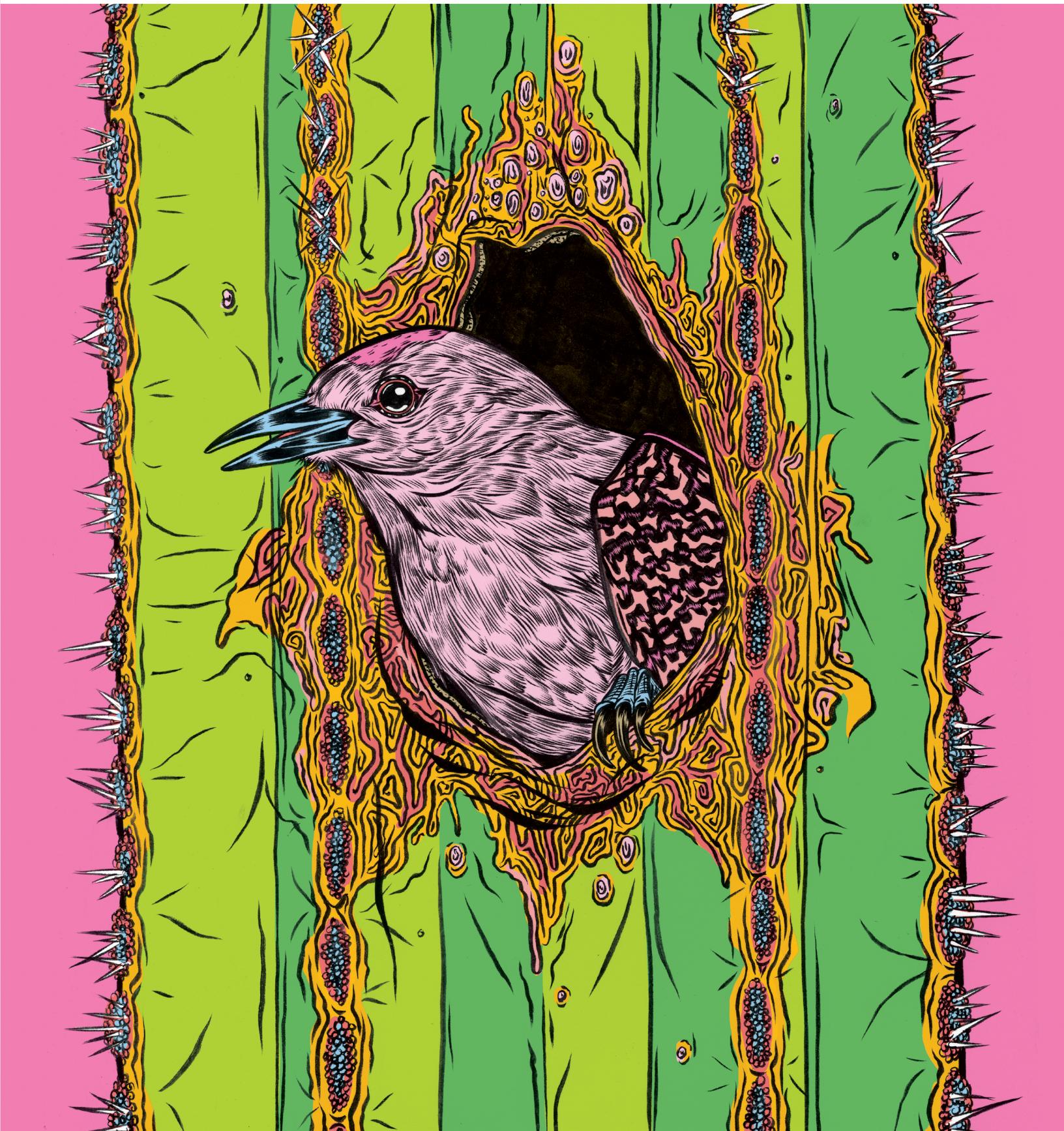


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Karen Chau currently lives and works in New York City. She has previously edited for 2Leaf Press and Phati'tude literary magazine, and she has contributed essays to Coming of Faith and Racialicious. However, she spends the bulk of her hours providing administrative assistance for a property management company.

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CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

READERS,

HERE WE ARE: THE LAST ISSUE OF SUNSTRUCK MAGAZINE. WE DIDN'T ANTICIPATE SHUTTING DOWN THE PUBLICATION SO SOON. LIFE INTERVENED, AS IT ALWAYS DOES, AND WE WERE PRESENTED WITH CERTAIN REALITIES WE COULDN'T IGNORE – MAINLY FINDING GAINFUL EMPLOYMENT SO WE DIDN'T STARVE TO DEATH.

YES, OUR LITTLE START-UP PUBLICATION HAD DIFFICULTY BRINGING IN REVENUE (SURPRISE, SURPRISE). IT'S A TOUGH WORLD OUT THERE FOR THE WRITTEN WORD, ESPECIALLY WHEN IT'S BEING PUBLISHED BY A SMALL GROUP OF PEOPLE WITH NO BUSINESS SENSE WHATSOEVER.

IT'S HARD FOR US TO LET GO OF THE MAGAZINE, BUT EVER SINCE WE DECIDED TO CLOSE DOWN, WE'VE BEEN FOCUSING ON WHAT AN AMAZING EXPERIENCE SUNSTRUCK HAS BEEN. WE'VE MET SOME WONDERFUL PEOPLE, AND WE'VE HAD THE PRIVILEGE OF PUBLISHING SOME ABSOLUTELY FANTASTIC WRITING. WE'RE PROUD OF WHAT WE'VE MADE, AND WE HOPE YOU'VE ENJOYED READING THE MAGAZINE AS MUCH AS WE ENJOYED CREATING IT.

TO CELEBRATE THE END OF SUNSTRUCK, WE HELD A NON-FICTION WRITING CONTEST. OUR INBOX WAS FULL OF BRILLIANT SUBMISSIONS TO OUR "OUT WITH A BANG!" CONTEST, AND NARROWING DOWN THE ENTRANTS TO THREE WINNERS WAS QUITE THE TASK.

BUT, AFTER MUCH DELIBERATION, WE ARRIVED AT A FINAL LIST. WE'RE SO EXCITED TO SHARE DENISE TOLAN'S GRAND PRIZE-WINNING "TWICE THIRTEEN," A MOVING ESSAY ABOUT TRADITION AND FAMILY; RUNNER UP RANDY OSBORNE'S HUMOROUS AND MASTERFULLY-CRAFTED "OVER THE RIVER AND STABBED TO DEATH"; AND OUR HONORABLE MENTION, NANCY BREWKA-CLARK'S "JEFFERSON'S HAPPY PLACE," WHICH LOOKS AT AMERICA'S FOUNDING FATHERS IN A WAY ALL OF YOUR HISTORY TEXTBOOKS DID NOT.

WE'D LIKE TO THANK EVERYONE THAT'S HELPED US ALONG THE WAY: OUR FAMILIES FOR MAKING SUNSTRUCK POSSIBLE, OUR FRIENDS FOR SUPPORTING AND ADVISING US, AND OUR CONTRIBUTORS FOR MAKING EACH ISSUE SO SMART AND GOOD-LOOKING. WE COULDN'T HAVE DONE THIS WITHOUT ANY OF YOU.

MOST IMPORTANTLY, THANKS TO ALL OF OUR READERS FOR PAYING ATTENTION TO US. MANY OF YOU HAVE GIVEN US THOUGHTFUL AND KIND FEEDBACK, AND WE COULDN'T BE MORE APPRECIATIVE FOR THAT. OUR MISSION WAS TO "CONFRONT THE REALITY IN WHICH WE LIVE," WHICH IS A FANCY WAY OF SAYING BEING CRITICAL OF MODERN CULTURE AND POLITICS. WE HOPE SUNSTRUCK INSPIRED THAT FACULTY WITHIN YOU.

SINCERELY,
ADAM & CALEB

NON- FICTION

HE IS THE HAPPIEST,
BE HE KING OR
PEASANT, WHO
FINDS HAPPINESS IN
HIS HOME.

- GOETHE

REVISITING RALPH MCGILL

THE HERO THE SOUTH NEEDS

BY TYLER HICKS

In his award-winning 1963 book “The South and the Southerner,” journalist and editor of the Atlanta Constitution Ralph McGill said there are two Souths: one that is unyielding in its cruelty and prejudice, and one that is beautiful, kind and full of hope. Using his syndicated column as a bully pulpit from which he dispensed moral lessons and his signature brand of righteous indignation, McGill constantly reminded Southern readers that bigots stuck in a moral time capsule were hijacking their home and culture. Given North Carolina and Mississippi’s recent passage of anti-LGBT legislation, McGill would probably feel the same today.

McGill died in 1969, a year after Congress passed the last civil rights act, the Fair Housing Act. In the following years, it has been tempting to fly the “Mission Accomplished” banner and discuss how far we’ve come. But with the bathroom debate replacing the water fountain debate and Donald Trump replacing Ben Tillman, the South needs voices like McGill’s just as much as it needed his then.

McGill was born on the outskirts of Chattanooga, Tennessee, on Feb. 5, 1898. He loved football, Civil War history and discussing politics with his father, a working-class man who passed his love for

the Republican Party along to his son. When he attended Vanderbilt University, he started writing for a variety of publications, including *The Fugitive*, a literary journal in which he penned stories and opinions alongside the likes of Carson McCullers and Robert Penn Warren. It was the beginning of a brilliant career in political, sports and news writing, though McGill never graduated from university. Vanderbilt expelled him after a school chancellor disapproved of an article that McGill wrote for the student newspaper, *The Vanderbilt Hustler*. The piece, in which he accused the university of misappropriating funds, launched the young, fearless journalist into the realm of moral journalism and kick-started an enviable career that deserves closer examination.

After his expulsion, McGill found work as a cub reporter with the Nashville Banner, a post that gave him the opportunity to chase down politicians and party bigwigs while he learned from his curmudgeonly, cigar-chomping superiors in the newsroom. In “The South and the Southerner,” the writer remembers these Banner days with a fondness untouched by time. In particular, McGill credits his first job in the news media for revealing the power of partisanship: “That guarantee of freedom of the press is in the constitution for one

Is the press toothless, or merely constricted by the power and popularity of clickbait?

reason – to enable newspapers to speak out,” he wrote. “There are some newspapers which are mute and others which carefully engage only editors with chronic laryngitis. But there comes a time in all controversies when one must hit the issue right on the nose or turn tail and die a little.”

At first, these “controversies” were political corruption and backroom deals. Soon, his focus would shift to voting rights and legal protection from discrimination for black people – causes he supported his entire life. McGill refused to turn tail throughout his career, especially when he left the Banner for the Atlanta Constitution in 1929, where he rose to the ranks of editor of the newspaper. It was this position which allowed him to shed a light on the beauty and evil of his beloved South.

*Ralph McGill was a tireless advocate for civil rights and a pioneer in the realm of moral journalism.
(Photo via Vanderbilt University)*



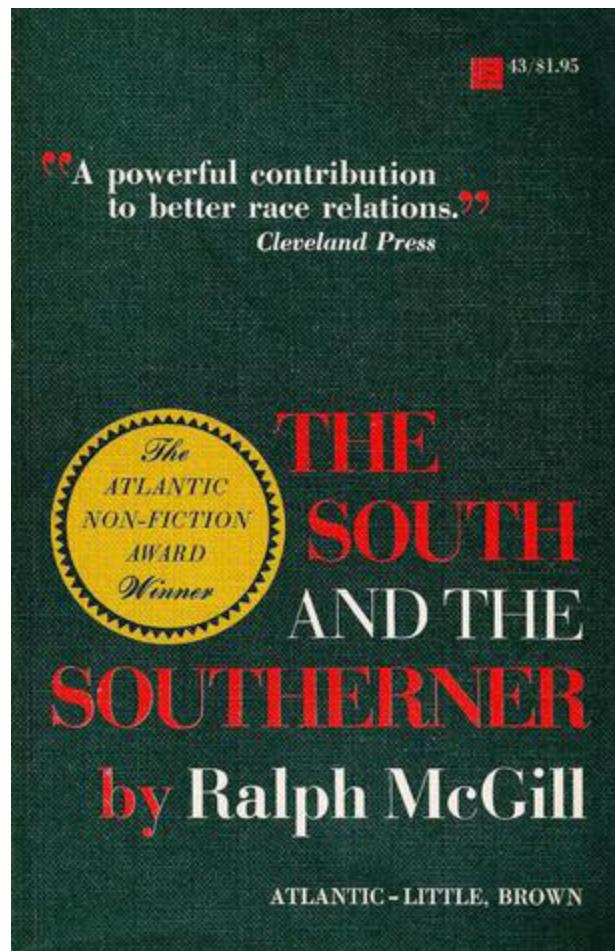
His primary responsibility was sports coverage, but his disgust with the South's civil rights violations spurred him toward the socially and politically conscious writing style that made him famous. One of McGill's first crusades was against the Ku Klux Klan. While others, particularly lower class white Southerners, sought refuge with Klan membership, McGill saw right through them and reported their heinous crimes to any reader that would listen.

Yet, he was still strategic about his content. He knew that even the enlightened reader would tune him out if he appeared to be angry or condescending in every article, so he mixed in feel-good stories about barbecue and local Atlanta citizens.

Still, the death threats rolled in with every critical article. The Klan once burned a cross in the front lawn of his Atlanta home. But he remained devoted to his cause – criticizing the Klan was a moral imperative, something far more important to McGill than the institution of journalism itself.

It was an era when Klan leaders simply blamed blacks and Jews for societal problems. Fortunately, McGill was there to challenge the mob mentality. He devoted many of his columns to the issues of voting rights, desegregation of schools and other Jim Crow laws. He also praised the South when it took steps forward, determined to show younger citizens that the “Southernism” characterized by “mobs burning buses” and “dynamiters of schools and churches” was not the true South. Part of this meant maintaining the integrity of what he saw as an increasingly feckless press.

Discussing Southern newspapers in “The South and the Southerner,” McGill recalls that, “A shocking number of its newspapers had failed in the responsibility of leadership to reveal a region to itself.” He took it upon himself to hold a mirror



The *South and the Southerner* was published in 1963.

up to the South in order to celebrate its triumphs and condemn its shortcomings. The newspaper, as a central resource of community information and, to McGill, leadership, was the mirror the South needed. As he saw it, “The wall is broken – not down,” and he was intent on repairing it.

While his resume – complete with assignments in Cuba and war-torn Germany – reads like the journalist version of the “Most Interesting Man of the World,” McGill’s seminal contribution to journalism may be the morally progressive undercurrent at the base of all of his pieces. Preserving the beautiful, culturally rich South for future generations was more important to him than remaining objectively mute in the face of hatred

and bigotry – even if that meant the occasional soapbox rant.

His publication gave him the tools and the stage to espouse these critical views at a time when, like now, voices of reason were a scarce resource. However, there are some modern-day journalists who have picked up where McGill left off, and who have

He remained devoted to his cause, criticizing the Klan was a moral imperative, something far more important to McGill than the institution of journalism itself.



Ralph McGill is mentioned in Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" as one of the few people who wrote about the civil rights movement in "eloquent and prophetic terms."

continued the legacy of journalists exposing prejudices and holding politicians accountable.

The brilliant Ta-Nehisi Coates continually writes evocative pieces about race and prejudice in America. Similarly, Nikole Hannah-Jones of The New York Times and Slate's Jamelle Bouie continue to investigate the nation's pervasive racism. These writers may be journalistic unicorns in today's digital-first world, but they show that serious journalism is still desperately needed because there is so much about our society we've yet to understand. Think, for example, about the powerful writing done in the wake of Michael Brown's shooting in Ferguson and the ways in which it opened up a conversation about race that continues today.

An example of such reporting was a series of critical essays by The New Yorker's Jelani Cobb about black disenfranchisement in the city of Ferguson: a mostly black city run by a predominantly white city council and police force. His article "Bullets and Ballots," argues that Ferguson was a

time bomb emblematic of the larger struggles that exist in our nation, a struggle defined by persisting inequality and vitriol on both sides. Like McGill's syndicated columns, the work of Cobb, Coates and their contemporaries elevates the national consciousness, challenges the status quo and provides sobering reminders of the rifts that permeate our society.

Yet, the majority of publications in operations today aren't so bold. Which raises the question: Is the press toothless, or merely constricted by the power and popularity of clickbait? The former is a popular argument, but toothless coverage may be a direct result of the rise in clickbait, entertainment-based journalism. Capturing readers is a challenge for any publication, and print newspapers continue to shutter their doors across the nation.

While McGill was inclined to separate his hard-nosed political articles with popular puff pieces, publications nowadays may forgo the hard-nosed

stuff altogether. But, with trust in media at an all-time low, what do they have to lose?

McGill wielded considerable influence through his columns, and the industry thrived through syndication of his work. The business model and the landscape of journalism have both changed since then, but the popularity of the writers listed above reveals that there is still an audience for journalism that tackles the divisive issues, so why not try to give readers the “real reporting” that we so often hear discussed?

By empowering talented, socially conscious writers and editors and giving them the platform they need, the press can fulfill its essential role as a watchdog, seeking out and skewering wrongdoing. Better yet, the press can hold up the walls that, both in McGill’s time and now, seem to crack more every time a Southern politician raises his voice to discriminate against others.

In his book, McGill reflected on the “unfinished region” that was the South after Reconstruction. Poverty, politics and prejudice fractured the region into “Two Souths” – two separate regions in one that still exist today. We are unfinished, and, while being a Southerner is at times “mystical,” as he described it, we are far from the promise of freedom and equality that was etched in our nation’s constitution alongside freedom of the press. To reach that ever-elusive progress, we need journalists like Ralph McGill and, just as importantly, publications like his Atlanta Constitution. ■

McGill constantly reminded Southern readers that bigots stuck in a moral time capsule were hijacking their home and culture.

SNUFFING OUT THE HABIT



A SMOKER'S HISTORY

BY ETHAN SHEPHERD

When cigarettes are mentioned, I envision all the famous cigarette-smokers and the associated caricatures that trail them, like the thick fumes lingering in the air of a silver-screen movie. From the rugged persona of the Marlboro Man, who loves his tobacco as much as his horse, to the cartoonishly wicked Cruella de Vil, gesticulating with her ebony cigarette-holder, to the modern depictions of nameless junkies begging off passersby, the images are memorable and immediately personable. Moreover, they're haunting, like the last words of a noir-film detective as he leaves his femme-fatale behind him.

Even more haunting is the image I have of myself and the cigarettes I have smoked: the morning smoke before coffee or breakfast, the phone call cigarettes and my belief that the nicotine helped to inspire good conversation. I can think back to when I thought smoking cigarettes was a cheap way to show rich taste. Like every smoker on the planet, I didn't just have a nicotine addiction: I had a brand preference. As if I were a connoisseur of wine or cheese or old baseball cards, I could — or so I claimed — detect a difference between the creamy, burning sensations I got from Turkish tobacco versus an all-American blend.

Smoking was also an easy way to talk to strang-

ers or re-evaluate a friend. Like some smokers, I believed I could detect tiny, barely perceivable traits about other smokers from the way they held a cigarette. The only kind of woman who hides her cigarette in her palm and smokes it when half-hidden isn't a woman most men want: too trashy and weird. A guy ought not dangle his cigarette from his fingers like something dainty: is he not suspiciously effete? Anyone who smokes through a filter must think that they are either a gangster or Socrates reborn. Like the musky clouds wafting around Mr. Serious Someone's pipe in an old painting, the smallest wafts could indicate the greatest of lineages and mysterious facts.

Unlike the innermost secrets of Le Club Fumée that have to be learned through regular attendance and astute observation, I can accurately recall my pre-membership days as I reflect on my post-membership status. I was 15-years-old when I began smoking regularly and 23 when I had my last cigarette. Until that mid-point in my teenage years, I had only found short opportunities to try cigarettes for any length of time; always enough to enjoy my novice hacks and coughs but never enough to complete the full initiation into wheezing and oh-so-very sensual sneezing.

It was not until my best friend at the time be-

Like all journeymen I went from borrowing here and there to acquiring the club's accessories for myself.

came a smoker and tapped me for membership that I successfully joined. Like all journeymen I went from borrowing here and there to acquiring the club's accessories for myself. At that point, he and I engaged in rank-climbing and merit-grabbing as few have since. Together we went from half a pack a day to a full pack. We eventually levelled off at the daily serving of two and a half packs each.

More than mere oral pleasure or the allure of engaging in an adult activity while we were still young, smoking seemed to give me and the other teens in my clique a kind of freedom that other small indulgences did not.

Smoking was as much a sophisticated experience as it was a choice. *Yes, I will have a flavored smoke. No, I do not smoke cigarillos. Have you tried my new flavored cigarettes?* I had proudly bought and tried every brand I deemed worthy.

I had no real desire to quit smoking when I first tried for many reasons. My friendship-circles were composed of cloud-blowing smokers who puffed and heaved unrepentantly. They had no misgivings, and they managed to smother my own in waves of human-sprung exhaust. In all the nicotine-stained pathways flowing through my imagination, I did not even have a serious fear of every smoker's boogeyman: lung cancer. The thought of walking down a quiet street without that reassuring weight of a pack in my pocket or a lighter to play with unnerved me more than the thought of tumors.

Smoking was more than a habit. Smoking was the hobby that helped you think; helped you relax; helped you quiet your head in a busy world. A single five-minute session spent smoking one cigarette was like a fine meal that redeemed an otherwise lousy restaurant.

Smoking is a deadly addiction, but what isn't? Too much hot coffee and you can die of esophageal cancer. Too much time spent breathing in the pollution of a big city is just as bad. Too much of anything is bad for you, so why should I have worried about dying because of something I actually enjoyed?

But why do smokers smoke? Like the naïve bystanders to a betting spectacle, non-smokers often presume the very best of the worst of endgames. The chain-smoker or cigar-puffer is a puppet manipulated into visible play by the bedeviled fingers of Sin Itself. The Goody-Goody Think-Well of the World understands the power of lust and longing but has the fortitude to withstand both. The truly satanic goes unsuspected by them; that pure hedonistic delight is the winning success of the whole gamble. Similarly, these same callow kitties purr gracefully as they nap, knowing that every wry joke made by the victims of vice regarding their condition is a disguised plea.

The Goody-Goody never realizes that the wizened smoker who espies a stranger with a plug-hole in his neck nodding solemnly to him does not do so in pity: they're wordlessly honoring a veteran of their own battle. To understand the satisfaction gained from proper observance of the rites one must be present for a moonlit powwow of puffing and quiet contemplation of a shared cigarette's feeble ember. To gain true knowledge one must bite the fruit; be it for goodness' sake or deliciously evil taste.

Despite my glories in the field and my accomplishments with the club, I chose to retire from my campaigns and causes due to the basest of reasons: financing. Therefore, unlike those yet-unseen cancerous growths that threatened my future (and that did not scare me in the least), the cost of my dues became too much to sustain participation as recorded in all the annals.

My escape seemed emphatically dull compared to the romanticism offered by staying in: a pill called Chantix. I had lessening physical hankерings for the stuff of my old thoughts and "tastes," but I was able to ignore the memories of my former habit for over a year. It was easier to stay busy with everyday life than it was to ruminate and reminisce. I was older and purportedly more mature, and I had no need of juvenile distractions anymore. My relapse did not occur until my first year was on the cusp of becoming two.

I was no longer a cynical teenager more concerned with his leisure than his health. I was now a young man who was wary of broken bones and the presumed aging of my body that was stalking my footsteps and general movements. Diseases that left adults bed-ridden and unable to fulfil their own

needs seemed more like tax-collection agents than ghosts, which meant they were not merely real but threateningly so.

The adult I had become tried everything he could to quit. He tried pills again but found that remembering to take the pills caused him to remember why he was taking them, and that these remembrances awakened deeper urges than he had foreseen waking. His dedicated pill-taking might work only so long as he forgot how much he wanted a cigarette to deal with his new, more adult-level problems. There were bills, bad friendships, mean-spirited bosses and weird work schedules. Pills didn't help forget those, but cigarettes did!

He became a different kind of character from the one he typically envisioned himself being. If he did not understand his own urges and needs in an immediate way he had to begin thinking of them in a distant, non-immediate way. He tried hypnotherapy because the pills did not solve what he suspected was a deeper problem—his own love of cigarettes. When he reclined and listened to internet-spawned voices that chanted into his ears and calmed him to the point of an unreal nervousness, all he wanted was another cigarette to recover from the surreal mood that the voice had brought with it. When he sought the advice of the numerous free, seemingly helpful articles by anonymous authors with eloquently worded screeds and sagacious offerings, they seemed only to reinforce his preconceptions or to guide him to new ones. These reinforced notions only bolstered the need for the many cigarettes required to process them after a first consideration.

I eventually stopped trying to deceive myself into believing that there was a sole, end-all fix for a problem that had many open-ended paths that intertwined. I was not a character who needed to be examined and analyzed because he misunderstood things about himself. I was a person who needed to make commitments about the things I already knew. The chief thing that I did know was that although I did enjoy them on some level, cigarettes no longer had a place in my life.

The last time I smoked a cigarette I thought back on the whole history of my relationship with cigarettes. I went over the old memories, tried to feel the old sensations and attune myself to the mood they had inspired. I remember the brands I tried, the instances where I forced myself to go

outside in the cold to smoke a cigarette, knowing that I would rather be warm than shiver for a simple hankering. I thought of the money and time wasted and how those creeping ghouls and phantoms of real life were fierce predators on susceptible prey such as me. I tried to account for all of the creatures and stereotypes, all of the burns and ashes, and each of the coughs and hacks I had suffered.

Despite my glories in the field and my accomplishments with the club, I chose to retire from my campaigns and causes due to the basest of reasons: financing.

There was nothing enchanting in all of those recollections, not a single fairy-tale moment that didn't seem stained by my commitment to smoking. It was then that I realized I did not need pills, potions, patches or something outside myself. All I needed was to accept that I could either learn to control my need or be controlled by it. That was the day before my brother's birthday, and when he visited the next day, I found myself too concerned trying to spend time with my brother to worry about myself or my cravings. I have not smoked a cigarette since.

The last time I was offered a cigarette I discovered I was no longer tempted. A friend at a party, who is one of the last smokers in our circle of mutual acquaintances, lit a cigarette in the most seductive way she knew how and offered me the chance to share a smoke with her. I declined. When I was younger I would have asked myself if I had lost my magic-sense of taste, but I knew I hadn't. I'd just snuffed out the habit. A cigarette really is just something you burn. ■

JEFFERSON'S HAPPY PLACE

A TOUR THROUGH VIRGINIA'S PRESIDENTIAL
PLANTATIONS

BY NANCY BREWKA-CLARK

If you visit the Virginia plantations of four of America's earliest presidents, you'll learn that the U.S. was founded by men who loved stuff they couldn't pay for and had little regard for the people who took care of it. George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison and James Monroe all sank heavily into debt at one time or another. But it was Jefferson who made it the American creed never to be happy with a bird in the hand if you could take out a loan to go after two in the bush.

By the time Jefferson scratched out "property" and replaced it with "pursuit of happiness" while drafting the Declaration of Independence, wealthy colonists up and down the Eastern Seaboard had acquired lots of stuff. Other people were forced to care of that stuff in what was called the "peculiar institution," otherwise known as slavery. Not that the majority of the founding fathers thought slavery was odd in the modern interpretation of the word "peculiar." In this case, it just meant "money-based."

Everybody knows what Monticello looks like because Jefferson's plantation in Charlottesville has graced the nickel since 1938. But despite the acquisition of thousands of acres of land and hundreds of slaves to work it, Jefferson died with a personal debt somewhere between \$1 million and \$2 million

in modern currency.

Being a linguist, Jefferson must have known that the root for the word "happy" meant luck, fortune, happenstance, in other words, something uncontrollable in the long run. When he sat down to pen what was actually going to constitute the law of the land, perhaps he admitted to himself that not everybody was going to be as happy as he was. A black male slave would be counted for census purposes as three-fifths of a person, and a black female for nothing at all. At the turn of the millennium the slave graveyard was finally discovered at Monticello. It's located some 2,000 feet from the house,

At the turn of the millennium the slave graveyard was finally discovered at Monticello. It's located some 2,000 feet from the house, in an area Jefferson referred to as "the Park" with nary a mention of what was planted in it.

in an area Jefferson referred to as “the Park” with nary a mention of what was planted in it.

Jefferson’s protégé James Monroe lost his plantation, Ash Lawn-Highland, to debt as well. With its view of Jefferson’s treetops just two miles away, the house itself is modest inside and out, a gentleman farmer’s property. Out in the back yard sit the restored slave cabins, whitewashed and gleaming. The Monroe Doctrine warned European powers not to meddle in our affairs, but Monroe had no trouble deciding that the solution to keeping the lid on slavery was to send all freed slaves back to Africa. Jefferson, Monroe and Madison were all members of the American Colonization Society, which, along with the support of the U.S. government, established Liberia for this happy purpose. But to their surprise, most freed slaves had no desire to move so far away from home, no matter how humble it was.

James Madison’s widow Dolley couldn’t afford

to keep their grand home just 40 miles to the north in Orange. At Montpelier, there’s a grassy race track for steeplechases, kept up from the time when a 20th-century branch of the fabulously wealthy Du Pont family owned the place. You can see it from the edge of the woods containing the old slave graveyard, which had never been kept up until the last decade’s social pressures dug into the entrenched view of “out of sight, out of mind.” For over a century, slaves toiled on the estate, and when they died, a groundcover of periwinkle and a few stones from the fields where they labored were enough to mark the spot. Twenty-first century archeological excavations found all the graves laid out in the east-west alignment typical of slave burial grounds. One theory has it that slaves were laid to rest with their heads to the west so that their eyes might metaphorically look back to the east at Africa. Another proposes that, being Christians, they were anticipating the arrival of Archangel

Madison's Montpelier (Photo by Linze Lucas)





Monroe's Ash-Lawn Highland

Gabriel from the east to trumpet the end of time. They were all buried at night, by torchlight, the happiest time for a person who didn't own anything, not even his own body, during the day.

Living in a fine house he inherited from his half-brother on the Potomac outside Alexandria, George Washington loved expensive things. Although his worst debt was incurred before the Revolution when the bottom fell out of his tobacco business, in 1789 Washington had to borrow 100 pounds at 6 percent interest from a friend to attend his own inauguration in Manhattan. He was born at Popes Creek about 75 miles to the south on

a property now run by the National Park Service. The ancient family graveyard is still there, although there isn't a trace of the unmarked graves of approximately 150 family slaves.

Of the 300 plus slaves at Mount Vernon, Washington inherited some and some came as part of a dowry when he married the rich young widow Martha Dandridge Custis. Like Popes Creek, the long unmarked slave burial ground at Mount Vernon was laid out near the family tombs. While Washington felt anguish over slavery in the abstract, he was as wily as the next politician when it came to protecting his property. When the seat

While Washington felt anguish over slavery in the abstract, he was as wily as the next politician when it came to protecting his property.

of government was located in Pennsylvania where slaves could be freed after six months' residence in the state, he rotated his, regularly making trips to Philadelphia with them to break the six-month streak, hoping no one would notice.

Not only did he sign the first fugitive slave act in 1793, but he acted upon it when he tried but failed to get his property, young Oney Judge, shipped back from New Hampshire. She'd fled there after discovering the Washingtons were going to give her as a wedding present to Martha's spoiled granddaughter, continuing her years of slavery by another generation. To his credit, Washington did free his slaves in a will written just a few months before he died in 1799. Martha didn't have the power to free the slaves who'd been part of her dowry because they were still considered Custis property even though she'd been married to George for 40 years. After she died in 1802, back they went.

Just as he had the first word on happiness, the last word belongs to Jefferson too. He wrote that sometimes he would lie in bed at night and hear his

slaves playing the fiddle and singing. This was understandable because, unlike their burial ground, their rustic street row of huts and work sheds lay almost beneath his window. If all the DNA evidence linking him to the children his unmarried slave Sally Hemings bore can be trusted, this was a proximity which might have had a more lasting effect on posterity than he'd ever admit. Haunted by debt, Jefferson would stare at the ceiling, probably seeing dollar signs float there like buzzards and wonder how people who owned nothing could be so damned happy. ■

"Jefferson's Happy Place" was named Honorable Mention in SunStruck Magazine's "Out with a Bang!" non-fiction writing contest.

Washington's Mount Vernon (Photo by Renée Comet, via the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association)



OVER THE RIVER AND STABBED TO DEATH

BY RANDY OSBORNE

My childhood home is for sale – bank property, cheap – because of the murder in the backyard. I might buy it.

Not murder by the standard of law (the jury decided) but a violent and fatal act just the same. And not in the yard but in the main room of the house, the room where my grandmother Madeline worked her sewing-machine treadle decades ago. She pushed the fabric through. The needle jumped, and cloth cascaded off the table. The Singer whirred, its clackety chatter like celluloid flapping loose on a full reel when the movie's done.

The curtain can never lift on that screen again, of course. Ridiculous to think. And yet.

Here's what happened at 1802 S. 4th St. in Rockford, Illinois, about a week before Christmas 2011, according to trial testimony. Terry Johnson, 47, visits resident Raymond Gitchel, 59, for the purpose of smoking cocaine. They smoke cocaine. Johnson tries to steal a bag of heroin from another guest. He and Gitchel argue. Gitchel tells Johnson to get out. Johnson refuses. The dispute grows noisy, and someone appears from the second floor of the house with a baseball bat. But Gitchel acts first. He plunges a knife deep into Johnson's thigh. Johnson cries out, "He just stuck me!" Then to Gitchel, "I can't believe you just cut me! I can't believe you just stuck me!" Finally Johnson limps away – trouser leg

no doubt soaked already – complaining that he will need stitches. He doesn't get them. The knife has sheared his femoral artery. Johnson is bleeding to death.

Later, one of Gitchel's housemates reports Johnson is begging for help outside. Everybody ignores this. "Oh well, he should have left," Gitchel remarks. The temperature sinks to 21 degrees that night. Next morning Johnson lies face up in the grass beside the chain-link fence. "What should we do" somebody asks. "I don't know," Gitchel says. "I'm going to make a sandwich."

I love this story. My grandmother Mad would love this story. She raised me.

On pulpy detective magazines Mad raised me. On Poe and Hawthorne and the Holy Bible (Old Testament only, please). On mythology, too, which is why Johnson's thigh injury makes me think of the Grail King, his grievous wound, his barren land.

Mad raised me alone, her husband having jolted the family by leaving for some strumpet he met at work. An old man! They could hardly believe the sap still flowed. But when does it ever not? Many scholars of the Grail legend believe that the word "thigh" is a euphemism for genitals, the king's injury "a dolorous stroke."

In news video the day after the crime,

trench-coated cops tromp the plank steps of Mad's yellow-taped front porch. The same steps where I once sat, chin in hands, and waited for my life to start. I would grow up a writer or doctor – if the latter, a surgeon, specifically. I would incise people. The blade, like words, can harm or heal.

Gitchel paid \$40,000 for the house in 1999. Today the bank asks \$8,365. But the roof leaks, the wiring's shot and the furnace is stripped. "I don't even go inside," the real-estate agent tells me. Floors are falling through. The place is condemned.

In news video the day after the crime, trench-coated cops tromp the plank steps of Mad's yellow-taped front porch. The same steps where I once sat, chin in hands, and waited for my life to start.

In 1986, Ronald Ower: another man knifed and left to die in Delores Park, my favorite patch of San Francisco green. Teenagers wanting to "rob a faggot" attacked Ower as he made his way home. I learned about him while researching morel mushrooms.

A delicacy prized by chefs all over the world, the morel belongs to the genus *Morchella*. Species names roll out like a magical chant: *esculenta*, *rufobrunnea*, *angusticeps*. Ower, a university student and aspiring biologist, was the first to cultivate morels. The "New Scientist" took notice. "Morel enthusiasts rejoice!" The day was nearing when they'd no longer need to "grovel through the woods" questing for "a few of these delectable fungi."

Ranging tan to black, morels are unmistakably phallic, as an author hints in the journal "Mushroom": "I step back, circle and, for a moment, admire the spectacle. Stooping, I run my fingers

gently along the surface of the cap, in and out of the grooves and hollows, down the long rubbery stem."

Ower grew morels on his kitchen table. He filed for a patent, outlined his methods in "Mycologia" and signed a development contract with an agricultural biotech outfit in Michigan. But by the time his patent cleared, Ower was gone. His killing happened, coincidentally, on the night of my birthday. Because I scan the world non-stop for such discoveries, I can't help but notice that Ower's initials match my own. And it makes sense to me that his last name, spelled as if to suggest a debt, is pronounced like a unit of time.

* * *

In 1967, my mother clinched her second husband and retrieved me from Mad. Our time felt less deep than I expected. I had her at last, yet I didn't. *He* had her, in that bedroom down the hall. This my mother and I shared: During the damp seasons, we foraged in the woods for morels. "Delicious because they are wild," she told me, herself now less wild than ever. Super-domestic, in fact. Free of the workplace and happily kitchen-bound, she refined her cooking skills to the delight of my retired stepfather. A few years passed. They decided to scale it up. They bought a restaurant.

Here I washed dishes, swept floors and met Cheryl. Doe-eyed, full-lipped Cheryl, 16, with a pageboy haircut and springy step, at her first job waiting tables. The sexual draw was almost immediate, and mutual.

I was 21, and I was the son of her boss. She wasn't even legal. I didn't care. Did, but didn't.

Also I was the logical choice, wasn't I, when Cheryl's parents told her that she could only attend the outdoor concert at Sinnissippi Park if accompanied by someone older, someone responsible?

The music is nearly over. Cheryl sits between me and her friends. I am behaving. But then, I can feel her. I turn and meet her stare. I lean into that jailbait. Her lips first a pliant mash, then breathily open. Noses to cheeks. Tongues teaching each other, being taught. It goes on for about a half-minute.

We pull away and cast our eyes at anything elsewhere, dizzy.

The rest is hardly worth telling. Cheryl's friends take her home. At work Monday we're both shy. I speak to her in a distant way, almost cordially after

Doe-eyed, full-lipped Cheryl, 16, with a pageboy haircut and springy step, at her first job waiting tables. The sexual draw was almost immediate, and mutual.

that, certain that I'll be taken into custody any day. My parents sell the restaurant, and it's years later when I see Cheryl's wedding notice. The last name of her fiancé is peculiar and sticks with me – might have anyway – and his first name is the same as mine. Naturally, I attach meaning to this, take points. She wanted me.

* * *

In 2013, jurors acquitted Gitchel of murder but convicted him of involuntary manslaughter. They sentenced him to five years in prison, with credit for 508 days served. At the Rockford newspaper's website, where I went to comb the archives for details, the current front page blasted news of a major drug bust. "Nearly 30 people have been taken off the streets along with around two million dollars' worth of cocaine, marijuana and prescription drugs. Among those arrested [are] a dentist, a high school football coach and other area professionals." Out of curiosity, since I knew a few people in town, I scanned the names – and there he was. The other Randy.

Had their marriage lasted? I Googled. Located him, but no Cheryl. There's a Facebook photo. Paunchy fellow in hotel pool with blonde babe, definitely not Cheryl. Rings on their pertinent fingers.

More legwork brought me Cheryl's address. The Google street view shows a single-level house, solid white, set back from the road under a grove of trees that dapple the sunlight. In the driveway a small car, also white. Maybe it's the weekend. Maybe she's home. By herself?

I would contact her. Not online – that's too impersonal. Phone call? Potentially awkward. A letter. I'll compose a letter. Everyone appreciates real mail

with handwriting, ink.

No, I do none of this. Nor will I buy Mad's old place in some sorry attempt to grow again what can sprout one time only and best existed wild. A torn, scattered-to-the-winds patchwork impossible to stitch back together.

But I hope Cheryl has replaced him, replaced the Randy that I foolishly imagine "replaced" me. Gendered humankind roams the earth with lonely holes and then each of us ends up in one. Nomads. Monads.

How can I, this bag of meat, dream ideas from nothing but air, make sparks in mud? How can I begin to know myself, before the credits roll? As with poor Johnson when he staggered from the Gitchel house, nobody wants to hear our shocked complaints. The wound is worse than we know. It finishes us. ■

"Over the River and Stabbed to Death" was named Runner Up in SunStruck Magazine's "Out with a Bang!" non-fiction writing contest.



TWICE THIRTEEN

BY DENISE TOLAN

Italy, 1973

I turned 13 twice that year.

The first celebration began at 5 a.m. after me, my brother and our mother brought our suitcases downstairs and stacked them by my nona's front door so they could easily make the move to the trunk of the taxi when it arrived. We lined up the suitcases like we would be lined up in the plane – my brother by the window, me in the middle and my mother at the aisle. We were flying back to Texas after five weeks in Italy.

"*Sedere*," my nona said, pointing to the heavy chair at the head of her kitchen table. I sat, and she placed a small Italian crème cake in front of me. "*Buon compleanno.*"

We took turns passing around a fork, each of us taking a small bite of the sweet, white dessert. Then, like a magician pulling a rabbit from a hat, my nona reached into her apron pocket and held out a package wrapped in gold foil. She moved the cake and put the box in its place. "*Per te,*" she said. For you.

I tried not to tear the shiny gold paper as I opened the present. I wanted to take it home to use as a bookmark – a souvenir. Inside the wrapped package was a slick plastic pink box with scalloped

edges that opened like I imagined a clam shell might. On a creamy satin pillow inside the pink box was a tiny gold cross.

"*Quanti carati?*" my mother asked.

"*Ma diciotto carati. Cos'altro?*"

"Your nona bought you good 18-karat gold," my mother said, scolding me as if I'd already done something wrong with the gift. "You better take care of it, *mi senti*. You hear me?"

I nodded reverently. I didn't know the difference between 18-karat gold and any other gold, but clearly there was a big one. The tiny cross suddenly felt heavy in my hand. My nona took a used tissue from her apron pocket and wiped her nose. Then she pulled a thin gold chain from the other pocket. I threaded the cross on the chain and handed it back to her to clasp behind my neck.

While she tried to connect the chain from one end to another, I held the hair off my neck and felt the familiar sting of building tears. I cried because the cross was the first piece of nice jewelry I'd ever received, and I knew she must have saved for a long time to buy this gift for me. I cried because when I pictured her reaching into her apron pockets I realized that her spine was so round it was like she was forever looking into her pockets. I cried because when I saw her again next year, she'd be even older.

Another year seemed like a lot for her to endure.

"No cry," she said, turning me so she could see how the cross looked on my neck. "No cry," she said in English with her heavy Italian accent, rubbing the back of my head, pushing my face into her shoulder. "No cry," she said again and again. I was grateful she never said the words in Italian.

I cried because when I pictured her reaching into her apron pockets I realized that her spine was so round it was like she was forever looking into her pockets.

Texas, 1973

The taxi idled by my nona's front door while my mother finished the call to my father. She was making sure he knew what time our plane would arrive in San Antonio. Before hanging up she held the phone out for me. "I'm not wishing you a happy birthday yet," my father said. "It's still August 17th here. We'll celebrate when you land in Texas. Then you'll be a real 13-year-old."

I fingered the soft gold of my new cross as we headed in the taxi toward the bus station and then the airport. I boarded the plane in Milan as a 13-year-old, but somewhere in the air between Italy and Texas, time fell apart in a way I didn't understand, and for a while, I became 12 again.

When we landed in San Antonio, my father hugged me before anyone else. "Now I'll say happy birthday." He'd worn a pair of slacks with a nice shirt tucked in and his good shoes without laces. He looked like many of the Italian men we had just left behind – dark wavy hair, confident eyes, a cruel jaw. He and my mother held hands on the way to the car and smiled shyly at one another like a couple who'd been separated for the summer while they attended camp.

When my brother and I spotted our dog Bianco sitting like a chauffeur in the driver's seat of my dad's truck, we began to run. I opened the door, and Bianco licked me crazily, hungrily, without restraint. He had been my 12th birthday present. My brother got in the truck and held up an empty

McDonald's bag. Bianco sniffed it.

"You ate at McDonald's?" my brother asked, suspiciously. My father hated McDonald's.

"The dog likes their milk shakes," he said, shrugging. "What are you going to do?" We all laughed. The moment felt like a scene from a sitcom I hoped to watch again and again. In the tight back seat of the truck I held Bianco and tried to smell the milk shake already dry in the fur around his snout.

At a stop light a family in the car next to us looked into our truck window. I was proud of what they saw – my beautiful mother wearing fresh lipstick, the American Eskimo dog licking my chin, and my father, singing loudly and beautifully with the windows wide open – "When the moon hits your eye like a big pizza pie that's amore." I would have been jealous if I'd been in the other car.

For the first few days of my 13th year, I thought it might have worked – the candles, the prayers, the trip to Saint Antonio's shrine. Then my father woke in the middle of the night. He might have tripped over the dog or an old memory but whatever hit him started the familiar descent into his unique brand of madness.

He might have tripped over the dog or an old memory but whatever hit him started the familiar descent into his unique brand of madness.

Italy, 1973

During the school year my mom worked in a daycare center so she could buy the plane tickets that would take us back to Italy every year. My father never went. He had to work, or watch the dog, or be home in case of an emergency. No one ever pushed too hard. Italy was ours.

We always left Texas in July, flying from Atlanta to Milan where we boarded a small airplane to Ronchi. From Ronchi, we took a bus to Udine. The first few days at my nona's house were recovery days from the travel. We were happily confined to my nona's dark, quiet row house playing briscola,

eating handmade gnocchi and watching television shows we hadn't seen in a year. In the mornings my mom would carry a warm pitcher of water upstairs so we could take a sponge bath. There was a toilet downstairs but no shower. We adapted quickly.

Left on my own, I would go into my nona's bedroom, open her armoire and look at her slips. She had folded them all beautifully. Between each slip was a delicate piece of tissue paper like the kind fine department stores wrap clothes in. I'd discovered the slips one day when my nona asked me to get one for her.

"Nona," I'd said, seeing so many slips I wasn't sure which one to choose. "*Ci sono troppi*. There are too many."

"Look on the left and count three slips down. That's the one I need. *Avanti* – come on."

When I told my mother she shook her head as if the story was one she hadn't heard in a long time. "She told me she always wanted to find her slips even in the dark. It must be from the war when they had no electricity. The paper in between each slip helps her count," my mother said, then sighed. "Slips are the only nice things your nona ever owned."

When I was sure no one would come find me, I'd unfold my nona's delicate slips and wrap them around my shoulders like mink stoles. I pretended I was the heroine in an old foreign film who had done something brave to keep her family together. In my movie, we never went back to Texas.

Across the street from my nona's house was the University of Udine. I'd sit for hours in the upstairs window watching the students come and go. I studied them, trying to figure out what made them Italian and me so American. Was it the way they kept talking as they greeted each other with a kiss on one cheek and then the other? Was it the way they held their chins slightly upward as if to say they were listening, but still believed their own ideas were the best? Was it the ease in their step as they walked the ancient brick streets never looking for places they might trip? People would stop my brother and me and ask, "*Americani?*" Even when we answered in Italian they would smile; "*Si, si. Americani.*" I walked up and down Via Superiore for hours on end pretending I had a mink stole on my shoulders, mimicking the chin and the walk. I wanted to be a part of this motherland so when I returned to the fatherland it would feel like the

foreign place.

After a few days, my mother would sense a shift in our energy. She'd wake us early in the morning and take us to the bus terminal for our annual pilgrimage to Ciseriis. Even though my brother and I were excited about leaving the house, we were never excited about the first stop in the small village of Ciseriis.

"I hate this boring place," my brother would say, recognizing from the bus window the wooden picnic table beneath a chestnut tree that let us know we were getting close.

"*Stazito*," my mother would whisper. "Ciseriis is our village," she would say, pointing out the window with her long, skinny finger. "This is where we come from. This is where my mother was born, where I was born, where your sister was born. *Ricorda*. Remember."

Don't look for Ciseriis in a guidebook. The bus drops passengers off in front of San Carlo Barromeo Catholic church because there is nowhere else to drop anyone off. Every year when our bus stopped in front of the church, the priest would run out as if he'd been waiting for us since the last year. And every year he would perform the same routine - shake his head, hug me tightly, and exclaim, "Olgetta – you are so grown up."

Olga was my sister. She was the first-born child of my mother and father, but she was 14 years older than me and there were no siblings between her birth and mine. She had lived in this village until she was 11-years-old. That is when my father returned to claim back my mother and was forced to take his daughter as well.

Once I had listened from another room as my mother told a friend how my father left her alone in Italy for 10 years. She said he left when my sister was 6-months-old, and she had no idea where he had gone. She thought he might have gone to America, because he always talked about Washington D.C. and the cherry blossoms he swore bloomed in colors so bright you had to wear sunglasses to look at them, but she never found out, even after his return, exactly where he had been.

My mother said those had been tough years because he never sent any money to her, but every few months she would get a letter from him – mailed by an old friend in Udine.

"I'm watching you," the letter would say. "If I see you with another man, you and your daughter will

be sorry.”

The “your daughter” part stayed with me for a long time. I knew my sister was his child because out of all of us, my sister looked just like my father. It took me a few years to realize that my father’s attitude towards her went way beyond any question of paternity. She might have been his by chance, but my brother and me were his by choice.

“No,” my mother would say to the priest. “This is Denise. Olga is already grown with a baby of her own.” The priest would look disappointed, as if I were to blame for my sister’s growing up and his ultimate aging.

He always talked about Washington D.C. and the cherry blossoms he swore bloomed in colors so bright you had to wear sunglasses to look at them.

My nona, not one to treat priests with much reverence, would leave us behind and begin walking down a dirt road toward a small enclave of houses grouped in a circle around a well. My mother’s cousin Primo lived in one of the houses. The house had once been her family home, and she was on her way to claim the best chair at the kitchen table.

My mother would linger at the church, speaking in Friulian to the priest. It was a dialect I despised because my mother only spoke it with my father, her sister and her mother. It sounded nothing like the Italian she spoke with everyone else in our lives.

“*Bing, bing,*” she would say softly to the priest.

“*Buona,*” I would say loudly to my brother. “She means *buona.*” When she spoke in Friulian it felt like she was talking behind a closed door.

Once in a while I would hear a catch in her voice and then my father’s name. The priest would take her hands, and they would pray. But I always wondered why my mother cared so much about the thoughts of a priest who could never remember who I was.

At Primo’s house my brother and I would drink

fizzy seltzer water from an old refrigerator then chase chickens around the yard. Primo had never married and seemed nervous about having children in his house. Boys named Primo were always the first-born sons, but my mother told us once that this Primo was actually the second cousin named Primo. The first one had been in the war and when he came home he fell in love with a woman from a neighboring village who was poor. Poorer than Primo’s people. His parents forbade the marriage, and the first Primo said he respected their decision. A few days later Primo number one came in from the field, ate his soup, took out a pistol and shot himself in the head. I always wondered if the table in the second Primo’s kitchen was the same table the first Primo had eaten his soup at.

“You ask too many questions,” my mother said when I asked. But I noticed she didn’t like to sit at the table either.

While my nona looked at old pictures and talked about the land with Primo, my mother found ways to entertain us. She showed us the hole in a closet in the hallway where they’d used the bathroom as children. She’d walk us to the fields to see the aging grapevines and pet the goats.

Occasionally we’d walk around the circle of houses. She was hoping her old friend Concetta would come outside, but I knew Concetta never would and was surprised my mother still thought she might. A few years back, we had gotten off the bus and there was Concetta waiting to board. My mother dropped her purse on the ground to hug her old friend. But in the blink of an eye, my nona pulled my mother back and placed her palm on Concetta’s chest, pushing her away. My mother reached down to pick up her purse and never looked back at Concetta. When I did, Concetta was crying.

“Why, mom?” I asked as we followed my nona to the village. “Why wouldn’t she let you talk to your friend?”

“When my father got black lung disease from the mines,” my mother whispered, “Concetta told people he had tuberculosis. Everyone shunned our family. My mother has never forgiven her.”

I loved my nona, but the list of people she wouldn’t forgive never seemed long enough to include my father. Whenever I tried to tell her how bad things were at home, she would turn her back to me and say, “*Non parliamo contro i padri.*” We do

not speak against the fathers.

After we walked around the village, my mother took us far up the side of the hill so we could see the village from above. Once she promised to show us where she and her sisters had spent hours looking down at a house on the far side of the village, laughing at the antics of the people who lived there.

"One of the men had a little hat, and he would take it off and tip his head to the wall," she said. "We laughed so hard." When we got to the ledge my mother showed us how to lay on our stomachs and push ourselves forward to see down the side of the hill.

I looked over. In the courtyard below were several men and women wearing what looked like hospital gowns. I figured out very quickly that this was not a house at the bottom of the hill, but a hospital for people with mental disorders.

"Mom," I said. "You were laughing at disabled people."

"I didn't know," she said, her face red with embarrassment. "We didn't know."

It was the first time I began to question her judgment.

A few days later Primo number one came in from the field, ate his soup, took out a pistol and shot himself in the head.

Texas, 1973

Sometimes the neighbors would call the police. Sometimes not. When my father woke at night and that gear in his head got stuck on rage, he would rip the pictures off the walls, toss the contents of drawers on the floor and fling plants and coffee cups at the furniture. Someone in the house was always a bitch or an asshole, and none of us deserved all he did for us. By the time I was 13 twice, I had a sense of what he'd given up for us – an education, the hope of a good job, his chance to fish alone by the ocean.

On a lucky night, my father would wander into

the backyard screaming and yelling at the top of his lungs. My mom would spring into action, grabbing my brother and me and driving us to sleep at one of her friend's houses. But some nights he would storm through the house listening for anything that would call attention his way. On the mornings after, we walked to the kitchen ignoring the debris in the house and on each other. Our house looked like a burglar had ransacked it, but we sat next to the burglar like it was just another day.

Italy, 1973

After a few hours at Primo's house another bus would come to take us to Gemona. Gemona was a larger city and there we would eat a late lunch before walking the few blocks to the Sanctuary of Saint Anthony. I always thought it was an awesome coincidence that we lived in a city in America named after my mother's favorite saint.

"I thought it was a sign," my mother told me once. "When we came to America your father asked me if I wanted to move to Virginia or San Antonio. When I heard the name, I said San Antonio." I wondered a lot about what life would have been like in Virginia.

My mother held my hand as we walked behind the newer, grander church and toward the ancient ruins in the back. To get to the statue of Saint Anthony, you had to walk through a covered rock hallway – something like a small tunnel. The stone smelled of age and smoke and the touch of thousands of fingers and hands. A long line of people shuffled single file through the tunnel, stopping often to read the notes of thanksgiving left to St. Antonio for miracles delivered. There were pictures taped to the notes as well. One picture was of a small boy without legs sitting on what looked like a broken down tractor. "Thank you, St. Antonio for saving our son after he fell from the tractor and was run over." After a few dozen notes, I felt hot and sick to my stomach, overwhelmed by the intensity of the emotion stuck to the walls.

My mother never let go of my hand. The closer we got to the end of the tunnel, the stronger the scent of incense became. Once past the notes and pictures, we entered a small room. There were rows of hard wooden kneelers stretching across the brick floor all facing the statue of Saint Anthony

on the back wall. Candles burned in votive racks, on hastily constructed shelves on the walls and at the feet of St. Antonio. People and smoke and sorrow took up all the air. I would begin poking holes in the stories from the pictures on the wall – faltering in my faith already. Even though the boy who'd been run over by the tractor lived, he had no legs. I wasn't sure it was a full miracle. My mother would squeeze my hand, perhaps sensing I was about to bolt.

"Kneel down," she'd say. "Pray for your father. Pray for St. Antonio to make him change. He makes miracles happen."

And I would. I would kneel down and pray as hard as I could. My nona bobbed her head back and forth while moving her lips in a stream of words I could not hear. My mother pressed each bead of the rosary to her mouth. Occasionally I would catch my brother looking around or trying to read a hymnal, and I'd pinch him. I was not about to let his lack of attention stand in the way of a miracle.

"Kneel down," she'd say. "Pray for your father. Pray for St. Antonio to make him change. He makes miracles happen."

Texas, 1973

No matter how angry he was, my father always walked past my room. I had seen him break my brother's arm and kick my sister down the driveway. I'd seen him bite my mother on her breast. I was the only one my father never hit.

I asked my mother if he was really my father.

"Don't be stupid," she said.

"He never hits me, Mom."

"It's because you were born under *una buona stella* – how do you say – a lucky star."

Somehow, in the light of day, that made sense to me.

But in the middle of the night, I'd blame myself each time I heard a voice plead with him to stop. In the dark, on my stomach, I memorized every sound flesh can make when it is struck. I accepted that each punch, slap and hit was because of me – be-

cause I had faltered in my faith of St. Antonio. "Your mother doesn't love me as much as I love her," my father said when he picked me up from my first youth group meeting after our return from Italy. I noticed a scratch under his chin from the night before. "She only loves your bitch sister."

I sat quietly in the truck. I'd learned that saying anything at times like those was like throwing a rock at a hornet's nest.

Italy, 1973

We were filled with a sense of hope when we left the sanctuary of St. Anthony. We boarded the bus, headed back to Udine and ate dinner at my nona's solid table made from the wood of the chestnut trees that grow in the forest near Ciseriis. Each time we made this pilgrimage my mother believed this would be the time St. Antonio would heal my father; would make the impossible possible. And each time I wanted to believe it too.

Although everyone knows Saint Anthony as San Antonio de Padua, not everyone knows that he visited Gemona in 1227 to build a chapel honoring the Blessed Virgin Mary. Anthony never completed the building, but the ruins remained. The tunnel leading to the chapel was built from those ruins. In 1976 a great earthquake demolished the little chapel. I imagine all the notes, all the pictures, all the miracles were lost too.

We never returned to Gemona after 1975.

And there never was a miracle for my father. ■

"Twice Thirteen" won the Grand Prize in SunStruck Magazine's "Out with a Bang!" non-fiction writing contest.

POETRY

THE ACHE FOR
HOME LIVES IN ALL
OF US, THE SAFE
PLACE WHERE WE
CAN GO AS WE ARE
AND NOT BE
QUESTIONED.

- MAYA ANGELOU

HER DAD CALLED HER "CRECK"

BECCA LAMARRE

Reflections caught behind the poplar tree
Gangly girl crooked with yesterdays
Careless lest for the praise
Of the apron west of the stucco skin.

Folk know to arrange round railcar
Crossings – piles of lines that carry
Other's notions of meaning
Like a whisper as they pass leaking

Into the folds of innocent crusts by.
Don't care if you're Italian or Irish or
Native or African American they don't
Say who or where or how or why

To know Jesus but not of a Jew.
This is the haute of the valley.
A blood brown river runs silent,
Gangly girl dips her toe and it bites back.

She can smell the grass and feel
Where she stabbed a monarch abdomen
Soft and sweet and wings slightly paled
Bare now on the black rock trail.

Even if you leave she'll never change place
For a seed planted a starling spore
The lung doctor will tell you later so
Your lips can curl despite your plight.

BOXES

ANINA ROBB

The things I collected in my childhood
have long been packed away
in shoe boxes on the top shelf of my closet.

Sometimes when I'm hanging a jacket,
a box falls: buckeyes, sparrow feathers,
and pottery chips scatter.

I hold each one in my hands:

the tempting nuts, still poison,
the feathers of the sparrow, still buried
in the back yard, the pottery I dug for and saved.

I always wondered who owned these things,
if because I held them, they were mine.

I gather them up, again.

How tender the skin on my hand has grown.
And all the while I pretend
I'm callused over so thickly

that someone would have to peel for days
to find out who I really am.

FIFTEEN YEARS



STEVE SHILLING

To me, they will always be
seven, playing kickball at recess
with that big, red, industrial
rubber ball, shooting marbles
into a big dirt pit, all my winners
going into a Maxwell House can.

Later today, they will be plumper,
working odd jobs, factory work,
divorced, drunk, some with jail time.

To me, they will always be
seventeen, snapping towels
in the locker room, thin,
muscular, braggarts of the
things we said we did, but
know most of us didn't do.

Later today, we will make
small talk, searching for
something to say, nothing
having changed, no one else
having gotten out of our town,
not even in the next fifteen years.

They will die in this town, still
not doing most of the things
they will say they have done.

THE SILENCE OF THE NIGHT

AMANDA TUMMINARO

It is unsettling, the way nothing stirs
except that traveling bug upon a stem.
I have built my island tropics
in lieu of my lonesome nature.
This is a micro gesture, though,
for tears still fall from their saucers.

It's as if I walk alone in the night,
as though everyone is asleep or perished
or vanished by the hand of a thief.
During the night my mood shifts like dough
and I am in the fingers of the wind,
their uncertainty and their billows.

There are no sounds to verify my existence.
The ambulance is dead and buried
'til the sliver of frostbitten morning.
My thoughts are my only company –
they are like ladies sitting with me on the porch,
gabbing our gossip and sipping tea.

BEAUTY SLEEP

CATHERINE MCGUIRE

The brambles slowly engulf their yard, topped
with trumpets of morning glory.

Inside the house they sleep, wrapped in layered
dreams of the past, layers of *could-have-been*.

Exotic treasures tangle like yarn, drifting far
away from their intent. Jewel-tone cloths
cover delicate yearnings, wooden cubes corral
a few tamer philosophies.

The world snowed them both with promises;
they were far too open. Anything could happen.

So the wise witch ensorcelled,
sent them dreaming their hearts weren't broken
by the needle-sharp tragedies they'd witnessed.

They'd love to wake, yet somehow they know the mirror
will tell them ages have passed. They know they will wake to old age,
to wishes turned bramble, as they trade dream for life, then death.

FICTION

**A HOME
WITHOUT
BOOKS IS A
BODY WITHOUT
A SOUL.**

- MARCUS TULLIUS CICERO



THE LAST STOP CAFÉ
KAREN CHAU

For all the time spent thinking about what happens after you die, nothing prepares you for the reality of nothing. I died a long time ago, but I still haven't gotten used to it. Nothing isn't a thing you get used to, just a thing you become. And I was never going to end up as nothing. Not while I still remembered. Without details, every story sounds like the same story. Young girl, long of hair, pretty of face, in love—enough to incite the gods to anger, enough to incite others to envy. But mine's got the kind of finish that distinguishes: the long reach of the divine, dragging her into the Underworld. Eurydice, a name that held music, that brooked like river water, until she crossed the river she couldn't escape. It's always sad, the death story. Sharp and twisted without any chances of escape. So I grew as sharp and twisted as I needed to be to outrun it.

I did the only thing that made sense. I traded an old necklace for a car—a beat-up old Chevy that ran all right—and I drove. The underworld was as packed as tenements. Souls without bodies slithering around like a terrarium full of slugs, wet in their own slime, reaching for spaces of glass to cling to. By choice, mostly. Or, at least, that's what I'd like to think. I'd like to think it was because they were looking for some memory of warmth or closeness that they missed. I understood wanting it, I guess, but I just couldn't be part of it. Too sticky, too suffocating, too forgiving. I wanted time to lodge my grievances. To burn, rage, countersue. I didn't want to be pinned down like another insect against the glass, there for Death to see and study and mock. I wanted to leave, but who could leave?

So I chose the next best thing.

Driving from corner to corner of the Underworld on a tank of gas that always remained quarter-full. Whole landscapes appearing and disappearing in the slashes of glass that weren't smothered by dirt and grit, glimpsing shards of life like an incomplete mosaic—small encampments with fire pits and tents, dirt mound houses, lopsided cabins with logs jutting out like impudent chins, lean-tos and teepees, whole cities rising out of the dirt, lit in the grimy yellow of kerosene lamp and torchlight. It was an incomplete way of seeing the world, but that's life in the Down There—Incomplete.

I happened upon Last Stop in the regular course of things. Like everything else down here, it looked faded, a firefly in a jar a day away from dying, but there were several trucks parked in front, and I figured my car wouldn't look too out of place. A diner can't be anything more or less than what it is. Good to let yourself indulge in some of the familiar routines once in a while. A cup of coffee is as good as every other that you remember, tasting like ash the moment you touch the rim of the cup to your lips. You take what you can get. The dead need to remember something, so that's what we remember. The old rituals. The familiar habits. The addictions. The vices. It isn't what you'd figure, but death isn't for the living. It's like having your face pushed into ice water. You can imagine it all you like, try to prepare for how you think it'll feel, but the shock will cut right through all the thinking and speak straight to the body. Knives to

the face, that's what it's like.

She was a waitress there when I met her. Nobody to wait on, but she waited anyway.

She was one of those mothers, those *wives*, that didn't know what to do when there was nobody left to mother, nobody left to wife. I guess she thought she was good at it, good enough for it to be her only calling. Until she was called.

All I expected was a cup of ashy coffee and then, me on my merry. It seems stupid now, the way we spent our years thinking of death as some kind of bright light of knowledge. The dead, all-seeing, all-knowing. Wise. Wheat fields, smelling fresh as crisp laundry, bountiful and eternally pleasant. The truth doesn't smell quite so nice. We aren't any wiser or better, just less opaque. When I walked into the diner, it looked like every other rest stop I'd ever passed: dimly lit, tabletops sticky with syrup and spilled sugar, maybe half a dozen patrons inside.

She was standing with another waitress by the cake stand. The cake was coconut cream—or maybe it was a pie, who can tell—with two big wedge slices cut out of it. She was gossiping. I didn't know who she was. I didn't care. I walked right up to the counter, passing the three truckers seated one after the other, chain-smoking in unison, the bags under their eyes triple-lined, the whites shot with red like cracks in a dried riverbed, fretting deadlines longer passed than they were. I said, "I'm looking to get some service."

The other waitress rolled her eyes and disappeared into the kitchen, but she stayed where she was, cracking her gum and eyeing me. There were paunches over her hips, her figure wide and heavy-set like all women who bore fruits, plural. Her make-up had been done garish that morning, peacock-blue swipes against her eyes, neon pink against her mouth, her cheeks. Showgirl chic. "Well," she said, "aren't you *sweet*."

I stared. My mouth must have been hanging slack because she made a clucking noise with her tongue, all false concern.

"Careful," she said. "You'll get stuck that way."

"Pie," I said. "Apple."

"Careful," she repeated. "That sort of thing gets some people in trouble."

They tell you death is peace, all quiet and calm and restful, when all it turns out to be is just silent and still. Not the same thing, but you get used to it, and all the while, everyone keeps going, living in the shadows of what life used to be and pretending it's the same. Grunts for words, ash for food, mime for real movement. Everyone turns inside themselves, pushing every bit of aliveness they've got left into just being. It's hard enough to remember who you once were, what you once lived. You waste all that energy on pretending to be alive, and you lose everything that once defined your life.

What I mean is it wasn't common to find someone like Miss Apple Pie who had the energy to speak.

Maybe it had something to do with just how long we'd been underground. People like us have seen all the newcomers, traveled all of the paths, and we figured we'd rather bet the house and lose than risk never playing.

Her face was one of those you couldn't look away from. It was almost sculpted out of marble—you could see the thumbprint of creation marked on the cornea of her dark eyes. Lines cut at the corners of her mouth and eyes like waves crashing to shallows against the shore, freckles sprayed over one cheek where the sculptor forgot to dust off the grit after sanding it down. Even the imperfections, carved.

Like recognizes like. She looked through me, her black eyes flicking over me. "You have something you want to say," she said. "So say it."

"You don't meet many people who talk down here," I said.

"Yeah," she said. "You talk plenty."

I asked for another piece of pie. My stomach, nothing more than a pit of worms, squirmed with something that felt like hunger. "Those that knew me called me Eury," I said.

She narrowed her eyes. "Did I used to know you?"

I shook my head. "I don't think so. If you do, I don't remember you."

She shrugged, walking over to fetch the steaming coffee pot. "I don't remember you either," she said, pouring some into a cup and sliding it towards me. "And I remember everyone. But I suppose there's a first for everything. How'd you die?"

The only kind of cachet left in a world without meaning, without merit, without direction. I gave the usual answer. "The first or second time?"

She arched a brow and leaned her hefty bosom against the counter. Her apron strings waved like the sway of a hip. "Now that's a story."

"You tell yours if I tell mine?"

"Fair is fair," she said.

"The first time, it was a snake," I said. "I stepped on it. It bit me. Died."

"Isn't it just like them," she said. "And the second?"

"They let my husband come for me. They said he could have me back, but only if he didn't look back."

She darkened. "They don't seem to like spy before you buy. And I'm guessing..."

I nodded. "No returns or exchanges. Don't pass go. *Et cetera et cetera.*"

She clicked her tongue. "Some men can't be trusted for that sort of thing," she said.

"Well," I said. "Who's to say it was a fair deal in the first place?"

"That's true," she said, "but then again, you'll never know, will you?"

"Cheerful," I said. "How about you?"

"Not much different. Raining fire, destruction, the world going dark and switching off because someone got tired of keeping it."

"And what happened? You got caught?"

"Got caught looking back," she said, refilling my cup. Her nametag, one of those

cheap plastic things, rustled with her movement. I looked up, expecting to see something old. Hagertha, maybe. Glory-of-God. But the tag was blank, nothing but black. “So I was turned into a pillar of salt.”

“A pillar.”

“An enormous column,” she said. “Enough to pay thirty thousand Roman soldiers.”

“Wow.”

She shrugged. “Depends on their pay scale, I guess.”

“Why’d you do it?”

“Everything was on fire,” she said. “We were leaving. My family, me, my girls. Supposed to be headed for a better start, a new beginning. How can you start something without knowing how the last ends?”

“And how did it end?”

Her smile coiled like a snake in the grass. “Bright light and the sobs of women.”

“That’s poetic,” I said.

“I’ve had a long time to think about poetry,” she said.

“And your husband?”

“Gone,” she said. “I don’t know where. Maybe the other place. He always was more pious.”

“Better at following the rules,” I said. “That would have helped me out.”

“Maybe we should have exchanged husbands,” she said. “Maybe we would have lived better lives.”

“Sterling silver?”

She hooted a laugh. “Linen tablecloths.”

I lifted my cup of coffee, pressed the hot rim of it against my lips, imagining it as a kiss. “We wouldn’t have met each other.”

“Yes,” she said. “But I wouldn’t be salt.”

“You aren’t now.”

She flushed with color. “Aren’t I?”

I don’t know how long I spent there in that hole with her, eating her dead food. Whittled down the number of cakes until the cook had to be woken up to make something fresh. Fry some potatoes or something, who knows. I wasted pots of coffee trying to convince her to come with me. See the world, leave the diner, just plain get out. “Isn’t it better than looking at nothing?” I asked.

“Everything is a lot of nothing,” she replied. She was cheerful that way.

You ask me, I think she was afraid. Who wouldn’t be after being granulated and made whole again? I think she just didn’t want to be left behind. She didn’t like to run, wasn’t cut out for it. When you’re a runner, and I am, that panic deep in your bones tells

you to go and all you want is to blot out the world. You don't need to remember (What's there to want to hold onto?), not when you're trying to start over. She was The Discarded, her family moving on without her. A pile of salt the sea forgot to reclaim.

I tried to sell it. "You get out there and start seeing everything outside of these four walls, and you'll love it. You'll see."

"Why are you pushing this so hard?" she said.

"Maybe I'm tired of being alone," I said. "Maybe I like company that talks back for a change." That was enough of the truth to be a good lie. It's hard to tell someone you want them around because you need someone who knows exactly what you went through. Who knows when to talk and when to stay quiet. It's hard to say you want them to stick around because there's no support group for Those Punished by the Divine. (What a club that'd be if there was one. You'd need stadiums!)

So I told her, "It'll do you good." I told her, "You need to get out before you get as silent and stir-crazy as the rest of them." I said, "You haven't even seen the way the road looks when you approach the border to the living, and the light spills over and drowns everything in gold like Midas all over again."

I don't know how much time passed while she thought it over, but the cook fried his third batch of potatoes and beat the batter for the fifth cake when she reluctantly agreed. There was exhaustion in her eyes, a quiet triumph in the other waitress, and I knew I hadn't done it alone. I thought about asking the other girl's name, considered learning her death story and thanking her, but I didn't. Only met her glance from across the room and nodded my head.

She nodded back.

Sometimes that's all you have space for.

"What am I supposed to call you?" I said.

She glanced down at the black plastic nametag. She carefully undid the pin and pulled it free from her shirt. She smelled like frying oil, carried it with her whenever she moved. "I suppose," she began, haltingly, "you can call me—mm, no—or maybe..."

"You don't remember your name?" I said.

"L.W." she said. "You can call me that."

"L.W." I repeated. "You got a lot of things to bring?"

She glanced back at the row of coffeepots keeping warm on their burners. "No," she said. "I have nothing."

"That's for the best," I said. "Nothing to leave behind. Everything to pick up fresh."

"You'd know more about that than me," she said.

I sniffed. "You say that like it's a bad thing."

She didn't answer.

"When did you want to leave?" I said. "I can give you all the time..."

She shook her head, interrupting me. "We can go as soon as you want," she said. She untied the strings of her apron and pulled it loose, setting it down on the counter. "We

can go right now, if you want. It doesn't make any difference to me."

"Sure," I said. "If you want."

She twisted the top of the salt shaker loose. "Yes," she said. "That sounds good." She licked the pad of her thumb and buried it in the mound of salt inside the shaker.

"After you," I said.

She set her thumb in her mouth and sucked the salt off. At my curious glance, she said, "In memoriam."

Inside the car, she fussed with the dials. "I know it doesn't look like much," I said, as she punched defrost, "but it runs, and that's really all you can ask, isn't it?"

"Is it?" she said, turning another dial. Hot air smelling strongly of exhaust blasted out of the vents. I turned the dial to off.

"Where do you want to go?" I said.

"Wherever you were headed is fine."

I switched the car into reverse. "You can look back now, if you want," I said, pulling out from the parking spot and turning towards the road. "No one's going to turn you into seasoning."

Her smile was thin. "Can you imagine? Meat tenderizer. MSG. Bouillon."

I shrugged, my foot dropping down against the accelerator heavy and hard. The wheels revved with a whirring roar of cylinders, and then we were sprinting forward into the distance. "Your choice," I said.

"Never seems that way," she said. "Where are we going?"

"North," I said.

She sniffed. "Specific."

I didn't tell her before she agreed to come along, but I figured if she had any objection, she'd let me know long before we got there. I could count on her to say something, even if what she said was backhanded and indirect in that maternal fashion. I was headed north—that wasn't a lie—but where I was headed was the Line of Light, the uppermost boundary which connected the Underworld with the world of the living.

You could call it a morbid curiosity, if you wanted. It would have been the threshold Orpheus took me across, if he had managed to stay on task. I wanted to see it again. It's the beauty that stays with you, the kind you remember—light from the world of the living filtering past the thick veil that separated the two realms, all warm and orange-gold. Rumor went that if you stood where the shafts of light fell, you could feel warm again. Only briefly, but sometimes a minute is enough. A deep warmth that radi-

ated down to your bones like you were coming alive again, like falling in love, like the first time you look at your baby, like your journey through the birth canal. That's where I wanted to take her. Somewhere to remind her that, with all of the empty time that was our lot, there was still something to make you want to keep going. Heat and light.

By the time we got there, the light was nothing more than a puddle of yellow like a pool of urine in the street. She approached it carefully as if she was afraid it would startle and sprint into the brush. "Is it all right...?" she said, extending her hand over it. The light splashed onto the back of her hand, a sickly jaundiced color, and she gave a nervous little giggle.

"Can you feel it?" I said.

"Something," she said. "I think."

We stayed until the light retreated completely onto the side of the living, and then we sat and watched it scribble shapes. She sat on the ground, her arms clasped around her raised knees, staring at it. "Does it always feel like that?" she said. "I can't remember it from before."

I closed my eyes and tried to summon the memory of a summer breeze. The smell of olive trees, the soil loamy and springy beneath my feet, youth and fresh blood. "Was there a lot of light where you were from?" I asked.

She exhaled. "It was...always warm," she said, "Hot. Had to keep my hair tied up just to keep from sweating to death. The light was blinding."

I didn't turn to look at her. I knew my eyes on her would be too much. "You can never look at it straight on," I said. "That's what they say."

"I thought the saying was to walk into the light."

I smiled. "Only on the other side. On this side, all that'll do is break you into pieces."

She hummed her agreement and kept looking. We sat like that until the light came back, reappearing in swirls of dark browns and deep blues like the first risings of a bruise. Her eyes were red, swollen around the edges when she looked at me. If I were the kind to make guesses, I'd have guessed she cried.

"You want to leave now?" I said. "I only planned this as a quick stop."

"Yes," she said. "I want to go back."

"Haven't you heard?" I said with a thin grin. "You can never go back."

"To the Last Stop," she said. "I want to go back to work. To the diner."

For some reason, I didn't expect it. I had changed her mind. I sang my song, and she had listened to it all. "Why?" I said. "What's waiting there for you?"

She stood, brushing the dirt off of her skirt. "You wanted me to see the world, and I came. I saw. I want to go back to the things I left behind."

I figured that for a lie, but if she wanted to tell me, she would have. My jaw clenched and I nodded. "All right. I'll take you."

The drive back was quiet. She didn't talk. It was a typical return, the excitement faded away to the exhaustion of traveling. I wanted to know what she thought was waiting

for her but not enough to ask.

"I did what I needed to do," she said. "I didn't need to see anything else."

"There's a lot more out there to see."

"For you, maybe," she said. "Not me."

"Seems reasonable," I said.

"You don't accept it yet," she said. "I'd like to think that you will."

I slouched deeper into my seat. "You don't need me to accept it."

"No," she said. "But I'd like it."

I pulled up outside the diner. "Your destination," I said.

She reached out her hand, settling it briefly on top of mine. "Thank you for bringing me along," she said.

"You made the choice," I said. "That's all."

I let the car idle while she climbed out and headed back towards the entrance of the diner. I don't know why I waited. Maybe I expected that she was going to realize that she really wanted to come with me, that she had outgrown the things she thought she left inside the restaurant.

I stopped and risked a glance as I pulled out of the parking lot. Just in case she was coming. In case she started running after the car. I saw her form in the rearview mirror, small and bent at the waist, one of her hands digging into the hard soil outside the diner, the dust flying up in a small cloud around her face until she looked as dark and worn as the building. The other waitress, thin as a birch tree, knelt and handed her something.

The lid of the salt shaker went flying. I watched the grains spill like sand from the mouth of the glass jar, pouring deep into the ground. She covered it over with the loose soil, burying it with a hard pat of the hand. She stood, dusting her hands off against her skirt. It stained like black powder. Her eyes connected with mine in the mirror.

I shifted the car into gear, the rear wheels spitting up dust as I sped out and away, the light burning hot against my brow. In the mirror, I watched as the hard glare of sun blotted out the image of her face, her body, in the increasing distance like old film, burning from the center as it consumes itself, as it explodes in a flash of light and heat. ■

