stuff?
But why did you "said so?"
Isn't it everybody's job to clear the table?
Can you sing "I used to think my mother was a... queen?" Can you sing it
again? Mommy, can
you sing it again?
I'm perfect. Aren't I?
Wouldn't it be great if I had two mouths? One to talk and one to eat?
Why can't I play my drums in middle of the night?
What's inside crystal?
Shouldn't it be Harry Hotter?
You don't know?
Are the stars winking at us?
When I have children, will you make cucumber cookies?
What does unpropitious mean?
How do you say wine in Japanese?
Can I borrow your car?
But why?
Are you going to cry at my wedding?
Is darkness an absence of light, or its own entity?

Breath shutting
down.
flailing,
falling forward
under the wave
a forever question mark

Why weren't you careful? How can I be angry at you? I'm not perfect — is that why?

Is that why? What if I forget the whorl of your voice? Did you have time to be afraid? Do you still know light? Why weren't you careful? What would your children have looked like?

Can a soul laugh?
Can a soul wonder?
Can a soul remember?

How am I to be
mother of son, without son?
Why weren't you careful?

But why?

The Mark

Devorie Kreiman

On the pale pink dining room wall,
my son, with me,
hung canvas prints of the weddings of his sisters.
March wedding -- blood roses and fairy lights.
May wedding -- trembling lilies on swaying greens.
What are the flowers of December?
December 19. We marked that day.
His wedding day.

He twirled to where the corner was bare,
smacked his scholar silk hand
on the wall:
Here. My wedding picture will go here.

I want, oh, I want,
to say, now, that I one-stepped towards him,
smiled: Yes, here.
No!
I said, that day,
to my buoyant boy becoming a man:
Get your filthy hand off the wall.
And I said: Look!
You left a mark.
It was hot. He sweated
the grey shadow of his hand onto the wall.

December 19.
His wedding day.
His “almost wedding day.”
The wedding hall
dark and empty
a whimper and a nod
to us in the early throes of grief.
They gave us that.
No one was married in that elegant hall
instead of him
on his “almost wedding day.”

The first year, we kept a candle burning.
A flame for the soul, fiery wisp
straining from the corner table
by his mark of his hand on the wall.

People showed up, offered comfort.
Well... they tried.
I tugged at them.
Look! Here.
Here he leapt at what was going to be
when it was still going to be.
Here I was the mom who thought
a grimy handprint reason to snap.

Seasons shoved in between us
faded
His voice. His funny dance.

We painted the wall
sunshine yellow.
When people come into our home
I still bring them to the corner
I still beg them to know
He put his hand here.

Audra Coleman lives in Asheville, North Carolina. She has been honored to see her work in fiction and creative non-fiction appear in WNC Woman, Mothers Always Write, The Good Mother Project, 3288 Review, Kestrel, Palaver, Quail Bell and The Great Smokies Review.

Swan Song

Audra Coleman

When I was eighteen my boyfriend and I moved in together, renting a small lake cottage nestled in the woods thirty minutes outside of the college town where we had both grown up. I could drive to campus, park, and walk to class in just under an hour. This seemed perfect given the circumstances. The year before, I had, literally, disappeared in the middle of my senior year. Poof. Gone. My locker still filled by half a wardrobe of tight sweaters, empty Doritos bags and coffee cups, my winter coat, an economics textbook marked in the middle of a chapter detailing GNP and GDP, a literature book that didn't belong to me, and a magnetic mirror on which I had written "All is vanity" in red Sharpie. There had to have been notes, folded and creased into perfect rectangles, whose contents I can only imagine contained the latest he said/she said gossip, whose parents were out of town, and what time the party started.

Maybe had I known I wasn't ever coming back, I would have cleaned it out myself and carried it all home, at least my winter coat and the notes that I had naively assumed would remain forever private and in my possession. But I didn't know then that my dad, who had driven from Missouri the whole day prior, would, instead, put me in his car and drive me over four hundred miles straight west to Menorah Medical Center in downtown Kansas City. At the time, it was one of only a handful of medical facilities in the country offering an in-patient unit specializing exclusively in the treatment of eating disorders. "It's not a psych ward," my dad kept repeating on the drive. When I was admitted, I weighed in at a perfect ninety eight pounds.

It was here, on the fourth floor, that the secret I had held for so many years finally escaped. I'm pretty sure every girl in there had some secret or another that needed coming out. The overeaters tried to bury their secrets under six thousand calories of rocky road ice cream all consumed in one single sitting, the bulimics tried to throw it up and flush it down the toilet, again and again, and the anorexics, like me, tried to starve their secrets to a slow death. Who would die first, you or the secret? This type of famine is a waiting game. As it turns out, I learned secrets don't starve to death all that easily given their uncanny ability to feed upon themselves when necessary. At

some point, the anorexic will realize this. It will occur to her that it might very well be her, not her secret, who dies first in this standoff of wills. This doesn't really matter. It is no more than a quick moment of understanding that serves only to strengthen a resolution already made. Whoever dies first is of very little consequence in the big picture. She knows that both she and her secret can no longer co-exist. One must die, so she will continue to consume only a spoonful of lemon pepper a day until she has a full-blown anxiety attack in the middle of first period Spanish class and is driven four hundred miles to a Jewish hospital the very next day.

All of us there had tried in our different ways to silence our secrets, to prevent their escape. No matter how much food Gina shoveled into her mouth, her secret about being date raped hadn't been buried, it had only gotten fatter and fatter. No matter how many times Kristin stuck her finger down her throat and heaved into the toilet, her secret hadn't just magically come up and out, finally flushed away before anyone could even notice. It did just the opposite, wedging itself firmly within her throat. More than once, she woke me up in the middle of the night to tell me she couldn't swallow or breathe because of its growing mass. She didn't have to explain herself. I understood precisely what she meant. I wasn't any luckier. My secret hadn't starved to death. No matter how many miles I ran, it hadn't lost its flesh and turned to bone. We weren't stupid. We just refused to give up because I imagine we all knew (before we really knew) that if a secret like that were allowed to live, to somehow finally escape the body, you couldn't just stuff it back in your mouth and swallow it like a dozen Dunkin donuts. You couldn't force it into the toilet, flush it out of sight and just reapply some lipstick. You couldn't deny something that now had a life all its own, outside of your desperate grasp. Once it was out there, it'd be out there for good. We each understood the significance of that in our individual lives, how the dominoes would fall, one by one, right down the line. Nothing would be the same, and all of it would be out of our control. That's why we tried so hard to kill our secrets, even if it meant killing ourselves in the process.

Three days before Christmas, my own secret slipped from my mouth as I sat across from the staff psychiatrist, a tall and handsome Egyptian doctor around the same age as my dad. I didn't look at him when I finally said it. Instead, I stared behind him at the large, expensively framed print. In a previous session, we had discussed the painting after I happened to mention liking it. He wanted to know if I recognized the artist. I didn't. When he told me it was Picasso, I felt my face burn with shame. Still, today, I can feel the panicked embarrassment of not knowing the right answer to his question, of not being able to answer, "Yes, of course, that's Picasso!" He must have seen this, and because he was kind, he spent ten minutes or more telling me how the piece was from the painter's Blue Period, a period defined by monochromatic paintings in shades of blue that contrasted sharply with his

well-known abstract pieces painted in vibrant hues with which most people identified him.

“He painted in blue because he was depressed, very depressed, during those years,” he said, his hands folded in his lap. “This piece is called, *The Tragedy*. It is not his most famous. Not even from this collection, but it is my favorite.”

“Why? Why was he depressed?” I asked, my eyes returning to the print.

“For many reasons, many, many reasons, I suppose.”

Neither of us said anything for the next minute or two. I had slowly gotten use to this, these gaps in conversations. Weeks before, during one of these awkward stretches of silence, he had pointed out that I was measuring my thighs as I sat there—thumb touching thumb along the top, the rest of my fingers wrapping around the thigh until my middle fingers met one another on the underside. He wanted to know if that’s what I was doing, measuring my thighs. Was I worried I was getting fat? How would I feel when I gained weight, if my hands were no longer able to connect around my thigh’s circumference? After that, I learned to just sit still in the discomfort of it.

“Interesting,” he finally said, returning to the painting. “It almost ruined his career—his Blue Period. The critics did not like them. No—no one wanted such paintings of melancholy, such sadness. Really, they are pictures of grief.” His folded hands never left his lap.

That was all he said, but I learned later in one of my art history classes that it was the suicide of Picasso’s good friend that had caused him to feel such immense grief, that for years he could not see in vibrant colors, that only the blue of wide grief could find itself onto his canvases, that he, not just his paintings, had been swallowed up and devoured by the profound sadness he felt for those years. *The Tragedy*, by Pablo Picasso, that is what I stared at, all that blue suffering, as I let my secret go. And, just like I knew it would, within hours its force had toppled the very first domino. It is amazing how less than five words spoken in barely above a whisper have enough force to lay flat an entire world, how those words can collapse so many lives in one long chain reaction. It did not take long for it to knock over the man I had named out loud, my step-father, who drove his car to a country road and ran a hose from exhaust pipe to window. I do not know how long it took for the carbon monoxide to trick his blood’s hemoglobin into believing it was oxygen, how long it took for the two to form a permanent bond that would in time cut off his oxygen supply. Supposedly, it is a quick and painless death. I think this must be true since he died while still writing his suicide note. I know this because years later I found the note in my mother’s dresser drawer and read it for myself. I saw how all the letters slowly began to lose their shape and drift down the page until the entire last sentence just slipped off the page. He never apologized.

After The Tragedy, I didn't go back to high school, to my mother, to my friends or boyfriend. I couldn't. But, somehow, I still managed to earn my diploma all the way from Missouri by finishing my early college credit English coursework through the mail and by completing the government and econ classes required for graduation at a local community college. Miraculously, my dedicated school counselor managed to get it all approved with the principal who signed off on my diploma. I suppose everyone knew what had happened, and they, no doubt, went out of their way in an effort to help me avoid forfeiting a 3.8 GPA for a GED. I wrote them each a thank you.

Those were the circumstances surrounding my eventual move back to Indiana that following fall. An hour's drive to class seemed a small price to pay if it meant avoiding all of that. The last thing I wanted was to live in a place where it seemed I knew everyone who knew everything, although I have heard there were many versions of the everything, ranging from pregnancy and abortion to drugs. I did not want to chit-chat with Mrs. Hatheway in the grocery store aisle, knowing full well what she was thinking but not saying. My hands still visibly shook when I accidentally happened to run into someone, really anyone. So the little neighboring town of Nashville, with its different post office, restaurants, grocery stores, and pharmacies, seemed ideal.

The morning Scott and I met the owner to look at the cottage, I knew before she even said a word I would work two jobs if necessary in order to pay the rent. The cottage itself, a tiny Swiss-inspired chalet, sat only 100 feet from a lake. Weeping willows lined the water's edge, their delicate silver-backed leaves floating like feathers on the breeze. Two resident snowy white swans glided upon the golden ripples, their long exotic necks curved in the perfect shape of the letter S. Everyone knew swans mated for life, that they were symbols of love and fidelity. They were the elegant and majestic white birds of the Russian ballet, of the European fairytales I had loved as a child. They were the "mysterious and beautiful" drifting swans of Yeats's *The Wild Swans at Coole*. I took all these as positive signs, especially the swans. We signed the lease in the kitchen, as sunlight streamed through the windows.

Exactly a week later, we moved in. While unloading boxes from the truck, Scott's Aunt Sylvia showed up unannounced and accused us of playing house. Looking back, I can see why she would have thought that, but she was wrong. I wasn't playing at anything. This was my chance to create what I had heard described as a happy and stable home, a home that didn't threaten total collapse from the constant pressure of grief. I desperately believed at eighteen I could create that for myself if I only worked at it hard enough, if only I was perfect enough.

Each week I read "Hints from Heloise," as I knew my grandmother did. I spent all day every Sunday cleaning each room top to bottom so thoroughly I would have earned the gold star from *Good Housekeeping*.

Windows, inside and out. Light fixtures. Baseboards. You could have eaten off the kitchen floor. There wasn't a stain I couldn't remove. I threw myself into the serious matter of meal planning with such earnestness it would have made every homemaker of the 1950s beam with pride. The *Better Homes and Gardens Cookbook* my grandmother had given me became my bible. I learned what it meant to baste, braise, blanch, dice, and pare. From its pages, I learned to make dishes like "Melon Patch Delight" in the summer and "Big-game night" during football season. When my boyfriend invited his friends for dinner, I got my grocery list out and carefully copied each and every ingredient listed in the recipe titled, "Supper for the Men."

I learned from the last fifty pages that preparing these dishes was only half of the equation. Your table decorations were of utmost importance if you hoped to achieve a pleasant eating experience. Every meal should be a treat from the very first sight. In the section, "Table Settings," it proclaimed, "You don't have to serve a formal dinner to set a striking table. In fact, you can do it with every meal. You go at the job with a spirit of adventure rather than of duty—at least you should." I took this to heart. There are no less than ten paragraphs in the "Selecting Linens" section, which outlined exactly which meal on what occasion to use cotton, linen, and rayon damask; appliquéd and printed; lace; burlap; felt; organdy; and chintz. Since we only had paper napkins, this left me feeling nothing short of defeated every time I read it.

I felt more encouraged while reading the section, "Seasonal Table Settings." I tried my best to follow the suggestions provided for creating an inviting table that reflected each season. Each October, I tried to recreate "Colorful as Autumn," which recommended table furnishings in gold and brown and a "handsome wild-bird centerpiece announcing a tasty game feast—a favorite with sportsmen." Since I didn't have a stuffed mallard on hand, I cut bittersweet and put it in a basket surrounded by small gourds of yellow and orange. In December, I tried to imitate "New as Winter's First Snow," which advised using soft candlelight as it "brings a feeling of warmth and friendliness to your table when flowers are scarce." That was easy enough. I could afford candles. In April, there was "Fresh as Spring," favoring a table decked in white and emerald green to announce the arrival of spring. Because I could not locate the "miniature white snapdragons against the background of bold aspidistra or canna leaves," I settled for daffodils, tulips, and hyacinth. Achieving "Cool as a Summer Breeze" seemed the most out of reach, as I did not have any ice blue damask cloth or blue frosted glass, nor the stark white plates necessary for our table to look "refreshing and cool." I worried most in these summer months that somehow grief would finally seize upon the opportunity to pull up a chair and gorge itself upon the food I had so faithfully cooked and placed so meticulously on our little table. But it never did.

It would not be until our second spring, during that March when it threatened to never stop raining, that grief would find its way back to me.

Each day I watched from the window as the rising water of the lake inched closer and closer to the front steps of our cottage. I was sure it would absorb all that happiness I had so tirelessly tried to create. Without the sun, I came to see that weeping willows really did weep, the raindrops falling to the ground from their drooping branches in a torrent of tears. I came to see that those golden ripples easily disappeared and sank beneath the surface, only to be buried under layers of sentiment. But, in the end, it would be my fairytale swans that would finally bring it all crashing down in just a matter of five days.

Day One:

I am soaked standing at the kitchen window, my t-shirt and pajama pants clinging to my body. I'm still wearing my running shoes covered in thick brown muck. It's not yet seven, and I have been up for well over an hour. I glance at Scott only long enough to confirm that he is actually now awake and in the same room.

"Look what's happened. It's bad," I say pointing out the window. My hands are shaking. I am used to this by now, my sympathetic nervous system responding to any stressor, no matter how slight, with a rush of adrenaline preparing my body for fight or flight.

"Why are you wet?" I can hear in his voice that he is more annoyed than curious.

"Look. You have to look out the window. By the road. Do you see them? The swans?" I extend my arm even straighter in the direction of my finger. I had seen them earlier when it was barely light. Even through the pouring rain, they were easy to spot, the movement of white against all that grey. Almost immediately, I had noticed something wasn't right—one continuously walking in nervous circles around its mate that hadn't moved from a prone position at the edge of the road. Headlights had come down the hill and braked beside them. This had upset the circling one. With its orange beak, it repeatedly struck the car with violent blows until the driver continued down the road. It then rushed back to the other's side and quickly settled down beside it. Something was wrong. I put my shoes on and tied the laces. This wasn't easy as my hands had already begun to shake. I was still twenty feet away when he saw me. Immediately, he stood upright, his neck rising, his feathers beginning to ruffle. When I didn't retreat, he first walked then ran toward me hissing, his wings extended and flapping furiously in an impressive show of aggression.

"Do you see the mud in here? It's fucking everywhere, Audra! Jesus! Did you maybe think about taking off your shoes?" I don't answer. I can see Scott out of the corner of my eye, how he is exaggerating the calculation of each step around the mine field of mud to make it to the window. I can hear each of his long nasal inhales, each annoyed, amplified exhale pushed out

from between his lips.

"I'm going to clean it up," I offer defensively. Finally, he sees them.

"Is it dead? Someone probably ran it over—on purpose," he says.

"I don't know. I couldn't get close enough to see. He chased me off. What if she isn't dead? Just really injured or something?"

"How do you even know it's the female? You don't know that."

"I don't know," I answer. I don't tell him that I do actually know, that all I've heard is "SHE's dead" not "HE's dead." That my intuition has already assigned permanent pronouns identifying which is which, that I am certain it is right.

"I can't believe you went out there. Seriously—why would you do that? Look at the mud."

Again, out of the corner of my eye, I can see him shaking his head, looking directly at me, demanding an answer. "Seriously...it's fucking everywhere."

I know he wants me to say something, but I don't. I just keep looking out the window. "You're unreal. Do you know that?"

"I'll clean it up. I already told you," I say, still refusing to look at him.

"Did you even make coffee?"

I don't answer his question. I just keep looking out the window. I just keep watching—one motionless, the other lying down, rising, pacing in circles. Repeat. Repeat. Repeat.

"Why would you even say someone ran it over on purpose?" I finally ask.

"I'm getting in the shower," is all he answers. It's true. Not everyone around the lake loves the swans as much as I do. I found out, shortly after moving in, that, originally, they had been purchased to control the algae growth of the lake and to reduce some of the problems associated with migrating Canadian geese. However, it turns out that mute swans are highly territorial, not just toward Canadian geese but all waterfowl, and, one by one, the few established resident ducks were killed or chased off by the swans. The biggest issue I knew of surrounding the swans had occurred the previous summer, when the artist at the top of the hill raised hell when her black Cocker Spaniel named Pierre was attacked while taking his afternoon swim. He lived, but I heard it was quite unsettling to watch. A great debate broke out, some arguing the swans were winged mercenaries, while others pointed out that neither dogs nor humans were permitted to swim in the lake to begin with. After a vote, it was settled, and the swans stayed.

I do not make the coffee or breakfast for that matter. The mud is still everywhere when Scott leaves. He is in his uniform wearing his gun. He doesn't say goodbye. I watch him drive away. He does not stop at the swans. I know he is irritated, angry with me. This scares me. I've made a mistake. The mud. The no coffee. The no breakfast. I find a rag under the kitchen sink and

begin to clean it up. I stop at least fifteen times to return to the window. Maybe something has changed. Each time, nothing has. I take a shower, return to the window in only a towel—still there. I get dressed—still there.

I stay by the window until I am forced to leave for class. Unlike Scott, I stop the car beside them. He charges, just as he did earlier, but now I can hear his beak stabbing at the car door. I have not anticipated this, the sound of it, and my body jerks with each and every smashing collision. I am sure he will injure himself in his frenzied assault. Still, I am able to see her. She is dead, her slack neck twisted upon wet gravel. He has now disappeared. I do not know if he is behind the car, in front of the car, or maybe underneath the wheel. I am too panic-stricken to move, paralyzed by the sudden fear I will run him over. I stop breathing until I see him re-emerge at the window, his great wings outstretched.

By 11:00am I'm sitting in calculus class. From my desk I copy from the board

$$(x + a)^n = \sum_{k=0}^n \binom{n}{k} x^k a^{n-k}$$

. My handwriting looks like my grandmother's, shaky and uneven. My pencil is literally convulsing in my hand. I look around me. No one seems to be staring. In the seat in front of me is a girl. She is completely dry. I don't understand how this is possible. On the back of her blue sweatshirt, there are three triangles, the only Greek letters I know. Delta, Delta, Delta. In the hospital, a girl had admitted that as a pledge she had been forced to stand in only her bra and underwear in a long line with all her fellow pledgers while her future sisters circled each girl's stomach and back fat in permanent black marker. Love handles, hips, thighs—according to her, no part was left un-scrutinized. No, thank you. I know how to feel fat and starve on my own without thirty girls wielding a sharpie. I don't know how to solve the equation I have written down. I know I need a tutor. I think about writing down $\Delta\Delta\Delta$ as my answer. When I get home, it is still raining. They are still there. She is still there, my delicate Odette, her Swan Lake crown of twilight jewels now stripped from her downy head. Her long bending neck now limp and lifeless, the pristine white tulle of her feathered tutu now soiled and spoiled by the grey mud of the gravel road. This breaks my heart in a thousand different ways. I set the table with paper napkins.

Day Two:

"There she poured out her words of grief, tearfully, in faint tones, in harmony with sadness, just as the swan sings once, in dying, its own funeral song." Ovid does not know these are mute swans. This is all I know about them. I have never heard them in wild song, only in grunts and hisses. If you look it up, reference books will confirm there is no such thing as a "swan song." That is a fallacy passed down from the poets. Still, I close my eyes and listen, imagining the melody loosed from her slender neck in the moment

before her death. I listen for all that beauty released after a lifetime of silence.

An hour before I know Scott will be home, I start the beef stew. I set the table, again, with only paper napkins. I do not eat.

Day Three:

11:00am and I am back in calculus class. I learn all my homework answers are wrong. I can hear my stomach rumbling, the muscles contracting in search of any food that might have escaped digestion. I've only eaten three bananas in three days. I know this is a problem. I think my stomach is loud enough that the boy next to me will hear it. When I get home, I see our neighbor Margaret in a rain poncho, standing in the drizzle on the far side of the swans. I park the car and hurry down the drive. We are both far enough away on our opposite sides that he does not charge either of us. He only stands guard over her body.

"What do you think happened?" I yell across the distance. I see her throw up her arms in a shrug.

"Got hit by a car I imagine. That one's not leaving, though," she yells back.

"Someone's got to move it," I yell.

"I'm going to talk to Georgie and see if he can do something. It's going to take more than one person."

"It's so sad," I yell back.

"Well, it's life, right?" is all she says back. I think about offering to help, but I don't.

"I've got to go start dinner. I really hope it gets figured out," I sort of shout before turning my back on all three of them. But I don't make dinner. Instead, I tell Scott I have a migraine. This is a lie. From bed, I watch re-runs of *The Golden Girls* on the only channel we get. I am still awake at 3:00am. I go downstairs to look out the window. It is dark, but I know they are there.

Day Four:

Scott wants to know what's wrong with me. He says I'm not normal. He leaves that morning again without saying goodbye. By the time he finally gets home, I am in bed pretending to be asleep. He wants to apologize for being an asshole. Really, he wants to have sex. I don't say no because I think about the mud, how I didn't cook breakfast or dinner, and how I still only have paper napkins. Plus, I don't know how to say no. He is on top of me, and, before he can finish, I have bitten my bottom lip so hard I can taste blood. I hate him. I hate the swans.

Before falling asleep, I imagine the swans—him, bedded down beside her, out there in the darkness. I know he is still there, next to her lifeless body. She is his possession. He dominates her, even in death. I think about the rape of Leda by Zeus disguised as a swan. Scott is asleep, so I get out of bed to

look up Yeats in my anthology of English poetry. Only I don't read *The Wild Swans at Coole*, instead I read *Leda* and the Swan.

A sudden blow; the great wings beating still
Above the staggering girl, her thighs caressed
By the dark webs, her nape caught in his bill,
He holds her helpless breast upon his breast.
How can those terrified vague feathers push
The feathered glory from her loosening thighs?

I get back into bed. I still can't sleep. I think about the less popular version of *Swan Lake*, the one where the white swan princess kills herself because the black swan, the evil magician's daughter, has tricked the prince into infidelity, dooming the princess to remain a swan forever. I pray our swan will kill himself, that he will drown himself and sink out of sight weighed down by his inconsolable grief.

Day Five:

When I wake up, they are both gone. This doesn't make me feel guilty. I tell myself it is an answer to prayer. I tell myself I still hate them, even her, but especially him—his wretched sorrow, his utter devotion to suffering. Still, I drive around the lake in my pajamas to see if I can spot him. He is nowhere to be found. I am crying. I am sure someone has killed him and tossed both of their noble bodies into their trash filled with coffee grounds and cigarettes butts. This thought is unbearable. I pull over thinking I might throw up. Between sobs, I tell myself I am relieved they are gone. Their crippling white grief on display day after day—out of sight, out of mind. I tell myself, again and again, I no longer love the swans.

***S.R. Aichinger** has an MFA in creative writing from Creighton University and lives in Omaha, NE. His work appears or is forthcoming in |tap| lit mag, Into the Void Magazine, The Paragon Journal, Snapdragon: A Journal of Art & Healing, Ghost City Review, and IDK Magazine, among others.*

Untitled #2

S.R. Aichinger

after Melissa Broder

I held a nightlight
to my bones
& watched you
pretend to sleep
beside me,
my single thought
all night
concerning your lips,
like two fresh
fragile scars,
pressed
against my arm.

R.E Hengsterman spends his time under the Carolina Blue Sky. His musings can be found at www.deconstructinghuman.com and on Twitter @rehengsterman



Heavy

Shot on cardboard pinhole camera & Ilford fp4

Mike Riess lives in Washington D.C. with his wife, Jen, and his daughter, Madeline. He works as an attorney and has recently started writing short fiction. This is his first published work.

Avenues and Floss

Mike Riess

On First, ice chips and flecks of barbecue sauce litter his knotted beard as he limps quickly through the evening crowd, desperate for a spool of mint string, cutting between so many people, so many faces, pointy ears blistered from the cold, curved mouths and hooked noses emitting synchronized frosted puffs, penciled eyebrows arched against a capricious wind whipping flags, launching hot-dog wrappers.

On Second, he passes Zips, glimpsing the revolving shiny suits sheathed in plastic. No matter, no matter.

On Third, the cold air begins to burn his lungs, but it's just irritated cells lining the trachea, just molecules restricted from entering membranes.

On Fourth, he senses but does not look at the building and its ten stories of gleaming glass, no doubt bathing in the evening's purple light. He can hear the whooshing of the automatic doors, can smell the collection of leather shoes, can feel the air heavy with the smug satisfaction of men congregating in the perfectly-heated lobby that he used to mop. No matter, no matter.

On Fifth, he sees his pickpocket sensei, Ricardo, with his dirty cup of change and busted boom box distorting Jeff Buckley, who (Ricardo, not Buckley) gives him a smile with an upturned tongue stretched toward his nose, men like him on Fifth having sufficiently scared him when he worked on Fourth, because if he didn't meet his cleaning metrics he would end up like the men on Fifth, which led him to the pills, causing him to become one of the men on Fifth. The consequences from the fear of the thing, rather than the thing itself, is always the thing that gets you. No matter, no matter.

On Sixth, he gazes up at the public library standing tall, thousands of books stored within those brick walls, books about multiverses, where in an infinite number of universes minus this universe he is someone else, with a slightly different chemical composition, which alters his "decisions" (in reality there is no free will—we are all slaves to the gray matter in our brains) assuring him that in at least one of those universes Lindsay does not leave him, meaning that strands of her auburn hair still wind up in the tub at their tiny, rundown place on Twelfth and he holds her large, yet delicate hand as they stroll down Eleventh sharing a peach ice with the summer sun beating

down on their pale necks.

On Seventh, he gets to where he wants to be: Duane Reade. Right incisor, left molar, both canines: he can feel the barbecue wing remnants lodged. Glide floss, mint flavor, of course, so soft and gentle, yet shred resistant, is really all that he needs, the thing that he misses most, he decides, because, really, what's better than removing food from your gums? But when he pulls out his tattered wallet he only has a crumpled dollar and a scuffed nickel—three dollars and twenty cents short, if he remembers correctly. No matter, no matter.

On Eighth, he's limping faster, with no purpose, nowhere to go, sweat dotting his forehead and pooling along his upper back despite the winter freeze. He picks at his teeth with unkempt nails, scratching vigorously, tongue lamely attempting to reach the remnants, thwarted by his tightly-compacted teeth. It is hopeless: the plaque will calcify, attaching to his enamel and below the gum line, bacteria polluting his mouth, releasing toxins in his bloodstream, leading to an arterial clot, which will cause a massive heart attack, and voilà, he will be no more. No matter, no matter.

Back on Seventh, pacing outside Duane Reade, grasping for a solution, when he sees his chance, a perfect target: a distracted, long-haired father, with a bulge in the left pocket of his Patagonia jacket (in one of the multiverses he must be wearing a paint-stained, moth-eaten sweatshirt) with his daughter, no older than five, ambling alongside him, about to enter the convenience store. He limp-hustles, swinging his left foot like a fast-moving scythe, beating them to the entrance and holding the door open. The daughter enters the store uninhibited, humming Miley Cyrus, but the father looks at him with revulsion, his face twisted into a pained smile/grimace. As the father walks through the open door, the floss-dependent man tests his amateur pickpocket skills: a phlegmatic cough, accompanied by a quick, smooth swoop into the father's left pocket, and in an event so unlikely, so shocking to the floss-dependent man—he had been convinced he was going to be caught and locked up (at least, he hoped, they had floss in prison)—he actually grabs the wallet without the father noticing and slips it quickly underneath his paint-stained, moth-eaten sweatshirt.

Back on Eighth, he is pacing again. The father had a fifty in his wallet, so the floss-dependent man has enough for at least eleven packs of floss. He knows he should wait at least thirty minutes before entering Duane Reade, but he can taste the minty explosion that awaits him and feel the smooth string that will slide between his teeth and fish out the remnants.

Back on Seventh, he can wait no longer. Even though it's only been ten minutes, he enters the convenience store, where he immediately spots the father, who is ghost-white, animatedly talking to a woman, who is playing the part of an officious-looking manager, while simultaneously trying to console his daughter, who is hysterical, repeating her grievance over and over:

“Daddy, you promised me a KitKat. You promised me a KitKat. You said I could have a KitKat.” A handful of customers watch the scene unfold, and the manager then makes an announcement over the PA system: “Good evening, patrons. We have a customer who lost a black wallet. If you find it, please promptly return it to the cashier. Thank you for shopping with us, and don’t forget about our Monday discounts in the Oral Hygiene section.”

He can’t believe his luck—what are the chances?; unless, of course, he is hallucinating, which is a distinct possibility, considering that the barbecue wings were his only meal in the last three days—but then he sees, through the gap between Burt’s Bees lip balm and Dove moisturizer (he was hiding in the Skin Care aisle), that while the father converses with the officious manager, his daughter, who has stopped begging for a KitKat and has moved a few feet away from her father, is silently crying, tears dripping on her pouty lip, and it’s just too much to bear for the floss-dependent man, who now silently curses his luck and begins to explore the endless possibilities available to him in other universes, but then the father and daughter are about to leave, so he moves quickly and jumps out of the Skin Care aisle and exclaims, a little too loudly, “My God, I found the wallet,” and the father turns around and looks at him with revulsion, and something else too—*suspicion*, yes, that’s it—and the father grabs the wallet from the floss-dependent man and looks inside, thumbing through his credit and insurance cards and noting the fifty-dollar bill and before he can respond, the daughter, in a display of youthful exuberance, hugs the floss-dependent man, wrapping her bony arms around his right leg, and the feeling is wondrous, divine, how long it has been since he has been touched by another human being, how good it feels to feel the warmth of another body and share a moment with another person who appreciates his existence and the floss-dependent man thinks, Screw the floss, this is much better than that.

Eden Bailie is a young poet from Pennsylvania. Words are her solace and passion. She reads and writes every day, and continues to develop her unique voice.

Timeless

Eden Bailie

i try to read coffee grounds like tea leaves.
a flightless bird / ambitions too big for my body
i reach around in the dark to feel something
that makes me feel older,
bus tickets to the city and heeled boots,
still playing dress-up,
except this time i paid for the shoes.

*Laura Green lives in Portland, Oregon. She is working on a memoir tentatively titled **Bastard Child of a Renegade Nun**. Excerpts have been published in *Vinyl Poetry*, an upcoming edition of *Broad Street*, and in the *Flash Fidelity* section of the *Tin House* online magazine.*

Forms *or*

12 Examples of Faith

Laura Green

**She hadn't always been a poet.
She started out in prose. Fiction. But everyone said her characters were unbelievable.
She said, "Some of my best friends are unbelievable."
Still, she made the switch to poetry.
No one needs to believe a poet.**

1. Believe This Is A Poem

She hadn't always been so skinny. When she was a baby she had fat thighs. So fat they had rolls, so fat they touched with her feet inches apart. In pictures she looks satisfied. Full.

In pictures from when she was a full baby, everything was turquoise plastic with sparkles embedded, all the women wore bellbottoms and sandals or bright colored dresses with thin belts and pleats. Skinny belts and pleats, the women had always been skinny.

Every man appeared untrustworthy. No one should trust a man in a button-down shirt with a butterfly collar. Still, she wanted to trust those men, like she wants to be believed. You can want a thing you don't need. You can want a thing you shouldn't want. Full.

Her poems are full of chrome counters, Old Spice, Soap-On-A-Rope. Her fiction had been blazers. Chest hair that sends a tingle, believe it. A woman spread her bare arms wide, *I'm glad you made the switch*, and maybe there's a shimmer. The glint of lotion. Scales? So skinny.

No one believes her poems, and does anyone have to? But no one likes them. Not her mother, not her best friends. *There's something missing. Or too many words.*

So skinny.

Full.

2. Re-enactment

Maggie says (shaking her head): Mmm - it's not really a poem, though, is it.

She says (looking at the sky): Well, I mean.

Maggie says (consoling): I mean, it doesn't need to rhyme, I'm not saying that, but. I mean.

She says (nodding gratefully): Sure, I guess. *(Patting the goat)* Greg is looking good.

Maggie says (uplifted): He is. The knee support makes all the difference. *(To Greg, the goat)* Doesn't it buddy. You just needed a little support.

She says (sweetly): Mmm...

Maggie says (with gusto): You know, maybe if you ate more. This is the kind of poem a hungry person writes.

3. From Memory:

"It's not really prose, though" the teacher said, re-crossing her legs. "Is it."

It was April but hot. The air smelled like lilacs. The air outside. In the teacher's office the air smelled like roasted nuts and new carpet. Part circus, part hotel lobby.

"I mean, for one thing all your characters are shadows."

Ms. Finn had on dress shorts - tan with faint white stripes. One long scar from where you'd find the head of her femur to where you'd find the head of her tibia. Someone had opened her.

"It's hard to believe in a shadow. You can see that, can't you?"

Ms. Finn re-crossed her legs. For a moment a slice of wooden chair seat appeared between her thighs,

"It's hard to trust something you don't really believe in," then disappeared.

4. Chapter 4. Swimming

Vincent's shadow climbed the wall. Bamboo wallpaper. It was easy. The feathers of his hair lifted shadow peaks in the breeze. His shoulder shadows were sharp.

"You're chubby, it's true," he said, "You've always been chubby, but I can swim with you on my back. Despite it. Because I am strong."

Vincent rocked on his heels and rotated 20 degrees. The tip of his butterfly collar caught the light - a horn grew on his shadow shoulder, a spike.

"Don't worry," he said with his head quite still, it's waterproof. The suit will be fine. You can't hurt it, or my hair. Don't worry about my dress shirt."

He spun till his shadow had no shoulders. A chest. A bottom. Then tipped back, back, back. The points of his shoes rose up past the baseboard. Up like an island, like a dorsal fin, up and he spun. Vincent spread his arms wide, and maybe there was a shimmer. Maybe dots of light roamed across her face. Maybe it was just his bracelet, hanging from the thin shadow of his right wrist. Maybe scales.

"You can't hurt me, I'm strong. Strong as grass. Strong as mink," he said. "Believe me."

She leaned forward, the top of her head met the light, and forward, a small grey mound by his left foot, and forward, a half moon, and forward, a globe. He spun till her globe head faced his toes. She opened her mouth, cracked globe, "I believe you."

"Good girl," he said, and crouched down, absorbing her.

5. "Maybe it's a problem with form," Ms. Finn offered. "That might be it. This is the kind of story a poet writes. Maybe you just need a different form."

6. Before The Switch (formed into a list)

chocolate

pancakes

malted milk

eggplant

egg cream

eggnog

mink

donuts

did I say pancakes?

pizza

fiction

suede

7. After The Switch (formed into a form)

I haven't always been a poet
but some of my best friends glimmer. So. I made the switch. I'm
hungry
but the form fits. She said, "It's not like prose didn't leave you hungry."
True, I could eat fiction till my chin shined.
No one needs to wipe the spilled sauce off a poet.

8. OpEd:

Maggie says she should be funnier.

Poetry takes itself too seriously, Maggie says as she brushes her pigmy goat's teeth. You started out wanting to make a difference, but if this is what you're doing now...

Greg is a rescue. Greg the goat. *There are serious things in the world, you know. Poetry is just poems.*

Greg says:

Have a brownie, have another. You should gain weight. You're so skinny.
Greg the man.

9. Analysis

When she was a baby she'd eaten brownies. She'd eaten a desert with Cool Whip and marshmallows. She'd eaten eggs. Scrambled eggs on toast with mayonnaise. She'd eaten pizza and meatloaf. Not a tiny baby, obviously. Once she'd made the switch. To solid food. Peas and ham and hot dogs. *It's unbelievable, what you are,* says the mother in one of her new, funny poems. *Oops - ate. Sorry darling, that was a typo,* she laughs. *It's unbelievable what you ATE.*

10. Faith (a monologue)

I can't believe it's April! Already! Unbelievable!
I can't believe she's so tall. I can't believe it's been so long.
Blue mascara? Unbelievable. Can you believe it?
NO!
You'll never believe what I had for lunch.
You
Will

Not
Believe

how many dogs! I saw in the park! I don't believe it. I don't *believe* it.

30 pounds? A fish? Triplets?!!! Can you believe they thought they'd get away with *that*. I can't believe how tan you were, your bangs, that bracelet. Tony Danza!!! Oh my God I don't believe it! 20 dollars?!! No. An hour? A bus ride? Six times? No!

No, I don't believe. No. Not six. I won't believe nails. Not time - I won't believe it! Try. Try to make me.

NO! I won't believe you dated him. I won't! Stop! Stop trying to make me believe we're forty. Oh my god, stop please stop. I can't, I *can't* believe you made it yourself. Please, it's too hard.

What if I believe she called even though you asked her not to, and then it turns out she didn't call. It's not that I don't want to believe it - I simply can not. No one could. It's unbelievable.

No one could, so who am I? Who am I if no one could?
To believe it.

I'm not one, that's who, and you better believe it. I'm not one if no one could.
I'm not one to believe it. I can't.

11. Make me Believe

ingredients:
Wonder
Bread

method:
Hold Wonder Bread to your mouth until just tender.
While still warm press firmly to your eyes till lightly seared.

Serve open faced.
Don't eat any.

Serve face down.
Eat it all.

12. Shadow Puppet

Your blazer does seem wet, though, and we're sinking.

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Still, she made the switch to poetry.

She said, "Some of my best friends are unbelievable."

Unbelievable.

She started out in prose. Fiction. But everyone said her characters were...

She hadn't always been a poet.

Manit Chaotragoongit was born on September 30, 1983 in Bangkok, Thailand. He received a Bachelor Degree in political science and public administration. His inspiration started when he was teenager and found old books about art and photography. He felt it deeply in his heart and he learned about art and photography by himself. His first job was a photographer in a little publishing company in Bangkok. Currently, he is working in public enterprise, but through practice he is still learning about the methods and creativity of art and photography. He prefers conceptual photography and street life. His artwork is all about life, he presents his experience and vision through his eyes. He thinks everything in a part of life has meaning. He hopes that this work will have value for the audience.



Dreamy Day

Life in the modern world has too much competition, and moves too rapidly in every dimension of life, such as in politics, economics, and culture. The invincible chain binds our life with the change of society and we can not avoid the trends of the world.

In a silent place far, far away ...far from the crowds, chaos and life of society, as I stood and looked at the composed branches of the trees, the sun shined the light of hope. It was the truth of life, and differed from the illusion of society. I touched, I felt, I indulged with the silence, tranquility, and peace of nature. I thought the nature was the answer to my question about calmness.

I felt when I lived among pure nature it was a time of serenity.



Silent Home

In the modern day a lot of people look at the uncertainty of the future. They try to foretell or guess what will happen, and search for possibilities or certainties among volatility and change. But when I saw the old house, the place of my memories, I thought about the part of my life with my house. There were too many feelings, a story of the past. It was a period of reflection, and revived lost memories. My calmness from a time when I didn't have distress about the future. I felt free and independent from the expectation of the future, and absorbed with the past. Perhaps we are looking forward to the future, while we miss and forget something in our current life.

Mike Zimmerman is a writer of short stories and poetry, as well as a middle school writing teacher in East Brooklyn. His previous work has been published in Cutbank, A & U Magazine, and The Painted Bride. He is the 2015 recipient of the Oscar Wilde Award from Gival Press and a finalist for the Hewitt Award in 2016. He finds inspiration and ideas from the people and places he loves. Mike lives in New York City with his husband and their cat.

Mowing Season

Mike Zimmerman

When I was fifteen, I got a job at the Christmas tree farm a walkable mile from home. The grocery store where my mother was the floral manager had already fired me for being rude to a secret shopper whose bananas I'd mishandled. The movie theater manager kept trying to set me up with her daughter, then fired me for saying I didn't care for girls who smelled like butter. We lived too far from anything else, so the farm was my only option if I wanted money for books or weed.

We mowed in the summer, took a month off, cut in the fall, and sold in the winter. I mowed the grass in between the evergreens, which were planted in straight lines like rows of desks across 150 acres. After mowing, I went through the aisles of trees and trimmed each one into a triangle pattern with hedge clippers. Christmas trees don't grow into that shape naturally—they have to be trained, nurtured, like most things. This took all season, and my weak hands would shake some nights while I counted the cash.

Working with me that summer was Ralph, the boss, who mainly stuck by the gear shed. He filled the weed-wacker and the lawnmower with gas, sharpened the stump-grinder, and listed jobs that needed to be done. Mike and Greg, brothers, cut down unshapely trees for firewood and took care of the horses for kiddie parties. Jeff was the arborist; he planted, and he made sure the trees were healthy. Jeff seemed to have a hand in everything.

As an owner, Ralph was lazy but genial, with a serious temper. Mostly, he drank beer and told people what to do, but he at least left us alone to do it. Mike and Greg were brothers who were notorious troublemakers at my high school but were too old to have been in school with me. They told me that a few years ago, Ralph got really drunk and beat Mike in front of a horrified family of six buying their Christmas tree. Apparently Mike had cut too much of the stump off for Ralph's liking. He ultimately chased his employee with the saw around the snowy parking lot before retreating to the handmade ornaments and wreaths tent to have another whiskey. Mike kept the job because, like me, he didn't have another option.

Even though Ralph was in charge, it was Jeff who met me on my first field to show me what to do.

“So this is the first field. These guys are called—”

“Blue spruce.” I recognized them without enthusiasm, pale green with very sharp needles. My father had planted one in our front yard, and my mother had called it ugly and threatened to chop it down. Dad had to take it back to the garden center.

“That’s right. The most important thing is to tell the new growth from the old growth. Only trim the new growth. How do you tell the difference? Well—”

“It’s bright green and not stemmy and brown.”

“You done this before?”

“I’ve seen plants before. I don’t need a lesson to do this.” I wanted to be left alone so I could listen to my Discman.

He handed me the shears. “Actually, you do. If I come back here and find an entire field cut to shreds, we can’t sell trees four months from now. So you do this one, smart guy.” He pointed to a blue spruce in front of him.

I trimmed up the tree at an angle, carefully avoiding any old growths. Jeff stood right next to me, eyeing up every little snip I made around the tree. I finished and stepped back—it looked like a perfect Christmas tree to me.

He bent over, his underwear just peeking out of his jeans. He picked up a tiny sliver of old growth I’d nipped. “What the fuck?” Jeff got in my face.

I looked him right in the eyes. They were blue with flecks of green, like a pool collecting leaves. “That’s like, an eighth of a centimeter.”

Jeff grinned. He looked like a former surfer from years of working outside, tan skin, blond hair. “I know. I kinda like messing with you. You reek of weed, by the way.”

“Yeah. You get high?”

“Sure.”

I pulled out a joint from the plastic bag in my pocket, put it in my mouth, took out a lighter, and flicked it.

“Not here by the trees, smart guy. The back of my pickup.”

“Right,” I said.

We walked over to the pickup, which was parked on a dirt road just a few feet from the edge of the trees field. Jeff pulled the hatch down. “Climb in the back.”

I sat down right above the wheel in the open bed of the pickup and lit the joint. Jeff slid over next to me, and I passed it to him. While he took a long drag I instinctively pulled out a book, some mystery novel, and opened it up. The farm was quiet around us, just a bird cawed overhead. The pine needles fell to the ground with some light tapping. There was a nice breeze this early.

Jeff slid closer to me to grab the joint, way close, so that his leg was flush against mine. I could feel the texture of the hairs on his thigh, soft and feathery. Mine were coarse and nappy. The crease of my leg was wet with sweat. I almost told him to back off, but I didn't. We sat there, pressed together and sweating, while I pretended to read. I could hear myself breathing.

He passed me the joint and leaned over my shoulder. "Reading?"

I nodded. "Obviously." My voice cracked a bit.

"You're an odd one."

"Yep." I passed it back.

"What are you, like a senior?"

"Yep," I said, without looking up at him as he killed the joint. I could still feel his leg pressed against mine—everything felt very warm. "I should probably get to trimming."

"Okay. You'll be on this field until lunch. Ride the mower back to Ralph when you're done. Don't work too hard."

With that, I hopped down from the back of the pickup and reached up to grab my backpack. Jeff had it in his hands.

He handed it down to me but didn't let go; our eyes met again. It was a glance that I couldn't place then, but his faced seemed softer and narrower, like frustration mingled with interest—the way I would stare at a mystery novel I was about to solve.

#

While it was Jeff who showed me how to do the work properly, it was Mike and Greg who showed me how to make the work enjoyable. The two brothers always showed up a few minutes late in their unwashed grey hoodies and jeans. They'd glance slyly at each other while Ralph gave out the jobs for the day. Neither of them seemed to get much done, but what they got done must have been good, or Ralph would have yelled at them.

Our routine over the next week looked like this. After I finished mowing and trimming a field, they'd come around to hack down any dead trees for firewood or wreaths. Though "hack" is hardly what they did. It was a bit like watching my great aunt eat: a little nibble here, a little nibble there. They'd saw for a bit, rest, saw, rest. It would take them all morning to cut down three trees, and all afternoon to grind the stumps. At first, they were suspicious of how fast I did things, didn't talk to me much, but then Jeff told them I had weed. By the end of the first week, all four of us would sit and smoke together through the day.

"You see we can't carry the stuff, being on parole and all that, but we love it."

"Yeah, you just let us know how much we owe you on payday."

"Don't smoke too much, guys. It's been two weeks and we haven't really done much," Jeff said, taking a long inhale.

They never did pay me, but I liked Mike and Greg. My parents had taught me that the point of working was to finish—get the job done as quickly and as best you can. But I learned that summer there was a whole different point to working. Do as little as possible, just enough so the boss doesn't notice, and collect a paycheck anyway. Jeff seemed to agree with Mike and Greg's philosophy most days, and the four of us started spending hours on the same field, smoking joints between mowing and trimming and chopping and replanting.

Hot changed into stifling, and the grass changed from lush and fragrant to brown and dried. Our shirts weren't just damp anymore, they were soaked and sour. The lawnmower caught fire three times. It was blazing all through the afternoon, and Mike and Greg invented ways for us to pass the time, each of them profane. Our first game was to talk dirty to the trees.

"This bitch is sticky, look how sticky I made this bitch." Mike said as the sticky, hot sap oozed and melted from a trunk.

"Oh, she's sharp, don't worry, no glove, no love baby. I'm gonna get this saw deep in you. You do one, kid," Greg said.

"That lawn is about to get mowed so hard—I don't know." I said.

"How about, it's about time I trim this overgrown cunt?"

"That was great," I said.

"Quit yacking about it and get some work done," Jeff did his best Ralph impression. He always nailed Ralph's slurred speech. It was so dead on, you couldn't help but laugh.

"You know, if it weren't for this guy I would forget I'm at work," Mike pointed at Jeff. "You keep me from getting fired, man."

"I try," Jeff said. "But it's been three weeks now, and we haven't done much."

Dirty talk was one thing, but by far Mike and Greg's favorite game to pass the time was 'would you rather.' Mike's were always superpower questions, would you rather have Batman or Superman's powers, Jean Grey or Cyclops'. Greg's were always sexual, with the top tier ending with 'or get queer with a man?' Everyone made it clear that nothing could be more horrifying than having sex with a man. Even a splintery hole in a Douglas Fir was preferable. Greg made it his mission in life to find a scenario that would trap us into answering 'yes' to the man-sex question. We played these games everyday. While the sun grew hotter, the days grew shorter, and the wind had an occasional chill to it. I could tell the season was coming to an end because Ralph told us about picking up our final checks and finishing out the week. I started wondering if I had just imagined Jeff's interest or if something would happen between us. And that's exactly when something did.

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Week four, the last day of trimming season. It was in a concolor field. This was the smallest field on the farm, as these were not a popular tree for

Christmas—maybe fifty trees on the whole farm. Ralph planted this field knowing they wouldn't sell; he loved concolor's look and smell, which is the only evidence I have of Ralph having a soul. The concolor is a glacial blue, with flat and dull needles, and cones that are lavender until they harden into a deep brown. When you cut a concolor, it smells like oranges. The field that day was quiet, and dimly lit from cloud cover. We saved this field for last since it was the smallest and the least important to sales. It was the farthest field from the machine shed.

I walked to work early that day to avoid the rain. I couldn't help but be on time—even though I picked up on Mike and Greg's laziness and carried it into adulthood, no amount of teasing could ever break my timeliness. Dew sat heavy on the spider webs across the field, making them glisten in the cloudy sun like sweat on a man's back. It was beautiful in the way dandelion fluff on the wind or fireflies glowing amber after dark can be.

I started the mower. The machine slipped and slid everywhere and I ran over no less than three baby tress, spurting orange scented sap all over me. Soon I was covered in slick, wet grass, my shirt was smeared with green, and I had spider webs in my mouth. I had to periodically take off my shoes and empty them of wet grass.

"Hey kiddo," Jeff yelled over the motor. I cut it and waved. The three of them had arrived with a fourth coffee for me.

"Why the long face?" Jeff said.

I walked over to them, extending my hand for the coffee. "Nature is best observed and not disturbed."

"Whoa," Greg said.

"That's deep," Mike handed me my coffee, black. It was nice to smell something other than grass.

"I can't believe you didn't wait until it dried out to start mowing. That's what you get for taking initiative."

"I should have learned by now."

Jeff scanned the field, frowning. "Looks like you took out a couple new trees there, smart guy."

"Whoopsie."

"Don't be a dick, or I'll have to tell Ralph."

"Ok. Sorry."

Jeff put his arm around me. He smelled like cigarettes and coffee and suntan oil and soap all at once. "Ahh, he'll never know."

"This is so touching. I'm so touched," Mike pretended to cry.

"Hey, I have a question, would you rather Ralph scream at you for an hour or get queer with Jeff every time you mow down a tree?" Greg grinned.

Jeff took his hand from off my shoulder. "What'll it be, kid?"

"Honestly? Get queer."

"It all comes out now, on the last day of the season, his secret love for

Jeff,” Greg said. His voice had no hint of cruelty that would imply he’d seen Jeff’s leg pressed against mine, our awkward glances.

Mike and Greg thought this was hilarious, a real knee-slapper. I forced a laugh and side-eyed Jeff. He grinned at me and, despite the presence of Mike and Greg, I grinned back. But Mike and Greg weren’t even looking. They had linked arms, still cackling, near tears. The four of us walked off to see what trees needed to be trimmed and which ones needed to get cut, with me behind, still shaking grass from my sneakers.

It was a bad day for working. The sky turned an ugly brown, like a dying flower. The trees looked ominous, swaying in the coming storm. Blue lightning crackled. We could see the rain, ferocious and soaking, if we looked east. It was coming our way.

Ralph drove out to the concolor field in the gator, a small utility vehicle painted bright green, and called us over.

“We’re doing a half-day on account of the flood warning. Wrap up this field, and hurry up, for Christ’s sake.”

“Sir, yes sir!” Greg said.

“Right away, sir!” Mike saluted.

“You two should join the army, it’d teach you both a thing or two about discipline.”

“We’re learning about it right here, boss. Plus we’re teaching the kid,” Mike said. His tone was not sarcastic—he really thought that.

“Oh, I friggin’ bet. You learning a lot from these guys?” Ralph grinned at me, red faced and probably a bit tipsy.

“Yes sir,” I said, clicking my heels together and giving my best military impression. The guys thought that was hilarious and were practically crying while Ralph shook his head.

“Whatever. I want this equipment packed in thirty. Make it happen. And don’t forget to pick up your final check tomorrow.” Ralph sped off while we called after him, “Aye, aye!”

The four of us split the remaining trimming, one more row each. The air cackled while we worked. I’d never seen Mike and Greg work so quickly, driven by the approaching storm as if it were a whip. I jumped at each powerful snap of lightening I heard, counting the distance between each flash and crash. The air was colder.

“It’s about three miles away, let’s pack it up and head back. Kid, you ride the lawnmower back to the shed, since these two clowns can’t start it. We’ll hop in the pickup with the shears and the chainsaw,” Jeff said.

“How’d you know it’s three miles away, smart guy?” Greg asked.

“He’s counting the seconds between seeing the lightening and hearing the thunder. Because light travels faster than sound so you can count out, in seconds—” I said.

“What the fuck? What do you mean light travels? I never understood

how light can travel, it's either on or it's not," Mike said.

"You dumbass, he probably read it in one of his books. Right, kiddo?" Greg said.

"My dad taught me."

"That's fascinating stuff, man," Greg said.

"My dad taught me that too," Jeff said.

Another round of lightening. "Let me try. One Mississippi, two Mississi—" Greg cut himself off when the thunder rolled in.

"Two and a half miles," Mike said.

"Look at you two, learning shit," I said.

"Go put that goddamn mower away, stop yacking. Go," Jeff pointed to the mower I'd left covered in wet grass.

I walked over and tried to start it while the guys threw everything into the back of Jeff's pickup. I pulled, but it was slippery, hard to get a grip. I tried wiping off my hands but my shirt was slick with grass. Finally, I took my shirt off and wrapped it tightly around the cord. The guys hooted and hollered, and I yelled, "You're all useless," as they drove off. I pulled one more time—success. Lightening flashed and I counted: One Mississippi. I threw my shirt over my shoulder and hopped on the trailer, racing toward the shed, thinking about how metal attracts electricity and how hilly the way back was. Lightening flashed again, and the thunder was so loud it drowned out the motor. There was a shocking gust of wind from in front of me, nearly blowing my shirt away, like a warm whiplash. My face flattened and dirt kicked up into my eyes. I squeezed the lawnmower gear until my knuckles were white, and I pushed with the mower as fast as it would go. The shed was a few feet away when I felt the first, cold drop.

The shed was empty. Ralph probably came by to tell us to go home, then left. That was Ralph. The whole place was eerie but exhilarating as the rain pounded on the tin roof, like hundreds of drummers pounding out their own beats. I turned the mower off and made sure it was covered.

I didn't mind getting wet, so I walked, bare chested into the rain. Summer was over, and I felt the distinct end approaching in the chilly air. The grass and spider webs blasted off me, and I started jogging, soaked but thrilled in the way that only a summer storm can thrill, toward the front gate. By the time I got there not a single inch of me was dry, and I was giggling like it was the funniest 'would you rather' I'd ever heard.

There was a black pickup in the parking lot—Jeff's. What was he still doing here? He honked twice, so I slid into the front seat with him, my long hair just down to my eyelashes. I tossed my soaked shirt into the back of his car, slicked back my hair, and smirked.

"A little late. I'm already soaked."

"Well, I know you walk. I passed by you a few times. Even honked once but you had those headphones in at full blast. I thought you might not

wanna get splashed by cars all the way home.”

“No—no, I do not.”

“Then just say thanks, smart guy.”

“Thanks. I mean really. Thanks.” I looked down at the glove box, bit my lip, and listened to how hard my heart was thumping. I could feel a drop of water slide from my hair, tingling down my spine, and into the back of my jeans. I shivered.

We sat for a minute or two while the rain slowed down.

Thunderstorms in summer were tumultuous and intense, but faded quickly—like youth. The inside of Jeff’s pickup was all new-smelling leather, clean rugs, a pine-scented air freshener. I was used to my father’s car with pizza boxes, water bottles, and crumbs from who knows what. The front seat was one long bench. So as Jeff shifted around I could feel him, hear him taking quick breaths, smell the rain on him.

“No shirt,” he said.

“It’s soaked.”

“All of you is.”

Another long minute of sitting there alone—no cars ever come by the farm during this time of year. The rain let up its pounding a bit, changing to a steady, continuous stream. I stared down at my knuckles—there was a pine needle under one of my nails. Jeff was looking down, as well.

“Do you want me to just take you home?” Jeff turned with another odd look, questioning and narrow.

“Yeah.” At the time it seemed like an absurd question. Of course I would prefer to get a ride than walk in the sopping, splashing streets. Later, I wondered at other meanings, other possibilities in Jeff’s question. What if I had suggested a place, or if I had just leaned in, smelling of grass and citrus, and closed my eyes? Isn’t it true that people like Jeff—secretive, masculine, alone—have these longings and choose somebody young and foolish to waste their helpless love on?

Later still, I dismissed these questions. I dismissed the facts, too. I got old enough to realize that memory was too fickle to be trusted, a lawnmower cord growing more frayed with each yank. Now, I just want to close my eyes and think about that look he gave me and remember.

He turned the car on. “Which way?”

“Down Tuckerton to East Main.”

“I used to live that way growing up.”

“What? You’re from around here?”

“By Browning Road. We used to get into all sorts of trouble by that park—”

“Stephenson Park. What kind of trouble?”

“You know what kind. The trouble you get into after you’ve tossed back a few beers late at night, just you and your buddy, then bam. Trouble

pops up, like a monster, outta nowhere.” Jeff put his arm on the back of the seat and leaned towards me. Our gazes met, and then he turned to watch as he backed out of the farm’s small parking lot onto Tuckerton Road.

I didn’t know the kind of trouble he meant, but I imagined some anyway. A parked car, the windows fogged with breath, or Jeff’s tan back pressed against the cold metal jungle gym slide, beer cans crunching under his curled toes.

“Everyone who ends up here is from around here. Where did you think I was from?”

“I don’t know. You seem—more worldly than the other guys.”

Jeff laughed, but not in the way he laughed at Mike and Greg’s jokes. This was a bitter laugh. “Worldly. I left Jersey once when I graduated high school. Like seven years ago.”

“I just mean that you’re different.”

“Different’s not always good.”

“It’s not always bad. And I meant different good.”

“Well.”

“Yeah.”

The lightening came again, and it illuminated the road like twinkle lights. At a few stoplights, Jeff’s tires spun because the road was so wet. He calmly cursed, and we’d eventually find traction and glide along. Somehow, the rain had made the woods along Tuckerton Road seem more luscious and green and full. A person could pull over, step inside the brush, and be completely hidden from the road. You could do anything back there.

“Yanking those cords all summer really made your arms grow out,” Jeff said.

“Thanks,” I said. We were silent the rest of the ride, meaningfully silent. I got out of the car without even grabbing my shirt. I tried to flex my arms as I closed the door.

The next morning, I looked at myself in the mirror, really looked. There were a few veins snaking up my arms that hadn’t been there before. A riot of hairs on my face, itchy like pine needles, dark brown and red. Hell, I even looked taller. Maybe I could pass for a senior. When I got changed, I didn’t have my ratty work shirt because I’d left it in Jeff’s car, so I put on a nice T-shirt and rolled up the sleeves in a dangerous fit of vanity. I even slicked my hair back.

When I walked to the farm, Jeff was sitting in his pickup outside. I walked over, and he rolled the window down. Jeff had lost the baseball cap and slicked his hair back too. He was wearing a short sleeve button down with a T-shirt under it and dark blue jeans. “Just got my check.”

“Nice. Thanks for the ride last night.” I walked closer to the car, leaning against the driver’s side door.

“No problem.” He tapped the steering wheel and looked around. “You

know, I should thank you, too.”

“What for?”

“You helped me decide something yesterday. When you told me I was different good—” he looked away from me, toward the lines of trees on the farm. “I’m not coming back for cutting season in the fall. I’m moving to Philly with some—friends. Maybe I’ll get worldly, like you said.”

“This sounds like goodbye,” I said.

Mike and Greg were ambling up the drive, “Kiddo! Jeffie-poo!”

I noticed something odd then, just as Mike and Greg came up to us. The question of what to say about it, if anything, spun around in my mind. I had just a few seconds left with the two of them out of earshot. It was a small thing. Maybe not even worth mentioning. But it was right there. Jeff looked at me like he was waiting for me to notice. I swallowed and tried to grin.

“Let’s go get that fucking money,” Greg said. I was too late. They linked arms with me like we were old soldiers. “Come on, kid. See you in cutting season, Jeffrey dear!”

“Need a ride home today?” Jeff called after me, neutral and meaningless.

Stuck between Mike and Greg, I could only give my own flat response, “If you’re still here.”

We walked over to the machine shed, which was stocked up with lawnmowers, stump grinders, gasoline, whiskey, and beer. Ralph wrote us our checks at his desk, and got hammered quite extraordinarily to toast the end of the season. He insisted we each have a mug of whiskey with him before we took our checks. He wanted to offer us some advice—that’s worth as much as a good summer’s pay. Never make enemies when you can make friends. Enjoy life while you’re young. And don’t agree to run your wife’s family business if it’s on some stupid goddamn tree farm.

The guys all drank a few mugs to my one. Every sip seemed to take an hour, but every time I tried to leave, someone else had a piece of advice for me.

When Mike, Greg, and I finally left the shed, they linked arms with me again, mainly to keep Mike from slipping and falling in the mud drunk. Greg whispered to me over Mike’s shoulder, “He’s a cocksucking lightweight.”

“Let’s play,” Mike said. “One last round for the summer.”

“Give it to us,” Greg said.

“Here it is. Would you rather have sex just once with that white pine over there, or have sex with Ralph?”

“This one’s yours, kiddo,” Greg said.

“White pine. Its needles are pretty soft.”

“Good answer. We’ve taught you well,” Mike grabbed his brother and they stumbled together out of the gate. “Until cutting season, kiddo!” Even

though I only had a cup of whisky, my head was buzzing with it. I couldn't wait to see Jeff, even if it was the last time.

But the parking lot was empty. I'd taken too long, listening to Ralph and playing games with the guys. Jeff was gone. I never saw him again, in fact, not when I came back for cutting season, not around town, and not on Tuckerton Road. I almost asked the guys for his number, but I knew no one would have it. I thought about him some days—and some nights—and I hoped he went out and became worldly. Meanwhile, I turned one scrap over and over again in my head, one memory I have from looking into Jeff's pickup truck that morning.

Underneath his button up, Jeff wore a white shirt streaked with grass stains. The shirt was too tight, a bit torn, and it probably smelled like concolor sap and rain.

Charlotte is from St. Mary's County, Maryland. Currently, she is an MFA candidate in Poetry at the University of Missouri - St. Louis. Her poetry has appeared in or is forthcoming from The Normal School, Salamander, CALYX Journal, the minnesota review, The Monarch Review, and elsewhere. In 2017, she was twice nominated for a Pushcart Prize. She is co-editor-in-chief of Milk Journal and an assistant editor for Natural Bridge.

santa monica snapshot

Charlotte Covey

we made our way up and down
elevators. pressed our backs into
buttons, the small space carrying
us floor to floor with each
thrust. los angeles never looked so strange
till i saw it through the brown
in your eyes. we'd spent hours lighting up
the boardwalk, tripping over
orange-tinged vodka and weed
wafting toward the crashing night-
waves. your voice grew thick
with need, fingers nearing a promise
i hadn't made yet. *do you want
to?* i don't know, i can't remember how
i got here, in this hotel with my wrists pressed
against cold metal, your stubble to my
neck. maybe i didn't know how to want
you yet. i imagine the wanting now, mid-west air
humid and stale, no sea to hold my need. i am
imagining a new ending, one where i say, yes,
i want to. take me.

a spell for remembering

Charlotte Covey

when i wake up in your bed, you lightly
touch my hair, pile me into you, say, *it's the first
day of spring*. in my head
i tell you, *this is the season of
my spells*. when you leave me
for work, i burrow into gray
blankets, pillows falling to the floor in my haste
to be covered. once the door closes, i think
of checking each heavy wooden drawer, each white-washed cupboard.
i am trying to puzzle you out. instead i stay
nestled, feel the warm you've left me, push
a small hand out, pale as the flecks still on the ground outside. i pull
the lighter from your bedside (i always thought you
smelled of menthols, but now menthols smell like you). i flick
it on and off, think of catching every sheet, every tile,
every part of you on fire. sometimes, i end up
with words floating in the air unsaid, sometimes
they just won't come when i'm wearing nothing
but flesh. i keep thinking it's talking for me,
every goosebumped blush giving me
away. this is my first time
here. i want to memorize each quiet wall, protect every inch
in my mind, so i can always come
back, even if i never do. the sun rose so long
ago. when i move, it is high, and i feel like i am sneaking,
even though you left me here, and i take your red
bic, and i flame on white curtain, just for a second.
that moment is a spell to keep me here.
i find the kitchen, wander it naked, find pepper
but no salt, wine but no glasses. i heave
it back anyway, 'til it's through, and when it is, i sprinkle the last
few droplets around the sink.
i follow a hardwood path to the living
room, *your* living room, where you live and breathe and don't think
of me, not 'til last night when you downed scotch,
and pressed the letters that make me

'til you called me here, and i came.
when i break the bottle, i consider not cleaning
up. could feign accident, but the liquid's all
gone, and now it's one p.m., and i'm not
done memorizing, blinking my eyes with each imagined
flash. before i leave, i find your shirt and wear it, make sure
to press my heartbeat to the cotton, to linger long
enough that the fabric smells like bonfire
and cinnamon (at least, that's what you told me), and then i'll stay
in each fiber for safekeeping. by the door i sprinkle a pepper
circle, sit, knees bent, pray it works.

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, Foliate Oak Literary Magazine, The Fair Observer, Gravel: A Literary Journal, Fiction on the Web, and Microfiction Monday Magazine.

The Long Way to Town

Andrew Miller



The first picture of Bill with his new car

I was in the rider's seat next to Bill Petry in his 1917 Ford Model T that he bought when he was fifteen, nearly sixty years ago. He paid the original owner one hundred dollars for the car, money earned delivering papers.

We were bouncing toward Brooklin, a village on the Maine coast south of Bangor. The wind was in our faces, our jackets zipped tight against the October chill. We had to shout to hear ourselves over the shrill buzz of the motor, the clank and clatter of the chassis as we bumped in and out of potholes. The air was rich with aromas: at the start of our journey, the musty, dark gray upholstery, then as the engine warmed, hot oil on metal. When we swooped near the Atlantic Ocean, we took in the smell of decayed fish, dried mud, and sunbaked rockweed, heavy and a little sweet.

I've known Bill for almost twenty years and we ride the back roads often. Lunch is always in our plans, although we don't always have a specific route or destination. Today it will be the Brooklin General Store for chicken salad sandwiches, potato chips, sodas, a homemade molasses or oatmeal

cookie. This will be Bill's treat, payback for helping him work on this old car. On another day it might be the Blue Hill Wine Shop for a bottle of Merlot, a slice of Saint-André or cave-aged Gruyère, a loaf of bread from the wood-fired oven at Tinder Hearth Bakery. Thirty miles an hour is just right. Fast enough to get to there in time for lunch; slow enough to savor the ride.



Bill in 1960

We are both in our early seventies. Odd relationship, some might say. He's is gay, I'm straight, and we've always been that way. We both love the coast of Maine, red wine, antiques, and old cars. We both love to ride in the T. Although I'm not sure of our route, of one thing I'm certain: it'll be the long way. On any of the myriad twisting side roads that lead up the coast through beech, maple, and oak forests, dressed up in reds, browns, and yellows since the weather turned crisp. We'll grind past boulder-jammed blueberry barrens, now crimson, lurch through stands of spruce, the reds straight and tall, the whites shedding branches and tops, soon to die. We'll lumber by Allen Cove, the site of E. B. White's saltwater farm, muse over *Charlotte's Web*, think of Charlotte the Spider, Wilbur the Pig, Fern Arable, and the Zuckerman's barn. White wrote essays for *The New Yorker* as well as three best-selling children's books. Several of his essays were about Model Ts, and when he was in his twenties, he and a friend drove one to California. Back in the early 1980s, White spotted the Model T near Blue Hill and flagged it to a stop. He asked Bill if he wanted some Model T parts that he had discovered in his barn. Bill took the parts, then later regretted that he never offered the famous essayist a ride.

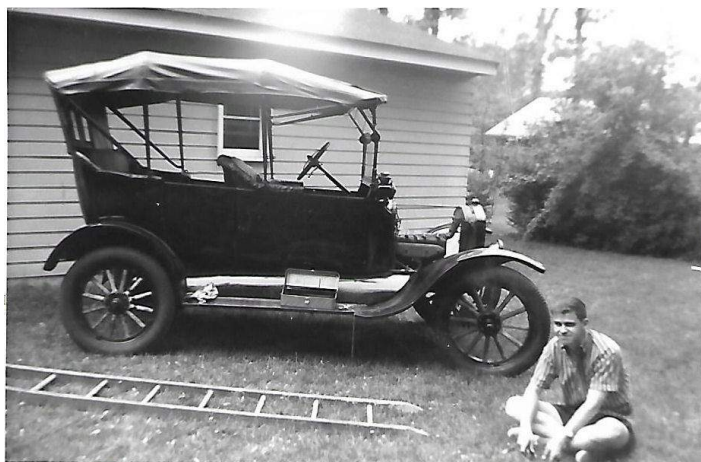
"Why didn't you?" I asked.

He became wistful. "Sometimes I rushed through life a little too fast."

Everyone that we pass, waves. The first time that we were out together, I asked, "How do you know so many people?"

“When I’m in the T,” he said, “everyone waves whether they know me or not.”

A Model T, the antithesis of the modern car, is easily recognizable. Boxlike with spindly appendages and protruding eyes, it’s stately and tall, never slouches, stands erect. And always black. As Henry Ford wrote in *My Life and Work*, “Any customer can have a car painted any color that he wants so long as it is black.” Not shiny and sparkling, but thick and dull, like clam flats at dusk, the underside of rocks at low tide. These vehicles eschew casual attire, wear only top hat and tails, whether they are marching into town for business, romping over back roads to visit friends, escorting lovers through a meadow, or plodding into a pasture for chores.



Bill in 1962

The car is noisy, breezy, bumpy, and slow, laden with eccentricities. Three foot pedals are on the floor: one to stop, one for reverse, one to shift from low to high gear. And, as E. B. White noted, pressing any one retards forward motion. The throttle is on the steering wheel and the spark and choke must be adjusted by hand. All very interesting and quaint, but it's Bill and his relationship with the Model T that intrigues me. He feels about this car as original owners felt about theirs: it's not a curiosity or a valuable gem to soup up and polish for others to admire. It's for chores, going to town, touring with friends. When Bill is out and about he never feels the need to show off, wear goggles, a newsboy hat, white duster. Everyday clothes do fine.

Bill has been interested in antiques for most of his seventy-four years, even before he acquired the Model T. On the table by his bed is a Victorian antique lamp that he purchased when he was twelve years old. His 160-year-old home is filled with handsome old furniture, lamps, and paintings collected over a lifetime. He has modern appliances in the kitchen, but they stand

alongside a functional wood-fire stove he often uses to cook and to heat the first floor. Bill does nothing to upset the original ambience of his home. The floors still slope and old cracks in the plaster remain.



Bill in 1979

Bill does most of the work on the car himself. You don't take a hundred-year-old vehicle just anywhere for repairs. Early in the week he called and asked if I had ever mounted a tire on a rim by hand. Ordinarily this is a one-person job, but his right arm had bothered him all summer and he wanted some help.

"Sure," I said. "Did that on my bike years ago."

"Come over at 9:30 tomorrow morning. We'll work on the tire, then ride to Brooklin for lunch."

When I arrived, Bill led me around to the backyard. The morning had started chilly, but now that the sun was above the spruce trees, the air had started to warm. Bill is a few inches shorter than average, with a dome-like forehead and round face that's quick to smile. Always well-dressed, today he wore a spiffy blue shirt, clean khakis, and a light gray jacket. If you saw him in the market, or walking about town, you would never guess he spends a lot of time with grease under his fingernails, tinkering with a hundred-year-old car.

I set tire and inner tube on a flimsy wooden table and forced the rim partway on. Bill slipped a couple of crowbars between rim and rubber on opposite sides of the wheel. My job was to drive the crowbars around with a two-pound sledge.

I picked up the sledge and started to whack a crowbar. As it bumped along, the tire shoulder slid under the rim. "Keep going," said Bill, "You'll do it." His brown eyes sparkled in the early morning light. He seemed to enjoy

watching me struggle with the sledge.

After the tire was on and inflated, Bill noticed that the stem on the replacement inner tube barely protruded out of the hole in the Model T rim. Our only recourse was to remove both the tire and the inner tube and enlarge the hole in the metal rim. After considerable work with an electric drill, the hole was large enough to accommodate the larger valve stem. I forced the tire over the rim a second time, Bill inflated the inner tube and mounted the wheel on the Model T. We stowed the tools in the shed and jumped in the car, our sights set on the Brooklin General Store.



Bill on the Fourth of July, 1995

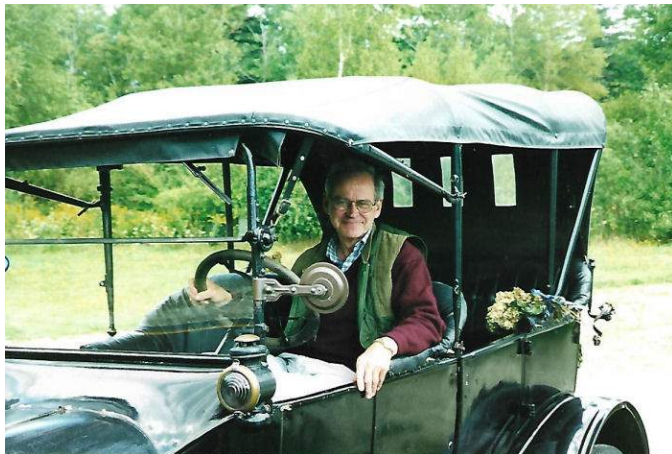
We parked in front of Friend Memorial Public Library, opposite the general store. We crossed the street and went inside to pick out sandwiches and drinks. Bill paid for our food, rummaging through his pockets for the exact change. We sat at a table next to the window.

I asked, “Where did you get your love of antiques and the past—from your parents?”

He opened his sandwich, sprinkled on salt and pepper, and rearranged the lettuce. “My father had some interest in antiques, but my mother didn’t. The truth is, my parents didn’t have much to do with it. I was meant to be living in Victorian times. That’s the way it is, and I never thought much about it.” He fixed his eyes on a platter of homemade cookies on the counter. He was probably thinking that I should buy the cookies since he had paid for lunch. He smiled. “Hard to explain, I guess.” He gazed through the window at the T, took a bite of sandwich.

Bill is not an introspective person. He doesn’t dwell much about why

he loves the Model T and all things old. It's as though the answer is so obvious, he doesn't feel the need to discuss it. The more I probed, the more he evaded. Perhaps I should ask those who wave at Bill in the Model T, whether they know him or not. Maybe they would have the answer.



Bill in 2009

I was about to go for the cookies when we noticed a stooped, white-haired man in a tweed sports coat exit the library, ease down the front steps, cane in one hand, a couple of books in the other. When he glimpsed the T, he hobbled straight for it. As he circled the car, he poked the tires with his cane, sank to one knee to check underneath, leaned inside to inspect the dashboard and foot pedals.

“Old memories?” I asked, motioning toward the man.

He nodded, set the sandwich on his plate. “That happens a lot.”

His usual smile gave way to a slight frown. “Once I gave an old fellow like that a ride.” Bill crumpled his napkin into a ball and dropped it on his plate. “Before we got in, he said, ‘I just want to ride, not talk...’”

“And...?” I asked, curious, but not wanting to interrupt.

“We went to Blue Hill and back—it took more than an hour—cruising up and down the old roads. Never said a word.”

The long way. Bill knew just what he wanted.

Bill's rider, as well as the man we saw leave the library, probably harbor rich memories of Model Ts. Perhaps they rode in them as youngsters, or heard about these cars from parents or grandparents. I looked back later to see if the man with a cane was still there. I thought he might wait to talk about the car or ask for a ride, but he had disappeared.

“Do you ever worry that your Model T could be stolen?” I asked. It has no locks, no glass windows except the windshield and could be started without a key. “No,” he said, “I doubt that anyone could drive it.” True, and a

little sad. People talk about these cars, stare at them in museums, but don't bother to learn much about them.

#

Several years ago, Bill taught me to drive the Model T. My proficiency with a standard transmission wasn't much help. I couldn't get used to shifting gears with a pedal that should be a brake, changing speed with a lever on the steering wheel. It was as though I was sixteen years old, trying to master an obstinate clutch and floor shift, an anxious parent at my side. When I had trouble downshifting, he'd reach over and work the throttle.

"Not too sure I can master this," I said.

"Well, somebody has to know how to drive this car." He squeezed my shoulder. "After I die, I want my ashes scattered from it."

I often think of that conversation. Bill never mentioned it again, but I understood. He wants his ashes strewn while the old car snorts and bucks and sways along Route 175 southeast of Blue Hill, where the road scoots over clam flats, wanders past rockweed covered rocks, through saltwater meadows dotted with apple trees and gray barns and stone walls, then settles into Allen Cove north of Brooklin—not far from E. B. White's old farm.

And I will drive the T.



Bill in 2017

*Somewhere in the snowy drumlins of Syracuse University, **Jono Naito** is excavating her MFA and waiting for sunlight. She is recently featured in StoryQuarterly, Longform, and elsewhere, and is an Editor-in-Chief at Salt Hill. Learn more about her work at jononaito.com.*

End of the Day

Jono Naito

Any student who waits for the late bus must do so under supervision of a teacher. Any teacher who is supervising must remain past the hours of the day until the bus arrives, or a parent or guardian picks the student up. This is how they must remain. These are the rules.

I have four wards. They are twelve, and they come to me each day, which I take as a compliment. They each come to wait, one after the other. JJ first, with a rolling backpack that she wears rather than drags, and a viola case bumping at her knees. Then Beth and Clover, together, connected. I suspect Beth likes Clover, the way she looks at her rather than at whatever they are talking about, which is often the Far Side comics on my door. Shaun is last; explosive, just as infatuated with Clover and trying to prove it. There is a scratching as JJ is already doing her homework at a far desk.

“Ms. B,” Shaun calls at me, rushing the table while chomping potato chips. “Ms. B—Ms. B—Ms. B.” She throws down her backpack and kicks it under the desk. “Why are you always here, Ms. B? Don’t you wanna go home?” I explain that I have to clean for the next day, which is true; I have sorted handouts, washed glassware, erased the board, checked on the frozen, dissectible frogs, stored modeling materials like popsicle sticks and Play-Doh, and even scrubbed at the stain on the edge of my blouse. It is unlikely to come out.

“You married yet, Ms. B?” Shaun yells back as she wanders off. I am not married, and Shaun knows that. I tell her no, but I don’t think she hears me through a sudden static that pours from above.

The after-school buses are delayed. Please wait under supervision until further notice. Parents will be notified.

The speaker above the door says this, and Clover groans the loudest. She wants to go home more than anyone. I can tell a lot about the kids by parent-teacher conferences. Clover’s parents like to hear about what she is learning, what she is good at. Their clothes are clean, and their phones are new. They once invited me to dinner at their house on the edge of town. I imagined the house to be a whole world of rooms.

We begin our extended wait, and the girls take to their own

entertainment. Beth starts flinging rubber bands at Clover, and Shaun blocks them saying, “Get down, Ms. President!” JJ leans a little to avoid them, but has stopped working, watching Shaun, watching the other girls have fun. They pull out an iPod that belongs to Beth. Her parents were rigid, when they sat quietly—they listened and left, their watches ticking louder than what I had to say. The iPod, I think, is one of many distractions they gifted their child.

The girls begin listening to music, singing *Alligator Sky* and talking about the summer. An hour passes. JJ and I observe the three—Beth, Clover, Shaun—as they move about each other in infinite activity. This happens often to JJ, yet JJ keeps coming back to the same room to wait for the late bus. Although JJ has parents at home, JJ’s grandmother is the one to come to parent-teacher conferences. I recall the way she stared down at the report card, all perfect grades, and slid it aside. Her hotdog fingers folded over each other, laced with metal, her earlobes so low that they seemed to drag against the table, she would lean into me and ask, “But is she happy?” I found the question to be unusual, and knowing it was impossible to tell, answered yes. All I want is for them to be safe. As I think this, Shaun approaches.

“Ms. Boyd, can I use the restroom?”

I point at the closet door in the corner.

“The Secret Lab? Really?”

My room is equipped with a small closet room that is a bathroom I use to prepare some class demonstrations. Shaun disappears for a moment.

After two hours pass, I run out of yellow Post-Its—my least favorite kind—to doodle on. I walk to the door, past Beth and Shaun, who are arm-wrestling. I stop with my hand on the handle, as I shouldn’t leave. So I call the office. The phone rings, and no one picks up. My Internet connection doesn’t take, which I do not find strange, given the school budget. I tell the girls that we may be staying quite a while, given the rules, and their eyes get wide, except Shaun, who is spending time staring at the mealworms and potato batteries.

“How long though?” asks Clover. Beth nods behind her.

“Yeah, can’t you take us home?”

I shake my head, and see all three of them before me. Clover is closest to tears, ready to go, to get out of here. I know better, and while they may not understand that, I place my hands on the desk in front of me and ask them to trust me. Trust me that it will be okay, they will be safe and nothing bad will happen to them. I promise this, and the lever of reality turns. Clover wipes at her eyes. JJ stops writing. Shaun sticks her finger in the mealworm jar.

I suggest they make the best of it, and set my desk chair to lean back, so I can rest. Not knowing how long it will be, they compose a short-term solution. The girls begin to build themselves a blanket fort from table-tarps

and cheap lab coats. The whole thing droops deep at first, but they are persistent and they fix it all up, taut and perfect. I rub the ridges of my forehead and pull out some wintergreen Tic-Tacs.

Shaun appears, laying her head back on the desk and sliding it under mine so our eyes meet. “Hey, you gonna share?”

I slide the box to Shaun, and she pours out four or five. The girls celebrate their work at the front table, using plastic petri dishes as plates. Shaun insists on grace. They use a plastic knife to slice the mints and pass about Shaun’s potato chips. Beth and Clover clink test tubes full of water, calling it champagne. I suck harder on my mint and remain at my desk.

By the gentle, moon-glow of the computer on my desk, the four girls camp out in their tent and talk, silhouetted by the desk lamp they brought in. Someone gets struck by a bundle of something soft, like a coat, and Shaun laughs. Shaun is always the one to laugh. I wonder where she gets that from, as on conference day, no one comes for Shaun. The voices fade with the passing of midnight, and JJ plays the viola, stopping only when she, too, falls asleep.

#

“I’m hungry, Ms. Boyd.”

Clover lays in the yard of their makeshift home reading *Simple Machines and Where to Find Them*, marked by a fence of turned-out chairs. She spent the morning pushing out from the original tent, and as I slept, the room had been almost fully rearranged. Outside the fence are fields of empty linoleum, and a ring of forest around the edge of upturned tables, stacked papers, and whatever chairs were unneeded. The morning light is cutting her down the middle—I normally close the blinds at 9:45, when the sun is harsh. I sit up with a start, amazed that I dozed off. The world is quiet—we are still alone, in our classroom. Shaun peeks her head out of the front of the fort.

“I’m hungry, like real hungry,” says Shaun. She looks at me for answers, and I shrug at the supply cabinets. They can figure something out. They’re clever kids, and I want them to know that.

JJ and Beth appear, as well. As Beth tends to a falling fabric wall, JJ quietly moves herself to the bins on the shelf, where I keep the old wooden bits and bobs used to teach simple machines. JJ pulls it all out, laying the materials across the floor. I didn’t think of JJ as much more than the quiet one, the studious, the awkward. I had hoped for her to open up, somehow, but over the time I’ve known her she seems to close up at the notion of growing up, of entering an ever expanding social world.

“What you going to do, make a crossbow?” Shaun watches from a distance.

Clover offers her help and scrounges for coins in nooks and alleys of the room, coming up with thirty cents. JJ fashions a trap and within the hour catches three squirrels at the windowsill, which the girls roast over the

classroom's only working Bunsen burner.

"You did good," Shaun says. She takes a thick bite of squirrel thigh and tears it back, a little bone spinning to the floor. They are all cross-legged on desks, but I am not one of them. I can feel it, standing back by the desk.

"I just wanted to help," says JJ, a voice growing there, an actual person and not a hermit crab or a snail, and the rest are struck by hearing her speak to them. I tap JJ on the shoulder, in an attempt to encourage it. JJ recoils at the touch. While the others spend the day expanding their tent under Clover's direction, JJ looks at the potato batteries left in a heap. When the girls take a break from their work, they talk again, the same gusto as the day before. Shaun and Beth each pull at Clover's attention.

"I want a room, Clo, like a dining room."

"Let's build walls next," says Shaun. "Keeps us safe, right, Ms. B?"

Clover listens to them both, and then chooses to follow Beth into the tent to work, leaving Shaun to quietly stack books like bricks around the perimeter. JJ ignores all this and ties a cup to a string, pulling up soil from outside.

The second night, I am invited into their space for dinner. They have built a proper fire in a metal dissection tray. JJ carefully turns a sparrow over and over, while Shaun tells the others about her grandfather who fought in a war. "He would stay on the planes, flying over the mountains in China, and balance the boxes. Plane can't fly if they have everything in the wrong place. Put this there and that here. Then the planes didn't crash."

After eating, JJ begins to play viola. Beth, the smallest of the four, curls up in her room of sorts, under a desk, decorated with her favorite book, *Perks of Being a Wallflower*, pens, and a duct tape pillow. She stares at me when I leave. My face must take up the whole window. "Ms. B?"

I nod.

"Ms. B, are we going to be here a long time?"

My shoulders, which must seem enormous, shrug. I don't know. Beth smiles wide. "I like being here."

When she is asleep, I leave for the long walk to my desk, topped by a bright computer—their moon. I must look like I am rising up into the night sky.

For the following days I stand at the head of the class and try to teach the girls, as if it would preserve them. Every time I consider the door, I realize I have to stay. I have pride in my kindness, my open heart, and no matter who they were at home, I am their rock. I promise them I am their world now. So I keep teaching, and they ignore me. With each morning we are still in the classroom, uninterrupted. At night, the buses do not come. By Sunday, the girls are no longer just students.

Their campsite becomes a house, with the tops of desks supporting a second floor, with old string and rubber bands to hang up old science fair

poster-board. These become walls, in which they cut real windowpanes and hang plastic wrap as glass. The fire is absorbed inside a kitchen, and I find myself knocking on the front door to check on them, to see why they have stopped coming to class. From my far-off space I see Beth and Clover playing games, tossing paper airplanes, hosting cookouts, drawing maps across the blackboard. They begin to name the places they know, like Homestead and Front Yard. The windowsills become Eastlight, and the things unused thus far scattered in the farthest reaches are referred to collectively as The Heap. A slew of terms arise for minor features of the cabinets and floors, like Bookshelf Cliffs, Projector Castle, Dead Roach. At night they are framed by the glow of their grand dining room window, as Beth and Clover continue to talk and debate such things as expansion, streets, rules. They invent a language known only to them, with a name they have to count on their fingers. Fifififio-fifififio-fifififio-fifififio. Shaun and JJ watch—during their time out, Shaun helps JJ spread dirt and place the torn potato batteries deep in the earthen layer. JJ gives Shaun paper from her notebook, homework forgotten, so that Shaun can make notes. She leaves some for me. I keep them in the top drawer of my desk.

Clover celebrates her birthday based on the calendar they keep. I am asked to deliver the cake made of potato chip flour for Shaun, as a surprise. Beth's party is soon after, and Shaun is not invited. Beth is excited—she and Clover have both turned thirteen. Clover wants to go on a trip seeing the sights around the room, a road trip, all of them seated in my rolling desk chair. Beth insists on a big meal, and spends the whole time talking about being a doctor someday. She is getting so old so quickly she needs to have that all figured out. Shaun, seated by me over by Bookshelf Cliffs, says, "I can't see how she knows all that."

I tell her that she likes knowing things, even if they won't come true. "I don't want to know anything unless I know it'll come true. What if you die tomorrow? Then what you know means nothing."

But the other girls, they are unwavering in their plans for the future, even if the buses aren't coming. They are growing up. By the end of the school year, they are still in the room with me, building, talking, growing, just like nothing has happened. Their house is beautiful. There is an herb garden by a field of potatoes, where JJ's slow pace continues to carve them into the earth. The house is painted a soft red, the picket fences are molded from Play-Doh. The cubby holes where I keep microscopes and the lost-and-found are cleared and turned into storage for memorabilia, and to sort the inventory of the universe. The world expands, faster and faster, and the girls expand with it.

#

They recreate favorite summer vacations. The potatoes growing, the house finished, Shaun delivering our mail to each other, they have dug down

roots. With less to do, everyone lays in the harsh sun, the windows of Eastlight flung wide, arguing for a breeze. I am invited for brunch, and Beth proposes the idea.

They start with hers; she describes a day with her older brother. He has been gone for a time from home, but last year he came back and they went to a park with a long lake. So the girls ask my permission to leave on all the sinks and begin to fill the room with water, pulling the desks back to make shores. Sand from the back of the Secret Lab forms beaches, and I sit on the front table to be a lifeguard, watching as they walk the edge, jumping in, swimming about. When they are done, I open the Secret Lab door and let it wash away into the floor drain, careful not to let ourselves or anything of value flow outward into the void. The girls sit in their living room, drying their hair.

Next is Clover, who has gone to London with her family. She describes a city of tall buses and old, bleak stone, and rounding streets called circuses. I help detach the cabinet doors and direct traffic as they ride about in a bus made of dust and popsicle sticks. “There is Projector Castle,” says Beth, standing at the front of their makeshift bus, playing tour guide. “There is Dead Roach.” I give them my phone to take pictures, which they spend a week reviewing, naming, and printing out behind my desk.

JJ describes her grandmother, who says she moves too slow to like anything but art. Shaun helps curate a museum of the photos they took, along with diagrams and science posters and my pink Post-It doodles. My Far Side comics are removed under supervision from the front door and laid out, and the final museum, three stories tall, complete with a gift shop and membership program, is finished by August. I visit a dozen times, JJ sitting at the front desk, happy to see her friends there. I tell her that her grandmother would love it, and she blushes. I pay for full membership—thirty cents, the whole economy. I get a special invite to the donors’ reception, where JJ plays for everyone while wearing a dress made from tissue paper. It reminds me that my blouse has turned a dirty hue, but I wait for Shaun to talk about her vacations before doing anything about it.

“This was the best one,” she says, and the others smile, walking hand in hand back to the Homestead, and the town they have begun to build around it. At 9:45 AM, when the strong sun comes in, I wake up and see JJ lovingly tending her potatoes, life having become so distant from the past that it is normal. When I am asked if my phone can be disassembled for parts, I let them. They seem happy. This is a life they deserve.

#

I pilfer a coat from the lost and found bin by the door and commit surgery to remove the lining, completing it with some duct tape. I don’t seem to get hungry or dirty, but I have become sick of my blouse. I put it on and walk home towards my desk, passing their house on the way back.

“What’s that there, Ms. B?” asks Shaun.

I tell her duct tape fixes everything, and show off my new look. Shaun tells me that Beth loves duct tape more than anything, that they should all get new clothes. When everyone wakes up, they head to The Heap and begin cutting and slicing all the garments from the lost-and-found, from sixth grade scarves to misplaced staff mittens, making thicker, warmer clothing. This is done with good timing, as harvest season is coming to an end. JJ, wrapped in bright, plushy neon coats turned into a set of overalls, stands over her potato plants, which she has been harvesting. The first frost has snuck by in the night and already killed some of the plants. Beth leads an expedition to Eastlight to close the windows, but it is too late. At Christmas I find myself holding JJ as she cries, a dead stem in her hands. I tell her it will grow back, that a new plant would come back like before. She holds the wilted scrap tighter. “No, Ms. Boyd. It’s right here, it’s right here, you can’t tell me it’s not right here.” Her crying slows after some time, and while I do not believe it, I think I have helped.

Shaun, Clover, and Beth put colored paper over the lights to be more festive, keeping themselves over by the sinks to avoid JJ’s sadness, exchanging gifts of crushed paper airplanes and erasers and balls of lint. By New Year’s I convince JJ to sit with me on the balcony of my desk and watch. JJ smiles and seems to make a wish or promise to herself. She wipes the snot from her nose and lays the rotten thing behind my keyboard, crossing the vastness of the room to join her peers at home, by their fireplace, in their home on the farm. When she isn’t looking, I tear up the beloved remains and put it back in the soil patch. I don’t want it upsetting her anymore.

#

As they turn sixteen, one after the other, I see time spin faster than I expected. The girls begin to demand more and more, and to fix that, they have to build. The town of Homestead becomes a city, and I find myself pushing everything about, erecting their movie theaters and malls and stadiums. The old house ends up in the corner with the farm, where JJ stays, as the rest move out to find themselves. The cubby holes become apartments. The streets are named after old classmates, little white labels from science fair projects worked loose and made into signs. Patrick, Jasmine, Daniel, Tabitha. I do not remember these people.

They make cafes and nightclubs and parks. The library has all the books Beth can find.

Simple Machines and Where to Find Them, The American Story Vol. II, Perks of Being a Wallflower, my teaching books, grades from the semester, four receipts from the last time I went shopping, and two months of lesson plan notes. The first three get checked out all the time, so much so that the rest is archived. Beth says she plans to write a book. “What about?” asks JJ, as they all sit in the city plaza, cross-legged, admiring the skyscrapers. I am leaning

on the fountain. Beth shrugs her shoulders, and points at the world around them.

JJ steals berries and fruits from outside using yardsticks and yarn. It is easy since the brush has grown so thick. She plants the trees, the orchards. She lures in all manner of wild things to populate the fields, and she works, day and night, making her grandmother proud. Her grandmother is probably dead by now, but she doesn't think about that. I think about that. I think about how time has not moved for me. I do not feel older, look older. I begin to realize I am yet another object of the room, a force of the universe, a law. Like gravity I am present, useful, and unchanging. This only reminds me that I am not them, but that is okay. I can continue to do what I can to save them.

I ask to take some animals JJ has caught in her traps, to gather up what I can to make a zoo. There are exhibits of squirrels, of birds, of all manners of insects. There is an exhibit of dissected frog parts. By the entrance, there is the main attraction, a massive terrarium for my mealworms. On her mail route, Shaun always stops in to say hello to them, but then, one day, she stops and says nothing, standing there. I go to her. "What if they die?" she asks, and I say we wouldn't know, the body would become dirt, then dust, and new generations would come, and grow, and live.

"But what if we die?" she says, and I am dumbfounded. JJ is in the back, delivering the last of the squirrels I asked for, and she comes over.

Shaun keeps saying it over and over, "But what if we die?" I can tell she means it immediately, like if the moldy tiles and fluorescent lights that form our sky would come crashing down, but I try to ignore that because I wonder about that, too.

I tell her that they don't have to die if they don't want to. Shaun looks with mourning at the mealworms, but JJ looks at me like I've struck her. "That's not true," says JJ, leaving. Shaun says she would like to have company, so I walk with her as she talks about names for the mealworms, how she tells them apart, what they will be some day.

By the next summer, the four girls stop playing their games and become something else. I am there when they each learn to drive, when they buy their tickets and order their late night fast food. Shaun is tough, her muscles thick—she runs alone to set records and competes at Dead Roach Stadium, which I attend as a referee. I attend everything. I am no longer their teacher, but I am all of everyone to them, always trying to do right, to be kind, to help them along their way. When Shaun stops delivering mail, I take over and find myself up at the homestead, the old farm, where JJ still lives. I see her smoking a joint in her garden, and drop off a package. JJ has let the farm go, commuting to the city to entertain herself. They are seventeen. Beth and Shaun shorten their skirts as they grow taller, and they hobble in fresh heels into nightclubs where I stand outside, wondering. When they leave, I find myself saying they should watch out, not to get caught out too late. I don't

know why I say this—we are alone in the universe. I feel jealous over their freedom. Then Beth starts bringing Clover to the cafes and theaters. I am not alone sometimes when I watch—Shaun is there, too. She watches Clover and Beth on those dates and heads for the road out, towards the door.

“Get out of my way,” she says, her voice deeper.

She is as tall as I am now, her face defined, her hair short-trimmed. She is powerful in her youth, and I stand in between her and the door. “Let me through,” she says, and she says it again when I don’t move.

I remind her of the rules. “Fuck the rules, Ms. B,” she says. “I don’t want to see that.” She points at the cafe miles away where Beth and Clover sit.

I try to tell Shaun that she has to stay. This is where we are. This is where I can keep them safe. I ask her again to trust me, and I can see she doesn’t want to. Shaun kicks a popsicle stick signpost. It splinters. “Then get me out of here, somehow.”

She signs up to do work far off, in the Secret Lab, but doesn’t tell me the specifics. She promises to send letters, but she still calls them notes.

They are eighteen. I see Clover and Beth outside the clothing store on Daniel Street, arguing. A week later, I see them kissing. Shaun is gone, and she doesn’t send letters like she said she would. JJ moves to the city, briefly, overdoses, and goes back to the farm. I am there to pick her up and load her onto the ambulance. I am there to change her IV. I am there, signing off my name as I wheel her out, her head hazy and lost. Seeing her eyes rolled back in her head scares me, follows me. I begin to feel questions, so I hide in the cupboard to weave cobwebs, watching out the smudged glass as the city breathes, growing with each exhalation. The view is gorgeous. Time passes even faster.

#

After some years alone, I borrow a ride and head back out to the farms, which are now full of automation and mechanical beasts, likely built by JJ’s own hands from what she could scrape from drawers and the undersides of tables. JJ is on the porch, far more heavysset, face grim, her viola leaning against the wall behind her. It is warping in the humidity. She has an unlit cigarette in her mouth, which she chews on, forehead full of sweat.

“Ms. Boyd,” she says. She gets up and shakes my hand. “Look at you. You have to tell me your secret.”

She sits down, pulling another seat up with the tip of her foot. She passes me a beer. I give her a Tic-Tac. “Thanks, Ms. Boyd.” She pops it and grunts, leaning back, enjoying the view of her land. I take stock of the house, so old, so storied, the paint peeling from its poster-board core. The front door hangs crooked; the hinges were made from pencils that were over a decade old. I ask how things are.

“Good. Lot less to do when you get the machines running. Takes the

fun out of it.” She coughs. “What I wouldn’t give for the potato patch. You remember that, Ms. Boyd?” She smiles at her knees. “You should visit with the girls. Shaun’s not back, but Beth, she finished medical school, opened a practice. Proposed to Clover. Clover wrote her book, I should have a copy somewhere.” She gets up to wander into the house, like she has done so many times before.

When she comes back, she tells me about the coming wedding. “It’ll be by the water. Remember the lake, Ms. Boyd?” she says. “I remember the lake. I haven’t gone swimming like that in years. That was something. That was something.”

I ask her when the wedding will be.

“Well, you have to come. I am sure they’d love to see you.”

I fit Beth for a suit, Clover for a dress. I make the cakes and arrange the flowers. They are moving so fast they don’t see me, didn’t even register that I was gone, but when I am walking in on the big day, Beth throws her arms around me. “Ms. Boyd, look at you. You haven’t aged a day.” She draws me in. “Wait until you see my wife. You haven’t seen anyone so beautiful.”

Beth asks me to officiate, so I do. JJ sits, legs wide, taking up a seat and a half in the third row. Halfway through the service, Shaun appears in the back, sitting in the farthest seat. She let her hair out. She frowns constantly, arms crossed. Clover notices, but Beth doesn’t. When Beth says “I do,” I then ask Clover, and she takes a long time. She looks at me, as if to ask permission. I nod.

“I do,” she says.

They kiss, our applause carried away on a gentle breeze from the open windows, encouraged by the ceiling fan. I don’t attend the reception, I am not hungry. I eat a Tic-Tac, and remain invested in the couple’s happiness from a distance, which has become that much less certain. When I next see Clover on a jog, she stops to talk. Her heart is still on a honeymoon, but I ask her what is next. “We don’t want a family,” she says. “So I’m not sure.” I remind her that she can be anything.

Next time I visit JJ, I hear Shaun is crashing in her old room upstairs, where she grew up. I don’t see Shaun myself. JJ says Shaun has been working the fields but won’t talk much. “Gone too long, I think,” says JJ. She tries to tune her viola, and gives up and drinks another beer. I was gone too long, too, I think. I attended a stranger’s wedding.

#

Clover and Beth retreat into each other and their work. Shaun continues to avoid everyone. JJ still invites me for drinks, well onward in years, into her thirties. Shaun has moved out, “God knows where,” says JJ. I bring a Bunsen burner and barbecue out in front of the house.

“After that first cook-out, you never were there to help us cook,” she says. “I think Clover and Beth had an idea of what home was like for them.

What they wanted when they grew up. It's why they forgot about you and me so soon. We don't figure in."

I mention parent-teacher conferences.

"I know, I know. You just wanted to be good by us. And Clover's parents were hippies, I'm sorry, but they were. No one gives less shits than hippie parents. She thought she had it so good. You should have seen what they let her wear even before you met her."

I agree about the hippie part, and JJ laughs. "See, I knew you were okay. You were what, twenty-something back then? You were still a kid, in a way. You, me, Shaun, we all have regrets. It's a small world. We always hear what is happening, what people really think."

She flicks a penny at a petri dish across the room, winking at me. "Dust to dust."

I don't hear from her for quite some time. It isn't until I catch Beth on a jog that I learn JJ is sick. I start to go to help her eat, to help her get the machines running. When she hears how worried we all are, JJ just laughs, and sips water through a straw. I move in with JJ just as Shaun moves in, too, and we finally talk. She spent time doing something tough while she was gone, doesn't like to admit details, always herself. But whatever she came back for, whoever she came back for, she doesn't know anymore.

"JJ was the one who really liked me," Shaun says. "I came up here every week to talk. I left, and it was JJ who wrote me."

I don't admit I am upset that she didn't write me like she'd promised, but I want to be big, to do right by them still, the kids driving these tall bodies. Each time we see each other, she salutes me. She smiles afterwards like it's some sort of joke.

We are both there as JJ does less and less, doesn't answer the door, or clean, or move. One night, she gasps hard and is quiet before we get in the room. Shaun makes the calls, even though it's to Beth and Clover, because it's JJ—JJ is gone. I try to fix up the viola. I write the obituary myself on my favorite Post-Its, the pink ones, leave them on every doorstep in our empty city. Over breakfast in the old house, I read it and reread it and, somehow, don't at the same time. We set the funeral for the weekend, at 9:45AM, when the most light comes through the window. We bury her where the tiles are cracked under my desk, peeling them back and chipping away into the foundation with bent chair legs. Shaun reads from *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, and eventually we all start singing *Alligator Sky*. We realize we used up all the tissues years ago as curtains, dresses, beach towels.

#

I do not know what I can do now. I only just realize all the children are dying, and I can't stop it. I pick up a hobby to pass the time and pains—walking. Walking around all of the quieter buildings, the empty parks, the dying orchards. A large part of it seems to fade, as if part of me were fading. I

go up to the archives, my desk. I take the elevator up to the third floor and begin flipping through the boxes. It is like an evidence locker in there, and so much of it is about me. Pens that I once used to write with, lesson plans that went untaught, the remnants of my old phone. I find receipts that say unfamiliar names like Target and PriceChopper. I say them out loud, the metal walls vibrating from my single voice. Not being quite sure, I assume I loved these places. Flipping past more boxes, I find old Post-Its, blue ones, folded halfway, and open ones. “You are my favorite teacher,” says one. “Thank you for being patient with us.” No signature. I don’t remember who they are from, but I feel lighter—once upon a time, I was doing the right thing.

At the park, I find Beth and Clover, sitting on a bench. I hang back and watch, and I wonder. Beth looks concerned, Clover is quiet, hands in lap. They are each wearing long, simple clothing. Clover’s mouth frowns by default, and her hair is cut short and dyed to keep it from grayness. Both of them are sixty-three, and given the time of year, I suspect their birthdays have just passed, and each of them looks alone. I see no wedding rings. It seems, at some point in the passing of days, they’ve separated.

I approach, and Beth stands to come and talk. “It’s okay, Ms. Boyd,” she says. “It’s okay. We don’t need you to come in. We don’t need you to fix this for us.”

There is the sound of a door slamming, and she spins around—Clover is gone. We stand still in the wide plaza and listen, hearing familiar voices.

“Oh, Mom,” we hear Clover say, “You should see this comic on the door first.” She says it with a decade rasp.

“Oh no, we have to scooch.” It is the voice of Clover’s mother, and Beth and I finally see it. The door is there, the classroom door, and through the glass, we see Clover, still old, holding her mother tight, much younger than herself. Her mother speaks again, “Don’t want to stay too long, we have dinner at home.”

Clover has her old backpack over her shoulder. They disappear from sight, and Beth starts running, running at the door as fast as she can with her age. I chase her, grab her, and fall back. I am holding her as she twists. She is weak. When she stops, she brushes at her arms and lap to tidy herself. I open my mouth to speak, but she stops me. “The rules. Yes, I know.” She gathers her things. “Thanks for everything, Ms. Boyd.”

I don’t see her again, and she fades. She fades quick, like people often do, and I am not surprised.

#

With no one left but Shaun, the city begins to disappear, too. The street signs fade, the grass dies. The museum is closed, and the mealworms escape and crawl into the walls of buildings. These collapse too, and the roads crack. Street by street, the city shrinks. The cabinets fall, the dead roach dissolves, the windows shut and board over, and light only tries harder and

harder to find a way in. Shaun lives at the old house now, tending to the potato patch by hand, what's left of JJ's garden. She does this for years, and I come by more and more often because I have nowhere else to go. Once I see her fall, and I tend to her as she recovers. "No, no, Ms. B. I'm good. You'll see, I'm good." She isn't, and I move in again, our city on the horizon until it isn't.

Time then does an odd thing and begins to distort all the more. I see it in Shaun, who hurtles towards eternity as her body and skin fold and her eyes cloud. Her mind is sucked of reason and memory until all that is left is commitment to the land, the house, the way the books and Play-Doh stack at the edges. On bright summer days I watch her turn the same earth over again and again, and when she stands and sees me, she salutes, but her arm doesn't lift up without a real and slow effort. I get used to saluting back, and the times I cry she hobbles over the dirt to me and touches my arm. "It's okay, Ms. B, I'm just getting the harvest ready for JJ. She hasn't been feeling so well, you know." Her fingers are cold and rough, with the knuckle-skin drooping like a blanket fort.

I start to treat the house like an old folks' home. I become hospice. I run little classes on the universe. I bring in old models, I draw up the archived lesson plans. Shaun is the only one there, and I feed her mashed potatoes. "Like JJ used to make," she says, and I say yes. I help her build a potato battery, then we dissect a frog. I read to her from *Perks of Being a Wallflower*. I gather mealworms and make a terrarium all for her. I sit with her as she stares at it.

"Ms. B," she says after a few months like this. "You remember the dinner? With the champagne and the mints and the potato chips? Beth and Clover were there, of course you remember."

I nod.

"Ms. B, you had those little mints. I would love a little mint. It has been so long."

I search my pockets and apologize; they ran out decades ago.

She coughs. "Well then, as a favor, for not having the mints, you gotta— you gotta tell me one thing, Ms. B, because I deserve to know."

I ask her what it is.

Her eyes wander up to the computer-moon sky, then refocus on me. Her old, little lips bend and pucker into a smile.

"You really not married yet, Ms. B? It's been, what—a hundred years?"

We both tumble into laughter, echoing across the porch. She stops first. I listen for a long time as her breath slows in that scary way it sometimes does.

"I was thinking. You know, I was thinking. I was thinking what would've happened if I left. Just right at the start, when I wanted some food.

Just went out that door.” She clasps her hands in front of her. “You wouldn’t have caught me like you did the second time. You couldn’t leave JJ and Clo and Beth behind. No, you couldn’t.”

Shaun wiggles a finger at me. “You didn’t like the idea of doing wrong by us like that.”

I sit for a long moment and look at the last of them, bundled under old coats from the lost-and-found. After a moment, I point. Shaun squints and sees it, far off, the classroom door, the same one Clover went out. I tell her what happened, and that she can leave if she wants. There isn’t much left for her here.

“I’d rather stay, if you don’t mind,” she says, tapping her fingers against the desk. “It’s been good. I was just wondering what it would’ve been like if the bus had come after all, don’t you?”

I ask her what if the bus did come, and she looks at me, confused. I get up and get my rolling chair and bring it over. I tell her the bus is here. I tell her we can find out what happens next. Shaun nods, eyes popping, her wrinkled cheeks pushed up in a thick smile. I help her on, grab her torn and light-bleached backpack from under the table and settle it in her lap, folding her hands through the straps. I start to push her about the room, naming places outside our school. We pull up beside the blackboard, and I tell her we have arrived at her house. She turns best she can, her hair unkempt under my chin like a thirsty bramble.

“One more time around. Tell me what we’re learning in school tomorrow.”

I push her around again, and tell her. I keep going, and tell her more. She is quiet, and soon she is not breathing. I don’t check, and I keep going, nothing I can do. I push her until I stop, and look around at the nothing of the edges pulling closer. I look down and see there is no body. I see the chair empty, the world empty, and me, left with the ruins of their universe.

Gustavo Hernandez is a poet who was born in Jalisco, Mexico and was raised in Southern California. His poems have previously been published by Sibling Rivalry Press, Word Riot, and Cactus Heart.
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SOUTH WORKS, 1973

Gustavo Hernandez

for Juan Zarate

The paycheck stubs are left to float
in the mop water pooling out front
of the liquor store. When they move
and leave room for reflection there
is Chicago: a new moon and the mill
growing silent and flashes, flashes of
brown faces of our double shifts and
our steel skeletons firm in the concrete
of your huddling buildings of the sweat
in our hair sprinkled down through the
drifts of December. Our smells in the
night taking over your city alive in its
fast segregated progression the sparks
in our eyes are the glowing red flickers
of lighters in lipstick the twinkling of
cardinals.

Hege Anita Jakobsen Lepri is a Toronto-based translator and writer. In a previous life, she was a manager of EU projects in Tuscany. Before that, she was a sociologist in Norway. Back then she wrote poetry and erotica in Norwegian. She returned to writing in 2011, after a very, very long break. Her writing has since been longlisted for Prism International nonfiction prize and published (or is forthcoming) in J Journal, Saint Katherine Review, Monarch Review, Citron Review, Sycamore Review, subTerrain Magazine, Broken Pencil, Agnes and True, Forge Literary Magazine, Fjords Review, Grain Magazine, The New Quarterly and elsewhere.

In Treatment

Hege Anita Jakobsen Lepri

"I don't really see how this could help me get rid of the nightmares," Alice said. She had stopped working on her landscape and was drawing spirals, or maybe it was a labyrinth, in one of the unused corners of the sandbox.

"It's supposed to work like this," the therapist said. "You can't change the past, but working with something you can change and shape the way you wish, sometimes helps you see the source of your fear."

"Then maybe I should start over again . . ." Alice said.

"No, no, leave it," the therapist said. "Tell me about what we see here, this forest and these houses and the people in them."

Alice didn't look convinced, but she had paid for five sessions and Toronto was an expensive city. She cleared her voice.

"In the forest, there was a couple. Their names were Aidan and Eve. They were happy. They had a child, a girl, who was bright and sensitive but rarely smiled. There had also been a boy who died only a few hours after being born. In time, they had made their peace with that and bonded around it as a family. They kept his ashes in a little ceramic jar on their mantel, a jar Eve had made with her own hands while she was expecting.

"Once a year for his birthday, they'd take his ashes down from their usual place and talk about what they imagined he'd become, had he lived. Later they would just sit in silence until they put the jar back on the mantel.

"The rest of the year they kept busy. Their daughter went to a Waldschule, a Forest school, where she didn't spend much time sitting, but learnt to find medicinal roots, to know good mushrooms from deadly ones, and everything else you need to survive in the wilderness.

"Aidan worked in a faraway town, spending his days doing incomprehensible things of little consequence in an office. And Eve, who still

felt the need to guard her son's ashes, spent her days making felted animals that she sold at farmers' markets in towns around the forest on weekends."

"That is very good," the therapist said. "What about this other house."

Alice thought about it for a while. There was a silence while the therapist looked at her notes. But then again, her story started running out of her mouth like a faucet.

"In the forest, there was also another couple. Their names were Adam and Evelyn. They were happy. They had great sex to the sounds of breaking branches and growing roots. Afterwards, he'd fall asleep and she'd stay awake gauging their future, as it appeared to her in sudden, visionary glimpses every time she closed her eyes. Their two children, a boy and a girl, grew up to be strong, smart, with an unwavering faith in their own abilities. The boy built telescopes that allowed him to see above the treetops. The girl collected rocks and learnt their inner secrets. The children feared nothing, and could take on anything, which was a good bulwark against the insidious small-town bullies in their school at the edge of the woods.

"Adam and Evelyn enjoyed the quiet. They lived in the forest because she was from the mountains and he from the coast—a compromise they could agree on. But Evelyn sometimes complained that she wasted her life away being neither here nor there, and maybe they should move closer to the city where they worked. Adam enjoyed the drive back alone every night, and said they'd never get enough value out of the house to find anything but a fixer-upper, and they weren't that kind of people. And on weekends, when daylight made her house seem more real, Evelyn agreed with him, and they stayed."

Alice closed her eyes as if she were done, as if she were ready to leave, go home, start cooking dinner and prepare for another troubled night. But when she opened them again, her storytelling continued.

"In the farthest corner of the forest, yet another couple lived. Their names were Ada and Evan. They were happy. They had two children, a boy and a girl. And what easy children they were! They slept through the night sooner than anyone could dream of, and were neither too sensitive nor too intelligent for their own good. No fear of being abandoned in the woods by their parents, or encountering witches, or being eaten by lone wolves.

"Ada liked having trees as her only neighbours. She'd talk to them when she came home from teaching chemistry at the community college in the nearest town, and be thankful for the lack of reaction on their part. Evan would sometimes feel lost, and take long walks in the woods looking for other signs of life. He'd come home hours later, with the musky smell of bark and heather on him, saying that now he knew why he liked living in the forest. And Ada would rip his clothes off every time, and have sex with him until he only smelled of her again. All while the children kept playing quietly in their rooms."

"That is very good," the therapist said.

"I don't think it's working," Alice replied.

"Why don't you tell me what happened then," the therapist said.

"One day, Aidan fell down a rabbit hole and disappeared. On the very same day, Adam and Evan fell down different rabbit holes, and no more was seen of them either. The openings seemed like normal, slightly oversized holes for a leporid, but the more first responders and family and friends dug, the deeper, wider and more forked the holes became.

"These curious incidents were widely reported in the newspapers, and several TV reporters set up camps near the fields with the rabbit holes, close enough to see right away if someone else fell in, or one of the missing men should make it out alive, still far enough away to avoid the risk of falling in themselves.

"After a week, and still no sign of life from the rabbit holes, the mass media packed up their cameras and microphones and moved on to a site where giant rabbits had been spotted, threatening young children, as some eyewitness accounts claimed.

"Ada, Evelyn and Eve were alone with their questions. They went without sleep for weeks. They wept deeply, first with fat salty tears running down their faces, and later with dry, hollow eyes, staring at nothing."

"This is a very sad story," the therapist said. "What do you . . . ?"

"This is not how it ends," Alice said.

"One day Ada decided that the crying had to stop. Even her easy children had become uneasy and constantly pulled each other's hair while running and screaming through the living room. She needed to understand, and the more she cried, the less aware she was of what was happening. The next day she talked to a colleague who taught Cultural Geography and Mapping Concepts at the community college. He was the only one who had neither sent cards nor offered to help, so she figured he would be capable of taking a scientific approach to it all.

"'Can you help me map all holes in some fields not far from here?' she asked. Not for a moment did he look puzzled or ask why. As it turned out, he had a PhD. in biogeography, and had spent a year studying the Damaraland mole rats' expansion in Botswana. For the first time in four years, he felt excited.

"Ada threw all her energy into the project. She learned more about the likes and dislikes of rabbits than she'd ever known about her own children. Her colleague produced new maps every month, going deeper and deeper beneath the surface of the earth. They'd sit on her porch rolling out the scrolls of paper, in awe of their joint accomplishment.

"And the months and years passed until one day Ada's son came out of his room, pointed at the latest map and asked, 'Have you found my father in here somewhere?' And Ada smiled at him, thinking it's interesting how children see connections where there are none. Then she kissed his forehead

and said, 'Some things take a long time to find, and some things are lost forever, but it's important to keep looking.'"

There was a pause. Alice put her left hand into the sandbox and started smoothing a mound of sand. For a moment it looked like she'd crush her whole creation.

"What about Evelyn?" the therapist asked. "Please tell me what happened to Evelyn."

Alice looked up, almost amused.

"Evelyn's children watched their mother cry and shrink week after week. When they discovered she had become only half their size, they decided they needed to help her. They took her to the hole their father had fallen into, dropped their old baby monitor into the hole, anchored to a long rope attached to an oak tree. Then they gave their mother the other monitor and said, 'Talk to him; if he hears you, he may try to come out of his own accord.'

"At first she just sobbed. Then her daughter gave her one of her forcefully encouraging looks, and Evelyn started talking into the monitor. 'What did I do that upset you so?' she said in a hoarse voice. Then she went silent while listening for signs of someone paying attention to her. When she realized all she could hear was her own echo, she said, 'I thought you were happy with me.'

"By the third day she was telling the story of their life together without rest. She didn't even pause to listen for signs of life from the rabbit hole. Three nights she just talked and talked. Her strong children went home to eat and sleep, and to leave her time to say things children really shouldn't hear. When they came back the fourth day, she was quiet. She looked at them, and they saw she had grown back nearly to her old size. 'Let's go home,' she said.

"The next day she put the house in the forest on the market."

"That's reassuring," the therapist said in her softest voice. She sounded relieved. "And the last one, Eve? How did she get over the trauma?"

Alice had closed her eyes to concentrate better. She tilted her face upward, and her face reflected the light from the lamp.

"After a month of hoping and searching, wailing and praying, Eve took all her wool, the ashes of her son, and put up a tent by the hole Aidan had fallen into. She sang and felted her days away, and at night she'd whisper in her sleep, citing excerpts from *The Odyssey* and *The Kalevala*.

"The daughter had seen her mother mourn before, and this time she asked no questions, just watched. Every afternoon she gathered edible roots, herbs and mushrooms just like they'd taught her at the Forest school. Then she brought them to her mother so she'd have something to eat. Her mother stopped singing for a short while and offered her solemn thanks. But afterward, the singing would start again. Louder and wilder as the night fell.

So, the daughter went back to her own life in the house to enjoy some silence.

“Word of Eve’s angelic singing spread through the forest. People said her voice had been changed by all the losses in her life. The purity of her sorrow brought all who listened to tears, but they were good, cleansing tears that left them feeling better. Soon her fame reached beyond the forest, to the small towns and then to the city. On weekends, crowds would gather around her, yearning to be near her, hoping her chanted torment could cure their own. By the end of the year, someone had secretly recorded her songs. The bootleg quickly sold millions.

“Much later, her daughter heard of this from an old school friend. She realized someone had to do something, and she was a practical girl, so she studied law and sued the owner of the recordings. Eve kept singing, unaware of her daughter’s work, unaware of her own fame. The daughter managed the money and copyright, and they lived as happily as can be expected, given the circumstances.

“And some nights, when no one was around, the daughter would stay in the tent, curl up at her mother’s feet, and imagine for a few moments that the angel-voice was all for her.”

Alice had opened her eyes, her childlike eyes, framed by a net of fine wrinkles. She had slid into a slouch.

The therapist too looked tired.

“That is some story,” she said. “You must be fatigued.”

“I don’t know where all that came from,” said Alice.

“Don’t worry about that,” the therapist said. “I see progress. “At least you’ve moved beyond the rabbit hole.”

Alice was the last patient of the day. After she left, the therapist started putting away her notes. She had taken her glasses off to rest her observation skills—she needed to do that more often now than in her first years of practice. So, it wasn’t before she walked over to the sandbox to prepare for the next morning she saw the landscape had shifted. The forest was gone, and so were the ponds and houses. In their place an embankment of sand with a large hole in it, so deep you couldn’t see where it ended. She closed her eyes and thought for a moment she should get to the bottom of all this. If she had been younger, she would have. But it was already getting dark outside, and she longed to be back home with a glass of wine and a good book. Sometimes it’s better not to know, she thought.

Emma Johnson-Rivard is a Masters student at Hamline University. She currently lives in Minnesota with her dogs and far too many books. Her work has appeared in Mistake House, the Nixes Mate Review, and Moon City Review.

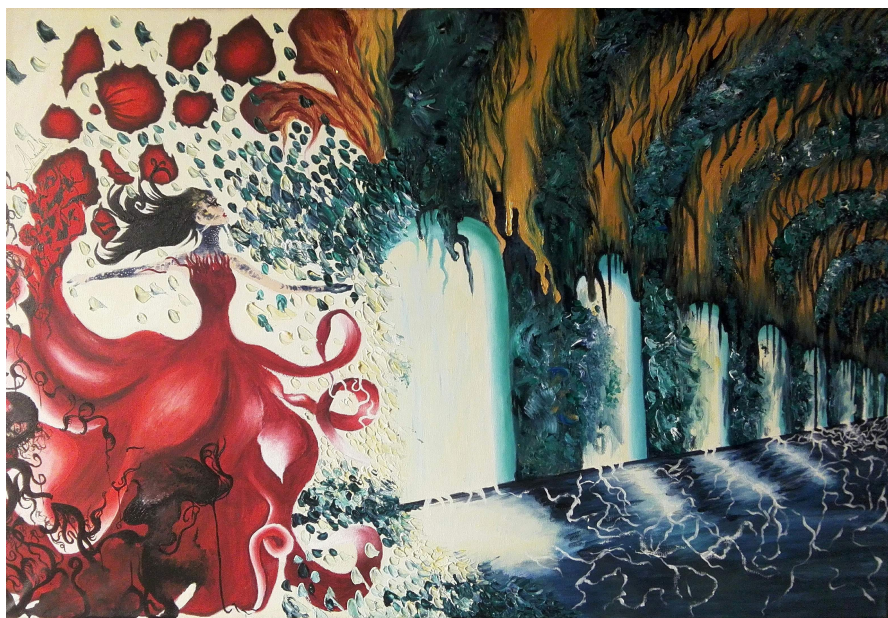
Burial Ground

Emma Johnson-Rivard

stand here a deer stand
dear *heart* we have
gone hunting
in the dark i heard
a boy died there, in the leaves
run dear, running
deer their
hooves chipped where the road ends
and the road ended where you stand
on the deer stand you will
leave flowers, dear heart,
won't you?

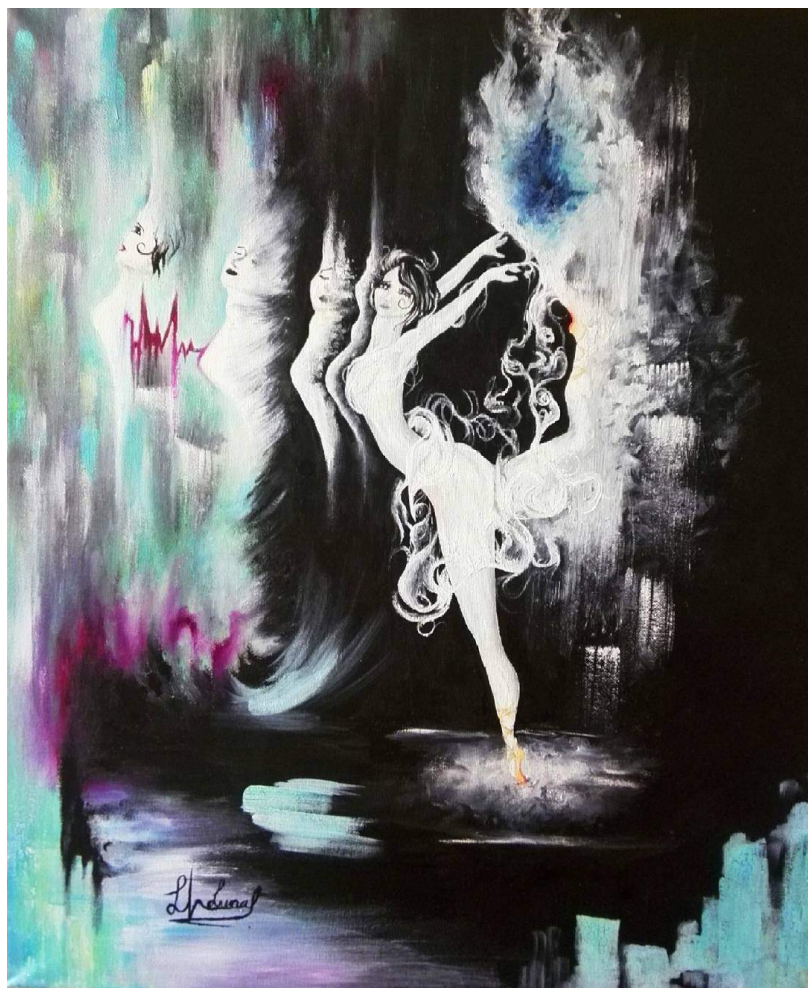
we won't be long.

Luna is Syrian. A straight A high school student, taking residency in Kuwait with her parents and her only sister. She discovered her talents in art in 8th grade, started small. Portraits on paper, drawn with pencils. A year later, she decided to try herself with watercolors. Soon enough it escalated to acrylics and oils. She's a spiritual artist seeking to make a known presence in a materialistic world. You can find her on Instagram at @lunaalley.



Castle of Demons

Everyone who merely glances at my paintings instantly knows they are borderline imaginary with an exquisite soul and detail. All or most of my work is extracted from my pure imagination. If not that, then the fiction novels I read on my free time would be responsible. Every single piece has to have at least one secret to it. A puzzle, a trick, anything that would convey an underlying message; so when people try to explain their perspective on it, it gives me insight on their mind and way of thinking. An analytical mind like mine strives on that kind of information. So, my love for psychology intervenes with my artistic spirit and has produced a style in painting I'm not so sure fits completely in any of the categories.



Firebeats

When a person's analysis of a painting of mine fits my message, then I'd bask in the knowledge my mind has its own peers, no matter how twisted it gets sometimes. And frankly, I believe that's the whole idea of art, for it to convey a message, a meaning. Not just a pretty or colorful presence in a room.

Sharon Frame Gay has been internationally published in many anthologies and literary magazines, including Crannog, Thrice Fiction, Literary Orphans, Lowestoft Chronicle, Fiction on the Web, and others. She is a Pushcart Prize nominee and has won awards at The Writing District, Women on Writing, and Owl Hollow Press.

El Paso

Sharon Frame Gay

Phoebe stood at the edge of the highway, looking left, then right. It was just past dawn. Nothing up yet but a pack of coyotes, trotting loose limbed on the other side of a barbed wire fence, nose to ground on a hunt. One glanced at Phoebe, turned away and followed the others along a dusty ravine.

A few strips of paper captured in the fence fluttered in the breeze. Phoebe sighed and straightened the backpack on her shoulders, turning west towards El Paso. In the distance, an eighteen wheeler rumbled over the ridge, heading east. She thought of crossing the road, sticking out her thumb. Instead, she walked on as the truck passed, cyclones of dust in its wake. Broken glass and slivers of tumbleweed peppered the bottom of her shoes, crunching under each step.

She adjusted the backpack again, pain rippling across her back and ribs. The light wind sanded her bloody face with grit, reminded her of what happened last night. Phoebe glanced behind, hoped he wasn't coming over the rise.

An empty paper cup hissed by in a gust, startling a crow in the ditch by the side of the road. Stooping, she picked it up. There was a smudge of lipstick on the rim, residue of coffee lining the bottom. Phoebe examined it, tossed it aside. It looked like a cup from the Straight Arrow.

The Straight Arrow was the only bar in Devil River, a joint hollowed out and filled with lost souls, termites eating through their own lives, hunched over the counter. Their beers sweated, leaving stains on the table tops. Stains that Phoebe wiped off every night before she locked the door and walked down the empty streets to the broken down trailer behind the gas station.

Last night, Phoebe walked through her rusted front door, closed it softly, flipped on the kitchen light.

Paul seldom waited up for her, his back a camel's hump under the dirty blankets, the aroma of stale breath and day-old dreams drifting through the trailer. Phoebe followed the debris from the kitchen to the bedroom.

Paul surprised her when he sat up, eyes red and bleary, hair upright on

his head like a rooster.

"Hey." He rolled over, took a cigarette from the nightstand, lit it, blew out a wad of smoke.

"Hey to you, too," Phoebe said. She unzipped first one boot, then the other, let them fall on the floor.

"Got any hooch?" he asked.

"Nope. Just some cigs." Bending down, she reached into a backpack and brought out three packs taken from the stock room of the Straight Arrow.

"Come here," Paul said, drawing back the blanket, staring at her like a snake at a rabbit.

Phoebe flopped on the foot of the bed, crawled up towards the pillow, the sound of her jeans etching a weary song along the sheets.

Without warning, Paul reached out, struck her solid in the chin, yanked her hair back, knuckled her ribs until she screamed in pain.

"I know what you did tonight," he hissed. "Jack saw you behind the Arrow kissing some Indian."

Phoebe struggled to get away from him, heels pounding the mattress, tears and snot running down her face.

He drew back one more time and clipped her jaw, then flopped down on the bed with a grunt. "I can't believe you cheated on me, after all I did for you! Get out, you bitch. And never come back."

Whimpering, Phoebe slid off the bed, grabbed her boots, backpack, his old jacket laying on the floor, and stumbled out the door before he changed his mind and came after her.

She ran a few yards down the road, took a breath, threw on his jacket. Something jingled in the pocket. Paul's truck keys. "Damn," she muttered. Wincing in pain, she made her way towards the trailer.

The lights were out. Paul must have gone back to sleep. Phoebe crept up to his truck, opened the door, and slid the keys on to the floor mat. Beneath the seat she saw the glint of a revolver. His insurance, he called it.

Paul dealt drugs to the people on the reservation. He met them on a dirt road near the highway. "They line up like idiots," he laughed once. "This beats hell out of dealing in Vegas. I'm gonna be rich, baby."

Phoebe reached into the glove compartment. A stack of money had been tossed behind a road map. She touched it, then drew back. Paul would hurt her. No mistake about that. Or send somebody else to do it. It was better to be stone broke and get out of here than have a few bucks and a price on her head.

She felt a jab of anger. Phoebe worked hard all week and shared the money with Paul every pay day. She plucked several hundred dollars from the bundle and stuffed it in her jeans. A measure of her worth, she thought.

Instead of taking the road back to town, Phoebe cut through the desert over to the main highway two miles away. The sun came up over a notch in

the hills, bright as a yolk, turning her stomach. She retched on the side of the road, then stood there, deciding which way to go.

#

Paul was right. She was with a man last night. His name was Dean. So good-looking it hurt sometimes just to look at him. Eyes so dark they didn't seem to have pupils. Arms littered with tattoos, crisscrossing his forearm like a serpent. He had wandered into the Straight Arrow over a year ago. Kept to himself. Nursed a few beers, ordered a burger, then left, boots clicking on the worn wood floor. He came into the bar alone most nights, face solemn and brooding, stared down into his glass as if reading tea leaves.

When she served him, he always smiled and thanked her, left a good tip. He wasn't one for small talk and Phoebe about gave up on him being friendly until one night he asked her if she had ever felt free.

"What do you mean?" she smiled. "This is America. We're all free."

"You think so?" he asked. "Strong words out here on the Reservation."

"Sure." Phoebe shrugged. "I'm free."

Dean ran his fingers across the sweating glass, tapped them on the table top.

"See that guy across the room? The tall one in the red flannel shirt?"

Phoebe nodded. "That's Bryan Goodfeather. He works at the casino off the interstate."

"I know. So do I."

"You do?" she asked. He didn't look the part. Too rough and silent to be catering to the crowds.

"Yeah, I sing a song or two most nights. Bryan's my boss. He's also my brother."

"Well, hey, that's cool," Phoebe said, then turned away, walked towards the bar, when he whispered her name. She glanced back at him.

"Come hear me some night, if you're free, that is," he grinned.

Phoebe and her friend Carla went to the casino one evening when she was off work and Paul was in Dallas. Towards the back of the casino they heard a guitar playing. Dean sat on a tall stool, his fingers tracing each string, each note. He saw Phoebe, gave a nod, then broke into a sad Dylan song. It was surprising how good he was. He had that catch in his voice that sounded a little like heartache, and she noticed the crowd leaning forward, listening to every note.

After his set, he ambled over to the table, pulled up a chair, a beer bottle dangling from his fingers.

"You were great," Phoebe said. "I like the songs you choose, too."

Dean nodded, dark eyes peering into hers. He had a broken nail on his forefinger. She longed to reach out, put it in her mouth, suck out the sadness. There was a whisper of a smile on his face. He tipped his head back, bolted

the beer, spun the empty bottle on the table between them.

"You're better than this," she gestured, taking in the smoke-filled room, the drunks, slot machines chiming in the background.

Dean shrugged. "So are you." He reached out, traced her wrist with his finger, slow circles that sent shivers down her spine. Leaning back in the chair he drummed his hands on the table, then stood and walked back up on the stage. Started the set with "Fire and Rain". The song tugged at Phoebe. "It's time to go, Carla," she said, rising from the table, the song trailing behind them.

After that, Phoebe went to the casino whenever she had the chance, and Dean showed up more often at the Straight Arrow. Sometimes she lingered after the show, sat with Dean while he unwound from the evening. They talked about their lives, their dreams.

"What do you want to do with your music?" Phoebe asked one night.

He hunched over the table as though hiding from himself. Glancing at Phoebe, he pushed the glass away, wiped his hands on his jeans.

"I know I'm not good enough to make it big anywhere," he said, "but I like making music and I see it as a way out of here. Maybe do small-time gigs around the country, then find a place I might settle down, find a decent job or even go to school."

Phoebe nodded. "Yeah, me too. I always dreamed of going back East, maybe Boston or someplace. See what those big universities look like."

He set his beer down, peered at her. "Why don't you, then?"

Phoebe shrugged, nervous. It wasn't her nature to dream big. She didn't dream at all. Thinking too hard about what you might want was a sure way to break your concentration and send your hopes spinning.

Several weeks later, Dean entered the Straight Arrow, jet-black hair in a pony tail low on his neck, wearing a flannel shirt so soft that Phoebe wanted to make a nest in it. He took a table at the back of the bar. Phoebe wandered over, set down a cloudy glass of water, stood before him, hands in her apron pocket. "What can I get you, Dean?" she smiled.

"You."

"Me?"

He nodded, looking up at her with such longing that her heart dropped into her feet.

"Meet me out back," he said, then rose and walked out.

Phoebe hesitated. "I'll be back," she shouted over to Jack, tossing her apron up on the bar. Jack nodded, twirled a towel in a glass, watched her leave.

Outside, the stars dotted the night sky, a last flicker of sunset over the hills. The back of the Straight Arrow reeked of old beer and piss. Dean was leaning against the wall, a cigarette cupped in his hand. Phoebe walked up, peered into his face. He stepped on the cigarette, leaned towards her.

"This is my best song," he said, reaching for her, drawing her in. He pulled her against him, nuzzled her neck, fingers laced around her waist. His lips tasted like hope when he kissed her. Shivering despite the Texas heat, she touched his cheek, his jaw, traced her heart against his chest and leaned into him. His hands traveled up her skirt, rough calluses against her thighs.

"No," she whispered.

"Why not? I thought you were free."

"Not like this. I want it to mean something. At least for one of us."

Dean nodded, dropped his hands, straightened her skirt. He cupped her chin in his palm, ran his thumb along her jaw. Brushed her blond hair back from her face.

"It means something to me, Phoebe. You know it does." He hesitated a moment, breathed out hard. Reached for another cigarette, his hands shaking. "I came to tell you I'm leaving tonight. Got a gig in El Paso at another casino. Pays better. More people. An opportunity."

"Oh. I see." Phoebe looked down at the ground littered with cigarette butts. Off in the distance, a dog barked.

"Come with me, Phoebe." Dean said. "Paul's no good for you. He's dangerous. You need to break away. I can't promise you much, but whatever it is, it has to be better than this." He looked around, shook his head. "I care about you. I hope you know that. We can go slow, take our time. No pressure. Whatever you want."

Phoebe was startled. She didn't expect this. She had feelings for him, but it was complicated. She hesitated. "I don't know what to say."

Phoebe gazed towards the hills, saw stars speckling a lonesome sky. This place had become familiar. She knew people in town, had a routine, even if living here wasn't what she wanted. Sweat trickled between her breasts. The back door to the bar slammed. They stepped apart.

"Give it some thought. I'll be at the Golden Wings Casino in El Paso." He slipped a piece of paper with his phone number on it in her palm, held her hand between his.

Dean kissed the top of her head, then walked away.

She felt a jab of panic. "Wait."

He stopped, turned around, a slice of moonlight tracing his cheek.

"I'll think about it." Phoebe felt her heart skip a beat. Then she smiled at Dean, put on a brave face. "This is a big chance for you, and you deserve it. I'm happy for you. Good luck."

Nodding, he walked back around the tavern. His car started up, drove away. Taking a deep breath, Phoebe walked into the Straight Arrow, tied the apron around her waist, touched the paper with his phone number stuffed deep in her pocket.

#

On the highway the next morning, Phoebe stopped and reached into

the backpack for a bottle of water. She took a swig, swirled it around her battered mouth. A tooth came loose. She poked at it with her tongue, spit into the road with another bloody sip, poured the rest over her hands and rubbed her face.

The sun had been up for three hours now. Phoebe trudged along the shoulder. Several cars slowed down, but she scowled and they sped up.

She had no family. Her mother gone from cancer for many years, her father a face in a photograph. All she had of her dad were his light brown eyes. When Mom died, there was no reason to stay in the small town in Nevada where she was raised. Phoebe thought she'd try her luck in Vegas. Learned how to wait tables. The money was good, and if she ignored the lewd comments and sneaky fingers, she could afford a small apartment a few miles from the strip and take care of herself.

But loneliness crept into her life, a constant reminder that if she fell, there would be no soft landing. Paul came along on a vulnerable night. The anniversary of her mom's death.

He was charming. Talked to her right away, made her laugh. Asked her out every weekend, and like a barnacle she found that she was clinging to him, though she was cautious by nature. Loneliness got in the way of common sense. She second-guessed herself right into his arms. She was nervous around Paul lately. He had a temper, and ran with all the wrong people. Last night was the first time he hit her, but he had come close several times before.

It was a loser's life. They drifted out of Vegas and into Devil River. That's when Paul started dealing drugs instead of looking for a real job. They landed in that beat-up shit hole of a trailer, the sun beating down all day, the night sky filled with stars that reminded Phoebe of sequins, so out of place with the smell of diesel from the gas station down the street. Every day, Paul slept until late afternoon. He woke up right about the time she left for the Straight Arrow.

Phoebe wanted a family. A real home. Somebody to love her. She wasn't getting any younger, yet Devil River trapped her in its red rock arms, holding fast while she suffocated. This wasn't what she wanted. But with little money and no family, it was worrisome to strike out on her own. Time and again she thought about leaving, but it seemed like the next day dawned, then the next, until the calendar on the wall was nothing more than a tease.

She thought about Paul. She cared for him once. They had fallen into a stagnant relationship in Devil River. There was no future with him after last night. Sadness crept in. When had she given up on them? Her chest felt tight. The world seemed so big, so lonesome.

#

Phoebe heard an engine growl behind her. Turning, she saw a big hauler bearing down, and on impulse stuck out her thumb. The truck slowed, then rattled off onto the shoulder. Phoebe trotted up to the driver's window.

A large woman sat behind the wheel, looking down. She had a round face, wiry grey hair, and wore big, black sunglasses that reflected Phoebe's image back to her, a tiny version of herself.

"Where you headed?" asked the woman.

"El Paso."

"I'm not going that far, but can give you a lift for a while."

Nodding, Phoebe walked around to the passenger side, climbed into the truck, tossed the backpack on the floor between her feet.

"My name's Mel," the woman said. "Short for Melvina."

"Phoebe."

With a grinding of gears and spitting of gravel, the truck rumbled back onto the highway. Mel popped a look over at Phoebe and sighed.

"Were you married to him?"

"To who?"

"The asshole who knocked you around."

"No."

"Well, that shows some sense. Guy doesn't deserve you." Mel grunted, shifting gears.

Phoebe nodded and gazed out the window, watched the reservation blur by. Familiar homes and hills appeared different through a traveler's eye. Everything looked dusty and torn. Even the cattle in the distance seemed sad, their tails brushing at flies in a sorrowful cadence.

They drove through a Texas cloudburst, leaving dusty thumbprints from the sky on the windshield like tiny cat's paws. The inside of the windows fogged up, and Mel turned on the air conditioning. Phoebe drew into herself, shivering. She still wore the black skirt and white blouse from the bar, Paul's old jacket wrapped around her, sleeves dangling past her wrists. Flecks of blood dotted the shirt.

Mel talked about her home town. How she had a little dog, Biscuit, waiting for her at the end of the trip. She was once married, but the guy was a drunk and one day she decided that she would rather run up and down the interstate than spend even one more day with the likes of him. She talked about her sister, Ruth, and the restaurant Ruth and her husband owned back home. How they always looked for good help. Waitresses and such. She peered at Phoebe.

"You know, what that guy did to you shows a lack of respect and cruelty." Mel said. "And if you let shit like that happen, what does it say for your own self-respect?"

Phoebe folded down into herself, head poking out like a turtle. She stared straight ahead through the windshield, knees up to her chest.

Mel shifted gears and pulled off the highway, stopped in an empty lot across from a McDonald's. She pulled a twenty out of her wallet and handed it to Phoebe.

"Would you mind running across here and getting us some lunch? Grab me a couple of cheeseburgers and a Coke. Get whatever you want."

Phoebe nodded and stepped out of the truck, wandered across in the desert heat. The aroma of burgers made her stomach rumble. Inside, she was blasted with cool air, heard the steady thrum of the machines, voices.

She walked into the restroom, ran a broken comb through her hair, rinsed her sore mouth out with water cupped from the sink. Dabbed at her face with a piece of toilet paper, and stared at her own sad image in the mirror.

Fetching the food, she made her way back across the road to Mel, and climbed up into the cab. The two ate in companionable silence.

"Thank you, Mel," Phoebe said.

Mel stretched her legs out, burped. "You're welcome. My pleasure." She looked at Phoebe out of the corner of her eye. "So, what will you do now?"

Phoebe picked at some lint on her shirt, rubbed at a flake of blood. "I think I'm heading for El Paso."

"Yeah?" Mel asked. "What do you plan to do there?"

Silence, as Phoebe squirmed in her seat. She shrugged.

"Oh," said Mel. "So it's like that, huh?" She reached over, took more French fries. "Look, it's none of my damned business, and I'm sorry I asked. It's just that I wish you well and I worry you're vulnerable right now, you know?"

Phoebe nodded, stared out the window at the hills in the distance.

Mel started the engine, pulled off the lot and back onto the road. She leaned over and turned on the radio, a country station with a tune about love and betrayal. They rode in silence.

Phoebe clutched the backpack between her feet and let herself fall asleep to the rocking of the truck out on the highway.

When she woke up, Mel was pulling off into a large truck stop.

"This is where I turn around and head home once I make my delivery tomorrow when they open," she said. "I know a lot of the truckers here. We come and go all the time on the same route, and I know the good guys and the not-so-good guys. We'll get out and stretch our legs. I'll ask around about a ride to El Paso. Let's meet at the truck in an hour."

Mel headed behind the huge diner where trucks parked overnight. Phoebe walked around, stretched her legs, played with the loose tooth. The smell of diesel was everywhere, engines rumbling like far-off thunder. She walked into the mini-mart by the gas pumps, bought red vines, Cheetos and two cokes. Borrowed the bathroom key and wandered into the ladies' room. Took a wet paper towel and ran it under her arms, around her neck, touched the bruise blooming on her chin.

She was back at the truck when Mel showed up a while later.

"Hey, I got you a ride," she said. "See that green eighteen-wheeler

over there? The driver's Mark Berg. He's an older guy, about ready to retire from the road. I've known him for years. Good guy. Said he'll take you all the way into El Paso. Leaves in the morning. Head on over to his truck at first light. You're welcome to bunk here in my rig tonight."

Phoebe thanked her, touched her hand. "Mel, you've been so nice. I won't bother you tonight. I'll just hang out in the all-night diner rather than put you out. I appreciate everything you've done for me."

Mel nodded. "Just remember, nobody is ever alone, no matter how empty the highway is." She handed Phoebe a piece of paper with her phone number on it. "Call anytime."

She gave Mel a hug, walked over to the diner and found an empty booth.

The night was weary. People wandered in and out at all hours. Each time the door opened, a blast of heat followed them in. The diner was thick with the aroma of grease, coffee, cheap perfume. An old jukebox in the corner played country tunes. A song that Dean sang at the casino flowed through the restaurant.

Phoebe closed her eyes, pictured his black hair, the crook of a smile at the corner of his mouth, his soft shirt. She imagined them dancing in a dimly lit honky-tonk, his arms wrapped around her, leaning into each other like toppling buildings. Later, she might track the tattoo that started at his shoulder and wound around his arm down to his index finger with her lips. She wondered if he'd kiss her belly and dust her thighs with his long hair, murmuring words she hoped didn't catch in his throat.

The song ended. Phoebe blinked, peered around the diner at the travelers. They looked pale and tired under the florescent lights. Out on the highway, traffic was picking up. The sky was tinged a soft pink off to the east, morning coming on.

Four truckers sat at the counter, nursing their coffee, hunched over their plates. Phoebe sighed. She didn't even know what kind of cereal Dean liked.

She thought about her father. It had been Phoebe's dream to go to college, make something of herself. Show up at her dad's door if she ever found him, say she did okay after all. He could have been any of the men at the counter. She'd never recognize him.

In a booth in a corner, a couple argued, setting their coffee cups down hard, faces drawn and angry.

Phoebe touched the gold wedding band she wore around her neck, her mother's ring, the only thing she had left of any value after settling her mom's estate. She ran her finger through the band. It didn't fit.

The couple left the diner, climbed into an old Chevy, drove over to the gas pumps. The waitress picked up their plates, wiped the table, ready for someone else to take their place.

Phoebe gazed out the window, saw her reflection. The night echoed with heartache. She was tired of washing up on the rocks of someone else's dreams. Tired of feeling like she didn't belong anywhere, to anyone. Her ribs ached. Her mouth hurt. The cold remains in her coffee cup tasted bitter as she set it down and stood up.

She left the diner and walked over to the rigs parked in back. It was already hot, dust devils forming in the grey dawn prairie across the highway. Standing on tiptoe, she knocked on the cab, then stepped back.

Mel rolled down the window. "Hey there. Come to say goodbye this morning?"

Phoebe peered up at her. "If it's all the same to you, I'm thinking I may want to head east after all. Wondering if I can hitch a ride."

"Well, hell yes," Mel grinned. "I could use the company. Climb on in. Just have to drop my load, weigh in, then we can take off."

Phoebe breathed out hard, as though she'd been drowning and morning fetched her out of the water, pumped her dry, set her on solid ground. She walked around to her side of the truck.

It was late afternoon when Mel drove back through Devil River. It had only been two days, but the town looked different. In the distance, Phoebe saw the trailer, Paul's truck parked right where it was the other night. The Straight Arrow hadn't opened yet for business. In the light of day, it looked stark and dirty. A feral cat edged its way to the front door, haunches thin and meager. In the middle of town, an ancient pickup truck full of Native kids in the back made its way across the four-way stop, going so slow that Mel cursed under her breath, nursed the brakes a little.

Craning her neck, Phoebe looked behind her, a silent goodbye to Devil River, watching it fade into a broken promise. She turned forward, looking out at the highway as it rose up on its way to her future, a river of hope leading somewhere that she hadn't yet imagined.

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Voyeurism

Jenna Lyles

I see your jetty face through my window
the sable twine your skull imparts,
the way you weep against the pane.

Tomorrow's edge curls inside
my cochlea. I can hear
your calloused feet dashing by.

Dry as rain. Soft
as burr.

Robert W. Henway hails from the woods of Michigan, but is currently studying at the University of Iowa. His work has been published in *Cleaver Magazine*, 1966, and the *Doctor T.J. Eckleburg Review*.

The Words of Autumn

Robert W. Henway

Once, while reminiscing on the days of my youth, it occurred to me that my clearest memories of Michigan all transpired at the height of Fall; when the skies were grayest, the rain coldest, and the leaves brightest. And when I thought back on this and on those vintage days, I became filled with a sort of melancholy for those moments lost to winter, summer, and spring. Surely those seasons were filled with moments of beauty and pain, and surely they must have meant something to me, but now time has blurred them. I know I still have those days somewhere in my heart, but these are the moments that remain so vivid when my mind drifts back to that northern land.

#

I remember standing just outside my childhood home, feeling the chill of the cold ground bleed through the soles of my shoes. I was holding a lit cigarillo, and the air was filled with its rubbery musk.

Somewhere in our small neighborhood a dog was howling, but I paid no attention. Instead, I stared at my reflection in the windows of the house. I took turns between looking serious and smiling at myself, all the while watching the smoke drift from my mouth. What I was really doing, though, was waiting for my father.

Somehow, almost a year after my eighteenth birthday, I had persuaded him to smoke a cigar with me. When I first proposed the idea at the restaurant, I did so thinking he would say no, and all my words came with the false sense of bravado someone gets when they know they're going to lose. So I wasn't really sure how to react when he casually agreed, and it didn't really sink in until I was sitting in the car outside of a liquor store while he bought cigars and cigarillos.

When we got home, some of my giddiness left as neither of us spoke a word. Not wanting to sound too eager, and really just not knowing what to say, I remained silent, and he did, too. The only sound filling the backyard was the plastic wrappers being torn open. When he handed me a cigarillo, we began to speak a little as he showed me how to light it, and how to draw the smoke into my mouth and not into my lungs. After that, things got silent again except for the quiet popping sounds of our lips drawing in the smoke.

I remember him brushing leaves off of the patio with his loafers. The leaves were muddy and wet from the morning rain, and stained his shoes as a result. But he kept at it, as if he were emphasizing something with each sweep. I even remember him bending down at one point to peel off the leaves that had stuck to the cement, his knees cracking loudly with each pull. When we finished our first cigarillos, he muttered to me that he would be right back.

He was gone long enough for me to smoke two more.

The next thing I remember is him walking down the hill of our little backyard, his footsteps causing small avalanches of yellow leaves. He looked sheepish but had a childlike excitement in his eyes. In his hands were two glasses; they were the kind I had only ever seen him take out for special company. Inside each were whiskey and ice, and even though I knew he saw me watching him approach, I acted surprised when he handed me one. The excited crack in my voice, though, was real.

I remember standing there with him, breathing in the crisp air and smelling the echo of my last cigarillo. I was watching him closely, waiting for him to take a sip. And when he finally did, I followed, drinking the whole thing down, staring into the glass as I did so, feeling the ice against my lips.

Later, when I had finally stopped coughing, he spoke up, speaking in a slow, drawn out manner that implied he was both improvising and heavily considering each word. I remember that the words felt ancestral and guiding. And while he spoke, I nodded my head, made eye contact, and tried to follow his voice. But my tongue felt swollen and clammy, my stomach was beginning to hurt, and an uncomfortable lightness seized my scalp.

Even then, I knew that his words had that important quality that meant they would never be repeated. I told myself to just listen, to just listen and remember his words for later. I told myself that I would remember them clearly, that I would process them when I was alone and felt better, that I would understand them, then. And I really believed I would...

#

The rain came gently that morning, as if poured from a kettle. It splashed against the orange leaves and trickled from the branches, mixing with the earth and diluting the brushstrokes of crimson foliage below. Occasionally a hint from the northern gales would blow through the woods, lulling the trees into a sway and muddling the view from the house.

It was warm in the kitchen, though. The air was fragrant with the essence of honeycrisps and cinnamon, and sweet folk music drifted across the walls, harmonizing with the laughter of my mother. We sat there, together, at the same kitchen table she had when I was born. We busied ourselves with peeling and quartering apples, filling the air with stories as we did so, because by then, this was easy work for us. We had spent the summer trying to learn how to make applesauce, and with each attempt we came across another problem; once we burned the apples on the stove, once we didn't properly

seal the jars, and once we added too much sugar. Each time we swore we would never try again, each time we told ourselves that it was just too much work, but each time we returned to it on the following Sunday, and so we filled our afternoons this way.

This time, however, things would be different. She had surprised me that morning by buying us a pressure cooker and a proper jarring kit. I remember she joked that we were actually saving money by getting them because we wouldn't be wasting all the ingredients anymore. Later, when my father came home for lunch, I remember her explaining the purchase to him with the same tone he used when she found us that day with empty whiskey glasses in our hands and cigar butts at our feet.

That day, as we peeled our apples, I found myself opening up to her in a way I never thought I would. I told her about Evelyn, how I had asked her to the school dance, only to find out she was secretly dating someone else. I told her about how alone I felt at times, how I regretted passively passing through my years of education, but how I was excited to leave all those classmates behind. I was just starting to realize how fast time moved. She surprised me that day by opening up, too. She told me about her youth, about her own heartbreaks in life, about her experiences with college and afterwards, and even the things that were bothering her that day. It was one of the first times I was able to see her not as just some infallible mother, unable to be harmed by the small things in life, unable to be insecure or uncertain, but as a human being, with no greater advantage in life than I had.

When we finished slicing the apples and had mixed them in with the lemons, water, cinnamon sticks, and sugar, we let the pressure cooker do its work and played Scrabble to pass the time. But as we sat there, joking with each creak and click from the pressure cooker that it was going to explode, I wondered why we hadn't done this before. Why was it that just before I left we found a true understanding of each other? Did she have a responsibility as a mother to hide things? Or had I just been too immature? I had always felt like we were friends, but that had been a friendship between a mother and son; this was something more real. And as we sat across that board of words, I found that I couldn't articulate what I wanted to tell her—that I didn't regret those eighteen years we shared together, but that I still wanted to relive them, to re-experience all of those highs and lows with the honesty we had now.

Just before the vinyl ran out of music, the pressure cooker finished its cycle, and a heavy silence filled the room. That was when she asked me if I was going to come back home to visit soon.

And in that silence, without the filter of someone else's voice in the room, all of our words felt stripped down. I could hear the fragility and honesty in her imploring voice. But I could also hear the formality leaking back into mine as I spoke those obligatory lies, the lies of a son to his mother.

#

On one of the last warm days of the year, my parents drove me to Iowa, and when we crossed the Mississippi River, I knew Michigan would never again be my home. Summer was over, and I could no longer see my soaring trees. The landscape before me was replaced by foreign fields.

When we neared the apartment building, I reminded my parents that I wanted them to wait in the car, not realizing how obvious it was that I was embarrassed of them. What I thought was a secret within my heart was that I was scared of my roommates, that I was terrified that if they saw my mother's beaming face as she carried in my clothing, they would think I was vulnerable, weak, or dependent.

So when we arrived, I jumped out of the car as soon as I could and ran up the apartment steps. Alone, I stood in line, signed in, and received my key, surrounded by families all the while. And alone I walked up the four flights of stairs to my room, opened the door, and saw the panic-inducing conditions of the living space. The mirror was cracked, the walls were peeling, and the bed frame looked like it was covered in dried toothpaste. The view from the window was a dirty brick wall, and the other two beds were so close to mine that you had to turn sideways in order to get between them. One roommate was pacing between the tight walls in only his boxers, while the other was unpacking his stuff into what appeared to be my little space...

After I closed the door and returned to the hallway, a frantic voice cried in my head, *Do I tell them? Do I tell them?* But when I reached the parking lot and saw my father bending over to unpack the trunk, I reaffirmed my resolve, taking the items from his hands and telling him I got it.

Four trips I made, up four flights of stairs, back and forth. Four trips I made, and not once did I look up from the ground, not once did I look towards their faces.

After the fourth trip, when I returned to the parking lot and found that there was nothing left to carry up, I finally lifted my eyes from the pavement. My mother's lip was quivering, and my father's eyes looked burned. With a shaky voice my mother asked one last time if she could see my room. She said it would be easier for her, that if she could just see my room then it would be easier for her on those lonely days sure to come, because then she'd at least be able to visualize where I was.

There, beneath the scorching early autumn sun, my mother stood vulnerable, pleading for one simple gesture of love, and I nervously laughed it off, pretending that she was just exaggerating her sorrow, that she didn't really mean it, that she would be fine. And then I hugged them both goodbye and walked back up the front stairs.

When I reached my floor and walked down the hallway, it felt as if there were a tether tied to the back of my shirt. It felt like it was growing more taut with each step, like a fishing line calling me back, and the further I

walked ahead, the harder it became. *It's not too late*, I thought. *It's not too late. You can swallow your pride, cringe for five minutes, and then it will all be over. Your roommates have parents, and their parents probably helped them move in before you even got here. Cringe for one moment, do it for all that they've ever done for you.* And realizing my mistake, I followed the tether and retraced my steps, nearly falling down the stairs with the frantic fury in my heart.

But when I reached the hot pavement, I saw that their spot was empty. Still, I scanned the parking lot, thinking that maybe they had just switched spots, that maybe they were coming back... I stood there staring into the blinding light until a stranger pulled into the last available spot.

#

That night, when the sun had set and the air had cooled, I pulled a pack of cigarettes out of my backpack and exited the building. I walked down the front steps and sat down in the grass. I tried to listen for the crickets and cicadas, forgetting that summer was over.

Lying there in the dark, I lit a cigarette and watched as cars left the city. And just before I headed back in, I pretended that the last pair of tail-lights I saw were my parents', that they had come back to see me one last time and were leaving again. And there, in the darkness, I tricked myself into seeing them wave back to me through the rear windshield, a smile on their lips.

Jury S. Judge is an internationally published artist, writer, photographer, and political cartoonist. She contributes to 'the Noise', a literary arts and news magazine. Her 'Astronomy Comedy' cartoons are also published in the 'Lowell Observer.' Her artwork has been widely featured in literary publications such as 'Claudius Speaks', 'South 85 Journal', 'The Tishman Review' and 'Dodging The Rain.' She has been interviewed on the television news program, 'NAZ Today' for her work as a political cartoonist. She graduated Magna Cum Laude with a BFA from the University of Houston-Clear Lake in 2014.



Falling Away

Under a sapphire sky, roots resist the dead tree's falling away from a golden edge into a fiery orange abyss.

Michael S. Garcia-Juelle is a writer and student in the MFA program at Florida International University in Miami, FL. His work has been published by Nanoism, Shotgun Honey, and others. He writes because the power of writing mystifies him, and he loves a good mystery.

The Manuscript

Michael S. Garcia-Juelle

Holcomb Murch knew there was something wrong with the manuscript from the moment it came across his desk. That's what he told me, anyway, that faraway night in the fall of '58. Time has distorted much of what happened in those days, but this I remember clearly: the sight of the formerly unflappable Holcomb Murch, flipping the lid on his gold lighter—*click-clack, click-clack*—pacing around the office, like a spider circling a drain. And I can still recall the way he whispered that word, "*wrong*," as if the manuscript itself might hear him.

Holcomb's office was always cool and dim, but more so on this occasion: cold like suspicion, dark like solitude. It was cloudy, too: smoky with the refuse of a thousand dead cigarettes. I sat opposite his vacant, worn-out throne—sat but stirred, stirred but tried my damndest to act natural. I figured at least one of us ought to.

"Facts of life: ten dimes buys you a dollar," I said. "And most of these stories are shit. What else is new?"

"I'm not joking, Malachi," he said, still whispering, even though the rest of the staff had been gone for nearly an hour.

"So what is it then, Holly?"

Holcomb stopped pacing. He looked, no, *glared* at me. I'd seen that look before: just before he fired the intern that dared to ask why his office was so gloomy, and the last time a representative from our printing press threatened to raise the rates. But he had never looked at me that way. No, never me.

Having exhausted the cigarette between his lips down to the filter, Holcomb plucked a new one out of his silver case, and put the lighter to good use. He sat, and took a long, healthy drag, while I felt my patience start to slip away.

"Go on, tell me. Tired clichés? Wafer-thin characters?"

"If only," he said. "If only." He laughed, but mirthless, dismal, queer. Another irregularity. "No, no, no. That's not it at all," he said. "That manuscript is cursed, Mal."

That settled it for me. He'd been rattled, I concluded. It was, after all,

an occupational hazard.

As Associate Editor of *Bizarre Tales*—one of the few pulp magazines with a wide enough circulation to afford a floor on the Upper East—I read a lot of dreck and drivel on a daily basis. Perhaps two percent of it was publishable, if I’m being generous. And of that number, there was a tiny fraction that really *got* to me, penetrated me; reached down deep and sank its teeth in; sank them in and wouldn’t let go. And in those moments when I saw some semblance of myself staring up at me from a tale of death and despair, I would find it impossible to simply move on to the next submission. I had been rattled, you see, rattled right out of the dim routine of filing rejection after rejection. I’d leave the floor. I’d take a walk, get some air, maybe a drink. And in no time, no time at all, I’d be back at my desk, ready to reject another sordid account of extraterrestrial abduction.

So I figured that’s what had happened to Holcomb—that a real chiller had gotten to him, and all he needed was some fresh air and a stiff drink—but I granted him the professional courtesy of not saying so.

“Cursed? I’m sure I don’t know what you mean.”

“Let me ask you, Mal,” he said, pulling open a drawer. “Have you ever seen this before?”

That was the first time I ever saw the manuscript. It was a misshapen collection of papers, yellowed by time and messily bound by a string of yarn. The front page was covered with queer, black inkblots. At first, I thought I saw them moving—not wildly around the page, of course. . . more like a subtle undulation. I don’t know if it was their arrangement or shape that produced the trick, but once I looked closely, the illusion dissipated.

Holcomb slid the infernal thing across the desk. I was simultaneously repulsed and attracted to it, a queer sensation I hadn’t felt since watching newsreels of Hitler’s camps during the war. I wanted to look away, but I couldn’t. I took the document up and examined it.

“I have to say, Malachi, it might be your finest work.”

Sure, Holcomb’s unusual behavior had made me a little nervous—for *him*. It hadn’t occurred to me, not until that moment, that I was the one on the hot seat; it hit me like an anvil falling into my gut.

“Is this a joke? A prank?”

“That’s what I thought,” Holcomb said. “Two days ago, when it first showed up in my mailbox. It’s unsigned, and *obviously* doesn’t adhere to our formatting guidelines, so I threw it in the bin without a second thought.”

“Then what’s it doing here? And what’s it got to do with me?”

Another cheerless laugh. “That’s the question, isn’t it? You see, the thing *somehow* found its way to me again yesterday morning.”

Only two people could submit entries to the Editor-in-Chief’s slush pile: the Junior Editor (Nancy) and the Associate Editor (me). Submissions to the magazine went through a handful of readers, mostly interns, before they

got to Nancy and me. We would forward the very best of them to Holcomb for final approval. This process had been devised by Holcomb's father, the elder Holcomb Murch, and had been in place since he had started the magazine.

"I considered throwing it out again a second time," he went on. "But I felt compelled to read it. It was the mystery, I suppose. I've got to say, Malachi, you've out-done yourself. It's quite a harrowing story."

"I've never seen this before in my life," I said, letting the manuscript drop on the oak desk with a *smack*.

"I figured you would say that," he said. "Nancy said the same thing. I wanted to ask you first, of course. But you were out. I rang, but. . ."

"Agatha's appointment," I said. "I told you."

"Yes, yes, your wife. But that's beside the point," he said, waving his hand as if to air the mention of her name out of the room. "Nancy says she's never seen it, either. And I believe her. Between the two of you, she isn't the would-be writer."

Holcomb was referencing the salad days of our friendship, when I would confide in him my own work, my own stories. He claimed to love them, to be riveted by them, but to this day, I'm still not sure that was true. He urged me to submit to literary magazines and journals; I would say no, that this was just a hobby, something between the two of us. Of course, I *was* submitting; everywhere except *Bizarre Tales*—the magazine founded and edited by Holcomb's father—so he would never know of my repeated, incessant failure to publish.

Having been reminded of the circumstances of our long friendship and professional partnership, I suddenly felt less like I was being reproached by my boss, and more like I was being betrayed by an old friend.

"What are you accusing me of, Holly? Playing games with you, after all this time?"

Holcomb sighed. He rose, and moved out of view to the liquor cabinet in the corner of the room. "A drink?"

"I'm fine," I said.

I heard the clatter of glasses, the rush of liquid. I stared straight ahead at his father's overstuffed chair—that ancient throne, worn and empty—and waited.

Holcomb began to pace again, but slow, deliberate, like a shark. "I don't know, Mal. There are things in that document. . ." His voice waivered. He cleared his throat. "Details of my life that, taken together, no one person could know." He took a swig of his drink—brandy, it looked like. "Not even you," he said, whispering again.

I understood now: for the first time since I had met him, Holcomb Murch was afraid. He had been rattled, all right, but in a much more sinister way than I'd presumed.

"You had hoped it was me," I said.

He glared at me again, but said nothing, just took another swig.

I went on: "From a friend, it's a prank. From a stranger. . ."

"A threat." Holcomb Murch sat in his father's chair again, and let a long, smoky sigh. "I had hoped," he said. "I had hoped."

We sat in silence. The ceiling fan whirled, Holcomb smoked. I had assumed this meeting was bad news—maybe our top competitor, *Macabre Monthly*, had finally caught up to us, or some nobody was suing us for "stealing" his idea (it wouldn't be the first time). But this. . . This was uncharted territory. Still, I figured, it was my duty as a friend of Holcomb's, and Associate Editor of *Bizarre Tales*, to get to the bottom of it.

"Let me read it," I said, breaking the silence. "Maybe I can help you figure it out."

Holcomb finished off his brandy.

"Whatever secrets are here," I went on, picking the manuscript up. "They'll be safe with me, Holly."

"Fine," he said. "Go on, read it."

"Not now," I said. "Agatha is waiting for me and I'm already late. I'll read it tonight and we'll discuss it tomorrow."

And so I left, passing the large portrait of the elder Holcomb Murch that oversaw the daily operations of Murch Publishing, Inc., on my way out.

#

I don't recall the specifics of my commute to the building in Greenwich Village that housed my sixth-floor walk-up, only general feelings: a vague desire to toss my briefcase, and the thing it carried, into the path of an oncoming car, and the urge to stop at every bench I passed so I could read the thing and see what the fuss was about—an urge that overcame me once I boarded the Q train. I found a seat, and retrieved the manuscript from my briefcase; I remember handling it as if it were some hallowed artifact.

Then I looked upon its cover page. Back in Holcomb's office, the inkblots on the cover had not called to mind any particular image or symbol, but upon seeing them again, I realized that they were arranged in the distinct shape of a crab. Again, there was the nearly imperceptible sensation of movement among the inkblots and, again, the effect dissolved upon further inspection. I watched the inkblots for what felt like a moment, only a moment. . . and then there was the conductor's voice calling "end of line, end of line," which I knew was impossible, as the Q train ended somewhere in south Brooklyn, an hour or so away from the stop where I had boarded.

I thought there must have been some mistake on the conductor's part, but I checked my watch and saw that it had been roughly fifty-five minutes since I took my seat. I looked out the train windows, and didn't at all recognize the sparsely populated station. Startled out of my seat, I moved to speak to the first transit authority employee I saw, but thought better of it (what could I say, anyway? The truth would sound absurd: "*Excuse me,*

madam, I seem to have gotten here from the 72nd street station instantaneously, and I find this unacceptable.”)

I reasoned that I must have dozed off and not realized it, and there was nothing I could do to rectify the situation but to take the train back to my stop. I set about boarding the uptown train, and resolved to continue reading the manuscript when I arrived at home.

#

The apartment was quiet when I got in, but all the lights were on. I didn't see Agatha in the kitchen or the parlor, so I went straight to the bedroom, where I found her fast asleep. She looked lovely when she slept, my beautiful, black-haired Aggie. I kneeled beside her and risked a peck on the cheek; I tried my best to be careful, but she stirred awake.

“Mal?” she muttered, but kept her eyes closed.

“Yes, darling.”

“Where were you? I worried.”

“I got hung up at work, then I fell asleep on the train. I'm sorry, Aggie, but I'm here now.”

“There's dinner. Let me. . .” She started to sit up, but I nudged her down gently.

“No, baby, it's okay,” I said. “I can serve myself. What did the doctor say?”

“I'm fine, Mal,” she said; the news I'd looked forward to all day.

“Everything is fine. When are you coming to bed?”

“Soon,” I said. “Soon.” I gave her another kiss, and she drifted off again.

#

I took my usual reading spot at the end of the sofa, and resumed my attempt at reading the manuscript. I flipped quickly over the cover page and its inkblots, which now filled me with an unusually strong feeling of apprehension.

I can't recall every word of the thing, of course, but I remember how the manuscript began: *The writer awoke in the dead of night from a dream dispersed by shattering glass*. The phrase sounded vaguely familiar to me at the time, like the name of an old classmate; I made a note to that effect, in keeping with the goal of helping Holcomb find the author, before continuing.

The prose went on like that first line—lyrical, rhythmic—and I found myself entranced before reaching the bottom of the first page. I read on: line-by-line, page-by-page, eager to unearth some sign of what had upset Holcomb so much, to find the similarities between his story and the one in my hands, to help me understand what had made him see this ostensibly innocuous collection of pages as a threat.

I looked and looked, but no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't see Holcomb Murch in that sordid, sinister narrative; I only saw myself.

The story was written in the first person, in a somewhat confessional style, and was about an aspiring fiction writer—"aspiring" as in failed, having never succeeded in publishing anything of note, despite a decade of toiling to that end—who, on one fateful night, is visited by powerful demon, implied to be the Devil himself. The writer's wife is ill, you see, and the prognosis is dismal, so the Devil offers him a wager: if *any* publisher accepts the writer's work in the next thirty days—on the strength of his work alone—his wife will be miraculously healed. If not, she will die at the stroke of midnight on the final day.

This writer, this foolish Orpheus, he accepts, of course—reasoning that the chance to save his love is better than no chance at all. So he slaves over his typewriter, writing a story a day, stories of all kinds: crime, horror, romance. The writer does not go to bed. He forgets to eat. He types until he is sick, until his fingers are sore, until he loses consciousness at the keys. He makes dozens of copies, then hundreds, and sends them everywhere, anywhere that'll take a good yarn. And when it gets close to the deadline, too close to trust the mailman, the writer goes out himself. He goes out all night, dropping manuscripts into mailboxes and through mail slots. All of this for his wife—not for himself, for his darling wife—whose condition worsens until, of course, midnight on the thirtieth day has come, and that vaunted letter of good news has not. And so, the writer weeps as the love of his life succumbs to her illness, dying in his tired, calloused hands.

Immediately after I finished reading the final page of the manuscript—where the writer finally gets that acceptance letter he so longed for, on the morning after his wife's death—I did not think of Holcomb. There was a knot in my throat and stinging in my eyes and I thought only of Agatha, my darling Agatha, probably doing some reading of her own in the bedroom. I wanted nothing more than to go to her, to throw myself in her arms and weep, weep for the doomed echoes of ourselves I found in the manuscript.

And then I thought of Holcomb, Holcomb Murch, my dearest and oldest friend, and I thought: *how could he do this to me?* It had all been a game to him, all along, something between the two of us. He had lied to me, I thought, lied outright. And for what? I needed to know. I needed to speak to him at once, and it couldn't wait for the following day.

I went to the kitchen, took the phone off its cradle and spun the rotary for Holcomb's apartment. It rang for a long time, but no Holcomb. I hung up and tried again. Still nothing. I became agitated; I started pacing around the apartment, everywhere except the bedroom, trying my damndest to make heads or tails of the day I'd had. I realized there was no way I was going to get any sleep like this, no way at all; there was nothing for it but to go to Holcomb's apartment

I stopped at the door of the bedroom and watched how peacefully Agatha slept. I had intended to tell her I was going back out—I didn't want

her to worry if she woke to find me gone—but I could not bring myself to wake her. And anyway, I didn't know how I would explain why I had to go see Holcomb right in that moment, why it just couldn't wait until the next day.

So, quietly and carefully, I put my loafers back on, grabbed my coat and hat, and went back out into the night, stuffing the rolled-up pages of the manuscript into my coat pocket along the way.

#

Holcomb lived on the top floor of a brownstone on the other side of the Village. I wanted to resolve this business with him and get back home to Agatha as soon as I could, so I cut through Washington Square Park. In doing so, I had unintentionally (or at least, unconsciously) guided myself to the spot where Holcomb and I had first met—serendipitously—some twelve years prior, as freshmen at New York University. I was having my lunch, alone on a park bench, when a thin, stiff boy with tired eyes took a seat beside me. We said nothing to each other. Nothing, that is, until he produced a copy of *Bizarre Tales*, and I saw his eyes wake up, and dance across the pages like stones on a lake.

I had not, until then, met someone that shared my affinity for weird fiction. I couldn't help myself; I told him I loved *Bizarre Tales*, and he lit up with excitement; even then, a smile on Holcomb Murch's face seemed incongruous, like footsteps in space. Once—after his father's suicide—I asked him why he didn't affix a "II" or "Junior" to his name, to distinguish between himself and his father. He looked me square in the eyes and said, "One of us is alive, and the other is dead. How much more distinguished can you get?" I made an uproar, laughing like a fool, while Holcomb's blank stare didn't so much as suggest the suppression of a smile. That was Holcomb Murch for you.

I was still reminiscing about the old times by the time I got to Holcomb's building. I pressed the button on the callbox marked "MURCH," and waited. Nothing. I knocked on the door, hoping someone on one of the lower floors might hear me. Nothing. I alternated between the two—knock, buzzer, knock, buzzer—for a while. I wondered what a single man like Holcomb Murch might be up to at ten o'clock on a weeknight, if not at home.

"Malachi," I heard a voice call from behind me. I turned to see the pale, handsome visage of Holcomb Murch standing on the sidewalk behind me.

"Sorry, Mal," he said. "Didn't mean to startle you."

Holcomb looked calm, collected, and well put-together in his gray pea coat: more like the Holcomb Murch I knew, less like the panicky mess that had called me into his office earlier that evening.

"You didn't," I said. "You're a real son-of-a-bitch, you know that?"

His eyes woke up, like they had back in the old days. "What are you talking about?"

“How could you?”

“Mal,” he said. “How could I *what*?”

“I know you’ve never been fond of Agatha,” I said, shoving the rolled-up manuscript against his chest until he took it. “I’ve never made a thing of it. But *this*?”

“What does Agatha have to do with—”

“They cut three tumors from her liver, Holcomb. Three.” I jabbed my finger into his chest, and he staggered back. “You know the chemicals they treated her with, over and over? The same stuff they use in mustard gas. *Mustard gas*.”

“Oh God,” he said. His eyes darted around: from the sidewalk, to the brownstone, to passing motorists, to the sky, to anything and anybody but me. “It can’t be.”

“She couldn’t eat. She lost her hair. Her nails rotted. We can’t. . . We can’t even. . .” I stumbled over a lump in my throat. “You can’t understand what it’s like. To live in fear every day. To worry—to *know* it could come back.”

“Mal,” he said. “Don’t you understand? Don’t you see?”

I wasn’t done. I grabbed him by his coat collar, stopping short of what I wanted to do, which was to wring his naked neck. “See *what*, you insolent dandy?”

“I didn’t. . .”

Holcomb choked up, and as close as I was to his face, I could see tears forming in his eyes. Seeing him—the Holcomb Murch—teetering on the verge of tears. . . it made me feel sorry for him. A car horn blared as it passed, not six inches away from us, and he flinched, like a wounded animal. My temper subsided enough to release him, and he followed me back onto the sidewalk.

“Malachi? I didn’t,” he tried again. “I didn’t do what you think I did.” He wiped his cheek. “The manuscript is *cursed*, just like I said.”

“Enough, Holcomb,” I said. “I’ve read the god-damned thing already, you don’t have to—”

“I don’t know what you read, Mal. But when I read that manuscript, it had nothing to do with any sort of illness.”

“What? But the wife—”

“There was no wife, either. My story was about the editor of a magazine called *Weird Stories*. His name. . .” he trailed off, trying to recollect. “Yes, I remember. It was M. Bloom Church. An anagram of Holcomb Murch.”

I thought back to my reading of the manuscript. Had the writer’s name been an anagram of my own? I couldn’t remember.

“Go on.”

“There was a scandal.”

He seemed apprehensive about continuing, so I pressed him.

“What kind of scandal?”

“An illicit affair. Several, in fact. Some scumbag reporter gets the scoop. Tries to blackmail Church, but Church rebuffs him. So it gets out. Readership drops, circulation plummets. Church’s magazine is ruined, and his father’s company with it.”

I considered Holcomb’s story, and decided he was telling the truth. It seemed much more likely—in comparison to what I previously believed, anyway—that Holcomb had thought he was handing me a different story. The last remnants of irritation towards him left me; I felt confused, frustrated, angry at whoever it was that was toying with the two of us, but sorry that I had taken it out on Holcomb.

“Someone must have switched it out,” I said.

“Impossible,” he said. “I read it. I put it in my drawer. It stayed there until I gave it to you.”

“Someone switched it, Holcomb. There’s no other explanation.”

“There is, Mal. You just don’t want to face it.”

We stood there, panting, in the crisp October air. The terror in his eyes dispelled my doubts about exactly what he was suggesting.

“It’s impossible,” I said. “It’s a story. Words, text—not some optical illusion. It can’t change depending on who’s reading it!”

“If that’s true, let’s look at it together.”

“Fine,” I said. “But not here. Not now. Tomorrow,” I said.

“Tomorrow, in the office. We’ll ask Nancy to read it, too.”

“All right,” Holcomb said. “Fine.”

I started to leave. And then, feeling as if I had forgotten something important, I turned back to Holcomb, who was fumbling with his keys. “I’m sorry, Holly,” I said.

“That’s all right, Mal,” he said, smiling that incongruous smile of his.

#

I did not cross Washington Square Park on the way back home. I felt unhurried, having been relieved of the agitation that had driven me to Holcomb’s in the first place.

I couldn’t figure an answer to any of it. The manuscript, the city, Holcomb Murch—none of it. The night grew colder; I tightened my coat around me, and warmed my hands with my breath. It was past midnight when I arrived at home, and Agatha was still asleep.

I don’t remember anything about settling into bed, and I don’t recall my dreams, although I know that they were terrible. I don’t remember waking to the crashing sound of glass breaking, either. I remember being on my hands and knees in the living room, scouring the area of the window, looking for the projectile that had put a jagged hole in it. I remember Agatha coming out—white as the nightdress she wore—frightened out of her wits.

"It must have been some kids playing," I said, doing my best to comfort her, although I saw no ball or rock, and I was at least as scared as she was. I had not forgotten the first line of the manuscript, and now I was certain that someone was out to get Holcomb and me, though I couldn't guess who or why.

I pinned the curtain to the wall over the broken window to keep the draft out, and told Agatha I would call someone about it first thing. I gave her a kiss on the forehead and suggested we should try to get some sleep. She came to bed with me, but only after fastening the chain lock on the front door.

I looked for a long while afterwards for whatever had broken the window. I told Agatha it must have rolled behind the sofa, or under a bookcase, but I never did find it—not even months later, when everything we'd owned was packed into boxes or stuffed into a moving truck, leaving the apartment devoid of places for rocks or balls to hide.

I did not sleep well for what remained of that night. The curtain did a poor job of keeping cold gusts out. I shivered and tossed in our sheets, fitful and restless, until a shard of sunlight slit my eye, waking me from the halfway place between dreams and sleep. The clock on my night-table read eight in the morning: that was a few minutes before I usually headed out the door. The realization that I was late—that Agatha hadn't roused me as usual—woke me with a start. She woke at six every day, like clockwork.

She was still in bed, next to me; lying on her side, facing away. I touched her shoulder and whispered her name.

"Agatha? Aggie, baby, are you okay?"

She moaned, which was a relief. "I'm not feeling so well, Mal," she said. I wanted to ask what was wrong, but when she turned over to face me I was overwhelmed with a fear so strong I found it hard to form the words. Her skin possessed by the faintest yellow tint—the familiar early stages of jaundice—and her eyes were bloodshot and bound by dark circles.

"I feel nauseous," she said.

"I'll call the library for you, honey," I said. "Do you want to go to the hospital?"

"No," she moaned, eyes wide with horror at the mention of the word *hospital*. "No. It's not that bad. I'm just a little under the weather."

"Okay," I said. "I'm going to go to the office, then. I have to check on a special project I'm working on. I'll be back early, I promise. If you don't feel better by tonight. . ."

"Fine," she muttered. "But it's not that. It can't be, okay?"

"I know, baby," I said. "I know."

It was then that I understood what the manuscript was—although I didn't *understand*, not really. But I understood enough. I got dressed as fast as I could, and somehow found the strength to leave Agatha's side to go to Holcomb Murch.

Nancy rushed past me on the sidewalk outside our building, cheeks stained with mascara, and waved me away when I asked what was wrong. I went inside and found that the offices of Murch Publishing, Inc., had been deserted. I passed the empty desks, the silent typewriters, the portrait of Holcomb Murch, the dead, and approached the office of Holcomb Murch, the living.

The scene was just as it'd been yesterday, as if he'd never left at all: a smoky, cool, and dark room; Holcomb Murch in his chair; a lighter going *click-clack* in one hand, a lit cigarette in the other.

"You're late, Casgiare." He spoke in a mock authoritative tone. "It looks like a bear's head, doesn't it?" The manuscript's ugly inkblots stared up from the center of his desk.

"I don't see a bear," I said. "What happened to Nancy?"

"I was going to wait until you got here," he said. "But I got impatient. I had her read it. I wanted to know what she'd see."

"And?"

"And it's cursed, just as I told you. She said something about a demon baby, clawing its way out of its mother's belly. Then she stormed out."

I believed him, but I didn't let on to that. Not yet.

"I see. And everyone else?"

"I let the staff start the weekend early. I'm more concerned with figuring this out," he said, gesturing at the manuscript. "Shall we?"

Holcomb came around the desk. We looked at the manuscript together, but what we saw wasn't the same. Line-by-line, page-by-page, I read the same exact story I had read in my apartment, while Holcomb claimed to see something else entirely. Where he read: "*M. Bloom Church became the second M. Bloom Church to manage Weird Stories magazine after the first hung himself by the neck,*" I read: *The writer awoke in the dead of night from a dream dispersed by shattering glass.* And so on.

We flipped the pages, turned the thing upside down, held it up to the light—examined it every which way we could, trying to find the key to the trick. But there was no trick; at least not the kind we were looking for.

"I told you," he said. "This thing is evil. Cursed."

"Agatha is sick again, Holly," I said. "She's got the old symptoms. How it started before. Woke up to it this morning. Do you think. . ."

"I don't know, Mal," he said. "You know what I woke up to?"

"What?"

"Pictures. Photographs."

"Of what?"

Holcomb stared blankly at the manuscript. "Me," he said. "Candid photographs that I had no idea about. . . The kind a private eye takes when he's casing you. I found them near the door, as if someone had slid them

under it.”

I didn’t bother asking what was in the photographs; I had already figured it, anyway. “Holly,” I said. “In your story, what did the reporter want with the editor?”

“To have his awful manuscript published,” he said.

And then I told him, told him what I’d known was true since I woke up that morning to find Agatha feeling sick again.

“Holly,” I said. “We have to publish it. In *Bizarre Tales*.”

“No.”

“We have to. That’s what it wants: to be read. To be published.”

Holcomb began pacing around the room again, just as he had at the start of it.

“How do you suppose we can even publish such a thing, hm? Whose worst fears do you think the printer will press onto the sheet? Mine, yours, his?”

“You are the Editor-in-Chief of *Bizarre Tales*, Holcomb Murch. You know full-well whose story it will be.”

“And what of the readers? What if its curse spreads to them?”

I pleaded with him. “The readers? What about *us*? What about Agatha? The photographs?”

“The editor does not give in, Mal!” Holcomb shouted. “He stands his ground! Do you think I *doubled* our circulation by publishing any drivel that came across this desk?”

“Even if it costs us everything?”

“*Especiall*y if it costs everything!”

Holcomb grabbed the manuscript from his desk, set it aflame with his lighter, and threw the burning pages into the waste bin. We stood together in the warm glow of its burning, saying nothing.

Then Holcomb turned and hugged me, held me in a warm embrace which I have not since forgotten, and said: “Go, Mal. Go to Agatha. Take care of her. To Hell with the manuscript, the pictures.” Then he smiled handsomely—a smile that didn’t seem out of place at all—and winked. “See you on Monday.”

And so I left.

#

I wish I could say that Agatha’s condition had improved by the time I returned home. I wish, too, that I could say I never saw the manuscript again. But after practically running through Manhattan to make it home, I was greeted by a fresh copy of the document, lying neatly on my doormat. I fell to my knees and took it up in my hands—I wanted to weep, but I was too angry; I wanted to scream, but I was too afraid.

I opened it. Read the first line: *The writer awoke in the dead of night from a dream dispersed by shattering glass*, and skimmed the rest of it.

Nothing had changed. Nothing at all.

I entered the apartment. I knew from the smell of retch and bile coming from the bedroom that Agatha was still sick. I found her lying in the same spot I'd left her, the yellowish hue of her skin having become more pronounced.

"Aggie, baby," I said. "I'm home."

"Mal," she whispered, and her lips curved into a precious smile as her eyelids wafted apart. "I'm glad you're home, baby."

"How do you feel?"

"Not so good," she said. "But I'll be all right. Right?"

"You'll be fine," I said. "Just fine. You'll see. I'll be right back, baby, and then you'll be all right."

I pried myself away from Agatha again. I took that godforsaken manuscript in my hands one last time, and ventured back out, back into the heaving city. And then I did something which I'm not proud of, but which, I believe, might have accounted for Agatha surviving another surgery, another round of chemotherapy, and living on for three decades beyond that day.

Unfortunately, the same could not be said for Holcomb Murch. The morning after the last time I saw him, an NYPD detective knocked on my door. Holcomb had been found dead, he said. The cleaning lady had discovered him in his chair, eyes and mouth gaping wide, frozen in a horrified scream. There was a ring of bruises around his neck, and his skin had turned blue from asphyxiation. I'm glad I never saw Holcomb in that state, as I don't think I could afford to have more nightmares about him than I do as it is.

It looked like he had been hanged, the detective said, but no rope was found at the scene. Nothing unusual had been found at all, in fact. Nothing apart from the waste bin—full of ashes, burnt paper, and residue from the fire extinguisher—and the portrait of Holcomb Murch, which was found face-down on the floor.

The detective escorted me to the local precinct and asked me a battery of questions about the days leading up to Holcomb's death. I didn't mention the manuscript, Holcomb's ranting about secret photographs—that would only complicate things, and I needed to focus on being there for Agatha. I think that, for a time, they suspected *I* might have been the murderer—as absurd as that idea might be—but I was eventually cleared of any wrongdoing.

Which isn't true, of course. I am anything but guiltless. That day—the day Holcomb Murch died, the day I came home to find Agatha's condition worsening by the second—I took the manuscript and ran. I ran six floors down, out onto the New York City sidewalk. I ran hard, past pedestrians and parked cars, past bars and barbershops, restaurants and bookstores; sprinted all the way over to Midtown, where I slipped the manuscript through the mail slot of the *Macabre Monthly* offices.

Where the manuscript went from there, I cannot say. I don't know

how many lives its curse has ruined, nor how many men and women it has driven to madness and death. I write this confession with the full knowledge and understanding that their fate is, to some extent, my doing. To write that I would have done anything differently, however, would be a lie. I would have burned this beautiful city to ashes to save Agatha, and I would burn it down now if I could have her back from the hereafter.

This is the truth: I regret nothing.

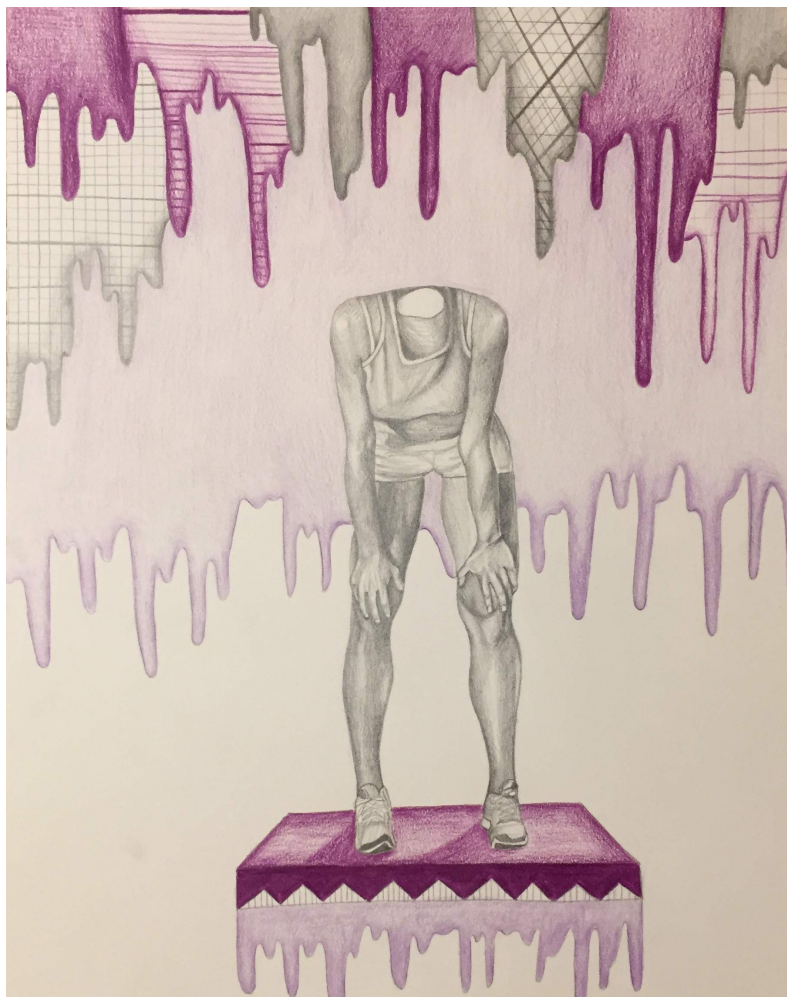
Signed,

Malachi Casgiare

New York, NY

1988

Julia Wang is a junior in high school. She is an aspiring artist hoping to work at companies such as Pixar and Bandai Namco one day.



Fatigue

A little different from just tired. Part of the series, "Body Language."

***Ben Kline** lives in Cincinnati, Ohio, works at a library, and likely consumes too much coffee and wine. His work is forthcoming or has recently appeared in Bending Genres Journal, Beech Street Review, The Matador Review, Impossible Archetype, Love's Executive Order, The Birds We Piled Loosely, and many more. You can read more at www.bencline.tumblr.com/publications.*

Tell Them I'm Dead

Ben Kline

Some of the other hillbillies I knew
by holler name or trailer park—
rough, government-lunch boys
who grew up not dreaming
in sleeping bags on dirt floors
before becoming frackers or
cutting-edge meth chefs,
their buxom older sisters
flown to Vegas by uncles
from other unmapped towns,
their little sisters raising angora goats
shown in barns damp with lax husbandry
between steep green hills and brown creeks
veining the Ohio into its east bank
on that stretch where it flows north,
where it floods without warning
and signals no dread—my mother
likes to tell me they are dead.

She sends text messages punctuated
by sad yellow emoji, attaches grainy
screen captures of clearly high school photos
and obituaries written in that quiet code
of country folk whispering known secrets
about old maids or lifelong bachelors
with special friends claiming too many
nephews on their half-brother's
cousin's mama's second married side.

I should be too young to know so many dead.
What was in the water back there back then?

My mother might know, yet will never
simply say. She prefers to imply
an overdose. A dull machete. Cancer,
maybe. Like a calendar of Christian holidays,
her grudges await future crusades. Two days before
I left, she said, *You are so cold*. Quite pot kettle,
but projection sustains anger with ease—maybe
her grim bulletins are rehearsals for the day
she texts some not-so-close relative
a close-up photo of my corpse.

Ghazal for Dead Siblings

Ben Kline

I do not see the future, its butterfly dates & times,
but it sure sees me, so I must be ready at all times

to intake raw data & analysis in beta, all while carefully
decrypting our Wednesday night deaths & the two more times

our half-nephew plunges down the stairs & the crows cawing
for murder after conspiracy, because they colorize times,

dropping red & yellow plastic shards in a tin bin in the barn
loft, each soft clink a tick on their clock that records times

like gross profits, accruing until Pops skids off the top,
victim of net weight gain & your fattened heart at times

weak with leaden grievances & terse emails from Mom.
I know her future too. She has nine dates, two vague times,

each one louder than the last, like kicked cats hissing,
scratching at your eyes, reminding you of those times

we pushed our little sister out the window, or once
you realized I liked boys, feeling queasy sometimes

when I shared details you did not need to know. I keep
thinking about all I have not told you, other secret times

I dreamed of great great Grandma's ghost, who revealed
by lightning strikes & thundered on about all the times

I would not escape. She revealed your date & the red maple
falling, crushing your lungs, hot blood gurgling at brief times

you felt you might still make it, even though you would not,
& I waited in my office for the call revealing your exact time.

Maria Valenzuela Frangakis was born in a dusty village along the International Highway in Mexico's Northwest. After completing her Chemistry degree, she obtained a Master of Sciences and worked as a research scientist in various academic and pharmaceutical labs for over twenty years, publishing her contributions in various scientific journals. Later on, while raising her three sons, she earned her M.B.A. and went on to found her own Biotech consulting company. She completed a memoir more than fifteen years ago, but never had the desire to publish it until last year when she decided to re-write it as a work of fiction. She currently lives in Chapel Hill, NC.

Not So Great Expectations

Maria Valenzuela Frangakis

By the time my parents arrived in San Jacinto, a dusty village along the International Highway that connects the U.S. And México City, they had three children, had lost two babies, and were expecting me. Progress, like the vehicles passing along the highway every day, sped by San Jacinto without ever making a stop. It left behind a smattering of adobe houses scattered across the landscape, as if the wind had strewn them every which way, covering everything with dust the color of oblivion. As evening fell, when the light from the kerosene lamps trembled through windowless windows, the entire village acquired a spectral appearance.

Before moving to San Jacinto, my father worked in a remote hacienda, saving what he could to buy his own land. He stayed beyond his commitment despite my mother's urging that the two older children needed schooling. But it was Javiereito's death—a beautiful, healthy baby boy born during the rainy season just the year before—that finally convinced him it was time to leave.

"One afternoon...that's all it took," bemoans my mother about Javiereito's death. "Your father couldn't make it through the roads, even with the tractor, to get him to a doctor... he died of dehydration."

A year later, with the new life taking shape in my mother's womb, they found that San Jacinto offered, in addition to an elementary school, easier access to medical care and to my father's land, which by then was ready for cultivation. At thirty-one, he was still the willowy, handsome man with whom my mother had fallen in love almost a decade earlier. At twenty-six, Mamá already appeared overwhelmed by her difficult life, her singular beauty now eclipsed by the sadness in her smile.

Life moved slowly in San Jacinto. People lived on the fruits they

gathered from the woods and feasted on anything that ran, flew, or crawled. The more entrepreneurial raised a few animals in their backyards, including dairy cows, the male offspring fattened to sell at the nearest slaughter house.

Once in a while, Don Lucho butchered a bull to sell meat to the townspeople, and news of the kill spread quickly across the village. While two strong men tilted back the head of the animal, Don Lucho expertly slit its throat with one decisive stroke. Nothing went wasted. Even the blood was collected for cooking, not an easy task considering the animal's spasms as he reached the final paroxysm of death. Some bartered what they had, but the best cuts went to those paying with cold, hard cash. There was something there for everyone.

Don Lucho reserved the animal's head for himself. His wife roasted it whole in a pit, with plenty of *chile colorado* to serve to him the next morning to relieve his certain hangover. With the rumen, she made *menudo* soup to sell by the plate in her makeshift stand, grilling the tripe and stewing the tail to add more choices for her customers.

My mother vied for *el cuajo*, the rennet, which she kept pickled in salt in a glass jar to use later for cheese making. Floating in the brine, it reminded me of the tumor her doctor had removed from her ovary years before, proudly displayed on a shelf until Papá gave it a proper burial.

A bachelor, my uncle often bribed Don Lucho with a bottle of good tequila to get the animal's testicles, which were usually reserved for Don Fernando López, who paid top peso for them. The aphrodisiac properties of this delicacy were no doubt responsible for Don Fernando's eventual fathering of sixty-five children along the International Highway.

By day's end, all that remained at Don Lucho's were a pack of dogs licking the blood spilt on the ground and a mob of children happily kicking around a ball improvised from the bladder of the ill-fated beast.

#

"Let's build us a chicken coop," Papá said to my mother one year when the crop had been devastated again. "This way we'll have eggs and can eat chicken whenever we can't afford meat."

"What about the outhouse?" Mamá asked, always concerned that we had to use the woods nearby as our public outhouse like the rest of the townspeople.

"Woman, we must worry about what's going into the kids' mouths first, before worrying about what's coming out the other end," he said, hoping to quiet her on the topic once and for all.

In all fairness to Papá, the chicken coop came in handy during the flood of 1958 when heavy rains lasting for two weeks straight caused the roof to leak. The first droplets began right over my parents' bed. Without worrying much, my father pushed the bed to the side and went back to sleep. As the leak grew, Mamá placed the chamber pot under it first, then a bucket. In the

end, when the tin tub we children bathed in didn't seem big enough, she finally woke him up. By then, certain the roof was going to cave in, burying all of us while we slept, she had packed us up, ready to go take shelter in the school as many others had already done.

"Where are you going, woman?" my father asked, seeing her in full camping gear.

"To the school, like everybody else. The roof is about to fall on us and you don't seem to notice," she said in that tone she used when she was fed up with my father's lack of concern. He knew he had ignored my mother's pleas to fix the roof before the rains, but he did not want to spend the night with the townspeople.

"Look, I worry the children will get infested with lice or worse, catch a disease from the crowd at the school. I built the new wing of the chicken coop in case the rains came hard this year. It is quite sturdy. Let's stay there tonight, and tomorrow we'll see." He used his most persuasive tone, knowing how scrupulous Mamá was about keeping us germ-free. She agreed to stay, but her work was far from over.

In the last couple of days Mamá had noticed that a few chickens appeared sickly. With our impending move to the coop she was suddenly afraid we might catch some dreadful germ from the sick chickens. While my father set the cots in the chicken coop, she occupied herself with inspecting every feathered creature in the coop, separating any that showed a sign of sickness. She'd expertly grab them by the feet and whack their heads against a pole, throwing them in a pile for later processing.

The coop was surprisingly dry and comfortable, especially after Mamá covered the canvas cots with extra-thick blankets and ran a mosquito net around them. Her fatalistic attitude could not dampen our excitement. As my father carried me in his arms, I was suddenly filled with joy. In my broken toddler-speak I yelled, "Ladies and gentlemen, it is a fact now; we're sleeping with the chickens!"

That night, Papá lay in the middle of the biggest cot to tell us bedtime *cuentos*. He placed my little brother and me on each side, his arm a pillow under my neck. I remember his smell and the softness of his underarm hair tickling my nose as he talked, briefly pausing every time my mother whacked another chicken.

#

Barely a year older than Rafa, I was years ahead of him. Starting with my ability to eat *colachi*, a zucchini dish we both hated, I bested him at everything we tried. His eagerness to do everything I told him without argument made my life easy, but it also bored me to death. His large head set atop a long, skinny body earned him his nickname, *majo*, which has several meanings, among them "nice" or "good-looking," but since neither of us knew that, I used it as an epithet whenever he annoyed me. I made up my own

rules when we played, changing them quickly if I saw myself in danger of losing.

But all this advantage came at a price. As the older sister, I was expected to be responsible for him, so that whenever something bad happened, my mother assumed I was responsible. Like the time he fell from a rocker and cut his head on the door's cement threshold and my mother immediately accused me of rocking him so hard that he'd gone flying off the rocker. My much older brother and two sisters were not only responsible for me, but also far more interesting than my boring little brother.

With no one home during the school day to watch us, Mamá began taking us on her daily trips to the well, outfitting each of us with a five-liter bucket. While we struggled carrying the half-full buckets, Mamá had no trouble balancing twenty liters on her head, and ten in each hand. With her stories of disobedient children drowned by falling into the well, she taught us great respect for it.

When the new well at the edge of the village opened for public use, it was nothing more than a hole in the ground. A raft made of twigs covered its mouth almost entirely except for an aperture wide enough for a bucket to go through. A barbed-wire fence beyond the well marked the village limits, as well as our own, for we were strictly forbidden to go beyond it.

Across the fence, to the far right, stood the hut where Pedro, the brick maker, lived with his wife, Soledad. Her unusual name intrigued me for its rarity but especially for its meaning: solitude. The few times I met her gaze across the barbed-wire fence, the name seemed to fit her, for she had haunting, lonely eyes.

Two huge craters, formed after years of Pedro's scooping out the red clay used for his brick-making operation could be seen some distance beyond the hut. Pedro's children played around naked, their enormous potbellies and shaven heads giving them a distinctive look. Rafa and I called them "the red children" because their skin had acquired a dusty, red tint from playing in the craters.

"Why are their bellies so big, Mamá?" I wanted to know.

"They are full of parasites," she said. "They could use one of my potions, for sure."

"Why are their heads always shaven?" Rafa asked.

"They probably caught head lice or ringworm at some point. Shaving their heads prevents lice from coming back. Still, it's best if you keep away from them, you hear me?"

Mamá need not have worried. Despite watching them with great curiosity, we had no intention of crossing the barbed-wire fence and playing with those strange-looking children. Further up Pedro's property was *la presa*, the reservoir where my mother watered the herd of cattle every day. *El Arroyo* swelled yearly during the rainy season, filling the reservoir to the brim

to last through the dry season. This particular year, however, with so much rain, the reservoir had spilled over to fill Pedro's craters and beyond, threatening to flood his hut.

With all its floods, the rainy season also accounted for the fertility of the surrounding land. Our village of San Jacinto lay in the valley of the Rio Sinaloa as it flowed to the Pacific Ocean, a broad area later known as "The Agricultural Heart of México." The valley became home to tribes that cultivated the land long before the Catholic missionaries made their arrival in México's Northwest almost a hundred years after the discovery of the Americas in 1492.

#

The sun had finally come out after more than a week of heavy downpour, alternating with a relentless drizzle. Rafa and I went outside to play after days cooped up in the house. A fine drizzle stubbornly persisted, but the sky had begun to open. To keep us dry, we made hoods out of burlap sacks by tucking one corner of the sack into the other, the way we'd seen adults protect themselves when working in the rain. As the clouds parted and the sun peeked through, we were charmed by the strange occurrence of rain falling under sunshine. Village folk believed that it was under these conditions that deer gave birth to their young. Few things worried my father more than his children acquiring the speech and especially the superstitious mentality of the village people.

"Don't believe those things!" he said in response to our excitement. "Deer give birth in all types of weather."

"Then how come the sun is out and it's still raining, huh?" I asked, certain my father was ill-informed.

"Look toward the ocean," he turned us both in the direction opposite the Sierra Madre. "It has finished raining over there, see? It will soon stop here. It has nothing to do with deer having baby deer."

My father was right. The rain stopped completely soon after, making us forget about the deer. Throwing off our burlap hoods, we continued to play until, thirsty, we went inside for a drink, finding the *tinaja*—the clay pot where our drinking water filtered through the cone-shaped stone above it—almost empty.

"Rafa, let's go get water for the *tinaja*," I proposed, thinking Mamá would be pleasantly surprised to see that we'd done so without being asked. Although my father always admired my *iniciativa*, I doubt the trait was fully developed by age six. Having fed the chickens, the pigs, and the cattle, Mamá stood at the far end of the corral, talking across the barbed-wire fence with the neighbor. She did not notice us gone.

At the well, I tied the rope to the handle of my small bucket, the way I'd watched Mamá do countless times, and lowered it to the bottom of the well. Thankfully, by now Pedro had built a brick surround and someone had

installed a pulley, which made the well a lot safer. But Rafa and I had never gone to the well by ourselves. Even with the pulley, the full five-liter bucket was too heavy to pull back out of the well; now I understood why Mamá filled our buckets only halfway. Rafa was over by the fence as always, looking for the red children.

“Look,” he yelled. “The ocean!”

“There’s no ocean in San Jacinto, dummy. Everybody knows that,” I said, as I strained to bring the bucket up from the bottom of the well. “Stop your silliness and come give me a hand!” I ordered him the way I always did. He came to help me, but kept looking back over the fence until we finally got the bucket out with great effort.

Even though I knew there was no ocean in San Jacinto, the sight beyond the fence was just as beautiful. Except for an area of dry ground immediately over the fence, there was water as far as the eye could see. It was even better than the ocean because there were no sand dunes to cross over or waves to worry about; just a huge, peaceful lagoon. Best of all, there were no naked red children running around.

Solitude was our only witness when we slid under the fence to go for a swim. Rafa ran a few feet ahead of me, wading in the calm water which reached only up to our ankles.

Then he sank right before my eyes.

“How can you swim in so little water?” I asked him, but he did not answer. Instead, he was desperately flailing his arms, a terrified look on his face as he bobbed above, then below the surface. A flash of memory brought back the huge craters where the red children played, and I screamed, “My little brother is drowning!”

I remember diving into the reddish murky water to save him.

I remember its sweet taste and the clicking sound of the water in my ears.

I remember clawing the slippery walls, trying to pull myself out of the crater.

I remember purposely trying to relax then, floating effortlessly.

I remember Rafa, trying to climb on top of me as if I were a raft.

I remember trying to scream for help but only bubbles came out of my mouth.

I remember being in the water for a long, long time.

I remember bobbing up and seeing a tall, dark man running toward me.

I remember the man taking off his shirt, still running in light-blue boxer shorts.

And I remember him pulling me out of the water.

While Soledad tended to me, Pedro dove again in search of my brother. She put me on my stomach and pressed hard on my back until I

vomited a large amount of water. Pedro dove twice into the red waters, and twice he came out empty-handed. On the third try he found Rafa and pulled him out of the water. Soledad pumped his unresponsive body the way she'd done with me, but when he wouldn't come to, Pedro took him by the feet and hung him upside-down.

When Rafa finally revived, he tried to run away from them, screaming, "Don't throw me back in there!" By then a crowd had gathered around us. With half the town following behind, we were taken home to my mother, who was still talking to the neighbor across the barbed-wire fence. She couldn't recognize her own two red children among that crowd.

I knew I was going to get an epic whipping for getting myself in trouble and neglecting to protect my younger brother. The thought of it scared me more than the ordeal we'd just gone through. Mercifully, the house filled up with people who had heard rumors of a drowning and had come to see first-hand. When Rafa's face turned grayish and he began vomiting, Mamá consulted *The Medical Advisor*, a huge encyclopedia of medical advice. "Secondary drowning could be fatal," it said. My father rushed Rafa to the hospital in the nearby city, while Mamá stayed home tending to the visitors. With Rafa out of the picture, and a little help from Pedro, I related the story to anyone interested in all its colorful details.

As it turned out, Pedro and his family had left the shack when the water got too close. They had taken the children to their grandparents and returned to rescue the family's belongings before the water reached the shack. Hearing my scream, as I jumped in to save my brother, Soledad went outside and saw the two small heads bobbing up and down in the water and alerted Pedro. Everyone agreed I'd been brave for trying to save my little brother, especially since I couldn't swim.

"Sofia knew about the flood all along and wanted to go see it with her own eyes," Mamá clarified. Then, looking sternly at me, "How could you be so careless and put your little brother in such danger?"

Indebted to Pedro for saving our lives, my father gave him a zebu cow and a pair of piglets with which to start his own farm—a suitable gift in a culture where many took better care of their livestock than of their own children. Some years later, as Pedro's farm grew, he stopped making bricks. In a relatively short while, his children turned out the same color as all the other children in San Jacinto.

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What I Liked Best

Sarah Freligh

was punching out, the satisfying chunk of time
stamp on card signaling that work day
was history. Especially in the afternoon.
Especially in August when I wore the grease
and heat of lunch rush like a uniform
I'd worked hard for and earned. Maybe
I changed in the ladies room. Maybe
I merely shucked my white apron, traded
my stained waitress shoes for sandals
and headed for the bar down the road
that was dark and cool as a cave. We
threw down our waitress money, blizzards
of bills we pulled from pockets and purses, sure
there would always be more, paid for
drinks and paper cradles of fries so hot
they sizzled a blister on the front
of my tongue. And what I liked
best was when the afternoon turned the corner
toward evening and the mothers among us
drifted off to fix dinner for kids or husbands
leaving us singles to order another round
we maybe chased with a shot, enough
reason to turn toward each other and show
off the selves we hid each day under our uniforms,
the girls who said sir and ma'am and thank you
for nothing. In the bar, we could dream
big, cop to it without apology, and when we sailed out

into the dusk, first stars hatching in a vast
indigo nest of sky, we wished on the first
one whose pulse and glitter caught
our eye, full up or fool enough to believe
we'd someday get what we asked for.

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Fly on Freddy

Louis J. Fagan

Hell, flies don't bother you none.

They crawl all over you in the cow barn, particularly when July's got its hell fury hold of things in Ridge. Bare back burnt and sweaty from the sun, you come in from the hayfield and get the cows in their stalls to milk. Don't matter if you smoke a pack of cigarettes while you're squatting next to your Holsteins, running your hands down their bags, switching milking machines from one cow to the next. Those flies know that milking time means feeding time for them. They know you ain't got nowheres to run and hide. They bite your back, land on your brow, crawl down the space between your jeans and your backside to the crack of your ass. They bite you all the way down the barn till the last cow's milked and you turn the herd back out to pasture for the night.

Man would lose his mind if he let them persistent little bastards bother him. They don't bother you none, though. Not a goddamn bit. When you was a kid, back before lung cancer got him, your ol' man used to say, If you ain't got flies, you ain't farmin'. You didn't know what the hell he was talking about then, but you think you know what he means now with all the years of farming behind you—and ahead of you, God willing.

The flies follow you across the barnyard and in the house for dinner. House is already filled with them, so the few you bring with you ain't about to make much difference, anyway. Ain't no screen door and the kids been running in and out all day, letting the flies in as they come and go. Madge has had the front door wide open, too, cooking dinner. Inside the kitchen's as hot as the barn and you can't blame her none. When you sit down for dinner, flies buzz 'round the shit stuck on your work boots under the table and they buzz 'round the food on the table.

Kitchen ceiling is covered with fly spots. The faded, cracked yellow paint is speckled with a layer of fly shit. The three fly strips dangling from the light fixture over the table need changing. Covered with dead flies, they are,

so much so that you can barely see any of the yellow glue lining the strips. Still, you hear the *zzzz, zzzz* when a fly manages to find a little of that glue and can't come unstuck. You tell Madge you'll change those damn strips after dinner. You never do, she says. And it doesn't matter, she says, because she didn't pick up any in town, anyhow.

If Madge remembers to get some next time she heads into town or if she doesn't is neither here nor there because the flies don't bother you none. You'd like to put in a milking parlor like the Earnst boys put in. They say flies ain't too bad in the milking parlor. They say a milking parlor cuts down on the flies all over the farm. But you ain't never putting in a milking parlor, you know that. You owe your soul already to Federal Trust and you're set to beg for eight grand more this fall when you buy high moisture. Somebody said milk prices were going to rise this second half of the 80s, but they ain't and they won't. No, you ain't putting in a milking parlor and you suspect the Earnst boys fight the flies just the same as you do in the summer months. Truth be told, them flies are the least of your worries.

You scrape your plate when you've finished the meatloaf and macaroni salad and boiled cabbage Madge has made and you whistle for Freddy to sit for five minutes on the back porch with you. Every night after dinner in the summer, before you head back out to the field to mow for a couple hours, Freddy sits with you. The flies crawl all over his fur and he don't even snap or scratch at them. Freddy and you are a lot the same in that regard. He don't mind the flies, either.

You grab a beer from the fridge and whistle again. Where's Freddy at? you say, while you pull the tab from that cold can in your hands, shoo away a fly that's landed on your goddamn nose, toss the tab in the garbage can.

I don't know, Madge says, rubber-gloved hands in the dish pan, scrubbing away. She wipes the sweat from her forehead with her forearm, says, Side yard with the kids?

You look out the kitchen window and your boy and three girls are running around like chickens with their heads cut off, playing some sort of tag, dodging and hiding behind the oaks your granddad planted way back when he was your age. Don't see him, you say, and head for the porch.

Some sonofabitch dropped Freddy on the shit pile you got sitting in your field along Webber Road. Middle of winter, you had the shit spreader full and pulled into the field and the pup lay there shivering in the cold on the manure you brought over the day before. 'Course, you did what any decent man would have done. You stuffed him in your Carhartt overalls, ran the load of shit off, and brought him home.

That was what, maybe six, seven years ago. In that time, Freddy turned himself into more of a house dog than a farm dog. Madge dotes on him with Milk-Bones and leftovers, and he's always begging something from the

table from her. You tend not to feed him at the table, still he likes to have a beer and a smoke with you after dinner on the porch all the same during the good weather months.

You pull your smokes from the side pocket of your jeans. One left and you light up, suck in smoke, exhale, whistle again for Freddy. Where the hell are you, mutt? you say and tuck the empty soft pack back in your pocket with your lighter for lack of a better place to stick it. You set your ass in the tattered lawn chair, stretch out your legs, rest one of your boots over the other, watch the flies zip around the both of them. Sigh, swig beer. Kill the can in three, four swallows. Wish you had another. Wish you didn't have to get up to get it, though. Too long of a walk back to the fridge right about now.

You sit quiet, pull on your smoke. No kidding at all, from here you can hear the hum of the flies in the barn across the barnyard. Or maybe the sound is just the roar of the tractor you was on all day. Either way, maybe you'll fog the barn tonight with the fly fogger when you come in from the field. Might cut down the flies some. If you can keep your eyes open by that time, you might just do that.

Most farmers are bothered by the damn flies. You ain't. Others will dust the cows' backs and lay out bait on the barn floor, but that don't fit your budget and fogging the barn from time to time takes care of the swarm some when it gets real bad. You got half a jug of fog juice left over from last summer somewhere in the tool shop that you could use, if you can remember where you set the damn thing in that mess of a shop you've got.

When you finish your smoke, you drop the butt in the can and set the can by the chair. You whistle again for Freddy, but he ain't coming. Dog always comes when he's called and you start to wonderin' just where he might be.

You gather up enough ambition to stand. The four kids tear across the barnyard.

Hi, Daddy. Hi, Daddy, they yell.

Where you heading? you say.

Play in the hay shed, Everett yells. He's the oldest, only ten, but he generally leads the pack like a drill sergeant and tonight's no different.

Maybe he'll take over the farm someday, but the boy don't seem to have an interest in dairy cows or tractors, the way you did at his age. On top of that, ever since he was in that Winter Festival play this past February, he's got it in his head he's going to be an actor.

Madge tells you to give him time. And there's the girls if he don't want to farm, she says.

Just so long as one of them wants to farm, you tell her. Otherwise, what's any of this matter if a man ain't knowing it'll all keep going when he's gone?

A fly bites your chest. Sonofabitch, you say and slap at it.

Where's Freddy? you yell to the kids, but they keep on running.

Hey, hold your horses, the lot of you, you yell.

Annie is the only one who does. Youngest, most obedient, she stops, turns.

Annie, where's Freddy at?

She shrugs. I dunno, she says. He's your dog, Daddy, she says.

My dog?

He's your dog, Daddy. Everybody knows that.

You getting sassy with me?

No, sir, Daddy, she says and takes off after Everett and her two sisters.

You throw your hands behind your head. My dog, you huff.

Little Annie might be right. Dog and you have had an understanding between the two of you since you pulled him off that shit pile those winters ago. Dog takes life as it comes the way you do. Enjoys food. Enjoys sleep. Enjoys a smoke and a beer after dinner in the warm months. And flies don't bother neither of you none. Pretty good dog, that one is. You sure as hell had worse when you was growing up. Mac was a mean ol' bastard. Smarty was anything but.

You whistle again, wait, then poke your head back in the kitchen. Madge has the radio on. Willie and Ray croon away about seven Spanish angels and she's humming along with them. Wiping down the table, she stretches across it and swipes the mess toward her. She brushes her head against one of the fly strips and it sticks in her matted hair as she pulls away.

Goddamnit, she mumbles, and tugs the strip from her hair.

She is surefire sweaty. Her hair sticks to her face. A long sweat mark runs down the back of her shirt. Her faded jeans are deep blue with sweat. You think: She is glistening beautiful. Glistening beautiful even with the flies darting around her, you feel yourself rising in your jeans.

She don't see you and you quiet step back in the kitchen, come up close behind her, set your hands on her hips.

Kids are around back, you say, drawing your mouth close to her neck. We got us some time, you say as you get harder. You brush two flies from her shoulder.

She swats you with her dirty rag, swats at the flies buzzing around you and her. I got a bushel of beans to freeze, she says. I'll be up till midnight as it is. Go mow. Get, she says.

I ain't no fly you can just shoo off, Madge Trenton, you tease, knowing damn well she's right. She's got work to do and you do too.

You head for the door and Madge says, No sign of Freddy?

He ain't nowheres, you say.

Madge sets her hands on her hips. Sighs. You know, come to think of it, I haven't seen him since this morning when I was in the garden, she says.

He went down with me instead of lying around here. I should've made sure he came back with me, but I was hell-bent on getting back here with those beans. Didn't want them shriveling up in this heat, she says.

I'll set the kids out to look for him, you say.

No. No, don't do that, she says. I'm getting worried. He's never out all day. Except for that one time, remember? When he had that run in with that porcupine and was down in the gully filled with quills. You remember that?

You scratch the back of your neck at a fly that's just bit you. Damn these flies don't leave a man alone, you say. No. No, you're right. It ain't like him. I do remember that.

I don't want the kids traipsing down back for him this time of evening with those coyotes down there, she says. I saw one loping through today. God forbid he's got himself in some sort of trouble with that thing. I don't want the kids getting near him.

Aw, he wouldn't hurt them none, you say.

No. No, he wouldn't, but that isn't the point, she says. You go look for him, would you?

Madge. Madge, I don't want to go looking for the damned ol' dog, you say, reaching in your pocket for your smokes. I want to get that hay down, sun's setting quick and thunderstorms supposed to be rolling in the end of the week, to boot, you say.

He's your dog, she says.

So I've heard, you say.

You pull out the pack, forget it's empty. You crumple it up, toss it on the counter underneath the phone and reach in the junk drawer where you keep your tobacco supply.

Will you? Madge says, back at the sink, drying plates, setting them in the cupboard.

I'm out of smokes? you say, shuffling through the screwdrivers, loose playing cards, squirt guns, bubble gum, rolls of duct tape and whatever the hell else is in there. Two cans of dip appear and you lift one out, shake it to see if it's empty. It is. You drop it back in the drawer and grab the other, tap it and it sounds full enough to you.

You're heading down back anyway. Just look around for him, call him, she says. And I'll pick you up cigarettes tomorrow when I'm in town. She smiles. Okay? she says.

You pop the lid from the can and nod. When you've got a good-sized wad of dip tucked there against your gum, your bottom lip bulging out, you tuck the tobacco good and tight with your tongue. You shove the can in the back pocket of your jeans where it sits snug in the ring you got worn there from the hundred cans that set there before this one. I'm heading down now, be back before dark, you say.

Across the barnyard you go. The 4000 sits in the empty bunker silo with the New Holland hooked on behind it. No cab, no A.C., you climb on, look to see you got no kids around you.

You glance over to the open hay shed, see all four of them. They're moving bales around, building a hay fort, it appears to be.

Enough of that now, you yell over to them.

They freeze, look out at you.

You go help your mother, you say. Help her snap those beans she's putting up for winter.

In a minute, Everett yells. He's got his shirt off and wrapped around his head like he's traveling through a desert.

Annie's got her shirt off too. Crazy little one, she is. Anything Everett does, she's doing. Got her shirt hanging from her head like she's a nun off to the convent.

Like hell, Everett James, you say. I said now and I mean it, you say. Jenny, Lyndsey, Annie, you too.

Everett plops the bale of hay he's got in his hands and hangs his head.

Let's go help Mom, you hear him say to his sisters and they all climb from the stack, the girls following their older brother like duckling following their mama.

Good boy, Everett, you say. Good girls. You help your mother.

You watch till they get through the kitchen door, making sure they don't have a change of heart when you pull out for the field. They've been known to do that from time to time.

You lean across the steering wheel, spit. Rub your jaw. Where the hell you at, Freddy? you say and fire up the tractor.

Heading over the hill behind the barn, you look to the pasture. The cows have fanned out, some chomping grass, others standing in the creek. Every one of their tails a'swishing, trying to no avail to keep the flies from them.

The exhaust from the tractor keeps the flies from you. No flies on the tractor, generally speaking. Usually just the sun laying its scorch across your back. Even as it sets this evening, it kisses your bare shoulders with a fierce warmth.

The hayfield you're headed for sits on the other side of the garden. Beyond that sets the woods, the gully running through them. You suspect Freddy to be somewhere roaming through the woods. He ain't no hound, nothing but a mongrel, but he fancies himself a hunting dog when he gets it in his head. You've seen him sit at a woodchuck hole all afternoon before, ears pointed toward it, head cocked, like he's expecting the chuck to waltz out and stick itself in his jaws for him.

You take down a swath of the hay, beautiful alfalfa, green as green gets and prime for cutting, and shut down the tractor when you come to the

side of the field resting by the woods.

My dog, you say as you climb down. He's my dog all right, you say.

Freddy, come here, boy, you yell and whistle. You spit and scan the woods. Where the hell are you, Freddy? you say. What you got yourself into? You cut into the woods, pull your can of dip from your pocket and top off the wad you already got in your mouth.

You spit and yell, Freddy. Freddy. C'mere, boy.

The woods are quiet, just the sound of your boots against the soft ground. Cooler in here too. You stop. Yell, Freddy. Listen. Head towards the gully.

Freddy slops around in the gully now and then, tracking muddy paws across the kitchen floor after he's come back in from trekking through the woods. You'll head for the gully, walk up it towards the road and if you don't run into him, well, you got that hay to get cut before dark sets in. That alfalfa'll need at least the night and two days besides, if you're going to bale it before the rain and you'd like to bale it. Can't buy hay, come January. Ain't no money to buy hay in January. Ain't no money to buy hay, period.

That loan hit one-hundred grand two autumns ago. You work to pay the bank. Madge wakes up at night sometimes worrying about foreclosure. You wake up on occasion too worrying about foreclosure. You are mother-fuckin' tired of working for the bank. All of a sudden you're mother-fuckin' tired of working for the Federal Trust. Last fall when you went in to borrow money, you walked in Dave's office and he had his shoes off, legs stretched out, his stocking feet resting on the heater. He almost looked human for a second—almost—before he swiveled back around in his chair, tucked his feet back in his loafers and pulled up behind his desk. Crazy as it sounds, if he'd just kept his shoes off, you might not have felt so small groveling for that money. You might not mind so much heading back this fall to grovel for more.

The ground gets moist but that's about it for water in the gully in July. You stop. Listen. Call out, Freddy. Listen.

You press your tongue against the dip in your mouth, spit. You stand still.

Something ain't right, you say right out loud—surprise yourself when you do. You set your hands on hips. Now, how do you know that? you ask yourself right out loud again.

You shake your head, walk more, stop, yell, spit, listen, walk more.

You quicken your pace some. Then you stop, spit, throw your hands on your waist, pull air into your lungs.

You played in these woods when you was Annie's age, you was that little running wild in here by yourself, catching toads, building forts. You been hunting here since your daddy started you hunting when you was just about Everett's age. You been hunting here since. You know these woods, the sounds and the silence of these woods, and something tells you something

ain't right.

Freddy, you yell, spit, then pull that dip out of your mouth and toss it to the ground. Your strides get longer, quicker, as you follow the soppy ground north towards where the woods sit flush to Webber Road.

A hundred, maybe a hundred and fifty yards from the road, you lay eyes on track. You squat. Freddy's paw prints in the mud? Looks to be so. Other paw prints there too. A coyote, you suspect, maybe the very one Madge saw earlier today. Maybe a coy dog, though. Could be a coy dog. The ground where the two different tracks converge looks like the two animals have had themselves a skirmish. You look about. Sure as shit. Freddy ran himself into some trouble. Pine needles pushed this way and that. Twigs broken, lying about. A tuft of Freddy's fur clinging to a mossy rock.

Freddy, what kind of trouble you got yourself in, boy, you say and gaze up the west side of the gully. It's steep, layers of slate, but climbable. The tracks head that way.

At least you ain't headed for that road, Freddy, you say as you work your way up the bank, using all fours. Head for the shit pile field, Freddy? That what you did? you say.

Your boots are muddy now and you slip and slide your way up, grabbing on saplings dumb enough—or maybe ambitious enough—to grow in the rock. Good Christ, you say, scrambling toward the brush that sits between the woods and shit pile field. Slate busts underneath your boot and you feel the tear of the sole from the rotted leather. You look down and see your sock peeking out. You've had holes in your boots before and you'll have more holes after this one. Still, your face reddens because you know you ain't buying a new pair of boots anytime soon. Kids will need school clothes before you know it, and school clothes will come before new boots. 'Course the anger flushing your face ain't towards the kids none. You're just mad, mad as hell at everything, the whole goddamn world, right now.

Up you go, keeping your eyes on the tracks. At the top of the ridge, you pause, scan the brush, notice where they've gone through. Freddy, you yell and you wait.

You know he ain't going to come running.

You stomp through the ragweed, burdock tall as you are, ferns, sumac, then the brambles scratching the living hell out of your arms, chest, back. Above you, a rustle in the trees and the flap of heavy wings startle you. You flinch, then watch two turkey vultures move across the sky.

Aw, hell, Freddy, you say as you push yourself past the briars and land yourself at the back side of the shit pile. Flies swarm like small tornadoes across the pile, the shit alive with the hum of their buzzin'.

You flick a thorn from your arm. You've worked up a sweat, torn your boot. You pull air into your lungs, know what you're about to find ain't going to be good.

Eying the grass around the pile, you've lost the tracks, any sign of Freddy. You decide you'll circle the pile, head left and around to the front.

Tramping along the perimeter of the pile, from up here, you can look out across the pasture and up to the barn and the house. You take it in as you clomp through the tall grass. Almost peaceful, almost beautiful tonight, all of it is. The farm sprawls out there almost beautiful as you trek around the shit pile looking for Freddy.

The length of the barn roof bows like the back of an old horse. The house sits weather-beaten, the shingles loose and torn off visible from here. Still, Madge and the kids are in that beat-up house, sitting in that hot box of a kitchen snapping beans. Truth of it is, things seem to have some rough edges on the farm, but good's generally inside them, you figure. You picture Madge, the kids. Aw, hell, them flies are sure as shit eating them alive.

The thought of those flies seems to conjure one out of thin air. It lands on your shoulder, bites you good before you can even lift your hand to swat it. Even so, you smack your shoulder, wave your hands around your head. Little bastard, you say, land on me again. Land on me again, I want you to, you say.

You walk around the front of the pile and a thick mess of flies swarm above a hole in the grass. You hold up because you ain't ready. You ain't ready just yet. You slide your dip can from your back pocket and you pop the lid, your hands just a tad jittery. You ease a wad of dip in your mouth, press it in with your finger, tuck it with your tongue twice. You stand still. Then you seal the can back up and set it back in your pocket. You shift your boots in the grass, rest a hand on your hip. Spit, shake your head, spit again.

All right, Freddy, you say, let's see what you got yourself into, you say and head for the matted grass. As you draw closer, the buzz grows louder, the flies whirling around like water going down a drain, two, three feet above that patch of ground you're heading for.

You telling me my dog's dead, you little bastards? you say. My dog died right there, is that the way it is?

When you're just about to that small clearing in the grass, you see Freddy's there. You see the smooth brown fur of his head first. Another step closer, you see his whole body now, sprawled out, legs stretched out, as if he's napping at the foot of the couch, where he likes to lay, back up to the house.

The grass at the far end of his body moves, barely moves, and you figure something is there at the ass end of him, sniffing at him, nosing about. Three more steps, you turn your head and spit and drop to your knees at his head. His ear's torn. His belly swollen, a tear there, maybe four, five inches long running from his front leg to back, coagulated blood stuck to it. His dark eyes are glassy, his mouth open, saliva white and foamy rests on his rubbery black lips.

A single fly crawls across the dry mud caked on Freddy's nose.

You snatch at it, but it flies away. You watch it disappear in the grass.

Then you lie your hand on Freddy's chest, wait for your hand to rise. You wait. And you wait.

The flies above you swirl with the hum of a machine. Louder than the milk pump in the barn when its running. Louder than your 4000. Louder than your 4000 when its pulling the Haybine. The flies begin to land on your back. First two, then, three, then more. Your back and neck get covered quick with them. If they bothered you, you'd go crazy right about now. You'd scratch at them and bite at them with your mouth, snap your jaws at them, run wild in the field to get them off you, but you ain't never let the flies bother you.

At least they ain't those buzzards, you say to Freddy. They could be those buzzards down here on us.

You look to Freddy's ass end where the grass moves ever so gently.

Snake, mouse, you ain't sure what's back there. You squint, to see, as if it matters. Then you know.

Freddy's tail thumps, barely, against the ground, but it thumps. Your hand rises against his chest, barely, but it rises.

C'mon, boy. Let's get you home, you say and brush at the mass of flies on your back. Flies'll probably follow us all the way, you say and stroke Freddy's side, scoot around to get your arms under him. But they don't bother us none, you say, they don't bother you and me none, do they?



Aloe

Dave Petraglia (see page 1)

