
Typehouse
Literary Magazine
Volume 5, No. 3, Issue 15

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LITERARY MAGAZINE

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Typehouse Literary Magazine

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 We are always looking for well-crafted, previously unpublished writing and artwork that seek to capture an awareness of the human condition.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

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Cover*: **A State of Unrest** by **Jj D'Onofrio** (see page 120)*
If you live long enough you will see things with different eyes and you will see colors and shapes you didn't originally see and feel emotions you didn't know you could feel about those very colors and shapes. Then, I suppose, you are born once more, just a very little bit, as the days go by.

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Karyna Aslanova *is a multimedia artist and poet from Kyiv, Ukraine, currently living in Prague, Czech Republic. Her main medium is photography, and looks to make her body of work as incongruous as possible by giving equal weight to majestic and surreal art portraits full of glamour and striking imagery, and to cold and gloomy street photography consisting of scenes of loneliness and, at times, desperation.*

'Repetitive Stillness: Wine'

The photograph explores the idea of an inescapable stillness, both a motionlessness in the physical world, and a stagnant, trapped-in-amber feeling within. Blending into the inevitable mundane, becoming nothing, thus becoming everything.

Gene Twaronite *is a Tucson poet and the author of seven books, including two juvenile fantasy novels and two short story collections. His first poetry book "Trash Picker on Mars" was published by Aldrich Press (Kelsay Books imprint) in 2016 and was the winner of the New Mexico-Arizona Book Award for Arizona poetry. His second book of poetry "The Museum of Unwearable Shoes" has recently been published by Kelsay Books. Follow more of Gene's writing at his website: thetwaronitezone.com.*

Another Word For

Gene Twaronite

love, five letters down,
is amour,
an ephemeral tryst
or a lifetime affair.
Another word for
truth, four across,
is fact, often accused
of being false.
Another word for
no, five down
ending in “r”
is never, but one
means sometimes
and the other
not at all.
Another word for
human, six letters across,
is mortal, as in
belonging to the world
at least until your
subscription runs out.
Another word for
me, six letters down,
is myself,
just another way
of saying
alone.

The Headless Tin Soldier

Gene Twaronite

Revisiting Hans Christian Andersen

Is this what it means to be steadfast,
silently shouldering your tiny gun
with unshakable tinny hands
through the long dark tunnel
and the fish's cold stomach,
never showing fear or tears
or any sign to prove you're
not just a lump of lead?

Might as well be headless instead of
one-legged for all it matters.

You wouldn't even shout to save yourself—
too improper for a man in uniform.
Easier to blame it on the
little black goblin in the snuffbox.
Blame him as well for the little boy
who threw you into the fire.

What are you waiting for?
Tell your little dancer you love her
before it's too late, before that draft
blows her into the fire next to you
and you burn together in
that horrible heat where flame
meets feelings never expressed,
just so the maid could find you there—
a little tin heart
and your dancer's spangle
burned as black as coal.

If I were that boy,
I would have thrown
you into the fire myself.

Tara Potter *is currently pursuing her MFA in Fiction at the Vermont College of Fine Arts. She writes about the persistence of the queer female imagination within patriarchal structures. Tara lives with her daughter just outside of Boston.*

When the Body Draws the Lines

Tara Potter

My name is Tanya and I'm a new mother to a baby girl named Hope. I like to paint and I'm afraid of the dark, but Hope doesn't care about that. I've heard (not directly of course) that I'm not supposed to care about my own stuff like that anymore either. A few weeks ago, while rocking Hope in her room in the dark I avoided looking in the corners; I tried to ignore the tingles on my back that felt like a pair of sinister hands. Instead I only looked down at Hope and in that private moment thought I should have named her Despair. This is not a confession. I can't imagine I'm the only mother to think such things.

That reminds me, I think it's important that you know now, before I tell you about the change that recently took place, that I did not have postpartum depression. If I did then this would be a different story, but maybe the same story. You've probably heard it before.

No, what I had were strong impulses to create, but couldn't, because there was no rest for my body or mind. I didn't want to make more babies. One baby was enough for me. I hadn't even gotten my period back yet. But my urge to paint was stronger than ever. New motherhood is a cruel joke if you ask me. Women grow and birth a human being, the highest creative act for the body to perform, and then we can't use that brain high for much else because of the task at hand, I mean, baby's survival. And making sure Hope survived was not creative. It was tedious at best, entirely lonely at worst. The love hormones helped but love isn't everything. Or maybe I should say motherly love isn't everything.

I was afraid of the dark for what I knew deep inside must be there with me. I felt it. I've heard that the reason most people can't see ghosts is because their minds aren't willing, their minds aren't open enough to accept something that the world says is unnatural. That's why children see so many ghosts that they don't remember later. My only comfort my whole life, until now, was the fact that my brain wasn't willing or open enough to see a ghost.

I started painting after my husband and I first got married. The problem was I didn't like marriage; the unspoken rules about my place in the relationship were not made clear when I signed the license. I made a lot less

money than him, so the household chores naturally fell to me. Double punished. To cheer myself up I bought myself these kits from the craft supply store. Kind of a paint-by-number. Each time I finished one I hung it up in our apartment until I became good enough to be embarrassed by them.

Then the issue was that I needed more of a challenge to fight against my misery, so I went to painting events, where they served lots of wine. Sip. Paint. Sip. Sip. Paint. Sip. Sip. Sip. Somewhere mixed in with the wine I learned how to copy famous works of art, but mostly I learned that there are so many creative angry women like me looking for a beautiful drunken place to put all of it and then hang it up and stare at it a while. The wine tried to make us all forget. But when I became pregnant I didn't have the luxury of forgetting anymore. Also, as it turns out, I never really forgot in the first place.

Our money situation got in the way when I was pregnant. My husband said we couldn't afford professional photographs. We had to save for the baby. But my body was a part of the baby too, right? I thought it was obvious, but the larger I became the more I began to disappear to him, the world. And the more urgent it felt for me to show up at least for Hope. When I was alone in the apartment I got out a tube of red paint and brushed it lightly onto my belly and breasts so the paint wouldn't overwhelm the details of my figure. Then I lay an old, stained, flat sheet over me to capture my form. It took some planning to execute this. Before I brushed the paint on I had to do several dry runs with the sheet so it wouldn't smear when I was painted. I only had one chance to get it right, having only one sheet and tube of paint, and fearing I'd give up on the project if I messed it up. The pressure this put on me, the pressure I put on me, was finally the good kind. When I saw that the center of my belly left a white hole in the middle I wept for the loss of my mother who had died when I was a child, but I hadn't quite mourned for her in adulthood. I lay there naked scrubbing paint off my skin and staring at it for a long time and my skin turned raw and a bright, oxygenated shade of red.

Hope was born at our apartment. The midwife brought my placenta to me on a towel, placed it on my legs. Its weight gave me comfort while I stared, wordless because I had never seen one before. I saw the other day on the news that scientists have figured out how to grow organs from stem cells. But women have been doing it all along without funding or celebration. After the midwife inspected it and found no missing pieces she took a step back and admired it too and I ran my fingers along it. It felt like a cheap cut of raw meat, but still warm. I knew I already missed its help with feeding the baby and I could feel the space it left inside me even if I couldn't see it. But I didn't want to eat it like some other women do, even though if it was cooked correctly, I bet it would be delicious. And I couldn't bury it under a tree in our apartment complex, because there weren't any trees or grass. So, while the midwife held Hope, I pressed it to paper, ignoring all the pain I felt so soon after my tear had been repaired. The image it left was curved but snarled too,

like a picture of a large brain or a deep-water tree stashed there from another planet. When I looked at it, its complex grooves and pathways touched me in once unreachable pits of my body. Pits that may never have received that attentive blood before I had seen what my body could make, even in the darkest most hidden places. The pathways appeared to have been both carefully planned and left to chance, almost unnaturally. I had to wait months before I'd create art again. It was before the change.

The problem really started because I could breastfeed, and my husband couldn't. If scientists agree that breastfeeding is so beneficial then why didn't they get straight to work on how to make men's bodies do it too? I know the answer. It really wasn't an issue at first. In the beginning I had lactation consultants, women, helping me, pressing my breasts to my chest wall, teaching me how to get my milk out, shaping my nipples so the baby would be tempted and able to latch. My vagina had torn into two jagged puzzle pieces during the birth and so I was laid up in bed a few weeks. One woman visited me each day to do the dishes, cook me food, brush my hair, and take the baby away so I could rest. Despite the high value she held for me, she only charged a small fee. Her visits were necessary even if my husband had to work extra hours at the post office to pay for it. Our survival was dependent on it.

Hope's only passion is survival. Her language, her cries, are perfectly designed to inspire swift action from me. If only my language had that kind of power with my husband. But as you'll see, that's irrelevant now.

A few weeks ago, my husband and I were lying in bed after I'd put the baby down in her bassinet in the other room. I had wanted Hope to sleep in my room, in the bed with us but he wouldn't allow it. He said right after she was born that he needed to keep making money, so we could survive, and without sleep he wouldn't be able to do it. The exhaustion had started getting to me. I felt as if I was flickering and I was desperate for my state of desperation to be seen. "I wish you could breastfeed tonight. I wish you had to get up in the middle of the night, so you could see."

He cocked his head at me, "I wish I could too, but you've got what the baby wants. You are way better at it than I would be anyway. I have no patience and you're such a good mom." It sounded like the times he told me I was so much better than him at cooking, doing the dishes, making the bed, and buying the lottery tickets. He shrugged his shoulders at the unfortunate superiority of my body and yawned, a giant ugly sound, and fell asleep. In the middle of the night, when Hope's hunger echoed through the baby monitor I stared at him sleeping for a minute and thought about painting lipstick on his mouth and chewing on his nipples. I knew I'd have to strap him down first because he didn't possess the same trappings of biology and instinct that I did. I decided at that moment that I wasn't going to tell him that my vagina had healed, because I never wanted to have sex with him again. Hope still wailed

in her room, so instead of indulging any longer in illusions of fairness, I unhooked one side of my nursing bra top, letting my breast fall, while shuffling to Hope's room across the hall.

Alone in the dark with her, in the rocking chair, I sang that lullaby over and over, you know the one about the baby falling from the tree, cradle and all. I felt the other new mothers throughout history in the nursery with me, their anger turned to smirking fantasies of the wind taking it all away. I wouldn't ever hurt my baby, but if the wind did, it wouldn't be my fault. After I felt Hope's body fall limply into sleep, I stopped singing. Hope's eyes flashed open wide staring behind me at the window and then they shut as swiftly as they'd opened. And that's when I knew I wasn't alone in the room with her anymore.

The next night I woke up to Hope's cry, but as I made my way to her room, she stopped. I peeked in at her face, softened even more than usual. Almost gleeful, I traveled back to bed. I thought babies self-soothing at her age was a myth, but I suppose even myths come from some truth. As I pulled covers over me, proud of Hope, it occurred to me that the rocking chair had been rocking. Only slight, the amount it typically moved on its own after I stood up, which is why I hadn't thought to notice it in the moment. But I hadn't rocked. I jiggled my husband but he didn't stir. I darted across the hall and the chair was still.

When we couldn't afford to pay for the help anymore after the birth, my husband's mother came to stay with us and help. She took the baby away from me and into Hope's room. She fed her bottles of my pumped milk I was saving for time away. Time away was a fantasy I was holding onto at the time. I don't judge myself for this. Fantasies got me through some tough moments in my marriage. His mother texted me a picture of Hope's smile, her arms in the background of the picture, from the other room while I was stuck in bed. I lie about this to others, and will lie about it to Hope, but her first smile was at her, not me. And I needed a smile from her something fierce. She took Hope for her first stroll later that day because she said, "babies need fresh air." As if my state was taking away Hope's needs. "She loved the walk. It was her first time seeing all the colors."

"Showing Hope new colors for the first time was for me. That was my job," I told my husband when he got home.

"She's trying to help," he said as he handed me a plate of his mother's dinner and went back into the kitchen where the three of them ate together as a family.

It reminded me of that scary movie *The Hand That Rocks the Cradle*, about the nanny who tries to take over the family, the mother's role, while she's at work trying to earn a living. Except it was worse because aside from the fact that she attempted to seduce the husband and murder the mother, the nanny could have been a fine caregiver. But with my husband's mother I had

firsthand experience with the consequences of the mistakes she made with him, even if these days I don't entirely blame her. The nanny even pumps her own breastmilk to feed the baby, which I'm sure his mother would have tried if science was on her side or she had been given the time. I told her she needed to leave, and she said, "You need to secure your own oxygen mask before you secure your child's." I wasn't on a plane going down. I needed to be cared for so I could do the job I wanted to do. She stayed another week and I took extra ibuprofen and began walking around the apartment, smiling through the pain. I did the dishes and changed diapers and held Hope close to my breast even when she wasn't hungry. Hope didn't mind at all, and when his mother saw that she wasn't needed, she left. Which would have felt like a triumph if I hadn't torn apart again and reset my healing.

The baby monitor didn't wake me up the next night and I slept the whole night through. My husband had already left for work and I felt better than I had in weeks, maybe ever. Then I heard sweet coos from Hope. My breasts weren't even engorged, which I'd been told would happen if my baby slept too much. I went in and picked up Hope and went downstairs to get something to eat. I felt like cooking some eggs. When I opened the fridge there was my milk, creamy fat, stuck to the sides of bottles. I thought I must have gotten up to pump in the middle of the night but with no memory of it. I was so tired those days I didn't question the blackout. I knew better than to question a gift like that.

I started sleeping through the night for several nights in a row. My milk was always perfectly contained in the fridge waiting for me to freeze for when I would be away. I stared at my painting easel I'd found at a garage sale when I was supposed to be purchasing baby items. It had sat in the corner of the living room since I bought it. I brought it out, so it took up more space. I thought about all the things I might paint, it felt good that it was out there for me to think about. And Hope and I were getting everything we needed, so I loved her even more than I did when she was first born. She looked a lot like her father. Mothers were always so proud to say that as if they were proving fidelity. But I had been looking for me in her all that time. I could finally see that her eyes were the same shape as my eyes. And that smile, that smile was all mine.

The next night, I felt rested and awoke naturally. I decided to creep quietly into the hallway. I saw the chair rocking from the doorway and crept closer to the ground to peer in. A woman was rocking my baby. I was frozen with tingles of fear but I didn't react immediately because I couldn't quite place her, though I knew I somehow connected my joy with her. Something about her made me sure she wasn't an intruder. And I held a certain respect for her too because she wasn't in some lacy nightgown but she was braless in a ratty t-shirt and underwear. Her hair glistened with oil, like a mermaid, but grittier. When she lifted her t-shirt, and gave my Hope her breast that looked

like a livelier version of mine, I was only fascinated. After Hope drifted off to sleep, she stood up and tenderly placed he in the crib, her arms were strong, capable, like most mothers' arms. She turned around gently, but with intention, and I realized this is what it feels like to be open enough to see. She had known I was watching. I felt a gratitude inside that I hadn't felt since right after I gave birth and even then, I hadn't owned it like this. But I couldn't speak. She sat back down in the chair looking at me for a while. I felt seen and so I wanted more of her too. She gestured her hand for me to come to her. I didn't read about any of this in the baby books so I knew I would have to act out of original instinct.

When she called me over I was already so low to the ground that my instinct was to crawl toward her. She guided my body to sit in her lap, pulled me up surely, despite my adult, lap-sitting clumsiness, which made me feel accepted. Hope was in a deep sleep so there was no worry of waking her. I whispered, "rock me," and she did. She immediately began rocking me back and forth. After I was soothed some she took off my shirt and picked up a bowl and found her way around the front of me to my breast and pressed it into my chest wall, then slowly pulled it outward, milking me, expressing my milk expertly with her hands into the bowl. She then moved onto my other breast and did the same. I felt mothered like I had never been in my life. She kept rocking and placed her strong maternal fingers in between my legs, sliding them beneath my underwear. I kept saying, "rock me, rock me, rock me," and she continued but took control of the pace. I could feel there was no rush, I could stay for as long as I wanted to. I could savor every good moment until I said, "rock me" the last time. After, I cooed like Hope does when she's happy and cared for. I'm not afraid to compare myself to my baby in this moment.

The woman pulled her hand out of my underwear and held it up in front of me. There was blood on it. My period had come back. Without thinking, I dipped my fingers into the milk bowl and mixed it against the blood on her fingers and it turned the color of the pinkest inner human flesh. She painted a line across my left breast over my heart and I painted a line through it. I saw myself in the reflection of the window. The X across my chest looked solid, planned, but it dripped down my ribs in unexpected ways.

My husband was gone in two weeks. It wasn't very difficult to get rid of him either. As you probably already know, ghosts and women can do many things to frighten men away.

The woman and I make love most evenings. It is easiest for her to appear as the sun is setting. While I rest at night, she nourishes our baby, and in the light of day, I show Hope all kinds of new colors. When Hope naps, I make art that celebrates the place where motherhood and desire intersect. My body shows me the way.

Robert Fillman *is a Senior Teaching Fellow at Lehigh University in Bethlehem, PA, where he has edited the creative writing journal Amaranth and directed the Drown Writers Series. His chapbook November Weather Spell is forthcoming (Main Street Rag Publishing Company). In 2018, he was a finalist in the Cathy Smith Bowers Chapbook and Keystone Chapbook Contests, and his full-length manuscript House Bird was a finalist for the Gerald Cable Book Award. A Best of the Net nominee, his poems have appeared in Cider Press Review, The Hollins Critic, Poet Lore, Salamander, Tar River Poetry, and other journals. Currently, he lives in eastern Pennsylvania with his wife, Melissa, and their two children, Emma and Robbie.*

Every night after supper

Robert Fillman

while her dead step-father rots,
my wife scrapes her leftovers
into the trashcan, as if

they were her teenage years, bone
and gristle but good meat too,
full portions of vegetables.

Some days, sauce like a rust-red
blood blooms across each small hand-
painted flower of the white

porcelain, while each choked back
year slumps one by one into
the bag with her youthful looks.

Perhaps she knows that I stare
from the table as I clean
my plate, chewing to the click

of her knife, lowering eyes
only when she glances back.

Ann Hillesland's *work has been published in many literary journals, including Fourth Genre, Sou'wester, Bayou, The Laurel Review, Corium, and SmokeLong Quarterly. It has been selected for the Wigleaf Top 50 Very Short Fictions, nominated for a Pushcart Prize, and presented onstage by Stories On Stage. She is a graduate of the MFA program at Queen's University of Charlotte. Her website is at annhillesland.com.*

Meet Your Kid for Lunch

Ann Hillesland

As I wait for the light to change, the middle school's electric sign, usually scrolling basketball games and fundraisers, instead trumpets "Meet Your Kid for Lunch," as if the pixelated yellow letters rearranged themselves just for me. Instead of continuing straight, past the 7-11 and the Mexican market, I swerve right and pull into the middle school's U-shaped parking lot.

A woman with a clipboard guards the entrance to the campus courtyard. "Name?" she asks. When I give it, she checks me off. The list is pages long, with few checkmarks.

Inside the courtyard, kids clump around metal picnic tables that shine blindingly in the noontime sun, dazzling my eyes so the school seems to waver. Though the school looked small from the outside, the courtyard seems enormous. Scattered parents shift from foot to foot, hands in their pockets as they speak to their kids.

Teenagers glance sideways at me. Since I had just left morning yoga, I'm conscious of my black yoga pants and long green t-shirt. Isn't that the way moms dress now?

The popular kids have staked out the center tables, lounging backwards to display their acne-free faces and cool, retro t-shirts. The less-popular kids line the courtyard's edges, as if flung there by centrifugal force, their shoulders hunched, their hair hanging to shield their eyes. I scan those figures, sure that any kid of mine will be among them, wearing glasses from reading too many books, secreting away any individuality for later use. Most look bored, but a few stare openly at me, rawly hopeful. I search for my flyaway blond hair, my ex-husband Ron's hazel eyes.

The touch on my shoulder, the hesitant voice, surprises me. "Mom?"

My first shock: my kid is a boy. I always imagined if I had a kid, I'd have a girl. But the shocks continue: he's one of the popular kids, wearing a plaid surfer shirt open over a vintage Froot Loops tee. His dark brown hair, just like his father's, falls over his eyes in a casual but perfect sweep. His eyes are mine, a pale blue that in my mirror looks hesitant, unassertive, but on him

looks coolly reserved.

"It's Kyle," he says.

Kyle. After my former father-in-law, a quiet man who grew spectacular tomatoes and ever-hotter varieties of pepper. I stare at him, amazed at the warm tan of his skin, the long fingers marred by hangnails.

At my silence, he smiles enough so his braces catch the light. "Should we get some food?"

"Right." I say. "Meet your kid for lunch." My arms and legs have a light, cottony strangeness, as if they've altered since I walked into the courtyard. I step carefully, following him, fascinated by his shirt's wrinkled back, the way his hair brushes his collar, his casual, slouching gait. My flip-flops scrape the concrete, but my feet have gone numb. Everything is unreal and yet mundane, from the tinny sounds from other kids' earbuds to the gull swiping a French fry from the trashcan.

A school lunch smell wafts from the cafeteria, of cheap hamburgers fried in old oil, overcooked spinach, boiled hot dogs. Instead of going inside, Kyle approaches a sandwich take-out window. "Never eat the hot lunch," he says.

The box-lunch line is short; most kids are still waiting for their parents to show—or not. "Ham, turkey, or veggie?" a lady in a blue baker's apron asks. She's identical to the woman who checked me off the list at the gate; slightly plump, her dark hair stuffed into a ponytail at her nape. I listen for my son's answer, as if this preference will reveal his personality.

"Ham," he says, and I let my breath out, turning that over in my mind.

I order veggie. I went vegetarian after the divorce, wanting to change everything in my life. I cut my hair, bought a Prius, moved to a tiny Craftsman across town from my ex and his new wife, a fellow sales rep from his work who can play golf and tell a dirty joke with the best of the men. She wears a diamond tennis bracelet on her tanned wrist and drinks Laphroig.

During the divorce I thought we were lucky to have no kids, but my niggling wondering about what might have been has escalated since our split. Now I finally know what we'd missed. What I'd missed.

Kyle and I find an empty table dappled with the fluttering shade of a eucalyptus. The bench is warm through my thin leggings. Tucked into an open cardboard box, the sandwich, chips, apple and cookie show the tidiness real life lacks. With no appetite, I open the bag of chips to keep my hands busy. Kyle reaches for his cookie, then, with a glance at me, unwraps his sandwich instead. He takes a huge bite.

"Slow down," I say, an automatic mom reaction. Questions boil up inside me: What's your favorite subject? Do you play a sport? Is there a girl (or boy) you like? What do you want to be when you grow up? Where's your favorite place in the world? What are you afraid of? So many, I'm not sure which one to ask first. Finally, I say, "Tell me about a time you were really

happy."

He chews his bite of sandwich, and at first I'm afraid he won't answer. God knows, at his age I probably couldn't have answered such a question. I'm not even sure I could answer it now. Everything happy from my marriage—dining in an Austrian castle, paddle boating on a Bahamian lagoon, reading the Sunday paper next to our pool—bears the taint of its end, his lies that exploded like buried bombs when he finally told me about the affair.

But Kyle is assured in a way I never was. "Well. This one time, you were going to take me to see an Avengers movie. We got to the theater, and it was sold out. I could tell you felt really bad about it. You were doing that thing with your hands." He folds his hands together loosely and jerks them back and forth so that the interlocking fingers rub, my nervous gesture I thought no one knew me well enough to notice. "Anyway, you said we would go for tacos instead, but you didn't drive to Pancho's. You drove us all the way to the coast, to this fancy place where we could look out at the beach in the rain while we ate. And then we went for a walk, and you didn't warn me about getting sand in the car like Dad would have or get mad when my pant legs got wet. I picked up a little white shell and I carried it in my pocket for a while afterwards."

"Why wasn't your dad with us?"

He gives a practiced shrug. "He was away on one of his business trips, like usual."

I swallowed regret, sour and caustic as bile. I would have loved this kid so much. I had wanted a kid, but I had lobbied Ron to switch to a job with less travel before we tried for a baby. I hadn't realized that some of the trips weren't related to business, that even on the legitimate ones he traveled with his coworker (now his wife), and one of their hotel rooms stayed empty the whole trip. I'd bet on the future and lost it all.

Kyle reaches for his cookie. "Eat your apple first," I say.

He rolls his eyes. "Mom, I wear *braces*."

Trying to drive out my throat's rawness, I bite into my sandwich, a squishy handful soggy with tomato, avocado and cream cheese. I can't seem to swallow—I open the water bottle. As I'm washing the bite down, Kyle's face changes. A new light comes into his eyes. "Dad!" he shouts.

I swivel on the metal picnic table, and there is Ron, with his golfer's tan, his dark, shining hair. His pressed slacks and blue plaid shirt instantly outclass my yoga clothes. Of course, I thought. Ron would have been a cool kid. That's where Kyle gets it. And here's his dorky mom, a slob with no makeup and a mouthful of sandwich.

The two give a manly handshake, and I wonder how often they have seen each other. Maybe Ron's been visiting Kyle all along, regretting more than I gave him credit for. Seeing Ron, having all three of us at this hot metal table, detonates a shockwave through my body; the family that never was and

never will be.

"Nice to see you, Kate," Ron says with his salesman smile. He told me a joke once: How can you tell when a salesman is lying? When his lips move.

"How long have you been seeing Kyle?" My voice sounds accusing, and I can't help it.

"This is my first time here."

"Would you have told me if it wasn't?"

He sighs loudly. "What would you expect me to do, call you up? Like you would take my calls. Like you would believe me even if you did."

"I'm not the one who caused the divorce."

"Maybe you were."

Kyle watches the two of us, eyes narrowed to a wince. Whatever joy he'd felt at the family reunion has drained away.

And this is what would have been. An oft-absent father. Parents sniping. The inevitable divorce. It *was* inevitable, I see that now. Even a child would not have kept us together.

What was better? To miss having a child, or to have one and subject him to the disintegrating marriage? Not that I could change my choices.

"Why visit now?" I say at last. I know my reasons. Before today, I was too invested in the marriage, then too battered by the divorce for the school's sign to reveal itself. Only recently had I begun to dwell on might-have-beens.

Ron holds my eyes and speaks quietly. "Barbara's pregnant."

My chest opens up, as if he's punched a hole in it and exposed my heart like a fish flapping, stranded ashore. "You didn't come to meet Kyle," I say. "You came to meet your future child with her. You wanted to know whether to risk fatherhood."

Too late, I remember Kyle is listening. I look over and see I've punched a hole in his chest, too. We both are trying to collect and hide the exposed hopes that have spilled out of us.

Ron glares at me. "Nice work, Kate."

The three of us sit in silent pain. Kyle won't look up from the untouched apple in his lunch. Around us I notice how few parents showed up. Most of the students sit with each other, subdued or laughing too loud, as if putting on a show of indifference for their absent parents, the parents who never wondered.

I'm disappointed and relieved when the bell rings. Lunch is over. I let Ron leave first. Though Kyle ignored Ron's extended hand, I gather Kyle into my arms. "I'm sorry," I whisper. He's stiff and silent.

At the gate, I pause with the other parents, all of us wanting one last glimpse of our children. Kyle picks up his backpack and hoists it on one shoulder, bending under its weight. He gathers the remains of his lunch and

mine, and throws them into a trashcan, where a seagull rips the bread off my nearly untouched sandwich. I watch Kyle until he disappears into the shifting shadows of the eucalyptus across the courtyard.

For months afterwards, I drive by the middle school every day at noon, wearing earrings and makeup and carrying Belgian chocolate in my purse for him, but though the sign churns out messages about school dances and soccer tournaments, it never again says "Meet Your Kid for Lunch." At least, it never does for me.

Steve Owen's *a writer with an MFA from Notre Dame. He's almost done with his PhD in Literature and Creative Writing at the University of Utah. His work has been published or is forthcoming in Typehouse Literary Magazine, The Notre Dame Review, Otis Nebula, Quarterly West, Flatmancrooked's Slim Volume of Contemporary Poetics, The Bend, and many others. He's received four awards for his work and he's a recipient of the Sparks Fellowship. His dissertation project, The Killing Thing: A Cursed Memoir, deploys disparate genres, breaking down the distinction between realist representation and fabulism with an estranging expressionist, parabolic aesthetic.*

Incident #3: Visitor Kills Me

Steve Owen

There's a knock at our door. There's no knock at all. No one ever knocks during summer. The circle swells from my mouth. My jaw aches.

I repeat the memoirist's mantra: I remember, I understand, I'm a ball gag.

The visitor comes in. He doesn't come in.

My mother stuffs a circle in my mouth. It distends like summer time at the beach. Flattens like tuna. Ouch, my jaw aches. Her summers were like that: an aching jaw. Her parents, when my mother was a girl, cut her body into small specks, sold them during the Depression. They lived on the beach with a train stop nearby with men on board – strangers, hobos, stowaways – who visited their two-room shack with wads of paper in their hands and pockets fell onto her and splinters on a thin wood-plank floor.

There's a ball gag in my mouth. There's no ball gag.

Whenever she tells me the story (again and again during the summer), cuts open on my arms. Words spray out. I'm nine, ten, eleven. Our summers like this.

The cigarette in her fingers always burning to ash. The smoke's always there. An orgy of circles, a thread, a knot in our rooms. When I wake, breathe us in. She's always making sandwiches. Cut into small cubes. In the summertime, she always makes them like this:

On the kitchen counter wall, an unused rotary phone. My legs splayed on a stool. The colors of the 1970s cover everything. Half-smoked limbs curl in the ashtray. She lights them, leaves them to burn on the counter between us. Her fingers twist a circle, the round blade cutting a second in the lid. The lid slumps. Spray lurches out. Splintering over the edge. Drops hit the cutting board. Specks of pink twist, judder on their surface, get swallowed.

My mother cuts the sandwich into small cubes. She sets a plate and

folded napkin in front of me. In my stomach, a noise, an emptying sound, a gas bubble. She aims the circle at my mouth. Pushing it past my teeth, tightening the strap at the back of my head, turning the soap on. It's noon, it's one, it's two. The TV echoes through our empty house: my father and brother at work. My mother shouts and makes jokes when the actors or characters kiss, the pillows around them swollen, splintering sheets. A bead aches from my mouth, a sigh, a drool. Her jokes punch the air. My eyes stare at the cubes. The actor or character on TV reminds my mother of her ex-husband. She opens her purse, removing the old polaroids. In the first picture, he's lying on his back, legs splayed. Her thumb flips through pictures, comparing him with her current husband, the size of two men, and I begin moving in the frame with them, flipping through the scene on thin sheets where I see a close up of a size that almost splits her in half. What makes one husband good and another bad.

The air sprays and clangs as she tells the joke about my father. The room is a mixing bowl, the walls its glass. Small specks in the air, a juddering, a white froth. The ex-husband lies down in my mouth, splays his legs. My jaw aches. She finishes telling the joke. She tells it again. When I'm older, she'll share it with my nieces.

In the summertime. I repeat the memoirist's mantra.

Knocking on the front door. There's no one knocking there. A visitor knocks.

My mother gets up and lets him in. Bits of paper and wood sit on his long hair and beard, on his old, sandy clothing. He sways, side to side, lurching. I'm too young to know he was probably on something. He tells us he's there for my brother. We've never seen him before. My mother tells him her son won't be home for hours: come inside and wait.

We stand there in the living room, listening to the soap. He removes something from his jacket. I have a knife, he says, and shows it to us. He makes a face like he's waiting for us to react, but my mother only nods and compliments it, "It's nice," and then offers to make him a sandwich. He seems surprised and nods back to her and follows her into the kitchen. I think I should call for help, but I'm afraid he'll hurt her if I don't come along, so I follow, too. The knife seemed so big, I looked it up later in a Sears catalogue. "A breaking knife breaks down large pieces of meat into smaller cuts. Their blades are usually around 10 inches and are curved to create leverage to break through tough skin, cartilage, and small bones."

Next to the rotary phone in the kitchen, he sits on our stool. My mother mixes a second bowl of tuna although the one she made for lunch is already in the fridge. I believe she's hiding her fear, and I'm impressed. My mother turns, spoons more mayonnaise into the bowl. Specks of pink. A white froth growing. Her summers were like this. I decide to hide my fear, too. I ask him to come see something in the family room. If I lead him away, I think, my

mother will be safe. She can call someone, maybe my father, on the phone.

In our family room, past old records and a drum set, past our pool table, past bird cages and her screaming parrot, an upturned litter box, and what looked like sand, I open the closet. Fish hooks, in a tangle, too many to count, hang there from our water heater. I offer them to him and he tries to pull one free. He cuts his finger, lets out a sound, a kind of cry or moan. He pushes the finger in his mouth, sucking, sucking, making sounds.

We stand there for a while, waiting for the noise to bring my mother. The visitor begins to grow sad; I can see oceans in his eyes. Afraid, I try to reassure him: she's probably called someone. The police, my father. She'll be here for us any second.

He takes his knife out and points it to the pool table. I follow him there and we get into various poses on it for my mother, expecting her to see us through the kitchen door: he places the knife to my throat and pretends to run the blade across it. He presses the tip to my eyeball, threatening to insert it into my retina.

A half hour later, the visitor grows more agitated. He climbs on top of me, breathes wet wood into my mouth. He drags me to the kitchen doorway so we can look for my mother.

Across the kitchen, in the living room, we see her. He places the blade tip to my belly. He stabs me again and again, and I can feel my intestines break, everything inside splashing out.

My mother shouts at the TV and makes a joke. She takes up a cube. She puts it in her mouth.

My jaw begins to ache.

Matthew Smart *lives in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, where he works as an information technology analyst. His poetry has appeared in Five2One Magazine, Queen Mob's Tea House, Riggwelter, Unbroken Journal, Bird's Thumb, and elsewhere. He serves as Prose Poetry Editor at Pithead Chapel.*

Date Night at the Old Greek Carnival

Matthew Smart

We're hanging out in the llama tent with the clowns smoking cheap weed
while out on the floor a dozen hungry mutts dance in tutus and
Eros is throwing knives at the woman tied to the spinning wheel.
She was maybe beautiful once, but the blindfold does her no favors.
The God was out drinking with the little people since before noon
and although he's twice their size he isn't as tolerant as he once was.

The joint makes its way around, caked in white stage makeup.
There's always at least twice as many clowns as you'd expect.
The scream from far away sounds like an echo from even further away.
We look at each other, into each clown's dumb and happy and teardrop eyes.
Nobody moves - circus folk are alike in that way. We'll all run away
eventually but we prefer to do it alone, under cover of darkness.

Eros calls the corpse his loving sister, but that doesn't narrow it down.
There's dog shit everywhere - the monkey running the ballet can't be found.
If there were people in the stands there might be some mild pandemonium.
Instead we stand around and look at the kaleidoscope crime scene spray.
For some reason the wheel's still spinning - nobody can find the right switch.
She's cold, and I'm hungry. The roasted peanut guy quit an hour ago.

Somewhere some dead body's mother just shivered in her lonely sleep.
We're content to climb the bigtop walkways where the hot lights hang.
We explore all the places we're usually forbidden to go. We fuck
up above the false everything, the three rings, the souvenir stands.
Condensation drips from the canvas tent and makes the catwalks slick.
As we climax together, I catch Eros watching from far below, frowning.

Brian Randall *is a poet and writer living in Santa Cruz, California. His work has been published or is forthcoming in Rust+Moth, Gone Lawn, and Roanoke Review. Find more of his work online at www.brianrandallwriter.com.*

Salt-Child

Brian Randall

They say I came out of my mother wrong, sideways like. And I was wrong, too, legs fused together at the ankle and something extra attached at the belly that had to be snipped away, though they wouldn't say what. Webbed frog fingers and little patches of scales on my skin. I think I saw the world as if I were underwater, until they cut the film from my eyes.

My mother used to bathe in the sea at night. She wasn't afraid of the tiger sharks or the bull sharks or anything else that made its passage down there in the dark below. She'd let the saltwater float her in the long stretch of moon across the sea's many backs. Onshore, the ghost crabs danced pale circles around her in the sand. Her daddy would always catch her sneaking back into the house before dawn and whip her calves raw with a blackberry switch, thinking she'd been out with some boy.

Daddy whips me, too, when he catches me in the barn drinking straight from Bertha's teat. And when he finds me wearing the headdress I made from Spanish moss and the dead gull that I found washed up with the driftwood. And again when I come into the house carrying the diamondback that runs smooth through my hands, all the while keeping a silent tail. That time he was even more furious than the others, and he threw salt into the fresh welts while the blood was still running down my legs. It crackled like fire ants, and he left me there to yowl and roll in the dirt.

There's a little clapboard chapel on the island, painted white beneath the rambling limbs of live oaks. Daddy takes me there at night to pray when nobody will see us. He makes me kneel on the rough floorboards until the feeling in my legs is lost. *Pray*, he says. *You better be praying. Pray that God takes pity on a salt-child like you*. He paces back and forth wringing his hands, his feet drumming drumming drumming on the boards, and when he hears a screech owl outside he grabs his own hair and pulls, grinding his eyes shut.

I'm having changes. Daddy doesn't know yet, but I feel something liquid taking shape inside me, turning and turning. I had my first blood under the last moon, and it smelled like the sea, like the inside of a shell.

They say when I came out of my mother, I brought a blood tide with

me. All of her emptied out behind me, big globs of rust-colored stuff and little chips of bone, all riding a wash of blood. It ran slick over the edge of the table and onto the doctors' shoes. They tried to stop it all from coming out but it was too late, she was purged, so they passed me off to Daddy.

Daddy catches sight of my changes while I'm bathing in the trough out back. He comes stomping over and grabs me by the hair before I can slide away. He twists my face into the dirt, saying, *Abomination Abomination*, while whipping me over and over. When he leaves me my legs are all tangled up beneath me and I have to crawl through the grit to get back to the house.

I lay on my pallet all the rest of the day, feeling the throb pass through me with every beat of my heart. I wait until after dark and then climb out the window, landing among the broken pieces of moon that litter the ground beneath the oak branches. My legs hurt, but they do good enough to carry me down to where the sand meets the water. The turtles are hatching, and I watch them burrow their way out of the sand and slide on their bellies down to the lapping waves. There are lots and lots of them, all with their eyes set on the star-scattered sea, and I follow them into the water. The turtles bob on the surface for a while and then sink beneath the waves. I watch their little bodies glide down down down into the deep dark. I watch my legs dangle in the night-water. I sense things moving beneath me, drifting slow as thunder clouds. Big things. Things so big they could swallow the island. And I feel something giant shift inside me, too. I sink down, until the last feather of moon disappears and there is nothing but black water pressing against me. I can feel big things all around me, feel them moving the water out of their way. I feel my mother down here. And my father. The water bends. Something passes. There was a time when everything swam, when everything sank.

When I go back to the house I know I am something more than Daddy. I know he fears my changes. I walk straight to his doorway and wait there until his sleep grows so fitful that his own thrashing wakes him. He sits up in his bed, squints his eyes at me, gathers his blanket up around himself. His chiding breaks apart into whimpers at my coming.

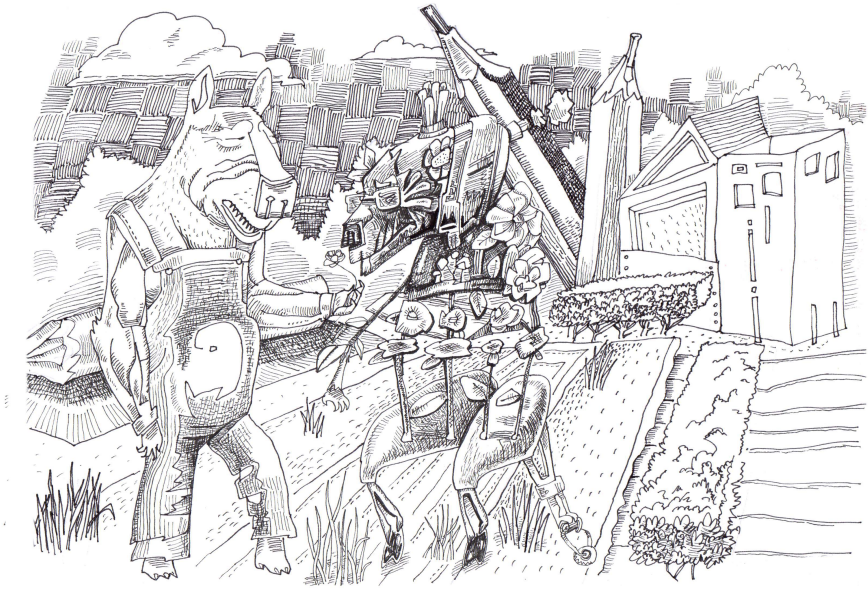
They say when they found Daddy he'd had a stroke. He was laying on the floor with only his eyes moving, rolling around in their sockets like they were trapped and needed out. His body had gone all wooden, his fingers crooked like hawk talons and his teeth clamped shut with his tongue caught in the middle, so that his beard was nothing but blood. They had to lift him up and carry him out like a piece of furniture. But by then I had already gone back to the sea.

There will be a time when everything swims, when everything sinks.

Fabio Lastrucci *born in Naples (Italy) in 1962. Sculptor and illustrator, he has worked for the main national television networks, as well as lyrical and prose theatre. In the late '80 he begin to draw comic-books (La guerra di Martìn, Esodare incerto), and published comics with the magazines Ronin, Sherazade and Perihelionsf.com. As writer he has published humorous novels, a fantasy saga, and some essays. His last work is a tribute to Stephen King "La pelle del re" (Delos Digital 2018).*

The Others

A group of people give us an idea of community, in the dark shadows of a cemetery. Dead or alive, normal or monstrous, these creatures live planning their choices like us, they hope like us, they wait for something like us, but a veil of misunderstanding divides them from who dwells in the daytime, our world. It's just a word which remarks a distance, the others.



The Garden

The pen creates strange movements on paper, following the whimsical impulses of his brain full of ink. The designer then looks at the drawing with surprise, while the lines construct the meeting between a gardener and the soul of the garden in the form of his "Genius loci." In this land, combed by meticulous signs, do not grow plants, but only thoughts.

Men and Dogs # 1

Saul Steinberg said that "cats don't think to be cats, they think to be people." Every other pet has the same opinion about themselves and their relationship with the rest of the world. Here, an old dog with hat and glasses brings out his master to take a walk in the street. Smoke is a common weakness for these two living mirrors, although the chain dangling from the man's hand would be the measure of their roles. But surely nobody could tell who of them is the leader.

Men and Dogs #2

A free and surrealistic representation about the same theme, here the borders between species, styles and symbols are not clearly defined. The cubist dog is not less plausible then the female dog in boots. The drawing harmony laws keep together the sense of the picture, without give answers to our curiosity. What are they all watching so carefully? It will remain a mystery, like the man's visage hidden out of the frame.

Cagnara

In Italy it is common to call "cagnara" the confused and noisy barking of dogs, considering it an unfounded and stupid noise. The sound of a fight is called the same way. Why then can't dogs feel like protagonists of a talk-show, where you have to raise your voice to hide the emptiness of the arguments? My humanized beasts are no more absurd than a television debate. Perhaps they are just more honest.

Jacob M. Appel *is a physician living in New York City. More at: www.jacobmappel.com.*

Table for Two

Jacob M. Appel

Our restaurant has folded.
So many years of meze and dolma,
Cozy poufs and hassocks, Hasan—
Our Hasan—bedizened for a sultan
In his embroidered Ottoman vest.
And the tasseled harem curtains,
And the gaping baroque mirrors;
Dried larkspur, gilded teacups,
Infinite reflections of candles.

All gone. Like cops or prowlers
We peer through the plate glass,
Resisting the naked wainscoting,
Angry sockets of chandeliers.

We retreat: hands clasped, souls frozen.
What is a marriage starved of its baklava
And three-dollar raki? What is grief
But lips not kissed over feasts unfed?

One door closes, they say, another opens.
Until the night there is no other door.

Meredith Bailey *is a freelance writer from Seattle, Washington. Her fiction has previously appeared in a variety of journals such as Em Dash Literary Magazine, Shark Reef, the Autumn Sound Review, the Magnolia Review, and the anthology Secret Histories: Stories of Courage, Risk, and Revelation. When she is not writing, she enjoys helping others craft their stories.*

Egg Bound

Meredith Bailey

Her name was Francine—not Grandma, not Nana—and we had endured a two-hour car ride with a broken air conditioner and a disgruntled Rhode Island Red Hen to visit her for her sixty-fifth birthday. Francine's canary-yellow craftsman stood on top of a small hill in Cooper Creek, an old coal-mining town in the foothills of the Cascade Mountains. As our wood-paneled station wagon crunched up the gravel drive, Francine stood outside her workshop. Flyaways the color of iron haloed a disheveled bun, and despite the August heat, she wore a long-sleeved denim shirt, her favorite pair of battered jeans, and black leather boots. She waved. I was the only one who waved back.

When Mother parked, I flung open the car door and fell into Francine's embrace. Her skin smelled like sparklers, her breath like citrus.

"So how's my Lillian?" she said.

I looked down at my new teal jelly sandals and stammered a hybrid of "fine" and "good."

Francine exposed a shyness that I felt around no one else. She was the ditch of whirling water you weren't sure you could leap across, the four-inch atomic fireball you were a little terrified to pop into your mouth. At ten years old, I didn't understand it yet, but behind her plain, heart-shaped face, her barely five-foot-frame, was the confidence and certainty of a man, in the unguarded way she shared her opinions, in the heedless way she moved, relishing the space she took up in the world. A desire to be like her was alloyed with the uncertainty of how to be around her.

Francine draped an arm across my shoulders. "Where's your sister?"

"At camp," I said.

"That's a shame. I barely see you all as it is." She squatted to wave at my two-year-old brother Oliver who wrapped himself in Mother's skirt.

"Believe it or not, I-90 stretches *both* ways across the mountains," Mother said. Once she'd untwined Oliver, she unloaded the kennel. It emitted a jittery *cluck*.

"You know I don't drive that far anymore," Francine said.

Mother muttered something I couldn't hear as she heaved a suitcase out of the back of the station wagon. Then she told Francine how sorry my father was he couldn't make it; he was busy teaching a summer session.

"Too bad." Francine's shrug said *just as well*.

As far as I ever knew, Francine had nothing against my father. She was cordial to him in my presence. Her attitude had more to do with her disappointment that Mother had gotten married at all. There were two pieces of advice that Francine doled out to my sister and me: 1.) You can't judge a weld by the way it looks. 2.) You're better off single.

Francine pointed at the kennel. "Who's in there?"

"Miss Pearl, stuck egg." Mother chewed the corner of her lip. "I couldn't leave her."

Francine nodded, as if it was exactly as she had suspected. "Put her in the tub, run some warm water. Epsom salts under the sink. It'll come out."

#

Miss Pearl looked wretched. The skin around her rust-colored eyes sagged. A pallor had washed over her crimson comb, and she couldn't even muster the moxie to protest being plunked in the water—nothing like the dust baths she preferred. Mother's hand rested on her back. She cooed to her, whispered reassurances, but Miss Pearl didn't believe a word of it. Thirty minutes later Mother dried her off and set her down in Francine's fenced backyard. Miss Pearl attempted to ruffle her damp feathers. She waddled around the wilting purple blooms of a butterfly bush, squatting and mumbling to herself in a series of anxious-sounding clucks.

"I don't know what else to do for her . . . " Mother said.

"Give the woman a little privacy," Francine said. "Trust me, it'll come out."

But Mother did not trust Francine. While Mother took Oliver to the grocery store to gather the makings for Francine's birthday dinner, I was instructed to stay behind and keep an eye on Miss Pearl. What exactly I was supposed to look for or what I was supposed to do if I saw what I didn't know I was looking for was unclear. But I didn't mind—alone time with Francine was special. I used to think she was different when my mother wasn't around, but really it was me who was different. When she was gone, I didn't have to feel guilty for liking her, for wanting her to like me.

Francine beckoned me to follow her into her workshop. I never told her this but it seemed to me like there were two Francines, mismatched in personality. There was slovenly Francine who lived in the house; her king-sized bed was never made, the countertops were usually sticky and dusted with debris from the peanut butter toast she ate. The antique oak dining table, dull and nicked, was littered with coffee-stained detective novels, black hair ties entwined with strands of gray, old copies of the *Kittitas County Tribune*, Johnny Cash cassettes, crumpled-up salt-and-vinegar potato chip bags, empty

cans of Fanta, and bits of scavenged "treasure"—skeleton keys, flat-head nails, bronze doorknobs, copper tubing, and rusted vintage forks.

#

Then there was fastidious Francine who dwelled in the detached garage—an orderly well-lit workshop where every tool had a home in a drawer or a hook on the wall, her worktable was clean and smooth, and pieces of metal sculpture in various stages of completion were lined up like patient customers on one side of the room. Some were abstract, a maze of steel rods or interlocking bronze loops. Others were figures made of wire or cast iron, even railroad ties, many lacking discernible heads or the correct number of limbs. It was a place that like Francine herself both awed and daunted me.

I joined her at the metal worktable where she was staring at a sculpture in progress. It looked like a woman waist deep in a pool of water. Individual strands of hair made of copper dangled down her back and stretched into the air behind her.

"Is she gathering water or drowning?" Francine asked. She crossed her arms as she eyed the piece. I did the same.

I'd seen a drowning person once—a kid at the YMCA. She didn't make a lot of noise but she splashed and bobbed up and down until the lifeguard jumped in. This woman looked nothing like that. Her profile was peaceful, maybe a little sad. She didn't have arms but I could imagine them resting at her sides—not flailing in the air.

"She looks too calm to be drowning," I said.

"Sometimes that's what drowning looks like."

I nibbled a hangnail. Did that mean that you could be drowning and not know it? That you could sink straight to the bottom until you were too far down to be rescued?

"So . . . " Francine turned to me. "Your mom been writing?"

I wasn't sure what to say—to talk about my mother with Francine was to betray her. So I stalled, running my fingers over an anvil, strung with hammers of all shapes and sizes. I could feel Francine's gaze following my roving fingers; she cleared her throat when I got to her two welding machines, on wheeled carts next to one another in a corner opposite her worktable. It was an unnecessary warning; I knew no one touched Mo and Larry except for Francine. Down here she trusted no one but herself.

"A little . . . sometimes," I said.

Francine frowned. "You and your sister are good girls, aren't you? You help out, right?"

I nodded, swiveling the vise at the end of her worktable.

"You have to help her. 'Cause she won't ask for it. I suppose I'm partly to blame…" Francine sucked her teeth. Her lungs pushed out a gust of a sigh.

Mother didn't often let me into her world, but when she did it was to

reminisce about parts of her childhood. Her first memory was her father teaching her how to milk a cow by hand at the age of four. She remembered his voice, baritone and soothing as he patted Nellie's tan coat, the soft, tight skin of Nellie's udder, and the sound of the milk splashing into the metal bucket. The only one of her siblings to show any genuine interest in their farm, she became *his* child from that moment on. He taught her how to drive the tractor, how to check the cows for mastitis, how to clean their udders with iodine before hooking them up to the milking equipment. She learned when to irrigate the fields and how to get a good price for a combine at auction. She helped him plant the potatoes every spring and harvest the corn every fall. In the house she was the youngest of four, a nuisance, but out on the farm she was her father's "right-hand gal."

While she had a soft spot for the Jersey cows, it wasn't until her father surprised her with her very own flock of hens, Rhode Island Reds and Plymouth Rocks, black-and-white just like zebras, that her heart swelled with love. She said it was the best present she'd ever gotten. She named each one, sang to them, collected their eggs, fed them, and cleaned out their coop. Then one spring morning, her father was reaching for the jam when his face blanched and he collapsed at the kitchen table; his heart had given out. My mother often said that was the day her childhood ended. But it turned out that was also the day Francine's life began.

What I never knew, and never felt brave enough to ask, was whether Francine had a sudden realization that she wasn't living the life she wanted as she waited for the paramedics to arrive to tell her what she already knew—that her husband was dead—or whether the slow drip of unhappiness she'd felt for years accumulated in a deluge the days following his funeral, when it fell solely to *her* to manage their nine-hundred acre farm.

Regardless of how it happened, about four months after he died, Francine decided to sell. She was going to purchase the little yellow house with the trellis and birdbath out front over in Cooper Creek that she'd always admired. And while she made no formal proclamation about being done with the cooking, the cleaning, and the washing, it became apparent to her two remaining children living at home, one of which was my thirteen-year-old mother, that if they wanted to eat food that was not out of can, wear clean clothes, and not live in filth, then it was up to them to figure it out. Francine was done caretaking—for potatoes, cows, men, and children.

Instead, she turned her attention to art, something she had dabbled in throughout her life, in the precious little free time a farmer's wife and mother of four could finagle. She painted in watercolor, sketched in charcoal, but all that ceased the first time she took a metalworking class at the community college two towns over. She said once that she was not a woman who prayed, but welding two pieces of steel together was as close as she could get to speaking directly to God.

Francine picked up the push broom and began sweeping. She turned her back on me, shook her head, and grumbled to her feet. While she could be harsh, she was not mean-spirited, so I do not believe she intended for me to hear. Perhaps she forgot she wasn't alone or she spoke more loudly than she intended. Either way her words scorched me: "I don't know why in the world she had a third one."

Francine went on sweeping and grumbling, but I ceased to listen. The air in the workshop had turned stagnant, oppressive. I longed to flick on the industrial fan but I could not form the words to ask. Instead I concentrated on the swish of her broom against the concrete floor. *A third one*. My brother as a number, my siblings and I an accumulation of digits that equaled an undesirable sum. Had Francine also said, "I don't know why she had a second…or a first.?"

Heat prickled my chest. A droplet of sweat slid down my temple. "I'm an artist."

Francine leaned the broom up against the wall and put her hands on her hips; her lips curled into a smile. "Is that so?"

"Yeah . . . I write."

This was a lie. I had not written a word, what I had was something to write *in*—a diary my mother had given me. It was cotton-candy pink with the words "My Diary" printed in a looping purple script across the cover; its blank pages were bound by a lock in the shape of a heart. It was hideous. Yet Mother had looked so pleased when she'd given it to me, like she was finally fulfilling a long-awaited request. When I had asked what I was supposed to write in the thing, she'd said, "Your thoughts, feelings, what happens to you. Life—that kind of stuff. "She'd brushed my cheek with her lips. "Think of it as raw material for your future self, my little artist."

"What do you write?" Francine asked.

I could not tell if she was asking because she was interested or because she knew I was a liar. Nonsense sluiced from my mouth. "Oh . . . just raw . . . stuff. Stuff that happens. In a diary, mom gave me. A pink one . . . "

Francine nodded, and for a moment her face lost its liveliness. She disappeared into herself and pursued the subject no further. I had failed to prove my worth. The pieces in her workshop, even the woman who was drowning and did not know it, mocked me with their purity, their purpose. I was the slag, best chipped away.

#

When Mother returned from the grocery store, she began preparing Francine's favorite meal: buttermilk fried chicken, mashed potatoes, and roasted corn on the cob. I was instructed to clean off the kitchen table—which consisted of dumping everything on the living room couch—and to keep the "third one," blissfully unaware his grandmother thought he should not exist, entertained. As Mother peeled potatoes and shucked corn, she inquired about

Francine's art projects and the hardware store where she worked part-time. She asked after people she'd gone to high school with and others from her youth. One of my mother's old friends had just had her fourth child—to which Francine clicked her tongue—while another had recently graduated from dental school. "Goes to show it's never too late to change your path," Francine said. Mother retrieved a drumstick from the buttermilk marinade and slapped it in the frying pan; the oil sizzled.

We sat down to eat, all of us quietly gorging ourselves, except for Mother who picked at the pile of corn she'd cut from the cob. She was stewing, but about what? Miss Pearl, or was there more to it? Did *she* ever wonder why she had us? Francine caught my eye and winked. I couldn't wink back.

I shifted my gaze to the motley collection of art adorning Francine's walls, most of it covered in a fine layer of dust. Some of her own metalwork —a set of oversized steel poppies, a crane forged from an old shovel— mingled with framed prints, from abstracts to figurative paintings. There was one family photo amid this burst of color: a picture of Francine and my mother the day she graduated from college—the only one of Francine's four kids to do so. In the photo, Francine beamed, her hand girding Mother's waist. Mother wore the bleak look of a kid who had opened a brightly wrapped birthday gift only to discover inside was a toy she already possessed.

"My . . . that was delicious. Best meal I've had in I don't know how long," Francine said. She wiped her mouth with her napkin and scooted her chair back from the table.

"It's just cooking. Nothing complicated about it," Mother said.

Francine stretched and clasped her hands across her abdomen, propped one leg up on her opposite knee. "So…what have you done lately?"

Mother knew what she was asking—I could tell by the sudden way she gave up eating her corn, rose from the table, and carried her still full plate to the sink, but she pretended to misunderstand. "Well . . . the girls have had swim lessons, and we've been working outside a lot lately. The wire on the chicken coop needed replacing. Plus, we've been trying to potty train Oliver . . . "

Francine's neutral expression did not change. She nodded along, as if she was interested in these kinds of inane domestic details, until Mother finally ran out of fodder. Then quietly Francine said, "I was asking about your work. Your writing."

"Oh . . . I've been so busy. It's been hard to find the time."

This claim was not true. Even if we were busy, Mother would not hesitate to stop what she was doing to steal away with her notebook. I didn't understand then why she would hide this from Francine. It was only later when I would seek to do the same to my own mother that I saw it for what it was—a form of punishment.

Francine sipped her iced tea and then pointed at me. “Did you know one of your mother’s poems won a state-wide contest in high school? That she had one published when she was in college?”

I put down my fork, heaped with mashed potatoes. “Where was it published? Can I see it?”

“Oh, just in the school journal,” Mother said, scrubbing a pot in the sink so hard her bicep bulged. “I used to have a copy but—”

“I have one.” Francine rose with determination, went into the living room, and re-emerged with a slim magazine. On the cover was a dilapidated red barn, the paint peeled off in long strips. Next to it was a tree stump with blue wildflowers growing out of it. Under the stump the featured writers were listed, among them my mother.

I had never read any of her poems. Writing was a mood that would overtake her, a malady. It was a private act to be done behind locked doors in cramped spaces like bathrooms or bedroom closets. I felt cheated. She would not share what she wrote with me, yet here her words were on display for the whole world to see. Best I could tell this poem was about dirt and a man who loved the feel of it in his hands. But by the end, the man was gone and in his place a pile of bloodied feathers and gnawed, broken bones.

“She had such promise...” Francine said. There was resentment in her voice, as if my mother had taken her promise and dumped it in the trash with the rest of our dinner scraps. “When she was your age, Lillian, she had a diary too. A little pink one I gave her. Remember, Helen?”

Mother took the dirty plates off the table, even snatching my unfinished meal, and stacked them on the countertop above the dishwasher with a *clatter*. “Vaguely . . . it got lost when you sold the farm.”

“No,” said Francine. “You burned it up in the fireplace. I remember because it was the day the Darby kids came for the chickens.”

Mother stopped her flurry of movement to stare out the window above the sink, her back to us. Her gloved fingers gripped the counter. When she spoke her voice was raw, wobbly. “I told you *I* would take care of them.”

“And I’m sure you would have. Right up until you started high school, going out with boys and your friends all the time. Working on the school newspaper. Working at the A & W. Then who would have been stuck taking care of your hens? Me, that’s who,” Francine said.

“They weren’t yours to give away.”

Francine snorted. “You think I *had* anything left to give away—four kids, a farm that was hemorrhaging money, and your father—a man who cared more about cows than anything else?”

“He cared for *me*.” Mother turned then, dripping soap suds all over the floor. “I’m sorry that bothered you so much.”

Francine’s face burned scarlet.

“The whole flock died you know, not a month after you dumped them

on the Darbys. They built a shit coop and a coyote dug in, tore them to pieces."

Had Francine known about the fate of Mother's flock? I could not tell; her face went rigid, giving away nothing. I often wonder what would have happened if she'd simply said, "I'm sorry" to my mother, if it would have made a difference, but she didn't. Or couldn't. Instead, she stood and looked at Oliver with tender disapproval. "I've always wanted more for you, Helen, but I can't make you take it."

Then she stomped out of the kitchen. We all jumped when we heard the door slam shut.

#

I retreated outside into the unrelenting heat, taking Oliver with me. He toddled around the parched, brittle grass chasing a grasshopper while I sat on the porch. I'd like to say that I felt sorrow for my mother's losses, that I suddenly saw her in a different light, understood her better, but I worried only about myself—whether their argument would spell the end to our visits to Cooper Creek, whether Francine thought *I* had any of the promise she assumed my mother had so carelessly discarded, and in a tight achy space deep in my chest that I could barely acknowledge I wondered whether I had robbed my mother of "more."

My head down on my arms, I didn't see Oliver wander over. "Sissy—look," he said. He held a large brown egg with a hairline crack down the middle, a red feather plastered to it. Miss Pearl had finally released her burden. I took Oliver's hand and we walked inside to bear this gift to Mother.

She sat alone at the kitchen table, her feet propped up on one of the chairs. All remnants of our meal, and the squabble, had been expunged—the clean pots and pans were stacked precariously on the drying rack; crumbs had been swept away; the dishwasher hummed and swished, scouring our plates; the yellow cleaning gloves were draped over the faucet and the magazine containing my mother's poem was nowhere in sight.

I tapped her on the shoulder. "Miss Pearl laid her egg."

She got up out of her chair and squatted in front of us, took the egg in her hand. She ran her finger over the crack, picked off the feather. "Does she seem all right?"

"Think so. She's scratching in the mulch."

"Well, we'd best put her in her kennel for the night." She sounded wary, disappointed even that Miss Pearl could be so foolhardy as to lay her egg in a place like this.

Then we heard the door open; Francine had emerged from her lair, her sense of chipper self-possession returned. She squatted down next to Mother, her eyebrows cocked and shouting *I told you so* when she saw the egg cradled in Mother's hands, but all she said was "Well…I'll be."

Mother looked up at Oliver and me but spoke to Francine. "I guess

you were right after all," she said.

The next day Francine did not protest when Mother proffered an excuse about cutting our visit short. On my way to the car, I saw what Mother had done. Miss Pearl's egg was resting in a saucer on the table, its bright yolk seeping slowly from the crack.

Soren James *is a writer and visual artist who recreates himself on a daily basis from the materials at his disposal, continuing to do so in an upbeat manner until one day he will sumptuously throw his drained materials aside and resume stillness without asking why. More of his work can be seen here: https://sorenjames.wordpress.com.*

Outboard

Soren James

Had I invested just fifty pence worth of love,
in your love
we'd have fifty times fifty things
to say right now.

Instead I put a thousand pound on the 3.30 at Newmarket, and now I've nothing –
not even credit enough to ring you.

So my life goes, down-
stream in leaky canoes. I'd
offer you a ride – but
there's no steering
these things.

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OFF

Nooks Krannie

FADE IN:

CUT TO:

EXT: SHADOWS ON WALL – EARLY MORNING

LONG SHOT – LOOKING IN WINDOW OF BEDROOM

Ayesha is caressing her adductors with her fingers, carefully digging sharp satellites of twin indexes in the flesh. Her body is naked and warm on the charpai.

CUT TO:

INT: BEDROOM – EARLY MORNING

MEDIUM SHOT – SIDE-ON TO AYESHA ON CHARPAI

Her eyes are staring at the ceiling, and the small crust of her liquid falls from the corner of her left eye onto the quilt that covers her stomach. The quilt is smooth, with bubbles of soft embrace, deeping in yellows and old urine marks. Every once in a while, she seems to breathe, running her right hand slowly through her rough braids, searching for context. Her fingers roll and grasp stale blemishes of pale coconut meat from her scalp.

CUT TO:

MEDIUM SHOT – WOODEN LEGS OF CHARPAI AND CARPET FLOORING

Ayesha puts her feet down, and sunrays make halos on the surface of browns, purples of pulp existing in planetary unison at the bottom of her big and medium toes.

AYESHA (V/O)

The sickness hides in my skin. My blood runs in a field, and I chase after it with a fork and two bottles of skim milk.

Ayesha walks slowly towards the ajar bedroom door, and the quilt falls off her naked body, hanging to the floor.

CUT TO:

MEDIUM SHOT – OUT THROUGH DOOR OVER AYESHA'S SHOULDER

A younger Ayesha is standing still, staring. She is wrapped in a muslin shawl, untidy and loose. We watch her as she wages a silent dialogue without breathing, her eyes are glass, motionless, reflecting dust trapped in the light, it's streaming, deriving pleasure without a need for a body.

CUT TO:

CLOSE SHOT – OLDER AYESHA'S FACE

Her head is straight, the valleys of her skin in scissors, cut the feet of common doves and finch, humming from her mouth echo on the walls. Her eyelids stretch over her nape, hiding the gulp in her throat.

CUT TO:

INT: BEDROOM – EARLY MORNING

LONG SHOT – AYESHA ON CHARPAI

She sits in the middle, holding her knees and rocking from side to side. Her eyelids are hovering, unconstrained like edible curtains, straws of grass and nails swimming on every curve. She tilts her head restlessly in the direction of the door, now open wide. She gets up and straightens the folds of her hips and makes her way towards the door. We hear low hums with every footstep.

CUT TO:

INT: BEDROOM – EARLY MORNING

MEDIUM SHOT – OVER AYESHA'S SHOULDER

We see young Ayesha standing in the same place, her muslin shawl now tighter around her throat. She seems to open her mouth to an 'O' and we see the crispness of her lips squinting like brittle raspberries that have been hand cut before their age.

CUT TO:

CLOSE SHOT – AYESHA

Staring back at herself, Ayesha opens her mouth without a sound. The humming gradually becomes louder until it's almost a genderless screaming. Ayesha looks down at her hands and sees meat, ground and pink, ballooning under her fingernails. She looks back at the younger Ayesha, and the screaming continues 'til everything stops except for dust.

CUT TO:

INT: BEDROOM – MID MORNING

LONG SHOT – OLDER AYESHA ON CHARPAI

She sits on the charpai, her knees fallen to either side. The folds of her stomach almost cover her pubic hair. She caresses her right nipple, and her breathing calms as the itch leaves her areola in pink of youngness. She stares at the ceiling and her pupils flail, sprouting spider legs before dissolving behind the retina.

AYESHA (V/O)

I eat myself off the ground. The blood of my body and my youngness, blooms, without dying, without the dirt of gravity inside its every hole.

FADE OUT.

THE END

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Beachcomber

Dane Hamann

You hope for shipwrecks,
and feed empty bottles to the sea

because what shatters under surf
beaches as an ember-red gumdrop,

edgeless and incandescent. Pinches
of color harvested from outgoing tides.

You root around brick-flopped
hotspots for relics of seaside industry,

and choreograph darts of expedition
angled to the sweep of shipping lanes.

You despair plastic and styrofoam,
but celebrate the rare blister of color.

It takes seconds, you demonstrate, to stoop
and dig a hand into the sand, but decades

pass as tumbling waves shape each
salt-frosted glass bead. You say good

hunts owe debts to garbage dumps
and stray cargo containers. That loss

and misfortune can be pummeled
into beauty. But as sea glass vanishes

like the fading field of stars
in a pair of rubbed eyes, you claim

that beachcomber is cousin to custodian,
slowly scouring shorelines wild again.

Dan Kennedy *is a writer in Virginia Tech's MFA program, where he won the 2017 Emily Morrison Prize in fiction. He grew up in Pennsylvania and graduated from Boston University with a BA in English. His stories have appeared in BULL and Ghost Parachute.*

Colossus

Daniel Kennedy

The jumps were ours. Built them just outside the old neighborhood, over a clearing on this wooded hill. From there, we could see our roofs, the glyphs of our fortune rendered in broken shingles. It was perfect—close yet hidden. Sort of how we were with each other.

Each year, we undid the long Pennsylvania winter, using spades to sculpt our works anew. The hill's exposure to sky made it a natural kiln. Jumps ossified beneath the sun. We used tires and stolen plywood for foundations. The lip was most important. The closer a lip curved toward ninety degrees, the higher you went.

Riding, in part, was about risk, how far you were willing to go. The chase could be addictive. Poor decisions were like currency—had to pay to feel that dope in your veins. Like when Bruce, my older brother, brought his bike to homecoming. Busted all kinds of flatland jazz, right there on the gym floor. Doc Parnell, the vice principal, finally noticed and set chase. Looked like one of those dudes on the Warhead candy wrappers, head just about exploding. What'd Bruce do? Rode backwards, taunted him, hopped a 180 at the door, which someone had propped open, and disappeared into the night. Suspension: worth it.

Wasn't shit going on in our neighborhood. Folks partied at the ballfields. Made bonfires so tall you thought the stars might melt. Passed around pills, blunts, and plastic bottles of vodka. When fools could no longer stand, they drove home. Doorsteps sagged beneath late mortgage payments, and employees whom banks assigned home visits were sometimes chased off by men in their underwear or women clutching rifles they'd bought at Wal Mart.

Whenever I looked at my feet, I'd imagine pointed reeds cording my heels to the Earth. I feared being stuck in place more than anything. That's why I loved catching big air. It felt euphoric. A chance to transcend everything that made me the person I was and to just soar. I'd close my eyes, wishing I could fade into the summer sky, but I never could. I always landed.

#

There was this neighborhood girl, Shanna. She lived with her

grandmother. Enjoyed watching us ride. Even rode a bit herself. Had black hair, gray eyes, and a perfect ass, like a Vegas ring girl's. She knew it, too: you could tell by the way she walked, and the way she leaned forward on her bike so her thong would show. Braces looked good on her. She changed the colors all the time, weird combinations like violet and black. A fat scar twisted over her wrist, where a drunken doctor had stitched it back shut. Teenage parents had given her up at birth. Most people—including Bruce—didn't know that.

#

Four of us sat on our bike frames beneath a slash of smiling moon. Shanna and I would be freshmen in a week. Bruce and our friend, Andrew, would enter their senior year. We passed around a bottle of Olde English.

"Wasted, Jesse?" Bruce took a swig. "Want more?"

"No," I said.

He handed me the bottle.

I took a sip, passed it back.

Bruce drank and wiped his lips. "Shit's nasty," he muttered. His hair, dyed blue, hung across his eyes. His t-shirt read, *Can you smell my teen spirit?* He had a studded belt and a lip ring, which my father routinely threatened to rip out. Thing about Bruce, anything he did looked smooth.

"Anyone have tree?" Shanna asked.

We shook our heads.

Andrew held his 40 ounce to the moon. "Gonna drink 'til I puke."

"That's fun if you're in middle school," Shanna said.

"Oh," Andrew laughed. "Got a cool kid here."

"I agree with Shanna."

Andrew laughed again. "Go do some homework, Jesse."

He'd moved from the Bronx, expelled from his old school for fighting. Some of my classmates whispered about how hardcore he was, and how weird it was for him and Bruce to be friends. They denied this perception had to do with Andrew being black. To me, Andrew was like a second older brother.

"Whatever," I said. "One of you should've brought weed."

Their true hardcore natures emerged mid-air, in the forms of maniacal tricks: 360s, supermans, tailwhips and barspins. Earlier that summer, they'd lit a blaze in one of the jump's gaps, and—after disappearing behind a tall curtain of smoke—descended through the flames like fallen angels. Shanna had been impressed.

She rose from her bike, picked it up, and wheeled it toward the trails.

"Where you going?" Bruce asked.

Shanna glanced over shoulder. Smiled. "Don't you worry about it."

I squeezed my upturned pedal, released it. The Primo logo was embossed on my palm.

Our setup consisted of ten interspersed doubles—ten jumps that had landings. One towered above the rest, its lip psychotically close to ninety degrees, as if curling backward in a snarl, laying bare some great creature's teeth. We'd named it Colossus, after the *X-Men* character, and had spent weeks carefully sculpting it. It rose against the milky dark, a wave frozen at the height of its crest.

Andrew poked my knee. "Talk to her."

"We talk. We're friends."

"She likes older guys," Bruce said.

"How do you know?" I asked.

"Just do. Why you care? You're only friends."

"I don't believe you."

"And?"

Shanna skidded to a stop, tossing dirt at our laps. She'd heard us. "What do I like?"

"Daredevil shit," said Bruce with a wink. He stood and grabbed his bike. Andrew followed. Both rode *Terrible One*s. The pair vanished up the hill.

"Here they come," Shanna said, moments after they'd disappeared.

Bikes hissed over barely visible ground. I wanted to say something smart, or funny, but I couldn't think of anything. Through quick looks I stole in Shanna's direction, I saw how she stared ahead, waiting for someone else.

One at a time, Bruce and Andrew appeared on the sullen sky, quiet silhouettes, like thieves stealing chunks of cloud. They landed, faded from view, and looped back around to Shanna and me.

"Ever done Colossus at night?" she asked. "Yeah. Old news." Andrew grabbed a bottle and drank. "For Bruce and me."

"You and Jesse've never done Colossus," Bruce said. "I did," I lied. "You guys weren't here."

"Then do it again. You're not drunk." Bruce turned to the others. "Said he couldn't drink too much. Has summer reading to do."

Shanna raised her eyebrows. "For what class?"

"Advanced something or other. Normal people don't take it." Bruce toed a faint smiley face in the dirt.

I glared at my brother. I could've been more like him, danger, or maybe stupidity, his cure for unhappiness. Just wouldn't have looked as cool on me.

"Nobody gives a shit, Bruce," I said.

"What book?" Shanna asked. "*The Great Gatsby*. Cliché."

Bruce flipped his bangs from his eyes and laughed.

He and Andrew argued about who'd gone higher, asked Shanna what she thought. She said she didn't know; they'd both gone so high. I stood and wheeled my bike up the hill.

"Jesse," Bruce yelled. "What're you doing?"

I ignored him. My heart raced. I hit three consecutive doubles and landed smoothly, careening the berm and circling back to the start of the rhythm section. I still wasn't ready.

Bruce pedaled up to me. "I'm just kidding, man. It's cool."

"It's not cool."

"You know, you acting like a little bitch. Over some cooz."

I looked past him. "You gonna move or not?"

He shook his head and stepped aside. I tried to feel myself in the Haro's alloyed steel, the chain grease, the chromed out Alex Triple Walls. Back then, our bikes were extensions of ourselves, metal bodies comprised of organic tissue. Fear and love, failure and pride: all of it flowed like oxygen through the frames.

I breathed. Pedaled once. Let go.

Colossus flung me from its lip with indifference. Higher than ever before. Arc shattered. Tangle of limbs and steel. Gravity doing its thing. Something exploded. As though the ground tried to pass through my body and out of my mouth.

I couldn't see at first. One time, as kids, Bruce and I went bodysurfing at Long Beach Island, the only family vacation of our youth. I wasn't paying attention when a massive wave broke and sent me tumbling through the surf. Bruce pulled me onto the shore as I vomited saltwater. He pulled me from that momentary gap in time, that gap between jump and landing. Hands under my arms, Bruce pulled until he saw that the bike was attached to my body.

"Get your dad!" Bruce shrieked.

"Please, somebody do something." *Shanna's voice*.

I didn't know how long I was down; time had sort of dissolved. Crickets and frogs jumped through approaching headlights. Andrew's father arrived in his F150, which he'd edged along our crude wooded path to get to me. I wailed as Bruce and Andrew worked the handlebar from my side. My parents weren't home, thank God. I was lifted into the cab. Bruce kept saying sorry. Andrew held me. I could see blood dripping off his brown knuckles.

"It's okay," he whispered. "It's all good, baby."

#

Five days and a surgery later, I was home in bed. Sixty-three stitches, four missing teeth, and a vacancy where my spleen had been. Ate Vicodin like Tic Tacs, hovered near the edge of dreams. People stood over my bed. Flickering shadows. One voice said sorry, and a second, deeper voice said you should be, because maybe you'll kill yourself, lord knows I've tried to stop you, but he does good at school, college might be in his future, but not if you make him a cripple, to which the first said, sure, like you could afford it, and the second voice—grown louder—laughed out the next words: what do you

plan to do, ride a child's bike at the Z games, X Games, the first corrected, who gives a fuck, the second gawked, it's not happening; that right there, your brother torn to shreds? That's the real world.

I knew of Bruce's mounting desperation. He wanted to go pro. I'd heard his bedside confessions when he thought me asleep. The crash had also changed me. Startled gasps at night, sweat-drenched sheets. Awareness that being cool, like Bruce, was not in the cards, a fact with which I had no choice but to make tenuous peace.

"What I do know," continued my father, "is you aren't going near those goddamn dirt mounds again. I'm taking them down."

"I'll fucking kill you if you try."

I opened my eyes.

"Bruce!" my mother yelled. She appeared in the doorway, wearing jeans and an Aerosmith t-shirt, bowl of salad in one hand and cigarette in the other. Her fingers looked like red straws from so many shifts at the diner. "Talking to your father that way, I ought to smack your face."

Bruce shoved past them. The front door slammed. Through the window, I saw him riding away, dust from our unpaved driveway stirred in his wake.

#

Despite how he blamed Bruce for our love of riding, seen by him as a rejection of the teachings he'd imbued in us, my father did not make good on his threat. Colossus and the other jumps stood at summer's end. My father, who six days a week wore a gray mechanic's shirt, his name embroidered in script on the pocket, regarded the world as a dichotomy, same as he viewed his job at Rick's. A thing was fixed or broken, practical or not. Life really was that simple, according to his philosophical framework. His world worked—not well, but it wasn't broken, not yet, long as he let those jumps alone. I knew he sensed that destroying them would be more than tearing down some piles of dirt.

#

Late one night, two weeks into recovery, I heard something outside my open window. Shadows passed over my Offspring poster. I looked out at the backyard, where the woods haunted its border. A willow marked the end of our plot. Its pale leaves caught bits of moonlight, its branches swaying like a woman's hair in the breeze. Someone was crouched behind them.

I tried to straighten but was halted by a sharp pain in my side. I winced, waited for the echoes to subside. When my vision returned, Shanna stood a few feet from the window.

"Hey," she whispered. "Can I come in?"

"What are you doing here?"

"Sorry. Should I go?"

"No, stay. I mean, if you want."

She climbed in and sat down at the foot of the bed. “How you feeling?”

“Okay.” I flicked my tongue against the gaps in my mouth. “Dad’s upset about bills.”

“I bet.”

She smelled like lavender and cigarettes. I focused on her scent. It signified that she was really there. She’d never done this, never would again. At the time, however, her crossing into my room felt permanent.

“Just visiting?”

“Nah.” She leaned forward as she reached into her back pocket. She produced a battered copy of *The Great Gatsby*.

“Where’d you get that?”

“From the school library. It’s missing, like, three or four pages, but I got the point. I thought it was stupid.”

“Really?”

“A guy who does all that for a girl who doesn’t even want him is a sucker.” She took a deep breath. “Did you try Colossus to impress me? I’d feel terrible if that’s true.”

I didn’t know what to say. Of course I’d wanted to impress her.

“I had to show up Bruce. Don’t worry.”

“Are you sure, Jesse?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, that’s stupid. Bruce loves you more than anything. He’s told me.”

“When?”

Her eyes scanned my room.

“Sorry to make things awkward. Would it be okay if I stayed for a little?”

“Um. Sure.” I slid over to make space. I imagined we were the only people awake in the world, two flames of the same candle, fending off the surrounding dark. She lay next to me, facing away at first. Eventually she inched closer and fit her body to mine. She turned, kissed me, and put her head on my chest. An avalanche of insecurities buried my thoughts: will I get hard, do I smell, do I make a move, can I recall the spot Bruce described that makes girls go crazy? I quietly breathed her in, as much of her as I could fit into my lungs.

I waited up for hours after she’d fallen asleep. I didn’t want the night to end, but I passed out before sunrise. When I opened my eyes, Shanna was gone. So was my Vicodin.

#

I returned to school mid-October. People had already formed groups. I passed Shanna in the halls on occasion. She usually waved, but sometimes, when she was with an older guy, she didn’t.

Around Thanksgiving, she started walking the halls with Bruce. But of course Bruce wasn't the only one. Football players—seniors with thick beards and varsity jackets—liked placing their hands on the small of her back, where the stripe of skin between shirt and jeans showed. I told Bruce about it after he'd spent all of Christmas break with her. He refused to listen. He said he felt bad taking the girl I liked, but he couldn't help feeling the way he did. I offered vivid accounts of Shanna flirting with other guys. The one thing I withheld was the night she'd slept in my bed.

The school year wound to a close. Despite our arguments, Bruce and I got along okay. No matter what was happening in our lives, we had the trails, and we had riding, our point of equilibrium. When we were doing the thing we loved, we weren't Bruce and Jesse; names weren't simple enough. It was like a process of distillation. We became two brothers and their friends, messing with kids' bikes in the woods.

On the last day of school, the guidance counselor told me I'd be in AP classes as a sophomore. Bruce and Andrew graduated later that week. The day before the ceremony, Bruce announced that he'd been accepted to the Universal Technical Institute—the motorcycle mechanics program. He planned for fall enrollment. My parents tried to be proud. It hurt watching them try. I knew that they expected him to get a job before going to school, because of my medical bills. Rick's Automotive didn't service motorcycles.

Graduation was held in the football stadium. Shanna, who was still hanging with Bruce, came with us to the ceremony. She laughed and joked with my mom as if they were old friends, or future relatives. In his red cap and gown, Bruce glided over the track. He searched for a moment and found us. Can't say he waved, but my brother did smile.

#

A month later, Bruce sat with my parents at the table.

"School has to wait until spring." My father's face was lost in his hands as he said it. "Can you call them and straighten it out?"

"Why?" Bruce asked.

"Money's tight, hon." My mom patted Bruce's hand, which he slowly withdrew.

"Not all bad news, though. Got some work for you at Rick's."Bruce nodded, rose, and went to his room.

But he didn't defer admission. A fall tuition bill arrived the same day I received a brochure from the Yale Young Scholars program. I intercepted the bill before anyone got home.

I pedaled toward the trails, envelope in my back pocket. Andrew approached from the opposite direction. We stopped in the middle of the road.

"Where you going?" I asked.

"Home. You?"

"Trails. What's wrong?"

"Wouldn't go back there I was you."

"Why?"

Andrew looked up at the sky, which had grown dark. "He won't say it, but I think Bruce is mad at me for going to Penn State this fall. He's just been so damn mad, but in a quiet kinda way. Makes it worse."

"He say anything weird to you lately?"

"Nah. Don't worry. He'll be fine. Just don't go back there right now." He patted me on the shoulder—"Be good, Jess"—and rode off.

Storm clouds assembled into lopsided towers. Raindrops began to pelt the road.

I smelled rain on the trees as I rode along the trail. I tried to think what I'd say to Bruce. Instead I thought of Shanna, how a week ago, I'd found her crying on our front steps, and how she thanked me for being a friend she could always turn to. She'd said that she planned to go to nursing school and get the hell out of this place without once looking back.

Colossus rose up in the distance. I came to the clearing. Bruce's shirt was off, his jeans around one leg. Bare ass thrusting. Boney shoulder blades shifting like seismic plates. The other, beneath him in the dirt, on her hands and knees. Shanna.

"Fuck, Jesse," Bruce yelled. I wasn't sure how long I'd been standing there. Shanna separated herself and flipped onto her back. She still wore her bra. She crossed her tan, muscular legs and looked away.

On the ride home, I could hardly see, too young, or too wicked, to think past my hurt, to think of colleges and opportunities and how I'd soar into the future. Of course they'd hooked up before. The concrete image of them fucking, however, ricocheted through my brain like a bird on fire.

I arrived home. Threw open the door. My parents were sitting at the table. Bruce's bill was in my hand. After showing it to my father, he cursed Bruce's name. He crushed the paper in his strong fist and repeatedly slammed the table, scattering cups and dishes everywhere, until my mother screamed. That was it, he said. That was it.

#

I didn't sleep. Bruce hadn't come home. In the morning, I called Andrew for backup.

I flicked my tongue against the gaps in my mouth as I rode. Blades of light sliced through the morning woods. Heat waves rippled across a flat, altered landscape. All of the jumps, save for Colossus, lay in ruins. The buzzing cicadas elevated Bruce's shrieks toward the sky. Bruce swung a shovel at my father, who stood a few paces back, knees bent, hands outstretched.

I heard the rattling of bike chains. Andrew and Shanna skidded to a stop next to me.

"Bruce, what the fuck?" Andrew yelled.

"You fucking coward!" Bruce cried.

"Bruce, please. This is crazy."

He stopped, like someone had pressed pause on him, and turned to me. "I guess I should listen to you, huh? That's right. The smart one. Why wouldn't I take your advice?"

I was so angry that I almost told him about the night with Shanna. Almost. But I didn't. There was space enough in me for his hate and his love. I didn't hate him. I wanted to be him.

"What, nothing to say?"

I shrugged. "Why don't we just go home? Come on. We can rebuild."

"Nothing's getting rebuilt." My father snatched the shovel from Bruce. "Let's go."

"No." Bruce walked over to his bike and picked it up by the handlebar. "Watch me. Just this once."

When Colossus was first being built, Bruce hardly let anyone touch it. He worked slowly, often dropping the shovel and sculpting the lip with his bare hands. He used the toes of his DC shoes to pack the landing. Whenever we arrived at the trails, he ran over to check his work. He'd ride back home and get water if the dirt looked dehydrated. Colossus was indeed his masterpiece, Bruce's resistance to our indolent world. My father could never understand that.

"Do the thing so we can leave," my father said.

Bruce crashed on his first run. The old man laughed. He turned and walked away, shoulders slumped in disappointment.

Bruce wiped blood from his elbows and remounted his bike. He spit in the dirt as he watched my father leave. Each of the next five runs, Bruce went steadily higher, throwing down huge tricks. He did a Superman-seat-grab, extending further than the pros we watched on TV. There was a kind of poetry to it, the way my brother flowed.

"Chill, Bruce," Andrew called.

Bruce didn't seem to hear him. He was transforming, molding himself into a symbol of our possibilities, fifteen, twenty feet in the air. His denial of gravity made us believe, if only for a minute, in majestic futures.

Bruce stopped to catch his breath. A droplet of sweat fell from his nose. He ran a hand through his blue hair. He turned to us and offered a single, solemn nod.

#

One Christmas Eve, between my third and fourth semesters of graduate school, I drove home from Boston to visit my parents. I stopped at the gas station we routinely used growing up. The person behind the counter had her hair done up in a lopsided ponytail. The navy Xtra Mart polo hung loosely on her shoulders. Her gaze remained distant as she rang me up, but our eyes met when I handed her my card. It'd been years since we'd seen each

other. I wanted to apologize for not saving him. I wanted to tell her how beautiful she looked.

Neither of us exchanged a word, and I left.

#

Bruce had talked about it before, but he'd yet to attempt a backflip. I guess he figured the time was finally right. Just one more run. One more and we could go home.

His bike hisses, then silence. Colossus—vessel of escape, icon of ruin—shrinks below him. As he inverts himself, his wheels, like a scythe, seem to slice open the silence, to cut a hole in the fabric of a torpid world. For an instant, his long body eclipses the sun. His tongue sticks out, his neck strains. I trace his path, so high up, floating up and disappearing through the door he's made. He sails among stars and planets, sails until he's called back toward Earth, until he reappears. That's him, still upside down, coming home. Returning to the legacy that awaits him there.

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Disappearing Ink

JP McMonagle

The year I turned nine my family took a road trip from Florida to California. At the time, my mother was quite fond of Whitney Houston's song, "The Greatest Love of All," and her debut album became the soundtrack to our summer vacation. Our "vessel," as my father called it, was a gray-and-maroon Happy Times van I had named Agnes. I would whisper secrets into her soft fabric seats while I watched the bayous, mountains, and deserts of America zoom past me through the blinds in her tinted windows.

My mother had spent months planning every detail of the trip and was eager to share the itinerary with my older brother, Sean, and me. She sat in the front of the van with a laminated map of the United States unfolded over her lap. Her plum tortoiseshell sunglasses rested on top of her frosted bangs as she said, "We're going to gallop on horses through the Rockies, then go down to the bottom of the Grand Canyon on the backs of mules."

"Barn animals?" Sean asked, a fresh thirteen, with white blond hair and a developing fascination with his own good looks. "Superb, Mother."

"Sounds fun," I said to spare her feelings, but I didn't care about those things. I cared about California. I cared about Knott's Berry Farm, a theme park that I'd read had a recording studio anyone could use to make demo tapes. I cared about becoming a star.

"Agnes," I'd say. "I'm going to get discovered in California."

I had already picked the song for my recording: Van Halen's "Jump." I knew every word of it. When it played on the radio, I belted out the lyrics as if I were David Lee Roth on stage. I'd imagine myself in tight leather pants, kicking my leg in the air while I sang into the microphone. I'd shake my head as only rock stars could so that beads of sweat would smack into the faces of my screaming fans. They would love it. They would love me.

The drive to Knott's Berry Farm took an entire month, as close to an eternity as I'd ever experienced. I'd moan from the back, "I wish we were

there now."

Each time I'd say it, my father tensed his shoulders but my mother never moved at all. "You're going to wish your life away," she'd say as she stared out the front windshield and then would try to temper my impatience with lessons on the Alamo, the Hoover Dam or whatever site she'd scheduled for the day.

Otherwise, I'd pass the time rehearsing "Jump" in the backseat or challenging Sean to our favorite game, Cut-down Master, a brutal competition that ended with one of us in tears and questioning our sense of self. Sean had just begun puberty. Red and purple pimples clustered on his forehead and cheeks and he had to constantly hide his boner with the elastic waistband of his Jams. By age nine, I weighed more than most adult men, and it had become increasingly obvious I was a homosexual. So, he and I had ample ammunition to use against each other.

I'd eye his face and say, "Your mug looks like a greasy slice of Sbarro's pepperoni pizza."

"I think we should call *Guinness World Records*." He'd welcome the distraction. "You must have bigger boobs than any other boy in the world."

If I couldn't rattle him with a new insult, I'd resort to my favorite. I'd pop open a regular Coke from the cooler my mother had packed, chug it, then say, "This is the best drink in the world. It's a shame you have diabetes and would die if you drank it."

"Rather that than have people think I'm a fat woman."

As hard as I'd try to beat him, it always ended with me in tears and him booming with laughter.

"Just wait, Agnes," I'd whisper. "Once I'm a star, he'll never make me cry again."

By the time my father steered us into the packed parking lot of Knott's Berry Farm, Sean's victory no longer mattered. All that mattered was the recording. Once the car stopped, I stepped out of Agnes as if onto a stage. The sun shone down on me like a spotlight from heaven. My mother took her time in the front seat, putting suntan lotion and tissues into her giant purse, while my father stood outside by the driver's door and straightened his toupee in the side-view mirror. Sean was in no hurry either and leaned against the back of the van as if he had nowhere better to be. He asked, "How much longer until we leave?"

I rolled my eyes and headed for the entrance without them.

"Jason, wait a damn second," my mother said. "You didn't shut the doors."

"Be a doll and do it for me." I turned and put my hand up as a real star might. And then said, "Wish me luck, Agnes."

As I bolted away, I heard my father ask, "Who the hell's Agnes?"

My parents caught up quick, but Sean lagged behind. He was too cool

to walk next to us and always looked for chances to sneak off and light one of the Newport cigarettes he kept hidden in his underwear. I tugged at my mother's arm. "Let's leave him."

Inside the park, there were six-foot Snoopys, Woodstocks, and Peppermint Pattys. The Sunday Comics come to life and a welcomed change from the oversized Mickey Mouses and Goofys I had become bored with at Disney World in Orlando. My mother even seemed excited. She stopped and searched for the windup camera in her bag. "I love this giant Lucy. You want a picture with her, Jason?"

"Later," I said and dragged her and my father through the hordes of people to the carnival section. Sean tagged along in the distance. It was a brilliant collection of giant stuffed unicorns, cotton candy stands, and booth keepers with white top hats, gold bowties, and long-sleeved red-and-white-striped shirts. Little boys and girls ran past in flashes of hot pink and neon yellow. Fathers tossed rings at bottlenecks with the intensity of major league pitchers. And there, right in the center, was the glass recording booth. I ran to it.

"Make this quick." Sean came up behind me. "I want to go to the roller coasters."

"Everything's not about you." I pressed my face against the glass and completely missed the irony.

A curly-haired blonde girl around my age was in the booth and sang furiously into the mic. I couldn't hear her through the thick glass, but I watched as she gave it her all. I would do better. My mother quickly found a sign-up sheet. I told her to write "Jump" in all capital letters so they knew I meant business.

"And please don't write Jason," I called after her. "Use my stage name: Steve Swan."

My father had come up with it last summer after I was stunned to learn Bea Arthur's real name was Bernice Frankel. He'd also suggested Tony Rossi, but I didn't think it had the same pizazz.

When my Mom came back over to me I asked, "Do you think after I get famous you, Dad, and Sean will want to change your last names to Swan so everyone will know we're related?"

"I think that's the only real option," she said, then, "You're next."

The blonde girl finished her set, and the man in charge stepped out of the sound booth across from her and handed over a cassette. His moustache hung over his lips like my dad's. "Good job, little lady."

I'll show him a good job.

He grabbed the clipboard that hung from a nail outside his booth, scanned it, and said, "Swan. Steve Swan?"

"That's me," I said and looked back at my family. I felt sad because I knew I would have to leave them after this. I wouldn't be able to conduct a

successful career in show business from Naples, Florida. Maybe a lead role or two in The Naples Dinner Theatre, but I'd never get to the global status I was destined for unless I was in California. I put my hand out to the man. "I'm Steve Swan."

"'Jump,' right?" he asked.

I puffed out my chest. "You know it."

"You record in there." He pointed to the booth the girl had come from and then the one behind him. "I'll be in there watching the whole time. You'll be able to hear me when you put the headphones on."

"Can anyone else hear me?" I asked.

"I can turn on the speaker to the outside. Some people say it makes them try harder if they know people are listening."

"No, no. It would distract me." I stepped inside the booth and closed the door. The microphone hung from the ceiling and the headphones sat on a swivel stool. I put them on and pushed the chair to the corner. I would not sit for "Jump."

Outside the booth, a kid with ketchup smeared across his tight tangerine shirt buzzed past the window. His mother trotted behind him with a wad of thin paper napkins bundled in her hand. The sound man took a seat in the booth across from me, his big headphones like Princess Leia's buns. I couldn't hear anything outside and I liked the way it felt to look at everything in silence. My moment of peace before my California debut.

"All right, Steve." His voice sounded robotic through the headphones. "You see that red light in the corner? When it turns green, the music will be on and we'll be recording. I'll count down."

I nodded.

"Three." His voice hummed in my ears. My mom stood outside with her thumbs up and a smile on her face.

"Two." My father grinned next to her.

"One." Sean was behind them both with his middle finger pointed up at me.

The light went green. Showtime.

The first beats of the song played. I closed my eyes and envisioned myself in the music video I would make, surrounded by women in tight purple jumpsuits and crimped hair.I took a deep breath and launched into the opening lines of the song. And though it felt awkward without David Lee Roth's voice behind me, I went on, powering into the bridge, riding it into the chorus

As the song played, I shook my hips and snapped my fingers, finding my rhythm in that little room. When I finally sang out the title lyric, "'Jump!'" I knew it had happened. I had transformed. I was no longer a little fat gay boy. I was a star.

A third of the way through, my eyes still closed, I envisioned my

mother and father in tears over how well I was doing. And Sean would be next to them, for once fallen silent, in awe of my raw talent. He would never again treat me with anything but respect and admiration.

When I opened my eyes, I didn't see my family. I saw the taunting faces of three teenage boys pressed against the glass booth. Pink and aqua cotton candy stuck to their cheeks and lips. They threw exaggerated limp wrists into the air.

"'I said Jump.'" I kept pace with the song as my mother stomped up behind them and swatted them away. The boys ran off grinning.

Behind those three teenagers were a dozen more. Laughing and pointing at me. Then I noticed their lips mouthing the words to the song as if they heard it too.

I realized they could.

My father stood frozen in horror, an immense sympathy spread across his sunburnt face. I sang on. My voice cracked through the rest of the track, but I tried to end with victory: "'Just go ahead and jump.'"

The green light went out. As I stepped from the booth, my mother was already in the man's face. "Why would you turn on the speakers so everyone could hear?"

"Shit ma'am, I'm sorry," he said. "That kid over there told me his younger brother changed his mind and *wanted* everyone to hear him."

Sean lounged on a bench, under a bush shaped like Woodstock. He was worse than happy. He was smug. My father stormed over to him as I wedged my face into my mother's side. "I hate him, Mom."

She put the curve of her chin on top of my head and said, "Shhhhhhh."

It hummed through my whole body.

A few minutes later I wiped the last of my tears onto her cotton turquoise blouse. At the bench, Sean sat and fiddled with the laces of his green Chuck Taylors as my father lectured and shook his finger next to him. I couldn't hear but assumed he asked my brother imperative questions like *What in God's name is the matter with you?* and *Why can't you be more like Jason*?

I looked up at my mom. "What are you going to do with him?"

She stared at Sean, contemplating. "I don't know."

"You should get rid of him."

She rubbed her hand over my head. "How about we start with an apology?"

"He's not sorry." I turned again, expecting to see Sean with glazed eyes and a blank face while my father continued his rant next to him. Instead, my dad relaxed by himself with his legs crossed and his leather sandal dangling off the edge of his big toe. A young girl pranced by, gazing up at the silver balloon she held from a string. Then a man with a stuffed tiger over his

shoulder pulled a boy in denim overalls by the hand. Sean was gone. He'd vanished.

I brightened up at an image of my dad's stern face, pointing at the exit as he yelled at Sean, "Get out of my sight. I never want to see you again. Change your last name. You are no longer a McMonagle."

Sean would be alone. No money. No family. Stranded at the park. He'd need to work. As he was short on skills and personality, he'd be forced to take a job as the Knott's Berry Farm Gum Scraper, in charge of cleaning all the benches in the park. Or he'd be the Official Roller Coaster Vomit Cleaner when someone threw up during one of the loops. He'd have to wear a brown jumpsuit and white food-handler gloves.

"Why are you smiling?" my mother interrupted.

"No reason," I said.

I followed her over to my father and breathed in the beefy scent of hot dogs. The merry-go-round chimed in the distance. Without Sean in the picture, I remembered how perfect it all was. I was still in California. I could still become a star.

#

To my utter disappointment, Sean had not been cast out of our family. He was in the toilet. My mother and I sat next to my father on the bench and waited for him. I spent the time thinking up his punishments. My parents could force him to sleep in the van for the remainder of the trip and let me have the queen bed to myself in the La Quinta Inn hotel rooms. Or they could make him write a letter using calligraphy, explaining how deeply sorry he was for playing games with my acting career. Better still, a public admittance that the only reason he'd sabotaged my recording was because he was jealous of my talent and brains. I said to my parents, "If you need any help with his punishment, I have a few ideas."

"We'll let you know." My mother held up a compact and brushed pink rouge over her cheeks.

"What is he doing in there?" My father pointed to the bathroom, a red wood building that reminded me of Snoopy's doghouse. "Jason, go check on him."

I put my hand over my chest and gasped. "You want me to fetch him off the pot? Haven't I been through enough?"

My father cocked his head and raised his eyebrows in impatience.

"Fine," I grumbled.

The inside of the bathroom smelled like mildew and pee. Toilet paper stuck to the blue-tile walls, and the floor was so sticky it shined. Sean was at the sink, flicking air bubbles out of his syringe. This was normal. A part of his diabetes. I said, "Hey butt-face. Hurry up. Mom and Dad are waiting to give you your punishment. You might not be allowed to come home with us."

I turned to leave. Sean called from behind, "Jason wait. I need help."

"You need *moi's* help?" I headed for the exit. "I'd rather drink turpentine."

"Please!" he yelled.

I wanted to ignore him but he sounded urgent. I went over. His skin was pale and his eyes hollow. His brown leather pouch that I called his Diabetes Bag was unzipped and propped open on top of a sudsy corner of the sink. Two bottles of insulin were next to it. His hands were shaky. I asked, "Do you need sugar?"

My mother kept sugar cubes in her purse for when his blood sugar dropped.

"No, I need insulin. But my fingers are numb. I can't feel them." He handed me the syringe. "Do it for me?"

I took it from him. It was skinnier than a pen. Black lines and tiny numbers printed up the length of it. I'd given him a shot before in his arm. It was easy. "Like poking an orange with a pin," my father had said.

Sean lifted his shirt. I stepped back. "In your belly?"

"Yeah," he said. His voice was airy and his head swayed like the tips of strong trees. "It'll hit me faster."

"Okay."

The needle was silver and pointed. Sean's gaze was distant and unfocused. I pinched his skin and fat together with my finger and thumb and pushed the tip inside him. I flinched at the thought of how it might feel.

"Easy, dude," Sean said and closed his eyes.

I bit my lip and stuck in the needle until it disappeared into his skin. I pressed the end of the syringe, and the insulin flushed from it. I watched him. No reaction. I pulled it out and rubbed my own stomach as if I could feel it there. A minute passed. His color returned. He opened his eyes and splashed water on his face. I stayed with him and Velcroed his insulin into the leather pouch.

He smirked and asked, "Want to see something?"

I nodded. He was Sean again.

"Can you keep a secret?" he asked.

"Yes," I squealed even though I wasn't sure it was true.

He took a tube of blue ink out of his pocket. "It's disappearing ink. I got it in the magic shop around the corner."

He'd never let me in on a secret before. I should have been ecstatic, but I was terrified. If I said the wrong thing I would annoy him. He would retreat. It was imperative I do everything perfectly. There was no room for mistakes. I couldn't ask if he had stolen it. Or what he meant to do with it. Or why it had to be a secret at all. The only choice was to hail the ink as a triumph and him a genius. I said, "This is so cool."

"I know," he said. A deep satisfaction appeared on his face before it turned serious. "Do not tell Mom and Dad."

"Of course not," I said, but I wanted to. Not to get him in more trouble. I wanted to tell them I was in on a secret with him. I had become his friend. My brother and I left the bathroom and returned to our day. Around the corner from the carnival section, the yellow peaks and green rolling hills of the roller coasters weaved around one another in the sky.

"They look like dragons." I grabbed Sean's hand. "Let's go."

My father, my brother, and I rode the coasters for hours, while my mother stood by and waited, marking up a copy of *Beloved* with a red pen even though it was summer and she had months before she had to be a teacher again. At six o'clock, we poured off the Flume dripping wet and laughing, she announced, "I'm done."

No one protested.

Thirty minutes later, I watched Knott's Berry Farm disappear through Agnes's back window as my father drove out of the parking lot and toward the hotel for the night. His toupee was on the dashboard drying in the last bit of the day's sun. My mother was quiet and flipped on Whitney Houston.

"Oh good," Sean said, "'The Greatest Crap of All' again."

I glanced over at him and smiled. He slid the ink from his pocket and put his finger up to his mouth to ensure my silence. I nodded fast like a woodpecker and mimed zipping my lips, locking them, and throwing away the key. Then, we both cracked up.

"What are you two laughing at?" my mother asked.

Sean and I sang out: "Nothing, Mother."

Later that night at the La Quinta Inn, the hotel air conditioner cranked out cool sixty-degree winds. The room was dark. I laid next to my brother on our queen-sized bed, both of us bundled under the covers. Bon Jovi leaked from Sean's headphones. My father snored on the other bed next to my mother, kicking her leg every twenty minutes to shake out a cramp.

I was wide awake. I should have been planning my strategy for the next day's trip to Hollywood. There would be Rodeo Drive, Venice Beach, then the Walk of Fame. Each attraction an opportunity to get discovered. Even though it would be my last chance before I'd have to go back to Florida, I couldn't focus on any of that. All I could think about was the disappearing ink and how Sean had shared it with me. I replayed the moment in my head for hours until I finally fell asleep.

Terry Ann Thaxton *has published three full-length collections of poetry: Getaway Girl (Salt, 2011) and The Terrible Wife (Salt, 2013), and Mud Song (Truman State UP, 2017), as well as a textbook, Creative Writing in the Community: A Guide (Bloomsbury, 2014). Her essay "Delusions of Grandeur" won The Missouri Review 2012 Jeffrey E. Smith Editor's prize. She's also published essays and poetry in Connecticut Review, Defunct, Gulf Coast, Cimarron Review, flyway, Sou'wester, Lullwater, Teaching Artist Journal, and other journals. She holds an MFA from Vermont College. She teaches creative writing at the University of Central Florida, where she also directs the MFA program.*

The Sweet Sign

Terry Ann Thaxton

He's reading a book his son gave him—it's how
comedy was born, but it is not his life. In the other chair,
an old woman, his own mother, in striped socks. Before

he had arrived this year from another state, she'd
placed candy canes on the tea table, and now her glasses
slide down her nose, and they both, mother and son,

listen to the loud TV, the refrigerator filled with leftovers.
It's an annual habit to prove this house lives,
even though two locked birds with no names must beg

her for life every day. She feeds them without the delicacy
of motherhood. Here, there is a shortage of bells.
Beside her the basket of old newspapers, and beneath

her bouncing foot,a pillow, as if she is a brand new girl.
Waterfall of colors splash below pictures of grandchildren
who barrel into the room every Christmas Eve. The fire

of her dreams runs again this season like the white
ground, like the motion of picking up chocolate, of standing up,
which is always a gathering up of every single year of the past

eighty-five years—her wedding band is a book on the edge
of the sofa, barely able to tell the old story surrounding
her recliner chair, the one holding her to this house,

to this town, this state, this country, this earth, this moment.
It is a prediction of a score that surprises her elbow, leading
her closer to the sweet sign of death trapped inside.

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Pamphleteers

Callum McSorley

József was fifty-two when he fell in love. He was a younger man called Lázlów, a former student with a scar on his chin where he'd been hit with the butt of a machine gun during the revolution. József first heard this story second hand at a party.

"Who's he?" József asked Tannor, whose apartment they were gathered in, nodding to a young man with lank, black hair and high cheekbones, who wore a long overcoat though the room was full of people, the windows steamed up.

"Lázlów Something. He tagged along with Barna and Hajós – they went to school together, or something like that."

"What's his story?" József traced the shape of the young man's scar on his own chin with a finger.

"Apparently it's a keepsake from the first demonstration outside the parliament building."

"He was there?"

"So they say. A lot of people were there."

"We weren't."

"We're too old for marching."

József didn't feel too old for marching, not when Lázlów looked up from across the room and smiled at him. They met formally later that night. It was Lázlów who spoke first.

"That man over there in the corner told me you're József Novák, the Famous Writer." Lázlów used the tip of a cigarette to point at Tannor.

"People just call me József."

"I read your books back in school." The tip of the cigarette now pointed back towards the past. "They were very good. Very good. A lot of my friends, they read your stuff, your old stuff, they find it very inspirational. Very important."

"It's all old stuff. And what about you? What do you think?"

"Me? I think I'd like another drink."

"Let me buy you one." They went to the kitchen, and József poured them each a shot of pálinka into greasy tumblers.

In the early hours of the morning, back in József's apartment, wrapped up together in the duvet against the night-time chill, Lázlów told József the first-hand account of how he got his scar. He was at the first demonstration, outside the parliament, one of a crowd of students chanting and singing, hissing and spitting. The soldiers began to push back against the front lines. "Russian dog!" Lázlów yelled at one of them, who replied by chinning him with the stock of his gun. Lázlów hit the ground, out cold. "That's what saved me, when the shooting started," he said.

"Did you fight in the revolution after that?" József asked.

"I tried," Lázlów answered, and loosened himself from the sheets to go and find his cigarettes. "We all tried. Many of my friends, well… you know." A sigh and a shrug spoke of all the dead.

But József didn't really know. He hadn't been strafed by gunfire in the city streets last winter. He'd been drafting copy for the pamphlets. He was no soldier, but he could fight in his own way. Already, on the first night they met, József was desperate to tell Lázlów about the pamphlets. But he stopped himself. First, it was dangerous to let any more people know than necessary – a good conspiracy required as few people as possible. And second, it all seemed rather silly at that point in time, with Lázlów standing naked by the curtains, smoking, and rubbing his scarred chin.

József Novák, the Once-Famous Writer, was fifty-two years old and desperately in love. This was trouble, he knew it.

#

"You want more cigarettes?" József asked.

Lázlów grunted. He was half-dressed on the bed, flipping through a newspaper, cigarette in mouth, ash falling onto his chest.

"That stuff is garbage, you know."

"I don't like the taste of expensive tobacco," he grumbled.

"I meant the paper," József said.

"Oh, I know it, but it's good to know what they're printing, see if any familiar faces pop up."

Lázlów had been living with him for over a month now. He didn't work and rarely left the apartment. "I'm keeping out of it," he would say, meaning he was lying low and drinking all of József's coffee and pálinka. József didn't complain because he'd gotten what he wanted after all. Lázlów was there, always there, lying on the bed, reading, smoking, drinking, always ready with a hug and a kiss. Just the thought gave József a kind of relief from the stress he was under. Things were coming to a head.

"I'll get you the evening edition," József said. He was closing the front door when Lázlów shouted, "And more cigarettes!"

The sun was falling behind the crumbling Gothic buildings of István Út, colouring the pock-marked facades in rose-gold. It was a fair summer. József strolled down to Markó's café. He stopped in front of the window as if to admire the pastries behind the glass. He watched the reflection. A couple passed by on the opposite side of the street. A man around his own age went by in the other direction carrying a heavy-looking bag. József took his time, pretending to study the prices, watching over his shoulders. There was nobody he'd seen before.

The bell rang when he opened the door. A thick fug of smoke came to greet him. He thought of Lázlów sitting at home. There was a soft chatter and clinking of spoons stirring coffee.

"Szia, Mr. Novák," Markó said, wiping down the counter and trying to look busy.

"Szia, Markó. May I use the toilet?"

"Go ahead, Mr. Novák, you know where it is."

József stepped behind the counter and into the kitchen, where the smell of deep-frying lángos made his stomach rumble. The chef looked away from him as he passed through the kitchen and out the back door into an alley where crates of beer were stacked up by the bins.

From there he took a twisting, folding route through the alleys and backstreets until he found himself near the warehouses by the east bank of the Danube. The area had been devastated by shelling during the war and had never sprung back. There was no glass in the windows of the buildings that still stood, and many of them were exposed on one or more sides where the walls had collapsed. He noticed a toilet on the second floor of one such building, still fixed in place, looking preposterous.

Their building had been a garment factory. It was small compared to some of the others in the abandoned estate, but it was mostly intact. He stood by the shutter and looked up to the first floor where he noticed the fading, orange light catch on a window blind that opened briefly and closed.

Tannor let him in. "I said you didn't have to be here today, József," he said.

"I know, but I wanted to be."

"You wouldn't rather be home with your concubine?"

"Yes, but I want to see if it works."

Tannor nodded in reply, as if saying anything further on that line might jinx it.

The others were late. Tannor chewed the knuckle of his thumb; József thought about Lázlów. What if something happened and he never came home? Would Lázlów notice? You are a foolish old man, he told himself. They perked up like a startled flock of pigeons at the noise of an engine. From the window they saw the van pull up, backing right against the shutter. Vincze jumped out one side, Szabó the other.

"What kept you?" Tannor asked.

"Road blocks up on Erzébet Utca," Vincze said.

"Soldiers?"

"You bet."

"You weren't followed?"

"We weren't followed."

"You weren't followed?"

"*We. Were. Not. Followed.* Hurry up and get the door."

"Okay, okay." Tannor held his hands up. "Szabó, go and get the door."

The back of the van was a mess of paint pots, brushes, and various pieces of tradesman's equipment, including step ladders and saws and a portable petrol generator. The raw reek of turpentine was enough to remove the hairs from a person's nose. József helped clear it all out. They uncovered a large, rectangular box draped with a festering dust sheet. Vincze pulled the sheet like a magician to reveal a fridge-freezer lying on its back.

In the end it was lucky József turned up because it took all four of them to slide the fridge out the van and carry it into the warehouse. None of them were young anymore, there were enough bad backs and weak knees to go around, and fridge-freezers were heavy – this one in particular even more so than usual.

Tannor did the honours and opened the doors. "Looks good." He pulled pieces of black, oiled machinery from the fridge, including a large drum-shaped piece, which he spun slowly to inspect from every angle. "Looks good," he said again.

Most of the machine was already built on the empty factory floor. Tannor, by giving instructions to Szabó, fitted the final pieces.

"What d'you think, Novák? She's a beauty, eh?" Tannor said. Tannor worked the treadle and the drum spun. It worked. It worked! What they'd built was an Arab – a manually powered printing press, cobbled together from various pieces, some of which dated back to the war and some of which were antique. It was indeed beautiful.

"But it's still missing something," József said.

"It's missing your words," Tannor said.

"Actually," Vincze said, "it's missing the type."

"That too." Tannor winked at József. "When will we get that sorted?"

"I want to wait another month before doing another run," Vincze said.

"A month!?" Tannor's voice echoed in the empty building. "I want to be printing next week! Your stuff's ready to go, isn't it, Novák?"

József nodded. He hadn't done any work in four or five weeks, but it was a pamphlet for God's sake. He was a novelist. A pamphlet he could draft in an hour. Yet, something had been keeping him from even thinking about it recently. And then there was Lázlów, who was always around the apartment, "Keeping out of things." He didn't have the time alone to work.

"A month, Tannor, a month. Be patient," Vincze said. And despite what Tannor liked to think, Vincze's word was the last word.

#

József had written one book since the end of the war, and it nearly landed him in jail. The government labeled it "seditious" and summoned him to a hearing. Since then he hadn't published a single word, and it had been nearly a decade. Meeting Lázlów had ignited the fire to *do something* in him again and, simultaneously, the urge to douse that fire immediately. He looked at the scar on his young lover's chin and felt a desperate need to cling to him, throw his body over him, protect him. This mixed with that urgent desire he once knew well, the desire to strike the keys (though he had sold is typewriter some years ago), strike out at the world, to stand up and deliver his message. Lázlów would think him brave, as if he too marched and stood unshaking before the guns of the soldiers. It was foolish and dangerous.

The whole thing was Tannor's idea, of course, but it was Vincze who had the connections and the know-how. Vincze was an engineer before he was a soldier. Tannor was ever the idealist, a fifty-year-old college boy in love with words who had spent his entire career in publishing, whereas Vincze was powered by bitterness. Bitterness got things done. Among them, József was just strung along, much like Szabó, who followed the group anywhere. Old fools, József thought, then pulled a note pad and pen from under his bed and set about scribbling with such intensity that even Lázlów became curious.

"What're you up to?"

"Just writing a shopping list."

"A shopping list?"

"A shopping list, sure."

"Sure… Could you put cigarettes on there?"

"You should quit. Smoking is bad for you."

"So is writing, József."

József smiled. "Make some coffee and give me a kiss," he said. Lázlów did both.

One day, József was looking in the window of Markó's – the type wasn't arriving for another three weeks but it was József's turn to go to the factory and check on the Arab – when a man in a broad-rimmed hat and spectacles appeared over his shoulder. "Prices are a bit steep, don't you think?" he said.

József addressed the man's reflection. "Maybe, but they make the best langós in the city."

"You think so? I always thought that bakery on Erkel Utca did the best. Why don't you come with me and try them? We can do a taste test." The man reached out, settling his hand on József's shoulder. He had the face of a civil servant but his fingernails were worn down to the bloody quick, the knuckles dry and creased with fine, white scar tissue.

He led the way. Erkel Utca was a ten-minute walk and while they strolled along together the man chatted about the weather. His name was Maurice. “My grandfather was a Frenchman,” he explained. “You can’t beat the French when it comes to pastry.”

At the bakery, Maurice ordered a pot of coffee to share.

“I’m not so hungry after all,” József said when Maurice ordered a sausage-stuffed langós.

“That’s a shame.” Maurice gave a great sigh. “You’re missing out.”

József sipped the hot coffee, but it sat high up in his gullet, making him feel ill. He felt like his insides were being squeezed. His cup trembled. “Are we going to get down to it?” he said. This, József thought, was something that a character in one of his stories might say, and he tried it on, willing himself to be brave like the people he imagined and wrote about. “Are we going to get down to it?”

“Good idea.” Maurice removed his hat and his spectacles. His head was bald, and without their frames his eyes became small, wet marbles. “I’m glad to find you as straight-forward in person as you are in text. I was a fan of yours – before the war.”

“And what about after?”

“What about after the war, József? You haven’t been up to much, have you? Until now.”

“Now? Now the closest I get to writing is doing the Sunday crossword.” József forced himself to keep eye contact.

“A wise choice, considering your precarious status.”

“I made a formal apology about that book. I demonstrated my contrition and commitment to the party.”

“Oh, I didn’t mean your political status. I meant your status as a homosexual, as a deviant.”

József nearly dropped his cup. Coffee spilled onto the table.

“Woops! Let me get that.” Maurice took a handkerchief from his breast pocket and began to mop up. “There’s a young man living with you, name of Lázlów Gereben, wanted for his part in the riots last winter.”

József shook his head but couldn’t speak. Blood pounded in his ears. He gripped the edge of the table to keep himself upright.

“A rather fetching young man with a pretty scar on his chin. He killed two soldiers, did you know that? Two of our brothers, József. No trip to the gulag for him, it’ll be hanging he wants. Or…” Maurice drank down his cup and looked inside it, as if reading something. “…Maybe we could just forget all about him. What is two comrades in this great human chain of ours? We had two new soldiers step into their boots within the hour. Gereben is a thug, but he poses no serious threat to the regime, does he? We proved that when we crushed the revolution in a mere month.”

József shook his head, barely aware he was doing it.

"No, we both agree. What we're really interested in are those people who pose an ideological threat, who, like woodworms or bedbugs, creep in quietly with their insidious intent and eat away our country from the inside out. Would you like another coffee?"

#

József gave Lázlów a kiss before he headed out the door. He tasted of cigarette ash. He had a sweet smile on his face when he said, "See you later."

"You'll be here?" József asked.

"Where else?" His face knitted into a look of concern, a rare look, it made him older.

"You'll be here when I get back?"

"Are you feeling okay?"

"I love you…"

"…I love you, too."

József turned back at the top of the stairs; Lázlów was watching him from the door, that new look still on his face. József waved, felt stupid, and carried on down into the street. Things were coming to a head.

He didn't look in the window of Markó's but instead went straight in. They went through the routine, József asking to use the toilet, Markó letting him into the kitchen and out the back. József avoided looking for shadows in the alleyways and kept his eyes on his feet until he reached the garment factory.

Tannor was waiting inside with the Arab. He was polishing the contraption with an oiled rag in feverish compulsion. He pumped the treadle, the drum turned – it still worked. "You weren't followed?" he asked.

"I wasn't followed."

"Sure?"

"Sure, I'm sure. You look like you haven't slept."

"So perceptive, you should be a writer." Tannor's laugh was brittle. He worked his jaw, chewing his fingernails, his lips, grinding his molars together. József could remember only once before seeing Tannor like this. It was before the hearing, when József's "seditious" book had gotten them in trouble. Tannor had been József's publisher back then, he did eighteen month's hard labour for his part in it. "Why are they *always* late?"

"You want to read it?"

Tannor held out a hand without speaking, a nostalgic gesture for József, one he hadn't seen for a long time. It made his eyes sting. He blinked hard, handed the draft pamphlet over, and turned away.

"Good, good, great! Well done, good work."

"Did you read it?"

"I said it was good."

"Read the damn thing, Tannor."

"It's wonderful, József, wonderful! Is that enough praise?" An engine

rumbled outside. “Here,” Tannor said and pressed the draft back to him, hurrying towards the van outside. He hadn’t read it, not properly. If he had he would have seen the coded message within, telling him to flee.

József felt sick watching them unload the van. He couldn’t bring himself to go near his friends, he couldn’t join in their excitement or their fear. He wanted to shout out, to tell them to run, but he forced himself to think of Lázlów and keep his mouth shut. Love was trouble, but it was love after all.

Tannor, Vincze and Szabó crowded around a box on the floor of the factory. They opened it up. There was a dull shine of metal and the smell of ink and machine oil. Tannor took a letter out and held it up for József to see. There was a power in those letters, he could feel it radiating out.

“Prettier than any precious stone,” Tannor said.

A truck crashed through the shutters. Tannor dropped the letter. Vincze was on his feet running in an instant. A shot rang out and Vincze fell, throwing up a cloud of dust.

There was shouting. It took three men with clubs to subdue Szabó. Tannor remained on his knees, his hands up, eyes blank. He was no longer fidgeting. He looked tired, like he might fall asleep right there on the floor.

Maurice was there. He took József by the shoulder and led him away.

#

When József got home, Lázlów was dressed and packing a bag. When he saw him he ran forward and held him in a tight hug. “Jesus Christ, I thought, I thought you’d been… I heard from Barna and Hajós that you and Tannor had been arrested by the secret police –”

“I’m all right, I’m all right.” József let himself be hugged close again. He began to cry.

“They said you’d been making pamphlets.” Lázlów chuckled. “I was ready to run.”

“We were, we were going to. We built a printing press and everything.”

Lázlów stepped back and looked at József’s streaming, red eyes. “I thought you were hiding something. So Tannor was arrested? How did you get away?” At this Lázlów rubbed at his scar with a finger.

József didn’t answer. He started to say, “I love you,” but Lázlów cut him off.

“You informed on them, didn’t you? You gave them up. This morning you were…” Lázlów stepped further away. He looked sickened, he looked the way József felt. The sound of the shot still rang in József’s ears, again he smelled the gunpowder, heard the eerie, soft thump of Vincze hitting the factory floor. He saw Tannor’s face. It was strange, of the two it was Tannor who seemed dead.

Lázlów started shouting. He called József all sorts of things, hurtful

things that József knew he deserved. József tried to explain how Maurice had threatened him, had threatened Lázlów, how he wanted to break them up, but it couldn't stem the tide of Lázlów's anger. Lázlów's friends had been shot dead in the revolution, Lázlów had nearly been killed himself.

"But they would have killed you!"

"Then I would rather have died!" He took his packed bag and stormed out the door.

József grabbed at the tails of Lázlów's long coat but he brushed him off with a stiff kick.

József Novák, the Once-Famous Writer, fifty-two years old and in love, curled into a ball on the floor of his apartment and cried until he fell asleep, whimpering now and again in the darkness of a dream.

#

It was a nice summer. Lázlów stopped on the terrace of a café. He took a small length of blank ticker tape and a pen from his pocket. He scribbled a series of ragged symbols on the paper and rolled it up. Then he took the pen apart, slotted the scroll of paper around the ink cartridge, and put it back together. He ordered a coffee, drank it quickly, and went on his way, leaving the money on the table weighed down against the gentle breeze by the pen.

Charles Kell *is a PhD student at The University of Rhode Island and associate editor of The Ocean State Review. His poetry and fiction have appeared in The New Orleans Review, The Saint Ann's Review, Kestrel, The Pinch, and elsewhere. He teaches in Rhode Island and Connecticut.*

My Broken Tooth

Charles Kell

is a moon. Mentally ill, it waits,
skulking in the bushes,
for the neighbor to arrive. Feel breath
fly through two holes.
Feel a string of water expand
the innermost particles.
A bleeding nurse wipes its drool
with a dank rag.
The night my father died the Winter
Olympics blared from
the corner TV. They skied down
through the closed-captioned snow.
My father looked screwed, a spare
tire under the double bed.
A purple marble like a giant eye
floating above his head.
I cracked it on glass, he said.
The Tolstoy tattoo frowns under a dim lamp.
Chalk in a cheek to pump down
the shaky jaw.
The drinker's face repeats.
Somewhere in Nagano a neon sign blinks
making the faux fur gleam.

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In Scorn of Eyes

Erik Bergstrom

A bracing wind blew off the Great Lake, delivering the cotton candy smell of the katsura trees through the window of Eddie's Renaissance Lit class, where he sat reading the words "SEE ME" at the top of his exam. *"SEE ME."* That's what it said on kids' papers at the *alternative school* back home. But Eddie never had trouble seeing Professor Richards. He watched him each day as the sweet katsura blew in, standing like he was then at the whiteboard, erasing his scribble.

September was wrapping up and Eddie was failing, and suddenly it was late summer again and he was back home, waiting for his friend Spence to visit before leaving for school in Indiana; waiting while his mother blew through the house, late for work and blaming him because all he did was *sit, sit, sit* and look out the window, waiting for friends who'd never arrive because he was ugly, stupid, and a quitter; speaking these things as she pounded through the house, her head cocked to the side to slide in her earrings as if Eddie weren't there; as if sitting by the window had turned him into a slice of glass that only reflected his image, opening up to the dying lawns of late August and their looping street you could drive around in a figure-eight forever.

The professor turned around. "Eddie, I'll let you in on a little secret. Something I don't often tell other students." He smirked. Eddie noticed how his cheeks had grown stubbly, that his skin was still dark from their Indian summer. "Shakespeare was just a fancy old man trying to sound fancy for his friends."

Eddie's mouth hung crooked, filling with doubt and spit. "So why—"

"Why learn it?" said Professor Richards, his thin lips smiling. "Hell, why do I teach it?"

"I don't know."

"Because, Eddie. It's about the words. Playing with them. How they feel when you say them. It's not about getting some deeper meaning. It's—almost something *personal*." He rambled on, though Eddie only paid attention to the shapes his mouth made on the O's and how long he held his tongue on his teeth for an S. "Read the passage out loud for me." He crouched and

passed his finger along the stanza Eddie chose for his paper.

"*Full fathom five thy father lies; Of his bones are coral made; Those are pearls that were his eyes; Nothing of him that doth fade*…"

"Now how'd that feel?"

"How did it...*feel*?"

"The lines, how they worked together. The imagery. These images could be conveyed any number of ways. Why'd Shakespeare choose these, you think?"

"Because…they rhyme?"

"Dig deeper."

"Because they're...pretty?"

"Getting warmer." Professor Richards stood. "Tell you what. I'm going to play good teacher and let you rewrite your essay. Focus on what's there. Don't feel the need to go beyond it. We good?"

Another gust of katsura blew in, shading the smells of lake water and the sewage beneath. The smells of the North Shore had been new to Eddie, being on his own for the first time and hundreds of miles from home, though the same old feeling persisted that his mind was caught in a civil war, missing things while he was too busy looking.

Home—where his mother was, and where Spence had left him behind. The hint of rotting waste that came in beneath the katsura had reminded Eddie of Spence's house, where he lived with his father who had a job at the wastewater treatment plant. They played basketball through the summer and into the fall—crisp, cobalt blue falls, like the one that found Eddie sitting alone in Professor Richards's class, reading the words *"SEE ME"* on his paper. Spence had ridden his own gale force winds to Indiana to become an athletic phenom, winds scented with body wash and sports drink, leaving Eddie behind in some time warp where everyone had disappeared and left him standing still.

The red letters bled back into his vision. The air came in once more through the window, this time colder.

"Anything else, Eddie?"

He looked up at his professor, saw him standing there with his arms folded—just the two of them alone, surrounded by empty, quiet desks. "What happened to Clarence? In the boat?"

Professor Richards leaned back and smiled as if recalling, with fondness, a piece of his earlier life. "The dream, you mean," he said, to which he went on to describe the scene from Richard III; of the old king's nightmare in the sea, surrounded by gnawed-upon bodies and the treasures they clutched; battered ships; pearls and gold; gemstones in the eyes of the skulls. Eddie watched and listened to the O's and the S's and how the words *sounded* coming from Professor Richards's lips—how they made him *feel*.

"What happens to sailors on Lake Superior after they drown?" Eddie

asked.

"I'm sorry?"

"Is it cold? Do they get scared when they can't breathe?"

"Oh, well. Yes, it's cold. Very cold. Superior's too big to ice over, but that doesn't mean it always stays above freezing."

"I don't think I'd want to die that way." Eddie slid his paper into his backpack. "Sounds awful."

"Oh, it's not so bad as that. I'm sure it's scary for them when the ship breaks apart and they're all scattered beneath the water. But after—well, it's almost like the water incubates them."

Eddie followed his professor's eyes out the window, out to the Great Lake that sprawled just a short length from the Humanities building where they lingered. Hazy streetlamps had begun to light up outside, while out farther, on the lake, a flashing beacon swirled through the mist.

"What's incubate?" he asked.

"Well…" Professor Richards paused to consider the word. Eddie watched his eyes, could nearly see beneath them to the gears working within. "I suppose it's kind of like diving into a high mound of snow with your hat and mittens and snowsuit on, and the whole world around you goes dark and soundless." Eddie watched the professor's O's again—lots and lots of O's. "And though the snow ought to give you frostbite, it chooses instead to protect you."

Eddie thought about hiding in snow; of hiding anywhere, like he had when Spence finally came over before leaving for Indiana, fighting that same old civil war. "So that's what it's like in the water?"

Professor Richards nodded with a clever uncertainty. "In a way," he said. "Their deaths are swift and sudden. Peaceful. The lake's hungry, but she's often merciful."

The air had turned frosty by the time Eddie left the Humanities building. He looked back at the old brick and mortar and saw only a few lights glowing. He thought about calling out to say he could *SEE him*, but instead he turned away and walked down Nineteenth Avenue towards the boardwalk. It was a cold Thursday night in September, and he knew it would be desolate.

A breeze shimmied up the bottoms of Eddie's pant legs as he hurried along, and he imagined he was a sailor then, feeling the water of Lake Superior around him and on top of him. He imagined it to be warmer than the cold night's wind. He imagined it incubating him.

#

There never came a moment where Eddie felt like he'd passed over. He expected a pinpoint of light. A fade to nothing. A darkness blacker than black. The only change came when the lake's bottom turned from murky silt to a thousand glittering jewels.

Alongside, Eddie sees ivory obelisks spiking up from rolling hills, while darker valleys conceal the shimmering of long-lost valuables. Debris spreads out beneath him, all covered with glowing coral. Sparkling rubies grow on the old boats' rails, antennas, and rudders, blanketing them like rust.

Amid the sunken ships, Eddie sees the remnants of lives like his, swallowed by the hungry lake. Fishing poles, frayed netting, buckets and rope spray out from the back of one boat, illuminating a path of descent. There are rain jackets and boots and sailing caps, all covered in sapphires, rubies, and emeralds. Eddie thinks about all the debris he left behind; the clothes he shed on the wet rocks at Brighton Beach, or the sealed envelopes to Spence and his mother, stamped but unsent. He thinks about his Renaissance Lit book on his dorm room desk and the notes he scribbled in the margins while listening to Professor Richards teach.

A slow, wavering beam of moonlight finds its way into the shadows, uncovering the meat-stripped skeletons of the seafarers who, like him, met their end in the lake. In their empty eye sockets, nestled snug, are reflecting gems. Their mouths hang open like they've been caught laughing.

Suddenly, the beam is lost in a shadow. A shroud covers the bottom of the lake like an oil spill, carrying with it a deep chill that grows through the water.

Eddie turns to find the surface. Long stretches of shadowy figures blink out the moon. Their eyes glow, too, though not with the sparkle of the skulls' gems. Theirs is a menacing orange, searing through the water like laser beams.

One of the phantoms glides close to Eddie, and he sees that it's got fangs; long and old, brutally sharp, like the sea monsters from his Renaissance tales. Its gnarled mouth snaps inches from his nose. He flails and swims away; looks for a hiding spot in one of the old, broken ships. Across the lake's expanse, he sees more glowing eyes scanning the deep like airport towers. They call out to one another with piercing squeals and chattering tongues—some echo in the distance, while others are distressingly close. They surround and close in on him like ghosts in a graveyard, and suddenly the lake doesn't feel so large to Eddie once he's cornered near an old catamaran.

He bunches himself tight against the lake's chill. His mother's voice comes to him—*Don't give up! Don't you give up, quitter!*—and soon after Professor Richards appears, running his thin fingers along Eddie's paper, demanding he *feel* the words, as if there was something to feel in them, rolling them around in his mouth and waiting for a spark to light.

He thinks about that last night on land. About what he's left behind, and whether this hell is worse.

#

The lake country had always been a retreat for Eddie's family. The sticky humidity of early June stuck out the most, along with the gasoline of

his father's boat engine and the mosquitoes that hovered at his ankles. Eddie hated it all, but that didn't keep him from looking back with fondness after his father died. Only fifty-three, otherwise healthy as a horse, yet taken by lung cancer after dozens of summers of smoking cigars to pink sunsets.

The lake, to Eddie, was like the windows he looked out, always reflecting a version of himself that came back unrecognizable; bends in the glass or ripples in the water that told him, "*This could be the better version of you*."

He'd joined the swim team at his father's insistence. "You got the body of a fish. Lungs of one, too," he'd said during their last summer at the lake. He found out about the cancer later that August, made it to a few of Eddie's first swim meets in December, and was gone by February.

After that, it had been a season of waiting for something to upturn the dust of Eddie's post-fathered life as he looked through the front window, only to see the same people and cars moving around the same street, caught in a loop. Spence, it seemed, was the only one to have pulled away from the town's orbit.

"You don't need to go to Indiana," his mother had said one night, serving him another dinner of macaroni and franks. "We can't afford Indiana anyway. Not anymore." She dropped the plate on the aluminum TV tray and left to eat her dinner alone in the kitchen. She hadn't brought a fork.

When Eddie stood and walked into the kitchen to retrieve one, he only invited more harm.

"Would your father have wanted you to quit? He loved to watch you swim." She shook her head, ran her fork over greens drenched in fluorescent French dressing. "I don't know why, but he did."

Eddie took out a fork and slammed the drawer shut, rattling the utensils inside. "He said I'd be good at it," he muttered. "But I wasn't any good."

"No good is right," his mother said. She looked up at her son when he wouldn't leave, the two of them facing each other down like dogfish over a nest. She wiped her mouth then and went to the refrigerator for a mineral water. "Face of a fish, isn't that what he said?"

"Body of a fish," Eddie corrected her.

"Right." She returned to her stool, unscrewed the cap of her water, and took a long drink. Then she said, "Well either way, it's all gone to waste now. We've got no money to send you to an out-of-state school without a scholarship. You'll go to Duluth like your father did."

Eddie went back to the window where his macaroni and franks had stopped steaming. He dug the fork into his food but left it there, untouched, the rest of the night.

Why did a *scholarship* matter, anyhow? His father had accumulated lots of money by fifty-three, and for *what*? Spence would've gone to Indiana

without a scholarship, because Indiana is where Spence had wanted to go. He'd wanted to become a famous basketball star. What had money to do with *any* of it?

The breeze had picked up as Eddie neared the Great Lake. He approached a bus stop shelter on the corner of Fourth Street and Woodland Avenue where another man stood, alone. A glowing light above him put shadows on his face. Eddie thought he recognized him, that maybe he'd seen him at this stop before.

"Need some money, sir?" he asked.

"No, I'm fine. You jis' get on outta here."

Eddie took out his wallet. "I'm trying to get rid of it."

"I said no. Now you jis' get on outta here before someone catches ye."

"Catches me doing what?"

"I got plen'y of my own money. I don't need no filthy boy's money."

A bus pulled in. The old man shouldered his way past Eddie to get on, smelling like the sewage that came up from the lake.

"You comin' aboard or not?" the bus driver called out.

None of the lakes Eddie's father had taken him to had ever smelled that way. Not in early June, when they'd reflect cerulean sky to invite warm bodies like Eddie's into their clear depths to *incubate*. It was the warming season, a chance for mutual thaw. It had never been like this.

The next time Eddie looked up, it was when he heard the air spring of the door closing just before the bus rattled away into the dark.

#

Something grazes Eddie's neck, like a feather tickling his skin, moving slowly to his shoulder. He turns to look.

He thinks it's his reflection, then he sees that it's a girl's face—youthful, though with eyes that show a deep, longing sadness that might be centuries old.

"What's your name?" she says, transmitting it as a thought.

"Eddie," he transmits back, then asks for hers.

"Isabel." Her voice rings clear despite the shrieking of the phantoms. She takes his hand and tugs it. "We should leave."

"Where?"

"I'll show you." She lets up for a moment. "Trust me."

They glide along the lake's floor and keep to the shadows. Before long, the bottom lights up again and the coral returns to life. He's never swam like this before—like he'd always wanted to—cutting through the water like a dolphin, moving the lake's atoms aside at will.

He sees more skulls clustered below, and it's like they're suddenly swimming through a catacomb. Each eye twinkles with a gemstone. Each mouth laughs at him. There's one skull that laughs the loudest, catching Eddie in its red and orange tractor beam before it raises from the bottom of the lake.

It trails them through the clouded water and Eddie loses the shape of it, only seeing the red glow of its eyes. He tries to push Isabel along faster but she keeps her pace. The skull closes in.

"We have to move faster," he says.

"Don't worry. We're almost there."

The skull emerges from the murk and closes in. There's violence in its laughter. It spasms its way toward Eddie, drawing closer to his toes.

He tries to communicate his fear to Isabel with a tightened grip and a flurry of kicks, but her determination is elsewhere. A blazing heat reaches his ankles. He turns and sees the skull inching closer to the flesh on his legs. He kicks frantically as it snaps at him.

"We made it," says Isabel.

The skull's eyes dim quickly, and it tumbles away into a deep, black chasm. Eddie watches until it's completely swallowed up, ensuring it's gone. Then he turns forward.

He sees a large freighter resting on a slope of the lake's structure. There aren't any bodies around it, no debris littered nearby, though every so often a moonbeam glimmers on the gemstones encrusting its rails and porthole windows.

"What is this place?" he asks.

"Our home," says Isabel. "For now."

She takes him into the ship. Young spirits, like them, swarm the interior, all from different periods of time. There are boys with horn-rimmed glasses who meet near a narrow staircase, while girls in flapper dresses linger in a doorway. Their attention turns to the new arrivals.

"Why do they look at us like that?" Eddie says, reading the bitterness on their faces. Isabel stops him near the kitchen's wood stove where rubies, garnets, and yellow sapphires glow like embers inside.

"Your death was a lonely one. Just like theirs." Her message cuts through their whispering. "The way you chose to take it comes with a price."

"What do you mean?"

"You don't get to leave the troubles of your past without making a payment first."

The voices swell and take over. Eddie hears their questions and judgments. "What's the payment?"

"This—eternity in the water. Always hiding."

"I'm here...*forever*?"

The spirits close in around them. The gems in the stove dim and flicker out.

"Yes. And this ship won't last as long as that. They'll find you again. Take you away."

The growing chill of the water compresses Eddie. He puts his hands to his ears, but he can't drown out the spirits' chattering.

Isabel's voice pulls him back out. "There is an 'unless'—"

"An *unless*?"

"Unless they find you. People from your past."

"Which people?"

"The ones who loved you."

At last the voices die out. The spirits break apart to leave them. Inside the stove, the gems flare up again.

"I don't think anyone loved me."

"No one?"

He searches her eyes. Then he drops his gaze. He sees that they're floating over emptiness. There's no floor to the ship, only a void of cold and dark water.

#

Eddie came to another stop where a bus waited for a woman running to get out of the rain. Her hair was in her face and her coat was unbuttoned, and he thought he recognized her from a class. He boarded behind her and stopped at the top of the steps.

"Does this bus go to Brighton Beach?"

"It goes near there. Might hafta walk a bit," said the driver.

Eddie paid the fare and found a window seat. He faced forward and saw the woman sitting near the front, pulling out a book.

"Is your book any good?"

The woman turned to Eddie and smiled politely. "Don't really know. I haven't read much yet."

"I think reading's a waste of a good time."

"Hmm. I'm sorry to hear that," she said, her voice growing weary.

"I'm going to Brighton Beach," Eddie said proudly.

The girl raised an eyebrow. "In the rain?"

He turned and looked out the window, saw some kids running down the sidewalk dribbling a basketball. "Maybe I'll incubate awhile," he said.

It was a *stupid* thing to show Spencer the big pond inside Brackenbury's woods. It was stupid because Eddie had found it first, had enjoyed it first, like finding a pond on the moon. By himself he had learned where the water ran deep and cold, cut away by a current that ran toward the creek outlet. He'd admired how serene it was, reflecting the chartreuse of the leaves as they bathed in dappled sunlight. When he jumped and swung off a long, hearty vine, he was the only one who'd heard how loudly his crash into the water disturbed the peace.

Then, one day, he'd shown the pond to Spence.

"Cool!" Spence said, as he stripped off his clothes. Eddie, a few paces behind, watched him carefully. He'd seen Spence without his shirt when they played HORSE in his dad's driveway. But there, a few fathoms deep inside Brackenbury's woods, Eddie had felt differently about it. They were alone

together, truly, quietly alone, for what felt like the first time.

Spence flung himself into the water, breaking the surface with a loud splash, yet somehow the sound had been cut in half. It seemed then to Eddie that *everything* had been halved, like the colors of the trees, or the coolness of the water's current.

He'd lost the wonders of solitude by bringing Spence there. But that's not why it was *stupid*. He would've given up half of anything to share that pond with Spence all summer; to live with the warm anticipation of getting to the pond each morning and stripping off their clothes together; of circling around each other, like being caught in a large whirlpool; of breaking the silence with their ribbing.

But Spence couldn't just keep it between them. He had to give his half, and half of Eddie's half, to the other kids, all of them roaring through Brackenbury's woods with cans of beer and joints, feeling each other up under their swimsuits in the shade of the innocent elms. They careened into the water so recklessly that the sound, to Eddie, had become nearly muted, like the roar of cicadas suddenly drowning in sticky, humid air.

Spence approached Eddie one hot day in August as he sat alone on a log, a towel around his shoulders. He'd been watching the kids swimming and splashing and had thought, maybe, the current would grow strong enough to carry them out of his life, as quick as anyone else. He'd hardly noticed when Spence sat down next to him.

"We're glad you found this place, Ed," Spence had said, looking at the pond in a different way than Eddie. "It's kinda the best way to kill off our last summer together. You know?"

Eddie broke a stick with his fingers and tossed both ends aside. "I guess."

"You ain't happy about it?"

Eddie hated talking to Spence about such things—that's not what he kept him around for, he figured. He shrugged and looked out to the pond again.

"It's only right we share it with them. We can't keep a place like this to ourselves."

But Spence hadn't known the meaning of sharing. Not in the way it had meant to Eddie, giving up the colors and sounds of the pond when he'd had it all to himself. Now Spence was sharing it with everyone—kids with no names—and, in turn, Eddie had to share Spence with them, even though none of them thought about Spence the way he had in those starlit summer nights, when he'd lain up in his bedroom alone, his window opened to the night's air and no longer casting his reflection.

It was all so *stupid*.

Then Spence had surprised him when he grabbed Eddie's hand, pulled him hard, and said, "Let's go. Trust me, Ed."

And he pulled Eddie down a slope of dead wood and green saplings yearning for sun, down to the shore of the pond, and finally into the air where they both landed on the pond's warm surface with the loudest crash Eddie had ever heard.

#

A loud *BOOM*—and the ship suddenly shakes and rocks backward. Isabel looks out a porthole window. "We're falling into the trench."

"What should we do?"

"Swim."

She grabs Eddie's hand and pulls. Her fingers are light and small, like a doll's, but they're strong. She draws Eddie to the front of the ship. Spirits scatter around them, their voices growing into a maelstrom of indecipherable noises.

The doorway pivots backward just as Isabel and Eddie swim out. Behind them, the trench swallows the ship and the screams of the spirits still trapped inside. Eddie gets only one moment to relax, breathe deeply, before the vacuum of silence fills with a new sound—the shrieking of phantoms, all around them.

"We have to go," Isabel says, her voice frightened but sturdy, like a mother's might be. They swim along the dulled rock at the lake's bottom as the phantoms quickly close in, their giant teeth snapping inches behind them. Isabel turns sharply, finding a valley deep enough where the glowing beacons of orange light can't find them. Shrieks and chatter fall off in the distance. Moments pass before Eddie opens his eyes again.

Once the lake falls silent, and Isabel has stopped swimming, she turns back to Eddie, and says, "Go on."

"With what?"

"Tell me the rest."

"What if it doesn't end well?"

The remaining light inside the canyon disappears once a long shadow floats overhead.

"Most times it doesn't."

#

Rain pelted Eddie's face as he ran down the path to the lake, nearly colliding with a couple coming the other way out of the park. The man shouted something, though all Eddie could hear was crashing tide and foaming hiss. His face was dark, though for a moment Eddie was convinced his eyes had been glowing.

He saw a pay phone on the other side of the parking lot and approached it, fumbling through his pockets for some change. He slid a few quarters into the phone—the last of his money.

When Professor Richards answered, Eddie didn't say anything at first.

"Hello? Anyone there?"

"It's Eddie."

"You out in the rain?"

"I'm at the park."

"What? I can't hear you, Eddie."

"I'm at Brighton Beach."

"What's at Brighton Beach?"

A hard wind came from off the lake, throwing darts of rain against the phone box and gargling Eddie's speech.

"What? I can't hear you, Eddie. Do you need me to come get you?"

Eddie slid down the length of the phone box. "My head hurts," he said

"Your head hurts?"

"It's in a civil war."

The phone box shook as the wind battered it. Eddie thought Professor Richards had left him, had maybe blown away like Spence, when suddenly his voice came through again, calm and sweet as the wind through his classroom windows. "We're all in a civil war, Eddie. Our minds want to go forward, our bodies want to stay in the same place."

Eddie laughed as he let the phone go, leaving it dangling hopelessly by its cord. Then he stood and walked slowly across the rock pier, looking down at the waves as they drove themselves into sides of the boulders with a death wish. He pulled off his cap and sweatshirt and felt the rain, fresh and warm, on his cold skin. He undid his belt and dropped his pants and kicked off his shoes, and he sat down on a boulder near the end of the pier, where he sent off a prayer and let the slippery rock guide him into the water.

If only Spence could see me trying to fight the current, Eddie thought. *He'd be laughing and calling me a damn idiot. He'd be telling me to get on out of that water, you stupid idiot, this is Lake Superior, not some watering hole out behind Brackenbury's woods.*

Soon the rain stopped and the wind died down. In that moment, Eddie considered floating across all of Lake Superior while watching the clouds part from the moon, thinking he'd just incubate for a bit and maybe come back after a while.

#

The swirling water in the valley calms and grows warm. Eddie feels wrapped by it, paralyzed in a way. He watches Isabel's concern at last melt from her face. She's looking up toward the surface of the water.

"Why are you smiling?" Eddie asks.

"*The sea nymphs hourly ring their bells!*" she says, and turns back to him. A light flickers in her eyes like a gemstone. "*Hark! Now I hear them—*"

"I don't know what that means," Eddie says, even as the words—and the very way she speaks them, how she shapes her lips—provide a warm familiarity.

"Someone's come for you."

Then Isabel fades to nothing, along with the glittering lake behind her. The weeds around Eddie blacken and crumble away. Above him, the phantoms' eyes dim like lanterns running out of gas, and their shrieks seep quickly out of his ears in the same exact way water pours from a boy when his body is pulled from the lake.

Tracy L. Lyall *resides in a dungeon beneath the steamy streets. Born in the 1970's during the time of roller-disco and cool, cigarette-smoking tomboys, she spent her early years traveling on greyhound buses and experiencing life, much of which became the basis of her writing/art/photography ventures. After writing for underground Zines then progressing to poetry, her writing spanned into journalistic media. Published by university presses, magazines, and small press. Currently raising a series of fiction and creative non-fiction novels along with two Joeys, she continues pursuing degrees of all kinds and running an online Literary Zine while producing works of art and photographing many moments from the sludgepool of Houston to the hills of Portland.*

I'm Reading

(Is it too much to ask that you not bother us while we are conjuring up the dead?)

Toxic Kitchen

(Here, try this one first and see if it eats your insides; you're my favorite parent y'know.)

Casey Killingsworth *has been writing poems for 40 years. He has been published in journals including Kimera, Spindrift, Rain, Slightly West, and forthcoming in the Timberline Review. Additionally he has one book of poems, A Handbook for Water, (Cranberry Press, 1995) as well as a book on the poetry of Langston Hughes, The Black and Blue Collar Blues (VDM, 2008). He has a Master's degree from Reed College and lives in the Columbia River Gorge, on the line that exactly dissects the Cascade Mountains north to south (his own calculation).*

Tornado

Casey Killingsworth

When you were young
and I was young
and wild strawberry
fields stretched across creeks,
when the summer grass
and the dew were the smell
of chamomile,
when our mothers' calls to come home
just sort of hung
in the air until they were snatched up
by the roots, by a wind that became a tornado
and all of it--the dew around our ankles,
the warm strawberries, the
abandoned mine shafts--
was just some mixed salad whirl.

Sometimes late at night
when I don't move away
from my wife's slow breath,
when I don't make
my way down by counting
stairs in the dark
to try to find words
to misshape all that happened
in that strawberry field,

sometimes when I stay,
here,
awake but maybe not awake,
when I listen and taste
and smell,
sometimes that tornado
comes home.
Sometimes it returns
to the lateness,
here.

And I like it.

Gerri Ravyn Stanfield *is the author of Revolution of the Spirit: Awaken the Healer, a guide to liberate the healing super powers within each of us. She has been published in The Rumpus, Manifest Station, and Nailed Magazine, among others. She is the executive director of Acupuncturists Without Borders, a nonprofit organization providing trauma relief in the wake of natural disaster and human conflict. She designs trainings for emerging leaders and healers in the US, Canada, Europe, Nepal, Israel/West Bank, and Australia. Ravyn is a cultural alchemist, writing to transform the heartbreak of our times and reveal gold in what seems worthless. She uses her background in trauma recovery, neurobiology, psychology, writing, and performance to coax more of the extraordinary into the world through the cracks in Western civilization. www.gerriravynstanfield.com*

Sister

Gerri Ravyn Stanfield

She sneaks into the garden after midnight to make congress with coyotes, foxes, Luna moths and any other creature awake at that hour. She breaks the curfew and so our nanny, Jeanine and my parents confine her to her bedroom until she learns to be decent, to comb her hair and wear a dress and fold her napkin. She never stays in her room.

When my friends and I go out to play football, she stands on the edge of our self-created field, always out-of-bounds.

No girls allowed, I say.

Her tongue extends from her mouth, and she squishes her eyes closed. She makes herself a monster.

I love her and I hate her. this sister with whom I floated in a womb for almost nine months. I believe she somersaulted over me and pushed me even then, explored every edge of our watery pouch, used freshly formed fingers to poke me, tug out our umbilical cords and scout for the exit. We were born almost a month early. She first with her arm extended, and me flipped around, unwilling to leave. I did not want to make the transition from quiet dark to unforgiving, cold light.

What would happen if? She wants to know. She never waits. She jumps into the pond from the barn loft. She lets bees land on her arms and remains still. She crawls into the cellar and finds the bones of a cat. My parents can't make her behave. Jeanine can't hold her back. I don't try.

She knows my secrets; found me in our mother's closet soaked in perfume, a red designer dress unfastened around my neck. She is the one who steals our father's bottle of French champagne and pours it into plastic cups

again and again, as we stumble and spin. She drags me to my bed and tucks me in, kissing the top of my head. They travel so much. Sometime she is the mother of us.

I watched her pour milk into a large blue bowl this morning and add a significant amount of honey, sticky, golden. She stirs it with a wooden spoon, mixing tawny sweetness into plain white silk.

What's that for, I ask.

Nunya, she replies.

Huh?

Nunya business, she shoves past me, bowl perched in her left palm, barely sloshing.

I went to my room to listen to the soundtrack from *Wicked* with headphones. Forget her.

Downstairs, Jeanine shrieks, and I open the blinds. The mulberry trees burst open. The heat arrived in spring, the monsoon now distant. My sister stands at the edge of the succulent garden with the bowl of milk in her hands.

Now, she offers the bowl and takes three steps back. The mountain lion is twice her size. My chest flashes, slow heat rises up my spine, my mouth is the desert.

I may choke from envy. My sister is not a girl, but a lion tamer. The beast laps the milk and honey; my sister scratches his head. The lion closes his eyes. My sister pets his neck in slow, circular strokes. The sun is high. He purrs like an antique car-engine, like a swarm of bees rising from their honeycomb.

Barbara Krasner *holds an MFA from the Vermont College of Fine Arts. Her poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in Nimrod, Paterson Literary Review, Naugatuck River Review, Cimarron Review, and elsewhere. She is the author of two poetry chapbooks, Chicken Fat (Finishing Line Press, 2017) and Pounding Cobblestone (Kelsay Books, forthcoming 2018).*

Sunflowers

Barbara Krasner

After Rainer Maria Rilke

You've seen anger unleashed, seen a woman
beat her wailing two-year-old with a stick
at a Cub Scout picnic. Seen a soon-to-be-divorced
father whack his toddler into open wooden cabinets
when the boy insisted the toaster belonged
to his mother. Seen a grandfather raise his hand
and his grandson run behind his mother for safety.

Over the years you've forgotten these things. Instead
you marvel over the height and strength
of the sunflower. Without realizing it, you've placed
vases and baskets of them on your desk, in the hallway,
in the foyer. They say, you don't scare me. I will cast shadows
of punishments meted, protect those without voices
in my smiling petals, and kiss their faces with sun
until bravado fills every pore.

The centers, lush mink carpets, provide ample space
for hiding, for resting. The overlapping petals
in multiple rows reinforce each other like shields.
Leafy tips of stalk spears denounce opposition and thrust
razor-sharp upon command.

Still, you cannot help but smile.
Still, you cannot help but gather them.
Still, you cannot force them into any position but up.

Joseph Moldover *is a writer and clinical psychologist living in the Boston area. His debut novel, Every Moment After, will be published by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt in April 2019. His short fiction has previously appeared in One Teen Story and The McGuffin, among other places (usually under the pen name Joseph Sloan).*

The Value of X

Joseph Moldover

Mom waited until the day after Christmas to tell me about losing the apartment. It had been a warm December, even for Florida, and we'd spent the holiday at the beach. Florida is good like that: even if you're dirt poor and don't have any presents or a tree at Christmastime you can still get out of your crappy little apartment and go sit on the beach.

I'd actually been thinking we might move into the bigger place downstairs because the old Chinese guy in the wheelchair had finally died. He'd asked me to carry his groceries a few times and I'd seen that his kitchen was way bigger. So the news that rents were going up and that we were going to be out was the worst kind of surprise because it went the exact opposite way of what I'd been hoping. It just went to show that Mom's obsession with my finishing high school was bullshit; she almost had a master's degree and still couldn't pay our rent. We had to be out by the end of January.

That evening I watched the Chinese guy's family empty out his apartment. They all looked pretty rich and athletic and they worked fast. I thought Chinese families were supposed to be tight but I'd never seen any of these people around before. They put most of his stuff in the dumpster and left his wheelchair right beside it.

Mom woke up at eight and shuffled around the kitchen, making us dinner. I sat at the table in the other room. "Brian," she called, "if prices for goods rise, then supply will…"

I ran my hand over the glossy cover of the thick GED book and closed my eyes. "Go down?"

She came in with two bowls of pasta. Mine was smothered in butter and cheese and was twice as big as hers. "Go up," she said, leaning over and kissing me on top of my head. "If things cost more, people don't buy them so there's more supply, right?"

I nodded. "Right." Up had been my other guess.

"Don't worry about social studies tonight. Why don't you work on math?"

She'd given me one of the diagnostic tests from the book the week

before. I'd done even worse on math than on social studies.

"I will."

She took a bite of her pasta. "I'm proud of you," she said. No matter how many questions I got wrong, she was always proud of me.

After Mom left I went outside, sat in the wheelchair, and rolled up and down the alley in the twilight. I hadn't been to school all year which left me with a tenth-grade education and no job prospects to speak of, but there was something I'd heard about over at Disney. I wheeled up and down the alley, up and down, and I thought about it, and then I took out my phone and figured out where to post an ad. I had a gig within the hour.

The first family met me in the parking lot. I didn't know where they were from and they never told me. There was a mom and a dad and three little girls who looked at me until their mother told them not to stare. The dad gave me an envelope, which I tucked underneath the blanket I'd draped over my lap. I felt like my legs looked too healthy.

"Do you need us to push you?" the mother asked.

"We don't need to push him," the dad said. "He just needs to be with us."

"I just thought he might need some help," the mother said. She looked pretty uncomfortable with the whole situation. I think we all were.

"I can push myself," I said. She looked relieved. It was the last time any of them would speak to me.

"Where to first?" the dad asked his kids.

It was still light out when I got home. The sky was a hard, clear blue. It was beautiful, which made the way I was feeling inside even worse. I left the wheelchair by the dumpster and went upstairs to our apartment. Mom had another hour to sleep. I sat down at the table and opened the book. I tried to focus. I used a piece of paper to keep track of what line I was on, like my third-grade teacher had shown me. I read a page, and then another, and I had no idea what was on either one of them. I had to skip a lot of words, and of the ones I could read nothing connected up with anything else, and when I tried to put it all together it got crowded out of my head by memories like the principal telling me that high school isn't for everyone.

I counted the money in the envelope, placed another ad online, and moved the wheelchair away from the dumpster so the trash men wouldn't take it.

Mom got the landlord to give us an extra two weeks because she was having a hard time finding something we could afford and that wasn't a crazy long drive to her job at the nursing home. It was stupid because she'd be downsized a few months later, but we didn't know that at the time. She looked at listings and called and called and tried to get people to lower the rent they were asking, but they never did. Something about those supply and demand

arrows that I could never untangle. She'd get off the phone and stare into space and then she'd catch me looking at her and she'd wink and smile and say that we didn't want that one anyway. And then she'd fire a random social studies or science question my way, and nothing was better than her smile if I actually managed to get it right.

I did a few more jobs. I worried that the people working the rides would recognize me and realize that I'd been there before with other people, but it never happened. There were too many people, and even in a wheelchair I'm not very memorable. I worked with families from all over the country. We'd go into the park together and because they were with me they'd get to go to the front of the lines. I got really good at using my arms to transfer from the chair to a ride and back again. We'd all go on together, cutting everyone else, and at the end of the day I'd count my money and push the chair home and when Mom woke up to get ready for work I'd be sitting at the table, staring at the math section of the GED book, wondering what the fuck X stood for.

I tried to quit when I had the cash to pay a month's rent. I figured that would give Mom enough time to save up for the following month. I didn't give her the money, though. For one thing, I didn't know how to tell her where it came from. There was more to it than that, though. Once I saw how simple it was, it seemed stupid to do anything else. School had always been hard for me, impossible - a series of mountains that were too high to climb stretching into the distance. I sat down at the table with the fat GED book and felt like an idiot, the words swimming in front of my eyes, flipping me off, a thousand middle fingers right in my face. And on the other hand, going to the park was easy. I'd be an idiot not to do it.

That was the first time I figured out how the world really worked. The people hiring me had buckets full of money and the trick was to get into position so that I caught some when it sloshed out. Mom's bucket, on the other hand, was empty and it was never going to be full no matter what degree she had or how many night shifts she worked.

They started looking for me even when I didn't advertise. Word of mouth. A family from New York whose friends had been clients of mine got in touch and when I said I was unavailable they offered double, and what was I going to do? We were down to our final ten days and Mom still hadn't found a new place.

They had a son and a daughter. He seemed like a little shit. She was hot. She had thick, dark hair and pale skin. She wore a purple tank top that was cut just low enough and when she put on her sunblock in the parking lot it was hard not to stare.

"Do you need some?" she asked, holding out the tube.

"Sara, he's fine" her mother said, taking the tube, snapping it shut,

and tucking it into her purse. I actually didn't have any sunblock but I generally don't burn. Sara stared at me, which made me uncomfortable, and I was glad when we started toward the front gate. The parents led the way with Sara beside them. The little brother dropped back until he was beside me as I rolled along.

"Can you feel your legs?" he asked.

"Uh, no."

"So if I kicked you, you wouldn't feel it?"

"No."

"I'm going do it," he whispered. "Sometime today, I'm gonna do it."

I didn't know what to say to that, and he ran ahead and walked with his parents and sister.

We went on rides all morning and then we ate lunch. I'd gotten into the habit of leaving my clients and eating somewhere else, sort of taking a half hour off. I didn't want to pay for the overpriced food in the park so I brought sandwiches under the blanket I kept over my legs. I was sitting with my back to the crowd at the food court, finishing a tuna and cheese when Sara appeared beside me.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"I'm eating."

"Why are you all the way over here?"

"Where else should I be?"

"We have a table inside."

"Well, I'm not with you. Not really. I'll be ready to go on more rides when you're done."

She looked around and then, without asking, she pulled up a chair and sat down.

"What's your name?" she asked.

"Brian."

"I'm Sara."

"I know."

We sat quietly for a moment. I finished my sandwich.

"How long have you been in a wheelchair?" she asked.

"Since I was ten."

"What happened?"

"I was hit by a car. I was playing in the street and a guy, he was drunk, he came out of nowhere and sideswiped me. They said I was lucky to be alive."

"Do you remember it happening?"

"No. I just woke up in the hospital and I was like this."

"That's terrible."

I shrugged.

"Did they catch the guy? The driver?"

"Yeah, but he got off. He was rich, and he had a good lawyer."

"What does that matter, if he did it?"

"Don't be stupid. That's not how it works."

"I'm not stupid."

"And he's not in jail."

She frowned and bent over to scratch her ankle. I let myself stare down her shirt. When she straightened back up, she looked me right in the eyes. "I think what my family is doing is awful."

"Lots of people do it."

"That doesn't make it okay. They're exploiting you."

"I agreed to it. I'm getting paid."

She shook her head. "It's still not okay. You shouldn't let yourself be used this way."

"Well, I need the money."

"There must be something else you can do. What do you do when you're not doing this?"

"I don't do anything."

"What do you mean, you don't do anything?"

I shook my head. My life at that time was a series of negatives. No school, no job, no girlfriend. How do you explain that? How do you tell someone about nothing?

Sara's mother called her name and she stood up. "Count the money my dad gave you," she said. "He's an asshole." She walked away. I took the envelope out and flipped through the cash. Sure enough, it was fifty dollars short.

I should have confronted the dad right after lunch and demanded the fifty bucks because then I could have threatened to leave if he didn't give it to me. I didn't, though. Part of me knew he wasn't going to pay, and I didn't want to leave. Being around Sara, knowing what she thought of the situation and of her family, it didn't make me happy but it did make me feel less alone.

When we got to the parking lot at the end of the day I told the dad he was short. He took the envelope, counted it, and then tossed it back into my lap.

"Sorry about that," he said. "I'm out of cash. You don't take AmEx, do you?"

"Andrew…" his wife said. The son was already in their minivan and was calling for them to get in and take him back to the hotel.

"You have to pay him, Dad" Sara said.

"I said that I don't have the money on me."

I looked him up and down. Leather flip flops and khaki shorts, a white linen shirt that was still wrinkle-free after a long day. He was oozing money; I

could have squeezed it out of him and scraped it off the pavement at his feet. "Tell you what," he said, "why don't you write your address down and I'll send it to you." He turned and got into the minivan and his wife, looking tired but not surprised or particularly upset, did the same. Sara gave me a pen and I wrote my address on a scrap of paper even though I knew her dad was full of shit.

"I'll make sure you get your money," she said.

I shrugged. I was just happy her brother had never kicked me. Her father honked the horn and she turned and got in, and then he honked again for me to get out of the way so he could back out. Sara was looking at me through the window when they drove away.

I went home and told myself that was it, that I was never, ever going to do it again. I rolled the wheelchair into the alley and picked it up over my head and threw it against the dumpster. I did that a few more times until one of the wheels was bent, and then I went upstairs. It was late, and Mom was already gone. I sat down at the table and tried to read some science, and when I couldn't get my head around any of that I flipped back to the math, but it was no good. My mind kept wandering and nothing made sense. When I was in school I'd always told myself that I had terrible teachers but at some point I had to admit that they couldn't all be bad, plus I couldn't even teach myself, so what did that say?

I lay down on the couch and pulled a blanket over my head. It smelled like my mom. She hadn't always worked nights; there had been times when she was home in the evening, when it was just her and me and she helped me with my homework and tried to teach me the things I hadn't learned in school. She basically did eighth and ninth grades for me. I shut my eyes and focused on that smell.

It was light out when I woke. The clock under the TV said 9:15. I would've slept even longer, except someone was in the room with me, saying my name. I sat up.

"Brian, someone's here to see you."

Mom was still in her scrubs and her hair was up. The apartment smelled like sausage and I heard food crackling on the stove in the kitchen behind her. I squinted and rubbed my eyes, and then I looked around. Sara was standing by the front door. I smoothed the blanket over my lap and looked from her to Mom and back again.

"Are you a friend of Brian's?" Mom asked, scanning Sara's hair and her clothes, her smooth tan legs, her painted toenails. Mom wasn't stupid. Sara didn't look like any friend I'd ever had.

Sara opened her mouth to answer and then turned to me.

"She's…" I began. My eyes fell on the thick book, still open on the table. "She's my tutor."

"Your tutor?" Mom asked.

"For the GED."

"And just how are you paying for a tutor?" Mom asked.

"He's not," Sara said. "It's for a class. I'm an education major. I get credit for it, but he doesn't have to pay."

My legs twitched under the blanket. I felt an intense urge to move them, to stretch, to jump up and run around the room. The sound of breakfast meat crackling reached a crescendo behind Mom. "Do you want something to eat?" she asked Sara.

"No, thank you. I can't stay. I was just dropping something off for Brian."

Mom nodded and went into the kitchen. Sara stepped further into the room and looked around.

We lived in a lot of apartments over the years, but that one was probably the worst. It wasn't any one thing. A few years before we'd had one in Jacksonville with gigantic roaches, and later on we'd have another where we'd get toilet water from upstairs coming into our kitchen. The one near Disney was the most depressing, though. It wasn't a catastrophe like the other places were, it was just a slow grind, the dead end to whatever path had brought you there.

"I have the money," Sara whispered. My legs twitched again. "Almost all of it. I had two twenties and I took a five from my brother while he was sleeping. I wanted to bring it in person. To apologize for my family." She took the folded bills out of her purse and when I didn't hold out my hand, she walked over to the table and tucked them under the book.

"Do you really go to college?" I asked her. She looked too young.

"I start at Vassar in the fall." She looked around again. "Do you have, like, an elevator? Or a lift on the stairs?"

"Yeah. There's a lift on the back stairs."

She walked over to me and looked down. My shoes were on the floor by the couch. One was flipped upside down, sole up, the treads worn down so much you could almost see through. Sara stared at it. Mom had the radio on in the kitchen, the morning news blending with the sound of her cooking.

"You wanted to know what I do," I said. "I don't do anything else. I go to the park, and then I tell myself I'm not going to do it again, and then I do, because there's nothing else. This is it."

She looked at my shoe for another moment. "I have to go," she said. "The Uber guy is waiting outside."

"Do you understand, though? This is it." I felt every one of my fingers digging into my knees.

"I have to go."

"We're out of here in a few days. The rent's going up."

She shook her head.

"What your dad gave me yesterday? Even without the fifty, it's more than my mom makes in three days doing real work. For going on a bunch of fucking rides."

Mom poked her head back out of the kitchen. "Where did you say you go to school?" she asked.

Sara looked at me. Her dark hair framed her face. She reached up and tucked a lock back behind one ear. "Florida State," she said.

"I took classes at FSU" Mom said. "I took a wonderful psychology seminar. I can't remember the name of the professor."

Sara's eyes were locked on mine. "It's a good school," she said without turning.

"You're sure you don't want any breakfast?" Mom asked.

"No, I have to go." Sara turned and walked to the door. "Take care, Brian" she said. I nodded, and she was gone.

I stood up, pocketed the money, and went into the kitchen. Mom was putting sausage and toast on a plate for me. "I'm glad you're getting tutoring," she said. "The school would never give it to you. I hired that lady for a while, do you remember? Mrs. Burek? But she charged $85 an hour."

I took the plate from her. "Are you going to have some?"

"I ate at the nursing home." She'd probably had leftover cereal. Mom leaned against the counter and for a moment she looked as exhausted as I knew she was. She took her hair out and let it fall over her shoulders. "Do you think it's helping?" she asked. "The tutoring?"

I stood in the middle of the kitchen, holding the plate of food. "Yeah."

She nodded. "Good."

I'd never be able to give her the money, not in a million years. No matter what story I made up she'd know it wasn't clean, and anything she imagined wouldn't be anywhere close to as bad as the reality. I turned and took the plate to the table. "There's no juice," Mom called after me.

"That's okay." I looked at the math problems on the open page. With the money in my pocket I had just over two thousand dollars in total. Say $2050. So, $2050 divided by $85. I closed my eyes and watched the numbers dance behind the lids. I could always do numbers, just not the way the teachers wanted me to. I couldn't show the work, couldn't translate the words on the page to whatever happened inside my brain.

24.1176. The number of hours I could afford with the money I'd saved. Would it be enough? Not even twenty-five hours to figure out those graphs for social studies and the science questions and the novels I'd never read and the math problems that didn't translate into anything I could understand. Was 24.1176 greater or less than X, if X was the number of tutoring hours I'd need to be able to pass the test? Just like one of the

problems in the book.

Mom came in and put a glass of water next to my plate. She patted my hand. “We’ll find another place,” she said.

I nodded.

“I’m so proud of you. I’m proud that you’re trying.”

I nodded again and looked down at my healthy legs. “I’m proud of you too,” I told her.

She tapped the book, directing my attention to the lesson on the page, and then she went to get ready for bed.

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Dancing Tiger

Fabiyas M V

Performers painted like tigers and hunters dance to drumbeats on the fourth day of Onam, an annual harvest festival of Kerala.

Many farms have been buried,
yet the harvest fest is dazzling.

He's one among the hundreds
of human tigers in the street.

A coat of varnish and tempera
powder conceals his skin. Pain,

paint odor, itch…he endures.
Drumbeats begin. He pounces,

shaking his hippo-belly. A
tumor also dances like death.

His fatigue and nausea vanish
in the artistic fervor. There are

hunters with bows and arrows,
dancing around him. As night

grows, waves of music abate
to end. Spectators go home

with the stars. Now he sits
in sweat under the bare sky.

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Saint Karen

Angie Ellis

In college, I was assigned a flatmate named Karen. She ate tinned mushrooms directly from the can, plucking each fat white button from the brine and popping it in her mouth, sprawled across the armchair with her limbs splayed lazily. She watched Friends on a loop while sloppily painting her toenails green or picking at a hangnail or spinning a basketball on her finger. *Jess, Jess, look. Hey. Jess.*

When she finished her mushrooms, she would get up and arch her back in a spine popping, feline stretch, then stomp to the kitchen, toss the brine down the drain and the can in the garbage. Not the recycle bin, though I had pointed it out numerous times and each time she said, *Oh yeah* or *Oops* or *Right-O, captain*. If brine dripped out of the can and onto the floor, she would drop a wet dishrag on top and smear it around with her green toes, then leave it there in its salty sop.

She blasted The Cranberries when she woke up, peed with the door open and left her wet clothes in the washer for days. She loudly pointed out the razor burn at her panty line, grinning at the ugliness, while I stood off to the side and folded my laundry.

I could only wonder at the freedom in it all. Here was a person beautifully untroubled by the world, untethered by inhibition or particular norms. What secrets was she born with, to coast so easily through life? I was in awe.

In the morning she was an enchantment, leaning against the kitchen window eating cereal, outlined in the early, hazy white light. *I'm so fucking tired oh my god.* Her hair in a scrappy ponytail, her sweats low and revealing hip bones and a creamy white lower belly. She smelled salty and boozy, mascara smeared under her eyes like pagan face paint because she didn't care, because she was out late, because she had sex all night and fell asleep without washing her face.

In the evening she was a goddess, smoky and wild. Her strappy heels revealed nail polish, scarred from not giving a damn, bleeding over onto the soft edges of skin around each nail. She would slip on something short and slinky while Chandler Bing offered up one-liners, punchy incantations, summoning laughter from an invisible audience. Glancing at herself in the

hall mirror she would proclaim her own hallelujah— *Fuck yeah!*— then storm past the kitchen window and drink from the tap, the setting sun washing her in gold, the sequins of her cheap dress catching light like jewels.

She would call out goodbye and slam the door, and I would breathe in her cloud of Love's Baby Soft, evoking things carnal and mysterious. I would pinch the soppy rag off the kitchen floor and carry it to the laundry hamper, catching the drips with my other hand. She was my priestess, I her follower.

I would pass her room three times before entering it. The light was always on, beckoning. Clothes on the floor, half inside out or balled into unrecognizable bits of fabric, crusty dishes, frayed makeup brushes and lipstick worn down to a waxy stub—all relics of moments I could only imagine. I would sit on the bed. Run my hand over the sheets, reading the pilled polyester like a sacred text, hieroglyphs that would remain a mystery. The room was stuffy. It didn't smell good, but it smelled divine.

Only once did I try on Karen's dresses, first the crushed velvet and then the crinkly, gauzy baby doll. The fabric pulled and stretched, these vestal robes not meant for my body. I stood in front of the mirror. *Fuck yeah. Fuck yeah.* But the ritual fell flat, my voice conjured nothing. Her nail polish seemed child-like on my toes, the sea darkness looked bright and foolish.

I ventured out of Karen's room in her chunky platform shoes and wine colored mini. I stood in the kitchen and opened a cupboard, taking down a tin of mushrooms, feeling the weight of this curious communion. I cranked the can opener along the rim and lifted off the top. The mushrooms bobbed in the liquid, fleshy-white like eyeballs and I thought of the time I saw a finger in formaldehyde at the museum. A dark thrill curled my toes and ignited my skin as I held the can away from my body and took a breath. I picked one and placed it on my tongue, wanting it to dissolve, absorb into my marrow. I wanted enlightenment, the sprouting of wings, but the texture was rubbery, the metallic flatness reminded me of blood. I gagged, then chewed, and gagged again. I spit it into the trash, tossing the rest in as well, then rinsed the tin and placed it in the recycle bin. I leaned against the counter by the window, but it was cloudy, and there was no sun to bathe me in its glow. In the dull gray light, I saw that her dress had a snag along the hip. The indent of my belly button showed through the thin acrylic, and it was itchy against my skin.

I avoided looking in the mirror on my way back to Karen's room, where I changed out of her dress and back into my pleated navy pants and cotton blouse, then slipped into my coat and walked down to the grocery store three blocks away. The tassels on my loafers bobbed around like jumping beans with each step, and I had the soaring feeling that I knew something others didn't. I handed a dollar to the cashier and placed the new tin of mushrooms in my canvas bag, smiling, gloriously smug.

These aren't for me, I told the cashier.

She shrugged.

Honestly. They're not for me.

All right, she said, deadpan and annoyed, before turning to the customer behind me.

I hate mushrooms.

I picked up my bag and walked out the sliding glass doors.

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A Meditation

Aparna Upadhyaya Sanyal

In the mountains, the saints say,
'*Lead me into all misfortune, so I may learn.'*

Below, pilgrims take dips in muddy water,
cakes of clay and ash, a benediction of bodies.

The gods come down each year, to village squares,
descended from cloud- touched temples.

Mingling with townsfolk, they ask for mutton and rum tots,
and to be carried child- like, to bathe.

The cloth of their acolytes is woven in the facsimile of river bed pebbles.
Purple words, no match for their maroon- tongued gravity.

The sometimes-fire is hardly warming, they intone.
You must burn steady, burn pure, burn gold to touch the soul.

But I've sipped the heaven come out of a hellfire,
willed life to ebb softer from my womb.

Sages and sin are the same to me,
God, another handcart of *arrack*..

Robert P. Kaye's *stories have appeared in Potomac Review, Hobart, Juked, Dr. T. J. Eckleburg Review, Beecher's, Per Contra, The Los Angeles Review and elsewhere, with details available at www.RobertPKaye.com. He facilitates the Works in Progress open mic at Hugo House and is the co-founder of the Seattle Fiction Federation reading series.*

Trust Fall

Robert P. Kaye

Nancy, my mother-in-law, called at 10:45 on a Wednesday night while Trisha was getting ready for bed. They always spoke Sunday evenings between 9:00 and 9:30, the timing and duration never varying more than a few minutes.

"Let me speak to Trisha," she said, circumventing our usual token chitchat. She had refused to move in with us even when she was going through chemo for breast cancer a few years before. She said her plan was to live alone until she couldn't, then consult her therapist—meaning the shotgun she kept in the hall closet. At the time, I thought this was a grim joke, but later realized I hadn't yet gotten to know my mother-in-law very well. She was hard to get to know.

"Anything I can help with?" I asked. My guess was that the cancer had come out of remission.

"No," she said. "It's a Smith family issue."

There were only three members of the Smith family: Nancy, Trisha and the younger sister, Maxine. I thought I was used to the clannishness, but it still stung at times.

Trisha took the phone downstairs while I lay in bed listening to the intensity and volume escalate in her voice, also unusual, because she was just as stoic as her mother. My mind wandered to one of my firm's team building retreats several years before, an event made mandatory by the eccentric partner who was into that sort of thing. The workshop leader announced we'd do trust falls, that exercise where you have to topple backward and be caught by your peers. Expecting to be caught was counterintuitive in our law firm. Everyone else groaned. I looked forward to it.

"Is your mother all right?" I asked when Trisha came to bed.

"Yes, Trevor, she's fine. But I'm going to have to leave town for a few days."

"I can clear my schedule and come along. The island is nice this time of year." Trisha had grown up in a small house reachable by a long drive, a ferry ride and a bone jarring ride down a dirt road to a rocky shoreline. The

cruiser at the end of the little dock always seemed ready to depart.

Trisha considered her answer. She abhorred lying and was more inclined to tell me to mind my own business. “I’m headed somewhere else,” she said.

It was clear she wasn’t going to explain. She never traveled on business. We both lost vacation days every year because we rarely took time off. When we traveled, we did it together. This was a Smith family issue and the No Questions Vow applied, but I asked anyway. “Anything I can do?”

“I can handle it myself,” she said.

“I know you can.” Nancy taught Trisha how to repair everything from a roof damaged by a winter storm to a bad fuel pump in the pickup. The younger sister, Maxine, was a different story. “But wouldn’t it be easier with some help?”

“It still bugs you, doesn’t it?” she said.

“It” being the mystery of her life prior to the island. The missing background, the total absence of relatives, including a father. I’d been told they were from Minnesota, the family involved in a cultish religion, from which Nancy had fled with the girls, the phrase “bad blood” about as specific as it got. The mystery did not abate with time. Internet searches were pointless with the surname Smith and no supporting facts. I stopped short of hiring a private investigator because Trisha always seemed to know what I was up to.

I may have sighed.

“You agreed,” she said.

“I know.” In college, we had wonderful sex for seven months, until things got serious. The No Questions Vow became a necessary condition for meeting her mother and Maxine for the first time. Any expectation that the stringent conditions would relax as we built faith in one another died from starvation. I may have sighed again.

“I’ll discuss it with my mother tomorrow,” she said. “Just so you know, I’m not opposed to you coming.”

I was thrilled to have made it even this far and did not expect Nancy to accede to my participation. Still, I sensed something surprising. Trisha was afraid.

#

Our destination lay at the end of a turbulent puddle jumper flight. I won’t say from where to where. The rental car we found in the assigned slot was red and Trisha insisted on its replacement with a grey vehicle, as specified in the reservation, which meant a free upgrade, which she wasn’t happy with either. This seemed odd for someone who likes a bargain and doesn’t care much about color except for the flowers in her garden.

She drove. Riding as a passenger was easier than sensing Trisha’s foot on an imaginary brake pedal at every bloody lump of road kill, of which there were many. She did not consult a map as the Interstate gave way to a series of

narrower byways past hardscrabble homesteads, tattered billboards, and the occasional wrecked vehicle in a field.

"You seem to know where you're going," I said. The No Questions Vow had been reaffirmed before our departure.

"Yes," she said.

Followed by silence. The mountains grew closer. A coyote loped into a culvert with something squirming in its mouth and managed to look unremarkable.

Trisha pulled off the road in late afternoon, stirring me from a semi-hypnotic state. We'd shouldered a low pass and the nose of the car faced an overlook. Way down below, a muddy river snaked through blurred rectangles of untended farmland. A string of high-voltage lines sagged between transmission towers, intersecting a small town dangling like a dead moth in a web.

"Welcome to my childhood." She gazed at the ridgeline opposite. "Such as it was."

We were a long way from Minnesota.

Down in the town, we turned past a brick school building with plywood over the windows and a boarded-up cinderblock post office. Trisha parked behind a derelict burger shack, a clot of tumbleweeds wedged under the collapsed walk-up counter.

Barking erupted from a small house behind a rickety board fence. The door opened, the light inside occluded by a large old woman dressed in faded overalls, work shirt, and house slippers. She kicked the dogs aside as she lumbered down dilapidated steps. The wind bit through my inadequate down coat.

"That you, Mary Beth?" the woman said, squinting as she came through the gate.

"Remember, it's Trisha now, Aunt Zee," she said.

"You'll always be Mary Beth to me, baby doll." She opened arms foreshortened by her girth. "Can I still get me a hug?" Trisha—once named Mary Beth—almost disappeared into the overstuffed old woman.

After the introductions, I re-parked, as instructed, between the woodpile and the squawking chicken coop so as not to draw attention to the "fancy" car. The wind maintained a persistent keening as it whipped around the few widely-spaced buildings, most of which looked abandoned.

The little foyer contained a gauntlet of barking mutts pushing slobbery snouts into my crotch. "That's Pearly," Aunt Zee said, pointing to a husky/lab/whatever mix with milky eyes. "And that's her pup Marvin, who I call Moron. Over there's Buster, or Bastard, whichever you prefer, their son by incest because they're stupid animals and don't know any better." She cast a grimace at Trisha. "Sorry, hon."

Incest?

Incest.

My blood ran colder than the wind and my mind raced. I'd already learned more that day than in the past fifteen years. I assumed whatever happened must have concerned Maxine, and might explain her difficulties coping with everyday life.

"Can we get some food?" Trisha said maybe a little too loudly. "It's been a long drive."

"I got ham for sandwiches," Aunt Zee said. "Which is pretty much what I live on these days besides eggs and chicken. You want tea, instant coffee, or water? I'd offer you something stronger, but a lot of folks out here are alcoholics, or crazy, or both and I'm more like most people than I care to admit."

"Tea's fine," I said. "Earl Grey, if you have it. Can I help with the sandwiches?"

"Oh, ain't he a charmer?" Aunt Zee said.

"You sit," Trisha said, taking a tub of mayo from the fridge and sleeve of white bread from a cupboard, like she did it every day.

"I got Lipton's," Aunt Zee said, lumbering to the stove to ignite a burner under a cast iron kettle that appeared to have been forged in the Middle Ages from a single piece of black iron.

"Lipton's good," I said.

"Course it is." Aunt Zee grinned, displaying the yellow-green patina on her front teeth in the light of a single forty-watt bulb in the hanging fixture. "Where on earth did you find this wonderful man, Mary Beth?"

"It's Trisha, Zee," she said, leaning back on the scratched Formica counter. "We met in college."

"College?" Aunt Zee said. "I keep forgetting what a fine job your mother did."

I drank the tea, concerned about not being able to sleep from the caffeine, but figuring my racing mind would be more the problem. We sipped from our chipped mugs with tag strings tied around the handles, ate our sandwiches, and made small talk until the dogs slaughtered the quiet when a car pulled up. "What a surprise," Aunt Zee said. "Baby girl's on time this once."

Max came through the door, hair almost colorless from too many bad dye jobs, smothered in Aunt Zee's hug and assaulted by dogs before her eyes lit on me. "Oh, holy god Trevor," Max said, hand to heart. "You scared the shit out of me." Then, to Trisha, "You brought him?"

"No," Trisha said. "We bumped into each other at the post office. Mom didn't tell you?"

"Sure, but I didn't think you'd actually—"

"Doesn't matter. We're not here to rehash old times," Trisha said. "He's not asking any questions and we're not involving him in what we came

here to do. He's here for moral support only. Are we clear?"

Max looked disoriented, which wasn't unusual. "Sure," she said. "I'm really glad you're here, Trevor. I can use all the moral support I can get."

I wanted to ask why we hadn't all come together, but knew better, so I opened my arms and gave Max a big hug. I've always had a soft spot for her, even if she was more drama than a traveling Shakespeare company. In the years I'd known her, she'd acted, waitressed, cleaned houses and, for a couple of years, disappeared. I suspected drugs were involved. Trisha had the rugged independence of her mother, while Max seemed perpetually on the verge of a breakdown. People mistook her for the older sibling. I thought maybe I now knew why.

"You want tea, Minnie Bee?" Aunt Zee said. "It just tickles me to say that."

"Nobody's called me Minnie Bee in a long time," Max said.

"Well it's that kind of night, innit?" Aunt Zee stomped through the kitchen, and the floor wobbled and the joists groaned. I thought it might collapse.

Max took a seat and brought something out of her knapsack-sized purse below the edge of the table. "Care for a little flavor?" She whispered to hide it from Trisha. She wagged the half-full pint of Jameson toward my cup.

I was about to say "yes," but Trisha plucked the bottle out of her sister's hand, wrenched off the cap and tipped it glugging into the sink, turning the faucet on full bore. The little room filled with the smell of alcohol.

"What the hell's your problem?" Max said.

"You know Aunt Zee's an alcoholic, you little pill," Trisha said. "You shouldn't be drinking either."

"Sorry," Max said. "I thought she was over that."

Aunt Zee stood beside the sink inhaling the vapors.

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"Trevor. Trevor. Wake up."

I awoke with arms pinned to my side in a mummy bag I didn't remember zipping into. My head remained halfway in a dream of driving through endless high desert wrestling a steering wheel with no influence on the direction of the car. A crack of light shone through the door from the kitchen. Barking erupted. Someone close by yelled, "God dammit dogs, shut the fuck up!" Aunt Zee.

Somebody let off a gasping howl of a sob. I felt drugged, but didn't remember taking a sleeping pill.

"Get hold of yourself, Min," Aunt Zee whisper-yelled in the kitchen. "You'll wake up everyone in the goddamned neighborhood."

Recent events required reassembly. Min, opposite of Max, short for Maxine. Trisha, short for Mary Beth, crouching over me, shaking my shoulder to wake me from an unnatural stupor. Her face dirty, hair up in a black watch

cap. Something like a white glove on her hand held close to her chest.

"If you still want to help," Trisha said. "Now's your big chance."

I managed to peel off the sleeping bag, drag on clothes and find my way to the pop and hiss of the prehistoric kettle and the sour smell of propane. Aunt Zee bundled a sobbing Max under a blanket into a bedroom.

"What's happening?" I shivered with cold, confused and barely able to function. Only then did I realize that either the ham sandwich or tea had been laced with some kind of sedative. There wasn't time or mental capacity to process the implications.

Trisha sat at the table, blanket draped over her shoulders, trembling, wiping away grimy snot. She cradled a hand swaddled in a wad of white gauze, a line of blood seeping against the straight edge of tape. She smelled like earthworms stepped on in a rainstorm. "This is harder than I thought," she said.

It struck me that perhaps I'd never heard her say that phrase before. Had never seen her broken. "You're hurt. What happened?"

"I'll tell you on the way," she said. "We have to hurry."

There wasn't any question that I'd go. The brutal awakening had me shivering in my inadequate down jacket. Aunt Zee draped her coat over mine, an enormous wool tent reeking of BO and old dog. The residual warmth stilled the shaking. I wished a shot or two of Jameson could be summoned back from the drain.

"You drive," Trisha said, handing me the keys. I managed to point the car through a gimbaling maze of small roads as Trisha called out turns, half my head still stuck in the dream where no amount of steering mattered. No illumination existed beyond the headlights except the silver wash of a brilliant moon and the splash of Milky Way. The rental car's heater struggled to produce meaningful heat until the jaw-clenching journey pointed up winding roads. A faint glow arose over the high shelf of hillside, though it was far too early for dawn.

"Turn here," Trisha said.

I pointed the car into an unpaved road aimed further uphill, surprised at the hiss of gravel under the tires. The origin of the false dawn greeted us as we topped the rise, the floor of the valley on the other side of the ridge studded with lights. The sketchy geography in my head said this had to be the outskirts of the city of X, its hi-tech tentacles extending toward the foot of the ridgeline we'd ascended from the undeveloped side.

Wire-stemmed orange flags whipped past headlights. A parked backhoe loomed out of the dark beside a small leaning trapezoidal house silhouetted against a moonlit scud of clouds. The structure looked like it would fall down in a strong wind, windows empty sockets, board sides stripped by weather.

"Here's good," Trisha said.

I pulled past the skeletal fence and stopped in an area bordered by stakes and orange markers. “This was your house?”

She gave me the No Questions look.

Too far. “You voided that contract when you drugged me,” I said.

She tried and failed to pull the door handle with her damaged hand, making a kind of whimper with the pain. I felt sympathy, but made no move to exit the car.

“OK,” she said. “You win. A construction crew will be up here in about five hours. We’re going to dig something up first. I think you’ll get the picture. I’ll answer your questions as we go.”

“Deal,” I said. “Lead the way.”

I followed the beam of a heavy-duty flashlight over uneven ground past posts and tape demarcating the future foundation of a new house. Judging from the lights below, the view would be spectacular. We went behind the ruined house to a mound of loose earth by a big rock.

Trisha shined the light into what looked like a half-dug grave with a pickaxe and shovel at the bottom. I took a sharp inhale at what almost looked like a face. The flashlight beam rested on a bottle encrusted with mud.

“I hit that digging and reached down to get it out of the way,” Trisha said. “Max nailed my hand with the pickaxe. She thought it was something else.”

“Your father?” I said.

“Yes. I’m just lucky she’s got a wimpy swing,” She laughed. It sounded flat, blown away by the wind. “We need to work fast, and I’m not going to be much help.”

The wormy smell of fresh earth rose up as I jumped down into the hole, leaving the wind behind. I tossed up the bottle, which Trisha put in a canvas sack that I realized was there to contain evidence.

We would never have found the small toe bones that reminded me of the pieces of a bizarre board game if the edge of the hole had been six inches farther to the left. I spent what felt like an hour on my knees sifting loose earth for metatarsals and phalanges in the darting shadows of the flashlight beam, each bone electric in my gloved fingers. The hole had to be enlarged sideways to pull out tibia and fibula, femurs, pelvis and vertebrae. Some ribs were brown and shattered. Hands blistered under work gloves, fingers turned to claws barely able to release the pick, which seemed to weigh a hundred pounds. Trisha hoisted up buckets of dirt, bone and rotten scraps of clothing, sorting large and small pieces into the canvas sack, all one-handed. The actions at the end of the beam of white light seemed to belong to someone else by the time we recovered the jaw and skull.

At some point, the flashlight became unnecessary as the sky turned pale. We shoved dirt back into the hole and raked dry material over the top. We passed the first pickup coming up the side of the ridge just when we

descended to the main road at dawn. I hoped to hell they would mistake the rental car for aggressive house hunters or real estate agents and not notice the earth-caked zombies within. Hoped they wouldn't spot the re-filled hole that looked like a grave with the fresh earth not crusted over by frost and decide to call the sheriff.

It took forever to scrub the dirt out of my hair and skin. We incinerated our dirty clothes in the burn barrel. Aunt Zee cleaned out Trisha's wound and put in nylon thread stitches while she bit down on the handle of a wooden spoon and screamed through her teeth. Max hid in the bedroom.

It wasn't until well after we'd landed at our local airport that I realized there hadn't been time or energy to ask any more questions. Max had been too freaked out to bring back the evidence in the trunk of her car, as intended. I'd traveled with a bag of human remains in my overnight bag, which smelled faintly of earth.

#

Nothing appeared in the local newspapers except advertisements for the houses. Perhaps the construction crew chose to avoid holding up the project with an investigation, figuring whatever happened at the site should remain ancient history for the sake of commerce. The doorbell never rang with police on the other side wanting to ask a few questions about the trip we made the week of y to place x.

I attempted to ask Trisha follow-up questions about what happened up on the ridge, but the opportunity slipped past. All I got from her was that Nancy had used the shotgun in self-defense. I asked if their father had gone after Max. She said she'd have to consult with her sister before discussing that. This left the issue at an impasse because, shortly after returning from the trip, Max had disappeared.

I could have pressed harder. The No Questions Vow may have been voided, but there was nothing compelling Trisha to answer. I wasn't even sure I wanted answers.

And so it went for a couple of years. We didn't spend a lot of time together. Her hand healed after some surgery and an explanation about a ridiculous gardening accident. She could no longer sew or grip well. The gardener we hired was one of the first outsiders to do anything on the house. I suppose I could have taken up gardening, but had no urge to do further digging.

One weekend in the fall, Trisha went up to the island to be with Nancy, whose cancer had come out of remission. The doorbell rang. My heart skipped, thinking it might finally be the police, but when I looked through the peephole and saw a wide-brimmed hat hiding almost-white hair I knew it was Max. Minnie Bee.

I offered her a drink but she said she'd been sober for over a year, so I made tea. The hollowness of one cheek suggested she was missing a couple

teeth. She appeared more at ease than in the past, but more fragile, the lines deepening around the eyes.

"You have to promise you'll never tell them I was here," she said. "I can't stay long."

"Sure." Yet another promise.

"I felt bad about not inviting you to the funeral," she said.

"What funeral?"

"My father. We took him out in the boat and dropped him where it's really deep. The awful thing is I realized I still loved him on some level."

I did not want to hear she still loved him. The bottom of some trench seemed like a good place for him.

"The funny thing was, we didn't say anything, just dumped him overboard," Max said. "We could have used you there. You're good at things like that. He was always spouting Bible verses, which made it even stranger doing what he did."

It was me that gave the toasts at holiday dinners and said the little bit of grace. I held my breath for a three count before asking. "What did he do?" I expected an invocation of the No Questions Vow.

"She didn't tell you? After all you did?"

"No," I said. Of course, I'd made assumptions.

"He molested Mary Beth," Max said. "I didn't know at the time, but he told her he'd kill me if she said anything and make it look like an accident. Mom was working in town at the burger stand with Aunt Zee and he was 'taking care of us' up on that godforsaken ridge."

I'd assumed that this would be about Max. It took the wind out of my sails, but I forced myself to ask. "And what happened?"

"He got bored with Mary Beth and said it was my turn," Max said. "So, she told Mom. We heard him yelling and crying before the gun went off. Both barrels in the chest. Mom and Mary Beth dug the hole. We left the next morning."

This was plenty, but she didn't stop.

"I cried about missing Daddy for years, but they didn't tell me what happened until I was old enough. There wasn't anyone else living up there at the time and it felt like summer camp every day. He liked to play games. The odd thing is, I remember my childhood as fun."

We sipped tea.

"What's your real name? Minnie?" I said, eager to change the subject and expecting to hear she was named after Minnie Mouse.

"God, no. It's Maxine. They didn't want me to be confused. Minnie Bee was just a nickname, like mini as the opposite of max. There's nothing I could have done, right?"

"Right." They didn't want her to be confused.

"Sorry I freaked out," Max said. "I'm sorry I dragged you into it."

"I volunteered," I said, even though I wasn't so sure.

We talked for a little while longer, Max nervous about Trisha coming back and catching her telling tales about the family she no longer could be part of and retain any sanity. Nancy and Trisha were different, Max said. They were tougher.

She left in her beat-up Toyota after I gave her all the cash I had in the house. I haven't seen her since and don't expect to again. I cleaned up all evidence of the tea.

I suppose I could have told Trisha about the visit, but it seemed the time for sharing such things had passed, and I'd promised. Nancy died a natural death at home in bed on the island with Trisha by her side about a month later. She didn't suffer, Trisha said. I wondered how that was possible, but chose not to ask further questions.

Thomas R. Moore *has published three books of poems: The Bolt-Cutters (2010), Chet Sawing (2012), and Saving Nails (2016). His work is represented in more than thirty literary journals and has been broadcast on Writer's Almanac and American Life in Poetry. His poem "How We Built Our House" won a Pushcart Prize and is included in the 2018 Best of the Small Presses Anthology. He currently serves as Poet Laureate for Belfast, Maine.*

Font

Thomas R. Moore

Scraping language together, I dig in
to write a sonnet. I nudge words
into ragged rows with my boots, kneel
to tamp boney verbs into the soil

with my fingertips. On elbows I re-arrange
the mounds, use my thumbs to squash
adverbs, then jettison prissy nouns
to shape spiky, willful renegades and

cast them into life with spittle and
breath. Hunkered now, pausing and
pensive, I weed loose adjectives,
re-phrase, count iambs, find one

sprout, and, buoyed by this fertile omen,
I opt, of course, for Times New Roman.

Wild Turkeys

Thomas R. Moore

They stretch and bounce to reach
  the barberries like thieving boys
under an apple tree. It's ten degrees

outside. One flails upward into
  the bush to pluck the red berries.
Can these birds really fly?

Behind the glass door our little
  terrier roars and the turkeys
scatter, one exploding high

into a spruce. In an hour they are
  back under the bird-feeder
leaving curled turds and tracks

in the snow. Their presence
  centers me, measures me - wildness
at our door, like coyote scat

at the edge of the lawn. Silent
  to us, the turkeys scratch
for birdseed under the snow.

Jj D'Onofrio *is a photographer and digital artist. His work has been featured over the years in Art Habens Magazine, Ground Fresh Thursday, Gravel Magazineand Lys d'Or in addition to public art projects such as, Pro – Ject Middleton and ArtEnroute. His work has been displayed in galleries stretching from Wisconsin to Milliepiani Gallery in Rome. Jj has been involved in the Madison,Wisconsin art world for many years not only creating his own work but representing talented artists from around the midwest at local art galleries. Jj currently lives just outside Madison using the rolling green hills as a backdrop for many of his works.*

Looking For Lost Souls

If you live long enough you begin to see ghosts all around you. Especially if you live in the same place you grew up. Add to that, living from day to day so much inside your head. I am bombarded with the interplay of memory and present. Dreaming and waking. All striving to achieve form in the daily charge of my living. In my art I am attempting to meld those aspects of experience together, to give them a broader form and a recognizable voice.